

## **Memory work, autoethnography and the construction of a fan-ethnography**

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### **Abstract**

This essay responds to recent discussions in fan studies in which scholar-fans have examined how their own multiple subject positions intersect with the objects and subjects they study. In drawing attention to the scholar-fan's vulnerabilities that are often silenced in published accounts of fandom, autoethnographic writing complicates realist conventions of representation and the ways in which textual strategies construct the authorial voice in relation to the 'other'. I argue for autoethnography's advantages by exploring some of the ethical challenges of conducting fan-audience research and by making explicit rather than implicit the ways in which locations of identity and emotional registers inform research choices and processes. Rather than offering a definitive report about the empirical 'results' of my research on *The Sopranos* and its online fandom, the following examines the scholar-fan's motives, the management of this dual identity when conducting 'fieldwork', and argues that interpretation of research events benefits from a critical autoethnographic approach.

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, ethnography, self-reflexivity, memory work, epistemology, scholar-fan, fan-audience research, online fandom, *The Sopranos*

### **Introduction**

Debates emerging from the third wave of fan studies have illustrated a willingness to embrace the use of the personal in ways that extend beyond the uncritical limitations of the anecdotal or brief autobiographical introductions.<sup>1</sup> Recent accounts include Nick Couldry's (2007) reflections of his journey through the New Jersey locations featured in *The Sopranos*. In framing his attempt to address the relationship between power and the significance of place in

fandom within a highly self-critical mode of writing, Couldry asks how his own fan attachments to the series might 'fit' with his 'sociological interpretation' of media tourism (2007: 141). Roberta Pearson's (2007) self-described autoethnography offers an interrogation of her investments with high-culture forms in order to challenge a problematic trajectory in fan studies that has excluded the study of high-culture fandom. Henry Jenkins's (2007) autoethnography intersects memories of his childhood comic book fandom and the role his mother played in fostering this attachment with a consideration of the emotional impact of comics in his adult life as he attempts to come to terms with his mother's death as well as his own mortality. In an earlier work Matt Hills (2002) draws on personal memory and experience in order to map out an instructive conceptual territory that traces the complexities of identity by making connections between multiple texts and fandoms, as well as 'academic' moments in his life story. Building on Couldry's earlier 'two-way principle of accountability' (Couldry 2000: 127), which stresses the need for 'a dialectic between the way we think about others and the way we think about ourselves' (ibid.: 126), Hills's autoethnography enables the 'scholar-fan'<sup>2</sup> to confront the constructions of an intricate array of moral dualisms that often align 'us', the fantasised 'rational' academics, against 'them', the fantasised 'deficient' or 'self-absent' fans (Hills 2002: Chapter 3).

These stories of the self echo calls for self-awareness of our partialities and positionalities as cultural and media studies researchers (see for example Couldry 2000; Lotz 2000; Hills 2007; Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, and Tincknell 2004). They make visible the reflexive voice of the writer while foregrounding the theoretical implications of objective/subjective dualisms through examinations of the relationship between 'academic' and 'fan' selves. The foundations that support such narratives are located in the well-rehearsed 'crisis scholarship' debates of the mid 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986) when ethnography was reconceptualised as a politically motivated activity that challenged absolute truths and closed narratives while unmasking the rhetorical conventions and transparency of the realist text. The crisis of representation inspired a diverse, interdisciplinary tradition of scholarship framed by postmodern aesthetics; experimental, self-conscious interrogations of the relationship of the personal to the cultural attended to notions of unstable boundaries, the ongoing process of subjectivity, multiple identities and multivocality (For an overview of literature see Ellis and Bochner 2000.). While many ethnographers now attempt to integrate the 'scientific' with the 'literary' or poetic in their writings (Richardson 2000: 253), what has been central in later developments across fields of practice that attend to the principles of ethnography is the rigorous concentration on the power issues involved when researching 'others', whether these individuals are members of a community unknown or familiar to the researcher.

Although I find considerable value in the above cited contributions, I argue here it is through empirical work with audiences that media fan studies can further pursue the question of power relations by examining how this dual scholar-fan identity is actually negotiated during the research process. In this essay I employ an autoethnographic approach that acknowledges the interactive role of the ethnographer whose voice interweaves amongst others yet is conscious of not allowing that voice to surpass the subjects under study (Van Maanen 1995: 9-10). In doing this I propose a close investigation of the challenges and contradictions that shape the research experience as the individual moves within and between academic and, in this specific case, fan-audience modes of engagement.

In this essay I provide first a brief sketch of a set of research issues that led me to conduct a fan-audience 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000) while introducing the possibility of combining autobiography with other methods. The next section introduces the significance of employing 'memory work' as an autoethnographic strategy. Self-reflexivity demands that we reflect on past events that informed our subjectivities. It means also looking back critically at the 'past' of the ethnographic or qualitative research encounter. In addressing the mediated nature of memory, I do not make claims that memory can provide a mirror of the past; rather I *use* memory as a way of initiating the kind of identity work that is necessary to understand how, as individuals, we are historically situated 'inside culture' (Couldry 2000). This critical examination of past and present selves leads to a retracing of my scholar-fan performance in the 'virtual field' in the latter part of the essay. I consider how, for example, my fantasised desires for a nostalgic return to a past home in the US, a place of belonging that shaped my earlier working-class and gendered identity, inspired the research and shaped my online encounters with fans. This latter section moves past the particulars of the personal when I make direct connections to the voices of other fans. I explore this potential first by drawing on recent scholarship within fan studies which offers ways of thinking about how fan objects present individuals with the possibility of finding an 'emotional home' (Harrington & Bielby 2005; Sandvoss 2005). I then contextualise this discussion with an analysis of a small selection of data from fan-created *Sopranos* online forums and electronic correspondences with respondents I encountered during my research. In following ethical research guidelines, all forum usernames and/or offline names have been removed. All correspondences have been presented in their original form.<sup>3</sup> In concluding the essay, I consider how a set of expectations for good reflexive practice can defend autoethnography against accusations of self-indulgence.

### **Initiating the research enquiry**

My choice to conduct a 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000) in which a range of quantitative and qualitative methods were deployed to gather and analyse data ('insider'<sup>4</sup> experience, participant-observation in chat rooms and discussion forums, the downloading, sampling and coding of postings, email correspondences) emerged out a desire to explore a broad set of questions concerning the relationship between the cultural performance of a contemporary US 'quality' television drama series and the identity performances of its online fan-audience community.<sup>5</sup> These questions intersected with my own personal interests in *The Sopranos* and from the pleasures I gained in identifying as a fan and member of this diverse online culture. I was interested in examining the ways in which fan-audiences' pleasures and emotional investments with the values and stories articulated through this hybrid gangster/family melodrama, interacted with discourses of quality inside and outside of the text. A focal point of the study therefore was an investigation of the meaning-making practices that created the norms, values, and moral codes which contribute to the symbolic construction of community (Cohen 1985). The series' thematic emphases and complex critiques of traditional notions of gender, ethnicity, and geographically-based discourses of community offered the potential for fans to perform a range of subject positions and identities. Textual analysis of the series became integral to the research methodology as it became clear that fans themselves conducted close analyses of episodes in their attempts to make sense of their own lived experiences, whilst also performing their fan competencies and 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995).

How can we begin to understand these interactions between the text's discursive articulations and the diverse range of fan-audience performances which reflect as well as shape individuals' identity formations? Couldry's suggestion for how 'to do effective textual analysis in the context of contemporary cultural studies' offers a useful point of departure (Couldry 2000: 66). Couldry argues that when asking the difficult question 'what is a text?' we must develop an 'understanding of the wider textual environment' (2000: 80). In order to do this we need to be aware of the intersections between 'flows of texts...flows of meanings (across and within texts), and ...the movements of potential readers within' both of the above mentioned flows (ibid.). It is the constant movement of texts and the ways in which they 'draw on each other' that reminds us of the dialogic nature of language. As Couldry adds, 'each of us in conversation or reflection draws on material we have heard, seen or read elsewhere'(ibid.: 81).

Matt Briggs's model of 'semiosis' allows a comparable conceptualisation of audience meaning making that moves beyond the assumptions of oppositional reading as proposed in Hall's encoding/decoding model (Briggs 2010: 10, citing Hall 1973). Briggs rejects media studies' reliance on the study of single texts 'and single encounter[s] with television alone' (Briggs 2010: 10) and follows Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) view that 'meaning making is always "embedded" in a cultural context formed by historical events and processes, discourses, politics as well as moralities and identities' (Briggs 2010: 8-9). In Briggs's Bakhtin-informed proposal, 'semiosis' refers to ways in which television's discursive expressions take part in a dialogic encounter with multiple competing voices. As Bakhtin emphasises,

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around a given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (Bakhtin 1981: 276)

For Briggs, semiosis plays a significant role for meaning making in the routines of everyday life, including television viewing and the social contexts in which meanings are shared in interaction. '[I]t is an ongoing exchange which unfolds across different texts at different times, between different people' (Briggs 2010: 11).

Briggs's earlier autoethnographic research (2006; 2007) which develops this model of semiosis is worthy of some expansion here. Briggs's autoethnography examines a range of conditions that inform his family's domestic reception of *Teletubbies*, a programme aimed at preschool children. Central to the project is the methodological imperative of bringing together the media text, context, and audience meaning making through a focus on a single case study. Briggs addresses this challenge by questioning how a wider set of texts and discourses related to 'responsible parenting' (Briggs 2006) inform the ways in which *Teletubbies* is taken up in the routines of Briggs's, his partner Sara's, and their infant son Isaac's everyday life. If Hills's autoethnography examines patterns across an individual's consumption choices which lead him/her to choose certain 'relevant and meaningful' texts in the course of a life history (Hills 2002: 82), Briggs's autoethnography follows a specific period of time in his life stage when the regulating discourses that construct common sense notions of 'proper parenting' (2006: 448) powerfully address him and his partner as new parents and contribute to their

experience of a TV programme. For example, in considering how the *Teletubbies*' text is 'drawn into semiosis' (Briggs 2007), the couple's 'teletubby practice' is understood as only one expression of a range of values that arise out of their adopted middle-class dispositions (2006: 450). Approaching a narrative of the self through this type of 'micro-example' provides the opportunity to examine closely, as Briggs asserts, how 'watching' TV can be seen as an activity that is 'embedded' 'in an irreducible nexus of practice' (2006: 456).

