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The Methods, Politics, and Ethics of Representation in Online Ethnography

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The Boundaries of Ethnography and the Internet

Any study of Internet interactions is challenging because of the simultaneous dense interconnectedness of the Internet and the normal boundaries between networks and communities. Moreover, online community development is inherently a multisited enterprise, and each locale in an identified network and its interactions must be thoroughly investigated to best discover its salient boundaries. In this chapter, I address the methods, politics, and ethics of representing these complex arenas through ethnography. I will provide a brief overview of the history and types of online ethnographies. Grounded in this discussion of online ethnographic works, and speculation about the future of such endeavors, I discuss the value of two ways to envision online ethnography: (1) The extension of traditional collaborative ethnography, in which a network of participant observers in offline laboratories or networks, as well as online, work together (sometimes unknowingly) to produce ethnography. This speculation is grounded in my experiences with online communities, one rooted in television fandom,¹ one rooted in research on drug use discourse,² and one that uses the Internet for

research, training, and educational purposes.³ (2) Emerging from these experiences, I discuss autoethnographic network mapping, in which a researcher grounds an online network map on herself or himself. I speculate that, in particular, this method would be useful in pedagogical and public sociological projects where media literacy/citizenship is the specific aim. The chapter concludes with the argument that these sorts of ethnographic practices both ground themselves in the traditions of the method, and address issues of the empiricist critique by explicitly exploring the meaning of “empirical” versus the meaning of “objective” in the practice of the social sciences.

In the way I understand methods, ethics, and politics, each of these concepts overlaps with the others, as each is concerned with distributions of power. Although ethics and politics are concepts that connote concomitant ideas of power, methods may not be. Decisions regarding exactly what tool in one’s methodological kit to employ often hinge on power—that of the researcher, the researched, and the shifting power relations between the two over time, perhaps especially in the intensely interactive method of ethnography (e.g., Ferguson, 1991, pp. 130–132; Kurzman, 1991, p. 261). The power in method is the power of representation of others (Markham 2005a). It’s a basic power—you get to choose the questions and the boundaries of the field, and you write the narrative. The ethnographic texts produced are models of social relations (Smith, 1990). The social relations involved in online ethnographies ultimately reveal that my position as arbiter of textual reality is a rather precarious power (see Marcus, 1998, p. 97).

Online Ethnographic Methods: Extending the Classics

Generally, ethnographic methods may be divided into three areas, and each of these and their well-known mechanics and methods are easily adaptable to the research site that begins, merges with, or ends up in an online setting,

- **Traditional field methods**, wherein a lone researcher enters a field site and becomes a covert or known participant observer. A subset of this classic type is collaborative ethnography, wherein pairs or teams of researchers, often a mentor plus field workers or students, engage the research site (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Burawoy, 1979; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Duneier, 1992; Geertz, 1973/2000; Hartigan, 1999; Kanter, 1977; Lynd & Lynd, 1927/1956; May & Patillo, 2000; Shostak, 1981; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995).

- **Autoethnography**, wherein the researcher is the explicitly grounded native of a particular field site or social situation/status (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Gatson, 2003; Hancock, 2007; Markham, 2005a; May, 2003).
- **Multisited/extended-case ethnography**, wherein the goal is to situate contexts within a dialogue between theory and the field, and the micro mundane world to the macro systems that structure those worlds (Burawoy, 1991, 2000), where “Empirically following the thread of cultural process itself impels the move toward multisited ethnography” (Marcus, 1998, p. 80; see also the Center for Middletown Studies, which, like the Chicago School, has been an ethnographic factory).

Each of these types may be said to be mainly about presentation of the data, as it is possible to tease out the autoethnographic self of the researcher(s), and locate and highlight the place in the macro system(s) of the ethnographic site.

Whether using any of the ethnographic methods outlined, the Internet is ideally situated to be a part of extending the reach of ethnography. Although the boundaries of Internet sites are inherently more permeable and less physically bounded (if no less graphically or cognitively bounded) than offline sites, it is possible to note the predominant way in which authors have presented particular online ethnographies, although many of these publications may be placed in all three categories, and all can be placed in at least two, simultaneously. The bleed between the categories is not necessarily unique to the online settings of these ethnographies, but noting these categories and where we might place particular analyses within them tells us something about the ethical and political place of the contemporary ethnographer.

Although first emerging within the last two decades, with its classics only about 15 years old, and despite the ongoing question of whether online ethnography is either advisable or possible (e.g., Ashton & Thorns, 2007; Derteano, 2006; Ethnibase, n.d.; Holström, 2005; Howard, 2001; Nieckarz, 2005; Watson, 1997/2003), the online ethnography already has a vast tradition from which to draw.

