16 Place-objects

Anthropology of digital photography/s

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Introduction

Digital photographs are prominent features of everyday life; seen on smartphones, laptop screens, printed out, and uploaded to storage cloud archives. Rarely, however, have digital photographs/photography been a central focus of anthropological study. This dearth of scholarship is reminiscent of an earlier intellectual moment in visual and material anthropology, whereby (analogue) photographs had been regarded in the discipline, in Elizabeth Edwards' words, as a somewhat 'poorer cousin' to film.¹ A dual problem that digital photographs have posed for anthropologists is that they do not provide *something* clear to interact with, nor *somewhere* 'tangible' to go to, to be with them as part of social research. I explore these two issues in this chapter via my anthropological research on photography in Iran, which was a site of limited geographical access to me as a British passport holder in a politically fraught geopolitical moment in 2012. Focusing on the 'what' and 'where' of digital photography/s, I will suggest, leads us to advancing theories of objects and places, and such thinking and working with what I will call 'place-objects' can have broad relevance for MCS research in places of limited physical access, but which need not preclude the researcher's presence. My attempt to link the (digital) photograph with place follows a definition of place as, in Christopher Tilley's words, 'far more than location' (1994: 15): rather than being *of/about* a location, places, Tilley writes, are specific 'contexts for human experience, constructed in movement, memory, encounter, and association' (Ibid.). So too are digital photographs bound up in movement, being zones of encounter, memory, and contact. Sarah Pink, in a similarly phenomenological sense, suggests that digital photographs cannot be mapped as static nodes in networks, but can be understood as visual 'place-events' that are 'made, carried, consumed, move forward, and open up potentialities with perceiving embodied persons as part of specific environmental configurations' (2011b: 8). Linking the digital photograph to place along these lines, we see how digital photographs implicate, as do other kinds of physical/digital objects, the places through which they have moved,

and the related socialities of each place, in turn, shape their 'objectness' in the world.

The theoretical discussion about objects such as digital photographs as places is also bound to a methodological one. The argument about methodology presented in this chapter is theorised 'backwards' from the field, from the empirical research I undertook on Iranian popular digital-photographic practices between 2012 and 2013, in a range of places online and offline, inside and outside of Iran. In showing how digital photographs are of place, and *emplace*, the digital photograph can be seen and handled as a dynamic digital object, moving across social contexts and material registers, while it both reflects and makes place socially, politically, digitally, in this case opening up methodological pathways for MCS research on Iran. The case of my own restricted physical access to Iran provides the backdrop to the chapter's theoretical and methodological advancements, arguing that what might be considered more conventionally as 'problems' of place, such as restricted or unavailable access, can actually *be* accessed by rethinking the relationship between place and object, and taking seriously the proposition that the object becomes a place and a site of field research. In my research on Iran, digital photographic-objects became the places I ethnographically travelled to and with – across a range of geographical, social, and political sites to an extent that superseded the one month I was physically on the ground in the country.

I therefore suggest that a material cultural handling of digital photographs as *place-objects* helps us to understand how digital photographs are not only visual vehicles, carrying representation and aesthetic codes (Campanelli 2010), but, as digital objects, part of what they are as things is embedded with place – and, in turn, the place-making that digital photographs are implicated in creates social space(s) that the ethnographer can enter into and be with/in. This capacity for movement via the place-object, I argue, has broader implications and can matter when research topics touch upon politically precarious geopolitical issues that determine the nature of access in certain contexts of social enquiry. To begin the discussion, a historical overview of where the digital photograph stands in material culture anthropology is required before exploring how digital photographs, as contemporary moving objects, are bound up with place, which altogether forms the notion of place-object as theory and method for MCS.

The digital photograph in MCS: materiality and practice

The intellectual history of working with digital photographs in anthropology comes from a constellation of lineages on photography and the visual, spanning communication studies, visual studies, STS, sociology, and humanities, especially history of art. Two theoretical interests that tie these areas together are *materiality* and *practices*, which I will consider in turn as part of the material culture foundations of the digital photograph.

