Ethnography Is,
Ethnography Ain't

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The Death of Marlon Riggs

I remember watching Marlon Riggs dying. It was 1994, and I was in graduate school, quite literally so, scrutinizing his ghostly image in a classroom on the fourth floor of Schermerhorn Extension, the building that houses Columbia University's Department of Anthropology.

The dying, the death, was no less real for its unviewed finale or for the fact that I witnessed it by way of a rolled-out video console's totemic stacking of a TV monitor atop multiple VHS players, audio-video wires and power cords dangling carelessly off the sides.

In a form of filmic reflexivity far more rigorous than anything I'd seen before, Riggs, a controversial documentarian who'd already been denounced on the floor of the U.S. Congress as a pervert undeserving of government funding for his previous film, *Tongues Untied* (1989), a meditation on black gay manhood, had decided to use his final documentary, *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1994), a film on the *openness*, although not the *emptiness*, of blackness as a signifier, to chronicle his own end, his own death, his body more and more emaciated from the HIV virus with every passing scene.

Black Is, Black Ain't, anthropological in its luscious holism, flags and chronicles all the overdetermined markers (even clichés) of purported black-nesses: hair textures, facial features, skin tones, striding gaits, musical genres, political histories, vernacular legends, existential anxieties, stereotyped burdens, sexist acculturations—everything, including shots of kitchen sinks, the preparation of gumbo, a southern Louisianan stew, being its central metaphor of African American eclecticism and heterogeneity.

By the end of the film, however, a couple of images haunt most: out-of-focus shots of a bony Riggs, naked and alone, jogging, as best his sickly body

could, through sunlit woods; and a bedridden and hospitalized Riggs, effortfully explaining how he wants his film to end, an ending that he himself would most certainly not witness. Riggs's narration, by the final few sequences of the film, is punctuated by precise calculations of plunging T-cell counts and lost body weight, a heating pad on his bloated and nondigesting stomach, nods to the slow-moving finalities and mutating materialities of human life, what Emerson once called "the irresistible democracy" of physical decomposition itself, of all earth going back to earth—ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I have always considered *Black Is, Black Ain't* an illicit and uncanny autoethnography of courageous strangeness, especially with its mesmeric ability to cast its viewers as unrepentant and willing voyeurs. And I eased into my own willingness on that score, locking eyes on death and refusing to turn away, unable to do so. It is the kind of hyperreflexive film that pricks and prods at the soul, offering (at least to me) an early trip to one mass-mediated field site from which a portion of my own anthropological subconscious has never completely returned.

Several years later I would get my first chance to see Barbara Myerhoff's filmic depiction of her own demise, the 1985 offering *In Her Own Time*, a meditation on her relationship to Judaism, released about a year before the publication of *Writing Culture*, the volume that helped to foreground reflexivity as one of anthropology's central interventions, concomitantly energizing the field's main flank for cross-disciplinary ridicule: its supposed solipsism, a disciplinary reflexivity purportedly taken to unhealthy extremes. Myerhoff's film is not cited and invoked nearly as much as it could be, for reasons that might have to do with how it carries its investment in reflexivity—a reflexivity that is as much *art* as science.

Devouring *Writing Culture* had me chomping at the bit to conduct my own ethnographic fieldwork. Admittedly less because of the intrinsic lure, the interactive rough-and-tumble of "the field" (with its sometimes threatening and unwieldy exchanges, the kinds of exchanges for which I conjured up Anthroman, my ethnographic alter ego) and more because of the license the book provided for thinking unabashedly about writing itself, nailing shut the centrality of anthropological assumptions about ethnographic monographs as unproblematically transparent windows onto some cultural tundra out there beyond the text. It meant a valuable black-boxification or surrealization of ethnographic representation (as opposed to what I considered qualitative sociology's more positivist longings), even as it meticulously set about delineating the writerly techniques used for manufacturing scientific

authority in the first place. This seemed like a powerful paradox: explication and mystification at one and the same time. Although the accompanying critiques of its racial and gendered exclusions (from scholars such as Faye Harrison and others) seemed legitimate,[1] I was still determined to write myself into the writing culture project, to embrace its flights of representational fancy, unabashedly recognizing the inescapable aesthetics of all anthropological writing, a social science (like any other social science) coproduced through rhetorical flourishes and even literary artistry.

