Giving Ethnographic Accounts: A Critical Feminist Window

Miranda Niittynen
The University of Western Ontario, mniittyn@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss4/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Ethnographic studies that draw upon feminism are simultaneously subversive to and subverted by traditional anthropology, and this contradictory relationship manifests itself within the larger field of feminist ethnographic studies. Ethnography involves the gathering of verbal accounts by an ethnographer who textually represents the words, stories, and testimonies of research participants during fieldwork. Feminist ethnographers specifically seek to ‘give voice’ to marginalized groups. In doing so, they represent the complexity of oppression within cultural groups, and attempt to politically interpolate dominant discourses found in traditional anthropological studies. The groups studied need not be defined by national borders; rather, they are often (though not always) separated from the ethnographer’s socio-economic background. This is an undeniable shortcoming in feminist ethnographic studies given that, from the outset, educated feminist ethnographers often possess enormous social privilege vis-à-vis the communities they study. For this reason, the definition of feminist ethnography remains a contentious issue, and this practice often redoubles the theoretical problem of representing research participants that was originally manifest in more traditional approaches to ethnographic studies. In seeking to represent women’s verbal accounts and implementing them into ethnographic writing, feminist ethnographers often seek to derive legitimacy from the methods that they are essentially seeking to disrupt.

Given this shift in methodology, despite their altruistic attempts to represent participants differently, feminist ethnographers are always already implicated in ethical issues inherent to the unequal power relations that subjugate subaltern subjects (Alcoff; Hedge; Mohanty; Oyewumi; Spivak, “Can”; Spivak, “Echo”; Trinh, “Not”). From this position, I am intrigued by and have structured my research around the question posed by Judith Stacey and Lila Abu-Lughod: “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” For Abu-Lughod, possibility lies in feminist ethnography due to the very fact that this relationship entails women researching women, and it is in this practice that such methods are different from previous ethnographic studies (25). Contrary to this argument is Stacey’s contention that feminist ethnography’s only possibility is a partial one, since in every
way the ethnographer is betraying a feminist principle to remain ethical to her or his research participants (117). The contingent relationship formed between researcher and participant that Stacey notes follows that this feminist or experiential approach—though more conscious of its limitations—could result in a greater degree of betrayal for the participant than that often attending to more conventional ethnographic approaches.

Following Stacey, and incorporating feminist ethnographies over the past three decades, I argue for a closer analysis of this ethnographic relationship and a particular focus on the ethnographer as a ‘self.’ My response to this conversation takes up the subject formation of research participants, as it is unethical to expect participants to fit into a category so strictly defined by the dominant culture’s standards of what it means to be a ‘self.’ I argue that an ethnographic ethic would not mean simply common respect for the experience and feelings of participants, but also a realization of the ethnographer’s own transient position within this relationship. If the dominant norms of the ‘self’ are produced by normative linear narrative conventions, as argued by Judith Butler in “Giving an Account of Oneself,” then feminist ethnographers, too, remain guilty of replicating these conventions when formulating a ‘whole’ subject from speech of their participants. To this end, I incorporate Butler’s discussion on accountability of the self in order to implicate it within these qualitative ethnographic projects. In so doing, I propose that Butler’s theory has quite a lot to offer when discussing the paradoxical relationship between a feminist ethnographer and her or his participants. By complicating this notion of the self, I hope to offer new ways of thinking about feminist ethnographies that are critically accountable for the problem of subject formation at the outset of the project. In short, treating the ethnographer as a research subject, I seek to turn the ethnographic gaze inward.

Whereas feminist experiential ethnographers have sought to represent participants in a more ‘ethical’ and ‘whole’ manner, critical feminist ethnographers have sought to critique ethnographic practices that assume the ethnographer can reach authenticity and truth through research. As the result of influences from poststructuralist theories, critical feminist ethnographers have outlined the inconsistencies and interruptions that are faced within fieldwork, and have at times assumed their own failure at the outset of their projects (Lather; Stacey; St. Pierre; Visweswaran). In Fictions of Feminist Ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran argues that feminist approaches to ethnography demonstrate that ethnography is always a failure. Visweswaran claims that feminists take up ethnographic failures and recast them as ‘successes’ in order to set guidelines for future methodologies (98). In so doing, they suggest that the ‘better’ their methods, the more authentic the research product (Visweswaran 98). A sharp and rigid dichotomy exists between success and failure with respect to feminist ethnographies, as the ‘end goal’ of a study is often framed as a successful or unfettered textual representation of a participant; however, this kind of thinking is what critical feminist ethnographers are trying to avoid. For Visweswaran, failures
expose the overall problem of epistemology (99). Failures to ethically and successfully represent research participants expose more definitively the difficulties of understanding others and how deeply communicating subjects are marked by their cultures.