Materiality

The theoretical understanding and handling of photographs as objects is fundamental in the fields of anthropology and photography. Visual-anthropological scholarship on film and photography had been long focused on images; an approach that privileged analytical frameworks of representation, symbol, and sign.² However, in their seminal (2004) volume *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart marked a certain ‘moment’ in an anthropology of photography – one that had become object-focused. In moving away from semiotic approaches towards an object-focused framework for photographs based on the materiality of objects, Edwards and Hart and others highlighted the physical properties of photographs as thought to be central to their ‘objectness.’ In turn, this physical-materiality was found to shape the ways that ‘photo-objects,’ as they called it, function and have e/affect in discrete ethnographic contexts:

Materiality can be said here to have a positivistic character, in that it is concerned with real physical objects in a world that is physically apprehendable not only through vision but through embodied relations of smell, taste, touch and hearing.

(Edwards and Hart 2004: 2)

As such, it was the uniqueness of physical objects that constituted objects’ ‘aura,’ an idea espoused by material culture scholarship on photography within this oeuvre. Christopher Pinney, for instance, explicates the social efficacy of photographs in terms of a photograph’s material agency (1997: 171). What he terms ‘proximal empowerment’ denotes the ability of powerful objects (such as photographs) to bring about a sense of proximity on the part of the individual towards sacred beings or deities rooted in the physical materiality of the photograph, predicated on bodily contact with the photographic object. Not altogether departing from this tradition, but rather re-articulating it in a digital context, I aim to illustrate what it is about the digital photograph – whose physical engagements with objects are mediated by computer/phone screens – that constitutes its social efficacy as image *and* object, albeit digital ones. First, this raises the question about the materiality of the digital-photographic object.

That the digital *is* material and vice versa is a founding principal of Digital Anthropology as it was conceived of within UCL Anthropology’s material culture section. In Daniel Miller and Heather Horst’s seminal 2012 volume, the social order was shown to be a material one, not predicated on abstract systems of societal relations, and this altogether called for a holistic approach to studying the digital (Miller and Horst 2012). The material basis of the digital has since become an established principle, informing the majority of anthropological research on the digital. In their book *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology*, Sarah Pink, Elisenda Aredèvol, and

Débora Lanzeni speak to a contemporary world where ‘the digital and the material are not separate, but entangled elements’ (2016: 1), while in the context of contemporary critical museum studies, Haidy Geismar writes how

we need to think about the digital not only as material, rather than immaterial, but also in terms of a trajectory of materiality that links our commonplace understandings of the digital to the analogue, information to material, systems to structures, knowledge to form.

(2018: xvii)

Paolo Favero, writing specifically about images in the digital age describes how ‘the supposed immateriality of the digital is evidently one of the greatest myths of our epoch’ (2018: 78). In the digital context, then, materiality and ‘objectness’ remains a core framework for understanding digital photographs/photography in social terms, which will be subsequently developed in theorising the place-object.

Practices

In addition to the materiality of photographs is the study of photography as social practice. This is a distinction Jonas Larsen highlights in developing an ‘ethnographic framework’ for digital photography:

[P]hotographing is absent from most theory and research that jumps straight from photography to photographs[, ... such studies move] directly to the representational worlds of photographs and skip over their production, movement and circulation. The diverse hybrid practices and flows of photography are rendered invisible.

(Larsen 2008: 143)

Photography as practice, I concur with Larsen, remains fundamental to an anthropological handling of digital photography and photographs – an approach that predates the digital context of the medium. Seminal anthropological scholarship on analogue photography from India (Pinney 1997) and Tibet (Harris 2016) to West Africa (Buckley 2001; Sprague 2003) and Indonesia (Strassler 2010) has examined histories and forms of popular, amateur, and ‘vernacular’ practices, showing how photography belongs to and/or departs from national visual traditions, image regimes, and wider socio-technological developments. Practice has also been a main framework for multidisciplinary perspective studies of digital photography (Larsen 2008; Gómez Cruz and Lehmuskallio 2016). The emphasis on practice highlights the social dimension of photography as dialogical. In her work on digital amateur photography, Sarah Pink, recalling Pierre Bourdieu’s 1992 study of (analogue) amateur photographers in France, notes how ‘amateur photography is not necessarily an activity done for its own sake, but is implicated in other

activities' (2011a: 95). So too with the popular digital-photographic practice of photoblogging in Iran, as I will discuss, whereby the capacity to dialogue *with* viewers is fundamental in what the practice of photoblogging is (Cohen 2005).

