

'A WOMAN', 'AS A WOMAN', WHAT DO YOU MEAN? Feminist ethnography, transgender studies and the uses of not passing

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ABSTRACT

The article calls attention to a mismatch between the multiple and often seemingly incommensurable understandings of 'gender', circulating both within trans and non-trans gender scholarship. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which 'gender' is assumed and utilized in feminist ethnography. I argue that the pressing implications that transgender theory and -experience have for epistemic habits and ethnographic praxis are yet to be properly acknowledged. Using personal experiences as a non-passing transfeminine ethnographer, I show how a masking of contradicting understandings of gender regularly takes place both in everyday research situations and on levels of academic writing. This, I argue, contributes to upholding cisnormativity in ethnography.

Keywords: ethnography, transgender, methodology, feminism

ABSTRAKTI

'Nainen', 'naisena', mitä sillä tarkoitat? Feministinen etnografia, transtutkimus ja läpimenemättömyyden käyttö

Artikkeli käsittelee sekä trans- että ei-transsukupuolen tutkimuksessa kiertäviä 'sukupuolen' määritelmien moninaisuuksia ja näiden keskinäisiä ristiriitoja. Tekstin painopiste on erityisesti tavoissa, joilla sukupuolta ymmärretään feministisessä etnografiassa. Artikkelissa väitän, että transteorian ja -kokemusten implikaatioita episteemisille ja etnografisille käytännöille ei ole tähän mennessä huomioitu kunnolla. Hyödynnän omia kokemuksiani transfeminiininä etnografina näyttääkseni, miten ristiriitaisten sukupuolikäsitysten häivyttäminen tapahtuu sekä kentätyötilanteissa että tieteellisessä kirjoittamisessa. Peittämisen käytännöt ylläpitävät osaltaan etnografian cisnormatiivisuutta.

Avainsanat: etnografia, transsukupuolisuus, metodologia, feminismi

Introduction

Increasingly in the 2000's, transgender scholars have changed the role of trans in ethnography. From figuring only as an object of exoticizing and outright violent medical and anthropological study, some¹ trans people have – against the odds – moved to positions of academically legitimized knowledge production. Among the multiple trans presences in contemporary universities, a certain precarious trans authority is being carved within feminist (auto)ethnography. Yet, I argue in this article, the impact this will have on ethnographic epistemic habits (Liljeström and Peltonen 2017) and research practices has yet to be widely understood or, at least, widely discussed.

So far, trans ethnographers and autobiographers have often – understandably – focused primarily on documenting variously marginalized trans lives (Pearce 2020; Nicolazzo 2017; Salah 2007; Namaste 2005). This has perhaps for its part supported a relative mental 'ghettoization' of transgender studies in relation to more mainstream feminist-, gender- and

¹ This process has, unsurprisingly, not been an equal one: Academic transgender studies is, for example, often suspiciously white and 'western' (or Anglo-American). On transness and racism, cf. Bey (2017), Chaudhry (2019), Krell (2012) and Vidal-Ortiz (2014). On transgender and imperialism, see e.g. Haritaworn (2012) and Towle and Morgan (2006).

queer studies (Stryker 2004). Yet, as e.g. Stryker (2006, 1994; Metcalfe 2021) has pointed out and shown, transgender studies always also turns the ‘traditional’ gaze around, to scrutinize those assumed to be non-trans, cis, ‘normal’. Among any number of other questions, trans scholarship has posed the same queries about gendered existence regularly (and aggressively) asked from trans persons, back to those asking. It asks the non-trans person, “How do *you* know that you *aren’t* trans? What or who proves that, and what authority defines what constitutes proof?”. A snarkier commentator might add, “Has a team of doctors observed you for at least a year and signed a form attesting that your perceptions are valid?”. As I shall return to later, the (non)answers to such questions are illuminating.

In another sense it can be considered somewhat surprising that trans perspectives have still made little impact on the mainstream of feminist ethnography, as this is a field generally thought to be extremely sensitive to issues of gendered (and other) positionalities (e.g. Skeggs 1994, 1997). As I see it, the fields also share certain histories: Transgender ethnography can be said to draw on ‘intersectional’ thinking, being heavily indebted to the work done by e.g. Black feminists, feminists of color, and postcolonial feminists². Transgender studies, like all of these others, offer critiques of so-called “myth[s] of shared womanhood [and manhood]” (McKenzie 2014). Non-trans feminist ethnography, too, is in many ways highly tuned

2 Trans and queer studies, obviously, also share a history of both support and conflict in terms of epistemology and political aims (cf. Stryker 2004). Following e.g. Nash (2013), I argue that people can and have ‘arrive(d)’ at – in this case – ‘trans’ through different genealogies, that are in themselves important to analyze in terms of class, racialization, academic status, etc.

