

INFO 272. Qualitative Research Methods

Multi-Sited and Virtual Ethnography

Fall 2014

Selecting a 'Field Site'

Questions to ask:

- ❖ What about this research topic is spatial?
- ❖ Where can you position yourself as participant-observer? (logistics)
- ❖ Where is this social phenomenon carried out, practiced
- ❖ Where is it visible?
- ❖ Where is it contested?

- sometimes the project starts with no more than an intriguing 'site'
- sometimes with something less apparently sited, a topic, an issue, a phenomenon
-

Ethnography ala Malinowski (1922-1960s)



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Spatial Aspects of Field Work:

- ❖ fieldwork: the study of distant cultures through total immersion in particular sites, participant-observation
- ❖ assumed to take place in one distinct site ('the field')
- ❖ crossing boundary from outside to inside (becoming a quasi-member)

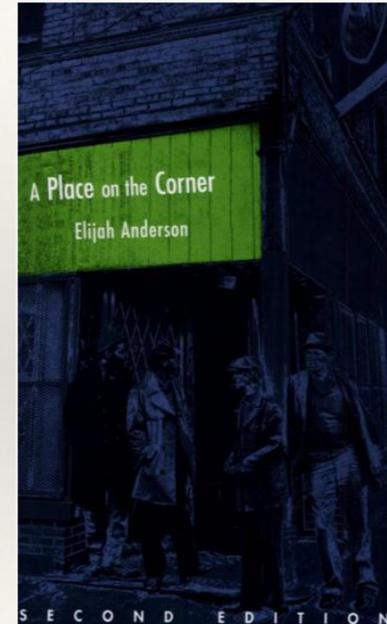
see Gupta and Ferguson on the 'assumption that the site = focus of the whole culture'

Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1997). Beyond Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. In A. Gupta & J. Ferguson (Eds.), (pp. 33-51). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Challenges: Urban Settings

Spatial Aspects of Field Work:

- ❖ complex, heterogeneous, overlapping cultures [Hannerz]
- ❖ the challenge of foregrounding”



Hannerz, Ulf (1992). Cultural Complexity: studies in the social organization of meaning — argues that culture diffuses unevenly and has an effect on individuals to varying degrees. Not a homogenous essence that all 'members' take up and reproduce in the same way. We are exposed (and to varying degrees socialized into) multiple cultures, live within points of cultural overlap and intersection

Anderson, Elijah (2003). A Place on the Corner

Challenges: The Spatially Ambiguous

- ❖ “cyberspace”
- ❖ transnational communities, diasporas
- ❖ global institutions (the UN)
- ❖ the mass media
- ❖ non-places (airports) [Augé]

Augé, Marc (1995) 'Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity' – discusses places of transience (motorway, airport, supermarket)

Challenges: Media and Comm Tech

- ❖ 'double articulation' [Silverstone] -- one can study the television (as a consumed object, it's place in the home, it's shape / size / style) and the television *program* (as window into and education about contemporary culture)
- ❖ Internet can be studied as both culture and as cultural artifact [Hine 2000]

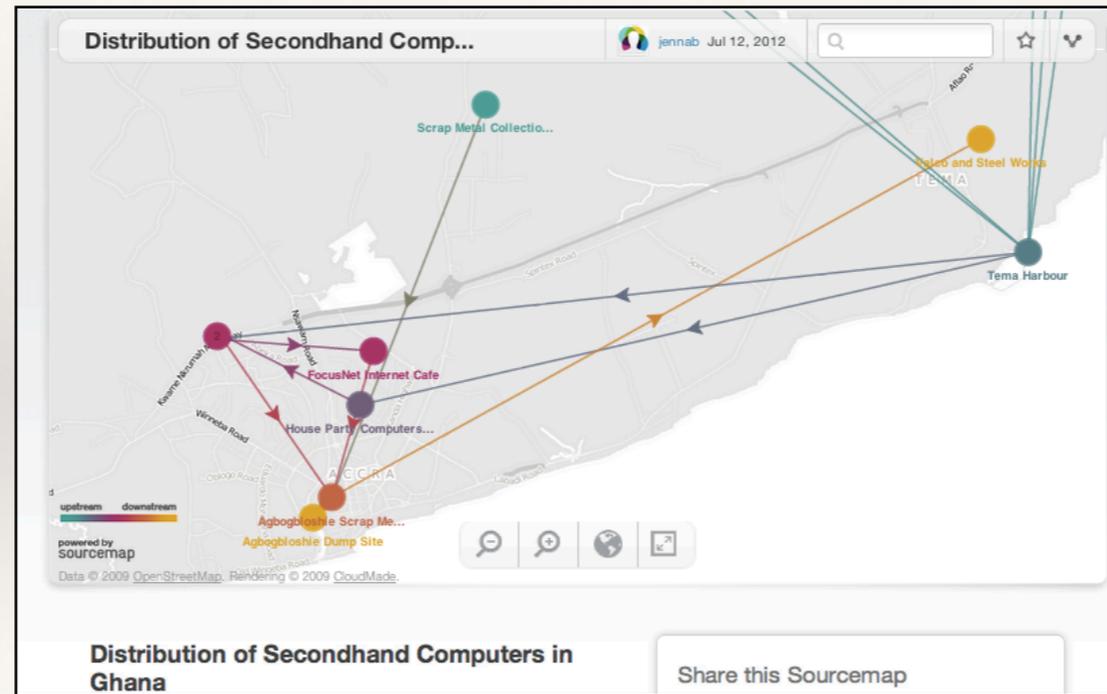
Silverstone, Roger (yr??) Consuming Technologies. Article, "Information and Communication Technologies and the Moral Economy of the Household"

