Interrupting Research: ethnography of a research encounter with the Bororo people in Central Brazil[1]

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This essay dialogues with feminist debates around ethics, epistemology and methodology. It analyzes the 'failure' of my research encounter with the Bororo people in Central Brazil. The essay uses the Brechtian theatrical concept of 'interruption' to scrutinize the empathic assumptions which inform feminist methodologies. It also demonstrates how ethical research opens a fruitful space for dialogue between researcher and researched. The relationship between researcher and researched is discussed in relation to the implicit hierarchies inherent in the global/local dichotomy. Using the insights of feminist epistemology, the essay ascertains the significance of feminist scholarship to the advancement of a more dialogical epistemology.

Keywords: feminist methodology, hierarchies of global and local, researcher and researched positionalities

Introduction

The conference *Thriving in the Edge of Cuts* was a platform for debate which poignantly responded to current governmental cuts to university funding. Through a variety of contributions, the conference event affirmed the enduring relevance and social impact of gender research. This essay is one of these contributions. Building on feminist epistemologies' insights and its emphasis on the politics of location, the essay demonstrates the significance of feminist scholarship's contribution to the development of a more dialogical epistemology. It represents only one of the many cases in which gender research has enabled innovative readings in social research.

The theoretical engagements of this essay are the outcome of 'failure'. 'Failure signals a project that may no longer be attempted, or at least not on the same terms' (Visweswaran, 1994:100). This essay is an ethnographic account of my 'failed' research encounter with the Bororo people in their indigenous reserve in Brazil. My initial

research plans were to investigate a 'cultural revitalization project' that the Bororo are currently implementing, which involved the construction of a new Bororo village. Informed by the anti-essentialist epistemology of theories of performativity (Butler 1990, 1993), I wished to analyse Bororo identity discourses and their uses of cultural essentialism to serve their own political purposes (Ramos 2000). Because my time at the village was limited, it seemed appropriate to focus my analyses on an interview I planned to conduct with one Bororo individual, who for ethical reasons I shall call X. However, after learning he was going to be interviewed for the purposes of research, X refused to proceed. His refusal functioned as an 'interruption' of the research process. Bertold Brecht's (1975) concept of 'interruption' is a useful metaphor to explain the redirection of the present research process. 'Interruption' is a theatrical technique with which the actor breaks the 'fourth wall' and invites the spectator to consider critically the situation being presented on stage (Brecht 1975:45). In classical theatre, the 'fourth wall' separates the characters' dramas from the spectators'; in Brechtian theatre actors and spectators share the awareness of being in the theatre and examine the social critique performed on stage. X's refusal to give me the interview forced me to continue my inquiry in different terms. After my negotiation of the terms of

research with him, I realized that prior to studying Bororo individual's responses to cultural essentialism (or exoticism), I would have to engage with a closely related issue in the Bororo community; that of research itself.

By analysing my research encounter with X, this essay seeks to make a small contribution to discussions of feminist methodologies. It focuses in particular on the relationship between researcher and researched. This relationship is a central concern for the feminist epistemological project of overcoming oppressive hierarchies in knowledge production. Aiming to move away from an epistemology of detachment, feminists have encouraged close, intimate and dialogical relationships between researcher and researched (Stacey 1988, Hill Collins 2000). They have also been attentive to the ethical dilemmas involved in such relationships (Stacey, 1988) and to the biases of researcher positionality (Lewin 2006). There has also been much criticism regarding the representational objectification of research participants and the power of the *researcher* over the research process (Mohanty 1996; Minh-ha 1989; Narayan 1997; Chow 1996). However, the power and influence of *research participants* in the research process remains an underexplored issue.

Feminist methodological literature has adopted a monolithic conceptualization of power which

underplays the interests and manipulative strategies of research participants in research processes (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry 2004). Moreover, the analyses that explore the role of research participants tend to maintain a 'fourth wall' separating researchers from research participants. The maintenance of a 'fourth wall' characterizes a colonial epistemology, which places researchers as spectators and research participants as actors and prevents a dialogical relationship between them (Rosaldo 1989; Canevacci 2007). The preservation of the 'fourth wall' depicts research participants as active agents manipulating researchers to serve their own 'local' businesses. Building on X's 'interruption' (cf. Brecht 1975) of the present research process, I argue that research participants are actively engaged in research processes in relation to their own business and in relation to our business: the business of research.

