Trying to be a vulnerable observer: Matters of agency, solidarity and hospitality in feminist ethnography

Tine Davids

Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Article info

Available online 17 March 2014

With the concept of the 'vulnerable observer', Ruth Behar problematizes the issue of whether researchers are just innocent bystanders observing and engaging in their own and other cultural diversities. In this article, I seek to further explore this engagement in my research on Mexican female politicians. This encounter with these – in particular right-wing – women has not only led to me having a different understanding of agency, but has also caused me to critically examine the practice of conducting feminist research. Can feminist solidarity be encountered and critical standards met in research on conservative women? What kind of engagement or common ground can be found in this inter-subjective and transnational space, connecting myself as researcher to the Mexican women under study? In trying to answer these questions, I will entertain both Behar’s notion of vulnerability and Derrida’s notion of hospitality.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

A few years ago, I was asked by a friend whether or not I was proud of the achievements of Rita Verdonk, a female Dutch right-wing politician and former Integration and Foreign Affairs minister. She was a much-discussed politician and became known as ‘Iron Rita’ because of her ‘macho’ style in addressing political issues. She claimed that she was unafraid of taking unpopular decisions and portrayed herself as straightforward, harsh but fair, and goal oriented. She was often compared to the former UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

I found this question to be confronting and interesting, because it triggered in me the dilemmas of feminist solidarity and the kind of resistance and change envisioned by feminist theory that I encountered as a researcher in my work on female Mexican politicians. It was particularly relevant to the aspects of my research that focused on conservative right-wing female politicians. Furthermore, the question suggested the possibility of conservative women successfully attempting to resist patriarchy in a predominantly masculine domain like politics. At the time this question was put to me, rather casually at a party, Rita Verdonk was being very successful in founding her own political and rather xenophobic movement, which was growing steadily.

I do not remember the precise words of the question. However, it was framed in such a way that it was clear that the person asking it was curious to know what my thoughts were as an academic and feminist about Verdonk’s success as a woman operating in politics who was creating a new movement, regardless of its views or her political vision. Wasn’t I, in that respect, proud of her as a (fellow) woman? This puzzled me: not because I doubted for a moment my profound disagreement with her right-wing politics and xenophobic ideas, and not because the question suggested that I was supposed to feel solidarity for any woman simply on the basis of also being female. Instead, this question went deeper for me; it relates to well known dilemmas on the possibilities and impossibilities of feminist solidarity, and to feminism(s) as a political project(s) that has become increasingly challenging after the deconstruction of the subject of enlightenment and the...

As a consequence, this tied right in to the dilemma I was experiencing, originating in, on the one hand, wanting to be a feminist researcher, politically left-wing oriented and in search of a basis of solidarity with women in a different cultural context, and on the other studying right-wing conservative elite women who often seem to embrace, instead of challenge, hegemonic gender codes in the way I understand to be part of feminist struggles. On a more general level, it triggered questions such as: how can research on conservative women be simultaneously critical and feminist, and respectful to the questions such as: how can research on conservative women be simultaneously critical and feminist, and respectful to the contexts of a different cultural context, and on the other studying right-wing conservative elite women who often seem to embrace, instead of challenge, hegemonic gender codes in the way I understand to be part of feminist struggles. On a more general level, it triggered questions such as: how can research on conservative women be simultaneously critical and feminist, and respectful to the

Meeting Marina

In 1989, I was invited to a round-table discussion on women in politics organized by 'el Nacional', a national Mexican newspaper. There, I met Marina, an up-and-coming young female politician for the right-wing party PAN. The journalist who organized the meeting opened the discussion by asking why women’s political participation in Mexico seemed to be lagging behind in comparison with the rest of Latin America, where women had often been granted their political rights to vote and run for parliament earlier (it took until 1953 before women could vote and be elected in Mexico). He wanted to know if this had anything to do with the conservatism in voting behavior often ascribed to women.

Meanwhile, the two other participants (a female Partido Revolucionario Institutional, PRI, politician and the female head of the National University Trade Union) tried to counter this idea of alleged conservatism among female voters, with Marina engaging in quite a different and rather conservative discourse on this issue:

“I think that if women are going to do things wrong, the same ways that men do, I honestly feel they should stay at home. It’s impossible to think of progress while ignoring the very essence of being a woman, her motherhood.”

