Extraterritorialities in Occupied Worlds

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The relationship of the Internet to territory is complex, contradictory, and changing. Exploring the diverse and shifting ways that Eritreans in diaspora have used websites to participate in national politics from outside the country sheds light on the dynamics of digital extraterritoriality and its significance for politics. At first cyberspace may appear to be simply an extraterritorial space, where websites are constructed as spaces with no territorial location. A contributor to a recent volume on digital anthropology notes that, “few aspects of digital media, cyberspace or the network society are as commonly perceived as fundamental as its disembodying aspects, its placelessness and subordination of physical proximity to network connectivity.” At the same time it can be said that, “[a] cardinal rule of the geography is that social life takes place in ‘constructed’ spaces.” If we understand cyberspace as a constructed space, its significant feature is not its extraterritoriality but rather that the space of cyberspace is ambiguous and elastic, allowing it to support diverse constructions, alternative imaginaries, and multiple forms of territoriality and extraterritoriality.

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa bordered by Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and the Red Sea. First colonized by Italy, Eritrea was later annexed by Ethiopia in 1962. Three decades of war fought on Eritrean soil followed. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front won independence in 1991 and Eritrea has been governed since then by ex-guerilla fighter Isaias Afewerki and his ruling party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice. The original Eritrean

diaspora was a product of the war with Ethiopia that drove Eritreans to flee their homes or stranded them abroad as was the case for Eritrean students studying overseas who could not safely return. Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans were forced to make new lives for themselves in other lands under various circumstances. The Isaias regime entered into a new conflict with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 over the border between the two nations. From 2001 on, its policies and practices became increasingly repressive. This has created a new diaspora, particularly among young people who have been fleeing the country in thousands every month.4

Diaspora, much like cyberspace, allows new imaginaries of the meaning of territorial locations and borders and makes possible new spatializations of relationships. Diaspora can be understood as a form of extraterritoriality. Diasporas possess no territory; they exist, not through occupying space, but by transcending it. Migrants, refugees, diasporas, and similar populations live in ambiguous and simultaneous relationships with multiple territorial locations and communities. They are at once connected to and disconnected from the places where they live and work on a daily basis (where they may consider themselves temporary and/or be treated like outsiders), and also from the territory they no longer inhabit (the places they left behind but to which they still belong or feel attached). The concept of diaspora and related notions of displaced people capture the disconnect between such populations and territory, giving them an extraterritorial identity. Moreover, the extraterritorial aspect of diasporic identity is not simply the fact of living outside a homeland. Diasporic belonging is extraterritorial in the way that it bridges and creates continuity out of the discontinuous spaces occupied by members of dispersed populations. Diasporas, thus, are not simply located outside of the nations they left; through their presence and their absence they remap citizenship and sovereignty across and within national territories.

The Internet also makes possible new forms of connection and disconnection involving mediated absences and presences. The next section of this paper considers how the metaphor of space has been used in relation to the Internet in ways that lead us to conceptualize it as extraterritorial. Then I consider how we might complicate our conceptualization of the Internet as extraterritorial. I do so through an analysis of Eritrean diaspora websites that reveal more complex possibilities of the relationship of digital media to ter-

ritory and to extraterritoriality. This suggests that the Internet is best viewed not simply as extraterritorial, but as enabling the re-envisioning of territorial relations. In particular, the Internet can be used to remake our sense of place in a number of ways that are significant for nations, states, and sovereignty. The Internet is more than simply a cheap, convenient mode of communication. Cyberspace does more than simply shrink distances, it serves diasporas as a space that is ambiguously located, easily accessed, and in some sense equidistant from all locations on the globe. It is at once neither here nor there (neither inside the nation nor outside it), and yet it is also both here and there simultaneously. Cyberspace thus disrupts the homeland/diaspora dichotomy. The political impact of new media, moreover, appears to be much greater outside of established democracies, in autocratic systems where information and public debate are state-controlled or highly centralized.

