Excellent, Approachable, Local: Using an experience-driven, embodied methodology to explore communities of practice within a third place

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#YAH
Abstract

Communities of practice can only be changed from the inside out, by participants who believe they are governed by assumptions worth challenging. Challenging those assumptions can be difficult and stressful, but unless we are willing to do so, nothing will ever change. Using a year-long ethnographic case study of Aromas Coffeehouse as the guiding project, in this thesis I question two assumptions of modern ethnographic research. First, I question why researchers are so much more interested in talking about other communities than the communities to which they already belong. Second, I question whether our highly textualized treatment of human interviewees is appropriate or safe.

By approaching Aromas Coffeehouse as a community of practice within a third place, this thesis is an attempt to highlight the complex humanity at play in every interpersonal experience, and an argument that this humanity is best approached by researchers who are interested in seeing and relating to their humanity, not reading and writing it.
Positioning myself as an ethnographer

In October 2013, Aromas Coffeehouse opened a second location in the Benson neighborhood of Omaha, Nebraska, on 60th and Maple. I have spent the vast majority of my days there, as a student, as a socializer, and as an employee. This is a space that has provided me with a tremendous source of stability and belonging, and I have seen it do the same for others. It has been a tremendous asset to the Benson neighborhood, serving as a hub for creativity, education, political advocacy, and friendship, and it continues to evolve in a way that excites and inspires a growing base of loyal customers.

I live and breathe this shop - I am the Coffee Program Director, which basically means I have a hand in running the shops but don’t own them, so I have an intense desire to see the shop succeed. The baristas are my friends, which means I want to believe they feel comfortable and happy and inspired in their jobs, and the owner, my boss, is my friend, and I would love nothing more than for my research to be a source of encouragement to her, to be able to complete this project and say “see, look at this beautiful thing we’ve built.” These are all biases I must combat as I conduct my research.

I also believe, however, that my investment in the success, operation, and people of Aromas means I will use this inquiry as a chance to discover raw, useful feedback from the people who are a part of its daily life. Being invested in success means, to me, critically looking for ways to improve. I study space and conduct ethnographies of coffeeshops not simply because it’s interesting work, but because I want to dedicate my life to creating safe, meaningful spaces where people can come together and make their lives, and the lives of their communities, better. For this research to be useful, I must set aside my desire to cheer for my team and instead embrace a critical lens that recognizes this analysis as an opportunity for raw feedback about
what happens at Aromas on a daily basis, and to use this research as an impetus for improvement.

As I began this project, I received a tremendous amount of criticism from colleagues and friends, all of whom questioned how I could possibly research Aromas Coffeehouse, the company I love and work for, given my tremendous bias. Each time I pushed back with the same question - “why is ‘insider bias’ worse than ‘outsider bias’?” Of course bias needs to be recognized and checked, but there is no such thing as an objective, perspective-less approach to a qualitative research project. Given this assumption, I see no reason why the perspective of an insider - someone who has years of knowing the experiential details of a place, shouldn’t be the one to conduct research about that place. In fact, it seems preferable. My friends’ and colleagues’ concerns, however, seem much more in line with the exigent literature surrounding ethnographic methodology.

For this reason, I decided to use my case study of Aromas an example through which to argue for the merit of experience-driven case studies. I think the critique is a necessary justification and recognition of the reality that most projects like this are not conducted by people “simply living their lives” as I claim to have done. It is also a call to action to ethnographers everywhere to recognize the importance of using their carefully-trained analytical eyes to occasionally look at themselves and those immediately around them.

The second critique launched from the case study is one of ocularcentrism and overtexualization in ethnographic research - terms that will be explained below. My research focuses primarily on customer and staff experience in local coffeehouses, the experiences that affect their days and lives in real, visceral ways. I became aware - or perhaps more accurately, my interviewees themselves made me aware - of the hypocrisy of studying these embodied
experiences and not showing their faces, their bodies, and the coffeeshop itself. This was not at all the original intention of this project, but when Molly, a barista at Aromas, told me “I just feel like it’s something you don’t fully get until you see it. Like, watching people work or hang out or even talk about this place, there’s like a ‘vibe’ I guess - an excitement that makes you think like ‘oh, yeah this is special.’” And then challenged me to use my project to show the faces and emotions and truly embodied experiences of the people in this shop, I couldn’t say no. I understand that this, too, is a highly unusual choice, so an additional justification seemed necessary.

So what has resulted, after a year of watching a small case study grow into something much more critically significant, is an ethnographic case study of Aromas Coffeehouse, in which I study the community of regulars, their behaviors, and the values underlying those behaviors. But part of that study’s unique value is rooted in the fact that I was a member of this community long before I decided to research and write about it. I began to research and write, and neither I nor the people I was interviewing could shake our discomfort with the fact that my writing was, in part, insulting the space we loved by reducing it to a series of block quotes and analytical paragraphs. So I have made two unusual choices: I have written about my own community, and I have produced part of my research as a video. As a result, this thesis is the necessary combination of not only the ethnographic research itself, but a two-part justification of the unusual, but important, methodological choices.

Approaching Aromas Coffeehouse as a “Community of Practice” within a “Third Place”

Because I want my approach to this study to be one that is useful, accessible, and replicable, I must establish three things before I dive into practical methodology or results: what
kind of place I’m working with, a working definition of “space” within that place, and the lens through which I am viewing the people and interactions within that space.

What kind of place

In 1982, Ramon Oldenburg coined the phrase “third place,” a term popularized by Howard Schultz and his team at Starbucks, and now a household term in discussions of coffeeshops. Usually conceptualized as places of enjoyment or respite, these are places people go because they want to, as Oldenburg says, “enjoy each other’s company. They are not like businessmen clubs and singles bars which people inhabit in order to informally encourage the achievement of formal goals” (269). Oldenburg provides a formal definition in his work, which has become more or less the working definition of third place:

A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own. The dominant activity is not “special” in the eyes of its inhabitants, it is a taken-for-granted part of their existence. It is not a place outsiders find particularly interesting or notable. It is a forum of association which is beneficial only to the degree that it is well-integrated into daily life. (270)

While an isolated reading of this definition may lead one to believe third places are well established, uniform institutions with clear and consistent purpose, Doreen Massey reminds us that it is a bit more complicated than that:

In the context of the world which is, indeed, increasingly interconnected the notion of place (usually evoked as ‘local place’) has come to have totemic resonance. Its symbolic value is endlessly mobilized in political argument. For some it is the sphere of the
everyday, of real and valued practices, the geographical source of meaning, vital to hold on to as ‘the global’ spins its ever more powerful and alienating webs. (5)

Third places are not simply places people gather. As Massey notes, there are specific reasons people gather at specific places. Whether they are running to a comfort or hiding from a stressor, something has drawn these individuals to this place, and it is a place they feel welcome, accepted, and that things within this place are as they should be. Nana Okura Gagne, in her study of urban farmer’s markets, argues that people are drawn to specific third places because it allows them to embody an “idealized form of being, while undermining the dominant ideology of the neoliberal economy” (1).

