

The Digital Street: An Ethnographic Study of Networked Street Life in Harlem

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Abstract

This article makes the case that street life is characterized by its flow online and offline. Such change requires a new way of doing street ethnography that holds great promise for urban and digital scholars alike. I walk through a set of empirical cases drawn from years of participant observation on the ground and in the network with the same set of teenagers in Harlem. The fieldwork modeled also shifts concepts of public space, reworking Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* through digital study and grounding the concept of *networked publics* in urban ethnography. This article bridges urban and digital approaches to ethnography to keep pace with the social life of the street.

Keywords

ethnography, communication, urban, networked public, street, social media

Introduction

This article revolves around the simple premise that social life on the street unfolds in person and through social media. To illustrate this basic point, I begin with an encounter that looks one way in person but must be understood differently as it continues online.

On an early evening in March 2011, I walked along Lenox Avenue, in Central Harlem, with teens JayVon,¹ Ren, and Pete. The three guys meet eyes with a teenage girl, who smiles as she passes. The three boys turn around, calling out to her. JayVon runs after her. She stops by a cement planter. He reels off one question after another, inquiring about her name; destination; if she is going to see “a man.” The other two boys approach. She and Pete are already friendly and hug quickly. Meanwhile, JayVon

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compliments the girl on her appearance and reprimands her for not paying attention to Ren, who has begun his own effort to talk to her. Ren insists they know each other already, claiming they are Friends on Facebook, waving his phone as if it is proof. The girl moves away from the three guys but JayVon follows until she stops in front of a fenced-in lot. JayVon then grabs her arm, “stop moving,” he says, smiling. She smiles back. After a few moments of entangled conversation in which JayVon tells her his name on Facebook, she runs off, JayVon still speaking.

What happened here? On the sidewalk, this looked to me like a one-off interaction that ended badly. But how might my understanding of their communication shift when I follow it online?

Figure 1 is a conversation that appears in JayVon’s Facebook Inbox. Hours after JayVon aggressively approached the young woman on the sidewalk, the young woman, Denelle, sends JayVon, a Friend Request that he accepts.

In contrast to the rapid interaction on the street, their Inbox exchange proceeds slowly over multiple days, a snippet of which I diagram here. Denelle initiates the exchange, this time calling him out: “YOU WAS THA BOY I WAS TALKIN TOO OUTSIDE,” which JayVon confirms: “Yupp what’s supp.” “LAYED UP WATCHIN A MOVIE W/ THA MUNCHIESS—YOOOU,” she writes back.

The following morning, JayVon tells Denelle that he is not going to school and is “layed up” because he feels very sick.

Denelle offers her sympathy: “Ooo hope uu feel better thuggman.” But by calling him “thuggman,” she tests JayVon in private against his performance in public. “I will nd y doo I gotta be a thug man for thoo whats supp with that lol.” “Lol cuz yesterday,” she responds. JayVon concedes the sidewalk act when he says, “thats me being stupid lol i really dont be like that thoo.”

Then he says “atleast I find u pretty thoo,” which begins a long effort, following the diagrammed portion, to get them to meet again in person, back on the street. But Denelle instead prefers to chat online.

The meaning of their encounter changes as it moves to Facebook. Their interaction on the street did not sever relations as it appeared. Rather it enabled them as long as Denelle can take back control of their communication. The meaning of their initial encounter changes retroactively with JayVon’s admission to the act and Denelle sets the terms of future contact. On the street, such boy–girl encounters slide rapidly between playful and troublesome (Miller, 2008). Online, by contrast, new controls and pacing are available.

In this instance, my observations on the sidewalk were insufficient without the relevant digital data. The digital data alone would also have been inadequate. Had I simply “scraped” their Facebook communication, I would have assumed that the meeting on the street was Denelle’s idea.

In this article, I show the study of *the digital street*. I mean by this term that for teenagers like JayVon and Denelle, street life is characterized by its flow online and offline. As ethnographers, we have to keep up.

My broader project is to align urban ethnography with digital studies, particularly ethnography of social media. Up until now, these two sets of scholars have said almost nothing to each other. But one field grows through the other.