Following Larsen's ethnographic framework for digital photography as 'practices and flows,' I am interested in the myriad practices that can be determined through intentionality and/or 'undetermined' practices (Poster 1999: 16), connected to photographers, digital infrastructures, and the situated and 'interpretative flexibility' (Pinch and Bijker 1984) on the part of viewers. To conceive of digital photography anthropologically, then, in line with material culture perspectives of materiality and practice, is to study photographs as objects and practice, not simply to look at the image as a flat or *finished* representation – though as I will suggest, representation remains a core framework for any study of photographs/y. What is it about the digital-materiality of the digital-photo-object then, and the practices of digital photography, that links it to place? The digital-photographic object creates place via a combination of human and technological processes, practices, and desires – processes that are both human and extra-human, again recalling Christopher Tilley's notion of place as 'both internal and external to the human subject; a personally embedded centre of meanings and a physical locus for action' (1994: 15). With the present chapter I include digital places (and spaces) in addition to a 'physical locus for action' through the theory of the place-object.

Place

Exploring how place is linked with object through digital photography requires reviewing how 'place' has been defined in material culture anthropology and related disciplines. Separate to the notion of 'space,' which Tilley has suggested is a more abstract notion, contingent upon the social construction of it and its reality: 'what space is depends on who is experiencing it and how – it cannot exist apart from the events and activities within which it is implicated' (1994: 15). Places have more 'distinctive meanings and values for persons' and as such, 'are of affective importance[...] personal and cultural identity are bound up with place' (Ibid.). This phenomenological emphasis on affect and the situated experience of place are important in thinking about the efficacy of the digital photograph as a *place*-object bound up with, in the case of my research, post-1979 revolution Iranian national and transnational identity politics. Crucial to the theoretical argument about the place-object is placing the object in context as part of what geographer Doreen Massey calls 'constellations of processes' (2005: 141) that are unbounded and constituted through movement. With the digital photograph it is the constellation of process and practice(s) that produce the material object and render it visible in discrete digital and social places which, in turn, ends up producing social space. Hence objects, place, and space in this analogy, are not fixed, static, or mappable, but are both objects and environments made through motion.

Representing place: photoblogging in/of Iran

The present moment of material culture is in many ways in a post-representational phase. Material culture scholarship has steadily steered away from linguistic-based semiotic approaches that characterised early and mid-twentieth century approaches, as the spectrum of work detailed in this volume attests. However, with specific regards to photographs as material-culture objects, a capacity for representation remains a fundamental part of how (and why) images exist and are efficacious in contextual places (Pink 2001), and so too as I will argue, in the digital landscape, where ‘place-objects’ goes some way in explaining the digital photographic object’s agency, mobility, and lifespan.

Representation is fundamental in the practice of Iranian photoblogging. What (digital) photographs in these digital and social contexts ‘show,’ as opposed to the stories or narratives they ‘tell’ (Grimshaw 2001), holds diverse significance for a range of makers and viewers of the photographs. Anna Grimshaw provides a relevant discussion of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ with regards to film that I find useful in explaining how many Iranian photobloggers I worked with used images. The notion of ‘telling,’ involves a certain level of didacticism in communicating a narrative message. ‘Showing’ by contrast, involves a sense of exposition or display of a stand-alone image (or system of images) with a potentially greater discursive capacity, necessitating engagement with an audience. The Iranian photobloggers with whom I conducted research took pride in their capacity, as people with camera phones in everyday life, to show all kinds of images to a range of imagined viewers in order to engage in the historically loaded politics of representing Iran. With their images exhibited online, my informants expressed and demonstrated desires to show (represent) the ‘truth’ (*haghighat*) and a ‘reality’ (*vāghey’at*) of life across the country to people inside and outside Iran who may not be familiar with what the country and its visual and sociocultural diversities look like. Amin, in his early thirties and from Tehran, explained how

photoblogging is my medium of choice if for no other reason than that it involves a camera and the Internet. Even a tiny, barely functional camera phone provides the means to capture what I wanted to show to the world: the truth about Iran.

