Face-to-face Legwork and Facebook Ethnography: Finding Informants and Delineating Field Sites in a Zuckerbergian World

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Abstract

By both indigenous and anthropological accounts, Facebook has brought into interaction diverse peoples and cultures like few other digital platforms have. This perceived global all-inclusiveness provides a promising opportunity to anthropologists of ethnicity. However, given media anthropologists’ call for studies to examine the interplay between online and offline sociality -- and problematize the dichotomy between the two -- it also poses a methodological challenge. Facebook’s geographic reach makes studying its everyday embeddedness difficult. This paper describes my response to this methodological challenge. Through anecdotal tales from the field, I aim to contribute to the nascent dialogue about methodological approaches in the anthropology of Facebook. Inspired by Matei Candea’s defense of the bounded field site (Candea 2007), I launched my research about the role of Facebook in ethnic identity formation within the Senegalese diaspora from a highly localized, face-to-face entry point. I made Facebook friends through face-to-face contacts, rather than the other way around. This strategy presented several benefits. First, it was easier to build a network of participants and gain their trust. Second, immersion in the everyday, material circumstances of participants’ lives proved pivotal to understanding their attraction to Facebook in the first place. Third, I witnessed Facebook friendships turn face-to-face, and purportedly limitless networks get “cut” along ethnic lines. For even as informants idealized Facebook as encompassing the world and its diverse peoples, Facebook often reinscribed the parochialism and isolation of immigrants “sans papiers.” Methodological roadblocks to digital friendships thus foreshadowed boundaries in social interactions, just as face-to-face fieldwork provided the best window into Facebook worlds.

Keywords: Facebook, Materiality, Ethnicity, Network, Field Theory

Introduction

“Facebook is the world. The whole world,” a Senegalese informant told me, hovering over my overheated laptop in a Parisian apartment block. I had recently arrived in Paris to explore the impact of Facebook on ethnic identity formations in the Senegalese diaspora, and in the process, respond to the relative lack of attention to ethnicity in the nascent anthropology of Facebook. My informant’s reflection resonated with anthropologist Daniel Miller’s claim that part of Facebook’s success is due to “the desire by nearly everyone on our planet to be on the same network as everyone else” (Miller 2011: 217). Of course, Facebook does not include everybody. According to
Socialbakers.com, a site which tracks Facebook demographics, as of March Facebook had a 39.61% penetration rate in France, while only 5.51% of Senegalese are plugged in to the social network. However, there was a prevalent perception among Senegalese Facebook users I encountered in Paris and its suburbs that the social network juggernaut circumscribed the globe and brought together diverse cultures and peoples like few internet platforms have done in the past.

In this way, perceptions of Facebook draw into relief the “inherent multi-sitedness” -- to use Sarah Gatson’s term (Gatson 2011: 245) -- of online sociality. To the anthropologist of ethnicity, Facebook’s purported all-inclusiveness and extreme multi-sitedness presents both an opportunity and a methodological challenge. On the one hand, Facebook’s perceived potential to include any and all cultures, nations and socioeconomic groups holds great promise: the greater the scale of intercultural interaction, the higher the stakes of ethnic group formation and transformation, I thought. If Facebook is “the whole world,” or is at least perceived as such, what an opportunity it would be to observe international interactions with the click of a mouse.

On the other hand, media anthropologists have long contended that one must explore digital technologies as part and parcel of everyday sociality. Though some users may prize them as “spaces apart,” digital environments are not bounded spaces, but rather are intermeshed in complex ways with every day, face-to-face interactions, challenging rigid dichotomies between “online” and “offline” (See Burrell 2009, Leander and McKim 2003, Hine 2007, Humphrey 2009, Miller 2011, Postill 2008, Walker 2010)

Facebook’s perceived all-inclusiveness makes this methodological and theoretical requirement of media anthropologists all the more difficult to fulfill. I could not explore the everyday cultural contexts of all the interlocutors with whom my key informants interacted on Facebook. Facebook may circumscribe the globe, but a student anthropologist – within the time constraints of a masters’ thesis – cannot.

To delineate a field site, I had to build a network of research participants. To build that network, I decided to seek contacts through Facebook itself. In choosing this approach I was following examples set by Dana Walker and T.L Taylor, both of whom were able to trace the paths of research participants from digital spaces to physical ones (Taylor 2006 and Walker 2010). The former encountered research participants in online gaming sites before meeting them face-to-face. The latter visited physical places cited by Philadelphia residents in online civic forums. Likewise, I hoped Facebook contacts would guide me to the physical spaces they inhabited, and that those spaces in turn would provide entry points to online and offline sociality.

