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Becoming a Decolonial Feminist Ethnographer: Addressing the complexities of positionality and representation

Jennifer Manning

Technological University Dublin, jennifer.manning@tudublin.ie

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Becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer: Addressing the complexities of positionality and representation

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq**Jennifer Manning**

Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Abstract

Organisation and management scholars are often preoccupied with developing, refining and advancing knowledge, and in so doing, the empirical process through which knowledge is advanced can be ignored together with the impact this process can have on participants and scholars. This article draws attention to how management scholars might negotiate the complexities of positionality and representation through an illustrative case: my experience of becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer. Drawing upon my doctoral research, I share the experience of my ethnographic journey to become a decolonial feminist ethnographer. Developing a decolonial feminist approach to ethnography enabled me to identify positionality and representation as the key complexities of engaging in research with marginalised ‘Others’ while also providing me with the tools to address these complexities. This is not to say that becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer is the only way to engage in research with marginalised ‘Others’, but this critical approach encourages researcher reflexivity and helps in addressing the issues of positionality and representation. My approach suggests an alternative way of ‘seeing and doing’ ethnography motivated by an ethical commitment to the participants and the desire to respect their knowledge and experiences.

Keywords

Critical ethnography, decolonial feminist theory, positionality, reflexivity, representation

Introduction

My doctoral research explores the work and lives of marginalised, indigenous Maya women working together in backstrap weaving groups in rural, remote Highland communities in Guatemala. There is limited empirical engagement with marginalised, indigenous women in the Global South within Organisation and Management Studies (OMS). Located outside the dominant Western

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Corresponding author:

Jennifer Manning, College of Business, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin 2, Ireland.

Email: jennifer.manning@dit.ie

discourse, little is therefore known about how they construct their identity and their organisation/organising experiences. My ethnographic research explores the everydayness of the women's lives and how their experience may contribute to the discipline. To this end, I developed an approach to ethnography that provides space for marginalised Maya women to voice their own understanding of gender, identity and work from within the context of their social, cultural and historical location.

What enabled me, a White, Western woman, to undertake this research and develop findings from the perspective of Otherness is the development of my decolonial feminist ethnography. As a decolonial feminist researcher, I needed to be ethically and reflexively engaged with my participants to understand how I experience our relationships and how to (re)present the Maya women participants and their knowledge. This highlights the need to consider deeply the personal, political and ethical considerations of our research, which can result in more transparent and informed research accounts that recognise the lived experiences of those who have been marginalised in mainstream academic discourse. Thus, I provide insight into my *becoming* a decolonial feminist ethnographer, going beyond the choice of simply *doing* an ethnography (e.g. Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). In what follows, I first provide the theoretical rationale for my decolonial feminist ethnography and reflexively discuss why I incorporated decolonial feminist theory into my ethnographic approach. Following this, I set the context and provide insight into the practicalities of undertaking this research. I then draw on my experiences in the field to discuss how my decolonial feminist ethnography enabled me to address the complexities of positionality and representation to *become* a decolonial feminist ethnographer.

Becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer

I initially employed a critical ethnographic approach to research that provides space to produce rich accounts of the field, as well as to engage with the voices, perspectives and narratives of those who have been marginalised (Foley, 2002; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005; Madison, 2005; Till, 2009). Critical ethnography focuses on the development of a dialogical relationship between the researcher and participants (Foley, 2002; Madison, 2005), that is, rather than naming and describing, a critical ethnographer tries to challenge assumptions by fostering conversation and reflection (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). My becoming a decolonial feminist ethnographer began with questioning how I could implement a critical ethnography in practice, and I spent much time reflecting on the question posed by Kincheloe et al. (2015): 'How can researchers respect the perspective of "the Other" and invite "the Other" to speak?' (p. 171).

Kincheloe et al. caution that critical or well-intentioned research is not without its shortcomings. Understanding 'the Other' is one of the primary motivations for doing ethnographic research (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012), and I wanted to provide a space for marginalised Maya women's voices in OMS discourse. However, as a White, European woman engaging in research in rural Guatemala, my desire to know 'the Other' and invite her to speak is a potential source of dominance. I therefore needed an ethnographic approach that would encourage me at all times to accept the women's knowledge, cultural practices and work experiences without imposing a Western ontology of modernity and enable me to engage with them without perpetuating their Otherness. To this end, I built upon the foundations of critical ethnography and turn to decolonial feminist theory to help me engage in research *with* the marginalised 'Other'.

