Locating Media Ethnography

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What are the qualities and distinguishing features of media ethnography? Certainly, in developing research designs and reporting findings, ethnography has a history of being guided by an identifiable range of investigative activities, such as participant observation, conversational interviews in naturalistic settings, observation and the recording of speech-in-action, and detailed field note documentation (Spradley 1979, 1980; Fetterman 1989; Sanjek 1990; Wolcott 1995; Denzin and Lincoln 1998). As this range of investigative activities attests, what ethnography has historically done best is “make direct contact with social agents in the normal courses and routine situations of their lives to try to understand something of how and why these regularities take place” (Willis 2000, p. xiii, emphasis in original). It is therefore fair to say that participation in and the witnessing of activities and events over time to form a research record lie at the qualitative heart of what ethnography does, and does well. But despite a large and growing body of scholarship from which to draw, these qualifying characteristics are not always salient in media ethnography, making it difficult to describe the contours and confines of what is meant by ethnography in media ethnography.

This chapter is an attempt to explore and identify what qualities and distinguishing features are used to define and give shape to media ethnography. To pursue this charge, I want to revisit Nightingale’s (1993) question of “What’s ethnographic?” about media ethnography. Although Nightingale originally offered the question rather pithily by casting into doubt the ethnographic credentials of ethnographic research focused on media audiences, I think it is useful to return to her query, albeit this time taking it as an exploratory challenge. In fact, I want to engage this challenge by taking up a second, more recent set of questions posited by Coman and Rothenbuhler (2005), who ask, “Where is the dividing line between doing ethnography in the classic sense and doing research that is ethnographic in
some respects? How important is that line?” (p. 2). Guided by these questions, I draw from past and present work in media ethnography and examine it in relation to a broader history of ethnography and some of the key methodological and representational issues that have defined it. Through this approach, I hope to tease out a clearer portrait of what might be said to constitute media ethnography.

**Ethnographic Roots and Trajectories**

Eminent ethnographer Harry F. Wolcott (1995) notes that one of the problems surrounding the definition of *ethnography* is that the term

refers to both the processes for accomplishing it – ordinarily involving original fieldwork and always requiring the reorganization and editing of material for presentation – and to the presentation itself, the *product* of that research, which ordinarily takes its form in prose. (pp. 82–83, emphasis in original)

It is precisely along these two lines that I’d like to consider how the tensions within and converging forces outside the ethnographic enterprise have shaped the formation of media ethnography’s own practice and prose.

Ethnography has, of course, long been associated with doing research in “the field.” Indeed, for much of anthropology’s history, doing fieldwork has constituted a sort of rite of passage, and the field is conceptualized as a place “out there,” often in faraway locations where the “natives” dwell, practicing traditional, authentic culture. Since Malinowski yanked anthropology “off the veranda,” doing ethnography has involved the immersion of the researcher in the lives of research subjects as a means to observe their behavior in naturalistic settings. This commitment was perceived as essential for gaining access to the patterns, pressures, constraints, and incentives of local cultures, and thus necessary for unlocking the native’s point of view in order to produce ethnographic descriptions rigorous enough to be considered scientific.

While being in the field has remained important, in more recent years ethnographers from various disciplines have wrestled with both fieldwork’s problematic origins in empire and colonization – for example, travel writing as a reflection of exploration and expansionist enterprises (Clifford 1983; Pratt 1992) – and ethnography’s tendency to exoticize “the Other” while suppressing the ethnographer’s own presence in the completed text. From the latter half of the 1960s on, the internal conflict inherent in participant observation began to produce epistemological fissures along these lines, most notably in anthropology with the publication of transformative texts such as Malinowski’s (1967) *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (released 25 years after his death) and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* (1955 in French and 1961 in English). These texts and others that followed, such as
Dumont’s (1978) *The Headman and I* and especially Clifford and Marcus’s (1986) seminal edited collection, *Writing Culture*, began to move ethnographic description toward more confessional, reflexive, and eventually experimental writing styles as ways to recast the notion of epistemological validity in fieldwork and reject the scientization of research subjects, advocating instead more dialogical, contingent, and even autobiographic accountings of the field experience. These descriptive turns were meant, in short, to resuscitate the intimacies and vulnerabilities of fieldwork and make them part of an ethnographic record that had, up to that point, been defined by distance and objectivity but that increasingly seemed artificial and exploitative.

As a product, ethnography’s passage through this transformative process has been characterized as a series of identifiable phases of aesthetic reformations, which Lincoln and Denzin (1998) label as traditional, modernist, blurred genres, and the crisis of representation and legitimation. They assert that this progression has led to a “fifth moment” of representational “bricolage” capable of better addressing the inner tensions and ongoing dialectics of ethnographic practice (Lincoln and Denzin 1998). But while most agree that the concerns over ethnographic authority and the political implication of representation (e.g., who gets to speak for whom) have forced a reconsideration of the basis of ethnographic knowledge, not all observers are convinced of the currency of a paradigmatic interlacing. Hammersley (1999), for instance, points to the problem of merely binding together dissimilar ideas and the indiscriminate mixing of paradigms implied by ethnographic bricolage. Drawing from German sociologist Otto Neurath, he argues instead for a reconceptualization of ethnography closer to the art of boat building while at sea, “sailors who on the open seas must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the base. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used for support” (p. 577). Ethnography, like boatbuilding, can replace constructs but must keep enough from its past to remain intact and “seaworthy.” As these contrasting visions of ethnography’s path into the future underscore, the elaboration of an epistemologically agreeable way to translate the ethnographic experience appears to remain very much a work in progress.

