Commentary

Studying Each Other: On Agency, Constraint, and Positionality in the Field

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Can we ever fully prepare ourselves for the fieldwork moments in which our pre-conceived interests, ideas, and questions meet the complex realities of our subjects' lives? In "The Feminist Ethnographer's Dilemma," Orit Avishai, Lynne Gerber, and Jennifer Randles (2013a) challenge feminist ethnographers to discuss our reflexive practices when fieldwork realities conflict with our personal political goals. All three authors conducted fieldwork in what they consider "conservative social spaces." These spaces included a study of one Orthodox Jewish community's religious practices around female menstruation, an ex-gay ministry, and a state-sponsored marriage promotion program. In each context, individuals confronted social forces feminist analyses typically cast as regressive, normative, and regulatory. Indeed, on some basic level, these three field sites engage three of the most hotly contested zones of gendered life: women's reproduction, sexuality, and the marital family. Each author found that her fieldwork encounters forced her to reflect on her own preexisting assumptions and the distance between her politics and those of her subjects. Each author found herself developing a far more complex intellectual and political relationship to the issues she studied than anticipated. Thus, Avishai, Gerber, and Randles (2013a, 397) suggest that all feminist researchers engage in what they term "institutional reflexivity": sustained reflection on the "institutional conditions under which feminist knowledge is

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produced, the ways it shapes theory and analysis, and the unspoken pressures it generates for feminist researcher's work to contribute to broadly defined feminist goals of promoting social justice."

I think these observations are astute, but I'm not sure this dilemma is particular to any one type of research site. Indeed, in what follows I use examples from my own (one might say "progressive") ethnographic study of families with transgender and significantly gender nonconforming children to elaborate two features of the fieldwork dynamics endemic to most complex analyses of human life: the constant tension between agency and constraint, and how an individual's identity and appearance structure every significant interpersonal relationship, including those in the field. The stories I include here come from a multi-sited "ethnography of a category" (Valentine 2007), the transgender child, which I shadowed through its life as both a personal identity and a diagnostic classification within biomedicine and psychiatry. Over the course of twenty-four months, from 2008 to 2010, I observed the work of activist organizations that do advocacy work on behalf of children, participated in conferences and workshops for families and physicians across the country, and visited parent support groups, schools where individual children were transitioning from one gender category to another, and a clinic where families received psychological services. I interviewed physicians and mental health workers, activists, and parents or guardians of gender nonconforming and transgender children.

These families, with the support of their doctors, are engaging in novel forms of parenting. They call female children male names (and vice versa), allow them to wear whatever clothing they choose, and even approach the state to alter the gender designation on their passports and birth certificates. More than progressive, some even call these children radical destabilizers of our entire gender order (Ablow 2011; Brown 2011). Yet, had I remained fixated on their potential to disrupt conventional gender expectations, I would have missed some crucial parts of what I found them actually doing. Their stories engaged discourses I myself consider normative and others I would frame as revolutionary. And the multiplicity of those discourses was my greatest source of data on social change at work. I also found I understood their parenting practices in a deeper way by examining their interactions with and interpretation of me.

In what follows, I draw on the framework proposed by Avishai, Gerber, and Randles to offer two conclusions about the business of feminist (and, really, any) ethnography: first, constraint and agency are always at play, no matter whether the social context is conservative or progressive, and the interplay between those forces outlines the contours of communities of practice. Second, as we labor to place ourselves at some distance from those we

wish to analyze, they are also laboring, watching us, making meaning of us. These interpersonal processes should be treated as an important form of data, one that allows us to redress a weakness common to some strains of feminist thought—accounting for the individual women who choose life conditions we ourselves might consider oppressive. In this way, it is the individual feminist who must practice reflexivity, and not the institution of feminism, if one exists.

