Book review

Up Close and Personal, But Not Close Enough

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Samantha Holland (ed.)
Remote Relationships in a Small World
Peter Lang, New York, 2008
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One of the central aims of this book is to establish life online as a legitimate and sociologically significant area of study. To this end the book provides a genuinely wide range of original essays, each of which focuses on a discretely defined empirical site. The collection's empiricism is impressively buttressed by well-located literature reviews and the provision of detailed notes on methodology. This makes for an excellent teaching resource, as an introduction to the field and a 'how to' guide for those unfamiliar with the passages of qualitative research. It is also a useful research tool for those wanting to survey the field and access an up-to-date bibliography.

The authors position their research within a collective framing of the present moment as one which has surpassed the founding emphasis on the distinction between the virtual and the real that marked inaugural studies of computer mediated communication (CMC). The everydayness of CMC means that it no longer makes sense to frame enquires around the presumption of an originary

rupture between real and virtually mediated relationships. All the chapters clearly locate their analysis of CMC in terms of technology, practice and social context, which in part is a methodological effort to bring to the fore more nuanced interpretations of the intersecting virtual and real dimensions at play in many of our relationships.

What is a remote relationship? At the outset, Holland offers us a definition: 'I use the term *remote* to refer to the new technologies that facilitate many new forms of communication and also to underline the lack of physicality involved in many relationships developed at a distance.' (1) Internet-based technologies, particularly Web 2.0 social platforms, have rapidly penetrated a whole series of social relations as well as opened up entirely new configurations of relationships completely contingent on their technological specifications. *Remote Relationships* documents some of the ways in which 'technologies are profoundly affecting the conditions under which relationships are made possible, changing our ideas about what relationships are'. (1) This book looks into how and why people increasingly participate in relationships where they never meet face to face (f2f), examining what may be experientially distinct about these new socialities.

The book is catalogued under interpersonal relations and social aspects of the internet and computer networks, yet it is difficult to precisely discern its disciplinary investments. A reader less familiar with digital media studies and relationship research might view these texts, at the most general level, as part of a generic kind of interdisciplinary sociology, although, interestingly enough, there is not really that much reference to sociology. Social psychology appears to be by far the favoured established discipline, with communications studies coming close behind, followed by smatterings of anthropology, gender studies and education studies, as well as other fields.

The positive side to this interdisciplinarity is exposure to a wide array of citations, of which there are plenty of niche references—such as books on blogging or cyberspace—to pick your way through. However, for me a large part of the difficulty in locating the disciplinary commitments of the work is the lack of any clear theoretical lineage, where theory is understood to fundamentally shape the kinds of social worlds that become available to us through analysis. My concern was that the book showed very little interest in cultural studies' theories of identity and

subjectivity, which manifested in a stark, if barely existent, theorisation of power. This might be acceptable if other substantial theoretical investments were being made, such as in systems theory, actor network theory, media studies, or other theorisations linked to technology, but these barely cropped up. It was therefore difficult to identify the theoretical undergird for the book's politics.

This is not to say that individual chapters were necessarily theoretically deficient: Dennis D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini, for example, bring together Caillois and Bataille in their analysis of the playfulness of online sexual encounters, and Jonathan Paul Marshal and Rhiannon Bury make use of linguistic theories of performativity to analyse behaviour on internet mailing lists, and friendship in women's fan communities, respectively. Overall, however, the content suggests that there is a deficiency in demonstrating the *political* necessity of researching online relationships in a particular way, at this particular point in time. Trained in the feminist politics of location, I found it difficult to reconcile the paucity of epistemological situatedness with the possibility that this book might be a politically valuable project.

In her introduction, Holland states that 'the scope of the book is international'. (1) But what is being described as *international* is actually Australian, New Zealand, European and North American. There is a problem here. While there is nothing wrong in publishing research from these locations together, it is unclear how they function together as terms of privilege in the research and writing practice when the West stands in for the rest.

My central gripe is that not all of the chapters do much beyond description, even in their uses of feminist scholarship. For example, Bury and Naomi Rosh White and Peter B. White use feminist theories of gender to *describe* differences in men and women's behaviour, but do not clearly articulate a politics of the gendered uses of CMC they recognise; I wanted to know more about why the gendered nature of CMC mattered. Further, their descriptions, alongside others in the book, are implicitly heteronormative: men's and women's behaviour is taken for granted as normatively heterosexual in a way that completely overlooks questions of how sexuality co-constructs gender. The authors explicitly consider the functional nature of technologies and situate the capacities they create in phenomenological terms. Next we need to think through how uses of these technologies relate to wider

structures of power, both in terms of content, ownership and corporatisation, as well as in terms of the social formations of power which manifest cultural difference.