As if this challenge to ethnography were not enough, the contentious debates and competing visions surrounding the translative process between fieldwork and ethnographic text have been followed by a “deep reassessment of the nature of fieldwork” and a realization that the mise-en-scène of ethnography is being profoundly altered by the deterritorialization of culture (Marcus 1998, p. 107). Here various writers have called into question the need for traditional, Evans-Pritchard-style immersion in one cultural site as a means to explain the entire cultural and social life, focusing instead on elaborating ethnographies that explore how “large scale forces work themselves out in everyday life” (Ortner 1993, p. 413). This was precipitated by a sense that the gaps between the cultural worlds of informants and ethnographers were
closing, and how (if they ever were) “the natives” were no longer limited in experience to local lifeways, their worldviews being expanded (disrupted?) by a host of interrelated phenomena (migration, tourism, international trade policies, urbanization, natural resource exploitation, war, mass media, personal communication devices, etc.). Within this context, several prominent theorists have called for a shift from the more classical notion of “being there” in the field (singular and over time) to a less fixed, temporally emergent “multisited ethnography” focused, if not on cultural completeness, then on linkages and connections (Hannerz 2003a; Marcus 1998). This shift in locational emphasis implies to some extent a less deliberate selection of the research site, and indeed Hannerz (2003b) confesses, “I wonder if it is not a recurrent characteristic of multi-sited ethnography that site selections are to an extent made gradually and cumulatively, as new insights develop, as opportunities come into sight, and to some extent by chance” (p. 207).

The implications for this reconsideration of what constitutes fieldwork (and where and how long) and, by extension, “the field” itself is of particular relevance for ethnographers of media reception as the participant observation of media use has always been a problematic endeavor, not to mention the more recent challenge of studying the communities and cultural practices of cyberspace. In fact, in some media ethnography the notion of clearly defined geographic borders and cultural boundaries of a situated field gave way to a more open “network” of localities, flows, and movements of people, capital, and ideas (Castells 1996). For “new media” ethnographers in particular, this recasting of ethnographic inquiry as a means to study the heterogeneous complexity of networks has necessitated a rethinking of the nature of fieldwork, especially as cyberspace becomes both the “place” and medium through which research is conducted.

However, I don’t want to give the impression that the degree to which the reassessment of the field or the force of the various cycles of epistemological purpose and ontological doubt emerging out of anthropology and elsewhere has been transferred to media ethnography’s own formation in an easily identifiable line. On the contrary, even when traces of influence are discernable, that influence is quite fragmented and uneven for various reasons. For instance, media and cultural studies’ own ethnographic turn was seeded at the height of ethnography’s “crisis in representation” (Murdock 1997; Murphy 1999), whereas anthropology, though slow to come to mass media as a serious object of study, was already intimately immersed in the rethinking of the parameters of ethnographic theory and method when it finally did (Spitulnik 1993; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). Broadly speaking, the result was that while media and cultural studies took up the issue of reflexivity to spark a robust and theoretically productive debate, it didn’t immediately translate that debate into more complex, thickly descriptive media ethnographies because researchers seemed to be unsure as to how to negotiate the pitfalls of representing “the Other” without reproducing traditional ethnography’s dual legacy of objectification and exploitation.
Meanwhile, anthropology’s own capacity to weather its “crisis” was affected in some interesting ways by its concurrent engagement of broader issues of national and transnational power. This involved the pressing need to consider how human agency and local cultures were suspended within and expressed in relation to larger webs of subnational and transnational networks that were comprised, in no small measure, via “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) and profoundly shaped by “mediascapes” and “ideoscapes” (Appadurai 1996). Within this context, it was not hard to make the short leap from ethnography to media ethnography, as the collection Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002) most clearly illustrates. In contrast, the vast majority of the more social scientifically driven news production ethnographies, established in the 1970s and now experiencing a “second wave” (see Paterson and Domingo 2008), have been grounded in a social constructionist orthodoxy that has demonstrated little serious interest in the sort of methodological or epistemological introspection (Cottle 2000) found in media cultural studies and anthropology.

These different historical moments in the conception, development, and transformation of media ethnography have led in some interesting ways to parallel and intersecting research traditions. Indeed, the various strategies that media ethnographers in the different camps have employed as ethnographic methods (participant observation, observation, conversational interviews, group interviews, time use diaries, letters, and family albums and other personal documents) and as approaches to fieldwork and its related constructs (the field, immersion, rapport, researcher–subject relations, fieldnotes, etc.) are as diverse as they are revealing. But it is precisely because of these disparate trajectories of ethnographic research that it becomes difficult to talk about “media ethnography” in the singular, and so we might be better served to think in terms of “media ethnographies.” That said, it is also worth noting that various visions of media ethnography, and I am thinking particularly here of media and cultural studies and anthropology, have also criss-crossed, mingled, and broken free of each other at various times, giving the impression of a cross-disciplinary dialogue at the same moment that they somehow seem to float free of one another.