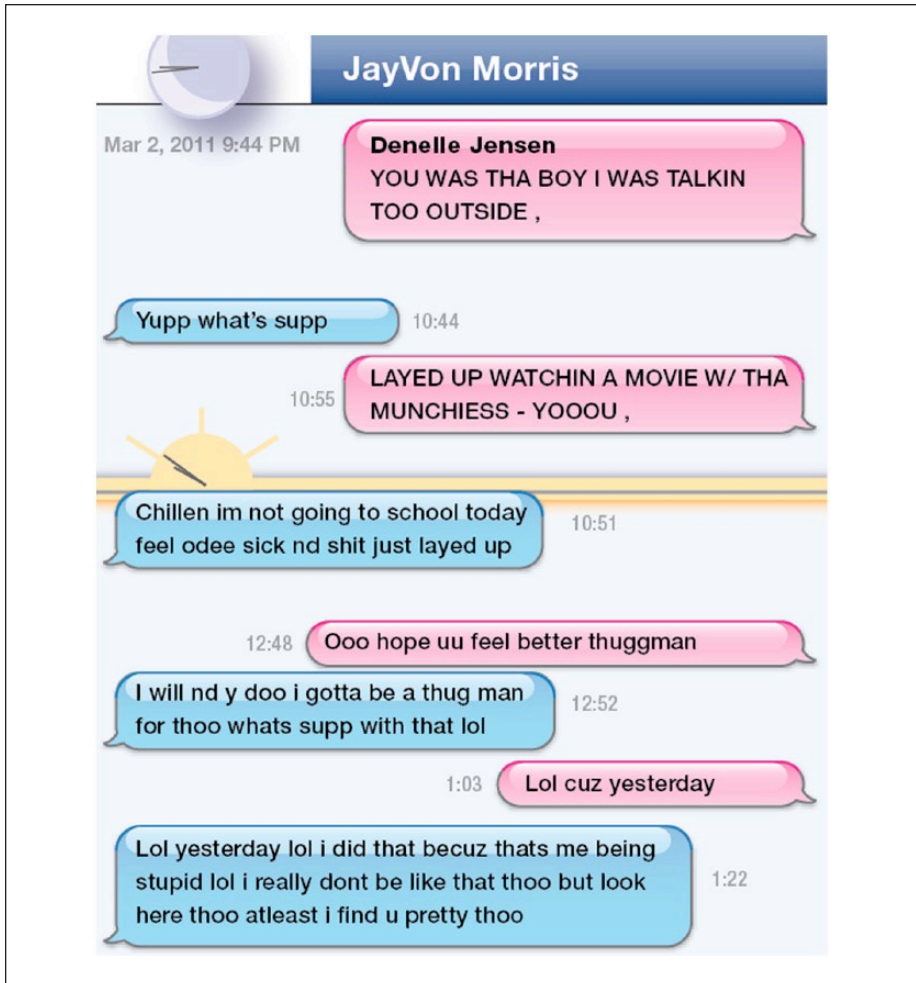


Figure 1. Diagram of conversation in JayVon's Facebook Inbox.

I will walk through a series of related empirical cases to illustrate my approach. As my theoretical framework, I take one key concept in urban studies, Elijah Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street*, and one from digital studies, *Networked Publics* (boyd, 2014; Varnelis, 2008). The code is about the transmission of respect on the street. The study of networked publics concerns the reordering of public space through networked technologies. As we will see, each concept has much to do with the other. But I first need to elaborate on the ethnographic issue addressed in this research. Then, I properly introduce my study; walk through the empirical examples of the code of the street and networked publics; and, finally, in the discussion section, I link the steps I took, acknowledge a key dilemma, and explain the importance of the digital street.

The Ethnographic Issue

Urban and digital ethnographers each have particular *commitments* in their respective fields that when combined can be mutually beneficial. I will start with urban ethnography, as it developed in American sociology out of work in Philadelphia by W. E. B. DuBois (1899/1996) and the Chicago School studies associated with Robert E. Park and his contemporaries. Urban ethnographers commit to being in the field day in and day out over the long term. They cultivate and invest in a set of personal relationships that form the basis of their study. But urban ethnographers are also expected to talk to other people, including institutional actors, to find out what their primary subjects do not understand or wish to reveal about their lives. Many urban ethnographers live in their field sites and match their neighborhood rounds and routines to those they study, going about this for years. Knowing people in a particular locale is one key commitment. Urban ethnographers fixate also on face-to-face interactions because they believe that social order and major urban issues like racial divisions (e.g., Molotch, 1972) and gentrification (e.g., Deener, 2012) are visible in everyday talk, looks, and gestures people exchange. Based on interactions and firsthand study, this tradition offers a rich literature on the people and processes of the urban environment (Duneier, Kasinitz, & Murphy, 2014).

Elijah Anderson (1990), one of its most influential figures, illustrates this premise of urban ethnography in his classic book *Streetwise* (p. ix). The purpose of years of fieldwork was to understand how “people ‘got it on’ or related to one another in public.” “To gain an effective point of view, I spent many hours on the streets, talking and listening to the people of the neighborhood.” Anderson “photographed the setting, videotaped street corner scenes, recorded interviews, and got to know all kinds of people, from small-time drug dealers to policemen, middle-class whites, and outspoken black community activists.” He hung out all over the neighborhood at “bars, laundromats, and carryouts,” and wherever else the people took him.

