

Narrative analysis and feminist anthropology

Relationships, representations,
and response-abilities

In memory of Dr. Karin Willemse

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Colourful, critical and curious are the first words that come to mind when I think of my mentor Karin Willemse. She was also committed. I was her student from bachelor, to master to PhD, between 2001 and 2015, and in this article, I offer an introduction to the sophisticated methodology she developed to analyse narratives from a feminist theoretical perspective. I tentatively trace how her work preceded, continued, and prepared the ground to wrestle with current questions regarding relationships, representations, and response-abilities within feminist anthropology.

Foregrounding reflexivity on power, positionality, intersubjectivity, and situated knowledges has since long reshaped the landscape of anthropological research, and it is not the sole purview of feminist anthropology anymore. However, the power of stories and storytelling continues to set feminist anthropology apart from any other subfield in anthropology (Mahmud 2021), focusing especially on narratives spoken by, listened to, and written up by women and other femme-presenting people. These narratives are generally situated in (and situating, Barad 2014) space and time to interrogate dominant power

structures and to bring into view alternative ways of being and becoming human, or more-than-human. However, questions of what narratives are, how to analyse such texts and how to represent them remain a focus of intense debates.

During the 1990s, Karin Willemse gradually and meticulously developed a rigorous methodological framework to put the feminist project of “research against the grain” into anthropological research practice. Her underlying aim was to represent narratives of Muslim women in Darfur, Sudan, without resorting to stereotyping them as either victims or heroines (Willemse 2007, 20). She endeavoured to comprehend women in their own words, and at the same time, to go beyond viewing these texts as self-evident by offering her own reading. Her careful and ethical approach enabled a profoundly nuanced understanding of the diverse and context-bound ways in which these women perceived, negotiated, and created strategies for dealing with the locally dominant discourse on “proper” Muslim womanhood. The resulting narratives Willemse composed depicted detailed, layered, and polyvocal descriptions of how these women defended their own interests, were economically active despite prevailing norms, maintained their status as respectable Muslim women, while also possibly altering that same discourse (ibid., 17). Her work shows, not tells, how to stay with the complexities at play in narrative analysis as a feminist anthropologist through her methodology that she called “biographic narratives against the grain” (ibid., 20-34).

The methodology of biographic narratives “against the grain” further develops and translates key feminist concepts, such as intertextuality, intersectionality and intersubjectivity, to ethnographic tools Willemse dubbed “listening, reading, and writing against the grain” (ibid.). I will illustrate the possibilities that her method offers while also bringing them in conversation with recent openings in feminist theory related to text, context and methodology as proposed by Haraway (1988; 2016) and Barad (2007; 2014) to deepen and expand this

approach. This deepening, I argue, offers narrative analysis in feminist anthropology ways towards radical inclusivity. Some solutions to the troubles that plague feminist anthropology are offered by a growing focus on the (auto)ethnographic contributions of Black, Brown, Indigenous, queer, and gender non-binary scholars (Mahmud 2021). Much effort is also leveraged to counter the dominance of U.S. perspectives in feminist anthropological theory building and publications (Al-Bulushi et al. 2020), for example by actively confronting anti-Blackness globally, and not just in the western hemisphere (Clarke and Thomas 2006). Additionally, feminist anthropology productively grapples with the limitations of the traditional “humanist subject.” While “posthumanism” offers some resolution, its critics highlight its inability to fully address racial nuances, especially the historical marginalisation and denial of humanity to certain groups. Another movement within feminist anthropology seeks to bridge the existing gap between feminist and queer anthropology, which is sometimes further complicated by their occasionally exclusive interactions with transgender anthropology (Mahmud 2021). While these methodological endeavours are indeed critical, they often leave an underlying ontological issue unresolved, which echoes through questions of epistemology and ethics (Barad 2007, 90). The overarching question is: how can we, as feminist anthropologists, contribute to a radically inclusive feminist anthropology? I argue for a diffractive methodology, following Haraway and Barad among others, one that encompasses relational ontology, epistemology, and ethics. The methodological framework developed by Willemse guides us in this direction and also raises important questions about relationships, representations, and, most crucially, response-abilities (Bozalek and Zembylas 2023). These, I argue, can be fruitfully explored by diffractively reading Willemse’s framework with suggestions brought forward by Barad.

