Sympathy for the difference -

The ambivalent relation of feminism, postmodernism and anthropology

What is feminist ethnography? Is there something like a feminist ethnography anyways? Are feminism and ethnography, that are both so deeply concerned about difference, really able to co-exist in harmony? What kind of contradictions do they evoke among feminist scholars and ethnographers? Where are the overlaps and where are the differences?

In the first part of the essay I will outline the definitions and notions of feminist ethnography by the feminist scholars Lila Abu-Lughod, Diane Bell, Judith Stacey and Kamala Vvwsweswaran followed by a comparison of Bell and Stacey. In the second part, I am going to outline the ways in which difference is described by feminist scholars, mainly on the articles of Vicky Kirby (1993) and Frances Macia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe and Colleen Ballerino Cohen (1989) who were involved in the mutual relationship between feminism and postmodernism. What are the differences between the, at least at the first sight, closely related movements? How can they benefit from each other and how, again linked to postmodernism, can the feminism scholarship respond to the idea of difference?

Is there feminist ethnography out there?

While asking whether there could be a feminist ethnography, Abu-Lughod seeks to find out, if feminism is able to have an impact on anthropology or not (1989: 9). Feminism and ethnography, she argues, have several parallels, and here she especially refers to the critique of the doctrine of objectivity which, especially in the last two decades became rather fashionable in the discipline of anthropology. Basically, there are two notions that are associated with the critique of objectivity: the emphasis on reflexivity during fieldwork and the attention towards the production of written text.

Reflexive anthropology is concerned with the fact that "facts" we collect in the field are the result of a "negotiated reality" during a "communicatively ambiguous social encounter" (Abu-Lughod 1998: 10) between the anthropologist and his or her studied community. These facts are therefore intersubjective and no result of objective inquiries. The second critique was initiated by the

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"Writing Culture Debate"\(^2\) which stated that ethnographic realism and the transparent language of objectivity, which has been adopted mainly in classic ethnographies, was used to assert the author’s authority. Objectivity here was deconstructed as a tool to create a system of truth which in the views of the authors of *Writing Culture*, was nothing more than "ethnographic fiction".

According to Abu-Lughod objectivity is interrelated with feminism in several ways that differ due to the respective standpoint of the feminist anthropologist. Referring to Evelyn Fox Keller\(^3\), objectivity is taking its meaning from subjectivity. Exactly this dualism corresponds to the polarized dualism of gender. Following this argumentation, objectivity is as reason, associated with masculinity, the counterpart of subjectivity, as emotion, linked with femininity. In this way the dominance of masculinity in science as transmitted through objectivity also reproduces itself, as it attracts those whose self-image matches with the mentioned binary thinking that opposes man versus woman, body versus mind etc. (p. 13).

More radical feminist theorists, Abu-Lughod argues, such as Catharine Mac Kinnon\(^4\), would not accept this structural distinction. In her point of view, objectivity is not only a notion given cultural meaning through a linkage to masculinity or male perspective but rather a strategy of male power, an effective tool to maintain sexual inequality. However, Abu-Lughod is sharply criticising Mac Kinnon for the same totalizing that she reversely accuses male theorists for.

As the 'halfie' anthropologist observes, there are basically two types of responses to the critiques of objectivity. Some feminist, supporting the previously devalued side of dualism, are in favor of a different relationship between subject and object, that seek to reshape the relationship towards a more balanced, equal, attached and close encounter. Others, probably aware of the gender dualism that this proposal maintains, strive to redefine objectivity. In their point of view, objectivity can be nothing else than situated. Part of this argumentation is a privileged women’s perspective since it never pretended being not a view from somewhere.

What however, Abu-Lughod (1990: 26f, 1991) asks, can feminist theory actually offer to anthropology? Firstly, feminism is predominantly concerned with the notion that the self is always a construction, never a natural or found identity. Since the self is a constructed phenomenon, cultural representations in feminist ethnography consequently have to be partial, hence incomplete pictures of an experienced reality. Secondly, that the process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference since gender as a system of difference is intersected by other systems of difference including race, class, age, disablebodiedness.

\(^2\) See Clifford, James and George Marcus (1986)

\(^3\) Here she is citing Evelyn Fox Keller (1985). Reflections on Gender and Science. New Haven: Yale UP

Despite the differences, Abu-Lughod believes that feminists are able to unsettle the borders between the self and the other, that have been crucial for the identity of the discipline of anthropology and that have shaped the basis for the anthropological notion of culture. Because the feminist approach to ethnography in her point of view, is working against essentialism, Abu-Lughod searches for alternative ways of "writing against culture" (1991).

