

Discovering Cyberethnography: Considerations of Feminist Approaches to Virtual Anthropology

What is a feminist ethnography? A feminist ethnography is not certain, institutional, unchallenged, contained, uncomplicated or value-free. It does not “give voice” but hopefully opens up spaces for the contestation of oppositionally defined identities and how voices are not only represented but accessed and interpreted. With the additional consideration of the Internet, a research medium that is also contested and “uncertain,” the necessity to write a feminist ethnography becomes even more apparent as critics bring into the argument issues of accessibility, identity, colonialism (read race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.). Feminist approaches to ethnography challenge us to reconsider these issues and interrogate them within not only corporeal relationships but virtual ones as well. In this paper I argue that by focusing a critical eye on the Internet and its uses, by complicating this “democratic” space where voices are posted and identities are textually constructed by globally dispersed populations, we reveal new possibilities of feminist research. By discussing current ethical issues in cyber research, we must reevaluate the role of identity and reflect on our abilities (or lack thereof) to recognize the multiple forces that work simultaneously to shape, challenge and reinvent it. It is also of the utmost importance to question how positionality and accountability also affect our methodological approaches. Our own perspectives, based on a multitude of experiences and social interaction and development, play a significant role in how we perceive those we research, how we choose and carry out our methods and how we write. Through this paper I hope to push this issue further to debate how feminist cyber-ethnographers negotiate our own participation as not only research “lurkers” (online browsing without interacting or logging on to a site) but as active online community members and the effect we have on shaping these sites and the very real subjects they represent.