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Constructing a Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography

Jennifer Manning

Technological University Dublin, jennifer.manning@tudublin.ie

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Constructing a postcolonial feminist ethnography

Jennifer Manning

College of Business, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper details the construction of a postcolonial feminist approach to ethnography; providing insight into how the researcher developed her ethnographic approach based on her theoretical framework and demonstrating how she undertook this research. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to outline how the researcher identified positionality and representation as the primary challenges of undertaking a postcolonial feminist ethnography with marginalised Maya women in Guatemala, and how she addressed these complexities in the field.

Design/methodology/approach – This postcolonial feminist ethnography was conducted over a three-month period in the rural highlands of Sololá, Guatemala. This approach bridges the intersections of postcolonial, feminist, critical and reflexive research.

Findings – The account presented in this paper offers insight into the theoretical development of a postcolonial feminist ethnography and its implementation in practice. The researcher demonstrates the importance of addressing the issues of positionality and representation to overcome differences in position, privilege and power when building relationships with participants, and to ensure the participants and their knowledge are accurately represented.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the growing interest in postcolonial research and proposes a postcolonial feminist ethnography as an alternative approach for engaging in research with the marginalised Other.

Keywords Postcolonial, Reflexivity, Guatemala, Maya, Positionality, Representation, Ethnography, Feminist, Postcolonial feminism

Paper type Research paper

Sitting in my studio bungalow surrounded by tropical, lush greenery in the Highland region of Sololá, Guatemala, on the shore of the stunning Lake Atitlan, I am trying to transcribe an interview and review fieldnotes and observations, however; I'm once again having a crisis of confidence. I'm coming towards the end of my three-month ethnography researching the organising and working practices of marginalised Maya women co-operative groups and in this time I've gathered (overwhelming) volumes of data, developed close relations to the women of this research and progressed from a novice researcher to an experienced ethnographer. A postcolonial feminist ethnography addresses the implications of power and positionality and the issue of representation in ethnographic research with the marginalised "Other". My research is supposed to provide the women with a platform so their voices can be heard. I feel a huge sense of responsibility towards the women. How can I be sure it is their story that is being told through my research? Can I really "give voice" to the women of this research? Have I been reflexive enough in addressing my positionality in the field?

In this paper, I reflexively discuss my experience of being an ethnographer guided by the postcolonial feminist concerns of representation and positionality during my fieldwork with marginalised Maya women co-operative groups in the Highland region of Sololá, Guatemala. Specifically, I provide insight into how I developed my approach to ethnography so to undertake this research effectively. The aim of this paper is to



contribute to the theoretical development of ethnographic research for organisation and management scholars interested in engaging in research with marginalised persons. My research explores the home and working lives of marginalised Maya women so to gain insight into how these women act and enact their working practices, thereby highlighting the different cultural, historical and organisational experiences encountered by women living in the socio-economic periphery within the Global South. These women, their work and their lives are located outside of the dominant Western discourse of management and organisation. My research contributes to the organisation studies debate from a postcolonial, female and local perspective to suggest alternatives to mainstream views on the subject. To this end, this paper questions how can (and should) Western researchers examine and theorise the lives and working practices of marginalised indigenous women? Drawing on my fieldwork experiences, I reflect on the complexities and ambiguities of representation and positionality when employing a postcolonial feminist ethnography with marginalised Maya women.

This paper is a reflection of my ethnographic journey and provides insight into how I coupled my theoretical approach with the ethical considerations of undertaking research of this nature. Structurally, I first provide theoretical context and briefly detail postcolonial feminist theory and its relation to my research. There follows insight to the construction and progression of my postcolonial feminist ethnography and how the issues of positionality and representation were drawn from this ethnographic approach. I then reflect on my experiences of being a postcolonial feminist ethnographer addressing the complexities of positionality and representation. Finally, I close this paper with a brief conclusion highlighting the contributions and demonstrating the importance of this approach to research when seeking to understand of the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power.