**EXTRATERRITORIALITY AND CONCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNET**

The connectivity of the Internet is both a deterritorializing force and a reterritorializing force. Through the Internet people communicate across political and geographic borders in ways that can make location seem invisible or irrelevant. Digital connectivity can upend our sense of geography by shrinking distances and bridging physical gaps thereby bringing faraway places close. A sense of “co-presence” is created online. The Internet also allows for the production of virtual spaces. We “visit” websites, we take “virtual tours.” We “go” online and “go to” or “visit” websites, we speak of web “sites” rather than “sights” even though we are looking at visual data on a screen. We speak of “cybersquatting” and “lurking.” Spatiality may be a distinctive feature of cyberspace as a medium. We do not experience or conceptualize our engagement with other media whether print, radio, or film in quite these ways.

Our notion of cyberspace as space and websites as places is a cultural construction. Schulte writes of this development:

As Internet use gained popularity, two initially separate practices, “computing” and “the Internet,” began to merge. This terminological melding signaled a conceptual collapse, as computing was increasingly imagined

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as networking and the computer apparatus was imagined primarily as a gateway to the Internet. As the Internet lost its body, in a sense, it became easier to imagine the Internet as a deterritorialized space or experience rather than a product of hardware.  

This process was neither natural nor inevitable, as Schulte points out:

Internet hardware and software development, institutions of government finance, state regulation, and corporate prerogatives actively re-imagined the Internet as a space to explore or inhabit or as a state of being rather than a product of digital code and programs contained within computer infrastructures and networking wires.

Cloud computing is a growing development in digital media that is represented by a new extraterritorial metaphor. People talk about “the cloud” as if cyberspace exists above our heads, even though we know that servers, computers, and users are all situated in specific locations on the ground. Data you store “in the cloud” may not be located on your device, but it is stored in a terrestrial location somewhere.

While cyberspace is imagined as an extraterritorial place, the focus of much Internet scholarship on the virtual, on online communities, and on the distinctiveness of digital media has tended to obscure the interpenetration of online and off-line worlds. As Christensen, Jansson, and Christiansen note, the Internet too often has been seen “as a territory in its own right” and thus detached from context. Yet, as they argue, “It is precisely these processes of co-construction, the interplay between structural forces and the social and cultural affordances of online media, that call for a critical re-examination of how territories are (re)produced and legitimized.” Diasporas similarly trouble assumptions about the meaning of territory and its relation to social formations and political orders.

7 Ibid., 10.
9 Ibid., 3.
Diaspora, Territory, and Cyberspace

Diaspora involves territorial connections and disjunctures that engender acts of imagination and affect that are linked to territory, yet not bound by it. Eritreans in diaspora were early adopters of digital media as a means of connecting to Eritrean politics.10 The speed of communications on the Internet is significant for politics because it makes distant places seem as close and accessible as near ones and, moreover, eliminates the delays normally associated with distance. This technologically constructed proximity achieved through Internet communications makes it possible for members of the diaspora to respond immediately to current events, national crises, and scandals in Eritrea. In this way they can actually participate in unfolding events, framing issues, shaping opinions, and mobilizing action.

Eritreans in diaspora created public space for themselves online through the establishment of several key websites that have proven long-lasting. These websites (most notably Dehai, Awate, and Asmarino11) form an online public sphere that constitutes Eritrean space in cyberspace. This Eritrean space online was not established purely for the diaspora or primarily as an online community sui generis but was intended to connect Eritreans in diaspora to Eritrea and serve Eritreans wherever they might be located.

Through the websites they established, Eritreans in diaspora created Eritrean space online. Eritrean online space is not simply extraterritorial, but serially and simultaneously engaged in multiple and shifting relationships to Eritrea itself. Sometimes websites serve as national space that extends the nation beyond its borders and sometimes websites serve as national space that is outside the nation and independent from it. In this latter sense websites may serve not as extraterritorial in the sense of a non-terrestrial space, but rather more as extra territory, Eritrean national space that is outside the nation and, therefore, free of government control. Websites may serve as extraterritorial when the aspect of virtual space is foregrounded, offering a space that has no particular location but is everywhere and accessible from anywhere. The ambiguity of location on the Internet thus makes possible different forms of territorialization, deterritorialization, reterritorialization and, extraterritoriality.