This aim is also followed by another quarter, namely the native anthropologists (ibid.). Both do not accept the (entity-)self of anthropology, both are forced to squarely confront the politics and ethics of their representations, both travel uneasily between a speaking "for" and from" and for both - although in different ways - the self is split between the intersection of systems of difference which results in a high awareness of positionality, audience and power.

To sum up, Abu-Lughod states that feminist ethnography as the 'better anthropology', is concerned with making women and gender politics visible, legitimate and even central as areas of inquiry (Abu-Lughod 1990: 16). The inclined promise is that "we can better understand the way the world works, if we are not male-biased, gender-blind, or caught up in our own western assumptions about the relationship between nature and culture, and especially our biological essentialisms" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 17). Feminist ethnographies therefore explore what it means to be a woman in other places and under different conditions, hence stress what work, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, education, poetry, television, poverty or illness mean to other women. In this way, she concludes feminist ethnographies move also away from a unified female experience but instead highlight the many forms it can take.

**feminist ethnography in gendered fields**

Diane Bell, a so called 'native' anthropologist does not, as Abu-Lughod, question the existence of feminist ethnography at all - simply because this approach has served her successfully in the field, in her later publications and when she conducted applied anthropology when she got involved in court cases of Aboriginal land questions in Australia. She believes that the rather interesting questions concerning the topic are "its politics, style, ethics and epistemology, as well as the tactics of those advocating a more 'balanced' approach to ethnography" (Bell 1993: 30).

For Bell the characteristics of feminist ethnography are making the knowledge, experiences, practice, feelings, thinking and beings of women not just visible but rather highlighting its political act by valuing women as knower, rendering men’s knowledge ethnographically decentred, and diminish male hegemony as a strategy to generate epistemic privilege. Putting emphasis on this notion, Bell declares all realities and perspectives as gendered. Consequently, Bell’s ethnographic writing is attempting to be instead 'situated, perspectival, contextualised, and partial'.

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5 Here she cites Susan Hekman (1990). Comments on Hawkesworth’s Knowers, knowing and known: feminist theroy
This view is embodied in Bells essay *Yes, Virginia, there is a Feminist Ethnography* where she describes her difficulties entering the field with a feminist approach and gaining academic reputation being a single, working mother of two children. Interacting in these multiple field she becomes familiar with multiple selves she is in charge of. Class, educational background, ethnicity, age, marital status and sexual preferences are some of many, also overlapping identities, that shaped her own feminism as well as her ethnographic representations. Hence, she does not support 'woman' as a unitary category (p. 33). Not surprisingly then, objectivity, as for Abu-Lughod, is criticised by Bell as a highly ambivalent notion: "It is the association of objectivity, the hallmark of science, with an absence of connection to ones’ s subject matter, that have drawn the ethnographic lines in the sand. If one passes beyond the line, speaks of self as feeling, interacting, or as an element in a relational field, one becomes 'subjective', and one’s work is no longer 'good sciences' (p. 29). According to Bell’s feminist approach, we should do both, deconstruct objectivity and reclaim the devalued term subjectivity. Since feminist ethnography, "opens a discursive space for the 'subjects' of the ethnography and as such is simultaneously empowering and destabilising" (p. 31). Empowering the 'researched' in her written work, for example, implies for Bell to pay great attention also to the hierarchy of semiotics and language. Instead of calling the women that helped her constituting and creating her data 'indigenous', 'natives', 'subjects' or 'researched' which are all terms that either appear derogative, burdened with a perspective of dominant colonial encounter, or signify a hierarchical relationship between the anthropologists and the people who they work with, Bell decides to call her 'informants' 'co-researchers' in order to claim their contribution on the data-collection without her work would be of no value and sense.

**The failure of feminist ethnography**

Judith Stacey is less optimistic concerning the approach of ethnographic feminism and shares Strathern’s (1987) statement of an 'akward' relationship between ethnography and feminism. Although she published, as Abu-Lughod, an essay with the title 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?', she would answer this question in contrast to the more optimistic Abu-Lughod with a disappointed "no - at least not a fully feminist ethnography". Unless many other feminist scholars, who share the view that ethnography is particularly appropriate to feminist research due to its experiential, contextual, interpersonal demands and its attention to the concrete realm of everyday reality and human agency, Stacey claims, after conducting fieldwork for two and a half years, she is less "sanguine" but more focused on the contradictions between feminist principles and claims of truth. In: Signs. Vol.15. No. 2. pp. 417- 419

6 note that for Bell, in contrast to Abu-Lughod (1990: 15) the devalued term is subjectivity and not objectivity.

