

Chapter 7

(De)Facing Alterity in the Digital Age

“The Real Problem” in the Social Interaction of Digital Natives

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This chapter examines research on students abroad who deploy digital communication technologies and reflects on two related theoretical problems located in such work: the question of alterity and the nature of the real in the digital age. I locate these remarks as a reflection on the purposes, procedures and products of the research carried out by the 2012–2014 Harmonia Grant project, “Negotiating Cultural Differences in the Digital Communication Era” at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, a two-year quantitative and qualitative research project on the communicative interaction of international university students studying abroad, documented in the collection *Digital Diversities: Social Media and Intercultural Experience* (Robson and Zachara 2014). This chapter begins by asking about the philosophical assumptions of our research, the implications of our questions and the concepts being mobilized by the study.¹ My goal in these remarks is less to interpret the data set that has been gathered but rather, to complicate the very premises we deploy in framing research of this type. I want, in the most positive way, to make our work suspect [from the Latin sub- + *specere*] to look at from below, from underneath, from the foundation, as it were, so that in making our work suspect, we can trace in the project, the underlying assumptions that shape and in many ways determine the meaning and significance of our study. Specifically, I interrogate three areas for questioning; all three are interdependent and implicate each other at a fundamental level. They are: (1) the use of the term *digital natives*, (2) the limits of qualitative methodology in studying digital natives, and (3) the concepts of the real and the Other deployed by digital natives.

1. CONSIDERING DIGITAL NATIVES

The first is the seemingly self-evident terminology describing our subject group: digital natives. What does this term actually mean? We use it effortlessly to indicate some qualities of the interview subjects. But who exactly are digital natives? Who counts as a digital native? Whence this term? And perhaps most importantly, what are the consequences of deploying a marketing term with a distinct colonial and imperial legacy? How does the implicit anthropological formation of the object of study determine and shape that study even before it begins? As a Cultural Studies scholar, I am deeply suspect of framing a research subject in the language of a marketing scheme. And quite frankly, even more worried about adopting the colonialism of an anthropological gesture toward the “native population” of cyberspace, re-deploying this nineteenth-century term devoid of its political and imperial context.

When positing or deploying a “native identity” formation such as digital natives, it might behoove us to consider extant critiques of ethnic identity scholarship. “Images ... [of ethnicity] ... purveyed by the mass media are neither just the compilation of folk ideas nor the popularization of scholarly findings, but also reflections of the needs of capital and the state. This material link is most easily seen in the advertising media, which not only describe products but also manipulate images of women, men, and children so as to define them as individuals needing those commodities” (di Leonardo 1984, 178). We see that material link in the ways the term *digital natives* has been deployed as a marketing category, with the proliferation of hundreds of articles bearing titles such as “Digital Natives: Six Ways Marketers Can Engage Millennials” (Sparks 2013). The term *digital natives*—despite its questionable descriptive capabilities regarding an entire global generation—is fundamentally a marketing category, aimed at selling even more effectively to the consumers who have a personal relationship with Beanie Babies, Tamagotchi and Slap bracelets (Sparks 2013). Conversations in boardrooms and blogs resonate with seminars such as “Cracking Today’s Digital Natives: 5 Things to Keep in Mind When Marketing to Millennials” found on the Word of Mouth Marketing Association website which advises, “More than any other generation, millennials value relationships with brands that are authentic and have a one-on-one feel” (Jordan 2013). We need to be skeptical and wary of mobilizing marketing categories representative of what Naomi Klein (2000) calls

the triumph of identity marketing as descriptors for academic research. Digital natives are in fact, the prized target of so-called “cool hunters,” scholars with academic training in the social sciences and humanities, particular anthropology, hired to take on “ethnographic field work” on the demographics of coolness for corporate purposes (Klein 2000).

Moving from marketing to the field of higher education, educational theorist and game designer Marc Prensky claims credit for popularizing the term *digital native* in his article, “Digital Natives Digital Immigrants.”²²

What should we call these “new” students of today? Some refer to them as the N-[for Net]-gen or D-[for digital]-gen. But the most useful designation I have found for them is Digital Natives. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.