These perpetual failures, however, should not signify the end of discussion. Instead, they mark a transition whereby the limitations that are inherent in the traditional approach to ethnography are no longer resisted, but rather utilized in order to disrupt the desire to ‘better’ engage with participants (Visweswaran 100). For Patricia Lather, “[f]ailure is not just a sign of epistemological crisis but also an epistemological construct that signals the need for new ground versus repetition on the same terms” (38). Hence, the current system that sets up research methods as either successes or failures needs to be dismantled for future access to alternative methods.

Inherent in the experiential approach (and following Linda Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking for Others”) is an avoidance of representing the voices of research participants: feminist ethnographers resist practices that speak for participants in favour of practices that allow them to speak with participants. Such a theoretical foundation has led those who practice feminist ethnography to seek, as far as possible, to inject an authentic voice of the participant into the final textual product. This has encouraged such researchers to utilize technologies that, on the surface, appear to represent voices in ethnographic projects. As the use of tape recorders help to define and shape what is included in the interview process, the polished ethnographic text exposes more definitively the position of the ethnographer than the accounts of the participant. While the text appears to reveal a culture (and its individuals) in its entirety—in its most honest form—it is the ethnographer and the readers of that ethnography who shape what will be interpreted and heard from the transcripts, recordings, and phonetic tones of participants. Not only is the accountability of a subject opaque to the researcher in its (in) ability to capture the words and coherency of that subject, but the tape recorder also causes real interruptions in the interview process.

Feminist ethnographers often have not fully separated their experiential ethnographies from those of more traditional methods, but only try different approaches to reach similar ends. These approaches are related through a desire to create ethnographies that represent ‘success’ based on conventional ‘wholeness’ through the words of the participant. In examples of traditional ethnographic practices, such as David Fetterman’s Ethnography: Step by Step, the tape recorder is promoted for its ability to “effectively capture long verbatim quotations, essential to good fieldwork, while the ethnographer maintains a natural conversational flow” (70, emphasis added). Implicit in his title is the idea that a successful ethnography can be accomplished through following a regimented system of steps, while his arguments suggest that the act of recording voices verbatim is something to which all ethnographers need aspire. This attitude towards the efficacy and desirability of recording devices in the wider context of ethnographic studies may, at first review, seem favourable.
Indeed, the problem of speaking for research subjects appears circumnavigated by means of technological assistance, but this should not lead one to the conclusion that the act of recording is not, in and of itself, a means of representation that risks appropriation and distortion.

The tape recorder is strategically used to record the ‘authentic voice,’ as opposed to more basic interview practices wherein an interpretational reading of the participant’s voice is transformed by the notes of the ethnographer. The notion of an ‘authentic voice’ already assumes that recording words will further represent subjects in a more ‘honest’ way than through the interpretive notes of the ethnographer. Authenticity is, of course, problematic in many ways. Although upon a first listening, the voice on the tape recorder seems the ‘true’ voice or a ‘real’ account of the subject, such listening does not take into account that such recordings do not simply stand alone in ethnographic representations. Rather, the very nature of ethnographic accounts necessitates their first being heard by a specific self—with its own interpretative frameworks and influences—and then analysed and written by the ethnographer in her or his own primary languages. Just as the ethnographer cannot escape her or his positionality and write from ‘nowhere,’ personal accounts similarly do not drop out of mid-air.

In Fictions, Visweswaran recalls her own obsession with the ‘authenticity’ that the tape recorder provided. Though ethnographers utilize tape recorders for their potential to directly and transparently represent participant’s voices, what is heard while transcribing interviews is ultimately affected by the ethnographer’s own interpretation of participants’ accounts. The final ethnographic text becomes the interpretational voice of the ethnographer, and rather than avoiding the problems of representation, the text essentially redoubles such misrepresentations. For Visweswaran, the use of the tape recorder became a means to satisfy her yearning to ‘capture’ women’s words only because of the perception that the device could replicate voice free from lenses of manipulation and representation (97). Visweswaran writes that it is the ethnographer’s task to break down participant resistance in order to create a clear subject-hood. She states:

Normative ethnographic description itself is rife with the language of conquest: we extort tales and confessions from reluctant informants; we overcome the resistance of recalcitrant subjects when we ‘master’ their language or ‘subdue’ their insistent questioning. The ethnographer finally arrives when she renders a people or person ‘subject.’ (60)

Desiring to be a self and to make research participants ‘subjects’ is exemplary of the normative drive to create linear narratives or ‘whole’ stories of one’s self or others. Refusing to be a subject, in the linear sense, is akin to refusing to be easily accessed; specifically, it is an agential way to avoid research that risks the danger of researchers “steal[ing] knowledge from others, particularly those who have little else, and us[ing] it for the interests of power” (Lather 96). As feminist ethnographers have shown, however, the agency to refuse re-
search is allotted only to groups with resources to do so (Hedge; Lundstrom; Visweswaran).