This was the start of a long-lasting, but also problematic, research relationship. I have followed Marina over the years until 2013 as part of a research project into gender and political representation and political subjectivity in Mexico. In the course of my research, I interviewed different women at the two ends of the political spectrum and in between: both right- and left-wing and what is considered to be more or less in the center. Of course, these women varied enormously in their motivations for participating in politics, their political sympathies and their personal struggles. I could identify more easily with some of them than with others in terms of their ways of conducting politics. In particular, it was the women with a conservative signature who belonged to PAN that I initially had the most problems with. How could I feel solidarity and empathy for women who apparently vigorously embraced such traditional representations of femininity, which in turn represented the dominant power relationships? (See also Wasserfall, 1993).

I am not alone in this dilemma. Margaret Power, for example, argues that the anti-Allende women’s movement in Chile was long understudied and overlooked because:

“(…) many scholars are reluctant to study people with whom they disagree; instead they prefer to conduct research on women who more closely share their own values or represent models they believe worthy of emulation. Additionally, scholars generally have believed that the Catholic Church, the conservative parties or their husbands dictated right-wing women’s political choices.” (Power, 2004, p.138).

The consequence of this is running the risk of depicting conservative women as cultural dupes or mere pawns in a male dominated political game (Bacchetta & Power, 2002; Bedi, 2006; Power, 2004, pp.138–139).

Something of the sort also happened to me. Marina was, at the time of our first acquaintance in 1989, an MP and...
This generated a two-way but integrated process. In particular, often the cases, issues or people we can learn the most from. Studies (as they do not seem to fit within the overall theoretical us the most are often left out or driven into the margins of the research. Noting that the issues, cases or people that irritate that I brought Marina to the center of the analytical platform of within the setting of a course on change. It was because of a suggestion made by Kathy Davis of fieldwork in 1990, that this relationship slowly started to how to deal with her life story.

Although she was at the time a single woman with no children who lived alone, she claimed (and still does) that it is “impossible to think of progress while ignoring the very essence of being a woman, her motherhood.” In advocating this ideal of motherhood, she also repeated the dominant discourse of her party, which was characterized by a non-negotiable stance against the legislation of abortion while developing a strategy to attract women and enroll them as active members in the party through the politicization of the bourgeois ideals of the family. In contrast to the PRI, PAN presented its politics at the time as being close to the private and domestic sphere, whereas, for the PRI, the politics of private life was displaced by public issues (see Barrera Bassols, 1994, p. 89; Massolo, 1994; Venegas Aguilera, 1994).

In my eyes, Marina was a champion in advocating the traditional ideal of motherhood as a basis for women’s participation in politics. In doing so, she was repeating a very well known rhetorical trope that ascribes the private and domestic realm and the inner world to women, and the outside, public and political world to men. It was the repetition of this traditional trope within the gender repertoire that seamlessly fit the bourgeois ideal of her party, and almost made me regard her as a cultural dupe in the sense that she did not display, at least to my eyes, any obvious resistance to it. In other words, she did not fit my feminist theoretical outlook on the world. Notwithstanding the fact that I considered every actor to be bestowed with agency, I could not decipher Marina’s, which led to a tendency to negate her and push her to the outskirts of my research, not knowing what to do with her and how to deal with her life story.

It was only afterwards, when I got back from my first period of fieldwork in 1990, that this relationship slowly started to change. It was because of a suggestion made by Kathy Davis within the setting of a course on ‘gender analysis in practice’ that I brought Marina to the center of the analytical platform of the research. Noting that the issues, cases or people that irritate us the most are often left out or driven into the margins of studies (as they do not seem to fit within the overall theoretical framework of the research), Davis suggested that these are often the cases, issues or people we can learn the most from. This generated a two-way but integrated process. In particular, it triggered the need to go back to Marina, and to reread and (text-) analyze her narratives, not only on the surface, but also by trying to peel off the many layers in her text while also attempting to withhold any moral judgment. Simultaneously, it triggered the need in me to investigate my own moral and theoretical judgments.

