

## Weaving the Underground Web: Neotribalism and Psytrance on Tribe.net<sup>1</sup>

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Originating with the countercultural movement of the 1960s, the growth of the psychedelic trance phenomenon is concurrent with that of the Internet. This shared history is rooted in utopian visions of a vast, interconnected global community free of the iniquities of neo-liberalism, defined instead by a return to communality and the gift economy. Yet, equally common are ominous, even apocalyptic, depictions of a world governed by Big Brother, divided by war and poverty, or destroyed entirely by human ignorance. In line with Michel Maffesoli's (1996) analysis of contemporary neotribalism, the international psychedelic trance underground may be viewed as a network of interconnected *nodes*. Yet, with more intentional commitment than Maffesoli allows, members connect through their shared experience of what Hakim Bey (1991) calls the "temporary autonomous zone" – the space outside societal hierarchies, marked by liminal states that Victor Turner characterizes as "necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (1986: 95). These relationships are frequently solidified and extended through the new forms of communication made possible by online social networking sites such as Tribe.net, which functions as a communications medium for a variety of "neotribes." The playfully subversive communities on Tribe.net comprise a virtual tent city, like those found at outdoor psytrance festivals. In this liminal space, both a sense of communal belonging and reformulations of self-identity are made possible.

Psytrance culture in America is marked by an opposition to mainstream society and a desire to cultivate alternative ways of life within a global "underground." In their ideal form, these parties are intended to be anarchical in nature—no gods, no masters, anything goes, do what thou wilt. Attendees are active participants in a performative space where electronic music, psychedelic art and ecstatic dance coalesce. Modern technologies are utilized in conjunction with tribal sensibilities to create collectively imagined worlds, where animal spirits of the ancient primordial forest dance with space aliens of the distant stars. In this nebulous liminal space,

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<sup>1</sup>The first version of this piece was published as the final chapter in my Masters thesis, [\*The Virtual Campfire: An Ethnography of Online Social Networking\*](#) (2008). It has since been published in an edited collection, [\*The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance\*](#) (Routledge 2010).

culture and nature are interwoven in a timeless ritual that evokes re-enchantment with the world and a sense of collective connectivity.

Despite the utopian discourses of egalitarianism and communality that drive both psytrance culture and cyberculture, Sarah Thornton's (1996) much-contested theory of *subcultural capital* and status-based hierarchies remains pertinent to current trends within these milieus. For instance, members of the psytrance community acquire "hipness capital" by adopting certain styles and acquiring certain knowledge (discerning music taste is particularly valuable, exemplified by the enormous popularity of some DJs). Social and cultural capital is explicitly displayed online, frequently equating to the quantitative value of one's social network and the extent to which one acquires fluency in and is granted access to computers and the Internet. How members of these neotribes construct subcultural hierarchies and display markers of subcultural capital is a secondary focus of this chapter.

### **The Shared History of Psytrance and the Internet**

In 1962, Marshall McLuhan published his landmark novel, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, which describes the changes that have occurred since the invention of the Gutenberg press. He noted in particular the accelerating collapse of spatial and temporal barriers, enabling global communications. His prescient notion of the "global village" has since become a popular metaphor to describe the Internet and the World Wide Web. Like radio, computer networks were originally invented for military use. However, the development of computer technology as a medium for civilian communication finds its beginnings in the intellectual sphere: just as print media had been largely produced by the Church and the university between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, so too was computer-mediated communication initially confined to powerful institutions—namely government, academic, and scientific research communities. The subsequent adaptation of this technology for personal use by a small group of hobbyists also had a precursor in the history of the radio. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, amateur ham radio enthusiasts were the driving force behind the rapid technological advancement of the medium (Briggs and Burke 1995: 155). Likewise, it was a community of computer hackers who have been principally responsible for the cultivation of "playful, emotionally and intellectually satisfying forms of collaboration" online, enabling the computer to become a "tool for the

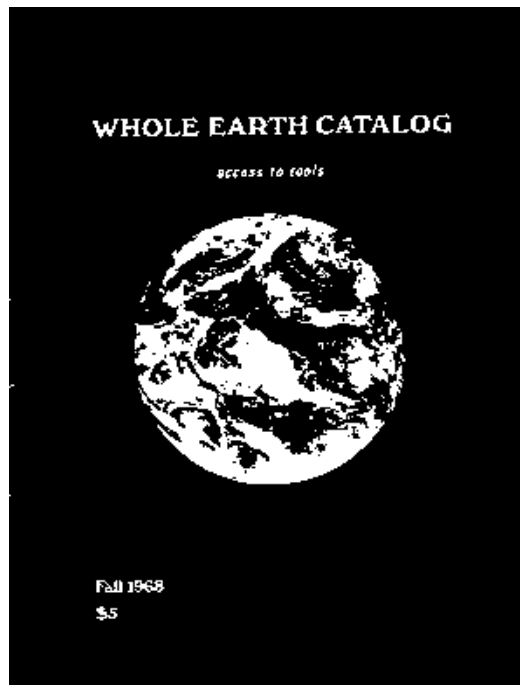
establishment of a better social world” (F. Turner 2006: 117).