My own work made similar attempts to capture and analyse the complexities of such flows and exchanges of meaning in the context of a study that was acutely aware of the ways in which the Internet and computer-mediated communication shape social interactions and the performance of audiencehood (see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Nightingale 1996). One of my aims was to explore how *The Sopranos*' intratextual constraints and its extratextual conditions, or as Couldry might describe it, the surrounding 'vast textual field' (2000: 70), impacted on audience meaning making practices in interaction. As indicated above, this included analysis of the generic and thematic dimensions of the series while also looking wider at how a range of supporting texts, such as the series' official website, ancillary products, marketing initiatives and trailers, addressed viewers in the producer's bid to gain a loyal, niche audience. Journalistic discourse and critical reviews, frequently circulated and discussed by fans across various spaces of the World Wide Web, provided further examples that contributed to the discourses of 'quality' around the series which addressed loyal fan-audiences as intelligent, discerning viewers. In addition, systems of production such as the history of the commercial producer (HBO), and the roles of the 'creator' and director/s were all considered as contributors to the maintenance of this 'quality' series' online fan-community.

In spite of my familiarity with many of the activities of the series' online fandom, much of the formal virtual ethnography, which led to a multi-sited approach to data collection and sampling, evolved out of an 'exploratory process' similar to that described by Christine Hine (2000: 71). Hine's commentary about not quite knowing at the beginning what data would be collected or 'what forms data would take' resonates with my own research experience and speaks of the ways in which ethnography as a method of inquiry, encompasses a 'sensitivity to follow up leads that look interesting' (ibid.). In the following sections I place emphasis on my reflections of some of the stages of that exploration while providing an autobiographical context. Hence I concentrate on writing the self into an examination of the processes of fieldwork (see for example Coffey 1999).

One exemplary model that demonstrates the transformative potential of utilising such an approach is Lyn Thomas's (2002) feminist-inflected qualitative research on fans of the British ITV drama series *Inspector Morse* and the long-running BBC Radio 4 serial *The Archers*. Thomas's critical writing of the self occurs as she examines the complexities around the relationship between the feminist researcher and the researched from the perspective of the scholar who occupies a 'dual, or split role – partly objective observer, partly member of the group, sharing anecdotes and experiences', yet who admits that her participation in these fan cultures is variable (Thomas 2002: 11-12). The strength of Thomas's approach is in her destabilisation of authorial power as she questions how her positionalities affect different stages of the research. When stressing the partiality of her analyses and throwing caution 'other empirical researchers' (ibid.: 179) in her conclusions, Thomas reflects on respondents' reading of draft chapters and their discomfort towards what they understood as her reduction of the complexities of their 'lived experience' to over-simplified categories such as ethnicity, national identity, or gender (ibid.: 189). Rather than accept unproblematically respondents' interpretations as evidence of authenticity, Thomas introduces the possibility for producing knowledge that is critical of academic use of 'convenient labels' (ibid.: 180) and respects multiple interpretations that are informed by respondents' own reflexive accounts. Crucially, Thomas's pondering about whether it was a 'success or failure' (ibid.: 182) that most of her respondents were happy with the way she represented them invites further questions about how scholar-fans and researchers wider afield in media audience studies might reflect on this form of knowledge production.

My similar focus on the experience of fieldwork foregoes an examination of the project's results however it opens a space for consideration about the approaches used to generate them. It is not my intention to privilege reflection, the subjective over the objective, or to imply that the use of 'objective' methods does not occupy an important place in the research. Working with such methods can give us some of the 'tools with which we can empirically research [the complexity of cultures] in a systematic and accountable way' (Couldry 2000: 5). This is true for researchers examining cultures (online or offline) in which they claim close proximity and intense personal interest and for those who make claims to having no prior attachments to their area of study.

In support of Couldry's larger aims to merge the objective and subjective aspects of culture and converge ethics and politics with method (ibid.), I propose that a critical 'dialogue' (see Johnson et al. 2004: 57-61) should take place, one that can allow researchers to investigate the implications of method/s and look for the possible gaps and silences for which positivist

approaches (i.e. counting, categorisation, coding) cannot always account (cf. Hills 2002: 66-71).<sup>6</sup> This kind of dialogue is reflected in Johnson's, Chambers's, Raghuram's, and Tincknell's (2004) more recent project of outlining a 'method' for cultural studies, in which the authors stress the importance of combining and maintaining an 'exchange between' methods, distinctive methodologies and disciplines (2004: 42), while arguing for the inclusion of 'auto/biography in all forms of cultural research' (ibid.: 60). The implications of Johnson et al.'s strong emphasis on self-reflexivity as a key component for cultural studies' practices therefore extend well beyond the confines of debates in fan studies and the expectations that scholar-fans account for their hybrid identity in their ethnographic research.<sup>7</sup> The following section initiates the starting point for this exchange.

### **Memory Work**

Central to the self-reflexive accounts cited above is the use of memory as a way of reflecting on personal and collective lived experience. If we accept that our memories can activate a way of 'thinking the social through [the] self' (Couldry 2000: 114-115, citing Probyn 1993: 3) we must acknowledge the mediated and discursive nature of memories, including, as Annette Kuhn states, those 'voiced, even in "inner speech"' (Kuhn 2000: 189). In all of its diverse forms, from testimonials to film and television fictions, the memory narrative is understood as dialogic; it is 'a text, a signifying system' (ibid.) influenced by texts that originated before it and other texts with which it traverses. Kuhn's (2000) reflections of her earlier autobiographical 'memory work' (Kuhn 1995) and the observations in her later research on UK cinemagoers of the 1930s (Kuhn 2002) remind us that rather than view personal testimonies as providing an exact record of 'the past "as it was"', we can understand such accounts as productions of meaning 'in the act of remembering' (2002: 9). It is important to make clear, therefore, that memory work is always contextual and highly performative, a staging of memory that 'is always already a secondary revision' (Kuhn 2000: 186). However, it is through this process of 'revision' that the past and 'the transparency of what is remembered' are thrown into question (ibid.). Significantly, Kuhn's definition of memory work places priority not on '*what*' is remembered or left out, but on '*how*' the 'relics' of the past are used to make sense of the present (ibid.: 187, emphasis in original). Memory work therefore is akin to a journey, which not unlike detective work allows one to '[patch] together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence' (Kuhn 1995: 4). However, unlike the closure of the mystery novel, memory work facilitates further interrogation at the discovery of every clue (ibid.: 5). The author is left with the challenge of constructing a cohesive account, although not necessarily a linear or unproblematic one, which encompasses a life story that constantly moves back and forth between the tensions of past and present and inner and outer worlds.

Connections can be made here with the ways in which an ethnographer's memories of their experience of their relationships with respondents can work to supplement written field notes, diaries, visual records, and in the case of Internet-based research, various forms of electronically recorded computer-mediated communication (CMC). In making the decision to conduct an Internet research project which encourages dialogue and exchange with participants, as opposed to the more 'one-sided' approach that can occur if the researcher decides to 'lurk' only (Lotz and Ross 2004: 507-508), the possibility of developing meaningful relationships with respondents increases. Reflexivity about the ways in which both parties make meaning during research thus becomes a necessary part of ethical practice (ibid.: 508, citing Kauffman 1992). We must therefore take account of how we remember those exchanges. As Amanda Coffey asserts, 'The craft skills of reconstructing and reproducing the field pivot on how we remember and what we remember. Our (re)construction is temporal and evokes the past in the present' (Coffey 1999: 110). This observation should not imply that an ethnography is necessarily a completely 'conjure[d]' 'false reality' (ibid.). It does remind us though that our interpretations of data are accompanied 'with the imagination of memory' (ibid.).

Memory work allows us to make meaningful connections between the experiences of the personal and the cultural as we recall former periods of our cultural situatedness within the constraints of social class, race, ethnic and gendered identities, thus enabling us to make sense of our present selves (Kuhn 1995: 4). The movement from past to present which enables the negotiation of my own speaking/writing position begins with an examination of how the historical and geographical context of my early *Sopranos* viewing informed my emotional relationship to the series which subsequently motivated my fan experience and later empirical research. The exercise of memory therefore confronts the history and politics of my identity through some investigation of what Charlotte Brunsdon calls the 'periodicity of viewing identity' (2000:187). This phrase conceptualises 'the diachronic aspects of television viewing, the way in which each individual has more or less engagement with television in general, and particular programmes, at different stages in their lives' (ibid.). The deployment of Brunsdon's more general 'periodicity of identity', however, also recalls Hills's wider question '*why do various fandoms become relevant and irrelevant to cultural identity at specific times?*' (2002: 82, emphasis in original). My narrative therefore begins in the following section with a story about the significance of television viewing choices and how a contemporary television series could speak to me about who I was in my youth and what I had become as an adult. However, its implications extend beyond these boundaries, by touching upon the ways in which audiences might speak about and value a range of fan interests at different moments in the construction of their cultural identities (ibid.).

### **Travelling across communities**

The birth of my second child Eva, not long after my son turned three and I completed my part-time MA in Visual Culture, is a useful starting point. When Eva was about two weeks old, my morning routine included taking my son to a local playgroup for two and a half hours, four days out of the week. During that time I would run shopping errands, rush home to catch up with sleep, tidy the household, phone or have coffee with a friend, watch daytime TV, or view on video the latest episode of *The Sopranos*. Exhaustion was one reason for watching lots of TV during the day accompanied by my increasing academic interest in the series, which was fuelled during a time when pre-and post-broadcast British press reviews hailed the show as a masterpiece example of 'quality' television. I videotaped the show's first series as I struggled to stay awake during its usual 10pm Sunday night broadcast time.