Postcolonial feminism: the organisational life of the “Other”

This research follows Imas and Weston's (2012) argument that there is a need to give a voice to the marginalised so they can establish their existence in organisation studies discourse. Much of organisation theory, no matter how global, only represents the ways of thinking of certain people and not others (Calás and Smircich, 2003, 2006). Organisation studies and practices, in the context of an ontology of modernity, do not acknowledge non-Western experience, hence, there are no recognised modes of organising in these regions (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Prasad, 2003). This research engages with postcolonial theorists' thinking in critiquing Eurocentric and Western representations of non-Western persons by exploring the agency, knowledge and experiences of marginalised indigenous women. Postcolonial theory examines and reveals how knowledge, produced in and by the West, is layered with imperialist and colonial power, creating and sustaining a politics of knowledge and Western knowledge dominance, thereby rendering the Rest (the “Other”) an object of knowledge for Western powers, known as the coloniality of knowledge (Jack *et al.*, 2011; Mignolo, 2007; Prasad, 2003; Quijano, 2007). Jack *et al.* (2011) explain that the postcolonial perspective demands the decolonisation of theory and the acceptance of different and alternative ontologies, epistemologies and world views, and challenges organisation theorists' thinking regarding the idea of progress in organisation studies (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012; Calás and Smircich, 2003, 2006). Recent interest in postcolonial studies provides an opportunity to address how the marginalised of the Global South organise their work and their lives.

The postcolonial feminist theoretical approach addresses the issue of representation of women in the Global South by Western theorists. More specifically, these theorists highlight the diversity in the experiences and knowledge of marginalised women within the Global South often ignored by mainstream Western organisation studies and feminist theorists (Mohanty, 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Postcolonial feminist theory contests Western feminist theorisation of gender; this perspective views such theorisations as privileging the experiences of already privileged “First World” women (Calás and Smircich, 2006; Gherardi, 2003). Spivak (1988) highlights the problem of the muted subaltern woman who inhabits the periphery of Western feminist theories, as the epistemological assumptions of such theories are based on positions of power and privilege in the West. Subalternity refers to those socially, politically and geographically outside the dominant power structures, such as the marginalised Maya women operating outside of hegemonic Western economic powers (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Spivak, 1988). Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern exist outside the global capitalist process and are perceived not to have agency to speak for themselves. Non-Western women working and organising in the margins are assumed not to have the capacity to organise and create. Thereby, under truncated and homogenising colonial narratives non-Western women living in the margins are presumed to lack agency, knowledge and progress (Chanda, 2005; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 1988, 1991).

Mohanty (1988, 1991) explains that women from the Global South are constructed as subaltern and “the Other”. Overall, in mainstream organisation literature, the voices of these, so called, “Third World” or “Global South” women are cast within the knowledge tradition of the Western world. Western feminist writings discursively colonise the material and historical heterogeneities of women in the Global South, thereby producing a singular “Third World woman”. As a result of this systematic appropriation of the figure, identity and image of “Third World” women, a characterisation of these women has been created that only emphasises their feminine gender (sexually constrained) and their being “Third World”, that is, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised, etc. (Mohanty, 1988, 2003). In the context of organisation studies, their contribution is portrayed as insignificant as they are seen to be involved in the “lesser” working activities, e.g. the production of raw materials, rather than the full involvement and contribution made at work by women in the “First World”.

For organisation studies to engage with these women is to re-define our approach and recognise them not as the “Other” or inferior, unschooled females, but to bring forward their agency, experiences and knowledge in a way that foregrounds and nurtures their own understanding and comprehension of their organised existence. My research attempts to engage with marginalised Maya women to expose the everydayness of their work and their lives, so to facilitate their contribution to the field of organisation studies and provide a platform from which their voices can be heard. Following Mohanty (1988), my research seeks to understand Maya women organising from within the local language, knowledge and cultural experiences of marginalised Maya women in rural Guatemala.

By engaging with postcolonial feminist literature, this paper offers organisation studies scholars another way of understanding organising from the condition and context of marginalised indigenous women. Moreover, the postcolonial feminist literature of this paper contributes to the construction of another way of engaging in ethnographic research with marginalised indigenous women. This research places marginalised indigenous women in the centre, both theoretically and empirically.

As briefly noted above, the postcolonial feminist theoretical approach is a complex and sensitive topic and, given this; I had to spend time considering the application of postcolonial feminism to ethnography and understanding how can (and should) I engage in research with marginalised Maya women. The following section details the iterative evolution of my postcolonial feminist ethnographic approach.

Constructing a postcolonial feminist ethnography

In light of my enquiry, ethnographic research provides the space to undertake research of this nature effectively, while additionally producing a rich, descriptive account of the field. Mirroring the characteristics of ethnography, my research needed to be inductive and open-ended (Till, 2009). However, considering the research topic and the postcolonial feminist theoretical approach, my ethnography needed to be able to address the complexities involved in research with “the marginalised Other” and guide me through the postcolonial position regarding the colonality of knowledge. In my preparation for fieldwork and my examination of different ethnographic approaches, I was continually asking myself, “How do I actually undertake this research?”

