

Critical Review



Deep Hanging Out in the Age of the Digital; Contemporary Ways of Doing Online and Offline Ethnography

Orin Starn (ed.)

Writing culture and the life of anthropology. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 268 pp. ISBN 9780822358731. Paper, \$25.95; cloth, \$94.95.

Christine Hine

Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 240 pp. ISBN 9780857855701. Paper, \$35.95.

Sarah Pink, Heather A. Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi

Digital ethnography: principles and practice. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2016. 216 pp. ISBN 9781473902381. Paper, \$46.00; cloth, \$128.00.

Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn

Digital ethnography: Anthropology, narrative, and new media. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. 127 pp. ISBN 9780292762053. Paper, \$19.95.

Tom Boellstorff and Bill Maurer (eds.)

Data, now bigger and better! Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015. 104 pp. ISBN 9780984201068. Paper, \$12.95.

Ethnography pertains to the act of doing long-term and immersive fieldwork plus a number of methodological tools closely associated with such a practice (including the interview and participant observation) as well as to the reporting and writing up of the results of this fieldwork. Although traditionally

ethnography has been the anthropologist's trick of the trade, and to anthropologists who wrote most of the books reviewed here, ethnography increasingly enjoys a fashionability beyond the discipline, with many in the humanities and adjacent social scientific disciplines (especially sociologists) now using some sort of ethnography, including market researchers, policy makers, and even trend watchers now also turning to ethnographic 'fieldwork' to explore meaning-making practices. The studies reviewed here have in common that they typically offer ethnography *for* the internet not *of* the internet, as few believe the internet can ever be studied in its entirety. However, they also show how a holistic approach, one of anthropology's other hobbyhorses, can be retained in following the user around while she moves from one social media platform or technological device to another, thereby studying which platform comes with which affordances and under which peculiar circumstances (thus recalling Madianou and Miller's recent work on 'polymedia'). When the digital is studied, much of the meaning-making work typically also does not take place on the internet itself, hence the need for a more immersive and participatory method or, to put it in the words of one of the authors whose work is under review here, 'Ethnography is highly necessary for understanding the Internet in all of its depth and detail, and yet it can be challenging to develop ways of conducting ethnographic studies which both embrace all that mediated communication offers and still provides us with robust, reliable insights into something in particular' (Hine 2015: 5). Ethnography is at heart an extremely adaptive approach, newly designed for each location or topic to be studied, as these studies also all firmly attest. Moreover, it is especially the digital turn which begs for new inventive ways of 'deep hanging out', as anthros like to call it as it begs for novel genres and formats to communicate the ethnographic experience.

Some of these possibly new sites and approaches are outlined in a recent volume edited by Orin Starn, *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*. Although not all the essays in it may be equally relevant to DIAS readers, it mainly marks the thirtieth birthday of one of the most influential anthropological books of the past half-century. Yet for those interested in exploring some of the recent modifications in doing ethnography, this is a must read. The original *Writing Culture* published in 1986 (some of its original protagonists are represented in this volume here as well) is generally hailed as having introduced, if not speeded up, a much-needed reflexive turn in the anthropological discipline, especially where it concerned ethical matters, reflexivity, and representation, thereby 'treating ethnography not as a transparent record of other realities so much as a genre of writing with its own conventions, tropes, gaps and silences' (Starn 2015: 3). The current volume offers new ways of thinking

about ethnography, thirty years on and many a global transformation later, the emergence of digital technology and the internet being among the most significant ones. In his introduction, Starn highlights the shift to multilocal research, where much of anthropology is done partly at home and increasingly by natives, if not 'halfies' to the cultures they study. Postcolonials have decided to talk back and use the internet to represent themselves and, on top of that, it is no longer clear what and where the traditional 'field' is that an anthropologist tended to study. From the traditional distinctive space or site, ethnographic projects have come to be defined by an interest in the 'temporality of emergence, the contemporary (as the just past and the near future)' (Marcus, chap. 3). Ethnography no longer is about *ethos* or the spirit of a *Volk*, Starn claims, with anthros now also studying science and technology, social media, engineers and software designers. Neither does the *graph* in ethnography simply pertain to the very idea of writing now that we are in an age of multimedia. And while the journal article and book remain the preferred modes for conveying ethnographic materials, anthropologists increasingly have moved into new territories.

