

FASHION STUDIES

Research Methods, Sites and Practices

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4 URBAN FIELDNOTES: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF STREET STYLE BLOGGING

Brent Luvaas

Street style anthropology

Urban Fieldnotes is a “street style blog,” a photography-based website featuring pictures of stylish “real” people shot “on the streets” of Philadelphia in their everyday clothes (see Figure 4.1). It is also a blog *about* street style blogs, an experimental, auto-ethnographic research instrument I started back in 2012 as a means of studying *other* street style bloggers. I use it to post my fieldnotes, interviews, and preliminary thoughts about the daily experience and larger social, cultural, and economic significance of street style blogging. Call it a meta-street-style blog. Call it an open-access platform for visual anthropological research. Or just call it a street style blog, because street style blogs are already sufficiently “meta” and “anthropological” to encompass these alternative classifications.

This is one of the insights I have gained through having my own street style blog for these past couple of years. Street style blogs are not just a rich subject of analysis for fashion studies; they are also a medium of it, an amateur mode of critical inquiry into the same themes, topics, and ideas that scholars of fashion hold dear. This is not, however, the only thing I have learned from having my own blog.

I have also learned how to pick a street style subject out of a crowd, to feel the subtle vibration of *style radar* signals reverberate through my body when someone “cool” walks down the street toward me. I have learned how to assess a “good” street style image, and I have learned the quick manual adjustments photographers employ to produce those images. I have learned to shoot

alongside a few dozen other street style bloggers outside the runway shows of New York Fashion Week without getting in their way; how to talk like a street style blogger, how to pass in their company. I have also learned the anxieties and preoccupations of street style bloggers—concerns over lagging pageviews, or accumulating readers and followers. I have learned, in other words, to think, act, feel, and evaluate as a street style blogger does. Most of what I have learned from having a street style blog, in fact, takes the form of “practical knowledge” of this sort (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Willis 1977), forming a pre-articulate understanding that informs my social theoretical conclusions without ever quite materializing as “data” or “fact.”

This chapter explores the utility of an auto-ethnographic research practice like my own as a method of inquiry within fashion studies. Using my experiences



FIGURE 4.1 Alexis, Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, one of the hundreds of street style subjects featured on the Urban Fieldnotes blog. *Photo: Brent Luvaas.*

as a street style blogger as a case study, I weigh the strengths and limitations of auto-ethnography for generating knowledge and developing theoretical frameworks about fashion and the fashion industry. I do not, however, pretend to do so from a position of distanced objectivity, for if there is one primary lesson of auto-ethnographic practice, it is that such a position is not possible. Indeed, it is not necessarily desirable. It presumes a disembodied, outside perspective unlike any we experience in real life, a false neutrality that threatens to bury the lived insights of fashion studies beneath the thinner top soil of factuality. Auto-ethnography strives for something “thicker” (Geertz 1977), something still humming with the breath and pulse of direct experience.

From personal style to street style

I discovered street style blogs relatively late in the game, right as they were transitioning from online cult status to fashion world ubiquity. It was the summer of 2010, and I had just returned from Jakarta, Indonesia, where I had been working on a long-term ethnographic project on the Southeast Asian country’s emerging fashion industry, and as part of that project, I had been taking all sorts of pictures of what “the kids in Indonesia” (*anak muda Indonesia*) are wearing these days. I had a hunch, as plenty of scholars of fashion have had before me, that personal style plays an important role in a nation’s economic development (see Jones 2003; Gilbert 2006; Zhao 2013) and a number of shots of assorted Indonesian hipsters in tight T-shirts and skinny jeans seemed to support the case. But there I was, now back in the United States, and the research had come to a grinding halt. I needed some way to continue the work from the auspices of my office at Drexel University in Philadelphia, half a world away from my field site. So I did what any minimally technologically savvy social scientist would do in my position in this day and age: I turned to the internet. More specifically, I turned to fashion blogs, those personal style websites like Diana Rikasari’s Hot Chocolate & Mint (dianarikasari.blogspot.com) and Evita Nuh’s La Crème de la Crop (jellyjellybeans.blogspot.com), where the authors post images of themselves in various outfits, while posing like amateur models on bridges, in bedrooms, and on rooftops. There were hundreds of fashion blogs in Indonesia alone by 2010, peddling their cosmopolitan daydreams of a borderless fashion world. These blogs attracted tens of thousands of readers daily. I too got quickly hooked and began to follow about twelve of them regularly.

