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The geographies of difference in conflating digital and offline spaces of encounter: Migrant professionals' throwntogetherness in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the effects of people's digital coexistence on the construction of difference and feelings of aversion to or recognition of "others". It seeks to make a theoretical contribution to works on the geographies of difference and encounter, Internet or digital geography, as well as on migration and digital media, by highlighting the relevance of indirect and fleeting digital encounters and the dialectical process in which encounters play out in intertwined, specific and multiple digital and physical spaces that we define as "cON/FFlating situational places of encounter". Based on a qualitative study with Chinese, Filipino and German migrant professionals in Singapore, it shows how fleeting digital encounters take an ambivalent role through challenging but also producing new "temporary fixings of difference". As such they can engender new sensibilities for and openness toward the host society but also breed new, or aggravate existing, cultural stereotypes and prejudices. The findings show that inherited and instituted classificatory practices that people use to structure and make sense of their fleeting interactions with others in offline space are, where possible, transferred and imposed on encounters in digital space. At the same time, they are inflected or replaced with new markers of difference where ingrained sorting mechanisms applied in offline space did not help them make sense of encounters in digital space.

1. Introduction

Theoretical contributions to understanding people's everyday coexistence, as brought forward by scholars working on the geographies of difference and encounter, have largely dealt with encounters in offline space whereas "the ways in which the politics of cultural difference and encounter are played out across digital spaces have remained understudied" (Leurs, 2014: 253). At the same time, research on digital media and migration has particularly focused on digital media's role for transnational social networks and relations among fellow migrants (cf. Hopkins, 2009; Alonso, 2010; Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010; Ros, 2010; Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012; Lim et al., 2016), while its consequences for encounters and networks between migrants and the local population have been far less considered.

To address this lacuna in the literature, we explore the effects that migrants' encounters with locals in digital space have on their construction of difference and their feelings of aversion to or recognition of local "others". In order to do so, we discuss the particularities of digital and physical space and how they shape "situational places" (Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2010; Dirksmeier et al., 2014) of encounter differently, by which we come to argue that "screen spaces" (Kellerman, 2016a: 29) allow a different "gaze" (Urry and Larsen, 2011[3]) and thus a different subduing of curiosity on cultural others. At the same time, we underline the dialectical process in which encounters play out in intertwined, specific and multiple digital and physical spaces that we define as "cON/FFlating situational places of encounter". We highlight the ambivalent role of cON/FFlating situational places of encounter, in which "temporary 'fixings' of difference" (Wilson, 2011: 642) are challenged but also newly produced. We contend that experiences from encounters are "scaled up" to reflect the attitudes of the larger population group, particularly in the case of negative encounters. Furthermore, we identify classificatory practices and markers of difference employed in digital space to classify digital others, based on categories of difference such as ethnicity, nationality, gender and class where other bodily or performative markers are absent.

Our theoretical reflection, based on works on the geographies of difference and encounter, digital or Internet geography, as well as on digital media and migration, is supported by results derived from a qualitative study of Chinese, Filipino and German migrant professionals' perspectives conducted between 2013 and 2015 in Singapore.

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In our analysis, we come to focus on a specific type of encounter which we conceptualise as indirect and fleeting digital encounter. Digital or Internet geographers have so far specifically looked into the processes and structures behind the production of digital content, i.e. they have centred the analysis on the creators of digital material, the material itself and the politics regulating its production, as well as inclusion and exclusion in digital spaces (cf. Davies, 2013; Kitchin et al., 2013; Warf, 2013; Ash et al., 2016; Kellerman, 2016a). Yet, we argue that netizens spend much more time on reading, viewing or otherwise immersing in online content created by others rather than creating it themselves. We focus on the effects of this interpretation of online material (rather than on its production) on the meaning-making process by turning to migrants' engagement with textual or other visual material authored by locals online without any direct interaction taking place. Research on encounters has mostly focused on the "multiple ways in which the stranger is construed as an outsider: the object of ejection, domestication or tolerance" (Amin, 2012: 2) by the ethnic majority or citizens (cf. also Wilson, 2016). In this article we focus on how this process is perceived by the stranger him- or herself. While previous research has mostly focused on intercultural encounters in European or North American settings, this research adds to the smaller and more recently emerging scholarship on Asian contexts (e.g. Ye, 2013, 2016b,a).

2. The geographies of difference in cON/FFlating situational spaces and places of encounter

2.1. Encounters in offline spaces and places

Research on digital media and migration has given much attention to the relevance of digital media for diaspora and migrant communities (e.g. Madianou, 2005; Oiarzabal, 2012), keeping in contact with families, relatives and friends in countries of origin through transnational social fields (e.g. Horst, 2006; Ros, 2010; Bacigalupe and Camara, 2012; Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Madianou, 2012), and the maintenance or loss of existing, and the establishment of, new connections (e.g. Hiller and Franz, 2004). Other studies have considered the effects of digital media on the construction of collective identities and solidarity among diasporic communities, and on immigrant mobilisation and nationalism vis-à-vis the politics of migration, nationhood, citizenship and identification (e.g. Brinkerhoff, 2010; Conversi, 2012; Oiarzabal, 2012; Rinnawi, 2012). In addition, new possibilities for disseminating information among the migrant community, and the consequential empowerment of individual and collective agents with access to the Internet to share and discuss their views, have been investigated (e.g. Bell, 2006; Brouwer, 2006; Platt et al., 2016). Studies on migrants' digital media use have often found that improved opportunities for maintaining ties to the homeland through digital means, have hampered migrants' motivation, need and attempts to build ties with members of the local societies they have joined (e.g. Lim and Pham, 2016).