By way of analogy, we could think of the fabric of media ethnography as something resembling more an unfinished quilt than a tightly woven tapestry of ideas, as the various traditions and methods used to approach media-related issues often appear like a patchwork of stitched-together materials. That is, as part of a longer ethnographic tradition, media ethnography displays reoccurring patterns and intersections, but much of what has been cut from other cloths often seems not to match. In an effort to trace some threads that lace together this creation, in the remainder of the chapter I attempt to present a clearer picture of media ethnography’s contours and limits by focusing on that key concept so central to ethnography’s origins: fieldwork.
First, it should be noted that as a research strategy, ethnography has been enlisted to answer different kinds of media-related problems. Broadly speaking, most media ethnographies fall into one of two categories: audience ethnography or media production ethnographies. These, in turn, can be defined in various subareas of study, such as media reception ethnographies (focused on meaning making), media use (emphasizing media technologies and the rites and rituals that surround them at home and elsewhere), and fan studies. Production ethnographies have pursued questions concerning media professionals in the contexts of the cultural industries, creative personnel involved in the production of “alternative” media (e.g., blogs, indy music, or film), or noncommercial citizens’ media (local community radio stations, indigenous video, etc.). Production and reception are not necessarily mutually exclusive areas of investigation, and some studies have collapsed two or more of the above foci (e.g. Juluri 2003; Abu-Lughod 2005). While it would be impossible in one chapter to take up a full examination of these different trajectories within the expanding range of media ethnography, it is useful to provide a few notes on general tendencies within media ethnography and look at some specific studies to help illustrate differences as well as overlapping points of methodological engagement and presentation.

Media Ethnographies and the Study of Production

In many respects, the study of the cultural context of media production, which has a rather established history in journalism studies, reflects the most deliberate vision of what constitutes the field. Classic studies of news production, such as Tuchman’s (1973) *Making News* and Gans’s (1980) *Deciding What’s News*, have as their focus very concrete field sites: newspaper newsrooms. These studies were developed via long-term observation of newsroom culture and its relationship to decision making in order to establish how news was made. Ethnographic observation of newsroom routines helped these researchers gain a fuller, more intimate understanding of how news was, in essence, manufactured via divisions of labor, bureaucratic hierarchies, and professional norms and ideological pressures (e.g., the place of “objective” and “authoritative” sources) (Cottle 2007). More recent work has extended this tradition of focusing on routines and decision-making practices in newsrooms, as journalists respond to technological determinants and new market pressures and adjust their craft to online environments (Paterson and Domingo 2008). Producing ethnographies that aspire to provide a “dispassionate look” that “real online journalists face” (pp. x–xi), Paterson and Domingo’s edited
collection draws from and extends the lessons of past media production ethnography produced in sociology and early cultural studies, as well as its tradition of epistemological realism.

Though the methodology used is referred to as *participant observation*, both past and recent news production ethnography have emphasized the objective nature of data collection and thus clearly lean toward observation and away from the emic-etic interpretative work necessitated when participation is given full partnership in methodological practice. In fact, Gans (1999) fully advocates detachment in the field, asserting that “once researchers fail to distance themselves from the people they are studying, however, or fail to allow them the same distancing, the rules of qualitative reliability and validity are side stepped” (pp. 542–543). To punctuate this emphasis on distance and analytical control, Gans goes on to say that “the rule I used in fieldwork was to be friendly to and with the people you were studying and to form friendships only after the research was done” (p. 547 n. 4). Such declarations underscore that within this literature there is little interrogation of the politics of the field and that the ethnographies are authenticated through cool distance that is textually inscribed by adopting a decidedly “expository” descriptive style (see Murphy 2008).

Anthropology has provided a related yet distinct corpus of ethnographic work on media production. In keeping with anthropological tradition, some of this research has been carried out with indigenous communities and other marginalized groups, often in terms of self-definition and activism via the use of video cameras. Others, however, have moved more into the realm of the cultural industries. Illustrative of this pool of scholarship is Arlene Dávila’s (2002) study of the production of *latinidad* in advertising targeted to Hispanics, Tejaswini Ganti’s (2002) examination of the Bombay film industry, and the previously referenced work on foreign news correspondents by Hannerz (2003a). Though focused on very distinct questions about media production, collectively these studies nevertheless tell us something about how ethnographic method has been employed to pursue issues related to media production as a cultural force, particularly within the context of globalization. It should be noted, however, that ethnographically these studies bear some striking differences, especially with regard to self-reflexivity and the relationship between the field experience and the ethnographic text.

This is particularly the case of media ethnographies that have primarily been elaborated via interviews with only passing attention to participant observation. For instance, interacting with foreign news correspondents in Johannesburg, Tokyo, Jerusalem, and elsewhere, Hannerz provides a thickly descriptive study grounded in the personalities of foreign correspondents. Significantly, unlike the work of sociologists of journalism sketched out above, Hannerz (2003b) focuses on agency over bureaucratic structures, describing and interpreting the lives and experiences of individual correspondents by “studying sideways” (pp. 3–4) – a notion meant to underscore his affinity with and professional similarity to his research subjects. It is within the context of this research that Hannerz (2003b)
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waxes reflexive over his relationships with correspondents and his choice to call his interviews with them “conversations” rather than interviews, going into some detail as to why and how his approach to the multisited study of news correspondents took shape. In short, through Foreign News and its companion article, Hannerz (2003a, 2003b) clearly attempts to make salient and textually inscribe those aspects of his research that were messy and not easily resolved, and one gets the feeling that he is oddly ambivalent about doing fieldwork in a multisited field despite his advocacy for it. This sense of discomfort, however, does not come across as contradictory. On the contrary, his reflections are revealing and productive, and in my view comprise one of the things that helps evoke a richer, more textured sense of his research experience in the final text and thus why multisited media ethnography has value.

