Subjects of Desire: Academic Armor, Intimate Ethnography, and the Production of Critical Knowledge

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Although critiques of objectivity have been vast, and experimental, postmodern approaches have been important and inspiring, the author argues that the pursuit of objectivity per se is not the biggest roadblock to producing critical knowledge. Rather, problems of objectivity are rooted in the larger issue of emotional detachment, *which is facilitated by* academic armor. *Emotional detachment is implicit in the standard scientific method, but such detachment can also be found in some postmodern approaches. In both cases, the academic's expert jurisdiction is preserved. In contrast, emotionally engaged, subjective experiences ignite one's work with passion and make one more invested in institutionalizing the truth of one's informants. Yet, emotionally engaged reflections alone are not enough to sustain an effective cultural and institutional critique. For this, one needs comparisons that can be observed and verified on interpersonal, organizational, and structural levels.*

I've been checking out the woman for 2 days: her shaved temples dancing with ornate tattoos, long black tresses sprouting from the remainder of her scalp. In her ears, silver hoops are everywhere, leaving only small glimpses of cartilage. Her skin is olive, draped in flowing black garments. Her sharp eyes, nose, cheeks, and chin pierce the surrounding atmosphere. She is a creature. Suddenly, powerfully, I feel her steely eyes turn, gaze, and hold on me. I slow my gait, stop, smile, and wait. "Enjoying yourself?" Her low, slow voice targets me. She is alone, standing in a hallway, although she might also be perched on a throne. I answer her as a respectful subject, with a gushing compliment: "Yes, very much so . . . I just have to tell you . . . you're very beautiful. I like your look. Where are you from?" She is from Toronto, her name is Mis-

tress Patricia Marsh, and she dominates people for a living. Earlier that day, she had been a conference panelist in a session entitled "The Dominatrix as Sex Worker." This biographical information melds with her visual impact, creating in me even greater awe. (Later, I also find out that she owns "one of the best equipped houses of domination in the United States and Europe" [Bell, 1995, p. 116].) Eventually, she questions me in return: "And *you*. What do *you* do?" I pause, anticipating scorn. "Um . . . actually . . . I'm a sociologist." She slowly scans my 6′2″ frame, which sports a black, form-fitting, ankle-touching skirt. She smirks, shakes her head slightly, locks her eyes with mine, and croons, "Honey . . . you're in the *wrong* line of business."

This interaction flattered me, flustered me, and continues to resonate in me.[1] Until relatively recently, such fieldwork moments may have simply been relegated as irrelevant to the knowledge production process and reported only in personal, rather than professional, journals. However, with the institutionalization of critical, feminist, and postmodern thought, academics have increasingly recognized that the flavor and scope of all research findings are influenced by researchers' personal experiences as well as their interpersonal or structural positions. Although it would have been quite risqué 20 or even 10 years ago to integrate the above scenario into an official report, today, it is standard practice for ethnographers to include such personal statements and anecdotes as well as to expose their personal stakes in the matter.

This intellectual movement toward embracing the subjective foundations of knowledge and challenging the dualistic subjective-objective paradigm has resulted in a full frontal attack on the principle of objective truth. Critics of the objective approach have aptly demonstrated that facts are never truly objective, because facts are artifacts created by humans, who are social, sexual, and political creatures. Furthermore, claims of expert objectivity can serve to cloak colonialist, exploitative relationships between experts and participants. Thus, some critics have called for an end to the pursuit of objectivity in favor of interpretive approaches that employ principles of multivocality and researcher reflexivity, sometimes using personal narratives and/or "reading" data as symbolic "text" rather than raw evidence. Although these critiques and their accompanying methodological experiments have been an important and inspiring endeavor, in this article, I argue for reintegrating the concept of objectivity into ethnography and critical analysis. I argue that employing subjective, reflexive, and interpretive research techniques does not require the complete abandonment of objectivity, which results in a lost opportunity for creating politically effective knowledge. I argue that the pursuit of objectivity per se is not the biggest roadblock to producing critical knowledge. Rather, problems of objectivity are rooted in the larger issue of *emotional detachment*, which is facilitated by what I call *academic armor*. Emotional detachment is implicit in the standard scientific method, but such detachment can also be found in postmodern approaches. In the pages that follow, I first discuss the problem of objectivity, particularly in the context of

studying sexuality. I then explain the concept of academic armor, the mechanisms through which it is employed, and its effects on researchers, participants, and the knowledge product. Finally, I outline how explicit subjectivity can actually *strengthen* rather than *invalidate* an objective stance. This in turn can enable researchers to produce knowledge that is both self-reflexive and able to provide critical, structural analysis.

SEXUALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

The study of sex work is a politically and emotionally tricky endeavor, and for those anxious about maintaining professional objectivity in academic research, sex work (and sexuality in general) is a particularly troublesome topic. With sex, as with food, everyone has preferences and distastes, favorite settings, and etiquette standards. Where these preferences and standards are supposed to "go" when doing research is unclear, but critics of the objective approach have been plentiful in the past few decades. In the humanities and anthropology, their critiques have been placed at center stage under the rubric of postmodernism: a tradition that examines the politics of language and truth or "discourse" (Foucault, 1972). Out of this tradition, a "crisis of representation" was born (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), leading to a variety of experimental research methodologies that subvert the boundaries between fact and fiction and between objectivity and subjectivity (Denzin, 1997; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). In sociology (the discipline in which I have been trained), postmodern methodologies have been less welcome, yet the idea that truth is political is not new. From the Marxist-inspired critical theorists to Howard Becker (1960), Dorothy Smith (1988), and countless others, many sociologists have long argued that personal bias is found in all research and that rather than composing a problem of tainted objectivity, this bias is an unavoidable result of researchers' social positions. For these sociologists, as for critics in the humanities and anthropology, the problem at hand is not that researchers have preferences but that researchers routinely "closet" their preferences behind a wall of objectivity. One way out of this closet is to admit one's loyalties and social stakes, including one's funding sources and politics, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

Although such discussions have exposed science as a social process and improved the honesty of social science research, I have concerns regarding two sides of this broad intellectual movement. On one side is the pressure to maintain or at least mimic standard scientific models; on the other side is the pressure to sever any ties to science, empiricism, and objectivism. For instance, on the "science" side, many researchers who "own up" to their positions typically do so by relying on static, abstract identifiers such as "White, lesbian, middle-class, female academic." Such identifiers enable readers to

imagine authors' structural positions but also keep researchers' interactive dynamics with participants a mystery. In contrast, on the postmodern side, one sometimes finds ethnographic work that privileges the personal but is relatively devoid of structural or comparative context. In other words, in some cases, ethnographic research has not gone far enough to identify the personal; in others, it has gone so far that the final product becomes lost in an apolitical vortex.

For the bulk of this article, I focus on the first of these criticisms: that researchers fall short of both their abilities and responsibilities to describe their personal circumstances. However, after critiquing the objectivist approach to social science research, I also address the subjective side of the problem. In both cases, I argue that emotional detachment and adherence to one particular methodology stymie the development of critical knowledge.

SCIENTIFIC SEXUALITY

When researchers speak in static demographic terms, it is not because they believe that these terms accurately describe the complexity of their lives. Rather, these are convenient and academically acceptable code words for condensing (and perhaps shielding knowledge of) a variety of more interesting interactional dynamics, some of which may threaten the their senses of control. The lack of intimate biographical detail is perhaps most absent around issues of researchers' sexuality. Many would say that this is with good reason, arguing that researchers' sexual preferences should have no impact on their academic work and that any discussion of sexuality from a subjective viewpoint skirts too many dangerous boundaries of voyeurism, self-absorption, and anti-intellectualism. Yet, the idea that sexuality should be separate from research is increasingly being questioned and subverted (Chapkis, 1997; Kulick & Willson, 1995; Lewin & Leap, 1992; Ronai, 1992, 1998).[2] Furthermore, just as many scholars are reconceptualizing the boundaries of class, gender, and race as fluid, so too has this process begun in the sociological study of sex. That is, sexuality is also beginning to be seen as something that only comes alive within interactions (van Leuven, 1998).

But despite these recent intellectual developments, the most legitimized sociological approach is not just to code one's attentions and affections into neat demographic containers but to banish them altogether from professional scrutiny. The more these tastes are put out of intellectual reach, the classic story goes, the freer and more qualified sociologists are to become experts on any social topic. Only when researchers exorcise their passions can they "find (equally) rewarding the company of priests or prostitutes" (Berger, 1963/1996, p. 6). This formula for good sociology raises for me the following questions: What happens if and when researchers become emotionally "hooked" by their informants, if only for a moment? How do researchers'

emotional engagements affect the kind of knowledge that is created?[3] What happens to sociology (or any other discipline) when informants have emotional or interactional power over researchers?

