Conclusion

We began this book with several aims in mind. The most obvious was simply an acknowledgement that in the past books have emphasised the textual over the visual. This was largely for technical and financial reasons. Books and journal articles with many colour images were expensive both to print and purchase. We have been slow to recognise the bias this may have led to. Our aim was to give these visual posts their due both in terms of attention and replication, properly reflecting the degree to which photos and memes now dominate the social media posts of some regions.

The second point was to demonstrate the potential of comparative anthropology. As papers start to emerge by anthropologists about visual postings on social media around the world, it becomes obvious that these may vary considerably from place to place. This is very evident throughout the entire ‘Why We Post’ set of publications dealing with nine different field sites. But this may be the first book that attempts a systematic comparison including both qualitative and quantitative evidence to show just how different such visual postings may be. Our third aim comes from the task of explaining these differences. Could such material have the potential for the kind of anthropological analysis of culture and values that we would have previously attempted using more conventional ethnography?

Ethnography is concerned with patterns and trends rather than the individual, distinguishing us from, for example, psychology. It differs from journalism in that our main interest is the typical and general rather than the sensational or exceptional. The many examples of both a quantitative and qualitative difference between our two field sites brings us to a concern with typicality. We have tried to be careful in not claiming that The Glades ‘is’ England or El Mirador ‘is’ Trinidad. We have given constant reminders that there is variation, based not only
on sociological parameters such as class and ethnicity, but also always at the level of individual preferences. At the same time we acknowledge that both populations themselves engage in constant discussion as to the nature of Trinidadian and English culture and behaviour, which clearly influences and resonates with our own generalisations.

The early chapters give a sense of people being socialised into certain expectations and norms as they grow up. By Chapter 7, this allows us to consider the basic values which are being expressed in the two field sites. In the case of Trinidad, this corresponded closely with Miller’s earlier ethnographic study, published as *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach.* There he suggested that Trinidadian values have developed in a ‘dualist’ mode resulting from the specific history of the island, whose population consists largely of descendants from either enslaved Africans or indentured East Indians. In that book, Miller argued that this radical rupture from their place of origin led people to develop two opposing projects. On the one hand there is a quite systematic attempt to embody a sense of freedom, which is transient and individual and expressed through events such as carnival and idioms such as sexuality. Things should be kept on the surface rather than institutionalised, which would have made them a possible focus of hierarchy and oppression. On the other hand there is a desire to reconstruct a sense of missing roots, expressed through a concern with extended family and an orientation to the longer term. Such values include gaining substance through education, respecting the home and tradition, and showing a strong commitment to religion.

In turn, this leads us to re-think the three contradictory factors analysed in Chapter 5 of this book. We see through inspection of these visual posts that there are parallels between the distinctions of gender, of ethnicity and of class in Trinidad, which are not independent of each other. Transience as an expression of freedom may become the burden of males, but also of Afro-Trinidadians and of the lower-income population. Meanwhile the need to re-construct roots and focus on the longer term may become the burden of females, but also of Indo-Trinidadians and the higher-income populations. What this means is that the basic dualism of Trinidadian values is made clear by projecting them onto categories of people – and then repeating that dualism for three different contrasts between social groups.

This is a characteristic of anthropological analysis. Most anthropology consists of cultural generalisations, which can be confused with stereotypes. The difference between the two is called essentialism. Essentialism means that cultural behaviour is an inherent property of
that population, related to their biology, psychology or some essential feature. By contrast, anthropology accepts that culture is normative and that we can describe peoples' behaviour as 'typical', but our analysis is used to find the reasons behind that behaviour, which are usually historical and cultural. We thereby demonstrate how, under other circumstances, these people's values and behaviours could have been entirely different. When we see these parallels between class, gender and ethnicity we realise that these are simply distinctions that are being exploited by cultural values and projected on to people. They are not an inherent condition of being female, or Indo-Trinidadian, or of high income.

From this perspective, we are not free agents who determine our own values: rather we are more like objects, things that carry the values of culture. We don't just post memes. By being ourselves a devout Christian or a devotee of hip-hop we are as individuals also a kind of meme: people who embody, express and thereby share Christianity or hip-hop culture. The contrast doesn't have to be between categories such as males verses females. It could equally well be the contrast between Carnival as a celebration of freedom and Christmas as a celebration of tradition. Furthermore, in Chapter 7 we found that in El Mirador this was not just a contrast between different peoples. The core dualism of transience and transcendence also emerged as a contrast within the postings of the same individuals. The same people seem happy to post some visuals that are strongly religious, moral and nationalistic, but simultaneously other posts which are highly sexualised and transgressive.