These ‘truths’ are subjective visions by the women and men who have the cultural capital and economic and technological means to deploy them.

A typical example of the kind of images seen on Iranian photoblogs can be seen in Figure 16.1. The image is a digital photograph taken on a basic Nokia camera phone in 2008 by the prominent photoblogger who uploaded it to his blog, ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ (LGOIT). It depicts Western brands and basic bathroom products, such as ‘Nivea’ moisturiser, as ostensibly seen in an average home in Iran. LGOIT described their intention of using everyday

Figure 16.1 Mundane ‘Iranian’ objects of everyday life.

Source: LGOIT. August 2008 archive. Used with permission.

digital images of quotidian objects to visually speak to various international and national narratives about Iran and how Iranians ostensibly live.

These sets of photographs are intended to be viewed as ‘normal’ images that represent the everyday place(s) of Iran. Such images speak to viewers abroad – including Westerners, and also Iranians who fled or live in exile – about how Iranians inside Iran live in a country that exists ostensibly outside the Western fold, and under heavy US-imposed economic sanctions. A visual discourse of ‘ordinariness’ and the social salience of ordinary ‘stuff’ (Miller 2008; 2010) are hereby deployed, as a communicative strategy in these photographs, which are taken and commodified/exhibited to viewers online as representing a ‘real Iran.’

The desire for alternative representation of the place of Iran witnessed in Iranian photoblogs sits atop a significant (visual-)ideological history spanning the twentieth century, but which gathered particular traction during and following the revolution of 1979, which saw the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The subsequent decades of social, political, and technological change led to extensive national and geopolitical-strategic campaigning over what Iran was ostensibly becoming – campaigns that were often posited in contradistinction to the United States and UK due to the

alleged '*gharbzadegi*' ('westoxification') that the ideological 'nativist' architects of the Islamic regime claimed was a corrosive feature in Iran under the former Pahlavi regime. Images, as a range of scholars have shown, became central to the post-1979 nationalising mission in Iran (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000; Varzi 2006), and to governments in 'the West' keen to represent the new regime (Adelkhah 2009). State media, photographs, street art, cartoons, paintings, museum exhibitions, and cemeteries were all deployed by the regime to uphold its national imaginary and form a basis by which Iranian subjectivity has been mediated transnationally in recent decades. Iranian photobloggers are acutely aware of these 'representational fields' (Harris 1999),³ and this visual-narrative history has a tangible impact on contemporary Iranian subjectivity, marking how many research participants expressed how they felt about themselves in the world. As Kiana in Tehran had explained: 'The media can change views about a whole nation. These new online photo-sharing systems (photoblogs) are the same, but this time, they provide *us* with the opportunity to show who we really are.'⁴ Kiana conveys how she sees photoblogging as a way to combat reductive and/or stereotypical representations of her country by showing a certain globalised vision of ordinariness that she hopes will have the effect of de-exoticising perceptions of Iran.

Responses to these kinds of banal images from a range of viewers across the world convey how the aesthetic strategy of the mundane employed by photobloggers is considered by some to be an effective means of making people reconsider what they are told by the media about the place of Iran. As one viewer in the US remarked: 'Thank you for your images. I truly enjoy seeing my "enemy" country in the light of non-politics.' The 'non-politics' here equates to the 'harder' aspects of 'top-down' (geo-)political agendas. A study of digital photographs as representational objects thus goes hand in hand with broader political economy of place – recalling in particular what Deborah Poole (1997) has termed the 'visual economy' of a given context that explains the political economic and social matrices in which photographs operate and are deemed valuable,⁵ and which pattern their production, circulation, consumption, and possession.