TRADITIONAL FIELD METHODS ONLINE

The earliest online ethnography is arguably Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993/2000), wherein the “homesteading” metaphor of the “frontier” of cyberspace took root (see De Saille, 2006, for a critique of this metaphor). Although Rheingold’s text is grounded in his personal experiences as one of the

creators of online communities, as well as in an analysis that explores the multiple and connected online and offline places and spaces in which his community ultimately exists, his presentation is, without formally using the tools of ethnography (see Rheingold, 2000 edition, pp. 54–55), a rich and useful account of the state of online community in its nascent years. Others in this vein include Ali (2009a, 2009b), Baumle (2009), Baym (1995a; 1995b, 1998, 2000), Davis (2008), DiSalvo and Bruckman (2009), Gatson and Zweerink (2000, 2004a, 2004b), Harmon and Boeringer (2004), Kendall (2002), Lu (2009), Markham (1998), Millard (1997), Mizrach (1996), Nieckarz (2005), O'Brien (1997, 1999), Parpart (2003), Sharf (1997), Shaw (1997/2002), Stivale (1997), and Turkle (1995).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ONLINE

Unlike many works in the classical ethnographic tradition, online ethnographies are often written by consummate and acknowledged insiders in the communities of interest, often by individuals who start out as students, or indeed non-academics. Beginning again with Rheingold, these works explicitly ground the author(s) as a member (sometimes indeed as an architect) of the community of interest first and foremost, and they include Asim Ali (2009a, 2009b), Sarah Gatson and Amanda Zweerink (2004a, 2004b), Stacy Horn (1998), Jeffrey Ow (2000), Latoya Peterson (2009a, 2009b), Lisa Richards (2003), John Seabrook (1997), Sherry Turkle (1995), and Stephanie Tuszynski (2006).

MULTISITED ETHNOGRAPHY

One engages in this type of online ethnography by either exploring more than one online site, by including both online and offline sites, or building a multilayered narrative that develops the larger social context of a community under study (Marcus, 1998, pp. 84–88, 117–118, 241–242). Philip Howard's previous suggestion regarding the lack of appropriateness for straight ethnography in online settings did not hinge upon "real" versus "virtual" per se, but more specifically on a physical ideal of the field site, suggesting that most online sites are both non-physically bounded in any way, and "difficult to set . . . in a larger social context" (2001, p. 565; see also Derteano, 2006; Nieckarz, 2005). This position however has given way to one that is multisited (Celeste, Howard, & Hart, 2009), and includes Ashton and Thorns (2007), Bakardjieva (2005), Bandy (2007), Blasingame (2006), Christian (2009), Connery (1997), Gatson (2007a, 2007b),

Gatson and Zweerink (2004a, 2004b), Goodsell and Williamson (2008), Hampton and Wellman (2002, 2003), Heineken (2004), Hine (2000), Islam (2008), Ito (1997), Kendall (2002), Knapp (1997), Komaki (2009), Leurs (2009), Mallapragada (2009), McPherson (2000), Mitchell (1999), Nakamura (2009), Ow (2000), Reid (2009), Richards (2003), Salaff (2002), Schmitz (1997/2002), Silver (2000), Stenger (2006), Stern and Dillman (2006), Tepper (1997), Tuszynski (2006), Watson (1997/2003), Williams (2004), and Zickmund (1997/2002).

It is worth noting again the difficulty of categorizing online ethnography. If we take a set of published texts by a research team (Busher & James, 2007a, 2007b; James, 2007; and James & Busher, 2006, 2007) together, these works present something other than only the online interviewing techniques that are their main stated methods. Instead, we could re-categorize this set as an autoethnographic multisited ethnography in that the authors set the research within academia where they are members, having prior knowledge of the bulk of their participants. A second set of examples occurs in *Race in Cyberspace*. Several of the chapters are never called *ethnography*, but arguably are, and are multisited: Nakamura analyzes advertising texts that are “popular media narratives of commercial cyberspace” (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000, p. 9). Jennifer González (2000) presents her sites as mainly text about graphics, discussing sites where users may purchase avatars. These sites, among some others in this edited volume (as well as in Porter’s 1997 *Internet Culture*), are treated mainly as texts, and institutional review board (IRB) and methodological considerations are not explicitly discussed. Similarly, Henry Bial’s keynote presentation at the 2009 Texas A&M University Race and Ethnic Studies Institute Symposium moves the author from film studies and analyses of actor performances, to the performances of Jewish identity in several online arenas. Finally, Jeffrey Ow’s statement is most instructive:

As an Asian male cyborg in my own right, I choose to play my own intellectual game with the *Shadow Warrior* controversy, acknowledging the perverse pleasures of weaving an oppositional read of the controversy, creating much more horrid creatures of the game designers and gaming public than the digital entities on the computer screen. In each level of my game, the Yellowfaced Cyborg Terminator morphs into different entities, from the individual gamer, to company representatives, ending with the corporate entities. (2000, p. 54)

Thus, Ow, though grounded in his own participation in both gaming and a racist culture, reflects George Marcus, “Cultural logics . . . are always multiple

produced, and any ethnographic account of these logics finds that they are at least partly constituted within sites of the so-called system (i.e., modern interlocking institutions of media, markets, states, industries . . .)” (Marcus, 1998, p. 81).

Politicizing Methods and Ethics in the Online Field Site: Inherent Membership?

That none of the authors discussed in the previous paragraph called themselves ethnographers is generatively problematic. Max Travers (2009) argues that the newness and innovation claims of online ethnography are mainly political (see also Hine, 2008). In a basic sense of the mechanics of what it is that an ethnographer does (goes to a site, observes the location, the interactions, the boundaries, talks to or observes the inhabitants, records or transcribes all such observations and interactions, reads one’s transcriptions, observes or talks more, transcribes more, and finally prepares a narrative wherein theory emerges or is tested), he is correct.⁴ However, Travers’s dismissal of the new *methods* of online ethnography misses the possibilities of the new *field*—in the sense of field site(s)—of online ethnography. The site of the online ethnography necessarily pushes the definitional boundaries of generally accepted concepts such as self, community, privacy, and text.

