

‘Welcome to the FoEI family’: presence and mutuality at a distance

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Introduction¹

Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) is a federation of environmentalist NGOs that was founded in 1971. It is a group that hangs together, albeit spread out in many places, in at least two ways: an imagined community in Anderson’s (1980) terms and through regular interaction, by means of communication technology and face-to-face meetings. The experience of activists’ FoEI identity carries an apparent contradiction. The membership structure is based on the system of nation-states and each country may only have one FoE member group. FoEI identity is thus closely informed by a notion of cultural diversity comprising a mosaic of bounded, territorial units. Nonetheless, FoEI activists do not experience such diversity as discontinuity or as a

¹ The fieldwork for my doctoral research project consisted in six months participant observation with FoE Brazil, five months with the FoE International Secretariat in Amsterdam, six months with FoE Malta as well as the three years between 2003 and 2006 during which I engaged with FoE Malta as an activist, nine international meetings between 2003 and 2007 and continuous email participant observation throughout the period from February 2003 to December 2007. I gratefully acknowledge the University of Aberdeen’s Sixth Century Studentship award for funding my doctoral research project. I would also like to thank Tim Ingold and David Anderson, the FoEI activists in Malta, Brazil and Amsterdam, the participants in the University of Aberdeen’s writing-up seminar, in particular Peter Loovers and Richard Muscat for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

barrier to mutual belonging. In fact, as it is for many people who regularly engage with communication technologies their regular interaction by telephone or Internet is experienced so much as presence that I would hesitate to call it ‘at a distance’. Instead it might better be referred to as ‘non-face-to-face interaction’. However, it is widely felt that face-to-face experiences are essential for their use of communication technology to be successful as presence.

Ingold (1993) shows that the theory of culture which equates ‘difference’ with ‘discontinuity’, implicit in the notion of discrete cultures and in its more diluted form as cultural diversity, is a product of the homogenising idiom of modernity. He calls identity-by-contrast, where difference is drawn as a boundary, *attributional* identity. On the other hand, mutual belonging that is based on immersion in joint action develops a sense of *relational* identity. Here, difference is a function of every participant’s position ‘within a continuous network or field’ (*ibid*, 229). FoEI activists are identified in the first instance by their national attributional identities. However they need to develop their relational identity in order for non-face-to-face interaction to be successful in maintaining their sense of mutual belonging ‘at a distance’. The FoEI meetings are the primary contexts where activists, by being immersed in joint action, develop these relational bonds.

In this paper I focus on how the international meetings allow FoEI activists’ to develop relational bonds. In effect the particular way these relational bonds are created during the international meetings is what facilitates the experience of non-face-to-face interaction as presence. I do this in three steps. First I shall give an overview of FoEI and the activists’ non-face-to-face interaction. Second, I summarise

Ingold's argument about 'cultural diversity', in order to show the distinction between relational and attributional senses of identity. Third, an analysis of a FoEI international meeting will shed light on the particularity of such meetings and the way in which the relational bonds developed or reinforced there facilitate the experience of non-face-to-face interaction as presence.

But first I must explain why this paper on an international environmentalist NGO federation is appropriately placed in a workshop about mutuality at a distance in migrant communities. Firstly, discussing my research with a fellow student in Aberdeen we realised that the way FoEI activists work and build their sense of mutuality is virtually identical to the practices of transnational migrant organisations, such as the Ukrainian Youth Association (UYA – www.cym.org/uk). The issues of building mutuality at a distance for such migrant communities could therefore be very similar to FoEI's experience. For the UYA and FoEI there is both a sense of imagined community and actual interaction in the context of the organisation which embodies their respective identities. For both migrants in the UYA and FoEI activists, their birthplaces are different and individuals in both cases have as much in common as they might also not have in common. Secondly, Rouse (2002) argued that the Aguillian migrants maintained a community dispersed in different places primarily by two means: regular travel and daily communication by telephone. Like the Mexican migrants the FoEI activists' sense of mutual belonging also partially derives from their regular meetings and use of communication technology. In this paper I suggest what actual experiences, relations and practices *allow* communication technology to be facilitate the maintenance of social ties in the absence of face-to-face interaction which is so central to many migrants.