Place-objects beyond representation: digitally (re-)engaging the senses

Beyond representing place, a range of wider characteristics constitute the a/effective qualities of the digital photograph as place-object. This requires what Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas (2001) referred to as looking 'beyond aesthetics' in studying the visual, as it does with Jonas Larsen's (2008) suggestion to move 'beyond representation' in ethnographic approaches to digital photography. In Iranian photoblogs, moving beyond aesthetics and representation points to the senses, to memory, and to wider a/effective engagements with digital objects experienced in digital and physical places. Food photographs are a prominent image category in Iranian photoblogs

Figure 16.2 Majun.

Source: LGOIT. March 2009 archive: www.lifegoesonintehran.com/24_March_2009.html (Accessed: 12/10/12). Used with permission.

and a clear example of this kind of digital-visual work. In one example (seen in Figure 16.2), LGOIT captures a market vendor in South Tehran mixing a popular sweet milk drink, called *ma'jun*. Visceral responses to this image, such as *bah bah* (a colloquial term in Persian and equivalent of 'yum yum' in English) in addition to other posted comments describing the smells, textures, and tastes of the image are tied in with a wider sense and discourses of longing for traditional sights, sounds, and tastes of Tehran, and Iran.

The digital photographs bearing witness to the availability of things like *āb anār* (freshly squeezed pomegranate juice) and *lavāshak* (dried fruit leather, typically sold in Iran) become salient points of connection in viewers' imaginative capacity to foster a sense of being there, between the place of the object (in Iran) and the geographical place of viewing the object – often two discrete geographical locations. The digital photograph as place-object hereby forms a material link between the place of the scene and the place of the screen. The image sensorially emplaces people in precise areas of downtown Tehran, based on affective and atmospheric feelings of place (Sheller 2010), recalling Paul Stoller's (1989) earlier argument that print photographs could be essentially 'tasted,' and where digital photographs 'pulse with meaning and affect' (Deger 2016). Such forms of engagement are particularly salient amongst the Iranian diaspora and individuals living in exile. We see here how the place-object engenders a capacity for various forms of emplacement, and this capacity for bringing people somewhere via the place-object has particular salience in contexts of physical or cognitive distance, including contexts of exile, displacement, and/or estrangement with a physical place such as a country or place of origin.

Digital geo-locations

So far, the discussion has highlighted that there is nothing necessarily all that new with the digital context concerning the social efficacies of photographs and photography, and their capacity to emplace. At the same time, a significant part of the *digital* photograph's affordance as a contemporary object is how, once embedded within wider digital infrastructures such as social media platforms and their associated software/affordances, the digital photo-object is able to evidence links to actual physical locations. Again we shall see how the Iranian context of popular digital photography is a salient example of why place-objects 'matter' (see Miller and Haapio-Kirk, Chapter 11), politically and socially to those involved in the practice – and methodologically, too, to the anthropologist conducting research under (geo-)politically sensitive conditions.

Geotagging is a customary practice of using geo-locating techniques such as Google Maps to 'tag' or emplace photographs on social media, websites, and platforms, in physical locations. These techniques are prominent in Iranian photoblogging, adding extra dimensions to individuals' renderings of the 'real' place of Iran. Figure 16.3 shows the geotagged Imamzadeh Zeyd mosque in Tehran, as seen in 2013 by a prominent photoblogger. Such live digital image-making and sharing reflects a unique contemporary socio-technological ability to create 'live postcards of place' (Bell and Lyall 2005), shaking up the past-orientated, 'I was here' analogy of photography of Roland Barthes' (1981) through the socio-technological potential, given the supporting infrastructural conditions, for digital co-witnessing in real-time live-streaming on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Telescope. One potential result is a

Figure 16.3 Geotagging on Tehran Live photoblog.
Source: 'Imamzadeh Zeyd,' Tehran.

present-rooted, 'I am here' (Bell and Lyall 2005), of digital/social co-presence. Along these lines, Larsen (2008: 152) notes how the digital medium is typified by a 'time-space compression' which, under the necessary conditions, can enable a collective experiencing of 'instantaneous time' (Lash and Urry 1994) in the act of making and viewing images. Geolocative practices seen in online digital image making/viewing thus reconfigures the traditional temporalities of photography by striking real, and even real-time, connections among photographer (image-producer), subject, and viewer.

