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Abstract

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Comments

NOTE: At the time of publication, author Marwan Kraidy was affiliated with American University. Currently(March 2013), he is a faculty member at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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This article articulates media ethnography with international communication theory in the context of globalization. It explores the history and regional trajectories of media ethnography, as well as anthropology's epistemological and political issues of representation that have become relevant to media studies. The authors argue that rethinking the limits and potential of media ethnography to address cultural consumption also necessarily involves considering how ethnography can serve to engender a vision of international communication theory grounded in the practices of everyday life. This reformulation is crucial at a time when some media scholars celebrate difference via microassessments of postcolonial locales and the plurality of cultures without attempting to consider global structural concerns. In fact, the authors argue, if media ethnographies are rigorously developed, they can offer international communication theory the material to bridge the gap between meaning and structure without losing site of the complexity, context, and power imbalances inherent in processes of globalization.

Understanding how globalization is experienced locally has been a largely impalpable goal for international communication theory and research. This elusiveness can be partly explained by international communication's inability to effectively articulate its meta-theoretical narratives of development and imperialism with systematic empirical research on cross-national and cross-cultural media influence. Studies focusing on systemic macrostructures have uneasily cohabitated with research emphasizing atomistic microprocesses. In sharing the quarters we commonly refer to as the field of international communication, the aforementioned traditions of research have not engaged in a productive dialogue. Although obvious ideological and professional differences are to blame, it may very well be that no epistemological or conceptual connection was found as a conduit for dialogue. This is especially unfortunate at a time when globalization, both as a material reality and as an interdisciplinary research area, requires a dual focus on macro- and microprocesses and formations. In this article we argue that media ethnography provides a space where the material and symbolic, global and local dimensions of international communication can be explored in tandem. We therefore propose to articulate media ethnography with international communication, paving the way to what we hope will be a research agenda that would reinvigorate international communication scholarship.

In general terms, international communication as a field has been more concerned with empirical, descriptive, and ideological issues than with systematic theoretical development. The reverse, by and large, has characterized media ethnography. For much of the history of media reception studies, qualitative media audience researchers composed ethnographies that were often theoretically sophisticated, but empirically sparse. Stirred by Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding (1980) model, qualitative mass communication research borrowed ideas from literary criticism, reader-response theory, semiotics, and even psychoanalysis, to build highly advanced conceptual positions.[1] In spite of ethnography's place in this interpretive turn and its subsequent influence on audience research, theoretical development occurred at the expense of methodological evolution. Rather than demonstrating a commitment to immersion, long-term observation, or participation and mutual trust in the daily lives of participants, the reception literature instead relied on in-depth interviews, discussion groups, and fan letters, both solicited and unsolicited. This gap fostered a tradition of "ethnographic" inquiry in which rigorous participant observation and description were largely missing (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Nightingale, 1993) and were sometimes replaced by a mostly textual and rhetorical handling of ethnography.

This situation leaves us wondering: What caused this drift toward "quasi-ethnographic" research? Why have so many studies, clearly lacking the ethnographic credentials outlined above, been forged under the ethnographic rubric? There are several reasons behind the politics and practice of media

ethnography, explaining the division between the proclaimed implementation of ethnographic techniques and the concomitant thinness of field experience. The "political economy" of ethnographic scholarship is one. Extended fieldwork is costly, requiring significant institutional and time resources that tend to be concentrated in a select group of elite universities. Ironically, the study of media audiences, itself a democratic recognition of the importance of mass entertainment in the daily lives of working- and middle-class audiences, is constantly threatened of becoming the epistemological privilege of well-funded scholars at elite institutions.

There are other, more important factors, however, shaping the conduct of media ethnography that we address in detail in the remainder of this article. Media scholarship encountered the "posts"— poststructur-alism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism—before the messiness of fieldwork was acknowledged and addressed. As a result, a growing corpus of audience ethnographies has been shaped more by the critique of ethnography's association with colonialism and Western discourse and less by the surprise and productivity of the field encounter (Murphy, 1999a). Hence the trumping of epistemological issues by political concerns— a tension that has somewhat hobbled ethnography's induction into the broader tradition of qualitative inquiry in communication, at least as an empirically rigorous enterprise. As we make clear in the development of this article, we are not dismissing the inclusion of issues of power and inequality in ethnographic scholarship. In fact, ethnography has a central place in critical-cultural scholarship and shoulders a special burden when it comes to questions of inequality because it gazes on the practices of everyday life. Rather, we argue against letting these issues define ethnographic practice that makes the researcher's task little more than tapping oppressed voices or moments of tactical resistance and describing them. Instead, if questions of power are to be taken seriously, they need to be relocated at the heart of ethnographic practice and given the kind of close and systematic study that allows us to think concretely and creatively about how they work through and are shaped by cultural practice.

