

# The Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography

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**Abstract:** Feminist ethnography does not have a single, coherent definition and is caught between struggles over the definition and goals of feminism and the multiple practices known collectively as ethnography. Towards the end of the 1980s, debates emerged that problematized feminist ethnography as a productive methodology and these debates still haunt feminist ethnographers today. In this article, I provide a concise historiography of feminist ethnography that summarizes both its promises and its vulnerabilities. I address the three major challenges I argue feminist ethnographers currently face, which include responding productively to feminist critiques of representing “others,” accounting for feminisms’ commitment to social change while grappling with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production, and confronting the historical and ongoing lack of recognition for significant contributions by feminist ethnographers. Despite these challenges, I argue that feminist ethnography is a productive methodology and I conclude by delineating its methodological imperatives. These imperatives include producing knowledge about women’s lives in specific cultural contexts, recognizing the potential detriments and benefits of representation, exploring women’s experiences of oppression along with the agency they exercise in their own lives, and feeling an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which the researchers work. I argue that this set of imperatives enables feminist ethnographers to successfully navigate the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** feminist ethnography, global feminisms, feminist methodologies, feminist critiques of representation

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Feminist ethnography does not have a single, coherent definition and is caught between struggles over the definition and goals of feminism and the multiple practices known collectively as ethnography. Towards the end of the 1980s, debates emerged that problematized feminist ethnography as a productive methodology. For example, Judith Stacey’s widely read 1988 article “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” raised questions about whether feminist ethnography actually poses a threat to research subjects because it holds out a promise of an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship with the researcher that may or may not be met, especially in the long term. In 1990, Lila Abu-Lughod’s article, also entitled “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?,” examined the dangers of feminist ethnographers who assume a universal “women’s experience” that erases power differentials between the more privileged ethnographer and her research subjects. These dilemmas weighed heavily in the minds of feminist ethnographers a quarter of a century ago, and the difficulties of navigating their fault lines still haunt us today. In this article, I provide concise historiography of feminist ethnography that summarizes both its promises and its vulnerabilities and I address the three major challenges I argue feminist ethnographers currently face.

First, feminist ethnographers must struggle with critiques within feminism about the possibilities and problems inherent in representing “other” women and working across difference; secondly, feminist ethnographers must account for feminisms’ commitment to social change while grappling with

poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production; and thirdly, feminist ethnographers have to challenge the historical and ongoing lack of recognition for their significant contributions. I argue that despite these challenges feminist ethnography is a valuable methodology and I conclude by delineating the methodological imperatives of feminist ethnography, which are the tools I believe enable feminist ethnographers to successfully navigate the challenges they face.

### **Feminist Critiques of Representing “Others”**

In their recent edited volume, *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*, Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis define feminist ethnography as “a project committed to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants’ lives” (2013, 1) and assert “that among the many strands of feminism, there is support for linking feminist ethnography to a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study” (2013, 9). This definition reflects feminist ethnography’s emphasis on being attentive to diversity and focusing on topics of inquiry that are relevant to its research subjects, especially those who occupy a different subject position than the researcher. In this section, I provide a concise intellectual genealogy of the development of feminist critiques of representing “others.” These critiques are foundational to feminist ethnography, which emphasizes the importance of examining power dynamics between subjects and researchers, and they have led to both a definition and a praxis of feminist ethnography that is attentive to these concerns.

In the 1970s, the popular slogan “Sisterhood Is Global” theorized an essential connection between women around the world that was based on their shared gender oppression. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through today, this slogan and its governing idea—that women are connected across cultures due to our essential identities as women and our common oppressed state—has been criticized as originating in an ethnocentric worldview that privileges white, middle-class, Western women. Audre Lorde, in her foundational essay, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984), argues that the second wave of the women’s movement was too focused on sexual oppression at the expense of women of color who suffer from multiple forms of oppression that cannot be reduced to sex discrimination. Since the early 1980s, global feminist discourse has been challenged multiple times by “third-world” feminists such as, among others, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Aihwa Ong.<sup>1</sup>

In her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (originally published in 1984), Mohanty argues that Western feminists have utilized colonial knowledge practices through their construction of third-world women as a monolithic group reduced to being the victims of their patriarchal cultures and traditions. She claims that third-world women are the “other” for Western feminists, who through discourse construct themselves as more actualized human beings in comparison with their non-Western counterparts. Mohanty contends that through this form of othering Western feminists come to see themselves as the “superior sisters” who need to rescue third-world women from their barbaric cultures. Rescue narratives have historical precedence under colonialism, where the colonialist rule was argued to be justified because of the treatment of women in the colonized country. Mohanty points out the similarity between feminist theories and colonial practices, both of which have included arguments about “saving” women.