In the following sections, I first provide an overview of Willemse’s careful and ethical approach to narrative analysis “against the grain,” highlighting the three tools she formulated. Subsequently, I present

an example from my own research to demonstrate the practical and meticulous steps involved in applying this methodology and its concomitant tools. Afterwards, I explore how a diffractive and response-able approach may further enhance narrative analysis in feminist anthropology. Finally, I bring together Willemse's methodology with diffraction and response-ability (or, more accurately, I diffractively read Willemse's work with Barad's take on diffraction and response-ability) to open up ways towards a more radically inclusive feminist anthropology.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS “AGAINST THE GRAIN”

Willemse described the feminist concept “against the grain” as an enticing guide in the search for the imagination and enactment of alternative subject positions in negotiation of dominant discourses. In line with many other feminist scholars, she eschewed easy binaries of powerful/powerless and oppressors/oppressed in an ongoing commitment to emphasise the search for alternative voices and perspectives to unsettle dominant ideas of history, knowledge, and identity. The methodological framework she developed is based on the “politics of locations” by acknowledging the multiplicity of intersecting and context-bound identities such as gender, race, class, sex and nationality (Willemse 2007, 22). From this theoretical principle, her framework aims to understand the context-bound and intersecting multiplicities by prioritising identity constructions by women in specific times and places.

Listening “against the grain”

Living with and being in conversation with Muslim women in Darfur during and long after the 1990s, she realised that “listening against the grain” was not just about hearing words. She urged an active stance to become aware of power differences between herself and the other women to discover how specific power relationships influenced the narratives and attitudes of the women. Listening against the grain means to give space to silences, and to allow women to set

the pace, content, and flow of conversations, and taking this process as part of a woman's reflection on and positioning in relation to dominant discourses. Listening against the grain involves trying to hear implicit messages and hidden scripts and to understand subtexts (Fairclough 1992, 100-110, quoted in Willemse 2007, 23-4). Willemse posited that people continuously reflect upon dominant discourses even when referring to common sense knowledge, whereby these discourses are not just acknowledged, but often negotiated and even adjusted (Willemse 2007, 28). Listening to the way women position themselves in their narratives in relation to specific discourses is the first step to creating a textured and layered understanding of the extent to which these women are allowed, but also claim themselves, space to construct alternative subject positions. Listening against the grain is based on a concept of epistemology that defines knowledge as embodied, partial, and situated. As such, knowledge is taken as a temporal construct that is determined historically, locally and personally (Willemse 2007, 30; Haraway 1988; 2008; Braidotti 2006). In this vein, knowledge emerges from social relations and interactions, including the interaction between researcher and interlocutor, and the act of listening against the grain is therefore an intricate part of how this relationship is part of the narrative text.

The social relations that converge during the research encounter between researcher and interlocutor are near infinite, and the problem of power inevitably arises, given that the researcher exercises interpretive power as they execute their project with the research participant (Hernández 1995, 160). Willemse also brought out, however, how interlocutors have their own agendas and projects, and can assert power by choosing what to tell and what not, and how. The multiple layers of past and present that mesh during a specific research interaction demonstrate that narrated texts can never be taken at face value. The ongoing interactions between researcher and research participant, embedded within countless and constantly shifting social relationships, sets the stage for the process of intersubjective knowledge production (Willemse 2007, 24).

