



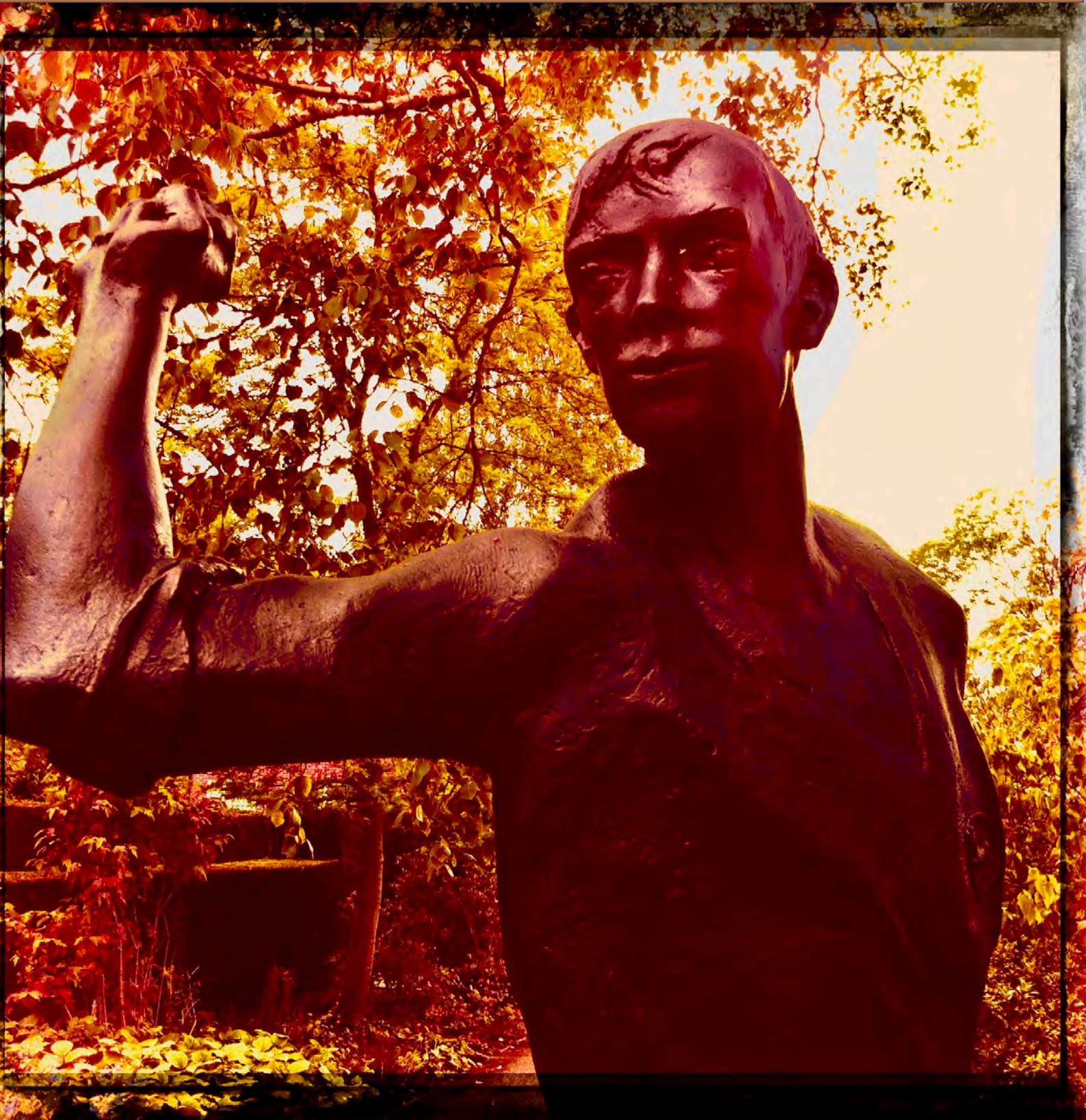
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SCHOOL OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATION AND SOCIOLOGY

OCCASIONAL PAPERS



***Locating the Auto/biographical:
sociological exchange through 'walking
with' Nelson Sullivan***

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Locating the auto/biographical: sociological exchanges through walking with Nelson Sullivan

In this paper we combine a number of, what for us, are related elements – YouTube films, autobiographical methods, diaries, letters and walking. We use these as a ‘lens’ through which to explore the sociological value of the films of Nelson Sullivan (1948 – 1989).