The hacker movement embodied many of the ideals of the international Situationist movement of the 1960s. According to Situationists, social domination worked through centrally produced, controlled, and allegedly manipulative mass media. This was what French Situationist leader Guy Debord called “the society of the spectacle,” wherein interpersonal relationships are mediated and saturated by icons and images in an accelerated consumerist society. The Situationists advocated *détournement*, the tactic of appropriating and “turning” the instruments and products of spectacle society to other, libidinal, ends. While Situationist-inspired activists altered prominent billboard ads, hackers concentrated their energies on manipulating computer networks. Inspired in large part by the radio jamming of previous eras, Situationist theory contributed to the emergence of what is today called “culture jamming.”

Despite the democratizing potential of the web, control and surveillance from government and corporate institutions threaten what is often considered the final frontier for individual freedom of expression. One of the founders of cyberpunk science fiction, William Gibson, coined the term “cyberspace” in 1982, which he described in *Neuromancer* as “a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation” (51). With the increasing ubiquity of Internet access in the face of deteriorating economies, unstable international relations, and environmental collapse, new media simultaneously enables the growth of social movements and provides new viral weapons of propaganda in this age of information warfare. Notably, the Situationists had warned of the common reactionary process of *recuperation*, in which threats to the dominant political order are appropriated or reappropriated by “the spectacle,” absorbed and made safe for mass consumption. This was certainly the case with prior broadcasting media, which by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had become controlled and packaged for mass consumption by large media conglomerates like CBS and NBC.

There was, nevertheless, a striking difference between the national mood that had shaped the reception of earlier culture industries and the mood that shaped computer-mediated communication. While radio, film, and television emerged in eras characterized by a popular desire for national unity and material wealth, computer networks were developed in large part by those who rejected institutional authority and sought to preserve civil liberties. Thus, the primary historical precedent for the grassroots development of computer-mediated communication was the US countercultural movement of the 1960s (F. Turner 2006: 4). Just as the mass circulation

of Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* played a pivotal role in the fragmentation of religious authority in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, 1960s underground publications—such as radical newspapers, political pamphlets, and “zines”—helped foster collective resistance to political authority in the US. Principal among these publications was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, whose readership connected disparate academic, technological, and countercultural communities.



*Cover of the first issue of the Whole Earth Catalog, Fall 1968.*

The *Whole Earth Catalog*, created by Stewart Brand in 1968, was inspired by Brand’s involvement with systems theory and New Communalist politics, which were based on the democratized spread of information and collective consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The catalog’s focus on reader contributions and its practice of transparently publishing financial accounts mirrored the interactive and open-source nature of modern Internet technologies. The first issue, the cover of which depicted for the first time the view of Earth from space, begins with a poem by Buckminster Fuller entitled “God is a Verb”:

*The revolution has come-  
set on fire from the top.*

*Let it burn swiftly.  
Neither the branches, trunk, nor roots will be endangered.  
Only last year's leaves and  
the parasite-bearded moss and orchids  
will not be there  
when the next spring brings fresh growth  
and free standing flowers.*

Brand's quest to create collaborative communities led to the creation, in 1985, of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (more commonly known as "the WELL"), a collective of online message board forums. The intimate social dynamics of the WELL constituted the central theme of *The Virtual Community*, published in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, who'd been an active member since its inception. Made up of technologists, academics, and counterculturalists (particularly fans of the Grateful Dead), the WELL reflected the dispersed networks previously established by the *Whole Earth Catalog*. As a prominently represented subset of the WELL, hackers introduced a return to the ideals that defined the New Communalists; namely, that "information wants to be free" (Brand 1985: 49).

From the 1960s convergence of countercultural, technological, and intellectual spheres epitomized by Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* to the 1990s dot-com frenzy originating in Silicon Valley, the evolution of the Internet has been fuelled by a utopian discourse of openness at odds with the imagined "corrupting" force of governance. This vision was famously articulated in a treatise entitled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* by John Perry Barlow.<sup>2</sup> Barlow's eloquent manifesto, a pointed attack of the legal system on behalf of the civilians of cyberspace, echoes the principles on which America itself was founded:

Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. *It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions.* (Barlow 1996, emphasis added).

