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An Extreme Reading of Facebook

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I welcome the development of internet forums such as the Open Anthropology Cooperative and Medianth. One question they raise is what we might use such public sites for as opposed to more conventional publications. I guess one answer I have seen is draft papers. Another, which I will explore here, is for taking arguments beyond those likely to be accepted for publication in more conventional media. In this instance I am going to take an actual publication and extract three of its component arguments. I will then take them a bit beyond the form they are given in that publication, simply because I didn't think more extreme readings would be acceptable, and also because, despite being a self-proclaimed extremist² I am not at all sure if I even agree with them. But like any academic I see an intellectual merit in pursuing such logics, and I would hope that they also suit these public forums as a means for provoking debate.

The publication these excerpts are taken from is called *Tales from Facebook* (Polity April 2011). As it happens, it is a rather unconventional publication in its own right. It consists of twelve portraits of individual Trinidadians written in a similar style to a previous book of mine *The Comfort of Things*,³ and uses these to consider the impact of Facebook on these individuals, although each also thereby also seeks to make some academic point. These are followed by three short essays. One takes the question of how Trinidadian Facebook is; the second looks at 15 tentative theses about Facebook more generally; and the third, which is summarised in this paper, develops an extended analogy between Kula and Facebook in order to construct an anthropological theory of the latter.

The three propositions I propose to push to more extreme lengths here are as follows:

1) *That Facebook radically transforms the premise and direction of social science.*

2) *That Facebook is a medium for developing a relationship to god.*

3) *That Facebook, like Kula, is an ideal foundation for a theory of culture mainly because Facebook and Kula are practically the same thing.*

² *Stuff*: 1-11

³ Polity, 2008.

I am optimistic that academics will find grounds for disagreement with these three assertions.

Proposition one - Facebook radically transforms the premise and direction of social science.

SNS (Social Network Sites) are already a major global phenomenon. While some of the initial sites such as Cyworld in South Korea have largely remained regional, Facebook is approaching 500 million users spread right across the world. Where Facebook is banned in China, QQ is used on an average day by 111 million people. Other major populations such as Brazil are dominated by alternative social networking sites such as Orkut, though shifts can be rapid as, for example, currently in South East Asia with the migration in the last year from Friendster to Facebook. Other sites with different functionality such as Twitter and Foursquare are also emerging as potentially highly significant.

The starting point for this proposition is that such developments fly in the face of the central tenets of social science. Foundational to Western social science has been the belief that human societies exhibit a slow but constant trajectory away from what are taken to be an earlier state in which people lived in communities, based around close kinship ties and devotion to immediate social relationships. Whether starting from the writings of Tonnie, Durkheim or Simmel, social scientists have assumed that under such conditions we do not study people just as individuals, but rather each person can be understood as a site of social networking. This became the premise for the development of anthropology. With its emphasis on kinship, any given person was seen primarily through their place in such a network, for example the category of being someone else's 'mother's brother'. So, long before Facebook, networking acted as a kind of shorthand for the way social science understood small-scale and traditional societies.

In contrast to anthropology, sociology was principally concerned with the consequences of an assumed decline from this condition as a result of industrialisation, capitalism and urbanism. Still today many of the most influential books in sociology such as Putnam's *Bowling Alone* or Sennett's *Fall of Public Man*,⁴ along with works by Giddens, Beck and Bauman remain clearly within this dominant trajectory. In all such work there is an assumption that older forms of tight social networking colloquially characterised by words such as community or neighbourhood are increasingly replaced by the

⁴ Putnam, R. *Bowling Alone*. Simon and Schuster, 2001; Sennett, R. *The Fall of Public Man*. Knopf, 1977.

dominance of individuals and individualism. My own recent book *The Comfort of Things* based on a single street in London gave strong confirmation to such arguments, since households proved to be largely detached from those who lived nearby and often from all other forms of community or wider social groupings.

