GRANT KIEN

# Global Technography

## Ethnography in the Age of Mobility

INTRODUCTION

# Mobility, Being, Global Network

This book develops and exemplifies an ethnographic methodology I am calling Global Technography.[1] I was inspired to innovate this methodology in due course while exploring the broad social phenomenon of mobility in the context of global network, media, and everyday cultural performances in which human actors and media technologies interact to produce the meaningful encounters that we know as our life experiences. Finding the tradition of conceptually demarcating and enclosing a space designated as the ethnographic field to be untenable in documenting how mobility is actually experienced in everyday life, I instead work with the notion of momentary spatialization as a means of finding and defining a physical location for observation. In addition to this methodological innovation, two further aspirations have driven this work forward. First, I offer an example of how sociotechno researchers, scholars in science and technology studies, philosophers of technology, and qualitative researchers can escape the traditional interactionist approach to technology that treats devices and machinery as dead props. Rather, I seek to illustrate how technology dynamically works with human actors to create and maintain the world we live in. Secondly, I aspire to demonstrate to researchers and scholars in general that acknowledging and documenting the participatory role of technology in everyday life and culture need neither sensationally celebrate technology nor denounce it out of paranoia. Instead, I wish to make obvious the value of exploring the role of technology in a way consistent with how we actually experience everyday life. A quick review of how I got to this place is in order.

The year was 1997 in Boboli Gardens, Florence, Italy. Like birds calling throughout the gardens, cell phone ringers would randomly break the silence from all directions, prompting their owners to squawk their singular reply, "Pronto!" It created a cacophony of precise technological noise mixed with the absurdity of human communication. Then, like a shot breaking through the afternoon air, I heard a crisp, English "Hello." I suddenly realized the significance of the wireless future of communica-

1 For an overview of technography, see Kien (2008).

tions technology. I could see that much of the wired infrastructure could be bypassed altogether, that the advance of personal appliances would make mobility the new normal circumstance on a global scale. I realized that "wireless" means everywhere, anywhere, any moment, every moment. Like others, I had been aware of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, which was said to be possible in large part by the globalization of wireless communication that allowed them to globalize their brand of resistance, in effect using the tools of neoliberalism against themselves. As a result, the Zapatista's struggle was almost as much about communication and aesthetics and turning the global network on itself as it was about confrontation in physical space. However, the full impact of what the mobile evolution in technology meant in everyday life didn't hit me until that day in Boboli Gardens. It was my moment of epiphany, after which my understanding of globalization and communications would never be the same again. There would no longer be a need to go to technology, or even for technology to come to you—once networked successfully, it becomes part of our ontology and we are simply never apart from it again. Although mobility and human influence on environment are not new phenomena, we are living through a seismic shift in our media environment that is bringing with it unprecedented freedoms and changes in power relationships that are enacted in the physical world through mobility. It's already banal to point out how the array of products on and coming to the market demonstrate that technology is rapidly progressing from portability to extreme mobility, to be used reliably while in transit—to be part of the experience of transit—making constant movement and positional fluidity to be a normal condition of technological subjectivity. Meanwhile, transit itself is a new normal. There is a class of global citizen constantly in motion for whom the term "migration" is meaningless, as the act of settlement isn't much part of their everyday experience. This is the set of circumstances in which evolve the portrait of the technologically mobile subject: a hypermediated 24/7 virtual environment (Kien, in press a). Advanced miniaturized technology, especially in medicine,[2] is designed to function both inside and outside, to travel with and within the human body as both enhancement

2 With approval from the United States Food and Drug Administration (see http://www.fda.gov/cdrh/emc/wmt-about.html) and the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (see http://wireless.fcc.gov/services/personal/medtelemetry/). For a downloadable study guide on wireless medical technology development, see http://www.monitoring.welchallyn.com/products/wireless/resourcelib.asp.

and appendage. Historical precedents given their due,[3] it is the networked nature of new digital appliances that distinguishes them from their predecessors. National territory is no longer confined to the physical borders of the nation, it rather erupts in the spontaneous performances of citizens in transit. As an ethnographic project, the field itself needs redefinition to accurately reflect the nature of space in this age of global mobility.