Decolonial feminist theory in OMS

Decolonial theory, based on the work of prominent Latin American modernity/coloniality theorists such as Mignolo (2007, 2009, 2011), Escobar (2007, 2010), Dussel (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado,

2006) and Quijano (2000, 2007), critiques Eurocentric hegemonic patterns of knowledge and claims of universality. Dussel and Ibarra-Colado (2006) argue that modernity is founded in the convergence of three related processes: *capitalism* as an economic and civilising system for which people consider there is no alternative; *colonialism* of epistemic, cultural, political and social systems; and *Eurocentrism*, the universality of the dominant type of Euro-modernity. Decolonial theory challenges an ontology of modernity by arguing that the universality of Western ontology is based on the displacement of the actions, ideas and history of 'the Other'. Thus, history and modernity have become products of the West. This does not mean that modernity is one and unchanging, there are other forms; however, 'in universalising itself and treating other groups as different and inferior through knowledge-power relations, the dominant form of Euro-modernity has denied the ontological difference of the others' (Escobar, 2010: 9).

Modernity is presented as a rhetoric of salvation to mask coloniality (Escobar, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). Coloniality refers to 'the pattern of power which has emerged as a result of colonialism' and is an explicit strategy of epistemological control and domination (Misoczky, 2011: 347). Coloniality and modernity are interdependent: coloniality is constitutive of modernity and there can be no modernity without coloniality (Mignolo, 2011; Restrepo and Escobar, 2005). As explained by Mignolo (2007), 'modernity, capitalism and coloniality are aspects of the same package of control of economy and authority, of gender and sexuality, of knowledge and subjectivity' (p. 162).

The coloniality of knowledge refers to the intellectual hegemony of Western knowledge production and dissemination, which attained and sustained dominance through participation in colonisation, and the persistent intellectual and cultural imperialism that has marginalised and, in some cases, eradicated alternative knowledge systems and ways of working and organising (Alcadipani and Faria, 2014; Calás and Smircich, 2003; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Jack et al., 2011; Mignolo, 2007; Misoczky, 2011; Quijano, 2007; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Ul-Haq and Westwood, 2012; Walsh, 2007). Decolonial theorists maintain that modernity and the coloniality of knowledge enforce Western management discourse and practices upon the lives and experiences of those in the non-West, dictating a Western tradition of managerial thinking that defines how and what should be studied and practised (Imas and Weston, 2012). As a means of control, it detaches those in the Global South from their native condition and capacity for autonomous thought (Ibarra-Colado, 2006). In the context of modernity, OMS rarely acknowledges non-Western experience and offers no alternative non-Western modes of managing and organising. The limited engagement with indigenous knowledge in the Global South has largely been categorised and determined through the gaze of the West (Alcadipani et al., 2012). Thus, there is a need to create a space in OMS that recognises the importance of 'the Other's' capacity for intellectual autonomy and their own seeing, doing and thinking, thereby constructing a different knowledge 'from the perspective of Otherness' (Dussel and Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Ibarra-Colado, 2006: 466).

Decolonial theory can be seen as broadening non-Western modes of thought and ways of 'seeing and doing' and demanding the acceptance of marginalised, different and alternative ontologies, epistemologies and world views (Escobar, 2007):

... Decoloniality [is] only made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism, but in [its] intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance [it] offers more than simple opposition. [Decolonial theory] offers ... the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge. (Bhambra, 2014: 120)

Similarly, feminist theory in OMS has become generalised on the grounds of White, Western women's experiences, and women who do not fit this profile are presented as 'the Other' (Calás and

Smircich, 2006). Much research ‘explains’ women as if the reality of White, Western, middle-class women applies to women from all cultures, classes, races and religions of the world (Mohanty, 1988, 2003; Parpart, 1993). The limited empirical engagement with marginalised, indigenous women in the Global South perpetuates this Otherness, and little is known about marginalised, indigenous, poor, Black/Brown, non-Westernised women, particularly in Latin America: their voices are eclipsed by discourses *about* them (Espinosa Miñoso et al., 2014). Calixta Gabriel Xiquin, a Kaqchikel Maya spiritual guide and feminist advocate, explains, ‘being a woman, indigenous and poor, in this society, condemns one to exclusion in the majority of spaces’ (in Krogstad, 2015: 50).

Decolonial feminist theory engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and indigenous identity and gender in Latin America – providing space for the silenced voices of women to speak of their identities, who they are and the relationship between their personal and organisational lives (Lugones, 2010). Lugones (2007, 2008) argues that modernity/coloniality needs to be understood through specific articulations of race, gender and sexuality, which requires OMS scholars to engage in dialogue with women in the Global South who have different values, ideas and experiences and to challenge the liberal, White feminist paradigm that continues to dominate the discipline (Metcalf and Woodhams, 2012). Harding et al. (2013) argue that OMS can be enriched and central debates redefined from the knowledge and insights of non-Westernised Global South women.