The very challenging nature of fieldwork on media reception is the second and more fundamental cause of the gap between the application of ethnographic techniques and the field experience. How does one "participate" in the somewhat "closed" contexts (bedroom, automobile, living room, headphones, etc.) of media consumption? In contrast to anthropology's historically less closed-in and more performative spaces, media technologies have created increasingly intimate, microcosmic, and virtual reception environments and practices. In many instances, this makes the notion of participant observation on media audiences extremely arduous and suggests a rethinking of what constitutes "doing fieldwork." What we are proposing therefore is that media ethnography be understood as a research process of forming communities and making conversations that underscore a systematic and long-term investment in form, purpose, and practice.

Beyond our methodological concerns, we believe that scrutinizing the forces that shape ethnographic inquiry in the discipline of communication entails reconsidering its potential to nourish and challenge theory. This article takes up that task specifically in the realm of international communication theory. By exploring the history and regional trajectories of media ethnography, as well as the epistemological and political issues of representation that have confronted anthropology and have become increasingly relevant to media studies, we attempt to map a path for global media ethnography as a means through which to engage and engender a vision of international communication theory grounded in the practices of everyday life. By the same token, our exploration leads us to insights about the role that both ethnographic practice and international communication theory can play in disentangling the intricate forces of globalization (Murphy & Kraidy, in press).

Fielding Ethnography in Media Reception

When considering how the two factors outlined above converged over the years and fostered a history of quasi-ethnographic media ethnographies, one must ask what makes a "good" media ethnography. More recent studies, such as those by Gillespie (1995), Mankekar (1999), and Tufte (2000), have shown signs of bridging the gap between description and fieldwork, concretely demonstrating that cultural immersion

and long-term participant observation have a central place in media ethnography. However, even in light of these fine examples of media ethnography, the unique research dilemmas of the study of media reception lead one to ask if media ethnography must be based on something akin to participant observation to be "ethnographic." Is a commitment to immersion, the building of trust, long-term observation, and the participation in the daily lives of research participants the only (or even best) road for researchers interested in studying the relation between media reception and cultural practice? The very diversity of modes of reception, reception contexts, uses of media content, and the performative and creative relationships that audiences develop suggest that media ethnography is a highly complex, multifaceted endeavor. Indeed, even the notion of research site has become much more fluid in recent years, as the mise-en-scène of "the field" is increasingly loaded with local adaptations of global cultural capital mediated via new "spaces," practices, and imagined communities of media reception. Here the social and the symbolic display the sort of deterritorialized formations and borderlessness that postmodernists have been talking about for years.

Engaging this complexity is pivotal for the elaboration of a broader ethnographic project committed to understanding how the phenomenon of globalization is played out locally in relation to particular traditions, systems of belief, and texts that have altered them. The point of analysis, therefore, should be the resulting hybrid cultures, that is, the stylistic features of local cultural life that emerge materially and discursively as "tonalities" (Geertz, 1983) of global culture. To seek out and understand such features of mass-mediated intercultural encounters (e.g., how cultural hybridity is constituted and what its ingredients are), researchers in the field of international communication must commit themselves to methods of inquiry that reposition the importance of context and everyday life in theory. Such an ambitious research agenda evokes the following questions: What patterns and practices link media consumption to a lived global culture? How do audiences negotiate global messages locally? How are the global/ideological elements of mediated messages fixed to and acquire class, regional, and/or community characteristics? What role does popular memory play globally in confronting or altering transnational power? How does the introduction of Western ideals about consumption shape local notions of resource control and management? A second set of questions about globality are in fact inherent in the practice of ethnographic knowledge: What/where is the research site? What investment does the ethnographer have with the research community? How do the subjects/participants of the research speak through the ethnographic text—what voice do they have?