Stanley and Wise “don’t agree that feminist knowledge should – even if it could – be produced in ways that are separated from values, feelings and a point of view.” (2000, p.271). I agree with them, and consequently felt that I had to scrutinize the motives that informed my understanding of feminist theory and, as such, in turn informed the knowledge production involved. For that I had to go back to the start of my research project. In what follows, I will first contextualize my understanding of feminist theory, and the drives that fed this understanding, before turning to what the process of the text-analysis of Marina’s narratives brought to the fore.

Situated in Dutch Academia

I started this project at the end of the 1980s, when research among middle and upper-class women, as most political women were, was not very popular, at least not within the academic circles and institute I was a part of. Critiques were leveled at me in my immediate academic surroundings that research into the political participation of women in formal politics in Mexico, in particular at the level of the parliament and senate, could not be a topic for feminist research since it dealt with elite women and, therefore, women of power. At the same time, the commission (all men) that issued the funding for the research apparently considered me to be either too feminist or too left-wing, as their main concern appeared to be whether I possessed enough pearl necklaces which, according to their perspective, I would need to be able to carry out such an investigation.

I have to admit that, at the time, these comments stung and bothered me as I strived to conduct feminist academic research. Indeed, the criticisms affected me all the more because I am white and, as an academic, a privileged woman. Since that time, these critiques have directed my internal argumentative positioning (Billig, 1991), albeit often unconsciously, under my skin as it were, becoming my alter against which my ego was constantly arguing.

Both the critiques and my reaction to them have to be placed in that period and the anthropological, feminist debates, including debates on gender and development, of the time. Studying and working at a department where Marxist theory had a major impact, and development issues were treated as an integral part of the subject of the study of anthropology, these debates formed me as a scholar. To more Marxist-oriented feminist scholars, it was clear that solidarity should be invested in designated oppressed groups, and research should be modeled to their interests, which made me all the more receptive to the criticism directed at my research project. The adagio of those days, which I embraced, namely that the personal is political and the political theoretical (Okely and Callaway, 1992, p.9), made it more difficult to distance myself from my research project. Moreover, with hindsight, this adagio helps to make intelligible the notion that research on elite women positioned both the research and the researcher behind it.
At the same time, the influence of post-modernism and post-colonialism made itself known within both feminist anthropology and ‘development’ studies. These influences were accompanied by a shift in thinking: from women as a category of analysis to gender as a category of analysis. This came in parallel with a shift from an instrumental (negative) conceptualization of power to a productive (positive) version thereof, as inspired by Foucault. This paradigm shift did not develop seamlessly. Discussions moved, and still move, on a continuum between more positivist and postmodern stands. These new insights needed time to conquer steady ground and often figured next to, or in combination with, ideas on women and power that still divided the world into neat groups of either perpetrators or victims of sexist, capitalist or other forms oppression (see also Davids & van Driel, 2009).

Under the influence of these debates, my insights into the loci of oppression were slowly shifting from a more Marxist-oriented vision on power to a Foucauldian one. I became increasingly convinced that feminist research should include the study of the mechanisms of gender and gender-related power mechanisms, which could and should also be researched among the elite. Conceptualizing power as a disciplining force that works in and through subjects convinced me that these mechanisms could also be studied among elites, even if they were positioned differently in and by dominant discourses (see also Schrijvers, 1991). This shift supported my original motivation and persistence in wanting to study women who participated in national politics. It also made me stick to my original plan and research design instead of abandoning the subject altogether.

Although I regarded elite women who were trying to enter the male bastion of politics as being subject to disciplining mechanisms, I still struggled with how to deal with feminist solidarity. In particular, also encouraged by the critiques I received, I struggled with how to shape this solidarity in my research. The heritage of Marxist theory had not left my system completely, and my sympathy and solidarity were (and still are) aimed at the sub-altern, which made me even more receptive to the idea of conducting elitist (and thus not feminist) research.

