

Editorial by Greg Niemeyer

Disentangling the Seams



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The world must seem flat in the minds of the software designers who created the above visualizing tool (visualroute.com) to show connections between hosts and clients in on-line interactions. A connection from Berkeley, California, to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce in China falls off the edge of the map (far left) and emerges again, in “Asteroids” fashion, on the far right side. The technical challenges of adjusting the map to show a continuous connection across the Pacific are minimal. The cultural bias of seeing the world from a Eurocentric viewpoint seems far more difficult to overcome.

The world seems flat, economically, as some people realize the potential of global economic competition, increasingly to the advantage of their home countries.

The world seems flat, metaphorically, in the workings of the Internet, as its diverse protocols remove geographic limitations from the communications among more and more people who are lucky enough to be on-line, the digital “We.”

However, we often cannot remove cultural limitations from our minds, even as we are engaged in transcontinental interactions. What we say about our interactions often does not reflect what we do. Mutual trade and mutual cultural cross-pollination are standard practice in our daily lives, yet culturally we still contend with the edge of the map cutting through the Pacific Ocean. This edge causes our widespread blindness to both the benefits and the challenges of Pacific Rim cross-cultural relations.

In my imagination, the Atlantic cross-cultural challenge is resolved, because one side of the Atlantic is called the “New World,” and the other is called the “Old World.” Although this colonialist view of matters is naive and by no means harmless, it at least allows for the drawing of continuous lines from one side to the other.

The Pacific, in contrast, cannot be resolved into a continuous space using colonialist strategies. All sides are “old worlds.” Our imagination of time itself struggles to continue across the International Date Line. The deepest trench on the face of the Earth runs neatly through the Pacific Ocean, yet the water surface above is smooth. A part of that surface, the North-Pacific subtropical gyre, according to Charles Moore [1], is covered with an estimated 3 million tons of plastic bags. Among all political sides, the balances of power are increasingly unclear. There are more people on both the Western and the Southern sides than on the Northeastern side of the Pacific.

Perhaps there are no sides at all to the Pacific. The Pacific presents us with the much harder task of imagining a world full of other people, without opportunities to colonize them, and without fear of being colonized by them. A world, not flat, full of opportunities to learn, to play and to construct connections that all “connectees” are proud of, a world that builds on mutual understanding of the other.

Our special issue of *Leonardo* points toward the potential crossing over the edge of the map without the brutality of colonization, points toward strategies of doing so in the very structure of its themes, points toward the production of alternatives to colonial thought by typically risk-tolerant artists and points toward the challenges of reaching higher ground on the shores of civilized exchange.

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Reference

1. <<http://www.mindfully.org/Plastic/Ocean/Moore-Trashed-PacificNov03.htm>>