To support this argument the essay will provide an ethnographic[2] analysis of my research encounter with the Bororo. Alongside Brecht's concept of interruption, my theoretical framework is informed by Turner's (1982, 1986) and Schechner's (1985) conceptualisation of processual analysis and the ethical dilemmas of feminist ethnography (Stacey 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Visweswaran 1994). The research process itself became the object of inquiry of this essay.

Therefore the sections that follow will engage with research as a point of inflection.

Analysing my Research Encounter with X

When I crafted my initial research project in 2009, I had already visited the Bororo reserve twice. At that time I took for granted the global knowledge politics and the impact of research practices among indigenous peoples. Instead, my visits to the reserve had guided my interest into studying the Bororo's 'cultural revitalization' project in relation to current trends of 'commodification of culture' (Moore 2004; Ramos 2000). I wanted to investigate how the Bororo, and especially X, used stereotypical discourses to serve their own political purposes. Following Sylvain (2002), I understood that a 'cultural revitalization project' would have to come to terms with the cultural image which corresponds to the expectations of state and international donors: the image of 'primitives'. Furthermore, drawing on Ahmed (2002) and Tate (2005) my aim was to explore the significance of essentialism to Bororo individuals. I was aware that my time in the Bororo village would be limited and certainly not enough to fully explore these issues. My visit to the Bororo village would last only a week and I was unable to stay longer at that time. For this reason, I planned to record an interview with X when we would discuss the discursive

processes of marginalization of the Bororo and the problem of essentialism in relation to indigenous identity in the Brazilian context (Ramos 2000; 2001). Once I arrived in the Bororo reserve, however, things turned out to be very different from what I had planned. As I already expected, people in the villages were curious about who I was and about the purposes of my visit. What I did not expect is that people would associate me with research.

'Is she here to do research?'

During my first day in the village, I did not manage to negotiate with X the possibility of carrying out research. He spent most of his time speaking to other people and busy with the organization of a cultural event. In the morning of the second day, I was very anxious because I had not yet talked to him about my intention to do research. I woke up and started looking for X in order to speak to him and negotiate the terms of research as well as informed consent. I found him at the village centre speaking to a Bororo man from a neighbouring village. Upon seeing us, the man asked X who I was. X said I was his friend and I was there to visit him. The man angrily enquired: 'Is she here to do research?' As X defended me by saying I was his friend and that I was there to visit, I felt an increased necessity to talk to him about research as soon as possible. I felt like I was betraying him by pretending I was there only

to visit. Still, due to his various commitments at the local school, I could not speak to him until the evening. Nonetheless, it was clear to me that Linda Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that 'the word … 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary' had proved to be true (Smith 1999:1).

'I am very careful with what I say'

Aware of the negative perception of research practices amongst the Bororo, I was very concerned about revealing to X my intention to do research. I knew I had to tell him and I even had to ask his permission to record our interview. In the evening of the second day, I was already very concerned about revealing my research intentions due to my previous interactions with Bororo people. Nonetheless, I knew it was time to speak to him about research and so I did.

I started by telling him that I had seen the new village and by encouraging him to continue working in the 'cultural revitalization' project. Driven by my anxiety, I started telling X all the things I could do to contribute with the project. I said I could help the community by writing proposals in English to potential international donors. That I could teach English, Italian or give alphabetization classes in Portuguese in the new school. Whatever they felt it would be necessary to help the community, I would do my best to pursue. While I said all these things,

I was worried about one unbearable thought: how could I possibly justify that I was there to do research? X and his family had been very kind during my stay. Would I play the role of the imperialist researcher who would use them for research purposes and give nothing in return? It was too late. I was there to do research and I wanted it to be ethical. So I needed to tell him. At once I asked:

X, do you authorize me to do research about the 'cultural revitalization' project? Can I write my dissertation about it?

He was smiling but his smile gave way to a thoughtful expression. He said:

Yes. If it is for a good purpose, you can.

I also needed to ask him about the interview. So I did:

…and can I register an interview with you about the project?

He was again hesitant and thoughtful.

I am going to think about it. I am very careful with what I say.