The question of how to shape my research according to feminist perspectives and solidarity was further spurred on by the ongoing debates within feminist ethnography on responsible knowledge production. These debates dealt with deconstructing the positivist claim of objective knowledge production and the corresponding hierarchical division between observers and the observed. This approach claims that knowledge is situated and the research process inter-subjective (Davids & Willemse, 1999; Haraway, 1988). Accordingly, inspired by the literary turn within anthropology, in which feminism played a significant but often un(der)acknowledged role (see, for example, Behar, 1993, pp. 308–309; Bell, Caplan, & Karim, 1993, pp. 3–11; Leonardo di, 1991; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989; Nencel & Pels, 1991, pp.15–19), experiments with genres, dialogical methods, (self) reflexivity, polyphony and narratives were undertaken (see, for example, Behar & Gordon, 1995; Schrijvers, 1993). In trying to live up to a responsible feminist style of conducting research and writing, in which the participation, knowledge and voices of others are respected and acknowledged as partners in a dialog, I aimed to combine critical reflection with an empathetic style of carrying out research (see also Berger Gluck & Patai, 1991; Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

As a result, without being particularly conscious of it, I translated these ideals, goals and critiques into a need to search for some signs of resistance in the women I dealt with. I had an ever present, but latent, wish to discover in every woman some sign of resistance, an imprint of, however deeply buried under layers of everyday concerns and compromises, a rebellious spirit of resisting the status quo or at least part of it. On reflection, my search for this spirit emanated from the idea that the manifestation of any kind of resistance against the status quo, with its corresponding patriarchal relationships, could and would justify conducting research among elites and was worthy of investing feminist solidarity.

These desires and thoughts had a decisive impact on my academic ‘mentality’ of doing research. One could argue that it became a personal governmentality with which I conducted research. In a Foucauldian sense, governmentality can be understood as those mentalities with which we govern ourselves into being moral agents (Foucault, 1991). People discipline and construct themselves as moral agents with the guidance of mentalities that are informed by knowledge and belief systems. These mentalities and systems direct agents to act according to what is considered to be righteous and normal within specific contexts. The way in which we are governed and govern is therefore not only tied to the administration or the political structures of the nation-state; there are many more aspects of life through which the behavior of individuals, groups or states is directed. Government as a disciplinary power that goes beyond sovereignty is concerned with the construction of ourselves as moral agents, and involves practices that shape our choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants, and lifestyles, and eventually our subjectivities (Dean, 2004; Hunt & Wickham, 1998; Larner & Walters, 2004).

The governmentality directing my research conduct, as a kind of hidden administrator, might be described as what Cornwall et al. have labeled as the feminist myth of female solidarity and female autonomy, to which feminist academics can be particularly attached. I might have stepped (with open eyes) into the trap of this myth, which is described by these authors as the will to all too easily read a kind of resistance into all kinds of women’s actions and strategies (Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007, see also Mohanty, 2003; Moore, 1988). Consequently, the opposite, namely detecting a lack of resistance, can lead to women being depicted as cultural dupes or mere pawns in the male-dominated political game. The filter of fearing not being able to conduct feminist research among elite women eventually trapped me in a dichotomous and, as Mahmood (2001) puts it, liberal and Western conceptualization of agency: either resisting or upholding the norm while referring to individual liberty as the political ideal.

Repetition and subversion in agency

It was only through the process of text-analysis, namely a close reading of Marina’s texts and close listening, that I not only discovered the multilayeredness of her words in the sense of their content and what she said, but also how she said it. This is how cultural patterns were encoded in the structure of her text (Meijer, 1996). I discovered that, consciously or
unconsciously, in repeating these patterns Marina did more than just repeating them (Butler, 1990). By analyzing her text in this way, I was able to see that Marina seemed at first sight to be advocating an essentialist and biological determinist notion of femininity. However, when listening more closely, this notion was actually carefully constructed as a political and moral notion that enabled her to enter the political domain without jeopardizing her femininity or decency. In stretching the meaning of motherhood from a biological to a moral and political version, she successfully rattled the cages of the dichotomies that are aimed at capturing femininity and masculinity in the domains of the private versus the public, suggesting a logic of exclusion.

Marina’s subversion did not exist because of a straightforward resistance to these gender norms, but arose out of undermining, consciously or not, the dichotomy that suggests that there would only be one world open to her, thus creating room to maneuver within the borders of these norms. Her agency manifested itself as a force that simultaneously repeated and complied with certain gender stereotypes, as well as partly subverting them (for a detailed analysis of Mariana’s text, see Davids, 2011). As a consequence, agency could be found as much in the work Marina put in to upholding the norm and ‘fitting the discourse’ as she did in resisting it.

