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**A Mongolian Horsepacking Adventure through
My Paranoid Poetics of Digital Ontology**

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Abstract

A Mongolian Horsepacking Adventure through My Paranoid Poetics of Digital Ontology

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This is not quite an essay. It is more of a scientific experiment conducted with words. It titrates the paranoid poetics of critique with the narrative practices of social media to precipitate a postcritical theory of digital ontology. The organic compounds used in this titration were extracted from a 16-month mine of ethnography among digitalreal tourists known as Dimecams. This ethnographic mine was full of participant-observations among the “digital” and “real” aggregates of horsepacking adventures in Mongolia. Starting with myths of Mongolian adventures that circulate in the backpacker communities of Asia, this experiment rewires the narrative circuits of exploration to illuminate two distinct iterations of adventure—the “real” and the “digital.” Common sense would have it that digital adventures appearing on social media are “representations” of real adventures from the flesh. The experiments I conducted, however, demonstrated that the digital and the real are actually two separate ontologies in which different types of adventures occur. Real adventures are full of misery and hunger

while digital adventures are nothing but epic selfies and unhinged freedom. The radical alterity between these two kinds of adventures necessitated a turn towards ontology. However, in this ontological turn, my experiment spun out of control and crystallized as a fractal. That fractal was later revealed to be a continuously self-referential postcritique of the paranoid poetics of critique. The same fractal was also shown to be the operational procedure which kept the narrative ontology of digital adventures afloat in a self-sustaining world that endlessly retold itself into existence. What emerged at the end of this experiment was a not-quite-ontology composed of not-quite-beings—which, in the not-too-distant future, will detach itself from reality entirely, drifting off into space and forming a new planet.

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I.

This is an experiment in scholarship and writing. It was performed in a laboratory modeled after Michael Taussig's experiments in his later period, post-*Shamanism Colonialism and the Wild Man*. The scholarly materials that I cooked in test tubes included critical theory, postcritique, the ontological turn, and the anthropology of tourism. The ethnographic crystals that I pulled out of this test tube looked like the "digital" and "real" experiences of horsepacking adventures in Mongolia. Part of my experiment involved eating these ethnographic crystals. The result was that I became a part of the experiment, making it difficult to discern where the experiment ended and where I started. It also became difficult to discern what was thinking and what was writing—not only in the sense that I could no longer separate between thinking and writing but also in the sense that I could no longer tell what sort of a *thing* was doing the thinking and writing. In short, I became lost in the scholarly experiment.

But getting lost is a fundamental part of horsepacking adventures in Mongolia. Thus, in a serious tone, the ways in which I became lost in the scholarly experiment were accurate ethnographic descriptions. As I said, however, since I ate the ethnographic crystals, and became a part of the experiment, anything resembling an arm's length distance between the scholar and his subject of study vanished into thin air. I could no longer tell if I was the ethnographer and scholar or if I was the ethnography and subject of study, nor could I tell what this "I" was. When the experiment ended—although it's possible we are still in it—I woke up inside of a cave, one which resembled the cave described by Christian Bök (2003):

 this antechamber of words
 in which you awaken is
 a petrified forest, its image
 inverted then reflected
 through itself, a confusion
 of stalactites and stalagmites,
 jutting spikes of calcite
 at mirrors that do not exist:
 a faucet drip, the sound
 of outer space underground.

I was scared. With help from Eve Sedgwick's (2002) "paranoid reading," I became infected with paranoia and started beating my head against the walls of the cave. The walls gave way and I found myself in a library full of anthropology books. Each book, however, was another cave full of anthropology books. It was, as Bök says, a "petrified forest." Bök's forest, however, was one of words. The petrified forests that I found in the anthropology books were of ideas—forests of ideas that would invert and reflect one another, ideas that would jut out at mirror images of other ideas jutting out. It was more terrifying than the cave where I had initially woken up. Thus, I returned to the original cave and continued beating my head against the walls. A few of the stalactites and stalagmites broke off and became lodged in my brain. I then pulled those fragments out of my brain. To my astonishment, the fragments were perfect replicas of the

ethnographic crystals which I had consumed at the beginning of my experiment! One of the crystals looked like a tourist riding a horse across Mongolia—sunlight streaming down from above and an ocean of green grass extending into the horizon. Another crystal looked like an Instagram post of the same thing. A third crystal looked like a hashtag. And a fourth like a digital recreation of Marisol de la Cadena’s (2015) “earth beings.” A fifth crystal was wearing Latour’s glasses. I laughed and put the crystals back inside of my brain and went to sleep.

II.

Tourists with minimal outdoor experience go on horsepacking expeditions in Mongolia. Although there are organized tours, there is a recurring myth in the backpacker communities of Asia that you can fly to Mongolia, buy a horse, and set off into the sunset alone.

I first heard this adventure myth after a week-long meditation retreat in Thailand. A hippie with confidence woven into his dreadlocks said that his next stop was Mongolia, where he was going to buy a horse and go into the “wilderness.” A mountain man visionary! Excited tales of comparable backpackerly adventures echoed in the wake of this proud hippie’s exalted quest.

I got involved in the banter, rattling off some tales about solo kayaking adventures on rivers that passed through underground caves. Another couple told stories about the Himalayan peaks they’d ascended. Even the meditation teacher—who’d been a wandering monk for ten years before sensual desire caused him to disrobe—told tales about wandering through the countrysides of Thailand and Burma with no shoes and nothing more than a robe and a small tent and a bowl for begging alms. The banter batted around for a while, but we kept returning to the visionary adventure myth of a mountain man buying a horse and setting off into the Mongolian steppes alone. The vastness. The freedom. Nothing to hold him back. The hippie smiled—his story had won—and he said something in his sweet Russian accent while brushing back his locks.

Years later, when I finally arrived in Mongolia, I found that nearly everyone else there had heard this same adventure myth. Someone somewhere had said something about Mongolia and horses and freedom. And it caught their attention. They kept brooding about that tale until finally one day they bought a plane ticket to Ulaanbaatar. But before buying that plane ticket, they’d all read Tim Cope’s (2013) *On the Trail of Genghis Khan*. One German woman told me that the book had changed her life. And for nearly 6 years after reading the book that she’d been saving up money so that she could come to Mongolia and live out her own mini version of Tim Cope’s adventure. (As it turned out, however, her adventure [like most adventures] was pretty miserable.)

Tim Cope is an Australian adventurer. And after a few crazy trips, like paddling down a river for a few months and riding a bike across Europe and Asia, he flew into Mongolia with minimal horse riding experience and set off on the greatest adventure of his life—perhaps the last great adventure of the twentieth century. Cope spent three years riding a horse from Mongolia to Hungary. Along the way, his horses were stolen, he ran into some wolves, his heart was broken, he fell in love, he found a dog, his dad died, and whole bunch of other ridiculous things that happen when you spend three years riding horses alone through the “wilderness.” Cope wrote a book, produced a documentary, and basically built a whole career around the fact that he did something really rare and kinda dumb when he was pretty young.