While ethnographic practices have traditionally sought to gain knowledge of other groups through observations that objectify the ‘other,’ feminist ethnographic practices seek to make individuals agential by producing them as ‘whole’ and ‘speaking’ subjects. Western notions of subjectivity, however, are already bounded by normative constructions of what it means to be a self. For Rey Chow this “subject-constitution” is heavily rooted in an Anglo-American liberal humanism that tries “to make the native more like us by giving her a ‘voice’” (“Violence” 35). The other is then represented as individual, monolithic, and static and is given a subjectivity imposed upon as the result of conventional western norms. Research participants are allotted few options, Chow argues: there are “two types of freedom the subaltern has been allowed—object formation and subject constitution—which would result either in the subaltern’s protection (as object) from her own kind or her achievement as a voice assimilable to the project of imperialism” (Writing 35). Similarly, Gayatri Spivak writes in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and “Echo” that this relationship results in a doubling effect as the only words heard by ethnographers are mirrors to what they already know as Western subjects, and this ensures that the subaltern is only understood insofar as her or his responses contain relative value to Western culture, societal values, or ways of knowing. In concert with Spivak, Chow argues that researchers are driven to gain knowledge of other cultures in order to “enrich” themselves with the “surplus value of the oppressed” (Writing 30). From this position, one might argue that participants express strategic agency by refusing to give their words under such restrictive conditions.

Ofelia Schutte argues in “Cultural Alterity” that she who is from the dominant culture sets the terms of the interview process, and seldom the other way around (62). The researcher not the researched—often decides the ultimate intention, whereas participant silence, or refusal to be interviewed, is considered an ethnographic failure. For Trinh T. Minh-ha, “silence can only be subversive when it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories” (“Not” 373). Reinterpreting silence as subversive, feminist ethnographers can begin to think against traditional forms of ethnographic representation. For instance, Visweswaran argues that lies, secrets, and silences are resistance strategies that outline ethical issues and demonstrate the positioning of the ethnographer. Discussing examples of research participants who have refused to be interviewed, Visweswaran and Jayati Lal conclude that participants embody agential freedom from subjugation when they refuse to be represented in any form outside of that they desire. For Lal, such occasions work against negative stereotypes of ‘Third World’ women as “unliberated” (204).

The construction of narrative accounts makes the concept of unfettered testimony by a participant problematic in its own right. Even if personal accounts seem the most true to the speaking subject, this does not mean that such accounts will be read or understood by others—or that they are not
affected by social norms. To provide an example, Schutte unpacks her Latina identity and how it is cast as a “recognizable category” (58). The word ‘Latina’ provokes a series of preconceived stereotypes, and she argues that “[Latina] is a signifier that both masks and evokes a range of associations—hot blooded, temperamental, submissive, defiant, illegal or illicit, sexually repressed or sexually overactive, oppressed, exploited, and so on” (58). Such negative associations tied to words—and threaded together—are “producer[s] of culture” (Schutte 58-59). In a similar vein, Gelya Frank argues that negative constructions of “disability” often skew the reality of the perceptual viewer. In *Venus on Wheels*, Frank addresses how preconceived linguistic norms regarding disability came to signify the material body of her research participant, Diane. She argues that clinical accounts by doctors, when describing Diane’s body, did not wholly reflect what was observed. Linguistic conceptions of what it means to ‘have legs’ or to be a ‘whole body,’ when placed under the veil of negative stereotypes, substitute embodied reality and ignore a “source of countless ambiguities that spill over or resist filling the outlines of narrative strategies” (123). In both Schutte’s and Frank’s work, words that stand for race, ethnicity, gender, and disability come to signify a number of preconceived norms that seek to “capture” identity and yet fail to account for the complexity of the subject’s fundamental reality.

Just as real experiences are lost to language, so too do bodies slip outside of narrative constructions despite the fact that they are tangentially part of this process. Butler makes this clear in *Senses of the Subject* when she writes that “[a]lthough the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture” (20-21). Butler argues that communicating subjects cannot put into words the “body in its knowability” (21); however, all scenes of address involve the body. Whether it is the animation of the throat in speech, the hands in sign language, or the body that produces the written text (Butler, *Senses* 15), the only tools offered to access bodies and beings are always already pre-established by a signifying system. For feminist ethnography, dependency on tape recorders reduces the speaking body to spectrality. If perceptions are skewed by preconceived linguistic understandings (and technological reduction), then one cannot give an account of oneself that is ungoverned by such norms.