Local Knowledge for Global Theory

With its largely localized focus, media ethnography offers much to the globally oriented and increasingly intercultural field of international communication. Just as ethnography faced a representational crisis in anthropology, which we explicate later in this article in relation to media ethnography, theories of international communication have been mired in debate around issues of power and influence. For much of its development, ideological power (involvement, control, participation, resistance, and negotiation) has been a central problematic and common thread in international communication theory. The cultural imperialism thesis is grounded in theories of dependency that emerged as a reaction to the paradigm of modernization that dominated the field since the early works of Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964), and Rogers (1969). In stark opposition to modernization theory's positivistic grounding, the notion of cultural imperialism was firmly rooted in critical political economy (Schiller, 1976, 1996). It questioned modernization theory and propelled issues of power and culture to the forefront of international communication research. However, the cultural imperialism thesis's almost singular focus on structural issues of ownership and distribution, in addition to the rise of political conservatism in the United States and Great Britain in the 1980s, caused its demise. In defense of the cultural imperialism thesis, Schiller (1991) insisted that we were "Not yet [in] the post-Imperialist Era." Other writers (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; García Canclini, 1990; Mattelart, 1994, 1998) have called for the recognition and exploration of mediated cross-cultural hybridities, whereas Mowlana (1994) advocated epistemological reorientation. This renewed ferment in international communication (see Kraidy, 2002b) was accompanied by scholarship

that shifted attention to the rising importance of "the local" as a space for media and cultural theory and research (Appadurai, 1996; Braman, 1996; Kraidy, 1999, in press). However, the stance that locality and its cultural manifestations (e.g., hybridity, reconversion) embody qualities of resistance rather than accommodation has received much more theoretical treatment than empirical engagement, and in postcolonial studies, the concept of hybridity itself is at the center of a heated debate centering around the corporate appropriation of concepts of ethnic and cultural difference (Kraidy, 2002a).

The elaboration of audience ethnography for international communication theory offers a heuristic opportunity to examine the local implications of globalization, which concern how the majority of the world population experiences globalization in its everyday life. After all, ethnography's main preoccupation has been the construction of what Geertz (1983) called *Local Knowledge*, even if that focus on the local was not always explicitly stated. Even much earlier, it was Geertz (1973) who reminded us that it is through

[a]lmost obsessively fine combed field study in confined contexts that the mega-concepts with which contemporary social science is afflicted (modernization, post-modernity, conflict, oppression, structure, meaning, etc.) can be given the kind of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively with them. (p. 23)

Geertz's assertion resonates with a renewed sense of urgency in today's heated debates on globalization because of the theoretical dilemmas of globalization as a phenomenon, process, and predicament given form and sustenance locally. That is, if international communication is to establish a more grounded theoretical orientation toward globalization, as in our opinion it should, then that theorizing needs to be informed by the material produced through fieldwork. This means that international communication ought to establish a more salient commitment to ethnographic inquiry—one both nourishing to and driven by theory.

Such a commitment is not a simple task and requires a certain investigative flexibility in the study of media audiences—one sensitive to a range of political and economic forces and distinct reception communities, in addition to subject positions tied to nationality, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation, while also paying homage to the epistemological critiques levied against the ethnographic enterprise in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, media ethnography faces a complex challenge as a central method of inquiry in international communication: how to develop more contextually grounded ethnographies while expanding the notion of the field, to address the unique dilemmas of localized research in relation to the global issues raised by transnational media processes. It is this very challenge that requires the ethnographer to address, ultimately, the interplay between ideology and experience (or, in more ethnographic terms, between history and biography) by seeking out what Colombian communication scholar Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993) has described as the echo of the hegemonic within popular culture.

This is an important objective in international communication scholarship because, although globalization may be discursively situated in terms of broad economic, political, and cultural trends, media consumption is one of the defining activities of the global-local nexus. It is perhaps the most immediate, consistent, and pervasive ways that "globality" is experienced. Prioritizing such an investigative agenda for international communication means taking seriously the global-local articulations that various media scholars (e.g., Kraidy, 1999, 2002b; Murphy, 2003; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1991; Thussu, 1998) have argued are at the heart of transnational media and cultural dynamics. Working out the details of this agenda demands wading through three areas of communication and media cultural studies that have experienced their own difficulties, namely (a) the crisis of representation in ethnographic inquiry; (b) the locational complexity that characterizes all social and cultural phenomena; and (c) the postcultural imperialism theoretical malaise in international communication. To understand the potential and limits of an ethnographic approach to international communication, the next section of this article draws attention to some trajectories, debates, and points of tension that have framed much of the media ethnography produced in the past 20 years.