Yet something about his tale, and the mini-versions of his tale that other minor adventurers tell, has such a strong pull that it causes people to save (and spend) lots of money to be cold, tired, and hungry—with terrible butt sores—for a month or more while riding horses across Mongolia. And then, after all that misery, this little microculture of

horse adventurers whip out their smartphones and create epic social media posts and beautiful travel blogs, which recreate the myth of adventure, awakening, enlightenment, freedom, self-realization, and a whole host of other hippie fantasies about the merits of doing something very challenging in places that are far away from cities. It's all quite bizarre...

III.

The most bizarre thing is the difference between the “real” experiences of these adventurers and the “digital” experiences that appear on their social media profiles. The *difference* (or should I say *différance*) is what matters. It is a *radical alterity*. And considering that there is a radical alterity between the “real” and the “digital” experiences of touristic adventurers in Mongolia, it seems only natural (or naturalcultural) that I use the ontological turn as the primary means of drilling this ethnography into an anthropology. (Drilling, as in, I am a Foucauldian drill sergeant disciplining a smorgasbord of nonsensical moments into a narrativization of something resembling theory.)

So, what is the difference? What are the tropes of the adventure “real” and the adventure “digital”? And how are those tropes so pronounced and so dramatically opposed such that the only way to make sENSE of them is to call them two separate worlds? (Or—as I explain later—one world and one not-quite-world, composed of beings and not-quite-beings, respectively.)

The “real” experiences of touristic adventurers—who buy a few horses and set off into the Mongolian sunset alone—coalesce (or perhaps “crystalize” in a Bökian sense) around a few themes—themes that I became aware of through an autoethnographic experience of riding horses across Mongolia as well as themes that I became aware of by spending time with other touristic adventurers who did the same—

—I spent time with these touristic mountain men and mountain women while drinking at bars, trading stories at bus stops about where to buy horses, eating free breakfasts in dilapidated hostels while trying to wow each other with stories and stave off anxiety with black coffee. I spent time with these tourists as they trained and developed their horsepacking skills at little camps that were specifically designed to empty their wallets. They would empty their wallets and learn how to ride horses and at the end of the day they would drink overpriced beer. And at the end of the week, just like the inexperienced horse adventurer Tim Cope, they would cross their fingers and set off alone. I spent time with these tourists out on the steppe. During the month or so that I spent riding horses in Mongolia, I would occasionally run into another foreigner on horseback. We would stop and trade stories.

Where are you from? What’s the trail like on the other side of the ridge? You want an apple? How have you been dealing with the rain?

We would share lunch. Maybe a campfire and a few songs and some dinner. And the next morning we would part ways. The whole time, there I was—the little ethnographer-in-training, taking notes and gathering data and writing down people’s contact info. Throughout my time in Mongolia I was continuously friending people on Facebook, and following people on Instagram. When it was all said and done, and I returned to the US, I kept following these touristic adventurers through the “digital” iterations of their horsepacking journeys.

But what were the “real” experiences of these touristic adventurers? Misery. Plus cold. Plus hunger and an aching butt and loneliness. It rained a lot that summer. So much so that many rivers were impassable and quite a few people died in the floods. Nearly

every adventurer talked about how difficult it was being wet all the time. And oftentimes the adventurers I met had never really been on an adventure before. (The romance of it all had strummed a chord on their heartstrings. But for some reason they never bothered to see if they enjoyed being outside before spending a few thousand dollars to be miserable and take a few epic photos.) Thus, they had no real sense for how much food to pack, let alone how to set up a tent. I gave away nearly half of my food to starving foreigners on the steppe, who were living off inadequate rations of noodles and rice. Many of the adventurers I met didn't really know how to start a fire, either. (I don't want to disparage their lack of preparedness too much, but I can't help it, up here on my high writerly horse.) I did, on occasion, meet some fellow adventurers who knew what they were doing. They knew how to handle a horse and they'd spent their fair share of nights under the stars. But these salty sailors were rare. By in large, the microculture of tourists who go on independent adventures in Mongolia are woefully underprepared. Among the cohort of the underprepared whom I crossed paths with, they all cut their trips short. They had planned for a month of horse riding, maybe two, but by the end of it they'd only ridden for a few weeks before they pulled the plug. Dejected, disenchanted, and totally exhausted, they would fly back to Australia or Europe or somewhere.

Yet, weeks later, months later, almost a full year later, when I saw these "adventurers" posting on Facebook and Instagram about their trip to Mongolia, the only thing I saw was epic photos—the mountain man or woman sitting atop a beautiful gelding with the green vastness of the steppe shooting out into infinity and a stark ridgeline framing it all. The adventurer would write something about what an insane and incredible experience they had had in Mongolia (or maybe they would just leave the photo to speak for itself) and then a whole digital army of likers and lovers and commentators armed with emojis would fill the adventurers heart with attention. Scrolling through some of these social media profiles, I often found that these posts about adventures in Mongolia got more attention than any of the poster's other content. Moreover, these "digital" adventures pulled in all of the standard tropes to mobilize the misery of adventure into a romantic story—folky song lyrics, cowboys hats, culture, nomads, narrative snippets, "traditional" clothing, scary dogs, and the hashtags to match—#wanderlust #passionpassport #travelgram #eaglehunter. It's as if they'd all read Said's *Orientalism*. But instead of reading it as a critique, they'd read it as a guidebook for how to make social media posts.

Thus, what we have here are two worlds. One "real" world, where adventure leads to misery, hunger, rain, and early flights home. And another "digital" world, where adventure is a beautiful romance of self-discovery, freedom, and cultural exploration.

IV.

Oops! I said Said. And when you mention Said (and his surprisingly readable tome, *Orientalism*) you run into a problem. The problem of critique. And critique is indeed (in Trumpspeak) a “yuge” problem, perhaps an even yuger problem than its grandparent, interpretation.

In 1966, Susan Sontag was one of the earliest authors to address this yuge issue. In “Against Interpretation,” she writes

By interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code... Directed to art, interpretation means plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?

Sontag depicts the knee-jerk hypochondria of many scholarly tools of “analysis,” in which the impulse is to discover a malady where there isn't one. X, sometimes, is just X. (But why, Sontag asks, are we even plucking X out to begin with?) And the ability to come up with an “explanation” for why X is really A doesn't illustrate a sharp mind. Instead, it illustrates the ability to digest and recalibrate a literature as flat as the Mongolian steppe is vast—the flatness of which I plan to recalibrate through the repetition of a non-calibrating narration (buckle your seatbelts)—because we are, most of us at least, failed novelists.