This potential digital affordance for spatiotemporal presence with the photograph has methodological implications for MCS, and for the digital-ethnographer moving with images in online spaces, where conditions on the ground are politically sensitive and access to a physical field site is restricted – and/or simply that on-the-ground ethnography is entirely unavailable to certain researchers from or in certain countries – both issues directly concerning the anthropology of Iran.⁶

One issue relates to the speed of the moving digital-photographic object. Speed is one part of its agency as a contemporary place-object; it is able to inhabit and traverse multiple places, without the necessarily negative implications signalled by Paul Virilio's 'dromology' (1986; 1991), with which he describes the speed of modern mass communication as destructive of human presence and experience. The digital photographic object, embedded within the digital infrastructures that bring it forth, connects with disparate groups in multiple settings, as seen in Iranian photoblogging in the various sites in Iran and wider contexts across the globe with which it connects. At the same time, this speed is subject to a range of material, economic, and socio-political constraints, all of which make-up the ethnographic 'field' – and its framing for the anthropologist. The creation of *place* by the place-object is embedded with wider flows and conditions, and it is both the digital/wider infrastructures and the human/social agency that determine where the object is *placed* in (online) space, how it is exhibited/seen, by whom and where.

Central in the digital photograph's ontological make-up is its *non-uniqueness* as a thing, able to exist and move within (but not exclusively) digital forms and landscapes. Crucially then, in contradistinction to Walter Benjamin ([1936] 1972) it is the *lack* of a thing's uniqueness as a single entity, but as a potentially replicable and fast-moving object, that has a/effect. Contrary to previous emphasis on the physical qualities of the analogue photograph, the digital photograph's 'aura,' agency, and its e/affective dimensions are therefore constituted through the places and environments through which it moves and leaves traces, which in turn become spaces and places the anthropologist can follow and inhabit as part of contemporary anthropological research. The digital photograph becomes a kind of relic of the 'moment' of capture and its different moments of viewer engagements. The place-object, hence, doubles up as a space-object in the way it constitutes (social) space through place. All the while, the ethnographer may follow 'live photography' and live streaming as part of their online participation-observation strategies.

Considering how place is central in photographic practice reflects in the digital age of geolocate media technologies what some scholars suggest is the need to put movement upfront in thinking about digital photographs' contemporary social contexts. Sarah Pink and Larissa Hjorth (2012) suggest that practices such as geotagging, and its implication of image in place, can be described as 'emplaced visuality' or 'emplaced cartography,' while Paolo Favero (2014) relatedly suggests that geolocate media can reveal a range of aspects about how social actors use and inhabit space. The relationship between media and social environments demonstrated by photobloggers illustrates Lane DeNicola's (2012: 84) claim that 'it is no longer sufficient to talk of landscapes being mediated; what we must recognize are those instances where media have become "landscaped."' In this sense, digital photographs seen here in Iranian photoblogs have been 'landscaped' with Iran and vice versa – the object here has become a place, the place an object, and along the way, social spaces are produced.

Methodological implications for MCS

In the auto-ethnographic sense, place-objects such as photographs demand presence and attention in the present, something that relates to the Object Analysis method in material culture, where there is the sense that one has to sit with and be with the object to comprehend it, to let it in (see Mercier, Chapter 10). The notion of co-presence facilitated by the place-object requires further discussion here. A central tenet of the ethnographic method involves a commitment to being 'in the presence of the people one is studying, not just the texts or objects they produce' (Miller 1997: 72). 'Photography,' Barthes wrote, 'offers an immediate presence to the world – a co-presence' (1981: 84). The digital photograph adds further socio-technological dimensions to these ideas. Internet connectivity and digital practices brings the realms of individual and social experience into 'entanglements' (Hodder 2012) or 'meshworks' (Ingold 2000), recalling the notion of 'quotidian attunement' (Buchli, Chapter 2) that highlights how places (and infrastructures) give rise to social relationships and create spaces in particular ways. The research implications of these new experiential-social realms include digital field sites, as I have further discussed elsewhere (Walton 2017), though it is important to note here that digital co-presence formed the core basis of my research participants' and my shared experience of 'being there together,' online (Schroeder 2010).

