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# Complicity and Care: Tensions of Acting in Non-Interventional Ethnography

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**Abstract**

Using Susan Leigh Star's theory of multiple membership, we consider the various tensions encountered in non-interventional ethnographic methodologies, where the researcher must partition their various "selves" or modes of being (due to site-specific or academic pressures) in order to conduct research. We cite experiences from two case studies—an ongoing digital ethnography of anti-progressive communities on Reddit and an ongoing participant observation study of civic technology and data work in local government—as a means to reflect on these pressures and concomitant anxieties as well as acknowledge these themes in situ.

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Methodology, Intersectionality, Ethnography, Activism

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## **Introduction**

In the current US political landscape, many researchers (at least anecdotally) are conflicted or anxious about their roles and responsibilities. These anxieties encompass everything from environmental concerns, to social and political justice, to a general worry about marginalized populations who are becoming increasingly vulnerable due to aggressive executive orders and mobilized prejudices. How do these anxieties affect the embodied experience of research, particularly where one owns and partitions an activist "self" and academic "self"? We are interested in examining these tensions in relation to research sites where these selves are unable to be exercised simultaneously, as it would risk the ability to do research (i.e. the research site does not allow for such action) or one's research position (i.e. the confines of academia do not allow for such action).

In this paper, we consider the various tensions encountered in non-interventional methodologies where the researcher must partition their various "selves" or modes of being (due to site-specific or academic pressures) in order to conduct their research. We explore these themes using Susan Leigh Star's theory of multiple membership along with case studies from an ongoing digital ethnography of anti-progressive communities on Reddit and an ongoing participant observation study of civic technology and open data initiatives in local city government. We ask: what is lost and what is generated in this process of self-suspension? Using Star's work we examine our own practices to consider what violence may be endured by both the researcher, the researched, and marginalized populations at large when ideals of activism and

academia are not mutually constituted or mutually constitutive.

## **The Splitting of Multiple Selves**

In her 1991 chapter "Technology and the Phenomenology of Conventions: On Being Allergic to Onions," Susan Leigh Star discusses the complicity and concomitant violence (to oneself and others) involved in discarding or hiding parts of ourselves to fit within a dominant network [4]. Star states, "We are the ones who have done the invisible work of creating a unity of action in the face of a multiplicity of selves, as well as, and at the same time, the invisible work of lending unity to the face of the torturer or of the executive." Although there is a powerful hand that forces the enactment of these multiplicities, there is an aspect of collusion in not being fully "oneself," in not "refusing to discard any of our selves in an ontological sense" to the full extent one is able which must be acknowledged.

Star builds on Donna Haraway's conception of the cyborg, and while not directly cited, Star's concern about the splitting of oneself recalls W.E.B Dubois's 1903 conception of "double consciousness," where he explicates the inherent multifaceted-ness in owning a marginalized identity [1]. Star's theory of multiple selves becomes useful in the academic context, especially at this political juncture (which, while centered on the United States, will have repercussions the world over), in the way she theorized how remaining "multiple" both strengthens the dominant structures through invisible work (performed to "fit in" while maintaining and managing multiple selves), and the violence that's experienced both in the doing of this invisible work and by other (especially further)

marginalized populations who suffer at the hands of the oppressive standards located in the dominant network.

With this in mind, and particularly in the course of non-interventional ethnographic methodologies, we ask: where does one observe to understand a broader phenomena in service of social justice, and when should one set aside their methodological commitments to intervene or act? In “doing justice to” our study participants, out of a commitment to the integrity of our methodology and usefulness of our research, how far do we go to understand how study participants are putting a world together, at the risk of compromising our own ideologies?

### **Doubt in Digital Ethnography – Katherine Lo**

My research site is a collection of anti-progressive communities on Reddit, focusing in particular on the subreddits /r/KotakuInAction, /r/The\_Donald, and /r/conspiracy. I observe the often violent and oppressive ideological expressions of these communities in order to understand how their ideologies are shaped, shared, and enacted. Digital ethnography offers a distinctive opportunity to ‘physically’ occupy and witness worlds that would otherwise be inaccessible. As a feminist woman of color I am able to anonymously visit, observe, and participate in white supremacist and anti-feminist online forums, spaces where my body and identity would normally preclude or limit participation.

In these spaces and moments I am a vocal feminist activist in the same moments I am reading a comment in an alt-right subreddit with a sympathetic lens. Holding these multiple identities allows me to occupy community spaces that are ideologically antithetical to

each other while at the same time this methodological practice puts the ownership of these multiple identities more urgently in conflict. Thus, several questions arise from the frictions generated through my engagements with this field site.

My initial concern arose from practices of regularly reading the thoughts and plans of anti-progressive communities, namely the expression of bigotry and hate for advocates of social justice, the incitement of harassment of vulnerable people, and the reveling in the suffering of marginalized people. Through regular engagement with the subjects of my research, I found myself becoming inured to these expressions and accounts of bigotry and violence. How does the temporary suspension of horror and distress (either intentional, to make the research emotionally tolerable, or unintentional, through the desensitization) act upon my activist ideologies?