The emphasis on intersecting structural oppressions and focus on people’s lived experiences and realities is also what – as I see it – gives these parts of trans studies a the different lineage and language than arguably more *haute*-theory queer studies. Any boundary between lineages is, however, murky; several theorists use widely overlapping idioms and strategies (cf. Elliot and Lyons 2017 for an important example of psychoanalytic trans theory).

in to similar discussions, long emphasizing the needs to localize, historicize and generally be reflexive about the many power differences between, for example, ‘women’ and ‘women’ or researcher and researched (Stacey 1988; Skeggs 2004; Davis and Craven 2016). The concept of cisnormativity (Bauer et al. 2009) brings out the key difference: Within non-trans feminist ethnography, there remains an assumption of something – explicit or not – that makes gender a kind of “stable foundation” (Stryker 2004, 212) on which difference between subjects can be theorized or simply attached. To illustrate: When, say, a white Oxford-based female scholar with a ‘female’-coded name and face writes an ethnography about poor, rural ‘low’-caste women in South India (Still 2014), she/we (feminist ethnographers) might question a number of axis of power and difference involved and e.g. ask what the chances of non-violent research are in such a disparate setting. Yet, despite questioning the myriad of differences between the women involved, people tend to on some level take it for granted that both the researcher and her participants are cis *women*. This is held so self-evident that it requires no further comment. As trans ethnographer Sonny Nordmarken writes, “[f]ew imagine we might be trans.” (Nordmarken 2014, 44). Yet, conversely, when such an assumption of transness is made, gender suddenly becomes the object of a number of demands of motivation or ‘proof’. “[T]ransness”, thus “calls [...] for attention to the labour involved in producing ‘obvious’ things” (Dickinson 2021, 206).

What’s the deal with ‘gender’?

The entry of the trans ethnographer forces cisnormativity into the limelight. Unlike those assumed to be cis, a trans person’s gender is often openly scrutinized. As I see it, this ultimately exposes the non-trans scholar to the same questions posed to those assumed trans. In this section, I look at how non- (and sometimes anti-)trans discussions speak about what ‘constitutes’ gender, and how these are reflected in trans conceptualizations. I will then apply this typology to four ethnographic examples.

One can posit four different schools of thinking about what ‘gender’³ means, found in non-trans discussions relating to (trans)gender ‘validity’ both inside and outside academia. Making such a picture, I draw upon earlier work by for example Westbrook and Schilt (2014), Crawford (2008), Browne and Nash (2010), among many others. I say ‘schools’, as the typology presented here is only meant to sketch out a rough-enough frame for the purposes of this article, not to detail the myriad of differences within each type.

In the first sense, ‘gender’ vaguely has something to do with ‘biology’ and physiology. What exactly this ‘biology’ is can, as Westbrook and Schilt (2014) note, refer to very different things, depending on the situation. Sometimes, it can denote a penis or the absence of it. Sometimes, reproductive capacities are important. Other times again, ‘biology’ can denote things such as hormonal levels or chromosomes. As one can see, some of this is related to visible ‘gender difference’, while some is not.

The second sense contains the ways in which feminism and social sciences most typically talk about ‘gender’ (Kessler and McKenna 2006 [1978]; Butler 1990; Thorne 1993; Skeggs 1997; Pilot and Prabhu 2012; among others). Here, it is related to something society (or discourse) has created, to gender-coded signs and performances and their reception and ranking by others (language, people, groups, institutions, etc). ‘A woman’, to take the example, is here something that only emerges in a social context. Within the school, which encompasses much of feminist history, there are obviously decades of differences. Roughly speaking, one part discusses how much control an individual can have over their presentation, while another focuses on what social consequences (e.g. oppressions or privileges) so-and-so positioning has. Other divisions include discussions about how

violent and/or desirable any such gendering is. This school of thought, arguably, is also the most common way people practically assign gender in everyday occurrences (such as when walking on the street).

The third way of speaking about gender has to do with personal experience, selfhood, desires, intimate knowledge, and identity. Identity can be construed as in some sense ‘innate’ (Westbrook 2010) or it, too, be read as a social construct (Ekins and King 2010). Nonetheless, this approach gives some level of (epistemological or political) authority to an individual: *I understand my gender better than anyone; I alone am the expert on it.* Thought in this school is usually heavily cross-pollinated between academia and popular-activist idioms.

In contrast to the three first schools, a fourth can be devised, at least linguistically. If the three first see gender as somehow knowable – and subsequently, through either essence or experience, knowing – a queer-influenced “anti-identitarian” (Browne and Nash 2010) or “deterritorialized” (Crawford 2008) view tries not to. Instead of resolving gender, it tries to “keep studying ‘queer’” (Haritaworn 2017). As such, it can be called a (non-)conceptualization of non-gender, or at least a very fluctuating one. Such a view might be seen as utopian, in either a positive or negative sense of the word (cf. Muñoz 2009).

This typology is not exclusive. For example, non-trans social scientists are not limited purely to social constructivist views: Sometimes, the importance of personal identity for gender formation is taken into account, while other studies might prioritize the ‘biological’. As an example, a study of girlhood might focus on the former, while a study on motherhood or sexual violence might incorporate much of the latter. In both such cases, however, the initial identification (gendering) of research subjects would, most likely, have been made on the basis of the individuals’ social presentation and position. Further, one can note that the four schools

3 By ‘gender’ I here mean all of what has often, misleadingly, been separately termed sex and gender.

are not necessarily logically commensurable. Sometimes, they are in clear opposition to each other. Yet, as Westbrook and Schilt (2014) importantly note, the different modes of speaking about what gender 'is' can often circulate parallel to and on top of each other, seemingly without contradiction. What way of defining things is prioritized often depends on the aims of the speaker/writer, and different understandings may be combined or earlier statements forgotten when convenient. People and institutions often also use different ways of deciding gender when acting spontaneously and when pressed about the topic (ibid.).