While theory and philosophy are strategically deployed throughout this book, it is my intention that vignettes illustrating eruptions of everyday experience should form the basis of a conversation between idealistic theoretical absolutes and the messiness of life on the ground as we live it. The work presented in this book takes a cue from Carey's directive, "to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended, and used" (Carey, 1989, p. 30). My interpretation of Carey's words is informed by Heidegger's philosophy of technology, in which technologies are created to be intrinsically part of ontological experience. In other words, they are created to perform roles—to act—in everyday life, and this demands an ethnography that can track the social performativity of technology as well as human beings. The performance of technology in everyday life is an important aspect informing the invention of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which offers a methodological technique in which dichotomies such as "network" versus "individual" can be reconciled.[4] However, the technical details of technical relationships can sometimes be lost or simply ignored in the exploration of performative moments. When there are neither individuals nor power, but only "collectifs" (Callon and Law, 1995) and "network effects" (Latour, 1986) in which singularity is an aesthetic slight of hand,[5] the experience of how one actually tends to conduct oneself and be treated—as an individual singular entity—can feel lacking. Theoretical interventions can help reconcile the nuances of individual performativity (of both human and nonhuman actors) within schematized geographical and geometric concepts, while instances drawn from messy everyday situations make such speculations understandable in life as we experience it. Practice constantly exceeds the field and any theoretical attempt to define it. Everyday life is complex and

3 I.e., walkie-talkies, transistor radios, the walkman.

4 For an overview of my interpretation of ANT, see Kien in press b.

5 For an ANT definition of "collectifs," see Glossary, p. 170; for "network," p. 173; for "singularity," p. 175.

confusing. In the emerging tradition of critical qualitative inquiry, I resist reducing everyday experiences to one-dimensional anecdotes in support of quasi post-positivist theorizing. Rather, I assume it is the everyday that stands on its own, without need of justification. It is the speculation we call theory that grasps desperately at threads of legitimation for its relevance to lived reality, for it is us as actors who seek meaning and justification for our actions.

Truth can be found only through technology, since truth itself is ideal and needs to be demonstrated, brought forth, and made to present itself. Benjamin (1978) gave us the terminology of the "optical unconsciousness" to describe how we believe we cannot know truth without technological assistance, and of "technological loyalty" to describe how we come to rely on machines to show us the truth about the universe we live in. Heidegger also embraced this idea, explaining that we need technology to manufacture situations in which the truth may erupt and become knowable. These eruptions then come to inform us about the truth of our existence. Self-inquiry, intellectual methodologies, ceremony, and ritual are ways of bringing forth the art of the self, the poiesis of being a person. Heidegger's postulate is heightened by technologically mobile media. The cell phone and laptop, now converging in the smartphone, are standard, functional pieces of the global citizen's mobile uniform. My use of the term mobility refers to the movement of individual people and actants in ever-shifting arrays that comprise actor-networks: not only movements in physical terms, but also conceptual movements such as transience in identity. Being refers to a Heideggerian state of "pure being," moments of revelation in which the truth about meaning and how we enframe our worlds erupt. Throughout this book, I work with this as "epiphany" in the Denzinian school of interpretive inquiry, a turning point after which, having gained "authentic understanding" (Denzin, 2001), things are no longer the same. Finally, network refers to the ever-mutating actor-network for which the global international telecom system serves as the most stabilizing entity. This entity is always participating in and allied with other, often more dominant networks of translation. For example, through its regulatory apparatus, nations partition the network and claim parts of it as their own. No less, nations take advantage of the network to extend themselves within and beyond their demarcated national borders, translating mediated space into nationalist territory, implicating communications technology in ritualized performances of culture.

Global Technography as I am defining it is interdisciplinary, involving performance studies, ethnography, Actor-Network Theory, media effects theory, globalization and identity theory, and some applied technological savvy. My wish is to contribute another step towards "a fundamentally new direction…in the approach to culture and identity" involving "a radical rethinking of the linkages of knowledge, culture, and association among people" (McCarthy et al., 2003, p. 30). Seippel (2008) suggests a network analysis is appropriate in understanding social behavior for three important reasons:

1. It captures what most of us actually see as a fundamental aspect of social life ontologically: the relatedness and/or embeddedness of human beings and social interactions.
2. The most vital characteristics of social interaction within civil society and civil society's autonomy in relation to other social institutions hinge on relations and networks, and networking is vital to social capital.
3. The relational character of power and influence are best understood as network formations.

Wilson (2007) argues for a need to employ ethnography on a global scale in order to understand relations of domination and resistance.

To state my own theoretical and philosophical assumptions, I acknowledge that for me Heidegger's philosophy of technology and his phenomenology are a satisfactory description of the nature and relationship of technology and my own existence. I believe Heidegger is correct in suggesting that technology cannot be separated from ontology since it is profoundly part of human everyday experience, emphatically so if globalization theorists are to be taken seriously. Problematic as it might be, I accept that Leibniz's monism—the philosophical basis of digital code (see Kien, 2002)—is the description of the nature of existential force that our digital world unspokenly assumes, which prompts reconciling dualism's theoretical inside/outside essentialisms and dichotomies. I work from the media studies perspective that media has the potential to profoundly affect culture and yet have enough of the cultural studies scholar in me to consider the relationship dialectical in that culture often determines the ways technologies are put to use. I assume everyday life is comprised of mundane, subtle, and sometimes spectacular performances, and all are equally important in the revelation of truth. I consider Actor-Network Theory a compliment to Heidegger's philosophy of technology, providing a pragmatic

theoretical grounding that can describe mobility and the relationship of "network and site" (Hay, 2001, p. 213).