Entering the Field

The moment I met Madeleine Frank,[1] I lost control of the conversation. My hours of careful planning, my premeditated introduction, my initial questions composed to sound thoughtful and informed all fell away, as she strode towards me, hand extended, with a look of quiet suspicion. We stood surrounded by a disorganized collection of diminutive chairs, desks, and tables in a small, urban charter school. It was a weekday evening and Madeline, the head of an organization called Gender Change, was there with her Director of Education and Training, Neil Stein, to lead a meeting for parents. The following day, an eleven-year-old sixth-grader named Jasmine would come to school for the first time as Michael. Michael's father and the school had informed parents about this change in a letter the previous week. Madeleine and Neil hoped to allay potential concerns parents of other children might have about Michael's identity, the school's response, and the education they planned to do with all the sixth-graders over the following days.

I spoke with Neil on the telephone several times in preparation for that evening. He quickly agreed to put me in touch with some of the families with whom he works. He was slower to put me in direct contact with Madeleine. It was clear from our initial communications that she was a protected figurehead, and I arrived on the scene with some trepidation about how she would respond to my presence and the project itself. I had learned a good deal about her prior career as a midwife specializing in assisting lesbian women with conception and birth, and I assumed she entered her work with children on gender from a similar nontraditional (one could say "liberal") vantage point. Her closely cropped haircut and softly androgynous style of dress appeared to confirm this suspicion.

I began asking her about the program for the evening and the history of the school, and before I got halfway through my first sentence, she interrupted to fire a string of questions at me about who I am, how I envision the frame of the project, and what sort of things it is I'll want to know. Madeleine's distrust was immediately palpable, on the surface. I found myself utilizing queer vernacular and my nontraditional gender presentation more than I ever had

before with other research informants. I thought positioning myself as an insider might make me a safer interlocutor. Yet, Madeleine seemed to dismiss me quickly, content to have me observe, but not particularly interested in engaging with me in any substantive way, even after the presentation as I drove away from the school in her car.

I spent the better part of a two-week trip trying to nail down a time to sit down with her for a one-on-one conversation. She evaded my attempts, finally sending me a one-line text message on the last day of my trip to offer up a single hour-long window. I quickly jumped at the chance, and boarded a train and headed 40 minutes outside the city to meet her near her home. Had I simply decided, rather than questioning openly, her reasons for trepidation, I might have missed an important part of Madeleine's story, and her read of me. When I asked her about our initial interaction, she told me that her early attempts at advocacy were roundly criticized by transgender adults, who feared a political backlash would result from talking openly about gender diversity in children. She had equal skepticism about journalists and media in general, and often felt misrepresented in their accounts of her work. I realized my own nontraditional gender presentation didn't necessarily make me appear safe, that her read of me as gender nonconforming in my own way didn't automatically position me as an ally.

Indeed, I learned in that conversation that there is reason to wonder what anyone, no matter how transparent their politics, will come to make of this emergent identity group and the group of adults affirming them. So-called conservative and liberal academics, clinicians, and pundits have internal disagreements about what transgender children represent. Are they the ultimate challenge to patriarchy and heteronormativity, or are they yet stronger evidence that the sex/gender system retains its vise-like grip on our social order? Indeed, which possibility would even be socially desirable? Depending on one's political perspective and personal philosophy, it's possible to view transgender children as change agents responsible for blurring our social boundaries between men and women, or as cultural dupes further reinforcing the current patriarchal gender order. Even among those who call themselves feminists and agree that disestablishing hegemonic gender norms is a socially desirable goal, some posit that transgender identities represent the usurpation of uniquely female power by men (Eichler 1987; Irvine 1990; Raymond 1977, 1979). Others, including many who identify with transgender or queer communities, argue that transgender identities have the power to disrupt and destabilize binary gender fundamentally (Bornstein 1995; Butler 2004; Connell 2012; Gagne and Tewksbury 1998; Garber 1997; Halberstam 1998; Stone 1991; Stryker 1995).

