I first met Kekula Bray Crawford in cyborg-L, a discussion list created by the Women on the Net project initiated by the UNESCO and the Society for International Development. I am of course using the word "met"—a term that connotes physicality and geographical time and space—loosely. Perhaps virtual encounter is a more appropriate phrase.

Kekula, in her postings in cyborg-L about technology, migration and the borders her people mediate, struck me as a very wise woman. She must be a wizened, old crone, I said to myself.

I finaly met Kekula last March at the campus of the University of California in Berkeley during the second face-to-face meeting of the Women on the Net project. She is indeed wise as our meeting and the E-mail correspondence/interview here will attest. But old she is not, just wise beyond her years. Kekula is in her late 30s. A big, beautiful Hawa'iian whose charisma is as thick as the lava in her islands' volcanoes. Her first words to me, the literalness of which strangely would make me think about figurative meanings, were gayly spoken. "Ah, a sister from the Pacific."

Yes, the Philippines is in the Pacific. It lies south-eastward of the China Sea. When Magellan sailed in the 1500s in search of an alternate route to the East, he found a group of islands he named after his king, Philip of Spain. If he had survived the fierce warrior Lapu-lapu, Magellan would have found passage to China and the rest of mainland Asia.

Since becoming an activist, I've always looked eastward, in a conscious attempt to connect with the Asian part of my heritage and partly as a reaction to 300 years of Spanish colonial rule and a hundred years of U.S. occupation of the Philippines. Most Filipinos still look to the West, toward the USA. Unfortunately, our cultural telescope as a people always misses the islands that dot the Pacific, and the peoples who inhabit this liquid continent.

"Ah, a sister from the Pacific." No other expression of solidarity could be as simple. The Philippines formally established itself a Republic in 1946, but it was only in 1991 that the Filipino people mustered enough force to finally tell the Americans that their military bases are no longer welcome on our shores. Hawa'ii, a free and freedom loving nation was forcibly annexed by the USA in 1893. Since then, generations of Hawa'iians would not stop until their independence and right to self-determination is recognised by the world at large. The U.S. Congress has already issued a formal statement of apology for the colonisation of Hawa'ii, but still the Nation of Hawa'ii has yet to regain its sovereign right akin to the status accorded to other indigenous people like the State of the First People of North America.

Kekula Bray Crawford is a leading member of the movement to re-establish the Hawa'ii Nation's independence. As foreign minister of the Nation of Hawa'ii (this should not be confused with the State of Hawa'ii, the government recognised by the United States of America), Kekula is a formidable presence in the various United Nations fora established to discuss and settle the claim to the right to self-determination by the Nation of Hawa'ii, as well as those of other nations of indigenous people—what is known as the Fourth World or nations annexed by another state, and which continue to practice their own distinct political culture but are unrecognised by the rest of the world.

Kekula's revolutionary work extends to other spaces, particularly into virtual communities shaping the Internet and resisting emergent forms of cyber-colonisation. In cyber circles, Kekula is also known as "Netwarrior," an apt name for a key figure in the cyber movements that have developed in support of the struggles of indigenous peoples all over the world. Using the Internet, Kekula and her confederates of techies and Net activists (collectively known as Netwarriors), have been waging a protracted online struggle since the start of the 1990s to assert the voices of indigenous peoples, to create virtual communities where land-bound community organising is no longer possible, and to build international support towards self-determination issues and efforts.

But the Netwarriors' objectives go beyond engaging the political agencies standing in the way of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. Indigenous revolutionaries like Kekula have upped the stake for the electronic world. In a paper delivered during the 1995 Conference of the Internet Society, Kekula and Scott Crawford wrote: "The indigenous peoples of the world already hold the ancient wisdom.

The question is, can their wisdom be translated into data and information in a way that preserves its essence, while allowing us to take advantage of the modern technologies that are available to distribute and share this wisdom in the form of data, to make a real significance in the future of humanity?"