Looking specifically at contemporary trans-scholarly understandings of gender, one can see the same four schools repeated. Trans commentators are obviously in no way a homogenous group: Beyond 'structural' differences like racialization, class backgrounds, assigned gender at birth and more, experiences and understanding of (one's own and others') transness itself are extremely varied. Desires regarding one's own future gender and ideals about gender in general are also widely differentiated.

One particular difference (one that has caused plenty of debate and friction between trans scholars and -activists) relates to the question of gendered knowability, mentioned above. Sometimes, this has been conceptualized as a rift between 'genderqueer' and (binary) 'trans' readings of gender (Elliot 2010). Some trans scholars, emphasizing fluidity, speak in terms of gender uncertainty or -deconstruction (Crawford 2008) or e.g. of gender as fiction (Halberstam 1994). Yet, many others are actively critical of privileging non-binary or 'queer' readings of trans, which are understood to be either privileged (Namaste 2000) or disrespectful of the strong desire of many trans people to *be* and be understood *as* a certain, legible gender, not do away with gender altogether (Serano 2007). This legibility-illegibility debate can also be understood as internal, i.e. one that a single trans theorist has with themselves and their different experiences through the temporalities of

gender⁴. For example Nordmarken writes, on the one hand: "I feel a rush of heat and euphoria in this moment of freedom [i.e. illegibility] – as I monster, gender-fuck and gender-terrorize." (Nordmarken 2014, 40). At the same time, the author returns to musing around the feeling after a few years of misgendering stares: "[T]he cumulative experience of strangers' attention to my gender ambiguity feels like stigma" (ibid. 41). Other trans scholars challenge the whole point or validity of such a dichotomous debate, as they see them as (inadvertently) upholding a gender boundary or hierarchy that is to be crossed. Lane (2009, 136), for example, argues for thinking of 'biology' as "diversity, not dichotomy".

In popular consciousness, trans ideas of gender are often connected to the paradigm of gender as personal experience or identity. Certainly, if the classic social scientist sees "gender [as] a social system of oppression and an interactive process involving performances and interpretations of bodies", then "[t]rans communities know gender as a sense of selfhood, which in some cases, may shift." (Nordmarken 2014, 47). In this school of thought, e.g. a trans woman can be defined something like "people who were assigned male at birth but who identify as women" (Baral et al. 2013, 214). Alternatively, an even more tautological formulation, such as the one on English-language Wikipedia, might be used: "A trans woman is a woman who was assigned male at birth." This view radically opposes the outer 'expert's' (be it the doctor or the sociologist) gaze. Others again aim to contextualize a discourse of self-identification, stating that it can only exist within a social framework that (under specific conditions) legitimizes such an act (Westbrook and Schilt 2014, 33). In this reading, one cannot

4 Exploring trans *ageing* and how our positionalities, desires and research capital change with time would be another important addition to this debate. Nordmarken, as well as myself, seem to in their writing be strongly influenced by a position of relative bodily 'youth' (or at least non-geriatrics).

meaningfully speak of for example the gender identity of iron-age Finns (cf. Henley 2021).

Yet, gender as a queer resistance or a sense of self are not the only ways in which it is understood in trans-academic debates. Trans researchers are usually personally acutely aware of the role one's reading and readability in surrounding society plays in the treatment one receives. Thus, trans-feminist studies, too, typically focus heavily on the social construction, performativity and response to gender in various settings. In trans (auto) ethnography, this is a given (Krell 2012; Nicolazzo 2017; Pearce 2020; Salah 2007; Namaste 2000, 2005; among others).

Further, discussions about gender as 'biology' are in no way alien to trans studies either. Despite the negative, transmedicalist connotations talk of 'biology' can have in trans understandings, particularly hormones and their effects on bodies are often positively spoken about. While hormones are in trans discourse not perceived to 'belong' to anybody (i.e. any assigned gender) in particular, they can be discussed both in the sense of their effect on personal gender identification and gendered perception by others. When comparing different trans scholars, the relation to the 'natural' also differs. Some, for example Serano (2007), might see hormones as powerful shapers of not just body but also e.g. sexuality – at least to an extent beyond our control (or linguistic determination) – while others exhibit a more cyborg-like mentality. Inspired by Susan Stryker's (1994) reclaiming of Frankenstein's 'unnatural' monster, some "proclaim [hormone-supplemented] 'monstrosity' a tool of resistance and reconnection" (Nordmarken 2014, 37). Yet again others refer to hormonal transition simply through its ability as a pathway to being allowed to be less hyper-visible and marginalized (Devor 2006). 'Biology', inevitably, also has to figure in trans debates because of the power of transmedicalist discourse in society at large. In relation to this, reasons for trans forays into

'biology' might also include a "strategic engagement" (Johnson 2018) with medicalized discourse, in order to access certain forms of support or legitimacy.

The impact on ethnography

What should hopefully have become clear from the brief outline above is that there are, both within and outside trans studies of gender, several different and competing understandings of what can or should be used to decide the criteria or basis of 'gender'. With this in mind, I move on to discuss how this apparent multiplicity compares to widely present epistemic habits and practical methods within contemporary feminist ethnography. My argument is that, while ethnographers (and their readers) might not actually be able or willing to say what exactly they mean by 'gender', this does not stop them from routinely behaving as if they knew. This creates a curious knowledge vacuum or paradox.

