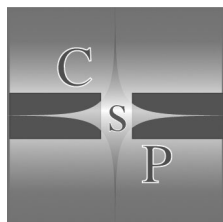


Breakcore

Breakcore:
Identity and Interaction on Peer-to-Peer

By

Andrew Whelan



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

In recent years it has become a sociological commonplace to posit a disjuncture between “how we live now” and “how we lived before”. Whether we choose to characterise “how we live now” as late capitalism, postmodernity, globalisation, “risk” or “information” society (*etc.*), a commonly emphasised source of difference is the impact of a global telecommunications infrastructure, impacting upon all aspects of social interaction, from instantaneous global capital flows to the constitution of subjectivity itself.¹

Lash, for instance, argues that the form of life of contemporary society has become technological: “I operate as a man-machine interface—as a technological form of natural life—because I must necessarily navigate through technological forms of social life ... I cannot achieve sociality in the absence of technological systems, apart from my interface with communication and transportation machines” (2002: 15-16). This is culture and sociality “at-a-distance”, as with Anderson’s imagined community (1983), but so diffuse and attenuated as to be disjunctive. The dominant form of sociality becomes “networked individualism” (Castells 2001: 131). Identification is to despatialised, elective-affinity social networks or “disorganisations”. The imagined community, constituted by “virtually proximate” individuals (Bauman 2003: 61), is not a national one but an international one (be it of musicians within a specific genre, academics, or what have you). Concurrently, there is a *disidentification* with the local. Place becomes generic as social relations are spatially “disembedded” (Giddens 1990: 21). Localities become homogenous “non-places” (Augé 1995: 78-79): suburbs, malls, fast food chains, transport systems; and these socio-technical networks are enacted in generic, “abstract” spaces: the internet, cable news, mobile telephony. Power

¹ For example, Beck (1992), Castells (1998), Giddens (1991), Harvey (1989), Jameson (1991), Lyotard (1984), and Poster (1995).

relations are reconfigured, such that the elite become an “exterritorial” class; conversely, immobility becomes the mark of the excluded (Bauman 1998).

This is not to suggest that such accounts imply that “how we live now” is a *consequence* of technology. They do imply, however, that recent technological developments (specifically in telecommunications and digitisation) play a fundamental role in these changing modes of sociality. Moreover, they often do so in broad and speculative terms. Whilst such theorising can be compelling, it is often, to say the least, under-operationalised empirically. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that by examining interaction at the “interface”, we could explore these broad claims about “how we live now”.

For instance, we might ask: how might “networked individualism” operate socially? What kind of “individuals” are these? How radical is the disjuncture between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its face-to-face (f2f) counterpart? How might mediated interaction inform our conceptions of sociality, culture and the self? How are sociality, subjectivity, and signifying practice managed and constituted by those who have significant personal investment in “virtual” environments? What symbolic, discursive, and material resources do despatialised social groups draw on in the collective production of meaning, and how might that meaning be identified and described?² How *do* “we” live now, and what are the appropriate means of finding out? Through a microinteractional focus on a number of interlinked “despatialised networks” and their efforts to “disorganise”, as fans of particular genres, as musicians working within them, and as agents constructing, representing and “making sense” of the world, I hope to be able to engage empirically with some of these questions, and some others besides.

What follows is an ethnographic account of *bedroom producer* interaction as instantiated in peer-to-peer (p2p) chatrooms. It takes as its principal data set approximately 2100 pages of conversational text logged nightly from these chatrooms, spanning a six-month time period from July

² There are also a number of broad thematic questions which emerge more specifically from this sort of field site, research and methodology, such as: what does it mean, or what happens, when we read text-based interaction from a public forum as a certain type of *social text*? Are we forced to choose between spatial and textual metaphors for understanding and describing these kinds of environments? What is the relation between textuality and “reality”, and to what extent is social reality textually mediated? How do technological and textual mediation intersect? How does the subject understand these forms of mediation, represent them, and get produced through them?

2003 to February 2004, alongside additional material generated through frequent visits to the locale in the intervening period. It is also informed by email interviews with a number of successful musicians working within the genre/musical subculture at the centre of the research, but largely absent from the “field” (barring the circulation of their music therein); feedback from “local” bedroom producers active within the field; interstitial consideration of websites and online fora associated with the “scene”; over 200 gigabytes of music and, of course, what Garfinkel refers to as “bibliographies” (2002a: 67).

Music, obviously, is important, and not just to active practitioners. Frith suggests that “Patterns of music use provide a better map of social life than viewing or reading habits” (2003: 100). Merely in terms of media exposure, in the industrialised world no cultural form is as ubiquitous as music: “The average citizen of the Western world hears music for just under one quarter of his/her waking life” (Tagg 2001). Music, however, is widely perceived to be *changing*, in terms of its sound, its constituent elements, the manner of its production, and its distribution: Taylor asserts that digitisation is “the most fundamental change in the history of Western music since the invention of music notation in the ninth century” (2001: 3). There is obviously a world of music now available for consumption by download, a world otherwise inaccessible. To consider music solely as a commodity has become an absurdity. A core theme of this text is the “technologisation” of musical culture; specifically, the question as to whether the relationship between music and technology could best be characterised as *rationalising* or *democratising*. And as DeNora suggests: “Such ‘high level’ questions are perhaps best answered through specific reference to real actors” (DeNora 1999: 37).