As our conversation followed he said that 'Bororo people are tired of being used and betrayed'. He said that he and the whole community needed to trust researchers in order to allow them to work there. I stayed in the village for another three days and I had decided not to be insistent with X about the interview. I was unsure if I would indeed be able to return to the community and help with all the things I said I would. I knew that in research a fully ethical engagement with others is not possible but I feared to leave the village with a debt that was unclear whether I would be able to pay (Stacey 1988; Spivak 1988; Hinterberger 2007). This was, in my view, a good ethical decision. I left the village without the interview, but with an invitation from X's family to come back.

The reconfiguration of my research illustrates the importance of an 'ethically conscious methodology' (Fluehr-Lobban 2003). It also illustrates how the ethical negotiation of informed consent opened a fruitful space for discussion which demanded that I reconfigured my research into a more dialogical epistemology. If, in the first stages of this process, I preserved the 'fourth wall' separating me as a spectator and the Bororo as actors, my subsequent negotiation of the terms of research with X opened up the possibility for his 'interruption' of the research process (cf. Brecht 1975).

Bertold Brecht's concept of 'interruption' is a useful tool to explain the redirection of the present research process. If, in the beginning of the process, I assumed a comfortable spectator position seeking to empathise with X's character as a Bororo performing an exotic culture, during our conversation he ultimately interrupted this empathy. As in Brecht's (1975) 'interruption' he left aside the character I expected him to play and directed his gaze to me.

He broke the 'fourth wall' and invited me to consider critically how unethical research practices have been harmful to the Bororo. He directed my attention to the geo-politics of research and to the subject positions that he and I were assigned to play. He also refused to play the role I was assigning to him and sent me back home to figure out how I could be critical toward my role as a researcher. This interruption led me to think retrospectively about all stages of this research process and to identify, in my inherited colonizing epistemology, the assumption that research participants are not aware of the wider political implications of research practice.

Such an assumption informs much of social science practices, and feminist scholarship has eminently contributed to its acknowledgement as well as other research biases which animate the production of knowledge.

Gender, Globalization and Ethnography: theorizing the hierarchies of 'global' and 'local'

The analysis of my research encounter with X through a feminist approach brings into view the hierarchical dynamics of the global knowledge politics. Globalization is a theme of intense debate in contemporary social sciences and it is most often conceptualized as a gender-neutral phenomenon (Chow 2003). In order to invert this tendency and to bring into light the

explanatory power of the gender dimension of globalization, feminist scholars have stressed the value of framing globalization through multiple scales of analysis (Nagar et al. 2002). The commitment to gender in the analysis of globalization proves its explanatory power in at least two different epistemological orientations. As V. Spike Peterson (2005) notes, attention to gender reconfigures the questions asked in positivistic, as well as in more constructivist and poststructuralist oriented epistemologies. Although she acknowledges the epistemic significance of 'adding women' to positivistic accounts, which equate gender to 'women' as an empirical category, she places much stronger emphasis on the explanatory potential of what she calls 'analytical gender' (Peterson, 2005:500). Analytical gender, as a 'signifying code', stresses the hierarchical symbolic organization of thought that privileges what is masculine and devalues what is feminine. As a result, the explanatory potential of analytical gender not only enlightens the workings of social hierarchies, but also reveals itself as the organizing code which underpins the valuing and devaluing of analytical scales and perspectives. X's refusal to give me the interview (much more related to my position as a 'researcher' than to my position as a 'white' 'woman') illustrated his awareness of such hierarchies and his refusal to accept the researcher's depreciation (or objec-

tification) of his perspective.

Feminist scholarship has also been attentive to the hierarchies which animate knowledge production. Feminists have criticized the androcentrism of dominant epistemology (Harding 1986) and examined its legitimizing criteria, which privileges the perspectives of 'men in the dominant races and classes' (Harding 1991:3). They questioned the possibility of a general theory of knowledge by placing emphasis in the context of knowledge claims (Alcoff and Potter, 1993), on the perspective of marginalized subjects (hooks 2004; Hartsock 1983), and on dialogue and lived experience as legitimizing criteria (Hill Collins 2000). Such epistemological engagements with context, marginalized perspectives and dialogue encouraged a close link between feminist and ethnographic analyses.

