

Cyberethnography: Reading Each “Other” Online

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“Today, with globalization in full swing, telecommunicative informatics taps the Native Informant directly in the name of indigenous knowledge and advances biopiracy.” (Spivak, 1999)

The present paper is a discussion of online exchanges as (cyber)ethnographies and autoethnographies (i.e. ethnographies of ourselves) online in relation to the Internet as yet another Western(ized) hegemonic, structure for the invocation, observation, theorization and appropriation of the “Other” through a virtual techno-mediated panopticon. The observations made in this paper are the result of prior empirical and theoretical engagement with studying online communities (see xxx 1998, 1999, 2000). I argue that while the Internet allows for the *possibility* of the Other’s engagement with and talking back to the hegemonic Western(sized) Self, the Internet performances and exchanges visible currently do not show evidence of this happening often enough to change the structural and discursive appropriation of the Other’s self-narratives. Observing that cultural and material access to the Internet outside of the North is fairly class-specific, I speculate that what is currently visible online is a veiling of the “subaltern”.

My work questions whether "feminist place[s] for connected thinking and acting in profoundly contradictory worlds" and "extraterrestrial maps of networks of embodied power marked by race, sex, and class" (Haraway 1994:82) are possible online. Among other things, I ask the question –when encounters between people from contradictory worlds occur, under what conditions would these encounters lead to dialogue as well as further understanding and action towards an common emancipatory goal?. My investigation leads me to question the kind of subject implicit in cyberfeminist discourses, as well as to examine the kind of subject that emerges online. The concerns and questions that I bring into my article are situated within the context of ongoing dialogues and debates concerning speaking for, with and about the “subaltern” (Alcoff, 1992; Das,

(1989); Mohanty, 1994; Spivak, 1994; Stacy, 1988) and draw from my experiences attempting cyberethnographies (Gajjala 1999) as well as founding and moderating email discussion lists (see <http://lists.village.virginia.edu>).

Online subjects are non-essential subjects/texts who's *embodied* negotiation of online spaces can be termed "wrything" instead of "writing" or "speaking." Wrything is an embodied negotiation of discursive spaces (analogue or digital) which are situated within larger discursive/material hegemonies and unaccountable hierarchies. Wrything occurs at the "clashing" point of the material and discursive, where individuals within discursive spaces are confronted with the *materiality* of their discourses. For example, wrything occurs at moments when "the object kicks back" ¹ and implicitly asks that structures of power and individuals speaking for "Others" within various hegemonic spheres be held accountable.

Online interactions, displays and performances are (cyber)ethnographies in and of themselves. Because of the nature of online existence/interaction, online texts can be viewed as embodied digital subjects. They are both discursive subjects and living texts. They are self-representations that in turn serve as "represent[ation]s [of] the world to the West" (Everard, 1998) and provide a space where the "Other" is once again invoked by the the Western(ized) observer. As Jerry Everard points out, "the internet is far from global but it serves to appropriate the idea of the global for western consumption. And there is a human cost to this process" (Everard, 2000).

Cyberethnography

Scholars such as Steve Jones point out that "issues with which sociologists and anthropologists among others, have traditionally engaged when conducting their research are part of ["Net"] discourse, for it becomes necessary to cover ground concerning participant observation, privacy, biography (Jones 1995, p.3).

Cyberethnography is a method of study that unfolded during my attempts at studying a women-only email discussion list and I have made several attempts to define the term (one such definition as cited in Ward, 1999 can be view from <http://www.pitt.edu/~gajjala/define.html>).

Hypertext is very much a part of cyberethnography. When I first began to use the term

“cyberethnography” in an attempt to differentiate ethnography online from face-to-face ethnography, I used it to talk of “ethnography” but ethnography as performed in “cyber” contexts. Therefore, cyberethnography is a study of online interaction. It is unique mainly because of the nature of online interaction which blurs and complicates the boundary between transmission and print media. It allows the subjects being studied to talk back even as the process is going on. The talking back is part of the cyberethnographic process. Cyberethnography complicates discussions regarding re-presentation, authority and writing in interesting and sometimes unique ways because of the nature of medium/technology for interaction. There are others who may refer to it as cyberanthropology².