In this E-mail correspondence cum interview, Kekula and I discuss our encounter with the new information and communication technology, and compare insights about the impact of such a technology on people, particularly on women. As initiator of the correspondence, I am interested in exploring the issue of technology as cultural practice. In engaging Kekula, a technology practitioner and visionary, I wanted to gain insights that would inform my own practice of technology as a tool for empowering other women. Hopefully those reading our correspondence will see some use for the ideas and issues Kekula and I have attempted to disassemble and reassemble.

Resources readers may want to check:
Nation of Hawa'ii
http://hawaii-nation.org
Netwarriors
Self Determination in the Information Age
http://inet.nttam.com

E-mails

by Pi Villanueva

on the Edge

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To: kekula@hawaii-nation.org
Fr: isis@mnl.sequel.net
Subject: Why do women need to be on the cutting edge?
cc:
========================================================================
Do you remember I asked you in Berkeley if we could interview
you for our paper magazine Women in Action?

My idea is to do away with the straight question-and-answer
type of interview. Instead, what I have in mind is an
"interflow" type of interview where we both can actually
engage each other on the issue of women and information
technology (meaning, you can ask me questions if you like). I
can start the interview with a question or two questions.
I've been dying to ask you since I've started sorting out the
informal discussions I had with you in Berkeley. There are
tons I want to ask you. Then you can email me your reply, and
then I'll ask you another one, and so on and so forth. The
questions are not straightforward ones; all will necessarily
have long prefaces to communicate with you my own premises,
biases—where I am coming from.

Basically, what I want to explore and navigate with you in
the interview are the following issues: why do women need to
be in the cutting edge of technology, what does it really
mean to be on the cutting edge, and what does it take for
women to be in this edge. (Where is this edge, btw.)
We can of course do this interflow/interview using IRC or
other real-time chat clients. But I feel email affords us
more time and space to mull over the issues and questions.
Tell me what you think about this proposal. My editor has
given me until the 15th to wrap up the interview.

Pi


To: isis@mnl.sequel.net
Fr: kekula@hawaii-nation.org
Subject: Defining Cutting Edge
cc:
========================================================================
What a great idea and I do remember.  I'd love to enter the
dialogue with you.  I just hope my crazy schedule works okay
for you.  I live far away from everything and once or twice a
week I have to go to the other side of the island.  This is
one of those mornings so I'm running, but let me take a quick
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attempt at this great question and then you can navigate us through your interview.

For me... why women need to be on the cutting edge of technology is because the playing field had been levelled by mass growth and unmarked progress since something like language in a sense. The world is governed by men—we have the results due to the management and decision-making in that world. When we were in Beijing and Huairou, women were present from all over the world even though at the time there were 140 bloodletting wars taking place at the same time. Yet, we did not see these barriers. We saw power, women, dance, peace, freedom, pain, suffering and alternative address. The use of language as an example is completely real, but it comes close to the opportunity of field of human facilitation that the net and multimedia technology provides. If women do not get to, on, in and producing the edge, men will and with that comes the reflection. Because as new and alternative as it is—the dominant "mentality" will prevail as it is trying so hard to do already.

The "cutting edge" is perhaps more honestly defined by multiregion—state or condition. Rafa for example, living in the Middle East will find digital and T-1 cutting edge; and her ability to get there is money. For myself, living in the U.S. the cutting edge is virtual reality and information management. Again, money is what it takes to get there. We can grow as quickly as we are given the opportunity to. One thing to always recognise is that the human mind is still light years beyond the ability of computer technology. We have to keep that tangible in our worlds.

Okay, gotta run, but I hope that starts us off well...
Much love Pi and say hi to the women there for me?

Aloha,
Kekula

To: kekula@hawaii-nation.org
Fr: isis@mnl.sequel.net
Subject: Computer networking for social work
cc:
===
At the risk of sounding like a raving fan, you are a true inspiration for women—myself included—who are struggling to creatively meld personal autonomy, activism and a commitment to exploring the potential uses of the new technologies for the genuine advancement of humanity. You are mercilessly breaking new grounds and stereotypes; thank you very much for this. I am sure our readers will be very interested to learn how you came about this integrating of politics and technology.