Third places are places with significant symbolic, physical, social, and moral value that people use not only for their practical utility (buying groceries, buying coffee), but also for the role they play in grounding them in a world that values what they value, or shielding them from a world that does not.

Because most third places are merchants who sell some sort of product or service, it’s difficult to avoid a direct conversation about the merchant-consumer relationship and the effect it has on the value system of a third place. The foodservice and hospitality industries are centered around customer experience (Cetin & Dincer 4), which leads to an interesting conversation about the relationship between capitalism and these crucial community centers. Rudolph Gaudio argues that the commercialization of “coffeetalk,” which he defines as “the naturalized conflation of conversation with the commercialized consumption of coffee, space, and other commodities,” is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. He argues that “coffeetalk,” this seemingly mundane, everyday communicative practice, “is inextricably implicated in the political, economic, and cultural-ideological processes of global capitalism, as symbolized by the increasingly ubiquitous
Starbucks Coffee Company” (1). In short, he argues that because Starbucks is explicitly selling an experience, that experience - including and especially the conversations you have amidst that experience - cannot be understood separately from its capitalist underpinnings.

My work finds significant differences between the experiences had at Aromas and Gaudio’s analysis of people’s experience at Starbucks, specifically rooted in the fact that, unlike Starbucks, the “Aromas experience” is not intended to be a product to be purchased, but is rather the (mostly) naturally-occurring setting in which these capitalist transactions necessarily take place. Andrea Pruncut investigates how urban spaces are constructed by its constituents by comparing two cafes on the same street, exploring how its customers and neighbors collectively build its identity. Pruncut’s analysis points to the consumer as significantly more influential on the purpose and culture of a space than Gaudio seems to give them credit for (17). Gagne articulates a collaboration between capitalism and Massey’s sheltering community centers that resonates much more strongly with my work:

Crucially, whereas Sennet ascribes such a changing (or shrinking) sense of public space to the rise of capitalism, in Farmers’ Basket it is precisely highly developed capitalism that provides the framework for encouraging people to rethink their economic and social practices and to aspire to decontextualize and to revitalize their sense of public space in an urban setting. (288)

The complicated ideology of coffeeshops is one that provides useful complication to discussions about their value systems, and Gagne’s analysis, while not specifically about coffeeshops, is useful to and resonates strongly with my own analysis. In summary, the exigent literature surrounding third places recognize that the values of any specific third place are constantly informed by both merchant and consumer, both of whom are aware that they are existing in a
complicated space that is both supported by and subversive of the ideology of traditional capitalist exchange.

*Working definition of “space” within this “third place”*

My working definition of “space” is informed primarily by Doreen Massey in her seminal work *For Space*. Before I can populate my analysis with specific people and interactions, I must first have a sound understanding of space - what happens in a space, how it happens, and a recognition that the construction of that space is always happening. Massey characterizes her work as “appearing obvious,” which is precisely why I am interested in it, especially for a project about a third place. In fact, according to Oldenburg, if I am studying “third places” and their construction, the only theory relevant to my project will be ones focused on that which is “‘not special’ in the eyes of its inhabitants…a taken-for-granted part of their social existence…not a place outsiders find necessarily interesting or notable.”

Massey makes three assertions which together serve as my working definition of space. First, space is a “product of interrelations,” constructed through interactions on any scale. This truth is not effected by size or scale or location of space. Second, that we should approach space as “a sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories exist; as the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity.” Space must have multiplicity, Massey argues, and multiplicity must have space. And if her first assertion is true, then our study of space must assume a reality of plurality. Third, Massey asserts space as constantly changing, always under construction: “Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have yet to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished, never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.”
This interrelational, multiplicitious space constantly under construction is precisely how I define space in any exploration of what happens within it.

The lens

This “third place” description, even when usefully complicated by Massey’s description of place, is only symptomatic. Third place theory is useful for describing “what kind of place” Aromas is, but does very little to help us understand the specific interactions occurring within the walls of Aromas. So now that we have an understanding of the kind of place we’re working with and how we are understanding the space within that place, we need to establish the lens through which we are viewing the people and interactions animating that space. For that, we turn to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s communities of practice.

A community of practice is a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” This learning is not necessarily intentional. To be considered a community of practice, there must be a domain of shared interest, a community, and there must be a practice - they must develop, consciously or not, a shared repertoire of tools to do something (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 27).

The concept is rooted in research conducted by Lave and Wenger about the ways in which outsiders can become insiders in a specific community. Lave and Wenger (1991), in their study of how outsiders become insiders in a specific community, posit that learning is socially co-constructed, not a vacuous acquisition. Membership, they argue, is earned through legitimate peripheral participation - the process through which outsiders engage in simple but recognizable important acts to become members of the community - it is a learning by interacting, not a learning by being instructed (29).
Years later, Wenger clarified the structure of a community of practice, describing each community as being built of three interpreted terms: 1) mutual engagement, or the idea that participation in the community build relationships that allow for the co-construction of norms and the building of mutually beneficial relationships , 2) joint enterprise, the co-construction of what it is that connects members of this community, and 3) shared repertoire, the tools produced and used by members of the community to pursue the joint enterprise.

These three components have most recently been revised again to the three tenants first listed: Domain, Community, and Practice. The community of practice for this particular project, then, is structured as follows:

- **Domain**: A shared interest in Aromas Coffeehouse - “we both come here”
- **Community**: The “invested regulars” at Aromas Coffeehouse (a term I will thoroughly define throughout the rest of this paper)
- **Practice**: The actions the invested regulars take to ensure Aromas is a successful, approachable place they can continue to enjoy.

All of these components will be expanded and explained as we explore the research conducted at Aromas Coffeehouse.

