Pinging the Self: Echolocation as a Theory of Connection and Disconnection

Annette Markham, keynote lecture 1, September 27, 13:15 in the Humanities Theatre. Essay reprinted with permission from annettemarkham.com.

I think, therefore I am;
I speak, therefore I am;
I am perceived, therefore I am;
I am responded to, therefore I am.

(paraphrased from [my essay](#) on the politics, methods, and ethics of representation in online ethnography, 2005)

In early days of the Internet, Richard McKinnon remarked that it is no longer adequate to say "I think, therefore I am" (invoking Descartes) or even "I speak, therefore I am" (invoking the linguistic turn, generally). In the internet age, he said, the more appropriate phrase is "I am perceived, therefore I am." The symbolic interactionist in me pushed further to say that if we take the dialogic process seriously, the phrase should actually be: "I am responded to, therefore I am," whereby we give full attention to the continual dynamic of the relational self. The social negotiation of self is made more visible by the traces of texts, tweets, and emojis that evidence this dynamic. The computational aspect of this social construction process is highlighted– but perhaps made more mysterious– through the appearance of advertisements that are well targeted to our interests

Vulnerability in this epoch is being disconnected[1]. Disconnecting from what is perceived as a steady stream of identity pings leaves us bereft of the continual marking of boundaries that mark the edges of the Self. This ontology of echo-locating the Self through constant "call and response" can be summarized in the quote above. When we have no response, and our self is identified through the flow of responses, we can feel bereft, vulnerable, non-existent.

Let me back up to summarize a bit[2] of how I come to focus on disconnection as a way of getting closer to a key characteristic of digital existence.

In 1997, I finished an ethnographic study of users who described themselves as 'heavy users' of the internet. Based on my analysis of their everyday discourses, I developed a framework for thinking about everyday relations between humans and their (digital)(internet) technologies, which included three main categories of *tool*, *place*, and *way of being*. In 1996, it was easy to understand how people interpreted the internet as a "tool", extending the senses or limbs in prosthetic fashion. The conceptualization of the internet as "place" was likewise common, fostered not least by popular depictions of 'cyberspace' in fiction and the use of architectural sensibilities to design community interactions. One could enter distinctive places of the internet and experience a "sense

of presence." In my 1994-1997 study, very few experienced the internet as a "way of being," a term I chose to describe:

> *a transparent state wherein the self, information technology, everyday life, and other are vitally connected, co-existent. Technology does not hold a position as object outside the agency of the human. Rather, the categories are collapsed, to varying degrees. (Markham, 2003, p. 11)*

 It is now well understood that because digital technologies have become somewhat ubiquitous and banal, they have become both less visible and more influential. And as we rely more and more on them, they become a *way of being*. But what does this mean, separate from its categorization along some sort of spectrum from *tool* or *place* (externalized) to a *way of being* (naturalized)? How does the technical or digital function in the continual construction and negotiation of identity and selfhood?

We could say that the body (or the traditional (western) site of authenticity or reality) which is seen as separate from technology in both the tool and place frames, becomes seamlessly interwoven with the digital. At any and all points thereafter, the technological infrastructure must break down, be removed, or shift radically in order for it to be noticed. This could bring us to Haraway, Hayles, or other posthumanist/technofeminists, whose work over the years insists we have always been cyborgs.

But for me, the question is how the self in a digitally saturated society is negotiated through the *processes and elements of connectivity*. For me, the seemingly seamless 'always on' state of connectivity is, at the more granular level, a process of continual echolocation, in the way we might think of radar, whereby the outline of an object in space is determined by sending a steady stream of sound signals and listening to the quality of the echo.

At the micro-interactional level, we can see this constant radar pinging to find the self. As I have found in five years of ethnographic and phenomenological study of around 1,500 youth regarding their everyday digital media, this is not seen not, as expected, through the process of being connected (or swimming in water), but being *disconnected*. We know that disrupting the flow of affirmation and reaffirmation creates what in psychological terms we might label anxiety and cognitive dissonance, especially for youth. The fear of disconnection is sometimes simplified as FOMO, or fear of missing out. But in their poignant narratives, the vulnerability is more meaningful and disruptive[3].

> *"I keep reaching for my phone, even though I know it's not connected. I don't know why."*
> *"I just want people to know I'm out there, that I exist."*
> *"I'm so mad at myself. Why am I so obsessed with getting instant responses?"*

Being disconnected doesn't just cut off communication from others, it puts the body in doubt. This is not like removing one of our senses or having a limb ripped off. Rather, the body suddenly appears as a discrete, separate, and isolated object. Disconnecting can bring on a state of extreme vulnerability, then, since there's no continual Other with whom you're bouncing off continual information pings. Of course, one retains physical self/other interactions, but the core ontological delineation of Self is predicated on a continual differentiation through the continual call and response of echolocation.

