Discussant's Comment on Ardèvol's working paper
"Dream gallery: Online dating as a commodity"

by Kyra Landzelius

Dear All,

Before I present my comments on the interesting paper by Elisenda Ardèvol, perhaps a few words of self-introduction are in order. I must confess to being a Network newcomer, or more like a once-and-future member – having enthusiastically joined this group back in autumn (2004) only to find myself wrapped in other quests (mainly my bread-and-butter job as a medical anthropologist and finishing a collection on health activism – which does have a share of media anthro hidden in it). Having discovered the 'file folders' function for yahoo mail at about the same time did not help matters any, as best-laid-plans to automatically organize inbox inflow resulted in entire streams and themes of neat incoming stuff seamlessly lodging itself into folders that became simply another icon, which I never even thought to glance at – I being a prime example of the dangers of technological 'options,' not to mention the dangers inherent in the idea of 'organizing' one's desk-top!). I have also been a nomad from home (as a visiting scholar in Graz)—although this is an exile I gladly welcome, given the splendors of southern Austrian landscapes! Thus, I want to say at the outset that I appreciate that John Postill, our seminar chair, invited me to be a discussant in the e-seminar series despite my virtual absence. By way of preparation, I spent a long morning glancing over the oeuvre that constitutes past e-seminars (feeling somewhat like an interloper), and so here also extend my gratitude to all the contributors for the interesting discussions and topics circulating therein, some of which have undoubtedly found their way into my musings here. I write here largely stream-of-consciousness (and then have gone back to impose some semblance of order through paragraph headings assigned after-the-fact).

Overview
Ardèvol's paper is entitled 'Dream Gallery: Online Dating as Commodity' (hereafter abbreviated 'Dream Gallery'). In the author's own words it presents a 'recent study focusing on how Internet users introduce themselves publicly in cyberspace through personal web pages, personal diaries and web sites where they can search for relationships, love, or friendship.' (p.1). And yet, 'Dream Gallery' at once reaches for much more in its purview; although in certain key respects, from my reading, it accomplishes much less than its stated intention. Perhaps its ambitious reaching is responsible for a provocative, if somewhat teasingly unfinished, final paper that touches on many interesting themes, without tying them together or seeking closure. The theories of Giddens, Baudrillard, Turkle, Gergen, Turner and Beck surface, without much elaboration in relation to the data, nor without a dialogue developing between these theories. The rather broad yet vague sweep of 'Dream Gallery's analyses—resulting in a 'suspended' paper—leaves the reader wanting more—which I hasten to add, is the mark of a successful scholarly overture, after all.

Situating The Study
Most of the text is devoted to a detailed presentation of the commercial dating-service search engine, Match.com.es, and of personal web pages posted therein—'user profiles' (textual and

images/photos)—although it is unclear as to how many web pages this discussion is based upon (and this is a critique of the paper's presentation of methodology, which I will take up below), or indeed whether the author is picking and choosing certain common characteristics and compiling a kind of 'generic' web page for analytical purposes. One of the paper's strongest contributions is the overview it gives of these paid subscriber match-making sites. There is a rich trove of material for theorization in these sites themselves: the logic driving them, the producers designing them, their implict 'model' of the 'average' consumer, their rationalizing of selves/relationships into 'compartment' profiles, their reflection and response to social anomie, to over-worked lives with little time to simply socialize, to 'risk mentalities' in the era of AIDS, etc. And what about their role as 'big brother' gatekeepers policing and even censoring (and moreover paid to police and censor!, and I would add, manipulate) intimate representations of selves and potentially intimate (future) relationships? The author does not take the route of analyzing this search engine/home site, per se; and yet, her descriptive overview is peppered with analytical commentaries that proffer intriguing insights. I would have like to have heard more from her analytical perspective on these sites. The analyses she does provide get rather hidden in-between descriptions. Moreover I sense an unresolved tension in her own reading of these sites as signifying domains (mass cultural 'productions') based largely on their empirical design, and her reading of users' relationships to these sites, their constructions of identity vis-à-vis these sites, and how these shape relationship-quests in an internet age (the latter more adequately depicting her objective, as stated below).