In contrast, radical feminist Robin Morgan argues in her introduction to *Sisterhood Is Global* that a latent global women’s culture exists and can be activated by women examining their common experiences with patriarchal oppression (1984, 1). Mohanty questions the viability of Morgan’s thesis given the diverse

experiences of women across the globe; more fundamentally, she challenges Morgan's understanding of "women" as a meaningful identity category and argues for studies and analyses of women that are context-specific and historically situated. Mohanty's criticisms do not rule out the possibility of women working collectively across difference, but reveal the ways in which Western feminist discourses risk reinforcing colonial knowledge practices if they set up discursive binaries that reproduce the West and Western feminists as superior and more advanced than women in the global South.

Aihwa Ong (2001) is also critical of Western feminist essentialization of third-world women. Ong is especially concerned with linear narratives of development, which she argues Western feminists employ in their depictions and theorizations of subaltern women. Ong claims that feminists too often focus on Western targets and ideas of development at the expense of recognizing alternative and/or native developmental goals. Under this construction, third-world women are conceived of as living in a premodern era, and entrance into a modern world and economy is seen as the goal of "development." Ong critiques this as a magical belief in the power of modernity to emancipate women from oppressive gender roles (2001, 11).

Mohanty and Ong argue in favor of abandoning Western feminist notions of development, which always begin with the assumption of third-world victimization. They advocate challenging colonial discourses by allowing subaltern women to define their own goals for development, instead of being circumscribed by Western feminist constructions of what development means. However, despite this criticism, Ong argues that "feminists, because of their privileged positions as members of hegemonic powers, should speak out against female oppression at home and overseas" (2001, 114). For Ong, the dangers of not "speaking for others" are greater than those of continuing to do so, although any such attempts will inevitably be fraught with misrepresentations. Mohanty and Ong promote recognition that "partial truths and understandings" are preferable to all-encompassing theories, because they are less likely to reinscribe dominant discourses and because they allow for different "visions of the future" (Ong 2001, 116).

These criticisms not only challenge many Western feminist tenets but also pose several key challenges to the practice of ethnography. In Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the author questions whether or not subaltern others can be "given voice" by intellectuals seeking to bring it to those who have been historically silenced. Spivak argues that academics cannot "give voice" to the subaltern, since in such an arrangement the subaltern's voice will always already be co-opted and secondary. Her argument points to the possibility that instead of giving voice to the voiceless the intellectual's action is recapitulating the subaltern status of the subject. This remains a risk of feminist ethnography. However, I agree with Amy Shuman's assertion, in her book *Other People's Stories*, that even though telling others' stories is a process fraught with representational and ethical landmines, we can and must continue to engage in it with the hope that we can learn something from the telling of "untold stories" (2005, 162).

Since the 1980s, many additional critiques of Western women studying and representing "other" women have emerged. Specifically, feminist ethnographers studying underprivileged groups have been heavily criticized. As a significant example, in the late 1980s a white Australian feminist anthropologist, Diane Bell, wrote an article in collaboration with Topsy Napurrula Nelson, an Aboriginal woman from central Australia, which revealed extremely high rates of rape within the Aboriginal community. The article and Bell came under severe scrutiny from other Aboriginal women and feminist academics. Many critics argued that Bell had misused her power as a white anthropologist to discuss intraracial rape within the Aboriginal community, and some claimed that Nelson was not a coauthor of the piece but was used by Bell to gain legitimacy for her article (Bell 1996, 109). The article and the controversy that followed created discussions within feminist circles about the problems inherent in representing "other" women.