As an ethnographer, I found a partitioning of selves through orientation: In being accountable to my research subjects as a feminist researcher, and in pursuit of a rigorous ethnography and concomitant analysis useful for activism, I attempted to commit to adopting the subject position of the anti-progressive group members. In attempting to understand their experiences and worlds, I temporarily position myself in opposition to social justice and feminist values. How does my desire to be empathetic risk or compromise either my feminist activist values and commitments to marginalized or vulnerable people?

A direct tension between selves as activist and academic arises in confronting the ethics of researching hostile field sites, where activism and academia are not

mutually constituted. Tenets of ethical academic and feminist research practice include obtaining explicit consent and working collaboratively with your research subjects. However, such an engagement with anti-progressive communities on Reddit remains a relative impossibility, both in the pragmatics of gaining the cooperation of a group that is ideologically hostile and in the maintaining the safety of the researcher. In this tug-of-war between selves, I feel responsible for minimizing harm to and deception of my research subjects, yet complicit in propping up the dominant and explicitly oppressive network. The violence in wielding multiple selves surfaces most acutely here, in the balancing of experienced oppression and embodied empathy. These moments, replete with doubt and discomfort, force a choice: do we attempt to alleviate these feelings so that we can care for ourselves?

How do we grapple with our multiple selves that must be partitioned and may be directly at odds? My attempts to contend with these tensions—through connecting my activism more directly with this research, along with fostering community spaces for marginalized people—are partial and unwieldy, but offer further opportunities for reflection. One such opportunity manifested in the ability to counsel and protect victims of harassment, and advocate for better safety measures on platforms for vulnerable people. While such acts affirm the activist potential of my research, the research at the same time engenders a fatigue that impacts other activist engagements.

### **Tension in Method and Milieu – Leah Horgan**

In working with data scientists on an official city data team, I examine how local government departments

identify social concerns, and how they configure data objects and design processes as a means to address them. Ultimately, my work aims to identify the less salient processes that potentially encode prejudice and to inform ways to organize data projects to avoid “propagating injustices and reinforcing dominant interests” [2]. To gain access into this space, I participate in the capacity of a designer and help my team (department) with many design, outreach, and communication needs. Additionally, as there are many influencers and stakeholders circulating outside the official data office, I am conducting a multi-sited investigation into various stages, themes (e.g. homelessness, predictive policing, city services, infrastructure, and sustainability), and locations of these data, design, and civic tech efforts. In examining the forms and ethics of these spaces, I ask: How do cities make decisions and “solve problems” amid the “radical expansion in the volume, range, and granularity of the data being generated about people and places” [3]? Who is included in the decision-making, and how?

For me, there is a strain already present in partitioning my academic, observing self and the self that cares for and desires to be useful to the data team; this difficult duality is recognized by many practitioners of participant observation. In this particular milieu, however, such tensions become further exacerbated when my activist ideologies must remain undercover in order to engage as both a team member and as an academic. In one such tension-ridden example, I participated in communications plans surrounding the release and analysis of crime data against the backdrop of protesters gathered to speak out against a recent instance of police brutality, one where important

information regarding the victim's death was not released. What does it mean to sit atop of this official building and gaze upon a protest one would otherwise be part of, and how does this color one's participation and observation? How or should one introduce inner conflicts into a field site that otherwise cannot or does not address such themes?

Additionally, there are tensions found in the method itself. Principally, participant-observation is a mode of "living with and living like" study participants [6], with the aim to understand their experiences and their world-making as it occurs in the given field site. This method of ethnography above others "uses the self ... as the primary instrument of knowing," [5] leveraging the body to gain access to the benefits of total immersion to. However, there is less emphasis or understanding on how the study participants can "live with and like the researcher," or how they can use the researcher as a means of knowing outside of their own experiences. For instance, I was recently charged with design and communications tasks surrounding for a forthcoming political empowerment project by way of the data team. Here I suggested that the entire framing be changed (that they go with a more inclusive term than "female" for the project name), but was ultimately rejected on grounds of my suggestions not sounding "powerful" enough. What is the responsibility of the researcher to extend oneself as an instrument of learning or at least of provocation?

### **Conclusion**

We surface these experienced tensions to begin to contend with the frictions of owning an activist "self" while conducting non-interventional ethnography. We feel this *acknowledgement of, reflection on,* and even

*sitting with* of discomforts highlighted above are important components of our feminist methodology, and that such practices will be increasingly necessary in this politically volatile period. In doing so, we hope to move through and eventually past the anxieties embedded in this balancing act, and its tendency toward collusion, toward a mutually constituted practice. Through this meditation we ask: How do we take care of ourselves, our participants, our ideologies, and each other in the course of academic research?

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