If there was an open bar, a loud dance beat, and some cross-dressers, Nelson Sullivan was there, his video camera a cumbersome yet essential extension of his body. Nelson was the videographer of the downtown stars, voraciously trailing the scene queens...Thanks to his scrupulous attention, Nelson's left behind a treasure trove of late-night videos that, even, more than the Warhol diaries, trenchantly capture the party years in all their gleeful, decadent fun. If you're not in one of these Videos, you've been home too much and homo not enough. (Musto, 1989: 27)

Nelson Sullivan was a film maker, a ‘videographer’, who documented New York, and elsewhere, in the mid-late 1980s. Sullivan was described by Sean (2010:1) as a comparatively ‘...penniless music-store worker originally from the repressive confines of the rural South, he began renting an unassuming apartment at 5 9th Avenue in the Meatpacking District in the early 1980s’ (Sean 2010: 1). While working in the music store, and after spells in college and owning a beauty salon, Sullivan’s interests in film and the New York LGBT club scene combined and he began to record his experiences and the experiences of others. According to Dick Richards, Nelson’s school friend and long-term collaborator (see, also Sanchez 2002; Sean 2010; Rivera 2016), Sullivan started filming on a cheap handheld VHS video camera before advancing to an 8mm camera. Empowered by cheaper and more accessible technology through which to create film, Nelson was one of the first (if not the first) ‘vloggers’. As he himself suggests in 1989, he was one of the early pioneers of ‘pointing the camera at themselves and walking around’ (2016 [1989]), talking into the lens to document the everyday, the mundane and the spectacular for a largely anonymous and undefined audience. It is suggested that during a seven-year period he shot almost 2000 hours of footage (Sean, 2010). In this footage Nelson records and observes in great deal much which is commonplace and everyday about his own life - the shopping trip, walking his dog, buying food at McDonalds or clothes at a thrift store, through to the animated city street scenes and the ‘daily ballet’ of sidewalk life (Jacobs 1961:64). From the mundane to the spectacular, Nelson richly documents an important New York scene ‘on the edge’ and at the margins. Nelson’s films offer unique insights, from multiple angles, into the New York LGBT party scene of that time.

[Nelson] Why don't people think of that? Why am I the only person I've ever seen pointing the camera at themselves and walking around? I mean, nobody's ever seen that, obviously, and people just stop dead in their tracks and turn around and look when I'm doing it. It's like they've never seen that. I think that's highly unusual. There's something...something that needs to be...some study needs to be done on why that is such a rare occurrence. [Dick]: Well, I think it's because the cameras are so new. [Nelson] I think this year is the year that

everybody is going to turn the camera around. It's a "turn the beat around"
[world/whirl]. (Nelson Sullivan, 2016b [1989])

Highly unusual for the time, but commonplace now, Nelson's practice of filming himself walking and talking into his large video camera means his films offer a contemporaneous vantage point of time and place. Well before the ubiquitous live-stream, speech to camera or 'talking head' of current social media, Nelson invites the viewer into his world. This world, Nelson's world, is continually on the move – from parties, to lunch, for coffee, uptown, downtown, private clubs and public spaces. Rather than attempting to *describe* this scene 'after the fact' as many vlogs and video diaries attempt to do, Nelson's films invite us to 'walk with him' through New York and Kershaw, South Carolina. The films offer so much more than static snapshots of one location or the standard disembodied, bedroom based talking head of much YouTube material. Walking the streets of New York and Kershaw allows the viewer to be immersed in Nelson's life. The films are not simply (or only) nostalgic pieces documenting a version of New York 'lost' in the historical ether, nor are they titillating curiosities depicting 'groups' and 'lifestyles' that ran counter to dominant trends and discourses in Reagan's 1980s neo-conservative America. Instead, these are autobiographical materials of the first order and of the highest quality. Richly detailed, relational and dialogical films which examine the ever-changing figurations between Nelson and a cast of other characters, and which provide an assortment of relational clues (Goodwin and Hughes, 2016) to lived lives, loves, life chances, power balances, opportunities and disappointments beyond the lens.

In this paper we are walking sociologically *with* Nelson on his various journeys through downtown New York and his hometown of Kershaw, South Carolina. We do so with the intention of 'reading' Nelson's films as sociologically valuable documents of life. To that end, we have covered three main areas. First, we offer an explanation of how we analysed Nelson's films and how this analysis centralised some of the key questions and issues we discuss in this paper. Second, we consider the implications of repositioning vlogs from being predominantly taken as 'online diaries', to autobiographical materials that are something of a hybrid between letters and diaries. Third, after observing that movement through place is a key feature of Nelson's films, we explore walking as an autobiographical act a little further. Finally, we conclude by considering the implications of Nelson's work for past, present and future sociological practice which uses YouTube videos and vlogs, by emphasising the importance of the 'dialogic exchange'.

Encountering Nelson: our analytical approach

The 'information' available for interpretation and analysis in Nelson's films is multi-faceted. We take Nelson's films as auto/biographical materials, in which time and space are crucial. This is particularly pertinent in Nelson's films as Nelson himself moves through a variety of 'times' and 'spaces' during his recording. This includes filming during the day as well as at night, walking through downtown New York and his hometown of Kershaw in South Carolina. Nelson also 'visits' and moves through particular locations in both. For example, he takes his mother and aunt to the World Trade Centre when they come to visit from Kershaw. As Stanley and Dampier (2006) highlight, when utilising auto/biographical documents of this kind it is not naïve empiricism; they do not 'unproblematically reflect an 'objective' external reality' (25). Instead, as Goodwin and Hughes suggest (2016), they are 'themselves (part and parcel of) processes involving relationships past, present and (possible) future' (680). They show what

Edensor (2010), in his consideration of walking rhythms, might call a 'flow of experience'. This is not only relationships, experiences or events 'within' the films (or other auto/biographical documents), but could point towards that which lies 'beyond the lens' too. Finding a way to adequately capture and analyse these films in all their sensory multi-modality, without 'loosing' parts of the footage, poses a challenge. Our solution has been two-fold. First, to unpack the films into three formats. To do this we produced a series of six vignettes, transcribed the dialogue and took a number of stills from the films using screenshots. Second, we spent considerable time iteratively watching the films themselves and discussing them at length (both before and after we selected the six to be made into vignettes).