The primary reason I combined the theoretical frameworks of “third place” and “community of regulars” (connected by Doreen Massey’s definition of “space”) is to capture a comprehensive perspective of the place, the space within it, and the people animating that space. Third place theory gives us a firm grasp of what kind of place Aromas Coffeehouse is, but tells us nothing about what occurs within that space. Community of practice theory allows us to discuss the behaviors occurring within a place, but tells us nothing about the place itself. And even the most robust definition of space is meaningless if that space isn’t animated by real people.
who came and engaged in specific behaviors. Combining these perspectives allows us to combine both an external and internal perspective, something ethnographers themselves often try (and as I will explain later, fail) to do.

“Because I’m a Part of the Family!”: Exploring the Community of “Invested Regulars” at Aromas Coffeehouse

My methods have been a seemingly infinite number of observation hours and more than a dozen interviews. I relied on my observation from both sides of the bar and in every imaginable social position in the shop to frame my experience, and once I decided the customer transformation was what I wanted to explore, I conducted interview with several people I suspected had undergone such a transformation. I also chose to only interview customers with whom I have formed close, casual relationships. I wanted to maximize my credibility within the Aromas culture to drive my research. My interviews were driven by three main research questions:

1) What catalyzes the level of investment I’m perceiving in these regular customers?

2) How does this perceived transformation actually affect behavior?

3) What, if any, values underly these behaviors?

I transcribed the entirety of all my interviews, then created a coding scheme using grounded theory (Charmaz), a method of analysis in which theory and data, much like the merchant and consumer in third places, constantly inform and develop each other. Using grounded theory ensures that the data and theory never lose touch with one another, and guarantee a contextual analysis that rejects both vacuous theory and vacuous data. I began my analysis with a round of open coding (see figure 1). After doing this for all my interviews, I listed all my individual codes and merged them into themes. I did this for each individual interview and
Open Coding Example:

WM: What made you choose to come here? Why not another coffee shop?

Scout: The toddy. To be honest, a specific drink. The coffee is incredible. And as much as I consider atmosphere to be important, I want to like the product and everything, too. And especially as you guys are starting to roast your own coffee, that’s just incredible. I just don’t think I could go anywhere else.

Also the staff. Staff is important. Like if I feel valued by the staff, friends on the staff, that is really important. I try not to be high maintenance, even though I know I have the right to be having been on the other side of the bar, I don’t want to be that. I still apologize a lot, like “I’m sorry, I know that’s annoying.”

WM: Are there specific things the staff does to make you feel valued?

Scout: Just recently, Morgan has started calling me “part of the family,” which just makes me feel so excited and special. I know I have gotten to know certain staff members better than others, but even the ones who I just have a basic connection with are still super friendly and personable. Which is awesome.

WM: What does that mean to you, being a part of the family?

I feel like it goes beyond the term “regular.” I mean, I would consider myself a regular. I feel like a lot of the baristas would consider me a regular. But being a part of the family is more like ground level, sort of. I went to the launch party, I’m a member, I don’t feel like a necessarily get special treatment, which is a good thing. You guys are more than the people who just serve me my coffee. We hang out, we have real conversations. It transcends the term “regular.”

Like when you told Jason, “yeah, we’re a fan of hers.” I was like “aww, I’m a big fan of you guys.” It makes me feel valued, I guess, as a person in this community.

I think that definitely comes from the staff. Like without you guys, I mean the toddy would probably still bring me back, and the in-house roasted coffee. But you guys make me feel at home. I do feel at home.

I guess it’s not only the staff, but it’s also the other regulars I hang out with here. Like Taylor, and Dee invited me up to the 402.

(Figure 1)
also for all of my data once the interviews were complete. These themes shaped future interviews, and are the foundation for most of my findings (see figure 2).

**Findings**

My research yielded a concise, verifiable theory for how one transforms from customer to what I will call, for lack of a more exciting term, an “invested regular.” At the most broad level, here is the formula:

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Customers:  
Come for the productivity, for the coffee, for their friends

→ Non-work Interactions with Staff

→ “Invested Regular”
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**Non-Work Interactions with Staff**

As outlined above, my research revealed a universal catalyst in the transition from consistent customer to invested regular: non-work interactions with staff. Universally, members of the “community of regulars” identify friendships with both staff and fellow regulars that keep them excited to come to Aromas several times week (if not several times a day), but they also universally identify what I call “non-work interactions with staff” as the phenomenon that began to make them feel a new sense of belonging. These non-work interactions take several forms, four of which I have identified so far. They are listed below in intentional order, representing both the chronological order in which they usually occur and the intensity of investment they seem to cultivate.

1. **Observation** - While writing this paper, some of my peers argued this is not an interaction. But if, as Massey argues, “…identities/entities, the relations ‘between’ them, and the
(Axial Coding Example)

Open Codes
- Valuing Barista’s Opinion
- Feelings welcomed by baristas
- Valuing non-work interactions with staff
- Transcending “regular” via hanging out with staff
- Remembering verbal affirmation from baristas
- Viewing barista as gatekeeper to the “home”

• Contrasting Types of Regulars
  • Contrasting regular with “part of the family”
  • Transcending “regular” via hanging out with staff
  • Prescribing appropriate regular behavior

Using interactions with barista to define status as “regular,” “family,” etc.
Defining different kinds of regulars

• Product Quality
  • Consistency between baristas
  • Comparing different espressos in Omaha
  • Getting excited when a specific barista is working
  • Preferring Aromas for a specific drink
  • Customer realizing they now have higher coffee standards
  • “Showing off” Aromas to an out-of-towner

“Excellence”

• Valuing not being pretentious
• Customer not feeling judged for asking about coffee vocabulary
• Barista self-defining as different from the “snobby barista cliche”
• Introducing people to specialty coffee
• Valuing approachability
• Identifying “being rude or a snob” as the worst offense a barista could commit
• Seeing approachability as equally important to product quality

“Approachability”
spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive,” then every interaction between individuals and their senses, including self-perception (and resultantly how the construct their own identity within the space), are indeed interactions relevant to the construction of both the space and the identities of the individual, and thus worth studying. Members of the “community of regulars” all experienced different paths of social interactions with the staff, but many recall periods of observing how the staff interacted with not only the regulars, but also with each other. As John, a customer whom I have watched become a part of the “community of regulars” since I began writing this paper, recalls, “One of the first things I noticed about Aromas was the way the baristas treated each other. Like they would work together on a Saturday morning or something, then go have lunch together, and come back and just hang out. That’s pretty cool. Pretty rare, I think.” This kind of observation also extends to how the baristas interacted with customers. In a conversation with John and Beth, a long-time member of the “community of regulars,” they said:

John: I remember just sitting with my headphones in just getting some work done, and still noticing how the baristas were talking with other customers. Everyone was so comfortable. It’s like everyone is equal, you know? Not that they’re not actually, but you know sometimes employees can make you feel that way. But here it’s like I’m never really sure—

Beth: Yeah! It’s like you can never tell who is a barista and who’s just a customer.