7 see Arjun Apadurai essay 'Putting Hierarchy in Its Place'. In: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.3, No. 1, pp. 36-49, for the de-construction of the term 'native'.

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ethnographic method. Her question of interest is concerned "whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation" (Stacey 1988: 22). Here, Stacey refers to the presence of the researcher which is inevitably influencing the 'researched' and therefore also consequently the field. "For no matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker's presence may appear to 'natives', fieldwork presents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationship (...) that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. The inequality and potential treacherousness of this relationship seems inescapable" (Stacey 1988: 23). From this assumption Stacey concludes that also the exploitative aspect of ethnographic processes seem unavoidable. Giving evidence for her argument, she outlines several circumstances in the field (case of a secret of paternity, illicit affairs and activities, homosexuals out-comings) where informants were competing for her allegiance or where she was with her role as a friend and a researcher brought into a dilemma. A case where she was suddenly confronted with the dead of an informant illustrates how delicate the issue can become: "whether or not, and to whom, to make a gift of the precious, but potentially hurtful tapes of an oral history I had once conducted with the deceased. (...) Not only would the funeral and family grieving process serve as further research 'opportunity', but also the dead would free me to include more of this family's truths in my ethnographic account than would have been possible, had he lived" (Stacey 1988: 23).

Human encounters are always complicated but conducting ethnographic fieldwork makes these encounters even more precarious since one has to juggle with personal empathy and professional data collection. "The lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill, a mill that has a truly grinding power" (ibid.)

The conflicts of emotion and interest she describes here are features that she ascribes to ethnographic method. But doing qualitative, long-term research as a feminist, how to avoid this dilemma? If the social context of informants needs to be considered, as it is one principle of social qualitative research, how could this be done without getting somehow involved?

Another critique of Stacey, that, in my point of view, highlights the 'awkward' relationship between ethnography and feminism in a more characteristic way, is the apparent "collaborative and reciprocal quest for understanding" (ibid.) that is inherent to ethnographic method. In Stacey’s eyes, this at the first sight mutual relationship is betrayed by the fact that "the product of the research is ultimately that of researcher, however modified or influenced by informants" (ibid.). Postmodernist ways of dealing with such power issues are, according to Stacey, not sufficiently. Although it recognizes the problems of intervention and unequal reciprocity with informants, it does little to ameliorate them. It also fails to resolve the feminist reporting dilemmas.

However, it should be noted, that despite the fact Stacey is tremendously questioning a harmonious
relationship between feminism and ethnographic research and became less innocent concerning ethnographic work, this does not mean that she not also highly appreciates ethnographic work. She assures that "fieldworkers can and do form valuable relationships with many of those we study, and some of our unsolicited interventions into the lives of our informants are constructive and deeply appreciated" (Stacey 1988: 24).

Writing against Canon

The intention of Viwsweswaran attempting to outline a definition of feminist ethnography is simple and challenging at the same time. She wants to question the male dominated canon. Unlike Stacey (1988), Viwsweswaran (1994) thinks that feminist ethnography can indeed benefit from experimental ethnography, and even more so vice versa (p. 18). "Skepticism, and perhaps a respect for the integrity of difference, replaces the ethnographic goal of total understanding and representation", (p. 20f). Feminist anthropology in this sense benefits from experimental ethnography by reevaluating its assumptions about "the other". Talking about representation, the 'native anthropologist' also criticises experimental ethnographic in this respect. "Despite the fact that these writings explicitly challenge the authority of representations ... of themselves. Self writing about like selves has thus far not been on the agenda of experimental ethnography" (p. 32). If we have learnt anything from colonialism, she says, it is not whether anthropologists can represent people better, but whether we are able to contribute something to people’s own struggles for self-representation and self-determination. However, the writing of indigenous anthropologists have mainly be excluded of the canon. "Self writing about like selves has thus far not been on the agenda of experimental ethnography. To accept authority is to give up the game" (38f, emphasis in original). If the "other" indeed becomes subject, we will have established "hermeneutics of vulnerability" and an anthropology that is able to question itself. Hence, a way how feminist can make their own contribution to the study of colonialism is through a critique of the politics of representation itself (ibid.). Here it is presumed that with courage and support the other is going to join us by speaking out.

The problematizing of voicing plays a big role and Viwsweswaran remarks that yet feminist theories of language have not reached ethnography so far. In her point of view feminist anthropologists can not only learn from women’s speeches but more so from their silences as well. Even heteroglossia8 is "not a ready-made solution" (Viwsweswaran 1994: 31) since although it assumes the equal appearance of different voices, these voices are most likely male ones, and in the

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end it does not confront problems coming to voice. Hence, the feminist claims that experimental ethnography by criticising anthropology`s scientific ethos must not forget to name explicitly patriarchy to examine how patriarchal the scientific voice indeed is, thus questioning the very notion of canon(ibid.).

