Ethnologies

The Cultures of Computing. By Susan Leigh Starr, editor. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Reprint. 282 p., Index, bibliography, ISBN 0-631-19282-4.)

Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies. By Rob Shields, editor. (London: SAGE, 1996. Pp. viii +196, index, bibliography, ISBN 0-8039-7519-8.)

Bruce Lionel Mason

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Citer ce compte rendu

pagan hero could not be converted. Clark's book then explains to us that not having other epics with which to compare *Beowulf* is not an insurmountable problem in terms of analyzing themes. The *Beowulf* poet's individual artistry, as that of all epic poets, she argues, long took a place secondary to the power of tradition. By studying the themes of this one poem within their contexts, one appreciates not only the talents and idiosyncrasies of this particular poet, but also a different concept of repetition and theme, all without having other large Anglo-Saxon epics with which to compare it.

In the end, *Beowulf* remains a poem difficult to categorize, but these two studies give us more to acknowledge in its text, its tradition, and its composer. The *Beowulf* epic tradition begins and ends with one poem, but Clark and Davis ensure that the critical tradition will live on with their provocative books. There is much here to be appreciated, some to be challenged, and all to be built upon, just as these two authors have clearly appreciated, challenged and built upon the foundations set by Parry and Lord.

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According to Rob Shields, editor of *Cultures of Internet*, the Internet is "Over-hyped, over-sensationalized...[and] under-examined" (p. ix). I am not sure I agree with the latter part; these two books represent the latest in the burgeoning wave of publications dealing with the ways in which computing, computers and culture inter-relate. However, despite two very similar titles, the anthologies present two very different perspectives.

Susan Leigh Star's *The Cultures of Computing* is already into its second printing and she describes it as having "four major themes: computers as a medium for building communities and networks; computers as a way of stretching and redefining specific cultural practices; problems in representing cultural practices for computing; questions of power and cultural conflict in

the various worlds of computing" (p. 8). This description reads like that of an overstretched compiler and, sure enough, the anthology seems somewhat out of control as well as already out of date. This is a slightly harsh summary of an occasionally invigorating set of articles, but on the whole I found the anthology to be turgid going.

Susan Leigh Star's introduction is one of the high points of the collection and symptomatic of it; occasionally brilliant insight is lost in decontexualized esoterica and a frantic attempt to make things fit. For example, she spends a fair amount of the introduction detailing the "Geek Code," one of the more fascinating folkloric creations to come out of the Internet. Essentially, the code consists of a series of symbols that encode information about a user. For example if I were to sign my email Bruce Mason t+, then a reader could track down a Geek Code and decipher the "t+" as "Star Trek is a damn fine TV show and is one of the only things good on television anymore" (Star, p. 18). Her reporting of the code is fine, but she fails to ground her discussion to any extent, commenting only that it draws from a long association of computing professionals with the image of "the nerd" (p. 20). She gives us no clear idea whether the Geek Code is ever used and, if so, by whom, when, to whom and so on. As with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet's recent article on forms of Internet folklore (1995), Star substitutes some fun data for analysis. On the other hand I found her analysis of being "homed" and then, by extension, of being "wired" to be very stimulating. Drawing on the feminist perspective that "every marked category implies its opposite" (p. 22), she first deconstructs the state of being homeless then reconstructs its opposite being "homed:" for example, she claims that "being homed means I do not risk arrest in the process of conducting my bodily functions (eating, sleeping, passing waste);" (p. 25). She then extends this analysis to the "consensual hallucination" (Gibson 1984) of cyberspace in order to examine what it means to be "wired," the emic term for being connected to the Net. Such thoughtful scholarship is precisely the type of analysis that often goes out of the window in the desire to publish something to do with the Internet while it is still a hot topic.