The approach taken here to analysis is somewhat unconventional, but well suited to the multiform nature of the environment. Effectively, data are furnished which demonstrate orientations to fundamental units of shared but contested meaning, and subject to close analysis. The approach to these “units” runs as follows. A brief definition of the bedroom producer is sketched (1.3). An account is then given of the rationalisation/democratisation debate (1.4-1.6), with specific attention paid to the agent conceptualised as “subject to” these forces (1.7). The p2p environment is described, firstly in terms of an overview of the development of the technology (2.1), and then in terms of the “file-sharing imperative”, the reciprocity norm “governing” p2p (2.2-2.4). Following this the mp3, the digital artefact at the centre of p2p exchange, is discussed, in terms of the information revealed in its “properties”, and through consideration of the “tags” provided by “rippers”—those who

“produce” mp3s from commercial releases (3.1). At this point, the text turns to the “presentation of self” within the p2p environment, through discussion of the concept of *persona* (3.2-3.3). These introductory sections “set the scene” for the interaction analysed in following chapters, through providing descriptions of (a) the social, legal and technological “ground” to interaction, (b) the local norms of exchange, (c) the resources so exchanged, and (d) the “mediated” subjects engaging in exchange.

With the “scene” so set, in-depth analysis begins, with the emphasis throughout on elaborating and discussing local, intersubjective meaning as this is manifest in dialogue. This analysis is so structured as to achieve several tasks at once, through treating individual data as *simultaneities* (Ardener 1982: 11). The analysis opens by addressing the seemingly confrontational nature of CMC, through discussing specific instances of “trollery”, where the reading is informed by and engages critically with ethnomethodology, semantic anthropology, ethnographic sociolinguistics, and Bakhtinian metalinguistics. The immanent interactional order is indicated with reference to interactants’ orientation to network-induced “lag” (4.2, 4.4). A critical discussion of ethnomethodology is interjected, suggesting that semantic “density” belies the possibility of focussing solely on *how* communication is achieved (4.3). “Confrontational” interaction is shown to utilise ritual insult exchange, where these insults demonstrably take specific forms (4.5-4.6). This speech genre is contextualised with reference to Herring’s (1996b) account of “adversarial” interactional style (4.5). It is then argued that instances within the data are isolable as *coprolalia*, that is, as a particularly adversarial, dysphemistic speech play, iterated through the use of expletives and obscenity, and “structured” so as to transgress the politeness norms of conventional bourgeois discourse (4.6). Throughout, close attention is paid to the potentials for interactional innovation inherent to the medium (specifically through “quotation”), and the *distributional* nuances of meaning deployed by personæ and inhering within specific interactional forms and terms.

To this end, the first *shibboleth* to be considered is introduced, the honorific/epithet *nigga*, firstly in terms of an etymological account of verbicide (5.1).³ As simultaneity, careful consideration of this term and the

³ The term *shibboleth* (derived from the Hebrew, meaning “ear of corn”) was used as a “watchword” to differentiate the Ephraimites, who could not pronounce the *sh*, from the Gileadites, in a biblical incident which would today be characterised as ethnic cleansing (Judges 12: 5-6). In contemporary usage it refers to terms indicative of social location or origin, the use of which therefore serves to distinguish between groups.

variable contexts of its deployment across a trajectory of use and meaning (as element in greeting sequences, requests, and “jokes”) provides the preliminary means of accessing the other core theme of this text, the social identity of the subject at the music-technology interface as instantiated in the form of the bedroom producer, through considering the role of *embodied* identity in the constitution of subcultural authenticity (5.2). An allotropic investigation of meaning is presented, suggesting that levels of meaning “density” are variable, contestable and contextual (5.3).

This is then further demonstrated in relation to the politics of identity articulated and policed by the terms *gay* and *ghey*. Herring’s conception of interactional adversariality is inflected through the introduction of the *adversative* (Ong 1981); which furnishes a perspective highlighting homosocial aspects of interaction (6.1-6.2). The adversative is described as an “insider” form of social cohesion, and is then enriched through a reflexive ethnomethodological evaluation of its own sociological manifestation and interpretation, and through an account situating it in terms of the concept of *fratriarchy* (6.3). The fratriarchal reading is elaborated through analysis of the remarkable semantic and interactional properties of *gay/ghey*, as often obscene “literalisations” of adversative contest which demonstrate the relationship between subcultural authenticity and normative, heterosexist masculinity (7.1-7.2). The ambivalent character of fratriarchal transgression is then contextualised in relation to the category of the *abject*, such that coprolalia is shown to have a double role in the production of subcultural masculinity and the critique of bourgeois respectability, where these are operationalised simultaneously (7.3). This masculinity, performed by the bedroom producer, is situated in terms of its relationship to computer culture, particularly as evinced through the relations between computer games, identity, and the subcultural musical formations of “chip tune” and “gabber” (7.4). Following this, the bedroom producer’s constitutive relationship with “nerddom” is discussed, before fratriarchal space is underlined in its peculiarly “familial” aspect (7.5).