Six films were chosen to form the basis of our analysis and subsequent focus for this paper. They were selected iteratively but with purpose, and in response to some of Nelson's own commentary about his films. A significant proportion of the films document the 'spectacular' nightclub, LGBT scene of downtown New York in the 1980s. These types of films are predominantly what Nelson has become 'known' for, particularly his connection to well-known personalities such as RuPaul and Michael Alig. Our interest, however, was first piqued when one of the authors watched Nelson's film 'Stopping at McDonalds in 1989'. What captured us in this video was the way in which Nelson invited us to be part of his 'everyday', and of the way he documented some of the most mundane aspects of life which we could relate to. In this first video, it was ordering at McDonald's. In others it included waiting for his brother at a restaurant, going downtown with friends for drinks, and taking the dog for a walk. When talking to his friend Dick about his new camcorder, Nelson similarly finds his 'daytime', or more mundane, films to be significant too, echoing our focus and agreeing that there is something fascinating to be gleaned from these;

"I'm going to start going out in the daytime instead of at night. I mean, I've done the nightclubs. I love them, but there's so much more going on in the day...Just walking around New York would be pretty damn fascinating, don't you think, with a wide-angle lens?"
(2016 [1989])

Four of the six vignettes created are included here, with the rest available online (madeinleicester.com) These four show Nelson in three of the main locations that feature across all of his films, interacting with friends and relatives who commonly appear them; in New York, in Kershaw and 'on the road'. Despite our best efforts, the 'sound' and the 'flow' of the films – of Nelson's voice, his footsteps, birds tweeting and traffic moving, the way he moves and the angles he uses – is almost completely lost for readers of this paper. There is no substitute for watching the films. We highly recommend that you take an opportunity to watch them and follow the links (also see Appendix 1)

Vignette 1: Moving through Nelson's home in New York

The video opens as Nelson is half-way through a sentence telling the camera it's his 39th birthday. He is in the downstairs of his house, which seems to be a mostly open-plan space, so that when he moves around you see kitchen, then living room. The room is bright. He is constantly moving as he talks to the camera. Nelson has got ready to go out with friends for his birthday, wearing a smart jacket and scarf. He has a moustache. You can faintly hear his footsteps as he moves. Nelson listens to his phone messages. The camera is focused on the phone as he clicks a button and the tapes start moving – one message is from Eric, the other is from Ru Paul. The area around the phone is cluttered, the calendar

is a month behind. The video seems to cut in and out where Nelson has stopped and started the camera. He moves inside and outside during the course of the video. First alone, then later with his friends Eric, Liz and Lana. Outside, city sounds can be heard, including car horns and moving cars. He gives us a moving view of the neighbourhood, focussing momentarily on buildings, road signs, meat trucks and lorries. He smokes a cigarette, ruffles his hair and tries to find the best angle to record himself from. He looks up and down from the camera to the street, conscious of people looking at him as he films. When Eric, Liz and Lana arrive Eric takes a photo of Nelson and they walk into his house. When Nelson talks to his friend Paula on the phone, Eric is mouthing something to Nelson, before Nelson finishes the call and they head out. Before leaving, the camera lingers on a portrait of Nelson. They all say goodbye to Nelson's cat – Eddie – and dog – Blackout. The video closes as they go out to 'have fun', the last shot lingering on their colourful shoes.



Nelson's friend Eric takes a picture of Nelson as they approach, singing Happy Birthday.



Nelson's phone and items surrounding it as he listens to a 'happy birthday' message from Ru Paul

Vignette 2: On the road in Georgia

The video opens on Nelson in a car with his friend Dick. They are somewhere in Georgia stopping for gas. It appears to be evening time, the sun is setting. The sound of the car radio and other cars can be heard in the background. Nelson moves the camera to look at the gas station as they pull in through the passenger window. Nelson gets out whilst Dick fills the car with gas. Nelson moves about and takes in some of the views. As Nelson moves he is sometimes brightly lit and other times it is much darker. He points out West, North, East and South. Nelson gets back in the car to wait for Dick. He sits quietly, looking at the camera and then looking around. He shows us the view he can see and the steering wheel. They then drive out onto the super-highway and towards a food complex to stop for 'McDonald's food'. Nelson contemplates putting the camera away but turns it on again when he is ordering. Customers and staff around Nelson are in shot; many of them look at the camera. Nelson counts out the money with one hand. He twists around a lot – not moving the camera but himself – taking in all angles of the McDonald's. They pick up napkins, say hello to some children then head back out to the car. Dick gets a vitamin C out of the trunk. Nelson walks around the car, taking it in with the camera, as he talks to Dick. They get back in the car with all of their McDonald's food and Nelson turns off the camera so they can eat. The camera turns back on at night-time. It's very dark, Nelson is barely visible. They have arrived at a care home of some kind to visit Nelson's Aunt Nancy. The halls are empty, it seems quite late. No-one is around. When they finally find Aunt Nancy, they hug and say hello, and Nelson smiles widely, getting himself and Aunt Nancy in shot.