In preparing my ethnography, I was strongly influenced by the postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s (1978) book *Orientalism*. Said (1978) does not directly address ethnography, but many scholars note that his central question is strongly related to the discipline of ethnography; “How does one represent other cultures?” (e.g. Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; Marcus, 2001). Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* refers to the process of “Othering” which is when the Self is distinguished from other people who are perceived as mildly or radically different. Said’s creation of the term *Orientalism* refers to the representation of non-West persons within Western writing. *Orientalism* is the way the West dominates, restructures and has authority over the non-West. This reflected my concerns regarding the representation of non-Western marginalised women in organisation studies. According to Said (1978), *Orientalism* is a modern form of colonialism; Western research, texts and writing create binary oppositions between the people of the West (us) and the Rest (them), thereby classifying non-Western populations into homogenised and rigid categories (e.g. the marginalised indigenous woman). Consequently, cultural exploration is a political activity and, according to Said (1978), this research cannot be separated from its political roots.

Understanding the “Other” is one of the major motivations for doing ethnographic research and I wanted to undertake research so to know the “Other” and provide a place for marginalised Maya women in organisation studies discourse. However, my desire to know the “Other” can be a potential source of dominance through my interpretation and representation (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). Said’s (1993, p. 184) critical approach to anthropology, and relatedly ethnography, ascertains that they are the “handmaiden of colonialism”, perpetuating *Orientalism* and maintaining the objective “Other”. Planning my ethnography while reading Said’s work reinforced my understanding that I cannot represent the women participants as objective and I must be reflexive because I am not a rational observer (Marcus, 2001). My self (including my epistemological, ontological and political agendas) is central to my research in acting against an authoritative stance of Western research and objectification of the non-Western research participants. The process of Othering, through *Orientalism*, can be decreased with a reflexive ethnography that makes space for research participants’ voices and knowledges, and in which my self and interpretative authority are part of the research and text produced (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). Reflexive practices helped me recognise the intersections of my voice, place and privilege (Cunliffe, 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). By engaging in reflexivity

I began to understand the ways in which my beliefs, preferences and assumptions affect the process and outcome of my research enquiry (Alvesson, 2003; Hardy and Clegg, 1997; Cunliffe, 2003; Hardy *et al.*, 2001; Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Styhre and Tienari, 2013).

In the early stages of constructing my approach to ethnography, I learnt that I must rely on methods available from more recent reflexive and critical ethnographic approaches to explore the organisational and working lives of marginalised Maya women (e.g. Foley, 2002; Madison, 2005). Taking a reflective stance I must occupy a subject position in my interaction with the women of this research and taking a critical postcolonial stance I must challenge (my) Western power dominance in the production of knowledge. That is, I cannot ignore the political nature of my research and I must address the coloniality of knowledge being produced by Western researchers (me) engaging with non-Western persons (the marginalised Maya women) (Calás and Smircich, 1999; Hernández Castillo, 2010; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Lugones, 2010; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Said, 1978, 1993). As such, my critical reflexive approach to ethnography needs to incorporate my philosophical and political assumptions and address power relations in the field and the production of knowledge. I need to ensure I am not speaking for the women, but speaking with them, thereby providing them with a space from which they can speak. Following Foley's (2002) analysis of reflexivity in critical ethnography I had to reflect onto myself and regard myself as the "Other" so to become reflexive about the situated, socially constructed nature of my self, and by extension the "Other". To be reflexive and critique myself means that I am forced to explore the Self-Other relationship and power relationships during fieldwork. Reflexivity is a continuous, on-going process but to begin I wrote two personal, honest pieces, my personal reflexive statement and my expectations of the field. This was my first step in trying to ensure fieldwork, interpretation of research and knowledge produced were participatory and collaborative processes (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001). Being reflexive helped me to understand my position in relation to the Maya women and the women's view of me.

Without my intention, or even knowledge, my research is political, and I learnt that the production of knowledge, particularly when produced in the Global South, is always a political endeavour (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Restrepo and Escobar, 2005). With this understanding, my approach to research had to ensure that I am not an authority producing expert knowledge based on research with "Third World objects". My research needs to be a dialogue between myself and the women participants in which power is shared and knowledge produced together. Thereby, I seek an ethnographic approach that is motivated by a commitment to the participants and the development of reciprocal relationships in the field. Feminist practices in ethnography are committed to understanding issues from women's perspectives, influenced by feminist ethics (e.g. equality, equity, liberty, etc.) and concerned with forms of power and politics, furthermore, reflexivity is part of a feminist ethnography (Buch and Staller, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Lewis and Mills, 2003; McCorkel and Myers, 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). At this stage of my journey in constructing my ethnography, integrating feminist practices into my critical, reflexive research was the next logical step.