Along with my white, middle-class, post-graduate academic positioning during this periodicity of identity, my age, heterosexual and gendered status, played equally significant roles in my introduction to *The Sopranos* as both a fan and as a scholar. It is worth elaborating that my use of 'middle-class' as a categorisation does not capture the specificity of experience nor does it do justice to the complexities that exist around class identification. My earlier upbringing in a Boston suburban city in the United States was shaped by a working class history. I grew up in a working-class family in which both grandfathers were labourers; my father and uncles worked as mechanics, truck drivers, or in factories. The women in the family held jobs in factories also or found other unskilled minimum wage employment when not at home caring for children. I was encouraged to attend a non-academic, vocational high school, was expected to learn a practical trade appropriate for my gender, and was the first within my more immediate family to earn a high school diploma. It was only later in my twenties, after some frustration with the limited prospects of my job as a 'paste-up' and production-prep worker at a local printing company, when I attended evening classes at a community college and then applied to university to study for an English degree. This lengthy process of higher education within the Arts and Humanities introduced me to some of the bourgeois leisure practices that were alien in my life before this point, while at the same time heightening my political consciousness and discomfort about the conditions that produce social inequalities. My later experience of post-graduate education in the UK introduced me to the highly politicised field of British Cultural Studies and nurtured my growing sympathies with feminist concerns about the history of women's oppression. Over the years I thus 'became' middle-class and acquired academic career aspirations; however, my feelings about occupying this status have been ambiguous. While I define myself as middle-class I have felt more often that

I exist in that liminal 'space between' working-class and middle-class identities (Medhurst 2000: 20). Echoing Andy Medhurst's experience, a more precise way of capturing the uncertainty of this position might be to utilise the label 'once working-class academic' (ibid.: 25).

Having Eva became an emotionally difficult time for me, a crisis of identity during which I felt caught up in the middle of the many conflicting discourses surrounding motherhood and work. The pleasure I was expected to feel at being able to have a second child in my late thirties was constantly challenged with feelings of frustration, not to mention anger, when there was little help from extended family, and my male partner quickly returned to his more prestigious academic career, often involving frequent travel away. I increasingly felt loss over the teaching profession I left in London before I had my son, and began to feel my MA study had been a waste of time. My life seemed to progress from enjoying the intellectual challenges of post-graduate research as my three-year old was getting closer to school age, to hardly finding a minute to myself to scan the advertisement section of the weekend newspaper when I wasn't incapacitated by fatigue.

In short, I began to feel I would be deemed a 'feminist' failure if I did not make some attempt to make clear decisions about my professional future. It was not long after Eva turned 18 months old before these motivations propelled me to embark on contract university teaching and later in the following two years develop a proposal to study *The Sopranos* and its Internet fandom. I now see this move as one that articulated many complex desires and identifications, including some attempt to extend my own fan pleasures with the series through academic discourse. My hesitations about relying on the financial earnings of a man and being tied down to the home confirmed my anxieties about failing to live up to what I imagined constituted a feminist identity. My 'construction of the identity "feminist"', as Brunsdon has argued, implicitly created a binary to an imagined 'non-feminist other', the 'ordinary woman' whom Brunsdon labels 'the housewife' (2002: 90). From the early days of planning the study I felt committed to remaining sensitive to the ethical problems this type of othering would present if recreated in the research. I did not question at the time, however, how the nature of my arrival to this middle-class, 'feminist' positioning informed my affective relationship to the series, its online fandom and my later research choices.

At this point in the discussion, the tone of the prose will shift as I use a different kind of memory work to help make sense of this journey. As I was not in the habit of keeping a diary of my life at the time when Eva was born, *The Sopranos'* scene or scenes that first generated an intensity of emotional responses in me might be usefully revisited through what Carolyn Ellis calls the process of 'emotional recall' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 749).<sup>8</sup> If I take my mind back to one morning I imagine myself, in the present tense, in the living room of our three bedroom Victorian terraced house, lying down on our sofa wearing a worn, faded pink towelling dressing gown and slippers. I see myself turn to baby Eva who is swaddled in what I believe I remember to be the hand crocheted blanket that an American high school friend gave me several months earlier when I returned to Boston, the area where I grew up, for my grandmother's funeral when I was three months pregnant. Eva is sleeping in the Moses basket another friend from Bristol (UK) lent us which is placed in front of the Ikea bookcase that is tightly packed with a selection of my partner's old vinyl LPs, a mixture of novels, and oversized art books, some of which I shipped over from the States. This bookcase sits in one alcove next to the fireplace while the TV and its cupboard occupies the other. I remember nothing much of anything else now except that I recall feeling a heaviness in my body of the same type that weighed me down many of those mornings and I now imagine myself slowly sitting up to turn off the TV after *The Sopranos'* credits roll down the screen. I see my hair in a mess and imagine there are dark circles under my puffy eyes. I then see myself sobbing, and searching through my pockets for tissue to wipe my eyes and runny nose. I am now looking at this newborn baby and I think about my father's mother, the woman after whom I named my daughter. I then say her name 'Eva' and I tell my deceased grandmother how much I miss her.

My memory tells me this sadness had something to do with viewing a *Sopranos'* scene involving Livia Soprano (Nancy Marchand), the monstrous mother figure with whom the central character Tony (James Gandolfini) struggles to come to terms throughout his long-term psychotherapy sessions. This flash of recognition that takes me to the memory of my grandmother, whom I have since then claimed bears a striking resemblance to Livia, however, is still difficult to discern. As a way of attempting to revisit the emotional event I decide to rewatch the pilot episode which first introduces Livia. I am soon reminded, after only watching the opening credits, that I feel an immediate sense of familiarity with the New Jersey industrial and suburban landscape, the 'real' locations chosen by the show's creator David Chase, which contribute to the series' claims to authenticity. My proximity to the text is enhanced, however, by the series' representation of an Italian-American working-class community's habitus. This experience, I feel, in spite of the series' obvious play with the tropes of the American gangster genre, eerily reflects remnants of my own past, which is

articulated in the characters' distinctive eastern sea-board working-class accents and dialect, their choice of food, clothing and hairstyles.

This feeling first strikes me upon hearing Tony's unrefined speech and the defensiveness that surrounds his difficulty in articulating his feelings during his visit with Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco). As Tony begins to recall the events of his working day, his violent, hyper-masculine side is slowly exposed through the use of flashbacks. This aspect of his gendered identity is clearly attached to his role in the mafia, to which Tony appears loyal and committed. However, the context of the therapy reveals that this loyalty is not simply achieved via his own free will; the expectations of his family, and the history of their social class status have determined much of Tony's path, as the later focus of the series reveals. The first scenes from the Soprano home also introduce the stereotypical whining but tough mob wife Carmela (Edie Falco), their two children, and visual markers of the Soprano family's upward mobility, which are displayed through signs of conspicuous consumption rather than understated bourgeois tastes. The large suburban house and swimming pool in a highly desirable middle-class neighbourhood, Carmela's later evening wear accentuated with padded shoulders, expensive gold jewellery, false finger nail extensions, and big hair style, are all conventions that tell a familiar mafia narrative. However, to assume that the text engages 'knowing' viewers exclusively at the level of critical distance or post-modern irony dismisses the possibility that popular texts can work 'at the level of fantasy' (Walkerdine 1990: 175). Like Valerie Walkerdine's account of viewing *Rocky II*, I feel *The Sopranos* is a text 'I can insert myself into, position myself with, the desires and pain woven into the images' (ibid.). If 'Rocky's struggle to become bourgeois' (ibid.) reminded Walkerdine of her own, then Tony and Carmela's aspirational desires for financial success and power in a bourgeois world, 'whatever way [they] can get it' (ibid.: 176) speak to me in a similar way.

It is the early sight of Livia however, that offers me an experience of punctum and mourning of the dead of the kind Barthes (1993 [1980]) describes through his encounter with the winter garden photograph of his mother.<sup>9</sup> From the moment Livia appears, I make the connection between her image and the memory of my grandmother Eva, often surrogate mother and significant matriarchal character in my own family narrative. While I would not describe my late grandmother as monstrous, she certainly held a comparable amount of powerful weight in my family history. Like many of the older women who surrounded my childhood, both women demand the attention of their adult sons, both speak with determined, what would seem to outsiders as exaggerated, eastern sea-board accents, and both are approximately the same age, and have similar facial features. It is the image of the slightly dishevelled, anxious Livia,

wearing a mis-buttoned common 'housedress', the loose, easy-care polyester dress a woman of her generation wears when staying home for the day, that carries with it the weight of personal and cultural associations, thus promoting a search into the visual archives of other memories from my childhood. This is the dress I remember my grandmother wore most days in her middle and old age, as she performed her household chores or rested in front of the television in her worn leather reclining chair, like the one in Livia's house, a further signifier of the material furnishings of my working-class grandparents' generation. Upon hearing Livia's repeated question to Tony, 'You want some lunch? I got eggplant,' memories are inspired of my grandmother's mannerisms and her cooking which often incorporated this standard Italian-American fare. It is finally Livia's resistance to Tony's suggestion that she move into what he calls a 'retirement community' that completes my sense that this fictional encounter represents for me a highly personal, 'located experience' of family and community (Livingstone 1999: 97). After spending her adult life married to an alcoholic husband, raising her two sons, and later working in a textiles factory in her middle and older age before losing much of her eyesight, I am reminded of my grandmother's own fears that she too, in her ill health, would be forgotten, left, as Livia's angry retort implies, in a nursing home with other elderly women 'babbling like idiots'.