My own work right now involves getting women to use computer networking to enhance their social action work. It is work that is as far from the cutting edge as you can imagine, that is if the cutting edge means only the technology stuff—high tech, low-tech, multi-media, virtual reality, GPS, GIS, etcetera. Personally, I think of my work as helping women march up to the top of a hill

from where they can survey the plains and marshes below and the mountains and gorges beyond.

To be sure, even in my society, there are many women who are already riding the crest of the information technology revolution. But being technology-savvy is never enough for women to be able to really cut the edge where it matters. Women scientists, engineers and technicians need to be aware that technology—and the sciences for that matter—is not neutral ground, that it is not a value-free entity. The world, as you said, is governed by men. Corollarily, technology, constructed by man in his image and his vision of the Divine, is a site of power, of contestation and daily struggles. Our pagan ancestors believed that good and evil emanates from the same source; that the power to create and the power to destroy flows from the same force. Christianity on the other hand has forced this concept of absolute good and evil, and the dichotomy between the two: God and the Devil, the benevolent and the malevolent, order and mayhem. Ergo, technology is seen as either pure goodness or pure evil.

On a more practical level, I'd like to share some of the obstacles I have personally encountered, in the hope of eliciting your own reflection on similar matters. These obstacles stem from complex issues that I am not sure I am even able to comprehend, much more articulate, well enough.
First, there is the technology stuff—awfully unfriendly and codified in an alien language (techies are notorious for lousy documentation)—which one has to take a hold on. This demands time and money, both resources women don't have too much of. What I know about computers and computer networking I learned on my own, using my own time, and my own resources (and the dial-up account of my organisation). I don't really recommend this kind of approach. I am a mother of two young children, and I have a life in the real world. Each second I spend in front of the computer, I am actually using up time I could have spent with my family and friends. I take pride in what I've managed to do and learn (like you, I am a drop-out of the school system), but I wonder if there are other ways women can learn and wield the technology stuff without—so to speak—reinventing the wheel.

Learning something new and useful is empowering. But it can also be scary, since each step towards learning is also a step to becoming aware of what you don't know. It is frightening to be confronted about how much I need to learn to get to that point where I will be relatively comfortable and confident about what I know. For most women, knowledge and the taking of knowledge can mean tremendous personal sacrifices. How did you learn the technology stuff? Did you have mentors? Do you have a community with whom you can share the "boring tech stuff?" How do you deal with groups that shut you out because you're a woman, or because you don't talk the tek-talk, or just because?
Many young women are learning about the new technologies—as programmers, web designers, network engineers, etc.—from the school system. It makes sense for us in the movement to attempt to reach out to them and convince them to work for grassroots interests. But this is easier said than done. In my society, education is expensive. Landing a high paying job is a top priority of university graduates, especially those with computing skills. New graduates of computer programming and engineering courses are fodder for the transnational corporations here and abroad—specially the U.S. where the IT sector has a big

demand for highly skilled workers. How can we in the non-profit sector compete with the private sector when it comes to recruiting computer technology skilled people?

There is also the issue of confronting the western and patriarchal value systems inherent in modern technology. In one forum we organised, one woman put the issue squarely: If we introduced modern information and communications technology to the grassroots, are we not also inadvertently helping the transnational corporations tighten their stranglehold on the Third World? How do we get into the wired world without buying into the ideology and politics of the transnational forces and interests that dominate it?

Your life and work are closely tied to your people's struggle for self-determination. As an indigenous woman, how do you deal with a technology that originated from the West vis-à-vis your people's struggle to assert their integrity and survival.