Existing literature presented alternate strategies to explore and problematize the online-offline boundary. Caroline Humphry analyzed how participants themselves discuss online-offline relationships. In Russian chatrooms, participants engaged in an “interpretive game,” constructing and decoding relationships between online avatars and offline identities (Humphrey 2009: 42). Similarly, Tom Boellstorff conducted his
ethnography of Second Life entirely on the online platform, and in doing so, encountered users who claimed that Second Life identities were more “real” than offline selves (Boellstorff 2008). Hampton and Wellman conducted a primarily offline ethnography as part of their experimental design (Hampton and Wellman 2003). Finally, in the first full-length ethnography of Facebook, Daniel Miller observed Trinidadian Facebook usage online for several months in conjunction with his on-the-ground fieldwork (Miller 2011).

However, given my limited timescale, networking on The Social Network seemed most efficient. I assumed that digital connections would be “faster” and “easier.”

In reality they were neither. Unlike Walker and Taylor, I was unable to find potential informants digitally and follow them through physical spaces. But in my case, methodological roadblocks provided ethnographic insight. In this paper I share anecdotal tales from the field portraying my attempts to, as Dana Walker recommends, delineate manageable field sites that nevertheless capture actors’ dynamic flows through digital and non-digital spaces (Walker 2010). Facebook’s scope and “unmanageability” highlight the methodological and theoretical importance of this exercise.

For reasons I shall describe in the following section, I failed to gain trust within digital circles that could turn into face-to-face conversations. I could not find participants or gain their trust through Facebook messages alone. Rather, inspired by Matei Candea’s reconceptualization of the bounded field site (Candea 2007), and in resonance with Dana Walker’s efforts to delineate field sites amid dynamic, online-offline flows (Walker 2010), I launched my research of a diasporic digital network from a highly localized, face-to-face entry point: a Senegalese immigrant’s cramped Parisian apartment. I made Facebook friends through face-to-face contacts, rather than the other way around. This strategy presented several benefits within my particular fieldwork context. First, it was easier to build a network of participants and gain their trust. Second, immersion in the everyday, material circumstances of participants’ lives proved pivotal to understanding their attraction to Facebook in the first place. Third, from my highly localized vantage point, I witnessed digital friendships become face-to-face friendships. In turn, I witnessed purportedly limitless digital networks get “cut” along ethnic lines. For even as informants idealized Facebook as encompassing the world and its diverse peoples, Facebook often re-inscribed the parochialism experienced by undocumented immigrants -- or immigrants “sans papiers” -- in their offline lives. Thus my difficulty making digital connections foreshadowed boundaries in my fieldwork communities, both online and offline. Ultimately, face-to-face fieldwork provided the best window into Facebook worlds.
Finding Informants In Multicultural Paris And Multicultural Facebook

My initial strategy for recruiting research participants was “internet-based participant social network formation. My hope was that Facebook friends would become face-to-face friends, and ultimately, research participants. So I began by searching through publicly accessible Facebook pages – that is, profiles without privacy restrictions – whose residence status listed Paris. I sifted those listings in turn for names I knew from experience to be Senegalese or West African. I then contacted those who satisfied both conditions. I introduced myself as an anthropologist and asked if my interlocutors would be willing to discuss with me the role Facebook played in their lives, either online or in person after my arrival in Paris. This strategy was not effective, and I received no favorable responses.

Previously, I had taken a colleague’s advice and created a Facebook page for my research project. Apart from my own postings, this page quickly became a digital wasteland. Contrary to my preconceptions, forging online connections was not “quicker” or “easier” than making contacts face-to-face. On the contrary, it proved more effective and efficient to make Facebook friends through face-to-face contacts, rather than the other way around. Without racking my brain for the perfect word or tone-softening emoticon, I could build their trust, obtain consent, and network for further contacts.

Oumar, one of my key informants, is a case in point. An American friend who grew up in Senegal gave me Oumar’s cell phone number. The two grew up in the same village in Senegal. Both were part of the Peul ethnic group and spoke Pulaar as their first language. I called Oumar shortly after arriving in Paris. He answered on the first ring. “You can come by any time. I don’t have a job right now,” he said matter-of-factly.