This ethnographic commitment to the “shoe leather” of participant observation and personal relationships is urban ethnography’s greatest strength. But it can also be a limitation. What I learned in my years of doctoral research in Harlem was that the ethnographic strategy described by Anderson would be misguided as a way to study teenagers in public space. How teens got along and how the adults got involved could only really be understood in person *and* online—by being an ethnographer on the ground and in the media. Because the life of the street is embedded digitally, a shift in commitment is required.

Compared with its urban counterpart, ethnography of digital media developed more recently, cross-nationally, in a diffuse set of academic areas, such as communication, human–computer interaction, media studies, cultural anthropology, and informatics, to name only some. Instead of a commitment to interaction in person digital ethnography is highly adaptable to the numerous social connections people share. Digital ethnographers study different forms of interaction and presence through or with media and the affordances of technologies in people’s lives. They follow the same mandate of close-up, long-term participant observation in their fieldsites. The fruits are a rich literature on the mediated environment, inclusive of ways in which people organize themselves

through online connections (e.g., Beaulieu, 2005) or leverage social media to manage the uncertainty of intimacy (e.g., Pascoe, 2010).

A move that digital ethnographers make is to situate their study “In the Network.”² Doing fieldwork in the network, wherever that may be, allows the ethnographer to observe the online traces (Geiger & Ribes, 2011), links (Thelwall, 2004), and other digital communication through which a community comes to know itself.

For urban ethnographers in the network, key sight lines open onto the same people and processes long cared about. Taking this networked commitment seriously corrects for the saturation of media in our fieldsites. By reporting only on personal observations, urban ethnographers come to study increasingly smaller proportions of social life.

But by no means should the urban ethnographer leave the ground to study the network. The best ethnographic research is done at the intersection of both. Urban ethnography betters digital ethnography, which often assumes that “ethnography can be focused on following connections, rather than being focused on a specific place” (Hine, 2015, p. 24). In this tradition, ethnography can be carried out in person, online, or both (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Hine, 2015). It depends on the research questions and the nature of the social world, which may be geographically distributed or “technologically generated” (Chayko, 2007). But from the perspective of urban ethnography, how can a digital network *ever* be studied only on its own terms? Under what conditions could ethnographic understanding not be enriched or stand to change by getting to know even a single research participant in person? Digital ethnography needs the commitment of urban ethnography.

The trick moving forward is to integrate these approaches through rigorous fieldwork in person and online and an analysis that links the two literatures. I will walk through these steps in a set of empirical cases. But I first explain my study.

The Study

My study began in November 2009 after I met a local pastor at a community center. The pastor, a Black man in early 50s and an ex-offender, gave a talk about youth groups he said were engaged in a back-and-forth violence that was not connected to drug markets and that the community could stop if the adults came out to stop it. The pastor, or simply “Pastor” as he is known in the neighborhood, said that he was following 1,500 teens in Harlem and the Bronx on Twitter and that anytime he heard of potential violence, he sent a text message blast to mobilize community members. He said that he needed more people to join him, particularly during the critical afterschool hours of 3:30 to 7 and the late hours on Friday and Saturday nights when teens traveled to and from parties. I joined his text message list and started to receive his notifications, which prompted me to think about the flow of street life through interpersonal media and at the community level—not only through film, music, the news, and other mass media.

I should say that I am a White man and that I turned 30 that year. I moved to an apartment in Central Harlem in the summer of 2009 so that my wife could be near Columbia University to complete a master’s degree. When I met Pastor, I had been looking for a dissertation topic for my PhD in sociology at Princeton University.

With time, I became intimately involved in Pastor's outreach work, monitoring disputes, stopping fights or trying to, and providing assistance to young people with school, work, and the court system. When a friend of mine who works at a midtown investment firm told me her office was upgrading computing equipment, I arranged to have their old hardware installed in Pastor's office and I started a computer lab called "The Lab."

I also had leads on basketball games across the city (where I am from) and I brought young people to games that we played in together. One teen nicknamed our impromptu group, "The Basketball Crashers."

I took on other neighborhood roles. I worked as a workshop leader at a major municipal summer employment program for three summers, as a consultant at a public defender office representing teens and young adults, member of a government-funded juvenile gang task force. I led college readiness workshops at an afterschool athletics and tutoring program. I spoke at, visited, or conducted observations inside six schools in Harlem and one in the Bronx.