At this stage the third and final unit of meaning to be considered is introduced, the “amen” breakbeat. This ubiquitous break plays a fundamental role in “breakcore”, the genre at the centre of the research, and can be considered a “museme”, a minimal unit of musical form and meaning (Tagg 2000: 83; Middleton 1990: 189). The discussion begins with a description of accounts of music which emphasise its “extradiscursive” aspect. Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic is described and related to a recurrent theoretical-interpretive concern, the ethnomethodological conceptions of *how* and *what*, as a

means of critiquing this perceived “extradiscursivity” (8.1). The break itself is then described in terms of its temporal properties and the practices it is subject to in its repetition and resequencing, and contrasted with the “basic disco rhythm” as a means of “marking” time. These practices are summarised under the aesthetic ideal of “keeping the edits tight” (8.2).

The sampling of the amen as a cultural practice is then discussed in terms of competing notions of “communal” and “individual” creativity, where these notions are shown to be complicated by ideas of (racial) political identity and “cultural appropriation” (8.3). These issues are explored across a stylistic continuum from “jungle” to breakcore, oriented throughout towards contrasting approaches to the deployment of the amen and its contextual relation to the sample base. The dancehall sample base, and the “soundclash” performative model, are discussed in terms of their role in jungle, which is shown to have an adversative homosocial aspect, related to the issue of homophobia in dancehall lyrics (8.4). The politics of sampling are thus discussed in terms of both racial appropriation and the recontextualisation of material perceived as problematic by some practitioners. Subcultural authenticity is shown to be articulated through a differentiation *between* genres, and between the “underground” and the “mainstream”, where “dancefloor compatibility” is associated with “incorporation” (9.1). The debate within breakcore circles concerning the use of the amen is related to ideas of both creativity and musical structure (9.2). It is then argued that ensuring the maintenance of the “underground” entails an ongoing increase in the “tightness of edits” (virtuoso temporal control on the producer’s part), alongside an engagement with the counter-aesthetics of *noise* (both the non-musical sound, and the genre). Both of these phenomena are characterised as adversative displays of sonic dominance (9.3).

The various approaches to musical composition outlined thus far are then summarised and situated through a discussion of “plunderphonic” sampling. *Bricolage* “pop mashing” is contextualised in relation to broader cultural practices of intertextual citation (10.1). This leads in to a problematisation of accounts of plunderphonic practice which seek to highlight its political “resistance”, and thereby a critical assessment of sampling, p2p and “bedroom producer-ness” (10.2-10.3). This assessment is then related back to rationalisation and democratisation so as to critique these frameworks. It is argued that metatheoretical impositions are misguided in terms of their logical circularity, their tendency to reify complex social phenomena, and their normative assumptions (10.4). The role of CMC in the constitution of the breakcore “scene” is explored through a discussion of the Goffmanian dramaturgical metaphor and the

distinction between “frontstage” and “backstage” (10.5). A pragmatic approach to field and theory is advocated, such that theory becomes a narrative resource, whilst subcultural “resistance” becomes both context-bound and multi-directional (10.6). The discussion concludes with some reflections on the mode of academic writing and the form of reflexive “ethnographicity” (10.7).

1.2 Doing internet research

What follows takes the “decentralised scenic institution” of a particular virtual “space” as primary (Kahn-Harris 2004: 99). This space can be delineated so as to indicate the features it possesses rendering it pertinent to a discussion of the role of technology in musical culture. The first such feature is the bedroom producer, the “amateur” musician “residing” there. The second is the space itself, p2p, as a contested site of music distribution—and production. The third is the “scene” in question: “underground” or “independent” electronic music, specifically, the genre known as *breakcore* (a contraction of “breakbeat hardcore”).⁴ Breakcore is a post-rave, hybrid musical style privileging percussive intensity and complexity, which draws, among other things, on 8-bit or chip tune music, drum and bass, gabber techno, heavy metal, hip-hop, IDM (“intelligent dance music”), industrial and jungle. A punk, “DiY” aesthetic significantly informs the genre. Whilst best thought of as an umbrella term, breakcore demonstrably engages in *plunderphonic* sampling practices, which is to say, breakcore practitioners frequently *expropriate* other recorded musics.⁵ The *site* of the research thus intersects with this *style* of musical production in a particularly *facilitative* way, one which producers “make capital of”.

Over the following chapters, the online environment is taken seriously as an ethnographic research site:

The computer revolution has already occurred. Most research already takes place in front of the computer screen. Linked, hypertextual multimedia representations of music not only further thicken the descriptive stew but also, at their best, they offer the computer user the opportunity to enter the virtual world of the ethnographer (Titon 2003: 179-180).

⁴ For a brief overview of the history of electronic music, including descriptions of contemporary genres such as those discussed below, see Luna (2003).

⁵ The term *plunderphonic* originates with the Canadian composer John Oswald (1985). It is generally used to describe any music composed wholly or largely out of samples of previously recorded material.

CMC “is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space” (Jones 1995: 16). Hakken similarly asserts: “on-line activities constitute a sufficient social analogy to the field site, that this is a ‘where’ which, while ‘nowhere’ in the geographic sense, can safely be presumed to be sufficiently ‘where-like’ in some relevant cultural sense” (1999: 58). While there is, as Gertrude Stein famously said of Oakland, “no there there”, this “where-likeness” and its import will be discussed in detail. The placeless space that “there” is online, is a set of shared symbolic practices; it is a “socially produced space” (Jones 1995: 17). Crucially, this can be understood as a *textual space*. Featherstone and Burrows point out that “contemporary social life still tends to operate with an implicit physiognomic notion that the face and the body are the only ‘true’ sources which can reveal the character of a person” (2000: 5). *Foregrounding* textual space highlights the role of discourse in the social construction of space conventionally thought of as “real”, and the mediated personæ participating in CMC shed dramatic light on the presentation of “real” selves.