Katie Ward critiques the dichotomy between “real life” and “virtual life” implicit in my prior definitions of cyberethnography (Gajjala 1997) and extends the notion of cyberethnography while suggesting that physical and virtual realms are becoming inseparable in emerging hybrid, discursive-material spaces that are “neither physical or virtual but a combination of the two.” Ward’s extension of the notion of cyberethnography allows me to further argue that this hybrid space occurs within a glocal digital cyberspace mediated by unequal power relations and configurations of power dominated by the structure of the digital economies in place in today’s unavoidably inter-connected and unequally networked world. Thus cyberspatial social life is situated within digital capitalism (see Schiller, 1999 for a historical account of “digital capitalism”). In addition, cyberethnography

continues to explore the same problems of representation that both feminist and non-feminist ethnographers have been confronting for the past two decades... while ethnographers attempt to represent a social situation, they often re-produce it, thus constructing a *new* version of reality. We are forced to question our taken for granted assumptions, which lead to a new construction of the social processes within a specific context (Ward, 1999)³.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, cyberethnographers also face dilemmas in relation to the blurring of print and broadcast media and in relation to the blurring of private and

public within cyberspaces. must also take into account. Online researchers have, and continue to, encounter dilemmas in relation to the ethics of online research (see Bruckman et al). Some of the issues relate to the nature of the medium and the texts/subjects that are possible online. Thus, it is important not to view online interactions as traditional texts but as changing subjects (as we would approach the subjects we study from an anthropological perspective) who are able to speak for themselves, it is my opinion that discursive subjects are not anthropological subjects in the traditional sense. They are partial, online presentations of real life agents who interact within various online contexts. They are both subjects and texts. Therefore, the ethics of cyberethnography must engage issues raised by both copyright laws and human subjects review boards.

I approach the study of virtual interaction as a media scholar, and not as an anthropologist or a sociologist. It is true however, that the concerns surrounding anthropological and sociological re-presentation of cultures intersect with the study of media re-presentation of culture.

Indeed new ways to present and communicate data, such as the use of dance demonstrate the various ways of presenting and interpreting data. The point is, that with cyber-ethnography, expectations and traditional definitions of the situation are dropped, as the researcher has very little control over the conversation. Participants remain unknown to the researcher and this adds to the balancing of power between the researcher and researched. The participants have no reason to trust the researcher, and are therefore in a stronger position to ask questions and challenge the assumptions of the researcher. It is this potential that the participants have for challenging, that makes the research process reflexive (Ward, 1999, p 5).

Online Texts as Ethnography

is it in the saying

or in you

or in the understanding

*of
perpetual half truths
virtual and imagined truths*

*who's to say whether
western or indian*

*i refuse to be either
i dont dare laugh
i might lose my balance*

*...but once in a while
behind hands that strive to hide
the nervousness
i giggle a little giggle..
not at you
or me
but at the process of*

*being scrutinised...observed...'understood'
as we perform
like monkeys
producing hamlets....
or
chicken littles
muzzling wolves....*

*as
through the internet, the western world finds
yet*

*other ways to
invoke
the
"Other"*

*scrutinize, observe, theorize, "understand".
you say -
almost tongue-in-cheek
i am from a village far, far far east
almost but not quite*

*you say
mis- represent me in your spheres all you like
patient and humourous
as unwittingly
the western(ized) knowledge-seeker tries to
uncover
you*

and educate you

*you laugh
kindly
sometimes
not so kindly
other times*

*we laugh together
but understand the need for bridges and collaborations
someday "they" may actually*

**actually*
dialogue with
"us"
until then
we say
let's watch the performance.*

Cyberethnography includes the notion that online texts are ethnographies.