In summary, decolonial feminist theory challenges the coloniality of knowledge and gender to contribute to the decolonisation of OMS based on the experiences and world views of marginalised, indigenous, non-Westernised women to construct a new indigenous feminist geopolitics of knowledge and knowing (Connell, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2011; Lugones, 2007, 2010; Schiwy, 2007).

Developing a decolonial feminist ethnography: identifying the complexities of representation and positionality

Decolonial feminist theory encouraged me to rethink critical ethnography and helped me engage differently with the Maya women participants to understand their knowledge, experiences, world views, and gender within the everydayness of their lived experiences. Integrating decolonial feminist theory into critical ethnography encouraged me to consider the political and ethical implications of research and how my commitment to the Maya women participants might be enhanced.

Following Scheper-Hughes (1992, 1995), I advocate for ethnography that is morally engaged in ethical pursuits and questions of power. A decolonial feminist approach to ethnography encourages dialogue between myself and the Maya women, where power is shared and knowledge is produced together. This raises issues of representation and positionality: the researcher’s power in relation to knowledge production and the representations of participants and their knowledge. It highlights the position of researchers in enabling collaborative dialogue and equal power relations with participants. In addressing the complexities of representation and positionality, a decolonial feminist ethnography therefore enables me to ‘respect the perspective of “the Other” and invite “the Other” to speak.’ (Kincheloe et al., 2015: 171). It also encourages reflexivity throughout the research by inviting me to explore power relations and representational practices (who produces and owns knowledge) when engaging with these women (e.g. Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Özkazanç-Pan, 2012). That is, I must question how, and if, I can represent the lived experiences of marginalised Maya women and encourage myself to openly confront the issues of power and ethics in my research.

Throughout my research, I engaged in reflexively questioning my positionality – my identity and relationship with participants (e.g. Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; Fine, 1994) – and explored how I negotiated my relationship with participants. I also reflexively questioned the

politics of knowledge production to ensure I am not complicit in potentially silencing or colonising participants' knowledge and voices (Jack and Westwood, 2006). Integrating decolonial feminist thought therefore requires deep engagement with how the *self* is involved in the research process and encourages researchers to question their relationship with the social world and the way in which we understand our experiences (Cunliffe, 2003). Thus, being reflexive encourages me to be honest in the motivations that bring me to my research and about my identities, positions, assumptions, anxieties and so on when engaging in research (Alvesson et al., 2008; Doucet, 2008; McDonald, 2013). Given the complex, sensitive nature of my research and the many social, economic and cultural differences between myself and the Maya women, I had to regard myself as 'the Other' and become reflexive about the situated, socially constructed nature of my *self* and my research participants (Foley, 2002). This is particularly important in the context of research with multiple axes of difference, inequalities and geopolitics (Sultana, 2007).

In summary, decolonial feminist ethnography embraces a reflexive questioning of the researcher's position as (re)presenter of participants and the examination of power relationships. I will now set the methodological and empirical context of my research and provide insight into its practicalities, before providing insight into my experience of *being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer and addressing the complexities of positionality and representation.

Methodology and Maya contextualisation

My motivation for undertaking this research was to facilitate the 'speaking back' of marginalised Maya women, such that they can take ownership over their identities and their ways of working and organising, and to bring this into OMS. Broadly understood, the purpose of my exploratory research was 'to understand marginalised Maya women's organising'. To achieve this, I undertook a 3-month ethnography in the rural, remote Western Highlands of Sololá, Guatemala. During this time, I immersed myself in indigenous Maya culture: living in a rural, predominately indigenous town; working intimately with the women, and their families, of two weaving groups; exploring the working practices of four additional Maya women's weaving groups; and interviewing four local, indigenous social foundations that work with the women's groups, supporting them in a financial and developmental capacity.

I commuted on 'chicken buses', 'pickups' and minivans for over an hour each day to reach the remote communities in which the women live and work. The mountainous Highlands of the Sololá Department are covered in a tropical, luscious green landscape, and at an altitude of approximately 1600 m, clouds rapidly descend in the late afternoon engulfing the region in mist and tropical rains during the rainy and hurricane season. The villages are hidden along back-roads deep in the highlands, and their homes, concealed by large swaths of cornfields, are scattered throughout their rural villages. The rural communities have limited facilities and resources; schools, churches and small *tiendas* (shops) and *molinis* (mills) are dotted throughout the community. In these communities, there are no community centres, offices and amenities, and there is limited economic activity apart from agriculture. The women work together combining their knowledge, resources and skills; however, they do not work from one centralised location. Making their products by working from home provides them with flexibility and enables them to focus on their primary responsibilities: working on their agricultural land, subsistence farming, managing their livestock, making clothes for their family, looking after children, maintaining their homes and cooking all meals for their family using basic utensils, raw ingredients and limited facilities.