Intersubjectivity between researcher and research participant is infused with asymmetrical power relations that researchers can attempt to, but will never fully, abrogate by listening against the grain. Willemse showed how researchers can question such power hierarchies, but they cannot discard their role as a researcher nor the fact that they listen to and read the narrative as meaningful with respect to the construction of alternative modes of academic narratives (Willemse 2007, 141; Davids and Willemse 2014; Behar 1993). Such narratives often develop over time during the ethnographic endeavour, and they may entail interviews, everyday conversations, walking dialogues, snippets of reflections, gossip, and random conversations during daily events, and more. These narratives may also bring out highly contradictory negotiations of dominant discourses and how the past relates to the present and the present to the past. The aim of listening against the grain is not to try to smooth things over and create a coherent narrative, but rather to keep inconsistencies as part of the text and to offer new ways to understanding these.

The embodied and intersubjective nature of knowledge production also has consequences for notions of the self and of self-awareness, which are constituted performatively and discursively. Willemse was acutely aware of the critique on the biographical method and its reliance on “western” notions of the self and selfhood. Abu-Lughod (1993, 30-2, quoted in Willemse 2007, 26) pointed out that the conventions for narrating about one’s “life” forces local ways of narrating into a western straightjacket that might alter the original narrative beyond recognition. Willemse therefore pluralised the notion of “biographic narratives” to refer to different forms of narratives on the self, which allows for the possibility of referring more loosely to narratives which reflect only certain parts of a woman’s life, both past and present, without necessarily being chronological (Okely 1992, 4-9), linear or singular. As such, her approach, she claimed, does not have to imply preconceived notions about the self or the structures of the text when the process of narration is largely directed by the narrator.

This means, for instance, giving the narrator space to represent themselves as an individual and/or as belonging to a collective. Moreover, many of those who experience themselves as belonging to a collective would nonetheless often represent themselves as individuals (Willemse 2007, 27; 2012).

Reading and writing against the grain

In addition to, and building on listening against the grain, Willemse developed tools for reading and writing against the grain, by reading and re-reading women's narratives while explicating the multiple readings and interpretations that this procedure gives rise to in writing. She made an analytical distinction between a narrative as a text and its context, which she dubbed "texts-in-context" or "con/text analysis." Texts-in-context (Willemse 2007, 28-30) are always also part and parcel of discourses. She drew upon Meijer (1996) to argue that reality (e.g., historical reality) cannot be separated from text, and that the focus in this phase of the research should be on how texts produce subject- and object-positions, and how these positions are distributed along the lines of gender, race and other dominant categories of power and subjectivity.

Willemse worked extensively with the concept of "intertextuality" (Kristeva 1986) in its broadest sense as "the sum of knowledge that makes it possible for texts to have meaning" (Meijer 1996, 23, cf. Fairclough 1992, 103-05, quoted in Willemse 2007, 29). These meanings are never straightforward. Analysing a text in relationship to pertinent contexts is, in her eyes, a way to understand the complex ways in which women deal with power relations and related subject positions in diverse social settings. In principle, the number of readings of a text are multiple, potentially infinite, depending on the other texts relevant in the same contexts. This means there is always an ambiguity as to the "real" meaning of a text. Thus, ambivalence should be part of the analysis and should not be reasoned away. Moreover, by reading a text-in-context, the reader, in this case the researcher, becomes paramount in deciding on, and even creating, the meaning, or rather

meanings, of a narrative. Readings, Willemse posited, are therefore never unbiased, but are inevitably related to personal, political, social, cultural, and economic interests. This calls for self-reflexivity by the reader/researcher as interpreter and analyst (Willemse 2007, 30). The researcher as reader, recipient and interpreter of the narratives is situated, as these positionings are complexly shaped by the contexts of the intersubjective research encounter, as well as in the contexts of reading and writing, which to some extent also continue the research encounter.

In other words, my positioning in the moral discourse of the Sudanese government as temporary inhabitant of Kebkabiya, as well as my interest as a feminist researcher from the West will be reflected in those [reading] choices (cf. Schrijvers 1993, 156). In order to articulate my readings as dialectic and self-reflexive, the text I produce on these pages, my ‘narrative,’ should leave room for a plurality of perspectives. (Willemse 2007, 30)

The con/textual reading of the women’s narratives helped Willemse to understand how the women in Darfur negotiated dominant positions. This helped her to describe in detail when, how and why these women, overtly and covertly, enacted specific positions of victimhood and agency, of compliance and resistance, and so on. The tools of listening, reading, and writing are described separately by Willemse, but as her student and, later, co-teacher, I know that she taught them as entangled efforts. Reading starts with listening, and both are part of writing against the grain.