One day, I was going through my daily regimen of Indonesian fashion blogs—The Versicle, Glisters and Blisters, Afternoon Tea and Living Room—and one of the bloggers had posted a photo of themselves taken by a certain Yvan Rodic, also known as FaceHunter. “I can’t believe I got to meet FaceHunter,” she posted, or at least something to that effect—I have since lost sight of the original post and

am paraphrasing here—“and he even took my picture.” Well, I did not know who FaceHunter was back then, but I was intrigued. So I followed the link that the blogger provided and found myself on FaceHunter’s website (www.facehunter.blogspot.com then, now facehunter.org). It was a stripped down, minimalist affair by website standards, composed of full-length, full-color images of “cool” people in “cool” clothes posing in “cool” places.

Rodic, it turns out, is a Swiss-born, London-based, former advertising copywriter turned photographer. He travels around the world with a point-and-shoot digital camera taking photos in up-and-coming fashion cities, including Jakarta, but also Helsinki, Dubai, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and numerous other places besides. He had already published one book by this time, called, appropriately, *FaceHunter*, and was now working on his second. By the time I had gotten around to shooting pictures of the sartorial idiosyncrasies of Indonesian youth, Rodic had already been through Indonesia doing the same thing twice. He has been there several more times since then.

I started to dig deeper, and through Rodic’s site I became aware of dozens, and eventually, hundreds of other amateur photographers doing more or less the same thing, photographing the stylistic quirks of various cities well off the fashion map, and then posting them online for other people to observe. Some of these websites were devoted to particular cities. There was, for instance, Michelle Oberholzer’s Cinder & Skylark in Cape Town, South Africa; Yael Sloma’s The Streets Walker in Tel Aviv, Israel; Javi Obando and Flora Grzetic’s On the Corner in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Liisa Jokinen’s Hel Looks in Helsinki, Finland. Others, like Rodic’s website, were more itinerant. Their creators hopped from city to city, and often fashion week to fashion week, to report ground-level trends as they happened. Some of the best known of these websites were Tommy Ton’s Jak & Jil, Adam Katz Sinding’s Le 21ème, and Scott Schuman’s The Sartorialist.

What interested me about these websites, which I came to know as “street style blogs,” was in part the sheer phenomenon of them. They were attracting a huge amount of attention from both inside and outside of the fashion world, drawing in hundreds of thousands, and at least in The Sartorialist’s case, millions of pageviews per month. Street style blogs, built largely by amateur photographers with no formal background in fashion, had become competitive with major fashion magazines over the course of a few years. Now they were attracting those magazines’ advertising base. Many bloggers were getting big sponsorship deals. Many were having their content featured in print publications. Many were on the invite lists of the biggest fashion showcases. Street style blogger, it seemed, had become a potential career path in the fashion world, a back door into a notoriously closed-door industry.

I was also interested, however, in certain similarities I saw between what these bloggers did and what I do as a cultural and visual anthropologist. After a few

weeks of browsing the global street style blogosphere, I became convinced that we shared a common project. These bloggers' mission in photographing South Africans, Indonesians, Fins, Jordanians, or whoever was remarkably similar to my own. We were all documenting—albeit selectively—what it looks like for a city, or a nation, to reimagine itself as a fashion capital. We were visually chronicling the formation of stylized identities, the rising of new class groups, and we were singling out those distinctive individuals in these places that we saw as capable of speaking to larger cultural processes at work, putting, that is, a local face on globalization. I was fascinated. I put my work on fashionistas in the developing world on hold, to focus instead on those bloggers photographing them. I knew there was a project to do about all of this. Now I just had to figure out how to do it.