Speaking of novelists, Dostoevsky identified the great grandparent of *critique*, the grandparent of *interpretation*, otherwise known as the great tradition of “knowledge.” In “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” Dostoevsky (1995) writes of a dreamy “they”—perhaps the same spooky “they” that resonated for Susan Lepselter (2016) when she was hanging out in an uncanny desert of thrown together connections in the “cultural poetics in an [alien] America” (Stewart 1996)—and this dreamy “they,” in Dostoevsky's short story, chanted (perhaps while blinking [or at least that's how I imagine it] in the same way that Nietzsche's [2006] last men blink when they say, “We invented happiness...”):

Knowledge is superior to emotion, cognition of life superior to life. Science will give us wisdom, wisdom will reveal the laws, and knowledge of the laws of happiness is happiness—nay, superior to happiness

Anthropologists blink, too. Theory is superior to ethnography, we say. (The knowledge of the laws of experience is higher than experience.) Or maybe we get coy about such a straightforward claim, though our buttoned up academic journals are clear enough for anyone to interpret. But interpretation is the problem! More precisely, if we are going to be splitting academic hairs, then *critique* is the problem. That's what Bruno Latour (2004) suggests, while tripping up in apophenia and “runnin' his mouth” (Stewart 1996) about what Lepselter's (2016) interlocutors called “UFOs”:

What has critique become when a French general, no, a marshal of critique, namely, Jean Baudrillard, claims in a published book that the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight, so to speak, undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself—as if the terrorist planes were pulled to suicide by the powerful attraction of this black hole of nothingness?

What has become of critique when a book that claims that no plane ever crashed into the Pentagon can be a bestseller?

Academic critique has been invaded by the bodysnatchers, screams Latour, while blinking. Academic critique has gone to bed with the crass conspiracy theorists of America, screams Latour, while blinking. The same conspiracy theorists that elected that yuge orange monster, screams Latour, while blinking.

After brooding on the words of this academic demigod, as he beams me up into his heady UFO and probes my brain with “ideas,” giving me leg cramps and mouth sores, this demigod starts sounding like a hypochondriac crying wolf. And in claiming that his critique of critique is still critique, I too am getting involved in critique. We are engaging in a continuous one-upmanship. It is the same one-upmanship of the next guy’s irony that makes America great, again—the same ironic one-upmanship that makes David Foster Wallace a terrible author in my eyes but an incredible author in the eyes of many intellectuals—the same ironic one-upmanship that churns the gears of the 4chan meme factory (see Nagle 2017)—the same ironic one-upmanship that helps the yuge orange monster strum the dejected heartstrings of America’s heartland—but it is that same ironic one-upmanship (though whitewashed of all its irony) which has infected critique, which has turned yuge swaths of academic “thought” into a meme factory. But before I start churning around in this milky irony and turning my boredom into butter, let us take a quick repose and open ourselves to the playful paragraph that launches Rita Felski’s (2009) essay, “After Suspicion”:

On Tuesdays and Thursdays I tell a roomful of students that myth is culture masquerading as nature and that signifiers beget ever more signifiers in the prison house of language. Postmodernism just is the cultural logic of late capitalism, and the documents of civilization turn out to be synonymous with the documents of barbarism. The Orient, we surmise, does not exist, even as the discourse of orientalism cranks out endless proofs of its essential and unchanging nature. And sexual identity, far from being the truth of the self, is forged by a cultural imperative to confess so deeply ingrained that we no longer see it as the effect of a power that constrains us... the animating spirit of our inquiry is the conviction that appearances deceive and that texts do not willingly surrender their secrets.

So pull out your Latourian probes and done your Derrida (1995) hats. Let’s uncover some secrets!

How can another see into me, into my most secret self, without my being able to see in there myself and without my being able to see him in me? And if my secret self, that which can be revealed only to the other, to the wholly other, to God if you wish, is a secret that I will never reflect on, that I will never know or experience or possess as my own, then what sense is there in saying that it is “my” secret, or in saying more generally that a secret belongs, that it is proper to or belongs to some “one,” or to some other who remains someone? It is perhaps there that we find the secret of secrecy, namely, that it is not a matter of knowing and that it is there for no-one. A secret doesn’t belong, it can never be said to be at home or in its place... What is the “I,” and what becomes of responsibility once the identity of the “I” trembles in secret?

We have, here, a wrench thrown into the gears. A wrench that was in the gears to start with. The obsolescence of an intellectual tradition that never started. In the same way that American irony spins itself into the manifestation of the yuge orange monster, critical theory spins itself into an implosion of nonsensical sensemaking, in which each new secret (discovered just beneath an appearance) reveals itself to just be just another appearance hiding yet another secret (it's turtles all the way down!). Bök (2003) articulates this point in *Crystallography*, which "is a pataphysical encyclopædia that misreads the language of poetics through the conceits of geology." As he writes in a meditation on fractals, which could also apply to critique:

A fractal is the ideal of redundancy:

the obsessive restatement (re(in)statement)
of itself, by itself, in itself - a never-ending
message that digresses from its digressions
yet nevertheless repeats (repeats) the same
message over and over and over ad infinitum

A fractal is the ideal of redundancy:

imagine a series
of Chinese boxes
in which each box
contains a series
of chinese boxes

Imagine a library full of cultural anthropology books, in which each book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books.

And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books. And each one of those books within a book contains yet another library full of cultural anthropology books.

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Somewhere within this fractal landscape of the discipline of anthropology, I discovered the anthropology of tourism, which (at first glance) appeared to be nothing other than the anthropology of tourism. On closer examination, however, the anthropology of tourism revealed itself to be suffering from a standard case of “paranoia” (Sedgwick 2002). These “anthropologists of tourism,” as they refer to themselves,¹ suffer from two key paranoid tendencies.² Their first paranoid tendency is a crippling fear of

¹ Although I do not want to encourage my patients’ hallucinations by calling them “anthropologists of tourism”—and thereby contribute to their delusions, which are most clearly expressed through an odd, though mostly benign, obsessional game, which they take very seriously and which they usually refer to as “scholarship” or “my career”—at the same time, as an anthropologist of tourism myself, it is beholden upon me that I take my interlocutors seriously and not cast aside their beliefs as nonsensical. Rather, I aim to take their paranoid beliefs seriously and ultimately to make sense of their paranoia. Thus, it is with this respectful demeanor towards the particular tourism subgroup of the larger species of *Anthropos anthropologenus* that I refer to my interlocutors as anthropologists of tourism. For more information on the parent anthropological species of the tourism subgroup, see Geertz’s (2010) *Life Among the Anthros and Other Essays*—Geertz’s “Anthros” being the folk taxonomic term for *Anthropos anthropologenus*.

² While it is likely that the anthropology of tourism subgroup displays other paranoid tendencies or concomitant psychopathologies, which prevent them from perceiving the world in the way other normal and well adjusted species do, in my own field research within the fractal library of the anthropological jungle I became especially paranoid about two specific paranoid tendencies of the anthropologists of tourism. Those two parasoias, which I started to become paranoid about, so much so that it was impossible for me to continue reading through the anthropology of tourism literature without seeing those paranoid tendencies popping up everywhere, are perhaps a manifestation of my own paranoia. In other words, as an anthropologist-in-training, I have begun to develop a disciplinarily cultivated paranoia. That paranoia (in combination with the postcritique literature that I have read) caused me to become paranoid about paranoia. Being paranoid about paranoia, I found two examples of paranoia in the anthropology of tourism literature. However, because I am paranoid about my paranoia, I am not sure if I actually found examples of paranoia or if the anthropology of tourism literature is more benign than I can tell because I am always so paranoid. Thus, once you stop reading this footnote, and return to the body of the text, if you can still remember where you left off (but, again [again], this is a fractal, so you can pick up or leave off wherever you want), you will see me outline two key paranoid tendencies among the anthropologists of tourism. However, and this is the point I have been coming to, I don’t know if those paranoid tendencies among the anthropologists of tourism that I have identified are actually real. What happened, in reality, as opposed to on the surface, is that I skimmed through the anthropology of tourism literature and noticed within those fractals that there were two examples of something that I could call “paranoia.” And thus, I began to spin around those two examples, unfolding a new plane in the already existing fractal. A fractal that could also

V.

