

RHIZOMIC ETHNOGRAPHIES

RHIZOMES, LINES AND NOMADS: DOING FIELDWORK WITH CREATIVE NETWORKED COMMUNITIES

Penny Travlou

What a grand day – great people visiting (over 350 of them), excellent work to show & brilliant space – very proud of the larger community we are part of :-) (Marc Garrett, February 26 2012, Facebook)

This short narrative of my ethnographic journey begins from its end: the day that I formally announced its completion, after twelve months of a nomadic peregrination at different localities across Europe and the trans-global spatialities of the Internet. That was the day of the opening of the new gallery space of Furtherfield, at Finsbury Park, London. Furtherfield has been my first ethnographic case study for this project or, to frame it better, my very first encounter with the subject of my ethnography: processes of social formation. This study, part of the HERA-funded project Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP), asks how creative communities form within transnational and transcultural contexts and a globalised and distributed communications environment.

A text of interwoven lines

My intention here is to unravel the story of my ethnography and to (begin to) give shape to the volume of field-notes created during fieldwork. As the word 'text' (from the Latin *texus*: 'to weave') implies, the making of the story – any story – is a 'weaving' process. I am not referring to the grammar and materiality of the document, its letters, sentences and paragraphs put together, but to the multiple stories, voices and geographies that are woven together in the knots of the text-as-cloth (c.f. Ingold 2010).

It is on purpose, therefore, that, in its attempt to retrace the lines of my fieldwork and their interconnections, this text eschews a linear structure. It is a patchwork, where fragments of field notes, nodes where people and projects meet, are stitched together to create a cloth, that in turn attempts to recreate a journey.

Quilts, bodies and the making of community

As I am writing this an exhibition I happened to visit, a couple of years ago in Atlanta, comes to mind; of quilts from the Mississippi Delta in the US, stitched together, cloth-by-cloth, by African-American women in the Depression Era. Each tiny piece of cloth was stitched at a specific place on the quilt to form a pattern; each pattern was about a story; each story was told by one of the women; and all the women together made a community. The creativity involved in the making of the quilt was one of the ways these women performed (and reaffirmed) their community. At the particular time of being together and making this quilt, these women formed a community of quilt-makers sharing that specific process of creating an object.

The quilt was the voice – one of the voices – of these African-American women, a polyphonic narrative of these women's presence within their communities. It was the story-telling of their life as African-Americans, as poor, as women. Their story had a material entity, an affective presence.

James Leach concludes his ethnographic text, *Creative Land*, with the statement that 'process is a creative land [...] process is already places and persons]' and 'creativity exists as a relationship with other people.' (Leach 2003: 216, 218). The quilts I saw in Atlanta are precisely such a creative land, objects in the making, a process of places (the Mississippi Delta) and people (the women who made them, the other people whose stories, entangled with these women's lives, were woven as colourful patches into the cloth). They are, also, the relationships of these people with a myriad of other things: small cloths cut from old garments, dresses etc., each with its own fascinating history, scissors and needles manipulated by dexterous hands, the beds on which the quilts were draped, the bodies they covered...

Similarly, my ethnography is about a creative land, a process of places and people and things. It is about creativity as a synergy of spaces, practices and artefacts, interlinked in such a manner that their singularity(-ies) form an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari 1993). Spaces are lived by bodies; practices are performed by bodies; artefacts are made by bodies. The connecting commonality here is, therefore, a community of bodies – people who make this assemblage happen.

In the opening quote of this text, Marc Garrett, Furtherfield's co-founder, enthuses about the creative land of the Furtherfield community of people, space and artefacts. This community assembles, binds and fuses together through cultural practices and creative processes. James Leach's (2003) suggestion that cultural practices of making new things can also 'create' individuals and bind them in social groups, 'creating' the community they inhabit' (after Biggs & Travlou, 2012 online) is topical here. Within Furtherfield I had the opportunity to witness the unfolding of creativity, 'emergent from and innate to the interactions of people.' (Biggs & Travlou 2012 online).

Ingold (2008) describes this deployment of creativity as:

lines along which things continually come into being. Thus when I speak of the entanglement of things I mean this literally and precisely: not a network of connections but a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement (Ingold 2008 online).

