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Original Citation

Downs, Yvonne (2011) Muddy rules for cyberspace: Musings of a she-blogger. In: Gender and Education Conference (GEA) 2011, 27th-29th April 2011, University of Exeter, Exeter UK. (Unpublished)

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‘Muddy rules for cyberspace’: Musings of a she-blogger.

Yvonne Downs

SLIDE ONE

Introduction

Burk (1998) argues that the rules of engagement in cyberspace are ‘muddy’. Although this was written more than ten years ago and refers specifically to intellectual property rights in a digital age, I would argue that we still enter digital spaces on complex, emergent, often ambiguous terms. I base this contention on my experience of writing a blog for a number of months while doing research for my PhD, which in turn raised a number of questions on which I have been musing since then, which fall into the following broad concerns:

- If cyberspace is a space, what kind of space is it?
- What is the relationship of cyberspace to material spaces?
- How and on what terms do we move into and occupy the space?

This paper takes the form of an autobiographical account of my experience of blogging, more specifically of my first and last posts, that both entwines and spins out from these questions. It is located in the broader context of a consideration of ‘cyberspace’, animating the contention that ‘(t)he new opportunities and constraints online interaction creates are double-edged, leading to results that can amplify both beneficial and noxious social processes’ (Kollock and Smith 1999, p.4). Whilst acknowledging that ‘cyberspace represents an exciting new medium which allows us to communicate, teach, learn and understand in ways never before imagined’ (Bryant 2001) I also ask whether the multiplicity, mystification and mythologizing of cyberspace (Mosco 2005) has diverted our attention away from an overarching and synthesising question: ‘What happens to gender when it goes through the hardware?’ (Arpiz 1999).

In my account I will outline how my experience of blogging shaped my thinking on this, drawing on Lauren Berlant’s (1997) concept of ‘intimate publics’ in order to make sense of my musings. However, my specific and limited experience of blogging clearly cannot serve as a theory of cyberspace, although it is important to note that the notion of cyberspace as a space is a theory in itself. Some would argue that

whilst conceptualising digital domains in this way might be a useful heuristic device (Chesher 1997), the notion of space here is illusory (Kramarae 1995) and that digital domains compress or eliminate space and are better theorised as temporal (Chesher 1997, Jones 1997). Nor am I engaging specifically with its culture and politics (Holmes 1997, Jones 1997, Žižek 1997, Arpiz 1999, Green and Adam 2001, Mitra and Watts 2002), although my account instates both cultural and political considerations and I agree that '(c)yberspace and its virtual lives need their cultural, political and economic shapes analysed for their social consequences and meaning' (Jordan 2001 p.2).

Nor do I specifically address the politics of gender that are inherent in and illustrated by the concept and practice of blogging itself. The prevailing perception is that 'the most influential bloggers are men—despite statistics showing the actual number of bloggers to be relatively even across gender lines' and that 'the content of women's blogs is perceived by some to be less noteworthy than men's by virtue of their often domestic and personal sphere of reference' (Gregg 2006: 151). Although I will return to the claim that 'the emergence of something new casts fresh light on old phenomena' (Chesner 1997, p.91), my aim is primarily to instantiate a method of 'seeing with both eyes' (materially and discursively) relations of power within new digital spaces.

SLIDE TWO

First post

I began blogging in November 2008. I positioned my blog as one of the 'cultural artefacts' that I created for my PhD thesis, another of which was a sewn patchwork, which I also evoked by means of the background graphics of my blog. I chose to call my blog 'mindingthegaps' because I am concerned about what happens in the space between what St. Pierre calls the 'vicious binaries' of dichotomised thinking (1997, p.176). I called myself 'phoenixrising' to allude to the role of myth in the accomplishment of distinctions between 'separate spheres', such as public and private and personal and political. I also wanted to challenge Stanley's (2000) argument that emphasis on the self leads to the collapsing of the social into interior processes. It can do of course but I also agree with Skeggs that 'it is precisely through the telling of the self that 'social processes (of positioning, of value, of moral attribution) are put into effect' (p.350). To support her argument Skeggs cites Lauren Berlant's idea that self-telling is enabling the (re)formation of US citizenship for

example. Berlant (1997, p.9) also maintains that the distinction between the 'merely personal and the profoundly structural' is a false one. I thus saw blogging as a way to invoke the work that goes into creating separations and the mechanisms by which they are achieved. Primarily, however, I started blogging because I am interested in how the concept of reflexivity can be realised through disruptive practices, akin to being woken from an hypnotic trance by snapping fingers¹. I did keep a reflexive journal as well, but this is a solitary pursuit and its contents are for my eyes only. I also wanted a medium that would connect me to others and present my ideas to scrutiny. Contrary to Jones (1997, p.12) who argues that the internet is meaningful as a space only inasmuch as it highlights the lack of connection between those in it and that, like old men in a reading room we are 'among not with' (p.14), for me blogging served this purpose well, encapsulated in the following comment on my final post:

Oh, you stopped blogging! Just when I'd found your blog and thought, at last, another 50-ish PhD student with teenage sons

To summarise then, the *raison d'être* for my blog was as part of an academic project, albeit one that aimed to blur boundaries of public and private. Thus in my first post I wrote that I hoped my blog would allow me to:

- access what I set down relatively quickly and easily.
- create a window on what I was willing to share/make public and what I wanted to keep private.
- test whether I was willing to ramble publicly in order to interrogate my professed intention to trouble the academic habit of presenting a clever front
- prove to myself that I can do it.

On reflection I see that these aims answer the question, 'What purpose does blogging serve?' but it leaves the question, 'Why did I think it served this purpose?' unanswered. I now find it illuminating to ask, 'What unacknowledged assumptions about the kind of space I was entering are embedded in my aims?' In the first place and despite my recognition that blogging is public rambling, it is clear that I do not have the same attitude to being on display in this 'public' space as I do towards being in actual public spaces. One of the things I hate about teaching and presenting is being on display. I do not interpret this in terms of personal proclivities so much as a classed response to a feeling of being 'exposed', the roots of which lie in actual practices detailed by Rubin (1976) and Steedman (2000). And yet I do not recall any accompanying feelings of trepidation when posting, other than uncertainty about my technical know-how reflected in my final aim. Indeed in my final post in June 2010 I

write that 'it seemed like quite an adventure' and nearly all my posts have an upbeat, jaunty tone such as when I write in May 2009 that 'I likened doing my PhD to riding on swings and roundabouts', rather than using the term 'iterative process' to which that alluded. I think part of the reason for this is that I was not entering the space as an actual person but as a 'persona', 'phoenixrising', a representation of whom can be seen in my profile photograph. I have concluded that at this point I agreed with Jordan (2001, p.31) that we lose the physical body in cyberspace and that the actions and feelings of a 'persona' may not reflect the actions and feelings of their creators (Mackinnon 1995). Revisiting and musing on my aims, I see that I understood cyberspace as a public space but qualitatively different to actual public spaces and as a site of empowerment. It offered possibilities that were not available to me in actual spaces, particularly the possibility of 'appearing in public without shame' (Sen, 1999, pp.70-71). I did not question my right to take my place and stake a claim in it. I would have proceeded more cautiously had I taken heed of Wise's (1997, p.179) contention that women are always already virtual in modern and postmodern epistemologies ('not quite there, not quite real') and that in cyberspace there is more possibility of domination precisely because the 'real' body is 'imaginatively relegated' (p.181).

SLIDE THREE

Final post – June 2009

I have to make clear here that I regard this post as the end of my blog even though I posted one more time. But this wasn't a post per se. here my blog served as a repository for part of my thesis, a means of incorporating a representation of my patchwork that was less concrete than including a photograph of it in my written text. The tone of this post is sober, subdued and chastened. I was sad, cowed even, when I wrote it. The reason for this was that I had been subjected to verbal abuse of a personal nature from someone who was known to me as a result of keeping a blog. Ethical considerations mean that I will not say more than this but I do want to emphasise firstly that this attack, and I use the word consciously, was verbal and not a written comment on any of my posts. Secondly, it was delivered by someone I know well and have known for many years and not by someone with whom I had connected by virtue of blogging. Thirdly the nature of the abuse, although it was occasioned by the content of my posts, did not stem from disagreement with the content per se but from a particular interpretation of it that had little connection to my intentions when writing it.

When I began blogging I did consider that some people might take issue with my aims, that they might vehemently disagree with the blurring of public and private on methodological or epistemological grounds, that they might see this as not at all scholarly and that they might let me know all this in no uncertain terms. I cannot pretend that I am as yet at ease with the combative nature of some academic exchanges (and I voice my concerns in a post of January 2009) but, as I have intimated above, I saw cyberspace as a safer space than, say, a conference. In the same way that entering a space as a 'persona' feels less risky, disembodied critique also feels less 'personal'. I was of course aware that women in cyberspace could be harassed and that this harassment was often of a sexual nature (Filipovic, 2007). However, as Kramarae and Taylor (1993) point out, computer mediated technology is more of a male monologue than a mixed-sex conversation and I was also carving out my own space, rather than joining others in theirs such as in a chat-room. As I proceeded I felt vindicated in my confident and largely unguarded approach and I entered into some fruitful correspondence with several people who left comments or who contacted me via email. One correspondent has over time become a 'cyber buddy', a term we both used initially unconsciously, as opposed to 'virtual' or 'internet' friend for example. To me this says much about the nature of cyberspace. It suggests for example that 'cyberspace' was 'real' to us not virtual but at the same time less concrete than an 'information superhighway'; it points to a particular level of intimacy (buddy, not friend) and it indicates a developing social practice and social form in which we either participate or become marginalised (Scott, Semmens and Willoughby 2001).

