

Coming through Loud and Queer

Ethnomusicological Ethics of Voice and Violence in Real and Virtual Battlegrounds

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I fought thousands of informants in my first year of fieldwork. In my defense, everyone was shooting and swinging and shouting at me. Guns, flamethrowers, swords, and pipe bombs made the earth run red, day and night.

One afternoon in August 2008, I was hiding out in the sewers, taking a break from the mayhem to write in my journal. Upon preparing to leave this relative safe zone, I stopped to spray-paint Barack Obama's iconic "Hope" image on a nearby wall.¹ Before I could reach the concrete arch of the exit, however, I heard a faint *ploosh, ploosh, ploosh* in the distance. It sounded like the crescendoing slap of boots against shallow water in an adjacent tunnel.

Someone was coming. Ally? Foe? A spy disguised as a friend? I couldn't take any chances.

So I dashed to a corner and activated my cloaking device. The splashy staccatos grew louder, and the source emerged: yes, combat boots worn by a gigantic enemy soldier with a rocket launcher slung over his shoulder. As the goliath lumbered into view, I could hear him muttering under his breath, a hodgepodge of trash talk, homophobic curses, and misogynist slurs. His voice was gruff, coarse, almost intimidating. At least he hadn't seen me.

But just as this soldier was about to make his way back out of the tunnel, the Obama poster caught his eye. He paused in front of it . . . then whipped out a metal shovel and began bashing the image. *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. Each strike of the shovel carved a charcoal scar on the red, white, and blue pensive face. And with each scuff mark, I grew more indignant.

I probably should have stayed put and jotted down observations. Instead, I tiptoed out of the shadows, uncloaked, and inched toward the preoccupied soldier. For a second, I considered saying something—raising my own voice—but

¹ Shepard Fairey created this now-famous and enormously commercialized poster of Barack Obama (Gambino 2009).



Figure 18.1: [above] Sewers in a *Team Fortress 2* match and [below, from left to right] a Barack Obama poster, covered with dents, scuff marks, and eventually blood. Screen captures from the author's first-person avataric perspective.

ultimately decided against it, and instead plunged the blade of my knife into his back.

The soldier collapsed onto the floor like a rag doll. His movements looked unreal, like some overanimated fatality one would see in a cartoon or a video game. I stared at the soldier's corpse, then at the beat-up poster of the would-be president, before abandoning the scene of the crime, probably none the worse for wear (Figure 18.1).

There's Something Queer about Ethnography

Was it bad ethnographic form to stab this soldier? And to do so silently? Perhaps the issue wasn't so much the fact that I attacked him, but rather how my stabbing felt partly motivated by his symbolic assault on my spray-painted poster.² Was

² TF2 enables a player to upload any image to their account and to spray this image on any in-game surface (one copy at a time), visible to all other players in the map. A player can update their image at will and swap images on the fly.

he an anti-Obama fanatic? A merely mischievous Republican? A racist? Exactly the opposite? Could I discern any of this solely from his shovel and his throaty cussing? In the absence of pertinent information, I made a snap judgment and assumed the worst of the soldier. Yet my presumptions of his unsubstantiated bigotry lent extra satisfaction to his demise anyway, a tiny victory of swift retribution via bytes and pixels.

Strange though these reflections may sound, here was just an ordinary day in the online video game *Team Fortress 2* (TF2), where I conducted fieldwork between 2008 and 2011. TF2, released by Valve Corporation in 2007, is a first-person-shooter (FPS) game that continues to host tens of thousands of active players every day. In TF2 matches, a player is sorted into a Red Team or a Blue Team to compete in scenarios such as Capture the Flag and King of the Hill. My ethnography, which formed a chapter of my dissertation (Cheng 2012:151–92) and subsequent book (Cheng 2014:139–66), focused on how the use of live voice-chat (players speaking to one another in real time through microphones) could produce playful, inflammatory, and politically charged soundscapes. With TF2—as with any FPS game—one tends to hear voices that are overwhelmingly male. Most female-identified players whom I interviewed thus noted that they hesitate to use voice-chat due to the high risks of verbal harassment. On the blog *Terra Nova*, one commenter remarked that in online shooters, “the girls stop talking completely, the shy people shut up mostly, and all that is left are the 12–18 year old guys, and it becomes a locker room” (Cheng 2014:143). Because male voices audibly dominate, any non-speaking players are largely assumed to be male unless or until they vocally out themselves as Other(wise). I framed this dilemma as an acoustemological closet for women: damned if you speak, homogenized if you don’t.

Peering into this closet, I grappled with a slate of perplexing sounds and subjects: prepubescent male players whose disembodied voices were misheard as female by other players (some of whom were likewise boys who ended up being misidentified, and so on), giving rise to nervous chatter about the ambiguous sex telegraphed by high-pitched voices in general—chatter that reified binarized genders and elided spaces for transvocalities; the potential for voice-changing (sonically cyborgian) technologies, or suspicions thereof, to thwart players’ attempts to visualize and categorize speakers’ identities; and players’ frequent appeals to alibis of role-play, performativity, and humor when accused of sexual harassment or trolling (*just a game, just hamming it up, just for laughs*), championing the normative sociality of seemingly antisocial speech and simulation.³ It has been ten years since I first stepped into a TF2 match, and now,

³ On the materialities, poetics, and potentialities of trans and genderqueer vocalities, see, for example, Krell (2014) and Goldin-Perschbacher (2007).

at a decade's distance, I feel an urge to provide some long-marinating critiques about the ethical vagaries and quandaries of online game fieldwork. Stabbed informants? Check. Got blown up by a grenade while text-interviewing the player holding the grenade launcher? Check. Saw graffiti sprays of lesbian pornographic hentai? Heard the words *fag* and *bitch* and *rape* slung around as casually as bullets? Wobbled around decisions of whether to speak up or stay quiet in this carnivalesque hunting ground?

Constantly.

In my encounters with violence, vice, and voice, my fieldwork seemed to afford, encourage, and even necessitate a playful and pliable methodology. As an ethnographer, I learned to perform the same kinds of simulated barbarities as my interviewees and research associates. Engaging in gameplay and participant-observation, I—my avatar—looked *just like one of the guys*, the rambunctious dude-bros with guns blazing. To parse this idiomatic phrase: *just* (merely, fairly) *like* (almost, but not quite) *one of* (concealment, exculpation, diffusion of responsibility via group participation) *the guys* (the homosocial imaginary in charge). I heard countless instances of sexual harassment and racial epithets, and even though I never contributed to this offense, I took few steps to deter them. In fact, I rarely used voice-chat out of concerns that my own audible contributions could unduly influence or outright silence the very social dynamics I sought to understand.⁴ Upon hearing verbal abuses, I thus came to experience dissonant emotions of gratification (for how these offensive voices gave me something to quote, something to write about) and guilt (for enabling these voices through nonintervention).