Gary Fine argues, “Ethnography is nothing until inscribed: sensory experiences become text” (1993, p. 288). The online site is already text, already inscribed (even more graphic sites, such as YouTube, have text); researcher elicitation from subjects is often unnecessary. This seems to be one reason for Travers to dismiss the online ethnography as one that “usually results in a ‘thinner’ level of description” (2009; p. 173). Despite the few examples Travers cites to prove this assertion, in which his sense seems to be that online ethnographers read “a” posting by a subject, the dozens of examples wherein the researcher(s) rather reads hundreds, perhaps thousands, of posts, often by the same set of participants, over years or as an archive, are ignored. Online research can provide either the same level of depth as a one-shot, one-hour interview, or the same level of depth as that produced by the daily participating, embedded offline ethnographer. It may also provide the same level of in-depth analysis as any historical or comparative historical text-based analysis, wherein the text is gleaned from archival sources (see also Marcus, 1998, p. 84).

Perhaps because the site of entry is so often (assumed to be) a private space (home, office; privately held online account), the idea that the online field has

special ethical boundaries is often taken for granted. However, when reading the ethics sections of just about any work presenting itself as ethnographic, we find the same sorts of boundary-establishing behaviors outlined; indeed they are not inherently different than those found in offline ethnographies. I started my first online ethnographic project before the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research" guidelines were written (2002). From the outset, I followed the practices therein, paying particular attention to how various Internet venues across the terrain of a single community established their own ethical expectations (AoIR, 2002, pp. 4–5; Gatson & Zweerink, 2004a, pp. 17–19). I didn't get my sense of ethical boundaries from the AoIR, but rather from having been trained in sociological research methods.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY: A SKETCH

Dorothy Smith has asserted, "There is no such thing as non-participant observation" (1990, pp. 87). As acknowledged by Judith Davidson and Silvana di Gregorio (Chapter 38, this volume), the higher scrutiny and surveillance of IRBs, coupled with the fact of "ordinary people . . . actively engaged as indigenous qualitative researchers in the virtual world," further complicates the already somewhat fraught professionally defined understandings of informed consent, participation, observation, authoritative narratives, discourse, and scholarship. The online arena then, is a field in which defining insiders and outsiders is more explicitly complicated than in traditionally understood conceptions of ethnographic field sites.

In contrast to Annette Markham's assertion, the first step in online environments is reading (see 2005a, p. 794). As well, in contrast to Hugh Busher and Nalita James (2007), it may be argued that academics are always already in the audience or group being studied when the research site is grounded in online interactions (see Turkle, 1995, pp. 29–30). The Internet itself is one of the only definable fields with which the overwhelming majority of its researchers are already intimately familiar, at least in the mechanical sense (we read, we post, we e-mail, etc.). The content of any particular subfield site within the Internet may be unfamiliar, but the method of becoming an entrant will not be. In other words, lurking or reading online content *is* participant observation in a way that unobtrusive observation isn't in an offline ethnographic situation; if we're a reader of online spaces, we are already "in," in a real way because most online content is read (interpreted), and not necessarily interacted with by adding the reader's own post. But is it always participant observation for which one needs

IRB permission to perform? When does reading become thinking become data gathering become data analysis? When is one a community member, a citizen, or a scholar? Does one need permission to read, or only to post or talk to others online? If, on the Internet, experience is already inscribed, already performed, and not in need of an ethnographer to validate it through scholarly revelation, we are again exposed as decision makers who arbitrate the definitions of the boundaries of appropriate interactions.

In a sense, all online ethnography is “disguised observation,” but it is not also necessarily deceptive observation. The contemporary publicly accessible website carries with it an expectation of being under some level and type of observation, and it is questionable whether anyone participating in such sites has a reasonable or defensible expectation of being unobserved, or indeed of being able to control the observers’ intentions or uses of such observation. The hegemonic bedrock of ethnographic ethics, however, involves both informed consent and an awareness of power differentials, both embedded in the historical excesses of human subjects research, as well as those of IRBs themselves. But, again, reading is its own form of interaction, and posting, submitting, and publishing one’s text online invites readership and an audience, if not a community. Markham’s concern with the researcher’s “loss of authority [or power] in the presentation of research, and diminishment of one’s academic role as observer/interpreter/archivist of social life” mirrors the loss of control the everyday online writer has once he or she presses post/submit/publish (2005a, p. 800; see also Marcus, 1998, p. 97).

In noting the “10 lies of ethnography,” Fine discusses the positives of power and information control, assuming that the ethnographer has the greater share of salient power and control (1993, p. 276). In online settings though, the researcher is hardly the lone ranger (an ethnographic character Fine impugns) controlling the information flows and representations of an isolated or previously unknown/ordinarily unknowable community; again this “lie” of offline ethnography is intensified online. One’s colleagues may engage in open published critiques of one’s work, but so may one’s subjects, and *your* subjects are hardly yours alone.