Conversely, fellow anthropologist Arlene Dávila (2002) simply makes the assertion that her interviews with the staffs of 16 Hispanic advertising agencies are part of “current anthropological research on the media’s role in the construction and expression of identities through ethnographic analyses” (p. 264) without any further methodological reflection or interpretation. In her book on marketing and Latinos (Dávila 2002), she does supply a few notes on entrée, immersion, and participant observation (pp. 17–20), but these are quite limited and provide strikingly little detail. As such, though in many ways just as descriptive as Hannerz’s, her study actually reads much more in line with past cultural studies work which evokes ethnography while refusing the often untidy work of delving into details of how or why it is necessarily ethnographic. This is not to suggest that Dávila’s interviews are any less conversational or rapport generating than Hannerz’s, or that her observations of meeting and attendance of events and conventions are any less participatory. But whereas Hannerz provides ongoing narrative connections with his subjects and moments of reflexivity that give a sense of his ethnographic habitus, Dávila largely retreats from such efforts.

To this observation some might respond, so what? But the point that I think needs to be made is that if ethnographers dismiss the chore of methodological self-interrogation or fail to provided detailed renderings of the field experience, how are readers able to identify the “ethnographicness” of what is labeled media ethnography? That is, if ethnography is in fact both “process” and “product,” than how can we, as readers, fully appreciate the latter without a clear sense of the former?

Indeed, simply stating that something is ethnographic instantiates a trading on the currency of the ethnographic tradition and an allegiance to an academic heritage by declaration. As Nightingale wrote some 20 years ago about cultural studies, the application the term ethnographic “acts to legitimate the research, to denote its cultural, phenomenal and empirical methods, and even to signify its emphasis on ‘community’” (p. 154). In short, media ethnography that doesn’t invoke the “complex specificness” (Geertz 1973, p. 23, quoted in Walcott 1995, p. 96) of the research process and communicate in some substantial and candid way the grain of the
field ultimately undermines “ethnographic validity” – a quality that Sanjek (1990) argues lies at the heart of good ethnography and is contingent upon explicit choices made in the field (e.g. decisions to link and follow events and activities), the range and variety of field relationships (e.g., key informants and friendships), and direct evidence from fieldnotes and interview transcripts.

**Ethnographic Identity in Fieldwork**

In my view, many of the most insightful media ethnographies that provide the kind of fodder for ethnographic validity identified by Sanjek are those of anthropologists and media studies scholars engaging questions of reception and meaning making who have as their field sites geographically identifiable communities (e.g., Michaels 1994; Gillespie 1995; Mankekar 1999; Tufte 2000; Parameswaran 2002; LaPastina 2003; Abu-Lughod 2005; Miller 2006; Podber 2007). These studies are fully anchored in immersion and long-term participant observation, and tied to the examination of “local culture.” These have provided some of the most detailed and compelling insights into the politics and practices of doing media ethnography. In asserting this, I also think it should be said that the kinds of tales from the field told by these writers are quite diverse in both descriptive style and ethnographic detail. What they share, however, is a sense of how the field experience shapes the direction of the research and how “being there” not only provides opportunities for detailed fieldnotes but also forms the more sensually understood (and thus remembered) “headnotes” from which to draw interpretations.

It is, therefore, not surprising perhaps that the negotiation of ethnographic identity, the centrality of community, the importance of surprise, and the embodied field experience surface as central points of interpretive struggle across the range of these long-term studies. For instance, Brazilian media ethnographer Antonio LaPastina (2003, 2006) has published several essays detailing some of the field dilemmas that have shaped his study of telenovela reception in “Macambira,” a small town in northeastern Brazil. In “Now That You’re Going Home, Are You Going to Write about the Natives You Studied?” a title inspired by a community member’s utterance days before his departure from the field, LaPastina (2003) interprets his ethnographic presence as something that reinforced his subjects’ own sense that their lives were quite distant from that of the “modern” Brazil they encountered on television. This feeling of difference and “otherness,” however, facilitated his conversations with followers of *The Cattle King*, a popular telenovela about rural life, adultery, and redemption in which a husband confronts his own faults and reconciles with his wife, who was driven to adultery by her feeling of abandonment within the marriage. Most of the viewers rejected the notion that a man would take back an adulterous wife, but through this and other ongoing discussions about televisual relationships, LaPastina was able to engage a full range
of issues related to local versus urban gender roles and practices, family life, perceptions about the influence of television on local culture, and the line between public and private life. Moreover, in discussing gender roles and adultery as played out in a telenovela, LaPastina was able to position his difference as a way to ask increasingly provocative questions and access the inner workings of gender roles and relations typically kept private. In such a way, his ethnography presents a contextually grounded study of meaning within an interpretive community, though that interpretive community is understood not first and foremost by its ties to a particular media text, but rather in terms of how a particular media text revealed something about how the community saw itself in relation to modernity.

In a related but more intimate and self-reflexive article, LaPastina (2006) examines, via his own experiences in the field, how avoiding disclosure shapes the personalities of gay and lesbian ethnographers fearful of the consequences should their sexual identities be revealed in the communities where they work. Counter to the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) researchers who draw from their own sexual orientation as a tool for researching GLBT issues, LaPastina (2006) crafts a “story of unfulfilled erotic tension, of moving back into the closet and choosing celibacy for fear of the repercussions my sexuality might have on my work and my life” (p. 728). Through this essay, LaPastina confesses that though he is Brazilian, much of his childhood experiences in São Paulo (where he grew up) and elsewhere shaped his “expectations, norms, anxieties, and fears” about “remote lands of the interior of northeastern Brazil” (p. 729). These profoundly framed his encounter with the community, filling him with presuppositions that caused a great deal of trepidation as he approached fieldwork. But it was not until he lied about his own marital status that he confessed, “I felt like a fraud and a coward, distanced from this culture I had begun to grow accustomed to” (p. 732).