Media Ethnography "Goes Global"

The "ethnographic turn" in the study of how social agents consume and make sense of media texts and technology has been taking shape for over 20 years. However, when speaking of media ethnography as a mode of inquiry that is somehow unique and/or worthwhile, we need to recognize, as Danish media scholar Kristen Drotner (1994, 1996) asserted, that interest in ethnographic approaches appeared roughly at the same time in a variety of geographical and disciplinary research environments. Drotner noted that this diversity is not always salient, however, because English-language publications tend to privilege an Anglo American perspective that restricts our understanding of broader sociopolitical contexts. For example, the work of writers such as Ien Ang (1985, 1996), Thomas Lindlof (1987), James Lull (1990), David Morley (1980, 1992), and Janice Radway (1984) has often dominated discussion about what constitutes the qualitative study of audiences and what ethnography means within the confines of mass communication research and media cultural studies. Even within this broader Anglo American trajectory, though, it is important to note different points of departure, different political and epistemological motivations for moving toward qualitative and ultimately ethnographic forms of inquiry. For example, the British qualitative tradition emerged from cultural studies' interrogation—via Marxist, structuralist, semiotics, and feminist theory—of the power of social texts. The adoption of ethnographic techniques was also driven by a desire to find alternatives to traditional social science research on media effects associated with the United States, for example, surveys, experimental research. In the seminal *The Nationwide Audience,* Morley (1980) was concerned with moving beyond inadequate models of audience reception (e.g., media effects, uses and gratifications) and toward an understanding of audiences that "differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on those meanings within the context of the rest of their situation and experience" (p. 11). As Morley (1996) noted, the 1980s "boom" in ethnographic audience research that followed was

the result of the critique of overly "structuralist" approaches, which had taken patterns of media consumption to be always-ready-determined effects of some more fundamental structure—whether the economic structure of the culture industries, the political structure of the capitalist state or the psychic structure of the human subject. (p. 15)

Opposition to the positivist paradigm, behavioral science, and quantitative methodology dominating the social sciences shaped early ethnographic work in the United States (Drotner, 1996; Moores, 1993). The notion of the active audience emerged as the centerpiece of much of this research, and various studies detailed the ritual and performative ways that people integrated and interacted with media technologies (e.g., Lindlof, 1987). Most of these studies focused on the notion of the audience, while some others, such as Lull (1990), pursued a research agenda on the family as a microenvironment within the larger audience. Although this approach shared the British school's rejection of audience passivity and acknowledged how individuals used media as resources, a sustained attempt to analyze ideology was absent. Subsequent theorizing about the relationship between texts and audiences, particularly by minority and feminist writers, began to lead U.S. media ethnography toward a more critical orientation. This writing wrestled with the politics of representation by theorizing issues related to social injustice based on race, class, and gender discrimination. The shift in emphasis was influenced heavily by literary criticism's preoccupation with the "text" as well as anthropology's own crisis over representation, but was charged politically through perspectives of writers who felt part of disempowered or marginalized segments of society (e.g., hooks, 1990; Trinh, 1989). The result has been an increased sensitivity around questions of textualization, often revolving around concerns about who is constructing ethnographies and in whose interest.

These epistemological and political trajectories are clearly reflective of a certain sociocultural ethos as well as, more generally, the relationship between (Western) academia and knowledge production. Although they have provided very important pathways into the enterprise of media ethnography, and ethnography itself seems to have achieved a "special appeal" in British and American cultural studies

(Marcus, 1998a), even recent Anglo America scholarship remains emphatic about the limitations and partialities of audience ethnographies. Thus, it implicitly disparages ethnographic practice (Juluri, 1998; Murphy, 1999a). For example, in the final chapter of *The Audience and Its Landscapes,* Hay (1996) asked, "(w)hich social practices and knowledge practices, through the apparatus and normative institutions that sustain and drive any kind of 'research,' become privileged (foregrounded) and accepted in representing a social structure—a sense of the way things are?" (p. 361). Such provocations are meant, of course, to stir the thick soup of qualitative audience research, rethink established protocols of inquiry and analysis (observation, artifacts, thick description, and imaging through film, video, or written text), and challenge the disciplinarity of media reception theory. As the placement of Hay's provocations as an afterword seems to suggest, however, these points are offered as conclusions about the slippery and problematic nature of reception studies, not as points of departure that reception researchers have been able to address methodologically. In our opinion, the cultural complexities of media reception (e.g., recognition of everyday life practices and patterns, reception context, mobility, tactics, and strategies of audiences) evoked by Hay and others as significant yet "phantom-like" concerns in audience research are precisely the empirical fruit that media ethnography brings to the table—points that we take up in detail in the following sections.