In light of this dissonance, I wish to focus on how perhaps much of online game ethnography—and maybe any ethnography—can activate a queer ethics, a flux of guiding ideas defined precisely by their playful indefiniteness. If *ethnography* implies the general study of a culture and its people, then does an ethically queered ethnography entail reimaginings of how a culture and its inhabitants may coexist and thrive otherwise? Can queering ethnographic ethics animate the troubling of right-versus-wrong binaries? Does it move us to yo-yo affectively between what is purportedly ethical and what feels ethical from moment to moment? In one sense, then, a queer ethics does not sound like an ethics at all, if by ethics we mean a codifiable arrangement of attitudes, principles, and behaviors. In another sense, a queer ethics may be the *only* viable ethics given the ambiguous identities, unpredictable circumstances, and moral vicissitudes

⁴ I realize that, when it comes to fieldwork in physical spaces, most scholars no longer believe in the feasibility of pristine environments (enabled by a minimally disruptive, tip-toeing ethnographer). But virtual fieldwork introduces a twist because ethnographers *can*, via disembodiment and avatic re-embodiment, choose to lurk and thus observe the environment without perceptible interference (Hall 2011).

of fieldwork and interactions at large, online as well as offline (Hankins 2014). One caveat: my agenda here to normalize ethical *queering* (a chic verb and gerund among humanists) plainly risks draining the concept of its antinormative charge, dulling its radical edge, and reducing it to a sparkly rhetorical accessory (Wiegman and Wilson 2015; Halberstam 2015). Although this paradox binds me from preventing semantic entropy, I will do my best throughout this chapter to safeguard *queer* and *queering* as active, actionable terms, as opposed to buzzwords complacent with their own ubiquity and opacity.

Maybe this has happened to you: students who are new to studies of gender and sexuality often ask me what it means to *queer* something . . . and what follows is a winding *hem-haw* dialogue in which I pretend to know how to answer that question, ultimately resorting to a half-assed admission of how the alterior principles of queering may defy the verb's definitional cohesiveness. So that's what I say (okay, ramble) to such a student. But here's what I want. I want *queering* foremost to serve as a call to social justice and a quest for better worlds, real and virtual. I want to live, play, and dig in the sandbox of queer optimism upheld by writers such as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Michael Snediker (2009). I want even a preliminary conversation about queerness, in ethnomusicology and beyond, to fill a student with antihomophobic fire and fight, not demoralizing confusion and academic insecurity. With this in mind, and with an ear toward crises of masculinity, surveillance, and shame, I will work through here the concomitant power and powerlessness conveyed by TF2 players' voices—voices that come through loud and clear (full of semantic mischief, rage, misogyny), yet, in the absence of in-person contact, remain comparatively impotent, given speakers' limited potential to make good on threats . . . or so some assume. I close on two solemn notes that drive home the purpose of coming through loud and queer: first, the 2015 tragedy of a real life lost in a storm of internet trolling and transphobia; and second, queer reflections on students' vocal-turned-violent protest of guest speaker Charles Murray at Middlebury College in 2017.

No Harm, No Foul?

"A primary ethical obligation shared by anthropologists is to do no harm," advises the Statement on Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). "Anthropologists should seek to avoid [. . .] harm to dignity, and to bodily and material well-being, especially when research is conducted among vulnerable populations" (American Anthropological Association 2012). First-do-no-harm principles—the mantra of non-maleficence familiarly adopted by healthcare practitioners—are, as the AAA insists, especially important for fieldwork that involves underprivileged communities. But on the surface, these rules don't map

neatly onto my ethnomusicological project and my simulations of violence toward informants in *Team Fortress 2*. An easy way to claim moral exemption in video games overall would be to say that playfighting is par for the course, enabling individuals to connect with one another, build mutual trust, and partake in creative teamwork as well as friendly rivalry. Simulations of war in TF2 are qualitatively different from the challenges of researchers who face severe precarities in real-world environments (Peritore 1990). A legitimate crisis in fieldwork would involve, say, an ethnographer deciding whether to join in violent initiation rites to gain entry into a criminal youth gang in Nicaragua (Rodgers 2001), or an ethnographer choosing whether to stay or to flee when “threatened, searched, suspected of subversion [. . .] in the midst of crossfire” on the streets of early 1990s Port-au-Prince (Kovats-Bernat 2002:209). Compared to such harms, virtual violence could be brushed off as all but trivial.⁵

Yet it’s not so simple.

In 2010, I presented some preliminary research on TF2 during the LGBTQ study group session at an American Musicological Society conference. I showed footage of TF2 gameplay: representations of visceral violence (explosions, gore, flying limbs); players uttering misogynist, racist, and homophobic remarks; and an atmosphere shot through with colorful carnage, all recorded from the first-person perspective of my own knife-waving avatar dashing through the battlefield, apparently engaging in the exact chaos that I, the researcher, had been trying to parse. After my talk, a professor approached me. He said he enjoyed the paper, but also recommended that I, upon completing my dissertation, should move on to a less distressing project for my own peace of mind. A few days after the conference, he emailed me to elaborate:

Dear William,

[. . .] It is your spirit that I worry about in your pursuing such research. I fear that the constant violence, anger, and prejudice found in these video games will affect you psychologically in ways that you cannot foresee and that may be difficult to shake. One cannot touch pitch without some of it coming off on one’s fingers. I fear the desensitization to the act of killing another person, even within such a context. [. . .] Please excuse this avuncular concern if it is unwelcome, but I feel an ethical duty to point out what I see are possible dangers.

Warm regards, — (9 November 2010) (Cheng 2012:17).

⁵ Anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnomusicologists contend frequently and imperfectly with the ethics and experiences of violence in the field. Moral and behavioral challenges confront researchers who venture into circumstances and locations (war zones, gang territories, households with domestic abuse) containing violent acts or ideologies. See Chari and Donner (2010), Craven and Davis (2013), and Castelo-Branco (2010).

The professor's message rang a useful wake-up call, reminding me that second lives (and virtual violence) aren't second nature to everyone. Especially for a person unaccustomed to the aesthetic and cultural conventions of video games, this media can seem outrageous and even dangerous. So while injuries to avatars cause no corresponding physical harm to the players who sit safe and sound behind computer screens, this professor's concerns, if merited, imply that participating in virtual violence can subtly do harm to one's own conscience and, by extension, to society's moral fabric. For despite my lifelong engagement with video games, I can't say for certain whether I've been immune to violent video games' effects on mind, body, and spirit. If I *have* been socialized or adversely affected by games, would I know it? Could I admit it? Over decades of debate, little scholarly consensus has emerged on stubborn questions of how and whether simulations of carnage link up with real-world hostility. Ideas of causation, correlation, imitation (mimesis), and release (catharsis) remain empirically difficult to circumscribe or prove. Either way, one thing I have to remind myself is that, *if* ludic violence were surreptitiously harmful, then the mere fact of being an ethnomusicologist probably doesn't grant me immunity.

