Introduction: Culture In, Culture Out

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
KNOWLEDGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Here are three essays dealing with computers. I intend that to sound sort of like "here are three essays dealing with ritual" or "here are three essays dealing with kinship"—to sound as if it were entirely unsurprising to open up a copy of *Anthropological Quarterly* and see three essays about computers, alongside three on social organization, religion, or pragmatics and ideology. It should be entirely unremarkable by now that computers are involved in the social and cultural life of the people and processes anthropologists study, everywhere in the world (digital divides notwithstanding). It should be clear by now that the interactions and uses by which people make meaning, act, or build societies is as inextricably linked to software, networks, computers, devices, and infrastructures as we insist it is to kinship or social organization. In all honesty, we should be well past the time when we need labels such as "digital life" or "the anthropology of the virtual" or "online sociality" as if they helped to clarify something.

On the one hand, it will not do to simply suggest that computers make no difference to the social and cultural lives of humans, and that we ought to go on as if information and communication technologies are simply a diacritical mark on otherwise fundamental features of human life. On the other hand, it cannot change everything. The requirement to say what difference computers make to things like sociality, knowledge, language, or human life in general is not met by appending the word "digital" to whatever noun or verb commands more immediate attention; but nor can the difference be approached as if it were one problem among many, parceled out after the fashion of area studies, or divvied up as if it were one qualifying field exam alongside others (which we nonetheless know to be a frequent occurrence).

Often such a problem can only be addressed by demonstration, and this is what makes the three essays gathered here so valuable. Each of them is, in its own subtle way, struggling with exactly this issue: how to maintain a classical orientation towards anthropology, yet bring it to bear on a problem whose significance is widely felt, over-analyzed, and poorly understood. The essays collected here do not seek to forge a new subfield, or to simply apply anthropological concepts to new objects like Facebook friends or cell-phone users; they do not seek to radically reinvent the methods, fieldsites, or topics of anthropology; and despite being written by people immersed in the technical details of software and networks, they are not any more inter- or trans-disciplinary than many other anthropological studies underway today.

Instead, what they do is something that should be familiar to any anthropologist: they form concepts out of rich empirical fieldwork and try to rectify them against those realities. They criticize approaches to problems and concepts forged in other places and in other times; and in doing so they leave open the possibility for future criticism that might take account of the changing technical conditions of our world (Strathern 2006). Each delivers good ethnographic value, explicating and orienting readers to very specific worlds and ways of being, and explains in each case what difference the difference engine makes. This is not special or new in any threatening sense; rather it is simply what anthropology looks like today.

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These three essays each take on one of the peculiar burdens of anthropology: the ongoing remediation of the concept of culture. Culture, as a con-

cept and as a feature of anthropological thought is both broken and yet impossible to leave behind. Within the discipline, it has been through so many changes, so much re-use and modification, and so much critique, that it seems impossible to see in it the distinctive form it might once have had; and yet, there are no other serious nominees for the position it holds.

Even more burdensome is the fact that all around anthropology, other disciplines wield this concept (and the associated claim to investigate it via ethnography) with abandon. Much of this work is conducted without much awareness of its peculiar failings, difficulties, and critiques. In information studies, in management, in consumer research, in public health, and so on, "culture" has a salience and a power it seemingly no longer possesses for scholars trained in the heart of anthropology. But even more troubling, very little of this work shows a grasp of the particular *strengths* of the concept either. Analyses of the "culture" of computing or the internet, to say nothing of its appearance in every microlocation from corporations and gymnasiums to gorilla troupes and hair salons, seem empty of theoretical force, barely distinguishable from norms and customs in some 19th century sense; such analyses certainly almost never attain the heights of systematicity or recursivity we associate with the exemplary works of the discipline.

The burden these essays bear is therefore a double one: first, to show that the objects of study chosen are adequate to some concept of culture, and second, to transform that concept in ways that will (one hopes) influence and remediate the ways neighboring disciplines employ and rely on this complicated notion. These articles all try to preserve the *cultural* at the expense of *cultures*—by finding diverse ways to specify the cultural, as James Faubion has put it, "as a constitutive dimension of human life, as one of the planes—an open plane, to be sure—of which it is always composed" (Rabinow et al. 2008:106). But they also raise the stakes for this concept by struggling with the question of how to work over the manifest importance of software, networks, and computers without going too far.

