Introduction: Is there an Ontology of the Digital?

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It might be argued that anthropology has come late to the question of whether there is an ontology of the digital. Although anthropological interest in digital technologies might be traced back at least as far as the early 1990s (Escobar 1994) and if taken to include the systems thinking of cybernetics, as far back as the 1960s (Bateson 1972), a corpus of full-length ethnographies that explicitly address the place of digital technologies in social relations has only really begun to appear in the last 15 years. The tendency of these studies, moreover, has been to rail against any essentialisation of digital technologies that suggests that they might contain their own onto-logics. Prompted primarily by the invention of the World Wide Web and the multifarious communicative and social possibilities that this information infrastructure provoked, recent ethnographies of digital technologies have returned time and again to the articulation of a revisionist argument against the claims that digital technologies have an inherent or unique quality to themselves. This has been most clearly articulated in anthropological critiques of the *virtuality* of digital technologies through ethnographic interventions that have aimed to show the all-too-human ways in which digital worlds are manipulated to human ends. Ethnographies of digital media use, from studies of online worlds (Boellstorff 2008; Malaby 2009; Nardi, 2010) to analyses of social media (Miller 2011; Miller and Sinanan 2014), studies of computer programmers (Downey1998), ethnographies of high-technology industries (Malaby 2009; English-Lueck 2002) and research on digitally embedded social movements (Coleman 2014), have repeatedly set out to return us to the creative ways in which people manipulate, reformulate, materialise and deconstruct a variety of digital formats with an unrelenting array of different ends in view. Ethnography has provided a reclaiming of culture from the reductions of technological determinism through a re-humanising descriptive move which has

largely rejected the question of whether the digital has an 'ontology', in favor of an attention to the mundane and multiple ways in which (digital) lives are lived.

Whilst we acknowledge that digital technologies do not inhabit some virtual realm that is apart from the everyday entanglements of life, the aim of this Theorising the Contemporary issue is to reopen the question of ontology for the purposes of pushing a critique of what we see as an appeal to an unproblematised humanism upon which the majority of ethnographies of digital technologies depend. We are intrigued, in particular, in the persistence of the signifier 'digital' which, however contested, multiplied, or analysed it might be, still seems to do the common-sense work of holding together a set of practices, techniques, technologies, ideas, ideals, promises and logics of the digital in a manner that we might usefully call 'ontological'. Rather than working against those that claim that digital technologies are simply the contingent and specific manifestations of varieties of human creativity, our aim in framing our enquiry with the notion of ontology is to open up the question of whether the digital has a 'reality' that is particular to itself, as a social and historical phenomenon.

Over the past decade, the social sciences and humanities have experienced an explosion of interest around the notion of ontology. Associated with this flurry of conceptual activity has been a number of interrelated and cross-disciplinary movements: a call to engage with objects as agential, and to attend ethically not just to the non-human, but also to the material world (Latour 1993; Haraway 2008; Bennett 2010); or the resurrection of the notion of reality through its refiguring as multiple, and a concomitant re-positioning regarding representational practices (Mol 2003; Bryant et al 2011; Henare et al 2007). Ontologically-minded theorisation in anthropology has unfolded in an environment where disciplinary cross-fertilisation has been rife.

But perhaps the hallmark of what has come to be known as 'the ontological turn' in social anthropology has been its focus on alterity as the key relational operator. If the ontological turn broadly speaking recasts the worlds of anthropology's interlocutors as multiple and ongoing ontological elaborations (rather than epistemological renderings of a single shared ontology), then any relations between these worlds emerge through, rather than despite, difference; or, in its most extreme formulation, radical ontological incommensurability (Viveiros de Castro 2004). This perspective has generated a healthy amount of ongoing and often heated debate (Laidlaw 2012; Bond and Bessire 2014; see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2014). However, as a move against ethnographic approaches that assume that we can simply apply our own categories of thought to other worlds, we find in the ontological turn a powerful means of reposing the question of what the task of a digital anthropology might be.

To ask if there is an ontology of the digital therefore does several things at once. It first and foremost dislocates the study of the digital from the study of culture as representation. That is to say, it is intended to provoke reflections on the digital as a dimension where socio-material realities are forged; and further, as a dimension which potentially challenges the binary on which the hybridity of the "socio-material" rests. Numerous studies of digital practices demonstrate the insufficiency of framing our analyses with real/virtual or concrete/abstract dualisms. To ask of ontology in this context is not only to ask about digital realities, but to ask what could subvert the dualisms which shape what we think of as real in the first place.

Secondly, the question is intended as a means to crystallise what we mean when we talk about the digital. To ask if there is an ontology of the digital is to ask if there are any conceptual co-ordinates or characteristics that hold across a range of vastly disparate empirical settings, from digital

archives of indigenous knowledge to genetic databases; from activist citizen science to Big Data mining. It is to ask whether the digital can function as analytic.

Thirdly, the question is intended to move us towards a more careful and detailed exploration of alterity and identity in settings characterised as digital. For example, in one of its most recent formulations, the notion of ontological difference has been posed not as between entities, but within them: "while the ontological turn in anthropology has made the study of ethnographic difference or 'alterity' one of its trademarks, it is really less interested in differences between things than *within* them: the politics of ontology is the question of how persons and things could alter from themselves" (Holbraad et al 2014). To think of difference as internal to digital devices or assemblages is to reframe the potential for transformation that they contain: the question is not how digital technologies are distinct from other forms of technology or other knowledge-practice, but rather if that distinctiveness *itself* resides in an inherent capacity to be distorted, re-configured and transformed - to be other than they are. In a context in which utopian and dystopian narratives of digital technologies are often vying for the same conceptual space and seem to offer little in between them, can this reflection on difference provide an alternative avenue to explore when grappling with the ambivalent political possibilities that digital technologies seem to offer?

And finally, to seriously pose the question of whether there is an ontology of the digital is to suggest that the answer might be "no". By keeping the conversation interdisciplinary, and by positioning the ontological separately from the digital (at least heuristically), the aim of this collection of papers is also to bring fresh challenges to, and different perspectives on, the 'ontological turn' in anthropology, as much as it is to bring novel insights for those studying digital technologies and assemblages.

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