

Embodying the breach: (In)securitization and ethnographic engagement in the US

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Abstract

In this commentary, the author offers three related perspectives regarding (in)securitization: first, an overview of ongoing discussions taking place among US-based ethnographers of colour about the effects of surveillance on ethnography; second, an example of the impact that (in)securitization may have on the researcher/researched relationship in contemporary ethnographic research; and third, an extension of Garfinkel's notion of the "breach" within the current sociopolitical context. Throughout this essay, the author calls for a greater sense of connection to and solidarity with those "vulnerable subjects" that we engage with ethnographically.

KEYWORDS

breach, ethics, ethnography, surveillance

In their opening essay, Ben Rampton and Constadina Charalambous call on sociolinguists to continue developing a mode of inquiry that "embraces ethnography" for the sake of developing a more "generative account of (in)securitization, treating the *lived experience of (in)securitization as an intensifying apprehension of institutionally authorized vulnerability and existential threat, produced (and received) in communicative practice in a range of social settings, both vernacular and elite.*" Building on this definition of (in)securitization, along with Rampton and Charalambous' claim that "the lived experience of surveillance remains relatively uncharted," I hope to make three contributions in my response: first, to offer a glimpse into an ongoing discussion taking place among US-based ethnographers of colour about the effects of surveillance on ethnography; second, to present an example of the impact of (in)securitization on the researcher/researched relationship that has impacted my own thinking about methodology; and third, to extend Garfinkel's notion of the "breach" within our current sociopolitical context. Throughout this essay, I call for a greater sense of connection to and solidarity with those "vulnerable subjects" that we engage with ethnographically.

1 | ETHNOGRAPHY AS SURVEILLANCE: ONGOING DISCUSSIONS

In a special issue of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* in 2016—an issue that we could read as a companion to the present issue—US-based educational anthropologists offer critical accounts of the ways in which contemporary systems of surveillance impact the ethnographer's work from data collection through analysis and publication. My goal in reviewing selected contributions to this special issue is to highlight evidence of the ways in which the lived experience of (in)securitization evidenced through forms of everyday surveillance impacts children, youth, and young adults and, in turn, shapes ethnographic projects taking place across the US today. The instances of “ethnographic refusal”—to borrow Audra Simpson's (2007) phrase—that prompted these ethnographers to rethink their methods took place under two conditions: when study participants explicitly critiqued the research methods and when participants remained silent in fear of surveillance. Upon registering their participants' concerns, how could these ethnographers employ standard research methods when their tools mirrored the very technologies used by state entities to surveil the communities at the heart of their studies?

Arshad Ali (2016) chronicles the ways in which—a decade after the September 11 attacks in New York City and the Pentagon—the sociopolitical construction of terror positions Muslim individuals as “citizen-suspects” and places them under constant suspicion by state entities implementing surveillance programmes targeted at whole communities. Listening closely to the speech and the silences communicated by the Muslim youth in his study, Ali understood their fears that his research project—initially focused on documenting their grassroots efforts to resist surveillance—would in fact increase police gaze instead of supporting their efforts to ameliorate it. Meanwhile, Danny Martinez immersed himself in a Southern California high school serving Latina/o and black students depicted in national and local arenas as threats to peaceful urban life. During the informed consent process, a number of the youth refused to be video recorded, likening the video recorder to the surveillance technologies familiar to them from the public spaces and housing projects in which they travelled and lived. In these accounts, Ali and Martinez reckon with the ways in which—as ethnographers of colour—we are “a walking contradiction with a foot in both worlds—in the dominant privileged institutions *and* in the marginalized communities” (Villenas, 1996, p. 714, emphasis in the original). Ali and Martinez worked to reconcile this dilemma by adapting their research methods. Rather than conducting a study that could “make the participants vulnerable in multiple ways,” Ali instead shifted his focus to “the effects of surveillance in their lives and communities rather than how they organized to challenge it” (2016, p. 92). Ali adapted his ethnographic methods to include audio but not video recordings, concluding that, “When conducting research among fragile and highly surveilled populations, we must attend to these matters in order to identify moments when our tools index systems of surveillance already questionable to these participants” (2016, p. 60).

