

poorly explained jargon gets in the way of clear exposition of the argument. Still, an impressive work which can be recommended for those interested in social theory as well as those primarily concerned with China.

**Daniel Miller and Don Slater.** *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg, 2000. Pp. 217, illustrs., bibliog, index. £14.99 (Pb.), ISBN 1-85973-389-1); £42.99 (Hc.), ISBN 1-85973-384-0.

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This is easily one of the best ethnographic studies of Internet usage. However, a more accurate title would be something like: *Uses of the Internet in Trinidad and the Trinidadian Diaspora*, as this is the book's main focus, and the authors disagree with those analysts who suggest that the Internet produces its own conventions and society.

The Internet has had a dramatic uptake in Trinidad, and this uptake is integral to the ways people express 'being Trini' and connect with their diasporic families. This is so, to the extent that the Internet can be conceived of as 'naturally Trinidadian': Trinidadians try to make their online life as Trini as possible, and seem to perceive this as inherently plausible. Because of the influence of existing culture, the Internet is not a 'virtual', or a 'disembodied' world, set off from the 'real', but connected to the everyday lives and projects of people. If the Internet is separated from social space, as it is in some Western conceptions, this needs to be explained, not taken as inevitable.

As well as talking to people in Internet cafes, and in organisations, or overseas, the authors conducted a house-to-house survey of Internet usage, and found that in general one in twenty households had a net connection, and that one in three contained people who used the Internet. Use was correlated with income (ie 62% of households in 'the Meadows' and 14% of households in 'Ford'), but enthusiasm and interest was everywhere, even among the residents of squatter's shacks. Access was also supposedly not affected by gender or age (even though boys' schools were better catered for than girls' schools, just as men at work had better access than women), but patterns of use were. Although the authors point out these variations in access, and suggest that the Trinidadian vision of equity for all might be somewhat misleading, they do not really investigate how these factors currently affect people's lives.

The authors claim that Internet usage permeates all sectors of society, all social contexts and all senses of the future. People see it as a way of being in the vanguard of style, of increasing career prospects, and of bypassing the need for formal qualifications while relying on their 'talent', 'flair' and 'ability to work things out'. The authors suggest that profound aspects of being are associated with 'style' in Trinidad, and that this helps with the ease and satisfaction of being online. This interesting idea also remains a little unexplored.

In general the preferred Internet usages were chat (particularly ICQ), email and email lists, and website construction—there was little usage of MOOs or newsgroups. Chat, in particular was seen as particularly Trini, as being an extension of hanging around and 'liming'—and the conventions of liming seem fairly heavily enforced online. People, not only used the Net to make new friends (particularly of the other sex), but to keep in

contact with their families overseas—thus in some ways re-establishing family ties. Phone calls were too expensive to make often, and ordinary letter writing was considered inappropriate. Email could be used to retell daily events while they were still fresh, to re-establish normal forms of mother daughter support, or to send jokes, photos and greeting cards (which take on the qualities of ‘gifts’, with all the Maussian implications). The Internet also fosters the Trinidadian way of conceiving of relatives as a potential network which is activated by, perhaps transient, pragmatic concerns rather than by concepts of ‘closeness’. Trinidadians overseas, can also use the Internet to ‘speak Trini’, or participate in liming—activities which might, in their countries of residence, be seen as sexist or racist.

Online relationships outside of families are treated similarly to offline relationships (as a pleasurable or pragmatic network again), and people evaluate these relationships in complex ways. People report that they can achieve closeness much more rapidly with less prejudice through email or chat—an effect which is not confined to Trinidad. The authors remark that these Internet relationships are not in opposition to traditional relationships, as is often claimed by analysts, but grow out of them.

As has been noticed elsewhere, nationalism, or more particularly ‘national identity or culture’ is not weakened by the Internet, and may even become stronger. The regional Caribbean Internet culture died with the use of ICQ and increasing Trinidadian participation. Trinidadian Internet usage also became more specifically Trini. Trinidadian web sites are often nationally centred, featuring flags, information about Trinidad and links to official information sites. Partly this nationalism, may have been provoked by people’s surprise that many non-Caribbean Internet users had never heard of the place—this hardly fits with the aspirations of Trinidadians to be in the vanguard of style or to move on the world stage.