Reflecting on this intense negotiation of ethnographic identity within this small community “where everybody knows everyone and notions of privacy are illusory” (p. 730), he acknowledges that he felt he had to use deception to be accepted. And though he is convinced this decision may have had implications for his data collection, he doesn’t believe that it negatively affected the quality of his data. What did surface and remain, however, was a sense that he had compromised his ethical mantra and in the process became somewhat objectified. “Although I was the one empowered, at least in the ethnographic sense, I was also the one feeling vulnerable. It was an anthropophagic encounter. I consumed them through my gaze and regurgitated them through my writing while they devoured the outside world, the externality of urban modern society, through me” (p. 730).

Along a similar line, another Brazilian media ethnographer, Heloisa Buarque de Almeida (2003), found that her field relationships with people of the rural community where she conducted her research were initially shaped by their objectification of her, via television images of São Paulo, as a big-city woman. This imposed ethnographic identity was difficult to negotiate as it often negatively “sexuated” her field experience.
However, she also found that, unlike most local women, her field identity as a paulista (a woman from São Paulo) allowed her to transgress local cultural norms to engage questions across gender about dominant representations and their interpretations.

Within this context of ethnographic production, I’d like to turn, momentarily, to my own work. Some might argue that, as a white male US scholar whose ethnographic work has taken place primarily in Mexican working-class communities, my emphasis on the necessity of immersion and on the productive discomfort of wrestling to come to terms with something not properly my own is by definition a product of ethnographic distance as well as an extension of anthropology’s “trade in curiosities, bringing ‘home’ accounts of exotic and unsettling practices from unfamiliar places” (Murdock 1997, p. 180). There is, of course, a long history behind this perception, and elsewhere I have examined at length my own burden of authorship in relation to representation, power–knowledge networks, and the ethical conundrums now recognized as a largely insoluble part of what ethnography based on fieldwork in “traditional societies” must contend with (Murphy 1999, 2002). However, while acknowledging that issues of location profoundly shape epistemological and political elements of the ethnographic encounter, I have found that even in my recent work with people and places very similar to my own background and place of origin, entrée, rapport, spontaneous conversations, and the surprise of the field experience remain essential dynamics in the gathering of data. These field-related, experiential processes engender an interpretive vitality that I find hard to imagine emerging through studies that draw from a more dissolved, ephemeral, phantom-like sense of the field or that spring from quasi-ethnography that assumes rather than establishes ethnographic proximity.

Along these lines, I am skeptical of the notion that “concept near” ethnographers simply “begin ethnography years before,” and hence bypass the difficulties of establishing rapport and credibility in the field. In fact, the contrary may be true as what might be called a renegotiation of ethnographic identity is often a thematically defining characteristic of “native” ethnographies, particularly when media ethnographers “go home” to conduct research (e.g., Kraidy 1999; Mankekar 1999; Parameswaran 2002; Akindes 2003; Acosta-Alzuru 2005; Kim 2005, 2006). For instance, Maronite-Lebanese researcher Marwan Kraidy (1999) has detailed the renegotiation of his ethnographic identity through the study of his own community, and in fact put the process of reimmersion into a productive dialogue with his fellow Maronites’ struggles to come to terms with their own hybrid ethnicity within a highly politicized and increasingly globalized, fragmented, and mediasaturated cultural environment. Even more deliberate is the tenor of Kim’s (2005, 2006) work, whose focus on reflexivity in ethnographic practice involves exposing not only her own experiences studying women of different generations from two apartment complexes in Seoul, but also how imported televisual texts operated as a resource for those women’s reflexivity about a changing world and their place within it. Interestingly, it is via her own profile as a Korean woman with Western credentials (degrees and time lived in the West) that Kim (2006) was able to develop
“TV talk” sessions where the women “‘enthusiastically’ engaged in a process of self-discovery” (p. 237, emphasis in original) and where she was expected to participate by drawing from and sharing her own experiences in the West.

The host of reflexive work produced by Kim (2005, 2006), Kraidy (1999), Buarque de Almeida (2003), LaPastina (2003), and others (e.g., Darling-Wolf 2003; Mayer 2005), underscore LaPastina’s (2005) assertion that ethnographic research on audiences “allows the examination of the phenomena not only in its immediate social, political, and economic contexts but also in a larger historical framework, as well as its insertion in the broader regional, national and global context” (LaPastina 2005, p. 141). Though LaPastina is primarily referring here to ethnography’s capacity to engage the cultural and social dynamics between community life and popular (hegemonic-commercial) culture, as Kim and Kraidy both show, what tales from the field contribute to media ethnography is a sense of situated knowledge and how that knowledge can draw attention to the link between the local and the global via the interpretive struggles associated with the field experience, ethnographic identity, representation, and objectification. That is, descriptive interpretations that implicate the ethnographic encounter make the rendering of field research with audiences an opportunity (though often an uncomfortable one) to bring to the surface that which has been masked or simply edited out in traditional ethnography: field dilemmas and personal tensions tied to hegemonic issues of power (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, age, social class, religion, and nationalism). Grappling with instead of discarding the tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas of the field experience within the ethnographic process and through the writing of the ethnographic text can lead to the elaboration of more revealing, insightful, and, well, more “humane” research, or at least the kind that ethnography is uniquely equipped to deal with if the ethnographer is willing.