We can complicate the notion of the Internet as extraterritorial by considering the ways that cyberspace can be used not only to deterritorialize, but also to reterritorialize. Eritreans in diaspora, for example, sometimes treat websites as national space where they in effect relocate themselves within the nation of Eritrea, even writing their posts in ways that sound as if they are inside the country, as for instance, when writing things like “if we are to develop this country,” meaning Eritrea, when the writer is actually posting from Germany, where they live. Cyberspatiality blurs the distinction between Eritreans inside Eritrea and Eritreans outside it. Since Eritreans in diaspora have more access to the Internet and are responsible for creating and maintaining the popular Eritrean websites, as well as for producing most of the posts, this blurring of spatial distinctions works as a kind of illusion that bridges the diaspora’s separation from Eritrea, concealing their distance from Eritrea and their dispersal from one another. In this sense, the websites they created reterritorialize the diaspora, locating them in Eritrea. Sometimes, cyberspace and diaspora are not so much outside of Eritrea as they are extensions of Eritrea.

I consider cyberspace as a space where the Eritrean diaspora is located. As Daniel Miller has argued, “Instead of regarding sns [social networking sites] as simply a means to communicate between two given localities, it is also possible to start thinking about sns as places in which people in some sense actually live.”12 Georgiou found that among the Greek Cypriot diaspora, “For those active participants of online Greek Cypriot fora, an online territoriality of community emerges against a grounded territoriality that excludes them from participating in what happens at the actual place (Cyprus as a nation-state and as a grounded territory.”13 Through their websites Eritreans can be inside and outside Eritrea at the same time.

Dehai was the first computer-mediated network of Eritreans and is now the longest-running Eritrean website. It has been part of Eritrean politics since 1992, the year before Eritrea was officially recognized as a nation. Dehai was established by a group of Eritreans in diaspora in the US and by design it was devoted to Eritrean politics and nation-building. Dehai built upon a non-technological worldwide web of Eritrean nationalist associations that had been organized in many countries by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front

throughout the 1970s and ’80s, and on other social networks and kinship relations that sustained a transnational Eritrean community of interlinked and overlapping networks. Dehai remained the gathering place for Eritreans around the world through the 1990s. Since connectivity within Eritrea was largely limited to government offices throughout that time, the Internet, furthermore, offered a special conduit from Eritreans in diaspora to the state. Through Dehai Eritreans used the Internet to expand the boundaries of the nation so that it encompassed the diaspora and the virtual national space of a website. Dehai could be seen as an extension of national territory rather than existing outside it. The catch-phrase underneath Dehai on the website’s homepage is “Eritrea online” suggesting that the site is meant to be experienced as Eritrea or to be understood as representing the nation. The extraterritoriality or placelessness of cyberspace is thus turned to the opposite purpose of creating Eritrean national territory.

The space of cyberspace is elastic; it can connect the diaspora and the homeland online in ways that blur the distinction between Eritreans living in Eritrea and those settled abroad. In that sense, it reterritorializes the diaspora and reshuffles territory-related distinctions. A recent post referring to an event where a speaker critical of the government was challenged by audience members proclaimed: “Here are Eritrea’s volunteer sons & daughters right in the heart of North America fighting tooth and nail once again against all odds, so that our precious nation & people remain fiercely independent forever & ever.” The author went on to say “it is my strong belief that the good bad and the ugly we have gone through pre & post independence has brought us all, the people and the leadership more closer than ever before with strong & resolute determination never seen before to stay the course of absolute unity indefinitely.” Here is a vision of the nation that transcends place, binding “the people and the leadership” in “absolute unity.”