My data collection, which developed organically with my relationship with the Maya women participants, typically included the following: observing the women in their homes as they went about their many responsibilities; taking fieldnotes and photographs detailing the women, their

lives, their family and their work; informally interviewing the women, which usually happened when they were strapped into their backstrap weave or when they were cooking (typically the only times the women sit/stood still); and casual, informal conversations with the women and their family members throughout the day. The Maya women weavers welcomed me into their homes and groups, and I developed personal and professional relationships with them and their families. I participated in their daily life and attended group meetings: work and home life blend into one fluidly and flexibly. A quadrilingual translator (English–Spanish–Kakchiquel–K'iche) facilitated data collection and the initial development of relationships. While the Maya population learn Spanish in primary school, most of the Maya women participating in my research did not receive primary education and only speak their ethnic Maya language. There are 21 Maya languages spoken throughout Guatemala aligned to the 21 Maya ethnic groups. The two Maya ethnicities in the region of my research, Kakchiquel and K'iche, speak two different, yet closely related, languages. My translator was a young indigenous Maya woman from a neighbouring rural community.

Epistemologically, translation is strongly related to the decolonial issues of representation and the production of knowledge (Kim, 2012). Thus, by 'translation', I do not want to revert to the old colonial idea of Western cultural and linguistic superiority (Bassnett and Trivedi, 1999). Aware of this tendency, in the context of my research, translation is based on the notion of 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1992); Vieira Pires' (1999) work based on Haroldo de Campos, who talks about a poetic of transcreation; and Bhabha's (1994) idea of a third space in translating the experiences of 'the Other'. I emphasise translation as an *in-between space* of multiplicities, exchanges, renegotiations and discontinuities that disturb linear flows and unsettle monological colonial truth. In so doing, this research reflects what the women wanted to share using their own language to discuss their work and personal lives. Having a translator did not prevent me from developing personal relationships with the Maya women through non-verbal and other meta-communication means. In addition, I developed a rapport with Luisa, my translator; she clearly understood why, and how, I was undertaking this research. Being a young Maya woman, Luisa also acted as a cultural guide and became part of my decolonial feminist ethnography; thus, she was more than a means for translation. Luisa helped me interpret and understand the local culture. In our lengthy discussions, following our time with the women in their homes and groups, we explored how the structures imposed by patriarchy and coloniality marginalise Maya women, and Luisa helped me identify how Maya women challenge this in the everydayness of their lives, and in so doing, she helped me understand Maya women's agency.

Maya women are continually encountering discriminating and subjugating practices against them in their patriarchal and ethnically diverse society while also negotiating the challenges of socio-economic marginalisation. Guatemala's long, bloody and complex history of conquest is visible in the everyday life of Maya Guatemalans. The Spanish colonisers, who arrived in the early 16th century, imposed European practices and religious beliefs, but did not fully eradicate Maya cultural practices and customs. In 1996, Guatemala emerged from a gruelling 36-year civil war, *La Violencia* (the violence), when Guatemala became 'a state responsible for the torture and murder of two hundred thousand of its citizens', resulting in genocide against the Maya people (Grandin, 2000: 198; MINUGUA, 2004). The most virulent aspects of Ladino (persons of Spanish and mixed Maya and Spanish descent) elitist nationalism culminated into a counter-insurgency that singled out the rural Maya population in a campaign of repression and murder (Grandin, 2000). The indigenous Maya represented the quintessential 'Other' in both physical and cultural terms from the elitist Ladino and White Guatemalan population who argued that the Maya population was hindering Guatemala's progression towards modernity and Western development (Smith, 1991).

In the years following the Guatemalan civil war, Maya women are still the most systematically excluded and discriminated against demographic of Guatemalan society (Lopez, 2006). These

women live in the shadow of colonisation, enduring social, economic, ethnic and gender discrimination in the everydayness of their lives. My research took me into the everydayness of life for marginalised ‘Other’ women, and my decolonial feminist ethnography enabled me to see them not as helpless victims in need of Western support and saving but as women living their own lives, addressing their own challenges and working in their own way. In *becoming* a decolonial feminist ethnographer, I made an ethical commitment to the Maya women participants and tried to ensure the development of collaborative, equal (power) relationships in the field and the co-production of knowledge.

In the following two sections, I discuss my experience of *being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer addressing the issue of my positionality in the field and questioning how I can (re)present the participants and their knowledge.