The evolution of my ethnography soon positioned itself at the intersections of postcolonial critiques regarding power in knowledge production and feminist concerns regarding ethical commitments to the women participants. The bridge between both approaches is their concern regarding Western representations of "Third World" women and their call for reflexivity and criticality in all stages of (ethnographic)

research (Calás and Smircich, 1999; Foley, 2002; Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; Lewis and Mills, 2003; Mohanty, 1988; Naples and Gurr, 2014; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Subsequently, my ethnographic approach is developed and to be enacted within a postcolonial, critical, reflexive, feminist paradigm. This is a complex paradigm addressing many overlapping concerns in undertaking ethnographic research, outlined briefly in Table I.

Implementing a postcolonial feminist research agenda means employing critical and reflexive practices in research; reflexivity and criticality are part of postcolonial and feminist research. The complex nature of a postcolonial feminist ethnography shares overlapping concerns that can be summed-up into two key challenges when conducting fieldwork and interpreting data: positionality and representation.

Positionality and representation in a postcolonial feminist ethnography

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-researched relations (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). The postcolonial feminist approach brings to visibility how “identities and political positions are worked out within the postcolonial context” (Lewis and Mills, 2003, p. 20). Positionality can be understood as the different, constantly shifting positions a researcher occupies in the field. From a postcolonial feminist standpoint, the researchers’ positionality affects all aspects of the research process, and researchers need to be self-reflexive and address the dynamics of identity politics (McCorkel and Myers, 2003). Consequently, my research is shaped by my relationship with the marginalised Maya women participants and by the positions I occupy relative to them and within wider society. Understanding my positionality involved reflexively addressing the influence of my positions and identities in the field, while ensuring this ethnography is a collaborative research process by building reciprocal relationships. The postcolonial feminist approach to ethnography voices the limits of ethnography “by (re)conceptualising the ethnographers’ positionality in the field through the intersections of epistemological concerns, ethical practices, and political commitments to Third World subjects”

Postcolonial concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coloniality of knowledge produced from research Power and politics in research and the production of knowledge Western representations of non-Western persons
Feminist concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Representations of women in research Ethical commitment to participants of research Development of reciprocal relationships in undertaking research Power and politics in research and the production of knowledge Subjectivity in research
Reflexivity in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subjectivity in research The researchers voice, place and privilege in the research process Self-Other relationship and power relationships during fieldwork
Criticality in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power and politics in research and the production of knowledge Subjectivity in research Power and politics in research and the production of knowledge

Sources: Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), Buch and Staller (2014), Calás and Smircich (1999), Clifford and George (1986), Cunliffe (2003), Foley (2002), Foley and Valenzuela (2005), Hesse-Biber (2014), Ibarra-Colado (2006), Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012), Madison (2005), Marcus (2001), Mignolo (2007), Mohanty (1988), Naples and Gurr (2014), Ozkazanc-Pan (2012), Restrepo and Escobar (2005), Said (1978, 1993), Spivak (1988), Sultana (2007), Yanow (2012)

Table I.
The intersecting concerns of postcolonial, feminist, reflexive, critical research

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(Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p. 579). Given this, I make an ethical commitment to the marginalised Maya women of this research so to ensure the development of equal (power) relationships in the field and the co-production of knowledge.

Together with positionality, the issue of representation is a central concern of both feminist and postcolonial theorists and researchers; both are consistent in their critique of the representation of Third World women within Western research (e.g. Calás and Smircich, 1999; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Spivak, 1988). Representations in ethnography are embedded in power relations and can produce imperialist tendencies in the representation of the participants and their knowledge (Said, 1978, 1993; Spivak, 1988). Spivak (1988) outlines that resisting hegemonic forms of representation of the marginalised is difficult and many researchers end up reproducing the dominant forms of knowing they aim to dismantle. Spivak's (1988) seminal work implicates the researcher, highlighting that while the postcolonial researcher, a non-subaltern subject, is writing with and for the postcolonial subaltern subject, typically their work results in producing reports on the subaltern Other and analysing the workings of the researchers power and desire.

With this understanding, my research had to be grounded in the women's voices and experiences; keeping the marginalised Maya women at the centre is crucial for my postcolonial feminist ethnography. This was accomplished through my postcolonial theoretical commitment, my feminist praxis and continuous critical reflexivity throughout the entire research process (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). To this effect, my postcolonial feminist ethnography recognises that knowledge produced is socially constructed and directly acknowledges the dangers in, and unintended potential of, speaking for others (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Undurraga, 2012). Concerns about representation require me to be continually reflexive throughout the entire research process and pay attention to power relationships in the field. Said (1978) argues that there is an unequal relationship in academic activity, whereby Western academics claim epistemological authority over non-Western peoples by suggesting that they must be represented as they cannot represent themselves. However, through my postcolonial feminist ethnography, I tried to address this argument by being committed to my postcolonial feminist theoretical framework, while also being reflexive and reflecting on my power and positionality, thereby helping me to address the issue of representation.

