Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar 59
'Being there', phone in hand: Thick presence and ethnographic fieldwork
with media

By
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Discussant
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Dear All

I am very pleased to announce the opening of our 59th E-Seminar, apologies for the short delay with openig the seminar but the email, which was sceduled for last night did not send.

The paper we will be discussing is:

'Being there', phone in hand: Thick presence and Ethnographic Fieldwork with Media

In this article, I explore the notion of presence, especially as it pertains to anthropological notions of 'being there' and argue that studying with media significantly influences our physical presence as we are able to bring distant and not so distant places into our fields. Anthropology was founded on the notion of 'being there' and it is still a crucial claim to knowledge for anthropologists. Digital anthropology has brought new challenges to the concept of 'being there', giving increasing depth to the arguments that physical presence is not a prerequisite for ethnographic studies or even for 'being there'. In order to discuss how media might influence our presence in the field, I develop the notion of thick presence. I take a point of departure in my anthropological fieldwork with information activists and journalists in Egypt in 2012 and 2013 at the height of the revolutionary uprising.

The paper has been written by Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (Independent Researcher, Denmark), who has recently obtained her PhD from Roskilde University, Denmark, whose work focuses on media and social movements and who in the last years has made an invaluable contribution to the list. You can now read the full paper here: http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

I will be acting as discussant and will be sending my comments first thing tomorrow. If you are interested to find out a bit more about my research profile you can click here: http://www.gold.ac.uk/media-communications/staff/barassi/

After I submitted my comments, I will give Nina the space to reply and after her response I will be opening the discussion to all.

For those of you who are new to this mailing list, these sessions run for two weeks on the list and all subscribers are welcome to participate.

I am looking forward to an engaging discussion.

Veronica

It is difficult to make sense of the multiple impressions, feelings and thoughts that I had when I read Nina's paper. I know I enjoyed it deeply. When I was reading the paper, line after line, my own ethnographic experience started to re-emerge. How many times I had 'been there', thanks to digital media, without physically being there? How many times I struggled with questions about non-interactive co-presence or thick presence? How meaningful are these questions in the study of activism and political participation where 'being there' also entails an expression of political commitment to the cause?

Perhaps because I could relate to Nina's work so well, I really enjoyed this paper. And there is of course A LOT to like in it. The ethnographic context of the research is fascinating and has left me with the need to find out more. The discussion about thick-presence and especially the analysis of the relationship between digital media presence, technological affordances and temporality is particularly insightful, and original.

When I say that there is A LOT to like in the paper, I also intend to highlight the fact that, in its current version, the paper is dealing with a lot of different and overlapping themes. The author discusses the difference between co-location and co-presence by exploring a variety of issues such as the complex relationship between here and there, the ways in which technological affordances shape different perceptions of co-presence and temporality, the implications of researching at 'a distance' in the age of immediate communication, the meaning of thick research in the context of technological use and vice versa.

The reader is thus thrown into a whirlwind of interconnecting topics and themes and at times is forced to catch her breath. This is not surprising for a working paper, yet I think that the paper would greatly benefit from a more focused approach. Perhaps my comments and questions below will somehow help the author in the process of sharpening the argument and strengthening the paper.

My comments and questions evolve mostly around four main points:

Ethnographic description – As mentioned above the ethnographic context is fascinating and has left me with the desire to find out more. The two main ethnographic anecdotes (the description of the Mosireen office and the demonstration outside the C28 military complex) could have been largely enriched. I would have liked to find out a bit more about the collective, its history, its members and its role in the revolution. I also would have liked to find out a bit more about the people Nina mentions, their role, their biographical narratives.

In the first anecdote, Nina describes how she felt as she had 'arrived to the field. Yet this left me questioning what brought her there? How did she negotiate her access? Was she already present in the field at a distance? What were the implications of that type of 'thin' presence?

Thick Presence vs 'Being There'' – It is clear from the paper that 'being there' can take multiple

3

forms. Yet it is also clear that according to the author, within ethnographic practice, there is a complex relationship between 'being there' and 'thick presence'. It seems to me that being present on the field, over a sustained period of time, equips the ethnographer with a 'thick gaze', an embodied, and thorough understanding of the research context and cultural processes. This is evident in the paper. Yet the paper also shows that thick presence is not only enabled through co-location, but also through online interaction. The example of the ethnographer sitting in the office of the Mosireen collective is insightful. In that context 'thick presence' could have not be achieved simply by physically 'being there' it could have only been achieved by both being there in the office and online. This I believe highlights the complexity of the relationship between multiple ways of 'being there' and 'thick presence', however in the current version of the paper, I find that this relationship is not fully explored. In particular, I am interested in finding out more about how this relationship is played out with reference to the triad mentioned in the paper (co-location; the presence of there here; and our presence there') and I would encourage Nina to explore this theoretical triad by bringing in a concrete ethnographic example. Can she break down how and when she experienced the triad?

Technological Affordances and Temporality – Personally I believe that here lies the deep originality of the paper. A lot of understandings of co-presence, have been focused on the difference between technological affordances and different perception of co-presence (see lit review in Madianou, 2016). Skype, social media, email exchanges, mobile messaging enable very different feelings of co-presence, and as Madianou has shown they all create a form of 'ambient co-presence' that is a typical characteristic of polymedia environments. What I feel we are missing from these debates is a thorough exploration of the complex relationship between co-presence, technological affordance and temporality. This relationship emerges in the paper well and I believe the author should expand the analysis further. I am personally very much interested in the relationship between digital technologies and temporalizing practices (see Barassi, 2015) as problematised by Munn and in the anthropology of time. Much debates about co-presence focus on 'space' and focus on how we can be there from afar. Yet they should properly explore (and this paper shows that well) how our 'being there is also' about temporal commitment, and how the temporality of our being there is what shapes not only our engagement with the field at a distance, enabling interaction and reciprocity. As mentioned the paper highlights many of these interconnecting themes about the importance of the 'temporal dimension', my question to Nina would be whether she would consider enriching her observations with a theoretical discussion about 'time'.