Anna Grimshaw describes the difference between an oft-disparaged *aesthetics* and the aspirational objectivity of a truly social *science* as one of the foundational fault lines disqualifying filmic offerings from their rightful place in the academy.[2] For some readers, the discussion might hearken back to the time Clifford Geertz famously chastised researchers for trafficking in "intuitionism and alchemy" or mere "sociological aestheticism."[3] Such concerns and critiques would help explain, Grimshaw argues, why even though anthropologists have used film and then video technology in ethnographic endeavors since the early twentieth century, the American Anthropological Association would still need to put out a statement almost a hundred years later imploring academic institutions to take films into account when assessing scholars for tenure and promotion. It is one of the reasons ethnographic films aren't given nearly the same weighty significance as books or articles in most academic contexts. The filmic's problem, she might say, is that it always bends toward the aesthetic, the emotive, the artistic, the affective, and maybe even, as Thomas Csordas would put it, the "preobjective."[4] This aestheticization of anthropological inquiry has always been, for a contingent of anthropologists, precisely what beckoned, seductively, and *Writing Culture* represented a critical point of entry into substantive engagements with such scholarly desires.

John Durham Peters argues that new media technologies, from telegraphy to the telephone, radio to television, photography to film, have always been predicated on an attempt to beat back death, to transcend our own mortality (indeed, he'd add, even our own humanity) in search of ways to finally communicate like (and to) angels or gods—unmediated, without the tawdry materiality of signifiers, smashing our way through the walled-in interiorities that ostensibly separate and alienate us from one another.[5] All media communication is, in a sense, communication with the dead, he says, which is one interpretation of what Roland Barthes claims about the indexicality of photographs: that they are all really spirit photographs, glimpses of

our own pending death and a way to see across that great veil. It is an attempt to watch ourselves dying.[6]

Riggs muses about his film providing for a certain transcendence of death, even as he invokes the loving caresses of family members as what will ultimately allow him to die in peace. Increasingly "the filmic" serves as a central instantiation of culture, the ubiquitous metacultural fact of contemporary existence, as my Penn colleague Greg Urban might frame things.[7] This is a notion of the filmic that is increasingly tied to the nonlinear, temporally textured, and even potentially death-defying logics of new digital technologies—the "digital" boasting almost fetishistic powers in some contemporary scholarly evocations. What does this "digital" imply for the writing of culture today? To what extent is watching Riggs's film (via VHS tape, admittedly, not DVD) a necessary component of what it might mean to study "culture" in the twenty-first century? And how does one write up such viewings, even before one begins to play with the possibility of filming them? What kind of writing does the potential digitizalization of culture demand and afford?

The Time Machine

Early in this new millennium a group of bearded men from a seemingly eccentric spiritual community based in southern Israel approached a successful African American entrepreneur with a business proposition. The Philadelphia-based businessman knew very little about these men's lives or about the transnational group that they represented, but he was intrigued by the ambitiousness of their pitch. The relational terms of their proposal would change radically over time (from a request for hands-off venture capital to more collaborative configurations of cross-Atlantic partnership to a final scenario that found the American businessman and his family playing a decidedly leading role in the entire endeavor), but the idea itself, the intended enterprise, was clear and fixed.

The men from Israel wanted help procuring rights to sell and lease an invention that imperceptibly and automatically shortens television programs, allowing networks and cable outlets to add even more minutes of advertising time to their daily broadcasts. This relatively new apparatus did not delete entire scenes or large contiguous sequences from shows, one traditional (and fairly conspicuous) technique that networks deploy to "reformat" theatrical motion pictures so that they fit television's conventional scheduling mandates. The technology was also far more sophisticated than earlier inventions

that attempted to squeeze films into advertisement-punctuated time slots by speeding up certain sections, another simple (although sometimes distractingly noticeable) way to decrease a show's overall running time.

These men were pushing for the proprietary acquisition of a newfangled mechanical device based on advanced digital technology, and they walked their potential business partner through the specifics, providing details about the machine they coveted, which works at the unit of the frame, prescanning and digitizing material and intermittently eliminating single "redundant" frames that function as duplicates to the human eye, making the deletions nearly imperceptible. There are enough "redundant" frames in the rebroadcast of an average feature-length motion picture or football game to open up space for several additional thirty-second ads—and without any substantive impact on narrative content or temporal flow. The machine offers a way to profit on media outlets' predictable interest in subtler ways of squeezing more advertising revenue out of every standard hour of commercial television, selling a way to game the media system itself (by hyperexploiting its dependence on advertisers). In some ways the men's social lives back in Israel's Negev region help to explain some of the reasons why they might be interested in this bit of technology—and motivated to capitalize on a media industry's cultural logic that productively interfaces with their own.