My understanding of the challenges of positionality and representation have been guided by the evolution of my ethnography that addresses the intersecting concerns of postcolonial, feminist, reflexivity and critical research; together positionality and representation enable me to address these concerns. Table II aligns my interpretation of

Intersecting concerns in postcolonial, feminist, reflexive, critical research

Positionality Representation

Table II.
Positionality and representation: addressing the intersecting concerns of postcolonial, feminist, reflexive, critical research

Coloniality of knowledge produced from research		✓
Power and politics in research and the production of knowledge		✓
Western representations of non-Western persons		✓
Representations of women in research		✓
Ethical commitment to participants of research	✓	✓
Development of reciprocal relationships in undertaking research	✓	
Subjectivity in research	✓	
The researchers voice, place and privilege in the research process	✓	
Self-Other relationship and power relationships during fieldwork	✓	

positionality and representation to the intersecting concerns of postcolonial, feminist, reflexive, critical research (as detailed in Table I).

In the following sections, I describe how I addressed the issues of positionality and representation, thereby addressing the intersecting concerns of postcolonial, feminist, reflexive, critical research.

Concluding thoughts in the construction of my postcolonial feminist ethnography

Constructing my ethnography was a messy, non-linear, iterative process. My approach to ethnography as a postcolonial feminist now seems obvious, but this was a journey of discovery throughout the first year of my PhD while at the same time I was exploring my postcolonial feminist theoretical framework within organisation studies. Following this journey and the construction of my postcolonial feminist ethnography, I had to enact this methodology, and philosophy of research, in the field. To this end, I entered the field and spent three months, September-December 2013, observing and interviewing the Maya women working within two co-operative groups. The following sections discuss my experiences in conducting fieldwork with marginalised Maya women by focusing on the challenges and complexities of positionality and representation within my postcolonial feminist ethnography.

Positionality: building relationships through differences

I always knew that I am privileged. I did not need to go to Guatemala to learn that by simply being born in a specific country or geographical space provides me with profound advantages in terms of material wealth, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, quality housing, women's rights, a future of many opportunities and possibilities, etc. I am free from the worry of where my next meal will come from, if I will be able to cloth myself or if I will be able to educate my children. Further, I am a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman living in Europe, and thereby have encountered limited marginalisation or discrimination. However, it was this privilege that concerned me the most about my positionality in the field. There are clear ethnic, social and cultural dichotomies of privileged-poor, educated-unschooled, rural-urban and white-brown that greatly influenced my relationship with the women participants.

I was introduced to the two women's groups through a local Fair Trade organisation. I was very nervous. I did not know what to expect from the women of this research nor did I know what they would think of me. I had previously lived in Sololá, had knowledge of Maya people and their history, and understood my theoretical framework and my ethnographic approach. Nonetheless, this research was a journey of discovery. I was learning how to be a postcolonial feminist ethnographer while also trying to explore the home and working lives of marginalised Maya women and understand how this can contribute to organisation studies discourse. Following our first introductions, my expectations of the women were dramatically altered. It is known that Maya women living in remote regions are quiet and conservative, but I did not expect their warm, welcoming and even funny nature. Immediately the women welcomed me into their homes and working lives, and immediately I realised that I had not rid myself of my "colonial mindset" that automatically characterised and categorised these women.

Forging relationships during fieldwork are the feminist ideal of equal, collaborative and reciprocal research engagement. I soon learnt that my positionality and personality were to play a significant role in conducting this research and building

reciprocal relationships. Rather than attempting to erase our differences I viewed them as important factors in developing our relationship. I was never going to be able to remove the physical, economic and social differences between the women and me. I am white, wear Western-styled clothes, had a camera, dictaphone and notebook with me at all times, cannot speak their different Maya languages, am educated through to third-level, had never worked in agricultural fields and had the funding and opportunity to fly to Guatemala to undertake this research when most of the women struggled to pay the bus fare to their local market. This all placed me in an irreconcilable position of difference. However, two key elements brought me close to my participants, my personality and my gender. The women and I shared a commonality in our womanhood. Although the women laughed at me, and at the same time felt sorry for me, when they heard I was unmarried at 30 and did not have any children. This became another sign of difference. Nonetheless, my gender played a large part in the women welcoming me into their group and homes, something that would have been an issue for them had I been male.