Being there and Political Participation: One element that is missing from the paper and that I believe would greatly benefit the analysis of co-presence in the particular ethnographic context of the research, is represented by the relationship between political participation and co-presence. Within the context of social movements 'being there' is often translated as a strong 'political statement', where the individual becomes an actor in the social movement, a way to participate to a given cause. The same applies to co-presence at a distance, social media interactions (liking, tweeting, re-twitting, sharing, messaging, passing information etc.) are all acts of co-presence, which are also acts of political participation and engagement. I wonder whether this emerged also within Nina's fieldwork and whether she could elaborate a bit more on the way this has

impacted on her understanding of co-presence.

As it can be seen from the comments above, I believe that this is a paper that could turn out to make a significant contribution to understandings of co-presence in media anthropology. It certainly has given me a lot of food for thought and I wish to thank Nina for sharing it with the list and for asking me to be a discussant.

I am looking forward to a lively discussion.

Veronica

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Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 9, 2017**

Dear all,

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to discuss my work with this network; it's a great privilege and I am looking very much forward to it.

Thank you, Veronica, for organising the seminar and for your careful reading of my paper and your insightful comments on it.

Let me start by addressing Veronica's comment on **ethnographic description**. This is a comment I particularly appreciate as I have had a difficult time finding a balance and have wanted to include more ethnographic details. Part of the explanation is that this paper was originally written as part of my article based PhD and I have sought a balance between repetition and the readability of each article individually. But I should also mention, of course, that this paper – unlike my other writings on revolutionary Egypt – is not so much thought as an ethnography of the revolution as it is thought of as a methodological argument about anthropology and media. I have often thought I should write the history of the Mosireen Collective, which I spent a lot of time with and which is significant because their history and their way of organising hold so many lessons and because they have been very influential. However, the urgency of writing this important history was put somewhat to rest by the amazing project, Filming Revolution, which tells Mosireen's story among many other things (see http://www.filmingrevolution.org/).

Veronica asks what brought me to my field. Let me frame this answer in a way that also speaks to the conditions for research funding. On January 25, 2011, I had been professionally and personally engaged with Egypt for almost a decade and I had done fieldwork with journalists in Egypt. So, when the revolution was popularised on January 25, 2011, I wanted to contribute to what was going on. But it was clear to me that neither going to Tahrir and joining the protests nor liking and retweeting would make any significant difference. I was also looking for a job. So, I sought to contribute as an academic and contacted an NGO, International Media Support, and asked them to help fund a research project about journalism in Egypt. The NGO eventually said yes, but with the condition that I included something about social media. This led me to focus on the interaction between information activists and journalists. I initially introduced my project to activists and journalists as being about mainstream and social media. I quickly changed this to activism and journalism as activists did not want to talk to me if I mentioned the word social media. They were tired of the narrative about how social media had created the Arab uprisings. Yet, I could not get research funding without talking about social media. So while I felt I was on a logical path towards studying journalism and the Egyptian revolution, it was funding opportunities that essentially led me to the Mosireen office.

International Media Support, the NGO I did my PhD in collaboration with was a key to getting access to Mosireen, which they knew from their engagements in the country. The network of journalists, bloggers and academics I had built through almost a decade's engagement in and with the country was also crucial. So, negotiating access was in one sense very easy, but as I elaborate on in the paper, actually having access when I was 'there' (in the offices etc.) was more complicated. The 'thin' presence I had had with activists (following them on Twitter for instance) was absolutely crucial for my having any clue about what was going on when I was sitting next to people. And that is really the essence of my notion of thick presence, that my different 'thin' presences (following people on Twitter, sitting next to people without interacting with them significantly and so on) eventually allowed for a thicker presence both when I was next to people and when I was far away.

This leads me to Veronica's (third) point about **technological affordances and temporality**. I agree with Veronica that temporality is getting too little attention regarding the meaning of presence. The way I have sought to pay proper attention to temporal aspects of engagements with media is by looking at media as place-making. In this regard, I have been significantly inspired by Sarah Pink's (for example 2011) and Doreen Massey's (2005) work on place and Shaun Moores' (2012a and 2012b) work on media as place-making, including discussions on this list. Thus, with a point of departure in an understanding of place 'not as points or areas on a map, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*' (Massey 2005: 130, original emphasis) I understand media as place-making. This entails an attention to places as occurring rather than existing and to movement in and between these places. When people in Egypt have watched Mosireen's videos from battles and stood up and walked to the streets to join the battles, some being killed doing so, this speaks urgently to the deeply entangled matters of space and time, and media's fundamental emplacement in the phenomenological world. I have written more about this (see Mollerup 2015) and hope to on this in my contribution to the forthcoming 'Theorising media and conflict' edited by John Postill, Philipp Budka and Birgit Braeuchler.

6

I think the best way I can respond to Veronica's (second) point about **thick presence** is through my experiences co-writing an article with Mosireen activist Sherief Gaber (see Mollerup and Gaber 2015). What particularly struck me about this process was how difficult it was for me to invoke certain conversations during the many hours I sat next to Sherief in the Mosireen office and how easy it seemed when I was 1000s of kilometres away. The thing is, often when I was sharing location with the activists in the Mosireen office, my presence was not very significant in the sense that though I tried, I had little to contribute with to the activists at this time. I didn't know how to edit videos, I was not in the streets filming violence and more, my Arabic was not good enough for translations, and regardless, I was there to do research, not simply to contribute, so this might also have led activists to hesitate in engaging me in certain tasks. When I was far away and talking with Sherief about writing an article, I had a very direct contribution and I felt a significant shift as I was suddenly much more central in the discussion. Interestingly, when I returned to Egypt for my second fieldwork, *after* having had initial discussions with Sherief about co-writing, I was rarely able to inspire the same kinds of discussions when sitting next to him – the daily matters of fighting a revolution (understandably) pushed me to the margins of interaction.