This is not to say location has no place online. In fact, Dehai posters often mention their city or country of residence or include it in their signature line. Posters generally use their real names and Dehai includes their email addresses from which their country can be determined since email addresses outside the US have a country suffix — itself an interesting expression of territoriality online. Yet the cyberspatial public sphere appears borderless since

15 Dehai post, January 17, 2015.
people access it from diverse countries, and analyses, comments, and debates from anywhere appear seamlessly in conversation. Furthermore, while posters’ identities and even locations may be known, readers are anonymous and their locations unknown. This, along with the belief that Eritrea’s leaders not only read posts, but might themselves post under pseudonyms all have contributed to a sense of accessing Eritrea itself through the Internet. A recent post exemplifies the pro-government stance of many Dehai posters while blurring the boundaries between diaspora and homeland and between the people and the state in its call to defend Eritrea:

Still the evil mission of the Human Rights Group is in action. Therefore, it is up to us Eritreans all over the world to stop it. Yes we can stop it for we are armed by the same if not more powerful weapon to fight back. We have ERI-TV [the state television] as the vanguard and then add all the following patriotic websites to give them hell. They are: www.shabait.com, www.shaebia.org, www.dehai.org.\(^{16}\)

The list of patriotic websites puts Dehai right after the official websites of the government and the ruling party and then goes on to include a number of other websites, while not including politically critical websites like Asmarino or Awate.

Sometimes what the Internet offers might best be understood not as extraterritorial, but as extra territory. In analyzing Eritrean experience I have likened diaspora and websites to a kind of “offshore” that is important for the loosened grip that national sovereignty can exercise over it.\(^{17}\) Successful rival Eritrean websites, Asmarino and Awate, being paramount among them, began to compete with Dehai in the aftermath of the devastating border war that Eritrea and Ethiopia waged between from 1998 to 2000. To say that Dehai, Asmarino, and Awate serve as Eritrean territory does not mean that no others ever go there, but rather, that when they do, they are entering Eritrean space. The Eritrean character of the websites is their defining feature as evidenced by the Eritrean identities of their web managers and content producers, the focus of their content on Eritrean national politics, and even the names of the websites. Dehai is a Tigrinya word that means both “voice” and “news,” Awate

\(^{16}\) Dehai post, January 24, 2015.

is the name of a nationalist hero, and *Asmarino* is a term for someone from Asmara, Eritrea’s capital.

Like *Dehai*, *Asmarino*, and *Awate* were founded by Eritreans living in the US; but from the start they differed from *Dehai*. *Dehai* used the Internet to extend Eritrean national territory and sovereignty to the diaspora and to cyberspace, supporting President Isaias Afwerki and the ruling party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice. Through *Dehai* Eritreans in diaspora participate in Eritrean nationalism and nation-building. *Asmarino* and *Awate*, in contrast, used cyberspace more like an offshore territory from which Eritreans could develop alternative and independent perspectives from those of the state, and challenge the legitimacy of the Isaias regime. While still constituting Eritrean territory online, these websites used cyberspace to create Eritrean space that is not dominated by the government. *Asmarino*’s tag line is “Independent.” These websites have responded to growing repression and the lack of independent media within Eritrea since 2001 when the government closed down the free press and imprisoned journalists along with high officials who had who had publicly expressed criticism of President Isaias Afwerki. *Awate* and *Asmarino* attracted posters and readers by attempting to transcend the self-censorship and policing that often inhibited dissent and critical debate on *Dehai*. A recent example from *Dehai* employs the common theme of accusing critics of being traitors allied with Eritrea’s enemies, particularly Ethiopia.

Since the 1950s, Eritrea has had her fair share of elements who betrayed Eritrea. The ugliest and the most disgraceful of these elements were the one[s] who wanted us to be “Ethiopians”? Where are these elements these days? Where else. Just like their predecessors, they are counting their days in this life with no country and people to belong to. Just like the rest, one after another they will evaporate into thin air in “NO MAN’S LAND.”