As it happened, Oumar faintly recalled seeing my message on Facebook. “I thought you were spam,” he told me. This comment highlights another facet of Facebook encountered in my research. The supposition of all-encompassing reach often came with skepticism or suspicion. If everybody is on Facebook, wrongdoers and scam-artists are on it too. Who is looking at my profile? Who is accessing my information? What are their intentions? As Sokhna, another future informant, put it, “Senegalese are taught to beware of people asking to be Facebook friends.”

I was thus unable to build trust in digital forums. To find my first key informant, the old-fashioned route worked best. But this was not the only benefit of beginning with a face-to-face encounter. Material living conditions influenced Oumar’s perceptions and usage of Facebook, and I could only glean this insight by being there.

Less than an hour after our phone call, I met Oumar at his foyer, a rectangular block of dorm-sized rooms. The building was constructed after World War II to house the African immigrants who helped rebuild bomb-ravaged Paris. The physical constraints of this foyer turned out to drive his heavy Facebook usage. Limited in the
face-to-face connections he could make in the foyer, Oumar portrayed Facebook connections as limitless.

The front entrance to Oumar's foyer was flanked by clusters of men selling cigarettes, household goods, and sundry African foodstuffs. “We are all African here,” Oumar told me. That being said, Oumar had little contact with non-Peuls. In the foyer, Senegalese and Mauritanians of Pulaar origins largely kept to themselves. Common language and shared food preferences contributed to these associations, Oumar said. On my first visit, he greeted our non-Pulaar elevator-mates in French, but after that, we ascended in silence.

Once inside his apartment, it was anything but silent. In theory the unit should have housed two men, but the cluster of two bedrooms and half-kitchen was home to many more. Four beds were visible during the day. At night, as Oumar would later tell me, a fifth was to be placed in the center, so that one could not leave the room without stepping on the mattress. One bed was not a mattress at all, but a hospital stretcher.

At the time of our interview the two other laptops were occupied by Oumar’s roommates, so we conducted the interview with my personal laptop. I sat on one of the beds, Oumar on the hospital stretcher.

Oumar had spent several years in Spain doing odd jobs, before returning to France to continue the search for steady employment. The daily errands of printing resumes and filing applications had helped structure Oumar’s time. The prospect of employment also promised friends and support networks. However, as an undocumented immigrant “sans papiers,” Oumar risked discovery and deportation with each job application. Discouraged, he had recently given up looking for work. Now he spent the majority of his time in his room. The term “sans papiers” thus indexes both the limited mobility and social isolation concurrent with Oumar’s undocumented status.

While loading his Facebook page Oumar grew reflective. Perhaps he had so many Facebook friends because they provided a sense of community he couldn’t find in the foyer, where suffocating physical proximity made emotional intimacy difficult. In fact, many of Oumar's face-to-face friendships began with a Facebook message, such as his face-to-face friendship with Madame Diallo, a Pulaar activist from Mauritania whom he met for the occasional coffee. In this way, Facebook was Oumar's ticket beyond the walls of the foyer.

Oumar asserted that on Facebook, his potential to meet new people and make new connections knew no limits, and was not constrained by national, cultural, or ethnic boundaries. In theory, he could cover more ground on Facebook than he could in all of his physical travels throughout Europe. While he told me he was committed to promoting Pulaar culture, he stayed away from Pulaagu.com, a website and social network that allows Peuls to interact in Pulaar and discuss cultural or political issues. Facebook seemed a superior social network because of the diversity of its users; “Facebook allows you to enlarge your circle,” Oumar said, adding that Facebook
enabled connections not only with non-Peuls, but with non-Africans as well. In contrast to his social relationships within the foyer walls, his list of Facebook friends could grow without limits and across intercultural boundaries.

As I will discuss in the third section of this paper, Oumar’s ideal of limitless networking was not always realized. What is worth noting for now is the importance of Facebook to someone without work and with few other options to forge relationships in a country far from family. Physical, material constraints shaped his belief that on the non-physical, immaterial Facebook, there are no constraints at all. Immersion in the materiality of Oumar’s Facebook usage was therefore key to understanding the value of Facebook to someone socially isolated and sans papiers.

‘Gates’ And Fences’ As Metaphors For Digital Interaction

Some of my most effective fieldwork happened without ever flipping an ‘on’ switch. To understand interactions within and conceptions of Facebook, on-the-ground legwork proved essential. By immersing myself in daily, non-digital interactions in a geographically circumscribed location, I observed a central dilemma facing Pulaar immigrants in Paris: how to ride the line between ethnic pride and ethnic parochialism. This dilemma played a role in both multicultural Paris and multicultural Facebook.