Agency and becoming are immanent within assemblages of things and people. In other words, agency and becoming are dynamic qualities, innate whenever things and people come together. Creativity is, thus, understood as an emergent property of relations, of communities (Biggs & Travlou 2012 online).

What kind of methodological framework could best accommodate these insights on creativity as an emergent property of assemblages? How should I go about my fieldwork in a way that accorded with the dynamic and constantly shifting patterns of interconnection between the communities I was about to 'study'?

Rhizomic Ethnographies: following lines – inhabiting places

American anthropologist Dona Davis (2007) claims that, if scientific research is largely about testing hypotheses and predictability, ethnographic fieldwork is about happenstance and chance, no matter how sophisticated the research design. She concludes that '[M]uch that emerges as desirable or worthwhile in fieldwork is unsought, unanticipated or not predicted.' (Davis 2007: 3). Since 'the field is not lab' (ibid. 3), therefore, I had to recognise that serendipity is crucial in this kind of study.

Hazan and Hertzog, editors of *Serendipity in Anthropological Research*, argue that 'besides being a major focus for research in the anthropological tradition, nomadism is a state of mind central to the understanding of the ethnographic enterprise' (Hazan & Hertzog 2012: 1). Following the thread of their reflection on the nomadic character of ethnographic research, they suggest that ethnographers, like nomads, are in a continual adaptation to a changing world. In this world ethnographers encounter incessant changes which

require them to be physically mobile, mentally alert, emotionally resilient and socially agile; [they] must be prepared to modify and revise her theoretical standpoint time and again; and [they] must cope with the frequent unpredictable mutations in the articles of faith as to the desirable management of anthropological knowledge (Hazan & Herzog 2012: 1).

These writings suggest that ethnographic research cannot be bound by prescribed formulae of 'writing culture' (ethno-graphy); this uncontainability is so even if we begin fieldwork with such a formula in mind. During fieldwork, the ethnographer is challenged to reinvent fieldwork practices, research methods and theoretical orientations. In the words of Hazan and Hertzog, it is the nomadic force that drives ethnographers from 'one idea to another, transcends boundaries, shifts involvements and transforms commitments until it is finally arrested and shaped in the published text' (2012: 2). Like Davis before them, they also conclude that ethnographic research – inescapably nomadic – is an 'evidence-based form of creating and applying novel explanations to new observations' and that this 'application of novelty' relies on serendipity and discovery (Hazan & Hertzog 2012: 2).

Spatiality, 'aspatiality' and methodological challenges

My research followed the contours of serendipity; of chance and happenstance. My initial idea, at the start of my ethnographic fieldwork, was that I was about to embark on a study of networked 'online' communities. In many ways this did happen: online communities constituted a major focus of my research. Already in the first few weeks in the field, however, I realised that this study would take me on a journey across a challenging, *physical-cum-virtual* landscape, shaped by fabric-like topologies, 'a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement.' (Ingold 2008 online).

My original preconceptions are recorded in a recent paper, co-authored with Simon Biggs, in which I described the methodological framework of my research, referring to its various parameters which would then shape my ethnography (Biggs & Travlou 2012). The paper was written before I started my fieldwork in January 2011; and, thus, the methodological framework described therein was not yet informed by the experience of fieldwork.

The theme of my enquiry was how creative communities form within transnational and transcultural contexts, within a globalized and distributed communications environment. My starting point was to take a closer look at the key-concepts of the project, network, community, creativity, to make sense of their meaning(s) and develop an ethnographic framework that would permit me to draw conclusions. At that point, I had little knowledge of the communities, practices, artefacts and spaces, I was about to engage with.

A review of the relevant literature convinced me that the methodological approach best suited to my study would be beyond the pale of traditional ethnography. I was about to study communities

assembling between physical and online space(s), in 'transnational' (beyond borders) and 'transcultural' (hybrid) locations.