In TF2, simulated violence is the norm. Annihilating enemies comes with the territory, as players' disposable avatars are free to die and respawn dozens of times in a matter of minutes. In players' eyes, in fact, it is pacifism that would constitute an explicit violation and daresay queering of social relations (Dougherty 2012). Refraining from killing opponents is a surefire way to get scolded by teammates for not pulling one's weight. Nonviolence in an online FPS can register as its own form of trolling behavior, subject to administrative sanction. Likewise, choosing to sit out a TF2 match—assuming the role of an impartial Spectator who forgoes an avatar and instead observes the match from various selectable camera angles—can appear just as problematic given that such a benchwarmer still technically takes up a spot on a server (each of which maxes out at thirty-two players). Too many nonparticipating Spectators can thus shrink the active roster of teams, resulting in a thinned-out arena, akin to a baseball field with no short-stop or no left-fielder. In this regard, abstaining from TF2's combat during fieldwork wasn't a realistic option. Violence was a virtual imperative.⁶

In a book about the online world simulator *Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff remarks that “ethnography has a special role to play in studying virtual worlds because it has *anticipated* them. Virtual before the Internet existed, ethnography has always produced a kind of virtual knowledge. [. . .] [Anthropology] has

⁶ Another common challenge of narrating any violence lies in how violence can exceed description altogether. To capture, streamline, or sanitize a portrait of violence risks doing ethnographic (that is, representational) violence *to* the field and the inhabitants in question, essentially virtualizing the realities at play. See Das (1990:33) and Daniel (1996:154–93).

always been about avatarizing the self, standing virtually in the shoes (or on the shores) of another culture” (Boellstorff 2008:7, emphasis in original).⁷ Any ethnographic writing or work, Boellstorff remarks, is already virtual owing to its epistemic labors and communications. And any ethnography, we could add, is likewise already playful via elements of performance, improvisation, dialogue, conflict, and collaboration. Video games, as explicit domains of play, are ideally positioned to highlight these ludic elements. Violent simulations in a gameworld such as TF2 further queer such play by upending typical formulas of polite conduct. As theoretical bedfellows, playfulness and queerness both allege the unsettling of norms, rules, and expectations. As political gambits, both call attention to alterity, marginality, and differential embodiment. To deem fieldwork virtual and playful is not to trivialize its aims; to call fieldwork queer is neither to postulate nor to valorize its methodological exceptionalism. Rather, prioritizing a concept of playful queerness can be one means of staving off our potential complacency with one-size-fits-all approaches to ethnography. Game spaces, as much as any site, showcase the possibilities of antinormative personas as they navigate contests of who’s in or out, who’s top or bottom.⁸

Even if we consciously do our best to adapt and improvise across our respective fieldwork, the embodied labors of research might still press us into certain physical and mental habits over time. As I successively passed the 100-, 200-, 500-, and 1000-hour mark in TF2 (automatically tracked by the game), my actions and methods started feeling positively mundane: chat with an informant, blow up a sentry gun, listen to verbal sexual harassment, scribble down a few paragraphs, stab a friend, repeat and repeat and repeat. The novelty of such ventures faded gradually, and the cognitive dissonance born of their initial absurdities melted into familiar tunes. Yet I wonder if this normalization was queer in itself. As much as I attempted to retain a sensitivity toward the stakes of my research, my tried-and-true field methods betrayed a degree of calcification and desensitization nonetheless.

One facet of TF2 fieldwork offered a safety valve in this respect. My go-to avatar was a character capable of camouflage, disguise, and literal backstabbing. Issues of observation and surveillance thus never roamed far from my mind. This reflexivity, however, posed a conundrum in its own right. With my avatar, I could appear *doubly* masked and pseudonymized while undertaking my class-specific duties of infiltration, sabotage, and deceit. Did the two-pronged excuses of *just a game* and *all for research* still fly? Could ethnographic respectability even remain possible when every few minutes in the field, I would hear someone scream . . .

⁷ See also Boellstorff (2007).

⁸ On top-bottom and sub-dom metaphors in music theory, see Maus (1993).



Figure 18.2: A Spy's disguise options in *Team Fortress 2*.

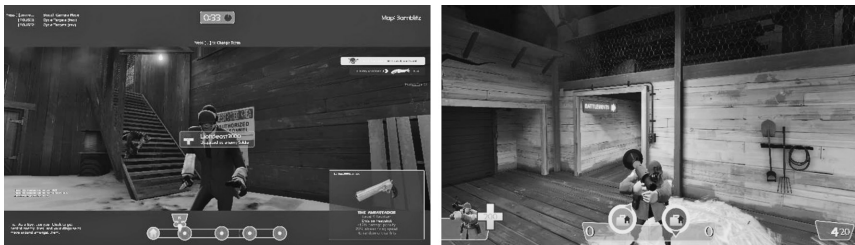


Figure 18.3: A Blue Spy disguised as a Red Soldier, as he [left] would appear to his own team and [right] to the opposing team.

“Spy!”

In TF2, players can select and swap freely between nine character classes (all male in appearance), each with its own distinctive avatar and abilities. Although I dabbled in every class, I spent most of my time playing as the Spy, who possesses skills that happen to be especially conducive to fieldwork. The Spy can disguise himself to look like any other character on either team. So a Spy on the Blue Team can, for example, shapeshift into the appearance of a Blue Sniper, or a Red Medic, or even a Red Spy (Figure 18.2 and Figure 18.3). A Spy can further activate an invisibility cloak and disappear from the enemy's sight. As a counterweight to these remarkable clandestine powers, the Spy is otherwise frail—plagued by low Hit Points, average speed, and poor ranged offense. An outed Spy is usually a dead

Spy. As an ethnographer who almost always played as this sneaky class, hearing my informants and friends shout “Spy!” not only distressed me for gameplay purposes (fearing for the safety of my avatar, exposed as a traitor in the vicinity) but also reminded me of the fraught politics of fieldwork and witnessing. Yelps of “Spy!” brought imagined echoes of “Ethnographer!” (as in *someone who’s watching us . . . an outsider, an imposter*).

The TF2 Spy personifies the tricky affordances, predicaments, and temptations of fieldwork. This character can blend into—literally look identical to—the others around him (assimilating into the native population) or turn invisible altogether. This said, players controlling Spies must learn to move and behave like the specific enemy class that they are imitating at any given moment. If Spies are disguised as speedy Scouts, they might want to run around frantically with a swinging bat; if disguised as stoic Snipers, they should calmly step from side to side with an outstretched rifle. Embodying a Spy is a one-man show and nine-character performance, demanding a stylized improvisation of animated and normative gestures to maximize the chance for safe passage through perilous surroundings. And just as the Spy wears many masks in unfamiliar territories, so fieldworkers put on alternate hats over the course of their travels and residencies, tailoring their actions, voices, routines, and rituals to the allowances and pressures of particular circumstances, interlocutors, and institutions.

According to the mandates of ethics review boards, ethnography and espionage don’t mix. In the field, however, the two can appear—or feel—hard to differentiate. Anthropologists have certainly been accused of espionage, whether it’s government-hired spying in particular or uncouth modes of surveillance in general (Price 2016:221–24; Browman 2011; Zenobi 2010). Official guidelines for fieldwork tend to push researchers toward transparency except in cases where disclosures might result in the harm of self or others. But transparency in online multiplayer video games can run into medium-specific challenges. A game ethnographer may intentionally or inadvertently lurk in virtual spaces with relative ease, defaulting to anonymity or pseudonymity via monikers and avatars. Deliberate efforts to come out as an ethnographer in an online gamespace aren’t as easy as one might think: while in the physical world, some fieldworkers might be identifiable through their appearances or comportment—say, a light-skinned researcher, with audio recorder and notebook in hand, openly and audibly interviewing musicians in a black church—video game avatars, even when visually customizable, have few means of looking *like* a researcher. Furthermore, in an online game, broadcasting one’s research intentions either out loud or via text can cause disruptions. Especially when the topic of inquiry *is* voice-chat, the surprising announcement of an ethnographer’s presence might lead players to cease speaking or modulate their conversations out of self-consciousness, discomfort, or sheer confusion. Yet another complicating factor owes to the rapid

turnover rates of a game's server population. As players hop from one match to another—which they do in order to experience a variety of maps and communities, akin to channel-surfing—any disclosure by a researcher would require constant performative repetition upon this entry of new participants. It is therefore not only procedurally and morally questionable but also *practically impossible* for an ethnographer of an online game to be definitively, continuously *out* in the field. (Granted, this revolving-door dilemma is hardly new for certain unmarked queer or nonvisibly disabled individuals whose coming out is an exercise in repetition.)