In line with listening and reading against the grain, Willemse’s writing against the grain aims to find alternative ways of representation that reflects the narratives as told by women in their specific locations, as well as their subject positions, and the researcher’s positioning as they listen to and read these texts. Writing in a self-reflective mode, she set out to overcome the objectifying, neutralising, and homogenising mode of anthropological academic writing and instead offer “situated”

understandings of lived realities (Braidotti 1991; 1994; Davids and Willemse 1993, 3-14; Ghorashi 2003; Nencel 1997; 2001; Schrijvers 1993, all quoted in Willemse 2007, 31). In writing up the narratives, she wanted to keep open the possibility for future readers to also read against the grain by making room for multiple narrating positions and constructed identities in the narratives of the women in Darfur. She meticulously represented the narratives as close to the women's words as possible, and although she could reproduce the narratives exactly as they were told, because of translations and editing, she described silences and unexpected twists and turns. In fact, it is precisely these interruptions that give a view on the intersubjective context in which the research encounters took place in their multiplicities.

A book, let alone an article, does not provide enough space to fully represent all the layers, interactions, and connections involved, not even in Willemse's 580-page book (2007). In her writing, she deliberately used the space of her book and articles to focus on the intricate processes of knowledge production, rather than on its outcomes. She emphasised the dynamics, contexts, and subtexts, rather than alleged facts and seemingly solid conclusions. This allowed her to structure her argument as a process of evolving and becoming. She adhered rigorously to the principle of polyvocality, by painstakingly differentiating her interpretations from those of her interlocutors. These distinctions are crucial to separate her analytical perspectives from the rich, varied interpretations inherent in the narratives. Most importantly, Willemse avoided imposing a preconceived analytical framework on these narratives. Instead of using them as mere illustrations to support or expand an established theory, she engaged in a process of theoretical exploration. Her explorations were deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of the women in Darfur. These narratives are not just stories; they serve as the "embodied, situated soil" that nurture and inform theoretical reflection (Willemse 2007, 33). This approach ensures that the theoretical insights emerge organically from the narratives themselves.

AN ILLUSTRATION

The depth of engagement inherent in this research methodology compels me to offer an illustration of Willemse's method from my own work. I have engaged extensively in con/text analysis and co-taught this methodology with her on several occasions. The illustration is taken from my work with gangs in Kenya. For over twenty years, I have been conducting research in Kenya's informal urban settlements, and my relationships with these communities extends beyond thirty years. My research collaborations over these years have included interactions with gang members, youth groups, social justice activists, and (queer) sex workers. Here, I present an excerpt from an interview with a drug dealer, called Kuch, whom I met in 2008 and have worked with regularly since then. I selected this interview excerpt for this article because it is dense with possibilities that allow me to illustrate the dominant discourses at play and how Kuch negotiates these. Often, such texts are much more fragmented, not always communicated in words, and often also taken from many different conversations and interactions over a long period of time. To weave these into a readable story takes more time and space than I have in this article.

When I interviewed Kuch, in March 2023, on his life as a drug dealer in Mathare, an informal urban settlement in Nairobi, he shared the following:

I am happy I invested in businesses outside Mathare, and also outside drugs. My friends from Gaza always laughed, why are you setting up this business or that? It gave me a foundation, and it also helped me to build connections outside Mathare. Now, it is very hard to trade in Mathare. People get killed now. That is new. I am doing okay, but most of my friends from Gaza are dead, or they are underground. You saw our beach pub, it still there, but now it has junkies, like zombies, and it has become like Nigeria. A new generation has come up. I am so glad I made it out.