So, is this community of parents raising transgender children progressive or conservative? It depends entirely on whom you ask. According to Avishai, Gerber, and Randles, conservative social spaces are "practices, institutions and social arrangements that feminism deems misogynist and/or anti-feminist" (2013a, 396). Feminism, in this formulation, speaks with a monolithic voice, one I've not found in real-world political disagreements over concrete social issues. If, as the authors say, a feminist research agenda is one that seeks "to provide voice, representation, and ultimately power to those whose interests, needs and perspectives were occluded by traditional gendered norms" (400), we cannot enter the field believing our subjects to be allies or foes, or assuming they will believe any particular thing about us. While the authors seem awfully certain who the "repugnant others" (Harding 1991) are, I found instead that the extent of an individual's culpability in constructing, reproducing, or resisting the patriarchal social order is itself an empirical question.

For example, I interviewed Patti on the night before her fourteen-year-old child Avery was scheduled to receive his first injection of Lupron, a synthetic GNRH (or gonadotropin-releasing hormone) antagonist, one of a class of drugs used to suppress the body's production of sex hormones to pause puberty. Patti told me the recent few weeks had been the most difficult time for her around Avery's gender. She compared Avery to transgender children she knows frequently during our conversation. She described other children who said, often with confidence, that they absolutely *are* girls, that there was some sort of mistake when they were born with the bodies they have. Avery used different language. She felt he was less confident in general, and that came across in his more reserved, less forceful responses about gender. But it also left Patti feeling uncertain about whether to proceed with blockers for him, or instead, to let him go through puberty just to "see what happens." She told me she spent a lot of time wondering if perhaps Avery was just gay—wishing in fact, that he would be gay.

> I worry a little bit about the pain for him and the shot but that's not, the bigger thing is . . . here he is 15 years-old still not even knowing what gender he identifies with. And having that be such an enormous part of his life. I mean, the gender. You know, the gender issue, his whole life is about this gender thing. You have to go into the city. We have to get shots. We talk about this all the time because he has to talk about it. He's got a year before a decision's gonna be made on cross-sex hormones if he wants to be able to present himself as female as an adult without any questions. Right? So I guess the worry is that we'll run out of time to make the right decision. And [our doctor] will say to me, you can transition at any time in your life. And my answer is yes, but then you look like a transsexual, you know? You have this body and everyone can just tell.

Patty and many other parents describe a feeling of working against the clock, in conditions of great uncertainty, while trying to decide whether to help their children forestall or allow them to experience their natal puberty. On one hand, they fear the unknown long-term consequences of hormone therapies; on the other, they have copious amounts of evidence suggesting that previous generations of transgender adults suffer mightily when their bodies and identities don't match in the eyes of others. One might read the above passage and think that Patty was at the very vanguard of postmodern parenting. Or, one might argue that her investment in Avery passing is a re-articulation of hegemonic gender norms.

The field my subjects inhabit is no monolith—it is a hodgepodge of structure, constraint, agency, capitulation, and resistance. The job of the ethnographer is precisely to analyze the spatial and symbolic boundaries of communities, their ways of understanding the world and their internal cultures (Blumer 1969; Geertz 1973). It is axiomatic, at this point, to suggest that while individuals actively make choices and structure their own lives, they do not do so free from social constraints (Marx [1852] 1978, 595). From Durkheim to Weber and beyond, sociologists have explored the tense interplay between social facts and the capacities of individuals to resist and reject them (Durkheim [1897] 1952; Weber [1930] 2001). It makes sense, to me, to situate the social self as partly autonomous from the power structures that construct it (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). Although systems of knowledge production subject individuals to normative pressures, people can reject or alter the effects of these forces. This lens foregrounds individuals' capacities to reflect on and interact with the social environment in ways that can either reproduce or change that environment. Subjectivities are constituted in and through the meaning systems, normative structures, and culturally prescribed taxonomies that circulate in society. As Foucault demonstrated, individuals internalize the norms generated by the discourses of sexuality and gender as they are circulated by social institutions such as schools, clinics, mass media, and even social movements. In so doing, they become self-regulating subjects.