I have so many questions, but I'd rather hear your own thoughts now. Mine are still half submerged in the haze of sleep. Every year, the whole archipelago of the Philippines goes on holiday from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday. The philistines head out to the ocean or hie off to the mountains. But the rest stay home to pray and hold vigil. Filipinos believe that from Thursday night until Sunday morning, God is literally dead. Then there are those who sit out the hottest days of summer sleeping. I, philistine and penniless, am part of this group. I am only now waking up.

I hope this letter finds you in good spirit and health, and the fair winds beneath your sails.

Pi

To: isis@mnl.sequel.net
Fr: kekula@hawaii-nation.org
Subject: Who's Wielding the Blade
cc:
===
You're incredible and I'm really impressed with your lines of thought. The feedback and then questions are great and works in both directions. I plan to share the technique with others in the future. I apologise for the delay. I had to leave the island for a few days.

Before going to this question I wanted to share one more point with you on the cutting edge. That's the "Bleeding Edge," going beyond the cutting, being led by western multimedia propaganda into immature technologies, spending money, time and frustrations on what is promoted as leading or cutting edge but actually are only developing edge. Thus, a dull end to the uses and satisfaction. Cutting Edge is also defined by our use of the technologies—old or past software or hardware that you become proficient at, effectively and cleverly spinning them in ways most people never even get to do due to following the never-ending flow of new information, technologies and concepts.

On justification in regards to globalisation, transnational, multinational, the neocolonial framework: it's difficult to identify especially through a third part association. Perhaps it can be placed on a sliding scale where

various balance levels can be attained, mostly philosophically weighing out ethics, realities, traditions, spirituality and future projections. If we take some theorists' ideas, which implore us to not ruin or disturb the indigenousNESS of a rural or untouched region due to their good intentioned mentality towards the struggle, are we not actually paying further into and aligning ourselves with that neocolonial agenda?

We as indigenous peoples might say: if we are to be ruined, and in the light of the multinational neocolonial agendas, then allow us the opportunity to meet some of the challenges we are faced with "from the inside out" with common tools. Level the playing field. Or let us ruin ourselves because we're certainly tired of being ruined by everyone else. Who will stop the multinational pharmaceutical companies, miners, loggers, road builders from ruining our forests? We've been set fire to. We've lost virtually entire races of people without the world even noticing. It happens on a regular basis and has continued for the past several industrial decades. Can we not have the ability to at least let the world know at our own will that we are being massacred and or that our neighbour is being eliminated by military weapons or technical fires? These realities of indigenous peoples must be placed on the scale of justification when it comes to technology and our contribution to western ruinization.

I like to say that it is a two edged sword and the one wielding it must be precise and knowing. Rooted deeply in simplicity, truth and earth. Not everyone needs to wield—there is a learning curve and testing ground for growth and development. It's alright. It will be okay. These are mothers' words... and they allow growth. She creates that space and there is manifestation.

Including technology in our agendas is imperative in my theory to stand face to face, shoulder to shoulder, back to back with our sisters, individually with, for and against the world(s) we select. Men? Well we use those who want to serve the highest good, who respect and honour the mother, who can find their own vision and strength in that truth. There are many. The rest? Ah well, we just dust them off the sides, that is our attitude. If they know more than us, so what? They may be spiralling down the path of a bleeding edge. Know it and understand our potential at this time.
The course we are on is unavoidable. We have some choices and they are few if we are to effect that course. We are the doormat for various negative and positive worlds to a number of situations and realities, from the homefront all the way to the global country/state/politic/religion/family of women. We are a unit. All of us have connectivity within body and spirit. We can join hands in peace; virtual space can allow us to do it more regularly. We need to build when we do, as we are: here and now. Really proving the appropriateness of furthering western initiatives is found in the strength we should build within our complex commonalities.

The greatest technology we need to prevent from becoming corrupted by the transnational grip is our own minds. The electronic extension of that only assists, if we don't mentally pay into the trap of that grip. Removing the fear of it is our first step.

Sisterly Affections,
Kekula