Thanks to a referral from Oumar, I lodged for a week in Mantes-la-Jolie, a suburb just outside of Paris whose population of Senegalese residents was 98% Peul. I lodged with Awa, a maid, and her four children. Awa in turn put me under the care of Au, a neighborhood watchman who made routine sweeps of the city to dispel adolescent tiffs and keep the peace. I accompanied Au on his nightly strolls, learning about the history of the city and growing increasingly nervous that I had yet to interview a single Mantais about Facebook.

Au described Mantes-la-Jolie as a city on the rise. Yes, there was the occasional drug bust, but there was also a new park and an active cultural center. Habitations à Loyer Modéré (HLMs) were things of the past. Television satellite dishes studded the exteriors of whitewashed apartment blocks. In fact, the city has changed so much, Au said, that even “les Français” had started to move there. But just because Mantes was changing didn’t mean it was becoming more French; “Here, this is Senegal,” Au told me.

Au’s night watch duties were difficult to distinguish from the nightly circuit of house visits among Pulaar Mantais. This nocturnal ritual of house visits exemplified the tight-knit nature of the Pulaar community in Mantes-la-Jolie. Awa’s house was one of the focal points in an established route spanning several blocks. Assuring me this was part of the job, Au would lead me up a few flights of stairs, knock on a friend’s door, and enter. A Pulaar Mantais did not need to call beforehand; a knock at the door would do. Inside, one shared a meal, shared gossip, and shared in often heated discussions of the evening news, both French and West African. Au explained to me the social
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significance of these impromptu visits; in Mantes, you’ll never find a locked door. “The doors are always open,” he said.

Au, Seck and other Mantais touted this “open door” policy as what distinguished the Mantais way of life from a Parisian one. In Paris, Senegalese could never live “en communauté” like they could in Mantes. Especially in the Parisian foyers, where many poor, single Senegalese immigrants were forced to live, there was no sense of community or solidarity. Echoing Oumar, they described foyer quarters as cramped and the physical closeness as hindering, rather than promoting, emotional bonds. Au’s house visits were proof that Mantes was just like Senegal, Au said, community-building rituals that connected one family to the next.

Discourses about “open door” sociality assumed particular weight in a multicultural, multiethnic environment like Mantes-la-Jolie. But opinion was divided. One camp of Pulaar Mantais assured me that doors were open to all races, cultures and ethnic groups, both literally and metaphorically. Au excitedly pointed out, for example, when a North African boy came home with a Pulaar friend for lunch, and formed bite-sized balls of Ceeb u Jen -- Senegal’s national dish of rice and fish — with his fingers in proper Senegalese fashion. “See, our doors are always open,” Au reiterated. Indeed, the boy even spoke a bit of Pulaar to his hosts. Au also drew the example of the local market. On Friday, one could buy Senegalese pop CDs, buerkas, and Moroccan food products. Au gestured to this multicultural, international mélange with a sweeping hand gesture as if to say, look – everything and everybody mixes together here.

Awa dismissed Au’s perspective as idealistic nonsense. First off, she said with a laugh, she always locked her doors after midnight. Taking me on a walk around the neighborhood, Awa claimed that unless you were born and bred in Mantes, and thus had the opportunity to make friends of all ethnicities and nationalities in school, you would invariably spend your time with other Peuls. The ideal of visiting everyone and everyone visiting you was just that: an ideal. According to Awa, ethnic groups were quite parochial.

By this point, I had become enthralled by the fine line between ethnic pride and ethnic parochialism in multicultural Paris. But what of Facebook and ethnic identity? Time was ticking, and thus far my fieldwork – steeped in material interactions – had done little to address non-material Facebook. But one night, one of Awa’s guests made a link between online and offline multiculturalism that justified my house-hopping hours.