This co-presence was not static, but motile, involving movements with and following digital photographic place-objects. The place-object constructs its own field site via its trails and 'traces' (Geiger and Ribes 2011) by which one can 'follow the thing' (Appadurai 1986a; Marcus 1995) within and across a range of social and spatial configurations. Screenshots of digital photographs and of its time/date stamped sociality – such as seen in comment threads in relation to specific images or galleries – helps in this regard, enabling the researcher to be co-present in a digital, phenomenological, and experiential

sense with the photo-object long after its original moment of capture/creation. Given my limited access to Iran in a geographical sense, working with photographs as place-objects allowed me to trace the practices and flows of digital photographs exhibited on and channelled by Iranian photoblogs accordingly – including their lifecycles (births and expirations), spaces of production, consumption and circulation – across diverse digital and discursive domains and contexts and publics, inside and outside of Iran. I moved with/in these different digital, visual and material domains and the various media (mobile phones, digital cameras, laptops, PCs, Internet cafes) used by producers and consumers in particular contexts to exhibit and interact with digital photographs on Photoblogs, Flickr, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms. In this manner, I situated myself in what Arnau Monterde and John Postill call (2014) ‘mobile ensembles’: the intersection of various digital media, participants and issues found in certain instances of mobile technology facilitated social praxis.⁷

Analysis: place-object and their socialities

In the context of analogue photography, Roland Barthes highlighted the ‘event’ of photography – the moment(s) anchored in time, space, and place that is central to what the photograph is. The digital form and settings of the digital photograph seen in Iranian photoblogging complicates the ‘event’ in digital photographic practices online, where the time/date stamp of the event is modulated by individual action, by social relations in flux, and by digital infrastructures subject to a range of affordances and constraints. The notion of place-object helps to illuminate the crucial link between digital photographs and place, beyond event(s). Moreover, Barthes’ classic theoretical assertion that analogue photography entails an ‘I was there’ raises the question of ‘Where?’ *beyond location*, which is central to this chapter. Where, geographically, and socially, was Barthes when he reflected upon a photograph of his mother as a young woman on a beach in his famed 1981 work *Camera Lucida*?

Relatedly, where was I, an anthropologist in the Internet age attempting to maintain my research network and enquiry into Iranian photographic practices after just one month ‘on the ground’ in the field in Iran? A main step involved exploring the methodological potentials that may be gained in the shift from analogue to digital form, where, with research taking place in multiple physical and digital sites, the ‘ground’ of fieldwork is ensconced in the ‘cloud’ of fieldwork. Barthes’ dual person- and place-inflected theoretical utterance, ‘I was *there*,’ is after all reconfigured in the practice of Iranian photoblogging itself to a present-orientated ‘Iran is / we are here’ – an act of collective witnessing – that the digital-photograph as place-object both facilitates and declares to a range of actors, including to the anthropologist. The place of Iran meanwhile, enmeshed in desires, practices, and perceptions, is unmoored from geographical rooting and is configured by the place-object,

becoming much 'more than location.' The contemporary ethnographer, too, has much more than geographical place to work with and in.

Crucially then, it is the emplaced sociality enmeshed with the digital photograph that forms a significant part of what makes these objects live with action – a notion that Scott McQuire (2013), in the context of museum digital archives and indigenous identity politics and practices, calls an 'operational' quality, denoting active not passive sites where social agency is realised by coming into contact with photographs that relate to collective identities. In a similar vein, Jennifer Deger's (2016) work in the Yolngu Aboriginal Australian context of digital photographic practices examines how the making, sharing, and viewing of elaborated family photographs reaffirms, reconstitutes, and 'thickens' a world of vitality, resonance, and ancestral significance. In Deger's work, as in Iranian photoblogging, it is not just the photographic capture (the creation of the object as a marker of time/space or even of a place 'as is'), but it is the post-production stylising, shaping, curating, and meaning-making in the photography that constitutes a significant component in explaining the efficacy of digital photographs as material objects and as practices.