There is obviously no shortage of work on this topic: the range of disciplines and methods brought to bear on the topics of information technology, computers, software, and networks is disturbingly large. One should ask: why is there so much written on this topic? Then one should ask: why is so little of it any good? In part, the answer is that, for some reason—call it a *cultural* reason—we are driven to see computerization and its incumbent technologies and social formations as so profoundly cutting-edge, so new,

so revolutionary, that we lose sight of what might really be new about them. The predictable reaction—that there is actually nothing new about them but scale and speed—is just as much a part of this cultural reason. Both the Californian enthusiasm of the technophile and the Edwardian reserve of the technophobe seem to signal the disappearance of any sufficiently rigorous concept of culture—even as the repetition of the term and the proliferation of its sites seem to go on unhindered. Or to put it differently: why are both *computers* and *cultures* everywhere today?

In anthropology, studies of online interaction, virtual worlds, and computer-mediated communication have, over the years, made various moves towards thinking through the concept of culture, but not much theoretical work has emerged. There are the widely read reviews by Escobar et al. (1994) and by Wilson and Peterson (2002), and seminal works by Miller and Slater (2000) and Hine (2000); and there is an increasingly large set of works in media anthropology that focus on the use of discussion, online interaction, and communication as part of larger issues like diaspora, migration, and new forms of distributed cultural conditions (Axel 2004; Barker 2008; Bernal 2005; Larkin 2008; Lysloff 2003; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002).

Of the theoretical works in anthropology that provide a basis for rethinking the concept of culture, Michael M.J. Fischer's article "Worlding Cyberspace," more than any other, attempted to move the discussion towards *worlding* as a way to distinguish it from bounded space and place-based versions of culture (Fischer 1999). The essays here continue what Fischer initiated, especially Golub's contribution, which very clearly positions its approach as a general attempt to understand how worlds of any kind form, in order to gain purchase on the question of what difference the computer makes to this process. Beyond this limited list there are plenty of contributions to the "ethnography of online communities"—but few I would suggest that push forward the theoretical and conceptual challenges of understanding both the proliferation of studies of computing, and their inability to account for this proliferation culturally.

The three essays collected here should therefore be read as attempts to change this state of affairs. All of them emerge from the heart of anthropology (all graduates of the University of Chicago no less), and all of them are erudite, widely read scholars with extensive fieldwork experience in more than one area. That they have turned their attention to the issues explored here is no doubt connected to the general cultural desire to

understand the meaning of computers, but it also emerges from a deep engagement with some of the central strengths and weaknesses of the anthropological analysis of culture. It is worth trying to bring these out a bit more sharply here.

There are a series of moves towards specifying the role of the cultural addressed in these essays. There is a first move involved in trying to achieve purchase on these new phenomena, and that is to literally *make up* a new culture. This is something to which Golub objects in studies of the "virtual worlds" where the success of past anthropology is used to legitimate the treatment of virtual worlds as bounded wholes—places with local everyday life, preferably including exotic practices that demand explanation for an audience that is not there. Such a move is not wrong methodologically—however, it creates an expectation, or hypothesis, that these worlds are both *separate from* and *similar to* the real-clothes worlds we have always studied. This move generally excuses researchers from having to look closely at the distributed inhabitants in their real-clothes bodies (which is admittedly time-consuming and painstaking work that does not feel very *new*) and also from the necessity of engaging with the technical and economic conditions of possibility for these worlds (which it must also be admitted, can take some of the fun, though not the interest, out of researching them). Rather than seeing virtual worlds and online environments as built on top of or extruded from existing worlds, organized in particular ways, much of the work in online ethnography both inside and outside of anthropology prefers to make up a culture instead, often implicitly, without giving it much thought.

Only Tom Boellstorff's recent book makes an explicit experiment of this move, reflecting on the implications of doing so not just methodologically, but theoretically as well (Boellstorff 2008). And it is in making an experiment of it that it is possible to attempt to hold apart the methodological decision from the epistemological (or ontological) claims that might be made about these worlds. A great deal of non-ethnographic work, for instance, relies on just this kind of confusion in order to treat online worlds and games as "laboratories of human behavior" (e.g. the work of Edward Castronova). However, as Golub points out here, virtual worlds are built out of existing ones, and the previously existing actual worlds are necessary but not sufficient grounds for the emergence of the new "virtual" worlds—which is to say, they are not a simple mirror or iteration of general human culture. And despite the manifest excitement with which

scholars have approached these cases as novel and interesting, few seem to have actually taken on the task of characterizing this novelty—this supplementary or extra "worlding" that takes place—and instead have treated it as a variation of (or repetition of) the worlding we already know.