I invoke this short rendition of a tale about one business arrangement organized around a piece of media equipment that precisely manipulates temporality (by appearing not to do so) as a way to begin discussing how such new technologies reframe and reformat traditional (predigital?) formulations of diasporic community—and of ethnographic representation. In a manner akin to the difference in scale between, say, a *scene* and its constitutive *frames*, a difference most easily (even automatically) exploitable by digital technologies like the gizmo designed to intricately trim programs without noticeably impacting story lines or frustrating the visual and auditory aspects of our sensorium, I intend this brief chapter to evoke some of the ways we might construct a productive conversation about reconfigurations of ethnographic time and space through digitality and its varied deployments.[8] Indeed all I want to highlight here is a simple (although somewhat controversial) claim that "the diasporic" and "the ethnographic" have, in a sense, gone "digital" as advanced modalities of mass mediatization create and re-create forms of sociality and even intimacy that demand and reward critical attention. Of course, this digitalization is disproportionately distributed. Even as arguments are proffered about "digital diasporas" not being simplistic extensions of, say,

race-based "digital divides," the digital can still have ethnocentric inflections when uncritically presumed to be the sort of universalist rubric that it is not.[9]

The men who approached that would-be financier in 2002 have a particularly interesting diasporic tale themselves. They were emissaries from a group of African American expatriates who emigrated from the United States to Liberia in 1967 before finally moving to Israel in 1969, where they have resided ever since. This group, the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ), provides one example of what a notion of "digital diaspora" helps to capture. Digital and "new media" technologies provide the glue that keeps their deterritorialized spiritual community together, a community that spans four continents and continues to successfully compel new people to join its ranks.

It is not just happenstance that such a group would gravitate to new technological innovations predicated on reframed temporalities. Their own time travel (including "exodus" from a Babylonian America, sojourn in the "wilderness" of Liberia, and eventual resettlement in "the promised land," a modern state of Israel regeographized as "northeast Africa") is based on a robustly refashioned sense of temporal possibility, on a contemporization of the Old Testament story of ancient Israelites, considered genealogical forebears by the AHIJ community. I will leave a closer interrogation of the community's subtle rereading of the Old Testament to another time. In this short piece I simply wish to juxtapose various frames and scenes of mass mediatization that constitute the community's present diasporic regime with a claim about how the ethnographic gambit itself is implicated in such a discussion. AHIJ community members travel transnationally, and it is their implementation of the newest media technology (online radio shows, community-maintained websites, YouTube uploads, the circulation of community-produced digital-film content) that provides some of the most powerful mechanisms for cultivating forms of commonality and mutual investment that have allowed this emigrationist community to survive for over forty years.

I would like readers to interpret the series of short sections that follow as constitutive *frames* for thinking through various forms of digital mediatization that overdetermine ethnographic practice in the contemporary moment. This is an invocation of *frame* both in the sense of a gesture toward contextualization (a conceptual framing of the relevant issues) and a singular impression captured in time (as in the presentation of a framed painting or the relative irreducibility of a film or video still). But this capturing is not meant to invoke a kind of taxidermy, an unchanging and lifeless simulation

of inert and frozen lived realities. As Bhabha, Clifford, and others have reminded us, diasporic and minoritarian temporalities are always (to use a Taussigian term) "nervous" with movement and agitation, recursive and fractal organizing principles that offer nonlinear logics of diachronic possibility—nonlinearity being one version of the digital's fundamental difference. Kara Keeling argues that such nonlinearity (assumptions about differential access to nonchronological temporal logics) has long determined Africana exclusions from modern Western subjecthood, the latter getting mapped onto a purportedly linear trajectory called "progress." Keeling's point is that the Africana exception is increasingly becoming the global rule, providing angst and existential nervousness for those newly nonlinearized through the rise of digitality.[10] What might be called "ethnographic temporalities" have a similar nervousness, and Keeling's claims have implications for both ethnographic and diasporic discussions. My mobilization of the *frame* intends to channel Keeling's point while also providing a productive metaphor for marking what Brian Axel calls (in his conceptualization of diaspora) "disparate temporalities (anteriorities, presents, futurities), displacements, and subjects."[11] I offer these frames, then, as building blocks for an analytical montage that provides a quick look at some of the concatenations and imbrications that constitute diasporic and ethnographic possibility today.