Shirin Vossoughi and Megan Escudé's (2016) contribution to that same special issue raises a related set of questions regarding the ethics of conducting ethnographic research alongside those populations referred to in the lexicon of US social science research as *vulnerable*. Reflecting on ethnographic research conducted in an elementary-level science and arts-based afterschool programme, Vossoughi and Escudé call for a scholarly stance that moves from “*surveillance* to *relationship*” by acknowledging the ways that our methods shape our research over time (2016, p. 42, emphasis in the original). By personifying the very tools that we use in our work—describing the camera as audience member, for example—they track the agentic ways in which children interacted with the video recorder as an interlocutor whose gaze could produce negative feelings of being judged or

create opportunities for witnessing moments of pride in classroom learning. These four ethnographers—Vossoughi, Escudé, Martinez, and Ali—all pivoted their locus of accountability, away from an imagined future audience (of dissertation chairs or peer reviewers, perhaps) to those youth participants engaged in the study itself (see Fox & Fine, 2013, for a related discussion of “collective accountability”). In so doing, they adapted their methods after carefully listening to community members directly impacted by lived conditions of (in)securitization. This kind of ethnographic engagement involves attending to key ethical dilemmas that arise throughout the research process; such dilemmas are emergent and often unanticipated prior to beginning data collection (Mangual Figueroa, 2014, 2016).

2 | THE (IN)SECURITIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE: AN EXAMPLE

I will now consider the ways in which state policies that simultaneously produce and profit from (in) securitization render us all more vulnerable. The example I present can serve as a prism for our socio-political and legal context of (in)securitization, and I share it in the hopes of prompting ethnographers to rethink our roles in relation to the communities we study. I started this line of thinking in 2011 when the state of Alabama’s House Bill 56 was signed into law. It was known as one of the toughest anti-immigration bills in the country and it should be understood in the context of anti-immigration laws enacted at the state level which have served as prototypes for the executive orders issued since 2016 by President Donald Trump. Among the bill’s authors was Kris Kobach, the former Secretary of State of Kansas, who had been intimately involved in designing and defending restrictive state laws originating with Arizona’s 2010 State Bill 1070, known as the “show me your papers” law because it raised widespread concern about the racial profiling of non-whites in everyday life. Alabama and four other states enacted copycat legislation in the early 2010s and Kobach remains one of Trump’s primary candidates for his proposed “immigration czar” position. The original Alabama law made it a crime to conduct activities considered “harbouring” and “transporting” any undocumented immigrant while “know[ing] or recklessly disregard[ing] the fact that the alien has come to, has entered, or remains in the United States in violation of federal law.”

As the American Civil Liberties Union explains, harbouring can include such activities as driving someone to a doctor, to church, or to a grocery store, which is then punishable by time in prison or hefty fines. The harbour clause caused an uproar from civil rights groups and members of the Alabama clergy because providing transport and safe haven are chief among the actions taken by churches working to provide sanctuary for those in need, regardless of their legal status (Lawson, 2013). More recently, Arizona State University instructor and activist Scott Warren was convicted of harbouring two undocumented immigrants who had crossed the Mexico-US border into Arizona. At the time of writing, the case is being heard in the federal court and Warren faces up to 20 years in prison for providing humanitarian aid and shelter to two migrants. In legal terms, he “has pleaded not guilty to one count of conspiracy to transport and harbor the two men and to two counts of harboring undocumented immigrants” (Ortega, 2019). Reports from immigrant rights’ activists in the region suggest that this case is meant to deter future humanitarian efforts by criminalizing the act of providing refuge to migrants along a border increasingly characterized by militarization and surveillance in the name of national security.

p[In the current context of anti-immigrant racism and the intensifying militarization of nation-state borders, routine activities that form part of the everyday life of an educational anthropologist and university professor may also be considered “harbouring.” This is especially true since former US

