

RADICALITY AND REGULATION: NEGOTIATING SELFHOOD IN TUMBLR ROLEPLAY

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Critical Gender Studies

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Budapest, Hungary
2017

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore theories of negotiating selfhood and subjectivity through an auto-cyberethnographic analysis of the Tumblr literate roleplay group *Vieux Noyés RP*. Tumblr roleplay is a genre of collaborative online fiction writing, which uses the social media site Tumblr as its medium. In my analysis, I use bell hooks' concept, spaces of radical openness, and Thomas Lemke's interpretation of Foucault's concept of governmentality to examine the ways in which the members' experiences of selfhood are framed within and by the group. Both frameworks discuss mechanisms of power, and I compare the iterations of these mechanisms to understand how they contradict, intersect, and/or interact with one another, in order to explore the possibilities and possible applications offered by hooks' spaces of radical openness. As a member and administrator of the roleplay, I analyze my own position and experiences within *Vieux Noyés RP*, drawing on auto-ethnographic and cyber-ethnographic methodologies. This particular style of inquiry allows me to reflect on the ways in which *Vieux Noyés RP* shapes my understanding of my position, both on- and offline, and also to reflect on the ways in which the internet-based medium of Tumblr informs our experiences of the roleplay group. I conduct this analysis using posts from the shared community chat space "the out-of-character" or "OOC" chat, private messages between members and myself, and my access to administrative discussions and behind-the-scenes content in order to shed light on the ways in which the margin/center distinction of hooks' radical openness and mechanisms of governmentality inform the relationships between members of the *Vieux Noyés* community, and their lived experiences of selfhood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Given the way universities work to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo, Women's studies can easily become a place where revolutionary feminist thought and feminist activism are submerged or made secondary to the goals of academic careerism. Without diminishing in anyway our struggles as academics to succeed in institutions, such effort is fully compatible with liberatory feminist struggle only when we consciously, carefully, and strategically link the two. When this connection is made initially but not sustained, or when it is never evident, Women's Studies becomes either an exotic terrain for those politically chic few seeking affirmation or a small settlement within the larger institutional structure where women (and primarily white women) have a power base, which rather than being oppositional simply mirrors the status quo. When feminist struggle is the central foundation for feminist education, Women's Studies and the feminist classroom (which can exist outside of the domain of Women's Studies) can be places where education is the practice of freedom, the place for liberatory pedagogy.

- bell hooks, "Toward a revolutionary feminist pedagogy"

To all of my many teachers:

To Zsazsa, bell hooks describes her classroom style as based on the assumption that "many students will take courses with [her] who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak." Thank you for opening up a space of risk, for demanding from your students that they have faith in their abilities as critical thinkers, for demanding that we leap into the silent gaps which signal difficult, complex learning, mind-first. These profound risks we take with ourselves in such a space lead us to our voices.

To Nadia, thank you for accompanying me on my journey to discovering feminist pedagogy, and being a voice of reason and humor for every pitfall, obstacle, and disappointment that I found on the way. I still haven't found The Answer, the perfect negotiation between meeting the needs of students and the needs of the professor, but I hope we continue to throw our ideas back and forth. Our conversations are inspiring, and always bring me a spot of sunshine in an otherwise cloudy era.

To Kuku, thank you for teaching me that I have common sense, and I can use it whenever I want. Thank you for teaching me how to cook perfect rice, the quickest way to get to school by bike, how to fix the toilet (though I never did get it right), and who the heck was Foucault. Taken all together, these lessons made each day a little more bearable. Also, thank you to Zo, who remains the light of my life, after Gertrude.

To Moniek, thank you for teaching me to recognize when my body was not okay, and for teaching me that caring for my body was the same as caring for myself. I've a long way to go in this education, but every lesson brings me a little more peace. Also, thank you for teaching me how to make banana cake without a recipe.

To ida, thank you for challenging me to think about things using 'texture,' to ask "how?" rather than "why?" From baking bread to watching X-men, every conversation ended in laughter, and that laughter helped me find myself when I felt like I was drifting away. Thank you.

To my family, for teaching me patience and appreciation. For always being only a phone call away. And for only complaining about how far away I was and how much I was missing every single time we spoke. Also thank you to FaceTime.

To the members of *Vieux Noyés RP*, thank you for being with me every step of the way, even when I couldn't be with you because I was analyzing everything you had said in the past. *Vieux Noyés* was a wild ride, a crazy adventure when we started a year ago, and its spread its joyousness to every part of my life. May we continue to take risks with one another, dive deep into our stories, and may we write, and write, and write together for many years to come.

To Grandpa,
A poet, a dreamer, a songwriter, and a storyteller
Thank you for your love

1931-2017

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 22,428 words

Entire manuscript: 26,256 words

Signed Kailey McDonald

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADMIN: The title for administrators of a roleplay group.

IC: “in-character,” delineates the text as belonging to the character, rather than the player who writes them; can also designate a character’s actions as appropriate to their characterization

OOO: “out-of-character,” delineates the text as coming from the player, and not the character whom the player writes; can also designate a character’s actions as inappropriate to their characterization

RP: roleplay

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Tumblr roleplay is thought of by roleplayers as a hobby, a casual pastime which allows participants to engage with their favorite genre of fiction writing in an interactive, creative way, relying on the participants to build a fictional world through collaborative writing. Despite the common classification of Tumblr roleplay as a leisure activity, there are strict demands on members' time and expectations of deep engagement with the fictional content being produced. Individual groups of roleplayers, organized by roleplay group, often develop personal connections and friendships through the writing process.

Though Tumblr roleplay is a popular activity within the realm of "fandom," it remains a critically under-researched phenomenon in fandom studies, and even more so in cultural studies and media studies. Research typically tends to deal more with fanfiction than fan-based roleplaying, and the literature on roleplaying typically focuses on RPG-style video games.¹ What research does discuss literate roleplay is outdated.² The world of Tumblr roleplay differs drastically from these other modes of fan-based entertainment, no matter how closely related they may be. Tumblr roleplay is unique in its tendency to create closed off communities of players, and the interactivity and control with which the story is conducted. As opposed to video-game style RPGs, tumblr roleplaying is written, and the control over the design of the world of the game is in the hands of the players themselves, and the creators of each individual roleplay,

¹ Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao, "Queerly Intimate: Friends, fans, and affective communication in a *Super Girl* fan fiction community," *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 6 (2012): 842-871; Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, "Why Virtual Worlds Can Matter," *International Journal of Learning and Media* 1, no. 1 (2009): 37-49;

² Paul Booth, "Fandom Studies: Fan Studies Re-Written, Re-Read, Re-Produced," PhD diss., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2009, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304985867>; Jennifer Jamieson Bortle, "Games People Play: Identity and Relationships in an Online Role-Playing Game," PhD diss., Duquesne University, 2005, <http://etd1.library.duq.edu/theses/available/etd-11012005-165900/unrestricted/BortleDissertation.pdf>.

who may outline certain parameters, making Tumblr roleplays much more tightly-knit and intimate communities. Fanfiction has the same freedom of world design, but lacks the interactivity that is inherent in roleplay games. By looking specifically at Tumblr roleplay as a phenomenon, I shed light on an almost completely hidden world of collaboration and creativity. In this analysis, I explore a roleplay group called *Vieux Noyés RP*, a group to which I belong and helped to create, whose members have developed more intimate connections with one another through shared discussions about moments of vulnerability. Using auto/cyberethnography, I analyze these discussions with the goal of illuminating the mechanisms of power at work in this space, and the effects thereof on framing members' interactions with the administrators of the group, each other, and their experiences of day-to-day life outside of *Vieux Noyés RP*.

I focus on iterations of selfhood, the ways in which members present themselves to the group, and experience themselves in relation to and beyond the group, using two different frameworks: bell hooks' concept, "spaces of radical openness," and Thomas Lemke's understanding of Foucault's concept of governmentality. Through this analysis, I attempt to explore the potential and limitations of "spaces of radical openness" and to understand how such a space is constituted by, interacts with, and responds to mechanisms of governmentality. Using auto/cyberethnography allows me to recognize and analyze my own place within this nexus of power relations, as administrator of the group, member, and researcher. As a methodology, auto/cyberethnography resonates with spaces of radical openness, allowing for my research to directly interact with the constitution and framing of *Vieux Noyés RP*, and of course, vice versa. Both authoethnographic analysis and spaces of radical openness call for a deeply vulnerable reflective mode of being, at once exposing oneself to risk, while at the same time improvising alternative ways of relating: to oneself, one's work, and the people one surrounds oneself with.

By looking deeper into these questions I hope to delve into feminist discussions of subjectivity and selfhood, governmentality and mechanisms of discipline, isolation and vulnerability, and sharing and collaboration as a feminist praxis that extends beyond the boundaries of Tumblr to have broader implications on neoliberal discourses of the properly healthy, able-bodied, productive, and non-disruptive member of society. I use the case study of *Vieux Noyés RP* to explore the potential of communities of resistance online to challenge these normative discourses and create alternative modes of being which can displace hegemonic power relations. Part of this stems directly from the mechanism through which *Vieux Noyés RP* operates, that is, the format of Tumblr roleplay, which relies on and encourages collaboration and the creation of original content, in this case, fiction writing.

1.1 TUMBLR ROLEPLAY

Tumblr roleplay is a form of collaborative fiction writing, which uses the social media site Tumblr as its medium. “Players,” those who are doing the writing, write their character by exchanging sections of writing with another player’s character, through one-on-one interactions called ‘threads.’ Each thread is written in ‘replies,’ a reaction to the proceeding post from the other player’s character, told in alternating point of views, depending on which character’s reply it is. The story progresses onward in this way.

Tumblr RPing can take several different formats, depending on the kind of structure the player desires: whether they want to roleplay independently or in a group, whether they want an original story or a fan-based story, whether they want to play a preformatted character or create their own, whether they want to engage in intense writing or prefer quicker “one-liner” interactions. Once a player has chosen their preferred format(s), there is also the genre of the

roleplay group to consider, a selection which is as expansive as there is material to inspire (i.e. dystopian, supernatural, historical, fantasy, original, fan-based, “smut”-centric, etc.). Each of these categories impacts the type of roleplaying one engages in on Tumblr, and the corner of the roleplaying world that the roleplayer has access too.

In this thesis, I will be working with a group roleplay called *Vieux Noyés RP* that characterizes itself as a “literate, highly selective, crossover RP,” meaning that the group emphasizes long paragraph replies over one-line exchanges, that their process of application review is rigorous, and that the story line is based off of several TV series and books which they have combined into one universe.

Vieux Noyés RP is a group roleplay created by the administrative team, which consists of Rose, and Rimsha, and myself. It opened in July of 2016, and is a supernatural fan-based crossover RP, based on the television shows *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals*, *Teen Wolf*, *Salem*, and the book series *The Arcane Society*. The plot combines specific story arcs, characters, history, and supernatural lore from each source text into one universe, creating a wide expanse of material for players to draw on in order to explore their characters and the world. Because there is so much material, combining the histories, lore, and character biographies into one cohesive universe was a difficult undertaking, and can be a lot for prospective applicants to process. This information has been collected and made available for visitors to the roleplay’s main blog, where prospective applicants can browse through the page’s links which go further in depth into things like the over-arching plot, how different supernatural species work, what locations are prevalent in the roleplay and what is necessary to know about them. There is also information about each of the admins, our role in running the roleplay, some personal information, and information about the characters we play. Lastly, each character has an extensive biography, usually between

one and two thousand words long, which delineates the character's life story up until present time in the story, their connections to other characters in the roleplay, future "plot teasers" that will occur down the line, a song to inspire potential applicants, as well as the actor whose face will be used to represent the character (i.e. face claim).

Because it is an application-based roleplay, prospective members must submit an application for the character they wish to play, including information like why the character appeals to them, what storyline they are interested in developing further, as well as character-specific information like giving us "headcanons" or small factoids about their character's idiosyncrasies that would not be made evident from the show or book, as well as an in-character writing sample that is at least three hundred words long, with dialogue. Each application is read over by all three admins, and we discuss them carefully, requiring a two-thirds majority for acceptance. However, if the decision is not unanimous, we often ask the applicant to submit additional information, or re-do certain sections of the application in order to get a better understanding of how they intend on portraying the character. Rejected applicants have the opportunity to request a review of their application, in which case we will give them an overview of what we liked and what we didn't, offering constructive criticism for improvements on each the specific sections of the application which we think need it the most. Frequently, those who request reviews will take the criticism and re-write their application accordingly, and are often accepted (though not always). Reviews are usually between five hundred and eight hundred words long, and are discussed and edited by all three admins.

At the time of writing, *Vieux Noyes RP* has twenty-two members, who play thirty-one characters, though this number fluctuates as members come and go, or add and drop characters. Using individual blogs representing each character, members post their interactions into the main

feed, called the “dashboard” or “dash.” Members can also reblog fan-made photo or gif edits of their character, songs and quotes that inspire muse, or relate to specific plots, and “ask memes” which other members can use to ask their character certain questions, or put their character in a specific situation. Some members have even made fan-videos for the roleplay, either for their character, or for the story as a whole.³ Each character’s blog is a collection of all of their individual posts, which can be organized through a tagging system, and can also have additional pages of information, usually the character’s biography, a navigation page to past threads and interactions, and links to other assorted content (photos, music, answered asks, headcanons, etc). In order to follow the storyline, someone must either visit each character’s Tumblr account individually, or follow every blog so that the content they post appears on the dashboard automatically. This makes it particularly difficult for non-members to follow roleplayed stories, as the content is often backward in terms of chronological posting, and is segmented into two-reply sections in each post. Every character will have several threads with different characters happening at a time, and in order to follow the story, one must be reading *all* of them, or most of them, in the order that they are posted. Typically, the only audience for the content produced by Tumblr roleplay writers is the people writing it themselves.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

In this analysis, I rely on a combination of autoethnographic and cyberethnographic methods, aiming to explore and question the rhizomatic structure of *Vieux Noyés RP*. In using these methods, I aim to illuminate the complex coming together of subjects, cyber space, community, governmentality, and my own experience as a constituent part of this structure, both as a member, and as a researcher. Auto/cyberethnography as a research method situates me as

³ One such video, created by member Dani, can be found here: <https://youtu.be/wUgpGvY9zTs>

the researcher to explore these various themes in a rigorous way, as it seeks to combine the subjectivity and emotionality of the researcher with the particularities of doing ethnography online.⁴

Autoethnography is crucial in informing both the framing of the research that I am doing and the way in which I do that research. H. L. Goodall (in Toyosaki et. al) advocates for a new ethnography in which “writing itself becomes a site of discovery, and hence, a research method.”⁵ This understanding of autoethnography is meaningful to my research in a multifold of ways. As I collected data from the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat (the private community discussion board/chat space), sharing my research, asking questions, and participating in discussion as a member, my research focus changed, adapted, and evolved. My fellow members gave me ideas, encouragement, and critique on the particularities of Tumblr roleplay that they found interesting. My intimate knowledge of the space and the people I was documenting, paired with the unique position I hold as both an authority figure creating and enforcing rules, and as a member subject to those same rules, is reflected in the conflicting and conflicted analysis which follows. My experience of *Vieux Noyés RP* is one of both feeling “at home,” feeling comforted and surrounded by people with whom I can ‘be’ freely, and yet also feeling constrained by and obligated to the requirement that I be constantly present. *Vieux Noyés* is at once a burden, an obsession, and a comfort for me. Being able to recognize and explore my own conflicting feelings and experiences in this space also allows me to uncover the mechanisms which function

⁴ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” in *Historical Social Research/ Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 274; Mkono, Muchazondida, Lisa Ruhanen, and Kevin Markwell, “From netnography to autoethnography in tourism studies,” in *Research Notes and Reports / Annals of Tourism Research* 52 (2015): 167.