John: (Laughs) Right, which was a little confusing, I’m pretty sure I asked you for the wifi password once-

Beth: People do that all the time.

John: But it’s actually pretty cool. It made me feel more comfortable, I think.
WM: You noticed that your first time in the shop?

John: Um, no I don’t think so. The first time I just remember the barista being super nice. But then I started noticing it all the time.”

2. On the clock conversation - The phrase “non-work interaction” could be confusing or accidentally imply that the interaction has nothing to do with the barista working. But, as Massey reminds us, space necessitates the existence of multiplicity, “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist” (9). The barista’s performance of being “on the clock,” does not necessarily impede her/his ability to engage in friendship-building conversation, it simply needs to be clear to the customer that the conversation is social conversation, not the barista “working,” or “providing customer service” (an increasingly vague distinction I will address at the end of this paper). Myles specifically identifies the conversations he had with Mark, a barista, while Mark was “on the clock,” as the reason he began coming to Aromas with increasing regularity:

Myles: I came here [to work], and through that I got to know Jelena and Charlotte and Mark. I think that was why I really started coming here more, just the baristas were so engaging. Like Mark can really talk forever, you know? (laughs) So if he wasn’t busy we would talk for 2 hours. WM: What did you talk about?

Myles: I mean honestly, anything. We would talk about religion, technology, just honestly whatever. It was just like hanging out.”
Beth’s transformation also began with non-work interaction while the barista was on the clock. In fact, she began identifying Charlotte (a barista) as a friend even while they only interacted while Charlotte was at work:

Beth: “I came in one day and was telling [two staff members] a funny story, and I made this joke about looking for friends, and Charlotte said ‘hey I’ll be your friend.’

WM: Just like that?

Beth: Pretty much. I would stand at the end of the counter a lot and talk to her while she worked. Pretty much from the beginning we were friends.”

3. **Socializing in the Shop** - While conversing with an on-the-clock barista certainly “counts” as a non-work interaction, they don’t seem to hold quite the same weight as a barista coming to your table after a shift to just sit and relax. Though no clear themes emerged as to exactly why, the language used to describe interactions in the space with staff not on the clock shifted significantly away from language arguably still about customer service (“really engaging,” “set a good vibe for the shop”) to the language of peers and friendship (“my friends are here!”). Baristas can shift from working behind the bar to sitting at a table with friends - customers, baristas, or both - with remarkable ease. Taylor says these relationships are significant in creating her experience: “It just feels homey. I know my friends are going to be here, whether they’re making me a latte or hanging out at my table. It’s welcoming and inviting.” Some regulars will often ask a barista about the next day’s work schedule, and make morning study/lunch plans.
accordingly. A few members of the Aromas staff are students, and they will study at tables with
customers, co-workers, and sometimes the owner.

4. *Socializing outside the shop* - The seemingly final step in solidifying a customer’s status as
an invested regular is social interaction with staff members occurring outside the coffeehouse.
Lunches, going to shows, going out for drinks, and even going to church have all been
interactions between staff and customers that the customers point to as cultivating significant
investment in the shop. In fact, while not universal, “the first time we hung out outside the shop”
emerged as a consistent pattern for when baristas and customers begin identifying as friends. The
more these interactions occur and the greater number of people (both baristas and customers)
with whom they occur, the more comfortable, connected, and invested the customers feel. Scout,
a customer I met while on the clock at Aromas but whom I now consider a friend, sees a direct
connection between her closeness with the staff and her investment in the success of the shop: “I
have friends that I know just through Aromas, which I think is really important. I have met so
many incredible people here. I just love hanging out with you and Brooklyn. It’s always a fun
time. It just makes me even more excited about everything happening here, you know?”

After these kinds of interactions, the language of friendship and family emerge most
strongly, clearly delineating between these individuals and other customers, even other regulars.
In response to my asking her to explain what she meant by self-identifying as “a part of the
family,” Scout said, “I feel like it goes beyond the term ‘regular.’ I mean, I would consider
myself a regular. A lot of the baristas would consider me a regular. But being a part of the family
is more like ground level, sort of.” Beth agrees, when she explains her coining of the phrase “community of regulars”:

Oh there’s definitely a group of regulars who are like the “community of regulars,” like they’ve created a community. Or there’s regulars like the (med school) students who are here regularly but just because this is a great place to get work done. But that doesn’t make us any more regular than them. It just means we have more of a relationship than the average regular. Would I call us the “in-crowd” of Aroma’s? Maybe. There’s a group of us who this is definitely our home away from home.

Invested Regulars

While it would be silly to try to posit some exact threshold for how much non-work interaction is required to transform from customer to invested regular, it is clear that the above four forms of non-work interaction are the catalysts for such a transformation. This transformation really is the dream situation for both the customers and the business - the customers find a place where they feel at home, can be with their friends, and can be productive, while the coffeehouse gets a core group of customers who not only consistently visit the space and purchase the product, but also have a sense of ownership that manifests is tangible ways, all beneficial to the coffeehouse. Specifically, I have identified five phenomena occurring after a customer has transformed into an invested regular, or what Wegner might call five practices of this community.

1. Rejecting Special Treatment - While invested regulars recognize that their experience is different from most customers, even that of “regular regulars,” primarily defined by their
closeness with the staff and which each other, invested regulars are remarkably insistent on rejecting special treatment. Scout, a former Starbucks employee, recognizes that being a regular is sometimes expected to come with perks, but she prioritizes the coffeehouse over her own possible privileges: “I try not to be high maintenance, even though I know I have the right to be having been on the other side of the bar. I don’t want to be that. I still apologize a lot, like “I’m sorry, I know that’s annoying” (she is never annoying). Beth recognizes her special level of investment in the coffeehouse, but clearly distinguishes between her role as invested regular and the role of the staff:

One key thing to note is that even though I’m here every day for hours, because I don’t work here, unless I’m directly asked my opinion I don’t feel entitled to say how things ‘should be done around here.’ Like other places, churches for instance, when people spend their money and their resources to make something work they feel entitled to say how things should be done.”