Positionality: exploring relationships in the field

Positionality addresses differences in position, privilege and power in fieldwork concerning, for example, gender, ethnicity, class and other social, economic and demographic factors that impact researcher–participant relations (Özkazanç-Pan, 2012). From a decolonial feminist standpoint, my positionality affects all aspects of the research process, and I needed to be reflexive to address the dynamics of identity politics and my position in the field (e.g. Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; Lewis and Mills, 2003; McCorkel and Myers, 2003). Thus, I reflexively located myself in the field to explore the nature of my relationship with the Maya women participants to reduce privilege and distance and to create a more symmetrical power relationship.

The Maya women participants and their families live an agrarian life: living off subsistence farming, making their own clothes (the *traje*) and living in small open compounds composed of adobe and concrete huts. Few have received formal schooling. They often struggle to pay bus fare to their nearest town market where many sell their agricultural surplus and buy additional household necessities. Rising at 5 a.m. every day to peel, boil and grind corn to make tortilla paste, together with sisters and daughters, the women spend hours making tortillas and preparing meals for the family, while the men search for wood and animal feed in the forested mountains. With no industry and a stagnant local economy, the life of rural marginalised Maya women is centred on agriculture, weaving, cooking and attending to their family. Isabel provides insight into the everydayness of life for marginalised Maya women:

Sometimes we laugh because the life of a woman is not easy. Women here get up early, grind the corn and make the breakfast, clean the dishes, get the children ready for school, clean the house and wash the family clothes, then we have to start preparing the lunch and after lunch, we clean again. If we have time we weave our orders [for the group] in the morning and afternoon, but we sometimes have to go to the fields to help the men with our agriculture. We also have to weave and sew clothes and look after the children in the afternoon. And then we have to start preparing dinner. After dinner, we have to wash the dishes again, and we also have to weave again, especially if we have orders. Women are the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed.

As a White, university-educated, heterosexual, middle-class, European (Irish) woman, I have encountered limited discrimination and marginalisation. My identity constructs clear ethnic, social and cultural dichotomies of privileged–poor, educated–unschooled, urban–rural and White–Brown that greatly influences my relationship with the women participants and their families. My identity, experiences and knowledge are formed within European modernity, thereby affecting my way of thinking and seeing. I experience the world as a White woman whose Western culture and epistemology are considered transcendent under which all others must be subordinated (Geertz, 1973;

Ladson-Billings, 2003). In contrast, the Maya women participants' culture, experiences and epistemology are devalued as they remain absent from a universalised Western modernity. We therefore experience our world in a vastly different way. I was never going to be able to remove the clear social, cultural, economic and ethnic differences between the women and me, which ultimately places me in an irreconcilable position of difference. As a result, I had to challenge my thinking, embrace our differences and seek out ways to form a commonality to address the issue of positionality.

Speaking with one of the participants, Anna, she explained what it means to her to be a post-colonial woman:

It is difficult being a Maya woman. We are poor. The Maya are poor because of our history in Guatemala and the political system that discriminates against us Many Guatemalans say that Maya women can't do anything, that we don't have value, and we should just stay in the home. And many Maya women believe this This is not part of the [Maya] culture that the woman stays at home. Before in the Maya culture, women worked doing important jobs like midwife or healers with natural medicine. These women were valued in the community. However, times changed and Guatemala was colonised by another culture. The men from this culture didn't value the work of the Maya woman. They introduced Christianity. In Christianity, Adam comes before Eve, so they say the woman is a lesser person and not valued.

Anna helped me challenge my thinking and understand that while our historical timelines and experiences differ, we share a history of colonisation as well as the shared experience of living in patriarchal controlled societies strongly imposed upon us by the Catholic church, of which Ireland has only recently begun to challenge. Ireland can be understood not only in terms of a European frame of reference but also in relation to other colonial experiences. Postcolonial theorisation is often focused on the issues of race and takes place within the context of the Global South. However, Ireland represents a unique case in that it was 'White on White' colonisation in Western Europe. Modern Irish identity and culture have evolved and emerged from centuries of British colonial rule, with colonialism leaving a very visible impact on Irish people, our cultural identity and our landscape, much like the lasting impact of Spanish colonial rule on the Maya people of Guatemala. Although our experiences are different, I could empathise with the women. I shared this with the women participants and together we explored what it means to be a woman in post-colonial patriarchal societies. In this way, the women began to see me as more than a university-educated White Western woman.

The women and I share a commonality in our womanhood, and as such, I could participate with them in their gendered divisions of labour. Thus, I found that I could address the issue of positionality by becoming actively engaged in their daily activities and being willing to do whatever tasks were necessary in the home and eat whatever food was put in front of me. I helped the women prepare meals for the family; washed dishes; played with their younger children; sat with them as they strapped themselves into their backstrap weave; organised thread and materials; peeled, cleaned and ground corn; followed them in their agricultural fields; and once spent an entire afternoon picking green beans in the rain.