So what does that make the rest of us? Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are, and always will be compared to them, Digital Immigrants. (Prensky 2001, 1)

While asking some crucial questions about the pedagogical methods used to engage students growing up in a different world from many of their teachers, he nonetheless deploys a deeply problematic quasi-anthropological formation to designate generational differences of technological enculturation, using terms such as the “digital immigrant accent.” Prensky’s tone (2001) is earnest because he is addressing the important question of twenty-first-century learning styles and the efficacy of outdated pedagogies. However, once again, in service of that serious question he unproblematically deploys an ethnocentric anthropological formulation that—in its wildfire acceptance, especially in popular media—has shaped our assumptions about these “digital natives.” He pleads his case:

It’s very serious, because the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language. This is obvious to the Digital Natives—school often feels pretty much as if we’ve brought in a population of heavily accented, unintelligible foreigners to lecture them. They

often can't understand what the Immigrants are saying. What does "dial" a number mean, anyway? (Prensky 2001, 2)

While his educational and pedagogical concerns may be quite valid, his plea for the pedagogy of gaming is in fact buried in the baggage of colonial and nativist discourse that shapes claims made about the "new generation."

On the most practical level, critics of the term have noted it suggests a familiarity with technology that not all children have, effectively ignoring the complex political economic contexts within which one has access to technology and the simple facts of unequal access globally (Holton 2010; Jones et al. 2010; Kennedy et al. 2010; Jones and Shao 2011; McKenzie 2013). Global statistics concerning the digital divide estimate that perhaps merely 8–10 per cent of the world's population have Internet access.

Writing in the *British Journal of Education Technology* in 2008, a group of academics led by Sue Bennett of the University of Wollongong set out to debunk the whole idea of digital natives, arguing that there may be "as much variation within the digital native generation as between the generations." They caution that the idea of a new generation that learns in a different way might actually be counterproductive in education, because such sweeping generalisations "fail to recognise cognitive differences in young people of different ages, and variation within age groups." (*Economist* 2010)

Although the *Harmonia* study interviewed international students from all continents and eight languages, one cannot presume that this group is therefore globally representative. In fact, while several of the students in the sample come from developing regions, these young people are not representative of the global population. In fact, "international students comprise a highly populated sojourning group with some specific characteristics that make their experience different from other migrating groups such as guest workers or refugees" (Berry and Sam 1997, 92). As Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton point out, "They are a more homogenous group in that they are typically young and well educated. In general, they arrive in the host country pre-trained in the host language and prepared to adjust to the host culture" (Berry and Sam 1997, 92). Because of their special status, one much more privileged than many migrants, refugees, and guest workers, "keeping

in touch with their own culture and society and maintaining existing relationships may be more of a need for student groups, compared to more permanently settled and established groups such as ethnic groups or immigrants” (Berry et al. 1989, 135–186). The research data completely supports these earlier studies with all but one student reporting their primary use of computer-mediated communication is contacting friends and family “back home.” The survey respondents quite clearly echo the existing research in the field, in that they pointed out not only the primary function of technology for contacting home but also their lack of using that exact same technology (i.e., Facebook) for contacting people in the host country. As a foreign student studying in Poland commented, “I rarely use it to keep in touch with friends here in Cracow.” When considering a study of international university students abroad, one might presume that their digital interactions might engage with alterity in some form. The Harmonia study suggests that this is *not* the case. Instead of engaging with “the Other” through computer-mediated communication, it seems that our sample used that technology primarily to engage with the same, the familiar and the comfortable.