⁵ H. L. Goodall Jr., *Writing the New Ethnography*, AltaMira: Walnut Creek, CA (2000): 136, in Satoshi Toyosaki Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, Nathan A. Wendt, and Kyle Leathers, “Community Autoethnography: Compiling the Personal and Resituating Whiteness,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 58.

to frame the roleplay, the OOC chat, as well as ourselves (the members) and our conduct within this space.

Autoethnography as a method and a process also serves as a methodological mirror or complement to the work that I argue is being done in the OOC chat, that of negotiating a space of radical openness, a concept from bell hooks which I explore in Chapter 2.⁶ Goodall's new ethnography calls for work which is "evocative, empathetic, therapeutic, emotionally honest, and compassionate," conditions which are honored in the practice of autoethnography.⁷ While encouraging understanding and empathy, these conditions do not preclude exploration of the difficulties and vulnerabilities inherent in conducting rigorously honest examinations of the self. Carolyn Ellis expounds on the autoethnographer's gaze: "First they [focus] outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resists cultural interpretations."⁸ It is a methodology of exposing and exploring rawness, of putting such an exploration in the spotlight as something that should be discussed and thought about in an emotionally complex and academically rich way.

Autoethnography works to complement the concept of spaces of radical openness, as they both encourage the creation and exploration of a vulnerable but powerful mode of being. A space of radical openness, according to hooks', "...nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."⁹ Spaces of radical openness work to expose and create alternatives to the violences of

⁶ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," In *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge: New York (1989).

⁷ Goodall, "New Ethnography," 31, in Toyosaki, "Community Autoethnography," 58.

⁸ Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological novel about autoethnography*, AltaMira: Walnut Creek, CA (2004): 37-38.

⁹ hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 150.

hegemonic power structures. Autoethnography as a methodology acknowledges and relies upon resistance to canonical research methods, which assume, and thus privilege, the white, western, middle- or upper-class, masculine position. Ellis et. al state how, in comparison to the conventions of ethnography,

Autoethnography, on the other hand, expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic.¹⁰

By incorporating the subjective and emotional experience of the researcher as a part of the research and acknowledging that these experiences also frame the research being done, valuable insights, which were once made invisible or dismissed as unscientific, can be explored. My experience of *Vieux Noyés RP*, my emotional and creative investment in the story, the characters, and the people writing them, is inextricably tied to any analysis I do on the topic. By doing autoethnography on, in, and with *Vieux Noyés RP*, I am contradicting patriarchal discourses of mastery, which underscore traditional assertions of what counts as “meaningful” research and how meaningful research can be done.

Cyberethnography also has important political implications for the work that I am doing. Cyberethnography applies the work of ethnography to the internet, a move which has had a great impact on the tradition of ethnography: on the understanding of what constitutes ethnography and where ethnography can and should be done. Cyberethnographic inquiry can illuminate the problems inherent in assuming the Internet to be a democratic and disembodied space, free from the reach of offline identities and distinct from offline life.¹¹ From my experience in *Vieux Noyés*

¹⁰ Ellis, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 275.

¹¹ Lisa Nakamura, “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell, Barbara M. Kennedy. London and New York: Routledge (2000); Jodi

RP, offline and online life cannot be so easily dichotomized. What happens offline can have severe consequences in the roleplay, for both the roleplay and the members, particularly if members fail to maintain activity due to offline circumstances. However, online activity also impacts offline life, impacting the way members' organize their lives, the decisions they make, and the way they perceive the world, important implications that I explore more in Chapter 2.

Cyberethnography also has the potential to strike at the colonial roots of ethnographic anthropological research. Kamala Visweswaran problematizes the notion of "the field" positing instead "anthropology should become home-work and not simply 'anthropology at home.' ...While the latter, she states, has usually been conducted by white anthropologists among 'Others' in the West, home-work would dehegemonize the white Euro-center itself."¹² Adi Kuntsman follows Visweswaran, stating, "the central idea of anthropology as home-work unfixes the very idea of 'home.' No longer an unproblematic location of 'belonging,' home becomes a site of investigation and negotiation."¹³ While cyberethnography does much to enable this kind of home-work, additionally, a central part of my investigation of *Vieux Noyés RP* revolves around members' and my own assertions of feeling "at home" in the online space of the roleplay and with other members. How do our relationships with one another, our conversations, and the stories we share, both in character and out, shape the space of the roleplay and our conduct, both online and offline? What does "home" mean as a radical claim? *Is* home, in this context, a space of radical openness or do the regulations shaping that space interfere with such a claim? It is this point in which I begin my analysis in Chapter 2: feelings of belonging and isolation in *Vieux Noyés RP*.

O'Brien, and Eve Shapiro, "'Do it' on the web: Emerging discourses on internet sex," in *Web.studies: rewriting media studies for the digital age*, ed. David Gauntlett. London: Arnold Press (2000).

¹² Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of feminist ethnography*, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, (1994), in Adi Kuntsman, "Cyberethnography as home-work," *Anthropology Matters* 6, no. 2 (2004).

¹³ Kuntsman, "Home-work," (page numbers not available).

In my analysis I draw on posts from within the OOC chat, which functions as a kind of discussion board for the group. I also used private communications that I had access to (private messages between members and myself, members and the Main account, and the group admin chat), and the applications from current members. Whenever a new member joined the group, I would pose a question in the OOC chat, or message them privately to tell them about the research I was doing and to ask permission to use the content they produced within the roleplay (including their in-character threads, out-of-character posts and communications with me, through my character's account and through the main), and inquiring as to their preferences, were they to agree, about use of their name and/or URL. I took care to explain that providing or refusing me access had no bearing on the roleplay, or their position within it. However, as an administrator of the roleplay, I cannot rule out the impact that may have had on the answers. Regardless, I was without fail given complete permission to use whatever I needed, with enthusiastic support for the project. I often reiterated the question when specific content came up that I was interested in using, particularly if it was sensitive material. For example, despite already having been given blanket permission from Charlie when she was accepted into the group, I asked for permission to use the post shown in Figure 2, because it contained personal details which I wasn't sure she'd be comfortable sharing. She replied "I am 120% okay with it. You can use the name and everything, go mental with every stupid thing I say xD".¹⁴ Another member, Dani, replied to my inquiry with "oh sure thing! if i do anything impressive lemme know aha ;D if I do anything embarrassing please let me know O_O"¹⁵ This is fairly typical for how these kinds of exchanges would go. Members would give me permission, inquire about the topic of my research more, and then express some kind of sentiment that the content they

¹⁴ Personal message from Charlie to me, Tumblr Messenger, Feb., 28, 2017.

¹⁵ Personal message from Dani to me, Tumblr Messenger, Feb., 17, 2017.

produce is somehow unworthy or embarrassing when put into a formal atmosphere. No one requested that I use an alias for them, most likely because we only know each other by first names, or nicknames.

In the third chapter, I use material that is more sensitive in terms of the functioning of the roleplay itself, as it deals with behind-the-scenes administrative communications, and private conversations between the admins about members. Despite being given blanket permission to use anything from these conversations, I felt anxious about putting some of these conversations into the public eye, particularly private communications between the admins regarding members of the roleplay and misconduct. I used these sensitive conversations because they do critical work in framing the roleplay space. How we negotiate these conversations between ourselves as admins, and between the admins and members, dictates much of the atmosphere of the roleplay, and thus are a crucial point of analysis in my thesis.

Auto/cyberethnography as a method allows me to explore my own experience of *Vieux Noyés RP* in a rich, thoughtful, and reflective way, and has in the process, enriched the experience of roleplaying for me and for the members of the roleplay. Many conversations I've had with members and my co-admins wouldn't have occurred if I hadn't had the lens of auto/cyberethnography to look through. My reflection process has also influenced my actions as an admin, encouraging me to push for policies within the roleplay that support the values of feminist autoethnographic research: compassion, empathy, and honesty.

1.3 ADMIN “KLAILEY”

In order to position myself within the roleplay more clearly for myself and for readers, in this section I talk about the different roles I have within the RP, and how they overlap and

diverge, specifically through the example of my nickname, “Admin Klailey.” In *Vieux Noyes RP*, I am a creator, administrator, and member. I play the character “Niklaus Mikaelson,” one of the main characters in the show *The Originals*, and occasionally play a guest character, Fr. Kieran O’Connell, when he is needed to advance the plot. Because I am also one of the creators and an admin (in this case, all three admins, Rose, Rimsha, and myself, are also the creators; this is not always the case for roleplays), I have the privilege of seeing more of the roleplay than most members have access to. I have access to all the behind-the-scenes communications that go through the *Vieux Noyes RP* account, as well as the future direction of the story (i.e. future characters who will be released, plot drops that will affect the entire roleplay in the future). I am also privy to much of the frustrations and difficulties circulating through the roleplay. The three admins share a messaging group where we discuss the day-to-day management of the roleplay, divide up the tasks that are needed to keep the roleplay active, and make important decisions about our policies and the future of the roleplay. Members will occasionally approach one of the three of us privately to share their concerns with us, or to ask for our help regarding an issue they are facing with their character, the story that is unfolding, or another member.

Knowing that members often come to the admins for help, it is interesting to note that it can be difficult for members to dissociate a player from the character they are writing. There are many reasons this can happen: if the portrayal of that character is frustrating or dissatisfactory; if the person doesn’t communicate frequently out-of-character (OOC), and thus doesn’t have an alternative personality to attach to the icon one interacts with; if the person has been playing the character for a long duration (more than six months). For example, I am an admin, but I also have a character in the RP, one with a particular reputation. My character, Klaus Mikaelson, is portrayed as one of the ‘bad guys’ of the story, with little regard for morals, and a tendency

toward violence. As it is a supernatural RP, this carries somewhat less consequences than would be expected in a more realistic setting. He is known for his cutting and sarcastic dialogue, and his lack of sympathy. Occasionally—though I hardly identify with my character, a thousand-year old sadistic male vampire-werewolf—I am referred to as “Klailey,” a combination of Klaus and Kailey. This is often used when we are reacting to one another’s threads out-of-character, and yet in these interactions, I occupy a space somewhere that is neither the serious portrayal of my character, nor my own personality. Instead, it’s a kind of between space; it’s me playing a “play” Klaus. Here is one such interaction:

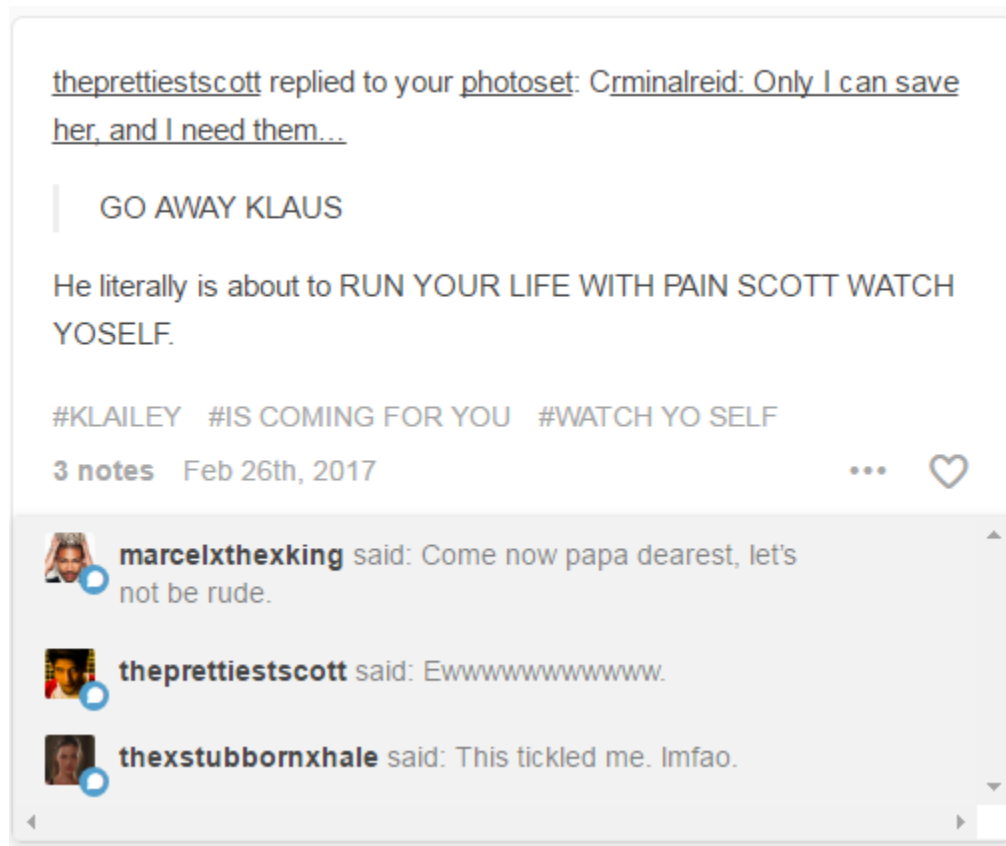


Figure 1. Post by Me in Vieux Noyés OOC chat-blog, “Decateur St”, Feb. 26, 2017. The comments below are in reaction, descending from the most recent to the oldest

In this post in the OOC chat, Kit, who plays the characters Scott (theprettiestscott) and Marcel (marcelxtheking), is reacting to a post I made in-character, as Klaus. Because of the

antagonistic father/son relationship between Klaus and Marcel, in-character, Kit often replies to my posts in this way.¹⁶ However, because they made the comment through Scott's account, in my reply to Kit's comment, I respond by referring to the plot we are currently writing between Scott and Klaus, which is a much more imbalanced relationship in-character in terms of power relations than that of Klaus and Marcel. I sign it with the name "Klailey" to indicate that I (Kailey) am communicating what a play-Klaus *would* say, had he access to our out-of-character interactions. Despite the original comment ('GO AWAY KLAUS') coming from Scott's account, I know how the sentiment is being directed (from Marcel to Klaus), and I know that these comments are both Kit speaking. They are not meant to be understood as Scott or Marcel actually commenting on the post, in-character. Regardless, the comments below the post are given in the tone of each character respectively. Scott's is more childish, while Marcel's is condescending.

The multi-layered interweaving of personas does complex semiotic work in building up associations and impressions of personality. In a discussion about this phenomenon with my co-admin Rose, she explained to me the work she would assume the employment of "klailey" would do:

Rose

oh because, not sure if this makes sense
but to my thinking
because being an admin carries its own authority or weight
and then playing arguably one of the most critical and dominant characters in the
roleplay carries its own kind of authority - and tends to generate people's awe or
respect
i would assume that a combination of those too [*sic*] in 'klailey' might have the
opposite effect. sort of like, combining both the individual effects that people
attach to either role

¹⁶ Kit identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

that of admin, and that of playing such a character that everyone wants to rp with; whose so central and dramatic, etc etc so that it sort of generates more respect or awe or what have you¹⁷

Rose's assumption makes sense; combining the weight of an authoritative role out-of-character with the fearsome and domineering characteristics of Klaus could potentially instill an aura of fear, or at the very least, unapproachability, around me. However, the way it is employed does the exact opposite. Rather, this "in-between" caricature of Klaus uses mockery to distance me, Kailey, from a character that is known for his terrible deeds and frequent reliance on violence; "Klailey" invites other members to join me in this mockery. Notice Sarah's (thexstubbornxhale) comment on the exchange: "this tickled me. Imfao." She wasn't directly involved in the exchange, and she's not joining Kit and I in our comedic character-caricatures, but the exchange was humorous to her, it "tickled" her, touched her with some feeling of light amusement. "Klailey" created the space for that feeling and helps to associate me, the personality of Kailey, who is *coincidentally* an admin and plays Klaus, with amusement, humorous self-deprecation, and light-heartedness. Because the only mode of communication available through Tumblr is textual, these exchanges and the residual associations are how we establish our personalities to one another.