I attended various co-operative group meetings, but most of my time was spent one-on-one with each of the women (on multiple occasions) in their homes and with their families. The women were very welcoming into their homes and were willing to talk freely. Engaging with the women individually provided a space where personal relationships could be built. I spent all morning and afternoon with the women in their homes and ate my daily meals with them and their families. There was initial curiosity and anticipation in having me in their homes, but the women soon overcame this because they have endless tasks within the home and my presence was not going to disrupt them from their daily responsibilities. I welcomed this. I helped the women prepare meals for the family; washed dishes; casually chatted to them as they cleaned their homes; played with their younger children; sat with the women when they were backstrap weaving for hours during the afternoon to make clothes for their family and products for their groups; followed them in their agricultural fields, and once spent an entire afternoon picking green beans. The women's unwillingness to disrupt their daily routine enabled me to adapt to their daily life and the women welcomed any help I could provide. I was attempting to understand their world and to do this I had to enter their world on their terms. The women grew comfortable with me and our mutual trust grew.

My personality enabled me to negotiate differences in positionality. I was willing to do whatever tasks were necessary in the home and eat whatever food was put in front of me. My interest in understanding their experiences brought us together, but never close enough to remove our social and economic differences. The differences remained between the women and me, but little actions, that may even seem mundane, can be significant in building relationships. I became an acceptable outsider; our differences were not barriers to rapport and trust:

During lunch, at the Chuacruz group training, I receive lots of complements 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 tamilitos I've eaten with lunch today, when I shyly say four they all laugh and clap, and say "You're just like us!"

Nonetheless, I occupied different positions with different women, and my positionality was continually negotiated on a daily basis in the field. Every day I needed to subject

myself to the same level of scrutiny as I directed from the women participants. Ensuring a fluid and open research environment is not easy, so to enable this I had to be fluid and open. I continuously reflected upon different aspects of my positionality and personality that could be considered power differentials, and I often had to suspend or alter certain aspects of my identity. On occasion, I prayed with the staunchly Christian women despite being non-religious. Additionally, at the beginning of my research, I had to suspend my liberal feminist ideals that the women were subjugated in their patriarchal homes and society. I soon learnt from the women that challenging patriarchy and social norms can only be achieved by the cultural understanding of feminism and at the pace deemed appropriate by the women living within that environment. The women were inadvertent feminists by simply leaving their homes, and sometimes even community, and organising together in their co-operative groups. Every day in the field I was learning and evolving. On other occasions I had to highlight certain aspects of my identity, explaining that I am not an expert, but a student who wanted to learn from them. I had to remind the women, and myself, that I was not there to judge their business, but to learn from them and understand how they organise and work together. Every few days I would ask myself different questions that enabled me to be more reflexive and position myself in the women's world, for example, "What would I do if I was these women?" or "Would I be strong enough to survive and thrive?". Placing myself in the women's position helped me to be more honest regarding assumptions about myself and assumptions about the women.

My flexible personal disposition and genuine interest in the lives of the women played a crucial role in addressing positionality and developing relationships. I was interested in the women, and they were interested in me. While our relationship was shaped by differences, we shared experiences and talked about our lives. My presence in their homes and lives even became welcomed by some of the women:

I sit with Alicia in her kitchen; it's a very casual and relaxed environment. Alicia makes us a hot drink of atol while there's still heat from the wood-fire cooker. I feel like I'm sitting in a friend's kitchen having a chat. Being a similar age, and also being unmarried without children, Alicia and I have developed a close relationship. This is my last visit with any member of the Chuacruz group, and when we begin to say our goodbyes Alicia says "It's probably better if you don't leave, and if you want, you can stay here with me! [...] The women in the group wouldn't mind either, they have spoken very positively about you, and they say you're a good worker, you help them in their homes and it makes them feel comfortable. [...] I am happy to get to know you and you're a good person". Although I'm looking forward to returning home, I'm sad to say goodbye. As we say goodbye, Alicia says, "I'm happy you're telling our story, it's important". Alicia and I hug.

It was a long, and at times awkward, afternoon in the drizzling-rain picking green beans with Maria, her husband and son in their fields. But as Maria walks me to the main road so I can get a "chicken bus" back to town, I notice a dramatic change in our relationship. This morning she and her husband were trying to get rid of me, but now she is hugging me good-bye and inviting me back to visit them anytime. She tells me I'm the first Westerner she's ever gotten to know or really talk to, and I'm not what she expected. She thanks me for accompanying them to their fields and spending time with her family. Maria and her family ask me a few questions about me and my research and thank me for trying to understand their culture. Maria says, "We're happy you're interested in our lives. We want the world to know more about the real life of an indigenous Maya".