However, when I began blogging I was not prepared for was the way in which the 'virtual' public content of my posts could be re-configured and re-deployed in an 'actual' private setting. I was not abused or harassed 'on the net' but in the real world, but interestingly not face to face but over the telephone. My abuser was not a disembodied stranger but was known to me. The abuse was gendered and was at the extreme end of a spectrum that at the other belittles women's presence in cyberspace as 'nattering on the net' (Spender 1996). It was at this point that Lauren Berlant's concept of 'intimate publics' became comprehensible to me and in particular her contention that in the intimate public sphere 'intimate things flash in people's faces' (1997, p.1). My blog had in effect served as a conduit for intimate public communication and represented, on a micro level, the proscription (the over-organisation according to Berlant) of public discussions about power and ethics in the

politics of gender. My experience led me to re-evaluate my belief that going out into cyberspace was qualitatively different to going out into actual public spaces. In short I do not reject the idea that the two experiences are different but I do believe that we also need to layer on other interpretations.

Moreover, when I recounted my experience in an earlier conference paper one delegate was incredulous that I had expected any different. Was I simply being naïve? Had I not seen the kind of comments that get posted on You Tube? I actually had not and I still do not understand the significance of this comment. I had said nothing extreme in any of my posts and was certainly less provocative than I am in conference papers. I had explicitly positioned my blog as an academic production. Although I had included references to the domestic sphere this content was hardly contentious and actually rather blunt and unsophisticated (I talk about putting shopping away for example). In short I had included nothing which might have prompted or warranted a personal assault. It was the mere fact that I was blogging that had incited a very particular reaction. I am therefore also saddened by the delegate's response above. To my mind it echoes the kind of reasoning that sees rape as a hazard of venturing out in heels and a short skirt and it all seemed depressingly familiar. Indeed I was reminded of Faludi's argument that:

(t)he public woman was originally a prostitute... Women, if they wanted to maintain their honour, did not speak in public. Here we see the vestiges of that.... Basically the subtext of all the vitriol is 'you whore'. What's changed?
(quoted in Filipovic 2007, p.303)

I would therefore argue that accounting for and addressing issues pertaining to change and to difference are at the heart of understanding what happens to gender when it goes through the hardware.

Conclusions

Thus I have no answers to the questions I raised in the introduction to this paper but I do have some ideas about how we might go about addressing them. Firstly, my experience of blogging leads me to concur with Vasselu (1997, p.47) who argues that:

many of the paradoxes and ethical concerns which appear to have been generated by virtual technologies are themselves a kind of emergent behaviour – unprogrammed effects generated within the tensions of more familiar systems of representation which have been supposedly disrupted and displaced.

Although recursive, I also agree with Reid (1995) that 'virtual reality' is not a set of technologies but is indeed an experience. Above all I am moved to conclude that we need to take a bivalent (Walker 2003), 'both/and' (Flyvbjerg 2004), approach to theorising cyberspace and its relationship to physical spaces. This bivalent theorising also needs to take place along various axes, such as the relationships between the material and the symbolic, embodiment/ disembodiment and power issues in gendered relations. In other words getting to grips with the nature and relations of cyberspace falls well within the ambit of feminist concerns and methodologies. Tempting as it is to see cyberspace as presenting new challenges, I see it rather as a space where 'patriarchal forms of domination and fantasy are re-enacting themselves' (Wise 1997, p.179). Therefore existing conceptual tools can provide a way of untangling inherent contradictions. Thus for example, Berlant's concept of intimate publics which I have used in this paper provides a way in to understanding the merging of public and private, which can on the one hand be a creative feminist transgression but on the other can also serve in the construction of 'otherness' and the reproduction of familiar oppressions (Dietrich 1997, p.175). As a concluding remark therefore I quote Sterling (1992, pp.xii-xiii) who maintains that:

although not exactly 'real', 'cyberspace' is a genuine place. Things happen there that have very genuine consequences'

¹ Blogging served this purpose well eg I embedded a video clip that I edited down from a longer one made as part of my participation in a separate research project (Taylor, Downs, Chikwa and Baker, in press for publication in 2011). I also embedded a song about my home town.

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