The ethnology of nowhere, everywhere: Marc Augé's *Non-places* as an analytical tool for supermodern ahistory and transience

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Marc Augé's *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* is a work charged with creating, in own terms, an 'anthropology of the near,' i.e., an ethnological understanding of 'contemporaneity' or 'everyday life.' While some may be critical of Augé's project because of its strangeness, he assures that his aim is not as radical as it seems since 'anthropology has always dealt with the here and now.'[1] In other words, he reminds us that anthropology – at least in the cultural sense – fundamentally requires observation of a particular 'here' and 'now,' even if an ethnologist has historical interests. Even oral history projects require interaction between the anthropologist and her informant, 'who tells us less about the past than about what he knows or thinks about the past.'[2] Although anthropology has begun to situate some aspects of the 'everyday life' as a valid object of study, it nonetheless seems to focus on that object with an inherent distance.[3] However, this is not to say that distance between the observer and contemporaneity does not exist within an analysis based on Augé's methodology. The structure of 'supermodernity' – the situation created by the changing nature of time, space, and construction of meaning by individuals and is the positive correspondent to postmodernity – fundamentally creates distance between itself and those within it. For Augé, the 'non-place' is the spatial instantiation of supermodernity, and opposed to 'anthropological place,' which presumes that a culture is inextricably

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[1] p. 8.
[2] p. 9.
[3] For example, consider the work of the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life, a research program based at the University of Michigan. While claiming the 'everyday' as an object study, much of the research performed by the Center is not a reflection of the everyday life of the *ethnologists*; instead, much of it is an analysis of the lives of 'working [class] families.' While the need for such research is clear, it nonetheless still requires the creation of an otherness between anthropologists and the objects of their study.

located within a certain time and place.[4] Non-places, on the other hand, are prevalent in supermodern and Jamesonian 'late-capitalist' society as spaces created for specific ends, such as commerce or transportation, 'which cannot defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity.'[5] Instead of remaining within a certain place for the duration our life, our experiences are defined through the non-spaces through which we travel and with which we interact. This essay will present Augé's work as a valuable means through which to analyze the mundane and the processes of signification that constitute post- and supermodern society.

Rebuilding ethnology within arms reach: the problematics of (anthropological) object, totality, and anthropological place

Augé's first aim is to establish an anthropological justification for an analysis of contemporaneity, which in part requires the rethinking of concepts central to anthropology in the traditional sense. To begin, he describes a recent paradigm shift within ethnology as practiced in France; rather than focusing on studying 'remote' societies, he writes, social anthropologists are now setting their sights closer to home. However, he refutes the claim that this reorientation originates in the increasing difficulty to perform fieldwork in 'the distant elsewhere – formerly "colonial", now "underdeveloped" – favoured in the past by British and French anthropology.'[6] Rather than being an 'anthropology by default,' the anthropology of the near has the potential to be a strong, methodologically sound area of research, despite its raising of a double-sided question. The first concerns the possibility of an anthropology of the near as being as conceptually complex as 'traditional' anthropology; the second questions whether 'the facts, institutions, modes of assembly … [and] circulation specific to the

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[4] While not explicitly specified, it is apparent that Augé also includes within 'people without a history,' i.e., 'primitive' cultures that have not changed for hundreds, if not thousands of years.
[5] p. 77-78.
[6] p. 10.

contemporary world' are valid objects for anthropological analysis given the difficulty we place on isolating aspects as individual objects of study..[7]

In the first case, Augé responds that European ethnology has already established that it can be as rigorous when analyzing the objects of 'traditional' anthropology, as it proves the importance of such objects to our own cultures and the existence of a plurality of cultures within a certain area. In terms of the second, Augé establishes that such a concern stems from a confusion of between the object and method of anthropologies of the near. Even if individual objects of study are hard to isolate given the complexity of modern society because of their interconnecting aspects (such as work, leisure, commerce, and so forth), we must still establish some boundaries within which we will set our sights. However, we need not worry about 'representativeness' within ethnological research in contemporaneity, because the '*mythologiques*' or abstract 'anthropological objects' longed for by anthropologists as general hypotheses from which to work are problematic in the first place. In addition, Augé believes that such isolated anthropological objects may not be of relevance or of interest to those within contemporaneity:

> An example is the amusing comment ... to the effect that the Bretons 'are a lot more worried about their loans from the Crédit Agricole than they are about their genealogies...'. Behind this throwaway formulation, the question of the object is outlined once again: why should anthropology attribute more importance to the Bretons' genealogies than they do themselves (although it is hard to imagine Bretons being totally indifferent to them)? If the anthropology of the near contemporaneity had to be based exclusively on the categories already registered, if it were not allowed to formulate new objects, then the act of moving into a new empirical terrain would not answer a need, merely the researchers idle curiosity.[8]

Augé also problematizes the importance on the creation or recognition of 'totalities' within ethnology as stressed by theorists such as Marcel Mauss. Within a Maussian definition, a 'totality' is exemplified through the non-elite, individualized

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[7] p. 11.
[8] p. 17-18.

everyman of sociological investigation, wherein 'his entire being is affected by the smallest of his perceptions or by the slightest mental shock.'[9] However, as Augé rightly notes, this treatment of the totality as a representational individual does violence to the very idea of individuality as a constellation of the forms of otherness, most notably in the case of 'private otherness': 'categories through which we may discern an otherness that contributes to, and compliments, all individuality.'[10] Although we may consider individuals and cultures as totalities in another sense, mutually dependent on their interaction with each other, they are not totalities within a Maussian analysis since cultures are never entirely static and since individuals are never completely void of otherness.

In addition to the problematics of conceptual object and the existence of 'wholly representative' individuals, Augé rejects the ethnological demand for 'the indigenous fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil outside which nothing is really understandable.'[11] In other words, Augé is arguing against the requirement of a definable 'culture' having a fixed temporal and spatial location and a closed semiotic system. Furthermore, the semiotic system must subsume all instances of 'semiotic violation,' wherein an event or utterance does not map to an established meaning, so it can be made subject to discourse using established relationships of signification. In a clearly post-structuralist – if not anti-structuralist – move, Augé argues that such an idealized society with a closed system of signification is little more than another anthropological myth. In Augé's view, such a system would excise all possibility of otherness from within; conversely, nearly all societies recognize some form of other, be it through the distinction between mortals and gods, the need to

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[9] Mauss, qtd. in Augé, p. 20.
[10] p. 19.
[11] p. 44.

marry or trade beyond the limits of one's own group, or those entities – even non-human – that threaten its existence. Having removed the possibility of a semiotically self-sufficient culture, Augé next takes issue with the concept of anthropological place assumed by traditional – namely Maussian – ethnology, which not only temporally and spatially fixes a culture to a given site, but also inscribes meaning on and for all entities within that site. For example, he states that an individual residing within an exemplary anthropological place 'does not make history, he lives in it.'[12] Furthermore, anthropological place has a tripartite function: to serve as concrete, geometrically defined (e.g., consider such related concepts as intersections and of 'crossroads') sites of identity, history, and 'relations of reference' (often social and almost always semiotically-laden interactions between an agent and some sort of other – the space itself, other agents, and so forth).

