Representing Diversity in Digital Research: Digital Feminist Ethics and Resisting Dominant Normatives

Sweta Baniya, Purdue University

Les Hutchinson, Michigan State University

Ashanka Kumari, University of Louisville

Kyle Larson, Miami University (OH)

Chris Lindgren, Virginia Tech University

In this paper, the authors consider how their engaged practices of feminist ethics have come up against specific dominant normatives. Privileging the experiences of women of color, they question the embodied relationship they have with their research participants, and offer their methodological approaches for addressing ethical challenges that have surfaced through conducting their research in both digital and non-digital spaces and places. Collectively, they collaborate to develop newfound strategies and methodologies for negotiating the often mundane, micro-level moments of friction that prevents intersectional phronesis. Overall, they pitch ethical research practices for digital and non-digital research with diverse subjects of different races, backgrounds, and cultures such that voice(s) are not compromised during research.

How can digital rhetoricians conduct research that centers itself upon practicing what we refer to as intersectional phronesis? We begin to develop this term by taking up social problems that Crenshaw (1991) defines as the often neglected "intersections of racism and patriarchy" (p. 1242). By phronesis, we extend Dolmage's (2014) work to mend the separation of metis (embodied cunningness) from phronesis (abstracted, scientific knowledge). Indeed, Crenshaw's call for intersectionality allies easily with Dolmage's (2009) recognition about how "bodily difference fires rhetorical power" (p. 8), and that rhetoricians too often normalize masculine bodies as the ideal rhetor. In this paper, we argue that an intersectional phronesis positions digital rhetoric to become "significantly bodied" (p. 4). In what follows, we each offer the field our own stories that enact this rhetoric—an embodied cunning that develops a wisdom that Royster and Kirsch (2012) refer to as a "polylogical social practice" (p. 95).

Sweta Baniya: Ethical Representation of Women in Digital Spaces during Emergency/Disaster

"It is dark disaster that brings light," says Maurice Blanchot (1995) in his book *The Writing of the Disaster*. Disaster is unpredictable, comes unannounced, and leaves insurmountable amount of disparity and chaos in the lives of people, community, and country. In addition to chaos and disparity, like Blanchot says, it also brings some light. In a globalized and digitized world, disaster creates ripples of affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015) in online as well as offline spaces providing rhetorical agency to the networked publics to mitigate challenges of the disaster.

Nepal, one of the world's smallest countries, suffered through a massive earthquake on April 25, 2015 that killed around 8,856 people and injured 22,309 others. With this 7.5 magnitude earthquake, Nepal underwent a lot of destruction, disruption, and disjuncture. On the other hand, this earthquake allowed the world to think about Nepal, to support Nepal, and to engage with Nepal. Nepal Earthquake 2015 thus created the circulation of discourses such as a) narratives filled with data and information, b) creation of a dynamic contact zone for the global and the local to come together through a collective globalized digital action, and c) the images and stories of women and children.

I started working at an international organization as a communications practitioner after the Nepal Earthquake. My job was to create digitally saleable stories about the survivors of the earthquake. In 2016, a blog post I wrote about a woman for European Union's website got 400,000 hits and 26,000 likes on Facebook. Those stories especially shared on digital media were mostly about women and children because stories about women and children were more pathos-driven as they were among the highly vulnerable populations during the catastrophic event. Like the organization I was working in, many other western organizations were also publicizing similar stories about women and children, their suffering, and how they were being supported in the digital sphere.

Additionally, I reflect back on my own practices as a communication practitioner and how my purpose was to just fulfill the demands of my job. Reflecting on my work allows me to understand the complexity of fulfilling the demand of the job as well as being responsible about the narratives of people I was writing and sharing. Before coming back to school, I had never been taught about the ethics of representation, but reflecting back with rhetorical education today, I understand my practices and its consequences of representing woman of color in digital media. The images I used for the blog

posts and photo stories were of women's suffering only because they were pathos-driven and fulfilled the nature of the job during that time. In the future, communication practitioners could be trained on responsible representation images of women and children during the time of crisis. This knowledge of human suffering during the disaster gets highlighted and ethics of representing them gets shadowed. With a self-reflection of my own work and analysis of practices of other organizations, I argue that, professional writing practices should include ethical representation of women and children especially during any kind of disaster, and such representations should be emphasized, highlighted, and practiced.