As Mahmood (2005, p.167) states, capacities like endurance, survival, suffering and persistence are often considered to be the opposite of agency. Of course, Marina did possess agency, but I had not been able to see it because I had not considered it to be part of her survival strategies. Although I thought I was critical of the enlightenment notion of an autonomous subject, I discovered that I still, albeit unconsciously, repeated a Western-based understanding of agency; I recognized it only as a force against the ruling norm, capturing it in a dichotomy of compliance versus resistance that indirectly presupposes the existence of free will outside and prior to discourse.

What I neglected was not only the repeating force of discourse and language itself, but even more so the agency, effort, energy and force invested in surviving, repeating and, albeit perhaps not in a totalitarian way, living the dominant discourse. Without this necessary signifying being a cultural dupe, as far as this at all exists. In reproducing certain gender stereotypes, Marina also questioned others, not so much out of a feminist or revolutionary ideal, but as part of a strategy to build a political career and in constructing subjectivity as a female politician. Moreover, implying the possibility of total compliance with the dominant discourse would suggest that those closer to the centers of (decision-making) power, such as female politicians, would not have to struggle over the content of dominant discourses, nor display any disjuncture with it.

Consequently, what I had failed to see was that any woman entering a public and masculine domain such as the political arena evokes a fear of compromising women’s sexual integrity (Goetz, 2007). She is therefore confronted with gender stereotypes and, as such, challenges these by merely entering the domain, perhaps not totally and not in a revolutionary way, but in a more ordinary, everyday life struggle kind of manner, in which any woman entering the public domain has to work her way through these stereotypes, creating her own room to maneuver. This is why women who enter this domain have to legitimate themselves while men do not. Marina legitimized and normalized this not so self-evident participation in politics by making this appeal on motherhood: on the one hand: ‘I do what I want’ (making her dreams as a young ambitious politician come true) while, on the other, simultaneously: ‘I am a good girl; I do fit in exactly with the dominant right-wing moral, look how I uphold these right-wing values.’ Agency could consequently be found as much in the work Marina had to put in to upholding the norm and ‘fitting the discourse’ as in the effort she had to make to subvert it. Of course, Marina did possess agency; it was just that I had not been able to see it (see also Davids, 2011).

**From resentment to vulnerability**

Marina’s agency presented itself as an ‘act of speech’ and performance (Butler, 1997) that I was able to witness in her narrative only through critical ‘text in context’ analysis (see also Willemsen, 2007); that is to say, by analyzing the layeredness in the structure of Marina’s text in relation to the surrounding context discourses. Witnessing her agency in this way allowed me to find common ground with someone whose political opinions I rejected and did not want to legitimize, but whose struggle I now wanted to make intelligible.

Although described here in this article as separate, the text analysis went hand in hand with reflecting upon my own presuppositions. A text analysis offers specific standardized methods and techniques to grapple with texts (see, for instance, Fairclough, 2007), but these techniques also build upon and require a constant awareness of one’s own framework of reference and understanding of the context. This entails a continuous dynamic of interpretation, shifting from text to context and moving between and in different worlds. In my case, these worlds were Mexican, as well as the international academic world of theory-building and both institutional and personal Dutch worlds. In short, self-reflexivity of some sort is built into the process of text analysis, depending on the author for the form that this takes.

For me, this process also meant making myself vulnerable in the way that Behar (1996, p.14) uses this term, namely to give evidence of my emotional involvement with the research subject. With the concept of vulnerability, Behar explores different forms of engagement in what Geertz (1995) has called becoming enmeshed in another culture (Behar, 1996, p.5). With this term, Behar wants to bear witness and strives for acknowledgement of the emotional involvement of the anthropologist/researcher with their research subjects. Many researchers, anthropologists, feminists and others have acknowledged the influence of the subjectivity of the researcher on the process of knowledge production (see among others Berger Gluck & Patai, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Lamphere, 2003; Nencel & Pels, 1991; Schrijvers, 1993; Stanley & Wise, 2000; Willemsen, 2007).