How then should social science respond to an extraordinary phenomenon that has arisen within the last decade and most especially during the six years when Facebook has been in existence? When the internet first developed similar claims were made about its revolutionary impact on social science theory. Research by myself and Don Slater⁵ was among the first to show that that while the internet may be hugely important in other ways the evidence for this `reversal' in macro social change towards individualism was very limited. At that time we were keen to pour cold water on any such speculation that the internet somehow flew in the face of conventional social science. We pointed out that just because one could find extensive material on the internet that claimed to represent some sort of community was no evidence in itself. In fact many people ended up putting such materials on the internet precisely because these had been dismissed by all other media and no one took them seriously. A place on the internet could be evidence for how insignificant something was rather than the reverse. Others such as John Postill provide many good reasons for being careful with regard to any glib use of the term community in this regard and Steve Woolgar devoted a whole research project to a sceptical perspective on these early claims.⁶

However in 2009-10 I carried out research in Trinidad which revealed a very different situation. This is the first work to document what happens when social networking matures into a facility increasingly popular with older people and in countries other than the US. The initial literature on social networking sites (from Boyd & Ellison 2007 through to Kirkpatrick 2010)⁷ was based on a period when these seemed to be the plaything of college students (especially in the US), for whom Facebook was invented.

My Trinidad research represents a more mature phase in the development of Facebook. It is based on

⁵ Miller, D. and Slater, D. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Berg, 2000.

⁶ Postill, J. Localising the internet beyond communities and networks, *New Media and Society* 10 (3), 2008, 413-431; Woolgar, S. *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyperbole, Reality*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁷ Boyd, D. and Ellison, N. Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1), article 11, October 2007; Kirkpatrick, D. *The Facebook Effect*. Simon & Schuster, 2010.

more than a year participating with many Trinidadians on Facebook itself, supplemented by two months there discussing Facebook face-to-face with those same participants, including over fifty more formal interviews, most of them carried out with Mirca Madianou, since they overlapped with another research project we are conducting jointly on the impact of new media on transnational communication, with case studies of Filipino domestic workers as well as Trinidadians.

The research in Trinidad demonstrates that there really is a case for saying that SNS reverse certain key trends presumed by most of social science. What had become regarded as the natural attrition of relationships is reversed. Previously we tended to lose touch with groups we once knew well who become replaced by new sets of friends. But almost inevitably the first action in using Facebook seems to be the resurrection of all lost relationships, for example, with ex-school friends or relatives who have migrated. Many of the participants in our study used these networks for several hours a day in order to resurrect what might be seen as a more traditional devotion to close social relationships that do come close to classical ideas of community.

Once this issue arose from the fieldwork, I decided deliberately to target research on people who still live in small villages and hamlets and who are well aware of the nature and character of such communities. It seemed right to let such people comment on the degree to which Facebook was or was not analogous to their own experience of living in a community and in other social networks such as kinship ties.

So let me summarise a portrait of someone who exemplifies this aspect of the research in the book:-

Alana is a college student who lives in a kind of settlement that has become quite rare in contemporary Trinidad. Modern Trinidad is a pretty mobile place and one meets relatively few people of any age who live where they were born. Her hamlet, Santa Ana, is quite small. There are around twenty-five houses straddling a ridge in the foothills of the mountains that form a spine pointing north. These houses, with only two exceptions, represent the descendants of the same three or four core families. So by now pretty much everyone in the village is related to everyone else. When it comes to any kind of significant event, such as a wedding or a wake, any remaining lack of relationship is ignored. For all intents and purposes this village is a family writ large. It also has those other hallmarks of community,

for example Alana's family have a running feud with their neighbour that has gone on for years. Every time a pause arises that might lead to a rapprochement, it gets extended by disputes about where children shouldn't be playing or when dogs shouldn't be barking.

Alana has two main times when she is involved in Facebook. She was originally persuaded to go on Facebook by a score of younger cousins who like to play the game FarmVille. She admits that this can add up to something like two hours a day of online labour. But the consequence is a thriving online cousinhood that is effective in developing her extended family relations. In order to detach from the family she goes to sleep around 8 pm. She then gets up at midnight and from then to 3 am she is on Facebook with most of her college class. Almost all of them have adopted the same diurnal rhythm. Alana reckons that only about 20% of the subsequent conversation is purely discussion of homework and joint projects.