Feminist scholarship and ethnographic analysis share a theoretical engagement with gendered hierarchies intrinsic to the global/local, modernity/tradition dichotomies which reveal analytical gender as the 'primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott, 1999 :66). Narratives of global and local resemble colonial narratives that reproduce gendered hierarchies and associate 'progress' and 'development' with masculine ideals which conquer the feminized 'Other', 'primitive', 'traditional' (McClintock, 1994; Hodgson, 2001),or 'local'. These narratives, and the problematic of

scale they entail, raise methodological questions for anthropologists about the possibility of studying the global ethnographically.

Henrietta Moore (2004) takes this challenge by comparing the concepts of 'gender', 'global' and 'local'. According to her, these are concepts with no empirical referent. They create a space of 'ambiguity and a productive tension between universal claims and specific historical contexts' (Moore 2004:71). These concepts open spaces of ambiguity and debate which are not occupied exclusively by academics. Moore takes the concept of 'gender' to exemplify how the space for discussion it opened has been, and continues to be, a source of heated debates both inside and outside of academia. The 'global' has opened a similar space and globalization or the 'global' is a theme of ordinary conversation in a variety of social settings. Moore questions the association global/abstract and local/concrete and identifies in these associations a pre-theoretical commitment with 'wholism', in which the 'local' is a part of a 'whole', 'the global'. This association also implies a hierarchical organizing of scales and perspectives which privileges the macro-economic 'global' and the social analyst's expert perspective over 'local' analyses and perspectives. Moore's suggestion for the ethnographic study of the global is a reconfiguration of the conception of the 'local'.

Following Moore (2004) I attempted to stretch my analysis to acknowledge the 'global' reach of X's perspective. Allowing his critique of the knowledge politics to go beyond the 'local', 'concrete' level, I took it seriously and realised the necessity of taking research itself as an object of analysis. Adopting Tsing's (2005) reconceptualised idea of the 'local', I take this research encounter to be a form of global connection, enabled by my encounter with X and our diverging projects. X's refusal to give me the interview required a more sustained connection between my academic world in the UK and the Bororo village. He required a concrete, material involvement with the community from my part. He knows my knowledge can be useful to help the Bororo community to gain access to national and international development aid. In our encounter in 'friction' (Tsing 2005), X made clear not only what he expects from me as a researcher but also the necessity of examining *the political implications of research practice.*

Tsing's concept of 'friction' is a useful tool to move from the generic and celebratory theorization of global mobile subjects, to an understanding of global connections which account for contrasting subject positions (cf. Song 2006). My research encounter with X brings into view the power differentials which organize bodies in the global economy. With Aihwa Ong (1999:11) X and I can ask:

What are the mechanisms of power that enable the mobility, as well as the localization and disciplining, of diverse populations within (…) transnationalized systems?

Building on Ong, our research encounter leads us to ask: what are the power mechanisms which enable the mobility of 'global' researchers and localize indigenous peoples as 'local', 'primitives' to be researched? With his 'interruption' of this research process, X questioned the assumptions which positioned us in the global knowledge politics. When refusing to give me the interview, X drew my attention to the history of unethical research practices among the Bororo and affirmed his position against such tendency. He taught me that 'Bororo people are tired of being used and betrayed' and that research in his village would have to come to terms with the community's requirements. The outcomes of research, X told me, will have to contribute materially to the welfare of the community. And if research itself does not result in a tangible contribution to the welfare of his community, then the researcher would have to find a way to contribute materially to community projects. Perhaps X would agree with Moore, Tsing and Ong and their critique of the global/local dichotomy. He was very keen to demonstrate to me his power to influence our research encounter. His refusal to participate in my research

as an interviewee questioned the configurations of global inequality, at least in the production of knowledge. X showed me that the implicit assumption of my research practice that I was a 'global' researcher and he was a 'local' participant would have to be questioned.