To frame my argument, I analyze four examples from recent years as a PhD student at the University of Helsinki, Finland, working on an ethnography of young middle-class feminist lives in Delhi, India. This period overlaps with my own, slow public and professional 'outing' of myself as transfeminine⁵. During this time my presence has mainly been read as absolutely non-passing (i.e. as a cis man). In this process I have, like many other trans researchers, "experienced the world experiencing me in drastically different ways" (Nordmarken 2014, 38). I have also "experience

5 'Transfeminine' or transfem is here meant to denote a wider term to describe people assigned male at birth, whose gender identity is – to a significant extent – female and/or feminine. Using the term is meant to leave space for all and any kind of legal and 'medical' genders as well as for people who might be excluded by the term 'trans woman'. The conceptual pair is 'transmasculine', transmasc.

sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and White, male, able-bodied privilege” (ibid.; albeit in the ‘opposite’ direction from transmasculine Nordmarken). I argue that, for a researcher, there are certain positive sides of such experiences: Along with all the fear, paranoia, dysphoria, and depression they cause, the multiple social presence can be thought of ethnographically as “methodological capital” (Gallagher 2000). This denotes all the ‘things’ (in the widest sense of the word) that enable a trans researcher to do the kind of seeing and research they do; it is what makes certain patterns visible and thinkable. Thinkability, again, can be seen as a first step towards shaping a new, better language of gender research, one that tries to fill in something of the mentioned vacuum. I also draw on Black queer/transmasculine scholar Anima Adjepong (2019), who talks about “*invading ethnography*” as a method of “strategic interrup[tion]” in order to shine light on the cis-het and racialized norms of ethnographic practice. As Adjepong, quoting Simmonds (1997), writes “‘I am a fresh water fish swimming in sea water. I feel the weight of the water... on my body.’ This feeling is not merely a static positionality, but is a site of knowledge production.” (Adjepong 2019, 32). The author warns against a kind of often seen sloppy reflexivity, which assumes “that one’s race, class, nationality, and/or gender make particular spaces in/accessible” (ibid. 31) in a somehow calculable way (cf. Táíwò 2020). Instead, Adjepong suggests “linger[ing]” (ibid.) in such meetings to see what kind of possibilities do or don’t arise and why that is. Further, in their reading “[i]nvading ethnography plays on the idea of the ethnographic researcher as an alien entity that invades a social setting” (ibid. 28). This “invader” is here turned around from the image of the colonial male anthropologist, or – more accurately – made multiple: No longer simply ‘powerful’, but intersectionality complicated, sometimes in power and sometimes deeply powerless. “[I]nvading ethnography”, Adjepong argues, “offers a language through which to grapple with [such] discomfort and marginality” (ibid. 41).

Importantly, separating such methodology from overt rule breaking, the out-of-placeness Adjepong speaks of is not necessarily at all *perceived* by others: the researcher is not necessarily *visibly* breaking anything, and thus eliciting particular responses. On the contrary, it is often specifically the *misperception* of the trans researcher by others that brings important insights. Methodologically, a certain parallel can here be drawn to research in both critical whiteness (Lundström 2010; Wise 2008) and upper-caste studies (Dutt 2019; Anand 2011), where authors discuss what happens in surroundings in which they are perceived to ‘belong’ (racially, caste-wise). Such perceived ‘belonging’ allows for respondents or those observed to speak and act freely, without concern for what is politically ‘correct’ or advantageous. Scholars like Anand and Lundström highlight the complex questions of complicity arising from passing as majority (i.e. seemingly siding with the ‘oppressor’), while Dutt is a particularly important resource for emphasizing the paranoia experienced by a minority body *needing* to be ‘read’ as majority in order to survive or thrive.

Trans-specifically, other important methodological elaborations have recently been made by for example Pearce (2020), Nordmarken (2019), Vincent (2018) and Haritaworn (2017). Yet, the relation between gender in ethnography and gender in transgender theory has, to the best of my knowledge, not been directly addressed before. What further marks the examples in this text is the specific focus on *non-passing* transness – which, in the reading against the typology given above, becomes particularly troubling for attempts at explaining ‘gender’. Also, in transgender writing in general, non-passing has also received much less attention than ‘failed’ passing (i.e. being read as ‘trans’ or ‘queer’) or even passing (being read as one’s identified gender(s)). To me, bringing out non-passing trans experiences is also important since, it is arguably among the most common and available ‘kinds’ of transgendered experiences: Most trans folks globally (particularly trans women) are not in a position to receive

treatments, surgeries, clothes, etc to help them pass, not to mention a supportive environment that would make attempting to do so reasonably safe. Following Dickinson's (2021) Marxist language one can say that trans people rarely own (or even have access to) the means of production needed for the social making of their own gender. Further, focus on non-passing resist the narrative that trans people somehow *owe* it (to themselves or others) to attempt to pass, or to follow a set path of steps resulting in an imagine 'complete' or legitimate transition (e.g. from medial diagnosis via hormones to surgery).

On this note, before moving on, it is important to emphasize that any suggestion that trans researchers embody important methodological capital is not to be read as stating a *requirement* to publicly use it in their work. As is well documented, trans students and scholars are still heavily marginalized (Nicolazzo 2017). Being open about your trans status as a researcher is usually a product of having certain privilege and might, even so, expose you to several forms of harassment and violence. It is also, in many ways, extremely exhausting. For me, any talk about 'transgendering' or 'queering' research practice has to come with a number of disclaimers.