I am not able to fully unpack this text and the myriad threads of meaning converging and emerging in this article, but the first step in con/text analysis and writing against the grain (which also implies listening and reading against the grain as explicated above) would offer historical and socio-political context to some of the terms Kuch uses. In terms of intertextuality, the term Gaza jumps out, and so does Nigeria. Both geo-political references have intricate histories in Mathare. In summary, Gaza refers to Dancehall music, not, as one might initially think, to Gaza in Palestine, although the two are not unrelated. The term Nigeria relates to the founder of the heroin trade in Mathare, who was married to a Nigerian drug dealer. A brief history of the heroin trade in Nairobi, along with the formation of gangs and community organising in Mathare, is essential to provide context for a more in-depth analysis of subject positions and dominant discourses later on. The use of the term beach pub in a landlocked city also requires some explanation for readers. Locally, it refers to bars within the settlement that have refrigerators and sell chilled, bottled beers instead of the local moonshine. This indicates that Kuch belonged to a specific class within the ghetto. This quote, and indeed the entire three-hour interview, contains many layers of intertextuality. Listening against the grain means engaging with so many layers of meaning and meaning-making that it is challenging to do justice to them in any form of representation.

After establishing the essential historical and socio-political contexts necessary for readers to grasp Kuch's narrative, the analysis proceeds to explore the intersubjective context between Kuch and me, which is both overtly and covertly integrated into the text. Kuch's manner of addressing me partly unveils our shared history. He is aware of my familiarity with the beach pub and knows that I have recently visited it, now under new management. He is also comfortable using Swahili and locally relevant terms like Gaza and Nigeria in our conversations. Our first meeting in 2008 marked the beginning of our intermittent collaboration over the years. Yet, the complexity of our relationship is perhaps most vividly illustrated by my fear of him. In 2011, during

an intensive research project on gang formation in Mathare that we both initiated, his carelessness in our collaboration led to a threatening situation where his boss mistook me for a CIA official. This incident, which I cannot fully detail here, resulted in me treading carefully around him. The risks associated with his life and connections meant that our interactions were always shrouded in danger, often without his intention. He also does not entirely trust me, not for any specific reason, as he has stated to me several times, but more as a general life stance. He does trust me as a researcher however, since I never publish anything without discussing it with him first, gaining his approval, and he knows he can hold me accountable because I always come back. Our research relationship is further complicated by the uncertainty of our meetings. Kuch's intermittent stints in jail and his ongoing evasion of the police and rival drug dealers, which often result in his prolonged absences or hiding, add layers of complexity and unpredictability to our interactions. This combination of familiarity, unease, and his erratic life course has significantly influenced our intersubjective knowledge production (Haraway 1988), culminating in the interview from which this excerpt has been taken. All this is overtly and covertly part of the text.

The third and arguably most crucial aspect of con/text analysis, where the tools of listening, reading, and writing against the grain truly demonstrate their depth, involves analysing dominant and alternative subject positions. Kuch perceives himself as standing "outside" in relation to both Mathare and, to some extent, the drug scene. Having worked in Mathare for decades, I have developed a keen understanding of the varied meanings attached to the perceived in- and outside of Mathare, especially in relation to Nairobi and Kenya as a whole. The dominant discourse in Kenya tends to portray Mathare as an entity separate from Nairobi, despite its geographical location within the city. In response, many residents imagine a distinct boundary between Mathare and the city, though interpretations of this boundary differ greatly. Some Mathare residents imbue it with a sense of pride in surviving the "ghetto,"

a colloquial term for Mathare and similar neighbourhoods. Others express anger towards government neglect, exploitation, and the police violence frequently inflicted upon Mathare residents. The “outside” also embodies a fantasy, a sought-after social horizon, while simultaneously signifying a betrayal of the community spirit within the ghetto, and a closing off of certain social opportunities, such as resource sharing during times of need. Listening to Kuch meant being attuned to all these potential meanings of “outside,” including emerging ones, and understanding how they intersect with the dominant narratives about Mathare, the drug trade, and Kenyan citizenship.