I do not want to romanticise my time in the field, and addressing positionality is difficult, but my ethical interest in, and commitment to, the women of this research and

my ability to be reflexive helped me address the issue of positionality. Nonetheless, while I credit myself in this reflexive paper, my research and the relationships developed would not have been possible without the open and welcoming nature of the Maya women and their families. Additionally, the women are the drivers of this research. They are producing the knowledge and I am simply a medium to facilitate this. I undertook this research because I wanted to accentuate the women's agency, and my primary position in the field was to provide a platform through which the women can voice their organisational experiences.

In this section, I critically explore how I addressed the power differences in positionality within my postcolonial feminist research. I foreground the researcher's social responsibilities and engagement with respondents in the field and reflect on how power asymmetries are reproduced and reshaped during fieldwork.

Representation: accentuating Maya women's agency and knowledge

My responsibilities to the women do not end in addressing my positionality; I negotiate the ethical challenges of engaging in this research from the construction of my postcolonial feminist ethnography through to the analysis of data and writing of findings. By engaging in reflexivity and in addressing the issue of positionality I was able to think of, and see, the women, who are very different from me, not as "them" or "Other", but as women accentuating their own agency and exploring their own understanding of their organised existence. This is an important first step in trying to address the issue of representation. I had to be reflexive to address positionality and power relations in the field and continue to be reflexive to ensure I am not speaking for the women of this research or appropriating their knowledge. I have a responsibility to myself, the Maya women and this research to ensure I am ethical and true in my relations and experiences with the women and representations of them and their knowledge.

Spivak (1988) powerfully exposed the issue of representation by posing her question "Can the subaltern speak?" Demonstrating that academics claims to both deconstruct the subject and to know and speak for the Other. However, it is not my intention to speak for the Maya women, but to provide a platform from which they can speak. I do not claim to have the authority to speak for the women of this research, nor can I claim to have full or complete knowledge of the women and their organisational lives. This research is intended to be a means of closing the gap, addressing power inequalities by producing knowledge together, and demonstrating the agency of the Maya women participants. On my first encounter with the Maya women of this research I discussed with them that I was undertaking this research so their story can be told, and I continued to have this dialogue with them throughout my time in the field. At regular intervals during the ethnography I had to remind myself that this is their story, not mine:

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, and they are a reminder of the power and responsibility of my ethnography.

The above fieldnote extract emphasises the significance of representation in ethnography. Representation goes beyond positionality and power relations in the field; I had to continue to engage in reflexivity to ensure I understand the realities of

their lives. There are ethical, social and political implications from my engagement with the Maya women. Although I am interpreting the data, the knowledge produced needs to be located with the women. This is difficult and requires a delicate balance.

Representation requires a reflexive examination of the context of discovery. Throughout the research process, I found myself frequently questioning my epistemological assumptions. Engaging in a postcolonial feminist critique I had to reflect on my authority and standpoint as a “First World” woman of power and privilege. I had to critique my own authority and power to control the knowledge produced. The politics of representation forced me to question if I have the authority to represent the Maya women’s reality. Marginalised Maya women’s voices have been excluded from organisation studies discourse and I wanted the women to represent themselves and their knowledge through my research. I viewed, and undertook, my research as an interactive and collaborative process; I addressed the issue of power and privilege and built personal and professional relationships with the marginalised Maya women. Moreover, I considered the Maya women participants as subjects of knowledge. It was my relationship with the Maya women participants and my understanding of the postcolonial feminist critiques that enabled me to identify and address the issue of representation.

The ethnographic process is both interpretative and analytical, and in the analysis and interpretation of the data generated during fieldwork, I foreground the women’s strengths, struggles and experiences. I act against an authoritative stance of Western research and the objectification of non-Western research participants and, in so doing, make space for the women’s voice and agency in which my self and interpretative authority are part of the research and text produced. I am not an authority producing expert knowledge, but a researcher engaging in a collaborative dialogue with Maya women participants during which I learn from the women, accentuate their agency and share their knowledge.