Anthony Giddens (1992) posits that the conditions of late modernity provide the materials for individuals to engage in novel forms of reflexivity, which allow them to fashion selves in ways that both embody and resist discourses of power (Green 2010). For example, as Barry Adam argues, contemporary sexual identities constitute more than an assumption of externally imposed categories; they also represent an "expansion of the horizons of what is imaginable for the self" (Adam 2000, cited in Green 2010, 323). Such "autonomous self-stylization" (Foucault 1986) can serve as a means through which individuals assimilate cultural practices and technologies of the self

into their own "practices of liberation" (Foucault 1986; Green 2010). If, as Avishai argues, orthodox women engage in *niddah* to shore up devotional authenticity, is it likewise possible that they make strategic use of religious observance in some circumstances to acquire the capital to resist male domination in other areas of their lives? Do they, like Avishai, even see the need for resistance to these practices? Indeed, Randles herself examines the strategic use by her subjects of state-sponsored marriage promotion as a means of affordable therapy; would they prefer not to have it? Do they share her skepticism of the project as a means of state action? And, finally, how do Lynne Gerber's subjects understand and experience the expansion of gender options within the context of lived heterosexuality as liberating or repressive? Where are the voices of those women feminism presumes to protect?

Studying Each Other

Early on in my fieldwork, I spent several hours in the empty lobby of a conference hotel interviewing one of the most controversial psychologists involved in research and treatment with gender-variant youth. During our talk, he puzzled over the connections between gender identity and sexual orientation. He presented a digital camera, on which he displayed an image of a young adult formerly in his care for severe gender identity disorder (GID). A soft and solemn face gazed into the camera, and as this psychologist continued describing his "adult outcome," I struggled to discern the work this image was supposed to do. Was I supposed to look for evidence of continued femininity? Was he an example of a "successful" male-identified adult?

As we concluded the formal part of our conversation and I switched off my recording device, he presented the camera again and showed me several more photographs. He then asked me if he could take my picture. I asked him why he wished to do that, and he responded, "I just like taking pictures," and proceeded to pull up several others, one of his own child smiling into the screen. I felt immediately uncomfortable, exposed, at issue. I took a mental inventory of my own gender transgressions that day—

+1: I had just gotten a haircut

–1: I was wearing a women's shirt

And I wondered if the young person in the initial photo felt similarly exposed when faced with his camera. Though I acquiesced, I wondered what I would become an example of for the next curious investigator. I became newly aware that he was the first of my subjects to ask if he could also record our discussion, and his tape recorder sat on the table beside mine. It was in this moment I realized that we were studying each other.

This was not the only time I felt my own gender presentation enter the dialogic space between others and myself. Gender could render me suspect, ally, or even data, depending on who was on the other side of my table. Sometimes this reality was made explicit; often it took the form of veiled questions about the origins of the project, my interest, or aspects of my appearance. Indeed it became clear to me that, much like the child subjects of my research, I too lacked control over the meanings made by others of my body and my identity. But it was clear to me that it mattered to my research subjects just who and what I am. They engaged in intentional labor to decipher my identity, relationship to communities with which they identified, and political perspective on their choices to facilitate gender nonconformity in their children. In short, they returned my gaze, and the ways they did so were themselves valuable data on how individuals make sense of gender in others, and how that sense-making affects interactions and relationships.

In the frame of this doctor's camera lens, I felt as if I had moved from the space of colleague, interlocutor, or even just researcher and into the realm of study object, of case example: a gender variant in my own right. In some ways, this taste of objectification offered me the closest approximation of what I imagine the children parented by my research subjects experience—objectification in the service of affirmation. My decision to relent to the lens offered me continued access to this clinician, and it was an important methodological choice. But it wasn't one without emotional consequence for me.