This roundabout exploration of "Klailey" is necessary to help the reader approximate my position in the roleplay, the position which I understand myself to occupy from within as I analyze the roleplay as an auto/cyberethnographer. My role as researcher is also a part of my persona, but is less visible to members than for example my personality out-of-character, or my rendition of Klaus in-character. Still, I frequently mention my research in the OOC chat, usually to inform members when I am feeling stressed or worn out, or on the rare occasion, when I have

¹⁷ A message from Rose to me, Google Hangouts, Apr. 29, 2017

met an important deadline and can relax a for a few days (which is understood to mean that I will have more time to devote to the RP). Sometimes, I ask questions directly related to my research to which I invite everyone in the OOC chat to respond. ‘Researcher’ then, is also a part of what ‘Kailey’ is associated with.

Having introduced briefly *Vieux Noyés RP*, typical member exchanges out-of-character, and my position in the roleplay, I now move on to theoretical analysis of these spaces, relationships, and understandings of self-hood within *Vieux Noyés RP*. In Chapter 2, I discuss feelings of isolation and belonging, and the work of the OOC chat in creating a space of radical openness within *Vieux Noyés RP*. In Chapter 3, I problematize the notion of a space of radical openness by exploring the rules and regulation of the roleplay, and how these rules function to dictate the space of the roleplay and control access to the support system that the OOC chat provides. In Chapter 4, I revisit the previous analyses to inquire if and how the realities they portray can co-exist. If so, what does this mean for the application of spaces of radical openness in further research?

CHAPTER 2. SPACES OF (IN)VISIBILITY AND VALIDATION

In this chapter, I will be engaging in an auto/cyberethnographic analysis of the “out-of-character” chat blog for the Tumblr roleplay group, *Vieux Noyés RP*. The “out-of-character” chat blog, or OOC chat is the private shared community space for the roleplay. I will be analyzing posts and comments posted by members there to explore how the space of the OOC chat both functions as and enables not only a sense of community, but also what bell hooks calls a ‘radical space of openness,’¹⁸ and what this means for the members and the community as a whole.

The OOC chat is where the different members come together to “hang out,” to talk about their day, what characters in the story are doing, or current events. Members can post individually, often using reaction gifs to underline the sentiment they would like to express. Occasionally, members will post pictures of something happening in their daily life, sometimes even selfies (though I have only ever encountered selfies in particular in *Vieux Noyés*, despite having been a member of numerous roleplay groups over a span of about seven years). Other members can then reply to the post in the “notes” section (see Figure 1) often sparking short exchanges, and occasionally inspiring conversation. In *Vieux Noyés*, the OOC is also often used as a space to vent about things troubling members in their “real life,” as they refer to their life outside of roleplaying or off of Tumblr. Figure 2 below is a post by a member, Charlie, posted a week after joining *Vieux Noyés*, discussing her experience with depression and as a member of the RP.

¹⁸ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” In *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge: New York (1989).

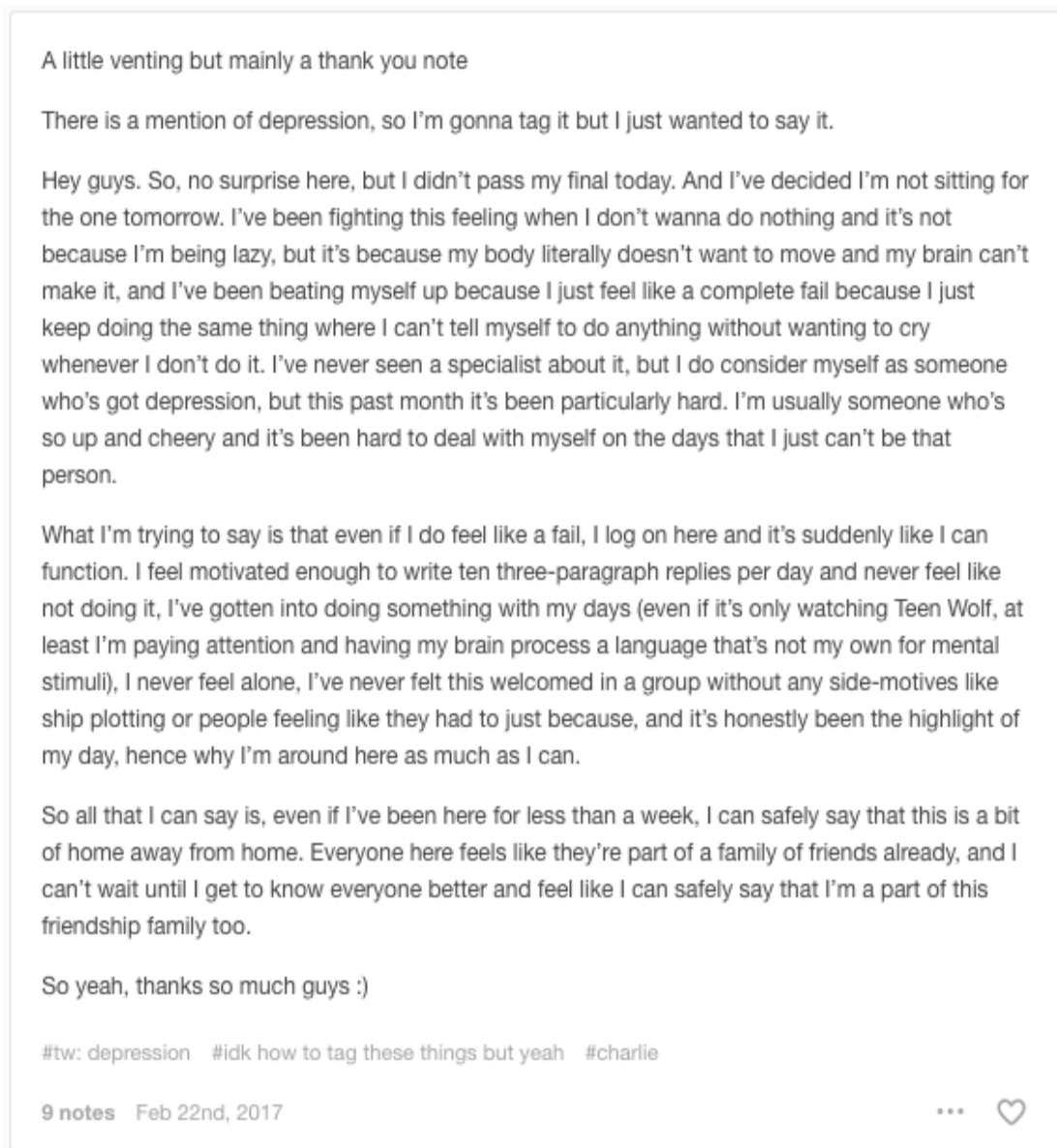


Figure 2. Post by Charlie in *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat-blog, “Decateur St”, Feb. 23, 2017.

In this post, Charlie discusses how meaningful it is for her to have access to a support system like the one she has found in *Vieux Noyés RP*, despite having only been a member for a week at the point of posting. She states in the beginning “no surprise here, but I didn’t pass my final today,” assuming a familiarity with her life offline that is not necessarily fact (I, for example, was surprised to learn she didn’t pass her final, having no knowledge of her school life prior to this comment). This assumed familiarity speaks to how she relates herself to the group, and her

relative level of comfort with us. She mentions a “family of friends,” and a “home away from home,” feeling intellectually stimulated, feeling “safe” in her knowledge that she is not alone here, that she is welcomed. This post is similar to many other posts in the OOC chat, unprompted but for a desire to articulate the exceptionality of the *Vieux Noyés* OOC atmosphere.

This particular post also highlights an underlying trend that is visible throughout the OOC chat: experiences in “real life”—that is, offline—of isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and introvertedness. Following this tendency is the expression of feeling “at home,” “safe” in the OOC, feeling a part of something. One member, Sarah, discussing the *Vieux Noyés* OOC said, “This is why I love this one <333 The occ also offers the opportunity to know how others are, if they are happy... having a bad day etc... because then we can offer them the love and encouragement that makes so much difference when you sometimes feel on your own.”¹⁹ Another member, Kitty, after a discussion in the OOC chat about her abusive ex-boyfriend, gave her real name, as opposed to her “screen name” because as she put it, “I actually wanted to be myself here <3”.²⁰ These comments both highlight the unexpected nature of the safety and acceptance they feel in the *Vieux Noyés* OOC space, in contrast to a lack of the same found outside this space. What does a community as a “safe space” mean in the space of the OOC? How do the members negotiate this space?

2.1 SPACES, CYBERSPACES, AND SPACES OF RADICAL OPENNESS

Space and spatiality are central to discussions about online communities. The metaphor of “cyber space” has been hotly contested since its initial usage in an academic setting, and there are many debates about how the application of the term functions to shape the ways in which we

¹⁹ Comment by Sarah on my post, in OOC chat-blog, *Decateur-St*, Feb. 22, 2017.

²⁰ Post by Sarah, in OOC chat-blog, *Decateur-St*, Sept. 6, 2016. This is the member’s alias.

conceptualize the Internet.²¹ Steven Jones makes the assertion that “computer-mediated communication is, in essence, socially produced space.”²² Malcolm Parks traces similar debates about the application of the term ‘community’ to a cyber context, outlining the tensions between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ approaches; a strong approach to community necessitates shared physical space, while a weak approach prefers to center psychological ties or sociality over geographical closeness.²³

The weak approach is better suited to my analysis, for the obvious reasons of the diffuse geographic locations of the members of *Vieux Noyés*, (to my knowledge spanning four continents), but additionally, and more importantly to my argument, because the spaces we share between ourselves are not always physical or geographically located. Conceptual spaces, conversational spaces, spaces of opportunity, are all spaces that *can* be physically located but do not require physicality, yet still can make an impact on the shape of a community and its interactions. As bell hooks says, “Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice.”²⁴

In her essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” bell hooks discusses the necessity of spaces of collective and transformative resistance for the continued survival of people living on the margins, in her case, for the survival of black people in the United States, particularly those coming from difficult socio-economic situations. She says,

²¹ Julie E. Cohen, "Cyberspace As/And Space" *Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works*. 807. (2007). <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/807>

²² S. G. Jones, “Understanding community in the information age,” In S. G. Jones, (Ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 10–35). Thousand Oaks, CA : Sage. (1995) 17.

²³ Malcolm Parks, “Social Network Sites as Virtual Communities,” In *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, New York, NY: Routledge (2010): 107.

²⁴ hooks, “Choosing the Margin,” 152.

Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them. Mostly, of course, we are not there. We never ‘arrive’ or ‘can’t stay.’ ...Those of us who live, who ‘make it,’ passionately holding on to aspects of that ‘downhome’ life we do not intend to lose while simultaneously seeking new knowledge and experience, invent spaces of radical openness. Without such spaces we would not survive. Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised.²⁵

For hooks, these spaces are necessary to survival, to negate the violence of enforced invisibility, while allowing for the freedom to navigate the terms of what being visible on one’s own terms might mean for their selfhood. In hooks’ articulation of a space of radical openness, this negotiation is constantly in play, a negotiation between enforced invisibility, silence, and erasure, while still holding onto to the pieces of oneself that they would not lose, and seeking out new ways to be. What is at stake is the intelligibility of the subject: whether one can claim subjecthood or not, and in what spaces, what instances. The space of radical openness *is* that space and instance, or more accurately, those spaces and instances, where subjecthood is open to negotiation. In these spaces, intelligibility is not only claimed, but also clung to, and returned back to others. Particularly in this context, the role of the Internet is central to the capability of creating a space of radical openness within the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat.

In order to establish the “radicality” of spaces of radical openness, it is first necessary to understand what constitutes a community, and particularly a community online. Every community is not a space of radical openness, and hooks does not give a checklist for what constitutes a space of radical openness. For that matter, finding a consensus on what constitutes a community was difficult to come by. Rather than trying to pin down hooks’ open-ended openness, “imagined communities” and “virtual communities” are a good starting point, to which hooks then can be compared.

²⁵ Ibid. 148.

In their analysis of “imagined communities” in online newspaper comment threads, Coles and West draw on Quentin Jones to discuss what elements constitute an imagined community in an online context, focusing specifically on two factors: elements of virtual settlement, and a sense of community.²⁶ Jones’ concept of virtual settlement entails interaction between at least three members, in a “common, public area,” with sustained membership over time.²⁷ Public, in Jones’ definition, is a space of communication shared between more than two members (which could just be considered a private message), but does not necessitate open accessibility. Sense of community, according to Coles and West, is located in the virtual settlement.²⁸ Indicators include: sense of membership (an in-group with which the posters identify, and an out-group with which they do not), an ability to exert influence over each other, and to provide support and be supported by one another, demonstrating a shared emotional connection, as well as a common history.²⁹ In a compilation of markers from various different definitions of community, then applied to virtual communities, Parks’ criterion for virtual communities include: Acting collectively, the group thinks of itself as a community, members identify with the community, ritual sharing of information, large patterns of interaction, and lastly, members exhibit attachments to one another and the community in general.³⁰

I would argue that the OOC chat of most roleplays constitutes an imagined or virtual community by these definitions. An OOC discussion space is central to every roleplay, and

²⁶ Bryn Alexander Coles, Melanie West, “Weaving the internet together: Imagined communities in newspaper comment threads,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 60 (2016): 45. While the concept is useful, the terminology of “virtual settlement” is problematic in its conquestual, colonial implications. I use Coles and West’s definition to elucidate further what a virtual community may entail, but I resist the necessity of labelling *Vieux Noyés RP* a “virtual settlement.”

²⁷ Quentin Jones, “Virtual-Communities, Virtual Settlements & Cyber-archeology: A Theoretical Outline,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 3 (1997). Accessed March 5, 2017.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00075.x/full>.

²⁸ Coles and West, “Weaving the Internet Together,” 45.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Parks, “Virtual Communities,” 108-109.

before the function of a private but shared sideblog, external chatrooms were commonly used along with group Skype chats. It is a crucial space for a variety of reasons, the most pragmatic of which is its utility for “plotting.” Because the story unfolds through one-on-one interactions between characters, it is necessary for members to discuss how a specific plot will unfold. These conversations are often instigated in the OOC chat, even if they are redirected to a more private space to develop further. The OOC chat functions as a kind of discussion-board-cum-chat-room for the community of the roleplay, but it is also the mechanism through which community manifests, as this is where relationships between members are established, where personal stories are shared, and where information about the roleplay is discussed en masse.