My argument is not to pose yet another analytical solution to the problem of paranoia (also known as critical theory—or, if you'll allow it, also known as theory) but rather to write in such a way that the full breadth of my paranoia is revealed. Writing in that way prevents the conceit of Science from infecting my scholarship, and putting a stop to Science allows scientific thinking to occur. In the section above, I used the Science-science procedure to conduct a literature review experiment. My other experiment, outlined below, is a continuation of my fractaling paranoia, titrated with the ontological turn and crystallized in a latticework where digitality lies along the x-axis and reality runs along the y-axis. Theory, as my experiments have demonstrated, is impossible without paranoia. The only decision I have in this petrified forest of paranoia is what to become paranoid about. "I" have decided to become paranoid about ontology.

VI.

My argument is simple and counterintuitive. The digital is the real and the real is the digital. Let me unpack that. What gets called the “digital,” on closer examination, looks like the “real.” And what gets called the “real,” if you’re willing to postpone some knee jerk assumptions, looks like the “digital”—the “fake”—the “virtual”—the mostly inaccurate hologram of the real. With this argument, I do not go as far as the philosopher Nick Bostrom (2003), who wrote, “we are almost certainly living in a computer simulation.” Rather, my argument, rooted in ethnography instead of theory, suggests that the importance, the emphasis, the weight, the authority of the digital renders the real as the fake. The subjects that emerge in social media and the stories that they share seem to determine what is real. (At least that’s what I observed in the “digital” and “real” iterations of “Mongolian” horse adventures.) And the “actual” or “physical” experiences of the fleshy holograms of the digital subjects seem to be just spam—or bugs—or viruses—or irritating ads that are popping up and getting in the way of what the digital subjects are trying to do—getting in the way of the subject that is manifesting itself in social media. The “real” subject is a nuisance. It is a popup ad that needs to be blocked. It is an impediment to the digital subject. That’s why when horse adventurers in Mongolia—whose “real” experiences amounted to little more than a month of plain rice and misery—generate social media posts that block out all the junk of “reality” to depict the romance of an unhinged cowboy. *Roughin’ it*. But my argument is that these social media posts are not social media posts that real people create. Instead, in my academic hairsplitting paranoia, I am saying that these social media posts are manifestations from a different world. And the subjects that create these posts are different subjects. “They” are not us! This is the incommensurable alterity that proponents of the ontological turn speak of.

But it’s not just the digital subjects that are not us. It’s also the digital objects. The “real” objects are an annoyance to their “digital” counterparts. This is what I was getting at when I earlier wrote that all of the adventurers I met in Mongolia had read Said’s *Orientalism* as a guidebook for how to make social media posts. Whatever the object of Mongolia “really” was, in its “reality”—which often meant the boring humdrum of life, like taking showers, scarfing down a crappy breakfast, getting food poisoning, haggling over a taxi ride, saving up money to buy an expensive plane ticket, finding a bank with a good interest rate where you could save money to buy a plane ticket to get to Mongolia, arguing with your mom about something stupid, trying to figure out where to eat or if you should cook something since you were tired of eating out—the beings that exist in social media care about none of this humdrum real. It is all an annoyance. It’s all spam that gets in the way of #eaglehuner or #wanderlust. It’s a popup ad that gets in the way of the epic photo of *me* riding on a horse in a beautiful place, while wearing a traditional Mongolian outfit, which makes *me* look so darn cool. But in fact it’s not you. It’s another creature. It’s the start of the virtual world that will eventually replace our own. For better or for worse, is not my concern in this essay. Simply the fact that the two worlds are separate, independently operating ontologies, is what concerns me.

VII.

Let's say that you are willing to go along with my line of thinking: the "digital" and the "real" are actually two separate worlds, rather than two things going on in the same world. If you are willing to grant me that, then, before I move on to my next task (which is to convince you that the digital is *actually* the real and the real the digital), I would like to introduce you to my ethnographic subjects—beings which are called Dimecams.

I have been conducting ongoing ethnographic research among Dimecams for a year and a half, starting in early 2018 and continuing into the present day (April 2019). Two and a half months of my Dimecam ethnography was conducted *irl*, which is the Internet acronym for "in real life." During this *irl* period of my ethnography, I was in "Mongolia" interacting with "real people." In the other 14 months of my ethnographic research, I was intermittently interacting with Dimecams via Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Throughout my *irl* and non-*irl* fieldwork, "I" (which is shorthand for two different beings, one digital and the other a fleshy hologram of the digital) established relationships with a community of Dimecams.

A Dimecam resembles something akin to an Aristotelian essence. But it is less of an essence and more of a thread. A Dimecam is the wormhole that connects the digital ontology to its real hologram. A Dimecam is neither the digital iteration of a "real" subject nor a subject *irl*. Nor is a Dimecam an argument that the digital and the real are somehow connected. But when you bring enough Dimecams together, they constitute a hive—it is this hive of thready wormholes that both connects and disconnects the digital and the real as things *irl* and not *irl*.

Dimecam stands for **digital media expats conglomerating around Mongolia**. This could be read as simply as "the foreign people in Ulaanbaatar"—the ones that are continuously engaging with social media while also being in a place they (and others) call "Mongolia." But just to give you a taste for the potential complexity embedded in this acronym, which is actually an ethnonym for the people that I studied, let us consider the word "around" which appears in the Dimecam acronym. Dimecam uses the ambiguous location of "around" Mongolia—as opposed to "in" or some other stronger locational preposition—to emphasize the fact that the self-constructed digitalreality of Dimecams is not located in Mongolia as a "physical" place, but rather that Mongolia is a digitalreal object with a huge mass—and that therefore it has a strong gravitational pull—which causes other (lesser) digitalreal objects (such as subjects) to gravitate towards the object of Mongolia—and these lesser objects hover *around* Mongolia, occasionally conglomerating into something real with a momentary "snap" (Stewart 2007). The digitalreal mass of Mongolia and its concomitant gravitational pull creates a *following* of Dimecams. This following operates in the way "expats" from a non-Mongolia get sucked into a Mongolia based on an "unpaid internship" or perhaps a "Fulbright ETA." However, we see another angle on the manifestation of this *following* phenomenon on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook when clicking or tapping occurs around the blue button that reads "Follow." When we follow someone or something with more followers than us, such as a famous "person," or even a specific hashtag, we are getting pulled into the

digitalreal gravity of that someone or something. In this same sense, “around” is the most accurate preposition to articulate a fundamental procedure in the Dimecam ontology. The way the lesser get sucked into the gravity of the greater generates an *aroundness*. And the narrative with the greatest aroundness in Dimecam ontology is the adventure narrative. Thus, this aronding quality, makes “around” the appropriate preposition for the ethnonym “Dimecam.”