Livia's untidy housedress seems to emphasise this aspect of Eva's difficult life while initiating more memory work outside this representation. My mother also dutifully wore the uniform housedress in the 1960s, however, this memory is accessed only through the mediation of the family album, which offers endless possibilities for further connections. These cannot be fully expanded upon here, but can be indicated: the mother leaves the house out of financial necessity to take up factory work. The grandmother looks after the two girls when she retires from work, or the elderly Italian woman next door, another housedress wearer who speaks no English, steps in to supply them with toast and milk in the mornings before they go to school. Later on, the mother spends less time at home in the 1970s and more time at night school as she sees the necessity to acquire her high-school equivalency diploma in order to enter a community college nursing school course. The father also attempts the high-school equivalency, but, unlike the mother, fails, adding some tension to the later familial narrative.<sup>10</sup>

### **Emotional homes**

These reflections point to observations that most television drama taps into the familiar, particularly in its dramatisation of interpersonal and family relationships (Nelson 1997: 43, citing Williams 1974). This fictionalising of the intimate provides viewers with the pleasures of

recognition and a context for emotional identification as, in Robin Nelson's words, 'Character and viewer seem to inhabit the same space' (1997: 20). Our relationship to these fictions as larger 'imagined' audience communities (Anderson 1991) thus becomes a process of negotiation, where the space between the familiar of the domestic private sphere and the wider public sphere is continually reassessed.

This negotiation and the implications it has for how we make sense of our identities is made more complex when we examine it next to the contemporary economic and technological conditions that facilitate 'changes in patterns of communication and physical mobility' (Morley 2001: 425). David Morley emphasises that transnational patterns of communication necessitate a reconceptualisation of the notion of home, in which the physical, domestic space of television consumption comprises one home, while the symbolic home includes 'the local, national, or transnational communities in which people think of themselves as being "at home"' (ibid.). My use of the term 'emotional homes' in the subtitle above reflects this emphasis which is extended by Harrington and Bielby (2005) in their coining of the phrase which is situated within their critique of three concepts in media studies: 'flow, home and pleasure'. The authors hence argue that Morley's 'spaces of belonging' and the notion of a 'symbolic home' suggests an emotional engagement, and can be considered within a discussion about the affective dimensions of television fandom which offers a productive means of theorising fan and cross-border fan pleasures (Harrington and Bielby 2005: 835).

As an American viewing a US series that has travelled to another geographical context, my engagement with the text can be partly understood as one that supports assertions that popular TV genres such as the soap opera, drama series and serial drama, can induce powerful memories of a 'home' or a past that has been left behind (ibid.).

Brunsdon, for example, notes that in her teaching of soap opera, it was the mainly working-class students who reported that *Coronation Street's* theme tune 'would trigger memories of home and, quite often, feelings of homesickness' (Brunsdon 2000: 11). The students' physical travel from home to university is invoked here, as well as their upwardly mobile travel from working-class to the middle-class experience of university life. In this context soap operas affirmed working-class as well as gendered status for female students, as they recalled memories of their mothers and past 'schooldays' (ibid.). In a similar way, *The Sopranos'* narrative often symbolically moves me, at this point in my life, from the present space of my home in the UK, the place that provides material evidence of my sometimes uncertain social

mobility into the middle-class to which my earlier description alluded, back to the emotional safety of the familiar, a place close to what I used to call home, a small Italian-American working-class community. In doing so it facilitates a questioning of how I came to be that person of the past, and how I attempt to make sense of that identity in the present.

Much of what I am pointing to here is illustrated by Briggs (2010) in his use of John Ellis's notion of 'working through' (Ellis 1999, 2000) as a way of developing the model of semiosis. The television drama series, like soap operas or the news, allows viewers to 'work through' their relationship to the wider public sphere (Briggs 2010: 9) as television is often consumed in the domestic space and 'becomes part of household life, its routines and rhythms' (ibid.: 120). When we view this type of sense-making activity as a form of 'identity work' (ibid.: 21), which uses the television text as a symbolic resource 'for thinking and acting' (ibid.), we can see how *The Sopranos* is one text that interweaves with other discourses and texts, including those made through talk in interaction, about the emotional significance of the idea of 'home'.

*The Sopranos* functions, in many ways, as one memory text amongst others that provokes, as Kuhn writes, 'a sense of what remembering actually feels like' (2000: 189). Kuhn adds that one of the formal properties that links memory texts is the contrivance of the structure of feeling, in which 'its organisation of time as cyclical rather than sequential – captures something of what it feels like to live, or remember living, in a particular family in a certain class setting' (2000: 191). The recurring scenes of the life events of family gatherings, marriage celebrations, high-school graduations, births and deaths in *The Sopranos*, as in other memory texts (Kuhn refers to the film *Distant Voices, Still Lives*) provide opportunities for some viewers to recognise their lives, and indeed, the routines of their everyday lives, in the text. These can be highly emotional recognitions, however, as Kuhn adds, these texts also can 'show that even the most apparently "personal" and concrete contents and forms of remembering may have a purchase in the intersubjective domain of shared meanings, shared feelings, shared memories' (ibid.: 191). What is specific to my example is the way in which the relationship of memory to questions of identity is linked to how I 'work through' my emotional *and* physical 'place in the world' in the present (Briggs 2010: 123).

'Understanding fandom as a form of *Heimat*' (Sandvoss 2005: 64) indicates also the type of intense emotional relationship fans can have with their object of fandom, which is often associated with notions of home and its accompanying connotations of warmth and security. Fandom thus 'compares to the emotional significance of the places we have grown to call

“home”, to the form of physical, emotional *and* ideological space that is best described as *Heimat*’ (ibid.). As Cornel Sandvoss adds, however, ‘[t]he sense of home in fandom’ is transformed into ‘a mobile *Heimat*’ as the spaces of fandom are both physical and textual, ‘and hence can be accessed by fans in different mediated and unmediated ways, at different times, and from different localities’ (ibid.).

While *The Sopranos*’ narrative works in powerful ways to re-affirm some sense of an Italian-American working-class self, it also challenges the fantasies that accompany nostalgic notions of traditional community and stable identity by calling attention to my anxieties about existing in a space between working and middle-class identities. The series’ representations of sexist, racist and homophobic diatribes, the othering that is also implied in *Heimat*, which emerges from the confines of some communities (including fandoms), also make me feel uncomfortable. In this respect, the series feels too close to home, reminding me of my earlier desires for escape. My present middle-class habitus and the emotional as well as physical journey that has led me to occupy this reflexive position of privilege is specifically called upon through a further instance in the pilot episode. At one point during Tony’s consultation with Dr. Melfi, the camera follows Tony’s gaze to a close up of Melfi’s medical qualification from Tufts University, Massachusetts. I watch this with some fascination as Tufts is the same institution where I completed my undergraduate degree and I wonder if I had ever noticed this small, coincidental detail before.

As I rewatch this scene several times in one sitting, I begin to understand that the tears shed for my deceased grandmother on the morning I recall above, may have also surfaced as a manifestation of multiple identifications and bereavements, including the longing for the support of a family who were thousands of miles away, and a sadness for my father who, like Tony, continues to find relationships and ‘talk’ difficult, and whose own education was stunted at the age of fifteen because of his parents’ expectations that he work to help support their family. This scene’s articulation of a tension between working-class and middle-class experience, as well as gender difference (it is the middle-class, educated female doctor who is placed in the superior position of knowledge to treat the undereducated, inarticulate Tony with medical intervention and ‘talk’ therapy) also triggers some identification with Dr. Melfi, which I may or may not have fully acknowledged upon first viewing. Melfi’s struggles with guilt over her position as an upwardly mobile, middle-class Italian-American woman, a realisation which gradually evolves over the course of the series’ later life, is close to my own guilt about being the first in my family to obtain a university education. This degree, I am now reminded, as I interpret Tony’s response to Melfi’s qualifications as defensive and sarcastic (it is her

'world' of education and 'theory' that can not be reconciled with his 'real' world of lived experience), while admired yet not completely understood by my mother, was never valued by my grandmother who always wondered why I did not simply 'settle down' and stay in 'place'. Similarly, it was not taken seriously by my father, whose joke, upon the announcement of my acceptance to Tufts, took the form of a question, 'What kinda strings did ya pull to manage that one?'

My father's comment strongly echoes both Tony Soprano's own statement, boldly quoted in the Allen Rucker text created for fans, 'You're born to this shit...You are what you are' (Rucker 2000: Chapter 2), as well as Annette Kuhn's mother's hardened words, 'You can't rise out of your class' (1995: 89). As much as the joke about my future infuriated me at the time, I now, like Kuhn, understand the context in which it was uttered and see the elements of its truth, which Morley partly confirms in his sceptical critique of cultural studies' over celebration 'of all notions of mobility, fluidity, and hybridity' (2001: 427). Morley argues, for example, that while the ease of mobility across vast distances has been equated with the postmodern experience, the 'paradigm still actually applies only to 1.6 percent of the world's population' (ibid.: 429). The impact of class, Morley reminds readers, remains 'a major differentiating factor in respect to immobility' (ibid.).

The economic reality of why some groups may be more likely to remain in place leads me to consider the emotional consequences of the working-class longing 'to be somewhere and someone else' (Walkerdine 1990: 175). Walkerdine observes that in order for the viewing experience to be effective, popular films like *Rocky II* must 'necessitat[e] an already existent constitution of pains, of losses and desires for fulfilment and escape, inhabiting already a set of fantasy-spaces inscribing us in the "everyday life" of practices which produce us all' (ibid.: 176). What I have described suggests some evidence of moments in which the fantasy-space of the text and viewer are more directly linked for me, and although their discursive meanings do not exist in isolation to the rest of the narrative, and in fact are more poignant when considered in relation to other scenes and later episodes and seasons, they stop me in my viewing and halt my attention. My comparison between the scene above and my experience is complex and intersects with memories of what I imagine to have been my father's own previous fantasies, his desire to return to the freedom of his youth before marrying at the age of nineteen and suffering the further financial burdens of working-class life with two children.