A second interesting feature of the relative privilege of the group is the almost universal practice in our sample of posting travel photos. While the respondents varied in the level of usage and opinions about digital technologies, almost all of them reported engaging in one practice: posting travel photos. Perhaps the ultimate visual icon of modern cosmopolitan identity, few artifacts measure up—in both ontological weight and sheer surface gloss—to the photograph. Susan Sontag (1973, 71) claimed that, “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.” Rather than assimilating or enculturating, it seems that a predominant digital practice of international students is the reproduction of the tourist gaze and its attendant practices. What Urry and Larson (2001) call “the tourist gaze” is a mode of seeing and representation that regulates the relationship with the tourist environment, demarcating the Other and identifying the out-of-the-ordinary. It elucidates the relationship between tourism and embodiment and elaborates on the connections between mobility as a mark of modern and postmodern experience and the attraction of tourism as a lifestyle choice.

The effects of tourism on “natives,” particularly the commoditization of culture, are increasingly subject to study. From the early scholarship

of Veblen (2009) on the leisure class to contemporary analyses of tourism, scholars have asked about the economic and imperialist context of travel extending their analyses to the commodification of “exotic” locales by foreign tourists (Enloe 2000). We might want to explore how digital natives in their touristic practices construct their participation in modernity and their status as modern subjects on Facebook. “To be a tourist is one of the characteristics of ‘modern’ experience. Not to ‘go away’; is like not possessing a car or a nice house. It has become a marker of status on modern societies” (Urry and Larsen 2001, 3). Numerous texts have explored how “the camera and the tourism are two of the uniquely modern ways of defining reality” (Horne 1984, 21). In fact, the concept of the gaze, as a constitutive part of modernity highlights “that looking is a learned ability and the pure and innocent eye is a myth” (Urry and Larsen 2001, 1). The classifications made by the tourist gaze occur within an economy of relations, producing what Said called “imaginative geographies” (Said 1995, 49–73).

Digital photography has expanded the role of the tourist gaze in the space of social media. “Users of Facebook have uploaded more than 10 billion photographs, with the number increasing by an astonishing 700 million each month” (Urry and Larsen 2001, 185). Most of the research sample respondents not only post travel photos as a matter of course, but almost all of them mention posting landscape photographs. “The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary” (Urry and Larsen 2001, 3). The almost universal practice of posting touristic landscape photos in the Harmonia sample points to not only the privileged status of international students as modern subjects but reinforces the questions raised about mobility, postmodernity, representation and the legacies of colonialism.

Indeed, we might ask, following bell hooks (1992), whether or not digital technologies are deployed not to enable an encounter with Alterity, but rather to consume alterity as a kind of manageable commodity. In her oft-quoted essay, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” hooks (1992, 21) notes that “The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” The students in the

Harmonia survey posted photos, especially on Facebook, but did not use that format to actually interact with local people. Instead, they posted touristic markers, icons of “otherness” that indicated their encounter with the desired Other—“Look! I’ve seen the Other”—as a “way to make themselves over,” to leave behind “innocence and enter the world of experience” (23). Deploying a series of markers meant to indicate an exotic locale, ethnic otherness, and a more worldly posture, the Facebook poster indicates that they are now on the world stage. But “the acknowledged Other must assume recognizable form,” as hooks (23) reminds us. Imperialist nostalgia operates through a tourist gaze framed around fantasies of the primitive, the “ethnic,” the “authentic” and the Other.

We might ask, following Sontag, whether digital natives via their photo posting practices are indeed enacting a “chronic voyeuristic relation” to the world around them. Or perhaps, following Roland Barthes (1981), we might examine photography’s tendency to naturalize highly structured meanings. In the texts of *Mythologies*, Barthes (2009) explores Myth (including photographic images) as a type of speech; delimiting how the process of mythologization brings a truth claim to socially constructed notions, narratives, and assumptions. The rhetorical power of photography, made in the now-moment by digital photography and instantaneous posting, is grounded in the ability to naturalize, to make innocent its cultural messages and connotations. “Photographs appear to be not statements about the world but pieces of it, even miniature slices of reality, without revealing its constructed nature or its ideological content” (Urry and Larsen 2001, 168). The claim made upon the real made by photography might prove a most fruitful path for analyses of social media data in that it connects these digital practices directly to the question of the real (to which I will turn in Section 3).