Augé provides a number of different examples of this concretization in respect to each of these three aspects. For example, in terms of its connection to history and identity, he references Pierre Nora's identification of *lieux de memoire*, and the desire of the French of his generation to celebrate Catholic feast days in a 'traditional' manner (i.e, within a small chapel of a town to which their connection may be relatively weak). Similarly, a town center often has multiple functions in this regard – the intersection of two main roads often becomes a site of commercial and interpersonal relations. The most telling is an example that of the 'monumentalized' (although he mostly recognizes this particularly in the case of monuments *stricto sensu*): those places that demand recognition of the functions at or within them (cf. Augé's discussion of ritual in his *An anthropology for contemporaneous worlds*). For example, a shrine is recognized as mediating the discourse between an individual and religious practice; when we interact

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[12] p. 54.

with people at a given site, we are able to recognize *why* we are there and may interact with them to discuss these presumably mutual discourses.[13] In another case, Augé notes the designation of particular towns as 'capitals of' certain dubious practices and entities: '[e]very settlement in France aspires to be the centre of a significant space and of at least one specific activity … [e.g.] Janzé, really no more than a large village, boasts that it is the "birthplace of the free-range chicken".'[14] Although this example (through this citation) is intentionally frivolous, one can imagine the interactions of people within a given site such as Traverse City, Michigan – the state's 'cherry capital' – given the festivals, business ventures, and the like dependent on this designation. To this, as we will see later, are opposed (although not entirely) Augé's non-places (*non-lieux*), spaced created to serve a certain function but whose distinguishing feature is that our interactions with the space itself are more important than those we have with the other individuals within it.

Towards an anthropology of the near: supermodernity and non-places

In Augé's view, an unchanging framework will not support an analysis of an object itself that ceaselessly 'changes shape' in the loosest sense possible – not only geometrically or geographically, but historically and referentially as well. While such changes, one may argue, are reflective of postmodernity, Augé nonetheless chooses another term to invert some of the distinctly negative aspects that the postmodern suggests, namely the instability of narratives. In opposition, he presents 'supermodernity' (*surmodernité*) as that which arises from the debris left from postmodernity's razing of the modern. Through the de(con)struction of problematic totality (e.g., 'grand narratives') a multitude of singularities begins to transpire, wherein

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[13] This accordingly makes such sites liminal spaces as well, as their function is understandably shared.
[14] p. 67-68.

the sum of the parts is truly greater than the whole. Despite Augé's 'positive' spin, his description nonetheless focuses on a problematic (if not negative) aspect, that the defining characteristic of supermodernity is excess. For example, in his analysis of the changing nature of time and history, he describes its 'acceleration' wherein lies 'a multiplication of events very few of which are predicted by economists, historians or sociologists.'[15] Within supermodernity, history succumbs to Faulknerian lament of the past *qua* not-being-past, wherein an event becomes history as soon as it is lived. However, this excess occurs temporally not only within the structure of history, but with *time itself*, through factors such as the extension of life expectancy.

Similarly, he notes that similar changes are taking place spatially as well, but paradoxically so; our excess of space arises from the 'shrinking of the planet,' resulting from faster means of transportation and 'on-demand' technologies such as satellite television. In another sense, this change is taking place through the proliferation of non-places, as we will see below. Augé's 'third figure of excess' is that of 'individualization of reference,' wherein individuals seek to define their own semiotic and semantic systems for themselves, rather than relying on 'reference points for collective identification.'[16] We can create localized arenas of signification in a *radical* sense through Michel de Certeau's identification of the individual's *bricolage* to subvert, rework, and wedge their way through societal constraints. In a more mundane capacity, we can think of our individualized systems for note-taking and semantic webbing, be it through paper-based methods such as index cards or those supported/supplanted by information technology.

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[15] p. 28.
[16] p. 37.