Let me now move on to Veronica's last point about **being there and political participation.** This hit on something, which resonates so much with my research, yet which I have not paid explicit attention to before. Veronica writes that in the study of activism and political participation, 'being there' also entails an expression of political commitment and that in the context of social movements, 'being there' is often translated as a strong 'political statement'. I absolutely agree and this speaks to my main challenge with getting access and 'being there', at least with activists (with journalists I experienced this differently). Let me elaborate by interrogating which 'theres' I was engaged in. For different reasons, I had chosen to try to stay away from the violence, which was pervasive throughout Egypt during much of the time of my fieldworks. That meant that I did not join the activists when they covered clashes and I did not seek out demonstrations with an imminent threat of turning violent. Had I been in those places with the activists, it might have been a stronger political statement. When I was 'there' with the activists, it was most often in their office. This office was often visited by journalists, filmmakers, scholars, students and many others, who – like me – were interested in the activists' time – activists who were also busy fighting a ruthless military dictatorship. Thus, 'being there' in this case was not a very strong political statement itself; rather, the activists at times felt exploited, not supported. This also resonates with the way some Egyptian academics felt; Mona Abaza has addressed this in her article 'Academic tourists sightseeing the Arab Spring' (2013). However, my feeling of at times being a nuisance changed when I returned in the beginning of 2013, when many international journalists and others had moved on to new beats. At this time, because of the lessened attention to Egypt and because my interest became clearer with my prolonged engagement, my presence was a stronger political statement. And this definitely had an influence on my presence and what I could know from 'being there'.

I hope I have done justice to Veronica's comments and I am looking forward to the open discussion.

7

Cheers,
Nina

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Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk   **February 10ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Nina and All

This is to confirm that the discussion is open to all. We are looking forward to your thoughts and comments.

Nina, thank you so much for your response. The ethnographic description is far more captivating and thick. The discussion about 'being there' had a different meaning for activists or journalists makes me think that maybe our 'being there' acquires different meanings according to the context we are in. Just a quick thought that I wanted to share with you and the list.

I am really looking forward to an exciting discussion

Veronica

Jamie Coates jamie.coates@gmail.com   **February 10ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Nina and All

Firstly, I'd like to thank Nina for writing a paper that resonates so well with many of my own

experiences. The number of times I whispered 'yes' under my breath, much like Veronica's comments beforehand, suggests these themes are likely to resonate with many. In my own research with young Chinese people, for example, embodied co-location without engaging with media produced a fairly thin sense of 'being there'.

To pursue Veronica's mention of temporality a little more, I was wondering whether a slightly old fashioned 'rites of passage' approach might not also shed a different light on the discussion. Fieldwork in its old fashioned
sense is still often seen as a rite of passage that qualifies 'the anthropologist'. Even though 'being there' as an integral part of ethnography is decreasingly seen as an absolutely necessary way of producing good insights, however, this argument is often predicated on a person already having 'been there' in some shape or form in the past. Many people do ethnography 'at home' or in fields they are already very experienced. In other words, it depends upon the anthropologist's prior experience, which you explain really nicely. As someone who came to your research topic after having already been engaged with these issues, do you think that the initial rite of passage of 'being there' was perhaps less necessary or complicated? Or to be more speculative, if you knew someone starting a new topic in a field they are unfamiliar, would you still suggest that a good starting point is some kind of embodied co-location?

In some ways I've always seen these sorts of questions as analogous to language acquisition. You can formally study a language in a range of ways but it is almost impossible to develop a 'feeling' for the language until you've used it within a live embodied context. Or at least, embodied co-presence affords a very different feeling than mediated ones (it makes me think of fans of Japanese pop culture, who, despite having a range of
vocabulary and cartoon-like habitus, don't really develop multi-purpose language abilities until they live in Japan). Once you've developed a feeling for a language, mediated presence is of course sometimes the best
way to develop a thick understanding of a range of phenomena, but does it replace the 'rite of passage' that a period of embodied co-location can bring. This period can be alienating and in some senses very un-present or
unnproductive, but it seems to produce certain capacities unavailable via any other means.

I know this doesn't really contradict anything you say, but I thought it might provide an example of why the 'rites of passage' rhetoric of fieldwork still seems to persist.

On a separate note, the paper has several threads (as Veronica suggests) that are fantastic but I wonder if there aren't several papers in this cluster of ideas. For example, despite there being discussions of twitter,
youtube and sitting in front of computers, the actual media (content affordances etc.) in these forms of thick presence still feel a little quiet. It would be a separate task, but I wonder whether tracing an instance of 'presence' through its various different modalities might not give us a different sense of what you're talking about.

Thanks again

9

Jamie

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 10ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Jamie and all,

Thank you for your comments; they have inspired so many thoughts I will hardly be able to fit it all here.

I am glad my experiences resonate with yours and this makes me think that this discussion of anthropologists' ways of being present with or without media should be coupled more with studies of new ways of being together. Our methodological challenges and opportunities certainly speak to new socialities related to media.

I like your idea of rites of passage, but I am not sure I can think of my own fieldwork experience as coherent enough to encompass a rite of passage. I could not delineate exactly when and where my fieldwork has taken place. When I was intensely following the 18 days in Egypt in early 2011, this was certainly part of my field though it was not until after Mubarak was deposed that I started thinking about doing this research project. What determines our fields, I guess, is more our paths to knowledge than necessarily interaction with certain people or locations. At least this has been my experience with this fieldwork - while my previous fieldwork with journalists in Egypt in 2008 felt much more confined and might be said to encompass a rite of passage.

Whether we can really determine what comes first, I would always argue for co-location when possible. Coupled with this, I think it is important we pay more attention to how media technologies can influence our co-location when we are actually there. Part of this revolves around interrogating the significance of distance across tables and across seas and investigating the connections between different places.