With a few exceptions, the primary focus of this anthology centres on the use of computers in working environments. Two of the articles come from the Computer Supported Cooperative Work project (CSCW) at the University of Sussex in the U.K. According to Mike Hale in his article (p. 103-17), this project exists in a borderland between industry and academia and has pioneered a line of research into software ethnography. This exploration of how workers use computers and programs in the work environment is remarkably similar

to Michael Owen Jones's conception of "corporate ethnography" and vulnerable to the same charges. However, Hale mounts a fascinating defence of the approach by describing it as "monstrous" (p. 109). By this he is attempting a post-structural, Marxist investigation of "undisciplined" research. To the companies they work with, the ethnographers are strange creatures who come up with weird results; to the academic community, the ethnographers are dubious cousins who talk the right jargon but conduct very dubious looking research (e.g. standing in front of a room of twenty executives and asking them to free associate on an image). Hale's description of the project is appealingly syncretic, illustrating well the insight that comes from this deviant form of research. On the other hand, Eevi Beck's article, also based on research done into CSCW, is poorly written and meanders to no discernible point in its description of two academics composing a paper by email.

Unfortunately, Beck's article is more the rule than the exception in this anthology. The nadir is Dianne Hagaman's article in which she wonders what it would have been like if Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead had access to hyper-textual databases and multi-media environments to display their Balinese fieldwork. I found Karen Ruhleder's article on the difference between classical scholarship using printed texts and that using electronic databases to be similarly barren. Technically the issue is of great importance; how do changes in storage and retrieval of information affect our use and understanding of it? Ruhleder however gets bogged down in detail and seems to be unaware of how many parallels there are between her work and issues in communication and medium in general. Given that research into classics spawned the interest into the relationship between orality and literacy this seems strange at best.

Several articles appear to be extremely padded. Rogers Hall and Reed Stevens compare competence in the use of Computer-aided design (CAD) between two engineers and a set of seventh-graders. Their paper is an attempt to reframe "competence as a comparison across settings" (p. 144). However their argument is tenuous at best; it appears to substitute length for coherence. Similarly Margaret Riel spends a good few thousand words describing the joys of hooking classrooms up to the Internet. Although there are some interesting issues at stake, Riel's article would work better as an advertisement than scholarship.

That is not to say that there is nothing in this anthology of interest. For example, Kathryn Henderson, in discussing "The Visual Culture of Engineers," makes some fascinating comments about how "knowledge in practice is the

locus of our most powerful knowledgability" (p. 199). Thus, she describes how Italian renaissance art drew great sweeping scenes as if seen through windows whereas 17th century Dutch artists drew intensely detailed portraits. According to Henderson, this resulted from the preoccupation with the camera obscura that radically changed how the artists saw their world. Such an insight has obvious applicability to folklore and ethnological research into material culture products and ways of seeing.

There are two articles in this anthology dealing with culture on the Internet. Unfortunately both scholars give the impression of having written their pieces quickly and to order. Nancy Baym's "From Practice to Culture on Usenet" is disappointing. Baym is one of the leading scholars into the creation of culture on the Internet; her 1993 article in the *Journal of Folklore International*, which applied Hymes's ethnography of communication, was the ideal response to John Dorst's claim that traditional ethnographic methodologies could not be used to study computer-mediated culture. Unfortunately, her article in this anthology is little more than a slight rewrite that applies some of the work done on fans, from a cultural studies perspective, to the Usenet newsgroup for devotees of daytime television soap-operas, "rec.arts.tv.soap." Similarly, A.R. Stone has been one of the leading investigators of cyber culture from a feminist and cultural studies perspective, but her article "Sex and Death Among the Disembodied" is little more than a rewrite of previous work. Even so I found her comments about the importance of "computer supported cooperative play," a dig at the CSCW project prevalent in this book, a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately she makes some rudimentary mistakes about role-playing games in her overview of MUDs (Multi-user dungeons).