X's 'interruption' addresses the relevance of the space for discussion, opened by Moore, to rethink the 'global' and the 'local'. In this space of debate, the hierarchical relationship between academics and ordinary people is questioned. Moore (2004) questions the hierarchies which place academics in a dominant position in the discussion around the 'global' and the 'local' and she notes that academics and non-academics are knowing subjects who think about global connections. Aihwa Ong (1999) also critiques theoretical explanations of globalization that re-establish prevalent hierarchies of scale and perspective. She rightly notes that cultural flows and images are 'conditioned and shaped within … new relations of global inequalities' (1999:11). These new relations of inequality cannot be analyzed through abstract and homogenizing lenses. These lenses tend too easily to emphasize abstract macro-explanations and gendered, racialized and economically privileged perspectives. X's interruption of the research process questioned the validity of these perspectives. By refusing to give me the interview and explaining to me his reasons for doing so, X questioned the unequal relationships that inform research practices. His 'interruption' of my research process drew my attention to the hierarchies that organize the perspectives of 'global' researchers and 'local' participants in the global knowledge politics.

Overcoming the 'global' researchers/ 'local' participants divide

The theoretical effort that is needed to reach beyond the hierarchies implicit within the global/local dichotomy is valid as long as it also reconfigures the relationship between researcher and researched. Research processes also reproduce hierarchies of 'global' knowing subjects who study 'local' research participants. The feminist principle of overcoming oppressive hierarchies in knowledge production places the relationship between researcher and researched as a central methodological issue. Feminist and ethnographic methodological debates have scrutinized the position of the researcher and warned scholars about issues of 'discursive colonization' (Mohanty 2003) and objectification of research participants (Mohanty 1996; Chow 1996; Fabian 1983; Minh-ha 1989; Clifford and Marcus 1986). 'Strong Reflexivity' (Harding, 1991) became a key methodological tool to acknowledge such representational problems in order to make explicit the biases of researcher positionality.

Drawing attention to the power of the researcher over the research process, scholars have argued that reflexive accounts may often reaffirm the unequal power balance between researcher and researched (Weems 2006); and rightly argued that reflexivity is not a solution for representational epistemic violence (Hedge 2009). They have also theorized the researcher's shifting positionalities in the research context (Weiner-Levy 2009; Malan 2004) and asserted the relationship between researcher and researched as a criterion for epistemological assessment (Gunzenhauser 2006). Although their contributions provide important insights about the researcher's positionality, they still overplay the power of the researcher over the research product. Moreover, the overemphasis on empathy within such accounts is problematic for it assumes that research participants are willing to befriend researchers.

X's 'interruption' of this research process questions such assumption. X's refusal to proceed with the research demonstrates how research participants are very aware of the ethical dilemmas involved in ethnographic research. X is very familiar with the contradictory position of the researcher as both an 'authentic, related person' and an 'exploiting researcher' which is 'an inescapable feature of ethnographic method' (Stacey, 1988:23). When he said that 'Bororo people are tired of being used and betrayed' and that the community needed to 'trust the researcher', X was stressing that research with the Bororo must be beneficial to the community. His assertions also questioned 'dualistic models of researcher and researched interaction which imply that manipulation and exploitation only takes place by the researcher' (Thapar–Björkert and Henry 2004: 364). As Thapar–Björkert and Henry (2004) argued, 'researchers can also be objectified, manipulated and exploited, especially when they are not positioned as part of a dominant group or culture' (ibid: 364). Thapar–Björkert and Henry's analysis is significant because it identifies in feminist methodological literature a conceptualization of power which is monolithic and unidirectional. They suggest that 'power is understood as not only top-down, but dispersed throughout both research relationships and the research process' (2004:364).

The present analysis is in agreement with Hayden's (2009) and Thapar–Björkert and Henry's (2004) assertion that the role of research participants has been underexplored in methodological discussions. I agree with their figuration of the research process as a result of a power dynamics between differently positioned subjects. Their analyses convincingly take into account research participants' agency, showing how participants' subject positions can influence research

outcomes. The present work intends to contribute to such endeavour. I argue that Thapar–Björkert and Henry (2004)'s analysis preserves a 'fourth wall' when theorizing the agency of research participants. They theorize research participants' subject positions by emphasizing how participants use research dynamics and manipulate the researcher for the benefit of their own 'local' businesses. In this mode of analysis, the authors place researcher and researched in a disconnected power play and knowing and known as belonging to different universes. Hayden's (2009) ethnographic experience, on the contrary, did not allow her to preserve the 'fourth wall'. In fact, her account illustrates how research participants interpreted and critiqued her social location in global politics. I cannot emphasize enough the value of these authors' theoretical intervention. However, the emphasis of the present essay lies in a hitherto underexplored aspect of research participants' awareness of research practices. Thapar–Björkert and Henry's and Hayden's accounts overlook research participants' critical interpretation of research itself. My research experience has made it impossible for me to overlook such an issue. In my case, X interrupted the research process by breaking the 'fourth wall' and affirming his subject position not only in relation to his own 'local' business, but also in relation to our business: the business of research.