The required online training manual for human subjects researchers states, “Researchers do not have the right to conduct research, especially research involving human subjects. Society grants researchers the privilege of conducting research. The granting of that privilege is based on the public’s trust that research will be conducted responsibly. Erosion of that trust can result in the withdrawal of this privilege.” I have discussed elsewhere (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004b) the complicated dynamics of who gives permission to who, and for what, when one’s research site is a public venue with not even an unlocked door whose opening announces a certain basic level of entry, and at most slightly opaque windows that

block certain kinds of participation. Those dynamics include the “privilege” of the researcher being just another subject in a way that classic offline ethnographers such as Clifford Geertz ([1973/2000] or even Joshua Gamson [1998]) did not have to confront. As well, Fine, citing Jack Douglas (1976), argues that the ethnographer has rights too. Given the very public nature of most online ethnography, those rights should be assessed under a model other than either a biomedical, or a 50-year-old social behavioral, one (see Stark, 2007). Rather, it should be one that takes the media literate citizen (including the online ethnographers themselves) into account (Fine, 1993, p. 271; see also Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Dingwall, 2007; Elm, Buchanan, & Stern, 2009; Feely, 2007a, pp. 766–770; 2007b; Johns, Hall, & Crowell, 2004; Katz, 2007; Kendall, 2004; Smith, 2004; Thomas, 2004). Online ethnographers have to engage in an exploration of our particular locations in connection to particular field sites, and it is fundamentally and qualitatively different exploring our place in the media-reading audience than it has been in exploring our place as outsiders to more or less bounded, easily identifiable, cultural or subcultural offline geographical locations. Thus, in a sense, we have to remake our guidelines for each online ethnography we decide to do, without at the same time abandoning our connections to professional and socio-legal ethics that we must simultaneously work under.

Finding the Edge of the Ethno: Representing Online Places and Experiences

How then does one go about using the political power one has as an online ethnographer? What is both useful and ethical in creating a representative narrative of an online site and its attendant identities and boundaries? I suggested earlier that one must understand one’s place in the larger community and the ever-tightening circles that demarcate our memberships in groups and networks and thus understand one’s multiple positions, identities, and power/resources, and how to ethically employ them.

THE INTERPENETRATION OF COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES ONLINE

’stina says:

(Mon Sep 14 10:27:21 1998)

QUESTION: This was in my local newspaper a couple of months ago, in the “letters” section:

As a high-school female student, it is troubling to me to think that my age group has been reduced to a simple stereotype of the child who has seen Titanic 18 times because Leonardo DiCaprio is “really really cute” and who religiously watches trashy, superficial programming like Buffy, the Vampire Slayer and Dawson’s Creek.

I resent being told that I am so lucky to have role models like the short-skirted, thrift-store shopping, bubble-headed Buffy. . . . The empowerment of women is a long way off if the media think that portraying sexy, moronic, peroxidized young girls will give us real teen-aged girls the power to take the world by storm. I have no problem with young—I am. I have no problem with sexy—that’s cool. I have no problem with hair dye—that’s between a girl and her hair-stylist. But what I do mind is moronic. To have “girl power,” we must first learn to respect ourselves and others. And if the only images we see are those of heroines with no brains, how can we ever respect ourselves enough to believe we can be something more than Buffy, the vampire slayer?

Courtenay B. Symonds, Houston⁵

Why do you think that young women are consistently told it’s “great” to have Buffy and Ally [McBeal] around as role models? Is it because t]here are so few role models out there for women, that the second [a] series that’s not a sitcom comes out that’s focused on women instead of men we’re all supposed to follow that woman’s lead?

Does this kid have a point?

’stina—who’d much rather be like Chris Carter’s Dana Scully than Joss Whedon’s Buffy Summers.

This textual excerpt from an online community—which generated an approximately hour-long analytical conversation about the gendered role-model appropriateness of Buffy Summers—in which I have spent more than a decade as a member, and more than 6 years as an autoethnographer presents an ideal framing device for a discussion of the methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography.⁶ First, because **’stina** used a common strategy that in fact replicates an ethnographic technique—she made reference to a piece of

conversation or text she'd overheard or read elsewhere to bring attention to a topic of concern to the community and herself as a member of it. Second, she quoted in full the words of someone else, whose original text appeared outside of the place of new inscription, for purposes of her own, again mimicking the technique of an ethnographer. Finally, by reproducing these texts in published form again (for the second time in Ms. Symonds' case, and for the first in 'stina's), I myself highlight methods, politics, and ethics—why these texts? Why these subjects? And, with whose permission?

Reuben May (2003) explored these issues in an article wherein he described himself as both a personal journal writer and a scholarly ethnographer. May's analysis is one of personal journals treated as archival textual evidence in and of themselves, not as field notes as his "statuses negate[d] the viability of formally studying college students' social behavior because his own behavior as a participant-observer would flirt with, rub against, or cross, social, administrative, or legal boundaries" (2003, p. 442). In exploring the difference between being an anonymous student participant-observer who "even wrote my first book about a neighborhood tavern because of my deep down urge to be around people and to share in their verbal games of sexual innuendo," and one who found it inappropriate to engage in the same techniques in exploring the nightlife in a college town wherein he was a non-anonymous and hypervisible Black professor, May tells us what he studied by telling us why he chose not to study it (2003, p. 443). In contrast to May's decisions, Markham (2005b), in a similarly contextualized article about sex/gender and class/race tensions and power dynamics, chose to present her narrative as a complex methodological piece that nevertheless presents findings from a formally defined ethnographic research project. Both of these authors were members of the contexts discussed but each made different choices about what could be defined as a legitimate research project, yet both published their accounts, and in the same journal.