To demonstrate how experimental ethnography might benefit from a feminist questioning of its assumption, she refers to a number of pioneer women anthropologists and their works\(^9\) that often have been dismissed as "popularized accounts" and have not being considered as proper anthropological work by their male counterparts. Some of these women, such as Elizabeth Fernea, were the wives of male anthropologists who were writing for a professional audience. Here the male publications seemed to adopt the "objective" explanatory mode, while the female was occupied with a "subjective", anecdotal mode\(^10\). However, Viwsweswaran notes that the first-person narratives, being selected by those women, are part of an implicit critique of positivist assumptions and as a strategy of communication and self-discovery. In fact, women are more often confronted with questions of positionality and decisions over which world she enters the community than male fieldworkers.

The second critique on experimental assumptions as formulated by the feminist concerns the field of text production. One of the key factors of experimental ethnography, according to Clifford is the intercultural dialogic production of texts. This led to a call for not more fieldwork data but more theoretical questions, as it was claimed both by feminists such as Rosaldo (1981) and non-feminists such as Clifford (1986) - a claim that is rejected by the feminist scholar who sees the value of feminist ethnography in the combination and not the separation of experience and theory.

Viwsweswaran compares these different perceptions with the divided quarters in feminism that are respectively engaging in either women centred or women de-centred approaches. Similarly, ethnographers and theorists are dealing with incorporating women in their works. While, according to the anthropologist, theorists tend to become increasingly de-centred, ethnographers tend to center woman in their works.

Like in all disciplines, when feminist anthropology was newly born, needed to imagine a universal "we". However, Viwsweswaran notices, that this notion is still uncritically reproduced by several anthropologists such as Strathern who argues in favor of a "natural kinship between those who are similarly oppresses. Thus, one may seek to regain a common past which is also one`s own" (Strathern 1987). The paradox that Strathern discovers is that experimental ethnography seeks to create a positive relation with the other while feminist ethnography seeks to attack the other.

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Insisting on an opposition between a unified female and the male other ignores and removes, in Viwsweswaran point of view, other power relations that exist between anthropologists and their 'subjects'.

**Comparative reflections about feminist ethnography**

As I have outlined above, Stacey and Bell, although both have been occupied with feminist ethnography, have diametrically opposed opinions on the movement. While Bell is, despite the difficulties she experienced as a 'native' anthropologist before, during and after her feminist anthropological fieldwork, highly in favour of a feminist approach to ethnography, Stacey, although not fully rejecting it, is not quite convinced about this form of scientific venture.

Bell, textually constructing three overlapping moments of demonstrating the gendered fields and the power relations in cultural systems she experienced, claims to explore the points of articulation between a gendered state and male privilege within the academy as well as dialogue between a masculine basis in the framing of rights and the structuring of the institutions of self determination-movements (Bell 1993: 41). Once, she was working with women, she did not yet ignore the male sphere as some critiques who resisted the notion of a women-centred ethnography. According to her own description, when working on Australian Aborigines she was "simply not privileging their experiences and assessments on the religious domain (...). I worked with men on genealogies, on country and dreaming affiliations, on sacred sites locations and mythological associations, on social and local organisation, on dispute settlement and conflict resolution" (p. 40). Obviously, Bell aims in different ways to maintain equality towards the communities she studies. Emphasising men as important dialogue partners in the fiels despite her women-centred method, calling her informants co-researcher, inventing a textual form where she, at the same time opposes and integrates her field experiences with her reflexive and also highly self-reflexive thoughts on feminist ethnography. This is even more highlighted by her studies as an "autochthonous anthropologist" for who the 'natives' of the fields are "one’s fellow citizens, one’s gatekeepers, and also the audience for the publications" (p. 41). Especially, this last point about the publication is strongly doubted and contested by Stacey who notes that fieldwork and its textual production represents, independent from the however good-intended aims of the anthropologist an intervention into a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer to leave than the researched. Visits of the studied community, that enable the researcher to leave sooner or later, discussions about the collected data with the informants before the publication and a "negotiated research result" that has to be published in a language that the 'co-researcher' has to be able to understand fully, are approaches that should by any menas have a higher usage in anthropological working. However, these remain, and this is what Stacy seeks to transport with her questioning, ideal theoretical constructs that might
happen under ideal circumstances but are barely translated into reality: "Even an exhaustive, mutually beneficial exchange cannot resolve the feminist dilemma" (Stacey 1988: 26). Quite the contrary, the greater the intimacy, the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship, the greater the danger (p. 24) that the exploitation towards researched, or betrayal against feminist principles is even higher than with the more abstract, positivist and "masculinist" account. Nevertheless, Stacey suggests to conduct feminist research that is "rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other" (ibid.). However, it is, in her eyes, nothing more than a "partially" feminist approach can mash mit the principles of (experimental) ethnography.