Among the best of the articles is Randi Markussen's "Constructing Easiness." Her objective is to deconstruct the naturalizing assumption that technology has made women's lives easier. It is, essentially, a literature review of the relationship between the introduction of technology and women's work. Her thesis is that most new technology is imposed on women's work by men and tends to reflect male perceptions of the nature and importance of such work. Using the example of nursing, she examines how much of the work done by nurses is "invisible" and not easily managed by computer systems. Indeed computer systems often make the nurse's work more difficult by demanding attention and focusing on unexpected areas.

The best of the articles in this collection are Spiro and Jones' work on hypertext and Paul Edwards's article linking U.S. politics and cyberpunk. Spiro

and Jones draw on the work of neo-pragmatist scholars such as Richard Rorty and their notions of the process of interpretation. A neo-pragmatist approach to a text, whether folkloric or otherwise, sees no one "essential" reading, but rather a series of different readings, each one grounded in the context of the reader. Such an approach is beginning to become popular in folkloristic thinking (e.g. Dubois 1996; Neal and Robidoux 1996) as it emphases the relationship between audience and text. Spiro and Jones speculate that the emergence of hypertexts, and it should be noted that the World Wide Web with its hypertextual format was in its infancy at the time of writing this article, could provide a means of understanding the rich interconnectedness of texts within a context and lead away from essentialist readings.

Finally, Paul Edwards provides an interesting analysis of the relationship between the discourse of cyberspace and the American political milieu. According to Edwards, computers "have always been as much as symbols as practical devices" (p. 70). The same could be said of the concept of cyberspace as a vast unregulated frontier. He grounds his analysis in the idea of "closed" and "green" worlds in opposition, postulating that the Cold War years were conceptualized as a hermetically bounded struggle between the two super-powers. Computers both as symbols and tools recreated this worldview; U.S. technology symbolically reproduced naturalizing assumptions about the rightness of the American cause. Edwards then proceeds to trace this concept through various science-fiction productions ("Terminator," "2001," "2010" and "Alien") and demonstrates the inter-relationship between machine and human, specifically the conception of computers as "others." Ultimately he postulates that Gibson's novels, which introduced the term "cyberspace," feature humans trying to break into the closed world of cyberspace while intelligent computers try to break out of it. His analysis is provocative but I wonder why he did not address Terry Gilliam's dystopian fantasy "Brazil" which features a future closed-world of regressed technology in which the hero escapes into a green world through hallucinations brought on by torture, nor did he mention Ridley-Scott's "Bladerunner" which features a similar dynamic and has been described as the first postmodern cyberpunk movie.

Shields' anthology *Cultures of Internet* presents a postmodernist, cultural critique of the Internet. Where Star's anthology deals with specifics, this book leaps into generality with a certain carefree abandon. Its main focus is an attempt to treat the phenomenon of the Internet as a type of cyberspace. As Shields says:

> In this work, we distinguish "cyberspace" as a generic concept for the
> imagined "world within" the computer or the social landscape portrayed in
> the lists of Usenet groups and postings. In this sense, Internet is a cyberspace
> (p. 5).

The anthology is structured quite differently to Star's work. Counter-posed comments in pages attempt to create a dialogic style and it is clear that the authors were encouraged to write discursively. This level of freedom has helped generate a fascinating and diverse set of articles.

The book opens with three articles that examine the relationship between legislation, social policy and the Internet. Leslie Regan Shade examines the furore created when material about the Bernado and Homolka case was circulated on the Internet. A Canadian court had ordered a ban on the publication of information pertaining to the case; however, several free speech advocates took the opportunity to disseminate the banned information via the Internet. This was just one of several examples that have taxed governments' abilities to regulate the flow of information. Indeed Shade follows a model of the Internet as extra-territorial, a cyberspace which knows no national boundaries. This may be overstating the case. Singapore quite effectively controls the Internet by restricting access to it; the average phone call has fewer barriers than the Internet. However, there is certainly a self-perception among Internet gurus that cyberspace transcends nationality and resists control of information. Regan approvingly quotes net pioneer John Gilmore's famous dictum that "The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it" (p. 24). The Internet is an example of a combination of social norms and technology that results in a climate in which "information wants to be free"(p. 24).