It is significant that the disastrous fate envisioned for these critics is non-existence represented as a kind of extraterritory — “no-man’s-land.” It is not a question, then, of living in diaspora rather than in the homeland, but rather of social death symbolized by being cut off from meaningful, inhabited territory.
The Internet has expanded the spaces available to people to express their views, engage in debate and discussion, petition, protest, and organize. *Awate*’s motto, “Inform. Inspire. Embolden. Reconcile” conveys in the word “embolden” the need for Eritreans to overcome fear of expressing themselves. This is all the more significant for Eritreans because within the country no opposition is allowed, the media are controlled by government, and dissenters are harshly punished. The significance of Eritrean space in cyberspace is heightened by the fact that people can experience freedoms of expression and critical debate not possible on Eritrean soil. As Sassen points out,

Electronic space is, perhaps ironically, a far more concrete space for social struggles than that of the national political system. It becomes a place where nonformal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult in national institutional channels.19

The diaspora websites, particularly *Asmarino* and *Awate*, have come to be used as an offshore platform for civil society where Eritreans engage in national politics outside the authority of the state. In these online spaces, politically independent perspectives and subjectivities can be developed collectively as posters construct alternative histories and reframe and revise national narratives, engaging in activities not possible on Eritrean soil.

The use of websites as a space for Eritrean civil society and expression is thus particularly important since government repression makes it impossible for these to take place in Eritrea. A recent post on *Asmarino* calls for donations to support the website “so that it will continue to keep the lights on for a new generation of Eritreans to be reporters, editors, poets, writers, commentators, designers, artists, painters, etc. Most importantly, to continue to be the voice of the voiceless Eritreans at home and elsewhere.”20 A post on *Awate* urging Eritreans to testify about human rights abuses to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea notes the difficulty of speaking against the regime. It also presents a vision of the nation that foregrounds mutual obligations among countrywomen and men rather than ties to land or loyalty to a government:

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20 *Asmarino* post, January 9, 2015.
It takes courage to give testimony on behalf of oneself or on behalf of those whose rights were violated by PFDJ [Eritrea’s ruling party]. And yes, there may be certain deterrents that discourage one from speaking out; the sense of shame or betrayal are examples of familiar cultural offenses. Nevertheless, the courage to speak out, in this case, is just as much a quest for justice on behalf of an entire nation as it is on behalf of oneself and other victims. To stand up for your rights and for those of your countrywomen and men, is to stand up for the future welfare of the nation that thousands have bled, died and sacrificed for...  

In the beginning Eritreans used the Internet in ways that extended the nation-state beyond its territorial borders and blurred the boundaries between the homeland and the diaspora. On Dehai the distinction between the people and the state was also left ambiguous and undefined in posters’ focus on the deterritorialized nation. These effects are created when diaspora posters write as if they are located in Eritrea, and when posts discuss Eritrea as if the citizens, the diaspora, and the state were a single entity. While these practices continue in some posts on any of the websites up to now, Awate and Asmarino generally operate as spaces that are distinct and separate from the nation-state and the ruling party. As an offshore civil society, then, websites like these allow Eritreans inside and outside of Eritrea to challenge the government from cyberspace. The online public sphere operates as an offshore platform outside state authority, offering important counterpoints to the state’s authority and to the national media it controls.

As emerges from this discussion, there are interesting parallels and synergies between diasporas as extraterritorial populations in relation to their homeland, and cyberspace as used by Eritreans and other diasporas as an extraterritorial space that does not reflect their territorial location, but rather their affective ties or emotional location. Although Eritreans in diaspora have settled abroad and made new lives for themselves as citizens of other countries, their sense of who they are is not defined by their legal status or place of residence, but rooted in Eritrea’s turbulent past, uncertain present, and possible future in which all Eritreans have a stake.