In recognizing these qualities, the point I want to underscore is that the value of ethnographies which privilege personal experience and investment in the field not only is a simple matter of sharing a good story (though they should be that) but also, rather, serves as an avenue through which to articulate “ethnographicness” along three important lines. First, going back to Sanjek (1990), they can evoke the range and variety of field relationships, help the reader understand decisions made in the field, and tell us something about direct evidence from fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Second, they can help address in some very interesting ways Spitulnik’s (2002) question “Does culture (place) matter?” – a question meant to return inquiry to the context of the local and a “sociocentric” as opposed to subject-centric interrogation of media reception (pp. 338–339). Third, they can help speak to broader issues about the social world, which Geertz (1973) argued involves drawing “large conclusions from small, but densely textured facts” that ethnographically emerge from the “particularity” of a given context but yet tell us something about the “normalness” of a people’s culture (p. 28). In my view, these three labors of textualization are the criteria through which the value of media ethnographies of communities should be elaborated and judged.
The Dissolving Field?

Despite this track record of field-based contextually grounded media ethnography, and the compelling tales of situated knowledge that it has conceived, the future of long-term participant observation as a central component of media ethnography appears in serious question. As more than one scholar has observed (Murdock 1997; Hammersley 1999; Murphy and Kraidy 2003), fieldwork, at least as traditionally envisioned, is time intensive, often quite expensive, and typically a solitary endeavor (the lone ethnographer), and does not necessarily lend itself to the tight production schedules or multiple multiauthored papers for those seeking numerous publications for tenure and promotion. This makes it, at least at the level of self-interest on the part of many researchers, a less attractive option for engaging issues of media consumption and culture.

But this doesn’t mean that media ethnography is just dying via its own cumbersome methodological weight. Rather, not unlike other kinds of ethnographic inquiry, media ethnography has been undergoing, perhaps even from its inception, a reconceptualization of “the field” and fieldwork. This is visible in the very language now used by media ethnographers, as indicated by terms like “opportunistic ethnography” (Bird 2003, p. 5), “passing ethnographies” (Couldry 2003), and “rhizomatic ethnography” (Akindes 2003). In earlier times, such approaches might have fallen under the banner of microethnographies in that they tend to present interpretations of data drawn from relatively abbreviated research periods (Wolcott 1995). But it would be a mistake to think such descriptive turns are just responses to time logged in the field. In the particular case of audience ethnographers, the new translations of the terms of fieldwork are as much as anything a response to a number of interrelated issues that have served to shape and define “reception,” such as the advent of “dispersed audiences” and “nomadic subjects” (Radway 1988), and the identification of “partial truths” (Clifford and Marcus 1986), the rise of complex “networks” (Castells 1996), and the need to study media and “translocality” ethnographically within globalization (Kraidy and Murphy 2008).

Within this academic context, it is perhaps not surprising that the rites and rituals of what were once the relative valences of fieldwork – entrée, rapport, and immersion – have given way to “complicity,” “lurking,” and “embodied subjectivities.” These adjustments signal more than just a trading of descriptive tropes, as doing fieldwork and the field itself begin to dissolve into a fluid, even ephemeral, sense of context and situatedness. And, of course, this sense of relocating the parameters of fieldwork is demanded by the ethnographic study of cultural exchanges (chatting, surfing, emails, tweeting, etc.) and social ties taking shape in cyberspace, but it should not be understood as something limited to virtual networks.

Couldry (2003), for example, asserts that since people live increasingly mediated lives, research needs to study people in action to reveal patterns of thinking. This requires
doing research in multiple contexts which have to be grasped as rhetorical context – as contexts of arguments and negotiation – which is not the same as knowing the total life-contexts in which those arguments took place. Listening closely and effectively to people’s talk need not require a full ethnographic contextualization for that talk. (p. 52, emphasis in original)

For Couldry, rather than “being there” in one site to capture media’s myth-making power, such “listening in” requires a dispersed notion of ethnography and must be elaborated across a range of contexts in order to capture patterns of thought and action that teach us something about the naturalizing power of media discourses.

Equally abstract is Bird’s (2003) rendering of fieldwork, which literally disappears via her efforts to develop “researcher-absent” methods (p. 17), arguing that one should not worry so much about “insignificant” issues such as time in the field (p. 8). Bird is, though, fully committed to an “ethnographic way of seeing” (p. 12) which places emphasis on asking the right questions and communication with participants over immersion. To pursue this, she charts ways in which ethnographic intimacy can be engendered without some of the more threatening and time-intensive aspects of the field encounter. These have included group chat room exchanges, solicited letters, and “ethnographically-based” telephone interviews, all of which have been adopted to help answer different questions and create situations where “the participant is invited to define the terms of the encounter” (p. 12).

Based on her past body of work, it is clear that Bird’s researcher-absent methods can foster ethnographically dense interactions and rich exchanges, especially as they seem to have been highly effective in facilitating participants’ interest in the research process by engaging them in ways that respected their communicative practices and cultural boundaries. So it is hard to argue with the fact that Bird’s scholarship not only has been methodologically creative and lucidly mapped, but also has shaped a better, fuller sense of the possibilities of ethnography for the study of media. But there are severe contextual limitations to these contributions as well, as it would be difficult to imagine soliciting letters and conducting conversational phone interviews in parts of the world where letters sent rarely reach their destinations and only a privileged part of the populace may have access to phones. And these are important considerations, because as more media ethnography in the “periphery” has shown (Juluri 2003; Fung 2008), newly industrialized regions are also the places where the biggest audiences are, who are entering in a massive scale into the culturally complex and politically loaded world of “audiencehood.”