Barlow's manifesto paints a telling portrait of the contention between the state and the "networked publics" of cyberspace (boyd 2008: 2). The top-down gazes of authority make up a vertical net that, more often than not, fails to ensnare the rhizomatic web of horizontal connections. Attempts to do so, epitomized by the massive US government-initiated "hacker crackdown" of 1990, have triggered a political movement dedicated to the preservation of civil liberties online (Sterling, "The Hacker Crackdown," par. 13). If the Internet is an ideological battleground, Barlow is a rebel warrior/reality hacker *par excellence*, a fitting example of the democratized shamanism characteristic of both cyberculture and the psytrance movement. Both are emblematic of new frontiers, sites where "technotribes" envision themselves as actively engaged in "reworking the future" (St John 2003: 78).

These revolutionary sentiments propelled the cyber- and countercultural forces that gave birth to Burning Man during the summer solstice of 1986. Central to this annual affair is the burning of a tall wooden effigy, a ritual of destruction and rebirth evoking Fuller's poem. The Burning Man Festival is widely viewed as a Mecca for neotribalists in the US, drawing freaks, trancers, ravers, hippies and techies to Nevada's Black Rock City to create a utopian, if ephemeral, community based on artistic expression and gift culture (Harvey 2002: par. 20). Described as the "ultimate meta-rave" (Gosney 1998: par. 3) or "mega-vibe" (St John 2009: 55), the event has become a sonic landscape featuring a wide and diverse range of music genres. In its early years, however, Burning Man was rife with tension between those few endorsing electronic music and those opposed to the influx of "ravers," the "techno" stylings of which "evolved into a kind of outlaw satellite of Black Rock City" (St John 2009: ???). Acutely aware of this longstanding stigma and the insulated nature of the event, many psytrancers believe Burning Man has "gone mainstream," now comprised of increasingly homogenous subcliques and cults. Nevertheless, there was considerable overlap between the international Goa/psytrance culture and the more localized Burning Man festival, where many well known trance DJs (such as Simon Posford and Goa Gil) played in the late 1990s. These formative "Community Dance" events organized by Michael Gosney and others between 1997 and 1999 were integral in establishing psytrance music and culture in the United States.

As earlier chapters in this volume have explained, psytrance (initially "Goa trance") was birthed in Goa, India, in the 1960s by hippie expatriates whose nomadic exile lifestyle was cultivated alongside a unique ritualized form of trance music—the first popular genre to be

electronically produced and distributed, shared, remixed, and sampled freely across the globe. With the playability of vinyl records limited by the arid environment, Goa trance developed out of a fusion of electronic and acoustic DAT recordings imported from around the world. This fusion was fostered by the traveler culture of Goa, a scene “constantly in motion,” and “gone like smoke in a few years,” as “the brotherhood gave way to ego-thinkers, territorial disputes and ignorance” (Mathesdorf 2002: par. 11). Nevertheless, these dancing travelers carried the Goa virus with them around the world, where it spread and mutated into an array of sub-genres and culturally-inflected permutations. In his continuing efforts, Goa Gil (2001) states his purpose as “redefining the ancient tribal ritual for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” the lofty aim of which is igniting “a chain reaction in consciousness.”

### **Technoshamanism and Neotribalism on Tribe.net**

In a paper on technoshamanism and related heuristics, Dave Green discusses Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of rhizomatic versus hierarchical relationships, marked by horizontal expansion as opposed to vertical, arboreal development: “The rhizome like the nomad is sustained by constant movement—*deterritorialization*—only temporarily creating new symbolic homes and practices—*reterritorialization*—before moving on” (2001: 6). The web exemplifies this process in unique ways, mirroring and magnifying the artifacts of our collective memory, accelerating and multiplying the “lines of flight” available to comprehension of the whole. Mediated emotional connections to others remain proximate, certainly “real” albeit mirrored and magnified—*hyperreal*, perhaps (Baudrillard 1994). Despite the theory that postmodern sociality is characterized by depthless, fragmented identifications, research into “virtual psytrancers” demonstrates the feelings of kinship, commitment, and close identification with a culture that sustains itself beyond the ritual of the dance floor, maintained in virtual spaces and sustained through shared beliefs in the spiritual power of psychedelic trance (Greener and Hollands 2006: 414).