Because of the very public nature of most World Wide Web sites (as opposed to online sites more generally, which includes more controlled access and private arenas from e-mail to newsgroups and bulletin boards, as well as intranet and Internet work- and education-based online arenas), the contentiousness over where the ethical boundaries are has been perhaps especially fraught because they raise issues perhaps thought settled already, as long as the formalities of the IRB process are followed. Is quoting from a blog the same thing as quoting from a newspaper, or a letter found in a historical archive? Is quoting from or reconstructing a face-to-face or overheard in-person conversation the same as quoting from or reconstructing a conversation or group discussion held through instant messaging or a bulletin/posting board? All self-identified online ethnographers,

like their offline counterparts, discuss these sorts of issues, and must figure out what exactly their particular online arena(s) replicate about offline, perhaps settled, situations so that they can defend their ethical choices (e.g., Barnes, 2004; Bassett and O’Riordan, 2002; Elm, Buchanan, & Stern, 2009; Sharf, 1999).

Jan Fernback argues that online space is “socially constructed and reconstructed . . . [and] is a repository for collective cultural memory—it is popular culture, it is narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts. . . . Cyberspace is essentially a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction. . . . [its] users are . . . authors, public rhetoricians, statesmen, pundits” (1997/2002, p. 37). Thus, does a multivocal or dialogic set of texts produce a consensus picture of a community, a fragmented sense of what is or was important to it as a whole, or a reproduction—or indeed a continuation—of the community itself? Ethnographic narrative inscription presents a holistic and often linear story of a people, their place, and their identity. This linear structure may be a necessity of adhering to standards of coherent presentation (see Markham, 2005b, for another perspective). However, communities, identities, and places are contested entities. They also change over time. One (or even two) ethnographers can’t cover every facet of a community, and the production of a coherent narrative requires choice-making. Although we as ethnographers can and do produce consecutive (or concurrent), multifocal narratives of one community, we are still the inscribers, interpreters, and authorities. What happens when there are other scholarly inscribers in one’s research field, as well as “lay” inscribers whose inscription is at least as analytical as one’s own (again, see Davidson and di Gregorio, Chapter 15, this volume)? One outcome could be a collaborative multivocal ethnography that combines the practices of each of the three main areas of ethnographic methodology. This becomes *macro-ethnography*.

Kate Millet’s *Prostitution Papers* presents us with an example of multivocal ethnography (1973; see also Davis & Ellis, 2008). Although Millet is presented as the book’s author, she is really its editor, soliciting and organizing a dialogue between four women, herself included. Millet presented the approaches of each writer in the form of essays authored by women who were identified only by their initials. She herself was K., the scholar activist. J. was the former sex worker—current psychologist, M. was the former sex worker—current PhD student, and L. was the lawyer and policy advocate for the rights of prostitutes. Although there was an overarching consensus offered by the authors—sex work is work, sex workers are positioned by patriarchy and re-victimized by the criminal justice system that seeks to punish prostitutes but not (or rarely) the

men they service—as each woman comes from a different status position, their narratives are quite divergent.

Millet called the work a “candid dialogue,” and the project actually produced both the book and a film. Millet was arguably a liminal ethnographer. She took on the ethnographer’s timeline of observation, inscription, and interpretation. By offering space for their own developed narratives, she invited her ostensible subjects to become ethnographers as well, auto-ethnographers in particular. Millet’s book is thus one that combines ethnography as the experience of the ethnographer and the text(s) that ethnographers and their subjects co-create. In the online ethnography, there is never just “one beginning [or] one ending” (Bochner & Ellis, 2002, p. 11), and no one position of unequivocal power. James and Busher worry that even with the shift in the balance of power that comes with using e-mail for interviews, “researchers cannot escape the power they exert from structuring the rules of the process” (2006, p. 416). Busher and James also worry about the insecure environments and lack of privacy inherent in the field (2007a, p. 3), [but they do not see that this is true for the researcher as well. As Stevienna De Saille notes, without making the Internet a utopia, power and access are quite different online, “As previously disenfranchised people increasingly put up their own boards, pages, and blogs, thus defining their heterogeneous subjectivity to the world, can it be ignored that the technologies of the web do indeed allow the subaltern to speak?” (2006, p. 7).

The “engagement medi[a]” that are both television and the Internet (Askwith, 2007) potentially take us far beyond team-based collaborative ethnographies and allow us to further parse the boundaries, ethical and otherwise, of television audiences, and the communities embedded within those audiences (Bandy, 2007; Islam, 2008; Lotz & Ross, 2004; Shirky, 2002; Whiteman, 2009). Around the same time that I was making the decision to formally study *The Bronze*, the book, *Bite Me! An Unofficial Guide to the World of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was published (Stafford, 1998/2002). It contained a section on the first major offline gathering of the community, the soon-to-be annual Posting Board Party, and included photographs of Bronzers, captioned with both their Bronze posting names and their offline, everyday names. Its 2002 edition contains even more easily identifiable information about several individual Bronzers, as well as thoroughly identifying information about *The Bronze* as a website, and some interviews with members (Stafford, 2002, pp. 113–156). As well, the site was well advertised, and well trolled by journalists, and through linked websites such as *The Who’s Who* and *What’s What of The Bronze* (where Bronzers themselves created a pre-Friendster/MySpace/Facebook place for ease of social networking, long before the mainstream discourse of “Web 2.0” appeared) self-promoted as the communal place to be.