A method emerges

My first impulse, after years of work in Indonesia, was to study Indonesian street style blogs. But there were only a couple of those at the time, Jakarta Street Looks, which was defunct as of 2009, and Jakarta Style Journal, which was updated infrequently at best. Street style was not a significant phenomenon there yet, for reasons I have articulated elsewhere (Luvaas 2013), despite the massive popularity of fashion blogs more generally. Moreover, studying street style in Indonesia would be an arbitrary decision to make, drawing imaginary boundaries around a far more expansive network that extends across the developing and developed world alike. The very thing that makes street style interesting—at least to me—is its global ubiquity. It must, I decided, be studied globally.

The only trouble is that I am an anthropologist, and we anthropologists can be rather stubbornly place-ist in our research methodologies. We are committed, above all, to “going places” and “being there,” to encountering people firsthand, rather than depending on secondary accounts and surveys. If I were going to do this project the way an anthropologist would, I would have to find some way of “being there” appropriate for street style blogs.

But how could I possibly do that? How could I possibly be surrounded by or engulfed within street style blogging? For all of the theorizing in anthropology in recent years about doing ethnography online (see Hine 2000; Boellstorff et al. 2012), I knew that online research alone would limit me in gaining that firsthand, “on-the-ground” perspective that I wanted for this project. I could only think of one possible solution. I would have to start a street style blog myself. It is the only thing that would teach me, in no uncertain terms, the lived, practical, material realities of street style blogging.

My plan was to use the blog as an open-access research platform. I would post my photographs and preliminary thoughts as they happened, invite comments

and corrections from other bloggers, link to their blogs, and feature regular interviews with street style photographers. I envisioned my blog as a go-to resource for the ethnographic study of street style, an open-source model of visual fieldnotes.

I started my own street style blog, Urban Fieldnotes (www.urbanfieldnotes.com), in February of 2012, and I completed my first post as a street style blogger on March 26, 2012. I have been doing the blog as of the writing of this chapter for nearly two and a half years, and in the process, I have interviewed and posted my interviews of twenty other street style bloggers, met and interacted with many others, both online and off, and generally been enrolled in a crash course in street style blogging. I have been contacted by dozens of companies, looking to feature their products on my blog. In turn, my blog has been featured in *Nylon Magazine*, *Harpers Bazaar Brasil*, *Moje Magazine*, *Drexel Magazine*, *The Philadelphia Daily News*, *StreetStyleNews*, *The Guardian*, and several well-known fashion blogs. I have received gifted products, had a stint advertising for American Apparel, “partnered” with a couple of fashion brands, and watched as my blog’s images circulated far and wide through Instagram, Tumblr, and other social media platforms. The blog now gets between 15,000 and 18,000 pageviews a month and has become, in essence, precisely that thing I set out to study.

Nonetheless, to clear up any potential confusion for my readers and make my intentions as clear as possible, I have posted the following statement in the upper-right-hand corner of the blog:

Urban Fieldnotes is a street style blog, documenting fashion, style, and dress on the streets of Philadelphia and beyond. It is also a blog about street style blogging, an experiment in auto-ethnographic research and open-source fieldwork that is part of an ongoing project by Brent Luvaas entitled “Street Style 2.0: New Media and the New Politics of Fashion.” This blog represents the views, perspectives, and preliminary findings of Brent Luvaas, a professional anthropologist and amateur fashion observer. This blog does not necessarily reflect the opinions and positions of Drexel University, his employer. Your comments and suggestions are welcome, but please note that any comments posted to this blog may be used in future presentations and publications, both print and digital, by Brent Luvaas.

Urban Fieldnotes, thus, is an instrument of participant-observation, a means of both interacting with and acting from the position of other street style bloggers. Starting the blog enabled me to move beyond the kinds of distanced textual analysis I see all too commonly in studies of both online phenomena and fashion and to explore street style blogging instead through the experience-near medium of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography: Using the self as the vehicle of research