The other level of pain I have to acknowledge is to do with my own strong identification with what I have imagined were my father's desires for escape. Freedom from working-class constrictions and the traditional gendered roles that dominated the community in which I was raised was an aim that totally consumed my young adult life during the late 1970s and 1980s, leaving it unsurprising that the television and popular films with which I have held strong attachments, all seem to have in common, largely white, working-class escapist narratives. My attachment to *The Sopranos* has been no exception. However, its difference lies in the fact that the series arrived at a particular point, a 'periodicity of identity', when I believed I had left behind the pains that accompanied those desires.

### **Making connections**

The aim of this memory work has been to introduce the analytical and epistemological value of the personal narrative in the fan-ethnographic account. As Kuhn writes, in one respect, the 'detour' into memory can be healing, allowing the voice of the past subject to speak to and then through the subject of the present (1995: 38). While such forms of memory work may be also privately experienced or articulated by wider audiences or fans of popular cultural texts, the discursive context within which this memory work is produced, which draws attention to the scholar's personal healing, in spite of its connections to wider cultural processes that inform identity construction, can be accused of falling short of meeting the goals of social research endeavours. The use of autoethnography in the context of empirical audience research therefore must be constantly justified, as a means of confronting charges of depoliticised solipsism and sentimentalism. In this respect, a strong argument for autoethnography is that it 'teaches' (ibid.), as it challenges the limitations of knowledge production and social science research practices that often attempt to separate the detached intellectual realm of the objective from the highly emotional realm of the subjective, which is silenced or rationalised in empirical work. While some recent fan studies scholarship (Harrington & Bielby 1995 and 2005; Hills 2002) has attempted to challenge this separation of the objective and the subjective by appropriating object-relations theory for the study of fandom, autoethnographic practices problematise these binary oppositions by prompting a critical questioning of how the researcher's 'subjective' self and their discursive investments may intrude upon empirical research in unexpected ways.

Hills's (2002) argument for autoethnography addresses the problems in fan ethnographies that have tended to avoid this line of inquiry. In criticising some ethnographies for their narrowed visions of what should 'count as "the real"' or as 'the "field"' to be observed and

analysed, Hills proposes that autoethnography can work to examine absences and problems in discourse, or the 'limits of both fan and academic self-expression' (2002: 72). Autoethnography, therefore, can interrogate the rhetorical conventions that we, as scholars and fans draw on when we attempt to explain ourselves. As Hills writes,

This realisation can open up the possibility of inscribing other explanations of the self; it can promote an acceptance of *the fragility of and inadequacy of our claims to be able to 'explain' and justify' our own most intensely private or personal moments of fandom and media consumption*. The fragility of discursive accounts is exposed by this persistent questioning, provoking an investigation of why we stop self-analysis at a certain point by refusing to challenge privileged discourses. (Hills 2002: 72, emphasis in original)

Through a persistent interrogation of 'aspects of identity which the writer is attached to', or their 'discursive investments' (Hills 2002: 72, citing Hollway and Jefferson 2000), the scholar-fan can perform 'a form of voluntary self-estrangement' (ibid.). In this sense, autoethnography can challenge and destabilise secure or comfortable accounts of the self, and thus introduce a space for other interpretations, other stories to emerge.

As my narrative has strongly suggested, my attachments to *The Sopranos* and my later choice to pursue an academic study of its Internet fandom, were laden with a complex emotional history. Much of this emotional baggage was then nurtured from the early days of my pre-PhD participation in US-dominated *Sopranos*' fansites. Engaging with other fans from the US through the medium of the Internet and the communication channels of newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms, meant that I could cut across geographical constraints and share stories about family and familiar places that were inspired by *The Sopranos*. This seemed to complete the sense that I had found the 'emotional home' for which part of me had longed.

However, at times the intensity of this personal relationship complicated aspects of the later research and in some instances directly informed my more 'scholarly' encounters with fan-respondents in unexpected ways. I want to extend a consideration of some of the concerns my narrative introduces by explicitly addressing my relationship to some of the collected

audience data. My aim here is to examine where my own investments with particular 'discourses and identities' (Hills 2002: 74) (for example my romanticisation of geographical notions of community, and some of my attempts to maintain a 'detached' and authoritative scholar identity) surfaced in the research. I will examine first, alongside some fan extracts, Sandvoss's conceptualisation of the fan's experience of the text as 'an extension of the self' (2005: 102) in order to consider how fan objects can reflect fans' discursive attachments.

### **Intersecting texts**

While I would not want to make the contentious assertion that the reflexive narrative of my relationship to *The Sopranos*, which is heavily invested in discourses of class, family, ethnicity, gender and age, equals the diversity of meanings made by other *Sopranos* fans, it would be fair to argue that my account supports Sandvoss's proposition that the fan object functions 'as textual extension of the self', thus blurring the boundaries between fan object and the self (2005: 102). In this sense, Sandvoss's conceptualisation of fandom challenges Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) Spectacle/Performance Paradigm which links narcissistic self-reflection specifically to public performance and its reliance on an audience, real or imagined. For Sandvoss, fandom should also be conceived 'as a form of narcissistic self-reflection not between fans and their social environment but between the fan and his or her object of fandom' (2005: 98). This 'second form of narcissism' can thus be applied to fans who may hesitate to 'publicly acknowledge their fandom' or who may not participate within fandom's social networks (ibid.). As Sandvoss writes, 'the first and foremost audience for the performance of fans is the fan him-or herself' (ibid.).

Strong identifications with the narratives and discourses articulated through fan objects for fans can indicate the different ways in which the object of fandom forms 'part of the fan's (sense of) self' rather than reducing the engagement to the notion of a 'textual possession', which still implies a clear separation of fan and text (ibid.: 101). In my account, *The Sopranos* speaks about and extends 'aspects of the self in the form of drives and fantasies' (ibid.: 100-101). Other fan accounts which reveal an intense emotional identification and personalisation of the text show also how the text can 'be experienced as part of the fan's fabric of the self' (ibid.: 101) reflecting the fan's own life struggles, values or repertoire of discursive investments. The tendency for some fans to draw distinct parallels between themselves and the fiction, thus inserting themselves into the narrative, indicates the ways in which fans' relationship to their object of fandom may be 'structured through their own beliefs' (ibid.: 104). As Sandvoss writes,

Beyond identificatory fantasies of resembling or imitating (Stacey 1994), the key indication of fans' self-reflective reading of their object of fandom then lies in the way in which they superimpose attributes of themselves, their beliefs and value systems and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom. (Sandvoss 2005: 104)

Consider, for example, the email correspondence below in which one young male fan offers an illustration of his self-reflective interpretation of *The Sopranos*. The extract speaks directly about how he perceives his sense of self in relation to the 'values', a term he chooses, that are articulated through the series. He makes clear also his unwillingness to reveal this in the public space of a fan discussion forum:

I am an 18-year-old British male living in the Midlands. This is hard to explain, usually I'm pretty articulate, but when it comes to the written word, I'm blank. Basically, I believe that there are two faces to everybody, there's the face you show yourself, and the way you behave with only your knowledge. The hidden face, my hidden face is an area of myself I do not reveal to strangers, but in this case, finding someone who wants to know for a greater cause and not just for gossip, is the reason why I have decided to speak. I often commit crimes seen on the show, I deal, I steal and I do "other jobs", but like I said, none as bad as those on the show, what I do, are things where no one gets hurt and business is done. When I watch "The Sopranos" the values I live by and values I like are what attract me to the show. (December 2, 2002)

Like many of the *Star Wars* fans who claimed that the films reflected their religious and spiritual beliefs (Brooker 2002: 5-6, cited in Sandvoss 2005: 104), or the *Cagney and Lacey* fans who claimed close affinity with the two strong female characters and their friendship (see Brower 1992: 169; and D'Acci 1994), many *Sopranos* fans proudly announce and share with others their investments with the text's nostalgic discourses of Italian-American heritage, family, tradition and loyalty:

I can so relate to this family. When I wear my Soprano shirt people will stop and say, "Oh The Sopranos, Don't you love that show?" and I'll say, "We are

The Sopranos!" People look at me like I'm crazy. I'm just glad to know that my family is not off the wall. (November 22, 2000)

The show is very realistic. I was raised in a very Italian family; and the scenes with all the men doing their "clubbing" and "meetings" are very authentic. I see my family in every scene. There's not enough of that kind of Italian kinship nowadays, except in certain locations like Philadelphia, New Jersey, Stubenville, OH, etc etc. I know this generation has so many ethnic mixed marriages that the true Italian family is becoming more and more extinct.... (March 30, 2001)

I can totally relate to the show! Just like the writer lived with me there are so many memories brought back to me! The food yummy (peppersaneggs) We live to eat! I love the warmth ya can feel it. That's Italian. (June 1, 2001)<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the previous UK-based respondent who located himself through the series' masculine focus on crime-related 'jobs' and making sure that 'business is done', what these commentaries appear to demonstrate is that some fans' sense of self, which depend partly on pleasures of the recognition of stable notions of identity, family and community, may be revealed to them specifically through a memory journey inspired by the memory text. The second poster's testimony to *The Sopranos*' authenticity, for example, is mobilised by the way that the 'emotional economy' (Ellis 2000: 103) of the drama series invites him/her to reflect on the how he/she was 'raised' and to 'see', as if looking into a mirror of the past, the dynamics of his/her 'family in every scene'. Some comparison between character Tony Soprano's nostalgic preoccupations and the concerns of this poster can be drawn here also. Like Tony Soprano, this individual appears to ponder his/her own status as subject in the state of affairs 'nowadays', as he/she expresses a sense of loss for what he/she perceives is the 'true Italian family'. Idealistic assumptions about ethnic purity, therefore, have been challenged by ethnic or racial mixing which has become more common with the diversity and fragmentation characteristic of the experience of late modernity (Giddens 1991: 190).