The contemporary ethnographer, Marcus suggests, “must make method out of a rhetoric of circumstance” (2002: 4). What we find as a general problem in ethnography has a specific instantiation within the study of music-technology interaction. In reference to ethnomusicological fieldwork, Slobin writes: “I thought my mission was to locate, identify, and describe ... local musics, and whenever I encountered musics of wider visibility, I was annoyed” (1993: 17-18). Such “visibility” is, of course, rendered possible by technologies of recording, storage and transmission, alongside the existence of a globalised oligopolistic entertainment industry. Only recently has technology itself come to appear a relevant feature of ethnographic method with reference to *music*, warranting reflexive scrutiny. At one time, recording technologies were taken as a simple good for ethnomusicological fieldworkers, “as a method of preservation, as a check on the fieldworker’s objectivity, and as a source of material for comparative studies” (Shelemay 1991: 280). The increasing role of technology in the production and dissemination of music, though, implies that isolating and “locating local musics” becomes increasingly problematic.

As with music, so with language: Sacks indicates that the discipline of conversation analysis is an artefact of recording technology: “conversation is something that we can get the actual happenings of on tape ... at least what was on the tape had happened” (1984a: 25-26). This empiricism

enables Herring's claim that "CMC is arguably the greatest boon to the study of language use since the invention of the portable tape recorder in the 1950s" (1996b: 155). The argument propounded in this text is that CMC is not only crucial to the *study* of social interaction, but to the development of *signifying practice itself*. CMC demonstrates and facilitates the global distribution of a youth-cultural idiom and related interactional forms; yet the *multi-modal* character of these forms is often elided by accounts of both CMC and youth culture. Although Hall (1996), Herring (1996b), Kendall (2002) and Mabry (1997), for instance, all discuss an often vituperative style of online interaction and its relation to masculinity, they do not, on the whole, explicitly engage with or analyse examples of this style of the sort presented here. Similarly, whilst Gilroy (1997), Keller (2003), Rose (1994), and Walser (1993) all seek to address "aggressive" performative modes and content in popular-musical cultures, they largely gloss over both the constitutive roles of misogyny and homophobia within these cultures, and the severity of their discursive enactment. Katz (2004), for example, presents an account of hip-hop DJ battles in which the central role of symbolic sexual and racial denigration is only obliquely (and rather coyly) addressed. This research differs, in its direct attempt to critically address these forms, and in the structure of this attempt, addressing them as both features of interaction and of musical style and structure.

Whilst this book initially originated in a theoretical interest in the rationalisation debate, ethnographic research design is emergent; methodology and focus develop simultaneously. I did not originally set out to analyse the discourse and interaction of bedroom producers; nor did I set out with an explicit methodological agenda. This strategic contingency is a consequence of what Strathern calls the "open-ended procedures" of ethnography, which "refer *both* to the manner in which observations are made *and* to the process of compiling a description. Far from truncating description," Strathern suggests, ethnography "has its own search engine in the form of a question: what connections are going to be useful? That is simply because one cannot always tell in advance; more strongly, it puts one in to the situation of not necessarily wanting to tell in advance" (2000).⁶ The initial approach is "open"; it is through the course of the research that such "connections" are established.

The core foci of this research: the amen breakbeat, *nigga*, and *gay/ghey*, are means of ordering the material or charting a path through it; they provide the "connections" through which the field can be described,

⁶ All emphasis is in the original unless otherwise stated.

and emerged as such through the course of the analysis. Tracking them furnishes a structure through which the data, and thus the milieu, can be engaged with. This could no doubt have been done otherwise, but it so happened that these three constituents of meaning most obviously required explication when it came to analysing the data, and proved through this analysis to be fundamentally informative elements in exchange and interaction.

The orientation to interactional form taken here follows ethnomethodological precepts in its commitment to the study of “materials collected from *naturally occurring* occasions of everyday interaction” (Atkinson and Heritage 1984: 2). In succinct terms:

The benefit of such a micro-analytic focus is that it addresses the ‘how’ question, it binds the [interpretive and analytic] claims to actual data, it reveals (rather than conceals) how the analysis was conducted, it invites reflexive re-interpretations, and it provides a concrete model for analyzing similar segments of data. Within a discursive analytic paradigm, the goals of descriptive rigor, context specificity, and particularization are key evaluative criteria (Korobov 2005: 230).

The analysis and interpretation which follow draw, then, on methodological “naturalism”: “every effort is made to maintain a direct focus on the specifics of interaction which is naturally occurring and uncontaminated by interventions from the researcher” (Heritage 1987: 258). Once I had “arrived”, the approach taken to the field was, in Schwartz and Jacobs’ term, “nonreactive” (1979: 75). As well as being grounded in commonly held epistemological assumptions about the “independence” of the social world and the dangers of researcher “contamination”, a further benefit of nonreactivity is that it yields data warranting explanation in its own right. Rather than data being used to answer (and thereby close) questions, it is used to generate, frame and inform them. A nonreactive approach is unobtrusive; the priority is interaction and exchange in the social environment, rather than the researcher’s position in it. Although I came across some discourse I found objectionable, I did not see the researcher’s role being, as Bell puts it, “to intervene in the lives of participants to enhance their well-being” (2001: 199).

