Chapter 11

Database Narrative, Spatial Montage, and the Cultural Transmission of Memory: An Anthropological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses ways in which the database narrative techniques of virtual media can be used to explore the relationship between real-world oral storytelling and embodied performance in the cultural transmission of memory. It is based on an ongoing collaboration between the author and the historical anthropologist, Wendy James, to develop a multilayered associative narrative, which considers relationships between experience, event, and memory among a displaced community. The work is based on a substantial living archive of photographs, audio, cine, and video recordings collected by Wendy James in the Sudan/Ethiopian borderlands from the mid-1960s to the present day. Its critical context relates to the ‘sensory turn’ in anthropology and to ‘beyond text’ debates within the arts and humanities regarding ways in which we can capture and represent the sensory experiences of the past.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter relates to an ongoing collaboration between the author as a visual anthropologist and lecturer in creative media production, and the Oxford-based historical anthropologist, Wendy James. This work, which has been proceeding on an intermittent basis over the past ten years, explores new possibilities for the use of interactive digital media in the communication of anthropological ideas and arguments. The work sits alongside James’ writings on her long-term fieldwork in the...
Database Narrative, Spatial Montage, and the Cultural Transmission of Memory

Sudan/Ethiopian borderlands, and is intended for distribution within museum gallery settings and networked environments, and as DVD publication. It is articulated within the context of the ‘sensory turn’ in anthropology (Howes, 2003) and ‘beyond text’ debates within the arts, humanities, and social sciences, which seek to bring non-textual forms of communication into the heart of scholarly discourse. In terms of technique, it builds on Manovich’s aesthetically orientated work on spatial montage (Manovich, 2001), to consider new possibilities through which to create narrative meaning. The focus of the work is on using multiple windows on a computer screen to juxtapose sound, still, and moving image recordings and create authored routes through a multimedia archive. The audience for this is mixed, to include academic experts, members of the public with a more general interest in the work, and the people themselves who are represented in the archive.

LONG-TERM FIELDWORK

Wendy James has been conducting intermittent fieldwork with the Uduk-speaking people from the Blue Nile area of the Sudan/Ethiopian borderlands since the mid-1960s. When she began her fieldwork, the Uduk were living as subsistence farmers in small hamlet communities but, with the outbreak of civil war in the late 1980s, they were forced to leave these hamlets and became subjected to a series of displacements across Ethiopia and the Sudan. Most of the survivors ended up living in a semi-permanent refugee camp just inside Ethiopia, where they remained until 2006, when an official repatriation scheme was initiated following the Sudan Peace Agreement. In 2011, when South Sudan became an independent state, the Uduk found themselves living just north of yet another border under the ongoing jurisdiction of the Republic of the Sudan. Recent fighting in the area has subsequently led to them to once again becoming displaced. Although James’ last trip to the Sudan/Ethiopian borderlands was in 2000, she has continued to work with the Uduk, both as a humanitarian advocate and through ongoing fieldwork with diaspora communities in the United States.

From the outset, James used audio-visual recording techniques as an integral part of her fieldwork, initially working with Super-8 film, reel-to-reel audio and photographic slides, moving on to Hi-8 video, audio cassettes and photographic prints, and more recently helping the Uduk themselves to buy their own digital cameras. In spanning more than a forty-year period, from the mid 1960s to the early 2000s, these recordings reflect the changing nature of her fieldwork through time, as she has moved from being a PhD student and participant observer, through becoming a historical witness of war and displacement, to writing advisory reports for various agencies working in the region. They also reflect the materiality of the range of recording technologies employed, which adds to the sense of a changing context of engagement through time (as described in depth in Aston & James, 2012). However, on another level there is a strong sense of consistency in James’ recording style, which combines observational footage with informal interviews often using long takes. This enables comparisons to be made across time and place, to highlight aspects of both continuity and change among the Uduk people and their neighbouring communities, and to link this to James’ own reflections and analysis on her experiences.

Many of the recordings are highly emotive in nature, as they combine observational material of everyday life and events, such as dance, music making, work rhythms, and children at play, with footage of traumatic events and spoken memories of these events. The observational material can be used to embody a sense of village life as well as to show continuities and changes that the people have undergone in their journey from the Sudan to the Ethiopian refugee camp. The transformation of tradition becomes evident, as formerly separated neighbours are thrown together in the refugee camp and children learn to combine older and
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