The last poster demonstrates some knowingness and media literacy in his/her humorous reference to the show's processes of production. There is an awareness here of the script-

writer's capacity to personalise public memories, generated through the plethora of representations that create impressions of what it might mean to experience life within an Italian-American family and community. The phrase 'That's Italian' recalls images of the Italian family, brought together by home-cooked food, made with the warmth and love of a doting mother. Responses such as these reveal ways in which the memory text might help individual memories and private fantasies find expression.

In the context of Askoy and Robins' research on diasporic Turkish audiences, viewer responses that articulate nostalgic desires reflect what the authors call a 'modality of fantasy' (Askoy and Robins 2000: 359, cited in Briggs 2010: 125-126). This modality illustrates what viewers express when they 'seek out idealized images of stability and coherence' (Briggs 2010: 125). Not unlike those noted above, such nostalgic identifications, which may not cohere with the 'reality' of the place as it exists in the present, as Briggs summarises, can hold both temporal and spatial importance as they signal desire for 'a return to a lost time' as well as 'a return to an imaginary space' (Briggs 2010: 126, emphasis in original). Briggs also summarises Askoy and Robins' method of accounting for the 'shifting nature of identity' (Briggs 2010: 124, citing Askoy and Robins 2000: 345). Askoy and Robins argue against essentialist assumptions that transnational television 'simply reaffirms migrants' sense of belonging to the "homeland" at the expense of their assimilation into the host country' (ibid.). Observations about the movement between different modalities of response such as closeness and distance, emotional identification, fantasy and nostalgia, 'and scrutiny, questioning and dialogue' (Briggs 2010: 125) capture a more cohesive picture of the complexities of these viewers' experiences of Turkish television. Similar shifts in modalities were common in my own study (see also Baym 2000) and often illustrated the ways in which fans performed different degrees of discursive work as they moved from what I identified as 'experiential involvement' (close identification and personalisation modes of talk) to 'critical apprehension' (distancing modes) sometimes within one posting, email response, or online chat. The following text explores some of the conditions that may complicate both fan-audiences and scholar-fans' articulation of the viewing experience. The section also pays attention to the kind of discursive work that might be played out by the scholar-fan when various aspects of their dual identity are under threat.

### ***Managing multiple roles: challenging defensive strategies***

While many fans find security and sense of belonging through the public sharing of personal memory, the possibility that some *Sopranos* fans may hesitate to share with others their

emotive personalisations of the text was identified at different points throughout my research. Close personalisation of *The Sopranos* in the context of forum interaction tended to be actively discouraged in some forums in favour of more impersonal, critical discourse. This might explain, at least to some extent, why three female *Sopranos* fans, with whom I had more private computer-mediated correspondence, disclosed their strong feelings about the character Livia outside of public forum threads. In one instance, when most Sopranoland Forum members left the chat room after discussing the seventh episode of Season Five, 'In Camelot', which many fans claimed was boring, one female fan wrote, 'I cried during the flash back because I realized that Livia is almost like my Grandmother' (April 18, 2004).<sup>12</sup> Another female fan also added, 'She's just like my Mom, kind of hard to watch sometimes... I think if my mom could have she would have put a hit out on me. LOL' (April 18, 2004). Although the former member quickly left the room without qualifying her statement, the latter noted that the difficult relationship with her 'controlling' mother, who, like her grandmother, regularly publicly humiliated her, had deteriorated to the point where they were no longer on speaking terms. The power of the representation of the difficult character Livia to facilitate fan comparisons to their own mothers and grandmothers and the dynamics of their complex family relationships, was recognised much earlier in an email by another female respondent who wrote, 'Livia was a tribute to my still living Grandmother'. She added,

It was almost painful to watch, because it was so dead on accurate to what I had to go through in real life. The writers on the Soprano's are amazingly true to life. The relationships are extremely accurate, and I think that is what is the draw. Soap operas tend to be sensational, and The Sopranos is well grounded. (August 5, 2002)

It is important to acknowledge that my early encounter with this response may have illustrated my own personal difficulty in dealing with this subject matter. Rather than follow up with careful questioning about why Livia's character could introduce such pain in watching, I responded with a reductive and nostalgic comparison between Livia and my own grandmother, as an attempt to share, in the way that one fan might share with another, some kind of common ground with this woman. I then quickly proceeded to ask about her 'bad experience' in another *Sopranos*' newsgroup, an additional point she had mentioned which became an increasing interest in the research at that time. On one level, it appears I may have shied away from asking this respondent more about her emotional viewing experience of Livia because I was not quite sure how I would respond to the potential enormity of what she 'had to go through in real life'. On another level, I can see that my reluctance may have

functioned as a form of defence, as her testimony might have triggered my own conflicting and painful memories of family.

Norman Fairclough has argued that attending to absences in texts is as important in discourse analysis as is the identification of textual presences (1995: 5 & 210; see also Hills 2002: 71). Absences are often created in interpretative communities, including the ones that comprise the academic canon, when sensitive or difficult subject matter arise. Ambivalences and silences in discourse, as illustrated in the above example, typify what Fairclough describes as 'classic defensive mechanisms' (1992: 157). These defensive discursive strategies often occur in unequal encounters, and can potentially result in the eliciting of specific forms of interaction over others. My defensive strategy in this research encounter and at various other points during the research, illustrates also Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) view that the researcher, like the researched, is an 'anxious' and 'defended subject', and that such a position is likely to intrude upon the production and analysis of data. Walkerdine et al. (2002) suggest that such research encounters demonstrate how psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, countertransference, detachment, identifications and fantasies do not disappear in the research process but can create contradictions between multiple subject positions. This example, therefore, exposes the difficulty and discomfort that researchers may experience when they feel vulnerable and are at risk of losing their objective, 'detached' identity (Walkerdine et al. 2002: 193).

In this case, as I have suggested, my projection of fantasies onto this respondent is evidenced through my intellectual 'desire to reveal' some kind of truth about fan experience in the newsgroup, which is, at the same time, very likely 'counterpointed by the desire to conceal' (ibid.: 184). This concealment implies the potential for power to shift into the hands of the researcher who has the capacity to suppress respondents' stories, reminding us that the research narrative is never neutral but constructed (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 29-30). What this account makes clear also is that the silence I constructed at this moment in the research, my initiative to change the subject and move on to something else, was comparable to many of the silences constructed by other fans in the message boards or in the Sopranoland chat room when the terms for discussions that were framed via the expectations of critical and rational discourse did not allow space for alternative responses.

My defensive tendency to conceal emerged at other times and in ways that illustrated further some of the tensions that surrounded my dual scholar-fan identity. Like the minority of non-US fans I encountered whose viewing times did not coincide with those of the US-dominated forum memberships, I felt the potential for alienation when falling out of sync with the timely activities of the rest of the group (see for example Hills 2002: 176). My own geographical difference to the majority of members in these sites caused anxiety from the start as it impacted significantly on my experience of participation in discussions as well as my viewing of Season Five episodes, a week or so later than other fans in the US, during the time of my chosen fieldwork when collecting data. Before this time frame I enjoyed taking part in online chats with fans from the UK or the US during UK afternoon or evening hours, often when the series was in hiatus. Later when occupying my role as virtual ethnographer I proceeded to utilise the chat facility as another resource to gather naturally occurring data from synchronous, or spontaneous CMC. I prompted Sopranoland forum members to join the chat room for immediate post-episode discussions at 10pm, US Eastern Standard Time, sent reminders a day or two before each episode first aired in the US, and was excited by members' growing interest over the weeks. As a long-term member of the group I enjoyed playing an important part in organising an activity that would contribute to the group's symbolic construction of community. As a researcher I felt confident that I made a productive move in terms of choosing a useful, additional method for data collection. This approach offered the benefits of participating in real-time, unsolicited discussion while allowing the possibility of alighting upon members' responses at appropriate moments; however I was not prepared for the extent of the practical challenges and feelings that arose from this decision. My first challenge was the management of my temporal distance to the group as the UK time difference was five hours ahead of US Eastern Standard Time. When I found myself sitting in front of the computer at the ridiculous hour of 3am every Monday morning I struggled to stay focussed and as interested as the other participants when I had not viewed the episode. On some occasions chats continued for over two hours, making it difficult, to say the least, to sustain the energy necessary to engage meaningfully in this type of virtual fieldwork experience, let alone negotiate successfully the terms of this commitment with the demands of family life with two young children the next day.<sup>13</sup>

Speaking from my positioning as a self-identified 'spoiler avoider' fan (see Gray and Mittell 2007), at least during the time in which I conducted the research, I experienced a distinctive hesitation when logging on, knowing that my viewing pleasure would be spoiled by other fans' accounts of the episode. As the weeks progressed I could not escape feelings of inadequacy that accompanied my fannish desire and clumsy attempts to interact with others when discussion allowed no space for my episode history experience but relied solely on viewing

immediacy and rapid response. Some of these feelings, in which the sense of a loss of visibility or fan status within the group emerged, began to overlap with feelings of loss of control over the research situation as an academic. In other words, while my experiences as an 'insider', combined with some of my successful and ethical attempts at data collection (I reminded members regularly that I was conducting research) could be perceived as ingredients for good, virtual ethnographic work, when my fan status as well as my research choices were undermined or failed to live up to my own expectations, I felt unclear about how to proceed. I wanted to ensure that I balanced observation with participation and initially saw the chats as a good opportunity to achieve this, but I had increasing doubts about whether this was a sensible approach. Aside from some of the issues I have raised above, in the eyes of those members who remembered that I was conducting research and was communicating with them from a much later time outside of the US, I was at risk of positioning myself as an 'outsider' who may have been perceived as 'trying too hard' (Hodkinson 2005: 137, citing Hodkinson 2002: 40). This position, in which the individual is clearly making visible their many efforts to be accepted within the group, therefore 'could be more damaging to levels of trust and cooperation than approaching participants upfront as an outsider' (Hodkinson 2005: 137).