Kuch’s portrayal of Mathare as a haven for drugs, death, and decay might seem to reinforce prevalent narratives. However, this viewpoint must also be seen through the lens of his complex life journey, which has recently made it impossible for him to enter this ghetto. A decade ago, his perspective on Mathare was markedly different. Back then, he took pride in being a part of “inside” Mathare; now, he speaks proudly of having survived and thrived “outside” of it, albeit still living in hiding and in fear for his life. Understanding the shifts in his positioning over time underscores the necessity of having a deep understanding of historical contexts and language when listening, reading, and writing against the grain. It also requires a deep appreciation of the intricate and evolving interplay between dominant and alternative discourses, and how individuals’ life journeys and experiences align with and diverge from these shifting narratives.

The infinite meanings, multiple threads and never-ending variabilities that converge and emerge in narrative texts beg the question how useful the arguments and conclusions are that I would tentatively derive from such partial, unstable, and open-ended knowledges. Perhaps the importance to my arguments pertains to showing exactly why and how knowledges are unstable and how, when and why seemingly contradictory positions may be held simultaneously. Keeping productive tensions in view may also reveal alternative subject

positions and ways of relating as humans and more-than-humans. My research with Kuch against the grain offers multiple ways to hear his words, resisting the dominant force of scientific objectivity (Harding, 1986), while also reflecting on my own positionality and how this shapes what I hear. However, questions of research relationships, representation, and response-ability, which are central to Willemse's biographic narratives against the grain, remain open for further deepening. Indeed, Willemse delved intensely into the complexities at play, yet the self and the other continue to be subject positions that enter into relationships. I argue that the next step of narrative analysis in feminist anthropology is to prioritise relationships themselves through which subject positions are constituted, which allows for a deeper engagement with the relationality that underly and entangle ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics.

CON/TEXT ANALYSIS, DIFFRACTION AND RESPONSE-ABILITY

In the year that Willemse published her book, another book was published which discusses the term “con/text.” Karen Barad, a quantum physicist, feminist theorist, and philosopher, draws attention to the fact that a text is already context, better expressed as con/text (Barad 2007, 459, ftn 62). They write:

“Contextual” is not a particularly apt term. The notion of context connotes separability as a starting point: it presumes there is an object that exists apart from its environment or surroundings and that this environmental context matters in some way (Barad 2007; Murriss 2022, 14).

Dissolving the distinction between “text” and “context” is further explored by Barad by taking entanglements of meaning and matter seriously and by fundamentally eschewing binaries. Traditionally, scientific and social analyses often employ the metaphor of “reflection,” suggesting that the world can be directly observed and comprehended as it is. Haraway (1988) introduced the concept of “diffraction” as

a more apt metaphor. Unlike reflection, which merely mirrors or reproduces, diffraction involves the interaction of waves, such as light or sound, to create interference patterns that reveal and even create differences and lead to new insights. Drawing from quantum physics, Barad utilises diffraction to illustrate how researchers can understand phenomena as dynamic entanglements of matter and meaning (2007, 74; 2014). Research, in this view, is not a mere reflection of reality but an interference with it, akin to how waves behave in quantum physics experiments. This interference generates new patterns and understandings, highlighting that the act of observing or measuring a phenomenon inevitably alters it. I argue that the relational ontology underlying Willemsse's use of intersubjectivity is further deepened by the feminist methodology of diffraction because it does not take *relata* (i.e., material-discursive entities) as prior to or separate from relationships. Instead, relationships constitute specific subject positions, entities and other phenomena. To capture the primacy of relationships, Barad coins the term "intra-action," a term they use instead of "interaction." Intra-action suggests that entities, as material-discursive entanglements, do not pre-exist relationships; rather, they are constituted by relationships. This idea challenges the conventional notion that subjects and objects, or concepts and materials, are distinct and pre-existing. Hence, in Barad's framework, difference is about the relationality and intra-action between entities, not their purported individual properties (Barad 2007; 2014).