Like other roleplays, the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat fits all of the characteristics laid out in the above established frameworks for understanding an imagined or virtual community. However, definitions are laid out in a way almost as to be quantifiable, boxes which can be checked off and filled in. When describing the OOC chat amongst ourselves in the admin chat, our descriptions don’t look for quantifiable characteristics, but rather a phenomenon, one which we often have trouble articulating meaningfully. When in the process of creating *Vieux Noyés* in July of 2016, the night before the roleplay was opened in a conversation about the OOC space, I described how I imagined that space to be to my co-administrators as follows:

Kailey McDonald
for every rp
the ooc feels like an enclosure
like we're inside our little house talking to each other
and each house feels a little different
but this hasn't turned into a story yet for me
it's like still a thousand stories in my head
i don't know what our home feels like yet xD but in a good, wide open way

Figure 3. Message from me to my co-administrators on the eve of opening *Vieux Noyés*. In Google Hangouts, July. 7, 2016.

The imagery of not only a house, but a home, a gathering place, a place of possibility is striking, particularly in hindsight, seeing how others have also characterized the OOC as feeling like a “home away from home” as in this instance this is invoked before the community itself had even manifested. At this particular moment, we had eighteen applications for characters (from eighteen different people), and had over 940 hits to the roleplay’s main page on that same day. Some of the applications came from people we had known from previous roleplays we had been members of, while others found us via Tumblr’s tagging system. We had interactions through our administrative positions with all of the applicants, even if it was just through reading their application. The quote above is illuminating, both in its description, and its timing. Despite my inability to *feel* our home, this lack of knowledge felt promising to me, it felt “good, wide open,” full of creative and comforting potential. hooks talks about home in her discussion of spaces of radical openness, stating

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.³¹

Home, for hooks, is not a fixed place, but an experience, one which encourages discovery and exploration, an experience which doesn’t look to settle, but seeks to confront and challenge current understandings of reality. “Home” requires imagination and dynamic perspectives. Having a home within the OOC means that this must be a space in which disagreement and discussion is promoted and valued.

³¹ hooks, “Choosing the Margin,” 148.

My earlier description of the OOC is reminiscent to hooks' depiction of spaces of radical openness in its inability to be quantified. hooks does not give us a definition for a space of radical openness. Rather, she paints a picture we must imagine into existence. "This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance."³² In hooks' space in the margin, it is not simply a sustained membership over time, or an attachment to members of the group, which constitutes that space as a community space, or the 'we' as a community speaking. Rather, hooks speaks about a reclamation, not only of space, but also of selfhood, of subjectivity without exclusion. What then, makes the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat a space of radical openness, a marginal space of creativity and power, rather than merely a space of community?

2.2 VISION AND (IN)VISIBILITY

Before the creation of *Vieux Noyés*, one of the co-admins of the group, Rose, was a member of another roleplay that I had created on my own. She messaged me that she was quitting because she no longer had muse, but "the straw that broke the camel's back," according to her, was the fact that the OOC atmosphere was lacking.³³

I think when your [muse] is already low, i think the sense of community or lack thereof can either make or break you cause i felt that when i was struggling with my muse and i mentioned it and legit no one even replied or said good luck or something. or even a pretense of 'oh ok i read your message.' no one has to, no one owes me that, but it'd be nice. whereas in [*A Touch of Darkness RP*], i feel like we do it for sean, we do it for kayla, we do it for everyone, whether they're regulars on the dash or not. otherwise it feels isolated and to put it bluntly, it feels like no one gives a shit about you/your characters.

...maybe i'm just one of those touchy-feely rpers who needs that sense of community. or well i'm not gonna say community cause [*Lifelines RP*] is still very much a community and it's wrong of

³² Ibid. 152.

³³ A conversation with Rose in Skype, Feb. 28, 2016.

me to put it that way but it's a different 'vibe'/'thread of connection between the rpers' what have you. and i do better in one that has people who, whether they know you or not - whether they care about you or not - they'll at least acknowledge the last message on the ooc, write something nice, say hi, etc. make you feel like you're there. like you're noticed and you're part of something.

For Rose, she was missing a sense of solidarity, togetherness, recognition, things which she had experienced in other roleplays, but was missing from this group. The difference between a community and the *something more* that she needed to feel acknowledged and validated was centered in the OOC. Without the acknowledgement that came from even simple exchanges, Rose didn't even feel like she was present. Presence, absence, vision and (in)visibility, all are critical in understanding how community, spaces of radical openness, and (un)intelligibility function in the context of the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat.

In discussing spaces of radical openness, vision and visibility (and the lack of) are focal points for hooks. A space of radical openness is predicated on and against invisibility, silence, and absence, and is re-shaped by the ability of those in marginal spaces to re-imagine alternative ways of being in relating to others. It is a space of refuge against being made into a spectacle, invisibility in a positive sense, yet also a space in which visibility is sought for and granted on one's own terms. Quoted above, hooks says "our lives depend on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised." The word "improvised" invokes sight, derived for the Latin *improvisus*, 'unforeseen.' Spaces of radical openness depend on the formulation of vision, of who can see, who can be seen, and what it is that they see. In the OOC space, as Kitty said, it is possible to "actually be yourself." While I do not attempt to make claims toward essential selfhood, within the OOC, it is possible to 'surprise' oneself by co-producing a 'self' unforeseen, a 'self' that the participant herself couldn't have imagined before.³⁴

³⁴ Gratitude to Zsazsa Barat for the insight.

The sense of family, safety, and community that is tangible in the quotes from members I have shared are all framed by the latent understanding that the acceptance and support found in the OOC chat at *Vieux Noyés* is not standard. The *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat has come to be understood as an exceptional space, a space in which members can trust that recognition will always be forth coming from the others. In the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat, a different, looser mode of being is allowed and encouraged, but often in direct opposition to an outside world where this is not the case. One member, Kit, said that the OOC space “creates community, builds relationships, and makes me feel like I have a weird misfit family.”³⁵ What is it about this family that doesn’t fit in, and where does the ‘not fitting’ occur?

In order to talk about ‘misfitting,’ it is important to first make sense of the processes at work in which “fitting” or “misfitting” comes about. To fit in one place is to be categorically similar, to be identifiable as ‘belonging’ in a specific social context. In her introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explores the processes of identification through which a body can become recognizable within hegemonic spaces of existence.³⁶ In her formulation of this process, identification comes to rely on an exclusionary mechanism that disallows for the possibility of other identities, rendering them abject, identities “who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject.”³⁷ This constitutive outside marks the ends of what can be recognizable as “subject.” Here is where begins hooks’ distinction between presence and absence when she points out, “mostly, of course, we are not there. We never ‘arrive’ or ‘can’t stay.’”³⁸ The lives that hover on the margins, or beyond them, at once are not seen and *must* not be seen, while at the

³⁵ Comment by Kit on my post in *Vieux Noyés OOC chat-blog*, “*Decateur St*”, Feb. 23, 2017

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, New York: Routledge (1993).

³⁷ Ibid. 3.

³⁸ Hooks, “Choosing the Margin,” 148.

same time being critically visible. Butler goes on to explain the systems of powers at work in such distinctions:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.³⁹

Butler’s zone of uninhabitability is the space of (non)being which the subject defines itself against. The zone of uninhabitability is the space relegated for those who do not “fit” into the dominantly accepted definition of “normal life.” The fear of falling into this zone of uninhabitability, this “dreaded identification,” acts as an impetus of social control, pressuring the privileged subject to manicure their behavior to avoid such a dastardly fate to avoid misfitting. However, as Butler states, this uninhabitable zone, *necessarily* must be inhabited to maintain its disciplinary force, the absent and invisible lives that hooks refers to *must* be visible. However, this visibility is not necessarily on the terms of the one being *made* visible. Here, this visibility is the spectacle which hooks’ laments.

Black folks coming from poor, underclass communities, who enter universities or privileged cultural settings unwilling to surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there, all ‘sign’ of our class and cultural ‘difference,’ who are unwilling to play the role of ‘exotic other,’ must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact. Our very presence is a disruption.⁴⁰

hooks demonstrates the visibility of the abject, a visibility only granted in exchange for spectacle, a stereotype which can reaffirm the boundaries of the subject. Spaces of radical

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

openness, for hooks, defy that need for the spectacle of the black body, instead creating a space in which “who we were before we were there” in that culture of domination, can survive intact. “Who we were” disrupts that culture through its continued presence, its refusal to be reduced to spectacle.

Vieux Noyés RP is not located on the margin hooks’ refers to. The textual platform of Tumblr changes the interplay between abject, embodiment, and the constitution of subject against the abject. *Vieux Noyés RP* is an invisible space of comfort, inaccessible to the public but for the portrayal of the character. In the OOC, visibility, which is manifested for hooks through embodiment, is not the requirement for intelligibility. Rather, presence is the requirement and visibility can be dictated as the member sees fit. What is shared in the OOC about oneself is up for each member to decide. Images, stories, personal histories, and vulnerabilities are not required in order to understand each other as subjects. Racialization, sexuality, gender, class, age, ability, etc., are much more difficult to rely on as indicators of a person’s status in this particular internet platform. They are present in the *Vieux Noyés RP* OOC chat in many ways, but often only at the member’s discretion. Overt demographic indicators, such as access to the English language and internet already can denote a class status, ambiguous though it may be. Membership in *Vieux Noyés RP* is largely, though not exclusively, based in English-speaking countries. These observations are not irrelevant, but are also difficult to use in generalizing about the demographics of members, and how they pertain to the relegation of members to margin or center offline.

These demographic categories are relevant in another way, however, removed from direct claims of members to subjectivity, but reflecting on the mechanisms of abjection nonetheless. Because *Vieux Noyés* is a fan-based roleplay, the content is based on pre-existing

television shows, with established characters and storylines. Several of the players in *Vieux Noyés* relay a feeling that their characters were somehow mistreated within the source show, and feel that they could explore the character's potential in a more satisfying way on their own. Oftentimes, this has to do with trivialized "minority" characters: queer characters, people of color (especially women), and women used as romantic plots to further a main male character's development. The design of the roleplay is such that *every* character is given a backstory, a personal network, a future direction, and a concrete and meaningful role in the story. Because each character is played individually, they cannot be summarily written off (or killed off, unless the member chooses to do so, which very rarely happens) to further the storyline of someone more "central" to the story. Every character, in this way, is central to their own story, and members have control over how this happens. Any sense of mistreatment felt in mainstream entertainment can be corrected in the roleplay. The members are given authority over a situation that, when watching their favorite television show or movie, they cannot exercise control over. Here is another aspect of hooks' improvised alternatives in action. Despite being fiction, these iterations of marginalized existence challenge the discourses in mass media of who constitutes an "important" character, and which characters are disposable. Though it's impossible for me to claim that members are using this as a way to represent their own experiences, having no access to those experiences within the purview of my research, diverse representations of different modes of being does important discursive work.

In a more direct sense concerning members, there are other experiences that render roleplayers to a margin. What proliferates in the OOC are stories of some kind of experience of isolation, particularly in relation to able-bodiedness. In *Vieux Noyés*, many members,

surprisingly for me, have shared their experiences with chronic pain and illness, as well as depression, anxiety, and instances of trauma.

2.3 ISOLATION AND VALIDATION

Because of the nature of the medium, hearing stories about chronic pain, illnesses, and traumas, was surprising to me, as a member and a researcher. Though I had hoped for an intimate OOC that felt like “home,” the readiness with which members shared such personal intimacies in a group forum was surprising, and even more so, heart-warming to me. I have dealt with chronic pain since I was fifteen years old, and have experiences with depression, which took me a long time to process and understand. Having a group, having friends, who understand the difficulties of living with these conditions has made differences for many of us. For example, I learned about “spoon theory,” a method of communicating about my experience of chronic pain with people who do not have a similar experience, in the OOC chat.⁴¹ Members talk about their up-coming surgeries, or share their excitement about going into remission. Some members will even come to the OOC to vent about traumatic ordeals they are going through, which are affecting their ability to live the way they want to. In this section, I will share some of these instances to explore what the sharing of such moments of vulnerability does for the OOC as a space of radical openness.

As margins go, the aforementioned conditions of chronic pain and illness, depression, anxiety, and instances of trauma, straddle an interesting line of supposedly intolerable and yet invisible modes of being. As Vickers notes, “invisible conditions are often forgotten, ignored,

⁴¹ Christine Miserandino, “The Spoon Theory,” *ButYouDontLookSick.com*, <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>, accessed May 3, 2017.

trivialized, or dismissed.”⁴² Yet, simultaneously, there is the understanding that set up against *normative* healthy experiences of life, such conditions are unbearable.⁴³ Linda Fisher illuminates this phenomenon when she discusses the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word “illness”, which is understood to be a state of *bad* health. Health, on its own, is always already ‘good.’⁴⁴ She also brings attention to two prior definitions of ‘illness,’ which both include moral judgments about wickedness, evil, and general “badness” in character:

1. Bad moral quality, condition, or character; wickedness, depravity; evil conduct; badness;
2. Unpleasantness, disagreeableness; troublesomeness; hurtfulness, noxiousness; badness.⁴⁵

Though the terms are now considered obsolete by the Oxford English Dictionary, their connotations of moral judgments are still invoked, and can reinforce the sense of otherness and isolation that many of the members of *Vieux Noyés* have mentioned feeling.

In the field of phenomenology and medicine, Butler’s constitutive outside is articulated by Fisher in terms of the “view-from-within and the view-from-without.”⁴⁶ In her discussion of ‘the illness experience,’ Fisher points out that the field of medicine currently privileges medical expertise, which often comes from people who do not live the experience of chronic illness (the view-from-without). Such people may often make assumptions about what that experience will entail, whether it is underestimating the severity and impact it has on one’s life, or assuming that living under the conditions of their chronic illness must make for an intolerable existence.⁴⁷ Such

⁴² Margaret H. Vickers, “Stigma, Work, and “Unseen” Illness: A Case and Notes to Enhance Understanding,” *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 8, no. 2 (2000): 132.

⁴³ Linda Fisher, “The Illness Experience: A Feminist Phenomenological Perspective,” in *Feminist Phenomenology and Medicine*, ed. Kristin Zeiler and Lisa Folkmarson Käll. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014: 29, 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 29.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

assumptions can alienate the person they are directed at, often resulting in a disinclination to discuss their experience, out of shame, or fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented.⁴⁸

Visibility and spectacle make an appearance in Fisher and Vicker's frameworks as well. People living with these "intolerable" conditions face misjudgment, misrepresentation, and discrimination if they make their condition known, but simultaneously face the difficulty of being held to the neoliberal standards of a normatively able mind and body. This double standard echoes the difficulties which hooks illuminates as she speaks of spaces of radical openness, stating, "this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance."⁴⁹

This community of resistance makes itself known in the space of the OOC chat. The double standard of invisible conditions does not have the same power of dictating behavior as it might wield in other spaces. This is not to say it has no impact, but rather the shared understandings of how the space is to function (with empathy, compassion, and support) shape responses and reactions so that view-from-without moral judgments do not have the same kind of erasing power, the violence to which hooks alludes to. The space for misrepresentation by the view-from-without is mediated by each member's ability to decide what kind of information about themselves is shared, and how. Figure 4 shows an instance of this kind of mediation where a member shares an experience of the difficulties of living with chronic illness.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 36; Vickers, "Stigma, Work, and 'Unseen' Illness," 132.

⁴⁹ hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 149.



Figure 4. Post by Kit in *Vieux Noyés OOC chat-blog*, “Decateur St”, Mar. 1, 2017.