Amongst my various conversations with Alana, one centres on this question of an analogy with community. What was it like growing up in and continuing to live in Santa Ana? As a student at university she is used to thinking abstractly about such comparisons and concepts. Nor does she have the slightest difficulty appreciating the meaning of community. In her mind there is a clear analogy but in various respects Facebook is not a patch on the real thing. However much one blames Facebook for malicious or ill-informed gossip, Alana feels it doesn't even begin to approach what happens routinely in a small place like Santa Ana. She tells of how, in a community like this, people would look at or the youths in the village, at how their friend's children are growing up,. They wouldn't take time to get to know them, they would just sit and talk about whether a child is neglected or a youth is into drugs. She says `Yeh, it's much much worse. I think people still have some level of respect on Facebook, well at least the people that I socialize with. They wouldn't blatantly put something very offensive. We recently had a stranger that came in. I think he dating a girl out the road and she girl, she pretty young. And she and a guy in the village always had an exchange of words. Like throw talk for one another and stuff like that. So he was passing and something she said and her boyfriend get up and try swing a blade at him. And he hold it and pull it away from his hand. All his ligaments and everything gone. He came out of the hospital about three days ago. His right hand, he can't do anything right now. He have strings and stuff on his hand trying to get it back... yeah terrible'.

The point can also work in the other direction. People congregate online and help each other with homework. But that doesn't represent the kind of commitment people make to each other in the village. Santa Ana is a place where you can spend the whole day cooking something up for a neighbour who is hosting some communal occasion. There had just recently been a wake that is celebrated on the first year's anniversary of a death, with food cooked by many neighbours and the community playing cards into the night. In a village such as this, whatever the internal quarrels, there is still the foundation for deep and sustained solidarity in relation to an external threat. When someone is ill or in crisis, you know instinctively what being in a community means, the responsibilities it gives you and the hold it has on you.

When judging the nature of Facebook as a community Alana is clear that it can only be assessed relative to offline community. She regards her situation, living in Santa Ana, as exceptional in contemporary Trinidad. When you are living in a place like that, the community is incredibly intense and her use of Facebook, however sociable, is a means to give herself some sort of break from that intensity. If people in Santa Ana turn to Facebook as a kind of milder version of community, it is to achieve some sort of distance, because the reality of living within such a close-knit community is simply too intense and invasive.

She contrasts her experience with that of a friend who lives in a much more typical settlement within Trinidad, near Tunapuna: 'it's more of a small town and you don't really see people going by each other. But she will keep in contact via Facebook'. For her friend there simply isn't enough actual community. She is frustrated at how little she knows or interacts with the people who live close to her. So her experience of Facebook does the opposite. It helps create a bit more social intensity in a situation where people have an insufficiency of direct communication and contact with each other. So Alana concludes that Facebook is used to balance out the degree of offline community.

Facebook has all the contradictions found in a community. You simply can't have both closeness and privacy. You can't have support without claustrophobia. You can't have such a degree of friendship without the risk of explosive quarrelling. Either everything is more socially intense or none of it is. This is one of the ironies of the huge emphasis on the loss of privacy that we find in journalist's accounts. It's the same public discourse that goes on and on about how we have lost neighbourhood and

community and everyone is so individualistic and lonely. Well if you really do want to have more community and less isolated individualism then that means trading privacy. But popular discourse wants it both ways, they want a community that is totally private and anthropologists should be pointing out this kind of contradiction.

So the most important thing Facebook provides is a means to complement the offline version of community and to live with those same contradictions.

I found Alana's account the most plausible I have come across and the one that accords best with the findings of my research. I don't have the space here to examine in as much detail the relationship of Facebook to other aspects of close social relations such as kinship, but my conclusions there are similar. What this means is that the best way to understand Facebook is in relation to anthropological studies of close-knit and intense society, not as part of sociology's encounter with contemporary individualism and the kind of networking envisaged by Castells⁸. Facebook seems like the end of what previously was the natural attrition of social networks. It brings all those who were once disregarded back into the frame of current regard, such as lost kin and school friends. Equally important is the ability of Facebook to bring back Diaspora populations and ameliorate the effect of their residence in different countries.

Facebook is six years old, but if it continues on its currently trajectory and a billion people use it for several hours a day mainly for actual social networking, with the resultant intensification of those social networks, then we will see a kind of shift from sociology to anthropology that we never dared expect. This is perhaps the most profound challenge to the basic presuppositions of social science for a century.

Proposition two – Facebook is a medium for developing a relationship to god

I have always been fascinated by the Akheda, the section in the bible where Abraham offers to sacrifice his son Isaac to god. This is when a covenant is established and we see thereby the effective

⁸ Castells, M. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

institutionalisation of that monotheism that develops unto Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For theologians such as Levinas, the key moment within the Akheda is when Abraham says the word 'Here I Am'. By standing before god, he establishes humanity in the moral gaze of the divine. From a secular perspective one could turn this around and argue that this is equally the moment which establishes the divine as the projected vantage from which humanity sees itself as being seen. It is culmination of a journey a 'going forth' (*lek lek'ha*) that Abraham makes from the first mythic portion of the bible which has much in common with Sumerian myths such as Noah and the Flood to the main 'historical' narrative which leads to this monotheistic trajectory.