The ways of dealing with this subjectivity vary widely, and the value of self-reflexivity in managing it, and eventually writing oneself into the academic text, is debated and contested (for instance, see Davids & Willemsen, 1999; Kobayashi, 2003; Pillow, 2003). For instance, Patai (1994), although acknowledging the subjective relationship between researchers and the
researched, considers self-reflexivity to be self-indulgent. However, acknowledging the subjective nature of social knowledge does not: make self-reflexivity an end in itself; mean putting your all into the academic work; or signify a call for solipsism. Instead, as Behar states:

“That doesn’t require a full length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and more particularly, the topic being studied.” (Behar, 1996, p.13, cursive by author).

As Behar describes it, this meant that as a Cuban, Jewish and American woman, she needed to better connect her own profound sense of displacement with the professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology (Behar, 1996, p. 21). My filter was a concern with not being feminist enough in studying elite women. In particular, I feared that they would only embrace dominant gender codes and would not show any form of resistance to patriarchal relationships, implying that I would actually find little ground for a feminist research project.

Meeting Marina, and discovering her agency and struggle, took time, patience and effort, but, perhaps more importantly, also involved a certain anxiety. This anxiety was caused by opening up and, in that sense, letting go of having total control of the objectifying gaze and instead becoming sensitive to the unspoken and unheard dimensions of the story of the other (in this particular case Marina), but also of oneself.

Making myself vulnerable meant needing to (re-) connect the personal drive and urge I felt to find resistance among women to the fear of not being feminist enough, or being labeled as such, and relating this to feminist theory and its political project. In making myself vulnerable in a positive way, as in being self-reflexive about my emotional involvement, I discovered that I had felt vulnerable in a negative way within academia. Looking at this with hindsight, the way in which I had struggled with this vulnerability, and the way in which this crept into my analysis, caused me to marginalize Marina within the realm of my research project, as I had pushed her to the margins of my study, objectifying and marginalizing her.

The process of critical text analysis forced me to reflect upon my own presuppositions, and made this inter-subjective research relationship intelligible. What I discovered through this process of reflection and text analysis was that I, despite all postmodern influences, still half-heartedly depended on an idea of these women as autonomous individuals, possessing a free will. I had to acknowledge that the paradigm shift I witnessed evolving was not only an objectified theoretical and analytical process detached from myself as a person, but was part of my daily reality and personal struggle to understand the world. Fearing that elite women would only embrace dominant gender codes prevented me from not only finding common ground for a feminist research project, but also from finding common ground with a woman like Marina.

From vulnerability as a problem to vulnerability as an asset

Facing the fear described above, letting go of resentment and being open to and willing to discover common ground with Marina, despite our differences, felt very uneasy, unsafe and even risky in a number of different ways.

Risky in this context meant letting go of total control and having to engage with someone I did not feel much empathy for and with whose political persuasion I did not want to be associated. But risky also meant acknowledging this kind of situatedness in my scientific work and eventually displaying it in publications, thus making myself vulnerable. As Behar states: “Science should make it possible for the unspeakable to be spoken and open borders previously closed, there are risks in exposing oneself in an academy that continues to feel ambivalent about observers who forsake the mantle of omniscience.” (Behar, 1996, p.12).

This kind of opening up, and the risks it involves, seems comparable to the risks Derrida (1998) implies in his understanding of hospitality, which is understood in the broad sense of opening up one’s home to (unknown) guests as well as with respect to the nation opening itself up to immigrants. Derrida distinguishes an ethic of unconditional and infinite hospitality and a politics of conditional finite hospitality. One should not choose between the two, but should instead make an effort to, at least in thought, reconcile these two avenues of hospitality (see also Pisters, 2007; Rosello, 2001). Derrida applies this perspective in the first instance to the politics of nation states and the way in which the politics of conditional finite hospitality is organized in relation to migrants, refugees and strangers in general (Derrida, 1998).