The historical reasons behind this dualism in Trinidadian values derive from slavery and indentured labour. This is very different from the history of the English people who live in The Glades. However, there may again be deep historical factors that account for the patterns that we discovered and analysed in Chapter 6. The first posts to be analysed in that chapter consisted of photographs of pet dogs and cats, and the visual material made clear the association between these pets and children. According to the historian Keith Thomas, this association, and in some cases substitution, between pets and children had become well established by the sixteenth century; it may have begun even earlier. The anthropologist Alan Macfarlane has also shown how this and much other evidence speaks to an unusual and early sense of the individualism of children and people more generally in England. In turn, this rebounded upon our views of 'nature' and may contribute to the development of a cosmology which we now find embodied in the suburban ideals that are the substance of much of the rest of that chapter.
As a result the people of The Glades, for the most part, eschew the projects of transience and transcendence that dominate the postings of the people of El Mirador. They avoid most of the overt sexualisation and emphasis on the cultivation of the appearance of individuals on the one hand, but have far fewer religious, nationalistic and overt statements of tradition and social identity on the other. Rather they seek a moderation and self-effacement that helps them to occupy this middle ground of the suburban middle class. Both as persons and through the objects around them, including properties and pets, they define a set of cultural values quite precisely by a systematic opposition to the two ends of the spectrum of values. There are also some internal oppositions, such as a strong contrast between males and female posting in certain areas and as seen in through a rather repressed but still present culture of working-class values that are determinedly opposed to those of the dominant factions of this society. So in their own way, the values of the English are just as expressive as those of Trinidad. Particular mechanisms, such as humour, are used to control and patrol the boundaries, and to denigrate those who have pretensions that might threaten them.

This is another major finding of this book. If anthropology depends upon people largely conforming to what are seen as appropriate images and avoiding those regarded as inappropriate, then this normativity, this moral order, must be reproduced through some device that keeps people largely in line. The point of Chapter 8 was to present our evidence for how precisely this happens. By asking people to comment on visual images posted by people they don't know, our informants had licence to express what were often scathing condemnations and sarcastic denigrations of every element of an image that they felt crossed their lines of normativity. We did not repeat this experiment for the English people of The Glades since they tend to be more circumspect, so the material would probably have been less rich. But the very evidence for the consistency and reticence in what they actually post speaks volumes for the degree to which the English are as controlling over cultural norms as people from Trinidad.

Chapter 8 then serves another role. The very structure of the book and its levels of generality lead us internally to homogenise these two populations. At the same time there are, of course, individuals in both sites who are highly creative, enjoy repudiating all such pressures and conventions and will look exceptional. Chapter 8 also shows that individuals may have very different and quite contrasting interpretations of the same photograph. No image in this book has a single meaning outside of this spectrum of interpretations to which it is subject by all those
who view it. The point is to keep these things in balance. The term ‘Trini’ should not preclude an acknowledgement of the individualism and diversity of particular Trinidadians, many of whom are very particular. But a focus only on individual difference would equally preclude the evidence for generalisation and typicality that emerges just as strongly from our evidence.

The decision to conduct systematic reviews of 50 profiles in each field site, which meant examining up to 30,000 images, was partly intended to balance any potential accusation that we have selected material merely to suit a given argument. These quantitative surveys were used to support the arguments for difference, though in the introduction we acknowledged that quantitative studies do not preclude qualitative elements. For example, if we take the overall mass of photos, we find that Trinidadian women are more than twice as likely to post images of themselves alone as are those of The Glades (1,006 as against 415), and far more likely to try and look ‘hot’ than those in The Glades (354 as against 52). All of this supports the discussion in Chapter 7.