In his book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour hypothesized that modern civilization has in fact never been actualized; rather, a false division between nature and society has been erected that obscures their true hybridization (Latour 1993: 95). Tribe.net represents a burgeoning desire to return to premodern modes of thinking, reaching back into the hyperlinked

web of tribal sociality as a means of reclaiming our faltering connection to the planet:

A lot of visionary artists are reflecting states or planes that are certainly more primordial and edgier than the technicolor flower-powered sunshine of the 60's. Goa/psy trance also reflects the aural elements of the shadow plane, and this is in response to the fact that we are dealing with heavy amounts of darkness. We could lose our planet in 50 years, for goodness's sake! 2005 was the hottest year on record, and Africa is suffering from a massive AIDS epidemic (Posted to the Tribe "Techno Shamanism").

Underlying popular notions of *neotribalism* is the concept of a universal consciousness that has been lost and forgotten in the wake of civilization, and that must be rediscovered if humanity is to survive. *Technoshamans* seek to raise positive energy in order to effect the healing seen as imperative for creating a better world and reclaiming our forgotten roots. Both terms evoke a romantic notion of merging modern technologies with ancient tribal wisdom. For instance, certain kinds of electronic music are attributed the capacity to induce trancelike states that can be shared by a group of people through ecstatic dance, evoking images of shamanic tribal rituals in South America, India, Africa, and elsewhere. Psychoactives such as LSD, MDMA, and DMT are frequently ingested to aid in inducing these states, altering visual and auditory perceptions, and enhancing feelings of connectedness to others and the "divine within." In the words of one Tribe.net member:

To me, [technoshamanism] is getting in touch with the past and uniting it with the present. Our species has danced the night away to a rhythm and beat for as long as we have had consciousness to do so. Whether it be an animal hide-based drum or a drum machine, the sound is the same. If music in general was compared to say, the English language, its beat and rhythm would be the vowel sounds that make up every word in existence. Understood by all who hear it regardless of ethnicity or creed.

Like the Back-to-the-Land movement of the 1960s, members of the psytrance movement continue to seek a return to humanity's ancestral roots through developing local, self-sustaining communities, with an emphasis on creating a global network of interconnected "tribes."



Chicago's Chilluminati offer an example of this, their web-banner declaring their aim of "promoting psychedelic trance and Goa music and culture – Chicago and planetwide."<sup>3</sup> Like any savvy party network, the Chilluminati are highly active online – hosting their own forum, uploading current tracks and upcoming events on their MySpace profile, and collecting a small gathering of members on the niche-based Tribe.net.

Rooted in the Burning Man community<sup>4</sup>, Tribe.net is home to countless virtual psytrance communities across the globe. Information flow on the site occurs primarily by way of membership in particular "Tribes" of interest, the homepages of which display a group message board for conversational posts, photos, listings, events, reviews, and requests. In a network of over 67,000 Tribes and over 256,000 members, a search for "psytrance" reveals nearly 400 Tribes. The first psytrance Tribe, Psytrance / Goa, was created in 2003 and is currently approaching 3,000 members. While a great deal of posts to this Tribe reflect the site's San Francisco roots, the most popular threads (such as "what got you into psytrance/goa?" with 115 posts, and "Psytrance – WEAK or NOT?" with 109 posts) encourage a diverse range of responses and ongoing dialogue from psytrance enthusiasts around the world.

Given the nature of the site, based on integrating local classified ads with social networking, many Tribes are locality-based. For instance, PsyCircle is a San Diego psytrance collective that defines itself on its Tribe homepage as "a group of aliens and artists that aim to raise the collective consciousness through our music, visual art, and communal style of underground PsyTrance-themed events." At the time of writing, the most recent posts to the main bulletin board include details on a spring psytrance festival in Ohio where several of the PsyCircle artists were to be playing sets; a 42-post thread on a gathering in the nearby Mojave desert beginning with a simple post stating "more details to come soon," continuing with carpool arrangements, and ending with enthusiastic replies thanking the event planners; and a series of photographs taken at the Mojave event. One of the larger psytrance Tribes with around 1200 members, Bay Area Trance continues to serve as a bulletin board of San Francisco Bay Area trance events dating back to the Tribe's creation in 2003. This permanency enriches the cultural memory of the psytrance community, granting it a history in digitized form.

