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Red de Argentinos:
Identity and Citizenship in a Virtual Community

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Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of social spaces in the interstices of the Internet by members of dispersed national societies. Red de Argentinos is explored as an example one of such spaces. Red emerged as an email based solidarity network of the Argentine diaspora and is now a community attached to multiple locales, for which cyberspace has a central articulatory role. These locales include the homeland but, as well, the variety of places in which individuals identifying themselves as Argentinian may be found. This project analyzes some of the factors that allow these types of virtual communities to develop. Special attention is placed on the elements that ensure bonds between members. Self-organization, solidarity, and positioning in relation to the Argentine social reality are seen here as factors that foster the development of a sense of citizenship that is constructed from below in this particular online social space. The need to include the Internet practices of diasporas as part of emerging online cultures in Latin America is finally suggested as an avenue for future exploration.

Résumé

Cette thèse analyse la construction des espaces sociaux dans les interstices d'Internet par les membres de sociétés nationales dispersées. Red de Argentinos est étudié en tant qu'exemple de pareils espaces. Red a émergé comme réseau de solidarité de la diaspora d'Argentine basé sur le courrier électronique et est aujourd'hui une communauté attachée aux lieux multiples pour lesquels le cyberespace joue un rôle articulaire central. Ces espaces incluent la patrie mais, aussi, on peut trouver la variété des endroits où les individus s'identifient comme les Argentins. Ce projet fait l'analyse de quelques facteurs qui permettent à ce genre des communautés virtuelles de se développer. Une attention spéciale est consacrée aux éléments qui assurent les liens entre les membres. L'organisation de soi-même, la solidarité et le positionnement en relation avec la réalité sociale de l'Argentine sont vus ici comme des facteurs qui encouragent le développement d'un sens de citoyenneté qui est construit d'en bas dans cet espace social particulier en ligne. Le besoin d'inclure l'usage d'Internet des diasporas comme une partie des cultures qui émergent en ligne en Amérique latine est finalement suggéré comme avenue pour l'exploration dans l'avenir.

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Contents

All Latin American peoples have lived exiled
inside or outside their land.

—Fernando Solanas

Someone asked 'what is Argentina?'
Maybe Argentina is this Café . . .

—E.P., member of Argentina-Café

Introduction

Cyberspace, the social environment of the global network of computer networks we know as the Internet, plays host to a variety of novel grassroots experiences and social formations. Global corporate interests, technologies in constant development, and rules of use that are decided in supranational forums enter into the tense dynamics that shape the Internet. This complexity of actors and processes defines cyberspace as a distinct global social matrix. Here, cultures, subcultures and communities can take advantage of the Internet as both a communication tool whose power is dispersed among their members and as an environment in which to develop interests, viewpoints and lifestyles under new rules of social organization.

The increasing access to the Internet in developing countries has spread the technology's capabilities to almost every region of the world. Cyberspace worlds now exist in every language and accommodate diverse cultural and social practices. What is more remarkable, by establishing themselves as self-contained realms of social activity, these virtual worlds have been able to develop a degree of separation between social practices and particular physical locations. Dispersed national societies, which have for

years taken advantage of modern technologies of communication to keep in touch with their family and their culture, have found in the Internet not only a device that further advances the features of earlier media, but also a space within which innovative forms of community life can be created. Defining their own rules of governance, these virtual communities create spaces of identity which are constructed from below and are detached from national territories.

With the development of communication technologies, the space of nation-states is opened to transnational systems of delivery, and, at the same time, previous constraints of time and space are removed. The reconfiguration of spaces of identity introduced by developments in communication technologies transforms the nature of the nation-state as a space of identity. The media landscapes now accessible within the geography of nation-states not only expand the range of everyday practices and domestic rituals of individuals, but also permit those practices and rituals to be virtually held in shared spaces of sociability with globally distributed communicants. First, satellite television created global image industries the outcome of which is the increasing deterritorialization of audiovisual production and the constitution of world audiences. More recently, global information networks gradually developed a vast range of means of capture, storage, transmission, and reproduction of information as diverse as movies, data

bases, messages, pictures, music and software, which together permit the constitution of communities centred in electronic spaces of interaction.

As Sherry Turkle suggests, the Internet has become simultaneously a communication tool that extends our sense of bodily presence and a mirror whose surface we can traverse to inhabit virtual worlds. The Internet is an efficient communication instrument of global dimensions that combines, on the one hand, a series of developments in global communication systems that originated with the telegraph and submarine cables in the mid-nineteenth century, reaching maturity in present day satellites and fibre optic networks, and, on the other hand, the popularization of the personal computer during the 1980s to its current widespread presence in middle-class households. The Internet can thus be viewed as an essential transformation of the features of other media, such as inexpensive reproduction, instantaneous dissemination and radical decentralization.

My interest is not so much in the ability of the Internet to occupy a place in the constitution of world modernity by connecting dispersed segments of the global society and articulating them in one single process. Rather, my focus is on the social spaces and new forms of community that the Internet makes possible and which places it in the centre of an unprecedented reconfiguration of the relation between individuals and mediated spaces. Internet users can

enjoy a virtual life that is removed from physical locations; they can inhabit computer mediated worlds and develop communities with others whose acquaintance is made through the exchange of written messages. While considered as a communication tool, the Internet appears to bring improvements to users "who are understood as preconstituted instrumental identities" (Poster).[1] Yet, if seen as a social space, the network becomes a realm where people are affected at the subjective and the intersubjective level. Social worlds on the Internet expand and distribute individual and social experience under a different set of coordinates, and, at the same time, open a terrain for the constitution of self and community under rules of interaction that are constructed by users. When one focuses on the social worlds that are growing on the Internet, it is possible to view the communication experiences it facilitates as a form of communion. As communion, it is not the transmission of messages between distant points that satisfies the communication experience, rather it is the "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" which comes to the fore (Carey qtd. in Jones 12).

Throughout this work I analyze Red de Argentinos (Argentines' Network), the oldest Argentine virtual community on the Internet. Originally a single mailing list built up to serve the purposes of Argentines dispersed

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[1] Poster, Mark. "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," <http://www.hnet.uci.edu/mposter/writings/democ.html>, 1995.

throughout the world, Red de Argentinos is now a complex transnational community. It gathers people who engage in continuous virtual discussions and who participate in the collaborative construction of diverse online resources. The horizons of this community do not end in the virtual environment of computer networks; in many cases, it spills over into the offline world through the organization of face-to-face events. Its major resources are still administered by migrants, although there is now significant participation by people living in Argentina. If the Internet can be considered to be an information "heterotopia", a place where, as in the library or the museum, "all the other real sites that can be found within [a] culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 24), focusing on Red de Argentinos is one arbitrary way to enter the Argentine portion of the heterotopia. The resources of Red de Argentinos are unique in that they are the result of a grassroots effort and were built up by people who live in a wide variety of places throughout the world and who met online as the community developed. Red emerged and grew on the Internet; its existence would be at risk if the network were suddenly closed or transformed.

In this work I examine the kind of community that has developed in and around Red de Argentinos. Is this social formation a technological enhancement of practices already present among national societies scattered around the globe,

or is it an emergent product of the transnationalization of cultures made possible by new global media? The development of these technosocial forms is interesting as an instance of the construction of spaces of identity by peoples in diaspora while access to the Internet was not available in their home countries. In addition, the endurance of these practices and perspectives of growth by users casts light on forms of appropriation of the medium and on the impact it can have in the social processes of developing societies. It is necessary, for instance, to question the implications of these arenas of exchange between migrants and residents in terms of transformations in practices of citizenship.

Virtual communities, Howard Rheingold summarizes, "are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Virtual Communities 5). Red has all the ingredients that characterize other virtual communities, but there is also a sense of national belonging, a shared identity space defined in relation to an idea of the nation, that permeates it. In other types of virtual communities the relationship between members is crystallized in the development of collective goods and shared forms of symbolization in cyberspace. In Red, however, there is also a sense of commonality defined in relation to the imagined community of co-nationals. This sense of commonality encompasses similar perspectives and

modes of interpretation which are in turn reinforced by the daily practice of reading each others' messages, debating, providing solidarity on issues, and building the community together.

Chapter One

Spaces of Identity, Virtual Communities and the Uses of the Internet by Dispersed National Societies

1.1. Spaces of Identity: Imagined Communities and Virtual Communities.

The expansion of the Internet has made possible the rise of an extraordinary variety of online cultures and social formations whose dominant space of intercourse, expression, and collection of symbolic material is located in cyberspace (although in some cases, forms of dynamic exchange between the virtual and the offline worlds appear). Even though they owe their present existence to the global information infrastructure, the public portion of which we call the Internet, the virtual communities of cyberspace contain traces of earlier communication technologies in particular as they have intervened in the creation of social affinities and in the production of a sense of cultural proximity. Virtual communities did not originate with cyberspace: they have a history that can be traced back to the use of other media. At the phenomenological level—in terms of their effect on human experience—earlier communication technologies started a process that has habituated us to the formation of

communities in virtual spaces. Today, interacting networks that encircle the globe enable a different type of gathering in virtual communities, one in which communicants are not only aware of each others' existence, but develop social relations through creative exchange with others. Of crucial importance in constituting nations as imagined communities contained by territories, communication technologies are now networking social affinities across national frontiers.

Different types of media have been central in bringing together scattered people whose existence as communities would have been otherwise impossible. By increasing the ability of the media to remove social relations from particularities of local contexts and to restructure social activity across geography, the development of communication technologies has extended their capacity to articulate spaces of identity. This attribute of communication technologies was one of the processes that underpinned the emergence and development of the modern notion of national identity during the last two centuries and made possible the increasing coincidence between the sense of belonging to imagined national communities and the territories where those communities were assumed to live. The media were central components in individuals' self-recognition as members of nations, as they are now in the global restructuration of spaces of identity.

Pre-modern societies, Anthony Giddens suggests, did not make a clear distinction between place and space. People understood their physical location in terms of their physical participation in social activities. The emergence of the nation-state implied a radical transformation in the notion of space: social relationships were removed from the constraints of face-to-face interaction, and increasingly began to depend on distant others. However dispersed they might be within the territory of the nation-state, individuals began to be "thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them" (19).

Benedict Anderson points to the importance of the alliance between print and capitalism in the constitution of nations as imagined communities. Print capitalism permitted the rise to prominence of vernaculars, creating languages capable of dissemination through the market, and thus enabling the emergence of large-scale social affinities. Collective exposure to the same narratives was crucial to developing notions of homogeneous time and simultaneity, a transformation that was essential for the emergence of nations. A decisive moment in the mediation of technology for the constitution of a sense of community was the experience of collective reading made possible by the appearance of the novel and the newspaper during the eighteenth century. The style in which the novel addressed its readers made it possible to create an awareness of the

existence of other readers of the same texts, a fact that had central importance, as Anderson suggests, in the emergence of nations as imagined communities. Newspapers also contributed to this phenomenon by allowing readers a daily moment of silent privacy in which each could be "well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion" (Anderson 35).

Since print capitalism permitted the formation of national communities among dispersed individuals, new generations of media have further expanded the impact of the printing press. Virtual communities developed with the invention of the telegraph, and took new shapes with the technologies that allowed radio broadcasting and television to appear. When radio programs made millions experience a sense of being present in the same virtual space, they laid the foundation for a

> different, and complex way of experiencing the relationship between the physical human body and the 'I' that inhabits it . . . the listener was in two places at once—the body at home, but the delegate, the 'I' that belonged to the body, in an imaginal space with another person (Stone Body 87).

Radio and television inaugurated important transformations not only of real geographies but also of imagined spaces, bringing together communities dispersed within the space of transmission. Television introduced the sensation of

watching an image that millions of others were seeing at the same time, and with it the impression of being "in a 'location' that is not defined by walls, streets or neighbourhoods but by evanescent 'experience'" (Meyrowitz qtd. in Morley and Robins 132). In Latin America, while other cultural institutions were still weak, the radio transformed "the political 'idea' of nationhood into quotidian feelings and experiences," conveying to isolated communities and individuals a sense of national unity (Martín Barbero, From the Media 179). Broadcasting has been considered to occupy a central role in the constitution and maintenance of a sense of belonging and common culture among listeners and viewers of national communities, serving a dual role "as the political public sphere of the nation state, and as the focus for national cultural identification" (Morley and Robins 10).

Allucquère Stone suggests that the communities that develop around virtual spaces in computer networks are part of the same phenomenon that can be traced back to communities of letters and fireside chats. Like earlier forms of virtual communities, the ones that grow in cyberspace are able to articulate shared beliefs and practices among people that are physically separated. Between the first textual virtual communities and those we find now in cyberspace, Stone points out some fundamental moments, each of them marked by the incorporation of a new technology. The first important antecedent to the virtual

communities that now exist through the exchange of electronic written text were the communities of letters that, around mid-1600s, developed among groups of scholars who circulated papers related to scientific experiments.

Since the appearance of the first bulletin board systems, in the mid-1970s, computer users have built communities in which they have learned to transfer "their agency to body-representatives that exist in an imaginal space contiguously with representatives of other individuals," with which they engage in participatory and interactive social practices (Stone, Body 94). This interactivity differentiates the Internet from previous forms of virtual communities, as it allows the communicants to "materially inhabit" virtual social spaces. The combination of advanced computer networks where new forms of social interaction were possible, new developments in the conceptualization of virtual reality, and William Gibson's visionary idea of a cyberspace conceived as a "consensual hallucination" based on an "imaginal public sphere and refigured discursive community", gave rise to a new moment in the history of virtual communities (Stone, Body 95). What can be seen along the development of different forms of virtual systems is the increasing split between the bodies of the members of virtual communities and their locus of agency.

Instituting a radicalization of space distantiation, the Net overcomes national boundaries and sprawls across

nations, introducing a restructuring of culture and society across space. Computer users can be members of virtual communities sitting in front of their computers, while their sphere of social intercourse is elsewhere. Today cyberspace not only creates a sense of expanded physical presence among people who navigate the networks, but also has become an environment of extraordinary cultural diversity that spans the actual world. It is increasingly difficult to evaluate the transformations that emerge in the intersection of geographic spaces covered by the Net, virtual worlds that cyberspace makes possible, and the spaces, like that of the nation, that are associated with narrations of identity. One of the products of such an intersection, the one that will be the focus of the present work, is a form of virtual environment where communities create, through interaction and collective practices, spaces of identity that are centred in the fluid hyperreality of cyberspace but can only be understood in reference to the imagined space of the nation.

Developments in communication technologies have decentred the juxtaposition between virtual communities and notions of territoriality. Morley and Robins suggest that the transformations in communication technologies have moved us towards "a new communications geography, characterized by global networks and an international space of information flows; by an increasing crisis of the national sphere; and by new forms of regional and local

activity" (1). These transformations are significant in terms of our experience of space and place. As Paul Virilio contends, the physical world has been colonized by means of transportation and communication in such way that "the infosphere—the sphere of information—is going to impose itself on the geosphere" (121). New technologies have the capacity to render meaningless frontiers and principles of sovereignty claimed over national territories; a complex interplay of deterritorialization and reterritorialization takes place in a scenario characterized by the global extension of networks and the continuous displacement of images, information, persons, capital, and commodities. Yet, the revolution in communication technologies has been central in erasing "the interactions of a print-dominated world" and in creating a sense of proximity between societies that enables us to enter "into an altogether new condition of neighbourliness, even with those most distant from ourselves" (Appadurai 271).