Prefaced by a trigger warning for blood, Kit, a member who had, at the time of the post, been in remission from cancer for a week, tells the chat about their latest hospital visit with some allusions to the reasons for visiting, and also explains their lack of activity posting, promising to try again.⁵⁰ The text is accented by a gif which, when moving, has an arrow alternating between the various answers to the question ‘Are you tired?’ before finally settling for all of the answers at once.

Kit, for all intents and purposes, is represented by a url and an icon picture (which are associated more with their character than their personality). The physical manifestations of their chronic experience with cancer do not enter our perception unless they themselves decide to share

⁵⁰ Kit identifies as gender-fluid and uses they/them/their pronouns.

that with us. However, the discourses of productivity and illness-as-badness still appear, despite the control Kit can wield over our perceptions of them. Themes of guilt and apology are iterated in the text, the gif attached to it, and once again in the comments, demonstrating how Kit has internalized the sense of illness-as-badness, illness as something that must be apologized for, which Fisher discussed.

The responses to Kit's post however, are characterized by themes of reassurance, appeals for Kit to rest, recuperate, 'take it easy,' and reminders that the activity requirements of the group are less important than health and well-being. I commented from the administrative account "love you bb, please just rest up and know that we are 100% aware of your situation. You don't need to feel guilty for getting healthy! –Kailey." Another member, Eoin, commented, "Oh my gosh! I do hope you feel better soon! Be sure to look after yourself and take all the time you need to recuperate. Rest is important! Be safe!" A third member, Dani, said "take it easy! <3 there's no rush to be active when your health comes first, just know we love u are here for you and hope the best for the weeks to come." Kit responded to these comments with the statement "I am resting, I promise. I just feel bad haha."⁵¹

The illness-as-badness stigma is being challenged by this exchange. As a member of the admin team, my comments about our awareness of Kit's situation and that they shouldn't feel bad about put their health first, carry some weight of authority. Private conversations between admins and members can go a long way towards allowing members to make space for their own health and well-being. It's difficult to say how much such statements can assuage guilt, however. The fact that multiple members also echoed the statement that I initially iterated says to me that despite the fact that the reason we are gathered together, to write this story together, depends on

⁵¹ Comments by members on Kit's post, in the *Vieux Noyés RP* OOC chat-blog, *Decateur-St*, Mar. 1, 2017.

the collective activity of all of our members, we agree that personal well-being must come first. More than that, we care to make sure that one another is aware of that, and doesn't feel guilty for allowing themselves that right.

The implications of this are meaningful in that the community of resistance which hooks' calls for, has been established. In hook's conceptualization, a community of resistance challenges hegemonic ideals of the fit, healthy, productive subject. What is alluded to in this example, but has yet to be established, however, is what is radical about the community of the OOC space. To delineate this distinction between resistance and radicality, I will endeavor to locate the ways in which the community of resistance of the OOC chat moves beyond challenging normative structures and discourses and begins to transform them.

2.4 RESISTANCE VERSUS RADICALITY

In conceptualizing the space of the OOC chat as first an imagined community, and then as a community of resistance, we begin to see pieces of the picture hooks has painted for us of what a space of radical openness looks like. What remains to be seen from the OOC chat is the transformative action and creation that hooks' imagined spaces entail.

...these statements identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation; in fact I was saying just the opposite, that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving to the center—but rather a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.⁵²

⁵² hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 150.

Here, hooks points out that the radicality of spaces of radical openness comes not only from resistance, but resistance paired with possibility. It is in the production of counter-hegemonic discourses that a community of resistance becomes a space of radical openness. In her (perhaps ironic) wording, the central location for these transformations of both the space and the discourses, is on the margins.

The first instance demonstrating such a production that I would like to analyze deals with sexual violence, trauma, family relations, and class, and the intersection of these in stigmas of silence. A member, Dani, vents about her recent shift working the door at a salsa club her family owns. She wasn't paid for the work she did, but was frequently sexually harassed, verbally and physically. "Men including my coworkers get within 6 inches of my face to speak, they belittle me at some points, they poke me, customers will come up from behind and put their hands on my lower back or rub my back and speak very close...It's never ending."⁵³ As a survivor of repeated sexual assault, she explained that going through these "micro" aggressions every night exhausted her emotionally and mentally.⁵⁴ There were twenty comments on Dani's post, a relatively high number, considering the average amount of comments per post is four.⁵⁵ In the discussion, Dani talked about her difficulties navigating the situation. Her manager is her mother, and the bouncer is one of the people who harasses her. Because her position is unpaid, she can't switch with someone else who does paid work, either. She mentioned that her mom/manager knew about the sexual assaults, but she also said that the situation wasn't something she spoke about very much either. She explained in the comments "Thanks to all of you for sympathizing, that support really

⁵³ Post by Dani in *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat-blog, "Decateur St", Feb. 25, 2017.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Based on an informal survey of posts in the OOC throughout the month of March, 2017.

helps. Seriously makes a world of difference to keep hush about somethings *[sic]* and then vent and realize that it's more validated than I thought it was if that makes sense?"⁵⁶

Dani's situation of isolation sits at the intersection of several of the experiences that other members have expressed: invisible conditions (psychological trauma), experiences of internalized guilt, being in a position of silence, of marginalization, economic disparity, and the trauma of sexual violence against marginalized and sexualized bodies. "Keeping hush" about her experiences with sexual assault had convinced her that her resulting mental and emotional exhaustion from reliving her sexual trauma every time she worked were not valid and could not be indulged.⁵⁷ In fact, she remarked multiple times that she would try to "hold it out for a couple for months" until she moved to New York.

Several members had suggestions for ways to change the situation, including talking to her mother/manager about finding another position for her, and she admitted that looking for other solutions besides enduring until she moved hadn't occurred to her until reading the comments on her post. She's since been switched to a day-shift on weekends as supervisor.⁵⁸ In a personal message, she told me that "it was talking about it here [at *Vieux Noyés*] that made me realize i should bring it up in the first place!"⁵⁹

There are many discourses at work in this complex exchange, and not all of them have been challenged, let alone transformed, by the conversation that occurred. For example, rather than trying to prevent sexual harassment, all of the suggestions and the resulting actions taken on Dani's part revolved around ways in which she could remove herself from the immediate danger, and placed the impetus for change on Dani's shoulders as the one who had to instigate the

⁵⁶ Comment by Dani on her own post in *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat-blog, "*Decateur St*", Feb. 25, 2017.

⁵⁷ Post by Dani in *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat-blog, "*Decateur St*", Feb. 25, 2017.

⁵⁸ Post by Dani in *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat-blog, "*Decateur St*", Mar. 7, 2017.

⁵⁹ Personal message from Dani to me, Tumblr Messenger, Mar. 7, 2017.

difficult conversations which would result in change. She also remains in an unpaid position, though members remarked on the injustice of not being paid for her work.

However, two key transformations did occur throughout this exchange: first, Dani ultimately found a new position where the potential for sexual harassment was far less prevalent, and second, her anxiety and emotional-mental exhaustion was recognized and validated, changing her outlook on what was acceptable and endurable for her, motivating her to seek change. Having a space in which experiences of sexual violence can be talked about is something that impacts all of our members, and condemnations of the situation, suggestions, and invitations to talk change the ways in which we relate to the space and to one another. Four of our members have specified sexual-trauma-related triggers in their applications, and all four were very vocal about their support for Dani, despite expressing their difficulties in discussing the topic.

In both Dani's situation confronting sexual harassment and Kit's professed guilt at being ill, the borders of the OOC space, the roleplay game, and "real life"—life external to *Vieux Noyés*—have collapsed. The discourses fostered within the invisible, enclosed space of the OOC, are reiterated beyond the confines of our closed discussion threads, thereby opening the borders of the OOC's transformative abilities to society at large.

For hooks, the space on the margin is not a safe space, yet it is crucial to the act of reclamation, making-oneself-intelligible. "For me, this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance."⁶⁰ The members of *Vieux Noyés* are not located on the margin which hooks discusses in "Choosing the Margins," but that doesn't make the OOC space, or what happens there, less of a space of radical openness. Challenging the view-

⁶⁰ hooks, "Choosing the Margin," 149.

from-without, the constitutive outside, the enforced (in)visibility of the center, is the work of not only a community, but a community of resistance, in a space which allows for the fostering of art, literature, and creativity—all of which do important work in challenging discourses which shape the proper neoliberal subject. The OOC chat is a space where the stigmas and stereotypes of “real life” can be shed, where new names can be claimed, or “real” names reclaimed, where stories can be shared, and where difficult experiences can be validated and transformed. Subjecthood, rather than being dictated by societal norms, expectations, and stereotypes, is in the hands of members themselves.

This collective space of empathy, compassion, and solidarity, constituted through shared experiences of invisible conditions and illnesses is a space where members can discover, improvise, new ways of being and of experiencing themselves. These are political actions of resistance, and impact the way members live their “real lives” as evidenced by Dani. The distinction between what happens in the space of radical openness that is the OOC chat, and what is “real life” is not as stable as Tumblr users like to imply.

However, like the distinction between what is Tumblr and what is “real life,” what is radical about Tumblr roleplay is not so stable a delineation either. Tumblr RPs are intricately organized and carefully negotiated spaces, guided by rules and regulations that designate how the space is allowed to operate, and who has access. In the next section, I will complicate the analysis I have done in this chapter by using the concept of governmentality to analyze the function of the admins and the “Main” account in regulating the day-to-day activity of the roleplay, its members, prospective applicants, and the story in general. The OOC space, in turn, becomes the site of contestation in the search for the answer to the question: who has a right to the OOC space?

CHAPTER 3: REGULATING ROLEPLAY

In Chapter 2, I argued that the OOC chat space of *Vieux Noyés RP* constitutes what bell hooks calls a “space of radical openness,” a community space of resistance which challenges and transforms hegemonic discourses of the productive, healthy happy subject, producing alternative discourses in their stead.⁶¹ However, the space of the OOC chat must be contextualized in relation to the roleplay as well. The roleplay, like the corresponding OOC chat, is also a *closed* space; only the current players have access to the space, and access can be revoked by the administrators if members break the rules of the roleplay. In order to understand how the OOC chat space is framed, I use Thomas Lemke’s (2002) adaptation of Foucault’s concept of governmentality for analyzing the rules and management of the roleplay, and discuss their implications in shaping and delineating the roleplay space. I will then focus on how these rules function in deciding who has access to OOC chat, on what conditions, and what this regulation means for the OOC chat as a space of radical openness, as well as for the determination of members’ comportment within this space.

3.1 GOVERNMENTALITY

Governmentality is a way to conceptualize the mechanisms of power which work to discipline the conduct of an individual or individuals. In my analysis, I use this framework to look in-depth at the distribution of power within *Vieux Noyés RP*, and how this power frames out-of-character interactions. In his analysis of Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Thomas Lemke summarizes Foucault’s definition of government as follows:

⁶¹ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” In *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge: New York (1989).

In addition to the management by the state or the administration, ‘government’ also signified problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc. For this reason, Foucault defines government as conduct, or, more precisely, as ‘the conduct of conduct’ and thus as a term which ranges from ‘governing the self’ to ‘governing others.’⁶²

Lemke argues that governmentality is concerned with the understanding of interactions between technologies of the self and technologies of power, and how these technologies are co-determined.⁶³ Foucault states that the act of governing people is “not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself [*sic*].”⁶⁴ Technologies of power are therefore the mechanisms through which the conduct of individuals is controlled, and technologies of the self are the ways in which individuals discipline themselves to fit within what is deemed the appropriate conduct in order to be recognizable as a ‘proper’ subject (this deeming of appropriate conduct is itself a technology of the self).⁶⁵ I will use this framework for studying the system of rules and technologies of administering at *Vieux Noyés RP* in order to explore how the technologies of power at work in the roleplay serve to inform and shape technologies of the self, mainly by inscribing members’ interactions with a system of values and expectations that delineate appropriate conduct in the roleplay.

3.2 RULES, REGULATIONS, AND THE ADMIN TEAM

⁶² Lemke, Thomas. “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique.” *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 50.

⁶³ Ibid. 51.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of Hermeneutics of the Self,” ed. Mark Blasius, *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 203-204.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst (1988): 18.

The admin team of any roleplay is the authoritative power, responsible for creating and enforcing the rules. The creator(s) of the roleplay almost always hold(s) the position of admin by default, though some roleplays will also hold auditions for additional admins, sometimes looking for a specific skillset the original admin doesn't have (for example, graphic design or HTML coding), or just to assist with the day-to-day maintenance of the roleplay. The admin team is not democratically elected, and cannot be 'ousted' by members, especially if the admin in question played any role in creating or designing any original content within the roleplay. Members who dislike the actions or decisions of admins typically decide to leave the RP. On one occasion in a different RP in which I was a member but not an admin, enough members complained about the actions of two admins (out of three) that both admins in question eventually decided to leave of their own volition. However, several of the concerned members left as well. There are pages that monitor and recommend roleplays which sometimes have "roleplay blacklists" to which people can submit roleplays that are dissatisfactory. If a roleplay makes it to one of these pages, the admins have usually already refused to address the issues which they are accused of. These 'blacklists' can impact the amount of people willing to apply for that roleplay due to the ostracization of the group by the greater roleplay community, and the roleplay often becomes inactive, or 'dies,' as a result.

In *Vieux Noyés RP*, the admin team consists of three members, Rose, Rimsha, and myself, and we designed and built the roleplay together. All three admins have been a part of the project since the beginning, and at the moment of writing have no intentions of adding anyone to the admin team. Each of us has a character in the roleplay and we are responsible for maintaining regular activity and interacting with as many characters as we can reasonably sustain at any given time.

As admins, we instilled our values and expectations in the rules and application form for prospective applicants from the outset and we reiterate them through different mechanisms in our day-to-day administrative duties. *Vieux Noyés RP* is an application-based roleplay, which means that in order to participate, a roleplayer must first submit an application for their desired character, and subsequently be accepted by the admins. As admins, we are particularly rigorous with our acceptance process, requiring an unusually complex application procedure that often entails asking applicants for an additional writing sample or to revisit certain questions if we, the admins, are unsure of the applicants' portrayal of the character for which they apply or their dedication to the roleplay. This style of application and acceptance process is atypical in the RP community at the time of writing. The current trend in the roleplaying world is moving away from application-based literate RPs, toward 'appless' one-liner-style RPs. We designed our application process specifically to appeal to those roleplayers who were looking for a literate roleplay that emphasized character development as its top priority story-wise. This said, we deny applications fairly regularly, even applications that come from current members looking for a second or third character. It is through this process that the technologies of power are at work in the roleplay and first begin to shape the technologies of self which govern (prospective) members and through which (prospective) members govern themselves.

It is important to discuss the application and acceptance process as this process controls who has access to *Vieux Noyés RP*, and as a result, the OOC chat, which is linked to new members upon acceptance. In designing our application and rules, we deliberately accentuated certain expectations and made clear the values that were most important to us: in-depth engagement with specificities of the universe of *Vieux Noyés RP*,⁶⁶ a focus on character

⁶⁶ Our "universe," or simply "verse," is the story and history we are setting up, but also the in-story rules of how this world works and what is possible within such a world (for example, how does magic work? How do different

development outside of romantic relationships, dedicated and consistent activity, and the fostering and encouragement of a welcoming and warm OOC community.