Attorney General Jeffrey Sessions issued a 2017 memorandum elevating “harbouring” to high priority for enforcement. As an ethnographer, I routinely gave mixed-status families rides in my car when conducting fieldwork in Southwestern Pennsylvania, and I can often be found meeting or travelling with undocumented adults and children in New York City. Following HB 56, I consulted with my university IRB staff person, who advised me to think through what kind of story I would tell police if I were stopped while travelling with an undocumented study participant. One suggestion was to tell the police that the person and I were just friends. Would this story line be considered passable to a police offer given our distinct social locations? What would be the impact of telling such a story for me, the participants, and for the research itself? As a professor of education, I frequently support my students in organizing campus-wide events that seek to enhance practitioners’ knowledge about and solidarity with undocumented students and families. Recently, after a graduate student organized a workshop focusing on undocumented students’ educational rights I received a threatening letter from a white nationalist blogger accusing me of harbouring undocumented students on a public university campus. How might my students’ own preparation suffer if I feared advising them in the very activities I deem to be ethical and necessary for our field?

3 | EMBODYING THE BREACH: A CONTEMPORARY LENS

In his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), the sociologist Harold Garfinkel examines the way that breakdowns in normative conversations—what Garfinkel terms “breaches”—reveal the normative structure that underpins language. Garfinkel states that the importance of studying how speakers respond to breaks in the normative discourse lies in the tacit knowledge that is revealed when these breaches occur. As Garfinkel asserts, “For...background expectancies to come into view one must either be a stranger to the ‘life as usual’ character of everyday scenes, or become estranged from them” (p. 340). When a person is “subjected to a breach” the normative backdrop to language use is revealed (p. 54). This ethnomethodological approach to analysing interaction has informed my own ethnographic work by focusing my attention on moments of dissonance and discontinuity as key sites for tracking interlocutors’ beliefs. Rather than relying solely on self-reports (elicited via interview), I have found that documenting moments of discord and repair that unfold throughout the course of everyday interaction has taught me a lot about how children and adults make sense of legal categories of national citizenship. In those moments, speakers reveal ideologies that they might not furnish when asked explicit questions.

I have witnessed, for example, disconcerting moments when undocumented students have become anxious upon being asked to identify their country of origin during classroom activities (Mangual Figueroa, 2017). During one such activity—conducted with nine- and ten-year-old students—a teacher said the names of various countries in Latin America and asked students to stand if they were from those places. This teacher hoped to build classroom community by drawing on students’ cultural heritage, and she had developed a roll call activity predicated on the belief that national origin is accompanied by a sense of pride to be expressed openly and publicly. However, for undocumented students born in Latin America, for whom disclosing one’s birthplace could be synonymous with revealing one’s legal status, this activity produced fear and silence instead of pride and participation. A breach ensued when the teacher solicited personal information that her undocumented students had been socialized to consider highly confidential. For those students, the details of where they were born and how they arrived in the US could put them or their loved ones at risk for detention or deportation. When I asked the same nine- and ten-year-old children questions about when and why they felt comfortable talking about birthplace, they had trouble furnishing a coherent account; but in face-to-face

interaction, I could observe the anxiety produced when the subject arose in the course of everyday schooling interactions. Upon reflection, those same students told me that they would proudly identify as Mexican-American, but if someone asked them if they had *papers* they would say *yes*—demonstrating their developing understanding of the intersections between nationhood, legality, and liability.

Here I'd like to suggest that we scale up our use of the breach to account not only for the tacit rules revealed when speakers attempt to repair breakdowns in linguistic interactions, but also for the ways in which racialized Spanish speakers have come to signify a threat to everyday life within the larger semiotic system of the nation-state. Non-white, non-English-speaking communities subject to (in)securitization within the US—through state-sanctioned surveillance, profiling, and criminalization—are routinely framed in political and mainstream discourses as threats to a fictive monolingual white nation borne out of a settler colonial ideology. The communities I work alongside include non-white Spanish-speaking undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America that routinely experience breaches in face-to-face conversation, or breaches in a traditional sense. But due to federal and local law enforcement policies, these community members also experience more than everyday miscommunication and interactional repair. They also live in fear of detention and deportation in a state that seeks to remediate their presence by forcible removal. Since their very presence in the US is considered a transgression—framed as a threat to national security—undocumented migrants are themselves considered a breach to normative social life (oftentimes without saying a word). In this era of heightened (in)securitization, the undocumented immigrant signifies an imminent rupture to the stability of the nation. However, immigration and enforcement policies that continue to deny migrants the possibility of legal citizenship and social integration ensure that migrants never become full members of the polity. They may therefore embody the breach indefinitely.