Seeking out commonalities, together with my active engagement in the everydayness of their home and work life, helped us overcome our differences. Differences remained between us, but little actions that may even seem mundane can be significant in building relationships. The women grew comfortable with me in their homes, their lives and their work:

During lunch, at the Chuaacruz group training, I receive lots of compliments from the women regarding my eating habits. 'You eat like a Guatemalan!' says Maria Chiroy. Yolonda says, 'All the women say you've been really good with the food and not fussy in eating what we make you. The women say this makes them

feel a lot more comfortable, we've had visitors who wouldn't eat our food or even eat with us, and some people get sick from our food'. The women ask me how many tortillas I've eaten with lunch today, when I shyly say four they all laugh and clap, and say 'You're just like us!'

My research became shaped by my relationship with the Maya women participants; the women and I shared experiences and talked about our lives. Mealtime is central to the familial social experience in the Maya women's homes, and it was during this time that we talked about our experiences of being women and their work in their groups. The women talked freely with me about their opinions on womanhood and what it means to them to be indigenous women living and working in the margins. Together, we created a casual, relaxed environment. I helped prepare food and peel vegetables, and the women laughed at how poorly I made tortillas. Through our conversations in the women's homes, I addressed the issue of positionality as the Maya women and I explored our similarities and differences. These conversations became ongoing negotiated spaces for identity construction and relationship development:

Yesterday I spent more time with Micela and her family. After lunch, we relaxed, chatting before Micela, her sisters and mother got back to their weaving. Yolonda, Michela's sister, says to me, 'We're really surprised, we've enjoyed spending time with you! We didn't know what to expect in welcoming you into our home [But] you make us feel comfortable and we like having you in our home'. To which Micela responds, 'Please God you'll be able to come visit us again'. And today I spent time with Alicia, I arrived early in the morning and sat with Alicia in her kitchen drinking a cup of atol as she finished preparing breakfast. Alicia says to me 'All the women have really enjoyed spending time with you. We [you and us] are very different, but we're also the same. You're a hard worker and the women like this, so you're like a Maya woman! I think it's best if you don't leave. And if you can't find anywhere to stay, you can stay here with me!'

Addressing the issue of positionality and developing relationships with the Maya women participants, I became increasingly comfortable and confident in the field. I began as a novice ethnographer overwhelmed by the magnitude of the research and the challenge of living alone in rural Guatemala without the support of friends, family or colleagues. I was 'the Other' in undertaking this research. My skin colour, clothes, language, culture, identity, education and even my height positioned me as 'the Other'. In continuously reflecting on my Otherness, I was able to decentre my position of power. Being 'the Other' removed my authority and enabled me to develop a relationship with the Maya women participants. As 'the Other', I felt vulnerable undertaking this research, I was alone in the margins and the Maya women, and their knowledge and ways of working were in the 'Centre'. My Otherness and vulnerabilities facilitated the women in welcoming me into their homes, where our relationship developed, and in time, I no longer felt alone or vulnerable. Thus, understanding and accepting my Otherness were part of my *becoming* a decolonial feminist ethnographer, and being 'the Other' helped me address the issue of positionality.

In summary, it was only when I entered the field that I was able to address the issue of positionality and move from *becoming* to *being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer. I could not prepare for this in advance because I did not know the Maya women participants nor how I could, or should, develop a relationship with them. Reflexively locating myself in the field enabled me to understand my Otherness while also identifying commonalities and exploring the blurred boundaries between the Maya women participants and myself. Thus, through dialogue and reflexivity, I negotiated my positionality and built mutual, collaborative relationships with the research participants where power was shared. My Otherness was not a barrier to rapport or trust. Addressing the issue of positionality is an iterative, ongoing process. Initially, our differences seemed vast, but together we explored our similarities and differences. In practice, this required me to decentre my position of

power by being reflexive and viewing myself as ‘the Other’. In so doing, I was not only able to accept our differences but also explore our potential commonalities. We found commonalities in our womanhood and our position of being women in post-colonial, patriarchal societies, and we used this as the basis for the development of our relationship. *Being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer requires an understanding that the researcher–participant relationship is more than just a dichotomy of insider–outsider and sameness–difference but a space of mutual influence where relationships can be explored through un/foreseen commonalities.

Representation: resisting othering

‘Research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.

(Smith, 1999: 1)

Power relations are embedded in ethnography, which can produce imperialist tendencies in representing participants and their knowledge and thereby collude with the structures of domination (Fine, 1994; Said, 1993). Western academics often claim epistemological authority over ‘the Other’ by suggesting that they must be represented as they cannot represent themselves (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Thus, researchers claim to know and speak for ‘the Other’, interpreting data, writing about and representing ‘the Other’. While I had to address my vulnerabilities in the field, I also had to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of the Maya women participants. They shared with me their personal and work lives, making themselves dependent on my interpretation and writing and thereby becoming representationally vulnerable. While I actively tried to decentre my position of power, this became a more complicated challenge when trying to address the issue of representation. As the researcher, I am in control of analysing the data and presenting the findings, and I am therefore ultimately still in a position of power to represent the Maya women.