These are early thoughts. I'm interested in pursuing this idea that in an era of constant connectivity and 'always on' or more importantly, 'always available' internet, mapping the body occurs as we receive feedback from continual flows of information. I'm also interested in whether or not the metaphor of ultrasound or radar might resonate.

Notes:
1. *I use this declarative phrase for provocation purposes only. I am aware and troubled by my focus here on vulnerability in what is essentially a privileged cycle of connectivity.*
2. *Sorry for all the glossing, I can provide sources on request.*
3. *The quotes are representative of a common pattern, but hardly evocative in this limited space, in hundreds of stories from youth, I get a sense of intense cognitive dissonance and profound anxiety around disconnecting.*

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Anthropology/Atmosphere/Anthropocene: Drones, Disruptive Justice, and the Disruption of the Earth

Adam Fish, keynote lecture 2, September 27, 15:15, in the Humanities Theatre

Drones personify the disruption discourse—a pitch by Silicon Valley, Shenzhen, and Madison Avenue that drones transform all that they touch: industry, art, culture, and politics. This disruption drone discourse has spread far and wide. Not only for start-ups and technology investors but also for humanitarians and activists, urban planners and scientists, drones are seen as ontological game changers that will usher in a new way of seeing, being, making money, and changing the world. This chapter analyses the history of atmospheric platforms in the discipline of anthropology, a discipline yet influenced by the disruptive drone discourse, and develops a theory of real disruption—human justice that disrupts the status quo and the disruption of the Earth's ecologies—as witnessed by drones.

It is true, seeing a subject from above provides a broader and more informative context; situating the subject within a bigger picture on Earth and in relation to other ecologies, technologies, and humanities. The application of aerial video and image making in anthropology has been rarely practiced and remains little understood. Many different technologies have been used in other epistemologies to give this "god view" of the Earth below: balloons, kites, helicopters, airplanes, satellites, and now unmanned aerial vehicles or drones. This chapter examines aerial methods in the history, present, and future of anthropology both as a method used by anthropologists and a cultural practice of research participants who use aerial systems to make politically-important maps and videos of transformed traditional or threatened landscapes. To establish the ground for this examination, four histories of ethnographic film and video will be brought together: participatory video production, activist video, image-based and participatory map-making, and the scant literature on aerial or atmospheric methods in anthropology. The use of new technologies such as drones by local communities is often encouraged by large international foundations so a critique of developmentalism in humanitarianism is necessary. These four research trajectories will be linked to a five-part typology of drones used in justice projects illustrated by case studies.

After creating this historiography of aerial methods in anthropology, the chapter will focus on drones as ontological entities. Any system consisting of mobile optics must be seen as both material objects suspended within an atmosphere governed by physics, as physicist Karen Barad would have it, and a phenomenological extension of the body as described by media theorist Marshall McLuhan. In this calculation, media studies scholar Jennifer Gabrys would consider the drone as emergent—something new is coming forth from a novel entanglement of technologies, geographies, sensors, and human senses. What that novelty is, however, is not merely a shift in the modes of production and consumption of visual images. Something more important is happening. The chapter will draw from the work of liberal philosopher John Rawls to typologize the drone as a semio-material technology of not only fair and *distributive* but also

disruptive justice wherein the positive, negative, and transformative consequences of new technologies are equally distributed. Five types of disruptive drone justice will be examined through historical and contemporary ethnographic case studies: social, ecological, information, health, and economic justice.

To conclude, the chapter will use the concept of *witnessing* from Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel to summarize what drones do in all five contexts, that is, the bearing witness from the air of the geological phase, the Anthropocene, a period of actually disruptive entanglements of technologies, ecologies, and humanities. While drones are pitched by its manufacturers and marketers as networking nodes in an internet of everything—the surveillance of people and nature and the computerization of the planet as described by media studies scholar Benjamin Bratton--it is disruptive justice and Anthropocenic disruptions of the Earth that are the actual, physical, and material disruptions witnessed by drones.

Adam Fish is cultural anthropologist, video producer, and senior lecturer in the Sociology Department at Lancaster University who investigates cultures of media production and digital engineering. He employs ethnographic, participatory, and creative methods to explore how political values are created, revisited, revised, rejected, or confirmed in relationship to labour with digital technologies: video, the internet, and newer platforms such as drones. His book *Technoliberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) describes his ethnographic research on the politics of internet video in Hollywood and Silicon Valley. His co-authored book *After the Internet* (Polity, 2017) reimagines the internet from the perspective of grassroots activists, citizens, and hackers on the margins of political and economic power. His co-authored book *Hacker States* (MIT Press, 2019) is about how state hacking and hacktivist prosecution impacts democracy.