If we consider the high emphasis of feminism on the partiality of truth, can this partial methodology of feminist ethnography not be the only consequent conclusion concerning the synthesis of ethnography and feminism? What does the so called "postmodern" or "new ethnography", that is dealing with similar issues as those of feminists, says to this feminist ethnographic paradox?

Post-modernism and feminism in anthropology

Feminism as postmodern ethnography, is aiming to tear the veil from scientific pretension of neutral descriptions, a reason why the latter has also been called 'critical' and 'self-reflexive ethnography'. Stacey describes post-modern ethnographers as scholars who bring to their research an awareness "that ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always a construction of self as well as of the other" (Stacey 1988: 24). To say it in Clifford words: "Ethnography (...) is always caught up in the intervention, not the representation of cultures" (Clifford 1986: 2). This notion implies that the "different" that is ethnographically represented is nothing but a construct, a result of our approaching towards "others".

Feminist theory, according to Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen "is an intellectual system that knows its politics, a politics directed toward securing recognition that the feminine is as crucial an element of the human as the masculine, and thus a politics skeptical and critical of traditional "universal truths" concerning human behaviour" (p.8). Comparing this political approach, the authors find analogues in anthropology and its acknowledgement that the non-Western is an important element of the human as the Western is, and thus critical of Western claims to knowledge and comprehending (ibid.). Nevertheless, they call attention to a drastic difference that has existed between anthropological and feminist inquiries which is the difference of positionality: While anthropologists speak from the position of the participant-observer, thus for the other, feminist speak from the position of the 'other'. However the voices of the feminists, as the authors note were also creatively constructed (p. 12). The reasons for this were that, even if feminist have attempted to speak for women they remained as women discussing in a patriarchal discourse which did not
render subject status to the feminine sphere. The scholars point out that feminist (mainly literary critics), even in the 1970s, were not only busy with the understanding of women’s "otherness" but also how this "otherness" was inscribed in language and discourse (ibid.).

Finally, there are not only differences between the feminist scholarship and anthropology but more particularly between feminist ethnography and postmodernism. While contemporary feminism can be perceived as an political movement with roots in the 1960s, post-modernism is characterized through its post-1960 notions, namely its "cultural helplessness" created through "post-Vietnam, post-New Left, post-hippie, post-Watergate”.

Despite all the above mentioned differences, but due to the de-constructive notions of postmodern ethnography and feminist scholarship and its reflections on the epistemology and the Other, a cross-fertilization of both approaches would be theoretically obvious. Surprisingly, little exchange between the two approaches has been done. But as Stacey (1988) notices, there are, even if rare, moments where postmodern ethnographers pay attention to feminist insights in their critics. One example is Crapanzano who observes that: "Interpretation has been understood as phallic, a phallic-aggressive, a cruel and violent, a destructive act, and as a fertile, a fertilizing, a fruitful, and a creative one" (1986: 52) which he ascribes not to the male observer but rather to the ethnographer, independent from his or her sexual identity. Apart from exceptions such as Crapanzano, Kirby asks why postmodern anthropologists has been encouraged or even defended by the anxieties of many feminist anthropologist. The answer, at least from a feminist perspective can be found in the power-relation principles of post-modernism itself. Who is afraid of the feminists?

**Let’s talk about text**

The concern of new ethnographers is that we have to question and expand definitions of the human, and this in fact remains, as far as it has been negotiated among postmodern anthropologists, a matter of expression, in the end a matter of textual styles. The critique of representation becomes a reflection and critique of language. By reflecting on the complex relation between author, reader and subject, the flesh of the text, ergo the constructive character of an "ethnographic fiction" is exposed to its bones. Debates around this topic, as it was extensively examined in the "Writing Culture Debate", are mostly of theoretical nature. Since post-modern ethnography is mainly a conversation about texts, its a conversation that takes place on a meta-level.

By inventing new textual forms of representation, authors like Clifford and Marcus claim to have a solution to expose global systems of power relations that have been embedded in traditional representation of other societies, namely classic ethnographies.

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As Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989) point out these new forms can focus on intertextuality, dialogue, and self-referentiality that in the eyes of the postmodernists demistify the anthropologist’s authority and thus increase the many voices as they have been expressed in classic ethnographies by one single author (p.9). However the intention of the new writing which is supposed to be multisubjective, incongruent, showing the reciprocal contexts of negotiated realities discloses the relational, communicative process between subjects in its relation to power (Clifford 1986a).

