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Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities

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Abstract: In this essay, we discuss the production of subjectivities at the intersection of local/global and online/offline environments through an engagement with the contexts ethnographically, to illustrate a methodology based on epistemologies of doing. We suggest that researchers studying the production of identity in technospaces must engage in the production of culture and subjectivity in the specific context while interacting with others doing the same in order to gain a nuanced understanding of how identities are formed and performed in such socio-economic environments. Identities thus produced are central to the workings of community situated in specific social, economic and cultural practices and structures of power. Through examining practices that shape these identity formations within various technological environments, we can work towards developing theoretical frameworks that actively shift hierarchies of oppression.

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1. Introduction

Doing research in the "third age of Internet studies" (WELLMAN, 2004) and locating our work in the "critical cyberculture studies" (SILVER, 2000), we are concerned with social and cultural implications of producing, consuming, and using technology in various contexts. In this essay, we consider a research practice based on *epistemologies of doing* in order explore the production of selves at online/offline intersections. This cyberethnographic engagement plays into the critical research agenda of examining the contextual manifestation of oppression. In particular, we place race at the center of our exploration of social network systems, which experience increasing popularity among young people. In this paper, we discuss details of cyberethnography through the lens of epistemologies of doing and through a review of existing scholarship about race in cyberspace. Further, we theorize how the race gets produced and authorized in the minute instances of everyday online/offline praxis. Our work draws from undergraduate and graduate courses, where students are involved in service-learning projects and technology-facilitated activities. Thus, the major objective is

to race the interface—to examine and interrogate the construction of (racial) identity in cyberspace. [1]

2. The Context of Social Networks

Social network systems, or sites, are essentially web based software which connect people and help them stay in touch with friends. Those who open accounts in social network systems establish and maintain friendships, hook up with dates, meet new friends, find jobs, and exchange recommendations and news. The systems share a few key characteristics: profiles, friends, and comments (BOYD, 2007). Individuals create profiles that represent their selves with photos and a plethora of information about themselves (for example, birthday, contact information, education, job, hobbies, favorite movies, books, music, and quotes). Also, the profiles in social systems depict one's network—a group of friends and acquaintances. Another common feature of the social networks systems is the interactive tools to build and maintain relationships within particular contexts and framings. Some of these features include message tools, notes, and comments. Users link their profiles and become connected through messaging systems, bulletin boards, blogging, and other tools. [2]

Students, professors, journalists, political candidates, religious leaders, video fans, and musicians create profiles representing users through images and references to favorite activities and media content. Online friendship is pervasive and involves millions of members, who are collectively called "MySpace generation" (HEMPEL, 2005) because the most populated social network is MySpace. According to various sources, myspace.com claims up to 100 million unique registered users worldwide and about 50 million of users in the US in August 2006. The population of another social system called FaceBook reached 18 million users in February 2007 (ABRAM, 2007). A virtual environment of SecondLife takes the idea of social networking to a cartoon-like reality where each participant has an avatar, which moves across the land and interacts with other characters as well as objects and places. SecondLife resembles a fantasy game, yet people collaboratively build the virtual world and live through vivid experiences of moving through and manipulating with physical space. [3]

Together with the growing popularity of social network websites like FaceBook and MySpace among college and highs-school students, the concern about these sites is rising among parents, school administrations, police, and law makers because of the information openness, which may put the young users at risk. MySpace has become a notorious object of television and newspaper coverage focusing on possibilities of abuse and crime due to excessive personal revelations. Various agents responsible for social safety address the assumed dangers of social networks. Two bills have been recently introduced by the US House of Representatives to block access to any commercial social site that allows users to create a profile and communicate with strangers at federally funded schools and libraries. On university campuses, administrators warn students that the information posted on their profiles may damage the reputation of young people when they apply for jobs or to seek admission to college. Some schools start

campaigns or initiate advising boards to recommend parents and students on how to post on social networking sites. Experts on privacy suggest that students do not reveal anything their employer or parents do not want to see. [4]