There is a second move in the analysis of online, networked cultural life, which is to return to behaviors and practices as themselves constitutive of a fieldsite. Here, it is not the boundedness of space or place that gives meaning to everyday life, but the nature of mediated interaction itself. In part, this is what Coleman attempts to capture through the analysis of hacker sociality. This move happens in opposition to the first one, invoking the necessity of looking at the dual sociality created by mediated communication—both online and in person—as that which makes it distinctive. In this respect, the camps and conferences that are a frequent feature of hacker's lives (and which are spreading to other domains as well) are an effect of this dual sociality and not a face-to-face practice that precedes it. The "cultural" plane of hacking therefore is not place/space-based but a zone of pragmatic stability that emerges out of multiple modes of interaction. These stabilities of practice are sustained and repeated in conferences, camps, online mailing lists, and the multiple modalities of communication and collaboration involved in creating software and networks. Hence, the object of "hacker sociality" comes to look similar in form to objects like rituals, carnivals, or feasts (and thus the turn to theorists like Turner and Bakhtin as resources for understanding them). The question remains, however, what difference does online software-mediated interaction make to this formation of pragmatic stabilities? Coleman answers that it is the very details of technical practice—hacking, coding, designing, tinkering, writing licenses—which provides the content of these ritual-like pragmatic stabilities, and hence remediates the cultural as something endemic to (and located only in the practices of) this community of individuals.

Finally there is a third and lateral move, which is away from culture and towards "social imaginaries." A focus on social imaginaries (especially those such as the public sphere and the economy) at first rejects the "cultural" as a meaningful word, but without sacrificing the complex combination of ideal and material practices that the word once signified. However, rather than many cultures (each distinct), social imaginaries come in only a handful of historically ramified forms tethered to global secular modernity of the last 400 years or so (Taylor 2004, Kelty 2008). A focus on "social imagi-

naries" as a replacement for culture can then be employed to analyze public spheres, democratic deliberation, and diasporic identities, both in person and via new media technologies. Such a move can push analysis so far beyond the question of information technology that it disappears or ends up making little or no difference to the case under consideration. Frequently this leads people to ask, for instance, whether the Internet is a public sphere (usually in the sense given by Habermas) or whether new forms of political speech (blogging, chat, IM, Twitter) change the dynamics of mass media politics, frame issues in new ways, and include, or exclude, people in new ways. Such questions are obviously productive, but they ignore the specificity—the cultural specificity—of the contemporary and its technical configurations.

However, as Dominic Boyer's piece demonstrates, the analysis of social imaginaries really only gets interesting when some version of the cultural is retained. Understanding the production and movement of social imaginaries itself requires a cultural analysis of the people, practices, places, and techniques that make them go. Practices of journalistic knowledge-making are a crucial component of the formation of imaginaries and are themselves under assault from the very proliferation of information technologies, software, and networks. It is the cultural features of journalism that structure the way an imaginary of the public sphere takes shape—not just the content that circulates, as we say, "in the public sphere." New technological possibilities, disastrous financial arrangements, and new forms of writing, blogging, tweeting, and chatting are all transforming the organizations, the life-worlds, and the practices of the people who make journalistic knowledge and make it circulate. It is therefore incumbent on us (anthropologists, as well as the journalists in Boyer's account) to ask how this reformed consciousness determines being: our public sphere is transformed not only by the words that circulate, or by the (recursive) technological layers that give it form, but also by the self-understanding of the actors who occupy it.

What at first might seem a contradiction—that social imaginaries replace the concept of culture, yet analyses of social imaginaries are only interesting when they retain a cultural analysis—is in my understanding a response to the other two moves: making up worlds and treating embodied techniques and practices as the site of culture. For a cultural analysis to work, there must be more at stake in understanding the role of networked information technologies than simply treating them as one more kind of place where

human behavior occurs, or as one more form of life among many. Rather, the technical and epistemic practices of well-chosen groups of people—journalists in Boyer's case—must be explored if one wants to understand the difference that new technologies make to human behavior.

