NEGOTIATING THE RESEARCHER: INTERSTITIAL, APPROPRIATED, AND DIGITAL IDENTITIES IN MEDIA PRODUCTION ETHNOGRAPHY

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While all people form, exhibit, and use multiple identities, the hybridity of identity plays an integral role in the production of ethnographic knowledge. This article explores three critical tensions concerning researcher identity in media production ethnographies. First, I argue ethnographer identity is interstitial, situated at the margins of contesting and, at times, divergent selves. Second, while researchers privilege certain selves and favor particular agendas, others can appropriate and promote certain aspects of the researcher's identity to serve strategic purposes. Finally, the rise of digital and social media has complicated traditional notions of identity management and 'the field' and provides new opportunities for participants to study the researcher. Thus, while acts of identity are exertions of power, that power can be harnessed and enacted by both researchers and participants.

KEYWORDS

Digital media, ethnography, identity, media production, methods, social media

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It was my last day in Nairobi, Kenya. Before I said final goodbyes, a group of young media producers I met during my fieldwork surprised me with a going-away present: a short, original video. The video opened with one person stating, 'To us, Brian stands for …' followed by others listing a series of nouns and adjectives that started with the letters of my first name, such as 'Bright,' 'American,' and 'Nice.' Yet, even though I spoke openly about my research project and 'R' was there for the taking, no one mentioned 'Researcher', nor did anyone reference my status as a student in the US. The identities that prompted my stay in Kenya had little salience to those who put this video together. Instead, members described me as a teacher, technical adviser, friend, and actor in their films. One even joked about my dancing ability, digging up an embarrassing three-year-old photo from the depths of my Facebook page. This video demonstrated that each person I met during my fieldwork defined me through his or her interpretive lens. They constructed these 'Brians' based on their personal interactions and experiences with my interpersonal and digital selves. While I sought to understand and represent these individuals and their media production activities through my ethnographic research, they were studying and making sense of me. And their constructions of my identity were, to a certain extent, outside of my control.

While all people form, exhibit, and use multiple identities, the complex control and dynamic nature of identity plays an integral role in the production of ethnographic knowledge. How a researcher presents herself and how others interpret her identity impacts that researcher's ability to access the field and to engage with members of the research community. Identity influences if and how an ethnographer is able to satisfy the demands and ease the concerns of community gatekeepers, and it impacts her ability to gather data during fieldwork, as community members determine their level of participation based on their evaluations of the researcher's utility and trustworthiness (e.g. 'I can/can't open up to her, she is/isn't like me'). Certainly, identity is an important consideration for researchers of all stripes, but the relational nature of ethnography distinguishes this type of research from other methodologies. Unlike most surveys, experiments, and other forms of quantitative and qualitative study, ethnographies involve prolonged contact and communication between the researcher and participants. In fact, in ethnographic research it is this connectivity and interaction that constitute an ethnographer's 'data'. Through identity management and presentation, ethnographers negotiate relationships that determine who and what they observe, how they make sense of these observations, and how they represent their findings to academic and popular audiences. Thus, more than any other methodologist, ethnographers use identity strategically to help them achieve certain goals in the field, such as build rapport with a skeptic or gain access to an otherwise closed site. At the same time, members of the research community also utilize different aspects of the researcher's identity to satisfy their ambitions. So while an ethnographer holds multiple identities in the field, those identities do not belong fully to the researcher. Thus, researcher identity in media ethnographies is a site of negotiation, instrumentation, and unease.

This article explores three critical tensions concerning researcher identity in media production ethnographies. First, I examine researcher identity as multiple and dynamic through a review of methodological and empirical scholarship that demonstrates that researchers possess and promote heterogeneous identities in the field that change over time. As such, I argue that identity is better understood as an act than an object as it is only actualized through the actions of the self or others. Next, I argue that ethnographer identity is interstitial, situated at the margins of contesting and, at times, divergent selves. Identity management leaves ethnographers in a state of constant negotiation, evaluating and privileging selves that are most useful for accomplishing research goals. As a result, researcher identity is often located in the spaces between an ethnographer's various selves. I then demonstrate the ways in which researcher identity can be appropriated by members of the research community. While researchers employ identity management to privilege certain selves and favor particular agendas, they are not the only ones who engage in the instrumental use of their identities. The hybridity of identity allows others to coopt and promote certain aspects of a researcher's identity to serve their strategic purposes. Finally, I argue that the global rise of digital and social media has complicated traditional notions of identity management and 'the field'. As ethnographers and research participants become Facebook friends and Twitter followers, their relationships become more permeable, mitigating power imbalances in ethnographic research. Social media provide a platform for new forms of exchange and mutual investigation, granting more opportunities for the researcher to become the researched.