As a Spy-embodied researcher whose personal and research identity could not be reliably disclosed to surrounding players, I practiced an unconventional and at times uncomfortable manner of ethnography. This wasn't lurking per se, since I was participating actively in matches and corresponding with individual informants through one-on-one email exchanges and text messages. But during matches, my own silence enabled an aural stance that felt like eavesdropping. Did I hear players, or did I *overhear* them? For starters, I was tautly listening to the dialogues of players who had little reason to assume the presence of an ethnographer. Upon hearing offensive utterances, I would document them while trying to remain impartial and level-headed, effectively rising *above* the fray as I *overlooked* the need to intervene. And during these practices of observation and documentation, I would instinctively assume that the insults—even, say, homophobic slurs or racist Asian jokes—couldn't possibly be about me, given that, as a non-intervening researcher, I saw myself *in* but not *of* the field. None of this means that my remote, avatarized, and pseudonymous ethnography was able to remain impersonal. Largely due to TF2's ludic frame, I took playful liberties in my virtual actions, whether it was stabbing an Obama-basher or going undercover as a Spy.

One line I rarely crossed was the sound barrier. I wore a mic-equipped headset during fieldwork but seldom spoke into the curved microphone hovering just two inches from my lips. In moments when I considered speaking up, I became extra aware of this dangling mic—how it was always ready to receive, ready to absorb my voice. Yet I neither participated in trash talk and harassment nor spoke out against such abuse. Elaborating on Dwight Conquergood's concept of "co-performative witnessing" in ethnographic work, D. Soyini Madison has stressed the political implications of a researcher's push and pull with communities in question: "We are quintessential witnesses in dialogic performance because the reciprocity of our engagement—the inter-animation of response and address—affirms and creates our subjectivity. We cannot be subjects without dialogue, without witnessing" (Madison 2007:829).⁹ Dialogue here, as Madison uses it,

⁹ See also Conquergood (1991).

refers to relationships writ large rather than to literal speech. Still, my abstinence from voice-chat in TF2 throws questions of subjectivity into loud relief. I did engage in the push and pull (in fact, the shove and yank and so much more) of virtual play, yet all without voice. Although I've already floated some preliminary factors for this silence—risks of intrusion, undue influence, ethnographic etiquette—there's another factor that I've had difficulty admitting to myself, much less to others. It is an unsavory consideration because it digs at not just the present me (the adult ethnographer) but also the past me (a closeted gay child, once upon a time).¹⁰

Locker Room Talk: Confessions of an Ethno-Gaymer

During TF2 fieldwork, a part of me—namely, the inner gay child—balked at the thought of speaking out against a torrent of offensive, jocular, or otherwise agitated male voices. The acoustic locker rooms of TF2 reminded me of . . . well, the high school locker room, the no-fag's-land where, away from adult supervision, the loudest and largest sweaty bodies reigned: sonically, visually, odorously, kinetically, against all senses, against all reason. With gay rumors, size comparisons, and dick and pussy jokes flying left and right, my preteen and teenage selves had good reason to keep the eyes down, speak only when spoken to, and change in and out of gym clothes with the alacrity of a magician's assistant.

In TF2 matches, hearing a profane chorus of male voices thus had the uncanny effect of repeatedly transporting me back into my adolescent body, back to a closeted, insecure, and embarrassingly pubescent stage of life. Shouldn't I have outgrown these insecurities by now? As an out-and-proud professor, didn't It Get Better? Despite the demonstrable safety of my ethnographic body (pseudonymous, avatarized, physically untouchable behind the computer screen), an illusory feeling of danger lingered throughout fieldwork. The semantics, affective charge, and mere timbre of masculine vocality *en masse* sufficed to trigger an illogical state of high alert. Just as in youth, when I remained fearfully mute when peers spat curses and derogatory gay jokes, so I kept my mouth shut whenever TF2 players struck up incendiary banter. My nominal role as a fieldworker actually afforded a convenient excuse to stay quiet. Moral and vocal reticence came preapproved through appeals to academic decorum.

Discordantly, the sounds of slur-slinging players could feel more visceral to me than the death-a-minute eviscerations onscreen. As I clung to silence, I enacted and endorsed the avataric actions by default, playing along in virtual bloodsport.

¹⁰ On the heuristic queerness of childhood and the queered relationship between (artificial) separations of child and adult, see Stockton (2009) and Halberstam (2012).

So despite my uneasy relationship with the speech acts of hegemonic masculinity, I engaged nevertheless in simulated violence, which, especially to outsiders (such as the concerned, avuncular professor at the musicology conference), could very well register as an egregious performance of hypermasculinity.¹¹ On the one hand, then, I wielded some authority in the TF2 field, given that I played proficiently as a Spy, extensively surveilled arenas, interviewed and befriended individual players, and eventually published a narrative on the sexual and queer politics of in-game voice-chat. On the other hand, I forfeited notable opportunities for direct influence: by failing to speak up, I was neither claiming the potential agencies of voice nor actively redressing the game's cultures of harassment—harassment that may have become habitual precisely by the scarcity of forthright objections to such offense. To be sure, in online gameworlds where trolling is the status quo, any voice that pleads for toned-down rhetoric would immediately sound like the outlier, the sanctimonious scold cutting against the arena's topical and amplitudinal grain. Voices of reason and de-escalation would come across, in other words, as veritably queer . . . meaning the new (or not-that-new) normal has become so-called locker room talk, glossed by the tautological apologia of *boys will be boys* (Wierzbicka 1987).

Here are two quotes, both recorded in 2005, unearthed from audiovisual archives during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign:

(*One*) Well, I'll tell you the funniest [thing] is that I'll go backstage before a show, and everyone's getting dressed and ready and everything else, and you know, no men are anywhere, and I'm allowed to go in because I'm the owner of the pageant and therefore I'm inspecting it. You know, I'm inspecting. I want to make sure that everything is good. You know, the dresses. "Is everyone okay?" You know, they're standing there with no clothes. "Is everybody okay?" And you see these incredible looking women, and so I sort of get away with things like that. (Kaczynski, Massie, and McDermott 2016)

(*Two*) I moved on her [Nancy O'Dell] like a bitch, but I couldn't get there, and she was married. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.¹²

In the first instance, on *The Howard Stern Show*, Trump was describing what he had said in women's *actual* dressing rooms. In the second, on the notorious

¹¹ Sociologists, psychologists, and gender theorists have long posited and contested the connections between masculinity and violence. Despite an absence of consensus, what's certain these days is how following any mass shooting or criminal atrocity, numerous articles spring up to pin blame on the ideological strangleholds of toxic masculinities. For critiques of "hegemonic masculinity" as a concept, see, for example, Hall (2002) and Connell (2002).