Example 1: The researcher's gender as knowable and knowing

"Do you think it's maybe problematic that you are, you know, a man researching women?" (comment at PhD workshop, Germany, 2019)

"The interviewees might not be so open to talking to you since you're a man." (comment at PhD workshop, Finland, 2017)

These comments illustrate one common response from people first encountering my thesis work. On the surface of things, they very much make sense: A commentator sees my face, perhaps reads my name in a certain way, and attaches a certain value to them regardless of whether I have said anything about my gender or not. When reading academic books

and articles, I too often do this – I google the name and make assumptions. These assumptions are then compared to the work in question. My work happens to be about a group of (at that point) cis women: Upper-middle class, 'upper'-caste feminists in Delhi, aged twenty-something; specifically about how they understand themselves through their ongoing relationships and conflicts with their parents. In many of the cases, daughter-mother relationships and discussions about social demands around 'daughterhood' are central. As anyone acquainted with feminist history will know, this connects directly to a very popular and often highly essentialized topics of feminist learning, feminist generations, understanding and accepting your mother as complex and faulty. It is highly cisnormative territory, connecting things like menstruation or birthing with ideas of 'female' knowledge. Gynocentric feminism (e.g. Rich (1976)), Alice Walker's (1983) search of her mother's gardens, as well as psychoanalysis and 'Jungian' self-help literature of the daughter on the "the heroine's journey" (Hirsch 1989; Murdock 1990) build older parts of this tradition. It is continued in plenty of recent popular books of autobiography or feminist fiction (in Finland recently e.g. Hubara 2021), where stories of 'womanhood' are commonly made to resonate with stories of 'motherhood' or with learning to understand *mothers as women* and one's own woman-ness as a (potential) mother.

As the above quotes show, the clash of this history of (cis) female-only space with my perceived gender foregrounds certain epistemic assumptions. These relate not only to (mine and others) gender being knowable, but a certain gender resulting in a certain, knowable kind of knowledge. Firstly, the assumption that the participants might not be so "open" with me because I "am" a "man" (which they obviously might not, for any number of reasons related and unrelated to my gender), shows the flipside of the argument: The idea that, if I *were* a 'woman' – somehow recognizably *like* them (despite the glaring differences in racialization,

citizenship, etc.) – the participants would *naturally* be more inclined to speak frankly with me. Thinking back to the typology in the introduction, what is the model of determining gender at play here? It can be seen as being partly social constructivist. Yet, such a view would hinge on an idea of some kind of shared experience of sisterhood that transcends societies and cultures. If pressed about the topic, it would be hard to explain just where the ‘shared’ daughterhood would lie in between a white Finnish ‘daughter’ in Helsinki and a dozen Indian ‘daughters’ who have grown up in different towns and cities in India. Thus, the argument eventually falls back on a ‘biological’ reading of gender, one which assumes a kind of ‘natural’ bond between women and their female children, one that for example a woman and her ‘son’ could not have. This ‘biology’ again is fully assumed, on the basis of socially-coded looks or other identifiers such as voice. To look is, here, to know.

Looking at the other quote above, another question is highlighted. The key phrase in it is “problematic”. The word can be read in two ways: In the first sense, the “problem” in my research would relate to the kind of lack of knowledge or knowhow resulting from my assumed gender (my ‘maleness’), as noted in the paragraph above. Assumedly, this lack would result in a low quality of interviews or analysis. Yet, this would – I assume – mostly be a problem for myself (and perhaps the interviewees, who’s time I’m wasting). Yet, this is arguably not what the word “problematic” refers to in the quote. What the commentator is suggesting is that what I am doing is *politically* problematic, not correct. As transmasculine scholar Aaron Devor has very succinctly illustrated, the idea of looks equating a certain kind of knowledge is deeply connected to contemporary feminist discussions about the “*authority* [...] to speak” (Devor 2006, 3, my emphasis). Seeing my ‘male’ face speak of mothers and daughters, one “might”, as Devor writes, “wonder what I am doing here [...]” or “[h]ow could someone so ‘not one of us’ ever hope to get it right?” (ibid.). I would continue the

argument to say that it is in some sense not really about “get[ting] it right” (i.e. whether the information is interesting or useful for further studies), as it is about whether it should be said at all by the person saying it.

Devor’s excellent (and awkward) point is that this notion of equating a certain embodied look with a certain kind of ‘true(er)’ knowledge is not limited to cis spaces. The people quoted above need not feel attacked. Devor (2006) narrates how he, over the process of transitioning medically, has been dually excluded from having ‘legitimate’ knowledge: First, as a female-assumed scholar of trans men (Devor 1997), and then as a (white, upper middle-class) cis-assumed male transgender and sexuality scholar. Thus, queer- and trans academic spaces, too, can exclude people from gender-legitimate ‘knowing’ for looking the wrong way⁶. Here, one is only ‘really’ transgender if one ‘looks’ the part, obviously a highly inflamed proposition. Yet, arguably, as I have been more public about my gender, my status as a knower has increased, albeit only within specific circles that give certain legitimacy to the discourse of gender *identity* or who emphasize a need to listen to those somehow academically ‘marginal’. For, as Devor also points out, “purchasing feminist and LGBTQ legitimacy [happens] at the cost of [any] more normative legitimacy, possibly to the point of personal endangerment” (Devor 2006, 4). It is important to add that being trans does not in any way guarantee legitimacy or safety within

6 Obviously, there are many understandable reasons for this, such as the desire to protect vulnerable communities or to give precedence to transgender trans scholarship. The moral question is whether it is ‘okay’ for a trans researcher to (sometimes) look cis (whether that means passing or ‘failing’ completely) or if that is to, in a sense, want to have the cake and eat it too? This is particularly pertinent as not at all trans people can reasonably do this, because of capital or mental health. Yet, one could perhaps also ask if it is ‘moral’ to demand trans scholars who do have the privilege of invisibility to – for reasons of solidarity – put themselves into potential risk by always having to publicly ‘out’ themselves also in forums where the audience might not be all that friendly (e.g. departments, conferences, publications, etc.).

non-trans feminist spaces either (e.g. Vincent, Erikainen and Pearce 2020; Serano 2013).