After dinner, I marveled with Awa’s guest Daouda Seck at the richness of the French vocabulary. Portail is the French word for gate, but literally means “portal.” It’s an opening, a window into something new. Clôture, on the other hand, the French word for “fence,” indicates closure. It imposes a boundary between entities.
Later in the evening, Seck invoked this semantic elegance once more, this time to annotate a Facebook name I had spotted in Oumar’s friend list. Roughly translated, “Katante Lenyol” meant “volunteer for the ethnic group.” According to Seck, this profile name was a risky choice. For someone who had the linguistic and cultural vocabulary – that is, an insider – such a name provided a portal into Katante Lenyol’s core identity; it revealed his core commitment to the Pulaar ethnicity. But for an outsider who lacked that vocabulary, “Katante Lenyol” constituted a cloture. Seck said the name was:

“A bit sectarian. Because someone who knows how to read Pulaar can come to this profile and say ‘ah!’ I found someone in the family, someone in the community. But someone else who sees it could recognize that it’s from the ethnic group Pulaar, but think, ‘It’s not worth it, it doesn’t interest me, because I’m not in the group.’”

According to Seck, ethnic terms in place of given and family names could repel cultural outsiders. While increasing ethnic solidarity, they also imposed a boundary between those with and without a Pulaar cultural vocabulary.

Thus, Seck used the same highly-physicalized language of gates and fences, opening and closure to describe Facebook that Au, Awa and other Mantais had used to debate offline interactions in a multiethnic suburb. This discourse of openness and closure explored the tension between pride and parochialism both online and off. Of course, I could not chart a causal link between the two; I could not say that the “doors” idiom offline had permeated discursive constructions of Facebook, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the parallel between offline and online dramas was striking. This parallel highlights in turn how immersive ethnography in a material environment can grant insight into immaterial worlds.

It’s A Small “Whole World” After All

Methodological roadblocks often provide ethnographic insight. My inability to reach Pulaar activists through digital outreach alone foreshadowed the way in which many Pulaar Facebook users “cut the network,” to use Marilyn Strathern’s term, along ethnic lines. The ethnically-inscribed Facebook usage of Oumar’s friend Katante Lenyol, above all, highlighted the value of on-the-ground legwork for recruiting research participants in Facebook ethnography.

Back in Oumar’s apartment, I asked my informant about “Katante Lenyol” or “volunteer for the ethnic group.” Katante Lenyol’s profile picture showed three young girls in Pulaar outfits and makeup. On his profile were links to videos of Pulaar poetry readings, musical concerts and cultural events. All of the comments on those posts – both his own and most of his friends’ – were written in Pulaar.
Oumar told me that he accepted Katante Lenyol’s friend request because of these displays of Pulaar culture; he immediately knew they had something in common. Nevertheless Oumar expressed suspicion about the authenticity of his Facebook friend’s profile:

“Here, in the photo, you have three girls. He can’t be a girl. And he certainly isn’t three girls. You can imagine that this person is very engaged for Pulaar culture. But on the other hand, they wear a mask…so this may not be real.”

However, this potential for duplicity only made Oumar more curious. He scrolled through the wall posts, searching for evidence to confirm Katante Lenyol’s identity. Something catches his eye: a phone number. “Now he reveals himself!” Oumar exclaimed. My ethnographer’s excitement could not have gone unnoticed.

Oumar called the number listed on the Facebook profile, and discussed with the man on the other end the proximity of their homes in Paris, and the proximity of their villages back in Senegal. Both distances were minimal, Oumar would tell me later. So they arranged to meet at the foyer. From Facebook, to phone, to face-to-face meet and greet, Oumar peeled back the technological layers in hopes of revealing, to use Oumar’s own phrase, “l’homme réel.”

Once in Oumar’s room, Oumar, Katante Lenyol and I each picked a bed. I asked about Katante Lenyol’s profile name; did he go by this appellation in face-to-face life as well? He assured me he did. The label served to honor his commitment to Pulaar culture and literature. He moved to Paris in 1990, and sustained his family through part-time work. But he considered his true profession to be the creation and interpretation of Pulaar poetry. “I live in Paris, but I work for l’ethnie,” he told me.

Katante Lenyol himself epitomized how many Pulaar Facebook users “cut the network” of Facebook connections along ethnic lines. Like Oumar, Katante Lenyol underscored the potential of Facebook’s infrastructure and global reach to facilitate multicultural and multiethnic interactions. For him too, Facebook was all-encompassing and ever expanding. Comparing Facebook with Pulaagu.com, Katante Lenyol said that the two websites were more or less the same, except that Facebook included a wider cross-section of people. “Facebook is the world. The whole world,” he said.