“Virtual ethnography” is an emergent and expanding field (Bell 2001, Giesler 2006, Hine 2000, Strathern 2000), in which there is recurrent debate concerning how CMC relates to “real life” (“RL”). One still hotly contested aspect of this relation is the ethics of online social research. This is an *empirical*, data-driven study; it is based on naturally occurring

exchanges and it presents those exchanges to the reader, for two reasons. Firstly, one of the goals of this research is to critically discuss specific discourse styles or genres, and in doing so to inform readers about or raise awareness of such genres. The best way of doing this is through the presentation and analysis of specific, actual examples. Secondly—and perhaps more importantly—this functions as a means of providing ground for readers to decide independently whether or not they agree with the emphasis and discussion thereby presented (Ronkin and Karn 1999: 363-364).

The “field site” of this research is public, and open to anyone with access to an internet connection (the platform which yielded the data is freely downloadable at <http://www.slsknet.org/download.html>).⁷ I have not obscured the location of the interaction, and the reasoning behind this is straightforward. The platform plays a constitutive role in contemporary music production, coming up repeatedly in musicians’ interaction online and off (this is how it came to my attention in the first place).

For example, in the most viewed article on the Ragga-Jungle.com website, jungle producer Tester suggests that “people need to realize that you simply can't cut a few acetates with an amen overtop an acapella you stole off Soulseek and be ready to ‘clash’ the next night” (Pepperell 2004). This is an argument about professionalism in music, denigrating as “amateur” a certain type of production. According to Tester’s argument, jungle has moved *beyond* this; those who “steal off Soulseek” can no longer legitimately *compete*. The argument is notable, as the site of this research is rendered synonymous with a type of production Tester wishes to distance jungle “clashing” from. The importance of Soulseek precludes the possibility of obscuring it; it is probably *the* dominant file-sharing application in use amongst contemporary electronic music producers. The “where-likeness” of the locale is such as to render it a place which intersects with “real” places in a highly dramatic and contested way, which I do not wish to downplay.

A question remains, however, over the nature of the interaction quoted from this field site, about which it is possible to formulate two contradictory positions. One asserts that interactions are public and *published*, and hence sources must be cited, the other suggests they are *private*, and hence should be anonymised if they are to be quoted at all. If the interaction is public, it is like other, more longstanding media (graffiti, radio, newspapers), researchers need not seek consent to quote such

⁷ Soulseek accepts donations towards administrative costs, but estimates that less than 1% of users actually donate.

material, and in fact responsibility “then rests with the disseminators of the messages and not the researchers” (Jankowski and van Selm 2007: 278).

Both of these perspectives can be problematic to the extent that they assume that research is concerned with communicative *content* (rather than *style* or *form*), and that it is *consensual* (that the interaction is presented in a manner those cited would support). The possibility of what Herring calls “legitimate critical research” is thereby occluded (1996a: 155).

Another way to elaborate this public/private distinction is with reference to the distinction between *text* and *space*: if the material presented and discussed here is a *text*, then it is to be treated as the property of its authors. If it is a *space*, then human subjects, who as such warrant ethical consideration—namely, informed consent, occupy it:

ask whether it’s ok to quote a dialogue you copied from a chat room and the response you’ll get will follow one of two possible routes. One view is that a chat room is a space and the dialogue is between people in it, all of whom are due the protection accorded them under the human subjects research model. There are variations on this that consider what kind of space it is, how private it is, and how much protection the virtual subjects should be accorded, but the dynamic is the same. The second view often takes a more direct route; the dialogue you have is a text, it’s in the public domain, and therefore, aside from considerations of copyright, is available for reproduction (Bassett and O’Riordan 2001).

Where online interaction is classed as a text, research like this can be situated within a literary or cultural studies tradition, where sources are cited and where data are treated as instances of broader cultural phenomena, rather than direct expressions of accountable individuals. The specific individual agent quoted is not considered, from this perspective, except to the extent that s/he instantiates the interactional, subcultural, sociopolitical, discursive etc. features that are at the centre of the analysis. An authorial model of citation—analogue to that in textual academic practice—is put into play. In some forms, this approach is informed by poststructural, discursive readings of human interaction, which emphasise the construction of textual meaning at the site of reception rather than production, and thus locate the locus of meaning between reader and text. In such perspectives, it is often the discourse which “produces” the author or speaker, rather than vice versa.

Consider the usernames of participants, and the question as to whether they should be anonymised in academic research. In 1997, for instance, Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, and Rosenbaum-Tamari argued that

On many grounds there is no apparent need for researchers to disguise the identity of participants any more than participants have done so themselves ... we are actually in the same position as the players themselves, who must develop their own interpretations of the textual mask presented by any given player.