My involvements placed me in contact with hundreds, if not over a thousand, local teenagers, as well as with many adults and organizations making decisions about them. I met a handful of White kids; all others were persons of color, primarily children of African American parents and some of parents who recently immigrated from the West Indies, West Africa, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. I observed tremendous variation in home and family arrangements; access to basic provisions, schooling, and work experience. But the nature of my immersion steered me toward young people involved in the social life of the street where they are exposed to the highest risks of neighborhood violence and police scrutiny.

My most concentrated period of fieldwork took place between November 2009 and August 2012, during which I logged 343 entries in my field notes and recorded 37 interviews with teens and adults, some in organizational roles.³ During this phase, I often spent many hours each day on certain blocks, most often on 129th Street and Lenox Avenue, a block and a half from my apartment. When I brought my car around, it became a place to hang out or a shuttle for kids and their family members. From personal ties with teens and their parents and other family members, I established connections by phone and on social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, in that chronological order. My fieldwork drew on face-to-face and social media ties to about 80 teenagers, and focused more closely on a subset of about 25 of them.

I studied the same set of people and the same street life online and offline. I constantly compared what I saw in person with what I saw on social media. My richest fieldwork came when I resisted the convenience of taking personal observation at face value or what I saw online as self-evident (Hine, 2015). By corroborating each setting with the other, and by asking questions of multiple people, better understanding emerged. I often took screenshots of content on social media that I then handed to people to ask questions like: What does this mean? Why did you say this this way? What happened next? The more I used screenshots as elicitation tools rather than final accounts, the richer my data became (Pink, 2009).

By scrutinizing both settings, I could see in some instances how matters online affected matters in person and vice versa. I mostly captured public (or semipublic)

communication on social media (i.e., a Facebook Wall), but I also collected private text message and social media communication from my very closest contacts. In these instances, we reviewed these data together, drawing linkages to events in person where appropriate.

But rather than continue this summary, I now take you through the field with me. Ethnography always doubles as a literature, which means that I model a practical shift at the same time as a conceptual one.

The Code of the Street

Face-to-face encounters are the building blocks of urban ethnography. A premise of Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street* is that respect in the inner city is transmitted through street-corner interaction. Young people test each other's nerve to fight in front of a peer audience that evaluates each challenger's toughness and heart (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010). Neighborhood reputations hang on this process.

But such confrontations are increasingly filmed and uploaded to social media. When this happens, teens must contend with a public record of their performance. The meaning of the encounter changes through media, as should the process of ethnographic understanding.

Consider an incident in 2010 that involved Rugged, a 13-year old I came to know through my outreach work with Pastor. On a Wednesday, several of Rugged's friends, teenagers I also knew in this capacity and whom I followed on Twitter, Tweeted about a video uploaded by one of their rivals. I followed a link in one of their Tweets to their rival's unlocked Twitter page, which integrated a video-hosting platform that contained several clips seemingly created to antagonize Rugged's neighborhood group.

The most recent one, titled "GOTTA TOUGHEN UP," was a 51-second video of Rugged taken with a phone. Along with the tagline "UNDER PRESSURE 1 ON 1 SHIT," the video showed Rugged on a popular shopping street where someone off camera held him by his backpack strap with one hand and appeared to film him with the other. The video depicted an intimidation during which Rugged, speaking frantically, swore on his "dead pops" that he did not hang out with his friends on their usual block.

According to Anderson, the code of the street dictates that kids must be prepared to fight when threatened in public space. But other ethnographic work by Garot (2007, 2010) finds that kids, even gang involved, do not always abide. They dodge such fraught encounters or decline to fight, and when they do, they attempt to explain away noncompliance. But Rugged's failure to enact the code of the street was caught on camera.

Before the video, Rugged was known for having brought a gun to school, notoriety he depended on for status and for safety. But his reputation changed. The video was viewed 1,715 times within its first 21 hours of publication, migrating over multiple social media. I observed the digital comments and reactions back on the street. When I went to Rugged's block the next night, he was nowhere to be found. Two girls said that Rugged "talk too much," expressing their satisfaction. Rugged did not hang out on his block for the next 8 days.

In court and elsewhere, video is often privileged as a self-evident record of “truth.” But the offline story matters also. By being around the same people and same event online and offline, I was positioned to pick up more of what was being said.

A girl who passed by Pastor’s office mentioned that others had been present during the intimidation. I collected subsequent accounts and came to believe that Rugged’s rival did not act alone but approached with two other boys, both older and bigger than Rugged and previously involved in shootings directed toward Rugged’s group. In other words, what was depicted in terms of one-on-one intimidation was probably three on one, far less shameful by the standards of code.