Example 2: 'Gender' across contexts

Transnational ethnographic work through a transgendered lens draws attention to another aspect of cisnormativity. This is the assumption of cross-contextual coherence among non-trans subjects. In other words, ethnographers regularly assume or imply that being 'not trans' (cis) is not just a given but that it somehow functions the same across contexts. Of course, documenting and understanding the variations in e.g. gender norms or local sexualities are the bread-and-butter of social science, at least since the days of Margaret Mead (2001 [1935]). Yet, when it comes to people *not* gender non-conforming, words like 'man' or 'woman' are used for assemudly cis individuals, indiscriminately across contexts. This becomes odd when contrasted with one of the central points of transgender studies: The word 'trans' or 'transgender' cannot be indiscriminately used to describe settings that are geographically, racially/ethnically, culturally and/or economically different (Towle and Morgan 2006; Haritaworn 2012). Doing so in situations where the people themselves do not speak of themselves as transgender is akin to a imperialist (or classist or racist) subsumption. Far from allowing for greater gender variance, speaking of e.g. *Hijras* in India or 'two-spirit' or *travesti* individuals in the Americas as "transgender" (or, sometimes, "third gender") is arguably a form of ahistoric transessentialism and (Towle and Morgan 2006; Living Smile Vidya and Semmalar 2018). Trans studies reminds us that a contemporary 'Western' academic-activist 'trans' way of being is not necessarily the same as another gender-minority way of being, and no recognition or solidarity between such subjects can be automatically assumed when conducting transnational ethnographic work. Furthermore, trans researchers are highly aware of how their own possibilities of imagining or expressing their gender shifts as one moves between contexts. Among other things, as Adjepong

(2019) demonstrated, this can also help one distinguish between settings where other intersections than one's gender (skin color, religion, etc.) become socially defining.

In comparison, it is striking that cross-contextual non-transgender ethnographic work functions as if non-transgenderness would be automatically homogenous and unnecessary to comment on, across any width of separation. Taking into account the number of people involved (supposedly many more people than the very heterogeneous group of people sometimes placed under the simplifying 'transgender umbrella'), I see such a seemingly 'natural' functioning as highly unlikely. Subsequently, any ethnographer working with what are – assumedly – cis people, should begin their work with the same kind of rigorous analysis of what this assumption is based on as any person working with trans individuals would. To use my own work as an example: If I set out to study cis women in India, how do I find them? Have I, at any point of my study, actually 'proved' that they are cis women, according to a standard of gender that I have explicitly given and argued for? If not, what does it mean that they 'are' women? Can I be sure that the participants' self-understanding of 'cis' or non-transness is comparable to what I mean with such terms, or is the reading of them as non-trans an imposition made by me? If the latter applies how do I justify the dissimilarity? How is my gender, in terms such as trans/not trans, read across different contexts or for example differently-classed spaces within a geographic location? Such basic questions are, as of now, almost invariably lacking in mainstream feminist ethnography. At best, they are treated as simplistic building-blocks in pseudo-intersectional equations (Adjepong 2019). Yet, from a trans perspective, the absence of a sensitive treatment of such questions is as fundamental a flaw in research as 'forgetting' to mention gender, class, or race altogether. When an assumption of a globally coherent cisgender-ness is dissolved, ethnography faces a huge data shortage and a pressing need for further study.

Example 3: Participant observation

Consider the following excerpt from my 2018 field notes:

I'm traveling in a taxi from South-West Delhi towards South Delhi proper around eight o'clock on a Friday evening. The city is built on plains and has more or less infinite space to sprawl horizontally. South Delhi is given its rhythm by huge, highway-like roads that turn into rivers of traffic jams in the day but often get very empty at night. Most of middle-to-upper class Delhi is almost directly connected by these roads. The very rich of Delhi, those who live in separate single-family houses behind thick walls in (semi-)gated communities, often do not have to see how the majority lives even from their car window. Yet there are plenty of poor people even in South Delhi, those of the 'servant class'. Ghertner (2015) writes that their visual absence is a product of a conscious effort of so-called beautification, the visual erasure of poor people from the pathways of the rich. Often this is done through typical tools of seemingly innocuous control: pretty wrought-iron fences, plant arrangements and bright neon lights.

At eight, people from different backgrounds will be riding the metro. Without the metro Delhi would be so much worse. It's not even dinner time yet. South Delhi markets and restaurant hotspots will be filling up with upper-class nightlife. The main roads of Vasant Kunj and Vasant Vihar where I currently am – posh enclaves near the airport – are still full of cars and bikes, but almost nothing but vehicles. I'm on my way to meet a friend for drinks.