The very 'inbetweenness' of these communities presented me with methodological challenges. For instance, what kind(s) of ethnography could I use to approach communities such as those assembling on the Internet? Since online communities are not defined by physical boundaries, we often conceptualise such communities as being 'aspatial'. This inference is supported by the claim – often made by symbolic anthropologists – that a community is the result of 'boundary construction through identity and shared systems of meaning' (Cohen, qtd. in Guimarães 2005: 146). This argument places a great deal of emphasis on the spatiality of community and, thus, to ethnography's role as a methodology not only for deciphering symbolic codes and meanings, but also for mapping territoriality and the physical presence of the community.

The claim that online communities are aterritorial has raised a heated academic debate, particularly within anthropological circles, since, followed to its ultimate consequences, this claim questions the very reality of online communities. As Anne Beaulieu argues, the lack of 'real' spatial (and face-to-face) relationships causes some anthropologists to consider online communities, enacted on the Internet, as 'illusory' (Beaulieu 2004).

Recent ethnographic studies of online communities (e.g. Turkle 1995; Miller 2000; Hine 2000; Beaulieu 2004) have greatly extended the remit of ethnography and demonstrated that online communities are as 'real' as any other. These studies, nevertheless, continue to regard online communities as 'aspatial'. For reasons that I am explaining below, I now consider this notion of 'aspatiality' as fallacious.

I began my fieldwork with such a notion in mind. I, too, believed that I was about to embark on a study of communities devoid of physical boundaries, non-located at geographical territories (which is in many ways true), and that these communities were a radically different kind of assemblage than the spatially situated communities of earlier ethnographies. However, my observations soon suggested that the communities I was interacting with had various levels of territoriality immanent within them and extending around them. The communities of my fieldwork were not entirely 'online'; they existed in-between – and across – virtual and physical space.

Whether online communities are entirely independent of, and separate from, physical space formed the theme of many debates at a workshop on digital ethnography I attended in September 2011 in Cava de' Tirreni, Italy. Many workshop participants believed that the 'aspatial' character of online communities place them in an entirely different stratosphere to communities that exist in physical (i.e. construed as 'real') space. I was intrigued by the arguments of one of the keynote speakers, Nathan Jurgenson, an American social media theorist. Nathan produced a passionate and forceful critique of the 'digital-dualist' assumption underlying the notion that online and physical space do not meet.

Nathan Jurgenson's critique accorded well with my own experiences. From an early stage in my fieldwork, I realized that, first, the communities I was studying were located in-between (and across) virtual and physical space and, second, that these two designations of space, virtual and physical, were interdependent, closely implicated and impossible to disentangle. Most importantly, these communities moved across space of any designation: across the boundaries of the online and the physical, and also across the boundaries of contemporary political geography, of states, supra-state polities and continents.

This insight was of particular relevance for me, as I was very interested in transcultural and transnational communities. Following Amit's (2000) argument about the shift of anthropology towards the investigation of multi-sited communities, I realised that I was interacting with, and looking at, fluid, mobile and mutable, dynamic communities that were in constant movement across space(s). John Urry's suggestion that spaces can (also) be viewed as 'comprised of various materials, of objects and environments, that are intermittently in motion' (2007: 34), thus, attained a strong resonance within my study. In the latter, software, code, online networks, communities, are precisely such constituents of space in motion: moving along their haphazardly intersecting lines, they contain and become space.

Roots and Lines

My methodological framework, therefore, mutated along with the study, from its original formulation as an online, multi-sited ethnography to a journey along lines, 'along which things [...] come into being.' (Ingold 2008 online). The first line for me to pursue may have been determined by the original study design, but the rest of the lines that guided my journey were discovered by chance. I followed lines as they came along, at each of their intersection with other lines, leading me to a journey across (a small part of) an extensive and highly ramified, rhizomic (root-like) network of people, concepts and machines.

My journey in this rhizomic network was guided by chance: at no stage of the journey did I know in advance who my other case studies would be: the second (*Art as Open Source*) and third (*Make-Shift*) case studies were lines that emerged – grew – out of Furtherfield, the first case study. Their very interconnectedness enabled me to see them not as separate case studies but as interlinked branches of the same entity, growing, and expanding, and intersecting with each other in a rhizomic manner. This is like a root with no clear beginning and end; what Deleuze and Guattari describe as being 'always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo' (1993: 25).