Like nearly every concept in the field of anthropology, “auto-ethnography” is a contested term, with multiple, intertwined histories. When Karl Heider (1975) used it back in 1975 to describe the sixty interviews he conducted with Dani schoolchildren, he was playing with two meanings of “auto”: first for “autochthonous” in that these were accounts that the Dani generated for themselves, and second for “automatic” in that the accounts they generated were straightforward and routine, lacking the discursive penetration (Willis 1977) and distanced insight of critical anthropological inquiry (cited in Reed-Danahay 1997, 4). Hayano (1979), Strathern (1987), Dorst (1989), and Pratt (1992) would later use the term to mean something more akin to “native ethnography,” that is, anthropological research carried out “at home” or among “one’s own people.” For a decade or two, this was the primary meaning of the term. It is only in the aftermath of the postmodern critique of anthropology in the mid-1980s, articulated most famously by Clifford and Marcus in *Writing Culture* (1986), that self-reflexivity replaced earlier aims at outsider objectivity, and auto-ethnographic practice came to mean something more akin to investigating one’s “self” as an embedded actor within a larger social system. Carolyn Ellis has been, perhaps, the most forceful voice for this brand of auto-ethnography. She defines the method as “systematic sociological introspection” and “emotional recall” in the service of understanding “an experience I’ve lived through” (Ellis 2004, xvii). Her auto-ethnographic work takes the form of self-reflexive narrative, quasi-literary accounts, and stories that connect “the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2004, xix).

In auto-ethnography, self-reflexivity is a mechanism for creating a more honest, situated, and grounded form of social scientific research. Indeed, after the postmodern critique it became a commonplace of ethnographic work in general to acknowledge how one’s own background and experience have shaped the account produced. It can be argued that at least since the late 1980s, nearly all ethnography has been auto-ethnography, as it employs the “self” as the vehicle of research (Ortner 2006).

But those who have explicitly used the term “auto-ethnography” have something else in mind. Anthropologists like Ellis use it to describe an additional methodological step of focusing their project in some way on their own direct experience as lived, embodied, and interpreted through “the self,” even while acknowledging that the terms and limits of what constitutes the self are by no means clear or fixed (Reed-Danahay 1997, 3). Auto-ethnography differs from ethnography, not in kind, but in the degree of self-reflexivity and focus on oneself: paying particular attention to one’s thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations as

a subject of inquiry. Auto-ethnography does not just use the self to do research; it is explicitly about “the self” as the medium through which research transpires.

In using the term *auto-ethnography* in this chapter, I am situating my own work within this latter meaning of the term, describing a mode of research in which, not only am I the one carrying it out, but my research takes explicit account of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences as a form of “data” in its own right. My understanding of auto-ethnography, however, also makes use of earlier understandings of the term. My work on street style bloggers is, in a sense, “native ethnography.” Street style bloggers, like many scholars of fashion, are disproportionately middle or upper-middle class, highly educated, and usually urban in residence. They have a penchant for self-reflection and an interest in sartorial expression in its myriad forms, often preferring the oddball to the mainstream, the off-kilter to the on-trend. Street style bloggers tend to stand in a critical outsider position in relation to the workings of the larger fashion world, and they move through the cities they inhabit like the classic flâneurs of Baudelairean mystique, both a part of and apart from the streets they walk down. They constitute, that is, a variety of amateur anthropologist. Therefore, for me to study them is not unlike studying my own people.

Moreover, my use of auto-ethnography also relies on Heider’s notion of the automatic. My process of carrying out fieldwork has gone through moments of conscious self-interrogation and other moments of unconscious acting from the position of, simply doing what a street style blogger does without thinking through what this is or means. In fact, I would argue, gaining firsthand insight into the experience of bloggers has required this sort of unconscious acting. To become a blogger is to internalize and normalize the practice of blogging to such an extent that it is no longer available to conscious thought. It must become part of one’s *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), one’s automatic and embodied mode of practice. Anything short of unconscious embodiment would hardly warrant the title of “auto-ethnography” to begin with. It is unconscious, embodied acting that marks one as a blogger. I could not simply choose to be a street style blogger and then carry out my research as one. I had to engage in a slow and deliberate process of *becoming* (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987), of internalizing, embodying, and enacting, one with many starts and stops, ups and downs, all of which have ultimately contributed to my theoretical understanding of street style blogging.