Les Hutchinson: Embodying Reciprocal Research Practices in Relation with the Land

Walking the Ledges Trail one spring morning, I realized that a seemingly everyday experience was actually a complex facet to my forming an ethical research methodology. I have been walking this same trail during the entirety of my time living in central Michigan while earning my PhD. This trail gives me a sense of comfort from the challenges of graduate school; it also provides me with a deep understanding of the land. I walk this land thanks to the centuries of Indigenous epistemological practices that saw a trail that lines the Grand River as a source of knowledge-making. For my research, intersectional phronesis begins by recognizing the land as not only a research participant, but a place where we form all our research relations.

Anishinaabe researcher Kathleen E. Absolon (Minogiizhigokwe) establishes (2011) that "Indigenous research is often guided by the knowledge found within. Aboriginal epistemology (the ways of knowing our reality) honours our inner being as the place where Spirit lives, our dreams reside and our heart beats" (p. 12). Absolon's view of Indigenous epistemology informs methodological practices that support the subjective, personal ways we come to know both in respect to who we work with, but also the places where we learn. Indigenous methodologies call on us, as researchers, to recognize the land as an integral source of knowledge.

Like Absolon, Louise Erdrich (2003) reminds, "Books are nothing all that new. People have probably been writing books in North America since at least 2000 B.C. Or painting islands. You could think of the lake as libraries" (p. 3). Erdrich writes about how the land continues to teach her how to live. She describes the ways the Ojibwe have written with the land, on the land, and from the land. Books, rock paintings, and even the shifting language of the lakes all are stories meant to educate us and inform our place in the world. This

place that we occupy, when following Indigenous epistemologies, sustains itself through practices that sustain the land—that recognize that we exist in relation with the land.

When we talk of phronesis as embodied feminist practice for acquiring intersectional wisdom, Indigenous land-based epistemologies align themselves well. A practice that highlights such alignment is relationality. The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (2015) draws on Shawn Wilson's definitions of relationality in *Research is Ceremony*. They recall that "For Wilson, to enact relationality means to understand one's relationship: to land, people, space, ideas, and the universe as interconnected and fluid. Relational accountability is *how* one is respectful and accountable to those relationships (i.e., practices)" (Act II). The practice of relationality calls on us to consider place—where we come to know—as an essential, given source of data. Indeed, the land teaches us much of what we know, but shapes *how* we come to that knowing.

I walk the Ledges Trail, writing the thoughts about the land and methodology on the Notes application in my phone. Embodied and connected to the device responsive to my fingertips, my mind is thinking about the land, but not with the land. Haas (2018) bids us remember that our bodies are never in isolation from the networked spaces we inhabit, but live relationally to them as well. My mind places my body inside the technological extension. At that exact moment when fingers type while feet step, my foot catches a corner of ground that shifts downward. My ankle bends wrongly, and I fall, spraining it. This happens because I was elsewhere. I laugh then, at myself, and the lesson learned. Relational accountability, to go back a little, urges me to question how respectful I was to the land's story so kindly shared with me. The Ledges Trail is approximately 300 million years old. I can only imagine the stories it has told over this time. I reckon I have a few more to learn before I leave.

Ashanka Kumari: A Reflection on Researching Your Friends and Colleagues

When I chose to pursue a dissertation project looking at first-generation-to-college doctoral students in rhetoric and composition, I recognized the necessity to position myself within this project. I, too, am a first-generation student. My features and body reveal my Indian-American identity whenever I enter a space, and many times in this case, a Skype video call. In determining my participant pool for this semi-structured interview- and document-based project, I chose to include myself and act as both a researcher and interview participant. This critical self-reflection allows my story to additionally inform the conclusions and narratives of first-generation rhetoric and composition doctoral students I collect, analyze, and present.

I am cognizant of several ethical considerations as I conduct my dissertation research study. First, I acknowledge my position as a current graduate student in one of the two programs I am studying. Several of my participants are undoubtedly people I consider close friends in my department. Gesa E. Kirsch (2005) remarks that researchers must be careful to consider and "delineat[e] clear boundaries" as researchers "so that neither party unwittingly compromises expectations of friendship, confidentiality, and trust" (p. 2166). Kirsch cites Pamela Cotterill (1992) who "reminds us that 'close friends do not usually arrive with a tape recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear'" (as cited in Kirsch, 2005, p. 2166). With all of my participants, and especially with colleague-friends, I strive to remain clear about the goals of the interview and my research study. Further, I do my best not to discuss interviews in conversations outside the interview space or in the context of my dissertation project unless I am clarifying or following-up with participants regarding interviews, my project, and vice versa. However, as with most research, many of these choices are easier said than done. For instance, while transcribing an interview with a friend-colleague, it became tempting to send a text about a particular comment the interviewee had made. In this moment, I found myself drafting a text briefly before pausing and deleting. Each part of the research process requires continued critical, conscience attention to my relationships with myself, my participants, friends, and colleagues.