To elaborate further on some of the anxiety I experienced when attempting to negotiate my multiple roles, I can recall an incident that challenged simultaneously my need for recognition and sense of importance as a long-term contributor in Sopranoland, as well as my desire to maintain some degree of ethnographic authority. Some weeks after I initiated the chats one of the group's prominent moderators suddenly took over my role in reminding members about the chat facility. Without advance warning he began moderating the chats by leading discussions. While this certainly would have been a natural move on the part of any forum moderator in Sopranoland, a fan-site that was shut down and reconstructed after a series of lengthy flame wars, as an active member of the group I felt quietly upset that he had never acknowledged my presence and usually kept a distance from me in chats and other forum correspondence. As a researcher I justified my frustration at what I perceived was a form of strategic sidelining on his part, as I may have posed a threat to his position as moderator, by assuming that the group would have eventually conducted the chats with or without me in the way they saw fit and I saw this as something positive. My rationalisation, however, did not manage to dissolve completely the complex feelings of vulnerability I experienced as a fan/insider and researcher/outsider.

Upon reviewing records of my own discourse in the forums (for example in my introduction to the groups and in threads such as 'Where Are You From?') and in chats, I found that on

repeated occasions I invested defensively in a performance of self as a citizen of the United States, thus foregrounding the issue of nationhood. Not unlike some of the tone of the above postings, I presented a romanticised ideal of my 'partial' Italian-American 'origins', celebrating the location which shaped my formative years and young adult identity, while downplaying the appearance of my later acquired British, academic identity, and hence my role as a scholar conducting research. In this respect, my discourse appeared to function as a means of attempting to overcome any possible difficulties that could have emerged from the interplay of my physical and professional distance from these US-dominated fan groups. Yes, I had identified as a *Sopranos* fan, participated for a lengthy time in newsgroups and bulletin boards and had earned a level of recognition and respect in Sopranoland well before conducting any formal research. But it would be naïve and dishonest to ignore that fact that when I declared my research intentions, my academic identity changed the dynamics of some of my future social interactions with fans.

It is worth extending this point here in order to acknowledge some of the awkward transitions that can occur when the fan is recognised as occupying the position of a researcher who transitions from participant, to participant who is also 'observing'. In one of the newsgroups in which I was a member during the time I collected data, the list owner granted me special status as moderator. The reason for giving me this new role, he stated, was simply because I was an academic conducting research. The announcement post to all in the group read: 'Jeanette Monaco in the UK is now a moderator. Anyone going for a PHD that is related to what we are interested in as a group should at least have this position' (April 7, 2004). This kind of moment recalls Hills's (Hills and Jenkins 2001) observation that within some fan cultures academic knowledge may not be accepted as 'superior' but 'may well be devalued, or even sneered at'. This is countered with Jenkins's reflection about his discomfort with the high authority status attributed to him by the fan community after the publication of *Textual Poachers* (1992). The de-legitimising of academic interest which can occur in fan cultures, however, can shift the balance of power in favour of the research participants, thus challenging the academic's 'own sense of centrality or cultural hierarchy' (Hills and Jenkins 2001). Although I was 'rationally' aware at that moment that this supported sense of academic authority felt uncomfortable and hence was morally problematic for me and for the research, it did not stop me from wishing this recognition might help me to gain even more access to potential respondents.

My nostalgic, defensive claims to origins, family, ethnic and national identity were identified also, as I have considered in the above postings, as some of the playful discursive practices

that were in keeping with the fan community's enunciation of cultural values, discourses and tensions articulated in *The Sopranos*. My utterances therefore replayed some of the communal expressions that many fans incorporated when securing their sense of belonging, thus locating their emotional home through the object of fandom. At the same time, it is this potentially territorialising discourse that displays the less favourable side of *Heimat* (Sandvoss 2005: 64-65). That is to say, while some fans may locate themselves through *The Sopranos*' nostalgic discourses or value their proximity to geographical places in the text, others may invest more in the series' discourses around therapy or the crime genre. The possibility of competition and struggle between different fan affiliations with the text thus has the capacity to contribute to the gate-keeping strategies of which some fandoms are accused (see for example Johnson 2007).

### **Destabilising ethnographic authority**

The prospect that the scholar might escape the boundaries of rational control expected of social research practice, perform in ways that reproduce the hegemonic construction of the 'other' in relation to an imagined ideal, and thus contradict their academic ideological investments, may be uncomfortable and introduce a troubling realisation for researchers committed to the notion of maintaining authority over the fan-ethnography. For me, and for those who are sympathetic to the spirit of autoethnography, this detailed critique of occupying the complex positions of both scholar and fan during the research process is highly productive and personally transformative, allowing the scholar-fan's consciousness to emerge through an ongoing 'process of acquisition' (Murphy 1999: 481; quoting Dumont [1978/1992: 12]).

The above examples illustrate the impossibility of separating the scholar's academic desires from their fan-related pleasures while also highlighting the problems with assumptions that might attempt to characterise these two discursive positions through a binary relationship of objective/subjective, good/bad or bad/good dualisms. Indeed, it is clear that the multiple dimensions of my scholar-fan experience have been shaped by shared ideological aspirations and intense personal longings. My need to create a sense of belonging within the academic community through a commitment to research that was based within the politicised domain of cultural and media studies was just as emotionally driven and informed by my social locations as was my desire for connection with a fan-audience community of others whose attachments to *The Sopranos* compared with mine. Encountering an organised television online fandom as a fan gave me the space for personal expression I could not find elsewhere; when I appropriated the community in order to conduct formal research my history and certain

aspects of myself were validated further, including my later acquired middle-class identity, which needed reaffirmation. In this respect, it seems unsurprising that my emerging academic interest and taste preference for US 'quality' TV drama, while informed by some of my need to connect with a place that was no longer my physical home, was implicated also within certain cultural systems of value that elevate the status of 'narratively complex television' while appealing to a 'quality' 'boutique audience of more upscale educated viewers who typically avoid television' (Mittell 2006: 31). As Hills has observed, such texts marked as sophisticated and aimed at niche or 'cult' viewers are attractive to academics and are 'more likely to meet with academic fervor and canonization' (Hills 2007: 40). My positioning as a part of a 'knowing' fan-audience membership was therefore not only validated by the fandom but by the media studies' academic canon.

### **Conclusions: Autoethnography as a critical challenge to 'self-indulgence'**

One of the most common charges against research accounts that embrace narratives of the self is the accusation that such approaches are self-indulgent. This equating of autoethnography with self-indulgence, as Andrew Sparkes (2002) has observed, has become so universal that 'all' such endeavours are often categorised this way, in spite of any redeeming values in various accounts (Sparkes 2002: 213). The only way for autoethnography to find its way out of this damning history and to avoid falling into this risk of embarrassment is to set expectations for practice.

My position about the writing and evaluation of autoethnography accords with Sparkes's initial suggestion that authors and readers need to recognise the difference between self-indulgence and 'self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous' (2002: 214). In this sense autoethnography should always aim to offer much more than the confessional that 'tells all'. Autoethnography, as I have attempted to illustrate in this essay, differs from any simplistic notion of the confessional through its questioning of how the self is mediated and constrained through language, culture, socio-economic historical conditions and through its ability to connect this questioning with the experience of others. Autoethnography must always aim to create a critical path that can help us to understand our own partialities and 'correct our biases' (Johnson et al. 2004: 52) as cultural and media studies researchers. As Johnson et al. argue, the stress on creating a dialogue with others through reflexivity is important here; identifying our biases '*informs our readers* of our partialities so that *they* can make any necessary corrections' (ibid., emphasis in original). However, as the authors continue, reflexivity can never provide us with an 'all-seeing godlike position'; it cannot

magically cut through the social and cultural in which power operates (ibid.). Rather than view the autoethnographic exercise as meaningless, however, I sympathise with Johnson et al.'s assertion that reflexivity can at least take us one step further in our knowledge production even if this knowledge always remains '*still partial*' (ibid., emphasis in original). For Hills, this means that our self-analysis can at least begin to reveal the powerful nature of some discourses 'because of the (non-discursive) investments that we make in them, and because of their structuring absences and familiar repetitions' (2002: 72).

This stress on continual partiality, as reflected earlier in my reference to Lyn Thomas's (2002) study, reinforces the need for all critical autoethnographers to embrace a willingness to question their potentially secure identities as completely objective researchers. By extension, the autoethnographer should be motivated, through continuous reflexive interrogation, to question any other identities and discourses to which they may have attachments, and which find expression through established rhetorical conventions.

This kind of understanding forms the essential starting point for realising how we can make ourselves accountable for the knowledge that we produce about the people and cultures we study. What I am asserting here reflects my direct attempts throughout this essay to respond to Couldry's 'principle of accountability' (2000: 126), as noted in the introduction and extended in the context of fan studies by Hills (2002), which demands that we must employ the same theoretical frameworks to analyse ourselves as we would when we analyse others (Couldry 2000: 126). Through my examination in this essay of the various ways in which I attempted to establish and maintain my scholarly as well as my fan identity, the interactions between academic and fan journeys of discovery and the various ideological agendas that shape them are brought to my own consciousness and to the attention of readers. My intention is that in bringing to the surface 'the uncertainties each analyst recognizes in the formulations of her or his own identity' (Couldry 1996: 315), academic identity, ethnographic authority and any assumptions about the fixed nature of fan identity are destabilised. Without privileging one kind of knowledge or one voice over the other, the intricacies of the shared discourses and differences between academic and fan experience have been recognised in this account and mulled over, with neither subject position being placed above scrutiny. In this respect, I have attempted to attend critically to some of the conditions that maintain what Hills has described as academic and fan 'imagined subjectivities' (2002: 3). The autoethnographic narrative I have proposed has aimed to inform and shape the fan-ethnography by showing a readiness to expose the limitations of the rhetorical conventions, discursive strategies, and subcultural

ideologies that shape the values of *both* academic and fan communities. I have approached this by interweaving my autobiographical narrative with the reflexive narratives of other fans.