The work of Bird, Couldry, and other media scholars underscores the observation that ethnographic method is in a time of transition, and that “fieldwork is not what it used to be” (Faubion and Marcus 2009). This assertion is punctuated by the work of Hills (2002), whose ethnography on fandom has moved perhaps furthest beyond the conventional boundaries of situated method, and offers one of the most “internal” visions of doing media ethnography. Hills is motivated by an empirically salient dilemma: that ethnographers need to question the currency of
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the fan’s own interpretations of their relationship with media texts. He contends that media studies has been hesitant to fully engage the “auto-legitimation within fan culture,” depicting instead fans’ personal investment in and articulation of their relationship with particular texts as “knowledgeability” (p. 66). But is “asking the audience” enough? Indeed, Hills argues that this deferment to fans’ vested, insider knowledge helps create an ethnographic alibi: “given the fan’s articulate nature, and immersion in the text concerned, the move to ethnography seems strangely unquestioned, as if it is somehow grounded in the fan’s (supposedly) preexistent form of audience knowledge and interpretive skill” (p. 66). Methodologically grounded in conversational interviews, this move to place fans’ own interpretations at the center of analysis is problematic as it serves to legitimize fan ethnography while disconnecting it from its own discursive justification. In short, since fan ethnographies take at face value fan discourses, they lead to inherently weak interpretations of fan culture.

So, then, how should one study fandom? Hills (2002) suggests a provocative albeit surprisingly personalized ethnographic adjustment: “ethnography of the self” as constituting both the heuristic device and the field itself. This requires, instead of suspending theoretical debate about the epistemological and ontological pitfalls of doing ethnography (e.g. Couldry 2003), an ethnographic inquiry for the study of fandom that lunges straight into the interpretive dilemmas of the self and experience. Hills’s decision to take this dive necessarily makes “the field” an internal place, and self-interrogation a pursuit of how the “personal is culture” as well as the ethnographic chore of wrestling to come to terms with one’s own tendency to provide narrative closures (e.g., the ethnographer’s own self-justifications and displays of common sense). As such, he argues passionately that this exercise in autoethnography is not, as critics have charged, the narcissistic pursuit of navel gazing, but rather offers a path to achieve something which past fan ethnographies (e.g., Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992) have neglected: “how multiple fandoms are linked through the individual’s realization of self-identity” (Hills 2002, p. 81).

This desire to link together various moments of fandom is an attempt to move away from single-text fan cultures (e.g. Star Trek; Yo soy Betty, la fea; and Doctor Who) and intertextual networks of “telefantasy,” placing emphasis instead on fans’ often long, interlaced histories attached to different fandoms of different programs or genres that gain and lose relevance through a person’s lifetime. It is also an acknowledgment of the very dispersed and increasingly fluid relationship that people have with media as a response to the sheer volume of texts encountered through everyday life. Within this mediated context of an ethnographer-fan’s biography, Hills (2002) places great emphasis on the fruits of autoethnography’s productive tension and performative contradiction:

I am methodologically and theoretically obliged to concede that my account of my own fandoms arrives at a point of narrative closure which privileges (present) academic reflection on the non-academic (past) self. The only possible way to disrupt
this narrative closure may be to interpret fan culture (and the self) through alternative theoretical positions. (p. 88)

In such a way, the field becomes a question of personal experience, and fieldwork a chore bound by and expressed through one’s own identities and affiliations in relation to media cultures.

Hills’s (2002) autoethnographic privileging of the self clearly casts the personal-locational as “the” ethnographic center, capable of questioning the naïve celebration of the “native’s point of view” and overcoming the interpretive limitations of low-tech, face-to-face ethnography when charged with making sense of the multiple theaters of reception. These points of interrogation are certainly needed in the ethnographic adjustment to people’s relationship with new media environments and textual convergence, but they are not unproblematic. In short, researchers trying to craft personal and meaningful ethnographies of the self will inevitably be faced with the difficult dilemma of trying to direct inquiry to sociocentric issues that resonate more broadly, as opposed to just settling on the subject-centric issues that autoethnography invites. Moreover, lost in the emphasis on the self and virtual is ethnography’s longstanding, fruitful, and, one might add, concrete commitment to observation (Nightingale 2008).

Making Ethnographic Media Ethnography

Since Malinowski moved anthropology off of the veranda and into the field, the enterprise of ethnography has traveled far. Indeed, media ethnographers have been invited to watch TV in living rooms, follow nomadic audiences, and “study sideways” media professionals. They have stretched the field translocally, hung out at passing media events, wandered through media worlds of production and reception, interfaced with fellow fans, and lurked in cybersites. Collectively, in no small measure this multicontextual tour of field sites has quite deliberately trespassed well beyond the boundaries of traditional ethnography to the extent that it would probably not be recognizable to many of its founders. So it is within this context that we might return to Nightingale’s (1993) query of “What’s ethnographic about media ethnography?” and Coman and Rothenbuhler’s (2005) questions, “Where is the dividing line between doing ethnography in the classic sense and doing research that is ethnographic in some respects? How important is that line?” (p. 2).