My analysis draws on existing ethnographic studies, with an emphasis on scholarship of media production, as well as my own research on community media organizations in Kibera and Mathare, two large slums in Nairobi, Kenya. During 10 months of fieldwork between 2009 and 2010, I examined the interactions between creative and constraining forces that impact the work of young adults learning to produce news, documentaries, and fictional stories about their communities (Ekdale, 2013). As I discuss below, each of these three tensions concerning researcher identity – as interstitial, as appropriated, and as digital – helped determine and complicate my experiences in the field and, thus, construct the production of this ethnographic research.

Identity as Act

Much that has been written about identity management in naturalistic inquiry draws from the work of Ervin Goffman (e.g. Bell, 1999; Berreman, 2012 [1972]; Caldwell, 2006; Lofland et al., 2006; Wertheim, 2009). In his book The Presentation of Self in

Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) explains human interaction using a 'dramaturgical approach', viewing identity presentation through the metaphor of theatrical performance. In this model, each social actor selects the stage, props, and costume to perform a carefully crafted version of the self, all the while serving as audience to others' performances of their selves. For Goffman, identity is situational and strategic, with social actors seeking to present coherent and advantageously designed selves adapted for particular audiences and environments. One of the first to apply Goffman's insights to ethnography, Gerald Berreman argues, 'the ethnographic research endeavor may be viewed as a system involving the social interaction of ethnographer and subjects … therefore, impression management is of methodological as well as substantive significance to ethnographers' (2012 [1972]: 162). As such, qualitative research methodologists take for granted the hybridity of identity and advise scholars to be deliberate and strategic in their self-presentations (Feldman et al., 2003; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Lofland et al. 2006). These prescriptive approaches offer best practices in shaping and utilizing identity so that ethnographers can achieve their research goals.

The phrase 'participant observation', synonymous with fieldwork, itself embodies the tension between ethnographers' dual commitments of engaging and examining. This dynamic has triggered a great deal of discussion about the ideal balance between these two roles, with some arguing participation is only epistemologically useful insofar as it provides the ethnographer access to the object of analysis (Jarvie, 1969), and others claiming that active and regular participation is an ontological necessity and ethical imperative (Samudra, 2008; Tedlock, 1991). In practice, few ethnographers are wholly participants in or solely observers of the communities they study (Gold, 1957; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002); rather, most researchers wrestle with locating a balance between these two identities that provides them with the best opportunity to understand the specific community at that particular moment in time while maintaining a sufficient analytical perspective. To that end, Johnson et al. (2006) offer a framework for understanding how an ethnographer's identity as researcher is complicated through her activities as a participant in a particular field setting.

Also central to researcher identity are considerations of similarity and difference between the researcher and the research community. As Kirin Narayan (1993) notes, formulations that categorize ethnographers simply as either insiders or outsiders overlook the complex identities that all researchers must negotiate when conducting research. Instead of relying on dichotomies devoid of nuance, Narayan writes:

> I propose that at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. (1993: 671)

Narayan argues ethnographers should interrogate their relationships across multiple identities, including education level, gender and sexual orientation, socio-economic status, length of time in the field, and 'quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts' (Ibid, 672). A more nuanced and grounded assessment of research relationships recognizes that an ethnographer and members of the research community share similarities across some identities and experience difference across others, that field relations change over time, and that research communities are not homogeneous. Such an assessment becomes epistemologically useful in revealing how these diverse, dynamic, and, at times, conflicting relationships affect the production of ethnographic knowledge.