All of these questions may produce uncomfortable answers, including that researchers' expert credentials may no longer ensure interactional power. Rather than maintaining a socially distant stance that is both powerful and above scrutiny, emotionally engaged researchers may find themselves in the ironic situation of having to "come out" as academics. In a sense, coming out as an emotionally vulnerable academic and coming out as a sexual deviant are similar processes because both entail moving from a comfortable place with plenty of insider perks to a place that is rockier but more true to one's heart. As an academic, one comes from a place of academic privilege, and as with other kinds of privilege, this position is safe if one "passes" as an insider, refrains from harsh institutional critique, and follows the rules. Part of this insider safety is fortified by protective mechanisms, or academic armor, which shield academics from jurisdictional threats from outsiders.

ACADEMIC ARMOR: PROTECTION AGAINST JURISDICTIONAL THREATS

I use the term *academic armor* to describe the physical and psychological means through with professional academics protect their expert positions or jurisdictions. I divide these mechanisms into three categories: linguistic, physical, and ideological.

Linguistic armor is the obscure language or "academese"[4] often used by academics. This language and its dialects can enable one to envision, categorize, and explain old things in interesting, new ways. However, this language also often intimidates outsiders (as well as other academics) rather than informing them and separates rather than connects researchers and informants. This distancing effect may be more than just an unfortunate, inevitable fact of professional life: It may also be part of the *point*. As Becker (1986) argued, professionally minded academics consciously replace common, direct words with words that are more obscure and "classy" as a way to distinguish themselves as specialists:

> The arcane vocabulary and syntax of stereotypical academic prose clearly distinguish lay people from professional intellectuals, just as the ability of professional ballet dancers to stand on their toes distinguishes them from ordinary folks. Learning to write like an academic moves students toward membership in that elite. (p. 30)

Physical armor (or the professional costume) helps people obscure and shield their bodies, project images of authority, and signal that they are more loyal to academia than to realms of the heart (as signified by clothing with eth-

nic, religious, erotic, or political significance). As Joanna Frueh (1996) put it, the "academic's costume, like many professionals' costumes, is a protective covering that armors a lecturer in the authority and power appropriate to her profession" (p. 23). This point became clear to me in one of my first teaching experiences. I was lecturing on Goffman's (1959) presentation of self, and a student asked what image I was trying to project with the new suit I was wearing. After recovering from the unexpected scrutiny, I said that I was "trying to look like an authority." I then changed the subject. As a fairly young, part-time, untenured, female instructor, "professional" costumes helped me compensate for other power and prestige differences and (I hoped) signaled that I really did belong in the circle of authority.

Indeed, sometimes, those who pay the greatest attention to their professional costumes are those who must try harder to belong, such as female, non-White, and working-class academics, who, unlike their White, male, and upper-class colleagues, cannot assume that they are entitled to respect. Furthermore, the ritualistic donning of the authority's costume can be exhilarating for those fighting for inclusion into academic circles. Yet, the flip side of this inclusion is exclusivity from others, particularly in the field, symbolically distancing those who study life from those who just live it.

Finally, *ideological armor* is a shield that enables one to have legitimate authority over specific social turf as well as the ability to command respect. When we as researchers are in the field, unprotected by physical institutions and rubbing up against our informants, ideological boundaries are perhaps the most important protection of all. Wendy McElroy (1995) provided such an example: While conducting research for her book on the pornography industry, McElroy was confronted by a sex worker on an intellectual point. The following is her reflective account:

> I felt threatened. I felt bested. I realized that my defense against being sexually intimidated by these women was a belief in my intellectual superiority. My trip to [this pornography convention] was the political equivalent of missionary work in deepest Africa, where I had found a native who spoke English with an Oxford accent. (p. 27)

This scene, with its breach of norms (the informant confronting the expert), highlights and makes explicit an otherwise implicit understanding about social hierarchy: The expert always knows best. Academics and other experts have clearly marked their turf as the intellectual, the detached, the objective, and hence, because of the cultural privileging of these qualities, the superior realm.