From this perspective, usernames *refer* to personæ in such a rich manner that further masking these “masks” would obscure their role in the subcultural landscape in a manner both untenable and unnecessary. In this case, for instance, usernames are also often the names of musicians, where these are in circulation “beyond” the platform (on commercial and netlabel releases, in live performance and so on). To alter usernames would therefore be to “interfere” with the data in its public referentiality, to obscure the “scene” and its participants. What, then, would be the sense in saying p2p is disrupting conventional music industry relations between consumer and producer if the names of all the relevant producers (and consumers) are hidden? As Bassett and O’Riordan cogently point out, uncritical application of the human subjects model may actually do a disservice to the environments studied: “the decision to disguise online activity, justified through the a rhetoric of 'protection' may result in furthering the unequal power relations of media production by blocking full representation of alternative media” (2001).

One counterargument to this position often runs as follows:

many Internet users employ the same pseudonym for an extended period of time and at multiple Internet sites. Consequently, they care about the reputation of that pseudonym. Thus disclosing information from a purportedly ‘anonymous’ pseudonym in many cases has the potential to identify and to harm its owner (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen and Couper 2003: 11).

A site might be publicly accessible, and yet nonetheless participants might not have any expectation that their interaction could be used as research data. They may feel that their interaction there is ephemeral, and where, for example, they discover that a username (perhaps still searchable and traceable to them) is reproduced in academic research, they may feel their privacy has been invaded, their words taken out of context and put to uses they did not intend, and so on. They might be under a serious misapprehension in this regard, for as Ess points out (2007: 494):

sophisticated users have at their fingertips a range of technologies ... that seem to make online privacy an oxymoron. In light of the difficulty of

establishing and sustaining privacy online, it may well be asked whether or not there is any meaningful ethical obligation to do so?

Nor, of course, is it only “sophisticated users” who can and do retain records of online exchanges; surveillance and logging are banal and ubiquitous features of life online (Chun 2006: 84-85 and *passim*). And as Mann and Stewart ask (2000: 46): “if people are happy for the internet to see the association between their words and their name, why should they object to it in a book?”⁸ One factor which inflects this account is just how “published” the cited data are—are they, for example, publicly archived and accessible online, or must they be logged by the researcher? As it happens, in this case the data was not drawn from a publicly accessible *archive*—although such archives exist. The *I Hate Breakcore* forum (2007), for instance, contains a searchable database of Souseek dialogue fragments, and similar extracts can be found elsewhere. Participants themselves routinely log exchanges and reproduce them elsewhere. This is all true of countless other online environments. Another factor is the timeline involved: at a later time such documents become “merely” archival, and often come to constitute the historical record of the group, the “scene”, as such. The private space solidifies into a public text. In this book, many of the interactions cited occurred over four years ago and are thus already at some small distance from the genre, the group, the individuals concerned, and the environment as currently constituted. All such historical records can be thought of as interventions, though, in that they can come to define or even constitute that which they are made to “stand” for, and this one is no exception.

Regardless of whether cited participants would be correct in assuming a “reasonable expectation” of privacy, they may be ethically entitled to information concerning the research—they may stage a reciprocal interpretive intervention. Also, any feedback from cited participants may be mutually beneficial, and the request for consent is a means of seeking such feedback. A question then arises as to whether such consent should be prospective or retrospective. Universal, *prospective* consent is perhaps the ethically “cleanest” option, but it is notoriously difficult to achieve in a chatroom environment, particularly where there is a relatively high turnover of interactants, and relevant data only come to appear so after a significant lapse of time. Awareness of the research project can also “contaminate” the data: Ess mentions one researcher who “discovered that participants who were made aware of her research intentions through the

⁸ One of the paradoxes here is that the academic text is usually *less* widely accessible than, say, the material recontextualised by being posted on a blog.

informed consent process consciously crafted their textual production in hopes of getting quoted”—in such instances “non-disclosure may be both necessary and justified” (2007: 497). All participants with whom I came into *personal* communication with were informed of the research and the logging of interaction, and in some cases this *did* alter the form and content of interaction, as well as our personal dynamics, in a variety of ways.⁹ Not only can making participants aware of the research influence their interaction and thus the object of study, it could also possibly lead “members to opt out (which may damage the community)” (Eysenbach and Till 2001: 1105). For these sorts of reasons, Paul Hodkinson has argued that

Posting an announcement of my presence as a social researcher on a newsgroup could be compared perhaps to making a similar announcement over the PA of a nightclub in which I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork. As well as creating possible hostility it might well distort the ‘natural’ interactions I am seeking to observe and record. Rather, I shall obtain permission from individual posters whose comments I reproduce or quote from (cited in Mann and Stewart 2000: 53, see also Hodkinson 2003).

Retrospective consent is in this regard the best means for resolving the tensions between the exploratory and open-ended ethnographic approach as here deployed, and the debt thereby owed to cited participants. The main drawbacks to retrospective consent, aside from the time it can take to search for and contact participants, are that in some cases those participants will not respond: their usernames may have fallen idle and

⁹ The analysis that follows is *ex post facto*, and imposes an interpretive structure on interactional data from which, for the most part, I was not an active, “real-time” participant, but a “lurker”. In many cases, the significance of cited data only emerged quite some time after that interaction took place. This is partly a consequence of my capitalising on the off-peak, dial-up access available to me when the fieldwork was carried out. This access served also to constrain or channel participation in certain ways. Most notably, it was difficult for me to upload music to those with broadband access, with the implication that I could not participate equally as an “amateur” producer (it simply took too long for others to conveniently download my own productions from me. On more than one occasion, interactants were startled to discover I had a download *queue*, and could not simply download and listen to their productions immediately). Presumably, given that this access was temporally constrained, it also impacted upon who would be present in interaction (those in certain time-zones could expect to be more active during those times).

they may not be traceable through other channels, or they may not wish to communicate with the researcher.