As I begin writing about my data, I plan to have my participants involved in various stages of the process to offer them moments to "qualify and challenge [my] reading" and understanding of our conversations and represent their comments accurately (Newkirk, 1996, p. 12). I share transcripts with my participants and give them an opportunity to clarify or omit anything off my record before analyzing my data. Once I write the analysis, I will similarly share chapters with participants to give them a chance to see how their words are being used and interpreted and offer participants time to respond to my interpretations. As Thomas Newkirk (1996) reminds, it is the ethical "responsibility [of researchers] to include participant interpretations even if they conflict with the judgment the researcher is making" to make fair claims (p. 13–14). Finally, all participants are assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities; though, I recognize that a name change might not be enough to protect someone's identity and will also mask any other key identity-revealing details such as their past education, jobs, or names of advisors.

To be a responsible researcher, I must represent myself and my participants with care. When I spend time with my friends and colleagues outside of the project, I consider my position carefully when speaking. These relation-

ships now require conscious considerations to delineate ideas communicated to me in the confidence of a signed IRB-approved research study consent form with and against items told to me casually in conversation. All research is necessarily an embodied practice. However, we continually have to draw hard and soft lines in how we represent ourselves, our bodies, our confidants, colleagues, and research participants.

Kyle Larson: Collateral Violence in Research on Parasitic Publics

Trained in feminist methodologies, I highly value participatory research designs based in grounded theory and community uplift. I highly value my research with feminist counterpublics and the relationships that digital feminist ethics helped me build with participants. But researching a digital white nationalist collective has made me reflect on what a digital feminist ethics entails when the research population is not communities experiencing oppression, but communities actively working to further oppression.

Formed on Stormfront before creating its own digital spaces, "Swarmfront" is a highly organized collective. It swarms digital platforms with demagogic rhetoric against (among other things) "genocidal" immigration and "forced" interracial relationships, propagating their "mind viruses" for more than 10 years now to make these platforms and people on them more susceptible to their ideology. Along with training podcasts on Swarmfront politics and debate strategies, its members use a *massive* online "instructional" seminar called "Bob's UnderGround Seminar" (or BUGS, which is also what its members call themselves)—named after its founder Bob Whitaker, a Ronald Reagan appointee. Swarmfront also has a rhetorical style guide of 19 tactics for spreading propaganda and a topical database called "BUGS Buddy" of copy-and-paste responses used for raids. And in order to raid these platforms collectively, BUGS post links to targeted platforms on a sub-forum titled "Where did you post the Mantra today?"

As someone committed to social justice and in a long-term interracial relationship, I recognize as a central ethical challenge the possible collateral violence that can result from this research. At first, I abandoned the research for this reason. My partner identifies as a biracial Black woman, and we both fear the possibility of her being attacked. After the events in Charlottesville, however, she told me to use my privileged position as a white man to pursue the research and expose Swarmfront *as* a collective, undercutting BUGS' attempts to appear as many individuals on a digital platform who just so happen to share ideologies. I therefore convened a group research meeting with faculty mentors to ensure that the research privileges her safety as an ethical necessity.

A digital feminist research ethics necessarily entails a commitment to social justice. The commitment then requires a critical interrogation of at least two ethical challenges of exposure for this research: (1) potentially dangerous exposure of myself as a researcher—and therefore my partner—during and after the research process and (2) unintentionally beneficial exposure for Swarmfront and its ideologies through publication and citation.

In this context, establishing a researcher-participant relationship with Swarmfront's BUGS would be unethical and, frankly, careless. Among other things, I take technological and procedural precautions in how I access their texts and how much I access at any given time, not knowing to what degree digital activity might be monitored. Texts indicate that Swarmfront maintains private backchannels, but accessing those spaces would also require receiving informed consent to use the collected information as found data. I instead created Google Alerts for main "mantras" to help me better document and understand Swarmfront activities that might not be publicly archived on its digital spaces, but are still publicly available on the swarmed platforms.