Many ethnographers have written reflexively about their efforts to balance multiple identities during fieldwork and how identity management has formed and shaped their experiences and relationships in the field. Reflecting on her media reception study of Japanese women, Fabienne Darling-Wolf (2003) notes that her status as a married woman helped her cultivate relationships with women who defined themselves as housewives, yet this same identity created distance between her and the women's unmarried daughters. She argues, 'my various selves worked for or against my inclusion within the group of women I conducted research with in various situations and at different points in time' (2003: 112). She adds that her relationships evolved over time as her identities changed, such as when she developed a new level of closeness with the women after she became pregnant. During Michael Angrosino's (2005) fieldwork at a Benedictine monastery, his Catholicism and temporary adherence to monastic rule helped him establish trust with the resident monks. At the same time, Angrosino suggests that his unwillingness to take the formal vows of monastic obedience – a central part of a monk's identity – created an intimacy barrier between him and the monks. He argues, 'I was withholding an important part of myself, and thereby gave them tacit permission to withhold parts of themselves in return' (2005: 30). For Angrosino, this marker of difference had a detrimental effect on his ability to establish trust and openness during the research process. Yet, Russell Shuttleworth (2005) argues that difference between researcher and research community in highly salient identities does not disqualify a researcher from reaching a sufficient depth of understanding. As an able-bodied man who studies the sexual lives of disabled men, Shuttleworth notes that he relied on his experiences as an ally of, friend to, and employee of disabled men to help him achieve his research goals. He adds that ethnographers should perform a 'reflexive interrogation of allegiances' to consider how an ethnographer's loyalties to various identities and institutions can impact field relationships and ethnographic understanding (2005: 55). This exercise forces ethnographers to consider power dynamics in the field and question how researcher allegiances – to one's self, to the community, to academia, etc. – can strengthen or weaken power differentials experienced by members of the research community.

As these examples illustrate, researcher identity is multiple and mutable, and these variations and fluctuations are central to the production of ethnographic knowledge. Therefore, identity must be understood not as a static object but, rather, a dynamic act. This does not mean that researcher identity is a façade or a pretense; rather, identity only gains meaning through being enacted or being acted upon. As with Goffman, researcher identity can be simultaneously genuine and a performance – one to which the researcher is both performer and audience. Through the enactment of selves, select identities are actualized strategically in response to specific situations and particular audiences. Thus, acts of identity are methodologically and epistemologically meaningful insofar as they serve to negotiate access to the research community, forge relationships in the field, shape data-gathering activities, and construct ethnographic representations. In the remaining sections, I explore three key tensions of researcher identity in ethnographic research through an interrogation of enacted selves during my production ethnography of community media organizations in Nairobi's slums. While the hybridity of identity is widely accepted and understood, I seek to complicate further our understanding of identity in ethnographic research by exploring the location of researcher identity within the margins of competing selves, the strategic enactment of the researcher's identities by members of the research community, and the changing power dynamics in research relationships as a result of expanding 'the field' to include digital and social media.

Identity as Interstitial

Ethnographers begin managing their identities in a research project long before they commence fieldwork. In addition to a handful of institutional activities such as securing research funding and IRB approval, researchers must negotiate access to the research community. In most cases, a researcher needs to identify and seek approval from a community gatekeeper – 'the person or group who has the authority to negotiate and approve research access in a group or an organization' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 101). Puijk (2008) notes that gaining access to media organizations is more difficult now than it was in decades past, making the negotiations with gatekeepers more challenging for ethnographers. For many researchers, establishing credibility means promoting their professional academic identity through the impressiveness of their CVs or the prestige of their affiliated institutions (Feldman et al. 2003; Garcia et al., 2009; Mayer, 2007b). Doing so promotes the researcher's academic identity, conveying that she is someone of quality pedigree and scholarly intent. In media production ethnographies, it is also common for researchers to highlight their personal experience producing media when attempting to gain access to the field (Dornfeld, 1998; Mayer, 2007b; Paterson and Zoellner, 2010). An identity as a fellow media producer can communicate to gatekeepers that the researcher shares common interests and experiences with members of the research community. It also can suggest that the researcher could be a useful resource to the community. For example, Barry Dornfeld (1998) became a production assistant for the PBS series he studied, and Jennifer Hasty (2005) worked as a journalist for multiple newspapers during her ethnography of state and private press in Ghana. By participating in media production activities within the groups they studied, Dornfeld and Hasty helped the gatekeepers – executive producers and editors, respectively – accomplish their institutional goals. In turn, these scholars received broad access to the media organizations they sought to study.