Other Tribes are more focused on the music community than local scenes, and typically have a larger and more geographically diverse member population. ::Psy Dub::, for example, has nearly 800 members, and a substantial proportion of its message board is comprised of music

reviews (denoted by the stars given next to the subject line). While most of the threads are single posts, one thread titled “psy-dub top 10?” received 40 replies from fellow psy-dub enthusiasts. DarkPsy, a Tribe devoted to a popular sub-genre of psytrance, has over 1100 members. The most popular thread, “Where are all the darkpsy mixes?,” was first posted in late 2005 and has continued well into 2009 with over 70 posts. Members promote their own darkpsy albums as well as the work of others, providing direct links to download sites as well as personal commentary. There are also dozens of Tribes devoted to specific artists and record labels, such as Kindzadza and Tantrum Records—many of these kind of Tribes, however, are rife with self-promotional posts and reviews and little discussion of the artists and labels themselves, implying that the intentions of those who joined were either to simply mark themselves as fans or to gain access to a large population for promotional purposes.

Tribe.net is principally a bulletin board in practice, made up of local underground scenes knit together in a virtual web, trance music production and DJ culture formed in a niche-village. As such, it is also an archive of human stories writ large. It is a tent city, with all the trappings of a festival: music, drugs and crafts marketed as consumer wares; insider knowledge as status markers; intimate “campfires” peopled by storytellers and caregivers, nurturing camaraderie and communality. Threads pertaining to specific events (such as “Gaian Mind Festival 2008”) fuel the flames of community through nostalgic reminiscences and collaboratively produced photo albums, enabling relationships formed in the course of ephemeral happenings to endure. The site’s members have long resisted censorship, and its relative obscurity has made it an ideal virtual turf in the battle against the increasingly watchful eye of authorities and the frenzy of popularized commodities. How this space was won is described in the story that follows.

### **Tribe.net as Contested Terrain**

Despite the rhetoric of egalitarianism described in the preceding section on psytrance and cyberculture, a closer analysis reveals that social and (sub)cultural capital play out online just as they do offline. In the high school cafeteria of “Web 2.0,” MySpace and Facebook are the popular kids, known by those with even the most rudimentary understanding of online social networking. Tribe.net, on the other hand, is a little-known site where the marginal become the mainstream, where the burnouts and freaks congregate just past the smoke-free school zone

boundary. Members feel free to perform playfully and act transgressively because of the slim chance that they will be seen by the judging gazes of the masses and unhip authority figures. While the more popular MySpace and Facebook encourage self-censorship to some degree, on Tribe.net it is common to come across public message board threads discussing nudity, bondage, drug use, mysticism, and shamanism with the sort of frankness normally reserved for close friends. A novice drug user, posting a thread entitled “Lsd versus mushrooms” in November of 2005 received 122 responses of advice from more experienced members over the course of three years. In a Tribe<sup>5</sup> called “Au Naturel,” a post entitled “how many of you drive naked?” incited friendly camaraderie and support in the form of 51 responses. A Tribe called “3+ Male Relationships” describes itself as “A tribe for Gay men that are interested in LTR [long-term] relationships of 3 or more,” and has 121 members. Clearly, the site is an excellent vehicle for information and social support difficult to get via mainstream media or in everyday life.

Tribe.net was introduced to the Internet community in July of 2003, as Friendster’s popularity was peaking.<sup>6</sup> Its San Francisco origins are still evident today, as this particular regional network remains the most populated and active. The site, emphasizing local networks organized by city, allows users to buy and sell items, rate restaurants and other establishments, and rummage through job postings and housing ads. Members can establish trustworthy reputations by creating personal Profiles, joining and creating Tribes based on shared interests, and connecting to friends. “The original thesis of Tribe,” co-founder Paul Martino wrote in an online chat, “was to marry Friendster and Craigslist—or as one of our focus group members said, ‘Craigslist with a face’.”<sup>7</sup> As for the origins of Tribe.net’s demographic base, Martino said that “to some extent Tribe was ‘captured’ by the Burning demographic.” For this reason, Tribe.net never went mainstream in the way MySpace did, instead becoming a niche site for displaced Fakesters (a playful term for Friendster exiles), Burners, and a collective of “New Age” spiritual seekers (including trancers). By virtue of even joining the site, members demonstrate insider knowledge of the “virtual underground.”

In marked contrast to the dramatic growth in popularity of MySpace throughout 2004, Tribe.net was reporting little increase in traffic, prompting the site to become focused on marketing strategies. In April of 2005, Tribe.net CEO Mark Pincus was replaced as part of the company’s initiative to accelerate its stalled growth. Over the course of the next year, Tribe.net members vocalized their discontent with the new management’s alterations of the site, such as

graphical and navigational changes. In July of 2005, rumors abounded that Tribe.net was soon to be bought out by NBC, inciting enormous protest and criticism that the site had “sold out.” These rumors proved to be false. Over the next six months, the site failed to produce significant revenue. Attempts to market Tribe.net to the mainstream were largely unsuccessful, for, in the words of one Tribe.net employee:

...in trying to guide this site to the mainstream we were trying to be something that we weren't. It remains to be seen whether an audience of geeks, kinks, and burners can grow out from its largely San Francisco based roots and embrace other niches in other places (Tribe Company Blog, 24 July 2006).

