

Who's afraid of feminisms? Decolonizing and queering feminist ethnography

Report LOVA Study Day
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LOVA Network and its members have a long history of debating and advancing feminist ethnography in- and outside of Dutch and European cultural anthropology departments. The yearly LOVA study day, that took place on November 17 at the Radboud University, aimed to build upon these debates and in two sessions the invited speakers discussed and explored the future of feminist ethnography in relation to decolonizing and queering practices. (How) Do these practices intersect and reinforce feminist ethnography, or do they deviate from, and grind against the philosophies of feminist ethnography?

The seminar started with a short word of welcome by dr. Tine Davids, member of the board of LOVA and assistant professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development studies at the Radboud University. Not only the speakers were welcomed, but also the (online) attendees and the students of the course Gender, Power and Frontiers that Tine coordinates and for whom the study day was part of their course program. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study day was organized in a hybrid form, which allowed international attendees from different countries, both within and outside of Europe, to join online.

Dr. Jasmijn Rana, chair of the LOVA board and assistant professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University, kicked off the first session about decolonizing feminist ethnography. She started by elaborating on the societal relevance of the topics discussed at the study day. Pointing out that on the one hand, especially after #metoo, issues related to gender inequality and sexuality became (again) highly relevant over the last years, and activism concerning these topics increased. However, on the other hand there are also people who feel the need to safeguard the status quo and counter the changes that the activists envision for this world. Therefore, it is especially relevant within this given time and space that we look at how methodology, issues related to power, and politics are intertwined within scholarship.

A starting point for this, and a central topic within feminist ethnography, is to analyze how we make sense of the (social) world around us. In what ways are we, scholars, part of or perhaps even reinforce unequal power relations that trace back to the colonial past within our research area, and even more important: how can we deconstruct them? Even though several methods and tools (thinking about positionality, intersectionality, auto-ethnography, etc.) were pointed out that contribute to unraveling and creating more transparency about power relations in 'the field', how to actually deal with them is according to Jasmijn one of the 'unsolved problems' within feminist ethnography. One way to deconstruct power binaries within research and thus decolonize feminist ethnography is to work towards a more collaborative, and less extractivist way of conducting research. This includes questioning roles of the researcher and the researched, what knowledge is and who produces it, who gains from the research and who your actual public is. However, besides decolonizing ethnography as a practice, Jasmijn also emphasized that in order to fully decolonize feminist ethnography we also need to critically look at the institutions where knowledge is produced and the discipline itself and the canon that is part of it. Which scholars are included in the syllabus and why? And how can this be more inclusive?

As the lecture ended with the questions if we can challenge and end the coloniality in our own institutions, and if we are able to mainstream a decolonized feminist ethnography in such a way that we can eventually just call it ethnography, the floor was for the discussant, dr. Kathrine van den Bogert. By starting to emphasize the importance and the need to actively engage with the colonial influences and the history of the discipline, by critically reflecting on the aspects mentioned in Jasmijns' presentation, Kathrine also encouraged the students to be critical towards both their lecturers, and the institutions they are studying at. Then, the difference between feminist ethnography and other forms of critical ethnography was discussed, a question that is often posed to Kathrine. By concluding that it is primarily a matter of how you position and identify yourself as a researcher within the history, and if you are consciously building on the work of other female scholars (foremothers), Kathrine got back to the topic of the canon that was raised by Jasmijn and she emphasized the importance of the work of Zora Neale-Hurston.

The audience actively engaged by asking questions and making comments about topics such as the need to be aware that the research questions that are at the foundation of research often originate from a 'colonial curiosity' about 'the other'; what is needed to, and how can ethnographers establish truly equal partnerships with both the interlocutors and local scholars, and how to deal with topics like anonymity in these 'equal partnerships'.