Similarly, my experience as a media producer was key to gaining access to the organizations in my study; however, my identity as an academic did little to help my cause. A gatekeeper from an organization in Uganda denied me access to his group because he felt that researchers were too much of a drain on the organization's resources. Even with the organizations I did access in Kenya, my academic identity, at times, was counterproductive to building trusting relationships with group leaders. One leader openly expressed her distaste for academia, arguing that most research was irrelevant to the experience of practitioners, while another leader was considering a future in academia and had concerns that my work might preempt the research she hoped to conduct some day. Therefore, my academic identity offered these gatekeepers little value at best or competition at worst. Instead, the leaders of these groups were most interested in my potential to be an ally, someone who believed in and assisted them with achieving organizational goals. My production and teaching experience satisfied these desires, because I was able to lead training sessions, support group members with their projects, and assist in day-to-day organizational activities. I further developed my identity as an ally by performing a variety of small supportive tasks, such as transporting equipment to and from the US, promoting their efforts to my friends and family, and donating funds during pledge drives. While few, if any, organizations are interested in someone who will detract from their goals and drain their resources, small non-profit groups with a scarcity of resources are particularly welcoming to researchers who can help them attain organizational goals. Thus, in securing access through gatekeepers, the irrelevance of my academic identity was compensated for by my allegiance to their mission and my utility to their organizations. Through gatekeeper acceptance and my regular contributions to their long-term and short-term goals, my presence with these groups was normalized: I was able to set up shop in their offices, I occasionally was cc'd in internal communication, and I was invited to be a part of organizational meetings. This arrangement provided me with broader access to the inner workings of these organizations, giving me greater insight into their decision-making, operations, and ideals.

Although researchers must gain access to the field through gatekeepers, this approval does not ensure community acceptance of the researcher's presence or the research project. In fact, community members initially ascribe an identity to the researcher based on their feelings toward the gatekeeper and their readings of the relationship between the researcher and the gatekeeper. Thus, it is important for a researcher to assert a distinct and independent identity, so that community members do not see the researcher merely as an agent of the gatekeeper. During my fieldwork, I tried to establish a certain distance between group leaders and myself so that members would feel open, revealing concerns and experiences they may not have felt comfortable having the leaders know. I developed a schedule independent from the leaders, I sought out group members outside of organized activities, and I waited, patiently listening to their opinions, aspirations, and fears. Over time, group members felt more comfortable revealing to me concerns with the organizations, disagreements with the leaders, and individual acts of rebellion. As a result of these conversations, I withheld certain information from group leaders – including details about broken equipment, forged documents, and delinquent members – that likely hampered their ability to achieve organizational goals. To be sure, withholding such information was a straightforward choice in favor of confidentiality and non-intervention, but it was simultaneously an instrumental act of my identity as friend and confidant to group members that allowed me to develop more trusting and open relationships with them.

Another reason for establishing distance from gatekeepers is that gaining access to communities and cultivating relationships with community members often involves privileging different identities. During my fieldwork, both gatekeepers and group members primarily were interested in my ability to provide training and assistance in media production. The members of these organizations were new to video production, so they were eager to learn from whomever was willing to teach them. But beyond that, my position as someone who owned his own production equipment provided me opportunities to further relationships with some of the members. For example, one man felt he was not given sufficient access to his organization's equipment, so he sought me out as someone who could provide him with the camera and editing software necessary to produce a short documentary. Others borrowed my voice recorder and DSLR camera, as these were resources they typically did not have access to in their groups. The gatekeepers, whose organizations had superior video cameras and computers, largely were uninterested in my technical resources, but these tools provided an opportunity for me to develop closer relationships with individual members. By working with non-organizational equipment, these individuals felt more freedom to pursue projects that fell outside organizational parameters, and my role as resource provider allowed me to be a participant-observer during many of these projects. I ensured that my participation in these projects did not work against the policies and goals of the organizations, but I did not seek organizational approval for this work, as doing so would have aligned me too closely with the gatekeepers.