Stopping at McDonald's in 1989



Nelson pointing out West, North, East and South at the gas station

Stopping at McDonald's in 1989



Nelson placing an order in McDonalds



Nelson with Aunt Nancy

Vignette 3: Nelson Sullivan and his New Camcorder

The video opens focussed on Nelson in quite a dark room. We see his friend Dick in the background and lots of art on the walls and knick-knacks lying around. There is a light directly above Nelson's head which illuminates his face. He smiles as he talks and points to the globe beside him. Nelson has a moustache and a goatee. The camera cuts here and begins again the following day as they set off for a long journey from Atlanta to South Carolina to see Nelson's family. We meet Nelson's friend David, who they stayed with overnight. Saying goodbye takes a long time, said various times at different moments, finally finishing when Nelson and Dick wave from their car. The car door slams, key jangle as the engine comes on and music kicks in loudly. Someone turns it down and the radio is low in the background. The car rolls along the road and the sound of other cars rumble past. Nelson gets himself and Dick in the shots, showing the effect of his new wide-angle lens. He momentarily turns the camera to the wing-mirror, the road speeds away from them as they drive framed by the outline of the mirror. As he talks he looks at the road with the camera fixed on his face. It finishes with a view of the road ahead through the front window.



Nelson focusses the camera on the wing mirror



Nelson and Dick both in shot with Nelson's wide-angle lens

Vignette 4: Exploring Nelson's hometown of Kershaw, South Carolina

The video opens with a close-up of the green and brown mossy bark of a tree. It zooms out and moves over to Nelson, who has a bandage covering part of his left cheek. Nelson is walking through the quiet streets of Kershaw, South Carolina. This is his family hometown and where he was born. Nelson is walking; we hear the crunch of his shoes on the floor, cars passing by and lots of birdsong. The shot moves and lingers on Nelson's Grandmama's house. It is a big, Southern house with white columns, a side-porch and a vast yard area. There are a lot of trees and plant-life around. We get in a zoomed-in shot of the columns and the front steps. Nelson walks across the side-porch to the door and goes in. His voice and footsteps echo through the big house, which is undergoing renovations. The walls are a patch-work of plaster and paint. He strokes a small dog and chats to the construction workers. Nelson is walking around the house looking for his relative, Jeanie, who he finds looking in a dressing table mirror rolling up her hair with rollers. This room is not undergoing renovations but has light green patterned wallpaper and what seems to be a small portrait on the wall. Nelson chats to Jeanie then leaves. He shouts his goodbye on the way out of the door. He shows us around the backyard; he takes us into the old garage – climbing some rickety, dirty white stairs, the camera focused on his feet. The upper floor of the garage is full of books, rugs, old beds, horsemanship awards. Nelson shows us a 1954 Broadway Playbill for 'Ondine'. Then, Nelson takes us through the backyard to the old gazebo. Nelson walks across to his neighbour's house, Miss Maubley. We can see his breath. He stops to show us a huge magnolia tree in his mother's front yard which has grown to be bigger than the house. Nelson knocks and calls through the door of Miss Maubley's house. He chats for a little while to Miss Maubley, moving around the kitchen as he does, pointing out the cooking. Miss Maubley is in shot behind or next to Nelson for a few seconds here and there. As he talks, Nelson looks mostly at Miss Maubley but looks at the camera every now and again as well. Miss Maubley walks Nelson to the door when he leaves and sees him down the steps as they say goodbye. The video ends looking at the pink and green blooms of a Quince tree, which Nelson reminisces about and wishes to say goodbye to.



Nelson outside his Grandmama's house in Kershaw, South Carolina



Nelson in the room above the old garage at his grandmama's house, looking at an old Broadway Playbill

Reading Nelson's Films as Diary-Letter Hybridity

[Nelson] was like a mentor for us [because] he taught us about all these films. He had all the films of Tennessee Williams and Fellini...and Michelangelo Antonioni. (RuPaul, 2016)

Many others have written about, and sought to classify, the range of human documents, documents of life and autobiographical materials (see Stanley 2004, 2016; Plummer 2001; Roberts 2002) available to sociologists. Typically, these range from letters, diaries, photographs, films, fiction, autofiction, oral histories, official documents and so on. Others have pointed to how 'new' communication technologies and platforms, such as YouTube, have facilitated an ever-growing variety and wider dissemination of auto/biographical stories and representations (see, for example Strangelove 2010). Given that Nelson's films were shot in a pre-YouTube era, this standard characterisation prompted us to reflect on the characteristics and categories of auto/biographical materials used in sociological analysis and where Nelson's films might fit into this spectrum of materials. This reflection crystallised around three main questions - are the films diaries or letters (or a combination of both)?; who were the intended audience(s) for Nelson's films?; and what was the intent beyond the initial creation of the films?