The audience-author feedback loop (Kociemba, 2006) of *The Bronze* has always been complex and multileveled—it wasn't just Joss Whedon who got to be an author, and he wasn't the only one to hear from his audience and community. Jane Espenson, eventually part of the production team, started out as a linguistics graduate student and provided the introduction to Michael Adams's *Slayer Slang* (2004). Meredyth Smith (~**mere**~) went the other direction, from Bronzer first to Whedonverse writer.⁷ Others were lurking and posting, and ruminating on the implications of being Bronzers. **elusio** did a couple of papers for undergraduate courses at a university in the United Kingdom, **Kenickie** was an undergraduate sociology major in the United Kingdom throughout most of the research, and **Psyche** and **seraphim** were graduate students in psychology and anthropology, respectively, who—like several other acafans—while doing no formal studies on *The Bronze*, nonetheless brought their intellectual interests to their offline and online fandom activities, as **Tamerlane** did, when he delurked after several years and became a visible member of the community,

Tamerlane says:

(Tue Apr 11 17:10:39 2000)

'**stina**, **Jaan Quidam**, **Closet Buffyholic**, **SarahNicole**, and others: This place really does interest me. More, I think, than the show. I think an awful lot of credit has to be given to **TV James** for instituting the format he did. One of my two long-time academic interests is Biology (the other of course being History). It always struck me as interesting the difference between your average college lecture class and a biology class with a field or even just a long, interactive lab component. Hanging around people for a three-hour open-ended lab, twice a week, where you spend the whole time wandering around looking at things and discussing them with others, led, I think, to a greatly increased connectivity (compared to even a three hour lecture). Not to mention the bonding that took place on long field excursions (one of my all time favorite camping trips remains a one-week Fire Ecology field-trip). Although I see communities develop at all the posting boards I visit (and I have been there at the beginning of a couple of others), I have never seen the cohesiveness of the Bronze duplicated elsewhere. This "message board" format, at least the way it has evolved, offers IMHO all of the best qualities of chatrooms . . . and threaded boards with few of the drawbacks. The ability to encompass a wide, free-flowing conversation that can be scrolled at leisure at any point within a one week period is pretty unique. The Usenet is similar of course, but the seemingly much higher level of anonymity and the much larger base of casual users seems to limit social interactions.

Here we see an example of how lurkers/readers have an acknowledged place as members of online communities and audiences—they may show up visibly at any time, and their observations/representations then become part of the communally produced text. Across the range of less formal photographic and inscribed observations, there were the Bronzers who wrote about their experiences on easily accessible websites (e.g., **Claris**'s site, www.NoDignity.com), wherein the ethnographer became the subject, where *sometimes* my informed consent was solicited before posting a quotation or a photo.

Other Bronzers (Ali, 2009a,⁸ 2009b; Tuszynski, 2006) also wrote ethnographies, while Allyson Beatrice (2007) wrote a memoir that grounded her online communal experiences at The Bronze. Scholars who do not identify as Bronzers, but as *aca-fans* (*aca-fans* refers to academics who research the object of their fandom, or who identify as both fans and scholars) of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS) to one degree or another, also wrote about Buffy fandom, and sometimes used The Bronze and Bronzers as data (Adams, 2004; Askwith, 2007; Bandy, 2007; Blasingame, 2006; Busse, 2002; Heinecken, 2004; Kem, 2005; Kociemba, 2006; Larbelestier, 2002; Parpart, 2003; Parrish, 2007; Richards, 2003; Stenger, 2006; Williams, 2004; see the Kirby-Diaz, 2009, collection for other broader BtVS fandom works). Dawn Heinecken and Michael Adams most explicitly use Bronzers as examples of audience members, with Adams acknowledging us/them as the hierarchical top of the fandom heap, whereas Heinecken does not draw a boundary around them as a community, but rather presents a division of fans that some Bronzers were a part of—Spike/Buffy 'shippers (short for “relationshipippers”—fans of particular romantic pairings, either those actually appearing in a show/text, or those wished for)—without noting where these folks were on the Bronzer totem pole. Neither of these pieces nor most of the others include discussion of methods, or IRB issues. These authors generally do not position themselves as ethnographers (with the exceptions of Ali, Tuszynski, and Richards). In Adams's case, he is a linguist, accessing the publicly available development of slang stemming from a particular show and its fandom, without really drawing boundaries around the community(ies) that make up that fandom, and seeing his data as published text, part of the public flow of developing language.