Additionally, we have a place within the application for applicants to confirm that they have read the rules. There is a tendency within the greater roleplay community for admins to hide a password within the text of the rules that needs to be mentioned at a particular point in the course of the application in order to be accepted. By hiding the password, prospective applicants have to read the entire page to find it, supposedly ensuring that the content is read all the way through. *Vieux Noyés RP*, however, does not employ this method, instead directly asking applicants if they have read the rules. The password method seemed condescending to us (the admins) as we were designing the rules, and we decided it better suited the tone we were trying to achieve by taking applicants at their word. Nevertheless, the majority of applicants take care to mention that they have read the rules (often several times) but didn't see a password, and if it is there, they will go back and read the rules again to find it. Their queries attest to their familiarity with the RP world. This strategy has been so effusive throughout the roleplay community that it has had a panopticon-like effect in disciplining and encouraging self-discipline in prospective applicants, despite the fact that nowhere do we mention requiring a password or have a password listed. This is a prime example of technologies of the self at work informed by the technologies of power that discipline the wider roleplay community.

The requirement that the rules must be acknowledged has several functions that shape the possible interactions in the space of the roleplay. It invests authority in the admins to enforce the rules listed, and that transgressions of these rules can be considered grounds for removal from

species work?). Our verse differs from our sources texts in many ways, and occasionally prospective applicants who are applying for a popular character which they have played in other roleplays, will ignore the changes we have made to the character, or fail to draw in aspects of the world we designed. This indicates to us whether or not they have spent time researching the roleplay.

the group. Because of this requirement, it is less meaningful that applicants actually read the rules, a requirement we cannot enforce without using the password system. Rather, this requirement of acknowledgment grants the admins the power to enforce consequences should the rules be broken, as members have told us they read the rules and had no protests.

The wording of the rules within *Vieux Noyés* is such that it characterizes the admins as benevolent enforcers, using the rules as strict but necessary guidelines for the creation (re: construction) of a respectful and caring space. For example, here is the phrasing of the rule about OOC drama: “OOO drama will not be tolerated in any way, shape or form. You will receive a warning if you are caught instigating or promoting such behaviour. Repeat offenders will be removed from the group.”⁶⁷ The meaning of ‘OOO drama’ is assumed to be evident to applicants; here, it refers to rude behavior, bullying, fighting, the formation of cliques (also referred to as ‘bubble RPin’ in which members only engage in writing with specific members), and other malicious interactions. However, the vagueness of the wording allows the admins the ability to decide what constitutes this behavior on an *ad hoc* basis. Additionally, the word choice of this particular rule is articulated through judiciary vocabulary— ‘warning,’ ‘instigating,’ ‘repeat offenders’—which reifies the authority of the admins and positions the reader (potential applicants) as ‘transgressor’ of the law and order of the RP, at the same time legitimizing the disciplining decisions of the admins. However, it is immediately followed by the extract below to mitigate the power evoked by the potential threat of removal:

That said, we understand that issues do arise and we are 100% dedicated to helping each and every one of our roleplayers feel comfortable and happy in this group. All we ask is that members who have an issue either about other rpers or regarding something else in the rp come speak with us in private about their

⁶⁷ “The Rules,” <http://vieuxnoyesrp.tumblr.com/rules>, accessed April 2, 2017.

concerns. We promise that we will do everything in our power to help you and resolve the issue, so long as no unnecessary drama is created in the process.⁶⁸

The above section functions to soften the unforgiving tone of the previous item and does the work of establishing the admins as kind and thoughtful entities, happy to mediate any and all issues. Yet, it also serves to interject the admins between unhappy or unsatisfied members, therefore authorizing the admins to control how the situation is framed. There is no mechanism through which we can enforce this, except making it clear that we are available as mediators. The assumption is that if it is satisfactorily dealt with between members without admin interference, it's not a large enough issue to warrant our attention. In *Vieux Noyés*, we aim to use the power we wield to diffuse uncomfortable situations, but to do so is obviously in our benefit.

An exchange between an anxious member, Kelly, and the Main account highlights the benefits of admin intervention (for members, but also for the admins). Kelly had a problem with another member, Kitty, who had given her some critique on her portrayal of her character and offered advice on how to portray her more accurately. It sparked anxiety and discomfort for Kelly, who sent an anonymous message to the Main account, stating that she felt uncomfortable in the roleplay and was thinking of quitting. However, following the anonymous message, she approached the admins of her own volition to tell us of the situation. After a few exchanges in which one of the admins, Rose, assured her that she was right to approach us and not to feel guilty about bringing the situation to our attention, Kelly responded with “You guys are amazing and I love it here. I do and I knew that [coming to the admins directly] was the best way to do it than be a coward. Thank you!”⁶⁹ For us, this message signaled a departure from her original assertion that it was the roleplay—the content, the story, the methods we use to move the story

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Personal message from Kelly to the Main account, Tumblr Messenger, Dec, 21, 2016.

forward—which had made her uncomfortable, and was instead the result of one specific individual’s—Kitty’s—comments. This difference was key to us as it located the responsible parties. For the admin team, having the roleplay as a whole accused of making someone feel uncomfortable is a huge problem to address. Soothing one member’s worries is much easier for us to handle.

For the Admin team, this was a tricky moment. Rereading the admin chat about the complaint, we felt Kelly had over-reacted to the message from Kitty, and we knew from similar situations in the past of her predisposition toward insecurity. However, we also felt that Kitty had been out of place in making the comment regardless, despite the fact that it was a polite exchange. Making decisions for characters which you do not have direct control over is very taboo within the roleplay world, and can be considered grounds for removal from a group, including *Vieux Noyés*, particularly if it happens within the characters’ exchanges (this is known as “god moderating’ or god-modding’). The admin chat commenting on the stream of events shows the thought process of navigating the situation and how we as admins justify the need for our intervention into sensitive interactions. It also illuminates the intersection of the technologies of power (our authority as admins to decide what is appropriate behavior for members, and what are appropriate reactions to specific situations) and technologies of the self (Kelly approaching us with her concerns and subsequently dropping them once reassured by a higher authority than Kitty, Kitty feeling authorized as though she had a right to inform Kelly how her character should behave). Ultimately, the Kitty/Kelly conversation became rationalization for our status as intermediaries, and the best (and only) voice entitled to navigate tense situations with tact—note the other admin, Rimsha’s praise within the private admin chat for how Rose handled the situation:

Rimsha

Okay I know this is about Kelly
but I just wanna take a moment to say
that I'm seriously impressed by how you're handling this
And like you, i'm not pleased either that others are telling her how to portray her character.
I think if anyone has their qualms they should be coming to us

Rose

yeah but to play devil's advocate just between us;
i also don't think kitty's comment was demanding or rude enough or w/e to warrant that kind of an
insecure 'trigger-quit' reaction from kelly
so i think that's also problematic on kelly's side. not that i'm judging her for her insecurity, but
like, i think that's part of the problem
kitty may have just meant it as a head's up
or fyi
but she took it as criteism
idk
but yeah, it's not kitty's place regardless

Rimsha

Yeah you're right about that too. I do think she tends to be oversensitive

Rose

and i'm trying to tread carefully cause we all know kelly is sensitive

Rimsha

Yeah
I do agree with that point
but that's all the more reason I feel like, people should come to us
because I feel like not everything goes over well directly⁷⁰

In the conversation that followed, Rimsha and Rose discuss the position of Kitty and Kelly after acting upon the situation. They agreed that they were right to consider both members out-of-line in the name of reasonable conduct in the situation. They also agreed that Rose would have to reassure Kelly that she was conducting her character correctly and that she was right to approach us directly with her concerns. While doing so, Rose would ask Kelly not to send in anonymous messages when she was feeling uncomfortable, because the admins could not step in to fix the situation if the message was anonymous:

⁷⁰ A conversation in the *Vieux Noyés* admin group chat, Google Hangouts, Dec. 21, 2016.

vieuxnoyesrp

it also is a little disconcerting for US as admins, to receive an anon⁷¹ about a complaint, and not know, like, who to turn to, how to help, what to do...

It's stressful not because we can't take criticism - because we're 110% open to that - but because we can't HELP unless we know who needs the help.

So it stresses us out to know someone might be feeling sad or anxious, and we have no control no information to do anything about it.⁷²

In this interaction, Rose (who is speaking through the Main account) establishes the admins as a positive force, “helpers,” and also uses language which instils guilt (talking about how Kelly’s message was disconcerting, how it stressed us out) in order to dissuade Kelly from similar action in the future. This is motivated by a desire to lessen situations of distress proactively, and to maintain an atmosphere of friendship and happiness, but it is executed by mobilizing technologies of the self which rely on guilt, shame and self-policing to be effective.

3.3 “ACTIVITY CHECK”

Similarly to the incident between Kelly and Kitty, there are many instances related to the OOC chat and the norms of conduct which are centered around that space, which have illuminated the power structures and technologies of control at work in the roleplay. The interconnectivity of the game, the rules, and the OOC with the roleplay itself has created interesting dilemmas for us, the admin team, when confronted with situations which we had not prepared for when putting together the rules. These three realms of the roleplay are not easily separated from one another as they are actively and continually co-constituted. While we, the admins, prepared for many of the situations we would have to deal with once *Vieux Noyés* had opened (how to confront inactivity, how we had envisaged the OOC space to function, rejected applications, etc.), much of the work that we do on a day-to-day basis is negotiating amongst

⁷¹ “Anon” is short for anonymous, used as a label which refers to both the person sending in anonymous message, and the anonymous message itself.

⁷² Personal message from the Main account to Kelly, Tumblr Messenger, Dec, 21, 2016.

ourselves how to handle situations for which we could not anticipate. Our conversations within the private admin chat typically revolve around trying to figure out what a policy should look like, and how to keep it consistent with how we run the rest of the roleplay and the values which guide us to these decisions. The most fraught negotiations center on players' activity (the frequency and consistency of replies), players' contributions to the continued building of the universe, and the OOC chat.

Activity is arguably the most commonly invoked and transgressed rule that roleplays have. By "activity," I am referring to the number and consistency of replies that members post within a certain amount of days. Because Tumblr roleplay is interactive, when one person stops replying to their threads, it halts storylines that other players' characters may be relying on, which is why activity is so central to the rules of the roleplay. At *Vieux Noyés*, members are allowed to go three days without posting before they are tagged in an "activity check," an announcement posted on the Main account, which notifies members that they have two additional days to contact the Main account before they are considered inactive and thus forfeit their spot in the roleplay.

In order to offset the rigorous nature of this commitment, members are allowed (and encouraged) to apply for a hiatus if they suspect they will be absent for more than three days. This is to notify the admins that they are not abandoning the RP, and that they intend to return to the roleplay once whatever interruption they are dealing with has passed. Hiatuses typically range from a few days to two weeks long, though we have granted hiatuses of a month or more in special circumstances.

Activity checks and hiatuses are important regulatory mechanisms for maintaining regular activity. They allow the admins to be rigorous in enforcing the rules, while also allowing

flexibility and compromise when called for. Activity is the most prominent prerequisite for continued access to the roleplay, and when a member is deemed inactive, they are “unfollowed,” (kicked out). When a member is unfollowed, access to the OOC chat is revoked and their character is re-categorized into the section of ‘open characters’ which prospective applicants are invited to browse when selecting the character they wish to apply for. Thus, as admins, we are wary of members who try to take advantage of hiatuses, or become “flaky” with their activity.

In February of 2017, we had a member who had been with us for several months, Wills, who came to us to drop his character, because of some upheaval in his life he was having trouble sorting out. His character was re-opened, and he was removed from the OOC. Shortly after he sent us a message, asking if there was any way he could continue to be involved in the roleplay in a manner which would be less time-intensive than holding a character. We, the admins, suggested that he contribute to the “newspaper” we run, an idea which he readily accepted. However, a few days later he asked if he was still allowed to post in the OOC, and we quickly realized that it wasn’t an easy answer and all three of us disagreed drastically about what Wills had a right to. Here is an excerpt from that conversation:

Rose

on the topic of wills
initially i was leaning towards sure, let him stay on the ooc
but reading what you wrote rim
i'm beginning to wonder too if that's fair to other rpers who leave

Kailey

But also guys he's not leaving

Rose

like why they can't just go 'you know what, i want to contribute too once in a blue moon so i can stay on the ooc'

Kailey

But they ARENT contributing even once in a blue moon
And didn't make the effort to come [up] with ways to stay involved

Rimsha

Yeah but he isn't involved either

Kailey

He is still a part of the RP and I'm not sure I feel comfortable excluding him from that space

Rimsha

I just think it's unfair. I was okay with it at first too. But I just don't want people to misunderstand and think that we give special treatment to anyone

[...]

people should actually be involved in the RP on a consistent basis

To also be part of the ooc

And unless we come up with like a monthly or by-weekly plan where he posts some sort of article through the paper I just think it's special treatment

Kailey

I don't see it as special treatment

Rimsha

He wanted to stay involved on a minimal basis btw cuz he doesn't have time

Kailey

I see it as he is putting in effort to build this world he should be allowed access to the community of support that surrounds it⁷³

While also illuminating a discrepancy between the rules that grant access to the RP, and the rules which grant access to the OOC, the conversation came to revolve around what kind of contribution to the roleplay is worthwhile, and how that contribution can be evaluated. In terms of governmentality, we were faced with a difficult decision about what rights and access we owe our members, and more pressingly, *who* we consider to be a member.

This discussion occurred precisely at the juncture of governmentality: the intersection of technologies of power and technologies of the self. By coming to the admins and seeking clarification of his rights, Wills acknowledged that (a) his status within the roleplay, and therefore his entitlements in relationship to it, has changed; (b) this change of identity impacts his rights of access to community spaces; and (c) we the admins have the authority to decide

⁷³ A conversation in the *Vieux Noyés* admin group chat, Google Hangouts, Feb. 22, 2017.

what his rights are and to control access to community spaces. This interaction is governmentality at work. Wills had invested in our authority as admins to dictate proper conduct and accordingly, we had to negotiate what rights we would extend to him, based on what category of identity both he and through his deferral to us, we, had now assigned to him. We ultimately decided on a majority two-to-one vote that he could retain his access to the OOC, though Rimsha never agreed with the terms we set.

In light of these mechanisms at work, we must consider what the use of these technologies mean for the OOC chat as a space of radical openness. Can a space be radically open if the conditions of entry are predicated on productivity? How does it impact the radical openness of a space if that productivity is the basis for what is understood as the collective betterment of that shared space?