Elisenda's goal is to: 'analyze the extent to which personal relationships are considered from a marketing standpoint, and in what sense we can talk about how personal relationships are "consumed" over the Internet' (p.1). I found this to be a very fascinating proposition, immediately leading me to a range of questions: just who considers these relationships from a marketing standpoint—the website producers? the users? general social theorists? the anthropologist/interpreter?? And just what is meant by a 'marketing standpoint': 1) relationships modelled after marketing processes (that is, commodified—and if so, deliberately or unconsciously or both)? or, 2) relationships that are structured and/or experienced according the logic of market processes (that is, in some way rationalized, budgeted, exchangeable, to be 'tried-on for size' or coming with a 'shelf life')? and/or 3) relationships simply wrapped in a discourse of market lingo (that is, rhetorically reflecting/reproducing market idioms without necessarily enacting or embodying them)? Or 4) are they 'marketed' 'only' because Match.com participants are paying for an online dating (or pre-dating) service and thereby 'manufacturing' relationships? In any event, this purchasing likely introduces new algorithms (expectations, values, freedoms, anxieties…) into relationships (or is this just my jaded perspective?). Likewise, one could raise similar questions with regard to the subjectivity of the persons who are acting here: how are these being framed by and framing the proposed 'consuming' of relationships over the Internet? However, as I eagerly read on I did not find these questions answered, or even addressed; and I apologize for perhaps being thick-headed, but it never became clear to me just exactly who the author considered to be doing the 'considering' here. I would really love to know just what questions are motivating the author's research along these lines.

One question Elisenda does pose is 'how are new relationship spaces organised on the Internet?' This is a brilliant question; and the author's descriptions of the Match.com service and its architecture go far towards portraying this interactive space as a meaning-making endeavor that embeds 'packaged' notions of self that users not only adapt themselves to, but it seems gain

'security' and reassurance by having these profile arenas ('my basics,' 'about my date,' 'appearances') mapped-out for them in advance. Elisenda's attention to the prominent role these webpages accord to the body (or at least, to graphics of the body) is a welcome contribution to the tendencies of cyber-theorists to simply assume the body disappears or loses importance in cyberspace, when in fact the opposite may be true: 'the body' (as icon, performance, fantasy, even posture) may well gain in magnitude (at least my own research supports that). Elisenda pays attention to bodies, but alas, not to gender, which is given virtually no mention in the discussion, even that pertaining to body graphics.

As noted, the author is interested in understanding how new relationship spaces are organised on the Internet. However, these 'spaces' remain sadly untethered. For example, they are not compared to other online spaces/experiences: eg, how might these for-profit 'getting acquainted' sites be similar to or differ from, say, online communications regarding hobbies or shared health problems, or even shopping on e-Bay? Or, to give another example, they are not compared to other offline for-profit dating services: eg, in what ways, if any, does Match.com differ from commercial match-making services that have been in operation for decades now (in other words, in what ways does Internet matter here)? To give yet another example, they might have been compared to other (non-Spanish) Match-com generated spaces, thus giving us a comparative glance at cultural differences and similarities in these sites, their 'users', etc. (Elisenda herself makes a case for such cross-cultural comparison on p.5). My point here is not to compile a wish-list of all the interesting ideas that emerge for analysis from her text, nor to imply that Elisenda should (or even could, in a single paper) engage with all of these angles in her project; yet I believe that the research she is reporting on here is really calling out to be illuminated with respect to some context and a critical angle derived thereof. Those proposed above are given by way of illustration, yet of course, many other angles could be conceived and one could think of multiple tetherings that would enrich this study by contextualizing it, and enrich its value for contributing to our larger knowledge quests (about online practices, or about Spanish culture, or about post/modern subjectivity, etc., etc.).