It is a central tenet of feminist ethnography that "knowing is itself determined by the relationship of knower to known" (Visweswaran 1994, 48). The products of the ethnographic endeavor are always "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988, 1990) or "partial truths" (Clifford 1986); every body (and everybody) has gender, and so gender always frames both the perceptions of the researcher and research endeavor by those who are studied and the knowledge produced by person-to-person encounters. An ethnographer is "a positioned subject," who occupies a position of structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision" (Rosaldo 1989, 19). Feminist standpoint theory long ago elaborated not merely the effect of the researcher's gender (Casper 1997; Harding 1991), but also her life experiences and even her embodiment (Hartsock 1983; Reich 2003; Smith 1990, 1997) on the products of ethnographic inquiry. What this means is that our informants are always looking to us and at us and gauging how to interact. This is not a methodological obstacle; this is a social and empirical fact.

My own gender presentation structured my experience of my research subjects in important and occasionally conflicting ways. From the noted psychologist who framed me as his own research subject, to the parents of transgender youth who endeavored strategically to either expose or remove their

children from my presence, to the children who often asked questions or made comments about my body, my gender became a topic of frequent commentary and speculation. Such scrutiny was an unavoidable characteristic of the ethnographic process. The subjects of my research—parents, doctors, and psychologists—were actively seeking to understand the very same phenomenon I was, yet with vastly different epistemological orientations and for different sets of reasons. We were participants in what Judith Stacey (1988) calls a "collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding." Indeed, we were co-creating the very questions we sought to resolve. In this context, who we each were in relation to the material became deeply important.

I witnessed complex processes of identification and disidentification with what group members perceive to be the meanings of transgender created by previous generations. Gender nonconfrming adults, myself included, were deeply symbolic in a variety of conflicting ways for many of the parents. We functioned as floating signifiers for the hopes and fears parents attach to their children's uncertain futures. For some parents, the deep pain and pervasive discrimination faced by transgender adults was too much to bear emotionally. For others, it was the notion that their child might cultivate an oppositional identity, one that radically departs from social norms, that was of primary concern. These parents attempt to disassociate their child from dominant cultural images of transgender adults. For still others, constructing taxonomies of different forms of adult gender variance allowed them to exert more careful control over precisely what *sort* of influence connections to the adult transgender community might have on their children's evolving self-understandings. It was around these issues of identification and disidentification that I felt my own gender presentation become most salient for my interview respondents, and navigating those moments proved treacherous, both methodologically and emotionally.

Jerri, the grandmother and primary parent of a nine-year-old transgirl, expressed concern that the dominant cultural images of transgender people, and in fact, the dominant self-representations she saw them present in community spaces, emphasized transgression over assimilation. Jerri worries this would be the sole representation her granddaughter, Phoebe, has access to, and that she might grow up thinking she has to form an oppositional identity herself.

> You know, I'll be really blunt with you. I don't want to offend you or anyone else, but the truth is a lot of trans people, a lot of trans adults are fringe, right? They're not fully accepted in society. A lot of them present themselves as being different and wanting to be different. Some of them present themselves as being freaks. And if that's their path and they're happy, good for them. And if that's Phoebe's path and she's happy, good for her. But I want her to know that she has many possible

paths. And so I don't want her to go into the trans community and just see the fringe people and so that's my only path. I want her to know that she can be an Olsen twin if she wants to! Or she can be a freak if she wants to. You know, she can have any of those paths.

For a number of parents like Jerri, strategic exposure to certain forms of gender nonconformity functions as a way to manage anxiety about the ambiguity of their child's identity.

Colten's mom, Deirdre, tells me her biggest fear is that Colten will spend a lifetime hiding the truth of his body from potential intimate partners. Deidre hopes that exposing Colten to genderqueer adults who live openly and without making full medical and social transitions might provide him with a sufficient model for how to articulate his own gender, thus alleviating his desire to make a full transition himself. As we conclude our interview, she asks me if I would join them for lunch that afternoon. She says she doesn't want to assume anything about my identity, but she'd really like me to spend some time with Colten. I ask why she thinks that would be important.