The power of writing diaries and letters is well acknowledged as mechanism for capturing 'living moments'. For example, for Nin (1946), the act of writing a diary was part of a craft-based writing tradition where living moments associated with heightened sensitivities were captured on the page. While for Steinbeck (2001) the act of writing letters was as a device to 'warm-up' to practice, to remove writers block allowing him to work out details of the text. In writing the letter and/or diary, the author reveals glimpses of their life routines, creative processes, incidental interests; the mundane, the ordinary and even the trivial enactments of everyday life – 'it is autobiographical material in the first order' (Steinbeck 2001: vii). Since the heyday of diary writing, the manner and process through which people record, capture and document their living moments has transformed from the 'traditional' physical page to the virtual, often mobile, forms of visualisation (Richter and Schadler 2009). These traditional autobiographical forms, and the practices which underpin them, have become secondary to emails and text messages, and to the regular entries and updates on social media. YouTube, in particular, has provided many with a platform to share a wide variety of their daily experiences from the ordinary aspects of everyday life through to the spectacular, the unusual and the extreme (see, for example McKeague 2018; Raby 2018; Berryman and Kavka 2017; Madden *et al* 2013; Miller 2019). Launched in 2005 YouTube has become a phenomenon. As digital platform it has revolutionised the way that people consume media, and many have replaced traditional forms of media with the 'content on demand' streaming and watching services. We are now 'post-television' as Tolson (2010) and others, suggest. Central to the success of YouTube are the large number of what have become known as daily vloggers – the daily video diarists. A variant on blogger (those who would use primarily text-based platforms to share their ideas, thoughts and feelings), vloggers use film and video and produce content ranging from anything shot on a cellular phone through to high end camera equipment, lighting, sets and more. These daily vlogs are perhaps one of the most recognised and popular form of auto\biographical expression on the internet. Indeed, vlogging, in particular, is often referred to as an extension of the diary (see Sorapure 2003; Snelson 2015). For Kennedy (2017):

These online life-writing practices are extensions of diary writing, and they constitute

contemporary forms of autobiography. Like traditional autobiography, people publish material about themselves, making it available to the public...

Or as Strangelove (2010) suggests:

Herein I treat any YouTube video that has some confessional or self-representational quality as belonging to the autobiographical and diary genre. Digital diaries cross boundaries of genre and media practice...The diary is the location of unstable, contested, multiple, and often incoherent selves, but it is also a place where we encounter real others. The online diary form may be flawed, but it can provide us with a representation of social reality (Strangelove 2010: 69)

However, while cast as 'extraordinary videos by ordinary people', these online biographical materials are still viewed through a tradition lens, as 'online diaries' or confessionals. Whilst we do not disagree with Kennedy or Strangelove's broad assessment, this categorisation prompted us to question whether Nelson's films could be neatly pigeonholed as diaries, or as 'vlogs' (as they appear to have been). In contrast to the confessional, diary format, Nelson's films contain a 'dear reader', direct call for engagement. Whilst the films are now on a vlogging platform and while Nelson clearly used the tools and stylistic traits of a contemporary vlogger, we would suggest the films are more appropriately characterised by what Stanley describes as a kind of 'epistolary intent' and 'letterness' (2015); meaning that there is an intention to communicate 'in writing or a cognate representational medium' (Stanley 2015: 242). This letterness – the intent to communicate – as Stanley highlights is also characterised by asynchronicity, by communication across a separation of time and space. Furthermore, and in line with Goodwin and Hughes' (2011) application of Elias' (2001) theoretical work to letters, we would suggest that communicative practices such as vlogs, like letters, point towards 'relationships past, present and (possible) future, and as referents of changing balances of power and shifting human interdependencies' (Goodwin and Hughes 2011: 680). The films are not simply about 'the individual' or their distinctive self-world, but instead are suggestive of dynamic relationships, behavioural standards, interdependencies and power balances that extend well beyond the screen. As such, Nelson's films can be considered a contemporary form of auto/biography. What is more, they constitute a form of auto/biography that combines aspects of both diary writing *and* letter writing – Nelson's films are a hybrid of the two.

However, given this, there are two remaining questions; who is Nelson communicating with and what was his motivation for making the films? As suggested above, the films are richly detailed, relational, dialogical and high-quality auto/biographical materials. They point to the ever-changing figurations Nelson and those he filmed formed. From the early lives of drag artists, such as RuPaul, or the wider array of characters fashioning their own careers in entertainment, art, music during the hedonism of the 1980s New York party scene. Beyond this too, we are introduced to members of his family; his mother and aunts, his closest companions and life-long friends, such as Dick Richards, and childhood neighbour in Kershaw, Miss Maubley. But who is this all for? Who were the intended audience? Audience and purpose are clearly important to contemporary online vloggers as they are creating materials specially for their viewers. In return, the viewers can respond with messages and comments. Yet for Nelson these films, whilst dialogic (he asks questions of his 'viewers'), they have no obvious or intended audience. As far as we know, Nelson created the films and then stored them in his bedroom. The films bring to mind the cogitations of C Wright Mills, who wrote a series of letters to the fictional

character Tovarich;