While this transformation is evident in the case of the transnational audio-visual space created by broadcast media, it is certainly radical in computer networks. Global networks allow people to socially interact in virtual communities while they remain unaware of how geographically dispersed their co-members may be or which borders their interactions cross. In several accounts, the Net can be considered as a means of communication capable of redefining our notions of geography, allowing us to sort

out firmly established geographically based allegiances. Networked environments challenge the geographic rootedness of social institutions. As human virtual activity takes place in cyberspace, the sovereignty space of nation-states remains attached to the constraints of the physical world. By transgressing the territorial spaces of the nation-state, global computer networks redefine the role of technologies of power and institutions of cultural governance with respect to networked computer users, who navigate a space that is elsewhere while technologies and institutions remain attached to the nation-state. As individuals gain access to transnational media, John B. Thompson contends, their ability to liberate themselves from the symbolic contents and forms of authority that prevail in their daily life increases.

Technological developments such as satellite television and expanded access to the Internet have diversified the forms of involvement with media across segments of national communities that are spatially dispersed. This is changing not only the way in which the media are able to build a sense of community and belonging within the space of the nation-state, but also the way in which communities that are typically transnational, such as diasporas, reorganize their practices. The extension of the Net throughout the world and the ease with which it can be crossed by individuals has transformed the way national communities are imagined. While other media contribute to

the constitution of national communities bound within the physical spaces nation-states claim as their territory, in cyberspace cultural lifestyles and trends develop and spread horizontally across borders. Virtual communities are decentred in terms of spatial experience; co-nationals build communities with the resources the Net provides, where cultural identity is practiced in spaces that can be equally accessed from within and without the actual territory of the nation. The fact that users can step into the Net from the most remote regions of the planet has provided national societies dispersed by global movements of capital and labour not only with an instrument that allows them to introduce new forms of communication practices, but also with a space for the creation of new types of communities based on affinities that pre-date their dispersal.

1.2. Virtual Communities and Globalization

Decades of developments in computer mediated communications have resulted in the global reach of cyberspace and in the emergence of virtual worlds we can step into from the most remote regions of the globe. These virtual worlds provide national societies dispersed across borders with spaces where a sense of common identity can be maintained outside the boundaries of the nation. When the world of computer networks began to grow and diversify in the scope of cultures and subcultures that inhabited it—and when access to the Internet outside developed countries was

even more scarce than it is today—migrant populations from developing countries began to use computer networks to keep in touch with one another and to provide solidarity, creating their "Little Italies" and "Chinatowns" in cyberspace: worlds where they could share practices of inhabiting virtual space.

Sandra Braman points out that certain theorists tend to associate spatial forms of organization of power and political institutions with communication technologies. In this way, for instance, orality corresponds to the city-state and print to the nation-state. Cinema, radio and television, appear as forms of mass culture that spill over habitual borders, prompting arguments against cultural imperialism and placing the state in the role of custodian of the values of the national culture. While the arrival of communication technologies based on the principle of the Internet demands a "reconceptualization of both the nature of the state and of its forms of power" (Braman, Autopoietic State 358), global computer networks also require the formulation of new ways of thinking about the relation between spatiality, identity politics and systems of communication.

As Michael Menser and Stanley Arowitz contend, with the current proliferation of diasporas and technocultures, no culture can be identified "simply as what takes place within its spatial limits" (12). Moreover, every culture or technoculture constructs spaces differently. Spaces built

up in cyberspace tend to be perceived as a form of the local, while, as J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor have suggested, physical locations can be thought of as accidents of proximity (qtd. in Rheingold, Slice of Life 65). To develop social relations on the Internet is, as Braman points out, to practice a form of tertiary locality that corresponds to a postmodern experience of space in which identification with the local is culturally defined and removed from a physical notion of place. Whereas secondary locality is epistemologically grounded in the empirical, tertiary locality is grounded in the hyperreal and its condition is determined at the symbolic level:

> Virtual communities—those that exist through electronic connections rather than through geographic clumping—are more and more experienced as the most important, the most 'real,' of the communities in which one lives. For those whose identities are grounded in cyberspace, the linkage between the local and the material world has become completely broken (Braman, Interpenetrated Globalization 30).

Virtual communities built by dispersed national societies are centred in the resources they construct in cyberspace. They are communities defined by different circuits in physical space and by a recognizable location in cyberspace. These social spaces, which set up foundations in cyberspace for peoples with established traveling routes in the physical world, could probably be better identified as having diasporic components, rather than belonging to migrant populations. Diasporic virtual

communities have been created by, and in many cases, still serve some purpose for those who are in diaspora. But expanded access to the Internet has transformed these communities and they are no longer networks of migrants. They are transnational communities that include members living in the territory in which the community locates its primary identification. Diaspora cultures that develop these types of roots in cyberspace are close to what James Clifford calls "traveling cultures", cultures not conceived as rooted in a geographical place.

The deterritorialized virtual world of computer networks is, at the same time, a space for the re-creation of cultural identity. While in most social virtual spaces communities emerge from the dynamics of interaction, in diasporic virtual communities the same dynamics converge with other factors. Turkle argues that the playful environments constituted within Muds[1] reveal new forms of thinking about human identity and the relation between people and machines (17). In the same way as Mud users spend several hours every week playing with their identities and inventing new ones, members of societies in diaspora inhabit virtual spaces where the experience of

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[1] Muds are real-time social spaces on the Internet where the participants interact through written text. There are Muds where the participants assume fictional roles in accordance with the rules of a game, like in role playing. In the so-called "social Muds" or MOOs identities can also be fictional but are not set by the plot of a game. For an introduction to Muds see Sherry Turkle's Life on the Screen and Howard Rheingold's Virtual Communities.

identity is focused on the re-creation of their culture and on attempts to become involved in the country's social problems. Dispersed societies seem to refer to the sense of belonging to the imagined community of the nation in the places they construct in cyberspace. Yet, how is the notion of community based on a shared sense of national origin maintained? How is it transformed by the diasporic experience? Whereas cyberspace has no internal borders other than those posed by language, it sprawls over diverse societies and different cultural realities. How are the discourses of cultural identity and the experience of citizenship available to geographically dispersed individuals brought into communities of virtual subjects constructed in cyberspace?

The fact that dispersed peoples constitute communities in cyberspace raises the question, already posed by Morley and Robins, of how they reconcile their existence in virtual social spaces with their bodily existence in localized geographic spaces. Stone's proposal to consider the participants of virtual communities as boundary-subjects, as individuals who "live in the borderlands of both physical and virtual culture" (Body 112), seems to be central to the study of such a juxtaposition. Borderlands function to create spaces where identity and meaning are not fixed but constructed in relation to intersections, exchanges and negotiations. How is the character of borderland subjects, of subjects for which technology

becomes invisible, affected when the screen and the keyboard allow them to cross borders and enjoy, on a daily basis, activities with other members of the national community? In this sense, interfaces, the surfaces where people and machines meet, are not only the physical borders of cyberspace, they are also the realm for the negotiation of cultural identity. Global computer networks are the terrain for the elaboration of "differential and plural identities", identities not forced to emerge from "some false cohesion and unity". The postmodern identities of the age of networks and accelerated cultural flows are perspectival and multiple, they are elaborated out of "positions and positioning in local and global space", and of "contexts of bodily existence and . . . existence in mediated space" (Morley and Robins 40).

The re-creation of a sense of community in dispersed societies that go online is not limited to the maintenance of cultural identity. It also occurs in the performance of exercises of citizenship that result in the formation of counter public spheres. Diasporic virtual communities allow migrants to participate in debates that concern different types of problems of the national society. Although the potential offline influence of such debates is limited, they address aspects of citizenship that are shared by residents and migrants, people who live in contexts where such dimensions are constructed differently. These and other online forms of expression and activism can be seen

as a globalization of the national public sphere, an important consequence of which is the impact that the extension of contacts with the civil societies of the countries where migrants live can have within the borders of the nation-state of origin. The Internet and other global networks have already become the spinal cord for the actions of grassroots groups, nongovernmental organizations and other forms of deterritorialized collective movements. As Howard Frederick has pointed out, the Internet has created a transnational civil society that has enabled the emergence of forms of world citizenship. With many points of connection with these global movements, virtual communities of co-nationals are public spheres oriented to activities that concern fundamentally, though not exclusively, public issues of the nation-state.

The expansion of access to cyberspace to an increasing, although still limited, number of individuals and organized groups in emerging democracies, has opened novel spaces for the exchange of information and citizens' participation that would be difficult and only relatively effective outside the networks. As Peter Dahlgren suggests, increased global interpenetration creates problems of intelligibility of political boundaries and entities, posing at the same time challenges "for how we are to view the structures and processes of democracy" (17). In the lengthy transitions to democracy in Latin America, global networks offer a new type of social space that can

contribute to democratization by making it possible for individual citizens and organized groups of civil society to exchange views about problems of public concern. Although the new space of interaction facilitates the discussion of issues in a way that can be celebrated from the point of view of a classic idea of democracy, there remains the concern about the limited empowerment provided by the networks as the conversation takes place between individuals solitarily operating their computers.

Communication technologies, Stone suggests, "can be seen as simultaneously causes of and responses to social crisis"; they mediate tensions between selves and bodies, serving "specific functions as creators and mediators of social spaces and social groups" (War of Desire 88). The Internet belongs to an age of accelerated cultural flows, in which identities structured by territorial affinities coexist with transterritorial identities of diasporic peoples, and where, as Jean-Marie Guéhenno points out, citizenship is becoming a mere juridical relationship with the nation-state. The virtual world of the networks constitutes a space in constant expansion that is becoming a significant component of the reinvention and rearticulation of global and local cultures and identities. To the multiplicity of public spheres, discourses and spaces that already exist in local contexts, computer networks bring their own complex worlds of cultures and subcultures, contributing to "the irreducible diversity

(and the new connectedness) of identity politics" (Robbins xiii). Virtual communities of dispersed national societies are spaces of cultural hybridization, where the codes that organize symbolic interaction are shaped by the local contexts in which the members of the community live.

While it is difficult to isolate a single driving force in the present stage of the globalization process, one of its most apparent characteristics is the speed of the changes. The astonishing velocity of the contacts between cultures and the growth of connections across societies would be unthinkable without the accelerated development that modes of communication and transportation have undergone in this century. A product of its time, the Internet is part of a series of global phenomena that increasingly connect and crosscut the legal and cultural order of nation-states, challenging strong conceptions of sovereignty and territoriality, and also restructuring the relationship between human activity and geopolitical spaces. As an expression of the centrality of information in global capitalism, the Net can be regarded, on the one hand, as one of the processes that disrupt nation-states as integral communities. These processes also involve the displacement of peoples throughout the world, in part the result of a reorganization of economic activity that includes forms of flexible capitalism and mobile labour markets. On the other hand, since it fosters what Giddens analyzes as the stretching processes of global modernity,

the Net is an integral constituent of "the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions that become networked across the earth's surface as a whole," permitting the emergence of spaces for the re-connection of communities of dispersed national societies and their reintegration in virtual locales (64).

Globalization creates spaces that are contradictory and multidetermined. Regional, national and transnational cultural systems coexist using different symbolic codes. Virtual communities built by dispersed national societies could be considered part of what Johnatan Friedman calls the localizing strategies that multiply in response to the fragmentation of the global system. These communities are also instances where globalization operates from the bottom up, as opposed to the globalization from above in which the actors are "leading states and transnational business and political elites" (Brecher, Childs & Cutler ix). Gathering people scattered around the world in practices that involve conviviality, solidarity, identity, and activism, Red de Argentinos, the virtual community I analyze in the following chapters, is part of the former process of globalization from below.

1.3. Diasporas and Communication Technologies.

Throughout history, diasporas, societies displaced around the world that remain bound by the collective memory of a departed homeland, have defined themselves by forming lateral connections, establishing traveling routes as well

as different types of practices of traffic and communication. Those practices have, in recent times, been enhanced by the development of virtual communities on the Internet. While many members of these communities participate from their homelands, others are dispersed throughout different regions overseas. In these social formations constituted through the mediation of computers and modems, the bodies of members who come together in cyberspace are located in diverse cultural settings around the world. On one hand, the Net further expands practices of communication that diaspora cultures have been performing with every previous development in communication technologies. On the other hand, the Internet opens up the possibility for creating new types of communities, spaces of social interaction centred in cyberspace, around which relationships are fostered between members that then expand to activities organized outside the networks. These include friendship and socializing but also involve participation in events that occur inside the geopolitical lines of the nation-state in relation to which members refer their collective practices.

Displacements of peoples throughout the world can be traced back to ancient societies. They are part of the global cultural flows that include movements of messages and goods, as well as lendings and borrowings between cultures. The conditions under which recent movements of people have taken place cannot easily fit into a single

category: there are temporary and permanent immigrants, who are often caught up in transnational movements of capital and sometimes flee their country against their will. Some are exiled, others are refugees, guest-workers, intellectuals, tourists, or students. Some scholars use the generic term diaspora to refer to the diverse movements of populations as a whole. While the Jewish diaspora is perhaps the best known model, there are numerous other examples of societies that have experienced diasporic movements. From the displacements of Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans to the United States, to Chileans requesting exile in Europe in times of dictatorship, almost all Latin American countries have part of their national societies living overseas. These displaced communities experience to some degree memories of their country of origin, sharing systems of belief and solidarities in which their relationship with the homeland is crucial (Clifford, Diasporas 305).

Diasporic societies are usually separated by long distances, dispersed across different countries, in some cases forming local communities, and keeping in touch with each other and with their homeland. Clifford suggests that "diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification are shared by a broad spectrum of minority and migrant populations" (Diasporas 304). Migrants share experiences of separation from their culture, are exposed to the more or less strong assimilationist forces

of their host societies, and hold a common myth of return to the country they have left behind. It is not unusual that migrants develop collective forms of dwelling, associate to provide solidarity, and organize events to strengthen the sense of connection that prevents "erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating and distancing" (Diasporas 310). Diasporas have borders that are defined by the relation between diasporic peoples and the diverse narratives of integration, acceptance or rejection they experience across different social and political realities.

The notion of diaspora can also have negative connotations if one considers that in many cases, migration is not the satisfactory solution to one or another form of exclusion that those who migrate have experienced in their own country. Diaspora can also function, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, in a transvalued sense, when it is viewed as a failure with respect to "the normative ideal of national sovereignty" (Spaces 339). However, diasporas can be analyzed in terms of transnational networks, of which the home country forms a part, but in which lateral connections between migrants are almost as important. In this sense, diaspora acquires "a positive condition of multiple location, temporality, and identification—while not forgetting the violent conditions that produced it" (Spaces 340).