This rhizomic topology resists chronology and organisation. Instead, it affords a nomadic pattern of propagation, where cultural practices spread towards available new spaces through fissures and gaps, eroding what stands in its way. Any point of the rhizome can be connected with any other point, multiply, break and start up again on one of its old lines, or grow new lines. Tim Ingold (2011) evokes a (seemingly) similar topology of interconnectedness and contingency when he refers to 'wayfaring' to describe how we live along lines (and not at places). We humans, as wayfarers, he argues, have no specific destination. But where one line meets another there is somewhere further to go, and, thus, we move constantly along those lines, that lead us from place to place. In other words, we inhabit a 'meshwork' of lines caught up with other lines (Ingold 2007: 80).

As a (cultural) geographer, I am intrigued by the ways in which both rhizomes and meshworks open up new ways to conceptualise spatiality as bodily practice. When people walk through, around, to and from every line within a meshwork, for instance, they leave a trail. Those trails entwine with, and become bound to each other. Lines are places; trails are movement; 'places, [...] are delineated by movement.' (Ingold 2011: 149).

And so with the meshwork of my fieldwork... I started in January 2011 at Furtherfield Gallery, London. During my time there, I was introduced to my second case study (line): *Art is Open Source* – an Italian duo who were resident artists at the Furtherfield Gallery. My third case study (again a line) started

from an apparently separate line: I was introduced to the Make-Shift community through my colleague Simon Biggs. However, Helen Varley Jamieson, one of the cyberformers and founders of Make-Shift, was a former resident artist at Furtherfield, a regular contributor to the Furtherfield blog, and friends with Salvatore Iaconesi and Oriana Persico from Art is Open Source. Salvatore, Oriana and Helen were all part of the broader Furtherfield community. On some occasions, Helen's nomadic trail met with those of Salvatore's and Oriana's in physical space, at geographical locations (e.g. conferences, festivals etc.); other times they were all meeting online on NetBehaviour, an online mailing list for networked artists (see below). Another line/connector/network thus emerged, that linked all the case studies together. By that stage, the term 'case studies' had become redundant; these were really interconnected lines within a greater 'meshwork', a rhizome.

How, then, to follow this rhizome? In his article on '*multi-sited ethnography*' (1995), George Marcus prescribes five steps that enable a researcher to 'follow a community':

1. Follow the artefact (e.g. artworks, performances, installations);
2. Follow the metaphor (signs, symbols and metaphors that guide the ethnography);
3. Follow the story/narrative (comparison of stories with fieldwork notes from observation);
4. Follow the life/biography (gather individual stories/experiences);
5. Follow the conflict (if any between transnational communities, e.g. copyright laws).

Taking Marcus' methodological framework a step further, I added a sixth stage, that of following the rhizome wherein artefacts, metaphors, stories, lives and conflicts nest.

Following the rhizome is a succession of detours. I would start to follow one line and then another one would appear and cause me to divert from my original path. At first, I was quite apprehensive about these diversions, until I realised that these allowed me to map-out, as it were, a greater part of the rhizomatic network I was 'studying' – a network of formidable dimensions, which, as it was becoming increasingly more apparent, extended well beyond the few 'case studies'. While at Furtherfield Gallery, for instance, Salvatore and Oriana were 'on a mission' to spread the word about their project REFF (Roma Europa Fake Factory), for which they were organising workshops at different universities across London (e.g. University of Westminster, South Bank University, etc.) and autonomous social spaces (e.g. the Really Free School squat at the Black Horse Pub). Serendipitously, the original line of my study (Furtherfield) was branching out to another line (AOS), which in its turn was branching into further lines, intersecting and intertwining, together the rhizome: dynamic, evolving, changing and self-constituting over time.

Movement

Lines, paths, rhizomes entail movement. Tim Ingold, in his text *Against Space: place, movement, knowledge*, suggests that we should look at our places as 'knots where the threads from which they are tied are lines of wayfaring', where lines trail beyond the knot 'only to become caught up with other lines in other places' (2011: 149). For him, places are becoming through movement

along paths: lines connecting place A and place B. Most intriguingly, when a 'person moves he becomes a line' and as 'the wayfarer is constantly on the move [...] he is the movement' (2011: 149, 150).