Questions of Locality
Following from this issue of space, and what I see as its absence as an analytical lens in this paper, we might turn to the question of 'what happens to place (space/time) online.' This is a hot topic of debate, especially among the more ethnographically-oriented cyberspace researchers. The debate has largely clustered theorists on one or the other side of an unproductive divide: those advocating the more-or-less virtual evaporation, transcendence or annihilation of place; versus those arguing for the reproduction, transformation or adaptation of place (albeit one usually conceived as re-worked in particular ways). Unfortunately, the author is silent on this debate, and it is unclear whether this is an unintentional or strategic decision; however it does have the dual effect of making her study float without anchorage to an empirical context, and without bridging to a corpus of critical writings and thinkings on just this question. I would argue that online research requires attending to just this issue, irrespective of which strand of debate a researcher aligns with. That is, if advocating that locality becomes redundant, then it behooves a fieldworker to demonstrate in just what ways this happens, how it is experienced by the various actors involved, how it shapes subjectivities, relationships, etc. Likewise, if the researcher is an advocate for the continuing relevance of locality, then again, how it persists, transforms, adapts, etc. needs to be spelled out. I myself am strongly in favour of a reading that argues for the

continued importance of locality; and would moreover assert that anthropology is particularly well disposed to address just these issues of situating the offline online, and vice versa.

In similar fashion, reading the text, I found myself wondering what has happened to 'culture'? In writing this it is not my intention to fetishize the concept or the word (indeed I am very much in sympathy with the 'death of culture' and 'writing against culture' trends in reflexive anthropology). My criticism here applies rather to the relative thinness of discussion about contexts, language or idioms, collective significations, social forms, etc. which could frame and help us to productively interpret and situate this website. It is as if these sites—and the empirical data and their analyses(?)—would be virtually the same if the author would have chosen for study any one of the 56 other languages in which the site is made available by its commercial designers. (My personal favorite here would be to see a study of the Esperanto version—who are its users, their ideologies, locations, etc.). However, to return to 'Dream Gallery' the reader is left querying: 'in what ways, if any, is this site different from say, its counterpart in North America, in Finland, in Australia, in Hungary…' Perhaps the answer is that it differs very little, but if so, then this would itself be a fascinating finding that requires interpretation following comparative data collection (in an aside, I might note here that my own findings in studying homepages on the part of parents of preterm babies in 9 languages (with the help of native speakers assuredly) is that there is surprisingly little formative or narrative differences between say, those posted in Turkish, in Italian, in Swedish or in English—but I have, as yet(?), been unable to attribute this—is this the 'global middle class' phenomenon that some theorize, is it mimicry, diffusion, convergence, a technologically-driven genre, or?). I would be very interested in learning if Elisenda (or others of you doing virtual fieldwork of a comparative nature) are encountering similar or different issues and can speak on them.

Questions of Subjectivity
Picking up on the author's concern to examine user's self-representation in relation to the theories of risk society (Beck), the 'saturated self' (Gergen), 'pur relationship' (Giddens), and 'simulacra' (Baudrillard), I will thus say a word or two about the issue of reflexivity. First, I highly applaud Elisenda's initiative here. We sorely need more ethnographically-informed, field-data rich, thick descriptions of the kinds of subjectivity being sweepingly theorized by such theorists. This is precisely the contribution that anthropology is best poised to make, especially in relating these theorizations to technologies (especially media) that explicitly or implicitly are implicated in hypothetical transformations of the (post or hyper) modern self. I assume I am preaching to the choir here, so I will climb down from my anthropology soapbox.

The author has chosen some fabulous quotes to highlight her analyses of subjectivity. One (presumed) informant in particular is worth mentioning—one identified as Morfeo, whose quotes are phenomenally rich in reflexivity, socio-historical insights and opinions, a tinge of self-irony and what struck me as a 'nostalgia for the present' (I think this was Appadurai's phrase). The words of this person seemed to hold an entire worldview that resonated with the author's thesis about reflexive selves and 'consumed' relationships. Yet, short of simply citing Morfeo at length, it is surprising how little analysis is given to his (her?) words. Perhaps the author here is letting Morfeo speak for himself, and I can appreciate a flight from over-interpretation (which alas I would have to plead guilty to), and yet we are also given no auxiliary or contextual information about this informant; nor for that matter, how these quotes were even collected.

I fear I have gone on much too long already (I noticed most discussants kept their comments short, and I have already violated that), so I will abruptly wrap this up with just a few words about format.