Taken as a whole, the dynamic of academic armor is not unlike the dynamic of slavery in the American South, where plantation owners created elaborate etiquette rules to help manage their discomfort with living among slaves, a physical closeness that threatened dreams of racial superiority (e.g., see Patterson, 1982). Each time these etiquette rules were enacted, Africans

and Europeans reminded themselves of and perpetuated a racist hierarchy. This system, constructed and enforced by Europeans, was explicitly meant to protect Europeans, not Africans. How then are these three symbols of professional and academic respectability—speech, dress, and etiquette—similar to the cultural rules of the antebellum South? If etiquette is a system of rules protecting a specific cultural understanding, what is the foundation of academic etiquette, and whom is it protecting?

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ACADEMIC ETIQUETTE AND ARMOR: OBJECTIVITY AND EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT

According to classic sociologists, objectivity is a crucial component of sociology; it distinguishes sociology as a *science* and a *discipline* from a *practice* such as social work. The renowned American sociologist Peter Berger (1963/1996) explained that "the sociologist tries to be objective, to control his personal preferences, and prejudices, to perceive clearly rather than normatively" (p. 5). This idea that mental clarity comes through objectivity is a common one, and it has validity if it means that one should be aware of one's ideological biases. However, the objective approach is itself an ideology with its own set of guiding rules. And what may be at the core of this objective ideology is the rule of *emotional detachment*.

Emotional detachment keeps one from "going native," a danger that virgin ethnographers are routinely warned against. Sometimes, "the natives" may be irritated by researchers' emotional detachment, but rather than seeing irritation as an indicator that they are not "getting it," researchers may instead be advised to stay strong and detached. As one sociologist, referring to the study of religion, explained,

> It is sometimes objected by religious people that properly to understand a religion one must belong to it . . . [But] this objection to the sociological study of religion is [merely] an objection to the detached and objective approach of any academic discipline. (Wilson, 1996, p. 340)

Thus, researchers need not worry about their informants viewing them as too detached; in fact, such a stance can help social scientists distinguish themselves as experts. Furthermore, because an objective, emotionally detached approach justifies academic authority, this also sets up a dynamic whereby informants (with their lack of emotional detachment) will always lose arguments with experts.

According to Bronislaw Malinowski (1955/1989)—the (in)famous anthropologist known first for his provocative work on "native" sexuality, magic, and crime, and later for his shenanigans with his female informants—emotionality is a sign of the "primitive" or the "savage." Although Malinow-

ski's terminology now seems absurd, his foundational mindset still holds weight in contemporary institutions; that is, if one does not want to be primitive, one should refrain from emotion. Because emotions are associated with a loss of control and emotional attachment with a loss of autonomy, it makes sense that academics would be attracted to an emotionally detached (i.e., objectivist) ideology; along with bringing professional prestige, this stance is a trump card for experts' relationships with their informants. In contrast, without that shield of detachment, researchers and their informants would be negotiating on closer emotional and social terrain. Ultimately, many sociologists worry that if the entire sociological discipline were to abandon objectivity, people could accuse them of bias, and thus perhaps their expert positions and identities would evaporate.

DROPPING THE ACADEMIC ARMOR

Effects on the Researcher

The jurisdictional benefits of academic armor are clear. However, a number of authors have also demonstrated the personal benefits of dropping this armor. For one, emotional engagement with informants brings personal transformation. As articulated by Kulick and Willson (1995), knowing informants intimately is transformative for researchers and hence, apparently, for their conclusions. In Kulick and Willson's (1995) anthology *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, this intimate "knowing" centers on erotic attachments, but this of course could apply to other emotionally laden and intimate realms as well.

My favorite written example of this transformative power comes from Dennis Covington's (1995) account of snake handling in southern Appalachia. Covington, who was originally researching a murder trial for the *New York Times*, soon became intrigued with the people and the culture of this area. Partially because of his own ancestral ties to the area, Covington developed a deep desire for understanding the enigmatic power of these people, a power that seemed rooted in charismatic Christianity and snake handling. The following segment is Covington's description of finally taking a snake into his own hands. To demonstrate the depth of his account, I have taken the liberty of quoting him at length:

> As low as it was, as repulsive, if I took it, I'd be possessing the sacred. Nothing was required except obedience. Nothing had to be given up except my own will. This was the moment. I didn't stop to think about it. I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands. Carl released it to me. I turned to face the congregation and lifted the rattlesnake up toward the light. It was moving like it wanted to get up even higher, to climb out of that church and into the air. And it was exactly as the handlers had told me. I felt no fear. The snake seemed to

be an extension of myself. And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared. Carl, the congregation, Jim—all gone, all faded to white. And I could not hear the earsplitting music. The air was silent and still and filled with that strong, even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to our conception of paradise, what it's like before you're born or after you die. (pp. 169-170)

Although this account is incredibly rich, insightful, and emotionally powerful, descriptions such as these are rarely found in ethnographic accounts. It is obvious that Covington (1995) was transformed by his experiences in researching this topic and that these experiences allowed him to understand it in a deeply meaningful way.

A second benefit of dropping one's academic armor is that emotional engagements with the researched can confirm or reaffirm researchers' broader social identities. For instance, Evelyn Blackwood (1995), a lesbian ethnographer who was initially closeted while working in Indonesia, told a story about feeling "cut off" from her self. She was lonely for her friends and her "dyke world," but this loneliness for her primary attachments was also a longing for *herself*. Both sources of longing subsided when she and an Indonesian lesbian became lovers. She wrote, "I needed to be with Dayan to remove the physical and emotional isolation I felt. She validated that part of me that went unrecognized everywhere else" (p. 69). Along with bringing such personal benefits, such scenarios illustrate the interconnectedness between self and society, which in turn illustrates the impossibility of any researcher being completely objective.

Ethical Considerations

Although an emotionally vulnerable approach can personally benefit researchers, what effects does this approach have on the researched? Unpretentious researchers may decrease their informants' feelings of dehumanization, but researchers' motivations and aftermaths may also be troublesome. For instance, if ethnographers engage in intimate "knowing" (in any sense of the word) out of nonreciprocating selfishness, desires for thrills, or hopes for later status points with colleagues, their behavior is obviously exploitative. Further, just because researchers speak simply, dress casually, and profess emotional vulnerability does not mean that power differentials with informants will evaporate. In circumstances where it is clear that researchers are outsiders, informality may even be viewed with suspicion and/or seen as a sign of disrespect. In other cases, an absence of armor may simply obscure

academic privilege. Thus, in some circumstances, academic armor can be erected as a protective mechanism for informants.

A parallel example of armor providing legitimate protection is that of workplace sexual harassment rules, institutionalized to protect workers with less structural power. However, power issues are usually trickier for ethnographers than for employers. Although researchers may still ultimately claim the most structural power, the immediate interpersonal power dynamic may be far more fluid, unpredictable, and weighted toward the researched. Thus, emotionally engaged researchers must continuously evaluate and construct the behavior best suited for each person and situation. In some instances, academic etiquette is a convenient excuse to simply do the right thing. However, for those wanting to take emotional chances with their research and their informants, there are certainly other ethically sound approaches available.

I sometimes describe my own approach as "the gossip test" method; that is, when I am writing and talking about my "subjects," would I say these things to their faces? Another useful approach comes from Ray Mohl, a sociologist who both studies and works in the construction industry. Ray uses the "bullshit detector" on his work: If his coworkers (and informants) say that his analysis is "bullshit," he rethinks his analysis. What both of our approaches have in common is that they are rooted in relationships with our informants, and it matters what they think about our work. Some would say that serious scholars do not care what *anybody* thinks about their research and that allowing others to influence the research process delegitimizes the conclusions. However, because fellow academics (including advisors, colleagues, journal editors, and funding bodies) routinely influence how data are collected and interpreted, what really underlines this rebuttal is the assumption that only academic insiders are allowed to influence academic work.

Effects on the Knowledge Product

Detachment and distancing from human informants secures a safe jurisdiction for academic work, and this protective boundary successfully facilitates the production of a specific brand of knowledge. However, common sense and experience tell us that knowledge comes in many brands and is generated through multiple channels. As Norm Denzin (1997) wrote, "Understanding is more than visual knowledge. Understanding is visceral" (p. 46). Though far beyond hope of appearing objective or scientific, it is obvious that Dennis Covington (1995) knows something about snake handling in a deeply meaningful way. It is clear that had he not dropped his professional armor and allowed his informants to have power over him, he would not have achieved this depth of understanding. Furthermore, through his emo-

tionally open writing style, Covington successfully transferred some key insights to his readers.