The Audio-Visual Truth Center

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem are based in Dimona, but "saints," as adherents are called, can be found throughout Israel and all around the world. Community members spent the 1970s and 1980s as "temporary residents" in Israel, which meant that they received little governmental assistance and were banned from legal employment. They worked anyway, often doing construction jobs off the books, secretly building homes for nomadic African Bedouin forced into sedentary living by a census-taking and tax-collecting Israeli state. They would sometimes get rounded up and deported to the United States while out on such jobs, which necessitated concocting elaborate (and sometimes illegal) schemes for their successful return to Israel's Negev region.

The AHIJ extends beyond contemporary Israel, consisting of satellite communities all around the world. If 2,500 to 3,500 saints currently reside in Israel (some claim as many as 5,000), many more make their homes abroad in the West Indies, Africa, Europe, and the United States. The group has of-

ficial "extensions" all across the United States (Chicago, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., being three of the largest communities) and semiofficial (or rising) communities in other parts of the world, including Ghana, South Africa, and Benin.

The AHIJ's Ministry of Information rests on the edge of their compound in Dimona, one of the many corrugated steel and cement edifices that encircle a small concrete lot at the center of their *kfar* (village). The Ministry is linked to the School of the Prophets Institute (the community's own self-accredited tertiary educational, or "dedicational," institution) and encompasses the Audio-Visual Truth Center (AVTC), their media-production arm. The latter is where I would spend much of my ethnographic time during stints in Israel, talking with the saints who run the media facilities and looking at their vast video collection.

The AHIJ are incredibly purposeful self-archivists, which means that they videotape many of the community's annual holidays, including the New World Passover ceremony, a festive two-day event commemorating the original group's departure from the United States in 1967. The AVTC captures special events with Ben Ammi, the group's Messiah, all around the kfar and the country, and they record relevant programming from various U.S. and European satellite television channels. Consequently their video facility contains thousands of hours of video footage in DVD and VHS formats, the majority of that material videotaped by the saints themselves. Several young members of the community are filmmakers (taking classes at nearby schools and developing their craft on community-based productions), and they are the ones responsible for many of the film and video shoots organized out of the AVTC (in consultation with the minister of information, the *sar*, who oversees the entire operation). When Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston visited the group in 2002, an event that received international media attention, the entire visit was chronicled by AVTC producers in digital video with hours and hours of footage. When a new kfar-like complex was completed in Benin, a grand elaboration on the Dimona version and fully designed by saints from the community, AVTC made sure to videotape the entire site, even before it was fully functional, profiling its many institutional features (banquet halls, manufacturing facilities, farming areas, classrooms, etc.), capturing its vast size (which dwarfs the Dimona kfar), and describing its potential impact on Benin, culturally and economically.

For a community sensitive about its public image and prone to being dismissed as a cult, the Ministry of Information and AVTC (in conjunction

with the community's Public Relations Office) are ground zero for discursive counterattacks against accusations of pathology and criminality. Just a few months after my first visit to the community, the *Jerusalem Post* ran an article, "Distrust in Dimona," reporting that Israel's National Insurance Institute (NII) had placed an undercover agent inside the AHIJ community to investigate rumors that saints were filing fraudulent benefit claims allegedly worth millions of dollars.[12] The FBI and the U.S. State Department were said to be collaborating with the NII on the investigation.

Early in the twenty-first century the AHIJ were finally given permanent residency status (an attempt to "normalize" their links to Israel and explicitly formalize their path to full citizenship), which meant that they were newly eligible to file for NII benefits. According to the *Jerusalem Post* article, "Israeli authorities" expressed concern about the fact "that they couldn't gauge the community's exact population, as estimates range from 2,000 to 4,000. (Again, some claim as many as 5,000 in 2012.) Even now, while the adults who have received permanent resident status have identity numbers, the community's size is impossible to determine. The children are born within the community, without the use of hospitals or conventional medicine—and, of more concern to the NII, with no official listing. Authorities have no accurate way of registering newborn babies or deaths." The community's relative impenetrability to the state's prying eyes is consistently deemed one of its more threatening features in such recurring news stories and investigative reports. Indeed calls to make them full citizens are at least partially predicated on the idea that such a move might finally create a kind of social transparency more amenable to bureaucratic inspection.