Ingold's insights have helped me to appreciate this state of way-faring within the meshwork of lines. The communities/collectives/networks I worked with were constantly on the move, along paths that I had also just begun to follow. As I was partaking in the making of the rhizome, we were all lines and movement. Our movement was fluid, haphazard, nomadic, taking us from London to Cava de' Tirreni, from there to Turin, and later, (after my fieldwork had officially ended while the rhizome continued to grow), to Rome and Berlin.

Online Communities

As I was journeying along these nomadic itineraries, I was also tracing lines in virtual space: visiting websites, online forums, social networks, to follow and communicate with the communities of my study. During the year of my fieldwork I passed a great amount of time travelling in NetBehaviour, a "networked artists' community for networked distributed creativity" (www.netbehaviour.org). Netbehaviour describes itself as

an open email list community for sharing ideas, posting events & opportunities in the area of networked distributed creativity and facilitating collaborations between artists, academics, soft groups, writers, code geeks, curators, independent thinkers, relationalists, activists, networkers, net mutualists, new media types, new media performers, net sufis, non nationalists (www.netbehaviour.org).

NetBehaviour is the online place where the wider digital community of Furtherfield comes together. From January 2011 to February 2012, I archived 8,317 messages on NetBehaviour. Many of these were to/from key people from the other interlinked lines of my research, AOS (Salvatore Iaconesi) and Make-Shift (Helen Varley Jamieson). These messages were, therefore, intersecting connectors and trails positioned, juxtaposed and interwoven with those in physical space.

Then, during my fieldwork with *Make-Shift* community, I worked both in the physical locations where the cyberperformances (network performances) were taking place and in the online spaces where these performances were streamed. This streaming, and the interaction with audiences it enables, is a critical practice for *Make-Shift*: 'everything that happens in the houses is streamed to online audiences who can also contribute text chat visible on the interface to everyone throughout the event' (www.make-shift.net). In addition to following Helen Varley Jamieson at various physical locations of her cyberperformance, I also attended many of her performances online, as a member of the online audience. This online attendance permitted me to follow Helen's nomadic journey to locations, cities and houses around the world (Turkey, Germany, France, Italy, New Zealand, India, the US). When I asked Helen how the *Make-Shift* community is constituted between (and across) online and offline spaces, she replied:

We're building a *Make-Shift* community [...]. So we have regularly people who come online and watch the show, to participate in the show and the people in the houses are participants making the show with us. And then we have a mailing list so you've been already on it (referring to my membership in the mailing list). So, we add people to the mailing list after the shows and hope that they would keep being involved and get feedback from.

To get a better grasp of the dynamic, constantly expanding community Make-Shift was becoming, online fieldwork was, therefore, indispensable.

For AOS, on the other hand, forming a community with people they involved in their projects, although appreciated, was not prioritised as one of their objectives. When I asked them how they felt about the Facebook group that was created by the participants of READ/WRITE REALITY, an intensive workshop on Ubiquitous Publishing organised in Cava de' Tirreni, Oriana Percico replied that:

The community of Cava de' Tirreni is a good example of temporary community. [...] Well I don't have any problem with this, but focusing on an objective, a goal, we have shared time very precisely, we didn't force people. For example, they did autonomously this group on Facebook, but we didn't ask them to do this because our goals were and is still always to give them tools. In this time, we were sharing a big experience, we really wanted it. We were there for five days. We chose to live together 24 hours. In that time, it was my family, it was not my community. It was my house, it was my time. And we did all together, we did everything together with them. So I have no problem, it was very clear... I mean in that moment we were assembling and no problem in disassembling.

[...] I don't want to build something which is out of my force... my energy, my goal, I mean something bigger than me you know (she laughs). Not a problem at all. The real point was that we wanted to give them a tool, our goal is that they use this for their own things. It was a community based on time, a specific time, a specific goal.

What was interesting to observe during the fieldwork, both online and offline, was that AOS were simultaneously members of various communities, as artists, educators, academics and activists. They were moving along numerous lines, meeting, collaborating, sharing knowledge and tools and, at the same time, making connections between disparate communities. Salvatore's and Oriana's activity, thus, was instrumental to the emergence of new communities (and networks), even if their intention was not the formation of those communities.