Tovarich, I want to give you, as Walt Whitman once said, “some authentic glints, specimen-days of my life. (But I can’t, of course, do it as he did; I haven’t the guts, much less the skill. Anyway that’s why I’m writing such personal letters to you...(Mills 2000[1960]: 292)

Mills (2000) alludes to ideas of ‘sociological authenticity’ via some flashes of the lived reality. In these ‘specimen days’ Mills writes to his imagined Russian academic pen pal, Tovarich, about his daily work routines in his home office, at the University, writing on the roads, and so forth. Much like Nelson, Mills details the minutiae of life – making coffee, collecting the New York Times – alongside the specifics of his sociological practices. Similarly, Mills, like Nelson, asks questions of his reader ‘tell me all that you did yesterday’ (Mills 2000 [1960]: 293). Yet, as with the case of Nelson’s audience, Tovarich does not exist. These are auto/biographical materials for an implied audience, letters/diaries written with a purpose but for no-one in particular. Mills writes the letters and ‘*along with this letter, if I ever find your address, I’m mailing you a copy of the book mentioned: The Sociological Imagination*’ (Mills 2000[1960]: 96). Comparably, Nelson speaks directly to his audience whilst not being sure if anyone will even watch or respond. He says, for example, ‘I guess it’s about one o’clock here in Atlanta. I don’t know what time it is where you are.’ (2015b [1989]) Both Mills and Nelson are ostensibly waiting for a response that never arrives.

This then prompts us to ask; what was the intent beyond the initial creation of the films? It is clear a primary reason behind Nelson’s approach, his motivations for the films, is born out a desire to document his own life and the lives of others. Yet, there is more to the films; these are Nelson’s apprenticeship. He had previously dabbled in local broadcast media and had appeared on niche television programmes. It is also reported that, just a few days before his death in July 1989, he had landed a TV show, which led him to quit his job in the music store. Were these films Nelson’s practice piece; one long audition which he used to hone his craft? The availability of inexpensive camera technology meant Nelson could practice without relying on others. It was a moment in time where we begin to see the ability to ‘broadcast’ was no longer dependent on large studios of expensive equipment. The films thusly mark a transition from craftsmen’s art to artists’ art (Elias, 1993). For Elias (1993) there is a long-term shift in power balances, between ‘craftsmen’s art’ – where art is produced for a patron, usually of higher social standing, and following the patrons ‘taste’ – and artist’s art – where art is produced reflecting the artist’s own taste and desires for an *unknown* buyer or audience. This is a civilising shift where there is less external control on the artists imagination and artists are no longer subordinate to the tastes, interests and desires of others. The transition to YouTube as a primary viewing platform reflects this long-term process identified by Elias in the shift from craftsman’s art to artists art. YouTube is a vehicle for artists and creators, in many cases, to express their imagination not reliant on funding from mass media producers.

Walking with Nelson: Accentuating and Locating the Auto/Biographical

‘[Nelson]...this queer flâneur artist very consciously floating through the scene’. (Colucci 2013)

Although seemingly accurate at first, Colucci’s (2013) description of Nelson as a queer flâneur does Nelson disservice. His movement through New York, and other places, is central to his films. However,

he is not a loafer, a loungeur, a saunterer or stroller. Nor is he a dilettante nor an alienated, aimless 'investigator' or observer of the city. He isn't someone who has abandoned his private realm in order to create an over familiarity with public external spaces (Lauster, 2007), nor was he a leisure obsessed boulevardier. Indeed, Nelson was far from being a 'figure of masculine privilege and leisure with time and money and no immediate responsibilities' (Elkin, 2016: 3). An artist attuned to the ambiances of his locale, yes. A member of a downtown LGBT scene, undoubtedly. Yet in his films, whilst initially they may appear overly concerned with the transient – even trivial – aspects of life, Nelson had purpose, a direction and a drive to produce films, document and to explore. He had an 'angle' and a subject matter born out of his own life experiences. Central to his 'angle' is movement through time and space and, in particular, walking (or riding) the streets of New York, as well his foot-guided tours of his hometown of Kershaw, South Carolina.

People think I'm crazy, but then, when they see the tapes, they realise what I'm doing...I've been doing this about seven years now and I've gotten pretty good at it...Yeah. I kind of equate myself more to a dancer than anything else because it's all motion. (Nelson Sullivan February 6th, 1989)

"Walking is critical to the task because it gets you out there and lets you get to know the city up close. However, you cannot merely walk through a city to know it. You have to stop long enough to absorb what's going on around you" William Helmrich

Walking is a well-established, if not regularly used, research tool in sociological and ethnographic practice. Whether it is 'walking the field' to delineate a research area (see Jephcott 1964) the use and analysis of walking tours as an ethnographic method to give 'shape' to sex worker research (Aoki and Yoshimizu (2015), the walking practices of hunter gatherers (Tuck-Po 2016), improvisational walking through industrial ruins (Edensor 2016), exploring city life (Bendiner-Viani 2005; Helmrich 2013), the ways in which walking produces time-space and the experience of place (Edensor 2010), or shared walking experiences with research participants as attenuation (Pink 2010), to name but a few. Likewise, the idea of walking through a space as a form or enactment of auto/biographical practice is not a new idea. It features, for example, as part of Milgram's the 'individual in a social world (1977) research and in his writings on mental maps and urban psychology studies. Milgram reveals the close interrelationship between the resident and their neighbourhood; wander too far beyond your block, the fewer people you know, and the less you feel 'at home'.