Nonetheless it also leads to content-based questions that scholars such as Said have been occupied with: In which way and through the manifestation of whose and what kind of writing has the non-Western Other been created? What kind of interests had the West to maintain these differences? Who did this maintenances serve? Question like these serve indeed not only anthropologists but also those people that had been the "subject" of study. More and more people are becoming literate in an age where reputation is dangling on a string that can be easily cut by global media attention and human right networking associations.

As Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen interprete, postmodern ideas happen to be seen as new, innovative and exciting, at least by the ones who invented it. However, they claim that these insights - that culture is composed of sharply contested codes of meaning, that language and politics are inseparable, and that constructing the 'other' is based on relations of domination" (Clifford 1986a: 2) has been topics that feminist theorists discussed over the last 40 years. "Like European explorers discovering the New World, Clifford and his colleagues perceive a new uninhabited space, where in fact, feminists have long been at work" (p. 14). This seems even more ironic when we think of Clifford’s statement in Writing Culture where he claims that feminist Ethnography has focused either on setting the record straight about women or revising anthropological categories (...) It has not produces either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such" (Clifford 1986b: 20f). The critique of Mascia-Lees, Sharpe (1990) and Cohen on the statement of one of most popular exponents of postmodern ethnography has several inclinations. Firstly, they decode in his point of view feminism is nothing more than a complain with a "sinister patriarchy" (p. 13). Secondly, they note that Clifford in the same book brings up Margorie Shostak’s Nisa: The Life and Words of a Kung! Woman as a primary example of feminist ethnography. With this, the scholars state, does he not only admit to know at least one feminist ethnography but also decides to solely write about feminist instead of inviting them to write in the field of postmodern ethnography (Clifford 1986b: 20f).

How modern is post?
Interestingly, it has been noted by the political scientist Nancy Hartsock\(^{13}\), that the postmodernist claim that language is an essential tool in constructing reality appeared at the precisely the same time women\(^{14}\) and non-Western people started to speak for themselves and global systems of power differentials. A even more harsh and concrete critique is expressed by Sarah Lennox\(^{15}\) who states that the notion that difference is constructed, embedded in power relations and consequently never to be known completely, is an inversion of western arrogance. When western white, males who have been in charge of power can no longer define truth, because it has been "invaded" by "others", Lennox concludes, they simply state, truth can no longer be discovered. In the end the different has to be rendered. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen who mention Lennox in their *Postmodernist turn in Anthropology*, read postmodernist theorizing as having socially constructed itself "as a metaphor for the sense of the dominant that the ground has begun to shift under their feet" (p. 16). If this should be the case, the scholars testify a dark diagnose for the anthropological project since "postmodernism, may run the risk of participating in an ideology blind to its own politics. More than that, it may help to preserve the dominant colonial and neocolonial relations from which anthropology, and especially the new ethnography, has been trying to extricate itself" (ibid.). Read in this sense, the textual difference that postmodernists claim in order to de-construct textual authority, can be regarded as the claim to socially reconstitute power and authority\(^{16}\). In effect, as Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen observe, the absence of discussions of sexual difference and the fact that only few women have been involved in the post-modernist project, could strenghten the previously outlined suspicion that post-modernism is another scientific venture designed by men in order to exclude women\(^{17}\) (p.17). What might sound as a conspiracy theory, makes more sense, if we consider that male critics seem to fear a space of discourse where the Other, namely women, are in a privileged position. In oder to avoid this the issues at stake have to be neutralized\(^{18}\). If we envision that indeed feminism has been perceived by many male scholars "as a limited and peripheral enterprise, not as one that challenges them to rethink their own positions in terms of gender" (p.18), this suggestion seems to be a rather clear statement.

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\(^{14}\) As far as I have understood the term woman here, hartscock does not necessarily refer to feminists since they appeared way earlier on the scientific landscape.


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
After talking about the postmodern attempt of proclaiming the different in contrast to the truth as their "true" inquiry in terms of maintaining power in public life, we should also pay attention to the "inner" consequences that postmodernist anthropologists might be affected, a point that is highlighted in Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen paper. "For in turning inward, making himself, his motives, and his experiences the thing to be confronted, the postmodernist anthropologist locates the 'other' in himself. It is, as finding the 'exotic' closed off to him, the anthropologist constructs him as the exotic" (p. 26). The end of the story: the anthropologist, as he is suggested by Clifford (1986a) is turned into the native who one seeks to grasp while postmodernist ethnography is transformed into new land that the anthropologist is eager to discover and explore (ibid.).