However, according to Katante Lenyol, precisely because Facebook encompassed everyone, the network had to be cut, “one cannot do it all.” Facebook may be “the world,” but Katante Lenyol’s focus lay with one worldly population in particular: les Peuls. Therefore, while he was pleased that I, an American, would soon peruse his page and thereby immerse myself in Pulaar culture, he did not concern himself with making the page comprehensible to cultural outsiders. For instance, he
wrote almost exclusively in Pulaar both on his wall and in the captions to the photos and video clips he posted. These practices advanced his aim of promoting Pulaar culture within the Senegalese diaspora. They were also unavoidable: “I am not Wolof,” he told me. “I don’t know French. And especially on Facebook, one has to do what one knows.”

I remarked to Oumar and Katante Lenyol how odd this interview – conducted in French – must seem given the content of his work. Katante Lenyol laughed; he probably would not have accepted to speak with me had not Oumar – a fellow Peul – made the call.

This sentiment made it quite clear why my attempt to find research participants through Facebook itself had been unsuccessful. While Daouda Seck’s insight in Mantes-la-Jolie highlighted the extent to which boundaries of ethnic identity are debated and contested, boundaries surfaced nonetheless. Some members of this digital community were relatively inaccessible to outsiders, and only a face-to-face relationship with a cultural insider could grant me the trust of participants like Katante Lenyol.

Conclusion

My inability to make contacts through Facebook alone foreshadowed the importance of Pulaar cultural and linguistic capital to connecting with this subset of Senegalese immigrants in Paris. In my case, this capital was easier to obtain in person, by association, rather than online. From the vantage point of participants’ material living arrangements, I gained insight into what attracts participants like Oumar to Facebook in the first place. These highly material interactions also highlighted that, though Facebook may be global and its users diverse, Facebook is not transcendent. While some Pulaar research participants idealized Facebook as limitless, they imposed and contested limits as they negotiated the fine line between ethnic pride and ethnic parochialism.

I join Dana Walker in reflecting that a localized physical entry point can enable attention to movement between online and offline spaces. “Drawing on Jenna Burrell’s study of Ghanaean internet cafes (Burrell 2009), Walker argues that in digital ethnography, the challenge is to “locate the field site so that it accounted for the fluid nature of internet practices, but did so without privileging such fluidity over the geographic place in which such practices emerged” (Walker 2010). For Walker, this meant basing herself in Philadelphia while using online civic sites to examine social connections that outstripped the city’s geographical borders.

Likewise, these fieldwork anecdotes do not suggest a generalized rubric for action. Rather, in resonance with Walker’s work, they highlight the importance of boundaries both in Facebook interactions, and in the methodological frameworks through which we view those interactions.
When Katante Lenyol claimed that “Facebook is the world, the whole world,” and discussed how one could meet anybody and everybody on Facebook, he connoted an existence without limitations, a boundary-free zone. This attitude is seductive, even for anthropologists. Given Facebook’s rapid expansion, it seems possible to conduct multi-sited ethnography from one’s desk chair. But Matei Candea’s concept of the “arbitrary location” cautions against trying to go everywhere and see everything. He argues that, in its enthusiasm to challenge bounded notions of states, peoples and cultures, the “multi-sited imaginary’…implies a problematic reconfiguration of holism (on a grander scale)” (Candea 2007: 167). In other words, Katante Lenyol’s enthusiasm about Facebook, shot through with holism, would be dangerous if applied to ethnographic methodology.

Indeed, as Strathern has argued, just because social linkages challenge boundaries does not mean that they proliferate without limits. When some limits are overcome, others may be imposed in turn. Some examples of this phenomenon include the network of scientists, students, and research subjects that gets “cut” when only a handful of names get a byline on the published article (Strathern 1996), or the ever-popular World of Warcraft fan sites that traverse ethnic, racial and gender lines but excludes those who lack specialized gaming vocabulary, or – last but not least – that ethnically-charged Facebook name, “Katante Lenyol,” which attracts some Facebook friends and repels others.

The challenge is to devise a methodology that captures the dynamic processes of making and unmaking boundaries, imposing and contesting limits, which occur on Facebook. Matei Candea, for his part, proposes the “arbitrary location,” a bounded field site that does not presume static borders around regions or social groups, but rather provides an “explicitly ‘partial’ and incomplete window onto complexity” (Candea 2007: 167). Oumar’s apartment was my “arbitrary location,” chosen out of happenstance and circuitous family friend connections. This partial window onto complexity grew in not-so-arbitrary fashion, as cultural insiders led me deeper into a Pulaar community wrestling with its portails and clôtures. The boundaries I faced connecting with Pulaar Facebook users reflected the debates about ethnic boundaries preoccupying users themselves.

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