At different traffic lights, the masses of cars come to a halt. I'm looking at people in the cars around mine, trying to count the non-male passing people I can see. There are few, and very few of those are in

turn driving alone; most of them are in the passenger seats, being escorted by a male-coded relatives or drivers. Outside, working class men are sometimes sitting in groups, talking, spending time. The only non-men outside seem to be groups of Hijras and cis women belonging to those homeless families who haven't yet been cleared away from crossings and underpasses. Me, and I suspect many of the middle-class people in the cars around mine, have been trained to view Delhi roads after dark with a gendered fear that's deeply classist.

I arrive at the bar at one of the most famous South Delhi markets. As so often is the case, the young woman working at the door is most probably somewhere from northeastern India⁷. The rest of the visible staff is exclusively male. I rarely come here because it turns into a nightclub on weekends. It gets packed, loud, and very expensive. Here, a beer plus taxes costs around 400 rupees (5–6 euros), a ridiculously bad deal in Delhi. Despite the heat, we get a table on the roof where one can smoke. After ten, the place fills up with people, mostly in larger groups who've come to dance. One androgynous man with long hair and cowboy boots stands out from the otherwise extremely heteronormative dress code. The men are donned in their best performance of North Indian masculinity: tight jeans, gold jewelry, chests showing and hair swept back. The women's dress code in this place is about as far from the road outside as one could be. In certain posh clubs, where one arrives in a private car, young Delhi women can wear anything (the less the better), and dance in a somewhat protected environment. In reality, this is of course no less toxic a space than the street; if anything, both statistics and personal stories tell us that the 'safety' of this place or of the wealthy men in here is another classist illusion. If middle-

⁷ On the racialized and sexualized undertones of the Indian service sector, see e.g. McDuaie-Ra (2013) and Haksar (2016).

class women can wield class capital in dealing with working class men, the men in this bar have everything on their side. One might criticize the women for being elitist; one might call them victims of internalized patriarchy; one might live in Delhi long enough to put one's judgement on hold and join them in the purchased relief.

The field note reads very much like a generic account of everyday life made 'strange' through ethnography. In this article, its function is to be read 'trans', in order to show how much *work* 'gut based' gendering goes into contemporary ethnographic work, both inside and outside the field. Further, I argue that even trans researchers themselves rely on assumed gender in everyday practices. Thus, the commentators cited in example one would be *highly* peculiar if they would *not* have assumed my gender as they did. Lightning-fast, usually binary, categorization into 'men' and 'women' happens on the basis of the most miniscule detail, such as the back of the head or the pattern of walking of the person in front of you. This would perhaps not be as much of an issue if the assumption would be used for 'personal' purpose only (e.g. to assess possible danger). Yet, as in the narrative above, social scientists use assumed gender on every level of argument: In just a few lines, I describe (at least) space, class, state violence, consumption, racialized sexualization, and something about the culture of South Delhi through a binary (or trinary, including *Hijras*) system; alternatively, all of these concepts and spaces are used to build up the binary that was already assumed from the beginning. This illustrates, as Kessler and McKenna argued already in the 1970's, how "[o]nce a gender attribution is made, almost anything can be filtered through it and made sense of" (Kessler and McKenna 2006 [1978], 167–8). This means that any other information – even potentially contradictory such – is made subservient to the gender assumption, made to fit it rather than seen as questioning it. Without relying on such seemingly smooth gender attribution, ethnography as we know it today would, arguably, collapse.

Someone might feel it is offensive to question the 'reality' of observation-based ideas of gender in a context such as this. Surely, in a city like Delhi (or Helsinki), gender is acutely present for example in the ways in which women are made to minimize themselves for fear of violent reprisal (Phadke et al. 2011; Pilot and Prabhu 2012). Surely, I too feel how 'convenient' it can be to be allowed to pass as male when I'm walking home at night. In patriarchal environments, passing as male can also be a reasonable research practice, in terms of both well-being and the knowledge gathered. The social reality of gender oppression and, conversely, male privilege is indeed self-evident to anyone who bothers to look. The issue here is not that, but the slippage that happens when a social reality becomes attached to certain physical bodies by the researcher's gaze, as if by magic glue. Non-passing transness, again, serves as a constant reminder that appearances can be deceiving. Fully cis-passing transness would do so too, albeit in quite different way: a fully passing or 'stealth' trans person would simply be seen as a cis woman or man, unless they chose to come out. This would mean, on one hand, less exposure to current misgendering or harassment and, on the other, access to a particularly meaningful personal history of moving through different positionings, as passing fully is the result of a very long process.

Example 4: In-depth interviewing

"I tried to be friends with dudes. It didn't work out. I don't know a single guy I didn't have like massive fights with. So... It just never worked out. They either thought I was crazy and angry, or people were scared of me, or like I was just fighting people a lot. Fighting because [they were doing] stupid sexist shit that I had no fucking... patience for." (Interviewee, Delhi, 2018)

"I do know that, with you in particular – and I feel comfortable saying this – I don't actually see you as, like, 'a man'. [T]o a large degree I do treat you like one of my girls. And that's been a space that

you've earned. That's not a space that just happened automatically."
(Interviewee, Delhi, 2018)