Becoming a blogger

My first day out on the streets of Philadelphia as a street style blogger drove this point home for me in as clear a way as possible. I found myself lingering on the sidewalks of Center City, camera swinging loosely around my neck, with no real

conception of what I was doing or how to go about doing it. At first I couldn't bring myself to approach anyone—my teeth grinding and heart beating out of my chest—and then, when I finally worked up the courage, I couldn't decide what I was looking for in a street style subject. Was I after a street-smart cool kid in spikes and black leather of the sort who might have appeared in *i-D Magazine* circa 1981, a quirky individualist in a puffy coat and overalls a la Hel Looks, or perhaps a rakish middle-aged gentleman in a tweed jacket of the sort Scott Schuman might have stopped for *The Sartorialist*? Philadelphia is not exactly overflowing with any of those categories. I would have to settle for someone who was simply “cool.” But how does one know that a subject is “cool” in the first place? How does one recognize “cool”? Is it an objective quality, a certain observable aestheticized indifference, itself born from the racialized streets of urban America (Leland 2004)? Or is it a measure of one's own background, one's accumulated taste as a member of a particular group (Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1996)? And how does one settle on the brand of coolness that is right for their blog? FaceHunter's cool is not the same as *The Sartorialist*'s cool, which has little in common with the cool of Hel Looks. Whose cool, I wondered, is closer to my own?

Bloggers tend to answer the difficult question of how they isolate appropriate models for their blogs with the conversation-stopping “I just shoot what I like.” Javi Obando of *On The Corner* says, “We just look for someone who claims our sight, who commands our attention. If we like it, we take a picture, and that's it.” Mordechai Rubinstein of *Mister Mort* says, “For me, it's normally that I like something. That's how it is for me, because I'm drawn to it.” Adam Katz Sinding of *Le 21ème* told me, “I just take photos of things that I like. And things that inspire me. I don't even want to say inspire me, things that intrigue me. Things that catch my attention.” But what do *I* like? I wondered, wandering the streets that day, and many days after, looking for people to photograph. What catches my attention? I thought I knew once. I thought, in fact, that I had a fairly decent sense of my own tastes and interests. But in the heat of the moment, stalking the streets of Philadelphia with a micro four-thirds camera around my neck, I couldn't seem to remember what they were. How does one know what one “likes”? The more directly you look at your likes, I discovered, the more they seem to disappear. It would take me months of shooting on the streets to develop a clear and confident sense of my own street style aesthetic, what I “like” and what represents “me.” And once I had done so, my aesthetic had already evolved into something else.

Finally, walking past the Zara on Walnut Street that first day, I made a decision. *That guy*, right there, in the blue blazer, high-necked sweater, and newsboy cap. *He* is the person I want to photograph (Figure 4.2). There was no hesitation. There was no questioning of my motives. After hours of relentless thinking, second-guessing, even third-guessing, that simple knowledge was an incredible relief. The chatter in my head went mute, if only for a moment. I walked up and talked to him before I had time to change my mind.



FIGURE 4.2 Erik Honesty, a vintage boutique owner and the very first photographic subject for the Urban Fieldnotes project. *Photo: Brent Luvaas.*

Later on I would analyze my own intentions in identifying that first photographic subject, a man I would later know by the name of Erik Honesty. He looks a little like someone who might appear on *The Sartorialist*. He has the dapper black gentleman vibe of an Ouigi Theodore or a Sam Lambert, a Brooklyn vintage shop owner and London tailor respectively, both commonly featured on street style blogs. My recognition of him as someone I wanted to shoot was no doubt already a preliminary embodiment of the street style aesthetic. I had seen lots of pictures of people who look like him, and I had come to “like” the look when I encountered it. But in the moment, I was not thinking of any of those things. I saw, and I reacted. And that would become my street style recipe from then on. Thinking, in these circumstances, just gets in the way.