There have even been ongoing allegations that the community's leaders were explicitly encouraging different AHIJ women to register the same children with NII officials under distinctive names so that the community could receive multiple benefits. The article lists many of these claims but provides no hard proof, only speculation based on the group's relative secrecy and opacity. Still, the community is on guard against such negative press, and the Ministry of Information (through the AVTC) is charged with helping to disseminate counternarratives of AHIJ's successes and positive strides, which is why some detractors might dismiss their media productions as little more than propaganda. These productions are usually pitched to two sets of viewers: saints in the kingdom (in the Dimona kfar and all around the world) and outsiders who might be prone to dismissing them as a crazy cult (for relocating from the South Side of Chicago to southern Israel and for their claim that African

Americans are genealogical descendants of ancient Israelites, the latter serving as justification for the former). The way their media productions negotiate the differences between those two audiences pivots on a fine-grained appreciation of temporal and discursive elasticities that both bind and banish.

The Birthday DVD

When Nasi Asiel Ben Israel, the AHIJ's international ambassador plenipotentiary extraordinaire, turned sixty-five, the community's Audio-Visual Truth Center produced a forty-minute documentary about his life.[13] This video narrates his birth (as Warren Brown) on the South Side of Chicago in the early 1940s and his early childhood in the infamous Ida B. Wells housing project. His individual story is told in the context of a larger African American narrative highlighting the Great Migration of black southerners to the urban North, the brutal murder of Emmett Till, the creation of Motown Records, the Sixteenth Street church bombing, Rosa Parks's refusal to relinquish her seat at the front of a public bus, and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, all canonized aspects of most retellings of African American life in the twentieth century.

The documentary also covers Brown's graduation from Dunbar High School (at the top of his class), public recognition of his status as one of the best high school graduates in all of Chicago, and his subsequent enrollment at DePaul University. While getting his undergraduate degree, he became a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, an African American organization, met his future wife, Harriet, and began to sell jukeboxes to black businesses as part of his father-in-law's successful Chicago business. When he was twenty-six, Warren and Harriet were able to purchase a home in a middle-class Chicago neighborhood, and the people who knew him best thought that his combination of intelligence and leadership might eventually make him a good bet for citywide public office, maybe even as Chicago's first black mayor. He was successful by most community standards, but according to his wife, "he was still not satisfied."[14]

Warren met Nasi Shaleak Ben Yehuda (then L. A. Bryant) in 1966 and learned about the AHIJ's message. By 1971 he was in Israel with the rest of that "vanguard group" of emigrationists and had been anointed one of Ben Ammi's twelve princes, Nasi Asiel (Prince of Blessings). Asiel was tasked with bringing more people into the kingdom, and he proved an incredibly effective ambassador. The documentary, an homage to a group elder, is a visual

"thank you" for his lifelong work on behalf of the community. But it is also an interesting instantiation of the AHIJ's complicated relationship to African American culture.

One of the first striking things about this short film is its attempt to integrate the AHIJ community into a larger narrative of African American cultural authenticity. For a group often categorically disqualified from valid racial-social belonging as a function of its distance from conventional (and stereotypical) notions of African American spirituality (linked to normative claims about African Americans' more understandable connections to Christianity and the Nation of Islam), this is a very calculated move. Their literal (as opposed to just metaphorical) identification with the ancient Israelites marks them as radically different, even strange. Moreover their own discourse about African American cultural specificity usually finds them defining themselves as quite decidedly outside of that normative cultural formation.

According to the AHIJ, African American culture is pathological as a function of its corruption by a dysfunctional U.S. culture. Their project is a classic example of what Anthony Wallace described as a "revitalization movement," which attempts to challenge just about every aspect of its pregiven cultural moorings; for the AHIJ, this means distancing themselves from African American cultural practices: dress, diet, music, worship, and education.[15] Every aspect of African American cultural particularity is suspect and in need of rehabilitation, which makes the documentary's move to link Warren Brown's narrative to canonical moments in twentieth-century African American popular and political culture—Parks, Till, Motown—so fascinating. This gesture appears as an attempt to fold the community back into a classical story of African American life and culture, a story that they are usually attempting to cut themselves out of. Indeed this video of Brown's transformation might even be said to produce a kind of traceless temporal suturing analogous to the inconspicuous deletions of that frame-snatching televisual device. In fact the birthday video reads like a PBS documentary about African American history in the mid-twentieth century, in ways that are purposeful, self-conscious, and pretty effective.