Despite being central to the functioning of the OOC chat space, these are not questions that the three of us admins agree on, and negotiations between the three of us on how to compromise our differing stances into one coherent policy are very telling about how politically charged the stakes are. Often, despite our best efforts to maintain constructive dialogue, the conversations get heated, and what began as a discussion devolves into an argument, particularly when one of the three of us is the subject. Take, for instance, a conversation about a hiatus request I made in the week before a deadline for one of the chapters of this thesis. I was already on semi-hiatus (which means I was still expected to post semi-regularly, but not held accountable on activity checks if this became unmanageable), and I asked to be moved to a full hiatus for the next week because I would not be able to commit to regular posts. Rose agreed with the following message:

Rose
also that's okay kailey, just do your best

and good luck with the presentation prep
also one reply at a time (just read your ooc message) is a-okay
even if you have time for more than one reply per day, i'd say don't take it for now
like aim for one a day and then beyond that use any extra time to give yourself a mental break

Kailey

I don't know if I can do one a day
for the next few days at least
like this is me saying like an actual hiatus
but after my presentation i should be back to where i was

Rose

oh i thought cause of what you said on the OOC you meant you'd try to do a single reply at a time
throughout this period
and then go back to regular activity

Kailey

I will try to do replies if I have time
but i'm not committing to posting every day
just until monday
but i'm on hiatus for this reason

Rose

yeayea i know that's okay
though like, one reply a day shouldn't take much time right? no pressure for you to commit to it,
i'm not saying it for that reason, just realistically speaking, it's not a huge chunk of time
just a general remark, not specifically for you to do it this time⁷⁴

According to my understanding, what Rose was asking me voided the purpose of a hiatus at all, since I would still be expected to post, not only regularly, but daily. In the course of the conversation-turned-argument, it came about that both Rose and Rimsha agreed that as admins, we have to set a precedent to other members, which means that there are different expectations of activity for admins. Rimsha pointed out that in comparison with the difficulties other members are facing (running a business, having cancer, being a working parent) my “excuse of studies no longer cut it as a rule when people like Kit, and kitty and so many of our other rpers despite their situations put in the effort to get consistent activity [*sic*].”⁷⁵ Again, concerns about activity,

⁷⁴ A conversation in the *Vieux Noyés* admin group chat, Google Hangouts, Mar. 4, 2017.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

(which amounts to productivity), contributions, and commitment manifest themselves in such a way that they speak to both the *ad hoc* process of policy-making for the RP, as well as judgments about the integrity of my request and my role as an admin. This is not to say that the concerns raised in the course of the conversation were not valid and worthy of consideration; rather, they functioned as mechanisms which worked to influence my own relationship with the roleplay. The technologies of power imposed in this conversation spoke directly to technologies of the self, *my* self, impacting the way I acted to better fit the model of member and admin that was being touted.

For example, the conversation quoted above caused me much sense of guilt as I tried to come up with an alternative solution (I offered to drop my character, but that was not a favorable option for either my co-admins, or I) that would allow me the leeway I needed but not put me in the position of being hypocritical as an admin. I felt somewhat slighted, like my co-admins considered me a liar about the demands on my health and time in my offline life. I felt like I was being held to different standards from my peers and held to unrealistic expectations about how much was reasonable for me to be contributing when on hiatus. Despite this, the agreement we arrived at, which I suggested, was that I would maintain regular activity as much as possible, and would be granted short-term hiatuses as needed. It is telling that I suggested “regular activity speckled with hiatuses” and Rose later quoted that as “regular activity speckled with the odd hiatus,” a small change but quite meaningful semantically: I should understand that the hiatuses I request in the future should be few and far between, which is a very different message from the regularity I meant to invoke with the words “speckled with hiatuses”.⁷⁶ Ultimately, I deferred to my co-admins’ authority. I adjusted my daily schedule to fit time for roleplaying in with thesis

⁷⁶ Ibid.

writing and health difficulties. Because both my co-admins are six hours behind me, I often stayed up until early in the morning, sometimes four or five AM, to converse with them about different admin situations and to write my replies so that I would be maintaining regular activity, which seriously altered my sleep schedule and my ability to focus on my schoolwork. These are the technologies of the self at work in restructuring my day-to-day life in order to better designate myself as member, re: a meaningful contributor, to the roleplay.

The mechanisms of governmentality at work in the roleplay demonstrated above serve to undermine the claims I have made in previous chapters of the OOC as a space of radical openness—here, rather than adjusting for the circumstances of my life outside of *Vieux Noyés*, I was called into question and set to a more vigorous standard than is expected of members, based on my previous lack of activity and my position as admin, *and* I agreed to the terms set forth. Rather than challenging discourses of value dependent on productivity, this discussion reinforced them, and also introduced hierarchies of what counted as acceptable reasons for inactivity and what was simply “making excuses.”⁷⁷

However, governmentality also functions to moderate the roleplay space in a particular way that is intended by the admins to create a welcoming environment, ensuring that it remains conducive to the promotion of collaboration and creativity as alluded to in the example of Kelly and Kitty. In a similar function to the careful negotiation of Kelly’s feelings and anxiety with what we deemed to be an appropriate response, our rules are designed to foster a space conducive to community. For example, the reason most commonly cited by members who are leaving roleplay groups is “lack of muse,” or lack of inspiration, which occurs most frequently when the roleplay is stagnating, that is when replies are slow and the OOC chat is quiet for a

⁷⁷ Ibid.

long duration of time, usually more than a week or two. The rules of *Vieux Noyés* were designed specifically to encourage participation in a holistic manner—we strove to encourage activity not only in-character (which is the main focus) but also in the OOC realm. We didn't only want an active and welcoming OOC chat, but we also wanted to see members interacting with one another's threads, commenting on the stories that were unfolding and cheering each other on to bolster a sense of community among the group:

- Members are highly encouraged to interact with each other on the ooc blog. We have a no one gets left behind mentality in this rp. When someone posts a message on the ooc blog, please do not ignore or wait for someone else to answer. Everyone should acknowledge and make an effort to interact with everyone else, be it IC [in-character] or in the OOC blog. There is no room here for cliques.
- All members are also encouraged to give our newcomers a super warm welcome. And all newbies are encouraged to reach out to current members for plots, ideas, etc. If you're feeling shy, message the admins, we'd be happy to help! :D⁷⁸

Building a 'community' is "encouraged" in the core of the technologies of power that frame the roleplay, and is then actively fostered through technologies of the self by the admins as we conduct ourselves in a manner that we wish the rest of the members to emulate. The sense of community, which is so central to our members, is constructed actively, but that is not to say that it is less valid a community space for that fact. The regulatory function of the admins in *Vieux Noyés* works to diffuse tension, to mediate uncomfortable situations and to promote an active and inspiring dashboard.

The analyses of this chapter, applying of Foucault's technologies of power and of the self, illuminate another dimension to the processes of subjectification discussed in Chapter 2. Take for example Figure 4, Kit's post about being hospitalized and feeling guilty for their

⁷⁸ "The Rules," <http://vieuxnoyesrp.tumblr.com/rules>, accessed April 10, 2017.

inactivity.⁷⁹ The illness-as-badness stigma works as a mechanism of control dictating what appropriate behavior is for Kit in this situation: they should not only apologize for the situation of their health and its impact on their activity, over which they have no control, but they should also feel the appropriate amount of remorse and guilt in reaction. The negative sentiment associated with the lack of activity and poor health serves to dissuade Kit from recreating that situation, despite the fact that such situations are out of their control, and also informs the actions and reactions of other members who may find themselves in similar situations in the future. The technologies of the self here shape the ways in which members understand their place and responsibilities within the roleplay, and how that intersects with their day-to-day lives. This works in counter to the comments of members which were analyzed in the last chapter, which attempted (but notably did not necessarily succeed) to convince Kit that they did not need to feel guilty and should instead use the time to rest and recover. Their last comment was, as previously quoted, “I am resting, I promise. I just feel bad haha.”⁸⁰ It’s hard to account for how much difference the alternative discourses of “health before productivity” made for Kit, but in the end, guilt still played a role in shaping their response.

Ultimately, governmentality informs all of the conduct of members in *Vieux Noyés*, and thus also frames the spaces we inhabit, dictating appropriate behavior in the OOC and what interactions between members should look like. In light of the emphasis on productivity and contribution in order to gain access to the OOC chat, and the constructed nature of proper interactions between members, what does this mean for the claim that the OOC space is indeed a space of radical openness? In the next chapter I will explore how the analyses of the past two

⁷⁹ Kit identifies as non-binary and uses they/them/their pronouns.

⁸⁰ Comments by members on Kit’s post, in the *Vieux Noyés RP* OOC chat-blog, *Decateur-St*, Mar. 1, 2017.

chapters co-exist in informing the OOC space of *Vieux Noyés RP* as a space of transformative potential.

CHAPTER 4: REFLECTIONS ON REGULATION AND RADICAL OPENNESS

bell hooks' essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" examines what she calls "spaces of radical openness," drawing attention to the contradiction, precarity, and tension of these spaces of resistance in the margins. She says "for me, this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe place. One is always at risk.'"⁸¹ In this chapter, I focus on the tensions within my analysis, using this space to ruminate on the difficulties I have faced in my research: in applying theory, in situating myself in relation to the claims I have made, and in exploring *Vieux Noyés RP*, a space which is incredibly dear to me, a space which may not be unilaterally empowering but is instead a complex, dynamic space fraught with power relations.

Thus far in my analysis, I have examined the Tumblr roleplay group *Vieux Noyés RP* using two distinct frameworks: bell hooks' concept of spaces of radical openness,⁸² and Thomas Lemke's articulation of Foucault's concept of governmentality.⁸³ Though applied to the same online community and space, each framework helped me to focus on different aspects of the roleplay. hooks' concept of spaces of radical openness invokes a space that challenges normative hegemonic discourses and generates alternatives, through the act of creation, of collective imagination. The OOC chat of *Vieux Noyés RP*, when seen through hooks' concept, is a space in which members feel comfortable being vulnerable, a space in which these vulnerabilities are legitimated by other members. What makes vulnerability acceptable is the fact that the existing norms (of ability, of silence, of proper productive capability and guilt) are critiqued and supplanted as members share their moments of vulnerability and the group comes together to

⁸¹ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," In *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge: New York (1989): 148-149.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lemke, Thomas. "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique." *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 49-64.

discuss. Lemke's articulation of Foucault's governmentality emphasizes mechanisms of discipline and the ways in which power is exercised in order to insure proper conduct and thus discipline individual's interactions. In *Vieux Noyés RP*, the admins, as the authoritative body, are empowered through mechanisms of discipline, which make possible the regulation of members' conduct within out-of-character interactions and shape and manage the overall atmosphere of the roleplay group for members.

At first glance, the rigidity of a regulatory framework contradicts the organization of the radically open space that hooks paints for us in so far as it is a space that resists regulatory hegemonic discourses and challenges the mechanisms that dictate "proper" conduct. While doing my analysis, I assumed these two theories would function in opposition to each other. What I was surprised to find was that it was precisely their tension that could bring about a space that sat at the intersection of the potential and the limitations of radicality.⁸⁴

While not always in sync with each other, these two frameworks do not necessarily work at cross-purposes. Technologies of power and of the self are not inherently oppressive. Rather, the potential for both oppressive and subversive effects lies in the articulation of these mechanisms enacted by the admins, who are authorized to enforce those mechanisms and whose authorization is accepted by the players on entering the roleplay. In some instances, the admin team mobilized these mechanisms to provide the structural support for a space of radical openness to continue to exist, such as when we mediated Kelly's concerns about Kitty's criticisms.⁸⁵ However, the analyses of the previous chapters also highlight discrepancies, which undermine claims to radicality. Enforcement of the rule regarding activity, for example, serves to re-inscribe discourses of productivity and contribution. By reading the concepts of

⁸⁴ Gratitude to Nadia Jones-Gailani for her insightful comments on this subject.

⁸⁵ See page 49 for more on this discussion.

governmentality and spaces of radical openness together, in dialogue with each other, I will explore how the contradictions and discrepancies can or cannot work together, and exist simultaneously in the same space. Such an analysis will allow me to explore my position in relation to hooks' theory, and reflect on my relationship to the center and margin, as member, admin, and researcher.

4.1. MARGINALITY AND GOVERNMENTALITY

hooks' conceptualization of spaces of radical openness is embedded in a discussion of hegemony and resistance to oppression. As her essay evolves, hooks' substantiates her arguments with anecdotes from her life narrative about in order to exemplify what living on the margin means. She speaks about crossing the railroad tracks in her small Kentucky town every day to enter a world in which black Americans were only allowed to provide services to white Americans, a world they were not allowed to *stay and live* in, but had to leave each day to cross the tracks back into their marginalized space. She says:

There were laws to ensure our return. Not to return was to risk being punished. Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing... We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both... Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.

This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional world-view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.⁸⁶

This quote is helpful to understand how spaces of radical openness function within mechanisms of governmentality, how members positioned on the edge use those same mechanisms to

⁸⁶ Ibid. 149.

reinforce their solidarity with the margin. In the quote, hooks describes how the codes of conduct which dictated who had the right to what space and in which capacity, were the catalysts for cultivating an oppositional world-view. This travel from margin to center and back necessitated understanding the technologies of power at work in the center, therefore making space for opposition. As hooks says, marginality was also “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”⁸⁷ In this way, mechanisms of governmentality frame spaces of radical openness even as they establish and enforce the distinctions between margin and center.

But does this juncture of governmentality and radical openness hold when applied to *Vieux Noyés RP*? In the discussion of marginality in Chapter 2, I established that a key instance of marginality was experienced by members through the lens of able-bodiedness, through invisible illnesses and conditions which function through technologies of the self to designate specific ways of being as improper, unhealthy, and imperfect according to neoliberal norms of productive capability. Importantly, however, as these ways of being are for the most part invisible, they function as a drastically different margin than that which hooks’ refers to. While hooks’ distinction between center and margin relied on a visible marker of difference (that of ‘skin color’), the less visible conditions (depression, anxiety, chronic illness, experiences of trauma) often allow people who experience them to “pass” as part of an appropriately able-bodied center. Yet at the same time, common discourses about what living with such conditions must be like (intolerable, pitiable), and what people living with these conditions must be like (depending on the condition anywhere from brave (cancer) to lazy (chronic pain) to selfish (depression and anxiety)) impose normative expectations of healthiness and productivity onto the members who experience these conditions, often ostracizing the members and alienating them

⁸⁷ Ibid.

from the appropriately able-bodied center. This dual knowledge of margin and center parallels the travelling back and forth which hooks speaks of. In hooks' case, while black Americans could travel between both places, they were never understood to belong the center, only to *serve* the center. In this instance, however, roleplay members often feel the pressure of the technologies of power and of the self that function in both the margin and center, as they are simultaneously understood as belonging to both spaces. This discrepancy between the two cases is meaningful in that for hooks' this travelling-between created the impetus for an oppositional mindset. In the case of the roleplay, rather than travelling-between, the margin and center are overlaid on one another, superimposing the expectations of the norms of both places on one body. Within *Vieux Noyés*, it is this double standard of expectations that is the catalyst for a shared oppositional mindset. Through the discussions of members' moments of vulnerability, the resonation of experiences result in a support network which upholds the possibility for alternative discourses, thereby challenging the normative expectations, as discussed in Chapter 2.

hooks states "it was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits and the way one lives."⁸⁸ Despite working in different ways, the convergence of center and margin is felt in both hooks' and my own application of her concept, with solidarity in the space of openness as the result. Key to this observation is the possibility for the existence of multiple margins and centers, a point to which I will shortly return.

4.2 REFLECTING ON THE MARGIN AND CENTER AS RESEARCHER

⁸⁸ Ibid.

In addition to the members' experiences, equally important to consider is my own experience of margin and center, belonging to neither and both at the same time. As an auto-ethnographer, I cannot ignore my own position as researcher in applying these theories. As both member and researcher, my position crosses the boundaries of online and offline life. Though racialized experiences are not a primary marginalizing dimension within *Vieux Noyés*, it does factor into my personal experiences offline. In conducting this research, I enable certain power structures, like the neoliberal US-style Western-centric higher education system, and yet also attempt to belie this system through the methods with which I conduct my research, and the content which I deem as "researchable." hooks speaks about spaces of radical openness and marginality from the position of a black American woman who lived through segregation and the daily racisms of living in the United States. I am a white, middle-class native English-speaking graduate student, studying in Europe and working with an online community in which characteristics like 'skin color' do not immediately enter in my day-to-day interactions with members of *Vieux Noyés*. This tension between offline and online modes of differentiation is an important consideration in the ways I apply hooks' concept in my research.