If this is viewed, however, only as a movement from myth to history it raises the question of whether Abraham should be regarded as some kind of freakish or unique episode based on the specific latent propensity of this individual patriarch to search out such a relationship to the divine as witness and thus moral encompassment of humanity, which leads in turn to the religious conceptualisations of these three monotheistic religions and eventually to further ethical and political orders of a secular kind. Or should the story of Abraham be seen as neither myth nor history, but rather as a pointed to some broader latent propensity towards a vision of moral humanity with analogies that make it a characteristic of being human? In which case this same 'going forth' or journey towards the conditions of the Akheda is something we might expect of people generally, including those who may be polytheistic or atheist in their beliefs, in which case it could be equally prevalent in the secular conditions of the contemporary world?

When investigating Facebook, the first step is to take it at 'face-value' simply an effective means of communication to multiple audiences, that helps people keep in touch, post photos and everything else that makes up a simple description of what Facebook appears to be and do. But after a while it becomes clear that there is a sort of surplus communicative economy to Facebook, in that people seem to do all sorts of things with it, and think of it in various ways that are hard to reduce either to some kind of communicative instrumentalism or indeed to any other kind of instrumentalism.

When I first started to try and understand this surplus communicative economy, I came up with the question of whether Facebook should be considered some kind of meta-friend. What if, instead of seeing Facebook as a means to facilitate friendships between people, many of us use friendships

between people in order to facilitate a relationship to Facebook itself? I had this fantasy that what most people should really be typing under the title of relationship status was: Married to Facebook lol? A common trope in modern discourse is that we feel we live in an era of materialism or fetishism, such that proper relationships between people are being replaced by relationships to things instead. This is a rather simplistic rendition of our world. As I have argued many times with regard to Mauss's *The Gift*,⁹ an anthropological sensibility is surely very different from a colloquial one. We have never regarded culture as a medium constructed to facilitate friendships between persons. On the contrary, relationships and exchange between persons, for example kin relations, are usually seen as a means to grow culture, for example through exchange. So for anthropologists, a relationship to Facebook as a thing is not axiomatically morally inferior to a relationship with a person. We do not resort to such simple judgments; we try to understand these cultural processes.

Given that Facebook is a social network, perhaps the simplest idiom for conceiving of this relationship to Facebook itself is to think of it as a sort of meta-best-friend. In the popular culture of TV, on programmes such as *Sex and the City*, a best friend is the person we can turn to when we are feeling lonely, depressed or bored, when life seems to have less purpose than usual. Our best friend is the one who is least likely to mind being disturbed when having a meal, or wanting to go to sleep, because they sense our deep need to engage in long gossipy discussions about ourselves or others, just to make us feel better. One advantage of Facebook is that it is a totally reliable best friend. Even at 3 a.m., when not even our best best-friend wants to be disturbed, we can turn to Facebook and feel connected with all those other lives, and come out of it less lonely and bored. Though, of course, we may also end up being more depressed or jealous because of the revelations about all those very active other people who don't seem lonely and bored. But this can happen after face-to-face chats with actual best friends also. There are people who see themselves as irredeemably unattractive and shunned by those who, in public, don't want to be associated with them. Fieldwork suggested to me that this was not uncommon, especially for school-age children. Such people often find Facebook a lot more forgiving and benign. You can't say that the photos on someone else's Facebook site were posted specifically for you to see, but also you can't say they weren't. Once there, they are part of your social life.

Journalism is already full of extreme stories about Facebook's negative impacts. It is held responsible

⁹ Mauss, M. *The Gift*. Routledge, 1990 (1925).

for people becoming jealous and murdering their lover, or for paedophilic grooming. To a lesser extent there are also positive stories about how Facebook stopped someone from committing suicide and helps those who are depressed. With 500 million users, we can be pretty sure that most stories and anecdotes about what Facebook might be capable of doing are true, however extreme. But that is a good reason to replace journalism and anecdote with more systematic research, which can demonstrate that such instances may be so exceptional as to be largely inconsequential, except for the people directly involved in those cases. It is not necessary to suggest that Facebook as a meta-best-friend necessarily cures depression or prevents suicide. We can still recognise that it is plausible, for a number of people, that it does act to complement offline friendships and to become significant as a friend in its own right.