Media production ethnographies are unique in that ethnographers and media producers share many similarities. Both ethnographers and media producers, particularly those who work in journalism and documentary production, are engaged in the exercise of gathering information about others and representing them to an outside audience (Murphy, 2008; Singer, 2008). This similarity in design allows for an extra layer of understanding between ethnographers and participants in production research. For example, Herbert Gans (2004) writes that journalists understood his personal detachment from newsroom politics because it resonated with their relationships with the subjects of their news reports. But the similarities between the two parties can also be a source of frustration for researchers, particularly when those who expect others to open up for the sake of their media productions are unwilling to do the same for a research project (Dornfeld, 1998). In part, most media producers see themselves as storytellers, not players in someone else's story. In my research, many of the media producers found a kinship with me as someone who told stories through both media and research, yet a few individuals struggled with my efforts to have them speak openly and reflexively about their work in media production. One woman felt very confident in her storytelling abilities but was less comfortable articulating to me what she valued about or sought to accomplish with her stories. During one exercise, I asked her to record a DVD commentary for her five-minute documentary, but she had trouble coming up with much to say about her project. I explained that most commentaries run the length of the video and suggested a variety of topics she could discuss, but after several attempts, she gave up after less than two minutes of commentary. For her, speaking to me or to an unknown audience about her role as a storyteller was a difficult and uncomfortable task. Thus, despite the similarities between ethnographers and media producers, the role reversal that places the focus on media producers turns this familiar activity strange.

These examples illustrate that during the course of ethnographic fieldwork, a researcher often enacts identities that are dissimilar to and, in some cases, competing with each other. In the field, I continually collected observational and interview data to satisfy my research goals, yet I was of most value to these organizations by serving as a teacher and an ally. While I had to establish myself as a credible, useful resource for the gatekeepers, I developed closer relationships with group members by distinguishing myself from the gatekeepers and by providing resources outside of the organizations. My work as an ethnographer paralleled the members' media storytelling, yet my research design inverted the framework, placing the storyteller in the center of my story. Thus, not only is the researcher identity multiple, it is often contradictory. An identity that is strategically useful in one situation may be irrelevant or damaging in another. When those circumstances are entangled, identity management involves asserting more than one identity simultaneously. Thus, researcher identity is interstitial, located in the margins between competing and contrasting selves. This liminality can be a source of unease for researchers, who seek to satisfy the desires of multiple agents in the field, including themselves. At the same time, it can be a source of confusion for the research community, who may not interpret the nuances of the researcher's acts of hybrid identity in the way they were intended. Members of the research community may recognize the researcher's multiple selves, but they may choose to interpret and privilege those identities that offer the greatest utility to them. Thus, while research identities are interstitial, promoted strategically through and between the margins of dissimilar and contradictory selves to adapt to particular circumstances and environments, interpretation and instrumentation of researcher identity is often outside of the researcher's knowledge and/or control.

Identity as Appropriated

Any discussion of identity construction, management, and instrumentation must recognize that ethnographers participate in and complicate an existing field of power relations. Although many ethnographers seek to challenge inequality through deeper understanding of mis- or under-represented groups and cultures, the ethnographic project accrues power primarily for the researcher (Cannella and Lincoln, 2009). Through ethnographic research, scholars gain experience, publications, and prestige, while members of the research community – despite a growing disciplinary emphasis on reciprocity and participatory research – rarely enjoy equivalent returns. Therefore, the management and performance of researcher identity is an exercise of power within a site of unequal power relations. However, members of the research community are not powerless in the ethnographic project. As Suzanne Wertheim (2009: 283) notes, 'impression management between the researcher and researched is bi-directional, with all parties able to exert only limited control over their ultimate representations'. While researchers strategically coordinate their identity presentations, members of the research community manage and promote their own multiple identities. The self that a researcher observes, interacts with, and interviews is a carefully designed act of identity on the part of the individual being studied.