¹² "Donald Trump—'Grab Her by the Pussy,'" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wM248Wo54U>.

Hollywood Access tape, he was boasting about sexual assault to Billy Bush, a hot-mic'd conversation that Trump and his political surrogates have tried to wave off as the humdrum banter of *hypothetical* men's locker rooms (Fahrenthold 2016). Trump, when grilled by journalists and by debate moderators in 2016 about these remarks, said he had never actually done the things he said he had done. Trump's insistence to Billy Bush that he "can do anything" because he is famous and powerful cast a lengthy rhetorical shadow, one that gave Trump the cover to *say anything about doing anything* because, as far as evidentiary burdens of speech acts go, *saying* is not *doing*. But victims came forward to corroborate the lewd encounters. "[Trump] just came strolling right in," recalled Tasha Dixon, who, during her time in the Miss USA Pageant 2001, was eighteen years old. "There was no second to put a robe on or any sort of clothing or anything. Some girls were topless. Other girls were naked. Our first introduction to him was when we were at the dress rehearsal and half-naked changing into our bikinis" ("Former Beauty Queen" 2016). As #Pussygate made the 2016 headlines, it incited a renewed war of words about the defensibility of locker room talk. Some people insisted that locker room talk shouldn't be taken seriously. Others argued that such talk perpetuates and normalizes rape culture. Some upstanding male athletes tried to offer chivalrous assurances that men don't talk this way in locker rooms at all, while others reported they do (Figure 18.4). Such debates, of course, have raged for decades, and online technologies have only fed the fire. Concerning the internet at large (beyond online games), Danielle Keats Citron describes how online "commentators dismiss [gender harassment] as harmless locker-room talk, characterizing perpetrators as juvenile pranksters and targeted individuals as overly sensitive complainers. Others consider cyber gender harassment as an inconvenience that victims can ignore or defeat with counterspeech" (2009:375; see also Lipton 2011).



Figure 18.4: Chivalrous refutations of locker room talk by athletes [*left*] Sean Doolittle and [*right*] Chris Conley, who leverage their culturally sanctioned masculinity (via baseball and football, respectively) to deny wholesale, implausibly, the *existence* of locker room talk—good intentions notwithstanding.

Consider the physical and acoustic space of a gym locker room, where some men spew rhetorical fantasies about heterosexual cravings. Maybe they do so to dispel or sublimate the homosocial and homoerotic tensions erected by the copresence of sweaty nude bodies. Libidinous banter becomes an efficient one-two punch of female objectification and queer disavowal. It's also an implicit form of extreme vetting that helps root out any gays in the midst (join in persuasively, lest you get outed). But the occasional yet inevitable glimpse of another man's junk is not the only inducer of overcompensatory speech acts. Sights of genitalia aside, the sounds of men's collective voices convey an audible threshold of testosterone that can urge counteractive bids for heterosexual masculinity. Here, then, is the soapy rub: chauvinist banter is used to banish the specter of homosexuality, but the banter itself repeatedly provides *sonorous, timbrally gendered* reminders that there sure are a lot of chatty, naked men in the room.

At first blush, players of an online game have a strong case for excusing foul speech acts as *just* locker room talk. Due to the geographic distance between pseudonymous players, some of whom might reside on separate continents, offenders could argue that they literally, physically cannot make good on their threats or come-ons even if they wanted to. Trolls and online harassers can also easily disavow their speech acts as the stuff of games. Attributions and accusations of authenticity, nature, or intent bump up against offenders' claims of speaking in the spirit of histrionics, hyperbole, and comedy. Trolling is, the excuse goes, the bombastic adoption of virtual personas and nonserious communication. As performative creatures, trolls purport to speak in many tongues, in voices not always their own. Indeed, despite the popular valorization of voice as somehow natural and intrinsic to the body, there may simultaneously remain, as Martin Daughtry puts it, an "ever-present element of artifice in vocality," in the sense of its discursive "constructedness" and iterative "theatricality" (2012:246). Notwithstanding their frequent trafficking in sexism and homophobia, trolls hide behind verbal drag and semantic masquerade, claiming that what they say doesn't define who they are. Vexingly, the more flagrant (semantically charged) a troll's speech act may be, the more easily it passes for hot air and expletive artifice (semantically empty). The ventriloquistic rationalization: *the things I'm saying are so appalling (so out there), you can't possibly believe they represent my real voice (the person inside)*.

Abundant philosophical, musicological, and media scholarship has framed disembodied voices as phenomenal curiosities (or explicitly queer objects) implicated in matters of power, persuasion, and even violence. Steven Connor, author of *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, notes how "the separation of the voice from its source has often been represented as a wounding, or severance. Voices do not merely drift apart from their origins, it is suggested, nor

are they inadvertently lost: they are ripped or wrested” (2012:1).¹³ Beyond the mutilation, censorship, and otherwise violent measures that can strip voice from body, disembodied voices themselves can perform a violence to the symbolic systems around speech acts and their accountability. A built-in alibi (Latin: *alius + ibi*, meaning *someplace else*) accompanies the disembodied voice, which indeed emanates from (or gets projected to) someplace else, somewhere other than the visible body. A voice’s very disembodiability indexes a technological artifice that enables the speaker to claim intrinsic performativity, an occasion of theatrical artistry that debars a listener’s attempt to read into the speech act at face value.

Despite the violence that can be done to and done by voice, Enlightenment ideals in the West have largely positioned voice as violence’s opposite. “According to the connotative field that surrounds voice,” observes Martin Daughtry, “to speak is to communicate with one’s others, to sing is to commune with them, and both together are the antithesis of killing” (2012:252). Drawing on his fieldwork on sound and music in wartime Iraq, however, Daughtry goes on to disclaim:

Shouting curses at someone is not the same as shooting bullets at them. But shooting people, it must be said, is often preceded, accompanied, and followed by shouting, and screaming, and sobbing, and laughing, and singing, and all manner of vocal expression, both ritualistic and improvised. Our voices are actions that set the stage for further action, and that action can bend toward or away from violence, sometimes in keeping with our intentions, sometimes in contradiction to them. (2012:254–55)

Daughtry’s observations jibe with the warnings of legal theorists and sociologists who reject the mitigated term “nonlethal weaponry.” A more appropriate and accurate term, some argue, is “prelethal” (Davison 2009; Cheng 2016:96–98). To designate Tasers, tear gas, or sound cannons as “nonlethal” is to unleash a rhetorical smokescreen that obscures the *always real potential for lethal escalation* during the deployment of such devices. In anthropological terminology, the smokescreen requires “diachronic” scrutiny to clear up; the story arc takes time.¹⁴ (Pepper spray may be nonlethal on its own, but when was the last time local riot police—or a S.W.A.T. team—carried *only* pepper spray?) In physical or virtual battlefields, voices can likewise accompany brutal action, sharing a common stage. An offender’s voice, in injurious situations, is not just background noise, second fiddle to the knife. More than a virtual force, this voice can act as an embodied accomplice, and, depending on its juridical classification (incitement

¹³ See also Connor (2000). Appropriately, Ventrilo is the name of a popular proprietary VoIP (Voice-over Internet Protocol) software for gamers who use voice chat.

