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Foreword

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Foreword

Sarah Pink

The title of this book—*Digital Environments*—signifies a significant step in the ways we experience and conceptualize the everyday worlds that we live and research in. That is, both anthropologists and the people who collaborate with us in our projects, inhabit and co-constitute environments in which digital technologies and media are inextricably entangled. This is continually evidenced by our everyday experience as researchers, as the people we meet in the course of our projects move through worlds that are at once on-line and off-line, and as we ourselves undertake research in ways that are never separated from the digital or material elements of life. As argued in two recent publications, the way that we understand our ethnographic practice needs to account for this (Pink, Horst et al 2016), and we also need new theoretical tools with which to understand the “digital materiality” of our environments, and ongoing changing processes and things through which they are configured (Pink, Ardevol and Lanzani 2016). As this book of essays shows, this digital material world is infinitely extensive and continually unfolding in new ways. It can be encountered across many places and is integral to many research themes and questions. In fact, there may not be anywhere that it does not impinge, given that in a world where the digital has come to dominate, to be non digital is itself a state or status that is determined, relationally, to the digital.

Digital Environments is moreover published in an academic context where digital anthropology and ethnography are flourishing. Its chapters therefore capture an intellectual moment where we are beginning to make sense of the digital elements of the environments we share with research collaborators; not so much as an object of study in themselves, but as something that anthropologists and ethnographers of other disciplines need to account for when exploring other topics—including fields such as art, wellbeing and activism. In this case we might ask: what is special about this “turn” in anthropological practice and attention? The answer is not that we simply have a new research subject or a new theoretical perspective that we might apply old forms of enquiry to, but rather that digital technologies and media bring

with them a body of theoretical, methodological and practical implications. Many of the themes and issues they raise are in fact already part of the sub-disciplines of visual and media anthropology. It is therefore, in this sense, not at all surprising that such an interesting collection of essays should emerge from the Visual and Media Anthropology program at Freie Universität Berlin. Media anthropology scholars have been ready for this moment for a long time. Moreover, recent works in media anthropology demonstrate a strongly developed field of theoretical and empirical media research (cf. Postill and Bräuchler 2010). Likewise, visual anthropologists were amongst the first to explore the possibilities of the internet for unconventional ways to disseminate their work. These sub-disciplines of anthropology and their fields of theory and practice therefore offer an important starting point for the study of digital environments. This is, moreover, a different starting point from others which have emerged, for instance, in ways situated more closely theoretically to material culture studies (Horst and Miller 2012) or that put participant observation at the center of the ethnographic research (cf. Boellstorff et al 2012). Instead, an approach to digital environments that is more closely harnessed to media and visual anthropology, and that is also informed by a training in visual anthropology practice, has something different to offer anthropology which will inevitably be itself performed in a digital material environment. It invites us to engage with visual and sensory research techniques as part of digital ethnography practice, to use these technologies in ways that are experimental—while at the same time theoretically coherent—and attentive to seeking ways in which to get beyond the surface that is often only scratched at by standard qualitative interviewing methods. An approach rooted in visual anthropology invites us to engage with the potential of audio-visual media for enabling empathetic understandings, as well as a tradition of reflexive and collaborative ways of working with participants in research, which can be translated with digital technologies into new forms of collaboration online.

Digital Environments therefore is a book that has emerged from a new generation of anthropologists. What is exciting about it is that it also represents the work of new scholars whose practice focuses on a central issue for the discipline, but does so through the prism of visual and media anthropology, which has traditionally not been part of the concern of mainstream scholarship in anthropology. This, I believe is a good sign. It implies an exciting future for the discipline as these perspectives and projects develop in the next years.

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