Shortly following this announcement, in August of 2006, Pincus bought back the faltering site. His return signified a shift back toward the original management structure, which promised to return the site “to the community and the content” (Tribe.net 2006: par. 7):



The move was widely celebrated by the loyal community of Tribe.net members, who flocked to the newly formed “brainstorming” Tribe to suggest improvements and new ideas. Members overwhelmingly expressed their support of the features that made Tribe.net unique from other social networking sites, particularly its emphasis on local community and openness to “alternative” subject matter.

In March of 2007, Tribe.net (described as “a mostly forgotten social networking site”) and FiveAcross (another social networking site) were officially acquired by Cisco Systems, a

“Silicon Valley heavyweight” in the field of telecommunications equipment (Stone 2007: par. 1). In response to a blog post covering the news on the popular technology website TechCrunch, one reader commented:

Seems the wild west has a new frontier tale to tell today, one about how the cisco kid gathered up the tribe and rode into the (silicon) valley, five across and lord knows how many deep, all manner of whoops and hollers piercing the pregnant air, gold in them thar hills, a whipping post and minions predisposed to bdsm and fire dancing on the open flats by nightfall... and the age-old struggle to domesticate the tribes rises up at high noon as the cisco sherriff makes steps into the cantina... can the tribe be civilized? will they settle? is this a new home or a hollywood set rigged and ready for showtime? there's talk in the tribes and the whipping post sweats and communal bondage, or is it bonding, waits to meet the law... switch on, switch off, or switch sides...

Despite this reader's amusingly ominous predictions, Tribe.net's slick user interface was the primary reason for its acquisition by Cisco; it is among the most flexible and advanced of any social networking site, allowing members to drag and drop modules on their homepages as well as their Profiles. Their user-centric approach continues to be grounded in communicating directly with members through forums dedicated to suggestions, criticisms, and concerns. The tightly knit communities that make up Tribe.net's demographic celebrate the site's relative anonymity, unhindered by crowds and thus able to gather together more closely around the “virtual campfire” (Ryan 2008: 9).

In December of 2007, Tribe.net launched a “premium membership” program, proposing enhanced features such as instant messaging and file sharing—as well as relief from the now prominent ads plastered throughout the site threads and sidebars—in exchange for inexpensive paid subscription fees. The response was quite positive, as many members value their communities on the site and have been proud to show their support by purchasing the \$5 monthly service (marked by the addition of a gold star next to their usernames). However, Tribe.net continued to be beleaguered by frequent sporadic downtimes, an inconvenience often noted in my face-to-face conversations about the site with fellow trancers, for whom the site is frequently associated with the New Age movement (defined broadly as “a diffuse collectivity of

questing individuals” by Steven Sutcliffe [2003: 223]), marked by stereotypical symbols and ideologies of earth-based spiritualities. In following with the nomadic and fragmented nature of New Age travelers, many of the original members of Tribe.net have carved out new virtual territories despite continuing to associate themselves strongly with the site. Today, the site is an intricate virtual graveyard of abandoned Tribes and forum threads—in effect, an archive of stories interwoven with lifestyle-based niches and colorful personalities.

### **Utopia and its Consequences**

While the most popular social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are egocentric in nature, centered around the individual member’s profile and social network, Tribe.net is interest-based and information-centric. Discussion amongst members is encouraged by the centralization of message board forums, publicly visible and open to anyone surfing through. However, this is not to say that Tribe.net is less hierarchical than MySpace or Facebook. On the contrary, being “in the know” is a key value in the formation of the “underground,” through which participants seek and obtain special knowledge (subcultural capital) that distinguishes them from the imagined “mainstream” (Thornton 1996: 11). In a similar vein, Maffesoli (1996: 141) notes that the cohesion nurtured by the tribe through proximate connections is also characterized by exclusivity:

It must be noted... that at the same time that it encourages attraction, even if plural, the feeling of belonging proceeds if not by exclusion then at least by exclusiveness. Indeed, the characteristic of the tribe is that by highlighting what is close (persons and places), it has a tendency to be closed in on itself.