The attempts to control and regulate online activities—from prohibiting and punishing to educating and training—reflect and play into cyberpanics or cyberphobias, according to Barry SANDYWELL (2006). He argues that cyberspace has been added to the inventory of monsters threatening life in the 21st century, along with various diseases, cloning, and weapons of mass destruction. Stanley COHEN (2003) who started the studies on moral panics emphasizes their focus on a threat to societal values and interests. The rapid technological development leads to deregulating market economy, expanding global capitalism, blurring borders, transforming everyday life, and reconfiguring social relations. The feeling of personal anxiety and uncertainty accompanies the dislocation from the normalized existence in communication limited to face-to-face interaction (SANDYWELL, 2006). COHEN suggests that moral panics originate from mass media or particular interest groups, and Stuart HALL et al. (1978) argue that it is the elite who engineer panics through political and judicial activity. One of the common themes in moral panics is the influences and behaviors of young people. With the case of social networks, the users give the food for thought and worries for adults and attract researchers studying techno- and cyber-cultural practices. [5]

3. Cyberethnography

Cyberculture is a prolific area of research, and ethnography occupies a central position in studying cybercultures (BELL, 2001). In brief, ethnography is "a written representation of culture" (MAANEN, 1988). It strives to create descriptions of individual or collective subjectivities for the purpose of understanding different cultures. Typically ethnography involves observation of a group of people in their natural environment and description of one or more aspects of group life. Such descriptions are called to develop insights into group life and to understand and appreciate various forms and facets of culture. Ethnography studies the familiar making it strange or studies the strange making it familiar. The use of technology by the younger generation—high school and college age students—may seem taken for granted in the context where computers are widely available, yet focusing the scholarly gaze on this simultaneously mundane and spectacular activity allows challenging and questioning obvious characteristics of culturally and socially constructed technologies. [6]

In conventional ethnography (which does not account for computer-mediated communication), a researcher immerses herself in the community she wishes to study. She becomes familiar with the people and participates in routine activities in order to gain insight into the experiences of her subjects. During the interaction, she attempts to grasp the significance of the language and the actions occurring in the studied community (MAANEN, 1988). The existing examples of cyberethnography suggest the necessity of involvement in multifaceted social settings where the Internet (or other technology) is a part and

parcel of everyday life. Daniel MILLER and Don SLATER (2000, pp.21-22) argue that "ethnography means a long term involvement amongst people, through a variety of methods, such that any one aspect of their life can be properly contextualized in others." Their fieldwork in Trinidad includes not only textual analysis of webpages but also interviews with government officials, business owners, Internet providers, and ordinary users. They hang out in the Internet cafes, chat with people in addition to seeking for other formal and non-formal encounters with Trinidadians. [7]

Even though participant observation follows the canons of ethnography, it retains the qualities of realistic study. This is because the authors maintain conceptual separation of online and offline contexts. The Internet takes its origin in the culture of science, yet this frame has shifted towards market-driven social space where the Internet is disguised as a medium of communication and a medium of choice delivering personalized service. This positivist conception easily yields to research which seeks for predictive decisions (JONES, 1999). In actuality, being online and being offline are intersecting and interweaving experiences. The question is: How the research practices can transcend the experience of computer-medicated interaction without creating boundaries and ruptures? Discussing Internet research in cultural studies, Jonathan STERNE (1999) suggests changing the primary concern with the interpretation of texts to the *production of context for a text, event, or practice* under investigation. In this case, the research considers not what a given event means to its participants but how the meanings are possible and what the conditions making particular practices are (JONES, 1999, p.262). [8]

In response to this objective, we articulate the interactive methodology based on epistemologies of doing. This methodology suggests that subjects/objects produce selves—through typing, writing, image manipulation, creation of avatars, digital video and audio—and engage in practices of everyday life at these interfaces. Living at the intersections of online and offline underscores the significance and particularity of the context and pays specific attention to the social status of knower. Exploring the production of identity in MOOs (multi-user-domain object-oriented)—a multi-user, text-based synchronous and interactive virtual community/program, Jenny SUNDEN (2003) notes that a distance—both spatial/physical and between the mind/body—is created between the typist/programmer and subject typed into existence in encounters with digital interfaces such as computers. She argues:

> "This distance is on one level introduced in text-based online worlds through the act of typing, and further reinforced by the mediating computer technology itself. By actively having to type oneself into being, a certain gap in this construction is at the same time created. The mediation between different realms, the very creation of texts by the means of computers, makes the interspace that always exists between myself and the understanding of this self particularly clear. Following the idea of a subject that can never have a direct and unmediated access to herself, that the I writing and the I written about can never be seen as one, cyber subjects are always at least double" (p.4). [9]

The action of *producing oneself* in such an environment is enacted through typing; however, the particular participant's agency is produced both through the act of typing and the programming that results through her/his embodied negotiations of socio-cultural literacies, memories, histories, patterns and negotiations. [10]

We argue that the ethnographic praxis in technology-mediated environments includes both production and consumption of technological artifacts. This position implies that behavior and activities do not stem from the characteristics of this artifact but from the cultural and social conditions/contexts in which this artifact has been created and used. In these cases, a researcher becomes a user and enters the environment she studies in order to live, to work, and to do things in and with these spaces. This philosophy emphasizes doing technology and building technospatial environment. Living within technology allows not only learning the code but typing oneself into existence while collaborating and interacting with others. In our research and teaching, we thus focus on building encounters in online settings, studying the discourses that emerge at the intersection of online/offline, and engaging the offline context through which the online worlds are entered. Producing and consuming digital realities thus help establish contingency of expectations about technological capacities and human qualities. [11]

Such living/lived cyberethnography relates to auto and critical ethnographic engagements. First, the cyberethnographer becomes a part of the setting, living and providing the framework for the interpretation of experiences. She is included in the epistemological space of the practice under investigation. This implies becoming a part of the online community, while building and maintaining one's own networks. Therefore, this involvement invites a reflexive dimension of ethnography. Bud GOODALL (1991) explains that reflexivity corresponds to scholarly and personal reflection on the lived experience to reveal the connection between the writer and the subjects. Ethnographic reflexivity implies theorizing and analyzing how subjectivities of the researcher and the subjects get mutually constituted in the interaction. The participation in the environment under study leads to autoethnographic writing, which places emphasis on research process, culture, and self as well as exposing and connecting social and cultural aspects of personal experience. The first-person autoethnographic narratives breach the separation of researcher and subjects and establish intimacy with the reader as a co-participant of the dialogue. Stories often focus on a single case thus breaking with the concern for generalization across the cases and striving for generalizations within a case. Such texts emphasize the procedural nature of inquiry, and individualized, fragmented, chaotic, and disorganized qualities of reality (ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000). Stephen BANKS and Anna BANKS (2000) argue that autoethnography has a pedagogical value as it teaches lay and academic audiences about themselves, illustrates a new forms of scholarly writing, and explicates the mode of critical attitude and self-disclosure. Critical here refers to the process of questioning commonsense assumptions while scrutinizing otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain (THOMAS, 1993). Such ethnographies invoke a

call for action and use knowledge for social change. The objective is not only hermeneutic—understanding of cultural symbols of one group in terms of another thus supporting the status quo—but also emancipatory—challenging culture and pointing at implications of descriptions and constrains of discourse. [12]

Contemporary culture is technological because science and technology mark the pervasive and the predominant role in shaping modern societies (BIJKER, 2006). The existence-in-culture happens in a variety of practices that constitute everyday life. The notion of practices connects material actions, principles guiding the actions, discourses, as well as moments and places of acting and meaning making. For example, Michel FOUCAULT (1996, p.276) defines practices as "places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect." Pierre BORDIEU (1977, p.72) uses the term habitus to describe "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations." However, ordinary members of society are not "cultural dopes," who passively carry and obey rules, but are creative appropriators of technology," who actively make decisions (SANDYWELL, 2006, p.56). To study practices means to examine how "everyday life invents itself by poaching" (CERTEAU, 1984, p.xi) as "users make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt to it their own interests and their own rules" (p.xiv). [13]

Reflecting the complex character of technological culture, the cyberethnographic research practice is multidimensional and multimodal. It takes into account multiple contextual factors through epistemology of doing. Sally MUNT (2001) writes that habitus as the practice of everyday life is written in or performed by the body. On the one hand, the body re-enacts its placement and configuration—class, gender, and sexuality, etc; on the other hand, these practices shape how we move through the world as gendered, sexed, and classed subjects. Online production of self expresses the bodily physicality through the acts of knowledge and ignorance, conversation habits, recognizable movements within familiar sites, and memory encoding. Such engagement in self-production constructs knowledge of self, others, and the interactions with others through building objects, or, literally, doing. Thus, we dialogically produce our selves as well as engage our colleagues and students in becoming interfaces to focus on the users' experiences manifested in specific constructions of accounts, oral histories, interviews, journal, or blog entries. [14]