THE NETWORKED SELF AND THE PEDAGOGY OF THE MEDIA LITERATE CITIZEN

As I have noted elsewhere (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004a), it is questionable how anonymous ethnographic sites have ever been. Thus, my comments in this section will mainly focus on field sites that are public arenas—not that there isn't a

backstage, but they are backstages that one need not be a “professional” to gain access to. The (perhaps dirty) secret of online ethnography (all ethnography?)—like other mass media-based research, especially television studies—is that it exposes the lack of special knowledge needed to do it. It is intense, but its mechanics are fairly simple, and they’re things we and our students are engaged in every day. All that is needed is the application of the sociological imagination to formalize the reading and posting I do at online communities where my membership ranges from the regular lurker, to the occasional poster, to the daily contributor, and where my online identity of **SarahNicole** remains a near-constant; I’m fairly certain that at the least one of my posts across these communities have already been incorporated into someone’s thesis or dissertation at this point. Two examples demonstrate aspects of this experience of the Internet and create speculation of simultaneously teaching undergraduates responsible research methods and media literacy/citizenship.

In 2007, I did something common to academics; I read a review of my work. What was perhaps unusual but increasingly common was that I stumbled across the review online while “Googling myself” in a search for citations of my work (don’t lie; you all do it too). What was truly unusual was that the review was written by some of the subjects of the research. This research was the outcome of a National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)–funded study on raves and the use of “club drugs,” which in our case focused on the online discourse surrounding these topics (Fire Erowid, 2007; Murguía, Tackett-Gibson, & Lessem, 2007). Early on, my co-principal investigator (PI) attended a conference at NIDA where he met Fire and Earth Erowid (Fire Erowid, 2002). Fire and Earth are the pseudonyms of the people who run Erowid, an online clearinghouse of information about drug use and alternative subcultures that was an important node in the network we were studying, so from nearly its inception, research subjects were involved in the research in ways that were previously unfamiliar to most of the research team. In their review, Fire characterized the work of Erowid thusly,

Although our primary role is that of cultural documentarians rather than participants of the drug-using subculture, in the modern anthropological tradition we adhere to, the validity of one’s understanding of a culture or community is based on whether one is a part of that culture or community. If there is too little connection between anthropologists, researchers, or documentarians and their subjects, the resulting research is likely to be inaccurate. Erowid was started out of our personal and academic interest in psychoactives, but we are only peripherally involved in many aspects of the field. We maintain connections and involvement with a variety of communities in order to better be able to serve their needs, represent their actions and viewpoints, and act as their trusted recorders and archivists. (2007).

These authors/subjects engage in a “contexting [of] the network” (Jones, 2004) of scholars and subjects that publicizes these connections in ways that go beyond publication in practically restricted-access journals read only by authoritatively legitimated experts.

The Internet exposes the fact that there’s public, and then there’s public; there’s talking back (other scholars’ letters to the editor, symposia/dialogue in journals; see Denzin, 2004), and then there’s talking back (Borland, 2004; Chen, Hall, & Johns, 2004; Gatson & Zweerink, 2004b). The race and pop culture website *Racialicious.com* and some of the talk-back generated therein serve as examples of when subjects talk back. *Racialicious* is more moderated than many news outlets’ comments section because it is partly meant to be a safe space to discuss issues related to race/ethnicity and racism (see <http://www.racialicious.com/comment-moderation-policy/>), but its capacity for generating talk-back with which many ethnographers may be unfamiliar is illustrative of the phenomenon wherein I think we can locate both scholars’ place in the research network, as well as platform a teaching tool.

In 2009, as director of my university’s Race and Ethnic Studies Institute, I hosted a symposium on race, ethnicity, and (new) media. Latoya Peterson, editor of *Racialicious*, participated as both a keynote speaker (2009b) and research presenter (2009a). Peterson took copious notes on each presentation, and presented some of her synopses at *Racialicious*. The synopsis of Lisa Nakamura’s keynote presentation and the article from which it was drawn (2009) drew sometimes angry commentary from fans of the game *World of Warcraft*, which, along with the gaming practice of creating machinima (animated music videos using images from the game), were the centerpiece of Nakamura’s work. As well, danah boyd (2009) re-published at *Racialicious* some of her work looking at socioeconomic differences between MySpace and Facebook users, and some users of those social networking sites had much to critique about boyd’s conclusions.⁹

These examples, along with my own experience with Erowid, demonstrate that both information and people, although theoretically having newly opened conduits, are also materially and ideologically embedded in truncated networks with less-than-permeable boundaries (Howard, 2004; Norris, 2004; Travers, 2000). The talk-back made possible by the Internet takes us beyond the professional deconstruction of our ethnographic pasts (Van Maanen, 2004; see also MacKinnon, 1997/2002), and pushes us as both scholars and teachers to explore our “distributed learning communities” (Haythornthwaite, 2002) and the “social context of user sophistication” (Hargittai, 2004). If it is important in the process of ethnographic research to locate the researcher as well as the subjects, and expose the connections between and among them, then the autoethnographic network mapping of particular research projects would be useful in pedagogical

and public sociological projects where media literacy and online citizenship are the specific aims. In developing an undergraduate course on the sociology of the Internet, I use my own online network maps as an introduction to the major project of the class. The students will have to place themselves in their offline and online networks—where do they go and what do they read, watch, discuss, and publish? Do their experiences reflect the published works on their networked worlds? Why and why not?