2. Voting with their Dollar - In the age of commercialization and commodification of the coffeehouse experienced written about by Gaudio (2003), it makes sense that customers who use the coffeehouse as their office or social space would seek to finance such usage as efficiently as possible. Not so for the invested regular. Almost universally, invested regulars describe the satisfaction they get from spending money at Aromas. In fact, they often called it “investment.” The justifications varied, but the theme was consistent: invested regulars want to spend their money here, because they want it to succeed: “So even just this mentality of after you’re friends with a bunch of [staff] at a coffeeshop, it could be easy to feel entitled to like ‘free coffee,’ but
that’s never been a thought because I want to see the business and Autumn succeed. I want to tip the baristas. I don’t like using a gift card if I don’t have money to tip the barista.” This phenomenon also resonates strongly with my personal experience as invested regular at a coffeehouse in my home town (and again at Aromas before I started working there). I would stress for an hour about whether or not to spend 6 dollars on lunch down the street, but spending 8 dollars over the course of a day at my favorite coffeehouse? Didn’t even flinch. For a few dollars I got a great product, supported my favorite establishment, and felt all sorts of positive vibes from “supporting local,” and “investing in my community.” A great deal.

3. Actively Contributing/Feeling Responsible for the Space - As Beth joked earlier in her conversation with John, it can be difficult for someone new to the coffeehouse to distinguish between staff and customers, an ambiguity we can blame squarely on invested regulars. Invested regulars take an active role in maintaining the space - the “culture of the shop,” “looking out for new customers,” and even literal maintenance of the space. During my interview with Taylor she abruptly got up from her seat to clean up after a child (whom she didn’t know) spilled water on herself and the floor. Taylor had grabbed napkins, cleaned the water, and refilled the child’s cup before I even recognized what happened. When she sat down, I asked her why she reacted like she did:

Taylor: I mean, it’s just a reflex at this point.

WM: But [the on-the-clock barista] was standing right there. She could have done it.
Taylor: Yeah, I know, but I would feel ridiculous just sitting here and making her do it. This is my space as much as hers, I feel like. I don’t know, maybe it’s weird. I know I don’t get paid or whatever, but I love this place. I don’t mind cleaning up a mess.”

4. Advocating for the Coffeehouse - Not only do invested regulars actively contribute to the space, they actively defend it. Unrecognized customers who complain are seen as intruders. On the rare occasion a staff member is not showing an investment or effort deemed appropriate by an invested regular, they are seen as a concern, not because the invested regulars always expect spectacular service, but because the underperforming barista is seen as a threat to the shop’s success. Scout is most aware of how connected she feels to the shop and its staff when she hears people criticize it:

Scout: When people complain. There’s no reason for me to, but I get a little but personally offended. Like the other day you were working and this couple came out [to the patio] and was complaining about you being out of soy milk. And they just kept going, they wouldn’t shut up about it. And I was like, “Places run out of things! Get over it!” But like I said, there’s no reason for me to feel that way. But I do.

WM: Why do you think you take it personally?

Scout: Because I’m part of the family! Yeah, I don’t know, like I know them as customers they’re not personally bashing you guys, they’re just saying as a company you should do this or whatever, but honestly I felt like “if you come after my family you come after me.” Like in Marcel the Shell, when he says “we don’t fight unless we’re provoked.”
5. *Coffee Evangelism* - Invested regulars are not content to keep their experience to themselves. They talk about Aromas. A lot. To everyone. They are genuinely excited about what is happening in the coffeehouse, and they want their friends and family to experience it, too.

Scout: “When a new person comes in, I want to tell them to be prepared to love it or get lost (laughs). I always find myself trying to convince people to come here, even if they don’t live around here.”

John: “I invited a few of my friends to [an event hosted by the coffeehouse] because I love it, and I knew they would love it, too.”

Myles: “There are so many of my favorite people here. So like it’s easy to tell people to try it, because the coffee is great, of course, but I can also introduce them to the great people.”

Beth: “I’m probably known more for talking about how great Aromas is than I am at inviting people to my church.”

While Howard Shultz and his team at Starbucks are working tirelessly to create their cafes as a “third place,” they have missed the simple but crucial fact that a “third place” is nothing more than a descriptor, and creating your cafes as a “third place” is enough to fit the dominant capitalist agenda of “gaining customers and gaining dollars,” it falls short for those of us who wish for our cafes to serve any other purpose, what Gagne would call a “highly developed capitalism”, one in which our quantitative achievements - the number of of customers and number of dollars - are important primarily to serve a qualitative community-centered purpose. To discuss this well and clearly we must recognize the communities of practice within these local, caffeinated third places, like the organic community of regulars created at Aromas Coffeehouse. Customers from across the city have come together to work, to socialize, and to
drink great coffee. In doing so, they have formed relationships with the staff. Those relationships flourished into friendships, and with the friendships came a new sense of identity - one that “goes beyond the term ‘regular.’” This is a formula corporate coffee dreams of, but has yet to discover how to commodify, and until they recognize the co-construction of and multiplicity within a community of practice, I doubt they ever will. The coffeehouse is a place of productivity and fun, a place where the staff and the customers co-construct each other’s identities in a way that makes them all feel engaged and valued. As one invested regular so eloquently put it:

It’s like the non-alcoholic version of Cheers. Kind of like home away from home, but I also refer to it as my ‘mobile office.’ I think of the regulars here as neighbors or co-workers, and the staff, too. Some of them are my closest friends. It’s pretty much a grassroots community - I don’t even know if that was Autumn’s intent, but there’s been this explosion of people who come here and create relationships. It’s really beautiful.”

**Approachability: A conversation at Aromas Coffeehouse**

While it can be easy to characterize communities of practice as focused solely on visible action - it is impossible to analyze the construction of actions without discussing the values underlying those actions. As Sara Mills explains:

The Community of Practice is a group of people who are brought together in a joint engagement on a task and who therefore jointly construct a range of values and appropriate behaviors…Individuals hypothesize what is appropriate within the community of practice and, in speaking, affirm or contest the community’s sense of
appropriate behavior…This set of attitudes or practices, which are seen as constituting a norm by individuals, are then discursively negotiated by individuals in terms of their own perception of what is accessible for their own behavior within a particular community of practice (124).