Good examples of such excursions into new territories are offered in the essays by George Marcus and Michael Fischer, co-authors of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), another important book, which (in its 1999 edition at least) already signalled the upcoming worldwide digitalization of cultural practice and the need to ethnographically study such emergent forms. In this volume, Marcus offers a further agenda (and a re-identification of the concerns of *Writing Culture*) for the ethnographic study *of* and *with* the digital, in what he refers to as 'third spaces'; dynamic archives, studios, and labs plus anthropologist involvement with design and prototyping as forms of cultural critique that move beyond the mere ethnographic text, now also offering an entrance to markets and commerce. Whereas Marcus's agenda remains at times abstract, in her chapter Kim Fortun provides a more lucid example of such an experimental third space. Her own project, named the Asthma Files, offers an online and dynamic aggregate of blog posts, articles, and comments by anthropologists, epidemiologists, policy makers, and patients that collaboratively contribute to this new sort of ethnographic project. Together, the essays compiled by Starn offer insights into some of the new venues and approaches recently explored under the banner of doing ethnography, although again some of the discussions here are especially of interest for those within the anthropological discipline. Of more general relevance is Christine Hine's (2015) *Ethnography for the Internet*, in my opinion one of the best introductions to doing digital ethnography currently available and much recommended for use in both undergraduate and graduate teaching.

Hine is a sociologist who earlier wrote a pioneering book on *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and next edited a volume on *Virtual Methods* (2005). These works approached the internet as both a cultural site and a cultural artefact that can be meaningfully studied through ethnography, finding out what the phenomenon of the internet represents for a particular kind of people in various places. The contemporary internet (or, better yet, 'internets') is very different from the one foregrounded in those previous studies. In her 2015 book, she shows that the internet has become a mass phenomenon now, almost banal, as in most places it is so fully embedded in the everyday that we tend to overlook its often-unevenly distributed infrastructure and simply appreciate it for the convenience its applications almost daily seem to offer. From time to time, due to moral panics and our projections of hope and fear projected on the internet, it may become more topical, bringing the internet's material and spatial features more fully into the picture. Following other ethnographies of the internet, most notably the 2000 study by Miller and Slater and later studies by Miller on Facebook and other social media platforms, Hine has moved on and abandoned the prefix 'virtual', focussing instead on how the internet has become everyday, embodied, and embedded, the E³ internet for short. In chapters 2 and 3 of her current book, she explains that today's internet is embedded in people's lives in ways that are meaningful within specific contexts, that being online has increasingly become integrated with other embodied experiences, and (again) that the present internet is a mundane and often unremarkable phenomenon that by now in most places is fully embedded in the fabric of everyday life.

This E³ internet can be studied using a collection of tools, including multisited and mobile methods, with the ethnographer ideally following participants when they move in between on and offline sites. In three subsequent chapters, Hine shows us, offering insights from her own online and offline research working, for example, as a participant moderator for Freecycle and other mailing lists, her research on the development of e-science in biology as well as exploring meaning-making through TV practices on the internet. In these chapters, she succeeds in bringing together a study of the digital with important trends in new anthropological writing, including a stress on auto-ethnography and drawing on one's own experiences to highlight the often-contradictory character of the internet experience.

The main proposition of Hine's book is that, when studying the internet and how it is being practised and lived in various places today and by various people, the ethnographic method is the obvious choice, offering rich data other approaches simply do not deliver. It is an unobtrusive method, characterised by periods of unstructured observation and a focus on experiencing the setting

in whatever sense it presents itself (Hine 2015:161). At the same time, as both internet technology and its cultural embedding are constantly in flux, it must also be a highly flexible approach that needs adaptation from one research context to another. While Hine nicely concludes each of the separate chapters with some points of careful reflection and ethical considerations, she remains keen on retaining the flexibility of the ethnographic approach, even coming up towards the end of her methodologically inspiring book with the idea for a 'pop-up' version of ethnography, an idea here offered in its early and most embryonic form and one typically in need of a more thorough deliberation in Hine's next exposé on the topic.

Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, and Tacchi are all renowned scholars in their field and all also affiliated with RMIT's Digital Research Centre (DERC) in Melbourne. Whereas their *Digital Ethnography* (2016) may seem to offer a textbook introduction into doing ethnography online and offline, similar to Hine's, their book is also a positioning statement for DERC, offering a proposal or set of 'principles' on 'how we might do ethnography as the digital unfolds as part of the world that we co-inhabit with the people who participate in our research' (p. 1). These principles include non-digital-centricity, reflexivity, and an open mind for the multiple ways in which people may be making use of the internet. It also implies adaptation of one's chosen methodological tools, adjusting them from one context to another, something with which Hine would agree (although her treatment of the 'field' as emergent site tends to be a little more satisfying in this respect). Next to these principles, the authors focus on seven different 'key concepts' or what they call 'routes', to approach the world of the digital, among them experience, practices, relationships, localities and things. The resulting format is a book with an introduction and seven chapters in which each of the concepts is explored in reference to three separate fieldwork projects by any of the authors (echoing a somewhat similar format in the 2012 *Digital Anthropology* volume, edited by Horst & Miller). *Digital Ethnography* offers a rich pallet of possibilities, yet in its sheer abundance sometimes also refuses to go more in-depth (although many references can be found to some of the authors' book-length studies on these and related topics). Yet the book obviously also has its advantages. Whereas Hine focuses only on methodological components, referring to some of her other publications for a more thorough theoretical analysis, students new to the field may benefit from *Digital Ethnography's* approach in that it does engage with a wide range of theoretical works in the emergent field of digital anthropology. It also incorporates insights from material culture and cultural studies as well as visual and multisensory anthropology to study Internet related practices. The latter two fields, as an example, provide the means for a less conventional way of digitally

disseminating one's findings (and another of the five leading principles in the DERC statement) as the examples throughout clearly illustrate. In that sense, this book complements Hine's study, as it offers some innovative and thought-provoking methodological choices not treated by her study, including the possibilities of 'video tours' (p. 46), with participants filming, showing, and explaining their own social media use but also excitingly exploring the sensory and haptic dimensions of social media practices (chapter 3).

Whereas Hine's book excels at self-reflexivity, and plenty of time is taken to dwell on the challenges and constraints of, for example, autoethnography, the 'five principles/seven formats' format of *Digital Ethnography* offers a strong and appealing statement yet also prevents a more in-depth analysis of and reflection upon (the ethical) choices involved in opting for certain methodological approaches. Instead, the authors highlight a battery of tools that have proven successful in settings as varied as gaming in China, lifestyle television in India, or the personalization of mobile phones in Korea and Japan – a variety that should make the DIAS readers not yet familiar with the ethnographic method enthusiastic about looking into its further possibilities.

Using the same title, *Digital Ethnography* (2013), Natalie Unterberg and the late Elayne Zorn introduce us to some of the new methods of digital storytelling and participatory design that contemporary ethnographers have been working on lately. Their small booklet is composed of three sections, which deal respectively with storytelling, analytical tools, and teaching tools. Most of their examples are taken from finished projects or those that have just started at the University of Central Florida (UCF), most notably, the Peru Digital Project and the Digital Ethnography Website. Anthropologists have been relatively slow to use computational affordances, but now they are catching up. They are well positioned 'to understand the impact of digital media on culture and to use their expertise in ethnographic methods to influence the use and even design of new technologies' (p. 7). Unterberg and Zorn's most important contribution here is their stress on seeing digital technology used in culturally responsible and responsive ways, indicating the ongoing importance of cultural translators in a world in which increasingly everyone has (access to) the means for self-representation. Hence theirs is a call to digital ethnographers not only to fully collaborate (and co-design) with 'cultural insiders' but also to learn the culture of digital media production and design in order to communicate efficiently. The examples they use, mostly taken from that other emergent field, digital heritage studies, combine elements of storytelling with the immersive, multilinear/multivocal and interactive qualities of digital media. One of the most exciting examples of such combinations in this respect is offered in chapter 6, which focuses on an educational computer game (actually a modification of

an existing game), now designed to teach its users about cultural heritage of the Latin immigrant population of Florida.

Some of the chapters, such as chapter 3, seem to stop somewhat abruptly, as one would expect authors to delve into the argument somewhat more deeply or do more than merely hint at an emergent research agenda (worthwhile of notice in itself, of course). Also an overview of the theoretical literature often does not go beyond 2009, which suggests that some of the materials have been on the shelf for quite a while, yet at the same time this proves how pioneering some of the work of Unterberg and Zorn actually is. It should make us look forward to a further reporting on some of the UCF digital heritage projects and the role of digital ethnography therein.