Diasporas can be considered among other global cultural flows that date back to ancient trade routes, the expansion of colonial empires, and the creation of world markets. The specificity of global flows at the end of the twentieth century lie in the crystallization of economic, political and cultural phenomena that question concepts developed in advanced stages of modernity like 'nation', 'state', 'territory', 'culture' and 'identity'. In the globalized and networked world of today, the imagined communities that constituted modern nationalities are no more than nodes "of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes" (Appadurai 273). The centre-periphery opposition no longer explains the complex, disjunctive and overlapping social order that is characterized by cultural flows occurring under conditions created by the unpredictable relationship between ethnicity, media, technology, finance and ideology. Many people around the globe today live in imagined worlds that are circumscribed by such landscapes and superimposed over the imagined world of their community.

Today's transnational communities are highly dependent on modern technologies of transportation and communication. As studies by Roger Rouse show, Mexicans who follow nomadic circuits between their country and cities in the United States use recordings of songs taped in popular fiestas with portable recorders to keep memories of their hometowns alive; similarly, telephones are used in order to

participate in family decision making and other events (Clifford, Diasporas 303). Travel circuits and communication through media not only link migrant members with those at home, they also have significant importance in the construction of lateral connections in multi-locale diaspora cultures. Clifford outlines Paul Gilroy's mapping of the uses of recording technologies across diverse black communities in different countries of the Atlantic basin as expressive forms that are able to establish transnational connections and form alternative public spheres.

While in order to constitute a Little Italy or a Chinatown it was necessary that a number of members of the diasporic culture live in physical proximity, with computer mediated communications those cultures can create virtual spaces where community activities can be enjoyed by fellow nationals no matter how dense their concentration in each town or how far apart they are from one another. Exchanges of electronic text contribute to the cohesion of communities of people who do not know one another in person but who are joined by collective memories and experiences. Virtual communities of dispersed national societies, like Red de Argentinos, share characteristics that Rheingold finds in other virtual communities, where people gather for conviviality in much the same way as in cafés and city squares. In the resources of computer networks, migrant populations find not only a communication tool they can use to keep in touch with home or maintain lateral connections,

and solidarity networks, but also a space where they can build communities, where they can interact with others in their own language, sharing interpretations of national problems, and discussing possible solutions.

In the following chapters, I analyze aspects of Red de Argentinos, a virtual community of Argentines, most of whose members live in diaspora. Red can be considered a transnational community from the point of view of the location of the participating individuals, but it can also be seen as a self-contained space of identity formed by people who share diverse degrees of attachment to both the common culture and to their current geographic location, and who also have diverse degrees of interest in the social reality of the country they have left behind. National culture in Red is not simply a memory and can by no means be considered as pure or ideal insofar as it is a point of departure rather than a point of arrival. National culture here sustains the image the communicants construct of themselves as members of the community, but is recreated as world views, which the dynamic exchange in virtual communities helps to keep alive, and which further develops in the constant exchange of viewpoints that the members of the community bring from their current contexts of residence.

Chapter Two

Red de Argentinos: Resources and Practices of the Virtual Community of a Dispersed National Society.

2.1. Red: an Argentine Settlement on the Internet

Argentine migrants, exiles and students living in the United States, Canada and Europe inaugurated the first mailing list of Red de Argentinos in 1988. The initial goals were to use the global infrastructure of computer networks as a means to provide mutual solidarity and to develop a space of conviviality accessible to those living away from the home country. When it still was a single mailing list, Red de Argentinos was advertised to prospective members as a "mailing list for general discussion and information on Argentine and Latin American social/political issues." By joining the list, members would be able to "learn how to make those patties (empanadas) that you miss so much, . . . discuss how to 'cebar un buen mate'"[1] and discuss "how to solve Argentina's most outstanding problems."[2] Prospective members were guaranteed that every week they would also

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[1] *Empanadas* is a traditional Argentine food. *Cebar un buen mate* means to prepare mate, an infusion that is usually drunk in informal social encounters in the coutries of the River Plate basin.

[2] Legend appeared a in List of Latin American Lists compiled by Gladys Smiley Bell, <GBELL@kentvm.kent.edu>, 1994.

receive a brief summary of headlines extracted from Buenos Aires' newspapers.

Red de Argentinos is now a complex and diversified community—its membership currently numbers about one thousand subscribers around the world. Red owns the computers from which its server runs and in the interaction between its members all the resources available on the Internet are used. It has four permanent mailing lists and two others that are open for special needs; two major home pages—*Gardel* and *Mafaldita*—, several collective projects for the collection of information on the World Wide Web and on FTP (File Transfer Protocol) servers, and three Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels. Among its members can be counted several Argentine pioneers of cyberspace: the creator of the popular IRC channel *#argentina*, the founders of the two Argentine newsgroups on the USENET, and the participants of several Internet-based projects, including newsletters and databases, some of which have gained independence. The rich and diverse on- and offline practices of the network have also been the source of inspiration for the edition of a CD-ROM. For some time, the links within Red are no longer merely electronic. Periodical regional gatherings are frequent and members who travel long distances to visit other members are not rare. This year, Red organized its first global meeting.

The heart of Red is *Argentina-Café* (also called *Ar-C@fé* or just the *Café*), the electronic mailing list of more than

a hundred messages per day where the most vibrant discussions take place. There coneteros[3] talk politics, share projects, exchange memories from home, organize face-to-face gatherings, try to answer questions about their identity as immigrants in different countries, or just post greetings to remind their friends behind the screen they are still there. As the membership of Red grew, the original mailing list was subdivided into several sublists; all still run from the server in the Mathematics Department of the University of Indiana at Bloomington.

Along with the *Café*, the other lists of Red host vibrant conversations. Smaller in membership, *Argentina-Deportes* is the site of heated debates on soccer, an Argentine national passion that many who leave the country have to relinquish with regret. In *Deportes*, migrants are able to exchange news about their favourite soccer team and to maintain, via email, the rituals attached to the sport. Conversations about soccer are more than mere talks: soccer is surrounded by a dense set of practices that encompass identification strategies, ways of political positioning, and even forms of self-fashioning. *Argentina-Noticias* is the mailing list where members of Red exchange news from and about Argentina. In *Argentina-Literaria* people post original stories, fiction and poetry and receive critiques from other

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[3] Expression created out of the Spanish word compañero 'companion' and the English word Net that was invented by the members of Red to refer generically to each other.

members. *Literaria* is also the place for the exchange of comments on literature websites, new books, biographies of authors, and events concerning the intellectual scene in Buenos Aires. Red used to have a list to talk about Argentine popular music, but it is no longer active. There are also two temporary lists in Red. The first is *Argentina-Viajes*, occasionally opened to channel the organization of charter flights from the United States to Argentina. The second is another list whose purpose is to discuss aspects of the organization of the network itself.

Although the most common form of intercourse is the exchange of emails, the IRC occupies a special place among some members of the community. A veteran member of Red, who lives in Davis, California, created the official IRC channel *#argentina* in Undernet[4] in 1994. The increasing popularity gained by the IRC in Argentina confronted the members of the *Café* with the need to create a real time space of their own. So they created *#cafeteros*, a channel which members can access only by invitation and which, because of the requirements of simultaneity of real time chat, functions only during the evening in Europe, when it is afternoon in Argentina and the East coast of North America, late evening in Israel, and early morning of the next day in Sydney and Melbourne. Events like birthday parties, that lose their

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[4] The Undernet is the most popular IRC network. Other networks are Dalnet and Efnet.

appeal when held through the deferred interaction of email, take place in *#cafeteros*.

The mailing lists of Red are run from a server that was purchased with funds collected among members from all over the world who sent checks to regional organizers, who in turn sent the money to the administrator in Indiana. The server was called Mafalda after a famous cartoon character of a little girl who "symbolizes the best of the spirit of the Argentine youth, which does not resign itself to the established order but attempts to modify and enrich it with its own ideas." Mafalda is a well-known character among Argentines whose irreverent reflections pose "bothersome questions to the Argentine society."[5] The server Mafalda also hosts *Mafaldita*[6] 'little Mafalda', the website of the *Café*, with pictures of memorable gatherings, links to members' homepages, their electronic and snail mail addresses (the latter are included for those who want to participate in postcard exchanges), a dictionary of *Café* jargon for newbies, a world map showing the distribution of coneteros country by country, and stories of members of Red. *Mafaldita* is specially decorated for the 9th of July, Argentina's Independence Day and is permanently updated, which makes it a kind of bulletin board for the community.

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[5] Felix Luna, qtd. in "Mafalda: La genia del genio," <http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu/ Mafalda/mafalda1.html>.
[6] Raul Drelichman and Darío Teitelbaum, "Mafaldita, el WWW server del C@fé de los Argentinos," <http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu>.

The continuous flow of questions on the *Café* about problems concerning life abroad motivated the creation of a text file with answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). At the present moment, *FAQ* has a place in the Web and FTP sites of Red, and is also distributed to newsgroups and via email. Although it is maintained by a group of Red members, *FAQ* is a collaborative undertaking to which numerous users have contributed. The information accumulated in *FAQ* reveals the variety of needs of the members of the dispersed community: from descriptions for the newbies about the online habits of the community, to suggestions about making economic travel arrangements to Argentina, how to obtain citizenship in the USA, or how to buy Argentine food, music and books in different cities of the world, and personal accounts of choosing a Medicare plan or getting an e-mail service for relatives in Argentina. What its creators consider most valuable about *FAQ* is the collaborative nature of information accumulation, where the organizers' task is to compile and update every month the valuable experience fellow members write about when answering requests for support.

In 1993 Red began to create its home on the web and named it Carlos Gardel, the most popular tango composer and singer of all times. *Gardel*[7] was built with the, at the time modest, goal of "collecting all the information referring

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[7] Luis Mandel and Federico Waisman. "Gardel, el WWW server de la Red de Argentinos." <http://www.cee.cornell.edu/~federico/argentina>

to Argentina available on the Internet." The first version of the *Gardel* home page had more than enough room to link all that information, since there were no Web servers in Argentina yet. In fact, according to Luis Mandel, its creator, a mathematics professor at the University of Munich, *Gardel* was the first website exclusively dedicated to information on Argentina, a distinction it kept for over two years. As the amount of information on Argentina grew and other web indexes specially devoted to the same purpose appeared, the creators of *Gardel* decided to reorient it to "bring information to Argentines residing abroad and to keep information and links related to Argentine culture."[8]

The present policy for collecting and organizing the information on Argentine culture follows a different model from other indexes, which are inspired by the commercial Yahoo. This is probably because of the collaborative structure of *Gardel*: each section is maintained by groups of members of Red who have some degree of specialization in the field and who collect information requested by other participants and by the general public. The literature site, which has a vast amount of information on contemporary writers and is compiled by more than a dozen present and former young coneteros living in Minneapolis, Paris, Madrid, and Argentina, is a clear example of the type of collaboration that develops in Red. Yet, it is probably not

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[8] Luis Mandel, <mandel@indy.fast.de>, response to email questionaire, 3 June 1997.

as impressive as the collection of tango lyrics, which continuously attracts suppliers and now numbers more than six hundred samples, constituting the largest tango database online. A similar type of collaborative project has resulted in an online cookbook, with recipes of traditional Argentine cuisine, some of which are adapted for ingredients available in North America and Europe.

Gardel not only carries essential information for Argentines living abroad, but also contains links to sites covering a variety of interests, from institutions in Argentina to forms of protest graffiti that take advantage of the free megabytes of the virtual neighbourhoods of Geocities.[9] *Gardel* contains memories of early experiences of the community and connects with other Argentine virtual communities, such as the Web pages of the IRC tribes of channel *#argentina* and those of the group of Argentine Internet users living in Sweden. For the organizers of these smaller communities, Red de Argentinos is an online reference space of which many were co-builders and remain active participants. While the mailing lists of Red have central importance in preserving social patterns and tastes, *Gardel* makes available the experience accumulated by the networks of people on the mailing lists to a wider constituency of migrants.

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[9] See for instance "Samantha Farjat y sus amigos . . . " <http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/4775>

Since the creation of Red, its resources have been vital sources of information for the Argentine diaspora. Fresh news about the country, posted or commented on by coneteros, have always occupied a special place in triggering and organizing discussions. The first Argentine newspaper to appear on the web was released in November 1995. Since then the number of news media who have created their own homepage has risen to well over fifty. Before the Web became the major source of news for the dispersed society, Red was, for several years, the fundamental news and information resource. Members would share what they could gather from family and friends in the homeland by posting to the list.

In the early times of the network, two graduate students living in the USA created and periodically distributed through Red two ephemeral experiences of email journalism: *Green Year News*[10] and the *Yurnal of Aplaid Meta-Mate-Cas*.[11] The first contained information about activities of members of Red in different cities in the USA and provided humorous commentary on the Argentine political situation. The other journal was a jocose periodical newsletter about the habit of drinking mate. By early 1995 Interlink Headline News appeared, an electronic daily

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[10] "El Green Year News en su colección completa." <http://www.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/rec/argentina/gyn/index.html>

[11] "El Yurnal. Solo para entendidos." <http://www.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/rec/argentina/yam/index.html>

newsletter distributed via email whose creators, Alejandro Piscitelli and Raul Drelichman, were active members of Red living in Buenos Aires. IHN, which included headlines from Buenos Aires' newspapers and news commentary written by the editors, was incorporated into the standard distribution of Red until it gained independence; its creators have continued their collaboration with Red until today. Red has also been the channel for the distribution of Microsemanario, a critical weekly newsletter of political, cultural and academic news prepared by the department of physics of the University of Buenos Aires.

The coming of web newspapers gradually introduced a different era in the use of Red as a news vehicle. The sublist *Argentina-Noticias* was created to specialize the function of news distribution, although most of the members that post news prefer the *Café*, and sometimes *Argentina-Deportes*. While most coneteros now have access to the same choice of newspapers on the web, there are now members who specialize in bringing information directly from the source. Such is the case of several members who have connections with nongovermental groups dealing with human rights, environmental protection, or other issues, and who post press releases gathered by their organizations. The *Café* and *Argentina-Deportes* are also places to read news posted from members living in Argentina who "re-broadcast" via email what they watch on television, thus sharing through the Net the instantaneous effect that television

brings and enabling those abroad to have a "real time" experience of events going on in the country. In exchange, coneteros living overseas translate and post news about Argentina that appears in newspapers from the cities where they live.

So far, the members of Red have been expanding the reach of the network on the Internet and in offline activities. Their view of Argentina, its problems, and its future have mostly depended on megabytes of information circulating on the Internet. Nevertheless, there is a project to uproot the experience of the *Café* from the network and move it to CD-ROM. The project is called *Café de Morel* and took its name from the novel The invention of Morel. According to its author, a design student living in Chicago, *Café de Morel* resembles Adolfo Bioy Casares' novel in its attempt to use machines and technology to "keep memory alive."[12] The CD-ROM will collect texts, images, stories, and songs contributed by members of Red since the inception of the network in order to offer it as an approach to Argentine culture.