The Internet reached Trinidad in September of 1995 and demand for services exceeded supply almost from the beginning. The government gave loans to its employees to help them connect and libraries and schools were also encouraged to connect. Surprisingly, the only lack of enthusiasm for connection came from the overseas corporations based in Trinidad.

Trinidadian Internet use is embedded within global technology and business, with constant moves to privatise and to abolish trade barriers. Though, according to the authors, most Trinidadians are optimistic and in favour of this entrepreneurial free market, there is some unease that they will have to compete against larger and established companies, and cheaper workforces in other countries (particularly in Barbados and India). The authors attempt to sketch this merging of business, national and personal aspirations, with personal lives, but with limited success—perhaps due to space constraints, but also because of their apparently limited questioning of people outside the business world. This is not that much of a disappointment as this is a vast topic, and it is doubtful that a useful formulation has yet been achieved anywhere, and their sketch is among the best around.

They further suggest that the Internet might possibly lead to decommodification of some aspects of life because of the ease of transmitting and duplicating information, and the ease of giving and obtaining services for ‘free’—or more accurately—in return for acknowledgment and status. This struggle between the traditional uses of the Internet as a system primarily relying on gift exchange and the attempts by the corporate world to fully commercialise all online transactions, is current throughout the world.

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Publishers often require short works, and this produces the only major weakness of the book. Sometimes there is not quite enough detail, not quite enough exploration of the differences with which people might approach or use the Net, and a little too much summary rather than example. The best use of the reflections of local users occurs in the final chapter on Religion, and this merely emphasises the relative silence elsewhere. Though the relevant summaries of Trinidadian society imply a masterful compression of data, I could not escape the feeling that I needed to know more, or could not really evaluate the accuracy of what was being described. This is, however a minor objection, probably solved by consulting the author's other work. This book can be recommended with enthusiasm.

**Fred Myers (ed).** *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. Sante Fe and Oxford: School of American Research Press and James Curry. 2001. Pp.368 illustrs, bibliog., index. US\$60.00 (Hc.) ISBN 1-93061-806-9; US\$24.95 (Pb.) 1-93061-805-9.

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This collection is a product of an advanced seminar at the School of American research titled 'Material Culture: Habitats and Values.' The seminar was organised in 1996 by Annette Weiner and Fred Myers. Owing to the untimely death of Annette Weiner in 1997 publication of the papers was delayed. The collection, edited by Myers, is published now as a *festschrift* and is, in the first instance, a tribute to Weiner and her extensive interests in gender, exchange and material culture. In the course of his introduction, Myers traces some of the developments in Weiner's thought as she innovated and developed work in dialogue with Maussian anthropology. Central to these developments was her challenge to a simple distinction between gift and commodity and her arguments that exchanges had the capacity to realise hierarchy as much as identity. Her focus on 'inalienable objects' opened the way to new accounts of value and the nature of things. Myers' comments on Weiner, that come in the course of a broad-ranging introduction, are complemented by a substantial discussion with Weiner included at the back of the book. In it Weiner recounts various aspects of her career in anthropology and also comments in insightful ways on recent moves in the discipline. She remarks that art and economics took her to the Trobriands which became a 'fatal attraction'. In anthropology's corpus, this conversation will stand beside others with major figures of the twentieth century. Each of these conversations is of historical significance.

The collection also plays a role in the discipline's present and future. It signals the centrality of studies in material culture in today's anthropology. Reading essays by Webb Keane on money in Sumba, and Nicholas Thomas on the indigenous and nationalist import of particular modernist painters in Australia and New Zealand, one sees a movement in anthropology to take the object as the nexus of social meanings not tied to particular sites. The task of ethnography is thereby reconstituted and realises the initial promise held out by the work of Kropytovff, Gell and others in that earlier seminal collection edited by Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*. Following Munn and Miller, this new collection shifts from a focus on exchange to issues of objectification, to material things and the regimes of value that they invoke. Miller's own reference to

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