From this construction of supermodernity and in contrast to the problematic notion of 'anthropological place' Augé identifies his key concept: 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity … a space which cannot be defined as [such] … will be a non-place [*non-lieu*].'[17] While Augé intentionally opposes *les lieux* and *les non-lieux*, he never directly claims that the latter is the complete inversion of the former, as he maintains that non-places always designate both 'spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces.'[18] Like Augé's construction of supermodern 'ahistory' as ultimately defined through the mass-cultural tides of Warhol's 'fifteen minutes of fame,' non-places pass just as quickly. It is hardly accidental that Augé exemplifies the non-place as the fundamental experience of the traveler through space, 'a simultaneous distancing from the spectator and the spectacle'[19]:

> in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse a future..[20]

In addition to the transitory nature of an individual's interaction – or, perhaps, transaction – with a non-place is the essential importance of the interaction being on the *individual* (rather than the social) level. While the social aspect of the non-place may not be nil, it is obviously not primary; through Augé's examples (airports, *le métro*, shopping centers [in the United States, we could perhaps refer to Walmart]), it is clear that we have a particular end in mind when entering a non-place rather than a synthesis

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[17] p. 77-78.
[18] p. 94.
[19] p. 92.
[20] p. 87. Despite the journey through a series of non-places, Augé nonetheless recognizes the primacy of the 'relations' that individuals (i.e., in this case, travelers) have with non-places. In this case, this makes Augé's traveler distinct from Benjamin's *flâneur*, wherein the latter's guiding principle is 'look, but don't touch' (Buck-Morss, qtd. in Clarke, p. 84).

between functional needs and aleatoric interactions.[21] As such, the individual, in a sense, becomes invisible or indistinguishable from the masses of those who pass through it; everyone seemingly goes about their own business rather than being preoccupied with that of everyone else. In this case, the individual ultimately becomes an 'other' in direct relation to the non-place with which she interacts.

Augé makes the revealing remark that the relations that individuals have with non-places are highly mediated to require certain 'contractual relations.' This contrasts with the anonymity provided, in some senses, by the non-place; when entering and exiting a non-place, such as an airport's departure lounge or certain work places, individual must affirm their distinct identity. This mediation is achieved through signification: advertisements, 'instructions for use,' signage, ideograms, and even the words themselves.[22] Although individuals have relations with non-places, those relations need not directly map to those for which the space was formed despite their tendency to do so, as non-places mediate a set of relations that are only linked loosely those purposes for which they were created. The implications as such are that our relations with non-places are fundamentally semiotic; through our interactions, we must always interpret a text *on an individualized basis.* This therefore suggests the possibility of de Certeau's radical agency in our existence within and interactions with non-places – we can fundamentally act in opposition to them in some manner despite how highly policed they are because of our interpretative freedom.[23] Furthermore, the

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[21] For more on Augé's analysis of *le métro* , see his *In the metro*.
[22] In terms of this final case, Augé notes that this holds true of 'certain places [that] only exist through the words that evoke them' (p. 95), such as 'America,' 'the West,' and so on. In this case, such non-places are fundamentally forms of the 'social imaginary' as defined by Cornelius Castoriadis.
[23] An excellent example of such a move is the work of the Surveillance Camera Players, a group of Situationist-inspired New Yorkers that perform short plays and other types of performance art in front of surveillance cameras located in public places – most often facing a busy street.

anonymity one achieves through initial and final validations of identity seem to work in our favor rather than constantly making us feel like the 'guilty party.'

Placing the non-place: a conclusion

With the ascent of the linkages between transnational capitalism, 'bedroom communities,' media culture, and technological development, it should be clear that Marc Augé's analysis reflects the changing nature of space and society to which, arguably, most individuals in the 'First World' are parties. When 'the old farm road's a four-lane that leads to the mall' [24] and 'everyday' errands require us to leave the comforts of our own neighborhood, we can see non-places forming before our eyes. As such, ethnology demands such a change as suggested by Augé. Recognition of a unity of a 'culture' or identification of modernistic totalities may be futile given the situation of postmodernity, but such a crumbling at the theoretical roots of anthropology does not mean that we cannot organize another barn-raising. As other disciplines have had to change given the shifting ground of postmodernity, Augé successfully identifies the supermodern as the new object for theoretical discourse within anthropology. Given the interrelatedness of all forms of theory, it should be clear that this construct should be applicable within other contexts.

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[24] Ani DiFranco.