Although hospitality may not always be formulated and studied in those terms, it is intrinsic to the core business of the anthropological and ethnographic enterprise. As Candea and Da Col write: “the ethics of hospitality are at the core of ethnographic knowledge-making, as anthropologists first play guest then host to the worlds of their ‘informants’, acting as custodians of their stories and memories.” (Candea & Da Col, 2012a, p. Siv). This raises the question of what kinds of custodian anthropologists are, and, more particularly, what practices of hospitality are put into practice in playing host to the world of their informants. At the same time, ethnographic and anthropological studies reveal that rites of hospitality function in order to deal with and control alterity and strangeness (see, among others Herzfeld, 1987; Ortner, 1978; Rozakou, 2012; Sahlin, 2009). Moreover, they often symbolically place the host in a hierarchically superior position and the guest in moral debt and an inferior position (Herzfeld, 1992; Rozakou, 2012).

These findings concern societies under study and cannot directly be projected onto the ethnographic endeavor itself. However, the ethics of the hospitality of the ethnographic practice, and corresponding knowledge production and representation, do not totally escape also being, in part, a practice of regulating, controlling and disciplining alterity. I think it is safe to say that we can recognize in different methodological procedures and theoretical approaches the finite politics of the conditional hospitality of regulating and disciplining alterity in the scientific and, eventually,objectifying gaze. As Candea and Da Col write:

“Anthropologists as writers, ‘back home’, become the hosts and custodians of their informants’ memories, arranging, organizing, and enveloping the ethnography
within an argument, rebuilding the concepts and debates of the discipline to find a home for the lives and concerns of erstwhile hosts.” (Candea & Da Col, 2012b, p.S16).

This may be compared to opening the door to our home only to strangers who are innocent and harmless, or to building/finding them houses (far away from our own) that make them harmless, thus controlling or avoiding risk. Unconditional hospitality, then, would mean opening the door and taking that risk, thereby making ourselves vulnerable.

In my case, encountering this risk by opening the door for Marina, instead of pushing her away or emphasizing the differences between us (as I also tend to do with a woman like Rita Verdonk), meant acknowledging the possibility of the relatedness I dreaded might exist, and which I preferred not to acknowledge. Despite our many differences, I developed empathy for Marina’s specific way of reworking dominant discourses and rattling the cages of gender stereotypes. I came to understand that it was precisely her questioning and challenging of these stereotypes that formed a commonality within, and through, (our) differences. Involving this risk, then, in offering Marina hospitality, in confronting my own vulnerability, and recognizing her vulnerability as a consequence of our inter-subjective research relationship, meant that vulnerability became an asset instead of a threat and a problem.

What helped in this process, and in due course, was that this happened over a period in which I became a mother and lost some of my resentment of motherhood as being foremost traditional and conservative. But what helped even more was the encouragement I found in feminist examples of self-reflexivity, such as that of Behar, but also others (see, for example, the authors in this issue). Daring to engage in such risks and to express such inter-subjectivity to get to know the other in relation to the self “while resisting the objectification as other”, as Patricia Collins put it into words, asks for ‘safe places’ (Collins, 1991, see also Ghorashi, 2010, and in this special issue). Such a space has to provide “a balance between difference and sameness in order to reach our goals of empowerment across cultures, races, and ethnicities.” (Ghorashi, 2010, p.90). This would imply, in my view, overcoming the idea of emotions and intellect as two mutually exclusive faculties (see also Collins, 1991). The academic and analytical platform of feminist ethnography can function as such a safe place, a place that provides room for understanding the mutual dynamics of agency, both that of “others” as well as that of “selves” (see also the introduction to this special issue).

As stated above, the opinions on how to deal with self-reflexivity and writing oneself into academic text vary widely within feminist theory and ethnography (see also Nencel in this special issue). Self-reflexivity is by no means an easy way of breaking down hierarchical research relationships, or even antagonistic relationships between researchers and the researched (see also Wasserfall, 1993). It does, however, represent a necessary attempt at a different mode of knowledge production that recognizes the situatedness of research, despite the many differences among its debaters. The home we build for our research subjects in feminist ethnography should therefore be a hospitable, reflexive and safe home, as inter-subjective knowledge production not only entails relations in the field, but is also multidimensional and continues after fieldwork, embracing analytical and representation processes.

From solidarity to vulnerability and hospitality?