4. Race in Cyberspace

Cyber practices have strong implications for our understanding who we are, or of our identity. Whether we are using e-mail, chat, participating in online gaming, or surfing the web, we are constructing identity. Through typing, imaging, coding and posting ourselves into being we can create and recreate ourselves endlessly, liberated from our bodies and identity markers they carry. This popular mythology of the digital boom promising a placeless, raceless, bodiless future enabled by

technological progress may still proliferate among the users. Where there is mainly text-based and 3-D avatar-based (as in SecondLife) mode of communication there is an implication that participants have reflexivity and choice in their self-presentation thus they can leave the body behind. The prolific and diverse discussion of gender and race in cyberspace suggests that this is a too simplistic statement. Embodiment and disembodiment in relation to digitally mediated environments is complex and nuanced. Despite the seemingly binary opposition between online and offline due to the invisibility of aural and visual cues, after logging in users do not really shrug off a lifetime of experience and practice learned within the multiple socio-economic and cultural contexts that they inhabit. Neither invisibility nor mutability of online identity make it possible to escape real world identity completely (despite promised escapes to "secondlives"). Race matters in digitally mediated environments, because those who spend time online are already shaped by the ways race matters offline, and we cannot help but bring our own knowledge, experience, and values with us when we log on (KOLKO, NAKAMURA & RODMAN, 2000). Because the self exists in cyberspace as a result of purposeful choices, it is possible to trace those decisions back, to the person who chooses to represent herself in a particular way. [15]

Racialization in the technologically mediated global context is a complex and complicated issue as race intersects with class, gender, geography, caste, colonization, and globalization, and raced subjectivities get produced against specific contextual backgrounds incorporating local and global economic and social processes. "The ecology of racialization" (NELSON, 2002, p.4) is presented by Lisa NAKAMURA (2002) and other scholars. The cybertype framework refers to the ways the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism; a process which corresponds to the dynamics and economics of access and the means by which users are able to express themselves online together with ideologies they bring to cyberspace (p.3). Nakamura argues that information technologies offer identity prosthesis to redress the burdens of physical body such as age, gender, and race, yet they produce cybertypes that are remarkably similar to stereotypes. The process of cybertyping stabilizes the sense of white self and identity threatened by the radical fluidity and disconnect between the body and mind celebrated by the fiction writers. Nakamura also suggests using a term identity tourism to signify the images, identities, and personae that users adopt; these personae are often not their own and they forcefully contribute to stereotyped notions of gender and race. Assuming roles for entertainment purposes, identity tourists take their virtual experience as a kind of lived truth in other-gendered or other-raced body. Such performance of identity tourism exemplifies the consumption and commodification of racial and gender differences. [16]

In other instances of scholarship about privilege, absences and silences connected with racial positions are explored. David SILVER (2003) focuses on the ways in which community bulletin boards and websites "route around" race. He describes how decisions regarding the interface design can limit the level of participation and representation available to differently gendered, non-

heterosexual, and non-white users. The users of a Blacksburg electronic village (BEV) are connected to the town government and non-governmental institutions as well as local and national businesses to create a virtual town square and an online shopping mall. The BEV allots online space for communities revolving around Blacksburg art, sports, and religion, yet it routes around communities based on the more volatile issues of race, in addition to gender and sexuality. [17]