Importantly, ethical attention must extend beyond data collection into the rhetorical ethics of framing and citation for publication. Circulating demagogic rhetoric uncritically perpetuates injustice, helping perform the work of demagoguery. I attempt to mitigate the risk by theorizing this collective as an example of what I call "parasitic publics" (as opposed to counterpublics). This theoretical frame heavily historicizes Swarmfront's demagogic rhetoric with pro-slavery, pro-segregationist rhetorics—a practice of critical contextualization that seeks to undercut the ways in which demagoguery can operate through dehistoricization and disinformation. And with citation as feminist memory (Ahmed, 2017), refusing direct citation of this parasitic public's demagogic rhetoric in the final publication performs a citation politics of just erasure as a practice of digital feminist research ethics.

Chris Lindgren: A Reflection on Unmarked Logistical Practices of Field Research

Field research is messy. Graduate programs attempt to tame this messiness through institutionalized coursework in research design, disciplinary epistemologies, and becoming well-read across different problem domains. When I was confronted with the task of selecting a research site, I realized how my training had not prepared me for such a difficult networking process. Indeed, site *selection* fails to justly capture the process involved in meeting and building a relationship with research participants. While my story ends

happily, I speculate that much of my success amounts to a network of support and privilege afforded by my own being as slightly older, able-bodied, cisgendered, white male.

In what follows, I reflect upon my experiences negotiating the technology industry with the attempt to instigate future inquiry into the polylogical nature of the embodied work to locate a research site. It is imperative that Computers and Writing researchers yield more field-based research projects, so we can contribute to intersectional theories and activist research agendas within professional domains. Like many industries, the technology sector has long been known for its biases against any person who is not white, cisgendered, and male (Abbate, 2012; Hicks, 2017), so what gaps in graduate mentoring can be marked by reflecting on questions of when, during a novice's first venture into the field?

I use these questions to identify unmarked boundaries that potentially impede successful and nurturing graduate experiences by reflecting on my graduate research experience as I attempted to find a site for field research. Overall, I offer my narrative as a small step toward developing an intersectional phronesis within the organizational context of graduate programs. I highlight how the arrival and constitution of my case-study was, has been, and is a reflexive negotiation between my identity, research goals, and my substantive experiences with the broader technology industry in which I sought out to study.

Some Embodied Differences During My Site Selection

My selection process involved a rough 6 months of cold calls and meet-and-greets. I followed leads provided by fellow colleagues, friends, and others whom I met along the way. I engaged different computer-coding communities through correspondence and events such as hackathons and meetups. After some time, I found myself inundated with phone calls, emails, LinkedIn message threads. These forms of communicative labor included invisible time and money, none of which I did not anticipate. I hosted people in restaurants and coffee shops, and I attended more hackathons and more programmer community meet-ups.

Along the way, I experienced two main fears in response to my research requests, which can be characterized as fear of 1) leaking of industry secrets, and 2) fearful managers who interpreted me as a threat to productivity. Regarding the first fear, the texts that developers write are defined as patented and licensed technologies. Consequently, many domains with patent-protected hardware and closed-licensed code rejected my requests. Secondly, managers feared that I would harm their productivity. One manager noted how

my research would "take developers from their chairs." Overall, my presence was perceived as suspect and a potentially costly endeavor.

What if I wasn't me?

I look like the majority of people who sustain power in the technology industry: white, heterosexual, and male. How differently would this process have gone, if not for my personal embodied relations? I didn't need to justify my participation in community meetups, hackathons, or email chains. Yet, how would I advise a graduate student to network in these contexts and situations, if they didn't have this embodied sameness? These are questions that I carry forward into my new status as a tenure-track faculty, who will train up the next generations of researchers.

Currently, our discipline borrows training and methodologies from other fields across the humanities and social sciences. Spinuzzi (2018) remains the most thorough treatment of fieldwork preparation and conduct. He helps researchers draft important documents and consider much of the logistical issues noted herein. However, Spinuzzi's adherence to Activity Theory permeates his advice, which requires a commitment to implicitly neutral ideas about "breakdowns" in professional information-workflows. Indeed, feminist organizational researchers (Acker, 2006; Fletcher, 2001; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) readily admit their own difficulties to identify how ideological-informed readings of bodies affect workplace communication. In the conclusion below, I ask more questions of privilege that are more easily marked, if we begin with an intersectional phronesis: an eye cast toward the socially organized ways bodies make differences, as much as they make unmarked sameness.

Phronetic Futures

In an effort to move toward a conclusion to this short article, we offer a list of phronetic futures to our individual projects. We felt limited by word-count but also bolstered by sharing space with one another. Together, we question what our bodies go through as we engage in our research: finding research sites, engaging with our participants, recognizing the land where we learn as an additional research participant deserving of ethical attention, and preserving discursive memories while honoring contemporary voices that are often silenced while silencing those that have spoken too loudly within our history.