Members of the research community also appropriate aspects of the researcher's identity, privileging those features that are most advantageous to helping them achieve their goals, often defining and redefining the researcher for others. Roschanack Shaery-Eisenlohr (2009) notes that in her research on Shi'ite politics in Lebanon, interlocutors often disrupted her interview agenda by asserting their assumptions about her identity. These interlocutors exercised their authority in the research relationship, redirecting the conversations and insisting that their preferred topics of debate were more important than her intended interview questions. Similarly, Vicki Mayer (2007a) recounts a moment from her fieldwork with soft-core cameramen when a participant's actions momentarily altered her identity in their relationship. Demonstrating his equipment, the cameraman focused the camera spotlight on her covered chest, transforming her primary identity from a researcher into a woman and a sexual object. While I did not experience similar efforts to exert power over and destabilize my research agenda, participants in my study did appropriate certain parts of my identity to serve their instrumental purposes.

Though my identity as a researcher had little salience with and utility to participants during my fieldwork, there were moments when others drew upon that identity when it became useful to them. In its simplest form, there was occasional interest in my data, such as when I conducted audience interviews at a community screening. The group that organized the screening was eager to determine the event's success, and they saw my interviews with attendees as a prime opportunity to get community feedback. At other times, interest in my role as a researcher impacted my research design, such as when one organization asked me to film a portion of my interviews with group members so they could use the footage in a promotional video. I agreed in the spirit of reciprocity, but I quickly realized that the dual purpose of the exercise made the interviews less useful to my research as the staged environment weighed heavily on the interviewees' comfort in disclosing sensitive material as well as how I conducted the interviews. Beyond interest in my planned research design, there were moments when my researcher identity was asserted by others to take advantage of a relevant skill. For example, one man decided to apply for a feature film grant but was having difficulty completing his application statement. He asked if I would interview him about the proposed project, so he could use a recording of our interview to help him organize his thoughts and finish the application. I had not planned to interview him about this project, but he called upon my identity as a researcher and an interviewer to help him accomplish his goal of applying for the grant. Thus, although my academic side was largely irrelevant to members of my research community, a few individuals privileged this identity when it benefitted them.

In addition to the instrumentalization of my identity as a researcher, those I met in the field also exercised control over my identity as someone of privilege.[1] My whiteness, education level, and comparative wealth were clear markers of difference that distinguished me from most slum residents I met and worked with daily. Because of these differences, I was often referred to and described as a *mzungu*, which is Swahili for 'foreigner' and is used often to reference Europeans, Americans, and whites in general. My *mzungu* identity signified wealth and opportunity, for myself and others. While Kibera and Mathare residents are regularly disparaged or ignored in the media and in public, *mzungus* almost always are granted attention, regardless of whether this attention is deserved or truly valued. Recognizing my position of privilege, several people asked me to write letters of recommendation for them; a teacher advertised our relationship to his students, instructing them to study hard so that someday they, too, could have 'a friend from the states'; and a few participants asked me to find them financial sponsors so they could continue their schooling. On one occasion, following a minor dispute between a local school administrator and a member of one organization, the administrator asked to speak with 'one of the *mzungus* in charge' of the group. When a leader refused, explaining that the administrator unfairly was minimizing the organization's Kenyan staff, a staff member privately suggested I accompany him to settle the dispute. I declined as I suspected that the administrator was more interested in financial capacity than skin color. Another teacher I befriended invited me to attend his journalism club meetings on multiple occasions, though when I arrived at the predetermined times, his club would not be meeting. Instead, he would pull his students out of class and ask them to listen quietly while I 'teach them something'. In private, I explained that I was happy to offer training, but I was most interested in seeing his journalists engaged in normal activities. But after multiple visits, it became clear that the teacher was appealing to my interests as a researcher so that he could raise his profile with his students through an affiliation with an American journalism teacher.

Such acts of identity appropriation do not erase the power imbalances in ethnographic fieldwork, but they are indicative of how the 'researched' can exercise power over the researcher during fieldwork. During my time in Kenya, members of the research community primed and utilized aspects of my identity when it became advantageous for them to do so, exercising control in and over the research relationship. They appropriated my designed identity as a researcher to gain knowledge in areas where I could provide assistance and they coopted my ascribed *mzungu* status to leverage that privilege for their benefit. Through instrumental acts of my identity, those I studied demonstrated an ability to exert power over my actions and my presentation in the community. As audience to my identity performances, they negotiated their sense of my self and then facilitated performances that served their ends. Thus, while the power balance heavily favors researchers in ethnographic fieldwork, we must not forget that those being studied also exercise agency and control through identity management of themselves and others.