Street style photography, at the end of that first day, seemed like an exercise in Zen big game hunting—if Zen and big game hunting were compatible things. One must be calm and collected, let go of self-doubt, and act without hesitation. One must, in other words, oneself be “cool” (see Mentges 2000), exemplifying a bodily

discipline of aloof stillness. And the biggest obstacle getting in the way of that goal is mental chatter. Calming the chatter in one's mind is a difficult trick for anyone to master, but it poses a special challenge for a social scientist used to taking constant mental notes. I struggled to be quiet and receptive, open to whatever—or whoever—came my way. Form too clear an understanding of who I was looking for, I learned that first day, and I would miss out on the subjects right in front of me. Case in point: Mandi, my next photograph for Urban Fieldnotes, taken the following day (Figure 4.3). On first sight, Mandi and Erik have little in common with each other, except that I reacted to them and knew I wanted to photograph both. That is enough commonality, it turns out, for a street style blogger. After practically giving up on street style that second day, standing on Walnut Street, assessing everyone who came by, I let go of my expectations and concerns. I would either find someone or I would not. Either way I would post about it on my blog. And then along came Mandi. I saw something in her and reacted to it. I am glad



FIGURE 4.3 Mandi, the second photographic subject for the Urban Fieldnotes project.
Photo: Brent Luvaas.

I did. Her picture remains my most widely “pinned” image on Pinterest, a perennial virtual corkboard favorite.

Street style photography, I have had driven home for me again and again while out on the streets, is a project of honing one’s intuition into a sharp visual focus. It means embodying the aesthetics of street style so deeply and so completely that they operate within you and upon you without conscious deployment. A good street style photographer knows not to overly intellectualize what she is doing or why she is doing it. She knows not to bring her embodied understanding to the surface. As Emma Arnold, blogger for the Chicago-based Trés Awesome put it, “I’ll know if I want to take their picture almost immediately, but then sometimes I hesitate because I’m nervous or [because of] whatever sort of circumstances are happening inside my head.”

Street style bloggers have a number of ways of talking about this delicate mental instrument I call—with some tongue in cheek—*style radar*, but their descriptions all suggest a similar underlying form: a dependency on instinct or intuition, a sense of simply “knowing” who they want to shoot, and a feeling of internal coherence between their own self-concept and the stylistic sensibility of the subject in question. *Style radar* operates outside of articulation. It is felt rather than thought, and it adheres to a variety of unmediated experience cultural theorists often describe as *affect*.

“Affect,” write Seigworth and Gregg in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, consists of “those forces . . . beneath, alongside, or generally *other* than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1). Affect describes felt realities that are not translatable into any known lexicon. But their un-pin-down-able nature makes them no less keenly felt.

And here we come to the crux of the matter for auto-ethnography. It, like *style radar*, depends on attention to internal states, affective forces that are not necessarily available to social scientific analysis as we typically understand it. What kinds of generalizations are possible based on my own experiencing of the immediate sensations of street style blogging? What kinds of articulable knowledge does this practice generate?

In a sense, auto-ethnography yields none. It is experienced rather than stated, felt rather than written. Its knowledge is practical knowledge, embodied knowledge. It has few “facts” to offer. It does, however, produce a certain kind of certainty. It produces a certainty that those social scientific frames we, as scholars of fashion, use to describe everyday life start to break down in the face of direct experience. We may, as auto-ethnographers or bloggers, recognize both Erik and Mandi as “cool,” but to do so tells us little about the social and economic circumstances that enable “cool”—key questions among social scientific researchers. Here we

have two individuals of different genders, ethnicities, and likely socioeconomic backgrounds, and yet they both embody an affective trait generative of street style imagery that we identify as “cool.” How, then, can “cool” be described as a form of socioeconomic distinction, as so many sociologists and anthropologists have argued it is (see Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1996)? How do we classify Erik and Mandi within an existing set of sociological categories? Doing auto-ethnographic research has made me generally distrustful of such broad categorical claims. Out in the field, identifying subjects for my photos and engaging with other photographers on a peer basis, abstract sociological categories become harder and harder to assert. Everyone starts to look a little like an exception. Sure, most of the subjects of street style blogs are members of the “creative class” (Florida 2002) or “new petite bourgeoisie” (Bourdieu 1984), those cultural arbiters for whom personal style is a mode of brand distinction. But plenty of them also work in retail or management. Some of them are students. Some lawyers.