Walking is a form of embodied practice. It provides a mechanism through which to observe and experience practices and everyday activities which are part of the 'production of material and social realities' and of 'being in the world' (Pink, 2008: 178). The experiential nature of walking is immersive and participatory. Undertaking walking tours, or any of the other ethnographic 'walking' practices highlighted above, add context to the partial knowledge gleaned from other types of documents or research data. Nelson is a pioneer of this genre of turning the camera around and filming himself. Nelson invites his audience into the rhythms of his everyday life, taking us on an auto/biographical 'tour' of the significant and insignificant aspects of the world as he inhabits it. In this, location, and Nelson's progress through it, is centralised; New York, Kershaw and elsewhere become as vivid a part of the films' content as Nelson himself, and the people he introduces us to. Walking these streets gives a clearer sense of how place and locality intersects with Nelson's biography. For example, instead of

simply describing his family neighbourhood and family background as a series of biographical bullet points, Nelson offers what appears to be a spontaneous and relatively unplanned walking tour. The tour combines movement through significant spaces with rich, detailed narrative about his experiences and memories of family life, particularly his childhood. He points out and interacts with objects, buildings and people, offers his reflections on these, and then moves onwards. This combination offers a more detailed and 'untidy' account of Nelson's southern, middle-class upbringing, which can be taken in contrast to his current life in New York. The route he takes, including his stops and starts and the accompanying narratives, accentuates and reveals Nelson's relationships with and within Kershaw, as well as New York.

Nelson's walking signals a form of continuity where 'before' and 'after' become blurred – even irrelevant (Tabboni, 2001). It points us towards patterns of continuity and discontinuity, to change and continuation over time. Nelson physically ages over the course of the videos. He celebrates his birthday; "it's the last time I'm going to be 39". Nelson's facial hair is ever-changing, from clean-shaven, to moustache, to goatee and back again. In this way, we are caught up in Nelson's continuous 'flow of experiences' (Edensor, 2010). This is not just isolated to Nelson's own 'time' either. Cultural and historical artefacts captured by Nelson's films – the 1954 Broadway Playbill, the cancelled cheques, cousin Jeanie's horsemanship awards, Eddie's vintage 1972 Chevrolet – represent past continuities and discontinuities, as events and 'moments'. Nelson describes these things as of 'another era' (2015a [1989]), but he experiences them in the 'present', as it was at the time of recording, and now by us twenty years later as we watch and analyse his footage. This is a kind of temporal 'unfolding', through which we see Nelson in a constant state of becoming. To reiterate, when referring to Nelson, we are referring to the wider interdependencies Nelson embodies and to the epoch – in the Millsean sense – of which he is a part; we observe "a past which in some sense is still living in the present" (Collingwood in Kumar, 2015: 275).

As Pink (2008) highlights walking goes beyond 'representation' and enables a process of 'mediation', of sharing, exchange and experience which brings out and makes more noticeable previously insignificant or overlooked details. This is not simply because we are more attuned to Nelson's substantive surroundings, but the viewer actually hear the birds sing just as Nelson heard the birds sing. It is possible to feel a genuine sense of nostalgia and loss as Nelson walks through and tries to articulate his memories of his grandmother's home. These things work to create a sense of identification, or empathy, between Nelson and his audience – in this case, us. As sociologists, we do not simply 'observe' Nelson, but walk alongside him on an authentic, meaningful and experiential progress. When attempting to 'use' Nelson's videos as auto/biographical, sociological material, then, it;

“...becomes more than a co-production of 'life story' telling, but a reciprocal relationship that is impactful and leads to change” (Goodwin, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion: Prioritising the Dialogic Exchange

When riding through the streets of New York in Nelson's friend Eddie's 1972 convertible Chevrolet (vignette 5, found here), Eddie suggests to their friend Albert 'you've got to go make your own scene'

(XXXX). We can go some way to thinking by ‘make your own scene’ Eddie is referring to creating your own distinctive ‘space’ for participation or meaning. This is relevant because many considered Nelson to be documenting a ‘growing scene’ through his videos, that of the Downtown New York LGBT club and party scene. However, as we have suggested, Nelson is not just an incidental ‘documenter’ best-known because he was friends with RuPaul and Michael Alig, and because. He participated in a spectacular scene of night-time decadence. Nelson was engaged in film-making artist practice of which the documentation of the night-time scene was one part. Rather than seeing Nelson’s films as documenting or producing a static, singular ‘scene’, he appears, rather, to be engaged in a process of scene ‘making’ or ‘creating’ which involves all aspects of his life.