Identity as Digital

In the past two decades, a growing number of scholars have proposed strategies for applying ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities and digital cultures (Garcia et al. 2009; Hine, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000). While a great deal of attention has focused on communities that exist primarily online, little attention has been drawn to how digital and social media affect the ethnographic study of communities that exist primarily offline. Yet, ethnographies founded on data gathered through direct observation and interpersonal communication increasingly must account for online interactions and identities, as the daily routines of a growing number of people are mediated by and given meaning through communication technologies. In contemporary fieldwork, ethnographers and participants can regularly connect with each other in online contexts by sending emails, reading each others' blogs, becoming Facebook friends, following each other on Twitter, and so on. This new layer of interaction and representation in contemporary ethnography further complicates identity management and power dynamics in research relationships.

Although most of the members of my research community were very low-income earners, they were well represented on social media. At the time, most were active Facebook users, they uploaded videos to YouTube, a few had started to use Twitter, and one maintained a citizen journalism blog. The budding journalists and filmmakers I studied were media savvy and often used mobile phones, cyber cafes, and internet access at the organizations' offices to log on to and update their social media accounts. Many of the people I met in the field sought me out through social media, and by the time I left the field, I had amassed quite a number of Kenyan Facebook friends and Twitter followers. These connections helped me conduct my fieldwork as status messages and tweets alerted me to issues of importance, revealed interactions and relationships between members of the research community, and helped me maintain direct communication with participants. Social media extended 'the field' by offering an additional site of observation and interaction with those I studied and a platform for staying connected to my research community when I was not in Kenya. My connections with participants on Facebook allowed me to cultivate and develop relationships in between the multiple visits that comprised my fieldwork. Even after my final stay in Kenya, I have been able to nurture these relationships though email, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blog comments.

Moreover, the presentation and exchange of digital selves on social media complicate a researcher's ability to manage her public and private identities. Prior to the digital age, an ethnographer exercised great control over which identities she presented to her research communities. Unless the ethnographer was already known to the community, community members were unable to observe the researcher in her natural environment(s). The researcher was an active agent in determining which of her selves she would reveal to those she met. Research participants also had little access to works written about them by the researcher. Unless the researcher deliberately shared resulting articles, books, or documentaries back with the community, they likely never knew how they would be depicted. Digital and social media technologies engender greater openness and reciprocity. They make public the ways researchers and participants represent each other to online audiences, and they create more permeable research relationships in which members of the research community are able to learn more about the researcher.

During my fieldwork, I occasionally blogged, tweeted, uploaded photos, and updated my Facebook status to comment upon experiences and knowledge I gained through my research. While most members of the research community are not interested in the academic publications I produce, they frequently attend to my contributions on social media. For participants, these contributions offer insight into my identity as a researcher as they illustrate how I represent field data. At the same time, the structure of social media situate these representations in a space where users can comment on, build upon, or outright challenge depictions they find false or incomplete. On Facebook and on my blog, Kibera and Mathare residents regularly comment on and share my content, helping to co-create these representations for a digital audience. While contributing content online is certainly an exercise of power, social media provide a platform where research participants have opportunities to be active members in the conversation or leaders in starting their own conversations.

Just as I was very conscious of my contributions to social media, I was also very deliberate about what I chose not to represent in these spaces. Knowing that members of the research community regularly attended to my digital self, I wrestled with how self-depictions online would highlight or diminish identities of similarity and difference. I became very aware of the presence of privilege in my digital self, representations of wealth and opportunities that were inaccessible to residents of Kibera and Mathare. This discomfort suggested a larger truth about the role of social media in research relationships: participants could use this space to study me. Even though I tried to avoid adding new content that emphasized my privilege, my Facebook friends had full access to my profile, including years of data about a life of comparative wealth. Photos, status messages, and comments that revealed parts of my identity I sought to downplay in the field were accessible online for participants to collect and negotiate in their construction of my identity. Social media, thus, provide a digital archive for participants to 'study up' on the researcher. Despite the careful efforts ethnographers put toward image management, members of the research community ultimately create their own meanings from the identity presentations they are exposed to and seek out. This permeable research relationship, one in which both researchers and participants are subjects and objects of study, further mitigates the power differentials inherent in ethnographic research. Participants are not afforded equal control, but it is control nonetheless.