An outline of Friends of the Earth International

On its website FoEI is described as the ‘World’s largest grassroots environmental network, uniting 69 national member groups and some 5000 local activist groups [on every inhabited continent]’ (www.foei.org). It goes on to say that the network unites around two million activists. FoEI is an environmentalist federation that includes social issues as an integral aspect of its environmentalist ideology and policies. Consequently FoEI puts a considerable emphasis on having a decentralised organizational structure. Indeed, FoEI expresses this focus on decentralization by referring to itself as a ‘grassroots’ federation. Although the actual discourse and practice of decentralization in FoEI deserves further analysis, the ideological aim of decentralisation in FoEI has resulted in a significant diversity of member groups and types of environmentalism. For instance there are primarily nature conservation groups – such as Global 2000 (FoE Austria) – as well as environmental and human rights advocacy groups – such as the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center, *Kasama sa Kalikasan* (FoE Philippines) – and each member group has its own unique mission statement. There are nonetheless some common membership requirements including independence from religious or ethnic movements, political parties and economic interest groups, and a democratic, non-sexist structure.

The diversity of groups is taken to express both the grassroots nature of FoEI and its widespread presence in the world. In fact, as can be seen in the description of FoEI that I quoted above, these two aspects are central to the identity, as well as rhetoric, of FoEI. At a basic level the diversity of groups is achieved by awarding membership status to already established groups and by restricting membership to one

FoE group per country.² FoEI member groups are expected to be active in their own localities (in local, regional and national contexts) as well as to participate, within their organisation's capacity, in FoEI activities. Therefore the identity of FoEI member groups is couched in two different terms: firstly, their national identity, including their different experiences of environmentalism in their respective home countries, and secondly their cooperation with FoE activists from other countries. These two aspects are not simply two features of a single type of identity. Rather they attest to two different senses of identity – attributional and relational. As I shall show, this difference challenges basic assumptions of how identity in anthropology is understood.

As *national* member groups, in the idiom of modernity within which nation-states are defined, their differences (of nationality, experience, ideology...) are implicitly construed along lines of discontinuity (notional, bureaucratic...) between such states and this discontinuity is the basis upon which membership criteria are founded. However, in the interaction between FoEI activists from different countries the boundaries imagined by their respective national, attributional identities are apparently bridged. This is not because they hold in common an overarching identity as environmentalists. As I have already mentioned, there are considerable differences among the ideologies and practices of environmentalism within FoEI that are not only accepted, but also considered essential to its representativeness. Rather, in their daily interaction, their immersion in FoE work develops bonds of mutual belonging where difference does not equal discontinuity.

² Except in the UK, where there is a FoE Scotland and a FoE EWNI (England Wales Northern Ireland) and in Belgium, where there is a FoE Flanders and a FoE Wallonie.

FoEI activists make intense use of communication technology in their daily work. The activists interact by telephone, telephone conferences – telephony via the Internet, such as Skype, has made telephoning even more widespread – individual email and email groups. ‘FoEI All’ is an email group open to any FoEI activist who asks to be added to the list of addressees. Each working group – called a programme – has its own email group and different campaigns and projects each have their own email group, sometimes called discussion groups. Over and above all this, the two national member groups FoE Malta and FoE Brazil and the International Secretariat, with which I did fieldwork, also have their own internal email groups. These are only the contexts in which FoEI activists interact. As part of their daily work the activists also participate in numerous other fora, both Internet-based and face-to-face with activists from other networks as well as with non-activists.

In the activists’ engagement with communication technology there are different types of presence. The difference between the types of presence is partly related to the type of technology – telephone, email or instant messaging – and of its particular use – conference and group emails or one to one conversations, emails or chat messaging. That people are present to each other by means of communication technology is evident in at least three different ways:

- participation by telephone is considered ‘official presence’ for some meetings that require participation for the fulfilment of duties in certain official posts
- email discussions, where a press release, a policy, a document etc... is sent to a group of emails and then comments, feedback, amendments, discussion etc... is carried out by people responding to the whole group –

this involvement is considered participation to the same degree that round table discussion is considered participation. For instance FoE Malta worked primarily in this way for a number of years. In both the FoE Brazil and the FoE International Secretariat offices much of the work is also done by email groups, even if some of the people in that group are in the office. This makes it possible to include people from different FoE member groups and people who have different office schedules.³

- Many activists develop intimate friendships or working relationships based on a mixture of face-to-face and non-face-to-face relations. Due to limited space I will describe in more detail only the first of these three types of presence.