**Essentializing the different**

According to the feminist scholar Kirby (1993), contemporary feminism, which embraces a hybrid, vying perspectives, interest and strategies, is heavily concerned with questions of representation, difference and epistemological critique. These questions all turn around the anthropologist’s occupation of "otherizing", of "making different" what they observed and interpreted. However, the contemporary attempt of feminist to tend to argue against other feminism who urge to synthesize difference hold[s] simultaneously true what otherwise considered contradiction" (Haraway 1988: 95, cit. in Kirby 1993: 128), thus fixing women’s identity essentially. Doing this, Kirby criticises "feminism capitalizes on this same political difference through the expression of its own will to truth/power" (ibid., emphasis in original). Her critique here says, while feminists trying to argue against other feminist notions in order to legitimate their own, they "otherize" by essentializing.

Foccusing on the feminist relation to the postmodern deconstruction of the self, Kirby does not mention the political confrontation between white feminists and women of color, that is pointed out by Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989). The scholars paraphrase several cases that were responsible for the crisis in feminism when women of color raised their voice in order to argue against white-middle class feminist who were talking with a united voice for women in general. Examples where the realities and activisms that were proclaimed by white feminists failed, are for example antirape activism that has served to reinstall stereotypes (the rapist as the black male), pro-choice-legislation that resulted in sterilization and abortion among the poor and women of color and no-fault legislation of divorces that had its own contribution to the feminization of poverty (p. 25). Here feminism seems to fall in the same trap as postmodernism since both pre-assume a "self-consciously reflexive stance (ibid.) towards the people they try to speak for.

Considering the feminist movement, there is on the one hand no need to do so, since feminists are by definition already devided from each other and only loosely bound under a collective banner of a political movement. According to Stacey and Wise (1990) is to say that women share 'experience of
oppression' is not analogically to say that we share the same experience. On the other hand, "otherizing" indeed seems to be endemic to scientific discourses. In Said’s words: "to convert them [the other] into topics of discussion or fields of research is necessarily to change them into something fundamentally and constitutively different (Said 1989: 210, cited in Kirby 1993: 130f).

But - the feminist scholars Stanley and Wise suggest an alternative: "We are driven to recognise the existence of not only 'a' feminist standpoint but also those of black women, working class women, lesbian women, and other minority women, and also those women who combine these oppressions" (Stanley and Wise 1990: 28). Arguing for a feminist standpoint in their perspective is not to argue for female separatism but to remove an existing methodological separatism. In fact, academic feminism should not become a legitimation for a new for of expertise, that of feminist theoreticians over 'mere women' (ibid.). Instead the scholars argue against hegemonic claims of feminists but for a pluralist feminist theory that comes with a small t rather than with a capital T (Stanley and Wise 1990: 47).

This perspective allows an alternative to the critique of "otherizing" that otherwise appears to be applicable on every critique and even on Kirby’s and Haraway’s critique of the feminist who "otherize" other feminists. Unlike liberal humanism suggests there might be no secret recipe out of the "otherizing", as long as we are working descriptive and even more so if we work as critiques, which all social academics do. Nevertheless, this is exactly what both feminist and postmodern ethnography attempts to do: somehow escaping the actuality of his or her imperial and hierarchical position. Yet, feminist and "new ethnographers" share the will to develop a better practice that is able to uncover and transform the sexist and/or ethnocentric notions that have been infiltrated into anthropology, these attempts can at the same time re-install other forms of -centrisms that are not necessarily helpful for a redressing of anthropology’s concerns.

Kirby notes, that the high demands of Third World and Women’s literature and different genres is an important project, however "it has to be remembered that different modes of writing ultimately engender different ways of producing an object as knowable, and all of them involve an exercise of power" (Kirby 1993: 131). Therefore it would be, according to Kirby, naive to think, as Visweswaran does, that just by writing differently we could change the canon or could escape the power/knowledge nexus. Concerning this feminist postmodern synthesis, Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen, who see their research field threatened, ask back: Once one has no metanarratives in which into which the experience of difference can be translated, how is possible to write an ethnography? (p. 27). Is it indeed possibly to think of difference without putting against any norm? Can we observe difference without hierarchical layers it is embedded in? And moreover, what kind of sense makes polyvocality if all voices are becoming equal and the historical links ignored. If all the voices can stand separately from each other, they fear, the history of the colonized and the history of the
colonizer can be viewed independently and power differentials and exploitation can be obscured and offer no ground to fight oppression any longer?