Facebook is somewhere we can talk as much as we like, with or without responses from others. It is a site that genuinely addresses the perennial problem of boredom, especially teenage boredom, without necessarily imposing on the time of others. It has its limits; it doesn't get drunk when we do. It doesn't always comment back when we want it to. You can only 'sort of' have sex with it. But at a meta-level it may serve a purpose. Some of the most poignant examples we found were of a person who posted constantly about a baby that was born prematurely and another who posted about a parent afflicted with a terminal illness. We observed that these individuals seemed not too concerned whether or not the responses they received were from people they knew well. Facebook allowed the public sharing of suffering. It was a 'witness' to suffering that might be cathartic in its own right. The fact that Facebook is made up of actual people may give it unprecedented power and plausibility to act like a meta-person in this way. The downside to this relationship would be its potential to become so extreme that it does become appropriate to talk of fetishism or indeed pathology. One of the stories in *Tales from Facebook* is about a man who feels his partner's addiction to Facebook has become pretty much on a par with heroin addiction; at least it became fatal to their relationship. There was no evidence that this sort of thing was common, but I believe that some sort of best-friend like relationship with Facebook is.

This is a work of anthropology rather than psychology, but it is worth at least speculating about Facebook's role in facilitating the fantasy worlds of individuals. Imagine a novel in which two work colleagues have barely exchanged more than a few sentences, an occasional comment on what the other

is wearing, but little more. Yet one of them dissects each word actually spoken, each glance, in copious detail. The man thereby convinces himself that he is now completely in love and in thrall to this work colleague and would surely leave his wife for her if only he didn't have children. He knows exactly which Greek island will be the site of their passionate tryst. A little molehill of conversation becomes the mountain that moves Tristan and Isolde. My evidence for the impact of Facebook in this regard is very limited. But it seems likely that people's increased ability to observe and follow another person passively gives even more licence to their internal fantasy world, where they can imagine whatever they might choose to happen between them. It is therefore possible that one of the most significant impacts of Facebook will be on internal worlds of fantasy and imagination, where many people spend much of their time.

One of the first discussions of the internet's impact that looked more deeply into its possible consequences was *The Second Self* by Sherry Turkle.¹⁰ But much of her discussion concerned the implications of being anonymous and how people could appear to be someone quite different from their offline selves when online. Although she doesn't make explicit use of his work, her discussion leads back to Erving Goffman, the author of the most rewarding of all social science writings about the self.¹¹ Yet Facebook points us in the opposite direction to this concern with anonymity, indicating rather an end to anonymity. This alone should give pause for thought to anyone who thinks such digital technologies lay down a consistent path in any given direction. In either case, such debates release us from any simple or colloquial assumption that there is evidently a more true or less true self, or that these correspond to the distinction between online and offline selves. What Goffman and Turkle reveal is that all versions of the self are to some degree performative and based on frames of expectation. We play a variety of roles in life with degrees of attachment and distance.

To determine whether or how far Facebook itself makes a difference to the nature of the self or self-consciousness is extremely difficult. For example, one could argue that the sheer number of photographs a person posts online must create a new self-consciousness about their appearance. As someone commented, 'I think for teenagers Facebook is just dangerous, and seeing everybody's photos makes you so superficial. It's like constantly looking in a mirror and seeing yourself reflected. But

¹⁰ Turkle, S. *The Second Self*. MIT Press, 1984.

¹¹ Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956. *Frame Analysis*. Harper and Row, 1974.

through other people's eyes. So you have everybody's opinions coming down on you, because everyone will comment on your photos. "And, oh I love your top" or this and that and you never know, it's just constant. So I don't think it's healthy for teenagers at all or anybody who has insecurities'. There were many versions of this idea that Facebook makes us more concerned with appearances and thus more superficial. But often such arguments work by contrasting the concrete present with a mythical, more authentic past. I was conducting fieldwork in Trinidad long before the invention of the internet, and at times I would spend hours with young women who were getting changed to go out for an evening. They would try on seven different outfits to get the right image. It's hard to imagine they could be any more self-conscious about their public appearance now than they were then. At that time I argued that, in an egalitarian society such as Trinidad, the concept of the self depended less on some interior being or institutionalized position or role. The self is a more transient creation, largely formed from other people's responses to your appearance, which alone tells you who you are. So if the truth of who you are exists largely in other people's responses to how you look, it is not that unreasonable to be obsessed about your public appearance.