I agree that media affordances etc. are very quiet in my paper and that it would make sense to elaborate on. To be honest, I don't think I have quite been able to shake the activists' resentment towards social media analyses and this has perhaps influenced my writing more than it should have.

Cheers,
Nina

Francisco Osorio fosorio@uchile.cl   **February 13ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear list, thanks for this conversation and to Nina for her proposal. If I understood correctly, thick description is enabled by thick presence, therefore, thick presence is first. Either (a) thick presence is necessary for thick description or (b) it is not. What would you say Nina?

10

It may be that the thicker the presence, the better for anthropological knowledge. So, the more legs are sturdily rooted in our thick presence tripod, the more support we have to create knowledge. So anthropological analysis rest in some conditions, being thick presence one of them. Is it not Nina?

There are so many corners to explore in your paper, for which I thank you again for producing such wonderful ideas, most needed in our times.

Cheers,
Dr. Francisco Osorio

John Postill john.postill@rmit.edu.au   **February 14ᵗʰ 2017**

Thank you for a thought-provoking paper, Nina. I have a question about your response to Veronica, specifically the bit where you explain that your point of departure is

"an understanding of place 'not as points or areas on a map, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*' (Massey 2005: 130, original emphasis) I understand media as place-making. This entails an attention to places as occurring rather than existing and to movement in and between these places."

I'm wondering how this relates (or not) to your discussion of co-location, thick presence, etc. What happens when we do away with place as commonly understood, e.g. in colloquial phrases such as "They haven't confirmed yet the actual time and place of the protest" and replace it with Massey's counter-intuitive formulation? Is it even possible to think and put into practice Massey's idea of place?

Also, could it be that we are giving 'being there' too much of a central role in what we do as anthropologists or qualitative social scientists (and I'm guilty of this myself in a couple of texts you cite)? What about all the other things that we do that are not about being there, e.g. keeping up with news about our field sites, delving into online archives, listening to non-context-specific gossip or opinions about research participants or their opponents (e.g. so-and-so is an old school anarchist)? How do you integrate all these other materials into your own accounts?

What seems to characterise my own research practice is not so much 'being there' as gathering primary and secondary information on a given problem wherever I can get it (ethically), often by following suggestions or leads from research participants (as well as from my favourite search engine), and then triangulating the resulting materials (usually a mix of thick and thin) as demanded by a given writing task and deadline.

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 15ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Francisco, John, all,

Thank you for your inspiring comments.

11

Let me start by addressing yours, Francisco.

Yes, I would certainly say the thicker the presence the better the anthropological knowledge and that thick presence is necessary for thick description. And I this sense I don't think thick presence sheds any new light to what anthropologists have always done. My aim with the notion of thick presence is to allow for a different understanding of 'being there', which takes into account the ways that media increasingly allow us a presence in places we are not physically at and allow places, we are not physically at a presence with us. This distinction between our presence there and the presence of there with us - along with different temporalities of presence this potential lack of reciprocity brings with it – is at the heart of thick presence and crucial, I believe, to our creation of anthropological knowledge.

This brings me to John's comments, which I particularly appreciate because Doreen Massey' notion of place, 'not as points or areas on a map, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events'* has made so much make sense to me. What Massey's notion of place particularly does for me is enable an appreciation of entanglements between different places exactly because her notion of place has a different temporality (and thus a different focus on movement) than more 'sturdy' notions of place.

And this notion of place, I believe, enables a more dynamic understanding of 'being there'. I think John and I (along with many others) have similar experiences in the field in many respects, trying to make sense of seemingly fragmented experiences of places that are connected perhaps mainly by our engagement with them. I, like John, have spent a significant amount of hours keeping up with news, delving into online archives etc. But what I came to realise during my fieldwork was that the places (in Massey's sense) that I was doing so in were of extreme importance. Let me provide the most obvious example, keeping up with news about street violence, which I mainly did through following activists and journalists on Twitter.

In late 2011, I was following the continuous street violence from my office in Denmark, gaining significant knowledge of relevant actors, the viciousness of authorities and more. In early 2012, I often found myself doing the same thing, but now from my apartment in Medinat Nasr in Cairo. The knowledge I gained from following news on Twitter from my apartment, still far removed from the violence, yet much closer to it, was significant in a different way. Following news about street violence when walking the streets of downtown Cairo had yet a different significance. About 200 metres from Tahrir, I could vaguely make out that people were gathered there by looking, but I was too far away to see what was happening. Here, a tweet enabled me to navigate safely, turning right instead of heading on to Tahrir when reading a tweet about clashes having broken out there.

So, to respond to John's comment about whether we are giving 'being there' too much of a central role, I would say yes, because the notion of 'being there' does not allow for the complexities of our experiences of many different 'theres'. I believe the notion of presence is better suited to explain these complexities. I was hardly 'there' in any of the three examples of

12

reading tweets I give above. And I hardly had any presence in Tahrir. But the presence Tahrir Square had with me was very different depending on the places I was moving through and that was crucial for what I could know. My knowledge was not less embodied when I was far away, but being close enough to be potentially harmed by the violence provided a very different experience. What I am trying to get at is that the duality and embodiment implied in the notion of 'being there' (you are either there or not and 'being there' implies your body being 'there') misses the complexities of the ways we produce knowledge. In essence, we are never really there, but the places we move through are of course of immense significance.

Cheers,
Nina

John Postill john.postill@rmit.edu.au   **February 15th 2017**

So if I'm understanding this correctly, a place in Massey's phenomenological theory is a one-off, transient, (inter)subjective experience. Where does that leave Tahrir square, the newsrooms, etc? What happens with the fixed built environment in this kind of account? For instance, where do geospatial technologies and data fit in, e.g. the metadata of geotagging, which rely on fixed coordinates such as longitude and latitude?