Other regional "schools" of media reception have had their own development, emerging largely outside of the British and U.S. trajectories but now appearing to be in a dialogue of sorts. For instance, Latin American scholars have a long and complex history of theoretical developments and qualitative research on communication and culture—an outgrowth of the region's own traditions of anthropology and sociology, as well as the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Rodríguez & Murphy, 1997). Moreover, the Indian, Spanish, and, especially, Scandinavian communication schools have created rich bodies of reception work in their own rights. Products of these "lesser known" trajectories are now more frequently available in English, and their influence is visible in the bibliographies of English-language scholars. For instance, the work of Latin American media theorists Jesús Martín-Barbero, Guillermo Orozco, Ondina Fachel Leal, Valerio Fuenzalida, Jorge González, Jesús Galindo, Sonia Muñoz, Leoncio Barrios, Antonio La Pastina, and Néstor García Canclini is now familiar to many European and U.S. researchers; and Scandinavian writers Kristen Drotner, Kim Schrøder, Klaus Jensen, and Thomas Tufte are quoted and/or occasionally publish in Spanish- and Portuguese-language communication publications.[2]

When considering the implications of this global theoretical and methodological cross-fertilization, it is difficult not to ask if there is a "global" media ethnography. This is precisely what Indian media ethnographer Vamsee Juluri (1998) pondered, but not without a sense of irony. He notes that in the past few years the work of seminal Western media ethnographers has come dressed in a sort of nostalgia, as if to suggest that the opportunity to do "real" audience work has somehow passed:

As someone entering the field in the mid 1990s, I wonder what it means that the high moment of audience studies seems to have passed, perhaps to travel, like old American sitcoms, to the rest of the world. This is not so much a statement about the intentions and fallacies of the many scholars who have worked in the field as a comment on the situatedness of the field itself in the geopolitics of history. (p. 86)

Paradoxically, Juluri's work, like many other non-Western media scholars (e.g., Kraidy, 1999; Leal, 1990; Mankekar, 1999; Parameswaran, 2001), represents a new sort of pluralism grounded in both its own situatedness and, to borrow from his own use of Stuart Hall, its "detour through the West."[3] Because of this growing global trend, it is becoming as important to locate from where and with whom authors are exchanging ideas as it is to ask how writers are constructing ethnographic texts. Both of these factors suggest much about the epistemological roots and geopolitical climates through which media ethnography and global media studies are taking shape. It is therefore crucial to examine what ontological and epistemological ghosts of ethnography's past reside in this "detour," because they certainly haunt recent ethnographic inquiry in communication and media cultural studies.

Detours: Inscribing Experience and the Collaborative Process

From its birth in early anthropology, the ethnographic approach has been utilized in the enterprise of taking events "from the field" and describing them in an effort to match the hard-data requirements of positivist science (Asad, 1994). However, the scientific notions of objectivism and interpretive processes of cultural translation ("the native's point of view") that colored these ethnographic accounts came under fire when a minor industry of "crisis" scholarship placed into question the epistemological moorings and political connections of anthropology (Clifford, 1983; Clifford & Marcus, 1988; Marcus & Fisher, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989). Specifically, critics assailed traditional ethnography's preoccupation with context and realism and the notion that field experience was little more than the collection of yet-to-be-processed data. These critics challenged the assumption that the reality of any given cultural community is readily available to interpretation as long as the ethnographer has the proper tools (e.g., good field notes, genealogies, maps, demographic data-gathering procedures, etc.) to engage in and dislodge its essence for the ethnographer's specific descriptive and analytical purposes.

Critics also accused traditional ethnography of embodying elitist and ethnocentric perspectives implicitly associated with colonial discourses. This charge focused mainly on how the "write-up" of the field experience simultaneously objectified (participants become objects for study as if museum pieces) and subjectified (subjugated via power relations) the "Other." Critics also questioned the way in which ethnography acted to reinscribe and maintain oppressive power relations through surveillance techniques of distance and control of description while the ethnographer remained invisible within his or her own text. Along these lines, media ethnography has experienced its own criticisms. Lotz (2000), for one, argued that what reception researchers typically do is a sort of hit-and-run version of participant observation, not ethnography, noting that much participant observation in communication research represents "the equivalent of Geertz stopping in to visit with the Balinese once a week—or even every day for a few hours—but returning home to sleep at the end of the day" (p. 450). Lotz argued that, although such empirical engagements may provide a deeper and more sensitive understanding of media use than other modes of inquiry (e.g., surveys or textual analysis), identifying them as ethnographic is problematic. Her point was that the body of ethnographic research under question does not suffer from data problems of a quantitative sort, but rather lacks consistency and the intersubjective knowledge and relationships between the observer and the observed, and thus diminishes the ethnographic distinction "deserved by research engaging in truly extended field study and obscures the potential of immersing oneself deeper into media use by groups and individuals" (p. 450).