2.2. The Members of Red and the Argentine Diaspora

One member of the *Café* describes her fellows as "men and women versed in diverse sciences and distinguished by their activities. There are literate persons, enterprising workers, and emigrants, people who have left the country

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[12] Juan Gril, "De chiquilin te miraba de afuera, ahora te miro por VR," <http://www.uic.edu/~jayvee/morel/quees.html>, 1995.

either for political reasons, exasperation, persecution, or for their own reasons."[13] There are members who left the country in stressful moments, some escaping from the repression of dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s, while others evaded the hyperinflation of 1989 and 1990. Many form part of the so-called brain drain, the migration of middle class intellectuals that constantly plagues Latin American countries. There are also members who are second-generation migrants, who were born abroad but continue to have cultural attachments to the land of their parents. Finally there are, in growing number, people who join Red from Argentina.

Although many coneteros living overseas consider themselves exiles, I will refer to the experience of Red members as a whole as diaspora: a dispersion of a national society that includes the homeland. Exile, as Clifford points out, is individualistic in focus, while diaspora "is tempered by networks of community [and] collective practices of displaced dwelling" (Diasporas 329). Red is one of the centres around which such collective practices converge. "Argentina," says a veteran conetero, "is a country that many would like to (or have to) leave convinced that they don't leave anything behind. And it is also the country to which, as soon as they arrive in another place, they want to re-establish links, sometimes through our *Café*, in order to

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[13] Paulina Ponsowy, "¿Qué es el Ar-C@fé?" <http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu/cafe.htm>.

recover at least a bit of the nothing they left behind."[14] Virtual communities can be thought of as crystallizations of social networks and computer technologies that co-create "each other in an overlapping multiplicity of complex interactions" (Stone, War of Desire 88).

Although Red is probably not representative of the Argentine diaspora, the stories that unfold in members' collaborations and debates document traveling routes and motives for leaving the country. They also permit an outline of the periods of Argentina's recent history which motivated movements of economic migration and exile. In the conversations in the *Café*, *Literaria*, and *Deportes*, expressions of frustration by scientists, physicians, engineers and other professionals living overseas are ignited by perceptions of a fatally unchangeable situation of displacement they had to undergo in their homeland. A conetero living in Israel who migrated in 1989 during the largest hyperinflation in Argentina's history, considers himself an exile rather than a migrant. His account of why he left the country echoes the feeling of many others: "seven years ago I felt oppressed by [the situation of] immorality and injustice, by the lack of future and dignity . . . . I felt it would be immoral to raise children in a society like that."[15] He points out that he only realized

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[14] L.P., "REPLY: Que es Argentina?" in Argentina-Cafe, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 4 March 1997.
[15] M.R., "REPLY: Exilio," in Argentina-Cafe, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 5 March 1997.

how deep his feelings really were once he found others in the *Café* who had verbalized similar thoughts in their explanation for living overseas.

The stories of the members of Red permit the reconstruction of circuits preferred by certain groups of emigrants.[16] Most coneteros reside in North America. An important number migrated to Europe enjoying the advantages of double citizenship they inherited from their Italian and Spanish parents. A few live in Australia, Brazil and Mexico. There are numerous doubly diasporic Jews -in diaspora as Jews and as Argentines living overseas, some of whom have migrated to Israel following their faith, but also in search of economic and political stability. There are coneteros whose connection with Argentina is a wife or a husband, and there are a few who became acquainted with the country through some special circumstance in their lives. Some members have been living in the host country for decades, others are nomadic and have experiences to tell about more than one society. Itinerants par excellence, students living

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[16] In fact, the outward movement of people follows some of the routes, but in the opposite direction, travelled by the migratory movements that suplied the Argentine melting pot. This was depicted by one member of Red that quoted the following "Recipe for Making an Argentine" (P. "Receta para hacer un Argentino," in Argentina-Cafe, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 6 March 1997):

Add in the following order: one Indian woman, two spanish horsemen, three mestizo gauchos, one English traveler, half a Basque worker, and a pinch of black slave. Allow to cook for 300 years at low temperature. Before serving, quickly add five Italians, a Russian Jew, a German, a Galician, three-fourths of a Lebanese, and finally a whole Frenchman. Allow to sit for 50 years, then serve.
Source: Argentine website at <http://www.middlebury.edu/~leparc/htm/food.htm>.

abroad are active participants in the *Café*. Some of them continuing to post messages even when they return to Argentina to visit their parents.

Red emerged from diaspora culture and is now a transnational community, attached to multiple locales. People in diaspora play central organizing roles, but the participation from Argentina is significant in number and growing. The life of most members living overseas does not appear to be governed by what Clifford calls a teleology of return (Diasporas 306) . "I know the country is not the same, I have visited it enough to know it, but it has the smells, sounds and gestures I love," answered one member when another inquired of his fellows if they would go back to Argentina if the social and political situation improved.[17] Yet, Argentina occupies the centre of the community, not only as the geopolitical space from which common traditions originate, or as the place to which they remain attached by links of kinship, business circuits, and travel trajectories. It is also a society with whose destiny coneteros remain concerned.

The membership of Red reflects, on the one hand, the fact that the use of computers and the Net is still male-dominated, and, on the other, the fact that women are affected differently by travelling and diasporic experiences. "Life for women in diasporic situations,"

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[17] O.C., "REPLY: Volver...?" in Argentina-Café, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 29 May 1997.

Clifford remarks, "can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies" (Diasporas 314). Women are less likely to migrate independently from men. Even though there are a few exceptions, in most cases of members living overseas, the husband is the family member who is the active participant in Red. One can know about his family only through his accounts. There are, however, some female members of Red living abroad on their own, most of them as scholars and students. This probably explains why the network does not reflect migratory patterns of the whole Argentine diaspora but only those of certain sectors of its middle class intellectuals. We have to keep in mind that the dispersal of the Argentine society includes also other people who had to leave home in order to survive, but who do not have access to computers and networks or do not identify with the practices of Red.

Female members of Red lead discussions on topics such as human rights and have been able to introduce changes leading to a less discriminatory use of language in the exchange of emails—in Argentina the idea of "political correctness" in language does not even exist: when one refers to a generic individual it is customary to use masculine pronouns and adjectives. Yet, what is probably the most significant aspect of women's presence in Red, is their occupation of strategic executive positions. Elena Fraboschi

is the administrator and co-founder of the mailing lists; other women are also very active in the design of *Gardel* and in the construction of the literature and human rights home pages in *Gardel*. As Clifford points out, women in diasporic situations have fundamental roles in the preservation of "values of propriety and religion, speech and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols" and in the adaptation to "a network of ongoing connections outside the host country" (Diasporas 314). Female participation has a strong rearticulatory role in Red. Coneteras from Argentina, are strong promoters and organizers of the agenda of real life gatherings in Buenos Aires, which take place whenever members of Red living abroad visit the country. They even have a real life place (Café El Taller) where they get together frequently in order to plan events. Women are, finally, important contributors to the cookbook.

Diasporas have borders that are defined by the relation between diasporic individuals and the diverse narratives of integration, acceptance or rejection they find in their new social and cultural realities. Diaspora families develop multiple forms of attachment, accommodation and resistance to the host society, but there is always a dilemma posed by the volatility of established forms in the trans-generational reproduction of culture. As Arjun Appadurai suggests, "the search for steady points of reference" becomes difficult, and, for the younger generations, culture becomes a matter of rational "choice, justification and

representation" (288-299). A member of Red living in London devised an idea to use the Internet in order to offer an alternative to this problem and created the IRC channel *#pibes*[18]. The channel has been a success since its creation. It gathers kids from eight to sixteen and the policy of the channel is not to allow adults. Some parents are satisfied because they find this a way to encourage their children to preserve the language. Among the participants of *#pibes* are children of migrants and of coneteros living in Argentina as well.

As in other virtual communities, people in Red establish relationships that go beyond the discussions of human rights, politics or history they may have in the *Café*. Coneteros are constantly preoccupied by one another's real lives. It is not uncommon to find emails from members sharing the sense of expectation experienced by a mother whose child is about to return to Buenos Aires after a long period of absence, sending greetings to parents who have just given birth, or reporting on the recovery of a member who had to undergo surgery. As in Rheingold's WELL, Red has seen marriages and divorces, births and deaths.

The intense links the community has created in virtual life have generated the organization of face-to-face activities that have grown in importance and frequency in the last few years. Along with mutual exchanges of support,

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[18] *Pibe* means "kid" in Argentine *lunfardo*, the argot of tango.

there are periodic meetings that bring together members on a regional basis. There are, as well, annual meetings in Buenos Aires that are held at the end of the year, when some coneteros return to spend Christmas with relatives, and there are smaller welcome parties when a member comes back during other times of the year. The most notable of these gatherings has been the so-called mother of all barbecues, which took place at the end of May 1997.[19] About fifty members from distant points of the globe and their families attended a series of gatherings that took place over a weekend in Rome. As many wanted to attend but could not afford the trip, a member living in Spain raised funds to buy a ticket and a name was selected by a draw. For many, the event was the first face-to-face meeting. Besides regional and global encounters, Red has organized a network of contacts all over the world for those members who travel to cities where other members live. For that purpose, a member living in Australia has set up the website *Tamara*, containing a list of email addresses of those interested in hosting travellers.[20]

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[19] Walter D. Fernandez, "Bienvenidos a la Madre de Todos los Asados," <http://www2.eis.net.au/~wdf/tgm.htm>, 1996.

[20] Walter D. Fernandez, "Bienvenidos a Tamara," <http://www2.eis.net.au/~wdf/tamara.htm>, 1996. Tamara gives an idea of how much dispersed around the world the members of Red are. The people whose email addresses appear in Tamara live in different towns and cities in: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweeden, United Kingdom, and the United States.

Crossovers between the virtual and the real also occur in the organization of the community itself. The fund-raising campaigns that permitted the purchase of the main computer server (from which the mailing lists are operated) and that allowed one member more to be present in Rome for the global meeting have strengthened the confidence within Red. There are members that envision these activities as the seeds for future projects in which the network would become actively involved in the provision of aid to needy sectors in Argentina. These proposals, however, are controversial and none of them has matured so far.

Behind the network rooted in cyberspace exists a real community bound together in solidarity and by collaboration. Red is now larger than the part of it that can be grasped in its public spaces. Its solidarity network includes present as well as former participants, as some people who are no longer members of the mailing lists continue to collaborate in other activities. The mappable centre of this community is somewhere between the *Café*, *Deportes*, *Literaria*, *Noticias*, *Mafaldita*, *Gardel*, *FAQ*, *#argentina*, *#cafeteros*, and *#pibes*. The counterpart of what can be seen in these resources in cyberspace is a community whose shape is like that of a rhizome and which sprawls across the real map following the traces of the Argentine diaspora.

Red started as a communication tool for Argentine migrants and is now a transnational community that also includes residents of Argentina. For years it was almost

unknown to most computer users living in Argentina. This was the situation until the distribution of commercial connections to the Internet was authorized, making it accessible to an increasing number of participants. Until two years ago, Internet connectivity in Argentina was only available to some university professors, students and researchers. In 1995, the national government passed regulation authorizing the telecommunications monopoly Telintar to distribute Internet services on a commercial basis. Meshworks of companies of all sizes emerged to participate in building up the different local portions of the Net. In a few months, the corporations that took control of the national telecommunication infrastructure enhanced the capacity of previously existing private online services, grassroots Bulletin Board Systems, and university and state networks to provide access to the Net, extending the range of users to those who have the required competences and economic resources.

As the Internet slowly penetrates Argentine civil society, questions arise about the influence the network may have in fostering its development. In this context, the experience of coneteros living in Argentina, and involved in a community whose governance and orientation they share with members living abroad bears consideration. Trying to understand the reasons why he spends hours every day reading and posting messages on the *Café*, one user from Buenos Aires sees his experience as a way of traveling and learning about

other life-styles, as a form of establishing contact with those who had the courage to leave the country for good, and as an enriching way of knowing how people see Argentina from the outside.[21]

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[21] Carlos García, "¿Qué es el Ar-C@fé?" <http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu/cafe.htm>.

Chapter Three

Cultural Practices and Collective Sense-Making: Mapping Interaction in Red.

Sherry Turkle has suggested that the analyses by technological determinists and the instrumental simplifications of utilitarian analysis of the Net do not recognize the complexity of the questions that participation in virtual worlds raises about identity, sense of community and modes of social interaction. Distributed forms of communication based on the exchange of electronic mail between people living in diverse contexts points to the importance of examining how interaction within a community centred in cyberspace shapes modes of exchange, social practices and identity. Peter Dahlgren characterizes sociocultural interaction as a dimension of the public sphere that pertains to "the realm of people's encounters and discussions with each other, with their collective sense-making and their cultural practices" (18). In this chapter I concentrate on the analysis of Red as a social space that articulates a community that is centred in the resources its members have built on the Internet. I look at the way communicants mark off their space of interaction and define their mutual relations. What forms

of interaction contribute to the maintenance of a diasporic community in cyberspace? What types of social bonds develop in a community where strangers living around the world congregate daily to talk in a space where they expect to find someone who speaks the same dialect? The conditions that define Red as a social space—like those of other social spaces, be they virtual or real—do not easily lend themselves to a single framework of analysis.

The construction of the interactive resources of Red and the definition of the character of the community are both the result of the collaborative nature of the network. The delineation of the characteristics of the sites that *Gardel* links, the topics of conversation in the *Café*, its administration, modes of discourse and forms of discussion are all marked by the fact that Red is a distributed transnational community whose only mappable centre is located in the settlements it has built in cyberspace. The convergence of migrants and residents is central to defining the visions of Argentina that circulate in Red. Daily life in the community is marked by the porous nature of the line between the social context where members of Red live and the way in which they describe their online practices. The organization of Red's online resources, the symbolic universe they vehiculize and the processes that set the agendas are all affected by battles and negotiations between individuals immersed in different physical contexts, by the experiences they undergo as they

enter a space of Argentine culture in virtual life, and by their sense of being part of a community that exists only through the mediation of technology.

3.1. Contexts and Contents: Discourse and Interaction in Red.

The analysis of the changing dimensions of social and cultural interaction of virtual worlds presents, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, the challenges of examining a moving target: there is always "the compulsion to constantly update the account," even as one is writing about it (Electronic Vernacular 23). When analyzing the use of global computer networks by diasporic formations, one encounters forms of exchange in electronic space in which people juxtapose interpretative and performative competences they have in common, with others developed out of the experience of living in different locations. There is a discursive dimension to this interaction that has to do with the forms of writing and reading that develop among the members of Red, their resources and repertoires, their ways of meaning-making, and their modes of discourse.

The character of Red is largely defined by the diversity of issues, agendas, and projects that its members address. As in any other unmoderated discussion forum on the Internet, the discussions circulating in the mailing lists of Red overlap: different conversations go on at the same time, constructing threads that layer one over the other. In order to follow them, one has to guide oneself by

following the "subject" of the postings. Members interweave talk about "Anorexia in Argentina," or "How to make a barbecue without smoke," with irritated discussion about the government's human rights policy, and with subjects more appropriate to the eve of the World Cup of soccer such as "Why the other *Sudacas*[1] don't like us?" in *Argentina-Deportes*. There are moments of relative calm and there are occasional flame wars. There are members whose competences or whose involvement in various types of organizations activate discussions and there is a silent majority of observers who, from time to time, introduce a point.