These surveys provide a mid-level between grand generalisations about El Mirador and The Glades and a concern to acknowledge individual difference. We see all sorts of partial generalisations about particular groups within each field site – things that many or most but rarely all people in that group do; difference may be quite pronounced or not very pronounced at all. In The Glades, for instance, middle-aged and older adults are more likely to post on issues of the environment or climate change, while in El Mirador this would be more common among younger people. In The Glades, females are as likely as males to post about science or IT, while in El Mirador the majority of such posts are from males. In The Glades women seem almost entirely to subsume themselves under the portrayal of their children in visual posts, while in El Mirador the posts of mothers retain a stronger sense of their own identity. One complication is that comparison involved various parameters – for example, age can complicate factors of both gender and region. Sometimes a gender distinction such as females posting more profile pictures than males is true for both younger and older people, but sometimes the more significant reason for difference seems to be age itself. While we conduct surveys and make simple comparisons of the incidence of categories or photographs, we do not use the language of ‘samples’ or ‘correlations’. These would give a false objectivity to our findings, which might well have been rather different in the next village or the next year. We cannot escape the burden of interpretation that relies on a vast amount of knowledge that is not quantifiable – nor should we want to.
We fully acknowledge that there are many arenas which are not especially contrastive. Browsing through the Appendix reveals all sorts of similarities between the two sites as well as striking contrasts. It would be astonishing if there were not these many cases of similarity. The very specific elements of Facebook, such as the use of walls or ‘likes’, are common simply because the platform contrasts with some earlier social media, for example MySpace, in being rather more controlling of how it is used. People in The Glades and El Mirador have taken equally to the sharing of memes. They also share many of the same jokes, videos and sensationalist news. A series of memes such as ‘Keep Calm’ or a viral phenomenon such as the ‘Harlem Shake’ demonstrates its global reach by appearing in both regions. Many Trinidadians have relatives in England; on one occasion when he was working as a volunteer for a church tea, Miller was flabbergasted to discover that one of the other volunteers was actually a Trinidadian born in El Mirador and now living in The Glades. As they say – what were the chances? There is so much common culture, ranging from centuries of colonial rule and education to more recent global media, from Beyoncé to Game of Thrones. So Facebook both homogenises a bit and reflects prior commonalities quite a lot. If this volume has emphasised cultural difference, it is mainly because that is the more neglected side of the evidence – and because, given the factors just outlined, the retention and development of new contrasts seemed impressive. People also often extrapolate from the common material to assume an entirely homogenised world. This volume shows us a very different picture.

In refuting the idea that social media is contributing to cultural homogenisation, we also contest its sibling argument that every modern development represents something called a loss of culture. The people of The Glades are no more and no less cultural than those of El Mirador and no more or less than their ancestors of several centuries ago. The young are no more or less cultural than the old. It is just a question of the respect paid by anthropologists to people’s everyday lives, and a general willingness to see patterns of contemporary culture as emanations of deep historical and cosmological issues – concepts which to us as anthropologists seem very evident. Yes, people trade apparently thoughtless and inconsequential postings that litter modern social media, leading to the current critique of the selfie or the castigation of such postings as the ‘dross’ of day-to-day life. These are often taken as a sign of our growing superficiality, in comparison with some nostalgia-drenched past. But prior to social media, the people of El Mirador or The Glades who met
face to face in the street were equally likely to have been gossiping about their friends or discussing the weather, not debating philosophy.

The final joy of writing this particular book compared to previous volumes is simply that the topic was visual postings, giving us a wonderful opportunity literally to show what we mean. In other papers, we will examine more analytically the transformations in photography that make social media photographs in some ways an unprecedented phenomenon. This book is both a reflection and acknowledgement of the fact that people now post images online in their billions every day. As a result, photography’s traditional aims of memorialisation and representation have now been complemented by an additional concern: it is a major aspect of everyday communication, which on social media rivals that of voice and text.

The visual postings on Facebook do not represent all the visual postings in The Glades. In contrast to in El Mirador, by 2014 other platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat had for young people already become at least as important as Facebook, if not more so, as a place to post images. In Social Media in an English Village, Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the contrasts and similarities between young people’s postings on Twitter and Instagram that complements the evidence of this book. So we cannot pretend the materials presented in this book are even representative of visual postings on social media, let alone of the myriad other ways in which people express themselves.

So we do not claim that this volume is comprehensive in any respect. Yet we hope that we have demonstrated how much is to be gained by welcoming with open arms this new visibility in the world. Photographs have been around for a long time. But this new, comparatively costless and effortless technology of camera phones, which enables images to be posted to a social media platform in seconds, is unprecedented. A large proportion of the people of our world thereby not only have a new visual language, they have recourse to a vast ocean of visual images, either being shared as memes or newly taken by individuals. This book itself represents a snapshot of this historical moment of visual enlightenment, in which the world is just starting to explore the potential of such visual display. It is as though we were living through the invention of clothing as an expressive form. We hope that we have contributed to this acknowledgement, but we finish with a sense that so much more can, and will, be learnt from these developments.