The knowledge that auto-ethnography generates might thus best be described as “anti-knowledge.” It does not so much yield knowledge for social scientists to work with as it demonstrates the limits of what can be known by them in the first place. To put it differently, we can think of auto-ethnography as a sort of critical corrective to sociological abstraction. It grounds social scientific work in the lived ambiguities of everyday life, and it serves as a moral corrective to distanced academic critique. It is easy to lambast bloggers from the comfortable confines of a university office. It is easy to accuse them of selling out their passions, branding their identities, or enacting, even if only inadvertently, some “neoliberal” mode of agency (see Gershon 2011). But it is a much harder thing to do when you have felt firsthand what is at stake for bloggers. It is simply too reductive a maneuver. Auto-ethnography gives us pause, lest we judge too quickly. It immerses us in how messy real social practice is and makes any academic fantasy we may have of tidying it up into a single, universal theory seem quaint and old-fashioned.

The more concrete kinds of knowledge auto-ethnography produces

Nonetheless, my delving into auto-ethnography has produced some more concrete forms of “data” as well, ones perhaps more subject to the critical eye of social theory as we typically understand it. I have learned, for instance, just how much time street style blogging takes. I have had to devote around six hours a week to cruising the streets, looking for people to shoot in order to generate enough images to post three times per week, another three to four hours a week to labeling and editing those photos, and an additional three to four hours a week to posting

and commenting on them. And this is after two years of experience. It took considerably more time for the first six or so months. This also does not include the amount of time bloggers spend viewing other blogs, commenting on them, or engaging in a meaningful way with a larger blogging network. Nor does it include the time bloggers spend marketing their posts through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. These activities can easily set bloggers back an additional two to three hours a day, especially if we include in our accounting the time it takes to build a network to market the posts to. Blogging, then, is a part-time job. To do it successfully is a major commitment of time and energy. It should come as no surprise that most street style bloggers stop blogging after just a few months, some after just a few posts. Unless they build a large following, attach themselves to a network providing regular positive feedback, or find some way to monetize their efforts, most bloggers eventually decide that it is just not worth it. It should also come as no surprise that so many bloggers eventually shift their attention from the streets of their hometowns to the sidewalks of major fashion weeks. It would be easy from a distanced academic position to argue that Fashion Week's domination of street style imagery in the past few years is a case of simple cooptation. The fashion industry noticed that the street style thing was booming and pulled it into its web. Indeed, that was my explanation when I began this project. But there is an even simpler explanation, obvious to anyone who has spent time on the streets looking for people to photograph. Shooting at Fashion Weeks is *way easier* than shooting on the streets. Most people on most city streets, even in New York and London, are not that fashionable, at least according to the standards of street style blogs (see also Woodward 2009). But at Fashion Week, fashionable people stream past. You can collect months' worth of images in a single day of shooting.

I have also learned that street style blogging requires a good deal of photographic expertise and some pretty expensive equipment. The current aesthetic of street style photography involves depicting a subject in crystal clear sharpness in the foreground of an image with a heavily blurred background behind them. To do so, photographers open the aperture of their cameras to a range somewhere between f1.2 and f4. This requires using a camera with a manual or aperture-priority camera setting. It also requires a fixed focal length lens, for use only with DSLR or equivalent cameras. Neither these cameras nor their lenses come cheap. In fact, nearly all well-known street style photographers now use full-frame DSLRs with fast, fixed length 50mm or 85mm lenses with a maximum aperture of at least f1.8. I started this project with a micro four-thirds, a DSLR-like Panasonic Lumix GF-1 and a 20mm f1.7 pancake lens. In theory, I should have been able to capture the look I was seeing on blogs like The Sartorialist and Jak & Jil, but in practice, I certainly could not. It was just not camera (or lens) enough for the task. Eventually, growing frustrated with my inability to get the kind of aesthetic that other photographers were getting, I researched the cameras popular among street

style bloggers and settled on a Nikon D700 with an 85mm F1.4 lens, setting me back some \$4,500. Compared to what many other photographers spend on their equipment, this was a bargain. And its effects on my work were immediately apparent. The quality of my images was vastly better. My ability to emulate the styles of other photographers improved many times over. As Adam Katz Sinding of *Le 21ème* said to me, “It’s got so much to do with the equipment. If I had a bottom of the line Nikon, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. No one would care about my website.” In street style blogging, then, equipment matters. So much for the hackneyed pro-technology sentiment that anyone can be a blogger! Most people simply cannot afford it. Not by today’s standards.