Though partial, my mapping of the visions, practices, and politics of fieldwork in media ethnography suggests a number of underlying themes that begin to reveal not only what is ethnographic about media ethnography, but also some points of unresolved tensions that might be seen as dividing lines. First and foremost, in considering the above questions it is important to recognize that in an effort to cover the full (and expanding) range of people’s relationship with consuming and/or
making media, many media researchers have adjusted ethnography’s aperture. This methodological recalibration has led to a sense that “the field” is a considerably less concrete and empirically “knowable” place, and that the there in “being there,” so foundational to traditional ethnography, has been fundamentally transformed in relation to media-centric issues of flow and fluidity of information within a networked society. Though the implications for this migration into the fluid, situational, virtual, and even ephemeral challenge ethnography’s longstanding commitment to studying cultural patterns through long-term immersion and participant observation, it has not stopped researchers from conducting “old-school” fieldwork. Nor has it meant that the new castings of media ethnography, where media events and networked communities seem to replace the field, fail to meet ethnographic standards of validity. In fact, the ethnographic value of this transmutation has been demonstrated by various researchers in different but quite significant ways (e.g. Hills 2002; Bird 2003; Hannerz 2003a). Through the articulation of process (methodology) and presentation of product (the ethnographic text), these studies have not only pointed to new strategies through which to empirically adjust ethnographic method to expand or alter our notion of the field, but also refine standard methods (e.g. interviews, group discussions, and personal diaries) to do research that is responsive to new ways in which people interact with, use, and make media, not to mention as well as with each other.

So, we must acknowledge that within the evolving elasticity and application of the term the field, there are very real reasons for this reconceptualization of ethnographic practice. A central one, in my view, can be understood through Abu-Lughod’s (1997) observation that, pace Geertz, media “renders more and more problematic a concept of cultures as localized communities of people suspended in shared webs of meaning” (p. 123). That is to say, since people, even in the most isolated communities, are increasingly connected to the cultural capital of cosmopolitanism via mass media, ethnographers have to be prepared and willing to venture beyond the situated boundaries of local culture to make sense of how members of that community might use media (whether as audiences or producers) to alter, renew, and reinvest in it. While this may cause some difficulties when trying to determine ethnographic validity along Sanjek’s (1990) previously outlined criteria, such as time in the field, it does not mean that we should stop looking for ethnographic rendering of “field” decisions, the textual explication of the range and variety of researcher–subject relationships, or evidence from fieldnotes and interview transcripts as measures of ethnographicness.

Within the move to networked communities, multiple sites, virtual lurking, and the internal field for the self, there is, I believe, a sense that we not wander too easily and comfortably into the virtual and the networked at the great expense of losing track of fieldwork’s former requisite: the embodied experience. To do so is to embrace a vision of ethnography that would be in my view concomitant with moving back onto the “veranda.” Or, stated another way, does a shift away from the situated and sensual experience of being in the field (e.g. village, neighborhood,
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or production center) carry naturally with it a return to transcription of what people say over inscription of what they do? In networked ethnography, do participation and conversation necessarily trump observation and the embodied experience? I think that in the ethnographic challenges ahead when considering the full cultural force of media convergence, we need to think hard about these questions. Certainly for whatever the shortcomings of his own ethnography were, Malinowski tried hard to overcome the Boas-esque limitations of transcription by attempting to “dislodge it from center stage in favor of participant-observation: getting away from the table on the verandah and hanging around the village as instead, chatting, questioning, listening in, looking on – writing it all up later” (Clifford 1990, p. 51) – lessons that, however old, we cannot afford to lose.

Finally, because of these somewhat contradictory directions of elaborating a more mobile, opportunistic, and arguably less concretely fixed vision of ethnography for the study of media, it seems that, regardless of how the field might be conceptualized, the articulation of the ethnographic experience through thick description carries a heavier burden than ever. Indeed, it is through the telling of tales from the field that we, as readers of media ethnographies, are able to get a sense of whether a researcher has between doing ethnography or doing research that is somehow ethnographic in nature. By this, I do not mean to suggest that for research to qualify as ethnographic, it merely needs to indulge in the appropriate stylistic maneuvering. Certainly there are plenty of writers who can produce what Sanjek (1990) has dubbed “slick description” (p. 404) without necessarily immersing themselves in the experiential and interpretive work of ethnographic method. What I want to assert instead is that media ethnographers need to labor more purposely with bringing the process to the product in an effort to evoke a fuller sense of place, context, community, intercultural exchange, and, yes, the consciousness that is articulating that experience.

Stylistically speaking, whether we see our work as residing in a fifth moment or as labor in a process of boat building while at sea is less important than if we are able to tap into the lessons from past ethnographic cycles of representation and description to write thick accounts of media reception or production that tell us something about the communities with whom we worked and how they view themselves, as well as, in the process, relay to us a sense of their “ethnographic-ness.” In my view, only by taking this descriptive chore seriously are ethnographers in a position to translate the field, however defined, into ethnographies that are, well, ethnographic. And if they do that, then the readers of those ethnographies will be better able to identify and judge whether or not the person who crafted the media ethnography was truly able, echoing Geertz, to interpret the possible meanings of a wink of an eye (virtual ;-) or otherwise) or the linguistic double entendre in the context of a media event, exchanges in fan speech, or the creation of alternative media. Indeed, if our media ethnographies do not labor to communicate such things, then maybe they are simply not worthy of being called ethnography.
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