Lets move this from an issue of psychology to one of anthropology. The idea that making visible relationships is far more than just a representation of those relationships has become widely accepted in anthropology largely through the writings of Marilyn Strathern. In her work a person is constituted by a network of relationships which are not just made manifest, but come to exist through becoming apparent. So in *The Gender of The Gift* the birth of a child was significant in particular because it objectified the relationships that are made evident through the existence of that child.¹² Obviously having a child is what makes people related as parents.

Scroll on a few years and it looks as though Strathern was not merely a theorist but a rather prescient prophet. Since today, when so many of us regularly use social networking sites, it seems almost common sense to see an individual on our computer screen as constituted by their network of relationships and to regard social networks as a medium of objectification that makes these not only visible, but also constitutive. A student increasingly discovers who they are by going online and checking to see in what regard they are held by how many people and how they have engaged with them and each other. Social networks also seem to generate their own compulsion to visibility. Just as

¹² Strathern, M. *The Gender of the Gift*. University of California Press, 1986.

people don't feel they were not actually on holiday unless they can see photographs of themselves enjoying that holiday, so today some people don't feel they have experienced an event unless they have broadcast it through Facebook or Twitter. It is as though we have all read Strathern and want to transform our lives to accord better with her understanding of the nature of social networks.

This idea that making a relationship visible also creates that relationship can extend to the self. Facebook is a place where you discover who you are by seeing a visible objectification of yourself. Central to Trinidadian cosmology, as found in Carnival, is the belief that a mask or outward appearance is not a disguise. As something you have crafted or chosen and not merely been born with, the mask is a better indication of the actual person than your unmasked face. This is why one of my informants states that the true person is the one you meet on Facebook, not the person you meet face-to-face. It follows that the truth about yourself is revealed to you by what you post on Facebook. On Facebook you find out who you are.

I believe, however, that there is a final stage in accounting for this surplus economy of communication that is Facebook. What becomes clear from studying Facebook after a while is that, whatever the reason why we first friended them, most people are well aware that there are two main layers to their network. There is the active layer they respond to and who respond to them and the inactive layer of hundreds of others who have come to represent a generic other consisting of the anyone or everyone. We may not actively engage with them, but we are well aware that they are there and the question remains what their role is in relation to our personal postings.

The idea of witnessing comes in dozens of different philosophical and theological guises. In the next section I turn to Nancy Munn on Kula; she makes considerable use of just such a concept of witnessing which she derives from Jean-Paul Sartre. There are powerful religious undercurrents to the idea that everything we do is seen, or should be seen, by another, perhaps divine force. A common trope in the various forms of Christianity found in Trinidad is the idea of an all-witnessing God from whom nothing is or should be hidden. An increasing proportion of Trinidadians follow various kinds of Pentecostal and Apostolic churches where concepts of witnessing are central. But even without any religious beliefs, there are plenty of secular equivalents. Consider, for example, Freud's concept of the superego,

the introjected image of one's own parents, who see everything and again become the foundation for our moral evaluations.

This is what leads me back to my starting point when considering the Akheda and to Levinas' proposition¹³ that we are constituted as moral agents only in relation to this third observing other, which corresponds to the divine before whom Abraham can proclaim 'Here I am'. It is manifested as the belief that there is a witness out there that is often the driving force behind moral action.

In Trinidad it is clear that people are increasingly aware that Facebook postings are also a form by which one sets oneself up for moral adjudication. It may be intentional presentations of one's best face or the fact that one inevitably ends up being posted while drunk and disorderly and often with the wrong partner, all of which shows why Facebook corresponds readily with a Trinidadian concept of truth. So here perhaps we reach the logical end of the search for an explanation of the surplus economy of Facebook.