In other words, if i am really going to approach Aromas as a community of practice, I must try to understand what values operate within the space - what values decide what behaviors are appropriate or not within the space.

In the interest of fully recognizing the co-constructed nature of values, I think it is important that we first pause, again, to talk about methodology. Just as values and practices ground and construct one another, so too does research methodology and results. So before we have a conversation about values within this community of practice, I want to talk about how we are going to talk about it, and perhaps more importantly, who is going to talk about it.

Bodies v. Texts

In her work *Embodiment and Education*, Marjorie O’Loughlin criticizes “Ocularcentrism,” the privileging, specifically in education, of sight over other senses. Ocularcentrism, according to O’Loughlin, “casts individuals as passive spectators whose characteristic mode becomes a sense of detachment from an objectified world, including other people” (34). She also criticizes ocularcentric education for its “neglect of the multisensory,” framing individuals as detached consumers rather than affected subjects.

Carolyn Marvin writes about the intersections and tensions between bodies and texts. In her book chapter “Communication as Embodiment”, Marvin laments the “cultural reflex that
regard the text as mind’s trace divorced from any corporeal origins reflects an aspiration to transcend bodies that has been centuries in the making. In the modern social imaginary, the body is at best superfluous to communicative exchange, at worst a moral impediment to thought” (67). Scholars like Marvin argue for a different perspective, one that recognizes the immovability of bodies from the creation and trajectory of all communication and, perhaps more importantly, the eternal subject of all human communication, no matter how mediated. “This more complicated view,” Marvin says, “takes seriously the fundamental corporeality that undergirds communication and challenges a dominating ethos in which only what is textually expressible is socially valued” (68). Text, Marvin says, is seen as the necessary and important communication. Gesture is “treated as embellishment if we think of it at all” (68).

What O’Loughlin and Marvin share is a critique of disembodiment, a recognition that corporeality is unignorable if we are to truly engage human experience. As O’Loughlin says, “corporeality is the very condition for subjectivity and, since education is about the construction of subjectivities, then it is fundamentally about issues affecting incarnate bodies.” Because the destructive perspective O’Loughlin criticizes is called “ocularcentrism,” it may seem intuitive that our solution ought to do something to explicitly de-privilege our sight, employing our other senses to engage a more embodied experience. In the interest of tangible, immediate improvements to our pedagogical and research methods, however, I suggest a different move. What if, instead of focusing on the privileging of sight over the other senses, we focus on what, exactly, these privileged eyes are seeing? In short, I suggest that, as pertaining to research methodology specifically, O’Loughlin’s concern is not simply the privileging of sight, but the privileging of a very specific kind of sight - the sight we employ when we read a text. The sight that shuts out awareness of corporeality, environment, and space of any kind, the vacuous
“reader sight” - the sight we spend all of primary, middle, and high school teaching our students to learn and perfect. Rather than making an all-out assault on the ocular, I suggest we make a simple, but crucial move, and simply zoom out. Recognize that this text in front of your face does not exist independently of your body that is reading it, the hunger in your stomach, the style of chair you sit in, the smell of the coffee in the other room, your lingering anxiety about the phone call you had this morning, or the sounds being made by your neighbor. Text is not vacuous. Similarly, and, I would hope, more obviously, research is not vacuous.

All research, all analysis, is argument. Any ethnographer who does not see themselves as an arguer has, I believe, a fundamental misunderstanding of knowledge and its presentation. If we remember, then, that our research is both used as and is fundamentally an argument, do we not want this argument to be as powerful as possible? An embellishment of facts or experience is of course unacceptable, but we should not for a moment confuse “not embellishing” with stripping the human experience of all viscerally recognizable and emotionally moving elements. As Marvin says, “We (academics) certainly think we know about text, the medium scholars swim in. It is, oddly, the body that needs anchoring” (68). If you are interviewing a human, writing about humans, analyzing the practices of a group of humans, you should bring their full human-ness to your analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity have their place, of course, but when consent is present and subject matter is low-risk, to strip a human of her face, body, expression, and tone (just to name a few) is a useless and counterproductive adherence to an academic standard that is at best habitually overtexualized, and at worst brazenly anti-feminist.

This is why, for the section of my thesis concerning the values underlying the actions within the community of regulars at Aromas Coffeehouse, I am going to stop typing, and instead refer you to “Appendix A” - the video on the attached USB drive. It will look, by all accounts,
like nothing more than a string of edited interviews with people in a coffee shop. Which is precisely what it is. A compilation of interviews, on camera, with people, their faces, their settings, their laughter, and their awkward pauses. My research focuses primarily on customer and staff experience in local coffeehouses. I have written a number of papers on this subject, papers that follow all condoned textual guidelines, use fake names, provide clean-cut coding schemes, and a number of block quotes. But I am no longer interested in ignoring what I can only describe as a convenient hypocrisy. I cannot claim to research and write about customer and staff experience in a coffeeshop, the experiences that affect their days and lives in real, visceral ways, and not show their faces, their bodies, and the coffeeshop itself.

I have edited the interviews in a way that is coherent and meaningful, and allows my interviewees to share their experience and make their argument. All participants have consented to be interviewed, filmed, and have their film published. I hope you will find this section useful not only for the merit of its content, but also for the implicit argument - it is going to require intentional choices by researchers if we are going to re-ground bodies in our research, or, perhaps more accurately, re-ground our research in bodies. We are not analyzing texts. We are analyzing humans. Our research should show it.

(For video, see Appendix A)

The need for experience-driven case studies: de-privileging the research question

As in any field, most ethnographic research is driven by a specific question deemed interesting by a researcher. The researcher then enters a culture or begins an experiment to see if their question or project yields any significant findings. My research is the result of a very different approach. I was simply living my life, one day looked up from my table, noticed that
my friends and I were acting differently both from other customers at Aromas and from how we
used to act when we first started regularly coming to the coffeehouse, and simply asked “what
exactly is happening?”