In addition to obtaining a richer, emotionally layered understanding of the informant, such emotional engagements "challenge the distance between 'us' and 'them' " (Blackwood, 1995, p. 52), which in turn lessens the tendency to construct the "Other" in a disrespectful light. As Wendy McElroy (1995) found in her run-in with a sex worker, sometimes, blurring the boundaries between us and them, or experts and informants, can be a humiliating experience. Perhaps the typical response in cases such as this is to turn away and distinguish oneself as separate from and superior to one's challenger. In contrast, McElroy's turf war began and ended on a personal, psychological level, where recognition of her own humility became a significant turning point in her understanding of her informant.

OBJECTIFICATION, VULNERABILITY, AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Allowing emotional vulnerability with one's informants need not mean that all vulnerable moments must transform into deep, meaningful relationships. For instance, I did not develop a meaningful relationship with Mistress Marsh after the moments described above; rather, it was more an instance of mutual, sexualized objectification. Again, some would maintain that there is no legitimate place for sexual objectification in sociological methodology, but objectification (or the reduction of complexity into external, singular, observable units) is of course the very basis of the contemporary scientific method. Without the ability to objectify, simplify, and reduce data into smaller, isolated categories, the abilities to be precise about the parameters of a concept and to make generalizable statements are lost. Thus, on a basic level, the process and outcome of sexual and scientific objectification are the same. (However, as I describe later, moving from objectification to an emotionally engaged "objective" stance requires more work.) And in both cases, when one considers *only* tiny segments of a whole, one's vision will remain unidimensional.

What then is the point of objectifying anything at all, if a unidimensional perspective is all that one can hope for? The answer is that this perspective is part of the story too. In the case of my interaction with Ms. Marsh, my flustered reaction gave me an insight into the interactional power that some sex workers might wield over their clients. Many sex workers (and all professional dominants) claim that they have power over their clients, but often, researchers, confined to sterile interview settings, must take their word for it. Sometimes, however, researchers patronizingly assume that sex workers *say* that they have control as a way to save face (in the words of one well-regarded researcher of prostitution, "they are not going to *admit* they're victims!"). In

contrast, by engaging with Mistress Marsh on sexualized turf, it was quite apparent that even if she was a victim in some way, she had a certain power over me.

Had I come to know Ms. Marsh in a multidimensional way, my objectification and intimidation surely would have blossomed into a more well-rounded picture. However, in comparing my experience with the worker-client power dynamic, which often initially rides on sexual objectification, this experience brought about insights that I then built into a larger theoretical frame. Before discussing just how this theoretical frame might incorporate critical analysis, however, I now briefly discuss the connection between some subjective methods and emotional detachment.

SUBJECTIVITY AND EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT

I have been arguing that objectivism (as well as some forms of objectification) is often based in an emotionally detached ideology and that this stance serves to protect the power and privilege of observers. However, emotional detachment is not a province of objectivism alone; it can also be employed in subjective methods, including certain postmodern approaches. In many cases, this detachment may be an unintended effect rather than a result of elitist intent.

For instance, the interpretive, postmodern stance that "humans live in a secondhand world of meanings" where "they have no direct access to reality" (Denzin, 1997, p. xvi) brings an inherently critical (and hence antielitist) perspective on reality; however, strictly adhering to this stance also makes it very difficult to generate meaningful connections to and critiques of the studied world. As seen in Denzin's description of this particular approach, this stance creates a sense of distance, disbelief, and the surreal:

> Reality as it is known is mediated by symbolic representation, by narrative texts, and by cinematic and televisual structures that stand between the person and the so-called real word. In critically reading these texts, the new ethnographers radically subvert the realist agenda because the real world is no longer the referent for analysis. Ethnographies of group life are now directed to this world of televisual and cinematic narrativity and its place in the dreams, fantasies, and interactions of everyday people. (p. xvi)

Thus, from this perspective, researchers see the world in a detached, "televisual" manner, reading and playing with data as text rather than observing and recording it as "real." Although it is important to recognize that reality is subjectively experienced and that one's experiences are filtered through culturally produced lenses, at what point does a televisual approach create an even more obscured and detached vision of the world?