Perhaps when we use smartphones in our everyday social interactions there is a constant interplay, a feedback loop, between objective cartographic places and Massey's subjective places. Presumably surveillance agencies in Egypt and elsewhere have better access to the former than to the latter places.

Just thinking aloud - not having read Massey...

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 15th 2017**

Dear John and all,

Let me do my best to elaborate on Massey's notion of place though other members of the list, not least Sarah Pink who as mentioned earlier has been instrumental for my reading of Massey, might have other significant elaborations. I should also mention that Massey's notion of place is compatible with Tim Ingold's work (which I am also very inspired by) and related to his notion of dwelling (see Ingold 2000, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013, particularly 2011:141) and would perhaps be more familiar to some people on the list.

I don't think Massey would have necessarily disagreed that 'a place in Massey's phenomenological theory is a one-off, transient, (inter)subjective experience', but I think she would have phrased it differently. Being a geologist, Massey's notion of place is among other things bound up with mountains and rocks that were formed 500 million years ago.

With this as a backdrop, Massey describes place as 'a temporary constellation' (Massey 2005:

13

131), and as 'collections of [stories-so-far], articulations within the wider power-geometries of space. Their character will be a product of these intersections within that wider setting, and of what is made of them' (ibid. 130). Place, then, is constantly changing (ibid. 133).

My thinking about place and interest in Massey's work has been very influenced by the violence that was pervasive in Egypt through my two main periods of fieldwork for my PhD, that is, in the first halves of 2012 and 2013. This has led me to a more transient understanding of temporality and place than Massey might have imagined (though I don't think this in any way contradicts Massey's points). Tahrir is a case in point, because the place of a sit-in could so quickly become an entirely different place as the military attacked. This is no different in newsrooms, of course, but the violence of street clashes highlighted the significance of these rapid shifts because it was so extreme.

Cheers,
Nina

Mark Pedelty pedeltmh@umn.edu   **February 15th 2017**

Fascinating paper, Nina. You add a great deal to the "virtual ethnography" conversation that scholars like Christine Hine initiated around the turn of the millennium. Given that ethnography is about intersubjectivities, this paper does a great deal to help us think about medium and mediation as elements of ethnographic engagement.

To throw in another element, the ecological implications of your paper are fascinating, although I don't pretend to have worked out what those implications might be (and thus the question). On one hand when it comes to relativising relationships we can get into magical thinking that the question is purely perceptual. However, in material terms whether we travel, interact in person, or do so via digital mediation all have profound environmental consequences in relation to biodiversity and environmental justice. As engineers craft artificial bees to replace organic pollinators and people increasing engage with each other cybernetically, these consequences can be complex and extremely difficult to characterize (the work of the ethnographer) or measure (the work of the ecologist). So I would never ask anyone to do that. However, I am wondering if in thinking through digital communication (that which "makes common" or mediates) ecological question have come to mind as well? Whether from the perspective of making meaning intersubjectively, and the constructive nature of mediation (e.g., digital forms of engagement, co-presence, etc.), or even in terms of ethics (e.g., travel or not to travel? e-waste and server farms and/or planes, trains, and automobiles? Terkle's "Alone Together" or something else?), environmental contexts and ecologies might in some way enter into the question of ethnographic mediation?

Don't let the question sidetrack this excellent discussion. Just wanted to see if anything came to mind linking ethnographic mediation and ecology.

Thanks for the wonderful paper.

14

Mark

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 16th 2017**

Dear Mark and all,

Thank you for bringing the environmental context into the discussion. This is something I find of extreme importance and very connected to the issues I have been dealing with. However, I think my path towards environmental concerns has less to do with ethnography and methodology and more to do with global connections and activism.

First, of course, I should mention that it is hard to keep environmental issues in focus when human beings are being killed by a brutal military dictatorship. But, of course, environmental issues and dictatorships are connected and in the grander scheme of things, environmental hazards are much more dangerous than any state on its own, authoritative or not.

A significant part of the revolutionary struggle in Egypt has to do with workers' rights. The authorities' extreme neglect of workers (and general human) rights and environmental issues are connected in the sense that profit and power trumps (dare I say that?) other concerns. If workers in a factory strike for better safety measures after a worker dies from falling into a chemical mixer, the security forces are on spot to violently end the demonstration and the system willingly incarcerates revolting workers with or without trial. Meanwhile, large international or multinational corporations are allowed to pollute lakes that previously fed local populations, ignoring both protests from local populations and environmental groups.

So, to get back to your question, digital communication has led me to think a lot about the movement of different forms of materialities and this again has led me to also think about the movement of the goods that are produced in these factories, the production of which the authorities to strongly tries to maintain control over. Unsurprisingly, many of these goods end up in Europe and North America. So, unexpectedly, my engagement with digital communication and the Egyptian revolution has led me to take interest in consumerism in the West and how we as consumers here can become more aware of the global impacts of our consumption both in terms of environmental and human rights issues.

I am not sure this was a proper response to your comment, but I hope this gives you an idea of how the relations between environmental issues and digital communication have influenced my research and my path.

Cheers,
Nina

Mark Pedelty pedeltmh@umn.edu   **February 16th 2017**

15

Agreed. In fact, rather than secondary or ephemeral, "environmental" concerns are often at the heart of struggles for justice rather than about something in the biodiverse and verdant distance. Conflict and violence are born of material inequality in addition to cultural repression. People struggle and fight because they are on the bad end of an ecosystem, and (hopefully) they do so against those for whom the means of production and energetic flow greatly favors, like the Western over-consumers you mentioned. What we do online or on the street does seem to connect these questions, so thanks for sharing what is I believe an important part of the online/offline discussion.

Elisenda Ardévol eardevol@gmail.com   **February 19ᵗʰ 2017**

Thanks, Nina, for your paper, its reading was really inspiring to me, and I found the ideas very nice and convincingly argued.