Style
The original text is in Spanish, but I have been working with, and am here responding to, the English translation. I regret that my linguistic handicap bars me from the nuanced benefits of the original text; moreover I am inclined to believe that some of my criticisms of style almost certainly relate to the effects of meanings 'lost in translation.' However, I hope they will have relevance to any future re-working of this paper in English. There are a number of expository statements where it is unclear as to the 'agency' driving them: For example, on page 2: '[The Internet] is a system where our dreams can become true at a low price and at low personal risks; a systems that responds to the current needs of our hectic daily lives and the compartmentalization of our social interaction.' It was unclear to me whether this was the author's opinion, a paraphrase or summary from the literature, a hypothesis guiding research or conversely a finding from the research at hand, etc.? Similarly, on page 7 'Our selves are subject to a plurality of social contexts and to multiple unique opportunities to relate to others, which means we are not able to define a stable identity of ourselves, and our bonds to others are more elusive and ephemeral as are our passions and deep feelings.' We can all recognize in this echoes of contemporary theorists of the decentered, postmodern subject—but I am uncertain as to whether Elisenda is 'simply' agreeing and taking these theories as fact, or intends to apply her data in order to support and/or debunk these theories. My preference is for the latter to be the case, but if so it would be important to present the data that gives us insight into these theorizings about the subject. With regard to the question of style, though, such general-type statements (and there are a few scattered through the text) may carry different connotations in Spanish, but the English versions would benefit greatly from a grounding in a specific voice.

Format
I would prefer a more structured format to the paper: with a more outlined introduction, empirical materials presented up-front, methods addressed, interpretations covered thematically by paragraphs, and a concluding section. This sounds awfully dry, I know, but I do think that a more explicit argument needs to emerge for the paper as a whole, and the argument that is there at times got buried in descriptive passages, or was rushed at the end. By and large, in working towards its analysis 'Dream Gallery' tries to go into too many directions at once, in terms of the theories and topics introduced, some of which almost pop out of no where (the theme of reality and representation at the paper's end; the topics of marital stability and teenagers mid stream). More structure would likely identify those themes/topics that the author wishes to focus on and those that necessarily must be reserved for another paper.

Methods
Feeling a bit like a schoolmarm, I would encourage Elisenda to be much more explicit about her methodology. This could be achieved in a long footnote even, but it should be put up-front in the text, and not come as an aftermath. I found myself looking ahead to get more information about where the quotes came from, for example, and even in the methods section, we are left guessing about the numbers of webpages read, the length of time spent, whether she interviewed people or simply quoted their pages, etc. Solid field methods is (or should be) one of anthropology's strong

points, and one which might well distinguish the contributions we can make to cyber-research. I might also mention here the question of fieldwork ethics. There has been quite a bit of (unresolved) scholarly writings about the ethics of doing research, the ethnographer's exposure, of representation, of whether or not things online are in the public domain or conversely, whether we, as researchers, need to protect the confidentiality and identity of online informants (whether or not they know themselves to be informants). There are no easy or blanket solutions to the special ethical issues raised by online fieldwork; however, I do believe that it behooves researchers/writers to explain their respective approach vis-à-vis the research subject for any given research exercise, and to justify their choice of ethical paths, especially perhaps if identifying photographs or the like are being made available as data.

Concluding Remarks
In closing I sincerely wish to thank Elisenda for this thought-provoking paper, and John for bestowing on me the honor of discussing it. It makes a most welcome contribution to the literature on personal narratives online or virtual autobiographies, and moreoever parlays these into considerations of relationship-building. It further ambitiously strives to relate these 'poetics of the self' to theories about the subject as being re-configured in contemporary times, and about relationships as being newly challenged through new technologies of representation. I fear that I have weighed in heavily, but (I hope constructively) in my critique of this work; if so, please accept it in the spirit that feedback is a gift—it is presented in that spirit, and I most certainly have had far too little feedback in the course of my career, so in that spirit to I invite other discussants to join in, and critique and correct my comments here.

I very much look forward to reading the larger work that 'Dream Gallery' is launching!

Sincerely,
Kyra Landzelius

Kyra Landzelius, Ph.D.
Visiting Scholar
Inter-University Research Centre for Technology, Work and Culture
Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society
Kopernikusgasse 9
8010 Graz Austria
phone: + 43 (0)316 813909-62
mobile: +46 705 752306
email: landzelius@sts.tugraz.at