Online interactions are both discursive subjects and living texts, it is possible to look at email lists, bulletin boards and websites as ethnographic evidence concerning the discursive subjects who inhabit cyberspace as well as to view the subjects themselves as active ethnographers of the various worlds (RL⁴ and Virtual) they live in. Online, there is a blurring of author/reader, audience/performer distinctions. Aycock and Buchignani (1995) have suggested that online interaction is a form of interactive ethnography in its own right. In their article on "The E-Mail Murders: Reflections on 'Dead' Letter", they show that people interacting online are "Author-Ethnographers" who leave visible transcripts of their interactions online. They observed that there are "several occasions [when] on-line text and "real" context seemed to intersect and to interpenetrate one another in subtle ways" (Aycock & Buchignani, 1995, p. 184). In this article, Aycock and Buchignani examine the way this possibility for "ethnographic analysis conducted wholly or in part through the new realm of cyberspace" calls into question conventional issues regarding authority, authorship, genealogy and ethnographic re-construction of "reality" (Aycock & Buchignani 1995, p. 184).

Within the context of virtual communities of postcolonials, it is possible to see virtual communities as interactive ethnographic texts, where the participants are the informants/ethnographers at various levels. They share stories about each others' lives, they provide textual ethnographic "evidence" of their experiences to the lurkers/audience and to the other informants/ethnographers. In addition, they also write ethnographies, in the form of notes and messages, about the host society in which they live. So, for example, on a digital community, there might be discussions about individual postcolonial experiences and opinions while simultaneously, there may be discussions about how mainstream "American" society behaves etc

However, because of the apparent “facelessness” of the encounters in these virtual environments, the level of engagement of individuals may differ in various ways, depending on personal preferences and competencies. While some may be encouraged to share more opinions than they do in face-to-face interaction, others may be intimidated by the technology and/or by the knowledge that unlike the spoken word, the written word leaves a visible stain. While ethnography in any situation (whether in with-body communities or in virtual communities) is a difficult exercise in “cross-cultural and interpersonal understanding and representation” (Stacey ,1988), ethnography online (or cyberethnography) is further complicated because the interaction is limited to bare text . The occasional “emotikons” used to express some forms of emotion are not as effective as nonverbal signs available in face-to-face interaction. In spite of the limited access to the nonverbal expression of emotion, various interpersonal patterns of interaction occur which do not allow for a complete “egalitarian” interaction.

Postcolonials Online

Postcolonial discourses online are discursive re-presentations and rhetorical performances imbedded within a set of power relations that favor hegemonic western ideologies. Online community is represented through virtual practices. The interactions on these virtual communities re-present material conditions. For example, contrary to the celebratory rhetoric concerning the heteroglossic and dialogic possibilities of hypertext and virtual community, postcolonial collectivities online display a show of what Clifford would call a “romanticized multiculturalism” (Clifford 1997, p. 273). Working class diasporic men and women and a majority of the women within the *real* geographic “third-world” locations pay the price for the discourses produced by bourgeois diasporic postcolonials online, who are viewed by the Western world as ideal informants because of their/our ability to translate ourselves and our Other so that we fit appropriately within hegemonic structures of power and thought.

Ananda Mitra, while describing interactions on soc.culture.indian (SCI) suggests that national formations of post-colonials online are,

product[s] of people who make up the electronic community, and given the wide range of opinions and worldviews proposed on the Internet, the image of India that is produced on SCI for its users is replete with contradictions that are a mainstay of everyday life in the South Asian country (Mitra 1997, p. 71).

However, the existence of these contradictions alone does not ensure a disruption of hegemony. Hegemony operates through the appropriation, “incorporation and neutralization of contradictions, not on a purely monological discourse” (Beverley 1993, p. 25). The few counter-narratives produced by men and women located geographically, intellectually, professionally, ideologically and socially outside of the bourgeois/elite westernized postcolonial worldview (a worldview that is often uncritically complicitous with Enlightenment and Colonial worldview in relation to “progress” and the “third-world”) are subsumed, appropriated, outnumbered and even silenced.

