

Discussant's comments on Jenny Cool' s working paper

“The mutual co-construction of online and onground in Cyborganic: making an ethnography of networked social media speak to challenges of the posthuman”

by
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Dear friends at the Medianthro mailing list,

First, I'd like to thank John for offering me the possibility of joining this e-seminar in the role of discussant. I'll try then to do my best to open up the discussion for this wonderful and suggestive paper by Jenny Cool, entitled '*The mutual co-construction of online and onground in Cyborganic: making an ethnography of networked social media speak to challenges of the posthuman*'. The paper is just a glimpse of a 10 year ethnography of the Cyborganic community, which makes the reading a very intense one (more on which later). The point Cool is trying to make is highlighted in different ways through the paper: demonstrating through her case study that the entanglement of online and onground practices, oriented through affiliations -firmly rooted in place and historically and culturally situated-, "reconfigures experiences of place, identity and embodiment, without dematerializing these sites of subjectivity or rendering them obsolete as sources of anthropological insight" (7). The consolidation of these affiliations through the intermediation of online and onground is what drives the author to stand for a posthuman approach -as critical social theory- to the anthropological subject. Drawing from Katherine Haynes, Cool challenges the reinscription of the liberal humanist subject (constructed as unified, knowing and autonomous) from the 'human' to the 'disembodied posthuman' grounded in discourses on disembodied subjectivity and technological determinism (15-16). Quite graphically, in the end, Cool expresses her aim to bring back the flesh into the discussion of the diverse and complex forms of techno-sociality. Which is especially relevant as Cyberorganic prefigures in many ways contemporary social media, showing proto-exponents of (micro)blogging or Facebook's personal status.

The scope of the Cyborganic ethnography is fairly impressive, even if in the short form of a working paper it is difficult to account for the whole complexity of the practices involved. And so it is how the author visualizes the online and face-to-face dimensions of the community and its expanding network of projects, communities and firms. As a media scholar who found in Lisa Gitelman's definition of media a particularly useful support for my research on participatory culture, the notion of 'place' as 'collocation' of different agents and activities has turned out to be particularly suggestive and connected to actual practices. It is also very relevant to me as an academic at a virtual university like the Open University of Catalonia, an organization created at about the same time as the Cyborganic community, with a clear bid for ICTs and characterized by tensions coming from its localized regional context (a firmly rooted Catalan university oriented to the global market) and the struggle to reconcile the online and onground dimensions in its micro-level practices.

In order to serve as a starting point for the discussion, I'd like to point out some questions, some of them addressed simultaneously to the author, some of them with the major interest to gain in insight of her arguments on the interrelation of the virtual, the material and the body through practices.

For the author:

- First of all, I'm missing a wider explanation of the evolution of these practices through time, and particularly, the actual interrelation of online and onground practices. If the role of place (as physical collocation in particular places around the San Francisco area) is evidenced as instrumental in the Cyborganic case and if we get an exact impression of the onground and online entities that constituted the community, I'd like to know more about the actual interrelations between both domains, given that the focus of the paper is on specific and intertwined practices.
- I've also been wondering about normativity and hierarchical relationships between the community, understood as a organizational form, and how it is related to practices.
- Drawing from your own ethnographic work, in what ways do you think the Cyborganic community is related to 'the global'? For instance, what particularities are observed in cases like new members of projects coming from outside San Francisco influence area or active members moving to other areas?

For the participants:

- I guess that the posthuman approach adopted by the author will lead us to some interesting discussion, even if I'm not completely sure about the exact sources of possible controversy. My question then is very general: in what ways does the notion of the posthuman posed by the author clash with other accounts of technologically-mediated sociality from an anthropological point of view?
- How do you think this ethnographic work can be connected to the online/ onground practices related to the use of current mobile and locative technologies?
- How can we relate a historical case like Cyborganic with practices around the emergence and consolidation of creative clusters around the world, following the notion of 'creative cities' by Richard Florida at a macro-level, but, more interestingly, going down to the level of micro-practices? As a reference, among many other possibilities, I'd like to point out Brennan-Horley and Luckman's ethnography around the case of Darwin (Australia), René Barownick, Noam Andrews about socio-spatial practices in specific quarters in London and Berlin (both from 2009) or Mark Gibson's Creative Suburbia 'A Critical Evaluation of the Scope for Creative Cultural Development in Australia's Suburban and Peri-Urban Communities' (2010).

I'm sure many more topics will arise, as this paper has a lot to say and suggest from different angles, be it from the perspective of the creative industries, practice, identity, virtual communities, labour/leisure social space, the redefinition of the notion of 'place', embodiment, agency, the local and the global, the intertwining of online vs onground (or what has been also labelled as 'onlife') ?

Thus, I warmly encourage you to contribute to the discussion from now on. Thank you in advance!

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