Conclusion

The 'failure' of my initial project can be seen as resulting from an epistemological assumption which placed research participants in an 'object' position. Although I am aware of the colonial legacy of representational objectification in knowledge production, in this project I assumed the comfortable position of a spectator researcher in search of empathy. Such an assumption placed research participants in an object position. My 'ethically conscious methodology' (Fluehr-Lobban 2003) and its engagement with informed consent enabled the opening of a space for discussion between researcher and researched and thus the 'interruption' of the research process. The Brechtian concept of 'interruption' (Brecht 1975) has proven to be a useful metaphor to account for the reconfiguration of this research process. 'Interruption' as a technique with which the actor breaks the empathic 'fourth wall' and invites the spectator to reflect critically about the dramatic situation is a useful metaphor with which to analyse my encounter with X. Using the 'interruption' metaphor, I argued that X refused to continue playing the role of an active research participant creatively resisting globalization processes I had previously assigned to him. He invited me to consider the political implications of research practice and broke the 'fourth wall' separating us.

Our negotiation of the terms of research brought into light that research participants may intentionally influence research outcomes not only according to what they choose to reveal and through their manipulation of the researchers to serve their own interests (Thapar–Björkert and Henry 2004). Participants also influence research processes by asserting their interests in relation to our business, that is, the business of research. The outcomes of this project suggest that research participants are often aware of the implications of research practice, which objectifies them and guarantees the researcher voice in the powerful position of knowledge production. Through his 'interruption', X invited me to analyse critically my position as a researcher. When he broke the 'fourth wall', I was forced to reflect about my previous epistemological assumptions. My initial research project assumed that Bororo individuals are active subjects only in relation to their own 'local' affairs. It assumed that the Bororo would perform Bororo identity and I would analyse it. X's 'interruption' encouraged me to think back and examine my inherited colonial epistemological assumptions.

My dialogue with X to negotiate the terms of research led me to realize that ethics and representation could not be tangential arguments in this research process. Instead, they should be the central point of inflection of my inquiry. The 'cultural revitalization' project lost its significance when I started to reflect upon the very process of doing research in the Bororo community. I thought it would be fruitful to start to explore the hierarchies which link the 'cultural revitalization' project with 'research' and the meanings that this practice has to the Bororo. X's 'interruption' encouraged me to focus primarily on the displacement of my ethnographic gaze. The reconfiguration of the project has sought to come to terms with X's critical intervention and to consider analytically the assumptions which informed its empathic gaze. X's intervention also invited me to consider the political implications of research practice and the subject positions that each one of us were assigned to play according to our social locations. The acknowledgement of the wider knowledge politics being played in our encounter was a fundamental step for a more dialogical epistemology.

Throughout the analysis of this research process, the significance of the contribution of feminist scholarship to a more dialogic epistemology becomes very apparent. It is therefore unreasonable to question the validity of gender research when one governmental goal (at least in its rhetoric) is to reduce inequality. Global inequalities are very present in the ways in which knowledge is produced, and, as I have demonstrated above, the contribution of feminist epistemologies is a

crucial step in overcoming unequal relationships in the production of knowledge. The pertinence of this exercise is unquestionable for the production of knowledge, which can offer much to inform the creation of equality policies.

Endnotes

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[2] I am aware that using the term ethnography to describe the analytical efforts of this article is problematic. Taking Willis and Tandman's (2000) definition of ethnography as a basis, I acknowledge that ethnographic analysis requires a much richer description as well as a much more sustained research encounter. This is one of the reasons why I decided to focus specifically on the analysis of the research encounter itself. The description and analysis of this research encounter can be referred to as ethnographic because throughout the research process, I have allowed lived experience to reconfigure the questions I asked. It is through the description and analysis of my research encounter with the Bororo that I attempt to make a small contribution to the theoretical debates in feminist epistemologies and methodologies.

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