To consider these issues is to begin to contemplate how CMC explodes “categorical boundaries such as those between private and public, between watching and being watched, between being informed and being intrusive, between our own and ‘somebody else’s’ problem, and the correct and incorrect uses of technology” (Nippert-Eng 2005: 314). The position propounded here is not one where “legitimate critical research” is “above” the dialogue so researched, such that this “legitimacy” immunises the research from the problematics of accountability and of the interaction itself, but rather one which acknowledges that diverse publics and contexts for dialogue exist.

The existence of a public domain for the sorts of interaction analysed here, it seems to me, effectively guarantees the existence of a further domain where this interaction can itself be discussed. It is not *necessary* to retain usernames to engage with this data, although in some cases local context may be diminished in anonymisation. Also, in this case, the often confrontational nature of the dialogue serves to render unreasonable “strong” ethical positions which foreclose the possibility of critical analysis: given that the dialogue so often involves ritual contest, whilst simultaneously being public and free from censorship, censoring the analysis of that dialogue appears disingenuous. To make this argument is to indicate that there is no monistic, unitary public space; instead there are many discrete interactional and discursive contexts, often marked not so much by civility and sensitivity but by conflict, dissensus and dispute. Different contexts may be in opposition and against each other’s purposes; they may wish to silence each other.

For instance, websites and fora are different from the original location of the interaction. Similarly, doctoral research—such as that which this book is based on, is a different context from an academic monograph, or a conference paper (in each case, audience composition and size, and its possible extension in time, will vary). An empirical discussion of innovations in cultural production is a different context to a critique of forms of masculinity and the discourse practices through which they are constituted. Research, in exposing a particular site to a new audience, may damage that site.¹⁰ There are gradations between contexts, and participants

¹⁰ There is always the risk, for instance, that research on Soulseek may unwittingly serve to bring the platform to the attention of copyright proprietors, who demonstrably have the power to destroy particular instances of this type of sociality and have those who practice or facilitate it bankrupted or imprisoned.

may be entitled to expect different levels of privacy across them. These levels also vary in relation to the sensitivity of the issues raised in the cited material.

For just these reasons, then—the variety of contexts or public spheres, the different interpretive schemes in play in them, and the different types of material constituting them—prior to publication I asked all cited participants if they wanted their usernames anonymised. Researchers should exercise due care and sensitivity where they suspect quoted interactants have “good reason to believe that their statements were made in the context of a certain community where certain norms and values applied” (Elgesem 2001). The context and interpretive scheme deployed here are rather different, and I believe participants to discourse and dialogue have rights to intervention in the contexts their words appear in—these are the extensions of their rights to participate in dialogue in the first place. I imagine this as a dialogical and reciprocal relation, which is to say, this book itself is predicated on the idea of dialogical reciprocity.

The fact that a small number of participants *did* request that their usernames be changed evidently bears out this approach. The issue of username anonymisation was handled in a variety of ways depending on the situation. The wishes of all respondents for retention or anonymisation were respected. In some cases where participants could not be contacted, usernames were retained where they were evidently “shells” or “ghosts”, no longer in use and not producing search results on other platforms. In other cases, usernames *were* traceable elsewhere, and where no response could be elicited from those participants, usernames were changed where it was felt that the material cited was sufficiently sensitive. In other cases, where it was felt that the interaction cited was innocuous, usernames were retained.¹¹ One of the lessons that emerges from this negotiated compromise is that neither the *textual* nor the *spatial* metaphors for CMC will consistently hold—textual space is not easily reducible to incorporation within either framework, and interrogating these metaphors is one of the objectives of this book.

Discussions of the work of plunderphonic musicians could similarly draw such artists unwanted attention.

¹¹ Researchers cannot reasonably be held responsible, I believe, for replacement usernames which are fortuitously in use, nor for “dead” usernames “resurrected” by different users at a later date.

1.3 Bedroom producers

The designator *bedroom producer*, in common parlance, refers to an ideal-typical individual, making music in (it is usually taken to be) *his* bedroom: “IDM is a community heavily composed to [sic] young guys who have internet connections in their bedrooms—totally scary in other words” (“DJ /rupture”, via email, February 20, 2003). The bedroom producer “has the know-how, the technology, and the will to create music via computer programs and sampling within the confines of his or her own room” (Ayers 2006: 133). The term has a number of immediate descriptive consequences: as Grajeda points out, “the bedroom—our trusted guarantee for reproduction—has become instead (or perhaps once again) a site of cultural production, inverting as well the gendered coding of consumption and mass culture as ‘merely’ feminine” (2002: 365).

The term conjures up the bedroom of the teenage boy in the family home, a “backstage” place, loaded with meaning as a specific masculine domain. This bedroom is the contemporary, *networked* version of that space nostalgically evoked by Frith: “not a place of sexual activity but a site of consumption, the place for listening to records and the John Peel show, for filing back numbers of *The Face* and the *New Musical Express*, for dressing up and posing, for practicing the guitar and messing around with a tape-deck” (1992a: 181). As we shall see, these activities are, for the bedroom producer, supplanted by computer-mediated equivalents. The internet is “integral to teenage boys’ bedroom culture” (Lincoln 2005: 410).

