Mobile Subjects, Mobile Methods:
Doing Virtual Ethnography in a Feminist Online Network

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Abstract: In this article I give an account of my cyberethnographic study of the International Women's University "Technology and Culture" (*ifu*) 2000 and the network its participants formed in the *ifu*'s virtual extension, *vifu*. The article offers a description of the methodological considerations and challenges I was confronted with whilst carrying out this research. In addition, I explore these methodological considerations on a conceptual level. Primarily concerned with questions of home and belonging and the question of how these notions figure in contemporary mobile lives, I explore here how conducting online research became the only possible method to adequately reflect the "mobile" nature not only of the event *ifu* and its virtual extension *vifu*, but also the ways in which participants negotiate belonging and mobility in their respective worlds and to the (v)*ifu* network.

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1. Introduction

In this article I give an account of my cyber ethnographic research of, and with the participants of the International Women's University "Technology and Culture" (*ifu*), held in Germany in 2000. The aim of the article is to demonstrate how online connectivity, alongside a differentiated understanding of mobility and academic feminism, shapes belonging in the context of a transnational feminist network. In order to demonstrate this mutually constitutive relationship, I focus here on two interrelated issues. First, I describe how I came to conduct online research and how mobility features in this research process both as an analytical tool and a topic. Secondly, I explore some of the participants' mobility patterns— geographical, social, intellectual, virtual—in more detail and highlight the negotiations of what it means to "belong" that ensue from such mobility. Both elements of this account revolve around *ifu*'s virtual extension, vifu. I focus on how the virtual *ifu* came to be my place of research and how it became a place of

belonging for *ifu* participants where they themselves theorise and negotiate mobility. [1]

2. Mobilities and Methods

What connects transnational feminism, mobility and technology? Arguably, women have come to participate in voluntary movement in more agentic ways than possibly ever before. This change is represented in the considerable body of scholarship discussing transnational flows, nomadic theories, and globalisation processes through a feminist lens. Alongside this move to mobility, women have also been closing the "technology gap" between the sexes, using the internet and communication technologies in order to make connections and establish feminist networks.[1] [2]

In a similar vein, Kevin HANNAM, Mimi SHELLER and John URRY (2006, p.2) suggest that a "new mobilities' paradigm" is emerging in the social sciences which begs us to account for "mobilities in the fullest sense", thus challenging social science to change both the objects of its inquiries and the methodologies for research. As the materiality of mobilities becomes more complex, HANNAM et al. argue, we need to be asking different questions about the conditions of mobility. This includes the premise that mobility cannot be described without taking into account the "spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities" (p.3). Consequently, such paradigm is not simply about "privileging a 'mobile subjectivity'", rather it asks us to track in our research "the power and politics of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis" (p.4). [3]

I propose that nowhere is this more obvious and important than in relation to academic feminism and feminist (cyber) networks. The relatively recent preoccupation of feminist scholarship with mobility, most notably perhaps in the form of theories of transnational feminism and nomadism (BRAIDOTTI, 1994; BRAH, 1996; KAPLAN & GREWAL, 2002; MENDOZA, 2002; MOHANTY, 2003) confirms this. In these arguments we are reminded that, having historically been the symbolic and material epitome of immobility or forced mobility, women are playing an increasingly important role as "agents of change" (KREUTZNER & SCHELHOWE, 2003). That is to say, academia in general, and Women's Studies in particular, have provided the ground for the increase in actual mobility for women as well as a the theorisation of mobility as nomadic scholarship (BRAIDOTTI, 1994) as the context from which and within which, women and feminist scholarship circulate. [4]

Alongside these scholarly developments, our understandings of place and belonging have been deeply transformed by the emergence of the internet and communication technologies. Indeed, "cyberculture" (ESCOBAR, 1994) was at first heralded to change the nature of social life and cultural identity. After an initial surge of excitement by some as to the boundless possibilities for the

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1   The well-established NextGenderation Network and the newly launched WEAVE network are cases in point.

creation of online-identities, most theorists have come to take cyberspace and the ways in which individuals inhabit it as not existing in a cultural, social, political and economic void (e.g. BALSAMO, 1996; GRAY, 1995). Rather, the discussion in the literature has moved from a simple binary opposition of "real" and "virtual" to more nuanced accounts of the imaginaries of the former and the embodied and experienced materialities of the latter. [5]

Furthermore, the technology itself (and the interest in it) can be said to have moved in the background of the debate in favour of explorations of the ways in which individuals make use of it. Forms of connectivity and ways to connect, including questions of power and inequalities, are certainly at the heart of these explorations. In this article, it is my aim to contribute precisely to that development rather than to discuss the internet and its communication tools as such. In particular, I am interested in understanding how belonging and mobility are experienced, theorised, and negotiated online. [6]