This incident pushes us to think differently about the code of the street and its study. First, we must consider the transmission of the code online by placing ourselves in the network. Fight videos (or nonfight videos) differentiate the interpretative process through which neighborhood reputations get decided. The secondhand accounts of a fight that those who witnessed it firsthand would tell, in which case the listener accepts as inevitable a level of exaggeration or other distortion, compete now with a video. People can watch for themselves. Ethnographers need to be online and offline to understand what people are saying about such incidents. Second, the code of the street, according to Anderson, depends on the urban environment, levels of poverty and racial segregation, police–community relations, and other conditions. But the digital environment may be increasingly important. As an encounter with no initial peer audience, Rugged was held accountable to the code through its mediation, which transformed the event by the video’s visibility (Bregman & Haythornthwaite, 2001), scale (boyd, 2010), and shareability (Papacharissi & Yuan, 2011) on social media. Played 1,715 times the 51-second video broadened exponentially to about 24 hours of total screen time over Harlem (and likely elsewhere).⁴ To understand how the code evolves requires attention to a new literature for urban ethnographers on the conditions of the mediated environment.

Networked Publics

Above, I reworked a mainstay concept of urban ethnography by integrating a digital approach. I want to now illustrate how urban ethnography can ground the concept of *networked publics*, a seminal idea in digital studies.

danah boyd (2014) uses this term in reference to teenagers’ peer worlds embedded in social media, where new issues emerge such as “invisible audiences” and the “context collapse” of relational settings separated geographically and socially. Varnelis (2008, p. 15) and his collaborators introduce the term more broadly, including to “explore both the networking of space and the spatiality of the network.” Public spaces coevolve with the media environment, inclusive of locational media that links the Internet and geographic location. But the concept can also be rooted in the people of urban ethnography.

The Street Pastor

Urban ethnographers often rely on a sponsor to unlock a community and vouch for the researcher, perhaps most important when crossing lines of race and class. Pastor played

this essential role in my study. Through the sponsor's network, the ethnographer enters a given social world, which can be understood even better through connectedness online.

I followed Pastor on his daily rounds, on social media, and as a recipient of his "text blasts" over the course of years. I was positioned to understand the intervention he mobilized in response to Rugged. When the video of Rugged travelled over Twitter in 2010, Twitter was the principal social medium for teenagers in Harlem. Teenagers would not find their parents on this platform, which was typically unfamiliar to the elders in the community. Pastor was a rare exception. When the video appeared on Twitter on a Wednesday, Pastor saw it immediately. On Thursday, after seeing Tweets suggestive of retaliation, Pastor sent a text blast to parents and other residents: "This is going to be a problem Friday is the word" and included the video's URL. He called for "a parent walk" at 9 p.m. Friday night. I participated with a total of roughly 40 adults and teenagers. We paraded past the neighborhood groups involved in the conflict. Some participants in the procession held memorial signs honoring two teenagers recently murdered.

By being on the ground and in the network, I saw that Pastor had acted as a generational intermediary in the peacekeeping tradition of the "old head" (Anderson, 1999) or "street pastor" (Jacobs, 1961). In the Rugged intervention, he moved information from the teens to the adults, using the preferred short-message medium for each constituency—the teenagers on Twitter and parents on text.

The sponsor in urban ethnography is often a knowledge broker within the context of study. Digital scholars can ground the concept of networked publics in the same brokers urban ethnographers depend on. These special people and the media they deploy configure local public spaces.

Once Pastor and I had developed mutual trust through our time together at work and playing chess, I felt comfortable enough to ask to see his BlackBerry, a hub of his "telephone ministry." Pastor, so generous with his life already, allowed me to download his address book, text messages, and other contents.

These data helped me translate his traditional role in the community to the contemporary notion of networked publics. According to Jane Jacobs (1961), street pastors are one kind of public character in the social life of the street. They act as peacekeepers between rival youth groups as well as residents and police, and they link people to organizations (Jacobs, 1961; Venkatesh, 2006).⁵ This self-appointed role depends on presence in public and "frequent contact with a wide circle of people" (Jacobs, 1961, pp. 68-69).

I saw this part in the community through Pastor's phone, which contained 1,350 contacts. I selected a random sample of 10% (135 contacts) and interviewed Pastor about each one. His network included boys from rival areas and some of their girlfriends, parents, siblings, and cousins; caseworkers from the Office of Child Support Enforcement, a gang intelligence detective, the commanding officer of a housing police sector, an NYPD community affairs liaison, an Assistant District Attorney (ADA), and a federal judge. Fellow clergy, government and community-based service providers, professional and graduate student journalists, and activists from organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People appeared as well. Some of his contacts would not otherwise "appear" together (Horst & Miller, 2004).