Further to fieldwork, data analysis and interpretation, the issue of representation also needs to be addressed in writing. Representations of the women and their knowledge create the possibility of Othering, that is, without addressing representation in writing I risk portraying the marginalised Maya women and their knowledge difference as inferior. In my writing about the women, I had to ask myself, “how do I write about the ‘Other’ without Othering?” My research is an enquiry aiming to broaden the discourse of organisation studies and bring the women’s knowledge and agency to the fore. To help me with this, I provide the women’s narrative in the context of their social, cultural and historical location. Contextualisation enables both myself and the readers of my research to understand the interpersonal reality and intersubjective context in which the women exist. That is, throughout the research process, I try to understand, analyse and write about the women by combining their subjectivity with their real life. This enables me to provide a space for the Maya women’s agency and voice, by exposing their everydayness, strengths and challenges in their organisational and personal realities, and thereby challenge the homogeneity of a singular Third World woman.

I am aware that by being Western I represent a potential problem in the representation and discussion of these women as the “Other”, yet, I am also aware that by neglecting and ignoring their voices the contribution these women can make to organisation studies discourse is limited. Therefore, rather than do nothing, I engage with marginalised Maya women and employ a postcolonial feminist ethnography to enable me to reflexively de-colonise my own thoughts and produce knowledge from these women’s experiences.

In this section, I have reflexively explored how I address the issue of representation, which is always problematic and difficult. The knowledge produced occurs within the research process, embedded within broader social relations and positionality processes that place me and the women participants in different social and cultural locations (Sultana, 2007). As such, my findings will always be interpretative and partial, yet telling of stories that may otherwise be untold.

Conclusion

The paper contributes to the theoretical development of an alternative approach to ethnographic research. The theoretical development and practical implementation of a postcolonial feminist ethnography, as outlined in this paper, demonstrate how I combined the intersecting concerns of postcolonial and feminist theories and criticality and reflexivity in research to identify positionality and representation as the key complexities in conducting research with marginalised “Others”. Constructing my postcolonial feminist ethnography was messy and non-linear, yet a journey of discovery that was strongly impacted by the theoretical framework of the research and reflects my political and personal convictions. In implementing postcolonial feminist concerns into a critical, reflexive approach to ethnography, I demonstrate how theory, research and writing are political engagements. The production of knowledge is always a political endeavour and a postcolonial feminist ethnographer must have an ethical commitment to decolonising her way of seeing, doing and writing (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). This approach acts as a guide for ethnographers negotiating the ethical concerns and complexities in undertaking research with the marginalised “Other”. Thinking critically and reflexively examining the researchers’ assumptions and authority form part of a postcolonial feminist ethnography and so too does an ethical commitment to participants. Being a postcolonial feminist ethnographer is difficult and requires a researcher to be flexible, fluid and de-centre her own authority and power positions. My experiences of being a postcolonial feminist ethnographer demonstrate the importance in addressing the issues of positionality and representation to overcome differences in position, privilege and power when building relationships with participants and to ensure the participants and their knowledge are accurately represented.

This ethnographic approach is not only restricted to the margins of the Global South, but postcolonial feminist research is fluid, flexible and can be applied to different marginalised groups organising and working in both the West and Global South. A postcolonial feminist ethnography is a bricolage approach to research. An interpretive and subjective approach that positions the researcher in the research process, ensures an understanding of the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power and does not limit researchers to certain data collection or analysis techniques (Kincheloe, 2004, 2005; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). As such, the most important implication in using a postcolonial feminist approach is to enact the shared commitments and intersecting concerns of postcolonial and feminist theories and criticality and reflexivity in research. Postcolonial feminist ethnographies are thus particularly relevant when researchers seek a more inclusive agenda that encompasses the experiences of the marginalised and challenges mainstream thinking and practices. My postcolonial feminist ethnography enabled me to understand that the co-operative groups act as alternative spaces for marginalised Maya women in Guatemala, empowering as well as enhancing their participation in employment in a fair and democratic way. In this way, their experiences may resonate with similar, marginalised communities in the rest of Latin America, Africa or Asia. And also with impoverished

groups organising in the European south or socio-economically marginalised groups in the West (e.g. the traveller community in Ireland, European Roma communities or the growing marginalised migrant groups in Europe and Turkey engaging in improvised, alternative organising and working practices), that is, those “Othered” within our own societies.

This is not to say that a postcolonial feminist approach is the only way to engage in research with marginalised “Others”, either in the West or Global South, but this critical approach encourages researcher reflexivity and helps in addressing the issues of positionality and representation. My postcolonial feminist approach suggests an alternative ethnography motivated by an ethical commitment to the participants and the desire to share their knowledge and experiences so to give voice to the marginalised, alter organisation studies discourse and challenge Western mainstream thinking and practices.

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Corresponding author

Jennifer Manning can be contacted at: jennifer.manning@dit.ie

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