VIII.

Now that you understand the fundamental preposition of Dimecam culture, which is only a small window into the greater complexity of this otherworldly ethnic group, I feel comfortable introducing you to a Dimecam.

Meet Dylan. When I met Dylan it was via email. A friend of his named Alex, whose friend, Rachel, was the first Dimecam I emailed back in 2018, told me that I should contact Dylan. After a few emails, I got Dylan to agree to a Skype chat. He had long hair and a goatee and his shirt was black and he would frequently cut me off and talk over me. In the memeified world of self-loathing online gamers (self-described as “incels,” or involuntarily celibates), Dylan is what some would call a “Chad”—or a man who presents as a chiseled, confident, charismatic charmer (though Dylan was likely too high on the hipster spectrum to register as a bonafide Chad).

Through a series of video chats I found out that Dylan wasn’t all that intimidating. He had gone to a mediocre college. And went to Mongolia through one of those international fellowships (hereafter IF) that *they* give you after graduating with a liberal arts degree—those IFs that make all your Facebook friends say *wow*, but which ultimately leave you broke in a foreign country with limited prospects for generating an income. Dylan dug himself into Mongolia during his IF, sort of getting stuck and staying on far longer than anyone else in his IF cohort. After the IF salary dried up, he wiggled his way into a short-term fellowship here and a poorly paid internship there before winding up as a Science teacher at a high school—the salary of which was paid in the form of a free apartment.

“I don’t care what my Mongolian colleagues think of me anymore,” he said one night while we shared a few beers and burgers at a hipster bar in Ulaanbaatar. “I used to stay out late with them—go on adventures in the countryside, whatever—they drink and sing all night! But I’ve given up now, ya know—not messing with that. I just pass out—go to bed whenever I want. And they’re like, ‘Oh stay up, stay up and drink’—but nah, I’m finished with it.”

He’d been in Mongolia for a long time. He knew the language well. And he’d dish out advice to newbie expats like he was serving slices of pizza.

“Don’t mess with the girls here. The Mongolian guys will beat you up.”

“The key to a knockout punch is in the hips.”

“If you drink the fermented mare’s milk, you’ll shit your brains out.”

And if anyone mentioned something about drugs, he’d say, “I know a guy.”

Similar to Tim Cope (the Australian adventurer who’d spent three years riding from Mongolia to Hungary), Dylan had come to Mongolia for the adventure, the horses, and the freedom. And just like Tim Cope, Dylan had learned to ride a Mongolian horse, ran into a few wolves, had his fair share of miserable adventures, found a dog, broke his heart, fell in love again, and lost a family member, whose funeral he could not attend because he couldn’t afford the plane ticket—the details of which you hear somewhere around the sixth beer, and which leave you confused about whether to cry in pity or shame.

Yet for all this messy molasses of Dylan’s “real” life—what in some scenarios he half jokingly called “failure” or in other instances he called “being a loser”—if you browse through Dylan’s Instagram or Facebook profiles, it seems the only thing he does is tame wild steeds and gallop them across the majestic steppe, or go on freewheelin’ vacations with his Mongolian lover. The narrative authority of this digital iteration of Dylan’s life lends weight to its reality. And the gravity associated with that weight might cause you to take the fleshy Dylan as the crappy pixilation of his digital self. That might tune you into the Dimecam ontology, rendering the “real” Dylan as the irritating noise that’s getting in the way of a “digital” subject. This thready headspace, where a digital self begins to look like a better version of its fleshy iteration, is the domain of the Dimecams. This more than human—better than human—domain of the Dimecams renders the “real” obsolete. The Dimecam is a wrench thrown into the gears of reality. A wrench that was in the gears to start with. It is the narrativized obsolescence of an unborn Dylan.

IX.

Perhaps you don't find this interpretation very convincing, or even comprehensible. But consider the alternative. — One of the alternatives is to understand my argument. But being paranoid about understanding what's going on in the world, let alone what's going on in my argument, is such a dull way to go about the task of reading (and writing), which has the potential to be something other than a chore. — The second alternative is to think about Dimecam ontology in a commonsensical way. To think commonsensically about Dimecam ontology would be to say that we are all real humans and then in our social media accounts we curate our real selves into likeable photos and captions that make us feel important and loved.

But what if we put aside the assumption that we are *curating* “ourselves” on social media? What if we take social media beings as real beings, instead of just representations of ourselves? This interpretive suggestion is a digital rendering of Marisol de la Cadena's (2010; 2015) notion of pluriversal politics, which takes earth beings literally instead of metaphorically or symbolically. What happens to thinking, asks de la Cadena, when anthropologists stop trying to understand indigenous mountain spirits through a symbolic interpretation and instead treat those mountain spirits as real beings? Harry West (2007) gets caught up in a similar set of questions as articulated in *Ethnographic Sorcery*. West describes an academic lecture he delivered in Madagascar to his informants. In this lecture, West performed a Turnerian symbolic analysis of the sorcerers who transform themselves into lions and start stalking around villages. “[T]he lion,” writes West:

not only symbolized both dangerous predator and regal protector but also symbolized a deep ambivalence about the workings of power in the social world. Simultaneously, the lion, as symbol, expressed the ideas that power was necessary to produce and secure the common good and that power constituted an ever-present threat to the community's many members.

This boring analysis was followed by an awkwardly silent period of questions and answers—until one of the audience members finally said what was on everybody's mind:

“[West], I think you misunderstand... These lions that you talk about... they aren't symbols—they're real.”

(Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids! Silly ethnographer, spirits are real! Silly reader, Dimecams are beings!)

What we have in West's Turnerian symbolic analysis of lion-sorcerers is yet another example of how paranoia prevents thinking. In the same way that I cannot read the anthropology of tourism literature without becoming paranoid about paranoia, West cannot see a lion-sorcerer without having a hallucination about power. It seems West is drinking from the same watering hole that anthropologists of tourism frequent—the watering hole which *they* contaminated with LSD, causing the anthropologists of tourism to have collective hallucinations of neoimperialism and neoliberalism. It's power! Power everywhere, they scream, while blinking.

X.

My idea of treating social media beings as real beings instead of as representations of ourselves that we can log into and out of—and that we can open and close social media accounts for—would perhaps hold more water if we thought further about the ways in which Big Data works. Given the fact that my understanding of Big Data is about as large as a tepezcuintle is massive in comparison to a Josepheartigasia, my eye-blinking analysis in this section of my essay draws upon Donna Haraway’s (2016) methodological technique of SF—or “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.” And, of course, once you start speculating, it’s hard not to get pulled into the paranoid apophenia *around* “them” (Lepselter 2016).