Here, we have the inherent autoethnographic nature of Internet environments for the academic—being online is arguably (a large part of) our work environment, if not always our home or our third space. The Internet exposes us again in our quest for “unpolluted truth” (see Fine, 1993, p. 274)—if we ever were investigating isolated “primitives” outside of the macro system, we certainly aren’t now. For every online interaction engaged in, every online observation logged, some other observer may be recording our actions, and observing us. Thus, we most especially “differ little from Erving Goffman’s social actors” (Fine, 1993, p. 282), and increasingly our students are very likely to be more expert members of social worlds that they have the right to engage in and comment on, beyond their identities as nascent researchers. We should provide the tools for that commentary to be analytical and empirical, so that both they and we are aware of the political boundaries of our methods and ethics. Media-saturation is not the same thing as media-literacy, and navigating through representations across the field of mass media is an important skill, even if one chooses to opt out of much interaction with such media.

During the next decade and into the future as ethnography moves from face-to-face, to online textual and graphic communication, to the spaces of Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008) and such games as World of Warcraft, and back again to the offline context, the ethnographic experiences discussed herein both ground themselves in the traditions of the method and are generative of explicitly exploring the meaning of “empirical” versus the meaning of “objective” in the practice of the social sciences. We can tell empirically based trustworthy stories about human behavior online, perhaps especially because we as the ethnographers are eminently exposable as but one in a host of voices telling the stories, and we are un-removable subjects of those stories, perhaps waiting for someone else to tell our story for us. We could perhaps call this Ethnography 2.0, in an acknowledgement of the way in which this way of practicing ethnography “allows its [practitioners] to interact with other[s] or to change . . . content, in contrast to . . . [being] passive [subjects]” (“Web 2.0,” 2/8/2010).¹⁰ This visible and experiential reality does not remove our ethical responsibilities from us, but it does make the boundary surrounding the ostensibly objective outsider (the

researcher, the lone scholar) especially permeable. It raises the question, can anyone be an ethnographer? If so, who watches the watchers?

Notes

1. Gatson and Zweerink, 2000, 2004a, 2004b; Zweerink and Gatson, 2002. These works, though driven by my sociological research agenda, were coauthored with Amanda Zweerink, a “lay” ethnographer I met online within the community I ended up researching. She was in advertising at the time we began working together and at present is director of community at CurrentTV.

2. Gatson, 2007a, 2007b. These are two of the three chapters I wrote for an edited volume that emerged from a National Institutes on Drug Abuse collaborative grant that looked at drug use discourse online.

3. Coughlin, Greenstein, Widmer, Meisner, Nordt, Young, Gatson, et al., 2007; Coughlin, Greenstein, Widmer, Meisner, Nordt, Young, Quick, and Bowden, 2007; Desai et al., 2008; Gatson et al., 2005; Gatson et al., 2009; Nordt et al., 2007. These represent some of the work emerging from a multiyear project exploring the ways in which a group of researchers, students, teachers, and others have worked together toward a paradigm shift in the production and use of science. This approach sought to integrate research, teaching, and service—the traditional triumvirate of evaluation for academics in college and university systems—by combining the reintroduction of an old animal model with new and emerging technologies and the development of a new online/offline community model that incorporated the development of formal and informal networks.

4. For specifically methodological discussions of the processes of online ethnography, see Chen, Hall, and Johns, 2004; Dicks and Mason, 2008; Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey, 2006; Gatson and Zweerink, 2004b; Hine, 2000; 2008; Hine, Kendall, and boyd, 2009; Kendall, 1999, 2004; LeBesco, 2004; Mann and Stewart, 2004; Markham, 2004; Markham and Baym, 2009; Walstrom, 2004.

5. The italics used here indicate that the poster was quoting directly from another source, in this case, the letters to the editor section of the *Houston Chronicle*.

6. My field site was The Bronze, a linear posting board (which originally also hosted a threaded posting board and chat room) located at the official website for the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS). It was called The Bronze after the club where the main characters often hung out, and the denizens of the online community dubbed themselves Bronzers.

7. Both of these women now have writing and producing credits outside the Whedonverse.

8. The **Jaan Quidam** addressed by **Tamerlane** earlier; I am **SarahNicole** addressed earlier.

9. See <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/05/11/dont-hate-the-player-hate-the-game-the-racialization-of-labor-in-world-of-warcraft-conference-notes/> and <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/07/09/the-not-so-hidden-politics-of-class-online/>. For another example of such researcher/ researched engagement, see also the discussion of Boellstorff's ethnography of Second Life, in which the ethnographer participates: <http://savageminds.org/2008/06/12/ethnography-of-the-virtual/#comment-392629>

10. I don't actually think it's appropriate to apply the concept of Web 3.0 to the concept of online ethnography I am explicating herein, because as a concept, there are too many varied definitions of what this even means (see "Web 2.0," retrieved February 8, 2010, from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0; and "Semantic Web," retrieved from February 8, 2010, from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_Web). However, especially because some consider Web 3.0 "as the return of experts and authorities to the Web" ("Web 2.0") and I think the Internet (both the technology and the end users) have made the online ethnographic project one that is too inherently open to non-expert participation. Although we may continue to have easily separated reference groups relative to our particular ethnographic projects (e.g., our academic subjects versus our academic employers), and though to some degree we can still keep our finished products mainly to an academic audience if we choose, I think we have to deal with being no more necessarily experts in our online endeavors as our ostensible subjects, and I think this reality highlights and complicates the traditional ethnographic notion of participant observation in ways that "Web 3.0" doesn't.

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