Baniya, through her embodied experiences and international organization work, offers an understanding of how ethical phronetic practices could be used outside of academia to represent diversity during times of disaster. She uses iconographic tracking developed by Gries (2015) as her methodology

to trace practices of using images of women and children during disasters. She questions: how can feminist ethical practices be used in international workplaces for establishing cross-cultural communication that helps to mitigate the challenges put forth by the disaster?

Hutchinson offers that an intersectional phronesis engages the land where we come to know as an active research participant in our scholarship. Ethical, intersectional feminist research can embrace Indigenous methodologies by recognizing the knowledge-making practices that predate, yet include our bodies. In going forward, she asks: how is *what* we research shaped by *where* we research?

Kumari questions the motivations of graduate program designers and leaders in considering intersectional identities and experiences that shape the people in all their embodiment that navigate doctoral programs. Similarly, how might researchers consider their own intersectional phronesis when conducting empirical research on populations within which they additionally participate?

Larson asks other privileged scholars to consider how feminist research ethics involves an intersectional phronesis of responsibility. It's an ethical responsibility to undertake troubling research increasingly experienced as violent for those with less privilege and especially for those whose embodied identities are being actively targeted. It's an equally important ethical responsibility to account for possible collateral violence during and after this process. And in necessarily taking on this responsibility, what does self-care entail?

Lindgren calls for an intersectional phronesis that supports graduate students as faculty prepare them for the mess of field research. Spinuzzi (2018) offers a starting point. Yet, I suggest that the field would benefit from marking the embodied complexities of fieldwork, which ought to begin with intersectional theories. Consequently, how do we recognize privileged access to resources befit for networking within professional domains, or the logistics of field research shape and are shaped by implicit bodily differences of gender, race, sexuality, and able-bodiedness?

References

Abbate, J. (2012). *Recoding gender*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Absolon, Kathleen E. (Minogiizhigokwe). (2011). *Kaandossiwin: How we come to know*. Blackpoint, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Acker, Joan. (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender and Society, 20*(4), 441–464.

Ahmed, Sara. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. (1995). *The writing of the disaster*. Lincoln, NE: University of

Nebraska Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241–1299.

Dolmage, Jay T. (2009). Metis, mêtis, mestiza, medusa: Rhetorical bodies across rhetorical traditions. *Rhetoric Review, 28*(1), 1–28.

Dolmage, Jay T. (2014). *Disability rhetoric*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Erdrich, Louise. (2003). *Books and islands in Ojibwe country*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Fletcher, Joyce. (2001). *Disappearing acts: Gender, power, and relational practice at work*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gries, Laurie E. (2015). *Still life with rhetoric: A new materialist approach for visual rhetorics*. Logan, UT: Utah University State Press.

Haas, Angela M. (2018). Toward a digital cultural rhetoric. In Jonathan Alexander & Jacqueline Rhodes (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of digital writing and rhetoric* (pp. 412–422). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hicks, Marie. (2017). *Programmed inequality: How Britain discarded women technologists and lost its edge in computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kirsch, Gesa E. (2005). Friendship, friendliness, and feminist fieldwork. S*igns: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30*(4), 2163–2172.

Newkirk, Thomas. (1992). The narrative roots of case study. In Gesa E. Kirsch & Patricia A. Sullivan (Eds.), *Methods and methodology in composition research* (pp. 130–152). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Newkirk, Thomas. (1996). Seduction and betrayal in qualitative research. In Peter Mortenson and Gesa E. Kirsch (Eds.), *Ethics and representation in qualitative studies of literacy* (pp. 3–16). National Council of Teachers of English.

Papacharissi, Zizi. (2014). *Affective publics sentiment, technology, and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.

Powell, Malea, Levy, Daisy, Riley-Mukavetz, Andrea, Brooks-Gillies, Marilee, Novotny, Maria, Fisch-Ferguson, Jennifer, & The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab. (2014). Our story begins here: Constellating cultural rhetorics. *Enculturation*, (18). Retrieved from http://www.enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here

Royster, Jacqueline J., & Kirsch, Gesa. E. (2012). *Feminist rhetorical practices: New horizons for rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies*. Carbondalel, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Spinuzzi, Clay. (2018). *Topsight 2.0: A guide to studying, diagnosing, and fixing information flow in organizations*. Austin, TX: Urso Press.

Tatli, Ahu, & Oʐbilgin, Mustafa. (2012). Surprising intersectionalities of inequality and privilege: The case of the arts and cultural sector. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, 311*(3), 249–65.