As a research methodology, diffraction moves beyond power producing binaries, such as mind/body, culture/nature, subject/object, animate/inanimate, and social/physical, but without denying the possibility of common-sense experiences of such binaries and their material effects in specific contexts. While engaging with dominant and alternative discourses, this approach traces these as entangled and fluctuating, instead of opposed to each other. As such, it more accurately engages with the variations and shifts in and through the listening to, and the reading and writing of, narrative texts. Diffraction means "to break

apart in different directions” (Barad 2014, 168), which calls into question the independent identity of all that is read through one another when engaging with and becoming part of a narration, which Barad also refers to as “becoming-with” the text (Murriss and Bozalek 2018, 2). Diffraction, even more so than Willemse’s framework suggests, implicates researchers as an integral part of the narrative texts they are investigating. There are no absolute insides or outsides, which also has material consequences and, in that sense, researchers participate in (re)configuring the material-discursive world. Researchers are not listening, reading, and writing as a distanced other, but as part of the lively relationalities of becoming-with the text. There are not only a myriad of different possibilities and re/configurations at play in the act of narrative analysis, but their entanglements melt the very idea of separate voices implied in plurality or polyvocality. What is read through a specific text during the act of reading a narrative text allows for the careful tracing of different, but not separate, threads of meaning, including the words and possible meanings by the narrator. Yet, these threads become entangled in new ways, “threading through” each other (Barad 2007, 236), through the act of narrative analysis (i.e. through the act of listening to, reading and writing a narrative text).

Weaving together Willemse’s framework of listening, reading, and writing of texts against the grain with a diffractive approach brings out the act of narrative analysis as an active doing or making together – what Haraway (2016) refers to as “sympoiesis.” Importantly, when relationships are primary, writing against the grain moves through representation, not by going beyond it, but by building new engagements without leaving the old behind. For it is not representation of a narration as text, but how to engage with a narration diffractively that becomes of ethical concern. These intra-actions between texts, narrators, researchers, and (future) readers facilitate a dynamic and open-ended process of understanding and interpretation. Diffraction reveals even more how researchers and readers are not just observers but active participants, influencing

and being influenced by the narrative text. Hence, questions about positionality and power become reposed within questions of how relationships are continually woven into structural processes of justice and injustice. The intra-actions between researcher and research participant (and future readers, and many others) are and become further and differently entangled in and through narrative analyses. All are articulated with and through the other, and all are affected by and affect each other as constitutive forces, leading to unpredictable and creative provocations and beings/becomings. This approach challenges the conventional notion of representation in narrative analysis. Instead of addressing the ethics involved in merely representing a narrative text, the ethical imperative concerns the way researchers become-with the text and as such take responsibility for the material-discursive consequences of research practices, including writing an article like this.

Taking a diffractive approach to listening, reading and writing narrative analysis against the grain, requires the researcher to be explicit and transparent about the cuts and selections they make to the near infinite entanglements and possibilities. Without such cuts, developing an article becomes impossible. Willemse's framework already suggests the ethical work involved in justifying specific cuts and selections. Here again, Barad's framework can add to Willemse's approach with its radical relationality. Barad's concept of "ethico-onto-epistem-ology" (Barad 2007, 381; Bozalek and Zembylas 2023) weaves together the realms of ethics, ontology, and epistemology, enmeshed through a diffractive methodology in ways that offer more depth to the ethical work at stake. By simultaneously taking into account the ethical, ontological and epistemological ramifications of methodological approaches and of specific cuts in a diffractive engagement of the entanglements at play, improve both coherence and accountability. Ethics, in Barad's view, is not external but it is intrinsically entwined with the very process of how things come to matter, in the multiple senses of this term. Employing a diffractive method in listening, reading, and writing against the grain constitutes an even deeper form of