While we must remain cautious about the effectiveness of categorization in the term *digital native*, we need also to consider the epistemological assumptions made about that group. As poster drkhturner notes on the Digital Natives debate site of discusscafe (2013), “If digital natives are people who were immersed in particular digital technologies during their formative years, then yes, they exist. The challenge is that they may see these same technologies as “natural”—and that they may not be as skilled, self-aware, or critical in their use of the technologies as we might assume they would be.” In other words, even if the category of digital natives is valid, it does not follow that said digital natives

have a privileged understanding of technology, the parameters of which have been naturalized. This observation leads to my comments about the relationship of digital natives to the concept of the real, to which I turn in Section 3.

There are a flood of debates, discussions, wikis, and blogs devoted to the argument about digital natives. However, in those numerous sites, what is debated is whether or not the term is valid and whether or not it can be used to describe an entire generation unproblematically. While this is a worthwhile inquiry, it seems to me that the critiques miss something more fundamental: namely, what does it mean to describe an entire generation in terminology derived from colonialism? To redeploy in a supposed post-racial era, the nomenclature of natives and immigrants? Micaela di Leonardo's (1998, 38) critique of the anthropological stance of going native notes, "The Other is terminally Orientalized—a proven inferior who must be forced to cooperate in studying his or her own present or past, an exotic individual who, in the aggregate, can provide the *mise-en-scène* for an infinite series of dramas of Western selfhood. Anthropologists participate in this 'colonial chic' or imperialist nostalgia."

On this point, previous scholarship examines the link between formulations of cyberspace as the new frontier and the colonial project. Following Heidegger, we observe that philosophical terminology cannot be divorced from the history of the use of that terminology, and thus we cannot avoid confronting questions of language and meaning.

First, metaphors are always more than mere words. They are mechanisms of real social and political hegemony that have the capacity to determine the current and future shape of what they merely seem to designate. As a result of this, current and future configurations of cyberspace will be determined not only through innovations in hardware and software, but also, and perhaps more so, through the various metaphors that have been circulated and are employed to describe their significance. ... Because cyberspace has already been submitted to a kind of colonization through the metaphors of the new world and the electronic frontier, its decolonization is a task that, if it ever transpires, must take place in and by engaging the material and legacy of these particular rhetorical configurations. (Gunkel 2001, 51)

In the case of the term *digital natives*, who appear in all research to represent a privileged sample of education and mobility, it is particularly

notable that this term appears in the supposedly post-racial era where some commentators have wondered why first world scholars have jettisoned the concept of subjectivity at precisely the moment when third world and native peoples were claiming it. This requires, at the very least, the decolonization of our categories of research.

2. ON THEORY AND METHOD: QUALITATIVE STUDY AND SELF-REPORTING

The attendant problem of studying the “native population” of digital culture is the corollary assumption that the natives have a privileged, that is to say unmediated access to their own conditions of existence. This presumption leads us to question the underlying principles embedded in any qualitative methodology, especially those that involve self-reporting. This is not to say that the research is not useful or productive, nor is it to reject that methodology. But I want to take the step back through a consideration of the limitations and complications of certain implicit theoretical moves so as to clarify and qualify what it is we can and cannot claim. As David Gunkel (2014) points out, self-reporting has the distinct advantage that it can, unlike any other form of data collection, provide access to participant’s thoughts, motivations, emotions, and gratifications. The main disadvantage, of course, has to do with the validity of reported data. This not only involves deception on the part of participants (deliberate or otherwise) but also “leading questions” from the interviewers, which can influence how one responds. Furthermore, self-reporting is based on an essentially modernist assumption that subjects are transparent to themselves, know what they do, and can reasonably explain why they do it (Gunkel 2014, 139). This presumed self-transparent subject is further weighted with assumptions about the proximity of digital natives to their native realm. The modernist view of the subject translates directly into/is based upon the modernist, instrumentalist view of the real.