My interest in ethnographic research was born of a genuine desire to learn more
about the communities of which I was a part. My community at Aromas, in which I was
immersed long before I began my graduate program in rhetoric and composition, was essential to
my life and thus wildly interesting to me as a person naturally enthralled by spaces and the
phenomena occurring within them, especially because I perceived within myself some kind of
transformation since my time becoming a part of this community, and because I was aware of
how differently I felt about and treated this space compared to other communities of which I’d
been apart, especially in the customer service industry. I wanted to train specifically in
ethnography so I could be a more active observer and participant in my communities, and learn
more about why I thrived in certain spaces and struggled in others, even if those spaces might
seem similar to an outsider (i.e. two different coffee shops). I remember specifically saying in my
personal statement in my graduate school application, “I want to use this time to sharpen my
skills of observation, reading, and analysis so I can apply them to the life I’m already living - to
become better equipped to thrive within my community and to help my community thrive.” As I
began my program and began to learn more about ethnography, however, I quickly learned this
approach was unusual.

Heath & Street’s book *Ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research* was
very instructive and useful in acquiring basic ethnographic skills. Their text and most other texts
I read, however, framed ethnography in a way that immediately gave me pause regarding my
situation at Aromas. Throughout their text Heath & Street tell the story of Molly, a new
ethnographer engaging in her first project in which she interviewed Roger, a juggler:

Though much is said about participant observation as the key means of collecting data
as an ethnographer, the truth is that only rarely can we shed features of ourselves to be
a “real” participant. Molly was not a juggler; struggling to learn to be one could help her
talk with Roger, but she could never take on features that emerged as central in Roger’s
identity of himself as juggler. Ethnography forces us to think consciously about ways to
enter into the life of the individual, group, or institutional life of the ‘other’. (35)

It is difficult for me to understand why such an instructive text would dismiss so fully the
possibility of being a “real” participant, but perhaps even more confusing why, then, if true
participation is impossible, ethnographers continue to feign a posture of “participant-
observation.” The idea of ethnographer as participant-observer is, for me, not simply a feigned
posture for the sake of conducting research. It is a role I inhabit in nearly every part of my life.
Because I research the communities to which I already belong, a position as participant-observer
is central to my own research (not to mention life) goals.

In my quest for some more validating texts, I found Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth
Chiseri-Strater’s text, *Fieldworking: reading and writing research*. Sunstein and Chiser-Strater
seem to gesture more generously to the idea of conducting ethnography as an insider, but still
describe fieldwork as the act of an external researcher coming to a site and situating themselves
within that site:

We are always part of the places we study. Whether they are familiar or unfamiliar, we
always stand in relationship to those places. No matter how far outside or how close
inside we may situate ourselves, there can be no place description without an author…
for this reason, fieldworkers train themselves to look through the eyes of both the insider (emic perspective) and the outsider (etic perspective) at once to locate their own perspectives. (166)

More than any text on ethnography I read during my graduate studies, Sunstein and Chiser-Strater articulate clearly and powerfully the importance of recognizing your humanity and subjectivities in ethnographic research. They clearly lay out their perspective on subjectivities of a researcher in a way that has been very helpful for me throughout my research:

So it is not always objectivity or detachment that allows us to study culture, our own or that of others. Subjectivity — our inner feelings and belief systems — allows us to uncover some features of culture that are not always apparent. As a fieldworker, you will conduct an internal dialogue between your subjective and objective selves, listening to both, questioning both. You combine the viewpoints of an outsider stepping in and an insider stepping out of the culture you study…Detachment and involvement, subjectivity and objectivity, insider and outsider stances are equally coupled in fieldworking. (7)

This idea of internal dialogue is crucial to any ethnographer, and Sunstein and Chiser-Strater’s reminder specifically has been useful to me as I recognize my own insider perspective at Aromas in a way that allows me to situate myself productively as an ethnographer. Still, I think it’s worth pausing to question whether it an insiders perspective is something an outsider can really adopt. Paul Stoller describes “gaze” as “an act of seeing; it is an act of selective perception. Much of what we see is shaped by our experiences, and our ‘gaze’ has direct bearing on what we think. And what we see and think, to take that process one step further, has a bearing upon what we say and what and how we write” (38). Our experience and the resulting vocabulary/knowledge base we gain literally shapes what we see.
If you, as an ethnographer, arrive at a site as an outsider and attempt the to “combine the viewpoints of an outsider stepping in and an insider stepping out…” you can, of course, inhabit the perspective of an outsider. That’s what you are. But how could you possibly inhabit the perspective of an insider, someone who has had their perception, language, and thought shaped by a lifetime of experience in the community? You arrive at the site of inquiry with fundamentally different eyes. To assume you can inhabit their perspective without sharing their experience, even while heeding Heath and Street’s warning to “stay alert to the fact that institutions and individuals in power may well use the ethnographer’s findings to confirm stereotypes, set policies, or determine critical matters, such as land boundaries and ownership… take account of limitations and constraints while continuing to advance our understanding of universals of human life and learning,” (125) seems at best unrealistic, at worst arrogant and dangerous. Miles and Huberman describe ethnography as “an act of betrayal, not matter how well intentioned or well integrated the researcher,” an action that “makes public the private and leaves the locals to take the consequences” (233). If we are not willing to “make public the private” of ourselves and our own communities, and stand with our communities as we “take the consequences,” we should not subject someone else’s community to such a betrayal. To do so seems to indicate either an intense fear of introspection and or own subjectivity, or conversely, a belief that we are masters of the stuff. Both seem problematic to me.

I am not suggesting eliminating external field work. But ethnographers are humans, and they have lives outside of their official field work. Surely we all notice things in our lives. We should write about what we notice. “The fundamental challenge to ethnographers is to lay out what is happening” (Heath & Street 35). Does our own lived experience not warrant such analysis? Are we being distracted by sensationalism? Sunstein and Chiser-Straer warn their
readers “not to choose places or events that are particularly sensational. The culture of a children’s playground can be as complex and engaging to write about as the subculture of witch covens or gang warfare” (56). I cannot help but feel we as a community are missing a tremendous amount of potential by not simply looking from up our desks, observing critically and carefully our own lives, and asking our fundamental question - “what is happening?”

While I was discussing this idea with a classmate of mine, she asked me, “But in fairness, isn’t this how all research is done?” I am thankful for this question, because it did make me pause to evaluate whether I was being overly critical. But I truly believe my concern comes not out of a desire to criticize me peers just for the sake of criticism, but rather because I believe so deeply in the potential of ethnographic research. Part of what makes ethnography so uniquely powerful is its position as the only field able to make this kind of introspective move. Films or chickens or global temperatures can’t analyze themselves or their own communities. Ethnographers can. To neglect this unique advantage of our training seems like a mistake.