The burgeoning research has, however, paid less attention to the digital modes of engagements and interactions between the migrant and local population, and the effects of such digital encounters. To address this gap in the literature, we engage with seminal works on the geographies of encounter and difference in which different conceptualisations of the nature and effects of the encounter with strangers in physical space have been developed. In the next section we consider insights from works on digital or Internet geography to debate how the characteristics of digital space might influence digital situational places of encounter and discuss how encounters might be altered or (re)produced in what we frame as cON/FFlating spaces of encounter.

A common distinction, which is mostly based on the intensity and frequency of contact, separates "fleeting encounters" (Valentine, 2014; Ye, 2016b,a) or "fleeting sociability" (Mehta, 2013: 98) from "meaningful" contacts (Askins and Pain, 2011; Valentine, 2014; Mayblin et al., 2015a,b) or "enduring sociability" (Mehta, 2013: 98). Opinions vary with regard to the effect of these forms of interaction on the emergence, manifestation or refutation of cultural prejudices and stereotypes and the consequential effects on aversion to or recognition of others. Mayblin et al. (2015a) have differentiated "fleeting, unintended encounters, where diverse people rub along together as a consequence of accidental proximity" from "meaningful contacts", whereby they define the latter as "contact which breaks down prejudices and translates beyond the moment to produce a more general respect for others" and which is usually based on sustained contact (Mayblin et al., 2015a: 1).

In a study that investigates the level of prejudice in major German cities, Dirksmeier (2014) found that only friendship between Germans and foreigners significantly reduced prejudices but not the greater contact opportunities and habituation in the cities. Based on an investigation of the negative social attitudes of the white majority in the UK toward different minority groups, Valentine goes further by positing that the mere coexistence of others in shared space, even if repeated, without meaningful, extended contact "often generates or aggravates comparisons between different social groups in terms of perceived or actual access to resources and special treatment" (Valentine, 2014: 81) and "can breed frustration and indeed generate different scales of resentment from rudeness in one-to-one situations to the threat of vigilante action" (Valentine, 2014: 82). According to Valentine (2014: 79), many everyday moments of encounter in the city "do not count as encounters at all". She further concludes that "when an individual has a negative experience with a member of a minority group as part of routine everyday encounters, this moment is often mobilised to produce and justify powerful negative generalisations about the whole population that the minority individual is seen to represent" (Valentine, 2014: 88) (cf. also Valentine, 2010). Simultaneously, positive encounters with individuals from a minority social group were seen as exceptional behaviour not representative of people from the wider social group as these encounters were not sufficient in destabilising "white majority community-based narratives of economic and/or cultural victimhood" (Valentine, 2014: 89). In a similar vein, in an ethnographic study on fleeting and lasting contacts between Russian immigrants and Germans in Berlin, Matejskova and Leitner (2011) found that the establishment of sustained contacts and positive attitudes toward individual immigrants alone did not change prejudice toward the larger immigrant group, which thus deviates from Dirksmeier's (2014) findings.

Yet, Amin (2012: 6) pointed out that it is important "to dislodge the politics of belonging from its current mooring in a discourse of strong social ties" as independent of their frequency and intensity, contacts in space can matter and scale-up to aversion but also recognition. In the same vein and by pointing to the fact that a large part of people's everyday sociability can count as unintended, fleeting togetherness, Ye (2016a: 78) has shown in a study on everyday encounters between locals and strangers in Singapore that this everyday rubbing along can "challenge the fear of the 'other' embedded in relations with strangers, […] disrupt stereotypical categories, and open up space for reflection and change afforded by its temporary nature". Similarly, Wilson showed in her ethnographic study on a bus route through Birmingham, that such journeys are "regularly shot through with moments of surprise and even shame when temporary 'fixings' of difference are proven to be flawed" (Wilson, 2011: 642).

Cresswell (1996) points to the importance of normative codes of conduct that significantly govern people's interaction in public space. Valentine (2014: 83) argues that this "urban etiquette does not equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference" while Ye shows how "everyday norms of civility" (Ye, 2016b: 91) can fuel the divide and create boundaries between newcomers and locals, as newcomers "are often seen as not having mastered civility […] because they have not learnt or do not practice situated forms of acceptable behaviour in public" (Ye, 2016b: 101). Amin (2012: 9–10) postulates that encounters with strangers are regulated by "a complex machinery of inherited and instituted classificatory practices, symbolic persuasions, and social