The exchange of messages that takes place in Red covers vast areas of interest. As in an actual Buenos Aires café, debates on the *Café, Argentina-Literaria* and *Argentina-Deportes*, are often permeated by efforts to elucidate the answer to what Julie Taylor calls the excruciating questions about Argentine identity: Is Argentina a modern society? Is it European or Latin American? Is it a nation that deserves respect or is it a banana republic? Is it independent or newly colonized? (Tango 377). These and other questions that puzzle Argentine society are recuperated in subjects and forms of writing in Red, in many cases in light of both physical and temporal distance from the events occurring in the mother country. Not surprisingly, human rights and democracy in

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[1] Pejorative way to refer to South Americans used in Spain.

Argentina come up frequently, sometimes embedded in the treatment of issues as diverse as soccer or cinema. Corruption among government officials, the appropriateness of free market policies to resolve the economic crisis, and, above all, the chronic authoritarianism of government institutions are often discussed, sometimes by establishing comparisons with experiences of other societies. Reading Red one wonders why Argentine migrants cannot erase from the horizon of their concerns the destiny of the society they have left behind.

Although political discussions are usually triggered by events happening in Argentina, in many cases they appear embedded in both international news and in news that is perceived as local by members in diaspora. The triumph of the left in the elections in Britain and France brought about conversations, with insights from members of Red living in those countries, on the role of the opposition to Argentina's neoconservative government. The investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing was a point of reference in talks about the negligence of the Argentine justice system in dealing with two never solved bomb attacks on the Jewish community which occurred in Buenos Aires. Sometimes it is not the connection with the Argentine reality but the style of conversation that makes it feel Argentine, as happened, for instance, in the discussion of the recapture of the Japanese embassy in Peru by government troops. Forms of understanding reality forged in the troubled process of

recent Argentine history appear even when dealing with foreign politics, as a veteran conetero pointed out:

> Beyond the sad incidents in Peru, beyond our rationality that allows us to feel that we are right more than 80 percent of the times; beyond our wonderful desire for peace; beyond our obedient acceptance of stories as they are told to us, beyond passions and ingenious or lucid discourses, beyond our witticism—in part wisdom and in part carelessness—that makes us display self confidence, appears our Argentine mark: the stamp of fear.[2]

Aspects of Argentina are recurring subjects in the messages exchanged in Red. However, it is not so much the direct reference to *la Matria*[3] and its culture that creates the idea of home as it is the perception of being in a place talking with people with whom there are unspoken common codes. "We share a code, and that is not of secondary importance, but, and this is what is really important to understand about this whole thing: here people have other codes," says a member living in Mexico.[4] The notion of shared codes brings us to interrogate their role in sustaining diasporic formations in cyberspace. Are the forms of common knowledge that surface as shared interpretative frameworks what remains of the sense of belonging to an imagined community when it is liberated

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[2] P., "El síndrome argentino," in Argentina-Café, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 27 April 1997.
[3] The word "matria" is the one preferred by members of Red to refer to Argentina. The correct word in Spanish would be "patria" (fatherland). Matria is an ironic contraction of "madre patria", the way Spain used to be referred to in times of the colony.
[4] T.I.F., "El sentimiento anti-argentino en Mexico," in Argentina-Deportes, <argentina-deportes@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 29 June 1997.

from geographic constraints—and, consequently, emancipated from the gravitational force of the cultural technologies and institutions of a single nation? As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett shows in her account of the uses of computer mediated communications by the Jewish diaspora, dispersed societies start using the Net for purposes of maintaining traditions and rituals, but they soon move on to use it to talk about all kinds of subjects (Electronic Vernacular 32-36). What remains important is the perspective from which issues are dealt with.

The fact that Red pursues the goal of being a network of Argentines, does not prevent it from reflecting social textures and differences, social heterogeneity and multiplicity. But difference and multiplicity acquire new meanings in the forms of exchange and collaboration that appear in a diasporic community. The dispersion of the members of Red into regionalisms based on the countries that host them is a situation that is sometimes difficult for new members to understand. The double existence of Red members in different physical settings and in a shared virtual place creates "minorities." "Those living in the U.S.", "those living in Spain", or "those living in Argentina," for instance, tend to have viewpoints that reflect their personal interests as individuals inserted in the society that represents their future.

Coneteros have their existences divided between the virtual world which they help build on a daily basis, and

the multiplicity of actual worlds they inhabit. The acquaintance of members of Red with two distinct cultural spaces derived from their position as members of a dispersed society living in different contexts, allows them "an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that -to borrow a phrase from music- is contrapuntal" (Said qtd. in Clifford, Diasporas 329.) This contrapuntal stance can become, sometimes, the source of stimulating insights into Argentine politics, human rights, and economic issues. However, there are no safeguards from distortions that can appear when the social situation of a country is pondered from a distance, without the experience of being there in person and writing as an individual immersed in a different context. As Néstor Gracía Canclini points out, the practice of Internet-based support groups in the Chiapas crisis shows the difficulties of approaching a local problem, with its complex multicultural reality, from abstract principles of democracy and justice (ch. 10). While members overseas usually support their right to "talk about the society where [they] live now or used to live in the past," and "that includes Argentina,"[5] as a conetero who lives in Denmark points out, members living in Argentina sometimes complain that those living abroad are unable to understand problems they are just reading about and not experiencing directly.

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[5] E. P. "REPLY: Desilución," in Argentina-Cafe, <argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu>, 4 March 1997.

For both resident and migrant members, participation in Red implies a border relation with a different cultural reality, one that is lived in and through cyberspace. For all members, the interface of the computer becomes a surface of translation, of intersection between different discourses of citizenship, and of the negotiation of their cultural identity. The geographic distribution of members of Red, their immersion in diverse social realities allows them to assume positions as "cosmopolitan intermediaries" (Clifford, Traveling Cultures) and to become translators not only in terms of language but also of cultural and political contexts of their daily lives. In an intense debate on feminism and "machismo," for instance, women in Argentina aligned themselves with their comrades in North America and Europe in an enriching exchange of public and personal emails.

As a forum for exchange, Red permits the expression of heterogeneous views by groups of members living in different places. But it is also heterogeneous in the sense that it connects different memories within the dispersed society. As it is composed by migrants that fled the country at different moments of Argentine history, sometimes forced by authoritarian regimes, in other cases looking for a better economic future, Red links visions of past events of Argentina, sometimes frozen in time by diaspora and exile, with voices that talk about the present and the future. Younger members are able to converse with

their older peers who possess different vantage points from which to observe crucial past events. Episodes of recent Argentine history, like the governments of Juan Domingo Perón or the agitated sixties and seventies, are fleshed out by coneteros who experienced them. In this sense, not only does Red contribute to the establishment of a new spatial regime for the construction of identity but it also connects across different temporalities.

From the point of view of members that participate from Argentina, Red can be considered a space of participation with co-nationals whose symbolic economy is oriented by its own political coordinates. Jesús Martín Barbero has analyzed popular marketplaces as circuits of communication that express distinct cultural matrixes, as places, in other words, where the discourse of everyday practices is constituted by traces of identity that are in conflict with the symbolic abstraction of the market (Procesos 98-110). As in those plebeian realms of public life, members of Red create and circulate symbolic material within a communication circuit whose topography and signs of identity are different not only from those offered by local cultural industries, but also from those of other Internet spaces.

3.2. Defining Inside and Outside: Membership and Space of Interaction in Red.

The spatial character of sociocultural interaction requires consideration of the nature of the setting, the

space where people meet, and the factors that "foster or hinder their interaction in these spaces" (Dahlgren 20). Computer mediated communication offers a type of social space that is conceptual rather than definable by topographical coordiantes. Virtual gathering places are referred to in spatial terms or use spatial imagery (like the *Café*) but their nature is cognitive and social. Whereas in real life communities, people have a strongly shared mental model of the place where their interactions occur, "in virtual communities, the sense of place requires an individual act of imagination" (Rheingold Virtual Communities 63). The perception of inhabiting a common space contributes to the creation of a sense of community in the virtual world. But virtual places are not only of a conceptual nature, they find real existence in the systems through which they are run. The mode of interaction (real time/asynchronous), the type of application through which the interaction takes place (Mud, mailing list, newsgroup, IRC), its internal management, its distribution in terms of topics (music, computers) or forms of membership (public, private) define and structure cyberspace communities.

Marc Augé points out that the way a community relates to the space it occupies expresses its identity and the relationships between its members. In Red people elaborate strategies to envisage their identity both as a group and as individuals, conceptualizing their mutual relationships and their relation to outsiders by focusing on the online

spaces around which the community has developed. Community relations evolve in relatively confined spaces (the mailing lists of Red and the IRC channel *#cafeteros*), although they are not spaces in the conceptual sense of the territory that determines the limits of the community. Rather, these virtual spaces should be understood in the sense of a "culture area", a zone that defines "limits of effective communication" in which the community holds in common a "system of significant symbols . . . around which group activities are organized" (Strauss, qtd. in Stone, War of Desire 87). The treatment of the interactive resources in which Red has its visible centre—the way in which it gives meaning to the space it occupies—is one of the means of grasping the texture of the interaction between its members. Forms of use outline the borders of the community, defining how bounded it needs to be and how much it needs to establish a distinction between inside and outside.

In Red, the space of interaction and the character of community relations are implicated in one another, as is demonstrated by concerns of *Café* members with the manner in which the conference space is structured. Although the administration created the sublists *Noticias, Literaria* and *Deportes* in order to channel part of the flow of its conference space to more specific audiences, the *Café* remained the core of the community and continued to be the central place to talk about news and literature (the sports list has gained a certain independence). The *Café* lacks

control over topic orientation: there is no regulation on whether the contributions from those engaged in the discussion have to be serious and meaningful or noisy and humorous, written in a scholarly or 'rapid fire' manner. Its style attracts the participation of different sorts of members while many more silently attend the conversation.[6] At the same time, however, postings to the Café increase the volume of information each member receives to a point where participation is resented insofar as it demands more hours in front of the computer than many are able to take away from their offline activities.

The volume of messages in the *Café* has been the reason frequently cited by members who quit. Once Red began to operate from its own server, the administration proposed a restructuring of the conference in such a way that the *Café* would be divided into a list for longer and elaborate messages and a list for noisy idle talk. The bitter opposition that the proposal received allowed unspoken resentment between members to surface. People whose contribution used to be more modest felt that the creation of a list—of which they would be excluded—for members capable of producing longer texts was elitist. Others just preferred to continue receiving all, including "noise", because they found that noise was precisely what created

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[6] An average of 10% of the members are active participants in the Café. However, this number can increase according to the kind of topics that are being dealt with.

the atmosphere that resembled an Argentine café. The episode made evident, on the one hand, one of the limits to its expansion that Red will need to overcome if it is to attract new members. On the other hand, it permitted an insight into the distribution of relations of power according to degrees and forms of participation.

The governance of virtual worlds consists in administering what is said in public spaces. There are highly restricted online places where one has to get authorization to enter or speak, and places with general access where anyone can say anything. Concerns over irresponsible behaviour online have generated lengthy discussion about rights, responsibilities, and good manners. Self-management in Red is encouraged from two sets of rules members are requested to observe. On the one hand, there is a code of netiquette[7] that introduces members to manners in public conversations, which are not much different from other netiquette rules. On the other hand, there is a reminder to new members on the website *Mafaldita* of the kind of behaviour Red considers acceptable: respect for "human rights, [and] no discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic group, or religion."[8] These consensual principles that govern conversations in the *Café* form a synthesis of rules of civic conduct between members that

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[7] Available via email to Horacio Chiesa, <H.Chiesa@agora.stm.it>.
[8] Yaco, "Mensaje a los C@feteros nuevos," <http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu/nuevos.htm>.

have been refined after hundreds of megabytes of written exchange. Although conversation is unmoderated, serious violations of these rules have resulted in the disconnection of members, establishing forms of political "othering" in Red. One such case occurred when a member living in Argentina began to construct his online identity as a person with brutish manners, as someone who, no matter the topic of discussion, had the capacity to disturb the rules of conviviality with his surreptitious aggressivity. His violations of netiquette codes were tolerated—although some members did so with disgust—but after he began to discriminate against Jews in his signature block, he was disconnected from the lists.[9]

Another moment that was critical in defining the character of Red as a virtual social space appeared in relation to online identities and to the possibility of replacing the mailing lists with USENET newsgroups. When people join social spaces in computer networks, they move into a culture of simulation where representations of reality substitute for the real. Users of computer mediated social spaces favour the construction of alternative personas, an activity which is made possible by the non-corporeality of the interaction and, to a certain degree, by the anonymity of Internet participation insofar as

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[9] Carlos Poli, "REPLY: Elena F. (aka Sonia /Sonja la Conetera)???," in <soc.culture.argentina>, 5 May 1996.

textual communication is the only resource available for the symbolization of the virtual space of interaction. Anonymity "gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and try out new ones" (Turkle 12). For these reasons, anonymity is largely exploited as a playful resource by users of Muds, IRC channels, and, sometimes, by participants of newsgroups and mailing lists.

Red, however, has practices and policies that lessen the indeterminacy produced by virtuality. In order to be a member of the lists of Red one has to supply the marks of identity that contribute to define what Stone calls location technologies: telephone numbers, actual addresses and other attributes that allow institutions to construct around the physical body the set of precisely determined characteristics that fix it in stable relationship with the subject. This requirement has been the subject of lengthy controversy. The position of the majority of Red participants has been to try as much as possible to discourage the presence of 'phantom members' that could interfere with the highly prized spirit of conviviality and solidarity on the lists. Thus, if anybody uses an online persona, the administration of the lists will always be able to verify—e.g. by making a telephone call—to whom it belongs in real life. The personal information of all members is available via anonymous FTP, with the exception of the data of those who wish to make their information

available only to the administration. These regulatory practices define another way in which power relations and degrees of freedom are distributed in the interior of the community.

Among the group of those who support anonymity and indeterminacy in the mailing lists of Red, are those who would like to feel more free to talk or to develop the theatrical aspect of what Rheingold terms "written conversation as a performing art" (Virtual Communities 61), and those who fear that making personal information public could result in its misuse.[10] The newsgroups alt.culture.argentina and soc.culture.argentina were created in 1993 by members from this latter group in response to the controversy. The people who initiated the protest left the mailing lists, but continued to participate in the construction of *Gardel* and *FAQ*. Although the founders attempted to re-create the *Café* spirit, the open and unruly character of the newsgroups resulted in their rapid transformation into USENET style. The newsgroups not only became the scene for attacks on minority groups and women, but also turned into arenas of participation for other Spanish speaking groups. The closed nature of the mailing list technology seems essential to protect the integrity in Red and to prevent it from

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[10] It is necessary to point out that privacy of information is a sensitive issue in Argentina since dictators have always used people's records for repressive purposes.

dissolving into an indistinguishable mixture of Latino cultures. In this sense, maintaining Red as a closed group where identities are known and entrance can be controlled can be interpreted as a boundary-defining practice, as what Thompson describes as a form of reasserting collective identity by, at the same time, excluding others (ch. 6).