My concern with researchers neglecting their own life experience as a site of inquiry is rooted in a more fundamental concern about the posture ethnographers take as they enter the field. Though coffeehouses are my first love as far as research interests go, classrooms are undoubtedly the second. My interest in pedagogy has been fundamentally informed by Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the further I unpacked my discomfort with ethnographic research of the “other,” Friere’s work came closer and closer to mind. One passage in particular seemed to me a concerning parallel between the kind of classroom and the kind of ethnography that make me uncomfortable:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.
Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. (72)

Most, if not all, trained ethnographers would praise Friere’s criticism of bank-model education. “Of course,” we say, “That’s why we do what we do! Our interviewers are full of knowledge, and we are eager to learn.” As Norma Gonzalez says in Funds of Knowledge, “We like to make much of the fact that in this project we are all learners: teachers as learners, researchers as learners, students as learners, communities of learners, and so forth” (2). What we fail to notice is the danger of the researcher constantly positioned as outsider coming in, as the necessary discoverer of such knowledge. Even if we recognize the funds of knowledge waiting to be mined by a good ethnographer, it is dangerous to imply (by instruction or by example) that ethnographic training is a set of skills you acquire, then go out into someone else’s community instead of into your own. Is it not preferable to mine the precious metals of your own community than to have them mined by some foreign company, even one who claims they “want to get to know you,” and “has your best interests in mind?” If we as a community of researchers are to avoid being implicated with the banking model of education as, in Freire’s, words,

…regarding men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more
completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited on them… and “minimiz(ing) or annul(ing) the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serv(ing) the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed or to see it transformed. The oppressors use their ‘humanitarianism’ to preserve a profitable situation,” (in this case, the profitable situation the predictable and clearly structured situations of trained ethnographers going out into the world, doing research, and getting published) we must encourage all ethnographers to embrace the funds of knowledge present in their own communities - not to never leave, but to recognize the value of the spaces in which they start.

I am not writing these paragraphs because I feel surrounded by ethnographers who seek to use their skill set for malicious or even remotely self-serving purposes. I feel fortunate to be surrounded by researchers who recognize the importance of their lived experience informing their scholarly work. My thesis adviser, friend, and mentor Dr. Faith Kurtyka is, in my opinion, the ideal role model for synthesizing her life experience with useful, replicable methodology (see “Get Excited People!”: Gendered Acts of Literacy in a Social Sorority” published in Literacy in Composition Studies, for example). I am writing these paragraphs because I think it is crucial that, as a community, we are constantly challenging and questioning our habits and assumptions. And I think the assumption that ethnographic research of an “outside” community is “normal” and researching your own community or, god forbid, autoethnography, is “the exception” is an assumption worth challenging.

Friere challenges pedagogical assumptions about framing the oppressors and the oppressed as insiders versus outsiders in a way that can be useful to this discussion: “The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They
have always been ‘inside’ — inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (74). While I don’t think ethnographers would ever intentionally pathologize the individuals or communities they research as “marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a ‘good, organized, and just’ society,” as Friere accuses the oppressors of doing, I do think it is a mistake to assume you can ever have a discussion (or, perhaps more dangerously, avoid a discussion) of “insiders” and “outsiders” without evoking real power dynamics and consequences. Part of the mindset I am cautioning against is one that says “those people out there are worth studying. I am qualified to study them because I am not from their community, and I have skills they don’t have.”

Our ethnographic work must, if we are to consider ourselves anything other than self-serving, be aimed at understanding and action towards a more just society. If that is the aim of our research, we should start with our own communities. If our goal as researchers is to validate, wherever possible, the lived experience of every individual regardless of privilege and a resultant contrived “insider” or “outsider” status, we should start with our own lived experience.

Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti describe an emancipatory research agenda as one that “calls for empowering approaches that encourage and enable participate to change through self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their situations. Yet these approaches must contend with a context that isolates practitioners, mutes autonomy, and pushes for standardization” (2). It is imperative that we do everything in our power, not only in our individual projects but in our discourse and habits as a community, to combat “a context that isolates practitioners, mutes autonomy, and pushes for standardization,” but if ethnographers are not willing to examine themselves and their communities, we can never truly call ourselves advocates of an embodied, contextual
methodology. Simone de Beauvoir warns against false gestures of liberation in which the oppressors are “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (34). I heed that warning, and want my ethos as a researcher to be rooted in embodied experience. I believe in the power of ethnography to change both the consciousness of the oppressed and the situation that oppresses them, and so I feel compelled to begin with my own community.

Conclusion

Approaching Aromas Coffeehouse as a community of practice within a third place gave me a useful lens through which to understand not only the ways in which an outsider can become an insider in this community of regulars, but the specific shared repertoire of practices these regulars have to succeed in their joint enterprise of maintaining Aromas Coffeehouse as an enjoyable, approachable space, both for themselves and for newcomers.

Approaching this space as a pre-existing insider allowed me to see and relate to the community I was researching in a way I never could have as an outsider coming in. The community of regulars and baristas at Aromas knows that I have their best interests in mind because I am one of them, and have been for years, and they know that I will always be beside them and in front to “take the consequences,” of any research I conduct.

The members of this community also genuinely want people to see and experience this space they have created, which is why they were all eager to have our conversations on video. In fact, the idea came from a barista at Aromas. Although every assumption I’ve grown up around in academia tell me that quotes and written analysis and reading humans as texts is the way I’m supposed to do this, I couldn’t imagine anything more hypocritical than learning from this community about how much they value approachability, but then refusing to present this research
in a way that was not only accessible to them, but suggested and encouraged by them. I was interviewing Molly for this project and were talking about what made Aromas different from other coffeeshops, when she made it clear that I needed to do something differently:

Molly: “I just feel like it’s something you don’t fully get until you see it. Like, watching people work or hang out or even talk about this place, there’s like a ‘vibe’ I guess - an excitement that makes you think like ‘oh, yeah this is special.’

WM: I know, we need a camera in here.

Molly: You should!

WM: *(laughs)* Yeah, I wish!

Molly: Why can’t you?

WM: …

Molly: I think you should, I think people would love it.

So I did.
Works Cited


Gaudio, Rudolf. “Coffeetalk: Starbucks and the commercialization of casual conversation”.