"Being" an Ethnographer/"Doing" Ethnography

Various authors have sought ways to move away from the surveillance techniques and colonizing tendencies of traditional ethnographic practice, calling for the elaborations of ethnographies that foreground the role of the ethnographer (e.g., Fox, 1991). Such calls have done much to alter the established protocols regarding the textualization of ethnographic research, and many ethnographies are now increasingly marked by accounts of personal experience, that is, who "we are" and "where we are coming from" (Behar, 1996). This epistemological turn is meant, in large part, to monitor the marginalizing effect of ethnographic practice by inscribing oneself in lieu of inscribing the Other. As such, these renderings can often be quite intimate as they provide personalized accounts of interpersonal tensions, the limits of ethnographic authority, field dilemmas, and epiphanies—textual domains that have become the foundational ingredients of autoethnography, as well as providing shape and substance to other self-reflexive approaches (e.g., native ethnography, the observation of participation, dialogical process, feminist ethnography, sensuous ethnography; see, for example, Akindes, 1999; Kraidy, 1999; Murphy, 1999b, 2002; Parameswaran, 2001; Seiter, 2000).

What emerges from a reading of these different forays into textual self-reflexivity is a sense of the ethnographer as self-conscious dancer. The ethnographer has entered the dance floor to dance with the others, but who the others are to the ethnographer shapes the ethnographer's way of moving and interacting, indeed, of the ethnographer's own sense of self and community. Who is under surveillance,

who is being observed, who is at "the center," who "knows his or her place," and who is forgiven for not knowing his or her place, who is "authentically" performing and who is merely imitating, and who has the freedom and/or capital to fully and seamlessly embrace daily life as his or her own domain? The implications of this social and sensual dynamic—what many have called a politics of location—and the relationships that bind it are quite profound in terms of how the ethnographer textualizes his/her field experiences and interprets culture. The answer to the above queries varies, of course, for each ethnographer, depending in large part whether he or she constitutes that experience as a process of collaboration (dialogical ethnography), of "returning" (native ethnography), of political engagement (critical or feminist ethnography), of personal reflection and rites of passage (autoethnography), and so forth. The point here is not to ferret out the possible ethnographic typologies of particular modes of self-reflexivity, but rather to draw attention to the fact that "being an ethnographer" or "doing ethnography" carries with it the burden of making (textualizing) the ethnographic encounter as salient and transparent as possible. In short, self-reflexivity emerges in various textual manifestations as a means to speak to the notion that you cannot separate the method and organization of knowledge from the knowledge itself—a point of epistemological and political tension that has haunted ethnography perhaps more than any other method of empirical inquiry.

Voices From the Field & Ethnographic Collaboration

A related site of ethnographic struggle, and one that is in many ways more important and challenging to the form and practice of ethnographic description, is that of the place of the voices of research participants. To address this concern, authors have borrowed Russian Formalist notions such as polyvocality and dialogical knowledge from Mikhail Bakhtin to argue for the construction of multivocal ethnographies (Conquergood, 1991; Quantz & O'Connor, 1988) and examine the limits of ethnographic collaboration (Hüwelmeier, 2000; Shokeid, 1997). In this context writers attempt to draw on a variety of individual opinions to recognize the multiple dimensions of cultural life. At their best, multivocal texts draw on disparate voices to restore the importance of unique individuals and resistance to social order while maintaining an understanding of how utterances are historically and ideologically located. Multivocal texts, however, can run the risk of appearing forced and sterile, positioning the Other as more comfortable and proactive in the ethnographic text then he or she might have actually been during the ethnographic encounter (Marcus, 1986). Rhetorical devices such as "co-researchers" and "cultural interlocutors" have been applied to soften disparities between voice, text, ethnographer, and power, but these labels may not necessarily function to make ethnographic descriptions any "thicker." Rather they may serve only to help fashion descriptions that appear more communal, open, and empowering than, say, "informant" or "subject." Moreover, they can be abused as the incorporation of the Other as an active speaker in an ethnographic text often erases rather than challenges relations of power (Grossberg, 1989), making one wonder if the elaboration of polyvocal texts actually democratizes ethnographies or if multivocality merely camouflages the authoritative voice of the writer.