It seems fitting that a perspective that uses fictionalized language to describe the social world would be parodied in fiction. Perhaps the best spoof of the postmodern mindset is found in *Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror*, a collection of three short stories by James Hynes (1997). In the story "99," Gregory, an egotistical anthropologist (who until recently had forsworn fieldwork as a colonialist enterprise), believes that he has stumbled on a village engaging in a quaint "crop circle" ritual. In the segment below, Gregory observes two men trampling circles into the ground, the results of which could then be passed off as a supernatural act. Although he knows they are con men, Gregory reflects that he "almost respected them for it":

> They were literally inscribing their own text on the landscape, constructing an alternative paradigm to the logocentric "history" or "prehistory" of the Neolithic real, reifying the spiritual in a field of wheat, making a palimpsest of the archaeological text. That the two con men might not see it quite this way did not trouble Gregory . . . he'd always appreciated that a kind of prankishness lay at the heart of the post-modern. (p. 147)

Of course, it is terribly unfair to judge the entire postmodern endeavor by its parody, and that is not my intent. However, this book, quite popular among academics in the postmodern "know," has also hit a bone of truth, exposing postmodernists as susceptible to the same use of jargon, posturing, and distancing as their scientific opponents.

In the real world of academia, these sorts of distancing maneuvers are more than simply arrogant; they also weaken one's theory. George Marcus (1997) addressed the error of a distanced approach (whether positivist or postmodern), stating, "distanced, expository discourse and representations . . . are inadequate without the collaboration and exposure of the discourse of situated persons" (p. 2). In other words, abstract concepts in and of themselves create unsatisfactory, objectifying explanations; for a more well-rounded picture, one must also understand the subjective experiences of the people involved.

Despite the distancing effect found in some postmodern approaches, grounded subjectivity is also an enormous strength of many postmodern and feminist authors, especially when they succeed in relaying emotion. Many authors within these traditions have identified the advantages of a vulnerable, personal approach (e.g., Behar, 1996; Denzin, 1997; DeVita, 1992; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). However, in reiterating these insights, I am suggesting that the drawbacks of objectivity should be recognized beyond the standard methodological and ideological critiques of positivism and colonialism. That is, the limitations of objectivity should also, when appropriate, be seen as an issue of personal elitism and emotional detachment. Only when that distinction is made can one consider whether objectivity might be possible without elitism and hence whether objectivity might be useful for the production of critical knowledge. Furthermore, ground-level views alone also do not pro-

vide sufficient fuel for critical analysis. For one to construct knowledge that is both nonelitist and able to offer insightful cultural and institutional critique, the additions of multileveled analysis and validity checks are needed.

FROM EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT
TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Critical analysis requires comparisons that can be observed and verified, not just interpreted or "read." These comparisons can occur on individual, institutional, and cultural or structural levels. By contrasting a variety of individual, institutional, and cultural perspectives, one immediately improves one's ability to both contextualize the informant and verify the power relations within that context. As a result of this contextualization and verification, the informant can be grounded inside a social map that can then be soundly critiqued.

Much has been written on the subject of validity in research, and this is not the place to reiterate this information. But for those striving to place their ethnography within broader critical analyses, validity and hence objectivity (which most scientists actually see as simply "intersubjective" agreement among experts)[5] are issues that must be addressed. As Marvin Harris (1999) so cynically contended, "Fantasies, intuition, interpretations, and reflections may make for good poems and novels, but if you want to know what to do about the AIDS time bomb in Africa, or landlessness in Chiapas, neglect of objective data is reprehensible" (p. 61). Although I argue that "fantasies, intuition, interpretations, and reflections" *do* play a crucial role in the formation of politically relevant knowledge (as opposed to being isolated in the pristine realms of art and fiction, as Harris suggested), Harris raised an important point: Without a sense of external validity, there is no political justification for critique.

Again, one way of ensuring validity is through comparative checks. On the individual level, this includes tests such as Ray Mohl's bullshit detector, whereby one's informants evaluate the validity of one's conclusions. This test captures some of the spirit of "multivocality" (whereby a collection of disparate messages are recorded), but rather than simply concluding that "truth" is relative, this test requires one to consider each voice and decide which ones are the most valid for answering the question at hand.