¹⁴ On synchronic versus diachronic ethnographic approaches, see Rice (2017:49–53).

to violence, hate speech, fighting words), may be charged and condemned accordingly in courts of law.¹⁵ Although the sing-songy, lilting playground mantra ♪ *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me* ♪ posits hypothetical resilience against verbal assault, the misleading conjunction (*but*) veils the reality of how the people who are subjected to harsh words are *likely at greater risk* to suffer the slings of material sticks and stones. Make no mistake: it's not just children who, without knowing better, use the sticks and stones excuse. Adults do it. Lawyers do it. Even Supreme Court Justices do it. During the oral arguments for the 1996 case *Schenck v. Pro-Choice Network of Western New York*, concerning the First Amendment rights of anti-abortion protesters, Justice Antonin Scalia stated, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can never hurt me. That's the First Amendment."¹⁶

"That's certainly our position of it," responded Jay Alan Sekulow, the lawyer representing anti-abortion activist Paul Schenck and his co-petitioners.

"And your point is they've never used sticks or stones," queried Justice John Paul Stevens.

"Not these clients!" replied Sekulow with a loud chuckle (a sound clear as day in the audio recording but undocumented in the transcript), as if there were anything laughable about a high-court legal decision on the constitutionality of whether someone can yell at abortion patients that they will burn in hell.

As philosopher Susan Brison puts it, constitutionalist defenses of hateful or harmful speech often rely on fallible claims to speech's "costless" or "priceless" properties (1998:40). Arguments that speech is "costless" propose that it cannot exact tolls or cause injury. Arguments that speech is "priceless" call for its unqualified protection even where vitriol and threats are concerned. Yet *empty threat* and *idle threat* are oxymorons. By definition, a threat exerts force, which should simultaneously obviate the possibility of inconsequentiality (empty) or inaction (idle). In a book on hate speech, Judith Butler argues that although a verbal threat "is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language, a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force" (1997:9). Now, someone who slings hate speech over the internet or in online games could argue that these screen-based mediums make it almost systematically impossible for this speech to prefigure harm. Unless a troll were to track down a target's

¹⁵ In short, the graphical assets of a game such as TF2 are predetermined; play the game for a few hours and you can pretty much see every animated explosion, dismemberment, and portrayal of violence that the game has to offer. Players' own voices, by contrast, are not bound by these preset parameters.

¹⁶ Full audio recording and transcript of this case can be found at "Schenck v. Pro-Choice Network of Western New York" (2017). I first came across Scalia's remarks in Brison (1998).

home address—which does happen—the leap from speech act to physical harm is curbed by the nature of remote and pseudonymous interactions.

Online FPS players who shout threats, unlike soldiers who do so in real-world warzones (per Daughtry's investigation), then, cannot *themselves physically make good* on their words. *Physically* might look like the most emphasis-worthy word in this preceding clause; it stands out, as adverbs tend to do. A subtler key word, however, is *themselves*. A male player (Player M) who hollers to a female player (Player F) through voice-chat, "I want to find and rape you!" likely cannot and will not ever find the woman he is addressing to inflict harm, even if the desire to harm existed. But to fix our sights on Player M's unlikelyhood of directly and corporeally assaulting Player F is to miss the broader regime of sexual violence in a society where such speech acts are condoned or outright normalized. One-to-one: *this* Player M may never meet *this* Player F in person. Yet one-in-five: the probability, according to conservative estimates, that Player F has been or will be raped by *someone* in her lifetime; statistics for assault and victimization climb even higher for trans women, black and brown women, and homeless or displaced women. And on his end, Player M might at some point assault (or have already assaulted) a woman other than this Player F, especially if one believes that his misogynist remarks in an online gamespace—appeals to *just joking!* or *just a game!* aside—signal, even in the slightest, a penchant for the trivialization or perpetration of sexual assault.

Aside from cases of extreme trolls who have done immediate damage to the lives and livelihood of their victims, assumptions that trolls are *all talk* overlook—overhear—the grander networks of harm that enable and ensue from collective offenses in virtual as well as physical environments.¹⁷ Appeals to performance, play, and humor only take us so far. At some point, reprehensible speech acts cannot be waived or waved off as nonharassment, as a pure matter of *whether* (as in, *I said I will rape you, but I will not be able to rape you*); at the very least, they are materializations of preharassment, previsions of *if* or *when* (as in *I said I will rape you, and here is a cruel memento or warning for the all-too-possible abuse you have experienced or will eventually experience*).¹⁸ Most people who spout sexual harassment in games or on the internet would disavow any affiliation with actual communities of sex offenders. Then again, such disavowal isn't simply up to the harassers to ascertain. Inverting the familiar postcolonial query of whether one can speak for others, we could say that anyone could already be speaking on others' behalf, wittingly or not (Alcoff 1991–92). Even in *virtual* spaces, players'

¹⁷ My ideas on speech, act, and community here draw on classic theories of dialogism, polyvocality, and networks of (vocal) performativity. See, for example, Bakhtin (1981), Cavarero (2005), Sedgwick (2003); cf. Peraino (2007).

¹⁸ See Waldron (2012) and Brison (2004).

selective threats and slurs both represent and reproduce the systemic *realities* of how queer, feminized, raced, disabled, dislocated, and stigmatized bodies are disproportionately targetable by incendiary speech acts and actions.

Trolls participate in infinite games of contrarianism and antagonism. But even when their words or actions result in demonstrable violence or injury, the sheer number of participating trolls is typically so large that the guilt associated with any tragic consequence is unlikely to dig into any single inciter. People often sigh about the unbanishability of trolls and lament how the internet will simply remain the way it is. This is a familiar lost-cause stance that contradicts from within.¹⁹ The apparent ubiquity of online vitriol means that agendas of rectification and critical understanding should be all the more, not less, compulsory.²⁰ At times, the nonhuman metaphor of the troll—some mythical beast resistant to reason and socialization—might lead us to forget that trolls are people, after all.²¹ Victims, dehumanized *by* trolls, are people, too. And different people can learn, unlearn, and be broken in different ways.

Here is one such story.

Rachel Bryk (Say Her Name)

On April 23, 2015, Rachel Bryk jumped off the George Washington Bridge and ended her life. She was twenty-three years old. As a trans woman working as a game developer, Bryk had lived with chronic pain and depression. In the months preceding her death, she confessed her thoughts of suicide on social media sites such as 4chan, Reddit, and ask.fm. Some responses came in the form of bullying messages—messages including “DO IT, if you’re such a weak willed thin skinned dipshit then fucking do it” (Miller 2015), “How do you feel about closed casket funerals,” and “You’ll be back online a few days later thriving on the drama you created” (Ask.fm 2015). Rachel Bryk never appeared online again, although a few webpages became sites of commemoration, debate, and further trolling. “So on the post mortem will they refer to [Bryk] as ‘it’ ‘she’ or ‘he?’” asked one 4chan user (Miller 2015).

¹⁹ Trolling is often characterized as offense without reason: insulting others or spewing hate for its own sake. Writers who take dyadic or dialectical approaches to conflict theory declare that conflict necessarily carries implications of conflict *resolution*. This doesn’t apply to trolling in the internet age because with trolling, there’s no resolution per se: “While the instruments of control that sustain power are not considered here, the definition of conflict is itself implicated in a wider ideological debate concerning the appropriate constitution of a harmonious world. In this respect, conflict by definition implies the possibility of conflict resolution, an equivocal position that calls into question its fixity as a concept” (O’Connell 2010:2–3).