The term *digital native* seems to presume some more immediate, more automatic, perhaps more intuitive understanding of technology. Our subjects, we presume, are somehow native inhabitants of digital culture. Further, it is generally presumed that this immediacy must mean a more sophisticated understanding of how that technology works in the world and what that means. My analysis claims

that no such superior understanding of the virtual is demonstrated by digital natives, who deploy the very same rhetorical and conceptual frameworks that dominate mainstream commentary, academic studies of communication, and the viewpoints of non-digital natives. Indeed, I want to argue that digital natives express views of the virtual that are closely aligned with commentators and philosophers from ancient through modern times—all of whom predate modern computing. In short, digital natives seem to have no advantage or privileged understanding of the metaphysics underlying the technology with which they have greater familiarity.

That interrogation of the limits of methodology points toward an even more fundamental formulation and the third concept I want to examine: the modernist, instrumentalist view of the technology that animates our interview subjects connects directly to the modernist view of the real underlying their assertions. Our data can tell us about the behaviors and practices of international students in online space, but we cannot—via qualitative interviews, no matter how rich—make claims about the nature of real social interaction as opposed to virtual interaction. Our subjects do, however, make those claims as a matter of course. What we can learn from them is precisely how their rhetoric of the real informs their understanding of their own actions online and offline and furthermore point to the seeming hegemony of that philosophical concept.

3. CONCERNING THE REAL

What is clear from the Harmonia data is that digital natives certainly mobilize the language and rhetoric of the real; in fact, several of them comment on the difference between real and virtual life as though this was a self-evident distinction. This is very informative, not because they are “reporting on” the real/virtual opposition, but because it is an organizing concept deployed by almost everyone in the interviews. We might argue that digital natives have a profound investment in the Platonic metaphysics of reality because while virtually all subjects responded by mobilizing the rhetoric of the real at some point in their interview, the interview questions never used that language. Even presuming a caution on the part of our study against leading the subjects to such comments, they emerged seemingly unbidden.

First, everything depends on how we define and operationalize the concept of the real. Even though online role playing games, social networks, and other forms of avatar-based CMC are often considered to be merely a matter of entertainment, they are involved in serious debates about and meditations on fundamental aspects of metaphysics. And in these situations there appears to be, as there are in many facets of computing, a default setting. This default has been programmed and is controlled by Platonism, which institutes a distinction between the real thing and its phenomenal appearances. In computer-mediated interaction, like online role-playing games and immersive social environments, this Platonic decision is particularly manifest in the discussions and debates surrounding avatar identity and the seemingly indisputable fact that what appears in the space of the virtual world are manipulated representations of real human users, who may themselves be entire different from how they appear in the computer-generated environment. As long as our research endeavors remain within and proceed according to this Platonic formulation, which as a default setting is often operative without having to select or specify it, we already know what questions matter, what evidence will count as appropriate, and what outcomes will be acceptable. (Gunkel 2010, 127)

I want to ask whether digital natives have even begun to problematize the notion of the real—firmly in place since Plato and through Descartes—that animates many of their conclusions and observations. Digital natives—whoever they may be and however tech savvy—don't seem to have problematized the underlying metaphysical concepts that the virtual world might have or should have called into question. The students in our sample may be “digital natives” but they have roughly the same theoretical perspective on the virtual world as Descartes, exhibiting and deploying what might be called Descartes 2.0 (Gunkel and Hetzel Gunkel 2009, 104–127).

I will argue that digital natives have almost no advantage in interrupting or questioning the parameters of reality presumed by rationalist or operationalist concepts of technology. While the *Harmonia* survey population is quite young (average age of 25.6), they nonetheless embody varying ancient and medieval notions about technology and metaphysics, with one participant claiming a neo-luddite view that, “A world without an Internet would be better” because computer-mediated technologies are “artificial and superficial.” In other words, the underlying concept of the real being mobilized by these young people is one straight from Platonic metaphysics where the real is

coextant with an originary entity and all representations are removed to varying degrees from the source. Artifice or superifice is presumed to be derivative, and thus, inauthentic. It is fascinating to see the Platonic schema of appearances and reality mobilized by twenty-first century digital natives, who—following Plato, in a reading straight from Book 10 of *Republic*—worry about the inauthenticity of appearances in the digital realm. As one interviewee noted, “People are not being real on Facebook.” As Boellstorf (2008, 119) points out, “There is a gap between virtual and actual self ... and a broadly shared cultural assumption that virtual selfhood is not identical to actual selfhood.” What our respondent seems to be suggesting by commenting that “people are not being real on Facebook” is that new technologies allow for a performance that should be suspect. What this doesn’t take into account, of course, is whether or not subjectivity is always already a performative.