The next two articles examine issues occurring in the implementation of cyberspaces within countries. André Lemos provides a fascinating historical account of the Minitel network in France in 1981. Originally designed by the government as a means to put France on the cutting edge of the information revolution it has, instead, been subverted by its users and become a place in which sexual fantasies are acted out and virtual communities created. Rather than an economic engine it has become a chattering maze. For Lemos this is a positive outcome; a "cold and austere" (p. 45) technology has been "reenchanted" (p. 47) by its users. A different level of irony is apparent in Joerge Dyrkton's description of the implementation of the Internet in Jamaica. As with France's Minitel network, Jamaica has embraced the Internet in an attempt to put itself at the edge of the information technology revolution yet

the contradictions are immense. Unfortunately Dyrkton does not pursue the issue at any great length, merely noting that "e-mail is too cool to bring about improvements in unemployment or other immediate social gains" (p. 56).

The fourth and fifth articles look at the relationship between cyberspace and bodily presence. Rob Shields and Katie Argyle ask "Is there a Body in the Net?" They note that

> Technology is often viewed as a source of separation between people, a barrier....Nonetheless, "presence" doesn't just vanish. Technology mediates presence. Within computer communication technology, there are ways that allow us to be present to each other, with our bodies, interacting in a holistic manner (p. 58).

Their analysis is, however, somewhat superficial and largely old-hat, consisting of simple comments about "emoticons" (graphic figures used to express emotion, e.g.:-) for smiling) and the use of emote commands in bulletin boards. Of much more interest is Ken Hillis's article entitled "A Geography of the Eye." In it he asks "Do cyberspace and [virtual reality] have a *moment* of invention, do they represent a decisive break that sets them apart from TV and telephone from which they are partly cobbled, imagined and extended?" (p. 71). He answers his questions through an ideological history of Virtual Reality, from early flight simulators to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to the present-day Internet. Key to his analysis, from a folklorist's viewpoint, is his concept of cyberspace as an invented space with the modernist phenomenon of the nation state, referencing the works on Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson. I do however disagree with his assertion that "In a post-national infomatics, narrative gets in the way of data, and cyberspace becomes both the new spatial metaphor and actual location of global power" (p. 88). I think narrative is crucial in the building of cyberspace; where Hillis sketches a formation of cyberspace through supra-organic forces, I think a folkloristic viewpoint that sees culture created in small groups and then disseminated to be a more plausible and humane perspective.

Hillis' article and the following one, by Dan Thu Nguyen and Jon Alexander, represent the peak of this collection. Both are superb attempts at theorizing the Internet. Nguyen and Alexander worry that we are giving up our bodies too easily in their analysis of the politics of cyberspace. According to the authors, the Internet is fundamentally disorderly.

> Net play is addictive; Net work is hegemonic. Both are disordering our primordial frame of reference — human subjectivity within spacetime (p. 107).

One particular body that is being disrupted by the Internet is the body politic. Nguyen and Alexander find that power, like information, is distributed in cyberspace and that institutionalized power structures are crumbling. The positive side of this is that people can create "a conversational, demassified, non-representational democracy that transcends the nation state" (p. 111) via the Internet. The negative side is the abandonment of the body, and the authors paint a bleak picture of that, claiming that cyberspace "diminishes the range and quality of human encounters, for, as deliberate and selective creations of ourselves, these representations lack the responsibility of an actual bodily commitment" (p. 116). Conversely, Nguyen and Alexander argue that this abandonment is perversely addictive. They focus on the brutality often found in online fantasy adventure games (MUDs), the prevalence of several rather nasty types of pornography. Noting that virtual sex frequently leads to very real orgasm and that the main problem that online sex chat-line users face "is not being able to type quickly enough, especially with one hand" (p. 117) they state that "the paradoxes that lurk within cyberspace gradually translate into cultural perversions and social-political distortions" (p. 117). The authors' theorizing is brilliant but their evidence is scanty and anecdotal; testing such questions and examining the lived experience of cyberspace is one arena in which folklorists and ethnologists have much to offer.