In looking back and summarizing what has been stated herein, at the start of my research project I felt vulnerable and the object of a certain feminist gaze. In the same way, I objectified Marina, marginalizing her and rendering her vulnerable within the context of my research. Confronting this fear of vulnerability and engaging in the risk of being unconditionally hospitable turned out to be productive, changing vulnerability from a fear and a risk into an inspiration and an asset. This engagement with vulnerability and risk asks for safe places in which such fear and vulnerability can be discussed, acknowledged and encouraged. Feminist ethnography can be such a safe place, where the dynamics of mutual agency between researcher and researched can be analyzed and strategized.

The unconventional avenue of hospitality then invites us to reflect on and explore the emotional and political engagements involved in hosting ‘the other’. I was able to give empathy and solidarity a place in my research by taking this multidimensional and inter-subjective nature of knowledge production seriously. Self-reflection (without becoming solipsism) is therefore, in my opinion, not just another tool, but a necessity for understanding this process. For me, taking the situated character of knowledge production seriously meant acknowledging and accepting this vulnerability, striving for a hospitality that bridges the differences between the self and other, object and subject, and researcher and researched, without deserting the critical analytical process of research.

Text analysis offered a means, and guaranteed for me this critical analytical approach. Indeed, it could be seen as bridging the two ethics of hospitality in offering a methodological and analytical toolkit while, at the same time, evoking a more unconditional ethic of hospitality: vulnerability. Combining text analyses with vulnerability opened up the way to discover common ground with conservative women as part of a feminist research project. This common ground (or solidarity if you wish) can be found in the academic feminist interest in exploring spaces that the subjects at hand have to maneuver. This space can be recognized in the different styles that individuals employ to both integrate different subjectivities within and subvert existing power hierarchies.

I therefore think the critical feminist research engagement and the reflexivity hereupon should involve both emotional as well as intellectual empathy. Meaning that reflection is needed on, and responsibility taken for, the emotional processes and possible identification, or lack hereof, and any other kind of emotional involvement in trying to understand ‘the other’, as well as on the positioning of ‘the self’ in relation ‘to the other’.

Coming back to the case that I presented in the Introduction, does this mean that I have to display solidarity and emotional empathy with any conservative woman like, for instance, Rita Verdonk, regardless of the content of their policies? Not necessarily. Of course, there are many differences between a Dutch politician like Verdonk and Marina, despite them both being conservative. Furthermore, the hospitality I can offer Marina, even if I succeed in letting this be, as far as possible, unconditional, is always partial and temporal. As an anthropologist, I am also very differently positioned in relation to Marina in comparison to the position
I hold in relation to Rita Verdonk as a fellow citizen who is part of the local political debate. These different positions, although they can coincide in some cases, come with different responsibilities.

Despite these differences, as a feminist, I had comparable feelings of ambiguity and resentment in relation to both positions. What I learned in exploring these feelings and this comparison between the two stances is that should Rita Verdonk become part of my research project, I would be obliged to offer her intellectual empathy in exploring her agency and room to maneuver within the dominant gender repertoire, instead of positioning her as a cultural dupe or pawn in the male dominated political game.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to a grant of WOTRO (Scientific Research in Tropical Countries), I was able to carry out research in Mexico during the period 1989/1991, and thanks to the Radboud University Nijmegen I was able to return to the field several times between 2005 and 2013.

I am indebted for support, comments and suggestions to Bibi Straatman, Karin Willemse, Dana Davis and the anonymous reviewers.

Endnotes

1 I do refer here to women from, what is in the context of Mexico, considered to be a right-wing party, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional), which is characterized as conservative, in particular in relation to specific feminist issues such as the right to abortion, since it is against the legalization thereof.

2 This movement has since been dissolved.

3 At that time, PAN was still in opposition to the then ruling PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). In 2000, PAN won the national election with President Vincente Fox. Since 2012, PAN has again been in opposition, since the PRI won the presidential elections.

4 As Mexico does not have a parliamentary system but a republic style after the US it would be better to use representatives and House of Representatives or congress. But a political representative is a rather undefined term and can also refer to political positions in a party. Therefore I use the term Member of Parliament.

5 Held in Mexico city, the same year we met for the first time, in 1989.

6 At the time, the procedure at WOTRO (Scientific Research in the Tropics), a Dutch fund, was that you had to personally defend your research plan in front of a special commission that was to advise WOTRO as to whether or not the research should be funded.

7 See for discussion of this paradigm shift also Davids and van Driel (2002).

References