²⁰ For challenges against the “lost-cause stance” toward social justice, see Scarry (2000).

²¹ On the uses and misuses of characterizing sexual offenders as nonhuman, see Brison (2002:89–90).

Bryk's death received some news coverage, but not a lot. One reason may be that Caitlyn Jenner's two-hour interview with Diane Sawyer happened to air the day after, on April 24. News sites and channels seized on the celebrity and clickbait-value of Jenner's grand gesture. For the next several days, the name "Cait" saturated mainstream, triumphant, self-congratulatory conversations about trans concerns, the new age of tolerance, and the boldness of ABC News.

Following the death of Rachel Bryk, her mother, Lisa, insisted on Facebook that "while Rachel was certainly bullied and harassed online, that was NOT the reason she committed suicide. Please pass along info on the abuse that trans individuals endure, but let's also educate people on how difficult it is to live every moment in pain. A combination of everything was likely the cause, so let's not make her a[n] anonymous statistic" (Miller 2015). Lisa Bryk rightly noted that suicide accommodates no singular or satisfactory explanation. Besides the calamity of a life lost, suicide begs incomprehension and disbelief, generating explicit wails of *why did they leave?* with an implicit wondering of . . . *how did they stay for as long as they did?*²² Without conclusively trying to weigh, quantify, or pathologize the overbearing factors in Bryk's life, suffice it to say that summative experiences of chronic pain (physical and psychic), depression, transphobia, and cyberbullying could have been altogether responsible for leading this young woman to cross a point of no return.

Besides the fact that vicious trolls would not have helped Bryk in the slightest, the staunch attribution of her suicide to intractable pain ends up ignoring the systemic injuries at play. (Elsewhere, I have shared an account of my own neuropathic pain.)²³ Perhaps Bryk's trans-identification led her to encounter discrimination and hostility in a search for medical care, whether for pain management, mental health, or gender confirmation procedures. Perhaps, as a game developer, Bryk felt alienated by the gaming industry's legacies of hegemonic masculinity, sexism, and transphobia. Perhaps Gamergate's war on women's "self-proclaimed" oppression has spawned a repressive climate that dissuades women like Bryk from asking for help (Parkin 2014). For harassers, Bryk was a perfect victim. Her open admissions of physical and emotional pain enabled tormentors to use her own confessions against her, twisting an ailing voice into an avowal of self-incrimination and self-destruction.

To lament repeatedly that Bryk suffered pain is to state a matter of fact, but also to isolate and stigmatize her as a perished individual who was, in life and in

²² In an essay criticizing the It Gets Better Project, Jack Halberstam (2010) writes: "First, just because a teen is gay and kills himself, does not mean that he killed himself because he was gay. Second, looking for hard and fast reasons for suicide, particularly in young people, is a fool's game and it ignores the multiple pressures facing young adolescents on account of the messed up worlds that we adults pass on to youth."

²³ See Cheng (2016:20–36).

death, trapped solitarily in her body, her exceptional situation, and her unavailed mind. This doesn't so much respect the memory of the deceased as it serves to let ourselves—survivors still here to make better and more accommodating worlds—off the hook. People who lambast suicide as a foremost selfish act tend to declare that individuals who kill themselves must bear sole responsibility for their actions.²⁴ Put another way, these are the same people who would insist that nothing other people say or do can either deter or encourage an individual's choice to die. This is the wrong way to approach questions of liability. To challenge these precepts of resilience and self-determination is not to disavow the significance of individual accountability and agency. Rather, it can underscore how such matters of accountability cannot always serve as a frontline excuse for the complementary responsibilities of the larger community. Words spewed online have apparent offline effects, and these effects refract through a conglomerate of exculpatory apparatus, technological mediums, institutional machinery, and moral fail-safes.

The last words of Rachel Bryk were: "Guess i am dead. Killed myself. Sorry" (Figure 18.5). She composed this tweet ahead of time and scheduled it to go live on Twitter at midnight on April 24, 2015, approximately eight hours after her time of death. The self-sendoff is a haunting postmortem echo. Queer in its disjointed temporalities, virtual in its delivery, and cruelly calcified by the screenshot-happy cultures of archival zeal, Bryk's farewell was typed out with the understanding that by the time the message materialized in cyberspace, it was already too late. (Or is it: it *would be* too late? It *would have been* too late? It *would have had to be* too late? No verb tense or participle sounds adequate to account for this loss.) Bryk did not, it seems, want to be talked out of her decision; for if attention had been all that she desired, she might have sent this tweet while still alive. But I don't want to abstract this circumstance with any further expatiating reference to fancy rubrics of queerness or virtuality, because the stark, straight-up reality is that Bryk was once alive, and now she is not.

Indeed, although my calls for a queer ethnographic ethics in this chapter have emphasized ideas of flexibility, ambivalence, and adaptive improvisation, none of these principles should take priority over a commitment to justice. Like many queer theorists and activists, like many first-time students in courses on gender and sexuality, I continuously wrestle with how the semantic vagueness and academic overuse of the term *queer* may counteract its own

²⁴ Here is an anonymous comment responding to the *Washington Post* article about Rachel Bryk: "No one can be blamed for another person's suicide. It's (?) sickening to do so. We all make choices. if we are not held accountable for the choices we make, or claim what we do is someone else's fault, then maybe we should be in a nut house. 'Cannot be trusted to make rational decisions' is one of the main reasons people are placed into mental health facilities. No accountability for their own actions" (Miller 2015).



Figure 18.5: [above] Rachel Bryk and [below] her last tweet, tagging two friends.

antinormative force and dampen its calls to action. If we're intent on vaguely verbing queer, then queer needs to pay its dues as an action word. Queer isn't just liminality, interstitiality, and performativity. Queer is the bottles thrown, the bodies broken, the flesh and the flame, the strategic rationing and renewal of how many fucks we have left to give. Let queer (ethno)musicology, as Susan McClary puns, work toward "effing the ineffable" (2012:252). Let's envision queerness's manifold uses as the chromatic rays diverging from a prism: refractory, diffuse, at times faint. To guard against being dazzled by these colors, we must train our sights on the original and primary purpose of the brilliant beam that enabled such a spectrum: to illuminate, pierce, and root out injustice with laser focus. A queer ethnographic ethics would do well to remember the historic blood and sweat that made *queer* a reappropriable, empowering rubric to begin with. Ethnography is already much queerer than we assume. Yet it can be queerer still.

In life, on the internet, Bryk had dared to say her name and show her face on public forums, rather than cower behind pseudonyms or avatars, as trolls tend to do. Rachel Bryk: say her name, because she no longer can.

I don't know when I will embark again on fieldwork of an online game. But when I do, I intend to learn from my past errors and to use my voice, so long as I have one. I will not default to prioritizing the preservation of a field's informational integrity. I will protest harassment and hate speech, no matter how slyly or

persuasively the speakers try to excuse their words as ventriloquistic ad-libs or locker room banter. Recall the professor who wrote me an email explaining his doubts about the capacity of my spirit to survive virtual violence and desensitization. He had a legitimate reason to worry. It's not that the belligerent game communities have deterred my scholarly efforts to fulfill the ethnographic mission. It's that my scholarly efforts failed to track the ethical imperatives beyond the mere mission of ethnography.