Hine, Christine. (2000) Virtual Ethnography

Approaches: Multi-Sited Ethnography

- ❖ From ... isolated and untouched remote cultures...
- ❖ to...Studying the local as embedded in the global [Marcus and Fischer - 1986]...
- ❖ which evolves into...Studying the global system itself [Marcus - 1998]
- ❖ “follow the object” “follow the people” “follow the metaphor” to create coherence
- ❖ Logistics: negotiating access at multiple sites? Cost? Depth of involvement?

Approaches: Multi-Sited Ethnography



my experience trying to trace computers from the port to e-waste dumped in Agbogbloshie site in Accra

Approaches: Virtual Ethnography

- ❖ Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) research vs. Online Ethnographers — theory of “reduced social cues”
- ❖ Cyberspace – “profoundly anti-spatial... You cannot say where it is or describe its memorable shape and proportions... But you can find things in it without knowing where they are” [Mitchell 1996]
- ❖ Questioning the nature of ‘participation’

Approaches: Online + Offline

- ❖ Can you study someone online without studying them offline? (questions of authenticity) [Hine 2008]
- ❖ Is cyberspace a bounded and detached space?



Studying a Part of a Whole

- ❖ Selecting an 'entry point'
- ❖ How does the part relate to the whole?
- ❖ What position do you take within the whole and how do you justify that position?
- ❖ Some strategies:
 - ❖ Where is the research topic most *visible*?
 - ❖ Where is the research topic *contested*?

strategy for studying 'media rituals'

Research questions:

- ❖ what is the role of media in the legitimation of wider power structures and inequalities?
- ❖ how are media institutions and media people *thought about*? what are *our beliefs about media power* and how do they contribute to the legitimation of that power?



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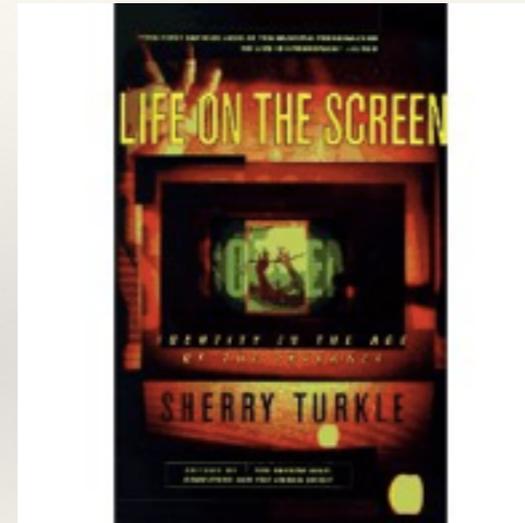
Method and data:

- ❖ **participant-observation**
 - ❖ leisure sites (Granada Studios Tour)
 - ❖ protest sites (live animal exports)
- ❖ **interviews**
- ❖ **media clippings about the protest**

studying 'Life On The Screen' [Turkle]

Research questions:

- ❖ how has the computer shaped our ways of thinking and feeling?
- ❖ how does a nascent 'culture of simulation' affect our ideas about mind, body, self and machine?
- ❖ how is the way we create and experience identity shifting?



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Method and data:

- ❖ **participant-observation**
 - ❖ in a virtual world (early text-based MUD)
- ❖ **clinical component**
 - ❖ offline, in-person interviews with participants

Ethnography Without Borders

- ❖ The field site is constructed (not discovered)
- ❖ studying a 'part' of the whole
- ❖ studying multiple sites
- ❖ studying movement



For Thursday

- ❖ For those of you who haven't already, send me your field notes!!!!
- ❖ Look over your classmates field notes – especially those on the same team