While writing this thesis, I struggled immensely with my application (perhaps appropriation?) of hooks' theory, uncomfortable with how blatantly removed from the experience of life as a black American my analysis was. I am uncomfortable with trying to "compare" one experience of marginality with another, attempting to hierarchize these experiences, or delimit one experience as "just as marginal" as another. I tried to avoid such comparisons and instead apply hooks' concept to a situation which bore parallels as a means of fleshing out more scenarios in which the idea of spaces of radical openness could be used to illuminate the mechanisms, the particular technologies of power, at work. It is an uneasy joining;

I feel my place in the center, the white woman scholar from the United States, and I see how easily this can become a “trendy” claim to marginality, a kind of “but, me too” appropriation. And yet, I feel equally uneasy dismissing my experiences of improperly-able-bodiedness, the margin on which I identify myself as well as the members of *Vieux Noyés RP*.

As she closes her essay, hooks states

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the “Other,” to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak. Often this speech about the “Other” is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. This ‘we’ is that ‘us’ in the margins, that ‘we’ who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space.⁸⁹

My uneasy identification with the space which hooks’ describes is somewhat eased by the knowledge that I do not speak of an “Other” in my analysis, but rather from my own experience, and the first-hand experience of a space, a group, to which I belong. I do not attempt to speak over or silence the voices in the margins as an authority of knowledge, but rather I try to explore, to learn from the experiences and conversations I have had with my friends in order to understand the importance of the space that we share, and the work which is being done within it. I do not know if I succeed, if I “enter that space.” Nevertheless, this uneasy navigation feels like important work if I want to do justice to my research as auto/cyberethnographic work. To shy away from such a reflection is to pander to the center by pandering to the margin, and would decisively make the work I have done a work of appropriation. Rather, like the tension between radicality and regulation, the tension I feel within myself, of occupying both *a* center and *a* margin, can illuminate the fluidity and porousness of identity categories. My dual occupation of two supposedly mutually exclusive spaces is indicative that rather than compete, these

⁸⁹ Ibid. 151.

experiences can overlap and exist contemporaneously. Like hooks points out, the center relies on the margin, but likewise, the margin exists through the knowledge of the center.

What this reflection on my position reveals, however, is that the margin/center distinction can be delineated in different dimensions. hooks talks about ‘marginality’ and ‘the margins’ but does not expound on *what* makes a margin. She says that “understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people,” pointing out conditions which may demarcate marginality, but does not explore the myriad of experiences which may resonate with the margin of racialized and classed experience that she draws attention to. Understanding marginality to be heterogeneous and always in dialogue with mechanisms of power leaves room in hooks’ concept for flexibility and fluidity, making space for nuanced applications and interpretations. By outlining multiple margin/center distinctions within *Vieux Noyés RP*, and the ways in which they interact with technologies of power, the precarity of spaces of radical openness becomes apparent, as do the constant negotiations of regulation and resistance, serving to highlight the “profound edge” which constitutes such spaces.

4.3 LOCATING MARGINS AND CENTERS WITHIN VIEUX NOYÉS RP

In their multiplicity, margins and centers within *Vieux Noyés RP* frequently contribute to one another; the technologies of power and of the self that enforce the distinction between one margin and center, can crossover to another, reinforcing or drawing new distinctions in different dimensions.

This is a phenomenon I feel particularly in relation to my multiple identities within the roleplay group. The tensions I feel within myself regarding my positionality as researcher can also be articulated in the distinction between my position as member and admin of *Vieux Noyés*.

I occupy both of these positions; I have the authority to make the rules which can designate margins from centers, and yet through these very rules I can find myself relegated to a margin, as was the case in Chapter 3, when discussing my inability to maintain our activity standards.⁹⁰ This unease with my dual positionality within the roleplay manifests in several ways. My co-admins, Rose and Rimsha, and I frequently discuss the possibility that we could inadvertently make exceptions of ourselves or other members when it comes to the rules. We are very wary of this possibility, sensitive to the knowledge that perceived favoritism can create margins and centers by alienating those members which are not counted among the exceptions. In the instance above, regarding my ability to maintain activity standards, this wariness to exceptionality has manifested such that we admins are held to higher standards (by ourselves) regarding activity and participation, so that members do not get the impression that we hold ourselves above the rules. As someone with frequent health concerns and strict demands on my time, I struggled to meet these expectations, and keenly felt the frustration of my co-admins when I disappointed them. Technologies of the self (in this case: guilt, remorse, a desire to ‘do better’ so as to relieve the burden on my peers) dictated that, since I could not live up to the expectations and responsibilities which accompanied being an admin, I offer to relinquish the title. Knowledge of the consequences of drawing a center/margin distinction regarding who was bound by the rules, based along the lines of access to authority, informs the actions of the admin team. However, this same knowledge can result in a more definitively marked distinction in a different margin and center, as became the case regarding the expectations of admin activity.

The discussion of Kit (Figure 4) in Chapter 3, also demonstrates this co-constitution of multi-dimensional centers and margins; the experience of being on the margin of able-

⁹⁰ See page # for this discussion.

bodiedness invokes a sense of guilt regarding their activity, a different margin/center dimension, crossing the boundaries of offline/online experiences *and* the dimensions of center and margin. The activity requirement which Kit feels they do not meet in this situation, works to constitute a center/margin distinction within the roleplay by excluding those who cannot afford the time necessary to devote to writing. As mentioned in Chapter 3, activity is one of the main factors that are considered in regard to access to the roleplay. Even members who maintain enough activity to remain members, but still cannot be online daily, may find themselves on less familiar terms with the other members, cast from the center incidentally due to their absence. It is in this way that the distinctions between different dimensions of margin/center seem to be porous, permeable, spilling over into one another.

This permeability does not always result in a reinforcement of distinctions; it is not such a clear-cut path of cause and effect. Rather, there are instances in which these margin/center distinctions seem to at once reinforce and yet simultaneously contradict one another. Such is the case when considering language as a technology of power within *Vieux Noyés*, which functions to demarcate a center, and reinforce imperial hegemonies built upon the influence of the English language. As previously stated, one of the defining characteristics of *Vieux Noyés RP* is that it defines itself as “literate,” and “highly selective.” This implies that high command of English is a pre-requisite for joining, and with that in mind, open positions within the roleplay are competitive. We have a provision in our rules, which reads as follows:

This is a literate roleplay. We expect the proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. We will turn away applicants who do not fit our standards. That said, we understand that everyone makes typos and mistakes and that top-notch writing doesn’t come overnight. English isn’t everyone’s first language either, and we welcome non-native speakers.⁹¹

⁹¹ “The Rules,” <http://vieuxnoyesrp.tumblr.com/rules>, accessed May 11, 2017.

The qualifications which modify the sternness of the rule do little linguistically-speaking to suspend the binding force of the initial statements, though they may do the work of providing symbolic comfort to those concerned about their ability to write at a high enough level. We, the admins, *do* turn away applicants who do not meet our standards, though this tends to be on a case-by-case basis. The decision is made after a private discussion of the admins, and the applicant is informed that they have not been selected. Applicants who were not accepted, however, have the chance to request a review of their application and following that may apply again if they so choose. This process is not uncommon. In the review, we give feedback in terms of strengths and weaknesses, and offer suggestions where they might best improve. The hope is that this feedback can mitigate the harsh nature of our expectations. We also give members the opportunity to workshop their writing with the admins and with each other. Regardless, a margin is established along the lines of language capability, further accentuated by the severity of the wording of the rules.

Both the review and the workshop function by mobilizing both technologies of power and technologies of the self: command of the English language functions as a technology of power, acting as a gatekeeper of a kind, eliminating certain groups of people (non-English speaking and those who do not speak well enough English to be considered “highly literate”); on the other hand, technologies of the self draw on the rhetoric of progress, improvement, and self-reflection, which are all crucial to the neoliberal discourse of the “good team player.” By positioning ourselves as the authorities that can designate the areas that require improvement, we are making use of multiple technologies of power. At the same time, the review and workshop are attempts by the admins to make more fluid the margin and center created by language barriers, despite the fact that it was us who designated that margin and center in the first place.

This nexus of technologies of power and of the self indicate not only a center and margin within the roleplay, but also a condition of membership that works upon the entire roleplay community outside of *Vieux Noyés RP*. The rules draw a direct connection between the lack of ability to properly wield grammar and spelling with non-native English speakers, and that this lack of ability bars a writer from having “top-notch writing.” This reduction of writing stories to grammar articulates an unspoken hierarchy based on the quality of writing of the players, giving a huge space for Admin deliberation, reiterating multiple center/margin distinctions within the roleplay. At the same time, interestingly, within the roleplay, we have several members who speak English non-natively, and are considered higher-quality writers than some of our native English speakers; I would contend that this does not actually impact the quality of writing systematically. Regardless of the fact that the boundaries of the margin-center dichotomy do not follow the distinctions between native/non-native speakers of English one might assume, the hierarchy of language use along unsaid but implied distinctions impacts the unfolding of the story we write together.

4.4 CONCLUSION

By ruminating on the margins and centers delineated within *Vieux Noyés RP*, by reflecting on my own experiences of margin and center, by attempting to understand the function of the various mechanisms of discipline at work within the roleplay, the precarious nature of spaces of radical openness become apparent. A space of tensions, danger, and risk, spaces of radical openness necessitate the exposing of vulnerabilities, the challenging of hegemonic ideals, acts of resistance which threaten the passive oppression of the status quo. In *Vieux Noyés RP*, discussions revolving around feelings of isolation or a sense of “misfitting” in life offline result

in a space which, despite doing the risky work of challenging hegemonic norms and discourses, feels like “home” for members. Even so, pressures to fulfill certain expectations of productivity and contribution rely on and in turn reproduce mechanisms of governmentality, resulting in a hierarchy of authority and disciplined conduct within the roleplay.

However, there are many aspects that my analysis does not touch upon worth considering. In order to fully explore *Vieux Noyés RP*, in all of its potentials and failings, I would need much more space. Applying my theoretical framework to the greater roleplay community could yield insightful analysis regarding the mechanisms of discipline that guide roleplayers in general. In addition to this, spending more time looking at the relationship between fan-based roleplays and their source texts could illuminate telling information about the nature of mass media, and the dialectical connection between media portrayals of marginalized characters, and the player writing that character’s story in an RP setting. In my experience, the relationship between player and character is an intimate one, and players react strongly to having their character “mistreated” by the source text writers (particularly in the case of television series which are on-going as the player is RPing). Another aspect of roleplaying worth researching is the activity commitment, and the amount of productivity required by the wider RP community. Not only is activity required by admins of their members, but in order for roleplays to exist, a massive amount of work is required, not only by the creators of the roleplay, but also by those who provide the resources needed to do so, for example: those who create html themes for Tumblr accounts, and the tutorials to know how to use them, those who compile research about different people, places, eras, etc., those who compile .gif files of individual actors, actresses, scenarios, and settings to use in replies, as well as many others. These people are referred to as “roleplay helpers” or “RPHs” and produce an enormous amount of content, using asking only for

recognition of their work, and at the very least, that people don't "steal" it (i.e. use it without crediting the original maker, or claim it as their own content). This sub-community is full of incredibly interesting phenomena, and is as yet, unresearched.

As an under researched phenomenon in and of itself, there is much to be explore when it comes to roleplaying. However, there were many instances during my research that spoke strongly to my theoretical framework and methodology, which I was not able to incorporate into my thesis. Reflecting more deeply on the potential of auto/cyberethnography, for example, is one point that I would like to incorporate into future scholarship, as it is a methodology that directly interacts and impacts the scholarship which follows, and more importantly, allows room in the analysis to reflect on this. The decolonizing and decentering potential of auto/cyberethnography in particular deserves more attention within ethnographic and anthropological studies.

My analysis has served not only to highlight the murky boundaries of centers and margins, but also to underscore the work yet to be done in understanding the mechanisms of power in spaces of radical openness. How open is the radically open space? Who is it open to? An in-depth auto/cyberethnographic inquiry into the functions of power within a space of radical openness allows for a greater understanding of the potential of such a space, and exposes the ways in which a space of radical openness is processual, always imperfect and in the making, rather than the tantamount of resistance politics. Illuminating the discourses that *Vieux Noyés RP* fails to question makes space for me, as an admin and member, to work on advocating for different methods of approaching these matters on an administrative level, and create space within the OOC chat for these matters to be discussed and debated.

GLOSSARY

Tumblr roleplay (RP) - A form of collaborative story-telling/fiction writing. Every person is responsible for writing one (or more) character(s) into the story. The story is told through one-on-one interactions called “threads.”

Activity, Activity Check – Activity is the amount of posts by each character required within a certain time frame. An activity check is conducted to monitor members’ activity, and to warn any inactive members that they will soon forfeit their right to their characters if they don’t resume activity soon.

Admins, administrators, co-administrators - The Admins are the creators and authority figures of the RP. They enforce the rules, decide what applications will be accepted or denied, navigate any OOC drama, promote the RP, create new content (write character biographies, design graphics, come up with plot drops and events, etc.). They are responsible for keeping the RP functioning on a day-to-day basis. They will center heavily in the second chapter.

Anonymous, Anon – An ‘anon’ is an anonymous person contacting the roleplay to ask questions without having an account attached to it. Tumblr has a history

Headcanon – Little facts about a character’s idiosyncrasies that would not be made evident from the show or book.

Literate roleplay – This is a type of roleplay characterized by long paragraph-style replies, and an emphasis on a high quality of grammar and writing.

OOO chat – “Out-of-character” chat. This is where people gather to talk “out-of-character.” the posts posted publically to their characters account will be considered “in-character,” something pertaining to the portrayal of their character somehow, so it’s important to have a space specifically designated for “OOO” posts, to “keep the dashboard clean” (the dashboard is where public posts appear, like the Facebook newsfeed).

Thread – A series of paragraphs between two to three characters that relates the events of a specific interaction between the involved characters, alternating point of view with each reply, depending on which character is responding.

Replies – The responses to a thread. One generally says something like “I’m getting to my replies when I get home from work!” Can also refer to the comments to a post on the OOC chat.

“Real life” (rl) – A term used by Tumblr users (and maybe other social media users, I’m not sure), to delineate a difference between what happens to them on Tumblr, and what happens to them offline. It is an interesting designation as it implies that Tumblr is somehow “unreal” and what happens there doesn’t count, something I’d like to explore more in this chapter, as it’s central to the ideal of validation and isolation. I didn’t get a chance to think too deeply about it yet.

TW – trigger warning

Sideblog – A blog that can be accessed to multiple people and is connected to everyone’s main Tumblr account. It’s a specific feature of Tumblr. For the purposes of the OOC, it can be made private and password-protected, which the *Vieux Noyés* OOC chat, is. I have been given permission from all of the members to publish all of the content I have used, with the names I have used in the chapter.

Universe or ‘verse – Our “universe,” or simply “verse,” is the story and history we are setting up, but also the in-story rules of how this world works and what is possible within such a world (for example, how does magic work? How do different species work?).

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