Even though I have, in the previous examples, argued for limitations in the currently popular habits of ethnography, this is not to say I see it as altogether limited. Few forms of research allow for the kind of engagement and attempts at anti-violent co-construction of knowledge as feminist ethnography can allow for. The above quotes, from two interviewees, illustrate this. Unlike many white commentators, none of the participants had expressed similar categoric fears about my inability to understand them 'as a man'. This, despite me not having come out to them either at the time these interviews were made. I also looked and sounded 'like a man' (albeit perhaps a somewhat awkward one). I was extremely curious as to what caused this marked difference in the reaction between white and Indian reactions to my work. Throughout the about two-hour long interviews (of which I did three with each participant), we touched upon the topic of the gendered meeting between them and myself. Beforehand, I hypothesized several possibilities: On the Indian side, it might be a product of a pedestal effect (Perez 2010) giving me unfair advantage because of me being white or being a 'man'. This was likely to only be compounded by me 'acknowledging' such privilege (Messner 2011). Yet, the participants were otherwise quick to be highly critical of white and male ethnographers coming to India, as well as of 'woke' privileged people in general. In a reading that strips away less of the women's agency, I postulated that the lack of open criticism of my gendering was due to our personal (often long-term) friendships outside the research settings; perhaps they simply did not want to be rude. On the Finnish side, I hypothesized that a certain white anxiety and vague, racist notions about all Indian women being 'oppressed' and without agency created a reaction of wanting to make sure the participants were sufficiently 'protected' from the exploitative researcher (cf. Mohanty 2003).

As I see it, all of these 'explanations' say something important about the research setting at hand. Yet, there is something else too, something that – as in the pair of quote above – was either said explicitly or between the lines. This is that, in the eyes of at least some of the women interviewed, I was not 'really' "a man" or a "dude". I seemed to be viewed either somewhat undefined or, as in the second example, even "one of [the] girls". In this setting of apparent trust, pre 'coming out', gender seems to function in transgendered ways, binary or non-binary depending on whether the interviewees' readings of me are seen as representing a stable non-man or not. Nevertheless, this gendering is not tied to 'biology', nor to looks or general social positioning, nor – importantly – to any previous expression of self-identity on my part.

Conclusion

I began this article by outlining four different 'schools' of thought vis-a-vis the 'criteria' for gender existing both within trans- and non- (or anti-)trans discourse. I noted that these were not easily commensurable. Arguing that these tensions remain largely untouched, I noted that feminist ethnography, despite its general attention to difference and complexity, functions within a cisnormative framework that allows non-trans (cis) to be unexplained and seemingly stable. To illustrate this argument in practice, I looked at four examples drawn from my own ethnographic work in which, I argue, the presence of the trans scholar draws attention to the inconsistencies or vacuums behind epistemic habits and research practice.

In example one, I analyzed how the male-coded body, as "matter out of place" (Adjepong 2019: 42) in an assumedly cis female-only setting makes apparent the crude 'standpoint' assumptions still present in feminist empirical thought: a 'woman' as homogeneously knowable and knowing.

In example two, I argued that the attention trans scholars have given to discussing the geographic, classed, ethnic and racialized multiplicities sometimes violently simplified under the ‘transgender’ umbrella, helps us direct the gaze towards the ways in which non-trans (cis) is assumedly to be and/or function in the same way in trans-national ethnographic work. I argued that scholars of cisgendered people, too, need to specify their definitions, as well as motivate what kind of cross-contextual comparisons between so-called ‘cis’ people can or cannot be readily made. In the third example, I showed how the practice of observation becomes severely questioned with the introduction of transgender sensibility. Further, I questioned the common ethnographic practice in which a researcher assigns a (usually binary) cis-assumed gender to everyone around them and builds grand theorizing on this assignation. These conclusions are then used to justify the correctness of the original gendered assumption. The fourth example, however, revealed that a possibility of a trans-informed, non-cisnormative ethnography does, indeed, exist. Gender is then assigned on very different grounds, or alternatively not assigned with any finality at all.

I have consistently argued that trans can function as methodological capital (Gallagher 2000). My argument draws on Adjepong’s ideas of gender minority researcher as practicing a kind of “invading ethnography” (Adjepong 2019, 28) – as well as drawing on e.g. critical whiteness and upper-caste studies – where the (invisible) out-of-placeness of the scholar comes to challenge assumptions. In stressing this, I have expressed doubts regarding certain queer and trans conceptualizations of overt gender-fucking as liberatory research practice, giving further arguments for a tactical or simply opportunistic use of cis-passing/non-passing as it best benefits the trans researcher.

I have pointed out the severe marginalization of trans scholars, particularly trans scholars of color, and noted that any open description of transness – such as the one at hand – always means exposing oneself to a number

of threats, inside and outside one’s institutions. Moreover, drawing on Aren Aizura (2012), it’s important to note that making ‘meaningful’ use of one’s own marginalization can be seen as a typically neoliberal (or, in Aizura’s words, “American”) story of “conquering hardship through individual triumph” (Aizura 2021, 150). Thus, trans methodologies or being publicly trans cannot, in my view, be seen as a moral requirement for trans researchers, often already hyper-visible. To counter such a trans-specific requirement, I agree with for example non-trans transgender studies scholar Patria Elliot (2010), who argues for the importance of cis researchers scrutinizing themselves and their peers through trans methods, even if that comes with a risk of being accused of not being ‘legitimate’ knowers.

In summary, trans scholarship challenges feminist ethnography to both think and speak clearer in terms of *who* and *what* are really being researched when gender is discussed. It bring to the forefront the incongruences between different ways of thinking and talking about gender, and makes us pay incessant attention to not allowing for accidental or sloppy slippages between meanings. Further, trans ethnography also speaks back to both transgender theory and activism and asks us to think further about the uncomfortable tensions between gender as personally versus socially and practically knowable.

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