Consequently, ethnographers must consider the important dynamic between themselves and their informants. These relationships often mark the most intimate dimension of ethnography and can be a combination of the most fruitful and frustrating aspects of long-term fieldwork because, with the passing of time, sincere friendships can develop, expectations change, and the identity of the ethnographer as well as informants can transform and alter who and what they represent to one another. The evolving relationship between ethnographer and informant is a process framed by the boundaries of race, class, ethnicity, and gender that shape meaning and define culture. Also important are the ways that relationships are formed in reference to hierarchical hegemonic structures such as nationhood, regionality, or, in the case of native ethnographers, access to cultural capital ("foreign" education, travel, material goods, etc.). That is, not only do relationships unfold in relation to the researcher's perception of informant, but also vis-à-vis the participant's perception of the ethnographer (Akindes, 1999; Kraidy, 1999; Murphy, 1999b).

Acknowledging such dynamics, asserts Weiss (1993), "implies that Orientalism is not simply a product of the Logos of the West." Rather, Weiss continues, "There is objectification on both sides, which

is part of the process of understanding begun by defining ourselves first through the opposition of 'the other'" (p. 187). This negotiation and definition of self-through-Other is one of the main reasons that a sustained and intimate commitment to the community under study is important for media ethnography. It is through this process of self-destabilization that a sort of productive discomfort emerges—a "place" within the ethnographic encounter in which dialectically produced configurations of subjectivity give shape to and reveal ethnographic knowledge. Some media ethnographers (Akindes, 1999; Gillespie, 1995; Kraidy, 1999; Mankekar, 1999; Murphy, 1999b, in press; Parameswaran, 2001) have provided contingent, historically and culturally reflexive accounts of how this dynamic defined their research and the data it produced. What each of these studies shows is that "field research is *impossible without the active cooperation* of the people and communities under study" (Sandstrom, 1995, p. 172, emphasis added). However, as Nightingale (1996) pointedly argued in her critique of active audience research, the ethnographer's commitment to "cultural translation," that is, the heart of interpretation in any intercultural process, remains essential. In this sense, it is clear that participants not only can, but also do provide direction for the research and negotiate a constitutive voice in the production of ethnographic knowledge. It remains, however, the delicate and inescapable task of the ethnographer to translate that voice.

Field Risks and Hazardous Initiatives
The field, asserts Clifford (1992), is a "set of discursive practices" (p. 99). To recognize this discursivity is not to abandon the notion of the field site, but rather to acknowledge how temporal forces, historical relations, and humanistic study are enmeshed and negotiated through (not "in") culture. So, whereas the positionality of voices, relationships, friendships, and experiences might give the impression that media ethnography, in the name of locating globalization in the local, must fix itself to a coherent internal understanding of local culture, to do so is to restrict culture as if housed in a specific place. As Geertz (1973) asserted many years ago, we do not study research sites, we study *in* the sites. Said another way, the situatedness of the local is not a site, place, or space to merely pin down and capture, but rather a point of reference through which to engage the emergent dimensions of globalization. Thus, to understand the field as a discursive set of practices is to focus on how subjects (and subjectivity) are located. Such an emphasis, to borrow from Clifford's (1992) metaphor of "traveling cultures," stresses the cultural range of external and internal relations, interferences, constructed and disputed historicities, and the "forces that pass powerfully through—television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies" (p. 103).

For the purposes of media ethnography, this construction of the field is key, as it suggests something about how fieldwork needs to be in constant dialogue with how biography relates to history, and how the performative, ritualized, distinct, and plural manifestations of local life relate to hegemonic culture. This global interrogation through the lens of the local requires that we not, as Marcus (1998b) cautions,

succumb to relying on "canned" visions of what the world historical system is like (e.g., relying too heavily on Marxist views of capitalism), rather than taking the appropriately ethnographic view that macro system terms of analysis should be radically rethought from the ground up. (pp. 39–40)