I like the way you articulate the issues of location, temporality and presence and the management of the prefix co- to construct your issue. On the one hand, I think this paper might be especially helpful for those that are beginning research in digital times and frameworks. On the other hand, I find it useful to put again into the fore the issue of media anthropology by rethinking anthropology "at distance".

I also like the way you make us think in the "there" in the "here". Your paper suggested me that more important than "being there" is to "make present", and how the ethnographic work is a way to make present people and things in a meaningful embodied manner. And this despite the questioned "ethnographic present" and its colonial resonances.

I just wonder which kind of ethnography can be made if we abandone its confinement to being "here" (my writing desk and now) and "there" ("there" and "then") by this multiple temporalities and collocations?

Just night thoughts,
Elisenda

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 20ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Elisenda and all,

Thank you for your comments. I find your connection between 'the questioned "ethnographic present"' and the temporality, distance and presences in different 'theres', which I am talking about, extremely fruitful. To me, this connection has to do with the openness of place (Massey 2005:131) and our perception (and perhaps at times rejection) of this openness.

For me, it has been very instructive to think about two contrasting experiences of doing fieldwork with journalists: In 2008 when I was doing fieldwork with journalists working for major international news outlets in Egypt and Syria and in 2012 and 2013 when I was doing

fieldwork with information activists and journalists in Egypt. In 2008, I always had a fear (which a journalist confided sharing with me) that something major would happen when I was at home and no one would tell me so I would be left to find out from the news. In 2012 and 2013, I carried out fieldwork literally with my smartphone in my hand and at this time I was overwhelmed by a sense of my field always being composed of so many different places at once that there was no way I could ever even try to account for them all. Yet this time I had a feeling – which I also shared with journalists – that if something major happened I would know. In an interview, a journalist pointed to his smartphone and told me that he was confident he would know if something important was going on in Upper Egypt at this moment. The contrast of my experience sitting in an agency office in 2008, following the phone calls with two stringers about an assault that happened in Upper Egypt is telling. These changes can obviously not just be explained with technological developments and they can also not just be explained with the many, many more people, journalists and others, involved with making news stories about Egypt in 2012 and 2013. Different interlinked and complex issues are at stake and I think place-making theory is apt to help illuminate these issues because it entails an attention to the entanglements between different places. In essence, the places I was part of in 2012 and 2013 were more open to other places than the places I had been part of in 2008 and this had important implications for the stories that could be made – by me as well as by information activists and journalists. But that by no means make the places I was part of in 2008 closed off or isolated.

As much as anthropologists have esteemed studies of particularly isolated people (somehow it seems studies which have included painstaking trips on a donkey's back to reach a field site has a certain exalted status in our field), our fields have of course never been isolated (Mark's attention to environmental issues is just one apt example here). To me, doing fieldwork with a smartphone in my hand has opened my eyes to the ways places are always open. It has also affected the ways the places I have been part of have been open to other places. By doing so, it has challenged the dichotomy of 'being there' and doing 'anthropology at a distance'. To me, this has significant methodological and theoretical implications for ethnography that I hope we will pay more attention to, especially with the threat of the digital making us lose focus on the way both we and our digital media are always embodied in the world.

Cheers,
Nina

Scott MacLeod sgkmacleod@worlduniversityandschool.org   **February 20ᵗʰ 2017**

Thank you for your moving and very interesting theoretical contributions to ethnographic "place-making," Nina.

I wonder if ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy as a complementary new methodology could come into conversation fruitfully with this. Here are some slides from a talk I gave in the UC Berkeley anthropology department in November 2015 on this re my new actual-virtual Harbin Springs' ethnography -

17

Naked Harbin and Ethno-Wiki-Virtual-World-Graphy:

Methodologies for Ethnographically Studying Virtual Place: Virtual Harbin

36 slides from UC Berkeley talk on F 11/6/15

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1tAhXFinq8xm8BDFcceoHsNBHJi0wpS0HDFh40PXsQ2I/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000 (accessible here
- http://www.scottmacleod.com/ActualVirtualHarbinBook.html ; see, too - http://scott-macleod.blogspot.com/search/label/ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy).

Thank you.
Best,
Scott

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 20ᵗʰ 2017**

Dear Scott and all,

Thank you for sharing your slides about 'ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy'; it looks like a fascinating project. Having never encountered this methodology before, I'm not sure how much I would be able to say about how well it complements ideas about place-making, but I would be happy to hear your thoughts on this.

I should point out that the kind of place-making I am speaking of should not be understood in any virtual sense; I understand places as critically emplaced in the phenomenological world and notions such as third place or virtual place sit uneasy with me. Different forms of media, of course, can be hugely influential on places, but in my understanding of place, media cannot constitute places removed from the phenomenological world. But as I said, not having any knowledge of 'ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy' I am not sure I am reading it appropriately.

Cheers,
Nina

Nancy Van House vanhouse@ischool.berkeley.edu   **February 20ᵗʰ 2017**

Thank you, Nina, for a thought-provoking article and also thanks to others who have responded. I want to highlight an issue that Nina touched on in her discussion around temporality. I'll call it "being-then."

Lived experience unfolds over time. Massey calls places spatio-temporal events. Ingold speaks of wayfaring.   Ethnographic "being there" is thus a matter of being there AND then.

Nina (and others) referred to the "temporal immediacy" of applications like Twitter and live-

18

streaming. I've been studying live-streamed video during protest events, drawing on Frosh and Pinchevsky's concept of media witnessing: e.g., live-streaming during Black Lives Matter protests in 2014 and the Feb 1 protests against Milo Yiannopoulos in Berkeley. The situation and protesters' understandings change over time. In the middle of things, it is often hard to know what is going on, even just on the other side of the square. An important part of participants' lived experience, then, is uncertainty: about what has happened, is happening, or is about to happen. Another important element is affect, especially fear: these events were nowhere near dangerous as Tahrir Square, but protesters risked arrest, tear gas, rubber bullets, violence within the crowd, and more.