Even more interesting than a narrative logic that would otherwise be fairly unexceptional (were it not for the community's adamant refusal of traditional African American cultural practices) is the documentary's use of images and sounds to reinforce its story. The film begins with canonical footage (stills and videos) from famous documentaries about African Ameri-

can life, some of the same PBS documentaries it simulates. The redeployed scenes from that earlier fare are noticeable for their own canonical status: oft-replayed black-and-white video of Emmett Till's photo above his open casket, classic footage of segregation's public pronouncements of "Whites Only" water fountains, images of peaceful black protesters, mere children, met by dogs and police batons. For African American viewers, most of these images have been seen many times before, and they are clearly still under copyright protection, but they are simply recycled from DVDs and VHS tapes of documentaries like *Eyes on the Prize* and integrated into this celebratory video without explicit citation. The closing credits list none of the original films included in the reproduction. The offerings are lifted without permission or conventional citation.

The video's use of music is similar. Its narration is delivered above recognizable jazz compositions (including "Kind of Blue" from Miles Davis) and classic Motown hits, which reinforce the video images of (and narrative references to) early Motown and its artists. Again none of the songs is listed in the credits. Instead they are sampled without permission or compensation—in a manner similar to early hip-hop redeployments of musical productions. Such infringements of copyright bespeak a certain calculated indifference to the organizing principles and cultural logics of contract-driven capitalist relations.

The DVD itself seems to further instantiate a kind of anticapitalist form of mass-mediated circulation. Like other videos made by and through the AHIJ's media production offices, some of which quite clearly carry ISBN numbers or noticeable price tags taped to the corners of DVD jewel cases, a substantial portion of the community's video work seems to mobilize the trappings and accoutrements of commodification as a kind of ruse for gifting, both within the community and to nonmembers. In a sense the commodity form (and its contextual mandates) almost seem simulated as a kind of protective cover for a different form of exchange, a mode that potentially puts community building in productive tension with the mereness of commercialization. Such a dynamic is hardly new, especially as more and more cultural groups become increasingly invested in forms of self-commodification predicated on the capitalization of ethnic and racial difference itself.[16] Just as the DVD's content mobilizes audio and video commodities to produce a text without genuflection to standard legal expectations about such intertextuality, its would-be commoditized form appears to play with the architecture of commercialized

transactionalism without making such mandates absolutely mandatory. Of course such gifts demand other obligations, but they short-circuit some of what ostensibly constitutes the commodities' distinctiveness.

Tellingly Ben Ammi's books, AHIJ sacred texts, don't seem to be exchanged in the same extracommercial manner, at least not nearly to the same extent. He's published at least ten of them, and they are almost exclusively *purchased* by saints, not given away. Even the interested anthropologist otherwise plied with free DVDs or CDs of many different AHIJ events and productions pays for his copies of Ammi's sacred offerings, which circulate almost exclusively as commodities for sale as opposed to gifts shared without payment. Something about the interesting irony of sacred books for purchase and secular media representations given away for free seems to demonstrate and reflect one version of the productive paradox animating the nexus in which the spiritual and the economic meet in a time of "millennial capitalism." The AHIJ's effort to harness the capitalist needs of media outlets (by way of a machine that allows them to shoehorn more advertisements into daily broadcasts) bespeaks a kind of tension between the sacred (their project of spiritual redemption for all mankind) and the seemingly profane (the global media system) that makes a virtue out of erstwhile vice while attempting to negotiate a mediatized moment still ripe, it seems, for the celestial picking.

It should also be pointed out, even if just in passing, that the endgame for the AHIJ is eternal life, physical immortality. They don't believe that anyone has to die. So they don't want to document the inevitability of life's end. They intend instead to dramatize the exact opposite, providing a very different way of thinking about how human beings might defy death. Not metaphorically, via video documentaries that allow us to see the dead in reanimated life, but literally, by allowing human bodies qua bodies to live longer, much longer. Forever. They use veganism (what they call an Edenic diet) as the central plank of their argument about the body's capacity to regenerate (at the cellular level) into perpetuity, which is just one more reason why they should be included in any discussion about revamped conceptualizations of temporal possibility in the contemporary age.[17] And this immortality might be persuasively theorized as yet another form of nonchronological temporality or even a different way to think about the digital—as something that lasts forever, a "sexist" blog post, a "racist" YouTube video, an "inappropriate" tweet, all of which continue to circulate in something close to their original forms even after their authors have taken them down.

Ethnographic Insincerity

Let me close with a point about the extent to which ethnographic researchers are increasingly accessible (even surveillable) in unprecedented ways as a function of digital technology, which includes, but is not limited to, those purposeful constructions of public selves found on websites such as Twitter and Facebook.