Race, like gender, sexuality, and other differentiators in cyberspace are made up of ongoing process of definition, performance, enactment, and identity creation. Cyberspace is not a place (ENTEEN, 2006) but a locus around which hypertext of texts, modes of social interaction, commercial interests, and other discursive and imaginative practices coalesce (KOLKO, NAKAMURA & RODMAN, 2000). To explore such practices, we analyze specific ethnographic encounters emerging in the research and pedagogical activities of the courses we teach, participate, and observe. These encounters illustrate and exemplify the qualitative research methods which help understand digitally mediated identities through building cyberselves and engaging social networking technology. The activities were designed to create encounters with the Other in computer-mediated contexts and to displace the Self in order to reflect on the positioning of self. Dislocation from one's comfortable position of privilege makes both researchers and subjects aware that particular technology is "always an articulated moment of interconnections among the range of social practices, discursive statement, ideological positions, social forces, and social groups within which the object moves" (SLACK, 1989, p.339). Specifically, race and privilege become visible depending on particular contexts and specificities working at the intersection of online and offline. [18]

5. Engaging Offline/Online Contexts

In this section of the article, we consider cases that embody and apply epistemologies of doing in cyberethnography. The cases come from the courses taught by one of the co-authors and authors' cyberethnographic engagements in online/offline communities. Relying on epistemology of doing in pedagogy and research, we "plunge" the students and ourselves into activities that engage them and us in offline/online contexts around doing technology. The interrelated course activities and projects seek to create nuanced and complex understanding. [19]

In one of the activities in a course on computer-mediated cultures offered in Spring 2005, undergraduate students worked in groups researching identities of Mexican-American teens at online/offline intersections through user interviews, textual analyses and linking/living online in their social networks. The Mexican-American teens were from low income neighborhoods of North West Ohio and had (a limited) access computers and the Internet in a community center after school. This group of teenagers is involved in social networking environment online, as an alternative to e-mail or instant messaging, to share content on friends' profiles and occasionally have fun. The assignment for the undergraduate course directed the students to examine how myspace.com and facebook.com play into the production of raced and classed subjectivities in online/offline

environments. To accomplish this objective, students in the undergraduate class also needed to understand how the two social network systems worked by creating profiles on them (if they did not already have one) and exploring the process of living and interacting in these spaces. [20]

The project design allowed multiple contingencies to interact: student researchers' location, larger techno-social phenomena of MySpace, preconceptions about Mexican-Americans, and social panics about MySpace. Because many of the students had FaceBook accounts, they seemed quite familiar with online networks. However, a few of the students expressed discomfort considering a possibility of starting MySpace account and ethnographically examining it in relation to the Mexican-American users. These students chose to concentrate on the textual analysis of the MySpace profiles. It appeared that MySpace and FaceBook carry the class markers drawing the divide between the two groups: University students preferred FaceBook, while their subjects chose MySpace. [21]

The students doing textual analyses of the MySpace profiles observed that these accounts contribute to the negative stereotypes of the Mexican-American community. The researchers saw this as contradicting the community center’s objective of eliminating such stereotypes. However, one of the students suggested on the discussion board that the children create a certain kind of identity in order to fit the community and do not consider the role of stereotypes. Another student continued with the idea that the teenagers do not understand that they perpetuate the existing notions of themselves but try to fit into a group of their peers. Thus far, playing out stereotypes was the most evident to the student researchers involved in the textual analysis. [22]

In addition to textual analyses, students engaged in online interactions with the Mexican-American teens while producing cyberselves in social networking sites by linking to them as friends and using multiple interactive features available on MySpace. Those students who chose not to participate in online interactions expressed their anxieties and discomfort about unhealthy social atmosphere of the sites where the teens prefer to hang out. However, those who were part of a FaceBook and also interacted on MySpace, made more careful and nuanced observations, pointing to the complexity of identities performed and linked (see examples discussed later in this paper). This suggests to us that those student researchers who were self-reflexive and also understood how to navigate the technical interface within a specific networking site were able to come to a more nuanced understanding of the users and their uses. These student-researchers tended to raise more contextually relevant and complex questions in class. Simultaneously, the lack of familiarity about how social networking systems work or avoiding involvement in specific technologies gives rise to some misreadings or partial interpretations. [23]

The visits to the community center, in-depth interviews with Mexican-American teenagers and staff members, and textual analysis of the teens' MySpace accounts were followed by a similar analysis of white appearing profiles on

MySpace. The closer identification with such users shifted the students' attention to the features available for identity construction. One of the students noted that the audiences and the users rely on prior knowledge and pre-conceived notions to make judgments about other users: what photos they post, what likes and dislikes they reveal, what activities they participate. Another student expands how she filters her perception of the identities she observed on MySpace:

> "To make a confession ... When I did a textual analysis for the white teens, I came across photographs of teens that appeared to be like me (looks, that is). However, once I opened up their page, they had rap music playing and all sorts of strange photos I wouldn't dare have on a page if I made one. So in a way two stereotypes were made by me. First, I assumed the girls photos I looked at were pretty much like me, but when I read past the picture, I made other judgments about their character that may or may not be true." (KT) [24]

The expectations about groups of people inform the reading of online identity, or the information one puts forth in the profile. Such group based, essentially stereotypical, approach to understanding people struck another student as odd. She says:

> "I originally thought all of the 'white' teens shared at least some things in common, but as I read their profile, I found that there so many subcultures within the 'white' cultures that that assumption is a false one. In fact, there are many African American or Latino people who have more things in common with white teens than other whites." (LM) [25]

She sees individuals connected at the affective and imaginary level. Even though these observations are overly optimistic and may still require some significant critical analysis from this student and her peers, she makes an inferential leap based on her bodily involvement in the online and offline praxis of identity building. [26]

John WARREN (2003, p.29) argues that "race as an identifier of difference is not *in* the body but rather made *through* the bodily acts." It implies that social meanings reside in the body and bodily movements, including rhetoric. So what are the "bodily acts" that the white female interacting on FaceBook draws from? While the ideas of disembodiment and multiple identities that surrounds much of the utopic discourses about cyberspace would suggest that LM and other FaceBook users have indeed left their bodies behind and are "beyond" race. However, through a close look at LM's response, we see that her bodily acts from everyday performative whiteness in fact constitute much of the ideology behind being connected in the social networks provided through FaceBook. Thus, LM makes her analysis of MySpace—where diverse socio-economic groups connect—from a whitened perspective. In particular, she seems to erase the differences existing along the racial and class lines, and based on her hidden privilege within this hierarchy, ends up reading and articulating sameness (Warren) in interests and profile design. The similarity comes from the common dwelling of the users on MySpace; this sharing of space, according to her, allows MySpace to bridge

the divide and create a "peaceful" co-existence while other differences cease to matter. [27]

As a contextual phenomenon, raced subjects are constituted in their geopolitical locations in the interlocking axes of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, colonialism, and transnationalism (SHOME, 2000). Rigorous contextualizing of racist discourses situates racism within specific moments; thus, "the effect of a particular racist discourse [can] be placed in the conditions surrounding the moment of its enunciation" (SOLOMOS & BACK, 2000, p.23). Such approach acknowledges both material and ideological elements in racial identities and emphasizes the nuances of racial formation in various sites. The geographic and class privilege and location assumed in the design of FaceBook, for instance, can be understood through one of the co-authors' own cyberethnographic experience. Thus Natalia RYBAS, one of the authors of this article, notes in her personal journal, as she cyberethnographically inhabits FaceBook:

> "Each FaceBook account included information about a user. Being cautious about what to reveal and what to conceal on this online profile, I initially avoided opening the information where I was born. Later I realized that I should be proud of the place where I grew up, and filled in one of the blanks 'basic information.' I wrote Taganrog for home town and Russia for home country. After updating the profile, the home town gets linked to a search; by clicking on it, I can get to people from the same place. So exploring possibilities of FaceBook, I wanted to see who else self-identifies as from my home country. To my surprise and disappointment, the search produces no result for my 'Home State: Russia.' Why state I ask? This word has a double meaning—a nation as a whole or part of the United State, yet the second meaning becomes more pronounced, especially if the good majority of users are in the United States. It seems that the framework of FaceBook is built on the assumption that the answer to the question about home town is in 'town, state' format by default. This site started as a college based social networking system, and ignoring the presence of international students and faculty cannot be just a mistake. The expectation that faces of the online network are just for the States minimizes and changes a certain element in the profile—my Otherness; it makes beyond classification, without a blank to be put in, invisible, and thus unable to be found by a search engine." [28]

This almost invisible detail plays into a subtle politics of location and space as the Internet is understood within the framework of a space (COOPER, GREEN, MURTAGH & HARPER, 2002; ENTEEN, 2006; MUNT, 2001). Such philosophy implies that space is active, operational and instrumental as it is productive and performative of knowledge and inscribes specific relations of power. The geopolitical reference points locate individuals and data within special coordinates thus code users into the structure of social hierarchy. [29]

Pointing at the performative nature of race implies that being white or black does not come with just or only the skin color or depends considerably on one's biological heritage. Robyn WEIGMAN (2003) states, it is not the same to have a certain skin and identify with white privilege.