Connective media can support researchers in "being then" in two ways: retrospectively and concurrently. Concurrent, real-time "being then" can be accomplished via contemporaneous tweets and live-streaming. Video is especially powerful because it is multi-sensory – e.g., the protests I've followed were at night, with darkness adding to the confusion, and incredibly noisy. The distant viewer sees and hears (much of) what the streamer does. Furthermore, streamers can be real-time key informants: they often narrate events and their on-going thoughts and emotions. The viewer also forms an opinion of the streamer as witness based on hearing and seeing his/her actions.

Retrospectively, the researcher can try to reconstruct events and understanding over time via electronic traces. However, correlating media across platforms is very difficult. More important, much of this media is ephemeral. Periscope videos, for example, expire after 24 hours if the owner doesn't specify otherwise. Real-time observation, for all its difficulties, offers information unavailable later; and an experience closer to that of participants.

The concept of "thick presence" is useful for understanding current variations on "being there" – I encourage us to think more about how social media can help us to "be then," too, as an element of into thick presence.

Scott MacLeod sgkmacleod@worlduniversityandschool.org   **February 21ˢᵗ 2017**

Hi Nina and all,

Thanks for your reply, Nina.

Where does your work head into a realistic virtual earth, I ask myself - re the actual and virtual of "being there" or "thick description"? Conceptually, I have in mind, a phenomenologically realistic WIKI Google Streetview / Maps / Earth with TIME SLIDER and with eventual avatars which is group build-able (like OpenSim/Second Life, but realistic) and eventually with an universal translator in all 7,097 living languages (where Google Translate is in 103, and Wikipedia / Wikidata is in 358) - for STEM researchers to add their data, photos, video, films, and computer modeling +. So this would be wiki (group-editable in multiple languages) - where we can all add these resources allowing for openness and ever growing anthropological thickness - both of description as well as of presence (and of thickness of integration of media elements,

19

interactivity, hypermedia, immersion, and narrativity re the overture in Packer and Jordan 2001 - a theoretical departure place for me), even as the actual on-the-ground "ethnographic present" continues to unfold and inform this developing realistic virtual earth.

I wonder conceptually whether such a developing realistic virtual earth for ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy (e.g. in Google Streetview +) would further contribute representationally to your observation that

"As much as anthropologists have esteemed studies of particularly isolated people (somehow it seems studies which have included painstaking trips on a donkey's back to reach a field site has a certain exalted status in our field), our fields have of course never been isolated (Mark's attention to environmental issues is just one apt example here). To me, doing fieldwork with a smartphone in my hand has opened my eyes to the ways places are always open. It has also affected the ways the places I have been part of have been open to other places. By doing so, it has challenged the dichotomy of 'being there' and doing 'anthropology at a distance'. To me, this has significant methodological and theoretical implications for ethnography that I hope we will pay more attention to, especially with the threat of the digital making us lose focus on the way both we and our digital media are always embodied in the world."

With a realistic virtual earth, would place-making emerge as a new (writing / graphy / making / representing) as well as virtual phenomenological frontier relative to your thinking about the actual phenomenological, I wonder, further challenging "the dichotomy of 'being there' and doing 'anthropology at a distance' - also with methodological implications? (For example, with regard to my actual / virtual ethnographic field site, Harbin Hot Springs, and in my language, in what ways does/will/is ethnographic field work - participant observation, thick description and presence - in the actual phenomenological on-the-ground alternative hippy-to-the-hot-springs Harbin hot springs' warm pool differ from, (be) similar to and wiki-inform ethnographic field work in a developing realistic virtual earth (including at the cellular and atomic levels in Google Brain project for example for brain research) and visiting a realistic virtual Harbin warm pool in one's bath tub from home - if we are all creating this via ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy?)

You write:
"that the kind of place-making I am speaking of should not be understood in any virtual sense; I understand places as critically emplaced in the phenomenological world and notions such as third place or virtual place sit uneasy with me. Different forms of media, of course, can be hugely influential on places, but in my understanding of place, media cannot constitute places removed from the phenomenological world. But as I said, not having any knowledge of 'ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy' I am not sure I am reading it appropriately."

You write:
"To me, doing fieldwork with a smartphone in my hand has opened my eyes to the ways places are always open." I wonder if, further, ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy with its focus on group ethnographic virtual world generation or making - with smart phone in hand - will put the smartphone into Google Cardboard on your or my face acting as an actual-virtual intermediary?

20

If one could convert your videos, for example, from the Egyptian uprising in 2012-2013 into a Google Streetview / OpenSimulator interactive build-able environment (which application isn't made yet - and avatar-bots with agency are only beginning to develop), and then interact ethnographically in terms of thick presence with these new avatar bots (say in 5 years from now - as A.I., machine learning and machine translation develop) - and with video also from the present converted into interactive avatar bots/realistic virtual earth - of you and your compatriots then and now - how would this further inform your understanding of thick presence phenomenologically on-the-ground re thick presence virtually, I ask myself?

Would Elisenda's observation about and appreciation of your "location, temporality and presence and the management of the prefix co- to construct your issue" lead to new ways of rethinking anthropological thick presence, conceptually, re a realistic virtual earth for ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy? (As a beginning example of this, I added a picture of the Harbin Gate House from 2001 in the Google Streetview virtual earth of the Harbin Gate House here - http://tinyurl.com/p62rpcg ... accessible here http://twitter.com/HarbinBook - and eventually I think we will be able to add our own ethnographic videos, for example, which will then become interactive bots - for both a kind of historical virtual anthropology, as well as unfolding frontier virtual anthropology with avatar agency; see, too - http://scott-macleod.blogspot.com/search/label/avatar%20agency - for related ideas).

Thank you for your thought-provoking "thick presence" place-making thinking, Nina.