As Kirby notes, feminist ethnography is, despite its great efforts to fight against hierarchy no exception: it is also caught within imperialism and indeed masculinism. The following inevitable question is striking: "How can we borrow from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage?" (Kirby 1993: 132). This doubt indeed shakes feminist ethnography to the core since it seems to have no basis for its own. By what can we define feminist ethnography then? What are the parameters? Is the writing style important or the genre? Is the sex of the author the decisive factor? The commitment to feminism? The object of inquiry? Is this already exhaustively answered? Is the feminist ethnographic project doomed? Answers to this might be found in epistemological feminist research processes.

**Feminist's know-how**

One of feminist great insights was deriving from the observation that "all knowledges are organized through an undeclared phallocentrism and ethnocentrism, an economy that far exceeds sexist bias, is not encouraged in the social sciences" (Kirby 1993: 127). But how can epistemology be put into practice methodologically, as a perspective and how does this relate to different research techniques? Stanley and Wise dedicated an essay to these questions. In their point of view, as it has been mentioned by Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen before, knowledge results from the conditions of its production and is contextually located which means it bears the marks of those who give voice to it. Searching for practical sets of research that consider the nature of knowledge, they suggest five feminist epistemological principles: The emphasis of the researcher-researched relationship, the management of the different, "negotiated realities" and understandings of both, researcher and researched, emotion as a research experience, the outlining of an intellectual biography of researchers, and finally the complex question of power in research and writing (Sharpe and Cohen 1990: 23). Consequently the researcher understandings are necessarily temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded and are as contextually specific as those of the researched. Applying these principles they discuss the notion of difference in reference to the "silenced feminist standpoints", such as black feminist women and lesbians. Being 'different', for black women implies two standing outside of white racist society while being a feminist making oneself 'Other' to black (male and other non-feminists). The scholars compare this standing point with "a stranger who is not yet in and yet not of 'normal social life'" (Stanley and Wise 1990: 30,

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19 Epistemology as defined by Stanley and Wise (1990: 26) refers to a theory of knowledge that deals with questions such as: Who can be a 'knower'? What can be known? What constitutes and validates knowledge? What is or should the relationship between knowing and being? Knowledge is defined by the scholars as a part of textually mediated relations of ruling (p. 39).
emphasis in original). Thus, the priority of black feminists is to change both \textit{it} and \textit{them}, the white feminists who speak in other women’s names while denying their experiences. Similarly, being different has also a double 'othering' implication for lesbian women since heterosexuality is the dominant meta-narrative of all societies in which 'woman' is defined in terms of social, economic, physical or any other personal dependency on a man. At the same time lesbians have to deal with the anxiety for men that women may become aware of homosexual women who, by seeing them might become aware of and 'see' their own activities as foreground, rather than those of men. A distinct lesbian standpoint or epistemology can by definition not be composed by any essence (whether biological, psychological or cultural), but of oppression. By experiencing silence, closures, intrusions, misnamings and withdrawals lesbians are forced into an ontological sense of 'other'. This, by any means makes her an 'other Other' (Stanley and Wise 1990: 33). Outlining an epistemology of feminism, the scholars manifested their notion of an anti-essentialist feminism that incorporates a number of feminisms, including this of women of color and lesbians.

\section*{Conclusion}

Difference is deeply in- and decribed by feminist methods, epistemological approaches and movements since its main topic is giving voice to an 'others' which makes it a highly political project. Precisely because of its sensitive political sense, differences of hierarchies and power relations are declosed by feminists. However, hegemonial expectations (if consciously or subconsciously) appear not only outside the sphere of feminist scholarship but also within. Right here, feminism can learn from postmodernism how to resist essential truths. However, as Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen pointed out the danger for feminism, if it moves to close to postmodernism is that while deconstructing meaning it risks also to deconstruct its own notions of "feminism", "women" and "oppression" (p.27).

Vice versa postmodernism with its many epistemological contradictions can learn from feminism who is also highly and professionally occupied with paradoxes since it aims for individual freedom while mobilizing sex solidarity, claims elimination of prescribed gender roles, yet wants to raise gender consciousness.

The feminist venture remains a field of constant change and resistance that is able to enrich any social science including anthropology. However, fruitful discussions have to be controversial by emphasising the difference. Simply because of that, feminist ethnography remains to be a field of constant struggle. In this sense, the tensions in feminism can be interpreted as a way of avoiding any one feminism setting itself up as a dominant discourse (Stanley and Wise 1990: 47). To exclude feminism out of ethnography means to repeat a discourse that is based on essential notions and the maintenance of hegemony. Feminis ethnography, in contrast helps to re-think the notion of difference, one of the main inquiries of ethnography in a critical, self-reflexive and political way by not just talking about it but rather experiencing it.
References