The rest of the collection lies in the shadow of the preceding two articles. "Contradictions in Cyberspace" by *Interrogate the Internet* (an interdisciplinary working group) reads like a poor parody of McLuhan with gnomic statements such as "The Net, then, has attained a status much like God...before rationalization" (p. 131). The nearest to ethnography in this collection comes in Katie Argyle's little piece "Life after Death" in which she reports on her emotions about the death of a systems operator who ran an online community of which she is a member. Although it is an interesting subject, Argyle never really tackles anything and the article feels as though it was hurriedly written to fill space. Heather Bromberg's article "Are MUDs communities?" is simply poorly researched and somewhat out of date. She takes issue with the lack of writing on MUDs, clearly unaware of a large body of work that was already extant in 1994 at the time of writing. Mark Lajoie's article "Psychoanalysis and Cyberspace" is simply awful — a classic example of the ludicrous, masturbatory field that is psychoanalysis. The anthology, however, ends on a good rabble rousing note. Sadie Plant's article on cyberfeminism explores the growing movement of radical feminists using the Internet to attempt to subvert partriarchal structures. Although the work is almost as intractable as Lajoie's

psychoanalytic opus at times and somewhat overheated, Plant does provide some interesting insights and provocative questions.

Although both books have problems, both can be useful for folklorists and ethnologists interested in studying computers and culture. Star's anthology comes out of a modernist stable and generally focuses on the use of computers in working contexts. I found it overly specific and suspect that most scholars will find that the majority of the anthology does not repay reading. Also, scholars with an interest in the Internet and cyberspace generally will find little of interest. It is most likely to be of use to specialists in occupational culture. Shields' anthology is precisely the reverse; its weakness is that it lapses into generalization. However this does mean that the book has a wide range of potential uses. Anyone interested in the ramifications of the Internet in our society will find much of interest. Yet, ironically, I found that I did not come away with any better idea about the experience of being wired, Katie Argyle's article excepted. At times the articles in the book are so concerned with applying the latest theories that I found little insight into the practice of cyberspace. This, I suggest, is one place in which ethnologists should be contributing.

Taken together the two anthologies provide an interesting comparison. Star's anthology has an "old school" feel to it. Fundamentally modernist it looks for meaning in work and interactions with computers. Conversely, Shields' collection focuses purely on the emergent concept of cyberspace and its effect on culture from a post-modern perspective. Both collections however suffer from being already outdated. The leisurely schedule of academic book publishing means that nothing in these two anthologies is cited from after 1994. You probably will not be reading this until sometime in 1999. The original research for most of the articles seems to have been done between 1991-1993. Since that time the breadth and depth of the Internet has increased exponentially and whole new technologies, such as the World Wide Web, have emerged. Ironically then one of the most fascinating statements that I find emerging from both of these anthologies is that scholarly publishing just cannot keep up with the latest developments in this field.

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Captured Voices: Five Centuries of Interplay Between Folk Literature and Print. An Exhibition. Curated by Michael Taft. (Edmonton: University of Alberta. Pp. vi + 32, illustrations.)

The scholarly field known as history of the book (histoire du livre) generally focuses on the transmission of written text from author to reader, whether in manuscript or print form. Essentially interdisciplinary, the field embraces the approaches of both literary scholarship and cultural history. Where one considers creative and reception processes, including the influence of publishers and readers on a given text, the other examines the context for publication and dissemination — that is, prevailing political, religious, legal, economic, or societal conditions. Scrutiny of internal changes wrought in a text by physical production also plays a role in this new field; akin to classical scholarship, wherein variant texts are compared and analyzed to establish an archetypal document, the goal of this technique (analytical bibliography) ultimately is to produce critical editions of literary text.

Folklorists will recognize this latter methodology, which emerged at about the same time in anthropological work. Given the close affinity in these concerns and approaches, it is surprising to find little interaction among