Furtherfield was the nodal place, where all lines of this journey meet, assemble, perhaps, in due course even disassemble. It was in Furtherfield Gallery where I met Salvatore and Oriana from AOS – an event that signaled the beginning of my nomadic journey.

Postscript

The text finishes with an introduction. I would like to introduce the three main lines (knots) of my fieldwork. For this matter, I would let the three 'case studies' introduce themselves:

Furtherfield

'The collaborative work of artists, programmers, writers, activists, musicians and thinkers who explore beyond traditional reimits; dedicated to the creation, promotion, and criticism of adventurous digital/networked media art work for public viewing, experience and interaction. Developing imaginative strategies in a range of digital and terrestrial media contexts, Furtherfield develops global, contributory projects that facilitate art activity simultaneously on the Internet, the streets and public venues.' www.furtherfield.org

Art is Open Source (AOS)

Art is Open Source, an informal network promoting artistic, creative and critical practices in different parts of the world. www.artisopensource.net

Make-Shift

Make-Shift is a unique and intimate networked performance that speaks about the fragile connectivity of human and ecological relationships. Make-Shift is an ecologically aware house party with a difference. As well as experiencing the intimacy, viscerality and shared experience of a live performance event; local and online audiences participate in a call-and-response between people, landscape and culture to discuss the theme of 'disposability' in its broadest sense. www.make-shift.net

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DIWO: DO IT WITH OTHERS – NO ECOLOGY WITHOUT SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Ruth Catlow & Marc Garrett

The acceleration of technological development in contemporary society has a direct impact on our everyday lives as our behaviours and relationships are modified via our interactions with digital technology. As artists, we have adapted to the complexities of contemporary information and communication systems, initiating different forms of creative, network production. At the same time we live with and respond to concerns about anthropogenic climate change and the economic crisis. As we explore the possibilities of creative agency that digital networks and social media offer, we need to ask ourselves about the role of artists in the larger conversation. What part do we play in the evolving techno-consumerist landscape which is shown to play on our desire for intimacy and community while actually isolating us from each other (Turkle 2011). Commercial interests control our channels of communication through their interfaces, infrastructures and contracts. As Geert Lovink says 'We see social media further accelerating the McLifestyle, while at the same time presenting itself as a channel to relieve the tension piling up in our comfort prisons.' (2012: 44).

Many contemporary artists who take the networks of the digital information age as their medium, work directly with the hardware, algorithms and databases of digital networks themselves and the systems of power that engage them. Inspired by network metaphors and processes, they also craft new forms of intervention, collaboration, participation and interaction (between human and other living beings, systems and machines) in the development of the meaning and aesthetics of their work. This develops in them a sensitivity or alertness to the diverse, world-forming properties of the art-tech imaginary: material, social and political. By sharing their processes and tools with artists, and audiences alike they hack and reclaim the contexts in which culture is created.

This essay draws on programmes initiated by Furtherfield, an online community, co-founded by the authors in 1997. Furtherfield also runs a public gallery and social space in the heart of Finsbury Park, North London. The authors are both artists and curators who have worked with others in networks since the mid 90s, as the Internet developed as a public space you could publish to; a platform for creation, distribution, remix, critique and resistance.

Here we outline two Furtherfield programmes in order to reflect on the ways in which collaborative networked practices are especially suited to engage these questions. Firstly the *DIWO (Do It With Others)* series (since 2007) of Email Art and co-curation projects that explored how de-centralised, co-creation processes in digital networks could (at once) facilitate artistic collaboration and disrupt dominant and constricting art-world systems. Secondly the *Media Art Ecologies* programme (since 2009) which, in the context of economic and environmental collapse, sets out to contribute to the construction of alternative infrastructures and visions of prosperity. We aim to show how collaboration and the distribution of creative capital was modeled through *DIWO* and underpinned the development of a series of projects, exhibitions and interventions that explore what form an ecological art might take in the network age.

In common with many other network-aware artists the authors are both originators and participants in experimental platforms