Coda: Middlebury, Envoiced

On Thursday, March 2, 2017 at Middlebury College, about one hundred people protested against visiting speaker Charles Murray. Thereafter, Middlebury professor Allison Stanger, who was accompanying Murray outside, suffered whip-lash and a concussion when they were physically confronted by a mob. The protest was not just for show—not just a game—and the violence was both symbolic and palpable.

Princeton professors Robert George and Cornel West coauthored a statement and invited academics around the world to sign. The statement began:

The pursuit of knowledge and the maintenance of a free and democratic society require the cultivation and practice of the virtues of intellectual humility, openness of mind, and, above all, love of truth. These virtues will manifest themselves and be strengthened by one's willingness to listen attentively and respectfully to intelligent people who challenge one's beliefs and who represent causes one disagrees with and points of view one does not share. (George and West 2017)

Above all, love of truth. Yet can a pursuit of truth in part serve the pursuit of justice, and can a love of truth go hand in hand with a love of people? How does "truth" factor into a minoritarian protest against Murray, whose oeuvre reeks of smokescreened eugenics—exactly the kinds of eugenics that have long been institutionally, sneakily leveraged to victimize LGBTQ+, disabled, and black and brown bodies?

In conducting my TF2 ethnography, I had chosen to stay mostly silent in the face of offensive speech. I realize now that I did so with the implicit assumption that staying silent would help me grasp, as George and West would say, the *truths* about what online interactions are like, about the gendered dynamics and verbal violence of multiplayer games, and so on. I was trying to trace an asymptotic arc towards a compelling and truthful ethnography. In so doing, I let my hands slip from the long arc of justice.

Here, then, is another statement responding to the protests against Charles Murray, this one issued by a group of Middlebury College professors:

On March 2, 2017, roughly 100 of our 2500 students prevented a controversial visiting speaker, Dr. Charles Murray, from communicating with his audience on the campus of Middlebury College. Afterwards, a group of unidentified assailants mobbed the speaker, and one of our faculty members was seriously injured. In view of these unacceptable acts, we have produced and affixed our signatures to this document stating core principles that seem to us unassailable in the context of higher education within a free society. (“Free Inquiry on Campus” 2017)

I agree that the physical violence was unacceptable and was likely the portion of this incident that escalated the clash to the topic of national media attention. But we shouldn’t conflate our condemnation of this violence with the mistaken notion that Murray’s inability to deliver his planned lecture necessarily signified a complete breakdown in *communication*. Something else was communicated that day: anger, confusion, pain, resistance, refusal, and truths of a different shade. The event was snapped out of its normative format and queered in its collective affect and legibility. Indeed, the professors who penned this statement included a list of principles attesting to the importance of the free exchange of ideas. One principle misguidedly stated: “Students have the right to challenge and to protest non-disruptively the views of their professors and guest speakers” (“Free Inquiry on Campus” 2017). *Non-disruptive protest* is as oxymoronic as *empty threat*. No such thing. Another principle: “The purpose of college is not to make faculty or students comfortable in their opinions and prejudices” (“Free Inquiry on Campus” 2017). Again, I agree. Yet this principle seems to presume that people who speak out and act out do so largely in order to maintain a level of comfort with their preexisting views—that is, by protesting and by drowning out the opposition, one is able to avoid the discomfort of hearing competing views.

Now, it’s likely that echo chambers can indeed feel safe and comfortable, but it’s not accurate to imagine that people protest because it is comfortable and is the easiest thing to do. Sometimes the easy thing to do may be to stay home and do nothing. The apparent discomfort of protesters was actually observed and narrated, in separate accounts, by both Professor Allison Stanger and Charles Murray. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Professor Stanger wrote:

From the stage where I sat with Dr. Murray, waiting for students to take their seats, I saw a sea of humanity. Students were chanting, “Who is the enemy? White supremacy,” and “Racist, sexist, anti-gay: Charles Murray, go away!” Others were yelling obscenities at Dr. Murray or one another. What alarmed

me most, however, was what I saw in the eyes of the crowd. Those who wanted the event to take place made eye contact with me. Those intent on disrupting it steadfastly refused to do so. They couldn't look at me directly, because if they had, they would have seen another human being. [. . .] Never mind that Dr. Murray supports same-sex marriage and is a member of the courageous "never Trump" wing of the Republican Party. (2017)

First: yes, *never mind* that. With all due respect and sympathy for Professor Stanger, Charles Murray's alleged support for same-sex marriage doesn't make the man a queer ally, and in any case should not award him a get-out-of-jail-free card. And here are Murray's own reflections in the American Enterprise Institute's neo-conservative blog:

About a week before the event, plans for protests began to emerge, encouraged by several faculty members. Their logic was that since I am a racist, a white supremacist, a white nationalist, a pseudoscientist whose work has been discredited, a sexist, a eugenicist, and (this is a new one) anti-gay, I did not deserve a platform for my hate speech, and hence it was appropriate to keep me from speaking. [. . .] I stood at the podium. I didn't make any attempt to speak—no point in it—but I did make eye contact with students. I remember one in particular, from whom I couldn't look away for a long time. She reminded me of my daughter Anna (Middlebury '07)—partly physically, but also in her sweet earnestness. She looked at me reproachfully and a little defiantly, her mouth moving in whatever the current chant was. I'm probably projecting, but I imagined her to be a student who wasn't particularly political but had learned that this guy Murray was truly evil. So she found herself in the unfamiliar position of activist, not really enjoying it, but doing her civic duty. (Murray 2017)

In choosing to speak out, the student protesters became both volatile and legible bodies, offering themselves up for a master class in close reading. Professor Stanger and Charles Murray were evidently moved to read into the students' shouts, bodies, and faces, using vivid imagination to ascertain some inconvenient truths about the power play in full swing. The protesters compelled Stanger and Murray to become unwitting *ethnographers* of sorts: to read the room, to check its boiling temperature, to perform a hermeneutics and acoustemology of space, voice, and skin. A queer reversal indeed. Finally, based on Stanger's and Murray's individual accounts, the Middlebury students didn't look comfortable at all; it was as if many of them were trying on a new outfit—awkward in composure and choreography, unsteady in confidence, uncertain in their propriety and precarity, coming out of their shells.

We might never be comfortable with envoicing ourselves queerly. We might never feel comfortable speaking out. Yet if and when we, as scholars and fieldworkers and activists, choose to resist or queer the codified ethics of our profession, we cannot expect to feel comfortable. We will continuously come to crossroads where we must choose between saying something and saying nothing. Different people will choose differently, with different justifications and potential repercussions. It falls on each of us to choose well, and just as importantly, to choose good.

It has taken me ten years. Better late than never. Only after completing an ethnography of TF2 have I come to recognize how my primary responsibility is not to an Institutional Review Board, the Society for Ethnomusicology, the American Anthropological Association, or any institution, period. My responsibility is to queer allies, students, and individuals like Rachel Bryk who deserve my voice of resistance more than they need my behavioral propriety or my signature on an authoritative contract. How does my cursive name even matter on that contract's dotted line when Rachel Bryk is no longer here to say hers aloud? In pursuing a life of the mind, let's not forget to attend to the lives of bodies, here and now. Standing in solidarity, let's come through for one another, loud and queer*.

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