I have also learned, much to my surprise, that few people object to having their picture taken and posted online by a complete stranger, regardless of whatever concerns about privacy most of us may express, and that even fewer people object to signing photo release forms handing over the rights to their image in perpetuity. Indeed, few people bother to read such forms. I get rejected by around one out of every twenty people I ask for their photo, and that number has gone down as my pitch has gained confidence. Shooting street style has driven home the utter ubiquity of digital photography to me in a way that few other experiences could.

And “experience” is the operative word here. The pieces of “hard evidence” and “fact” that I gathered through my auto-ethnographic method were gathered through—or at least supplemented by—my direct experience of street style blogging. Many are facts I could have come across by other means. I could, for instance, have asked bloggers during my interviews with them how long they spend blogging per week. In fact, I often have asked that question. But would I have thought to follow up that question with how long they spend promoting their blog through social media, if I had not known firsthand that blog posts spike in traffic primarily due to their promotion on social media? Would I have asked how their total number of pageviews had been affected by Facebook’s recent change in algorithm, if I hadn’t myself noticed a similar slump? And would I have thought to ask bloggers what kinds of lenses they use, if I had not run into trouble attempting for myself to capture the kinds of aesthetics they capture? Would I have even noticed the shallow depth of field preferred by bloggers, if I hadn’t attempted to reproduce it for myself? Forging myself into a practitioner, has not only directly impacted my interpretation of what street style blogging is and means, but has influenced the very kinds of questions I ask about street style blogging and of street style bloggers.

It would be foolish for me to argue that auto-ethnography should replace surveys, textual analysis, semiotics, focus groups, interviews, and other methodologies for all scholars of fashion in all circumstances. These methods yield extremely valuable forms of information, many of which are only determinable from a large sample size or visible to a truly “outside” perspective. I made use of a

variety of methods in my street style project, including auto-ethnography, but also photography, textual analysis of street style blogs, interviews with bloggers, and more classic ethnographic participant-observation at New York Fashion Week. When used in combination with these other methods, however, auto-ethnography is a powerful tool, grounding insights gleaned from elsewhere within the lived realities of everyday experience. It subjects theory to the test of practice.

Conclusion: Auto-ethnography and fashion studies

This chapter has presented just a small inventory of what I have learned about street style blogging by becoming a street style blogger myself. It is no doubt specific to my subject, yet it does suggest the utility of auto-ethnography as a method in fashion studies more generally, a field in which experiential methods have so far taken a backseat. There is precedence for auto-ethnography in fashion studies. Scholars like Ashley Mears (2011) and Stefanie Sadre-Orafi (2008, and in this book) have made very effective—and very compelling—use of their own personal experiences in their studies of modeling and model-casting respectively. Neither study would have been as rich with detail or emotion if the researchers had not gone through what their research subjects go through. It is worth wondering how an expansion of the grounded, experience-near method into other domains of fashion studies would impact the kinds of insights and theoretical frameworks developed by fashion scholars.

How different would the analysis, for instance, of editorial spreads in *Vogue* be if the scholar had been an editorial photographer herself? How would this affect her insights and impact her critique of fashion representations? Are there practical reasons photographs look as they do or feature the kinds of models that they do that are not obvious through textual analysis, which might support or weaken common theoretical assumptions about the nature of the gaze or the imagined audience of *Vogue*? What are the external pressures experienced by fashion photographers to do the kind of work they do, and how keenly do these photographers feel them? What kind of equipment do they use, and how does this equipment shape, limit, and influence the images they produce? What kinds of agency do the tools of the trade exert over fashion photography?

I don't know the answers to those questions offhand, but I think it would be worth finding out. There is, after all, an important gap in fashion studies that auto-ethnography can help to fill: the first-person experience gap. It is time to see what happens when we collapse the barrier between researcher and researched and begin to do fashion studies from the perspective of those very people we study—to see what fashion looks like from the other side of the lens.

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