By regulating its settlement in cyberspace, Red emphasizes its character as a community whose members live scattered across the world and whose roots remain in the virtual world they have constructed. The use of location technologies is not the only way in which coneteros attempt to escape from the indeterminacy posed by virtuality. Other spatial practices based on travel and face-to-face encounters, shared responsibilities in on- and offline activities, and the collection of members' photographs available in *Gardel* and *Mafaldita* are different efforts through which the community attempts to counter vagueness and bring stability to relationships beyond the virtual. These forms of regulation of the inside and the outside of the community do not necessarily imply that Red belongs to a closed group of individuals. The mailing lists of Red have a continuous flow of new members, and there are members who disconnect their email accounts for a time only to return after a few months. There are also former members who remain active only in the construction of the web-based resources.

The regulation of the space of interaction in Red should be seen more as a way of ensuring that the space provides an anchor for the community, and not as a strategy of normalization. Woods makes the distinction between freespaces, which "require inventiveness in everyday living in order to become inhabitable," and, 'ready made', 'pre-packaged', or 'user friendly' spaces, of which probably the best CMC models are the chatrooms offered by commercial online services like CompuServe and America Online. Freespaces are not 'inhabited', but produced. They originate as useless and meaningless, but "become useful and acquire meaning only as they are inhabited by particular people" (Woods qtd. in Menser 304-305). "The *Café* is part of my home", says a woman living in England. Altogether, the interactive resources of Red constitute a model of the production of space, a type of virtual space. Red loses its abstract qualities as it is practiced and produced by collective operations that turn it into space insofar as it develops the ability to express group identity as well as the relationships between individuals (e.g., de Certeau 117-118; Augé 49-81). Yet, it is not a space that is free from disciplinary practices, nor it is devoid of relations of power and difference that emerge in the interaction among its occupants.

3.3. Social Bonds and Identity in Red

The sense of community and the formation of collective bonds develop at different levels in Red. At one level,

there is a sense of commonality that is linked to shared interests, to the perception that being part of this electronic community is to form part of a large solidarity network where members can count on each other and join online in order to participate in collaborative projects. Red shares with virtual communities built around other interests what Marc Smith defines as collective goods. Collective goods are what "no individual member of the community could provide for themselves if they had acted alone," and, for that reason, compose a basic cement for online collectivities.[11] Smith distinguishes between three basic forms of collective goods: social network capital, knowledge capital and communion.

Social capital, which refers to the expansion of social relations that participants find in virtual communities, was one of the goals that the members of the dispersed Argentine society had in mind when they created Red. Red stimulates the growth of lateral contacts with other members of the dispersed society, not only in virtual life but also in the constant permeability between real and virtual life. Such expansion of relations has been important in the maintenance of links with Argentina, in the exchange of experiences of living abroad, and in the process of working through the adjustment to foreign cultures. The notion of social capital also encompasses

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[11] Marc Smith, "Voices from the WELL. The Logic of the Virtual Commons," <ftp://nicco.sscnet.ucla.edu/pub/papers/virtcomm.doc>.

other forms of relation that Red made possible, such as linking members of the community who are engaged in the struggle for human rights and the environment, and helping members develop acquaintances with others who work on similar fields—most notably, English-Spanish translators and computer specialists.

The valuable information that members seek in virtual communities is what Smith refers to as knowledge capital. In virtual communities, exchange of information functions as a gift economy: members exchange knowledge and obtain recognition (Rheingold, Virtual Communities). These exchanges appear in Red in several forms. Sometimes upon request, sometimes not, members post recipes, translations of local news stories, reports on human rights, analyses of the economic situation, descriptions of programs on Argentine television, or information about travel and immigration to other countries. Since an important number of the members of Red are professionals, they also contribute knowledge of a more formal kind, sending information on subjects like medicine, history, astronomy, literature, and music.

Red is a space for knowledge transactions and collaborative projects. People living in diverse parts of the world contribute information and segments of their work, part of which crystallizes in *Gardel* (whose databases on tango, Argentine cuisine and literature are unique on the Net), *Mafaldita*, *Café de Morel* and *FAQ*, in the

organization of offline events and in fund-raising activities. Another equally important aspect of information exchange takes place in the dynamic flow of the mailing lists. Mailing lists and the USENET have, for some time, been scenarios for the emergence of collaborative projects, such as digital quilt making and the construction of online cookbooks (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Electronic Vernacular 30-32). In a diasporic community where most members remain unknown to one another, these forms of collective work provide strong reinforcements of communal bonds since they are palpable evidence of what members are capable of when they work together, a point which the administrator of the *Café* is quick to remark.

At another level, Red is a community where a particular kind of bonds flourishes; in this sense, it is a social space where direct and significant relationships grow between participants (Williams 75-76). This is where communion, the other collective good mentioned by Smith, appears. Communion refers to the sense of membership and camaraderie which suggests "a non-instrumental contact with the group, an emotional bond." The collective occupancy of the virtual spaces of Red allows relations between members to emerge and sediment in forms of social interaction that frequently involve interpenetration between virtuality and face-to-face encounters. Ray Oldenburg distinguishes between three types of spaces of sociability: workplaces, the home, and places where people gather for conviviality.

These "third places", like the café, the pub, or the tavern, have purposes that "cannot be supplied by any other agencies in the society," and are of central importance in the formation of community relations (xi). Rheingold envisions virtual communities as a particular form of third places and describes how much the WELL, a virtual community based in the San Francisco Bay Area, resembles one of those spaces. Muds and the IRC also show how personal relationships in virtual life can be so compelling that participation in virtual communities has become for many computer users the predominant form of emotional investment (Turkle 177-232). As in other virtual hang-outs, regulars visit the mailing lists of Red looking for company and friendship, but at the same time, they seek personal relationships with folks who speak the same dialect, share common interests, cultural competences and a sense of belonging. The increased permeability between virtual and real lives establishes a situation in which personal bonds are reinforced. The risk of such powerful community relations understood in these terms is the creation of a closed group that may tend to exclude new members as "unassimilated others" (I.M.Young, qtd. in Dahlgren 140).

The forms of social relation mentioned so far have a singular place in Red, but are common to other types of virtual communities. What distinguishes Red, however, are the bonds built on what Thompson defines as the identity and hermeneutic aspects of tradition: a pre-existing sense

of belonging to the same national community and the presence of a set of shared means of making sense of the world (179-206). It could be argued that the moment of identification with the imagined community of the nation that predates Red's founding is the moment that anchors its collective identity and defines its borders as a virtual community. As I stated above, since the invention of the printing press, the media have been central in the articulation of national identities and the sense of belonging to national communities as spatially bounded experiences. For a long time, the media have contributed to the shape of imagined communities by creating spaces of shared cultural experiences within the borders of the nation-state. Red illustrates how the Internet enables the construction of spaces where a sense of national belonging need not be confined to national territories.

In Red, there are practices that tend to affirm social bonds by maintaining or reinforcing the sense of common belonging. On the one hand, this affirmation can be seen in practices of collecting culture. *Gardel* aims to be, as its administrator acknowledges, the most comprehensive website related to the Argentine symbolic heritage. One of its purposes is to accumulate all forms of expression of Argentine culture. On the other hand, practices of naming—calling a computer "Mafalda", designating the website *Gardel*—are attempts to fix identity in shared images that, at the same time, rely on referents that

express a certain consensus among members yet define Red by images that a more traditionalistic approach to Argentine culture would have rejected. Overall, day-to-day participation in Red could be considered, in the case of members living outside Argentina, a form of sustaining affiliations with the nation through a ritualized re-enactment of identity by means of the exchange and transmission of symbolic material in a shared locale of interaction. Moreover, there are communicative practices in Red that cultivate others that are already highly ritualized. Such is the case of *Argentina-Deportes*, which is dominated by the discussion of soccer, but which also contains real-time narrations of matches (members in Argentina send messages during the matches keeping others informed of the events), verbal fights between fans of different teams, and opinions. As Pablo Alabarces points out, there are few practices with a greater capacity to articulate the variety of dimensions of national identity in Argentina than those which concentrate on the preferred *fútbol* team and the national squad.

However, neither does Red intend to be a group whose goal is the cultivation of an enduring set of traditions, nor is the Argentine character of its social spaces defined without struggle between different world views and juxtapositions of symbolic content from a wide range of sources. Red contains social spaces for the ritualized re-enactment of practices of identity, but at the same time it

is a place where the repertory of emblems of national culture appear interwoven with symbolic material influenced by diverse local views. In the *Café* and the other lists, fragments of Argentine culture are gathered together with accounts of travels through the Italian countryside, analyses of college education in Tokyo, discussions of the history of the state of Montana, and descriptions of moments of panic experienced in Jerusalem after terrorist attacks. Unlike other communicative practices of diaspora populations, as, for instance, the consumption of Hindi films by South Asians living in Britain, conversations in the *Café* do not attempt to fix identity by appealing to a repertoire of images of assured national origin. Rather, Red is dominated by discussion threads that reassemble elements from different societies; it is a space where discourses of identity can be understood as co-productions, to borrow a term from Gracía Canclini (114). For this reason, it is difficult to determine the cultural borders of Red as something against which it defines itself. As in other diasporic formations, the construction of identity in Red can be seen less as a "process of absolute othering, but rather of entangled tension" (Clifford, Diasporas 307).

The development of common methods of interpreting and giving meaning to the world is a dynamic process that takes place in day-to-day interaction. We can consider Red as a public sphere in the sense that it is a "societal mechanism for the production and circulation of culture," capable of

framing and giving meaning to the identities of those who participate in it (Dahlgren 23). As a public sphere, it organizes the construction of individual and collective subjectivities in a process of exchange and conversation in which the subjects for discussion are made up of a wide range of issues. This diverse repertoire of topics in turn is useful to cast new light on past, future and on-going problems of Argentine society.

The *Café* is, as a conetera points out, not a space in which to talk *about Argentina*, but one in which to talk *between Argentines*. What gives Red its singularity as a public sphere is the fact that the debate on Argentine issues takes place between migrants, who are themselves subjects of discourses of assimilation and who have learned how to be citizens in different societies, and Argentine residents, who have found in Red a space where the discussion of the social and political problems of their country can be creatively enriched by the experiences of their co-nationals living abroad. What most clearly defines social bonds in Red is the idea of an interpretative community. Its social contract is sustained by the commonality of perspectives, by peculiar forms of approaching goods, ideas, and relations shared by people for whom, at one point in their lives, Argentina was the social framework through which they constructed part of their worldview. Red embodies Gracía Canclini's assertion that today's nations are much better defined as

interpretative communities rather than by their territorial limits, or by narratives of political history (49-55).

Chapter Four

Red and *la Matria*: Connections with the Argentine Society

4.1. Citizenship in Red de Argentinos

The relation of virtual communicants to the Net is often referred to as a distinctive kind of citizenship, which some have described by the neologism "netizen". The netizen exists "as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net makes possible." Netizens physically live "in one country but [are] in contact with much of the world via the global computer network", and virtually live "next door to every other single netizen in the world" (Hauben).[1] Through the Net, individuals are able to become citizens of the global village and to involve themselves in the agenda of an emerging global civil society. Numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the fields of human rights, gender issues, environment protection, and democracy, among other concerns, use computer networks to facilitate communication with citizens around the world, enabling such principles as democracy, justice, equal rights and liberty that once found justification within the nation-state, to be recognized from

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[1] Michael Hauben, "The Net and Netizens: The Impact the Net has on People's Lives," <http://www.eff.org/pub/Net_culture/Virtual_community/netizen.paper>.

a universal and cosmopolitan perspective. Citizenship is thus understood as "a set of values that can be actualized in differential spaces—in politics, in everyday life, in the media, in public life, and in consumption," and its exercise is increasingly liberated from territorial constraints (Ortiz 139).

Citizenship can now be conceived as a conceptual framework which not only encompasses the juridical and political aspirations of a population within the space of the nation-state, but also includes emergent practices of belonging and organization among individuals in the deterritorialized spaces of an expanding world-culture. In a world traversed by intense flows of persons, messages, technology, capital, and political ideas, the nation-state is in decline as a container of the social. At the same time, post-national forms of social organization are being formed, for which the nation-state is not the main point of reference. There are dimensions of citizenship that are uprooted from territorial contexts and reembedded in new scenarios delimited by global media. It is necessary to question the dimensions of citizenship that are formed in the context of emergent virtual communities, where the construction of identities, the aesthetics of self-presentation, the codes of sociability, and the theatricality of social relations are negotiated under technologies of power that are different from those

available at the corporeal level of those who are participating in the conversations.

The current transformation of the structures, functions, and meanings of the nation-state by the new "connected" transnational processes creates realms of socio-cultural interaction over which the technologies of cultural governance that once supported the hegemonic practices of the nation-state have ceased to be effective; this is particularly evident as new communication technologies break up "established sources of the control of information and the definition and administration of persons" (Miller 47). In this moment of global geopolitical turbulence, it is still uncertain how each nation-state will "exercise jurisdictional control over these new electronic information environments" (Branscomb 84). Cultures formed within computer networks develop in a space that is emancipated from territorially defined technologies of cultural governance and prefer to promulgate the rules, practices, and codes that contribute to their own management. As mechanisms that get individuals "to act and to align their particular wills with ends imposed on them through constraining and facilitating models of possible actions" (Burchell 119), technologies of government are distorted in the space of global computer networks insofar as human intercourse in online worlds problematizes the technologies that make individuals socially intelligible. Network users have to reconcile their participation in social spaces on

the Internet with forms of organization of collective and individual subjectivities that territorially defined mechanisms for the production and circulation of culture attempt to assemble.

Red can be considered a public sphere of Argentine migrants and residents that has grown in the interstices of global communication networks. Rather than developing from planetary concerns posed by groups of activists or from organizations of the civil society at the national level, it evolved from the multiple attachments of diaspora experience and the construction of collective homes away from home for the recreation of identity. But Red did not remain simply a diaspora space in which to "maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (Clifford, Diasporas 308). It also became a space for consciousness-raising and for the articulation of citizenship for those living outside the country who had a computer, a modem and access to the Internet. As the availability of this access increased in Argentina, Red assumed a transnational character that included members participating from the homeland. Red is not a group specifically devoted to development issues, human rights, the environment, or democratization in Argentina. It is, rather, a space where the practices of groups that are devoted to these issues are articulated to the concerns of individual citizens, some living in the country, others dispersed throughout the world; all are willing to discuss

proposals and get involved, to analyze social, economic or political issues of Argentina and to find answers for excruciating questions about the links between the present state of their homeland and its troubled history.