My feeling is, the more varied kinds of people that Colten talks to, the better. I want him to see more and more of those people in the gray area. I want him to meet more people that are like him. I want him to meet more people that are female but not at that end of female. In that way, it's kind of like when I discover somebody who speaks Italian, because my husband is Italian, it's like, *Oh, speak Italian to him, please. Speak French to him. He can do it.*

She paused, made direct eye contact and said, slowly and meaningfully, "So *please*. . . . Speak gender stuff to him in a way that I can't."

Other parents of masculine girls (generally of middle school age, and generally those who have yet to fully make a social transition) approached me during my fieldwork at conferences and asked me to spend time with their child. Twelve-year-old Eve's mother and I talked for a long time about her newly emerging gender identity and her own sense of isolation as she struggled to cope with her feelings about it. She asked if I would talk with her husband and with Eve during the lunch break at the conference. I agreed that I would, and she replied, "Oh, that's great. Because here you are, smart and successful and writing a book . . . and you're not a man." She seemed then to pause as if looking to me to confirm my identity. I smiled at her, but didn't reply.

When I met Eve later that day, she was wearing a striped boys rugby shirt, crisp white shorts, and impeccably clean running shoes. The burnt embers of her red hair were cropped short around her ears, longer and disarrayed around her forehead. She had disarming blue-green eyes, and seemed at once shy,

quiet, and utterly self-possessed. We discussed some of the older youth at the conference who left behind unsupportive family to attend. At one point, she leaned in conspiratorially to whisper to me, "I feel so bad for them. They couldn't get blockers and had to go through puberty, and now, they have breasts so they don't look so good." I saw her parents glance at one another out of the corner of my eye. They were watching us carefully, as if prepared to witness something important, revelatory. And then, in unison, they both looked down at my chest.

While there are examples of moments when I felt called upon to minimize aspects of my own gender difference and politicized identity, there were others where it was valuable capital as well. My gender, my gender-queerness, was a resource I could mobilize in the field—sometimes through its amplification and other times through minimizing it. I've no doubt it both garnered me access to certain people and conversations and precluded my access to others. I would argue that this is true for everyone. I worried upon entering the field that research subjects might impute political or psychological motives that would affect my fieldwork interactions. And I cannot say for certain that those encounters were not transformed. Perhaps most tellingly, at many moments, I found myself thinking about Loic Wacquant's ethnography of the "pugilistic craft" of boxing in *Body and Soul*, particularly the use of his body as an ethnographic instrument (2004). Wacquant's notion of "carnal ethnography," of learning the other through the acquisition of bodily habitus felt apt as my own body became a *tabula rasa* for the gendered fantasies of others. But for me, it wasn't the taking on of a gender different than my own that constituted the learning; it was the management of others' reactions to it and to me, their assumptions, discomforts, and interest. It was in those self-conscious moments that I believe I came closest to knowing the gender nonconforming child, by which I mean living the experience of having one's body and identity be the object of a particular type of searching gaze, one tinged with worry, fear, and expectation. This is precisely the kind of scrutiny politically inflected ethnographic research fixes on the lives of those we seek to understand, and it is a mistake to think that our subjects don't feel that gaze.

The recent emergence of transgender children provides sociologists with a unique opportunity to watch an emergent social category in formation. Yet contemporary struggles to understand and define the category itself inflect ethnographic encounters with a sense of urgency for the research subjects themselves. The desire for epistemological clarity leads parents, physicians, and children to investigate the gender of those around them with incredible nuance. I found this gaze impossible to escape, even as I tried to turn it back on those who directed it toward me. Avishai, Gerber, and Randles' fieldwork

reflections left me with several unanswered questions. For instance, how precisely did Avishai's Orthodox participants understand her secularism? Were they able to engage in reflective discussions about their differing vantage points? Did they understand her to be a feminist? How does Gerber think her disclosure of heterosexuality affected her research relationships to those who would have taken on a mentorship role had she been gay? Did they presume her to be an ally? How did they respond, and what does that tell us about the culture of their community?