My goal in expanding Garfinkel's notion of the breach is to emphasize how we as ethnographers must consider not only the significance of breakdowns in everyday conversation between interlocutors of relatively equal social standing, but also to track the ideologies that surface when the presence of particular speakers is treated as a social transgression regardless of the content of the exchange. Ethnographers of colour might themselves have ample experience of how one can signify a breach prior to saying a word; consider the familiar racist trope of dismissing women of colour as "angry" or "aggressive" independent of the actual content of our speech. I can also recall many instances in which I have been told—despite having learned English and Spanish simultaneously and speaking them both with ease—that I have an interesting accent, followed immediately by being asked where I'm from. The notion that, because one might also speak Spanish, one must be "from" somewhere else reveals a deeply ingrained equation between homeland and monolingualism. As Spanish has increasingly been criminalized, there is no shortage of examples of raciolinguistic profiling that treats the presence of Spanish speakers as a breach in the American mythology. Take the high school teacher in New Jersey who berated her immigrant-origin students for speaking Spanish to one another during a class in which they were working to complete academic assignments in English. By yelling "men and women are fighting...not fighting for your right to speak Spanish, they are fighting for your right to speak American," she equated US military intervention with the preservation of a monolingual nation and framed speaking Spanish as an act of disloyalty. Finally, consider President Donald Trump's rallying cry to repeal birthright citizenship for children born to undocumented parents. The president and his supporters have made clear that they hope to restrict the rights of unborn immigrant-heritage children before their first cry is heard; unrealistic as it is, this policy proposal fomented the fictitious image of a majority white and English-speaking nation impervious to demographic change due to immigration. Simply put, these examples offer evidence of a powerful social condition in which the non-white, Spanish-speaking body is treated as a breach by interlocutors with the power to define the normative. In an era of (in)securitization, embodying the breach comes with consequences issuing from everyday

injunctions of foreignness and disloyalty: leading, at best, to routine experiences of unbelonging and, at worst, to the possibility of detention and deportation.

Parents and children often invite me, as an ethnographer, to accompany them to meetings at school, at social service offices, and in other public spaces. In so doing, they invite me to break down those walls of socioeconomic, legal, linguistic, and other differences that might otherwise keep us separate. Social policies and institutional practices that turn these forms of human connection into liabilities jeopardize the possibility for solidarity and truth telling that the field of sociolinguistics can offer us. While the main provisions of Alabama's anti-immigrant law were suspended in a lawsuit filed by a number of prominent civil rights organizations, including the harbouring clause that criminalized the act of offering a car ride to an undocumented immigrant, fear reverberated through immigrant communities in and beyond Alabama as the case was being heard. And in the years since, ongoing threats to the possibility of meaningful face-to-face interactions within communities and across difference have only grown. In an increasingly polarizing historical moment characterized by fraught debates about who belongs and who can be trusted within the US nation-state, public school teachers report fear about broaching such essential subjects as social studies, immigration, and politics (Gándara & Ee, 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). We all become more vulnerable in the face of extremism and, as this extremism takes hold in the (in)securitization of our institutions and daily life, we all have a stake in keeping alive the possibility of meaningful exchange within communities and across our varying social positions.

I emphasize the vulnerability of undocumented and mixed-status families and I position the researcher as vulnerable in the hopes of countering the prevailing researcher-as-stable/participant-as-vulnerable binary that perpetuates a mythical detachment from the lived experiences of (in)securitization of the communities I work in and care about (see Behar's 1996 discussion of the purposeful exposure of ethnographer vulnerability). As Dolores Calderon (2016) writes of the enduring narrative tropes of settler colonialism upon which the US was founded and which pervade the social sciences today through enduring constructs such as "civilized/uncivilized," deficient/proficient, citizen/non-citizen, our: "binary representation of research methods needs to be complicated" (p. 16) and "we need to engage in an unsettling reflexivity that troubles our social location" (p. 13). In doing so, we might consider how our own vulnerability in the face of (in)security brings us closer to our participants. And as we listen closely to the words of communities most severely impacted by a condition of (in)securitization, I believe that we can recentre a collective fragility that can foster new forms of solidarity through and beyond ethnography.

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