While most all of the respondents regularly use computer-mediated communication, most of them find it suspicious and possibly lacking in metaphysical authenticity. One student commented that he/she prefers “pre-Internet experience” and yet another, “I very much prefer my social interactions with people before Facebook. Or even phone.” The dual suspicion of Facebook and the telephone is very telling. A quick glance at the history of technology reminds us that the new invention of the telephone was met with precisely the same rhetorical critiques now being leveled at CMCs. In fact, the phone was presumed to create the possibility for deception in social interactions, since you could not see the person you were talking to. An historical perspective on the fear of emergent technologies is very informative for contextualizing digital culture. “With the advent of the telephone and other new media came relatively sudden and largely unanticipated possibilities of mixing heterogeneous social worlds—a useful opportunity for some, a dreadful intrusion for others. New media took social risks by permitting outsiders to cross boundaries of race, gender and class without penalty” (Marvin 1988, 107). In short, the telephone as a new media form proposed the crossing of socially established boundaries of class, race, gender and nation, such that the “wrong” kind of person just might call you on the phone. And this threat is very much the same threat implied in the concern over cyber communication where you might not know exactly whom you’re talking to. On one level, technophobia is a fear of miscegenation. “The telephone and other new media introduced

a permeable boundary at the vital center of class and family, where innovative experiments could take place in all social relations, from crime to courtship” (Marvin 1988, 108). How strange it is that the social upheaval of the telephone mirrors almost exactly the social upheavals linked to the Internet, in particular, worries about social relations from “crime to courtship,” in our time, cybercrime and online dating. The social fears around these new developments produced social policies attempting to limit “illegitimate” access to telephones (Marvin 1988, 104–105). Even more immediately, the fear of new technologies is so powerful that our very well-being and even sanity is said to be at stake. Newspaper accounts in the 1880s and 1890s credit the telephone with causing insanity, in one case reporting “that the telephone had driven a Cincinnati citizen insane” (Marvin 1988, 187).

This concern over the “reality” of the interlocutor was applied to telephone conversation and now Internet avatars using almost the exact same language and metaphysics. This fear of deceptive interaction privileges the face-to-face as the only—or at least, most authentic—means of human communication. This, too, is directly reflective of the Platonic schema of the *Phaedrus* which famously poses the new technology of writing (seen as an inferior, and thus, inaccurate representation of speech) as a threat to the unity and authenticity of the voice (Plato 1987). As Walter Ong (1982, 79) notes, “Most persons are surprised, and many distressed, to learn that essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (274–277) and in the Seventh Letter against writing.”

Once again our digital natives seem to have bought into Platonic metaphysics wholesale—at least when it comes to their assessment of technology. This is not particularly odd or unexpected, for as Heidegger certainly reminds, our very understanding of the question concerning technology emerges from the Platonic explication of *techne*. “Plato was thinking of writing as an external, alien technology, as many people today think of the computer. Because we have by today so deeply interiorized writing, made it so much a part of ourselves, as Plato’s age had not yet made it fully a part of itself (Havelock 1963, 20–60), we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology as we commonly assume printing and the computer to be” (Ong 1982, 81). The dangers attributed to that technological invention—perhaps one of the most world-changing technological revolutions—are the template by which digital technologies are framed, understood and articulated.