The digital photograph constantly engaged with, shared, commented upon, celebrated, refuted – in short 'handled' by the public as if it were physically accessible object in a museum or exhibition context – and 'seen' as if representative of the place of Iran. In so doing, it constructs place as 'distinct meanings and values for persons' (Tilley 1994: 15). Indeed, if we take Christopher Tilley's concept of place as 'contexts situatedness in relation to identity and action,' then we can see how the digital photographic object incurs questions of identity and action in relation to place and peoples, photographers and viewers, recalling what philosopher Tim Creswell (2003: 26) calls 'place as an intersection – a particular configuration of happenings in a constant sense of becoming through practice.' Seeing objects as places made up of such 'intersections' helps us to understand the social lives, efficacies, and affordances of objects as themselves places where people congregate within and to and cluster around, for various lengths of time, to various effects – including the ethnographer.

Digital photography/s: towards a new object status

My discussion of digital photographs as place-objects marks a point where old and new practices, theories, and methodologies meet. I have been concerned with the 'oldness' of photographs as material objects, rooted in representation, aesthetics, and incurring phenomenological engagements, while looking simultaneously at the 'newness' of digital photography as platformed practices, shaped through the convergence of different media/platforms and infrastructures through which it exists and operates, and the performances of transnational sociality it engenders. Concurrently, I have examined the 'oldness' of methodological approaches to anthropological enquiry based on physical presence in a place, particularly when access is limited or unavailable,

with the ‘newness’ of engaging with online places and spaces that photographs construct in/for the social sciences. These meetings of ‘old’ and ‘new’ present a number of advancements for MCS, including shifts towards real-time, collaborative and networked sociality at-a-distance, while thinking critically about the plurality of objects such as digital photographs in places, and considering what the social/political implications of non-unique objects are – as empirically observed through their efficacies and affordances, attachments and attunements.

The notion of place-object I have posed in the chapter helps to explain how digital photographs can be of place (Iran as a representation), create a sense of place, geographically, through digital-locative techniques – including technological and phenomenological/imaginative capacities – and where places as digital objects, remain ultimately ‘contexts for human experience constructed in movement, memory, encounter and association’ (Tilley 1994: 15). This theoretical notion has doubled up as a methodological argument, whereby I have suggested that the place-object takes the anthropologist where they need to go for research, including a range of online and offline contexts. Thinking about objects as places, and places through objects, thus has broad implications for material culture scholarship. The ethnographic examples from Iran, and Iranian online environments, reveal how the digital photo-object is ‘handled’ as a material thing of significance online and/or offline, assembling configurations of peoples, practices, technologies, and desires in places and social spaces, online and offline beyond the geographical context, which may also be inaccessible or of limited physical access. Thinking about the theoretical and methodological potentials of place-objects can offer new pathways for research in and across a range of geographical sites that are politically precarious or otherwise inaccessible to anthropologists.

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Notes

- 1 Ethnographic film being a leading concern of visual anthropology in the UK context during the 1980s and 1990s (D. MacDougall 2005; Banks and Ruby 2011).
- 2 This move to objects in the study of photography signalled a turn away from the semiotic and linguistic approaches from 1960s anthropology and older lineages from strands of early twentieth-century French sociology (Peirce, Saussure) that

showed a privileging of representation in the study of images as signs, symbols and/or codes.

- 3 Harris defines the concept of 'representational fields' in relation to her work on visual representations of the idea of Tibet after 1959. She describes this as spaces wherein competing depictions have been mobilised for political agendas.
- 4 Interview, Kiana (Tehran) 2013.
- 5 This awareness of how the value of objects is constructed recalls Thompson's 1979 work *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*.
- 6 For an overview of the history and challenges of doing anthropology in/on Iran see S.R. Nadjmabadi (ed.) (2009).
- 7 Monterde and Postill's use of the term 'Mobile Ensembles' advances an earlier notion of 'media ensembles' (Bausinger 1984) in the digital context, referring to the 'unique set of mobile [and other] technologies that are brought to bear on a specific collective action' (Ibid.: 2).