At the International Secretariat (IS) in Amsterdam Griet, the executive director of the office moved to Washington for family reasons. For various reasons she remained the director of the IS but she works from Washington. To fulfil her duties as director, Griet works on documents at home and participates in email discussions, she travels to Amsterdam for executive committee meetings and for other annual office meetings (such as the office retreat or annual staff reviews)⁴, she discusses projects with individual staff and with groups by telephone or telephone conference and

³ In all three FoE groupings that I worked with during fieldwork, the activists did not all have the same office hours. This was either because

- they were employed for different numbers of hours per week, or
- they were volunteers, or
- they had work outside the office, or
- they worked from home for various reasons.

⁴ Griet also arranges work meetings in Amsterdam during the periods when she will be in Europe to visit her family in Belgium.

finally she participates in the weekly staff meetings by means of a telephone conference device. This device transmits voice in analog, which makes voice more audible and most importantly reduces delay. The reduction of delay in telephone conversations and conferences is crucial because one of the experiences that most successfully creates presence is the perception that there is no unusual gap between the moment an interlocutor speaks and the moment this is heard.⁵

During the staff meetings the staff who are in the office at the time would sit around a large oval table. Most times there were at least nine people around the table. The telephone conference device, a flat circular microphone/speaker, would be placed in the middle of the table. When the meeting was due to start one of the staff would press a button to call Griet. A dial tone would be heard and then Griet saying ‘hello’. After it had been decided who would chair the meeting and who would keep minutes the first part of the meeting was generally a round of reports from the staff and volunteers about their work in the previous week and their plans for the next week’s work. During this round the device was pushed around the table to be closer to the speaker to help Griet hear well. Griet’s voice was always clear in the Amsterdam office, but she often could not hear well – either the person speaking in the A’dam office was too far from the device’s microphone or there was noise coming from the street outside Griet’s window. In the A’dam office the activists addressed each other

⁵ With instant messaging this would be a gap between one sends the message and then receives the answer. The expectation of a gap in messaging changes since the messages are written and most people expect that you will be messaging with more than one person at a time. However most instant messaging programs inform you with a message at the bottom of your chat window that the other person ‘is writing a message’. This has the same effect of hearing the voiced response of someone on a telephone, the experience is the same – I have sent a message and the person I am chatting with responded in the usual time of a face-to-face conversation.

and the device (Griet) when speaking. The listeners however shifted between looking at the speaker, their notebooks while they took or reviewed the notes they were taking, or at an unfocused spot on the table. In these telephone conference meetings the voice is the most important aspect of a person's participation and facing each other is reduced in importance even among those in the same room.

Aurora is a long-standing activist from FoE Italy, she has been in the forefront of FoEI's international activities for almost thirty years and she is considered one of the authorities on FoEI history. During a meal at a MEDNET (FoEI Mediterranean Network) meeting in Rome in 2006, she explained that,

“telephone and email are wonderful, they have really facilitated our work. But if I don't know the person writing the email or speaking on the other end of the phone it's so easy to have misunderstandings.’

Aurora's comment cannot be taken to represent the situation of the entire federation. In fact there are many FoEI activists who cooperate on projects yet have never met face-to-face. Yet these projects are generally set up in the first place by people who know each other face-to-face. In addition, in consonance with Aurora's experience, FoEI still invests considerable amounts of energy, time and money on face-to-face interaction such as the meeting I describe below and staff exchanges. For this reason in order to understand how the activists are successfully present to each other by means of communication technology it is also important to explore what happens during face-to-face meetings.

The discourse of homogeneity and discontinuity in the idiom of modernity

Anthropological discourses have recently embraced the idea of unboundedness. Nonetheless, the notion of 'cultural diversity' remains at the core of mainstream

understanding of the diversity of human lifeways, possibly because the relational alternative is yet to be widely explored in ethnographic projects. This notion perpetuates the perception of cultures as bounded entities. In what follows I will trace some of the pivotal assumptions underlying the notion of ‘cultural diversity’ to show how the two senses of identity (attributional and relational) are based on different premises and are therefore indeed different types/senses of identity and not just characteristics of a single type of belonging.

Barth’s (1969) Introduction to his seminal collection on *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* problematised the old assumption that cultures were ‘naturally’ bounded units, showing how the boundaries between ethnic groups were not simply given as a consequence of mutual isolation but are rather formed through social processes of inter-ethnic interaction. Although his analyses of inter-ethnic interaction, interdependence and changing membership dispelled the false idea that such diversity was maintained through isolation (*ibid*), the assumption of (and focus on) boundaries perpetuated that very notion of discontinuity. This is still evident even in anthropological work that talks of interconnection (or of fluidity as interconnection), because for something to become interconnected it needs to have first been disconnected (Ingold 1993, 215).