Because the gender categories and identities I studied are in a process of active iteration, I discovered that they were surprisingly porous and susceptible to contamination by the ethnographic encounter itself. This presented me with certain methodological challenges in the field that warrant examination. Would I participate in organizing activities for the children, knowing that it was in the context of their shared community that many of them labored to form coherent identities? Would my presence and participation ultimately overdetermine what it is I would find? These moments and questions from my fieldwork with families and clinicians reveal both how individuals engage in the process of making new social categories and the many ways gender structures relationships in the ethnographic field.

Conclusions

I am intrigued by the questions raised by the authors in "The Feminist Ethnographer's Dilemma," but I find myself wanting more answers. What is a secular female body to Avishai's informants? How did that change, or did it, on days when she herself was menstruating? Why did Gerber's subjects believe her to be a lesbian, and what does that tell her about their ways of understanding others? Who was Randles to the people in these therapy groups? Was she seen as something of a state agent? An ally? A co-participant? What did each author mean to the objects of their studies, and to what extent did they take on their participants as part of the project of feminist social change?

In *Ethnography through Thick & Thin*, George E. Marcus applauds "fully exploring the personal dimension of a project," but he also cautions that "projection of these affinities from the realm of the more personal to the delineation of more generic social-cultural problems and issues is the key move which gives a project substance and force, and also more legitimacy in the mainstream tradition of social science writing" (1998, 15). I'm not certain I agree with Marcus that "in this move to shift from the personal to the distanced 'social,' a multi-sited canvas or space of ethnographic research emerges almost naturally" (ibid.). Indeed, I think it takes thought, reflection, and study for those of us who closely guard feminist ideals. While the shift from personal to social is a necessary precursor to the project of ethnographic

representation, I remain keenly attuned to the sense carried by my research informants (which I share) that the products of the representation have the potential to influence the political and emotional landscape they inhabit. What I've come to believe fundamentally is that the goal of feminist ethnography, and perhaps for ethnography more generally, is to be "for, not merely about" (Risman 1993) the particular individuals we study. By this, I mean that we must take seriously the self-understandings of our participants and the extent to which they share our political and social goals and ideals.

I found my subjects fully enmeshed in competing social forces; they navigated the realities of a "patriarchal" sex/gender system at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels, and yet they worked diligently and often successfully to transform the contours of that very system. Sometimes they were complicit in enacting forms of gender regulation; at other times they were downright deconstructionist. Part of the work of my analysis involved sorting out the social conditions under which struggles for recognition overdetermined a particular response. I imagine the same could be said for Avishai, Gerber, and Randles' field sites.

Like some other scholars, I do not view transgender phenomena as prima facie reproductions or contraventions of social order, but rather, in more nuanced fashion, as individual actions within a given cultural field, ones that involve struggles over intelligibility, safety, status, and desire (see, e.g., Eyre et al. 2004). Indeed, the denaturalization of male/female difference can, in some cases, disrupt hegemonic norms, and in others, serve to reconsolidate them (Butler 1993, 125). Paying careful attention to the content of my interactions with my research subjects brings to the fore the processual nature of relationship building in the field (Emerson 2009). Communities are structured by practices (Shapira 2010) as much as they are by politics. Talking with our informants openly not only about what they are doing, but how they understand what they are doing, garners far more interesting data than relying on a priori assumptions, as Avishai, Gerber, and Randles themselves came to discover. This insight does not relieve the difficulties of negotiating our different selves with our informants, but it does clarify why recording the ways we negotiate these selves garners even more useful data. Neither does any form of reflexive ethnography grant us escape from a problem that still vexes many feminists—namely, how to interpret those moments when we (women, queers, researchers, humans) come into contact with others who envision a fundamentally different life as desirable, good, or even liveable than we do.

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Note

1. All names of research subjects are pseudonyms.

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