Pastor enacted his role through the phone. “Spotters” kept Pastor abreast of happenings in their buildings, on their blocks, or within the agencies in which they worked. Nine of the young persons in the sample were spotters—boys and girls worried about their peers even if personally involved in fights or gun violence. By integrating his text messages, I could see that some teens texted Pastor about impending fights and unsupervised parties where Pastor would sometimes show up to “work security.”

Through his rounds in the neighborhood and presence on multiple social media, Pastor gathered information each day, as I followed. He translated and channeled this information to specific lists in his “text blasts.” One list comprised the adults (presumed to have unlimited texting plans) who opted to join his outreach network. Another list covered all young people in his ministry. He had broken other youth lists down by geography to avoid conflict when he announced job opportunities and programming. Three “media” lists roughly corresponded to news format (print, television, and radio). A “white shirts’ list” combined the commanding officers at local precincts. Through these lists in conjunction with his other involvements, Pastor created a set of networked publics on the terms of his traditional social role. We can draw on the sponsors and public characters of urban ethnography to understand how public spaces are networked.

But the joint commitments of urban and digital ethnography can reveal far more about networked publics. I turn now to the girls in my study, who also play a brokering role. Urban ethnographers too often study boys and girls separately, especially on the street where boys tend to be more visible. Consideration of boys and girls together—on the street and on social media—generates new understandings of the networked neighborhoods of the inner city.

The Girls

Early in my work with Pastor, we brought a group of teens to a basketball game at Madison Square Garden. Pointing to the girls, Pastor said they represented access to 14 crews. The girls were “the common denominator.” Their social media linked boys from rival streets.

A subset of the girls whom Pastor knew most closely, he called his “specials.” The specials dated boys in boy rivalries and were sometimes involved in their own girl conflicts, including with other specials. Their knowledge of neighborhood violence made the specials Pastor’s best informants, and in exchange, he served as their advocate at home, school, and in court. The specials became key participants in my study as well, and they clued me to the importance of girls in the social life of the street, as I observed their lives online and offline.

The specials embraced a dangerous status in the middle of boys in neighborhood conflict. When police arrested an ex-boyfriend, Rochelle, a special, posted on her Facebook page “FREE MY OLD THANG” with a heart emoji and a tag to his profile. Other young women wanted nothing to do with such status but were implicated by virtue of their position as a shared tie between boys in different neighborhoods.

While the code of the street burdens both boys and girls (Jones, 2010), it constrains boys at the level of gunfire, which is rare among girls. I found that girls crossed neighborhood lines far more easily than boys did. But this mobility also placed them at the center of attention.

As in previous studies (e.g., Suttles, 1968), I observed that boys spent more time on the street than girls, though girls also certainly hung out. Boys took custody of their streets in terms of neighborhood violence but also by calling out to girls who passed or inviting girls to the block. When JayVon approached Denelle, they were on Lenox Avenue, his home vicinity, and the boys did not follow her west past rival territory.

As I saw in Inbox messages, calling out also took place online. By way of illustration, one teen named Olivia received on an unremarkable Tuesday Facebook messages from seven males she said she had never met: “WASSUP SEXII”; “WASSUP MUFFIN HOW YUH DOING?”; “Wass good”; “Wassup”; “sup”; “wassup love”; “how u doin sweetie.” Calling out usually shifted from a public act on the sidewalk to a private one on social media. Being granted the trust to look at private messages allowed me to understand an important aspect of boy–girl relations not visible on the Facebook Wall.

That calling out took place in the Inbox made me wonder more about Facebook networks. As I talked to teens, I learned that the inclusion of unacquainted peers as Facebook friends was normal. When I looked at the Facebook networks of 30 teenagers—15 boys, 15 girls—who hung out on the corner of 129th Street, I saw networks not only far larger than national averages but female networks far larger than male networks. Of the 30 profiles, the average female Facebook network was 2.3 times larger than that of the average male network. Both sets of networks skewed to the opposite sex: for the girls, 2.3 males to every one female; for the boys, 2.4 females to every one male.⁶ I claim no statistical significance from this convenience sample. I selected accounts on the basis of those I knew and could talk to about my findings—findings in the network that could be compared on the ground.

Like other street-based ethnographers, I saw that courtship played out in the public space of the neighborhood (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Best, 2006). But access to Inboxes and networks allowed me to see that this process had spread online where it migrated into private space. Besides the asymmetry of courtship, I came to believe that the difference in network size reflected another facet of cross-sex relations. Through observations and interviews, I learned that girls played a complicated reconnaissance role in the neighborhood.