From these discussions, multiple questions arose which pose ethical dilemmas for feminist fieldworkers. The viability of representing others accurately was questioned, and it was debated whether or not outsiders could or should represent groups to which they do not belong. For example, Trinh Minh-ha argued that a “conversation of ‘us’ about ‘them’ is a conversation in which ‘them’ is silenced” (2000, 65), in a critique similar to Spivak’s claim about the inability of the subaltern to speak or to have a voice when being represented by a person who is more privileged. These challenges echoed Edward Said’s pioneering account in *Orientalism* (1978), which argued that anthropologists had played a key role in European colonialism through developing a discourse representing colonized countries as Other, a worldview that, in a simplistic dichotomy, regards the West and Western cultural practices as superior and “civilized” and the East (and the global South) and its cultural practices as “backward” and inferior. Said argued that British anthropologists specifically used images of women’s inequality to reinforce the idea that these “other” cultures were barbaric and in need of colonial rule.

In a similar vein, Lati Mani argues that British anthropologists focused on practices like sati in India in order to justify colonial rule and to construct the West as more advanced with regards to women’s rights (1998, 5). Said’s and Mani’s arguments demonstrate how an anthropologist’s or ethnographer’s gaze can serve to preserve the current status hierarchy, rather than to dislodge or interrupt it. This is one reason why Bell and Nelson’s article caused so much controversy. It reinforced the discourse that Aboriginals are “backward” and in need of the (white) Australian government’s help, especially when it comes to women’s issues.

Minh-ha’s (2000) critiques of ethnography as reinforcing a colonialist gaze are well known. Her work raises questions about whether any representation of an “other” necessarily means the other will be colonized and misrepresented to preserve the status hierarchy. In addition, it also puts forward (as much poststructuralist work does) the larger question of whether or not the colonizing gaze can be adequately “interrupted” through language or experiments with representational form. In the following sections, I explore how feminist ethnographers have been experimenting with representational form for decades, but I also maintain that experiments with form do not necessarily make ethnography feminist.

### **Poststructuralism, the Literary Turn, and Feminist Ethnography**

In 1994, Kamala Visweswaran’s *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* examined debates about “deconstructive” ethnography from a feminist perspective. Visweswaran interrogated the process whereby “objective” or “scientific” ethnography was being reassessed as a “fiction” and explored the means by which feminist ethnography could navigate these new fault lines. Her book addresses the challenges “the literary turn” posed to ethnographers in general and to feminist ethnographers in particular. In this section, I provide a history of the development of poststructuralist critiques of ethnography and present evidence that feminist ethnographers wrote “experimental” ethnographies decades prior to the literary turn within anthropology.

*Writing Culture* (1986), an anthology coedited by James Clifford and George Marcus, challenged ethnographers to rethink their projects in light of poststructuralist critiques. These critiques made apparent that there is a particular rhetoric of ethnography and that literary tropes are prevalent in ethnographic writing. *Writing Culture* explores the ways in which ethnography is a fiction that creates, through written form, an account of “others” that claims to be a valid source of objective knowledge. Historically, anthropologists and ethnographers such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas (considered the “father” of American social anthropology) tried to collect data from the groups they studied without interfering with their culture or attempting to change it in any way. The cultural information ethnographers collected

was expected to be as untainted by their subjectivity as possible. In *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus, along with their contributors, attempt to reconcile poststructural critiques of knowledge, as always partial and restricted by the discourses from which it emerges, with ethnographers' desires to not have their work reduced to being understood as "mere fictions" (Clifford 1986, 26).

Ethnographers and historians of ethnography struggle through these contradictions in *Writing Culture*, attempting to articulate how ethnography uses and is shaped by certain literary tropes, but at the same time is not solely defined by them. As Clifford puts it, "The essays in this volume do not claim ethnography is 'only literature.' They do insist it is always writing" (1986, 26). To begin with, ethnographers must establish how and in what ways ethnography has been confined by certain discourses. Mary Louise Pratt's essay, "Fieldwork in Common Places," begins with an examination of how the discipline of ethnography was founded as different from "less specialized genres" (1986, 27) like journalism, travel books, and missionaries' memoirs. Early ethnographers established their authority by describing their work as "scientific" in contrast to tourist recollections or other non-professional forms of writing about other cultures.