Discussing the concept of accountability of the self, Butler argues that subjectivity is an on-going process, one that is informed and governed by clusters of norms that police how subjects come to know themselves in the everyday. Calling into question the authority of self-representation, Butler has argued that when a self narrates its story, it is no more reliable than the accounts of others. Though it is usually argued that we can only truly know ourselves and never—or not without great difficulty—fully know others, Butler wants to problematize the belief that we even know ourselves. In “Giving an Account of Oneself,” Butler argues that the self’s account is not individual, unique, or representative of something truthful since our self-recognition is the effect of language conventions that produce social norms (23). When wanting to know other subjects, we anticipate a life
narration by and of that subject. A life narration understood in its linearity is emblematic of a larger conception of temporality and subject-hood described throughout Western history. It is along these lines of thought that Gelya Frank recounts “how our interviews began, an entanglement of intentions resolved by the most conventional narrative device of Western autobiography: ‘I was born...’” (124). In the case of past ethnographies, descriptions of participants are often represented in linear fashion with little regard to whether or not the individuals represented understand their own experiences in a linear or chronological way. This is to say that accounts of the subject have more to do with audience accessibility than an organic representation of participants.

Through this linear telling of subjectivity, Butler argues that a narration always arrives late to the norms that are already formed and, therefore, the self reconstructs and reproduces itself differently in each act of telling (27). Narration is assumed to be coherent and sequential. In the act of narration, however, the story of the self is always under revision. Calling into question this authority Butler states:

> We can surely still tell our stories—and there will be many reasons to do precisely that—but we will not be able to be very authoritative when we try to give an account with a narrative structure. The ‘I’ cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one’s own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know. (26)

Our accounts of ourselves, nevertheless, are never fully our own, nor can there be self-accounts that are not already conforming to linguistic norms that govern the corporeality of the subject (Butler, “Giving” 26). Likewise, the tape recorder only sustains the illusion of unfettered representation of a ‘true,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘fixed’ self since the self is perpetually in flux. Therefore, any telling from a subject, researcher, or participant cannot give an accountable response affirming who they, as subjects, are. Thus, authenticity through tape recording devices does no more to show the ethnographer the truth of the subject’s account than her or his own account of the subject’s words. “No reality can be ‘captured’ without transforming” (Framer 115), writes Trinh, and ethnographic interviews are deeply transformative because they involve a set time limit to ask pre-established questions relevant to the ethnographer. In this regard, capturing spoken words creates little more than a temporal fiction, as participants’ responses do not remain identical over time. It is, however, our inability to give authentic or authoritative accounts of ourselves or of others that will allow us to reframe our motivation for ethnographic practices. Such a reframing may allow for more ethical ethnographic fieldwork and text-work to be produced—work that recognizes its own limitations from the outset.

What is most important for feminist ethnographers is finding ethical ways of conceptualizing the research participant, or the means to question their own positions in hearing an other’s response. In “Giving an Account of Oneself,” Butler begins to (re)formulate the recognition project that understands the self in opposition to an other and, as a
result, contains this relationship as static. Discursively, the self comes to understand itself through what it is not. Since one is endowed with a specific exteriority, Butler argues, the self’s perceptions of the material world are fundamentally shaped by these factors. Butler begins to break down the ways in which the self conceptualizes its own recognition in the world for its livelihood. She states that self-formulation does not begin prior to recognition of the other. It would be wrong to argue that there are individual selves who reproduce this relationship. There is no original knowledge or self that starts this relationship, but rather it is the external norms through language that frame the ways in which both self and other are situated: “[a]s Hegel would have it, recognition cannot be unilaterally given”—or, in other words, the self does not come into being without the other and vice versa” (Butler 22). Since there is no original self in this relationship, it is important to recognize that this relationship is a reciprocal and mutually dependent system. To call this relationship into question is to critique how we situate the dominant culture and reflection of the other. Since it can be argued that the Western self understands its own subjectivity only insofar as it is not the other, so too is the other structured to understand her or his subjectivity in contrast with the western notion of what it means to be a ‘self.’