Whereas the studies by Hine, Pink et al., and Underberg and Zorn all briefly refer to inventive new possibilities that come with data aggregation and its visualization, anthropologists of the digital more generally have tended to be somewhat hostile to the currently overhyped big data approach in social sciences and the humanities. At present, a range of ready-to-use tools is readily available on the market, but the reflexive ethnographer should always be on the watch for often-hidden assumptions that shape such technologies (Hine 2015: 16). Ethnography ('thick data') is, more often than not, presented as the opposite of big data, and yet ethnographers have an important role to play in this respect.

In what they call a 'pamphlet', Boellstorff, Maurer, and co-authors (2015) (brought together by the Intel Science and Technology Centre for Social Computing) take a firm stance against the hype of 'more data equals truth', using old-school anthropological concepts, such as kinship and gift exchange, next to re-evaluating the work of classical authors such as Mauss and Malinowski to further scrutinize the sudden popularity of big data. Because the separate essays are often ingeniously in dialogue with one another, the contributions compiled here can mostly be read as a response to the first essay by Intel's in-house anthropologist Genevieve Bell (although recently she left the company to return to the academy). Her provocative musings make us think about the wider culture of data and what 'ethnography of data' might look like. Bell's chapter offers a rallying cry against the widespread stereotyping of data as neutral, invisible, and abstract, only to be found, raw, and waiting to be analyzed. Instead, she sketches a picture of data as wild, messy, often repurposed, surprisingly physical (leaving traces of their origin and environment), and surely not as everlasting as many believe the digital to be. Bell wants us to focus on big data and algorithms as a 'sociotechnical category', objects and cultural practices shaped by big data custodians and regulatory frameworks about data ownership. Moreover, what counts as data is primarily a social process that

may well differ from one place to another and begs for ethnographic scrutiny: who has the agency to produce big data, who has the agency to control it, what are temporal imaginations of big data (whose purpose often seems to be in the future) and, importantly, Why big data now? Why the sudden need to return to empiricism?

In the process, the authors tackle nasty issues, such as data ownership, by building on insights in previous kinship studies ('what kind of relation is data' and 'whose child is data', the users or that of companies such as Google, in Maurer's contribution), anthropological insights on the gift exchange linked to Google and Facebook's efforts at ritually displaying rank (again Maurer's chapter) Also the 'father of ethnographic fieldwork' Malinowski's crosses our path as his disgust of kinship 'mathematics' (and capturing cultural affinity and emotional bonds into mere diagrams) is contrasted and compared with today's very rejection of big data by anthros. The use of older anthropological debates to explain the digital transformations we are currently witnessing includes Boellstorff's revisiting of Claude Lévi-Strauss's 'culinary triangle' (and his better-known 1969 work *The Raw and the Cooked*). Boellstorff joins an emergent literature that challenges the notion of 'raw' data and the simplistic assumption that the 'bigness' of data assumes it must be collected prior to interpretation and thus it is 'raw' (p. 104), only to be analyzed or 'cooked'. A re-reading of Lévi-Strauss may complicate such a simple dichotomy by introducing a third term, 'the rotten'. Rotten data may potentially help us in theorizing the making of big data, leaving room for the unexpected and accidental, notions such as 'bit rot', or the unplanned loss of data. It also, as Boellstorff suggests, helps us avoid the often-inbuilt temporal assumptions of big data, with the raw automatically coming before the cooked, and hence may help us address the issues of power and control.

This is a great and thought-provoking work by some of the world's leading anthropologists, urging us to ethnographically study the use of big data in academia and beyond, both at home and elsewhere. This small fiery pamphlet then hopefully succeeds in triggering the first ethnographic studies of big data users, producers, policy makers, and their practices as they today can be seen in various Asian contexts, where big data is similarly the flavor of the month, with plenty of professionals but also home industries now specializing in the big data business.

The internet proves to be one of the most important and exhilarating sites when it comes to exploring the constraints and challenges of using the ethnographic method in order to continue studying how people make sense of their lives, especially now that so much of that life has been extended online.

Collectively, the books reviewed here offer a glimpse of how to successfully adapt ethnography to the age of the digital, to tell a tale of a rich digital multi-universe as it emerges and continues to unfold.

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