Not too long ago I was asked to give a lecture on the West Coast based on my research with the AHIJ, and it was advertised months ahead of time on the school's website. A few weeks before my trip from Philadelphia to California, I received a call from one of my research subjects wishing me luck on my forthcoming lecture and asking for more information about what I was planning to say about them. I hadn't mentioned my pending talk, but the saint had little difficulty finding it. Even a fairly uninspired Google search of my name and the community would have pulled it up. And as we all know, after such campus talks are completed, they are often posted online, such that presentations of even works in progress continue to be accessible via the web long afterward. So even if community members did not catch wind of the talk ahead of time, they can watch the video many months and years later.

Given the way we increasingly render our professional lives on the Internet, it is becoming easier for research subjects to study and follow the ethnographer's movements in the "backstage" region (outside of the specifically ethnographic context). Indeed it might just be an example of how the ethnographic is expanding to include spaces that would have once been described as beyond its purview. With respect to that lecture out West and its potential afterlife online, we have one small example of the easy access to ethnographic back regions that the contemporary moment affords. Although not all populations have access to the Internet, let alone equal access, we might imagine a world where such access (no matter how lopsidedly and unevenly distributed) becomes increasingly prevalent even if never close to universal. And with this emerges new questions shot across the ethnographic bow. For instance, does this ethnographer talk about his project the same way in the academy as he does when he's in southern Israel representing himself and his work to his subjects?

Traditionally the ethnographic project has been predicated on an ethnographer's being expected to thoroughly access the "primitive" others' backstage without necessarily divulging too much of his or her own—at least not

in the same way or to the same extent. Clearly the ethnographer is always managing a complicated cross-cultural dance in the field, and he may perform missteps that portray him in ways that he would prefer to mask. Still he could always hide some of his backstage material inside his proverbial tent. But even more than that, he would eventually leave for home with a kind of finality that kept such distant locales decidedly off limits, even for the most interested of informants.

With new media technologies like the web and academia's concerted commitment to redeploying those technological possibilities toward pedagogical ends, it has become increasingly easy for ethnographers' formerly backstage presentations of self (back home in the Ivy Tower) to be accessed and assessed by subjects in the field, even if said subjects could not, say, find a way to physically attend an ethnographer's scheduled presentation. Of course there are many things gained (at least potentially) from such emergent backstage access, and research subjects mining this new portal is just one aspect of the changing state of ethnographic relations. It makes sense to think seriously about how ethnographers are redisciplined in a world where their backstage (at home) continues to shrink into ethnographic view. It might be another leveling of the ethnographic playing field, maybe even a welcome one, but it does demand that we reconfigure the ethnographic context to include the kind of feedback loops and postfieldwork exchanges that the Internet and other new (increasingly inexpensive) technological outlets beget.

Johannes Fabian has written about the possibility of a "virtual archive" that allows ethnographers to disseminate material quickly, providing the opportunity for almost immediate response and critique from research subjects themselves.[18] This real-time exchange is not just another way to think about ethnographic writing (another excuse for "dialogic" narratives). It might also mark the beginning of a radically different set of relations between ethnographers and their would-be subjects. No matter where they are (and increasingly no matter how much formal education they have completed), the Internet is becoming more useful as a mechanism for humbling the ethnographer's aspirations for a kind of one-sided voyeurism. The researcher is ever more researchable. And if a fundamental portion of the bygone backstage is no longer out of view, at least not the way it once was, we might very well be witnessing a fundamental shift in the nature of ethnographic research and in the kinds of ways ethnographers can be held accountable for their representations of others. Such a shift, even if subtler than I claim, should have serious implications for how we go about writing culture today.

Although I would use the term *ethnographic sincerity* to mark some of this relatively newfangled tension between ethnographic and scholarly regions, between center stage and its rafters, I do not mean to simplistically imply that such sincerity is unproblematically transportable, a universal category applicable always and everywhere. Anthropologists have provided compelling examples of social groups around the world who do not share basic Western ways of understanding subjectivity and selfhood. The linguist Bambi Schieffelin, for instance, has worked with a community in Papua New Guinea that had little notion of subjective interiority or potential individual (in)sincerity, no language for imagining a flip side to taking what people say at anything other than face value—that is, before relatively recent and sustained contact with outsiders.[19] For the AHIJ, my own intentions and motivations for engaging their community are almost, at one level, beside the point, prophetic mandate and divine intervention acting as more powerful explanatory frameworks than any tale I might proffer about how I ended up attempting to conduct research with or on them. The difference between *with* and *on* clearly has major implications for this discussion, but my sincerity is partially what's at stake in either reckoning of things.