The notion of the boundary was seemingly so necessary because, as both Barth (1969) and subsequently Cohen (1985, 2000) insist, the identities they describe are putatively absolute, not relative. For instance Cohen (2000, 4) argues that the contributors to his edited volume ‘do not describe people as being more or less White/Aboriginal/Celt/Maori and so on, but as unambiguously one or the other.’

However, Ingold (1993, 218) traces the notion of discontinuous, discrete cultures (or absolute identities) to the universalising and homogenising discourse of modernity. When defining identity as absolute what is being focused on is what Ingold calls identity-by-contrast. Comparing relational identity with attributional identity, Ingold (1993, 228) argues that

‘the experiential centre from which a person lives his life in the world (and from which lines of relationship radiate *outwards* to incorporate others) is converted into a boundary *within* which his life-world, and hence the domain of his relationships, is contained. *We*, far from expanding to embrace the other, can include only those who share this life-world, as opposed to *they* who do not.’

He shows that due to the discontinuity constitutive of attributional identity and the internal homogeneity it implies, as a notion it cannot adequately *explain* collective senses of belonging.

Ingold shows that the understanding of bounded cultures depends on a particular theory of perception: *indirect* perception. Indirect perception posits that the body receives stimuli, but that those stimuli can only make sense if they are interpreted by a cultural system of meanings in the mind of a person. This cultural system of meanings is learned by interaction with other people in a process of enculturation or socialisation. However this theory poses an irresolvable dilemma: ‘[h]ow can culture, as a system of meanings, be acquired by experience if experience

only acquires meaning by way of culture?’ (*ibid*, 220). However children all over the world do learn to become knowledgeable members of their communities (*ibid*, 222).

In answer to the problem Ingold adapts Gibson’s theory of *direct* perception, where perception is the direction of attention in a single continuous world (as opposed to its being the interpretation of raw data through different frameworks of cultural construction). With direct perception, learning is a direction of attention to the same affordances in an environment achieved through participation in joint action. The ‘awareness of living in a common world, establishes a foundational level of sociality ... and constitutes the relational baseline’ (*ibid*, 223). Furthermore ‘this continuity is the precondition for our engagement with others and for the mutual understanding without which the entire anthropological enterprise would be impossible’ (*ibid*, 230). Therefore, a relational identity is based on the experience of engaging with others in joint action, and difference does not create a barrier to mutual belonging.

In consonance with this, Barth (2000) has refined his position to take into consideration not only different possible conceptualisations of the notion of boundary, but more importantly that not all collective senses of identity entail the notion of a boundary at all. For instance the sense of community for the Baktaman in New Guinea is based on reciprocity and shared abstinences (taboos). Another instance are the Basseri, a group of Persian nomads whose group conceptualisation is informed by the notion of the ‘camp’. The camp in turn coheres as long as there are positive decisions to travel together. When these change the camp simply divides. The notion of a boundary is entailed in neither of these groups’ conceptualisations of group coherence.

Ingold (1993, 229) argues that people do develop a sense of attributional identity when their relational ties are threatened or lost. Although not using Ingold's specific terms, Barth (2000, 32-33) offers a poignant illustration of the shift from relational to attributional identity. He relates the work of Bringa (1995) in Bosnia, before and throughout the conflict. Bringa shows how the members of a village related to each other primarily on the basis of neighbourliness, but also love, friendship, work, exchange, affinity, kinship and only in certain circumstances by congregation or ethnicity. However, as rumours and subsequently experience of inter-ethnic violence increased, congregation and ethnicity became more salient and the other relations were slowly cut off. The inhabitants of this village came to experience an actual breach in their relations and thus the consolidation of a sense of ethnic identity couched in attributional terms.

In the case of FoEI the opposite occurs. The activists from different national member groups start out as *not* having relational ties (although there are interesting exceptions), and already subscribing to the attributional identity implicit in their self-definition as members of *national* groups. Like an anthropologist beginning their fieldwork, FoEI activists increase their interaction and relations with other FoEI activists. Consequently the discontinuity implied by their attributional identities is reduced. Thus their differences (of nationality, ideology, experience...) are not experienced as barriers to mutual belonging to FoEI. There are important limits to this relational identity in FoEI. Since the activists live and work in many different places around the world, their participation in joint action is limited. Furthermore, their immersion in joint action, even in face-to-face situations, is at times limited *a priori*

by attributional identity. Although these instances are telling in the way attributional and relational senses of identity can clash in daily life, most activists develop close relational ties with other FoE activists from around the world and cooperate on a regular basis.