However, as Pratt points out, many well-known ethnographers have also been lovers of literature and some, like Malinowski, even considered writing novels (1986, 37). Pratt also discusses the phenomenon within ethnography of writing two separate monographs on the same project: one an academic monograph and the other a narrative about the personal reflections of the ethnographer in the field. There are multiple examples of such pairings, including early works like Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899) (Pratt 1986, 35). Interestingly, the twin books were not always produced by the same author but were sometimes written by a heterosexual couple who worked in the field together.

Barbara Tedlock's article, "Works and Wives: On the Sexual Division of Textual Labor" (1995), gives a historical and intellectual genealogy of what the author argues is a division of ethnographic labor between men and women. Men (husbands) write ethnographies that are accepted in the academy because the form and content of their work are academically sanctioned, and women (wives) write "experimental" or "reflexive" ethnographies that are considered non-professional narratives, better suited for the general public than for the academy (1995, 271). Tedlock's article makes two significant points simultaneously. Women's writing within ethnography has historically been undervalued and female-authored ethnographies have been largely dismissed because of both their form and their content, which included personal narrative and, most often, reflections on the authors' experiences with women in the field. These exclusions reinforced the idea that ethnographies of women's lives are forms of specialized and secondary knowledge, not necessary to an understanding of a culture as a whole.

Tedlock discusses the work of Ann Axtell Morris, which includes technical contributions to her husband's studies as well as *Digging in the Southwest* (1933), a first-person account of her experiences doing archeological fieldwork. The book is still in print today and is often credited with attracting students to the discipline. However, Morris's work is not part of the sanctioned canon of the discipline, and Tedlock argues that it is precisely the author's public appeal that makes her unpopular within the academy (1995, 268). Similarly, Ruth Behar claims that even feminist ethnographers are "somewhat embarrassed" (1995a, 8) by Margaret Mead, even though she is a well-known anthropologist and ethnographer. Behar suggests that because Mead was a public intellectual, her academic work was belittled by those in the academy who considered their work to be more theoretically sophisticated than Mead's.

Nancy Lutkehaus (1995) writes about the reasons for Mead's exclusion from the canon, arguing that it is problematic in more ways than one because Mead can be seen as writing both experimental and feminist ethnography before the "textual turn" and before (and during) the second wave of the women's movement.

Lutkehaus points out that between 1925 and 1975 Mead published more than 1,300 articles and essays (1995, 186). Many of these articles were “experimental” by current standards, and Lutkehaus quotes Mead as arguing “that no person ever sees more than a part of the truth, that the contribution of one sex, or one culture, or one scientific discipline that may itself cross both sex and cultural lines, is always partial, and must always wait upon the contribution of others for a fuller truth” (Lutkehaus 1995, 192). Lutkehaus finds Mead’s articulation of “partial truths” significant, given that this understanding is an important component of postmodern ethnography. It is worth noting that both Lutkehaus’s and Behar’s reappraisals of Mead’s contribution were written specifically in response to Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture*, in an anthology coedited by Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, *Women Writing Culture*, which attempted to understand why, in a discipline with so many “foremothers,” there were so few women ethnographers in the canon.

### **Recognizing the Foremothers of Feminist Ethnography**

While *Writing Culture* questions the practices and tropes of anthropology and ethnography, it does not question the canon that excludes women ethnographers, who, according to Behar and Gordon, can be seen as practicing “experimental ethnography” before male theorists coined the term. In the introduction to *Women Writing Culture*, Behar critiques Clifford’s assertion that feminist ethnographers are not included in *Writing Culture* because “their writings failed to fit the requirements of being feminist *and* textually innovative” (Behar 1995a, 5; Behar’s emphasis). Clifford argued that “feminist ethnography has focused either on setting the record straight about women or on revising anthropological categories ... it has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such” (1986, 21). Behar and Gordon disagree. In their coedited book, there are multiple examples of women ethnographers (like Mead) who were experimenting with the ethnographic form decades before it became the norm within the academy.