Throughout the account of social and cultural interaction in Red I am presenting in this work, there are dimensions of citizenship that come to the surface. Some of these dimensions appear in the self-organizing processes of Red as a community. Citizenship as self-organization refers to "a conflictive practice related to power", to the definition of common problems and to decisions about how to face them (Jelin 104). Like other virtual communities, Red is an identity space that resembles collaborative literature insofar as it is co-authored by its members, who, as Turkle suggests, are both consumers and creators, where creation not only signifies authorship but also the formation of self in the creative process. Self-organization made possible the emergence of the community and evolved with it as the network grew in size and sophistication. It appears simultaneously in several areas, such as in the delegation and division of work that is necessary for the administration and development, not only of the different online resources on which Red is based, but also in the organization of the activities that have moved the community outside the sphere of the virtual. The capacity for self-organization that is available in Internet virtual communities is vital for their autonomous existence.

Citizenship also finds expression in Red as solidarity. Solidarity is the civic dimension of citizenship; it is experienced as a set of duties and responsibilities towards others and "is anchored in the subjective feelings that unite or bind a community" (Jelin 106). The idea of creating a solidarity network for the Argentine diaspora was present in the foundation of Red. Since then, numerous examples of collective solidarity among individual members have animated the life of the community. The need to provide assistance to others undergoing similar diasporic experiences materialized in the construction of resources like FAQ, but it is also present in the day-to-day postings on the mailing lists of Red. Network solidarity is not confined to the members living in diaspora; it incorporates "others" that are like "us", but who still live under the conditions "we" decided to abandon. Moreover, solidarity in Red does not terminate in initiatives relating only to its members, since it is also understood as a promotion of awareness of the state of citizens' rights in Argentina.

While solidarity entails forms of bonding, of definition of "we" and "others", it also contains a political moment: "the reference to a third party, the authority (the state)" (Jelin 109). The resources of Red can be considered among those spaces that are not necessarily defined as political, but which, by enabling practices such as the public expression of points of view, discussion, the exchange of information on issues of public interest, the

elaboration of awareness campaigns, and the organization of activities supporting the Argentine transition to democracy, create a basis for the construction of a consciousness of citizenship that encourages the participation of individuals in the public sphere. In this sense, citizenship emerges as a space of struggle within the political projects that surface in the discussions on Red. This is the dimension of citizenship that has to do with Argentina as a nation-state; here citizenship is closely related to concerns for civil and social rights and to a preoccupation with inclusivity, a crucial concern in Argentina's transition to democracy.

Dominated by regimes that oscillate within a mix of populism, clientelism and political authoritarianism, the extended transition to democracy in Argentina has impoverished democratic institutions and organizations of the civil society and nourished a culture of limited awareness of citizens' rights. In the fourteen years of transition, the return to democracy has involved the restoration of political rights but it has also entered into negotiations that allowed those responsible for the so-called Dirty War to remain unpunished. It enabled citizens to regain the right to vote, but at the same time they saw their social rights eroded by free market policies that have affected fundamentally the middle classes and lower income sectors. As the journalist Horacio Verbitsky points out, the Argentine democratic regime is considered to still be in transition because the struggle for inclusion continues and

there has not been a full restoration of civil rights. That democracy is yet to be fully achieved becomes apparent, for instance, in the constant threats to the independent press, to opposition unionists, and to students who struggle to regain spaces of expression in a society where authoritarianism can be felt across all realms of public life (Sarlo, Argentina under Menem).

As Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg point out there is still a long way to go in the creation of "a culture of citizenship encompassing individual and collective actors across the entire spectrum of the diverse social and cultural landscape of contemporary Latin American societies" (3). Today citizenship is discrete in its scope; it contains demands for inclusion, but it has lost its ideological character and is devoid of the universalizing content of the struggles for expanded social citizenship of the 1960s and 1970s. In most cases, the struggle over citizenship is concentrated on demands for inclusion from specific sectors and the mobilization of emergent groups, such as human rights activists and grassroots labour unionists, environmentalists, scientific communities, and student workshops. Without necessarily celebrating Red as a site of resistance, it is necessary to consider its value in a context where other cultural circuits are limited by intolerance and authoritarian tensions, while the civil society is once and again marginalized, and the individuals' perception of themselves as citizens is in constant erosion.

Red emerges as a space where citizens can "talk among themselves about things that affect them and about the collective actions they wish to take in response," (Garnham 257) and as a site that establishes connections between NGOs and other organizations and citizens living in Argentina and abroad. While other public spaces in Argentina suffer the consequences of authoritarianism and marginalization, Red appears as an Internet-based arena where dimensions of citizenship are recombined under a distinct matrix. The construction of a consciousness of citizenship in Red is continuously affected by the intercultural negotiations that stem from its international character.

4.2. Red as a Space of Articulation of Online Practices of Citizenship

Citizenship in Red expresses a sense of collective identity that has its point of reference in an idea of the nation, but it is not satisfied with the cultivation of traditions. Rather, it supposes a dynamic relation amongst its members between the institutional reality of Argentina as a nation-state, and the experience of the destiny of Argentine society as a project in which their involvement is necessary, at least, in the mediated form offered by computer based communications. Approaching Red as an interactive space for making sense of the Argentine political reality, one is able to grasp other dimensions of citizenship that appear in the relationships between the members, in how they perceive themselves as individuals, and

in how regimes of participation are structured. In an age of media globalization, Red can be seen as a context in which the activities of citizens are removed from the locale of the nation-state. Red is close to what Appadurai calls "postnational social formations", a category he uses to describe "organizations, movements, ideologies, and networks which are not contained or defined solely in relation to the nation-state" (McLagan 188). Yet, most political practices in Red can be referred to that aspect of citizenship that requires citizens to participate and define their position in relation to the institutions of a nation-state.

Braman points out that the Net "may offer the opportunity for creation of a public sphere or public spheres genuinely outside of the bounds of any single nation state or organizational entity" (Braman, Interpenetrated Globalization 36). In many respects, Red could be considered a public sphere. However, since it is not necessarily associated with a form of political involvement, it is not easy to insert it within a single category of analysis. It encompasses processes that involve the exercise of power, but those processes do not necessarily correlate or interact with processes of self-organization. Red is close to what Miriam Hansen defines as the partial public, a space whose oppositional character can only be defined in a relational manner and depends on "connections with other publics and other types of publicity" (xxxix).

Although the members of Red sometimes act as members of a self-organized group with a political project, it is difficult to argue that it constitutes a nongovernmental organization of the same type as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, or even the Chiapas' support groups. Moreover, while it usually addresses concerns of the Argentine society, in some cases its members discuss problems specific to the countries in which they live, like coneteros living in the United States who find in Red a space to discuss immigration policies or those living in Israel who use the *Café* to arrange their joint participation in demonstrations against the orthodoxy of the Likud government. Red operates as a space of articulation for the concerns of organized groups and individuals constituted by citizens living in both Argentina and overseas, which, as a counterpublic, "offers forms of solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation;" forms that are mediated and "subject to discursive conflict and negotiation" (Hansen xxxvi).

The first of the articulations that is visible in Red is connected to the fact that its constituency includes members of NGOs and, mostly, residents and migrants who are not engaged in political activities on a regular basis but who share perceptions and experiences of exclusion. In Red there is room for rational-critical talk and for gregarious chat, for political involvement as well as for the maintenance of traditions. Activists of numerous

nongovernmental organizations based in Argentina participate in the conversations that take place in the mailing lists of Red.[2] Of those groups, the ones that have websites are linked by *Gardel*, which has special sections on both human rights and politics in Argentina. In some cases, established groups follow their agendas and regularly send messages that range from press releases to "urgent action alerts," calling people to get involved in electronic and snail mail campaigns directed against government officials and executives of corporations. In other cases NGO members share their initiatives with other members, seeking opinions while triggering fruitful discussion.

Another set of articulations that Red makes possible is related to its role as a space of convergence for new forms of activism by Internet users living in Argentina who organize online campaigns on specific issues, including human rights, freedom of expression, and consumer rights. Unlike the collective endeavours of grassroots groups, this form of activism originates in individual citizens who decide to embrace a particular concern taking advantage of the ability of the Internet to reach a segment of the population of other countries. Among these activists, there

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[2] These NGOs range across a number of different concerns. Among them can be mentioned Poder Ciudadano (civil and political rights; fight against corruption in the government); Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (mothers of disappeared: human rights); Servicio de Paz y Justicia (human rights); H.I.J.O.S. (children of disappeared: human rights); Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (intends to find children of dissapeared born in captivity); Memoria Activa (demands investigation of two bomb attacks against the Jewish community in Buenos Aires); among others.

are those who focus on human rights, like a young man who has created a "Vanished Gallery", a website linked by *Gardel* since 1993 that seeks to become a database containing all the available information about the Dirty War's policy of disappearing people. The most common of these forms of activism occurs through actions concentrated in time and limited to specific issues of corruption, consumer awareness, human rights, and the environment. As a space which connects local campaigns with migrants, Red empowers citizens and grassroots groups in Argentina. It provides these groups with a forum in which they can assert their political presence in the international arena by bringing them into contact with an audience of co-nationals capable of providing diffusion, translation, and links to other forums.

Red is also a space of contact between NGOs based overseas and citizens both in Argentina and abroad. There are coneteros who participate in organizations in the countries where they live and who bring their interests to the discussions in the *Café*. The most compelling examples are those of Equipo Nizcor, an organization based in Spain that has embraced, among other tasks, the fight for punishment of the responsibles of human rights violations in Argentina, and Derechos[3], a NGO whose purpose is to provide information on urgent actions and to get people involved in

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[3] Margarita Lacabe, "Derechos/Human Rights Home Page," <http://www.derechos.org>.

human rights issues. Derechos, which runs a server that hosts several other groups, including Nizcor and Madres de Plaza de Mayo, has its own mailing lists, and is administrated by Margarita Lacabe, a law student living in California who is one of the most active women in Red, and who also maintains the page on human rights in *Gardel*.

In a few cases, members of Red have acted as a self-organized group and promoted their own initiatives in an effort to generate consensus. However, these proposals are, in most cases, aborted before the time is ripe for action. The reason for the short life-span of many of these projects is the fear among many coneteros that using Red as a support group for specific actions may segregate those who do not agree with the policy. Nevertheless, this has not prevented Red from becoming a gathering point for certain initiatives. Such was the case of an appeal published in Buenos Aires' newspapers requesting the repeal of the pardon that President Menem gave to those responsible for the Dirty War in 1990. The appeal was signed and paid for by members of Red, but without using the name of the network. This was, however, one of the few occasions in which people from Red have attempted to make their claims appear on the mass media. It illustrates how complex the interrelations between regimes of publicity can become when diasporic groups make use of global computer networks. The petition was published when Red had been online for only one year. More recently, after gaining experience in several fund raising campaigns

to buy equipment and to organize regional gatherings, some members have started to propose that Red get involved in projects to help the needy in "la Matria." These proposals, however, are often received with scepticism by members who feel that Red might deviate from its status as a space of communication.

Although almost every significant online campaign concerning Argentina reaches Red, political involvement usually takes the form of talk, of rational discussion, of confrontation, arguments, and struggles for meaning. In other words, participation in Red is not as much about the activities carried out by citizens in relation to Argentina as a nation-state, as it is about citizens making sense of the political and social reality in Argentina. In this sense, the activities of Red can be considered among other practices in Latin America whose focus is on the achievement of interpretative power, a necessary step that enables marginalized groups "to justify their needs and on that basis demand satisfaction" (Yudice 23). While the sense of citizenship has developed among the members of Red as particular constructions of the self, this notion of citizenship expands as they get involved in activities promoted by online social networks. However, as Turkle suggests, there is reason for concern if participation only takes place online and beyond that there is only apathy. The fact that online exchange takes place between disembodied communicants, and that communities can be built inside

machines, raises questions about their ability to become spaces for the practice of responsible citizenship. Red articulates forms of reincorporation of migrants as citizens by means of virtual politics and, significantly, constitutes a space where migrants and residents can share reflections on Argentina's public issues, interacting in a context that is crossed by the experiences of a constituency that is dispersed across different cultural and political realities. It contains spaces of connection, and sites for rearticulatory practices that seek the democratization, recognition, and enfranchisement of citizens.

Since it is an unevenly distributed experience that "expresses membership and quality of participation in a political community" (Falk 39), citizenship can be seen as a struggle for inclusion. As a public arena of a society in which the sense of citizenship is continuously under siege from authoritarianism, clientelism, and the marginalization of the institutions of civil society, Red joins migrants and residents in a struggle to make sense of their need to be included. People in diaspora, economic migrants, brain drain members, people who choose to live as autoexiles by escaping a society whose future they feel powerless to influence: all describe their experience as forms of marginalization in their home country. Is their participation in Red an attempt to surmount marginalization? Can participation in Red as an Argentine resident be seen in relation to what García Canclini understood as the attempt to achieve new

imaginative forms of conquering public spaces in a time when traditional spaces of participation are rendered obsolete in the Latin American socio-cultural landscape?

The diminishing efficacy of traditional forms of participation and the obstruction of established modes of expressing political demands in Argentina contribute to what Eduardo Grüner calls "desciudadanización", a loss of identification with institutions due to the marginalization of civil society. Subaltern groups have explored diverse ways to either resist or accommodate themselves to local and global transformations, and have made many creative attempts to regain a presence in public spaces. New forms of organization within civil society and the appropriation of spaces and resources on the Internet gives new significance to the meaning of citizenship in the face of the cultural transformation of power relations and the changing role of the state in times of globalization. Yet, it is necessary to acknowledge that complex processes link a community built on the Internet to the promotion of democratic politics and public spheres, even more so if we consider that they take place during a period of expanding socio-economic conditions of exclusion, and the multiplication of publics, public spheres, and scenes of evaluation.

4.3. Cosmopolitanism, Access and Exclusion: Limits to the Impact of Red on the Argentine Society

Traditionally, the global displacement of the master-narratives on which modern political ideas are built has

been the result of communication between political and economic elites. In Latin America, a region characterized as a major importer of ideas and ideologies, intellectuals have acted as intermediaries between their societies and the world since colonial times. They still have central roles in establishing connections through which political, economic, and social ideas travel to their own societies. Writers, artists, politicians, and scientists living overseas have been notoriously influential by translating and adapting for local consumption all sorts of intellectual novelties from different metropolitan centres. As Castañeda suggests,

> they are like the honoured poets and minstrels of Homeric times, who travelled through the Aegean world with news, gossip, and songs, except that the modern intellectuals mainly brought back notions, whereas the Greeks would also spread them (180).

In the complex overlapping of today's global flows, the growing migration of intellectuals complicates the fluidity of political ideas. As intellectuals move to different contexts, they "inject new meaning-streams into the discourse of democracy" (Appadurai 280). The Internet and other global networks like the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) have contributed to the emergence of the global citizen "as a type of global reformer: an individual who intellectually perceives a better way of organizing the political life of the planet" (Falk 41), and whose spirit is deterritorialized, advocating non-violence, a clean environment, freedom of expression and human rights

no matter where. Red presents another use of global networks for the circulation of ideas: one composed of individuals who are dispersed across the globe but who share concerns as global citizens, while maintaining a focus on a single national society to which they consider themselves bound. The Internet, however, is not only open to economic and political elites; what makes spaces like Red innovative is its ability to bring together in collective practices and in the construction of new notions of citizenship, parties who are not intellectuals, in the sense and function the word represents in Latin America, thus establishing another path for the transmission of ideas and experiences from abroad. While it is, indeed, a property of other spaces on the Internet, what makes Red unique is its ability to translate the diverse experiences of members who share interpretative competencies.