The regular interaction is carried out primarily by means of communication technology. This form of interaction is experienced as ‘presence’, and consequently as ‘immersion in joint action’ which is therefore experienced as being, and reinforcing, relational identity. Nonetheless, it is during face-to-face joint action at the international meetings that activists’ initial *relational* sense of identity is engendered, and if this is *already* in place face-to-face meetings reinforce relational identity.

A face-to-face meeting - The Biennial General Meeting in Abuja

Immersion in joint action, therefore is the basis upon which relational belonging is built. However, FoEI activists spend a considerable amount of time in joint action with many people during their daily lives, yet they do not invest time in developing all those relations in the same way as they invest in relations with other FoEI activists. Above all they do not refer to the sense of belonging engendered in all these other contexts as FoEI. Rather the international FoEI meetings effectively create a context for a type of joint action that makes a profound impression on activists’ lives, while simultaneously designating certain people and contexts as FoEI. The joint action in which the activists engage during the meetings creates and maintains their sense of mutual belonging, of relational identity in non-face-to-face interaction, when they return to their different homes around the world. An analysis of a FoEI general

meeting will elucidate what the specific joint activities in order to explain what happens at the meetings.

Every two years FoEI holds its General Meeting (BGM). Each BGM is hosted by a different FoE member group. In 2006 Environmental Rights Action (ERA), the Nigerian FoEI, member hosted the BGM. The meeting lasted for seven days. BGMs are generally divided into two broad phases: the pre-conference, which is open to a broader public and the BGM itself which discusses issues internal to FoEI. During the BGM in Nigeria key outcomes were the approval of a ten-year strategic map for FoEI and eight new full member groups were voted into the federation. After the membership discussions the chairwoman of FoEI invited representatives of the new full member groups into the plenary room, where she explained the outcome of the voting and welcomed them as full FoEI members: “Welcome to the Foe-I family!” she proclaimed. All the delegates spontaneously rose to their feet and clapped for at least two minutes, then as the clapping went on the new delegates took their places around the table where there was a placard with the name of their country: Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Ireland, Belgium Flanders, Bolivia, Swaziland, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Around sixty FoEI activists participated in the BGM in Nigeria, and four researchers, including myself – I was present in the dual role of researcher and delegate from FoE Malta. All the activities of the meeting were held in a hotel, of which the FoEI delegates occupied nearly all the rooms. The exceptions were three outings, when everyone bundled into two buses to visit a market, Abuja centre and an impressive waterfall two hours by bus away from the hotel. In practice this meant that participants spent most of the seven-day meeting within the same places. The places

chosen for these meetings are usually relatively isolated. In Nigeria in particular this aspect was further exaggerated because the participants, for security reasons, were strongly advised not to leave the hotel. The meetings are held away from very populated areas because the organisers want to minimise possible distractions.

The participants spent little or no time using computers due to the tightly packed agenda. Over and above the joint work during the formal meetings, the participants follow a more or less joint rhythm of waking, meals, work sessions, periods of rest – coffee breaks, cigarette breaks, evening entertainment or socialising, and retiring to their hotel room shared with another participant. During the meeting, participants spent most of their time focusing on tasks and activities *together* - there are rare moments of being alone or of not paying attention to what is occurring in the group. For the most part, in activities on the formal agenda and in the non-formal activities, people formed round shapes, either round a table, or standing talking or dancing in a circle, or a large oblong during plenary sessions. In these rounded shapes, the orientation of the participants' bodies and their attention was focused inwards, creating joint rhythms. In the evening dancing most people danced and moved to the same rhythm. In the conversations people took it in turns to talk, informally or formally with lists of speakers, creating a roving pulse: people turned their heads and slightly shifted their orientation to the next person who spoke, also shifting their orientation to different people if they were speaking – diffusing their attention among various listeners.

The intense sociality and shared rhythms of the meetings, in both time spent in the same places with other participants and in the greater face-to-face interaction than

what they are used to in their daily work, have led some of the participants to feel that these meetings are ‘bubbles’ – intense and inward looking, and detached from their daily lives and from the rest of the world. Time also feels different to activists at these meetings. For instance, approximately one year after the Abuja meeting at the next all-FoEI meeting (called an inter-BGM) in Swaziland, there were a number of people whom I had last met in Abuja. Laide (FoE Denmark) and Aurélie (FoE Spain), in separate instances, both exclaimed how strange it felt to meet again. To them and to myself it felt as though the time in between the meetings did not exist.