Many scholars studying identity issues in the United States argue that self- or misrepresentation is not the only way to understand Western selves and notions of subjecthood. All that is true, but my goal is simply to maintain that ethnographic sincerity points toward a slightly different kind of real-unreal in a mediatized global landscape—and toward an ethnographic field site that is concomitantly getting reconfigured as a function of newfangled media technology and its digitalizing of ethnographic research.

Reflecting on my California lecture on my return to Philadelphia, I cringed at some of my overly flippant answers to audience questions, an occasional tone or terminological choice that ventured some distance away from my presentation of self in the kfar. I might not be duplicitous, at least I hope not, but that is an empirical question, one the AHIJ saints will decide. And they increasingly have access to more of the data they would need to do so.

The digital rewires anthropological possibility, creating new frames and stills of, from, or for our most romantic of disciplinary dreamscapes. Digitality's bending of time and space recalibrates the dyadic relationship that serves as centerpiece and pivot point for the entire ethnographic encounter. The traditional ethnographic project, arguably monological in its Malinowski-bequeathed form, has gone digital, and we should continue to think quite pointedly about what that implies for the future of anthropological research

and the versions of writing culture it might require, even as we take seriously the claim that an uncritical invocation of the digital easily traffics in a too comfy ethnocentrism. The digital might still be good to think with. If nothing else, it requires recognition of the fact that ethnographic subjects are already (quite authoritatively!) writing, filming, and observing themselves (and us)—and that that might just be (ironically enough) what saves the discipline from what others prophesy as its pending irrelevance.[20] Stealing a page from Marlon Riggs and Barbara Myerhoff, actively capturing our own demise (in images, sounds, and words) might be one way to negotiate such disciplinary death and dying, just one more way to make a case for what the future of ethnography is and ain't.

Notes

1 Harrison, *Decolonizing Anthropology.*
2 Grimshaw, "The Bellwether Ewe."
3 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures.*
4 Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing.*
5 Peters, *Speaking into the Air.*
6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida.*
7 Urban, *Metaculture.*
8 Ginsburg, "Rethinking the Digital Age."
9 Everett, *Digital Diasporas*; Ginsburg, "Rethinking the Digital Age."
10 Keeling, "Passing for Human."
11 Brian Keith Axel, "The Context of Diaspora," *Cultural Anthropology* (2004) 19:1, 27.
12 Yaakov Katz, "Distrust in Dimona," *Jerusalem Post*, December 8, 2005. http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Features/Distrust-in-Dimona.
13 In 2011 Prince Nasi Asiel made a very public split with Ben Ammi and the African Hebrew Israelite of Jerusalem after more than forty years of service to the community. Although I won't discuss it here, I believe that this recent split is an important thing to analyze if one wants to understand the fluidities of Africana spiritualities in the twenty-first century. I save that discussion for a later time.
14 This quote comes directly from the documentary "Prince Asiel Ben Israel, International Ambassador Plenipotentiary Extraordinaire."
15 Wallace, "Revitalization Movements."
16 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*
17 The community is also unabashedly against homosexuality, which, along with Riggs's omnivorous diet (as flagged by his film's literalization of a gumbo metaphor), would be part of what they would use to explain his physical mor-

tality. These are manifestations, they would argue, of a disregard for our ancestors' covenant with Yah, a disregard that directly translates into the inevitabilities of death. Eternal life, they argue, is possible only by repairing the links to Yah (i.e., obeying his commandments).

18 Fabian, *Ethnography as Commentary*.

19 Schieffelin relayed this point to me in a conversation we had after a presentation of my earlier work on race and sincerity. Some of her research on language ideologies among communities in the Pacific (e.g., Makihara and Schieffelin, *Consequences of Contact*) helps to explain such culturally specific assumptions. Similarly, according to Webb Keane ("Sincerity, 'Modernity,' and the Protestants"), overinvestments in such sincerity are often a kind of Christian (specifically Protestant) predilection or borrowing. For my own take on sincerity, authenticity, and racial reasoning, see Jackson, *Real Black*.

20 See Greenhouse, *The Paradox of Relevance*. Greenhouse does a lot to problematize this notion of sociopolitical relevance in terms of ethnographic practice and writing.