The dynamic online territory of Eritrean websites reconfigures territorial relations. Through Asmarino and Awate Eritreans in diaspora have used cy-

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21 Awate post, October 17, 2014.
berspace to de-center the nation, shifting its primary locus from the state’s center of power in Asmara, to Eritreans wherever they may be located. This was particularly striking in the virtual national war memorial established online by the Eritrean diaspora website Awate. The Martyrs Album as it was called, commemorated Eritrean lives lost in the 1998–2000 border war. The texts of the memorial written by the web managers of Awate constructed the Eritrean nation as rooted in Eritrean people themselves, in contrast to official narratives that locate Eritrea in national territory and the sovereign state that controls it under the leadership of President Isaias Afewerki. Eritrean websites reveal the creative strategies of the less powerful to construct new spaces and strategies of political participation and to expand the boundaries of what can be publicly expressed.

CONCLUSION

Cyberspace can be an extraterritorial space in the sense of “an autonomous sphere at a removal from the confines of any one national territory.” Yet, in profound ways it remains tethered to the earth and to the geo-political configurations of power and relations of sovereignty. The Internet’s freedom from constraints has often been overestimated by scholars and others. Perhaps the vision of openness and equality associated with the Internet represents merely a hypothetical potential that we can seek to approach but can never reach. In practice, identities, power differentials, and authority are reproduced online as well as contested. Censorship and self-censorship of various kinds define what is and is not expressed on Eritrean websites, for example. Self-appointed citizens monitor and seek to police online spaces and, Eritreans believe that in some cases they are recruited by the state to serve this purpose. All of the three websites are expressly democratic in their mission statements and ideals and their claims to being uncensored are credible. Nonetheless there is a paradox in that the Internet appears to be unbounded and totally open, and was likened by some scholars to a new frontier, while in practice, it is structured and limited by the ways people use it. The Eritrean online public sphere is not boundless and completely free of constraints. Even though websites are not administered or regulated by the state, or even

censored by web managers, posters impose political norms on themselves and on others that construct the boundaries of what is expressed and what is suppressed. There are ongoing tensions arising from existing political and cultural structures that do not vanish simply because a group has access to the Internet. Though many have theorized the democratizing potential of the fact that in principle anyone can post any view online, in practice people are often intimidated to post unpopular or dissident perspectives and those who do are met with harsh responses that serve to silence others.

In the wake of Snowden’s revelations about NSA data collection, it is becoming ever more clear that the often invisible architecture of the Internet, the servers and cables that constitute its infrastructure, as well as the locations of developers, designers, web managers, and posters are territorial and that their locations make a political difference in jurisdictions, regulations, and rights. As Castells reminds us, “The Internet Age has been hailed as the end of geography. In fact, the Internet has a geography of its own, a geography made of networks and nodes that process information flows generated and managed from places.”

Nonetheless as the Eritrean experience shows, the Internet remains a powerful tool for reconfiguring territorial relations and unsettling distinctions between categories of experience. It has altered the landscapes of citizenship and sovereignty and given rise to new political spaces. Eritreans have developed new political practices and discourses to negotiate the deterritorialized relations between citizens and the state. Eritreans in diaspora are experimenting online in ways that suggest new forms of citizenship, democracy, and the public sphere emerging out of the new technologies and the heightened mobility of our times. Diasporas and other mobile populations are altering nations’ centers of gravity through the powerful transnational fields they sustain, in part, through the Internet. Eritreans’ engagement with the Internet shows we cannot define its quality of extraterritoriality or its relation to territory in narrow or fixed terms. We need to explore the various and shifting permutations of cyberspatial and territorial relations that are always both grounded and virtual.

The affordances of digital media are increasingly woven into the fabric of people’s lives, and today cyberspace is perhaps no more magical than elec-

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tricity. Yet the Internet remains an inspiration, stimulating imaginaries of an unbound world where borders are crossed with ease and intimacies transcend distance, where collaboration and community persist on the basis of mutual interest rather than on repression, and where new spaces of creativity and connection continue to be sited.