As with in-person interactions, digital selves can be managed and controlled. Sites like Facebook offer sophisticated settings that allow users to restrict access to certain pieces of information so that users can present distinct identities to different groups of people. I chose not manage my privacy settings on Facebook and elsewhere, so the same content that was available to my friends and family was accessible to members of my research community. I chose to leave my online profiles open to those I studied to reflect the openness I sought from them. While this made me feel uncomfortable and vulnerable at times, it was an act of reciprocity, an effort toward more openness. This also ensured I felt a greater sense of accountability in constructing representations online as I know participants paid attention to how I represented my experiences online. While other ethnographers may decide to exert greater control over managing their online profiles, I believe connecting with members of the research community and opening up your digital identity to participants is a small act of reciprocity. It forces researchers to relinquish some control of their identity management and recognize the vulnerability of exposure that participants may feel during the research process. It also affords participants opportunities to conduct counter-research, making steps toward more equitable research relationships.

The Negotiated Researcher

This examination of the tensions in researcher identity extends our understanding of the ethnographic process. As ethnographers, the management of our various selves creates an interstitial identity, located in the margins of multiple and, at times, contradictory selves. And while we use identity strategically in our research, those we study can also exert control over the instrumental use of our selves. The power dynamics in ethnographic research are further challenged in the digital age as participants can now study the researcher online, complicating research relationships. Thus, while acts of identity are exertions of power, that power can be harnessed and enacted by both researchers and participants. These tensions impact the production of ethnographic knowledge as they determine the extent to which a researcher can access the research community and be a part of meaningful activities within that community. Identity presentation, negotiation, and appropriation also govern the tenor of research relationships, and thus the data an ethnographer gathers through interviews and observational methods. As Amanda Coffey notes, one of the greatest dangers in ethnographic inquiry is 'a failure to acknowledge and critically (though not necessarily negatively) engage with the range of possibilities of position, place and identity' (1999: 36). Therefore, I encourage other scholars, particularly those involved in ethnographic research of media production, to think and write reflexively about how their work is made possible by and constructed through acts of identity by themselves and others.

This article should not be understood as a cynical account of identity in ethnographic research. The purpose of identity management is not deception, nor is manipulative control the essence of identity instrumentalization. Ethnographers should seek to create mutually beneficial relationships with members of the research community through honest acts of identity. Yet identity is a site and source of power and control, and only a detailed assessment of acts of identity in fieldwork can reveal who exercises that power and to what ends. Although power imbalances typically favor researchers in ethnographic research, this account of instrumental and digital identities affirms the agency and control that can be exercised by members of the research community.

As media ethnographers, and even more so for media production ethnographers, we constitute a minority in our field. As such, we must encourage reflexive accounts from our peers that interrogate the researcher's place in the production of ethnographic knowledge. The distinctive features of media production ethnography – including the similarities between ethnographers and producers, the opportunities to participate in or facilitate the production of media content, and the ability to connect practices with texts – create a need to build upon the substantial methodological writings of scholars from other disciplines. This need will continue to grow in years to come, as more and more studies seek ethnographic understanding of online communities and cultures. As media scholars, we are well situated to study communication technologies both as media and as sites of culture, aka 'the field'. Issues of researcher and participant identity as negotiated, appropriated, and co-created are further complicated in fascinating and yet unknown ways online. We must continue to take advantage of our privileged position as media scholars; otherwise, we risk losing control of our domain to ethnographers from other disciplines.

1.
As Mayer (2005) argues, discussions of whiteness and privilege in ethnographic research either emphasize whiteness as a colonizing force or articulate a defensiveness to such whiteness without destabilizing its authority. Just as Mayer is unable to suggest an alternative way forward, I don't presume to navigate this difficult terrain with any greater success. Undeniably, my whiteness afforded me privileges not granted to residents of these communities, yet it also positioned me as an antagonist for some residents. While most Kibera and Mathare residents demonstrate kindness and graciousness toward non-residents, they do not necessarily value and respect rich, white people mucking around in their communities. After enduring a long history of colonialism, neocolonialism, and entitled foreigners with their stereotypes and their cameras, residents are understandably guarded or hostile to those they define as *mzungus*.

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