But how does one evaluate which voice is most valid? This process must of course involve much more than a personality contest; instead, it should contextualize viewpoints in a way that makes sense in a larger theoretical frame. For instance, if I were to ask a group of random sex workers to answer the question "Is sex work good or bad for women?," I would end up with a variety of answers that would probably coincide with each person's social

position, stake, or experience with sex work. This relationship between individual opinion and individual experiences is interesting and brings one in the direction of political critique, but more insight can be generated when this is augmented with institutional and cultural data about sex workers. From there, one can better observe that although there is no consensus on this matter, there *are* patterns of better and worse experiences in the sex industry that can be observed critically as institutional and cultural effects.

What I am proposing overlaps with Denzin's (1970) concept of "triangulation" and even more so with the "layered account" advanced by Ronai (1992, 1995).[6] According to Ronai (1995), a "layered account" is that which "decenters the authority of science" by including narrative reflections, fantasies, and emotions along with statistics and abstract theory (p. 397). In Ronai's (1995) "Multiple Reflections of Child Sex Abuse," this method is devastatingly powerful. The authority of this article centers on Ronai's narrative of her own experiences of being sexually abused by her parents, which, when juxtaposed against child sexual abuse statistics and theory, bring these statistics and theories into a new and startlingly relevant light. With her multilayered account and emotional power, Ronai's article screams of validity and critical analysis. However, as Ronai (1995) pointed out, this method of studying sexual abuse ("retrospective participant observation") is highly unique: "This is the only type of participant observation that can be done on the topic" (p. 421). By implication, someone who has not been sexually abused cannot employ these same methods with the same powerful results. Without these experiences, the best a researcher can do is become emotionally engaged. And for that, more sources of validity are needed.

In examining the power of subjectivity, it can be seen that there is a symbiotic relationship between subjective data and critical knowledge, because critical knowledge acknowledges unbalanced power and takes sides. In fact, without being rooted in highly subjective and emotionally engaged experiences, objective knowledge has no hope of being critical. Thus, I argue that the best objective knowledge is rooted in subjective experiences, publicly acknowledged and reflected on by authors, which are then augmented by, contrasted with, and verified against a number of analytic levels and validity checks.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, I have tried to capture the essential spirit of both postmodernism (honoring subjectivity and pointing to the relationship between power and truth) and positivism (with its emphasis on empiricism and validity checks) while critiquing the elitist academic armor found in both realms. Although this armor facilitates researchers' intellectual jurisdiction

and privilege, it inhibits the collection of truly subjective, emotionally engaged, embodied data. Such emotionally engaged ethnography can transform researchers and the knowledge produced and potentially shift the power dynamic between researchers and the researched. Additionally, it is the unarmored data experience that gives any analysis its "heart"; it helps move one from dry, detached writing and analysis to passionate writing that ultimately inspires critical analysis.

In sum, in dropping one's academic armor and engaging "in the moment," one is required to dance, spar, and negotiate with one's subjects face to face. Although the parameters of these moments may be brief, the content is never neutral, and it often ruins one's sense of control. Such moments, such as Dennis Covington's (1995) experiences with Appalachian snake handlers, may entirely transform one's state of mind: "I was moved by something I could not name. It was like desire, and not like desire, a longing for something that could not be possessed" (p. 120). Such experiences open up a variety of opportunities for understanding informants, as well as oneself, in a more intimate manner. Additionally, such experiences ignite one's work with passion and make one more invested in institutionalizing the paradoxical truths of one's informants. Yet, these experiences alone are not enough to sustain an effective cultural and institutional critique. For this, one needs comparisons that can be observed and verified on interpersonal, organizational, and structural levels. It is thus the combination of *emotional engagement with one's informants* (whereby informants can demonstrate their own interpersonal power and truth) and basic *empirical verification* that produces critical knowledge, which is both self-reflexive and able to critique the power relations between people, institutions, and culture.

NOTES

1. This particular moment occurred in March 1997 at the International Conference on Prostitution in Van Nuys, California, but many comparable scenarios have occurred throughout my research of the sex industry.

2. This is also true for other edgy and highly subjective elements, such as the role of anger in research (e.g., McCaughey, 1997; Rosaldo, 1993).

3. Postmodernists and feminists have pioneered the topic of emotion in research (e.g., see Ellis, 1991, 1993; Kleinmann & Copp, 1993).

4. I thank Jonathan Jay for this term.

5. For a concise description of objectivity and intersubjectivity, see Babbie (1986, pp. 25-27).

6. Triangulation tests for validity by observing a phenomenon from a variety of empirical perspectives and is generally more rooted in positivism than the layered account method.

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