Big Data is terrifying. We are all—you and me and the other Anthros—continuously churning out massive amounts of digital data—endless streams of 1s and 0s that somehow mean something to some *computers* somewhere—a computer which *they* probably own—or maybe *they* are the *computers*! And this data rides around in Internet Choo Choo Trains (also known as “cookies”), which follow us, as fleshy individuals, down every strange digital staircase we descend—maybe looking at some videos that would make our spouses ashamed, or maybe googling a carefully phrased question about our tax returns so as not to tip off any of *their* bots about something we might be up to, though certainly none of us are up to anything. And all the while, little Internet Choo Choo Trains (hereafter ICCTs) are chugging along beside us, gathering data on everything we do. Every mouse click. Every drag on the tracking pad. Every second I spend on *their* webpages. Every pause that I take while writing the sentences in this Google Doc. Do I even own this Google Doc? Or is there some legal framework in which (technically speaking) it’s *theirs*? And this gigantic mass of data, piled high in our individualized ICCTs, actually starts to curate the content that emerges in our individualized Google searches, our individualized Facebook and Instagram feeds, our individualized YouTube recommendations. Even the “people” that appear as we swipe our way through Tinder are curated manifestations of our ICCTs. And lord only knows what’s going on in Snapchat. It’s the Dimecam frontier, a realtime individualized world, crystallized in a personal paroxysm of ICCTs.

What we have, here, is a whole mass of social media worlds that have each been tweaked to fit the preferences of the individual user, the preferences of whom have been determined by the ICCTs full of data. This is how Big Data operates. And in this “SF” illustration of Big Data, I am trying to emphasize that none of us really have *power* over these ICCTs, nor do we have power over the ways in which these ICCTs create our individualized social media ontologies. Given how disconnected and independently operating the ICCTs are, it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to think of them as digital shadows of ourselves. Rather these ICCTs, these Dimecams, have nothing to do with us. They are beings from a different world. And the ontology of these ICCTs and Dimecams is more important than our own...

Don’t believe me? Consider for a moment the emergent system of Chinese Social Credit scores (which I *Googled* in order to understand it better), in which Big Data,

mined from social media and elsewhere, gets thrown into a test tube and crystallized into a score that determines whether banks should give you money. Or consider the fact that all of your liquid assets, unless you hide them inside your mattress, are distilled into a handful of digits beamed down from *their* cloud onto a screen. How do you file your taxes? How do you communicate with loved ones when they're not in front of your face? How do you apply for a grant? How do you file an insurance claim? Everything important is digital. The rest is just noise. The real is just noise. The ontology of ICCTs and Dimecams is more *real* than their fleshy holograms.

XI.

This rant's got me frothin' at the mouth—spittle all over my keyboard. Let me take a break from my paranoid poetics of digital ontology, and instead explore a spooky wormhole from my “real” ethnography in Mongolia. This “SF” iteration (Haraway 2016) of my real ethnography engages with hashtags, at symbols, and messenger apps, with the intention of demonstrating that it is no longer possible to do a non-digital ethnography—for even when tourists go to Mongolia to have “real” experiences of pure and unhinged “freedom,” they are actually just living out a digital fantasy. A digital fantasy which they recreate precisely in the way that they choose to block out all of the misery of “real” life and instead retell the same story of epic adventure that we've all heard a thousand times—because, after all, “the perfect narrative is revealed through... retellings” (Benjamin 1969).

XII.

By the end of my second day in Mongolia I was drinking. I was at a nightclub with some expats and their Mongolian friends. Someone had just ordered the second or third or tenth round of vodka shots. And that's where the memories start fragmenting—shouts and exaggerated arm movements—an ember glows at the end of a cigarette—thumping bass and green strobe lights—piling into the frame of a group selfie. On a dim street I met a drunken man with one eye swollen shut. He held a cigarette between his lips and asked for a light. #affect #anthrooofModerns

The next morning I scrolled through Facebook, surprised by how many “friends” I'd made while drunk. Photos upon photos—comments upon captions—in one photo I am elated. My left arm wrapped around a “friend.” My right hand holding up a shot of vodka. We are all teeth and eyes in the bright intensity of someone's flashing iPhone. #instaflash #flashfiction

My grinning “friend” in the photo goes by the name of @Zappy. He's a Croatian graduate student studying mechanical engineering. He came to Mongolia in the spring of 2018 for an “internship.” But if you look through his Facebook and Instagram profiles, it seems the only thing he did in Mongolia was have series of insane #adventures.

Consider one of @Zappy's Facebook posts, which he titled, *My Mini Mongolian Survival Adventure Story*.

“It all started with a postcard,” he wrote in his Facebook post. “The postcard had a beautiful picture of a mountain on it. I sent the postcard to my girlfriend. I said to myself, when I get home, I wanna be able to tell my girlfriend that I climbed that mountain.”

@Zappy had found an adventure encapsulated in the dual dimensions of a postcard. He was sucked into the narrative potentiality embedded in the epic arch of a two dimensional mountain range. Its intensity was spilling into the third dimension, wetting his hands and thoughts. But before he could stop the narrative spiral, its gravity had pulled him into the fourth dimension. As he writes in his Facebook post, “I bought a map, I started up my motorbike, and I hit the road.” #motorcyclediaris #motorcycleontologies

At the end of a long day on snowy mountain paths, the trail that @Zappy had been riding along disappeared into the bushes. But the postcard of the mountain still reverberated in his mind. And his dream of an epic tale to tell his girlfriend pushed him onward. “The deeper I went into the forest the stranger it got. The last kilometer to the top of the mountain became too dense. It was just covered in head high shrubbery.” @Zappy thought his motorbike was going to get stuck in the shrubs. “So I backed it up and revved the engine and shredded through the bushes at 50 km/h.” But his bike slammed into something and he flew over the handlebars—

@Zappy's Facebook story of a #Modern cowboy on an #ironhorse continues for another 3000 words, replete with howling wolves, near hypothermia, and the whole kaleidoscope of hunger and misery we call #adventure. Somewhere in that dreamscape—after getting lost—after realizing he'd have to spend the night out in subzero

temperatures without a tent or sleeping bag—it dawned on him: “My adventure story just got upgraded to a survival story!”

In the digital ontology of social media, @Zappy is a #cowboy, his motorcycle is an #ironhorse, and @Mongolia is the #wilderness. But when I met the fleshy hologram of Zappy at the nightclub—and wrapped my arm around him while holding a vodka shot and smiling for a photo—he seemed like just another expat, enjoying a few drinks, doing a little something for his resume, and having #thetimeofhislife.

After the iPhone’s flash receded into the night of the club, Zappy and I clinked our glasses together, downed our shots, and shook hands. We’d just made a deal. Tomorrow morning I was gonna buy his #ironhorse.

XIII.

Then next morning I sent @Zappy a Facebook message.

Me: Hey Zappy I just got up. Lemme know when we should meet up.

Zappy: I will go for breakfast at cafe bene in metro mall ;)

if you want we can go together to the black market and i can show you where you get the motorcycle parts to fix the bike

Me: Cool yeah just send me a message when your done eating

A few missed calls and bad connections later, I slipped into the noncommittal coyness of a haggle...