These reflections imply a sort of necessity that people may feel with regard to ensuring there is a higher and wider scrutiny of their personal exchanges and self-presentations. That is, people may want an assurance that there is some higher moral evaluation and they use Facebook to ensure that it exists. In which case, what Facebook provides is not only some particular friends who may comment on you nor even just a meta-best-friend. We have reached the point where Facebook may be regarded as providing a crucial medium of visibility and public witnessing. It gives us a moral encompassment within which we have a sense not only of who we are but of who we ought to be. Facebook is normative not just in the sense of a consensual netiquette, but also as a force for witnessing the moral order of the self. Not for all people and not necessarily. But without some kind of explanation of this ilk, it is hard to account for what often appears as a compulsion to place things under a generic public gaze rather than to post them to any particular person. Such an argument would render Facebook anything but superficial. It may be, for some, their equivalent to the presence of the divine as witness in their lives. In which case perhaps the Akheda really is a story about the latent propensity of humanity with regard to something we have in the past generally regarded as divine.

¹³ Levinas, E. *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen. Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Proposition three:- Facebook, like Kula is an ideal foundation for a theory of culture, mainly because Facebook and Kula are practically the same thing.

As I have made clear in several previous publications, my all-time favourite ethnography is *The Fame of Gawa* by Nancy Munn, a book that seems to me the culmination of Malinowski's project.¹⁴ Social scientists are not natural scientists, but I want to suggest that, if we imagine *The Fame of Gawa* as a theorem, than Facebook would be its proof. Kula has become the ur-example of culture for anthropology. We might spend the day like animals obtaining and consuming food, mate, protect our young till they are old enough to survive for themselves and then die. By contrast, human societies such as the people of Gawa create vast arrays of custom and expectation, rituals based on spirits of good and evil, arts and artefacts, etiquettes of behaviour, all of which make for a vastly more elaborate world. This wealth of culture rests on fundamental values by which people are expected to live and are judged. In turn these values create goals in life that make it rich and complex. Not only that, thanks to the Kula ring, the cultural universe of Gawa in turn gives rise to the excitement and challenge of Malinowski's *Argonauts* within a still more expansive universe, where those who negotiate transactions with other islands make even wider possibilities and accomplishments beyond the shores of Gawa itself. *The Fame of Gawa* is so called because it rests on a series of sanctions and exhortations designed to create, maintain and increase these values. If there were not a great world out there in which we can do deeds and become known for them, there would be no possibility of fame and much less to live our lives for. Culture provides the platform that allows every person to become a player. Kula activity finally comes back as Fame; and the people who exchange the valuables become the 'celebrities' of the Kula ring. To use modern parlance, culture is what ensures that the people of Gawa 'get a life'.

Munn reasons that this activity represents an expansion of what she calls inter-subjective spacetime: the scale of the world within which people can live and gain Fame. Positive transformations expand this spacetime and negative transformations shrink it. The first chapters of *The Fame of Gawa* are mainly concerned with the establishment of positive transformations, the complex systems of exchanges based on principles of reciprocity and mutual obligation and expectation that grow spacetime: first exchanges within Gawa and then through Kula with other islands. The final chapters are more concerned with witchcraft, an aspect of these same activities that can destroy and shrink our social relationships and the

¹⁴ Munn, N. *The Fame of Gawa*. Duke University Press, 1986; Malinowski, B. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Dutton, 1961 (1922).

field within which we can gain Fame. So culture itself can grow or shrink.

If Facebook may be regarded as a kind of social ‘big bang’ leading to an expanding social universe, then an analogy seems warranted with Munn’s argument about culture. For this analogy to be useful, we would have to see in Facebook something equivalent to both the positive expansion and negative shrinking of spacetime. To start with expansion, in Gawa a contrast is drawn between just eating the food you grow yourself and sending it out into ever expanding networks of exchange. Similarly, in Trinidad, a person might use some experience or reflection in dyadic exchanges with someone close to them, reporting it in a personal conversation with another person. I tell you about something that happened to me and that’s as far as it goes. But, with Facebook, they can harvest those same observations from the garden of their experiences and post them onto a site, where not just one other person will be able to consume them, but hundreds. Even if no direct messages are sent to and from individuals, they are made aware of aspects of others lives through textual and visual posts. As spacetime, it allows this information to carry across continents and diasporas, allowing news and information to travel vast distances with extraordinary effect. There is an unprecedented simultaneity, but also a digital inscription that lasts. As such, Facebook is a positive transformation and expansion of spacetime through social media.