This operationalist view of technology, condemning technology to either the status of a mere tool or in a more morally weighted view, the means of communicative deception, stems from a fundamentally problematic definition of communication itself, one that until only recently had gone uninterrogated even—and perhaps especially—within the field of Communication Studies (Carey 1992, Chang 1996, Gunkel 2001). There is simply no way that these presumptions of communication can remain undisturbed after phenomenology and post-structuralism. The presumption of the dominant sender-receiver model of communication depends on the notion of the self-aware, self-present subject. As Briankle Chang (1996, 181) explains, such an understanding of the communicative subject is a theoretical fiction, a Cartesian-based subject “that misses the fact that individuals are constituted as functioning communicators only insofar as they participate in communication, only insofar as they are positioned as sender or receiver differentially according to the medium and the context of a particular communicative event.”

An important consequence factoring in this vital critique of communication theory is that it actually attends, most seriously, to the face-to-face that our interview subjects seem to want to privilege, because it understands the communicative context and the effect of the other—in a Levinasian sense—as the *a priori* foundation for communicative interaction. What the contemporary communicative critique offers is the possibility of restoring the face-to-face to a genuine rather than fictional function. It would be one constitutive event of communication among others instead of *the* constitutive event. This would allow for a kind of Levinasian reading in that it understands the communicative context and the effect of the other as prior to any kind of messaging. There is no *a priori* self-possessed subject totality, pre-given and decontextualized, but rather an addresser who is first addressed by the other. Michel Foucault (1981, 48–78) observes that the image of communication as infinite, free exchange of discourse represents one of the “great myths of European culture.” Heidegger’s *Being and Time* problematized these assumptions, which were lodged in a prior concept of presence. “Communication is never anything like a conveying of experiences, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another. *Dasein*-with is already essentially manifest in a co-state-of-mind and co-understanding” (Heidegger 1962, 205).

Several of the interview subjects in the Negotiating Cultural Differences study commented that while they use, enjoy, and waste time on Facebook—with some reporting usage “all day,” “24/7,” and “all the time”—they nonetheless accord it an inferior metaphysical status, commenting that it is “less personal than face-to-face” communication. One interview subject was asked about how digital media helps with intercultural communication and was careful to clarify, “I think the most important for me is contact live, face-to-face.” This fantasy of an unmediated communicative act is just that, fantastic. Our respondents presume that whatever communicative digital practices they embody or especially, avoid are in some way inferior, less direct, and more “mediated” than the face-to-face.

Within the study data, it was extremely uncommon for respondents to complicate this metaphysics of the real, with only one digital native commenting, “I think our online social life is an important part of daily life. Not a replacement for real life but another dimension of it.” This was perhaps the only incursion in the entire sample even remotely problematizing the notion of the real. The real problem (for our respondents as well as our research) is not that investigators of computer-mediated social interaction have used one theory of the real or another. The problem is that researchers have more often than not utilized theory without explicitly recognizing which one or considering why one comes to be employed as opposed to another.

The international students in the Harmonia study—representing many languages and cultures—seem to indicate that global youth culture is certainly homogenous enough to reproduce a specific metaphysical understanding of the real that is not specific to native country or native language, but remains firmly lodged in a Western, metaphysical conceptual nexus operationalized in our formation and understanding of technology’s function. Those same conceptual parameters traced out in Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology” (1977) seem to apply to this global sample. Why would a diverse international group all mobilize a singular conceptual formation? The predominance of a Platonic metaphysical formulation is not surprising in a group of international students who hail from around the globe when one looks at the existing research on international students. That brings us full circle back to the issue of privilege *vis a vis* the relative status of international students with respect to other global peoples on the move, for example, migrant workers, refugees, and so on. The digital natives of the

Harmonia sample are relatively well educated and thus, not representative of global diversity of position and status. They are representative, however, of the ubiquitous naturalization of this specific formation of the concept of technology.