It will be noted, also, that *producer* has rather distant and anonymous qualities: one does not generally speak of “bedroom musicians” or “bedroom composers” (though there is an antecedent musical form in another part of the house: the *garage* band). This is perhaps a consequence of the idiosyncrasies of electronic composition; a piece of music “made” in the software “virtual” studio is generally said to be “produced”, not “arranged” and certainly not “composed”. *Producer*, however, also refers in the discourse of professional musicianship, where a record is “produced”, perhaps by such an *auteur* as Phil Spector. Toynbee suggests that the use of the term demonstrates that, with electronic music, “the distinction between musicianship and technicianship has almost disappeared ... the bedroom has become a metonym for a new cultural politics of access and empowerment” (2000: 94-95). The absence of such terms as *composer* and *composition* is in this regard extremely illuminating, and is discursively implicated in such issues as the allocation

of arts funding, and the lack of such provision to breakcore and other emergent experimental genres:

Working with the definition of *composition*, a tradition of the artist is reinstated on a terrain that is, on the other channel, continually being rewired at the limits of compositional practice via the practices of turntablism, sampling, filesharing, copyleft and networked performance, around debates of laptop performance, and via the histories of Afro-Futurist and non-Western sound that operate via parameters that are exterior to the compositional framework (van Veen 2003: 15).

The bedroom producer is also not to be confused with a related ideal (stereo)type: the *bedroom DJ*. The latter, of course, is first and foremost interested in mixing music “produced” by others. However, there are overlaps worth emphasising; consider the following Mixmeister Studio press release:

DJ Ed Hornsey is a dance music enthusiast who spends most evenings creating DJ mixes at home. But the popular term “bedroom DJ” doesn’t apply to him, he says.

“Bedroom DJ implies that I’m a wannabe, that I’m somehow less than competent. But the mixes I create are as good or better than what you can buy in the shops,” says Ed.

Hornsey is one of a growing class of music buffs who take their music mixing very seriously. Known as “mix producers”, they have a passion for creating commercial-quality music mixes, in a wide range of genres. But while bedroom DJs are typically practicing in the hope of landing a live performance gig one day, mix producers prefer the delight of completing a studio project to the thrill of being in front of an audience (2004).

This contrast class of bedroom DJs furnishes the following insight about *bedroom* and *producer*: combining the two terms generates a contradiction. *Bedroom* is amateurish, incompetent, gauche, homemade; *producer* is masterful, accomplished, objective. An association is “implied” between *bedroom* and “less than competent wannabe”, and drawn in commodified terms (Buy the appropriate software and become “commercial-quality”). There is also an ambiguity about getting “out” of the bedroom: the “wannabe” bedroom DJ “typically” does; his otherwise indistinguishable counterpart the “mix *producer*” does *not*. This is what we might call the “privatism” both the bedroom DJ and the bedroom producer are understood to participate in: “the delight of completing a studio project” is preferred to “the thrill of being in front of an audience”. That is, the “delight” of staying in, alone, in front of one’s computer, is

superior to the potential awkwardness of “being in front of an audience”, thrilling though that might be. The seemingly innocuous phrase, *bedroom producer*, is thus a contested site in a struggle for musical legitimacy and credibility. The term indicates the disparaged status of “amateur” musical practice (particularly in computer production, which is not yet respectably “naturalised” as, for instance, guitar or piano playing for pleasure is), associated with the influence of ideas of music as a profession and an industry.

It is telling that bedroom producers continue to be referred to as such, rather than, for instance, “online musicians” or some other appellation. The “loadedness” of the term is not the only thing which makes it *wrong*: the bedroom is not, strictly speaking, the site of the bedroom producer’s musical and social activity (it is, rather, an imagined location where the “wetware” body sits, functioning discursively to diminish production and that which is so produced). Bedroom producers themselves tend to shorten the appellation to “producer”. Similarly, guitar enthusiasts do not denigrate what they do with “amateur” or some other qualifier. Neither are they uniformly referred to with such a qualifier (everyone has to start somewhere). The “virtual” studio need not be in the bedroom, but until *bedroom* is dropped, the producer is condemned to “wannabe” status.

Thus the phrase *bedroom producer interaction as instantiated in p2p chatrooms* refers to those navigating a trajectory through these tensions. Music serves as a “pathway out of the private sphere of the bedroom and into the public sphere” (Lincoln 2005: 409). According to this line, given that the bedroom producer is already at the computer, the most immediate way of getting “out” and finding likeminded individuals is by going online, to where others are discussing, exchanging and “producing” music: p2p. Although the appellation has significant purchase, in its privatist and negatively-valued connotations of “wannabe” amateurishness and “nerddom”, it is a misnomer where it is taken as referring to actual bedrooms (it is *here* that there is “no there there”): the trajectory is bi-directional, and it is equally valid to assert that “produceriness” enters the bedroom from the network as that the producer enters the network from the bedroom. The “bedroom” is predicated on and materialised by the network, it is only through CMC that the “bedroom” exists.

1.4 The rationalisation/democratisation debate 1: rationalisation

Simply stated, the rationalisation hypothesis suggests that technology serves to “rationalise” music—and that this is, or has become, “a bad