Women ethnographers like Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elsie Clews Parsons were reflexive about their knowledge production, their relationships with informants, and the remarkable resemblance their work had to literature long before the textual turn within the academy. For example, Visweswaran claims that Hurston is not canonized for her contributions to anthropology because she “chose not to objectify African-American cultures using normative anthropological approaches, but to imbed them in the logic of a storytelling tradition,” and she also asserts that Hurston’s “tendency to blur genres and to rely on first-person narration is both ‘experimental’ and an early example of feminist ethnographic work” (1994, 33). The dismissal of Hurston’s significant contributions is an example of women’s ethnographic work not being considered “serious” precisely because it was reflexive and dialogic. These early feminist ethnographers did not present themselves as the ultimate authority on the culture of others, but as presenting the partial truths they had learned; moreover, they made a special effort to include the voices of “others” in their texts. However, now that postmodern ethnographers hold all such practices in high esteem, we do not see a turning to those early works but rather their continuing dismissal. In her introduction and chapter in *Women Writing Culture*, Behar is angered by the continual absence of feminist ethnographers from the mainstream canon; but Gordon (who helped Clifford with his introduction to *Writing Culture*), while equally distressed, sees Clifford’s assertions not as “malicious” but as resulting from his inability to work with feminist theory (Behar 1995a, 5).

Catherine Lutz tackles these questions in her article “The Gender of Theory,” where she argues that theory is gendered, raced, and classed within the academy (1995, 251). Specifically, she claims that theory within ethnography has mostly been associated with men’s writing, while women’s writing has been

connected with data collection and fieldwork. Lutz argues that there is a dichotomy in which male writing is seen as serious and difficult and women's writing is seen as not scholarly and personal. However, now that postmodern ethnography blurs the lines between the self/other and knower/known, one would assume that feminist ethnographers would be recognized for their early contributions in this arena. However, Lutz shows that they continue to be ignored because of the historical legacy of associating men with theory and women with personalized ethnographies.

This is the same legacy that Tedlock (1995) describes in the "textual" division of labor between husbands and wives who were together in the field but who produced very different ethnographic works. For example, Elizabeth and Robert Fernea lived together in a small Iraqi village, and Robert Fernea produced a traditional scholarly ethnography while Elizabeth Fernea wrote *Guests of the Sheik* (1965), which reads almost like a novel, although all of the events the author reports were part of her experiences in the village. Fernea openly discusses her problems with being accepted by the local women, who judge her because they think she cannot cook and is lazy by their standards. Fernea lives, as the women in the village do, in complete isolation from men who are not their relatives. Her only contacts are with her husband and their female neighbors. Specifically, her social life revolves around the harem of the Sheik, where she goes almost daily to have tea and chat with the local women. Fernea's account is marked by her personal reflections and by her subjective reactions to the restrictions placed on her, as a woman, in this field situation. Her work addresses the lives and concerns of women, although without the specific, politically inflected guidance by the idea of "global sisterhood" that would follow in the years after. In fact, Fernea's discussions of the complexity of her relationships with the Iraqi women (among whom she eventually makes great friends) perhaps could have served as a corrective to the romantic ideals of global sisterhood. Fernea manages to form bonds with these women, but their relationships are always shot through with difference: differences in religion, race, culture, and education level. The bonds are based on the commonalities she shares with the women, but these are few and far between. Fernea documents the negotiations she and the Iraqi women perform among themselves, figuring out how they can and cannot work together and communicate across their differences.

Feminist ethnographers like Behar (1990; 1995a, b) have combined experimental modes of writing with feminist theory and argued that they should be able to gain institutional legitimacy for their projects. In Behar's ethnographic work *Translated Woman*, which is the life history of an indigenous market woman in Mexico, the author's goal is "to see her not as a type but as she sees herself, as an actor thrust in the world seeking to gain meaning out of the events of her life" (1990, 229). Behar is committed to pursuing theoretical questions, yet does not want to usurp the meaning Esperanza gives to her own life experiences. Instead, she reads the "economy" of Esperanza's life narrative and names it a "spiritual economy" because Esperanza believes her life to be a struggle between good and evil. Behar is also self-reflexive in the work, and while *Translated Woman* is widely read, the author has often been criticized for focusing too much on herself, especially in the book's conclusion (1995b, 71). While feminist ethnographers like Behar have been practicing "experimental" modes of writing for decades, this characteristic alone does not make any given ethnography feminist. In the following section, I provide specific methodological imperatives and examples of texts that I define as meeting the demands of feminist ethnography.