Taking the microknowledge about places, spaces, rituals, and performance derived from ethnographic inquiry and articulating it in a way that nurtures, sustains, and at the same time challenges macrolevel theoretical frameworks of media, globalization, and culture also demands that we "risk" making some broader claims about the relationship between ideology and experience. Livingstone (1998, pp. 202–203) noted that this chore has been consistently refused by cultural and audience studies via the claim that the construction of generalizations about audiences imposes artificial categories on diverse, contingent, and elusive practices. However, the point remains that, while media theorists working through ethnography as a means to "make things out" (to echo Geertz, 1973) may hesitate in taking the (hazardous) initiative of making such generalizations, others—particularly those working in the global commercial sector—will express no such trepidation. Moreover, if media ethnographers have a political commitment to a critical ethnography, one that is concerned with how power is taking shape and

transforming people's lives on a global scale, then they must overcome their queasiness with the possibility of making generalizations and of objectifying, commodifying, or inscribing the Other. Indeed, it is necessary, as Fine (1998) has argued, to "barter privilege for justice" in an effort to "represent stories told by subjugated Others, stories that would otherwise be discarded" (p. 150).

The Ethnographic Contribution

It is with some irony, perhaps, that it is in precisely those areas that have been so epistemologically and politically hobbling to anthropology and other areas of humanistic inquiry (Moore, 1994)—the colonial encounter, imperial relationships, the textualization of experience, social and cultural description—that ethnography finds its potential to reinvigorate international communication theory. For this potential to be realized, though, the objective of intervention should be to articulate the relationship between globality and locality in dialogue with the politics and poetics of fieldwork. In other words, the ethnographer interested in engaging international communication scholarship (and vice versa) should not be fearful of cultural translation, that is, rejecting "the Occident," any more than he or she should be paralyzed by "Orientalism." Instead, researchers should take up the ethnographic detours of subjectivity, collaboration, location, and the field as sites of meaningful negotiation for a richer and more contingent sense of globality. Thus, the very power inequities and the transformative dynamic of cross-cultural exchange that define ethnographic inquiry become the conduit through which media, cultural practice, and the tonalities of globalization are engaged empirically by international communication scholars.

For international communication as a field, the rendering of the multiple mediations of cultural interactions is what ethnography brings to the table via the questions it asks, the procedures it uses to answer them, and the stories it ultimately tells. It is precisely through this multiplicity, this negotiated sense of how media audiences in various contexts engage or bear the transformative power of globalization through the symbolic work of local cultural practice, that media ethnography is positioned to address some of the dichotomies that have long shaped Western thought. These dichotomies include materialistic-idealist opposition (culture as behavior or ideas), individual autonomy versus the matrix of the superorganic, hegemonic versus popular culture, and so forth—and they have reemerged, albeit under new guises, in debates over macro- and microcultural processes of globalization. Ethnography's focus on the local, therefore, should not be grounded in ontological opposition to processes of globalization. Rather, the commitment to the local that is at the heart of ethnographic work should be directed at fleshing out, giving concrete manifestations to the large-scale forces of globalization. Interestingly, ethnography's contribution to such an investigative agenda could help, in the words of anthropologist Paul Willis (2000), move away from the "dominant individualistic view" (p. 4) of cultural negotiation by reengaging the notion that cultural creativity is usually collective and socially originated, and that meaning making is intrinsically framed, enabled, and constrained by powerful external structural determinants.

In closing, an ethnographic approach to international communication theory, although laden with necessary detours and hazardous initiatives, is a heuristic trail toward a better understanding of the dynamics between global forces and local specificities. Ethnographic inquiry, with its basis in local practices and the performative features of culture, offers both an epistemological opportunity and the empirical material to bridge the gap between meaning and structure without losing sight of the complexity, context, and power imbalances inherent in cultural consumption. In fact, this complexity and these imbalances are central to ethnography's purpose and form as they are ethnographically registerable. We hope that this trail will be explored by more of our colleagues, especially in a time when some scholars, intentionally or unwittingly, celebrate difference via microassessments of postcolonial locales and the plurality of cultures without placing them in dialogue with some of the more worrisome systemic aspects of globalization.

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Notes:

[1] For useful overviews, see Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), Moores (1993), Morley (1992), and Nightingale (1996).

[2] For selected readings in English, see Barrios (1988), García Canclini (1992, 1993), Gonzalez (1992, 1997), Leal (1990), La Pastina (2001), Martín-Barbero (2000, 2002), and Orozco (1995).

[3] The "detour" that scholars from the developing world are often required to take has been recognized by many scholars. See Keyan G. Tomaselli's (2001) account of his interactions with Western academia for a more recent and very telling version of the center-periphery imbalance.

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