I do not wish to argue that the FoEI meetings are rituals. However, the literature about ritual and rites of passage has drawn my attention to what is particular about FoEI’s face-to-face meetings. The meetings can therefore be compared with rituals, but up to a point. First, as I described above, participants feel that the meetings are different from their daily experiences in the intensity of sociality and in their peculiar sense of time they evoke. Second, the meetings clearly have the three stages Van Gennep delineated for rites of passage: separation, liminal phase, re-aggregation (Turner 1967). The participants (except for the activists organising the meeting in their home country) travel from all over the world to attend the meeting, which easily resonates with the first stage of separation. On arrival the pre-conference reinforces the phase of separation, since FoEI activists are presenting a conference primarily aimed at a non-FoEI audience. Then the General Meeting itself is the liminal phase. The return to their respective homes is the third and final phase of re-aggregation.

The ‘special’ time of ritual, created by the intense sociality and joint rhythms, makes the relations developed during these meetings more memorable and in some

way valuable. It follows that activists continue to invest in these relations through non-face-to-face relationships. Second, change is inherent in the movement, the travel described as part of a rite of passage (Parkin 1992, 17) and also integral to FoEI meetings. Therefore the potential for chance implied by movement, by travel makes understandable the shift from a bounded, attributional sense of identity to a relational one.

In addition, the travel involved in the first phase, which Van Gennep (and Turner *ibid* and Parkin 1992) calls *separation*, has a dual role. This first phase can be understood as creating boundaries between activists who attend the meetings and everybody else who does not. Baumann's (1992, 113) suggests that one of the resources of ritual is the possibility to change the definition of 'who is 'us and who is 'them', in other words mutual belonging. He argues that this is due to the different possible modes of participation in rituals, such as being organisers or specialists, guests, witnesses or sponsors among others.

As such, the 'resource' of ritual – especially observed in initiation rituals (Turner 1967, Barth 2000, 24) – elucidate how mutual group belonging is generated. However, this phase can be equally understood as a phase of congregation that does not necessitate the idea of discontinuity implicit in separation, especially, since those FoE activists who do not attend the meetings are still considered FoEI activists in the imagined community of FoEI. Therefore the change inherent in movement that Parkin refers to can be seen in that the meetings congregate FoEI activists. They bring together people who previously did not relate to each other, or reinforce already present relations by this re-congregation.

However, the primary contrast between the literature on ritual and rites of passage is what happens during the liminal phase. The liminal phase of the FoEI meetings does not collapse all the participants differences, as is expected according to Turner's notion of 'communitas'. Rather, as I have argued above, the differences between the activists are the basis for their participation in FoEI and in the meetings. Therefore in summary the comparison of the FoEI meetings in ritual is useful in the following ways only, because they help explain what is particular about these face-to-face meetings:

1. Ritual is a 'special time'
2. Travelling has the potential for change because in itself it is a change
3. The change brought about by ritual might be a change in identity. Because of the different roles people can play in rituals.
4. The 'movement' can be seen as a congregation as well as a separation.

Conclusion

In summary, FoEI has a membership structure based on attributional identity. This is an identity, apart from anything else, that is part of their endeavour to distinguish FoEI from other groups, such as other international environmental federations in a competitive environment of NGO political economy. Nonetheless, this attributional identity is at odds with the activists' relational sense of mutual belonging. The activists' relational bonds are primarily engendered during immersion in joint action at international face-to-face meetings. It is the particularity of these meetings, the intense sociality, the joint rhythms and 'special time', as well as the potential for change inherent in the travel and movements involved in the meetings that make space for the development of relational bonds. Subsequently their regular non-face-

to-face interaction is felt as presence and as such is a continuation of joint action in a common environment. Being experienced as presence, and therefore as joint action in a common environment, non-face-to-face interaction can not only reinforce but also develop those relational bonds of mutual belonging and social ties.

To return to the opening comparison with a transnational migrant organisation, it is interesting to outline a contrast between the UYA and FoEI that might generate interesting questions. The members of UYA interact with members from other countries on the basis of a single imagined community – in this case the Ukrainian nation. Where as FoEI activists first imagine themselves as members of their different imagined nations and subsequently imagine those nations as member of a community of communities – as imagined worlds (Appadurai 1996, 51). What difference to the types of relations and the means of maintaining these relations do these different imaginations make?

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