### **The Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography**

A feminist ethnographer must recognize, anticipate, and explore the ways in which her presence in the field affects her informants' responses and behavior. Feminist ethnographers do not assume they can perform research without affecting it in some way. Barbara Myerhoff was among the first, in her well-known

ethnography *Number Our Days* (1978), to utilize reflexivity creatively in her study of elderly Jews living in Venice, California, whose social life revolved around the Israel Levin Center. In his introduction to the work, Victor Turner claims Myerhoff is original and on the vanguard of ethnographic theory in her use of self-reflection and narrative analysis, and in allowing her informants to assign meaning to their own lives.

However, Myerhoff is not studying the other in the traditional sense, given that one day she expects to also “be a little old Jewish lady” (1978, 19).<sup>2</sup> In part, she is accepted into the community based on her identity, although she is also scolded and judged for not knowing Yiddish or Hebrew, and many ask her who takes care of her children while she works. Myerhoff works with and records the life history of an organic intellectual within the community, Shmuel Goldman, who often remarks on her “ignorance” of Jewish history. Myerhoff’s identity is both an asset and a hindrance to her work with these elderly Jews, issues that she openly discusses. Myerhoff came to her study through an interest in working with the elderly; she first attempted to work with elderly Chicanos, but was turned away with comments that it would be better for her to study her “own kind” (1978, 12). Myerhoff does not leave these challenges out of the narrative she constructs but includes them as important to her project.

Despite the inclusion of a discussion that addresses the challenges caused by her identity, the community Myerhoff studies remains at the center of her analysis in *Number Our Days*. She comments on how the community members often treat her as a grandchild and discusses the sorrow they feel with the treatment they receive from their biological children. Despite this attention to affect, Myerhoff does not romanticize her subjects. Rather, she presents them in their full humanity: arguing politics, judging her and each other, living in poverty but not feeling poor, and assigning meaning to their own lives. It is the community’s dedication to finding meaning in their lives that most attracts Myerhoff. Her work is dialogic and multivoiced, and throughout the book she remains committed to showing the reader in what ways these individuals make meaning out of their life experiences, and how they find it collectively, as a community, through ritual. Gelya Frank (1995) argues that Myerhoff’s work helped to create the countercanon within ethnography that now values reflexive and dialogic narratives. However, Frank also points out Myerhoff still risks being written out of the canon (1995, 207).

Myerhoff engages with gender and women’s issues in *Number Our Days* and in her last chapter discusses how she and many of her subjects agree that the elderly women within the community live much fuller lives than the elderly men. Myerhoff argues that this is the result of gender construction: women experience independence during old age, while continuing with many of the same daily tasks they have been doing their entire lives (cooking, cleaning, and caring for others). In contrast, the men who are retired do not know what to do with themselves or their time and have few deep relationships with others. I consider Myerhoff’s work feminist because she engages with self-reflexivity, allows her subjects to “speak on their own” in her text, and interprets women’s lives and experiences through a lens of feminist analysis. She recognizes the inequality women experience because of their gender but also highlights their resourcefulness and agency. Ethnographers have long understood that there are major differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. The benefit of a participant-observer methodology is that the ethnographer sees these differences firsthand. Myerhoff recognizes the formal inequality the women experience but focuses on the ways in which their everyday lives are not completely circumscribed by gender inequality.

In the years following Myerhoff’s work, and in response to poststructuralist critiques of all-encompassing theories of power, many feminists began to write and think about the resistance strategies women employ. Rather than focusing on how patriarchy oppresses women, feminists began to think through Michel Foucault’s assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978, 95). However, Abu-

Lughod argues that there are dangers in reading resistance strategies romantically and she suggests that Foucault's statement can also be read as signifying "where there is resistance, there is power" (1990a, 42). For example, in her ethnographic work with Bedouin women in Egypt, she finds that young girls resist their cultural traditions through the acquisition of consumer goods associated with Westernized femininity (cosmetics, lingerie, etc.) (Abu-Lughod 1990b). Abu-Lughod argues that the girls are not only acquiring Western consumer goods but also Western ideals about marriage, which make Bedouin women vulnerable to economic dependency on men in ways they have not been in the past. Therefore, resistance strategies may not ultimately lead to women's liberation, and may in fact not even reflect "real" agency if women are only entering into a new relationship with a different form of power. This raises larger questions about how feminist ethnographers can think about and analyze women's agency.