responsiveness than what is suggested in Willemse's framework. This approach is steeped in Haraway and Barad's notion of "response-ability" (Haraway 1992; 2016; Barad 2007; 2010). Response-able narrative analysis entails staying with a text and doing justice to it through a diffractive, careful listening, reading, and writing. This requires a recognition of the fact that the text is creating a response while changing the narrator, researcher and (future) reader, and that all are changed each time the text is read. Response-ability as a feminist anthropological research practice would also entail enabling the research participants in the study to respond (Schrader 2010), thus extending and deepening the research relationships to analysis and, if possible, to writing (and reading and re-writing) (Van Staple 2014). Response-ability centres on rendering each other capable and holding each other accountable, thus involving a deepening of research relationships and how these relationships become-with the text. The possibilities become infinite as these relationships can be extended to an infinite number of future readers. Tracing evolving entanglements response-ably starts by asking how we add to each other's ongoing capabilities and accountabilities. All intra-actors are changed in the process and each one "even comes to exist in a different mode than before the meeting" (Despret and Taylor 2018).

A diffractive approach to the narrative analysis against the grain of my work with Kuch would then be more firmly grounded in a deep understanding that the very act of narrative analysis is a response, and that responding is already an entanglement of ethics, knowledge, and being/becoming. I would use more space to integrate our history, and the myriad of relationships that shape and are shaped by our relationship, as part of the narration and the coming to be of the narrative text (and of reading and writing). As such, the analysis of intersubjectivity and intertextuality in Willemse's framework would be replaced by the tracing of situated entanglements, using concepts such as relationality and intra-action, and always with only a partial, temporal, and spatial glance of the possibilities and actualities. I would perhaps still focus on the way Kuch used the term "outside,"

but I would describe the converging and emerging meanings entangled in Kuch's use of this term and in the context of our evolving intra-actions and the (new) threads of meaning of my reading of his use of this term. Moreover, I would read the narrative text together with Kuch and include this intra-action as part of the evolving narrative text to allow for an even thicker understanding of, in this instance, what in- and outside of Mathare may mean, to whom, when and why. Response-ability is about being accountable for the entanglements that we as feminist anthropologists are part of and for the tracing we engage in. The deeper awareness that research practices are active engagements that shape reality and have material-discursive consequences would push me to be extra careful to not reiterate an alleged in- and outside of Mathare. By staying deeply attuned to the complexities of the active role of research in the world's ongoing material-discursive being/becoming, I would, above all, engage in ongoing and ever-changing experimentations in relationship with Kuch and other research participants, of which the narrative texts are but a few threads of infinite possibilities and actualities.

DIFFRACTIONS

By way of writing an open-end to this brief exploration, allow me to follow the rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) tendencies of diffractions rather than those of conclusions or reflections. Karin Willemse's transformative methodology translated feminist research against the grain to anthropological research tools and concomitant practices. Her work already brought out what it means to listen, read and write carefully while taking into account intersubjectivity, intertextuality and intersectionality. Reading her methodology and tools diffractively with special attention to response-ability, as developed by Haraway and Barad, deepens the possibilities of listening, reading, and writing of texts against the grain. This particular interference pattern, or weaving together of threads of meaning and acting, brings out the act of narrative analysis as an active doing or making together, foregrounding relationships

even further. A diffraction of Willemse's work with that of Haraway and Barad, enables an even more ethical engagement with the act of narrative analysis in feminist anthropology. Working with the intra-actions between texts, narrators, researchers, and readers, considers how researchers and readers are active participants, influencing and being influenced by the narrative. All that is involved in the never-ending research process has material-discursive consequences. The ethical imperative may then be centred on how we as feminist anthropological researchers become-with the text as much as our research participants, and even perhaps future readers. It is through the ethical, careful, and thus response-able engagement with narrative analyses that feminist anthropology may transcend its own current boundaries and to think and be with the relational ontology underlying materiality and discursivity. A feminist anthropology that is profoundly aware of its role in shaping, and being shaped by, the narratives and worlds it seeks to understand. In honour of my mentor Karin Willemse, I embrace the traces of her work that reverberate through me by further exploring diffractive narrative analyses and response-ability as feminist anthropological research practices, and this article represents only the first tentative steps in what I expect to be a long engagement.

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