Trinis are, in general, just as keen as the people of Gawa that their individual reputations should lead to enhanced respect for the island of Trinidad itself. Thanks to Facebook, the achievements of Trinidadians abroad, the degrees they pass, the children they have, are re-internalised within the local networks of Trinidad, ready for discussion and assessment. By the same token, Facebook internationalises events in Trinidad, initially to the Diaspora and then, if they are of sufficient interest, to others. Similarly, there is a consensual desire to export interest in particular aspects of Trinidadian culture, such as Steelband or Carnival. In the book, I also show how Facebook rests on reciprocal exchanges analogous to Munn’s reliance on Mauss and indeed Mauss’s on Malinowski. Munn, as noted above, also uses Sartre’s concept of wider witnessing ‘In Gawan images of kula fame, the virtual third party is the distant other who hears about, rather than directly observes the transaction.....As iconic and reflexive code, fame is the virtual form of influence. Without fame a man’s influence would, as it were, go nowhere: successful acts would in effect remain locked within themselves in given times and places of their occurrence or be limited to immediate transactors’ (pp. 116-117). My last proposition

rests on the idea that Facebook represents a realisation of this ideal as a virtual component in the construction of Fame. Again in my book I demonstrate the application of Munn's theory of the 'qualisign' to the analysis of Facebook.

The last chapters of *The Fame of Gawa* are devoted to negative transformations of spacetime. This implies that any cultural form that creates expansion has to have within itself the opposite quality which would destroy and shrink spacetime. I argue that the Trinidadian concept of Bacchanal corresponds to the Gawan concept of witchcraft because it derives from gossip and the exchange of news, which is part and parcel of what makes Facebook work. But it is equally the aspect that destroys its ability to expand spacetime positively. The very first portrait I introduce is one where viewing turns into stalking, stalking into jealousy and jealousy destroys a marriage.

There were many other stories circulating in Trinidad about inadvertent or sometimes deliberate exposure of sexual material, ranging from school girls to people's own relatives. Such as when a photographer has recorded something and tagged the photograph or, as is common with teenagers, the mere hint that one person's boyfriend was observed with another girl. These can cause an explosion of recrimination publically aired on Facebook itself. When such bacchanal occurs it often has the effect of either demolishing specific relationships or of making people in general frightened of the consequences of being exposed through participation in their online community. Bacchanal thereby directly contributes to the negative transformations of spacetime made possible by Facebook as it shrinks social worlds.

The other significant impact of bacchanal is that, like witchcraft in *The Fame of Gawa*, it also operates as an important sanction which secures normative and moral use of Facebook. In Gawa, witchcraft provides a sanction against those who would rather not bother to take part in these complex exchanges. We could call them the 'couch yams' of Gawa who just can't be bothered to help build a canoe or participate in a ritual, but come to fear witchcraft. In Trinidad, defining culture itself as bacchanal creates a fierce and continual debate about netiquette: how to determine what is proper and improper behaviour in the use of Facebook. Conversations about the immaturity of teenagers who fail to see the consequences of their desire to look more sexy than the girl next door or about how much they will regret losing their temper when they vent their spleen against a parent or best friend on Facebook are

typical. Equally, many negative comments appear about people who photograph private quarrels or tag too many photos or otherwise behave inappropriately. This negative potential, the bacchanal inherent in Facebook that could destroy community, is one of the main factors that help people build consensus as to how they should behave there. At least if they want to stave off destructive acts of witchcraft.

The extended analogy can be found in the book, where it is used to demonstrate my claim that, if Munn's book were a theorem about culture, then Facebook would be its proof. The true significance of her arguments only really becomes evident when they are applied, not only to Gawa, but to an entirely different context. Her theory can work not just for a few hundred people on an island in Melanesia but helps us to comprehend the vast network that is Facebook. By the same token, this act of theorisation makes another point that is central to my decision to study Facebook from an anthropological perspective. It follows from this essay that, if Kula exemplifies what anthropologists mean by the word culture, then so does Facebook.

I would prefer to offer the evidence of the book rather than these short examples, in order to make such extreme points more plausible; but the world of publishers seems inexorably slow and the book will not be out until April. Meanwhile, I hope there is enough here at least to show why I think anthropology has the potential to appreciate aspects of Facebook that might not emerge from discussion by other disciplines. That we have a responsibility to at least push things well beyond the incredibly superficial idea promulgated by films such as *The Social Network* that Facebook is best understood by an investigation of its invention by Mark Zuckerberg. I confess that I have pushed things to extremes, partly because I get intellectual pleasure from doing so. I am sure that some of you out there will see this self-indulgence as detrimental to the larger goals of our discipline, so by all means attack.