The often extreme libertarian sentiments embraced by US trancers echo the New Communalist rhetoric of the 1960s hippie countercultural movement, the “fuck the system” anthems of 1970s DiY punk, the “right to party” British acid-house-scene-gone-international- phenomenon of the 1980s, and the free-spirited underground ethos of the 1990s San Francisco warehouse raves. As a post-rave movement, psytrance is infused with both nostalgia for its genealogical parent cultures and a cautious, critical awareness of their consequent recuperation in the form of mainstream

popular culture. This commonly held paranoia was eloquently described in Hakim Bey's discussion of "permanent TAZs":

The Media experience a vampiric thirst for the shadow-Passion play of "Terrorism", Babylon's public ritual of expiation, scapegoating, and blood-sacrifice. Once any autonomous group allows this particular "gaze" to fall upon it, the shit hits the fan:-the Media will try to arrange a mini-armageddon to satisfy its junk-sickness for spectacle and death (Bey 1991).

The public nature of Tribe.net grants transparency to a subculture that might have otherwise insulated itself from becoming faddish or trendy. In one blatant example of the commercialization of the underground, Boston's long-running riverside psytrance events were overtaken in the summer of 2008 by two entrepreneurial DJs. As they said in an interview with *Shebrew Magazine*, "It does help that we go into everything from a business perspective. You gotta be able to take the underground culture and package it. We are the 'cool factor'" (in Berezina 2007: par. 15). Commercially packaged, the event resonated painfully amongst members of the local psytrance scene. As described by one attendee:

So i went to the SoulClap event last night. Damn I appreciate Psyforia so much! There was a \$20 cover charge!!!! and not the cheapest drink in town, they had an outside bar set up and it was SPONSORED by REDBULL! I should have known it was too well organized.

The music was good, didn't stay for the main act... couldn't handle the product placement in the VJ's work (which was otherwise really good). The crowd was pretty Euro (as in Eurotrash but I'm trying to stay positive here) - lots of tourists being like "wow, check out that girl, that's what a hippie looks like..." (Sonic Beating Tribe Member)

It is commonly believed that once a "scene" has been infiltrated by "scenesters" it has ripened into a commodified subculture. The term itself is derogatory, and only used when describing others. In her analysis of subcultural discourses of the mainstream, Thornton aptly points out that

“[r]ather than subverting dominant cultural patterns in the manner attributed to classic subcultures, these clubber and raver ideologies offer ‘alternatives’ in the strict sense of the word, namely other social and cultural hierarchies to put in their stead” (1996: 115). Currencies of value in the underground economy are directly tied to the forms of subcultural capital valued by trancers; namely, who you know (party promoters and organizers), music taste (DJs and producers), and style (vendors selling clothing, jewelry and art).

Members of subcultural communities often perceive themselves as beyond the ethos of productivity and the confines of governance, an attitude reinforced by subsistence through an underground economy supported by the forms of subcultural capital mentioned above. There is an inherent irony in claiming authenticity within the psytrance scene: many of the styles and spiritual underpinnings of the movement are based in the appropriation of indigenous cultures and religions (such as Native American tribes and Indian Hinduism). Evidence of this conflict recently occurred in the spring of 2009, when a San Francisco Bay Area event for Burners dubbed “Go Native!” was canceled in the face of virulent furor by Native Americans across the country. Pitched as a fundraiser for “neurofeedback research” into medicinal usages of peyote and featuring four “theme rooms” aligning Indian tribal groupings to the four elements, attendees were encouraged to dress in “Native costume” for the dance event scheduled to take place at an ancient Ohlone site (the indigenous people of the San Francisco Bay Area).

The Visionary Village leaders quickly complied with the American Indian Movement’s demand for cancellation and request for dialogue. It was to be a lesson in effective conflict resolution, though certainly tensions remain: On the night of the event, a handful of Burners were lectured to by the Ohlone community (including children) for four hours on the importance of cultural sensitivity. The Burners were apologetic and conciliatory and willing to bridge the rifts between their cultures: “I think that that this is also a wake up time for this community to WALK OUR TALK and start giving back. Instead of LEAVE NO TRACE (creating temporary communities and tearing or burning them down), it’s time for us to make a mark and LEAVE A TRACE--by creating lasting and positive change” (Burning Man Tribe Member). This collective desire for long-lasting positive change represents an awareness of and transcendence from the constraints of Thornton’s subcultural capital theory, reflected in the multitude of Tribes dedicated to discussion of global crises, sustainable practices, earth-based spiritualities, and the cultivation of intentional communities and co-ops. What do these interests and lifestyle



groupings mean in the context of the cyber and countercultural networks under discussion?