As a letter / diary hybrid, the films are ‘highly selective and partial’ and involving ‘a degree of self-censorship, perhaps even artful misrepresentation’ (Stanley and Dampier, 2005: 25) which can occur at the moment of filming (as well as during any editorial processes). Nelson – as he walks and moves through New York, Kershaw and all the other places he takes us to – co-constitutes those spaces and makes logistical and creative decisions on the constraints and possibilities of producing film. Many of these may be unintended. Examples could include having to turn the camera off so he can eat in the car; or, producing dim footage due to limited light on a night-time drive. We also know there are certain places Nelson could not take a camera, and his commitment to filming meant he would be reluctant to leave the camera behind; “I don’t really want to go because they won’t let me video in there” (Nelson Sullivan, 2018, [1989]). Rather than thinking of this as something contrived or inauthentic, this can be understood as demonstrative of an authenticity related to the constraints and possibilities of Nelson’s interdependency with the world, and vice versa.

Nelson’s purpose and motivation appears to stem from his wish to share this ‘authenticity’; to document his life and the lives of others; ‘I want to share my experience’ (Nelson Sullivan, 2016b [1989]). Elias highlights why this is crucial in his study of Mozart, as he suggests; ‘whether or not people’s lives make sense to them depends on whether or how far they are able to realise their wishes’ (Elias, 2010: 60). However, it is only with the proliferation of the internet that Nelson’s films have found wider attention and recognition.

“Beyond the confines of downtown New York Nelson Sullivan wasn't particularly famous, but within its boundaries (from 14th Street to Houston Street and from 5th Avenue to Avenue D) everyone knew Nelson because almost every night he was going out and documenting his surroundings”
(From ‘A Portrait of Downtown’, Nelsonsullivan.tv)

Nelson’s films occupy a liminal position between intra-group recognition of his practice and a wider recognition gained via YouTube many years after his death. The films demonstrate a ‘bringing-into-being’ (Inglis, 2007; Stanley, Salter and Dampier, 2013) – a cultural and sociological process of dialogic ‘scene-making’ and exchange – over twenty years, since the films were first created. As part of this process are the past, present and (possible) future relationships Goodwin and Hughes (2012) direct us to consider, and so now we too – the authors – are participants in this as well.

We consider Nelson’s videos and our study of them not only as an ode to Nelson, the individual – his life and craft – but also as dialogic exchanges which oscillate around Nelson’s authentic flow of experiences and our encounter with them. Through Nelson’s videos we witness something which is

contingent and temporal, it is continuously 'in process'. They are archival and cultural artefacts which signal and capture social change, and which are what Nelson describes as a; "direct way to communicate experience, depending on how, you know, how good...both parties are". To acknowledge Nelson's suggestion, we conclude by advocating for a re-orientation of approaches to YouTube videos, and to vlogs, particularly. Instead of taking them as present-centred 'online diaries', which provide an opportunity to 'see inside the mind' of isolated individuals, they are better considered as auto/biographical artefacts that are something of a letter / diary hybrid. In this way, we prioritise the dialogic exchange; the interdependence of vlogger and audience, and beyond.

Although our initial interest in Nelson's films was piqued by his position as a pre-YouTube vlogger who captured a particular moment in time, our interest changed over the course of this writing. We felt the sadness of Nelson's early death and his wishes somehow left unfulfilled, but also found Nelson engaging, inspiring and overwhelmingly likeable and charming. It would be fair to say our 'interest' transformed into a sense of connection; that, over time, we felt more and more compelled by Nelson's story and that we had a responsibility to help him to continue to share it. As part of our exchange with Nelson, then, comes the task and responsibility we have begun to fulfil in this paper. First, to (re)centre Nelson's films as amongst the earliest examples of vlogs. Second, to (re)establish their significance as auto/biographical material capturing processes of social and technological transformation. Nelson was right when, in 1989, he mused; "I think this year is the year that everybody is going to turn the camera around" (Nelson Sullivan, 2016b [1989]). Nelson is pointing us to broader questions about the rise of 'global public intimacies' (Gibson, 2016) and the future role of YouTube and vlogging as part of this. This demonstrates Stanley et. al's (2013) assertion that 'historical and cultural sociologies have closely-related concerns' (288) and, further still, Mills' reminder that biography is closely tied with history (2000 [1959]).

Appendix 1: Films

- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2014) Going to an all-night gas station in Manhattan in 1988 in a 1972 Chevrolet convertible <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPcxNsSyGeA&t=34s> Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2015a) Exploring Nelson's hometown of Kershaw, South Carolina https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGA4ilvth_o&t=97s Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2015b) The happiest Nelson Sullivan has ever been <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgenIQ8Vib4&t=179s> Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2016b) Nelson Sullivan and his New Camcorder Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gp9e1YkWqAA&t=320s> Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2016c) Stopping at McDonalds in 1989 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZJAtkqiV8U&t=82s> Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2017) Nelson Sullivan discusses the reality of video at the Chelsea Hotel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDXDWUTLhKU&t=92s> Accessed March 2019
- Nelson Sullivan / 5ninthavenueproject (2018) Nelson's 39th Birthday – Waiting for Eric and Liz <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjL6goBP0Kg&t=382s> Accessed March 2019

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