As I suggested earlier, autoethnography, as in the case of memory work, should seek to keep its narrative open and invite further questions. My autoethnography therefore is not complete and there are other stories that could be explored. If autoethnography accompanies the imperative to make the ethnography multivocal its author should aim to share, as Thomas (2002) and other feminist researchers have (see for example Van Zoonen 1994), analyses of research with respondents and thus create a space to reflect on the ensuing dialogue with readers. I have not yet, for example, considered the consequences of my failed attempts to share early drafts of my research with respondents with whom I developed an ongoing relationship. At various stages I offered fans opportunities to read work and respond but these offers were never taken up. Later after the fieldwork period, there was a large gap of time between my participation in fan groups and writing the draft chapters. This gap was due to a serious illness I experienced that interrupted the study and made my eventual return to work and fan participation slow and difficult. I later offered drafts again to various individuals with the expectation that I might gain valuable feedback. After several prompts and many excuses later from fans I realised the opportunity to incorporate fans' interpretations into my analysis was lost. These problems were not due simply to the difficulties one might face when conducting virtual ethnographic work, when respondents leave forums or email accounts become inactive. In my case I could not sustain fans' interests in commenting. Speculation may point to my earlier observations, drawing on Hills and Jenkins (2001), that academic knowledge may be devalued in some fandoms. This point should also remind us of the significance of the collective affective purpose of online fan forums. In this respect, my role as a 'researcher' may not have fulfilled the same potential for the members I approached, for reflexive identity affirmation as the willing audience of others in the 'community of imagination' (Hills 2002: 180).

This absence in my account, however, does not only highlight the need for further questioning of how the scholar's knowledge production might communicate effectively with the fan culture, but it draws attention to how illness can threaten the researcher's identity. For me the details of my illness narrative are too personal to approach in this essay. I would argue, as others have (Couldry 2000: 114, citing Visweswaran 1994: 51; Johnson et al. 2004: 53), that we still need to respect reflexive voices, including those belonging to our respondents, that might find some subject matter more difficult or less culturally acceptable to share (see for example Hills 2002: 87). I would add, however, that it is relevant to openly acknowledge here that when

illness intervenes in academic life and the demands of research, it can serve to heighten the limitations of imagined academic subjectivity. When illness interrupts research, the scholar, who may feel secure in their academic identity, is literally forced to put his/her rational, authoritative performance on hold. In my case, any vulnerabilities I experienced while I was on the path to establishing an academic identity as a PhD research student and Visiting Lecturer were amplified further.

There are many ways in which writers might approach writing the self into the ethnography. One journal article may provide only the introduction, an initial opening, to a longer, open-ended narrative. In summary, my hope for this autoethnography is that it can 'open up' the fan-ethnographic text and 'invite interpretive responses' (Richardson 2000: 254) in a way that contributes to the ongoing questioning taking place about the status of self-reflexive writing and its implications for the interpretation of empirical data not only in the context of fan studies but within wider audience studies' scholarship.

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### **Biographical Note**

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*Inspector Morse*, Zenith, 1987-2000, UK

*Teletubbies*, Ragdoll Productions, 1997-2001, UK

*The Archers*, BBC Radio 4, 1951- present, UK

*The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999-2007, USA

### Filmography

*Distant Voices, Still Lives*, dir. Terence Davies, 1988, UK

*Rocky II*, dir. Sylvester Stallone, 1979, USA

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the examples considered, the recent edited collection by Hellekson and Busse (2006) is worth noting. The chapters focus primarily on fan fiction in online contexts with all contributors 'exist[ing] on the intersection' of academia and fandom (Hellekson and Busse, 2006: 25). While none of the authors construct self-reflexive narratives that attempt to work through some of the challenges of this intersection as I propose to do in this paper, the editors 'put forth this book as a way in which the collective sum of the essays may permit an ephemeral, provisional, and contingent autoethnography' (ibid.: 24). In doing so, the collection does not prioritise one subject position over another but establishes a framework in which the insights of both communities can inform each other.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term 'scholar-fan' is now widely contributed to Matt Hills's examination of the complexity around the academic-fan hybrid identity in his work *Fan Cultures* (2002). Hills defines the 'fan-scholar' or fan-academic as the fan whose writing is influenced by academic theory. This term is distinct from the 'scholar-fan' or academic-fan who is a professional academic and whose experience of fandom informs their work in the academy to the degree that their fandom is utilised 'as a badge of distinction' (Hills 2002: 2). However, Henry Jenkins's earlier work *Textual Poachers* (1992) also acknowledged some of the implications of this dual identity. Jenkins's more recent use of the term 'Aca-Fan', for example, in the title of his official weblog, denotes his continued attempts to bridge the gap between academic and fan worlds. (See Henry Jenkins's Blog, 'Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins' at <http://www.henryjenkins.org/>.)

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the ethical and methodological issues involved when using the Internet for television audience studies see Lotz and Ross (2004).

<sup>4</sup> My reflections of the ways in which I attempted to negotiate my roles as both 'insider' and 'outsider' at various points in the research will illustrate, following Hodkinson (2005) that the use of both of these terms in the absolutist sense is problematic.

<sup>5</sup> My participation as active member in multiple *Sopranos* fan sites in the early stages of the project allowed me to explore a range of possible research approaches and strategies as I experienced fan activity in diverse online social spaces. I made the decision to narrow down my field of study to two US based online *Sopranos*' discussion forums: the Sopranoland Forum (<http://www.Sopranoland.com>) and Yahoo! Groups – SopranosForum (<http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/SOPRANOSFORUM/>). My precise period of fieldwork in these two sites took place over 14-weeks from March 7, 2004 to June 13, 2004. This time frame marked the show's fifth season with 13 episodes. One extra week was included as the US Memorial Day holiday fell on Sunday, June 6, 2004, the week after the penultimate Episode 12, which allowed fans the opportunity to speculate an extra week between episodes. A total of 11, 977 posts were downloaded. My final decision was to sample the heaviest posting week 12 from

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Sopranoland Forum and the same week 12 postings from Yahoo! SopranosForum. This episodic time frame focus enabled me to establish which topics and themes dominated activity and which were marginalised during the two weeks prior to the Season Five finale, 'Long Term Parking'. The focus on that week's activities, including discussion in the Sopranoland chat room, called attention to issues that arose earlier in the groups. My observations therefore remained sensitive to the diversity of my long-term participant-observations from the early days of the project to the end of the fieldwork. In addition to the data sample, I considered, where relevant, records and diary notes, a corpus of weekly online chats in Sopranoland Forum and email correspondences with fans from various sites.

<sup>6</sup> The imperative of making data manageable and obtaining results therefore has the potential danger of toning down or disappearing altogether, the multiplicity of voices that ethnographers seek to recognise (Alvesson and Sköldböck 2000: 186). The meaningful ways in which individuals may speak when they are 'not' speaking (Mazzei 2003: 356), for example, may be glossed over when deploying such techniques. This point echoes Barker and Brooks' (1998) challenge to Liebes and Katz's (1993) lack of attendance to certain types of audience response, which may be more difficult to identify or conduct a thorough investigation of, through quantitative analyses. They argue that problems are introduced in research accounts when scholars over rely on 'frequency' or repetition of different kinds of talk without explaining 'why frequency should count as any kind of proof of the salience of certain reactions to a cultural group' (Barker & Brooks 1998: 97). 'Without frequency to rely on', they add, 'analysis is much more complicated' (ibid.: 98).

<sup>7</sup> The relevance of this discussion in relation to the case of those academics who choose to research areas in which they have no fan engagement has been considered at length in Hills (2007). Hills's focus is on the 'scholar-non-fans' and 'critical scholar-anti-fans' in media/cultural studies who abandon aesthetics in favour of the study of popular culture. He argues that these academics, who have normally been exempt from the expectations of self-reflexive scrutiny, can benefit from a self-reflexive approach that recognises 'the general hybridity of contemporary media audiences' (2007: 46-47).

<sup>8</sup> If past events are not recorded through writing at the time they happen yet are remembered as emotionally evocative, Ellis writes, they can be accessed and reconstructed as story later. This approach does not rely on definitions of pure truth claims and scientific validity, but emerges from 'the position that language is not transparent and there's no single standard of truth' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 751). Therefore concerns over whether our writing about past 'truths' is biased by our present perceptions about the events (therefore being subjected to accusations of 'misremembering, misrepresenting or simply lying' [Lawler 2002: 249] ) should not take precedence over the autoethnographic narrative which strives to challenge such claims.

<sup>9</sup> This feeling is perhaps heightened by my present knowledge of the later extra-diegetic text surrounding Marchand's own death, which occurred after Season Two, on June 18, 2000. David Chase and writers however, decided to write Livia's death into the script in the second episode of Season Three.

<sup>10</sup> This kind of memory connection which is made from one type of representation to another, Burgin (2004) writes, as he refers to Barthes's (1993 [1980]) memory of an aunt, who wears a similar necklace to the one worn by a stranger in a 1926 van der Zee portrait, illustrates 'how the affect may not only be detached from the original representation but displaced onto other representations' (Burgin 2004: 60-61).

<sup>11</sup> All of these examples were posted on GIST TV Fan Clubs; 'La Famiglia – The Sopranos FanClub': <http://clubs.gist.com/tvclubs/fanclubhost>. Last visited on November 8, 2001. This site is no longer active.

<sup>12</sup> The gradual exit of members left three participants chatting; two female fans who joined in on a regular basis, and myself.

<sup>13</sup> My participation in a UK-based fan site which also utilised a chat facility came to end before this point when the site became increasingly inactive due to its small number of participants.