Best,
Scott

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 21st 2017**

Dear Nancy and all,

Thank you for your comments. I absolutely agree that ethnographic 'being there' is a matter of being there and then and I like how your notion 'being then' highlights place as a spatio-temporal event. Yet I'm not sure I would distinguish between the two, because understanding place as a spatio-temporal event would emphasise being there *and* then concurrently.

I'm curious to learn more about your work and how live-streaming has been significant for protests in other places. I am glad that you point to the importance of understanding the uncertainty that is part of (violent) street protests; indeed, it is often difficult to know what is going on even just on the other side of the square. I have been intrigued by the way media have been used in response to this uncertainty. In Egypt, tweets have been used to spread information about police presence and movements from one side of a protest to another, enabling protesters unable to see the police movements to respond to it, they have been used to organise movement of doctors and medical supplies to makeshift clinics around Tahrir Square and much more and in other ways addressed this uncertainty.

21

I agree that video is particularly powerful, but I find it crucial to emphasise that our multi-sensory engagements in the viewing of a video (streaming or otherwise) is an engagement with a different environment from that of the screening. To me, the violence that was so pervasive in Egypt throughout my fieldworks (and which I made an effort to stay away from) made this very clear to me. Whether I was close by or thousands of miles away, videos of violence in Egypt touched me deeply in very physical ways and often I found myself breathing with difficulty while watching people choking from teargas or unable to move while watching people dying. But I was not choking from the teargas and I was not in risk of being hit by bullets. Being able to engage in sensory experiences of violence, which occur in other places is not the same as inhabiting those places.

So, thinking of media as place-making, I think media can help us do is create new places, which draw on previous places and by doing so allow us an experience which is significant for understanding aspects of these previous places.

Thanks for bringing these issues up!

Cheers,
Nina

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 21ˢᵗ 2017**

Dear Scott and all,

Thank you for elaborating! I find your thoughts and ideas very intriguing though I worry some of the details might be lost on me.

One thought that comes to my mind reading about your work deals with a comparison an activist made between footage from protests made by TV journalists and footage by activists. He found that TV journalists often filmed from above (from a building or some kind of platform), removed from the protests whereas his own and other activists' footage from the ground gave a very different (and often shaky and very fractional) picture. His point was that when he saw TV footage he felt removed from the battles that he himself had taken part in while on-the-ground footage enabled him to relive the experience. As Nancy pointed out, uncertainty is a significant part of these kinds of street protests; a protester (or anyone else for that matter) always has a very limited perception of a protest. So, to try to think along with your technological visions and ambitions: If we were able to collect all the footage from a certain battle (and if there was a lot of footage from many different angles) and connect it both temporally and spatially and through this create an environment in which one could explore the different places of that battle, seen from above, from the ground, from around the corner etc. as it unfolded in time, we would be able to explore connections and gain experiences in a different way than by looking through videos on a screen or by being part of the protests. I would emphasise that what we would create would be a very different place than the protest or battle itself, but it would significantly draw on

22

the place of the protest or battle of course. I guess, what I am getting at with this is that perhaps I would use a different word than 'realistic', because – I would hope – one would not have to worry about being hit by bullets while moving through this environment.

I hope this intersects with your thinking and am thankful you guided me to this kind of thinking. I am curious as to how these types of technologies might influence our research in the future though I also hope that they will not become a substitute for being next to people.

Cheers,
Nina

Mark Pedelty pedeltmh@umn.edu   **February 21st 2017**

Your emphasis on the ethnographic encounter as "there" and "then" is fascinating, Nina.

That is a question that musicologists and ethnomusicologists come back to often given then way in which the musical experience (perhaps especially performance) facilitates or perhaps even requires a hyper-focus on co-presence and thus a very hyper-localized sense of time and place. Thinking past or future becomes an unaffordable luxury for the performing musician; there is a need to be "in the moment" and space with fellow performers and, to a lesser extent, an audience. Albright's "Groovology" is about that as well.

Two recent discussions of the issue came to mind as I was reading your paper and now in your responses:

Siu, Rhonda Claire. "Rethinking the Body and Space in Alfred Schutz's Phenomenology of Music." *Human Studies* 39, no. 4 (2016): 533-546.

...and an older favorite of mind that ties that sense of musical being in time and space to political mobilization...

Mattern, Mark. *Acting in concert: Music, community, and political action*. Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Thanks for your fascinating paper and responses!

Mark

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup ninagmollerup@gmail.com   **February 21st 2017**

Dear Mark and all,

Thank you so much for these references! I am not familiar with musicologist literature at all, but it makes very much sense to think about these issues through music, which in different ways than

23

violence brings multi-sensoriality to the fore. I should also mention that I have been greatly inspired by your own chapter on musical news in The Anthropology of News and Journalism in thinking about how we engage with news and their significance exactly because it highlights the significance of multi-sensoriality.

On a completely different note, it has been brought to my attention that I forgot to include the full reference to Doreen Massey (2005), so I include this below.

Cheers,
Nina

References

Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.
Pedelty, Mark. 2010. Musical News: Popular Music in Political Movements. In: Bird, S. Elizabeth (ed.) *The Anhropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

John Postill john.postill@rmit.edu.au   **February 21st 2017**

Patty Gray has an interesting discussion on remote ethnography and 'being then' here:

Gray, P. A. (2016). Memory, body, and the online researcher: Following Russian street demonstrations via social media. American Ethnologist, 43(3), 500-510.

I have discussed her 'being then' argument here:

Postill, J. 2017. Doing remote ethnography. In The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography. Eds. Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway and Genevieve Bell. London: Routledge.

I'll post a few thoughts later on this

John

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk   **February 23rd 2017**

Dear All,

This is to confirm that the seminar is now closed. I would like to thank Nina for the great paper and everyone who contributed to this thought-provoking discussion. We will let you know as soon as the transcripts will be available online.

all best
Veronica