Girls are “knowledge barriers,” Nika told me. When I interviewed Nika, she was a Sociology major at an elite college who had grown up in Harlem with boys embroiled in gang violence. She described an ongoing sense of “loyalty” to the boys from her home block. “I can’t date a guy from Drew Hamilton,” she said of boys from a rival area, and “can’t hang out” with the girls “associated” with them. “But I know to be cordial” to the girls. “I have to know what’s happening,” she explained. If rival guys are “on their way over,” she has “a responsibility” to notify the boys on her block.

But eventually, girls come to be marked as loyal to specific blocks. As Elesha, one of the specials, said, once the boys on 129th Street saw her as “from St. Nick,” her presence signaled she was there “to set . . . [them] up.” “Nobody care about y’all beef like that,” she said she countered.

Harding (2010) found that girls in inner-city Boston had larger and more geographically broad networks than boys. On social media, I saw this network position open a channel at the interstices of rival areas. A teen named Andre used this channel to launch a “campaign for respect” (Anderson, 1999) in the form of violence directed toward 129th Street. On Facebook, Andre posted photographs after attacks on his rivals, including one in which he held a sneaker he had taken and dared its owner to take back. Meanwhile, a teen from the 129th Street group launched a countercampaign of poses on Andre’s turf and photos of stolen baseball caps and bikes. This antagonism ran mostly through their mutual 169 female Facebook friends.⁷

Police also exploited these cross-neighborhood channels through the social media profiles of young women. In my conversations with police, I learned that detectives in local initiatives such as Operation Crew Cut and the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program (“JRIP”) followed boys of interest through “fake pages” that depicted local girls of color. Elsewhere, I discuss online surveillance at length (Lane, 2016), but the point here is that “invisible audiences” and “context collapse” (boyd, 2014) can be structured through relations between boys and girls in public space. The street pastor, rivals, and police monitor otherwise segmented neighborhoods through the social media of girls. The urban and mediated environments take their meaning from one another—so we need to be in both places at once.

Discussion

This article has walked through some of the steps I took to join urban and digital ethnography. To recap, I rooted my study in long-term neighborhood-based fieldwork, investing deeply in a set of personal relationships that started with Pastor. On this basis, I connected to my research participants on social media. This simple but crucial step allowed me to see the field site as a networked public through which I could move online and offline with the same set of people.

From this field position, I traced experiences in person and through media. I embedded online interactions in my field notes, often in the form of a screenshot. These screenshots provided verbatim, time-stamped communication. But this material was certainly incomplete, not only subject to deletion, revision, and other distortion but, most important, without offline story. By using these screenshots to solicit still further detail and perspective, I built richer accounts in my notes that sometimes changed my initial impressions.

Also on the basis of personal familiarity, I asked to see phones and Inboxes belonging to some core research participants. Interpersonal communication in the form of text and Inbox messages sometimes helped me understand things I saw in person, as in the case of courtship. My field notes, of course, still consisted of partial, subjective accounts. But I had repositioned myself in the field to stay in step with the social life of the street.

By being in the network, I was able to complete basic analyses of the nature or composition of phone- and social-media ties. I compared these findings with others in my fieldwork and with findings in the urban and digital literatures, which allowed me

to rework ideas related to neighborhood violence and its control, boys and girls, and the networking of public space. The shift I took in the field was also a shift in reading lists to prime my analysis through literatures not typically read together.

As other digital ethnographers have addressed (e.g., Boellstorff et al., 2012; Murthy, 2008), this kind of research encounters many dilemmas around networked privacy. The study of networked communication means that people not originally in the study can easily slide into view. This is not novel insofar as ethnographers have always observed and heard about their research participants' relationships. But now, we see identifiable records of these connections and interactions. My efforts to obtain permissions and to show my writing to my research participants did not necessarily extend to their ties on media. I always took steps to conceal identities, though I cannot say for certain that these steps were adequate. Whether I sought new permissions (and insights) had to do with many factors handled on a case-by-case basis, and not without tremendous internal stress in some situations. I prioritized longer forms of communication and communication in private contexts. But that distinction did not always hold. In the courtship material, for instance, I felt obligated to talk about my research with Denelle (whom I first met on the street at the same time as JayVon, a core research participant) but I felt no obligation to contact the seven young men in Olivia's Inbox. In the case of Pastor's contact list, I took the liberty of referencing people by their roles rather than making each person aware of my intention, which may have created a conflict for the contact and/or Pastor. Managing the breadth and boundaries of networked ethnography was an ongoing challenge.