Me: Yeah so I am a little concerned because it sounds like the bike is heavily used and that I will need to repair it a lot. But I don't know anything about bikes so I am worried that if I buy it from you I will spend a lot of time trying to fix it and not riding it. What do you think?

Zappy: yeah for sure it was heavily used. i went off road a lot. but this bike is really tough. the things that are broken are just peanuts and really cheap and easy to repair. i can introduce you to the whole thing and show you how to fix it. i think if you drive like me you will need to do some repairs. but if I fix it now and you drive normally you wont have any problems at all

We came to an unspoken half-agreement. Good enough to meet up at his apartment. Good enough to weave our way through the police barriers that were scattered throughout the city for the annual marathon to arrive at the Black Market and go looking for spare parts. But it was closed. So we spun around town for another three hours, while @Zappy used WhatsApp and Messenger to call and text “friends” and “friends” of “friends” in Ulaanbaatar’s densely packed conglomerate of social media #Moderns.

Around midday we’d found our way to a garage in one of the *ger* districts—or yurt districts—or unplanned low-income communities that have crystallized around the edges of Ulaanbaatar, where any Mongolian citizen can throw up a fence and a tent and claim a plot of land. And then forge a life in the vast desert of public services, where paved roads are rare, plumbing rarer, and heat in the winter, which routinely plummets to -20°F, radiates from the cozy wood stoves snuggled in the center of all of Mongolia’s *gers*.

But in the *ger* districts of Ulaanbaatar (where everyone’s struggling to make ends meet and where no one’s ends seem to be meeting) there’s no longer any timber (just over the next ridge), which you could chop down and drag home. Instead, you have to buy wood. But because wood’s too expensive, most opt for the cheap alternative, raw

coal. Or the even cheaper alternative, old tires. What results is smog—perpetual winter mists hanging over the city until spring.

It seems every expat I met in Ulaanbaatar had a story about the smog. Take @Jane, for example, whom I met on Tinder, the dating app. As soon as we'd matched on Tinder, we realized we were colleagues. @Jane was also slogging her way through a PhD. And it seemed we knew all the same people. Later that evening she invited me to a party at a notorious flat—as one #Modern said, “every expat in Mongolia has either lived at that flat or vomitted in that flat’s toilet.”

The vomit flat is a pleasant little double-decker abode, located on the 11th floor of an apartment in a nice part of town, with a cramped balcony where the cigarette smokers can hide and gaze at the city’s lights. This flat has an uncanny magnetism for Peace Corps Volunteers, Fulbright ETAs, Princeton in Asia Fellows, US Embassy interns, and a whole host of other well-educated social media #Moderns, fresh out of their undergraduate degrees and well on their way to the white collar worlds of the West—but not before a brief stint of “international experience” and the opportunity to get a little “perspective” on the “world.” They’ll hardly make a dime, but they’ll get a lot of *likes*.

XIV.

But how did we get inside of an apartment? Well, I was writing about the thick winter smogs that emerge from the tire-burning *ger* districts where @Zappy and I had brought his #ironhorse. And I was gonna tell you about @Jane's smog story. But then I got sidetracked by the vomit flat. #spacecadet

Evidently, as @Jane told me—while we were crammed into a corner of vomit flat's kitchen, surrounded by throngs of drunken 22 year olds, cheersing in pajamas, since it was a pajama-themed party—she had nearly fainted one winter as a result of the smog. (Quite a place to pull out a voice recorder and get to #work.)

"I had just finished up [high pitched 22-year-old laughter in the background which had nothing to do with our conversation]—oh jeez what're they up to," said @Jane, getting sidetracked. I held fast, voice recorder and beer in hand. #hardatwork

"Anyways—no, so I was saying, I had just finished up some interviews at this political organization that I work with a lot, right, and—cuz I do democratic, democracy—like political anthropology—how Mongolia is getting—is negotiating being a new democracy—"

"Yeah, I gotchu," I said, not really getting her, or even getting the whole notion of a "project," which every PhD student seems to be frothing at the mount about.

"—yeah, and then I was looking for my gas mask—"

"Wait, what," I injected, "you wear a gas mask?"

"Yeah, you have to wear a gas mask in UB [Ulaanbaatar] during the winter."

"That's crazy."

"Well, ya know, you gotta come up with solutions. I mean—ya know—so I [more laughter erupts from the 22-year-olds in pajamas]"

"What are they drinking," I said.

"Who knows. You wanna go to the balcony. It'll be easier to talk there," she suggested.

"Sure," I said. The conversation continued in fits and starts as we walked to the balcony, some of it captured on the voice recorder, some of it drifting off into the ether, forever undocumented.

"—gas mask—backpack—stolen—[trap music in the background]—I mean where else. I might have misplaced it—back home—this apartment—lived here—[laughter]—my boyfriend at the time—six months with a few other expats—on the way home—really thick smog that—couldn't even see other side—clutching the phone poles—stumbling—barely made it—always carry a backup!—"

We'd made through the sea of 22-year-olds and arrived at the balcony. I turned off the voice recorder, still sort of surprised to hear that @Jane had nearly passed out on a short walk home because her gas mask went missing. The smog in UB must really be #something (Stewart 2007).

XV.

But back to the other Dimecam I was writing about, @Zappy. I was trying to buy his #ironhorse. But it was half-broken, so we had to do some repairs at a garage in one of the *ger* districts.

@Zappy dove into the nuts and bolts. As a mechanical engineer, he really knew his stuff. Repairing an #ironhorse would be peanuts in comparison to the work he normally did. In fact, the whole reason he came to Mongolia was to innovate a new stove—a new stove that could lie at the center of all the *gers* in the *ger* district—a new stove that would do a better job of heating the *gers* and therefore require less coal—and therefore create less pollution in Ulaanbaatar, making it easier for people to walk home without a gas mask. Yet, when you scroll through @Zappy’s social media profiles, you see nothing of this work. No where in the digital ontology of social media do you see @Zappy hunched over heaps of scrap metal with a welding torch in hand. Rather, in the digital worlds of the Dimecams, “Mongolia” becomes a backdrop in which Dimecam subjects can mobilize the image-tropes of cowboyism and cowgirlism to create self-aggrandizing fractals of the adventure narrative—freedom narrative—wilderness narrative—(though here it might be cogent to recollect the romantic nature-journeys of 17th century Japanese prose-poet Matsuo Bashō as a means of fracturing Anna Tsing’s [2005] fractal about how a divine reverence for nature is simply the recalibration of a Western, Judeo-Christian [and all the other concomitant fractals you can think of] worldview that replaces a godhead with nature, as neatly expressed in the life and work of John Muir)—masculine narrative—Amazon narrative—mountain man narrative—mountain woman narrative—mountain mountain narrative—mountain mountain narrative—this the narrative drivel of social media, where inane things go viral and where everything that matters to us (like the stoves that decrease pollution) is just noise—

Half-way through @Zappy’s attempt at fixing the bike, I snapped a quick photo and posted it to my Instagram account.