This (ethnographic) project of recognition is on-going and does not stop formulating the other’s position in opposition to the self for the dominant culture’s own definition. Yet it is this belief that we can gain self-knowledge through the opposition of an other subject that makes ethnographic practices inherently colonial. To the contrary, Butler argues that the self can never be truly realized because self-understanding is composed mainly by norms that place selves in opposition to others. Butler states that coming to terms with the fact that we cannot fully know (our)selves should form the basis of future critical discussion. For Butler, these normative frames are part of language construction, and it is these “norms embedded in language” that police “what will and will not constitute recognisability” (23-24).

Arguing that we must begin to realize how our selves are formulated in order to revamp our approaches of studying others, Butler states that exploitative relations can only be disrupted through shifting our attention to the linguistic norms that position our subjects in the world (27). Recognizing the subject’s limit of knowledge about the self, researchers can begin to reframe their projects away from the power relationships that are supportive of self-definition through research participants. Advocating for more patience and humility, Butler suggests acknowledging the fact that full knowledge of the self or other is unattainable in theory as well as in practice. Only through this framework, it would seem, could a feminist ethnographer knowingly treat other subjects as collaborative research participants with a clear feminist conscience. Such a praxis may be the only way these pathological (and culturally specific) linguistic norms may be located, as engaging with our limitations may create new discursive spaces in which we can openly discuss our own ethnographic ‘failures’ and ‘successes.’ In suspending the drives for
self-knowledge, the ethnographer can avoid furthering ethical violence upon participants. Indeed, halting the drive for self-knowledge is difficult—if not impossible—Butler argues, since it would be an on-going process of resisting self-identification and the identification of others (27). We also cannot assume, she explains, that through our inability to know ourselves we will gain a form of transparency; rather, this will lower our expectations of our own capacity for self-knowledge and ability to account for ourselves or others (28). This is precisely where the question of ethics emerges in this critical conversation.

I shall reiterate the question: “Can there be a feminist ethnography?” Certainly, the many shapes and forms of existing ethnographies that seek to follow feminist principles suggest the answer is clear; however, as a consequence of the arguments and theories discussed above, I believe that the more appropriate lines of inquiry necessarily become the following: Are feminist ethnographies ethical ethnographies? Can feminist ethnography be ethical? And what does an ethical representation of a participant’s voice (or silence) look like?

Ultimately, I argue that feminist ethnography poses both the problem and the solution to ethical relationships between subjects. A feminist ethnography would presumably be an ethical project wherein knowledge gain comes with the utmost respect for research participants. Yet this is no easy task. Knowledge gain itself epitomizes the issues of structuring the ethnographic method, and has led to further violence of representation regarding those who are researched. As Trinh states, “[t]o lay emphasis on expression and on message is to forget that even if art is said to be a ‘window on the world,’ it is only ‘a sketched window[...].’ And, just as sketched windows have their own realities, writing as a system by itself has its own rules and structuring process” (Woman 21). Thus, ethnographic representations always follow through the interpretative ears of the ethnographer, whereas ethnographic writing follows from the linguistic and structural norms through the process of rhetoric.

The mechanism by which ethnography might become a solution for these ethical problems is its allowance of researchers to further disrupt their place within power relations. More conscious of the myriad ways in which ethnographic studies might affect the lives of others, this approach would immediately call into question a feminist’s ability to give an account of others or the self and fully recognize that “language is always older than [us]” (Trinh, Woman 36). Thus, it is a magnified reading of language that allows ethnographers to interrogate their positions and to realize that reflexive accounts, though important for research process, can only be partial.

What I argue here is that ethnography becomes the solution once it steps away from its traditional dialectic. This is put best by Butler in “Giving an Account of Oneself”:

There is lots of light in the Hegelian room, and the mirrors have the happy coincidence of usually being windows as well. In this sense, we might consider a certain post-Hegelian reading of the
scene of recognition in which precisely my own opacity to myself occasions my capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. It would be perhaps an ethics based on our shared, and invariable, partial blindness about ourselves. The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as what one thinks that one is, might imply, in turn, a certain patience for others that suspends the demand that they be selfsame at every moment. (27)

Ethnography essentially becomes a paradoxical metaphor for the Hegelian scene of recognition, and it is not until we disrupt our position within this dialectic that we will realize that the ethics of knowing will come from the comfortability of our non-knowing. Following Butler, ethnography can symbolize a window—a window that allows us to see its frame (even if it is only a sketch) as well as the area both inside and outside. This window will at times let us recognize our irrecognizability and break the desire to understand other subjects as static others, which stems from a desire to be a static self.
Works Cited


Lal, Jayati. “Situating Locations: the Politics of Self, Identity, and ‘Other.’” *Living and Writing the Text*. Ed. Diane L.


Stacey, Judith. “Can There Be a Feminist

Word of Mouth