But I do not believe in another way to study the street. In fact, even if the ethnographic issues through which I have framed this article are not of interest, scholars still must reckon with the research. Without concern for the digital street, those studying cities, violence, youth and adolescence, communication and technology, social organizations, dating, or policing and punishment stand to be passed up by the developments of their empirical field. Let me spell out this risk in terms of policing and punishment, using juvenile justice in New York.

Beginning in Harlem in 2006, a tiny subset of police in the juvenile justice sector, with access to social networking sites (which are typically blocked on department computers), built a repository of "youth crews," separate from gang databases maintained by police and by corrections and outside the purview of the police department's gang personnel. Starting on a site called Sconex in 2006, police matched a set of teenagers from the same housing project who were involved in local cell phone robberies to content that appeared to reference the same robberies and a shared group name. By identifying youth groups in terms of violent incidents and presumably corresponding depictions online as opposed to established gang names, hierarchical roles, for-profit enterprises, and other criteria in the gang database, a new universe of "Manhattan North Youth Crews" was codified and expanded on, first in Harlem and then citywide. This police work was formalized as the social media unit in 2011. Under prosecution, numerous crews were defined again as "gangs."

In Harlem, between February 2011 and June 2014, the District Attorney's Office handed down seven separate gang conspiracy indictments that defined the alleged

conspiracies based in part on the defendants' social media content. These indictments charged a total of 195 people with felonies and 48% of all of the evidence cited referred to social media activity.⁸

Police and prosecutors see the street online and offline. Consider this testimony from a Harlem-based gang detective. Serving as an expert witness for the prosecution, the detective was asked during direct examination by the ADA to describe his "training and expertise as a gang detective." The first thing he said was "I've gone to gang courses where they teach you . . . different types of social media to identify gang members." He testified that he maintained a Facebook account to monitor and interact with presumed gang members. The ADA then moved the line of questioning beyond social media. "Other than monitoring social network sites, what are other things you do to make determinations as to whether someone is in a gang and if so, what gang they are affiliated with?" The detective described "debriefings" with arrested persons, interviews with colleagues, reviewing police paperwork, and observation on the street and through surveillance video. This trial pertained to a teenager alleged to have shot at a rival gang member. The ADA and the defense attorney debated YouTube videos and photographs and profile names on Facebook and in terms of how to "characterize" a teenager's "bent finger" alleged to depict a gang sign and whether use of a particular nickname was to "self-identify" as a gang member. It is on the terms of the digital street that justice turns.

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Notes

1. Individuals' names or nicknames are fictitious.
2. In 2013, at Princeton University, Janet Vertesi convened a conference on networked technologies and ethnographic practice under the name of this position in the field: "The Ethnographer in the Network."
3. After this time, I scaled back fieldwork to write my dissertation and I relied more heavily on social media communication and meetings with my key contacts. I consider my fieldwork to be ongoing.
4. Elsewhere (Lane, 2016), I consider other ways in which the code and its study shifts on the digital street.

5. See also Pattillo (2007) on the tradition of the middleman in Black communities.
6. To estimate gender breakdown, a research assistant reviewed the list of friends on each sampled individual's Facebook profile. Working his way through the last page to load, he coded the presumptive sex of the top two and bottom two friends to appear on each page. When this simple network analysis was completed in August and September 2011, the mean network size was 1,340 friends. Network size increased to an average of 2,159 friends by November 2012 (excluding profiles of two boys and of two girls who deactivated their accounts or restricted the visibility of their networks). This is an average gain of 819 friends in roughly 14 months. This expansion could not reasonably be explained by the development of new personal relationships or subsequent inclusions of existing personal relationships. By contrast, nationally representative Pew data collected in November 2010 put the median number of Facebook friends for 12- to 17-year olds as 300 for boys and 350 for girls with teens typically acquiring seven new friends per month (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012).
7. When I asked Andre how he knew his rivals would see his provocations, he pointed to the site's automated notifications when mutual friends like or comment on content.
8. Each gang indictment is based on a document filed by the prosecution and presented to a grand jury for a vote. The document lays out a series of acts allegedly committed by the defendants in furtherance of a conspiracy as well as a set of criminal charges for the defendants. A majority of the grand jury (comprised between 16 and 23 persons residing in New York County) must consider it "more likely than not" that the persons investigated committed the alleged crimes. This action gives the District Attorney's Office permission to prosecute the named individuals on felony charges. The seven indictment documents I referenced include a total of 1,281 acts, 617 of which refer to social media content "caused or permitted to be posted" by defendants.

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