After the break, the second session about queering feminist ethnography started, which was less theoretical and focused on three ethnographic PhD projects. Nika Looman, PhD student at Ghent University, was the first speaker and she presented her research entitled: 'Queering narratives of ageing: older queer women's unruly sexuality assemblages' (working title). By focusing on queer women and non-binary individuals over the age of 50, a diverse group of participants is included. Both the concept 'queer', and the methodology of ethnography help by taking the complexity of the

studied individuals into account and to prevent thinking in dualities. However, the contemporary notion of queer, in which there is a prevailing narrative of 'being out and proud', often does not correspond with the experiences of the participants central in this study since they were not always allowed to be open about their gender and sexuality in the past. They thus often experience and express their gender identity and sexuality in different ways and use other narratives than younger queer people. Besides, the notions of time and temporality are important, since their identification also changes while they are moving through life. The focus of the research project is not so much to make the categories of identification smaller, or more descriptive, since there are "as many identities as individuals". Instead, studying these individuals from a queer feminist point of view and through ethnography helps to break these categories down and shows the 'messiness' of identification.

Questions were asked about the recruitment of the participants, their life histories and how their values changed over time, and in what way the concept of queer is still a useful analytical category if it does not resonate with the actual experiences of the participants central in the study.

Loes Oudenhuijsen, also a PhD student at the African study center at Leiden University, presented her research about sexual distant women in Senegal where she ethnographically explores transformations and continuations of gender norms in a context marked by increasing sexual anxiety. By focusing on the agency of the studied individuals, Loes aims to go beyond the stereotype that Africa is homophobic, and she explores the diversity of queer life. Queering feminist ethnography is in this research needed to prevent an excessive emphasis on social justice, often prevailing in feminism, and resulting in partial knowledge and thereby ignoring the often-paradoxical nature of everyday life. Besides, Loes stated, there is a tendency within western feminism to romanticize resistance and agency has thereby been seen as defecting social change. This neither resonates with the lives of the research

interlocutors. After illustrating some of the challenges that the queer women face in society, Loes surprisingly stated that the context in which this happens cannot just be labelled as 'homophobic'. The main reason for this is that some of the events/scandals that give rise to the homophobic sentiment, are deliberately created by the queer women. These, often violent, events do not only contribute to their status within the queer network, but should also be understood as questioning and resisting the over-all prevailing gender norms. Thus, queerness is not only related in this context to same-sex relationships, but also to a refusal to obey gender norms that prescribe female silence.

Again, the public actively participated and was critically engaged. Bridging the themes of both sessions, a student asked how Loes as a Western, white scholar thought about her own position in the field and why she chose to conduct research in an African country instead of 'at home'. Acknowledging that it is very important to think about these questions, Loes responded that research is also needed to deconstruct the ideas that 'we' [people in the west] have about African people, queer people and social justice. Besides, this kind of research is also needed in relation to policies of development organizations like the COC, that run programs about gender and sexuality in several African countries.

The last speaker was storyteller, illustrator, PhD student at the university of Amsterdam, (visual) activist, and founder of the Instagram account @Beirutbydyke, Sinine Nakle. At her Instagram page she tells intersectional stories about being queer in Beirut, Lebanon. While showing the comics, Sinine explained how her comics should be understood as a form of autoethnography, as they help decolonizing hers' and others' queer bodies, and imagine the city to be different for her and other queers who live(d) there. Drawing images that contest the prevailing gender norms is a form of resistance for her. Besides queerness, the explosion that happened in August 2020 in Beirut, and how the state dealt with the aftermath of it, is another theme that she made comics about. It is exactly because art is often

not taken very seriously, also not by the state, that allows Sinine to use it as a medium to be critical towards the government. By offering the possibilities of contesting power in several ways, Sinine considers comics as a very suitable practice related to feminist ethnography. As an answer to the question of an art-student in the room about how to better integrate art and academics, Sinine suggested to queer the methods that we use. By defining queer as a way that we choose to look at something, looking different at academics and at what can be labelled as academic can result in new, creative ways of producing knowledge.

In summary, the study day was very successful with many participants from different countries, inspiring speakers with different backgrounds, an engaging and critical audience and new LOVA network members. We would like to thank all speakers and participants for their input, in particular: Jasmijn Rana (LU); Kathrine van der Bogert (RU); Nika Looman (GU); Loes Oudenhuisen (LU); Sinine Nakle (UvA) and Tine Davids (RU).

About the author

Luca Naus graduated her MA in Cultural Anthropology at the Radboud University cum laude, with a thesis on the influence of international migration of young adults in Essaouira, Morocco. She has worked as a junior lecturer and researcher at the same university. In April 2021, she will start working as a PhD Candidate within the VIDI project 'Unequal Partners? An Ethnographic Study of Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim Couples in the Netherlands' at the VU University.