Indeed, it is Boyer who comes closest to embarking on a cultural understanding of the ubiquity of attempts to explore the "culture of computing." The "cybernetic-informatic consciousness" that he uses to link journalists and anthropologists together opens a door to understanding why *computers* and *cultures* are equally everywhere today—and maybe for some surprising reasons that have a lot to do with the mid-century *successes* of both cybernetics and anthropology. Cybernetics' fortunes look a lot like culture's—overused, diffuse, heavily critiqued, yet nonetheless compelling in their most rigorous forms. Cybernetics' dissemination looks a lot like culture's—taken up across nearly every discipline, attenuated by circulation, unpoliced by classic disciplinary modes of ownership and exclusion.

One might re-think, therefore, the critiques of ethnographic authority in the 1980s through this lens. They can be read not as critiques of the culture concept, or of the pretensions to scientificity (they certainly were in some quarters), but as critiques of the *authority* of the concept of culture (or of science more generally). What these critiques proposed was the impossibility of authoritative knowledge about the social world; what they brought about was the slow motion destruction of the impossible, though up to that point real, authority of the concept of culture.

It is for this reason that these essays should be seen as part of a project of reconstruction—not only of the concept of culture, but of culture *and* computers together. If some analysis of *the cultural* is still central here—both to anthropology and to a rich understanding of the transformation of the world by information technology—then it might just be that these essays are at the cutting edge, not for their focus on technology, but for their stubborn insistence on saving and refining the concept of the cultural itself. What is also clear, however, is that such a task is intimately tied to the practice of anthropological fieldwork and that each of these papers in different ways seeks to demonstrate the difficult work that is necessary for the concept of culture to be of any use at all.

There is, for instance, a difference between really studying the lifeworld of hackers, as they live and breath, and simply treating them as cloistered, adolescent, pale libertarians (unless of course they are, which is *nonetheless* both very interesting and not easy to elicit). There is a dif-

ference between playing an online game once or twice and writing an essay about that experience, and spending two years creating two level 80 healers, raiding on weekends, and developing strong emotional bonds with a collection of other game-players in order to understand the nature of action and worlding. There is a difference between reading a bit of Habermas and loudly proclaiming the epochal changes wrought on our public sphere by the decline of newspapers and actually talking to journalists about their practices.

Golub's contribution, for instance, does not shy away from the details of World of Warcraft, the way many articles by lawyers do (just to pick on those who can take it). Legal analysis of these games eschews detailed description, either because it seems way too geeky to do so, or more likely because it is seen as irrelevant to the argument being made (which in many circles of legal studies today is a deliberately thin "norms+customs" version of culture). By contrast, Golub must demonstrate the details of this lifeworld in order to make his case that players in WoW deliberately break down and limit the sensory aspects of the game in order to achieve other goals. What he demonstrates thereby is not the sensory realism of these games, but their social realism—the ways in which the game facilitates, and perhaps transforms, affectively intense social bonds.

Coleman's contribution does something similar, by showing in detail the nature of hacker embodiment and sociality across both the lived experience of the conference or hacker camp and the everyday interaction online. This analysis of conferences as an innovation of virtuality, not something that precedes them, has general applicability. It has long been true of scientific and scholarly fields (Diana Crane's famous "invisible colleges" and the essential role of the scientific congress and yearly conferences), but is now also true of many other fields, from security guards to struggling musicians, where people develop social bonds according to professional and work affinities, not geographical or personal connections. All kinds of folks use conferences, congresses, and festivals to enhance their careers and make new relationships, to experience fun and exhaustion, and to enhance storytelling and history-making. It will be only a matter of time before Facebook conferences emerge in the same fashion—not as a re-connection of old friends, but as a new form of cultural life. Do we still need a "digital" anthropology to understand such a transformation? Yes and no.

In the end, it may be that (as Boyer suggests) anthropologists have been thinking through these issues along—at least since Gregory and Mary were

invited to the Macy conferences, if not beginning with Boas. Computer pro-grammers are fond of the saying: "Garbage in, Garbage out." It's a way of saying that no matter how carefully or precisely one focuses on the comput-er itself, if one puts bad data in, one will get bad data out. The same might be true of anthropology. If the problem of culture and the cultural remains anthropology's most lasting, detailed, and problematic kernel, then maybe "Culture in, Culture out" should be our mantra and our warning.

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