> "[T]he myriad minute decisions that constitute the practices of the world are at very point informed by judgments about people's capacities and worth, judgments based on what they look like, where they come from, how they speak, even what they eat, that is racial judgments" (DYER, 2000, p.539). [30]

The meaning of these trivial, yet serious, differences is socially negotiated in performative acts that support relativity of race: It exists only in relation to other identities, only as a contrast. Thus, LM pays attention to "Latino and African Americans with very high education levels on MySpace and some whites with low education levels" as if these people fall out of the norm for MySpace networking. George YANCY (2004, p.7) writes, "Whiteness superiority thrives vis-à-vis black inferiority. Whiteness is parasitic upon blackness." This implies that whiteness must have a counterpart to project its power; and if the other seems exotic, the situation looks especially comfortable. If "an equal number of white people [are] reporting that they like rap music as African Americans" as LM observes, she overlooks the historical heritage and the cultural status of rap music. [31]

6. Conclusion

Cyberethnography based on the epistemology of doing responds to the debates regarding the problematics of studying online spaces raised by feminist postcolonial anthropologists and ethnographers. Two of these concerns are voiced by Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER (1993): first, questioning a possibility of general accounts of knowledge thus turning towards the contextualized processual embodied knowledge; second, considering a cluster of markings—including not only gender but also race, class, sexuality, culture, and age—as influencing the production of knowledge and forming cognitive authority. The cyberethnographic approach based on epistemology of doing emphasizes the doing of technology, building of cyberspatial environments, sustained interaction, and "being" online in order that the researcher may understand the everyday practices associated with the context. Typing and posting oneself into existence, the researchers learn the code, build communities, and collaborate with others. The process of meaning making is not available for textual analysis only; what happens online that produces text comes to the surface when one emerges in subjective experience of participating, building, and living the digitally mediated environments. Interpretation of texts and artifacts is necessary and make a part of cyberethnography, yet the ultimate goal is "richer understanding of the political character of cultural and social life, and this means examining the relationship among people, places, practices, and things" (STERNE, 1999, p.262). Living online and acting upon the opportunities suggested by technologies create relational links between the ethnographer and the subject(s). In this case, the spatio-temporal praxis shapes the researcher's subjectivity thus provides insight into similar processes in others. This dialogic performance of technospatial praxis (MUNT, 2001) produces cyberselves at the intersection of online and offline and allows for radical contextualization of the studied practices and informs the methodologies with which such practices can be studied. Consequently, we displace essentialist and realist arguments about the substance of digital experience and argue that identity cannot be removed from

socio-economic and cultural contexts of performativity, enactment and production. We call for process-oriented multi-modal cyberethnographic engagement. [32]

Finally, how do we go about researching in this framework? What is the process of producing one's self in relation to computer-mediated environments? The steps are very simple and straightforward as a researcher observes and describes the experience in great detail. For instance, suppose you wanted to understand the social networking practices of Mexican American teens in NW Ohio. You first find out how they engage in the practice of social networking using computers and the Internet in a general way, from talking to them and to others around them (parents, community leaders, siblings, etc.) while also observing the environment in which they use computers. Second, you observe how the technical infrastructure is made accessible to them and the physical, material conditions under which they access the Internet. You may make detailed notes or take pictures and videos depending on the human subject review board approval. The next step is to ask the teens to make notes and keep a journal for you and also to interview a few of them in-depth. Tape-record interviews when possible—but also have a research partner taking detailed notes and observations while you interview if possible. Last, you will begin to build theory from the basic narratives you have recorded by connecting them to existing frameworks in the discipline and elsewhere in order to articulate a framework for understanding the particular practices you observed. In addition, you begin to live in the networks that your interviewees are living in—with their permission of course. You will then be able to describe the social networking environment and experience as you see it as well—in detail. [33]

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