Addressing the issue of positionality in the development of our relationships, I thought of, and saw, the Maya women not as ‘them’ or ‘Other’ but as women accentuating their own agency and exploring their own understanding of their identity and work experiences. This instilled in me a personal obligation to ensure the women, their lives, and their knowledge and experiences are respected and accurately (re)presented. Thus, *being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer moves beyond establishing rapport and relationships with respondents towards the ethical implication of (mis)representation. My anxieties regarding the issue of representation are found throughout my fieldnotes, as exemplified in the following extract from my time with Maria Quisquina and her family:

I feel very privileged being in Maria’s home, and all the women of the group have been very welcoming to me, it’s nice to feel so welcomed into Maria’s home when I very often feel alone undertaking this research ... As Maria, her daughters and I make tortillas, Maria tells me that she’s happy that I’m interested in their lives and she wants the world to know more about the real life of an indigenous Maya woman. This excites me, yet also terrifies me. How can I, or should I, ‘tell the world about the real life of an indigenous Maya woman’? This is not my story to tell.

Being a decolonial feminist ethnographer requires me to question my position as a (re)presenter of the Maya women participants and their knowledge. As such, my approach to research views the Maya women participants as partners in the research process to avoid the temptation to draw representations that legitimise my voice rather than that of the women. I am not writing about ‘the Other’, but *with* her. Thus, when researching across differences, representation, like positionality, is a negotiated space: researchers must learn when and how to situate and privilege whose voices.

Being a decolonial feminist ethnographer, I struggle with these tensions and search out alternative options for interpretations and representations that resist Othering.

The women became agentic in my research where we explored different areas of their personal and work lives to work out meanings together. To implement this in practice, I undertook my preliminary data analysis at the same time as my data collection. Transcriptions of all interviews, conversations, fieldnotes and observations were written and reviewed at the end of each day. Such discipline facilitated deeper understanding of the women's lives and work. The following day, I discussed the development of my understanding with the women to gauge their opinion of my interpretation. In so doing, provisional ideas and themes were worked out together. This became an iterative process where my queries and questions became more in-depth as my relationship developed with the Maya women, and the women became agents in the research process, thereby ensuring that I was not re-imposing dominant structures that have oppressed them, but acknowledging their agency in the telling of their story. Throughout my data collection and analysis, the women challenged my interpretation of their lives and work:

In the first few weeks of my research, I understood the women's groups to be fair trade cooperatives. However, today, when I asked Rosa for her insight about my interpretation of the groups as fair trade cooperative, she simply replied, 'What is a fair trade cooperative?' To my dismay, I realised that I was imposing Westernised terms to define the Maya women's groups and their work.

Being a decolonial feminist ethnographer, I continue to engage in reflexive practices upon my return to the 'centre'. When analysing and interpreting data, I continually questioned what I was seeing and why I was seeing it; I also wrote notes about themes that were emerging, and alongside this, I wrote further notes about the context in which themes emerged in the field. Providing context to my emerging themes helps resist Othering by developing narratives that reflect the women's social, cultural and historical location. Contextualisation provides space for the Maya women's agency and voice, by exposing their everydayness, strengths and structures that oppress them in their organisational and personal realities. Although I may be writing the women's narratives, the narratives reflect the women's lived experience. For example, the following narrative extract provides insight into the evolving role of Maya women in a changing Guatemalan environment, demonstrating the complexity of the women's lived experience and offering insight into the particularities of the women's subjectivity, agency and their social, cultural and gendered context:

Marisol staunchly argues that it is possible for a Maya woman to receive a formal education and maintain her indigenous identity, if she wants, and this will not affect Maya culture. Noting that Maya women have endured and overcome so much, Marisol claims that education can only benefit Maya women and their culture:

But the culture hasn't changed! Education is very important and has helped women In the past, women were more private. Parents would say that the woman needs to be at home to do the chores, and the men can go to school. Now things have changed, and men and women are the same. However, in some areas, this is not working and women are not going to school or leaving their homes. But, in Panimatzalam, indigenous women are working in the banks of large towns. Education is changing women. Now we have rights and opportunities The culture hasn't changed. I don't know who was responsible. I don't know who decided to start sending girls to school. I think my father saw the necessity. He heard of other places where children were studying, and he didn't really like the way they were living, so he wanted something different for his children. So, my parents gave us studies. The culture is still there, but they gave us opportunities so we can improve ourselves.