Ethnographer Geyla Frank encounters such questions in *Venus on Wheels* (2000), which chronicles over twenty years of the relationship between herself and her subject, Diane Devries. Devries was born without arms and legs, and Frank meets her in 1976 when she is a teaching assistant in an introductory class Devries is taking. Frank weaves into her text theoretical questions about the possibilities and impossibilities of understanding even one other person (especially one as "different" as Devries), her personal reflections on her relationship with Devries, and a history of the disability rights movement in the United States. Frank discusses how she expects to find a "victim" when she meets Devries but is then surprised by Devries's high self-esteem.

Devries sees herself as a complete woman and continually acts as an agent in her own life. Much of the text explores Frank's assumptions about Devries and discusses the surprise Devries's self-assurance constitutes for Frank. Also central to the work is Frank's discussion of ongoing differences the two have as they negotiate their relationship. Frank discusses her conference paper, in which she does a Freudian psychoanalysis of Devries's life and which makes Devries very upset. Frank then comes to the conclusion that her failing relationship with her psychoanalyst may have led her to write the paper and agrees with Devries that this was a violation of Devries's right to self-interpretation (2000, 110). This incident reveals two points of contention in feminist ethnography. First, it is important to consider that feminist ethnographers feel responsible to their informants for their representations of them, and, secondly, feminist ethnographers often give their subjects veto power over their work, as Frank does with Devries. Devries often refers to Frank as her "biographer," and Frank struggles with how much authority Devries should have over her work.

Feminist ethnographers recognize that representations are not value-free and often have consequences for those who are represented in them. Frank wants to retain authority over her work and interpretations of Devries's life, but she does not want to represent Devries in ways the latter finds offensive. Frank's questions and passions are very different from Devries's: Frank is interested in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, and Devries is invested in having her story told and hopes it will inspire others. This is not an uncommon problem for feminist ethnographers, who often face the challenge of performing research on individuals or communities that are in crisis.

For example, *Troubling the Angels* (1997) by Patti Lather and Chris Smithies was first imagined by a group of women living with HIV/AIDS as a "Kmart book" to help their fellow sufferers cope with the illness. Lather worked as a coauthor with Smithies, who was the leader of a support group for these women. *Troubling the Angels* challenges traditional ethnographic tropes by not assigning meaning to the women's testimonies and allowing their statements to stand on their own, while Smithies's and Lather's comments are separated from and placed below (on the page) the women's perspectives. Lather refuses to assign a

coherent meaning to the women's experiences and interrupts the text with information boxes about HIV/AIDS and angels, which became common symbols associated with the disease (for example, through Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*). Lather argues that the text frustrates modernist ethnographic modes, and that its readers' struggles with the text are welcome and appropriate. She wants readers to "get lost in the text" rather than walk away with a coherent understanding of HIV-positive women's lives (2000, 286).

*Troubling the Angels* also works as a criticism of empathy, and Lather argues that our current humanist construction of empathy needs to be challenged (2000, 306). This claim is akin to Shuman's critique of empathy, which argues that empathy often serves as a cathartic or inspirational device for witnesses who, after having an empathetic experience, reinstate their relatively unchanged worldview and feel no obligations in return (2005, 5). Lather and Smithies's ethnography of women living with HIV/AIDS aims to undermine the sentimentality and empathy that might have been produced through a more coherent narrative structure.

Lather is both interested in engaging poststructuralist criticisms of traditional ethnographic work and committed to feminist theory. Although the structure of *Troubling the Angels* challenges ethnographic tropes of realism, the author remains "haunted" by the feminist commitment of doing justice to her subjects' words and needs (Lather 2000, 302). The poststructuralist demands to dislocate coherent metanarratives that "explain it all" and the feminist demand of giving voice to marginalized women do not seem incompatible to Lather. She argues that *Troubling the Angels* combines these goals, as well as frustrates the readers who are looking for either a poststructuralist ethnography or a feminist one.

Lather and Smithies (1997), like Frank (1995; 2000), allow their informants to read their work prior to publication. The women approve of *Troubling the Angels*, although some struggle with how the book is structured. Lather asks the women if the book resists both sensationalism and sentimentality, and most agree that it does. The women feel that Lather and Smithies were true to their stories and that the book has integrity. The book meets the demands of feminist ethnography, because it avoids representational violence as much as possible and tells a formerly untold story about women that features their struggles as well as their resourcefulness.