While overcoming dualism is one attractive feature of ANT, it also emphasizes ethnography as a method, interrogating everyday life as semiotic performance and effects of performances. This keeps pace with developments in autoethnography, although much qualitative research continues to reify human beings as the only source of agency and thereby to reify dualisms, as Durkheim and Goffman-rooted ethnography tends to treat technology as object and prop outside of meaningful human interaction. With ANT as a theoretical grounding for the ethnographic study of wireless digital technology, I focus on the processes and effects of global ontology that are enabled by technology. I undertake to demonstrate some of the mechanics of how some technologies actually do social work and to elucidate moral effects and rehearsals of actual and preferred outcomes (Denzin, 2003). Overall, my work shows some of the alliances, betrayals, struggles, and triumphs that go towards the construction of identity (including nationalism and hybridity) and performances of self in the context of globalization.

This book begins with a discussion of the methodology invented for this research: Global Technography. The issue of territorial definition is discussed in the context of mobility, with a rethinking of the traditional method of defining a closed field for observation resulting from the unique circumstances of technologically enabled mobility. Spatializing eruptions of mobile technology use—technological performativity—are taken as the defining feature of the field in the form of global network. Numerous vignettes exemplify the characteristics of such performative moments and their complex interconnectedness with everyday concerns.

Chapter 2 deals with the subject of global network and power, exploring various theoretical descriptions of how power operates in the context of complex international exchanges. Site-specific vignettes help understand how power is experienced in everyday "global" situations, inflected with highly nuanced histories, cultural logics, and intensely personal motivations. Chapter 3 then deals more squarely with the relationship between cultural logic and the use of mobile technology. This chapter pointedly explores the performance of mobility as cultural practice, illustrating how the way one uses technology may be profoundly informed and directed by cultural values.

The book moves to the issue of ontology in chapter 4, exploring the

relationship between technology and one's way of being in the world. Heideggerian ideas about technology and notions of truth are elaborated and exemplified through everyday examples that reveal enframing for what it is. Sentiments of belonging are explored, towards an awareness of the differences between authentic and spurious understanding. Chapter 5 then moves forward from the idea of belonging to elaborate issues that arise with the globalization of culture through the movement of both goods and global relocations of people (and hence cultural practice). The connection of the global to the local is thus exemplified through vignettes that link global iconography and historical patterns to local experiences.

Post-global citizenship is the topic of chapter 6, which looks at the disciplinary aspects of acquired mobility. More explicitly, culturally specific disciplinary apparatuses are elaborated with examples that show their impact on subjectivity in the post-global context. Chapter 7 elaborates a theory of home for mobile citizens, linking mobile technology with ritualized and routinized performances of culture that can be taken throughout the world. The idea of ontological security is shown as a motivation for constancy in everyday performances of self.

Chapter 8 takes us back to the authenticity of being human, demonstrated in everyday moments of caring, concern, and human connection that transcend global/local specificities and technological inscriptions. The resilience of everyday people is situated within the context of technological performativity and advancement, as its inspiration and driving force, and at times situating technology as ancillary to the main drama of interpersonal interaction.

Italy and Chiapas, Mexico, are worlds apart. And yet, they have become inseparable from one another and are both important to the book in your hands. There is little topical correspondence between the indigenous agrarian lifestyle of one with the advanced capitalist bustle of the other. Within a very short time, however, the invisible connections of the global actor-network they share become revealed, through a conspicuous tree native to the mountains of southern Mexico growing happily in Boboli gardens, to a cross mounted on the parapet of a Catholic community church high in La Selva Lacandona. The Italian's nationalist appropriation of the tomato, an indigenous American fruit, is just one example of how the artifacts of global exchanges are made meaningful in localized settings. Technologies of religion are exchanged for technologies of food (who got the better deal is another topic entirely). As such, technology is

no different than the "mein" (noodles) that migrated from China to meet the tomato in Rome, becoming not just a profound part of global history but an indispensable dietary staple in the present. Perhaps 500 years later, one might even be served spaghetti and tomato sauce in the mountain rain forest of Chiapas and think nothing of it.

Is it an accident that the largest contingent of supporters to respond to a wireless distress signal emanating from the indigenous peoples of La Selva Lacandona were Italians? Is it merely absurd coincidence? Is this global phenomenon all media effects, or is there something more profound informing these relationships? How does this global network form and reform itself? Observing the practice of culture in everyday life is one way to understand the nuances of sophisticated relationships stretched around the globe.