The luff of @Zappy’s hair bounces off the death-red of the motorcycle, looping into the black hallways of the garage. Hallways that drift into a nowhere off to the side somewhere. A dumb blare of sunlight plows in from the left, where the oversized garage door flaps in the wind. The dumb sunlight, contrasting with the black hallways, overexposes the photo—in the same way that a vulgar joke, which is halfway through falling flat in too-polite company, scrambles at full velocity to cover its tracks and postpone a shame that has already arrived. Plastic trays, alternating between black and yellow, are full of drills and drills bits. The muffler waits expectantly beside a tin of nuts and bolts.

With my thumbs I scrawled a caption beneath this Instagram photo: “Buying a motorcycle for a hundred bucks. Hope it doesn’t fall apart. Thanks @hiusa #explotheworld.”

It’s seems “I” too am incapable of “representing” Mongolia as anything other than a backdrop for exploration and adventure. I’m buying a motorcycle for a hundred bucks—OMG! He’s buying a motorcycle in a foreign country!—I hope it doesn’t fall apart—OMG! What a risk taker!—#explotheworld

Yet this ontological framing of a photo in Mongolia as a typewriter of adventure isn't entirely a framing of my own making. It is also a framing that the organizations which fund my research get involved with. HIUSA, which provided me with a bit of funding to go to Mongolia, required (as a condition for receiving money) that I make three social media posts, using @hiusa and #exploretheworld in my post. Thus, every "real" entity (human and corporate) that gets sucked into the narrative gravity of Dimecam ontological adventures, conducts business in the same currency, a currency that has no exchange value in the "real" world. All the Dimecams I met, @Zappy, @Jane, Dylan, and a dozen others, as well as one of the organizations that funded my research, all became caught with me in the gravitational gyre of a digital Mongolia made for expeditions—a place which we visited in the flesh but a place that our digital shadows never encountered—for in the digital ontology of Dimecams and ICCTs there is no "real" Mongolia, just a conglomeration of narrativized ICCTs, making it impossible for any "real" being to have access to Mongolia—unless, however, they ingest hallucinogens—hallucinogens like the ones Amerindians use to jump "perspectives." Consider what Eduardo Kohn (2013) wrote about these perspective jumping substances:

Just as dogs require the hallucinogenic mixture tsita to understand the full range of human expression, people ingest hallucinogens, especially aya huasca, so that they can converse normally with... spirits.

In other words, beings, human and otherwise, need something resembling a "substance" (maybe, as Taussig says in *What Color is the Sacred*, "polymorphous magical substances") to facilitate the leap into another realm. But without these substances social media looks like social media and flesh looks like flesh. From the perspective of social media, however, flesh looks like social media and social media looks like flesh. From the perspective of Dimecams, humans look like Dimecams. Consider the way Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) frames this perspectival *seeing as* in his well-known essay:

Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture - they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish, etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties, etc.). This 'to see as' refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts, although in some cases the emphasis is placed more on the categorical rather than on the sensory aspect of the phenomenon.

This *seeing as* that occurs in Amazonia similarly operates in the *seeing as* of social media Dimecams. Consider the Dimecams that leapt into my Instagram world shortly after my post of @Zappy fixing the motorcycle went live. Within seconds, one of

my high school buddies, who I hadn't seen in years, but who was still haunting the digital corridors of my social media presence, commented on the photo. "So that's your untamed steed?" To which I replied, "my iron horse."

Then another digital ghost appeared. It was Adventure Sam! One of my climbing partners from Colorado College, who'd gotten his nickname while running naked through a canyon in Utah and singing Neil Young's "Down by the River." Adventure Same wrote, "Hell yeah!" And then he vanished back into the digital ether. Lord knows when I'll hear from him again.

@Zappy called my name and pulled me back into the "physicality" of our shared ontology. He wanted me to hold the motorcycle still while he drilled a pilot hole into the frame. But he couldn't see very well in the dimly lit garage. So I pulled out my phone again and turned on its flashlight and held it above @Zappy's head.

XVI.

This is the final section of my essay. It is a sober backpedaling. An attempt to say something reasonable. An attempt to deliver a simple takeaway message.

Throughout this essay, I have been arguing that (1) reality and digitality are two separate worlds and that (2) the digital is just as real, if not more real, than the real. In line with the later works of Michael Taussig, Kathleen Stewart, Anand Pandian, and others, I have tried to present this argument performatively, in the writing itself. The alternative would have been to write under the false pretense that writing is transparent. And then proceed by writing an argument transparently. That is not a rational alternative to the slipperiness of knowledge, though surprisingly it is an academic status quo that few seem to be willing to part ways with. For all of the postmodern theoretical drivel that gets paraded around, academics seem to be shockingly unwilling (especially in the course of training undergraduate and graduate students) to take that drivel seriously and let it infect the shape of argument—infect the teleology of argument itself.

My quibbles about academic writing aside, I would like to now propose a backpedal—namely that digitality, rather than being a separate ontology, is a not-quite-ontology, and (further) that Dimecams (or the digital subjects that we all become in the digital ontology) are not-quite-beings. I propose adding “not-quite” as a caveat to the notion of digital ontology and digital beings in order to register the fact that the digital, though clearly on its way to becoming a separate reality, is not quite there. This not-quite framing that I engage with comes from Morton Pederson’s (2011) *Not Quite Shamans*, where he discusses how the upwelling of spiritual energy in a postsocialist Mongolia, in combination with the fact that there were very few spiritual specialists left in Mongolia following the communist purges, created a situation in which the victims of this postsocialist spiritual energy were “stuck in an endlessly deferred state of being not quite shamans.” Using this analytic as a tool for calcifying the incompleteness of digital ontology, reminds my concluding argument to earlier sections of this essay, in which I articulated my paranoia about paranoia—a paranoia in which continuous revisions prevent not only the world but also the analysis of the world and the proposed gap between the world and analysis from crystalizing into a completed project—a set and settled endness as opposed to an “aroundness,” which I depicted earlier as a fundamental procedure in the Dimecam ontology and ethnonym. Returning to the adventure myths that I introduced at the beginning of this essay—the myths with such strong gravitational pull that they suck people from across the globe into an insane mini expedition on the edge of death, where rain, snow, hunger, and boredom teach them how hard it is to die—if we frame those myths in the ontology of a not-quite, we can see how the “retelling” (as Benjamin teased out in *The Storyteller*) of narratives is what gives them life. Without retelling, without repetition, without the in-built incompleteness of a gravitational gyre that compels the retelling of a retelling, a narrative isn’t a narrative to begin with. This not-quiteness of narratives is the same not-quiteness that spins the digital ontology into a world of its own, divorced from “reality.” This repetitive retelling gravity of a not-quiteness is what causes foreigners to go to Mongolia, have miserable, muddy experiences in a series of present moments that stack up into a month long adventure—

and then, at the end of it all, post an epic photo on Instagram with a hashtag to match (#wanderlust).

This not-quite-ontology of digitality demonstrates that although much of the ontological turn literature has been used to understand the worlds of distant others—most frequently indigenous peoples in Amazonia and North Asia—perhaps one of the strangest worlds of all is just beginning to emerge right in front of our faces, which are lit up by the screens of our phones.

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