This is not to say that identity is completely off the table. Marshall, for example, makes explicit that as a result of focusing on the mailing list Cybermind his comments 'refer primarily to middle-class, white, Western, English-speaking Internet groups'. He states further that 'it should not be assumed that the effects observed will apply across cultures'. (199)

It is not clear to us how Marshall knows that his research subjects primarily fall within the categorical slippage white-Western-male, but even if it were, I am not convinced that this use of identity sufficiently adds anything to his analysis of the data. Identity should be brought in to specify and further develop an analysis, and should be used carefully in regard to generalisations. I am sure that men's uses of Cybermind are also affected by the particular vocations they occupy and the national contexts in which they have lived and worked, along with other formations invested in the building of masculinity. And if this is *not* the case, then we have an opportunity to start to use Cybermind practices to open up ways of thinking differently. Similarly, I would argue that acknowledging the racial status of research participants does little more that pay lip service to the 'oversight' of racial difference that such an acknowledgement then affirms as functioning within the text.

Notwithstanding these concerns, there is plenty of interesting data to get your teeth into if you are so inclined. Marshall provides data on the gendered differences in public and private uses of listervs; Yates and Lockley give us detailed primary statistical data on men's and women's uses of mobile phones; Bury and Armstrong focus respectively on women and girls to analyse the ways in which CMC is constructed through and in relation to feminine subjectivities. I just wish that locations and identities weren't introduced to us in the methodology sections of chapters, as if the usefulness of identity and place in understanding cultural practices ended with the categorical status of research subjects.

Again, in their analysis of websites for users of sex workers, Sarah Earle and Keith Sharp turn up really interesting data from punternet.com (a British website for prostitute reviewing). Yet, the authors make descriptive remarks such as 'field reports ... appear to be balanced judgements, mentioning both positive and negative features of the sexual encounter'. (274) To be frank, I do not think that this

description could properly be called analysis. Feminist interventions, pro or otherwise, into sex work (which I understand as a sexually specific economy of the body), remain unmentioned. Why is it that the focus on men, which merits sociological interest, happens to coincide with putting to one side a critique of the deeply, *deeply*, problematic associations being made between femininity, labour, passivity and power involved in some men's cultural practice of paying women for sex? I understand that the authors want to draw out nuances in meaning and move beyond the victimisation of women, but does that mean giving up trying to critique relations of power outside of those terms that are offered to us from within the text or object we seek to analyse?

I also wonder about the place of the body, and its relationship to place and identity, which seems to creep in and out of several of the chapters. Natilene Bowker provides some fascinating qualitative data on online participation of people with disabilities. I was particularly struck by the example of the research participant who 'types with his feet' (105); what an incredible opportunity to think about the Web 2.0 possibilities for communication that are already in practice, but that go unrecognised in habitually able-bodied conceptualisations of information technology. Unfortunately, the specificity of this participant's corporeal communications are only drawn in to be lost under the 'disability', which, although treated like a rubric at points, ultimately comes to function as a category. If there is a real political urgency to thinking through the possibilities that CMC make available to people affected by 'disabilities', I would urge these possibilities to be thought through in terms of specific bodily capacities. Otherwise the term 'disability', just like other terms of identity, once again becomes all too generic.

What motivates the study of remote relationships? Perhaps there does not need to be any justification other than the facticity of this sprawling social phenomenon. Yet, questions of power and social relationality seem to be creeping further away from one another. Further, the study of remote relationships does not seem to be very well positioned in terms of contemporary expanding fields, for example, in relation to scholarship on emotion and affect, or the cultural politics of intimacy, both of which are growing in gender and cultural studies. And while these chapters are sociological, they do not all draw very much on sociology's conceptual

lineages. Is there a desire to leave the moorings of these lineages behind? Is there a touchiness around identity?

To be honest, I have found it difficult to write this review any other way than as a long list of negations; perhaps that is a downfall of how I have been trained. I found the book's lacklustre use of theory was manifest in a failure to acknowledge any kind of contributions on the part of philosophy to the theorising of space and time, theorisations absolutely crucial to thinking through the creation of social worlds online. Because life online is primarily *virtual*. Ask anyone who is in a long distance relationship, as I am. Pixels are the closest I get to facial expressions; life on screen is different. What is this difference? Data hits the satellite, and my girlfriend says 'you've gone all pixelly'. Life is increasingly an arrangement of pixels; the virtual multiplies, becomes increasingly real. *Remote Relationships* is a decent primer for those seeking to research this kind of world, but it also raises the urgency to keep working with explicit motivations to hand, hopefully ones inspired by a cultural studies' reading of the book.

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