## Conclusion

In a postmodern era characterized by an emphasis on and fluidity between multiple identities and sites of belonging, the psytrance movement is representative of neotribal sensibilities (Bennett 1999: 614). These shifting nodes of identification make up a network of neotribes marked by empathetic and sensual proximate relations (Maffesoli 1996: 139). Forged through mutual aid within the shared experience of the *festal*—which Maffesoli (ibid: 92), defines as “those moments of pure consumption occasioning transgressions of imposed morality”—emotional bonds are formed on the basis of reciprocity and trust. This sense of trust is largely informed by the degree to which one’s online network aligns with one’s personal values, such as family and local community or musical preference and party style. The shared values of communality, openness, and creativity that undergird both cyberculture and psytrance culture coalesce on Tribe.net, creating a safe space for the cultivation of trust. It is one thing to embrace the now, to achieve spontaneous *communitas* in the interstices of everyday life—it is quite another turn when new media practices enter the picture, allowing users to create and retrieve artifacts of group memories in ways previously impossible, as well as granting new possibilities for collectively (re)envisioning the future.

Despite the substantial decrease in activity over the past few years, Tribe.net continues to serve as a massive archive of human stories and conversations and as a useful bulletin board of information pertinent to New Age travelers and *technomads*. Characteristic of the earliest online communities (such as the WELL), the site brings individuals together on the basis of shared interests, taste preferences, beliefs and lifestyles rather than institutionalized or familial connections, enabling the creation of more playful performances and personas in a manner akin to the “temporary autonomous zone” or TAZ frequently created at psytrance gatherings:

Let us admit that we have attended parties where for one brief night a republic of gratified desires was attained. Shall we not confess that the politics of that night have more reality and force for us than those of, say, the entire U.S. Government? Some of the "parties" we've mentioned lasted for two or three years. Is this something worth

imagining, worth fighting for? Let us study invisibility, webworking, psychic nomadism--and who knows what we might attain? (Hakim Bey 1991)

Victor Turner suggests that “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (1986: 95). In such states, “threshold people” may find themselves attuned to the orgiastic whole described by Maffesoli. In these moments, *communitas*—the very stuff of community, the *being-together*—unites us in collective reverence. In the imagination we transport ourselves into alternate universes of possibility with the comforting knowledge that the real world will be waiting for us when we return. The greatest mysteries lie at the nexus between individual imagination and collective hallucination; that is to say, we may become the people we wish ourselves to be in the spaces “betwixt and between” the roles we presently perform in everyday life (V. Turner 1986: 97). It is this potential future democratic utopia, realized and enacted momentarily in the TAZ, that is desired and variably actualized by the neotribes described in this chapter on a more permanent basis:

Although the TAZ remains a Wonderland—often identifying as tribes—tekno, doof, and trance outfits seek to pursue the “second world” on a permanent, or perhaps semi-permanent, basis. Here the dance party becomes a conscious effort to infect the world with the ambiance of the “second world,” to literally vibrate its aesthetic, to breach the ramparts of the world of sobriety and toil, with the love, conviviality, and hope known in the zone (St John 2009: ??).

In describing these autonomous spaces as they are formed in cyberspace and psytrance gatherings, this chapter has hopefully illuminated both the dangers of exclusivity and alternative hierarchies as well as the possibilities for re-imagining the world and effecting positive (even permanent) change.

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## NOTES

- 1 New Communalists rejected private property values, which they argued alienated individuals from society, and sought the restructuring of community in the form of a Back-to-the-Land movement. This American movement is characterized by a demographically prominent migration from urban to rural areas throughout the 1960s and 70s, with the creation of somewhere between 2,000 and 6,000 communes (F. Turner 487).
- 2 Barlow, who was also a lyricist for the Grateful Dead, co-founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), dedicated to the fight for freedom of speech on the Internet.
- 3 The name “Chilluminati” contains two linguistic derivatives: “chillum” refers to a smoking pipe historically used in India; and the “Illuminati” is the name of the secret society founded on May 1, 1776, which is today associated with Aleister Crowley, Freemasonry, the *Illuminatus! Trilogy* by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, a variety of popular video games, and conspiratorial rumors of a New World Order. According to a crew member, the “Chi” in “Chilluminati” was intended to refer to “Chicago”.
- 4 The Burning Man Tribe is by far the most populated on the site, with nearly 20,400 members as of May 2009.
- 5 Throughout this chapter, the ordinary language terms used to describe official features of these sites will be capitalized as proper nouns.
- 6 Friendster was the top social networking site until it was overtaken by MySpace in 2004, at which point membership underwent a dramatic decline.
- 7 Craigslist, a free, text-only site made up of classified ads organized by city, was founded in 1996 and has remained one of the most popular sites on the Internet today.

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