However, the question of the potential of Red, and of other similar arenas of exchange constructed on the Net by Latin American residents and migrants, for advancing the reconstruction of a sense of citizenship in the home country cannot be posed without considering the correlations between the global landscape of democratic politics that is being constructed from below and patterns of globalization originating from above which are dominated by transnational business and political elites. Most frequently verbalized by post-industrial ideologues and marketers of digital technologies, utopian positions and optimistic views about

the liberatory potential of Internet-based technologies offer easy answers to the problem of democratization that rely only on the agency of technology. The persuasive nature of these views is located "as much in the work of everyday fantasies and actions" as in corporate decision making (Penley and Ross xiii). Digital business stars that preach from the extravagantly designed pages of *Wired* magazine, for instance, and technophile government officials of Third World countries who understand development as a form of "historic discontinuity," occupy positions that present the "information superhighway" as invested with an immanent capacity to dissolve social conflict and to articulate forms of participatory democracy. Yet, the democratic potential does not enjoy ontological status in decentralized communication technologies. Moreover, for certain emerging mobile sectors of the Argentine society—defined by Beatriz Sarlo in Escenas de la vida posmoderna as one of the social products of the neoconservative reform in politics and the economy—the Internet may even be as far from a place in which to carry out the struggle for rights or for talking about issues of public concern as it is close to being a status-enhancing commodity, another realm in which the "enthusiasm for the novel" can be celebrated through the consumption of new communication technologies (Campbell 57).

Today, not even information utopians dare to forecast a rapid expansion of access to the global information infrastructure of the Internet in Latin America, given the

unprecedented conditions of social inequality that have appeared after more than a decade of neoconservative economic policies that have contributed to the disappearance of the welfare state.[4] Alejandro Piscitelli has noted the perceptible irony of talking about the wonders of the Internet in a context where the levels of exclusion in the region are increasing to a degree that even the mere survival of economic and political systems is at risk.[5] Given the present widening of the income gap, and the reality that "a middle class that once constituted 40 percent of the population is being quickly and savagely disappeared" (Taylor, Outlaw State 288),[6] it seems unlikely to most analysts that the distribution of access to the Internet in Argentina will trickle down the income scale in the same pattern established by other communication technologies whose mass diffusion occurred in periods of relatively rising affluence. Moreover, the current socio-economic situation seems to indicate that any impact the Net might have will reinforce previously existent conditions of access to the media—particularly since telephone and

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[4] While the number of personal computers in Argentina distributed in households fluctuates around 500,000, the number of Internet users is expected to rise up to 60,000 by mid-1997, according to the consultant Roxana Bassi, <rox@arda.com.ar>, email interview, 28 November 1996.

[5] Alejandro Piscitelli, "Editorial," Interlink Headline News N. 701, <interlink@torres-c.com>, 31/12/97.

[6] 12.8% of the population of the Buenos Aires area is composed of impoverished people who have been recently displaced from the middle class. Moreover, since the implementation of the tough structural adjustment policies of the Menem administration, Argentina's position in the United Nations' Human Development Indicator has fallen 6 points (La Voz del Interior, Interlink Headline News N. 889, <interlink@torres-c.com>, 7/07/97).

Internet access are based on the payment-for-use principle—with the consequent intensification of the "social disparity between consumers of electronic devices," a pattern that was characteristic of Latin American countries fifteen years ago (Mattelart and Schmucler 37).

García Canclini has suggested that the increase in cultural and economic integration, on one hand, and the decline of the nation as the container of the social, on the other, has created conditions for the emergence of multi-contextual identities that are elaborated as coproductions. Today, the world can be understood as a multicultural system typified "not only by the coexistence of different historical traditions but also by the unequal access of different countries, and of the different sectors of each society, to advanced means of transnational communication" (qtd. in Cooper Ramo 46). As long as access to public spheres like Red is a function of the availability of resources that are distributed across society according to the structures of economic and political power that democratic practices are supposed to control, their suitability for the promotion of active social participation in democratic politics is placed in question. In this sense, it is reasonable to argue that the unequal opportunities to participate in networks like Red can reproduce and expand social asymmetries by creating segmentations that disrupt the shared cultural horizons of local communities.

Instead of establishing a space for the advancement of democratic forms of power, computer networks may be closer to creating and reinforcing information elites and extending feelings of marginalization and *desciudadanización* to other realms of life. As James Carey has argued, in order to recover public space for citizenship, it is necessary to recognize "the social differences being produced an reproduced in what we often naively call the information society" (183). In this sense, is it appropriate to consider experiences like Red in terms of citizenship and inclusion when society is entering into new hierarchies based on differential access to a global arena of information? Red can be considered a forum in which experiences of citizenship are understood through collective practices, but whose forum is it? What happens to the plurality of voices that is needed to construct a sense of citizenship that is balanced between universality and particularisms? Are the relations of exchange that exist in Red, as a forum for the negotiation of citizenship, built on new patterns of inclusion? Or do they only ameliorate the conditions of communication flow on which middle class identity has depended in order to maintain cosmopolitan values that "may have once brought Argentines closer to each other and to other parts of the globe"? (Taylor Outlaw State 284).

Citizenship in Red is constructed within the parameters of modernity and cosmopolitanism. It is fashioned, on the one hand, from the experience of living in dispersal of a

segment of migrant middle class professionals and intellectuals, members of a brain drain—a "traditional Argentine export," according to Taylor (Outlaw State)—that has affected the country for decades: individuals who have found in Red a way to regain a space as Argentine citizens. In the construction of this online arena, migrants bring their experiences as citizens in other contexts to the discussion of Argentina's problems, and in those discussions they are joined by members living in the mother country who have found in Red not only a space of participation, but also a place where citizenship is a terrain of identification with modernity, with principles that "are consistently identified as part and parcel of Western civilization" (Friedman 214). Beyond the economic constraints that exclude people from the Internet, making difficult the introduction of a plurality of voices into arenas like Red, does the very cosmopolitan character of the experience as a space of identification common to migrants and locals delimit these spaces of interaction as sites where the struggle for inclusion can be generalized to a larger constituency? The ability of experiences like Red to develop roots in the home countries is not only a question of having access to the Internet, but also depends on access to the rules of discourse and representations, or "at least to their translatable equivalence", that make it possible for the present constituency not to be "excluded from the process of democratic participation" (Dahlgren 19).

Braman argues that "the democratic potential is the capacity of citizens to effectively and knowledgeably participate in socially constitutive processes," of which communication technologies are today an essential part. Such processes are elements in the exercise of power and are situated at the level of self-organizing processes of civil society (Braman, Autopoietic State 359). The democratic potential of resources on the Net cannot be reduced to its decentralized technological character or to an ability to overcome processes of mediation proper to modes of mass communication that could be justified because of their emphasis on of the role of the individual. It has to be found in the arenas of exchange constituted in cyberspace and in the forms of community they make possible.

Conclusion

A remnant of the Cold War, the Internet began its expansion during a time of profound reconstruction of the relationship between the globalization and the localization of communication systems. These are parallel to the new interconnectedness of power and finance that is characteristic of global capitalism. In a world of growing interdependence between distant locales, communication networks are essential components of the processes that constitute the globalization that takes place from above, such as the reorganization of the nation-state system, the evolution of transnational corporations as organizational forms, the shift of centres of accumulation, and the hypermobility of capital and labour. Yet, global networks have an increasingly important role in dimensions of globalization that take place from below, among them the articulation of environmental, human rights, and pro-democracy movements, the enhancement of lateral connections of old and new diasporas, and the construction of grassroots transnational communities.

As Morley and Robins maintain, it is necessary to understand the present transformations in the politics of communication from the perspective of a changing "politics

of space and place" (31). On the one hand, places that were conceived to be locales of social interaction, with connections to the rest of the world in terms of communications, commerce, and power, and which hardly reached beyond the territory of the nation-state, are today interpenetrated by multiple global flows. On the other hand, new virtual spaces have appeared whose location are difficult to match with physical spaces, but which can be accessed from anywhere there is a connection to the Internet.

Red de Argentinos offers a context in which to evaluate how the Net transforms the local and makes possible new social formations. The experience of Red illustrates that the kind of connections the Internet introduces are not only about its capacity as an advanced communication instrument, they are also about the creation of social spaces. Red contains locales of socialization to which its members feel attached through collaboration, solidarity, shared perspectives, and feelings of displacement. People living in different places all over the world conform to this community articulated around the resources of digital and telecommunications technology. While there are many factors which seduce people into becoming members of communities constituted in the virtual environment of computer networks, those who are members of diasporas bring with them a common identification with elements of a world that is defined in terms of national culture. Unlike the relationships

individuals have with the cultural technologies that are deployed by institutions, the elements of national culture that are brought into play by this type of virtual community are a matter of rational choice, and are usually combined with elements of the lived experience of the members.

As a social space, Red can be considered to be an online public sphere that is decentred with respect to the territory of the nation-state. It is a space of encounter and exchange where members of NGOs share views on public issues with migrants and residents. In this sense, Red offers not only interaction between organized groups of the civil society and citizens, but it also works as an experience of the construction of a culture of citizenship from the bottom up. Migrant members experience a sense of inclusion in national debates while at the same time enriching those debates with contributions that can only be made when the country is observed from a distant cosmopolitan perspective. Resident members contribute to this public sphere through their involvement in the day-to-day problems of Argentine society.

Citizenship unfolds as self-organization, as solidarity, as experience of collective identity, and in relation to the public issues of the Argentine society that place it as part of the personal projects of the members of Red. Conversation and common projects help to constitute Red as a social space where migrants and residents can share ways of making sense of the world. It is necessary to note,

however, the limits of the practices of citizenship in communities like Red. For resident members, to experience a sense of citizenship that is lived at the distance imposed by the computer interface can be considered only part of the process of constructing a culture of citizenship. This should necessarily involve an overall transformation of social practices, institutions, and representations intended to transform "subjects of law" in actual citizens (Jelin 101).

As Thompson contends, by introducing novel forms of action and interaction, new media have the potential to reorganize social relations. Red allows part of the diaspora to surface, to materialize in shared forms of dwelling in cyberspace, and to become enmeshed with groups and individuals in the home country. Aside from the role played by some political exiles during periods of dictatorship, the Argentine diaspora has not had a significant involvement with the problems in the homeland. The re-connection of migrants through the social spaces of Red permits part of the Argentine diaspora, which is dispersed in multiple locales, to develop a diaspora culture of global scope. Not only has Red aided a group of migrants adjust to living in diverse locales overseas, but it has also helped a transnational community that includes members living in the homeland to emerge.

The analysis I have presented in this work has not exhausted the multiple dimensions of transnational

communities like the one constituted around the virtual spaces of Red. A more in-depth inquiry into these social formations would require on-site fieldwork, cross-cultural studies considering other similar groups, and a close-up investigation of how these networks are able to transform individual lives and to articulate social groups both on- and offline, inside their country of origin and overseas. On the one hand, such a study could cast more light on the transformations the Internet introduces in diaspora cultures. How compelling has their participation in Red been for members of the diaspora? How have they changed their ways of living as displaced Argentines since they became involved in the community? On the other hand, further research could reveal the articulations with the homeland created by these virtual communities, and their role as gateways to other spaces on the Internet for the members who live in developing countries.

There is also much to learn about the experiences of collaboration and construction of knowledge that transnational communities on the Net have brought to life. *Gardel, FAQ*, the tango database, the cookbook, and the literature site mentioned here are only the tip of the iceberg of complex networks of social and individual relations that allow bottom-up approaches to the collection of information and symbolic material. How much are these projects facilitated by the proximity to diverse types of resources that social dispersal makes possible? The greater

availability of connectivity, information storage capacity, and bandwidth that some migrants have at their disposal, the affordability of the latest technologies in the countries where they live, and their ability to handle the languages that are most frequently spoken online are important reasons to study further the role communities like Red can have in the development of national online cultures. Where should we place the limits of the analysis of the experience of Latin American, or any other developing society, in relation to the Internet from the point of view of its appropriation? Can the analysis be satisfied by studying the users and the infrastructure installed within the national borders? Red also shows that the analysis of the use of the Internet, a globally extended medium whose capacity is distributed in the hands of its users, can benefit from the study of diasporas.

Argentina-Café	All topics	Mailing List	argentina-cafe@mafalda.math.indiana.edu
Argentina-Deportes	Sports	Mailing List	argentina-deportes@mafalda.math.indiana.edu
Argentina-Literaria	Literature	Mailing List	argentina-literaria@mafalda.math.indiana.edu
Argentina-Noticias	News exchange	Mailing List	argentina-noticias@mafalda.math.indiana.edu

Gardel (official site of Red de Argentinos)	Includes sections on news, politics, human rights, tourism, geography, music, tango, literature, enterteinment, media, cinema, images, Internet resources, statistics, economy, etc.	WWW site	http://www.startel.com.ar/gardel/argentina.html http://web.cs.ualberta.ca/~diego/Gardel/argentina.html http://www.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/rec/argentina/argentina.html http://www.cee.cornell.edu/~federico/argentina/argentina.html http://www.neonet.csuohio.edu/~argentin/argentina.html http://vishnu.nirvana.phys.psu.edu/argentina/argentina.html

Mafaldita (official site of Argentina-Café)	Includes photographs, netiquette rules, jargon dictionary, information about meetings, etc.	WWW site	http://www.mafalda.indiana.edu

Mapa del Café	Map showing the distribution of members of Argentina-Café around the world.	WWW site	http://usuarios.santafe.com.ar/~aquibeto/index.htm

Tamara	List of members of Red willing to host travellers.	WWW site	http://www2.els.net.au/~wdf/tamara.htm

Café de Morel	CD-ROM project.	WWW - Future CD-ROM	http://www.uic.edu/~jayvee/morel

Tango Lyrics Home Page	Includes scores and index.	WWW site Also available via FTP as a single file.	http://www.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/rec/argentina/tangos/

Todo sobre la cocina argentina	Online cookbook of Argentine cuisine.	WWW site Also available via FTP as a single file.	http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/1756/recetas.html

Literatura Argentina Contemporanea	Contemporary literature website.	WWW Site	http://lenti.med.umn.edu/~ernesto/Literatura.html

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)	Information useful for people living overseas.	WWW site. Also available via FTP and via email as a single file. Distributed monthly on soc.culture.argentina	http://www.informatik.uni-muenchen.de/rec/argentina/faq/

#argentina	Open to the general public.	IRC channel	#argentina (Undernet)
#cafeteros	Open only for members of Argentina-Cafe.	IRC channel	#cafeteros (Undernet)
#pibes	Open only for children.	IRC channel	#pibes (Undernet)

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