The Veiling of the Subaltern and the “Right” to Speak

The Net will be a more colourful, exotic place for us with Venkatavva flashing her gold nose pin, but what good will it do her? The Net, as it is, has a perception of Southern women as ‘brown’, ‘backward’ and ‘ignorant’. A frequent, kinder, depiction of them is as victim of their cultural heritage. Is being exposed to such images going to help Southern women by encouraging them to fight, with self-respect, or will it further erode their confidence in a fast-changing environment? (Annapurna Mamidipudi in Gajjala and Mamidipudi, 1999).

Working class men and women and a majority of the women and men within the *real* geographic “third-world,” either outside of or on the periphery of the cultural, material and linguistic locations of privilege, pay the price for the discourses produced by bourgeois “postcolonials”. Discourses thus produced perform a “veiling” function in relation to the materially and culturally underprivileged subaltern populations.

I must assert, however, that the solution is not for the relatively privileged third-world subject to silence herself in an effort to avoid speaking for the subaltern. While suggesting an interrogation of the roles assumed by and assigned to the third-world woman and/or feminist, within the Western hegemonic sphere my intention is not to dismiss her speech as untrue and invalid. I suggest that we should clarify the *difference* in the speaking locations of third-world subjects (whether feminist or not) situated within a setting of material and cultural privilege that is not available to subaltern women situated elsewhere geographically, materially, culturally. My intention is not to deny the struggles of diasporic third-world women.

As an e-friend pointed out in response to one of my papers, “[i]f we remain silent, that is not going to make the subaltern heard.” However, it is important for us to examine the speaking roles we are assigned as well as the location from which we speak. While the non-subaltern South Asian woman, as the “Other” of the Western woman finds a point of entry into the hegemonic sphere, in itself enabled by a history of relative cultural and material privilege, she must remember that her speech could be used as representative of a subaltern who is not located within the same sphere of material and cultural privilege. As Deepika Bahri points out, this

‘other’ (who has not spoken so far, only been spoken about) [who] begins to gaze at herself in the hope of reopening examination,... must acknowledge the power of this gaze, the context of its production, the privilege implied in the right to speak at all, as well as the limitations of that can be known or said (Bahri,1994).

Further, as “C,” a member of SAWNET⁵ points out,

The question about ‘what is *our* right to speak?’ while it *looks* like a question that places the Subaltern/Other on the map, doesn’t after all produce the spaces *from* which the Subaltern could speak.Instead of ending with ‘From what position of authority would *we* speak? I’d phrase question more explicitly as ‘who is paying the *price* for this authority and *whom* am I taken to be speaking *for*? *What* did we *say* when we were given/took up the authority to speak? And *how* did we say it?’

Macherey points out that “[s]ilences shape all speech” (Macherey 1986, p.85), and it is the silences of the subaltern that shape bourgeois speech. But can speech “reveal... silence” (Macherey 1986, p.86)? And if silence is indeed revealed does this mean that the speech itself is invalid? According to Macherey, the attempt to reveal the latent (the silent):

simply means that the latent is not another meaning which ultimately and miraculously *dispels* the first (manifest) meaning. Thus we can see that meaning is in the *relation* between the implicit and explicit, not on one or the other side of the fence.... What is important in the work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation ‘what it refuses to say’ ...what the work *cannot say* is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence” (Macherey 1986, pp. 86-87).

Thus, what is important (as important as what is actually said and written), both in the discourses on internet spaces and in academic or creative works by women of comparative cultural and material privilege is what is *not* said and even when said, what is not heard.

¹ Comment made by Laura Kipnis in response to the presentation of a paper on Cyborg Diaspora at the University of Pittsburgh Cultural Studies Symposium, 1996 (see Gajjala, in press and Gajjala 1999 for versions of this paper)..

¹ see <http://ernie.bgsu.edu/~radhik/sanov.html> for an account of such a wrything.

² see for example, Steve Mizrach's homepage on cyberanthropology
<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/seeker1/cyberanthro/newhome.html>

³ .see also Gajjala 1998 and Gajjala 1999.

⁴ RL stands for "real life" in compuslang

⁵ Quoted with permission.