*Troubling the Angels* attempts to "work the ruins" of feminist ethnography, but there remain questions about the ways in which feminist ethnographers are responsible to their subjects, especially in cases when they are not invited to write a text, as Lather and Smithies were. There are no clear answers to these questions, as they vary with each project and need to be considered individually. Some questions must be asked of every project—such as, "Whose story is it, what is it being used for, what does it promise, and at whose expense?" (Shuman 2005, 162)—but the answers will be context-specific. For example, when these questions are posed to Abu-Lughod's work with Bedouin women or to Frank's work with Devries, the respective answers will be particular to the contexts of their work. This attention to specificity is an important contribution of feminist ethnography, which examines women's lives in the local contexts in which they live and therefore does not yield overarching theories but culturally situated analyses that are grounded in the concerns of the women who are being studied.

## **Conclusion**

Twenty-five years have passed since both Stacey and Abu-Lughod first posed the question: Can there be a feminist ethnography? Their dilemma still troubles feminist ethnographers today, but in this article I

have argued that feminist ethnography is a productive methodology and an invaluable tool for feminism, which continues to struggle with working through the differentials of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, religious belief, and other forms of difference women have from one another. I have provided a historiography of feminist ethnography and addressed the three major challenges I argue feminist ethnographers currently face.

These challenges include responding productively to feminist critiques of representing “others,” accounting for feminisms’ commitment to social change while engaging with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production, and confronting the historical and ongoing lack of recognition for significant contributions by feminist ethnographers. In response to the first challenge, feminist ethnographers have developed a rich literature that thinks through both the possibilities and the problems inherent in representing “other” women and requires researchers to explicitly address these concerns in their works. Secondly, feminist ethnographers are attentive to poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production but realize that “the postmodernist fascination with style and rhetoric may lead not to better ways of doing ethnography, but better ways of writing unethical ones” (Skeggs 2001, 436). Finally, throughout the article, I have constructed an intellectual genealogy of the field that is my contribution to challenging the historical and ongoing lack of recognition for important contributions of feminist ethnographers. My hope is that others will join me in adding to this genealogy to more fully respond to this challenge.

I have delineated the core methodological imperatives of feminist ethnography, which are the tools I believe enable feminist ethnographers to navigate the fault lines and challenges they face. Feminist ethnographers produce knowledge about women’s lives in specific cultural contexts, recognize the potential detriments and benefits of representation, are interested in exploring women’s experiences of oppression along with the agency women exercise in their own lives, and feel an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which they work. To give a final example, Jennifer Bickham Mendez’s (2005) ethnographic study of Nicaragua’s Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement, otherwise known as the María Elena Cuadra (MEC) movement, utilizes the methodological imperatives I have outlined. Bickham Mendez is interested in exploring how women in Nicaragua experience the negative consequences of globalization, as well as in how they productively utilize strategies of resistance. Bickham Mendez stresses that her study is context-specific and is sensitive in her analysis to the possible effects of representation for this particular women’s movement. She also grounds her study in the concerns of her research participants and feels an ethical responsibility towards this community of women. She describes her project thusly:

To use a popular Latin American image, resisting the negative consequences of economic globalization for women and working people is “ants’ work.” This book is about the “ant-like” effort of one group of women ... and its efforts to improve the lives of unemployed women and women workers in maquila factories. (2005, viii)

Bickham Mendez goes on to assert that by focusing “on the ants’ work of a relatively small group of women” she hopes to “show how this case contributes to a clearer understanding of the complexities involved in social justice struggles in an era of globalization” (2005, ix). Her study represents the promise of feminist ethnography to enrich our understanding of women’s lives in specific cultural contexts and demonstrates why feminist ethnographic interventions are vital. They are vital, first and foremost, because we are invested in asking “in whose interests” an ethnographic text works.

## Notes

1. I have put “third world” in quotation marks here to indicate the contested use of this term, which creates a status hierarchy between the supposedly “first” and the supposedly “third” global spaces. Other terms, like the “developing world” or the “global South,” are equally contentious and do not reverse this hierarchy. Now that my concern has been raised, however, I will no longer use the quotation marks with this expression.

2. Tragically, Barbara Myerhoff died of lung cancer in January of 1985.

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