Unlike recent scholarship on virtuality that complicates this metaphysical inheritance, the students in the Harmonia sample quite clearly mobilized a single set of assumptions about the nature of the real. For contemporary theorists such as Žižek, “The real is already a virtual construct, and the difference between the real and the virtual turns out to be much more complicated and interesting” (Gunkel 2010, 46). As much of that recent scholarship points out, “It is not that virtual worlds borrowed assumptions from real life: virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our ‘real’ lives have been ‘virtual’ all along” (Boellstorff 2008, 5). (See also Baudrillard 1983; Taylor 1987; Žižek 2006; Gunkel 2007). In his essay on the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Žižek (2002, 240) asks about the pervasive nature of this belief, replayed over and again in our entertainment narratives. Whether it be *The Matrix* or *The Truman Show* (1998), there is a persistent, almost pre-modern notion that we are arriving at the end of the “real” universe. In our consumerist paradise, we begin to suspect that our world is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince us that we live in a real world.

As Žižek points out, this is ideology at its purest. He asks, “What if ideology resides in the very belief that outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some ‘true reality’ to be entered?” (Žižek 2002, 240). The nearly universal responses of the digital natives in the Harmonia study indicate that they share this vision; they must, therefore, comment upon and warn against the inauthenticity and fakeness of their own digital practices. With Žižek, I would then argue that their protests are mobilized so as to mark off the fake, their move to seemingly break out of ideology is the resumption of ideology at its purest. Why are the students in our study frantically reminding us of the un-reality of their own practices? I worry about the hegemony of common sense, a shared belief that renders digital behavior as suspect. “Contemporary experience again and again confronts us with situations in which we are compelled to take note of how our sense of reality and normal attitude toward it is grounded in a symbolic fiction,” what Žižek calls “the big Other” (Žižek 2002, 249). Our deployment of “the real” via frantic attempts to discount our digital practices attempts to overdetermine the Other. “And is the struggle for hegemony not precisely the

struggle for how this zero institution will be overdetermined, colored by some particular signification?" (Žižek 2002, 253). Žižek (2002, 246) states that the conservative view of reality ultimately put forth by *The Matrix* is "not radical enough." "The real is not the 'true reality' behind the virtual simulation, but the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency" (246). The (ultimately conservative) thesis of *The Matrix* is, according to Žižek, that there has to be a Matrix, because things are not right. The big Other is "externalized in the really existing Mega-Computer"; thus, "the problem with the film is that it is not "crazy" enough, because it supposes another "real" reality behind our everyday reality sustained by the Matrix" (Žižek 2002, 245). This recuperative vision, a kind of paranoia about the real is precisely displayed by the respondents in the Harmonia study, who insist, again and again, that their virtual selves are not real. The effort to continually discount the fakery of our own digital practices is an effort to overdetermine the place and meaning of the inconsistency of the real, to domesticate the Other, to reign in any attempt by Alterity to break through.

It is genuinely fascinating to report from our data that so-called digital natives make frequent use of social practices of digital communication which they simultaneously suspect, according those practices less authenticity and even less reality. This betrays the struggle over the real and our dis-ease with Alterity. It is absolutely interesting that in the context of our research, our so-called native informants know just as little about the territory as we do.

NOTES

1. The research project, "Negotiating Cultural Differences in the Digital Communication Era," was sponsored by the Harmonia Grant of the Polish National Science Center/*Narodowe Centrum Nauki*. The research team consisted of Dr. Garry Robson, Dr. Małgorzata Zachara, Dr. Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska (Jagiellonian University, Poland), Dr. David Gunkel (Northern Illinois University, USA), and Dr. Ann Hetzel Gunkel (Columbia College Chicago, USA). A summary of the research project is provided by Gunkel (2014). Findings from the project as well as papers selected from the resulting academic conference are published in Robson and Zachara (2014).

2. In his blog, Marc Prensky (2006) qualifies his claim to originating the term Digital Natives: "Bottom line: I am the person who should get the credit

for popularizing—not for being the “first to think up,”—the native/immigrant distinction, and I should get credit as well, until an earlier citation arises, for adding the descriptor “digital.” This is, of course, somewhat like, as Jerry Michalski points out, Marconi getting credit for the radio that Tesla thought up first, or Bell for the telephone thought up first by Elisha Grey and Lars Ericsson.”

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