Maya women have endured change and are resilient; the changes and challenges they encounter will not alter who she is or what it means to her to be a Maya woman. Simply put by Antonia, 'Maya women can do everything!', and explained by Alicia:

A Maya woman can work outside the home and still work inside the home and look after her family and home, while also helping to develop her community. Maya women are able to do many things. Now we have rights, we have a voice and we have a vote. Some people say indigenous women have no rights, but we have a voice. Maya women work hard. If an indigenous woman says she can do it, she can do it!

I acknowledge that I write from a position of power and privilege, but at the same time, the voices of the marginalised Maya women are located with mine in the telling of their story. My research is localised, grounded in the Maya women's meaning of themselves and their work, and through reflection, dialogue and collaboration, we explore their organising in the margins. This approach helps me to construct a historical, social and cultural representation of Maya women working together in groups. I do not separate myself from the women's narratives; we built relationships through our differences and commonalities and worked together to develop their story:

As I say my final good-byes the women of the Chuacruz group, a very simple, yet powerful sentence spoken by Yolonda stays with me, 'Thank you for getting to know the realities of our lives, and not just stopping by to take our picture and hear our stories, the lives we lead and the stories we tell are different'. These words both scare and excite me. They are a reminder of the power and responsibility of my ethnography, and the ethical commitment I have made to the women of this research.

Representation is a complex, ethical issue; no matter how well intentioned or collaborative the researcher–participant relationship, data can be used by researchers to un/intentionally (mis) represent participants. Addressing the issue of representation is an iterative process, one that requires continual reflexivity and questioning. In practice, I dealt with this by ensuring the women were partners in the research process where we engaged in a dialogue to develop an understanding of their organising and work practices. To facilitate this, I began my data analysis and interpretation during my data collection. Upon leaving the field, I continued to be reflexive in my analysis and interpretation whereby I continually questioned the findings. Moreover, when I write I provide context to the women's lives and narratives. Contextualisation locates the women at the centre of their story. There is no simple or direct way to address the ambiguous and complex issue of representation. It is a complicated and sensitive topic, often confusing and contradictory, but one that requires honesty and ethics, and mostly a commitment to *being* a decolonial feminist ethnographer.

Conclusion

In this article, I provide insight into my *becoming* a decolonial feminist ethnographer to offer critical ethnographers an alternative approach to research that reconfigures a critical ethnography to recognise the cultural, social and historical location of participants and identifies positionality and representation as the key complexities of engaging in research with marginalised 'Others'. My approach suggests an alternative way of 'seeing and doing' ethnography motivated by an ethical commitment to the participants and the desire to respect their knowledge and experiences. Decolonial feminist ethnography, therefore, helps researchers to be more ethically engaged, to embrace differences, seek out commonalities and rethink how to speak 'of' or 'for' 'the Other'. This requires researchers to be reflexively engaged with research participants to understand how we experience our relationships and how to (re)present participants and their knowledge.

This article offers a critical perspective on conducting research *with* ‘the Other’ by addressing the issues arising from decolonial feminist theory. It contributes to management research in three main ways. (1) It highlights how to conduct research *with*, not about, ‘Other’ people and cultures. (2) A decolonial feminist approach underscores how theory, research and writing are political engagements, and *being* a decolonial feminist researcher requires an ethical commitment to decolonising our ways of ‘seeing and doing’. (3) In so doing, decolonial feminist ethnographers can create a space in OMS to challenge the ontology of modernity that dominates the discipline and recognise that many marginalised, indigenous communities in the Global South have learned how to survive in challenging conditions and how to create something from nothing. This is the ‘real art of management and organization’ (Ibarra-Colado, 2008: 934). A decolonial feminist approach to research offers a means to decolonise OMS; it is a collaborative approach to building new knowledge that is socially, culturally and historically located. Implementing this approach in my research I found that Maya women organising is orientated by Latin American indigenous world views with which the women respect each other and reclaim the value of community, where they are at one with the community of the home and the community of the group under the conditions of equality and cooperation.

My account of *becoming* a decolonial feminist ethnographer offers OMS researchers a means through which their commitment to marginalised, ‘Other’ participants may be enhanced. Decolonial feminist ethnography, as an approach to research, would benefit from further application by management researchers to explore further the complexities of positionality and representation. There is no one best way to engage in research with ‘the Other’, but scholars interested in producing knowledge *with* marginalised ‘Others’ in the Global South need to consider how they address the complexities of their positionality with participants and the (re)presentation of participants and their knowledge, thereby ensuring that they are not implicit in perpetuating the conditions of inequality or potential silencing of the participants’ knowledge and voice and thus reproducing the participants Otherness.

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