Despite these contrasting perceptions of cyberspace and globalisation, most scholars agree that through the increased possibilities of technologically-mediated communication one's physical location is no longer the only reference point for belonging. Put simply, one can be in any one place physically, while simultaneously dwelling elsewhere via the use of communication technology. As Roseanne STONE's (1991, p.285) argument suggests, computer mediated forms of togetherness are thus "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face but under new conditions of both 'meet' and 'face' ". [7]

Following this line of thought, I suggest here that it is of little use to think of "real" space in opposition to and separate from cyberspace. Rather, I adopt here the view that, in order to understand multiple expressions and experiences of mobility, it is more useful to think of offline and online spaces and interactions in relation to each other. John URRY's (2002, 2003) analysis of physical co-presence in relation to virtual dwelling offers a useful step in this direction. [8]

In addition, it is not merely the diversification of modes of mobility and belonging that has been changed by the increase in online dwelling and interaction. Research itself has changed. Chris MANN and Fiona STEWART (2000, p.4) have put forward the claim that there has been a move from "research *about* the Internet to *Internet Research*" (my emphasis). The Internet itself, this suggests, has become an integral part of social life with its own dynamics and effects. Consequently, on-line communications can be analysed in their own terms for the forms of meaning, the shared values and the specific contextual ways of being which emerge in on-line environments. Christine HINE's "Virtual ethnography" (2000) offers a notable, comprehensive study of cyberethnography. HINE's concern is not simply with how people use the Internet but with how those practices make the Internet meaningful in local contexts. As such, she understands the Internet not to be a fixed entity. "Nothing about the Internet and its use is inherently meaningful or functional" (p.21), she argues. Rather, like any other technology, its uses have to be learned and its content has to be given meaning. Its meaning emerges through the ways in which individuals use it. The

status of the Internet as a site for community-like formations is achieved and sustained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted and reinterpreted. Sympathetic to these arguments, in the remainder of this article, I would thus like to highlight specifically the interconnectedness and mutual creation of life online and life offline. Without setting these two modalities up as a simple binarism, I explore in what follows how versions of belonging emerge through *vifu* but stem from and retrospectively construct the bounded temporal and spatial experience of *ifu*. [9]

A clearer idea of the event *ifu*, the virtual platform *vifu*, and the network of women that emerged from both will illustrate the context above. [10]

3. The International Women's University "Technology and Culture" 2000 (*ifu*)

Inspired by the slogan "100 days for 100 years"[2], the first International Women's University "Technology and Culture" 2000 (*ifu*) was held in Germany and designed as a three-month postgraduate program with a decidedly international, women only student body; an interdisciplinary curriculum; and a theoretical focus on women and gender. Overall, the event consisted of a number of components and groups of actors. The curriculum was organised into 6 "Project Areas" (PAs) rather than traditional academic disciplines. These PAs were Body, City, Information, Migration, Water, and Work and application by participants was to one of them respectively. In total 747 women from 105 countries participated in the academic program of *ifu*. In addition to the student participants, 313 lecturers from 49 countries contributed to *ifu*. Alongside these two main groups of academic actors, *ifu* was equipped with a large number of administrative staff, as well as 74 academic tutors. In addition, the project comprised three further components, a Service Centre, an Open Space program and lastly a virtual component, the Virtual International Women's University (*vifu*). [11]

The women who attended the event as participants came from a wide array of different walks of life. Mainly, they had an academic background (predominantly, but not exclusively, in the Social Sciences, including Gender and Women's Studies). A substantial number of participants had a professional or vocational background (for example in law, teaching, NGO work, human rights, medicine, developmental aid work, social work). [12]

Ifu was designed both as emerging from and contributing to the reforms in Higher Education in Germany in particular and in Europe more generally.[3] These are in particular developments toward increased internationality of student bodies, including a rise in student mobility; the reorientation of academic disciplines toward interdisciplinary research; as well as the trend toward the corporatisation of universities. When the idea of *ifu* materialised, its creators had hopeful and

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2   Referring to 100 years of Women's Movement in Germany.

3   Directly related to the Bologna process (e.g. http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/).

utopian visions in mind about what such a space would be like, who would inhabit it and how it would change the world. [13]

In "Die eigene Hochschule" [The own university] (NEUSEL, 2000), *ifu*-president Aylâ NEUSEL maps out the desired aims of the event as follows: it should give women a chance to learn in a women-only space. From there, it should set new impulses for the academy as a whole. It should promote and facilitate networking between women. Furthermore, the event's international population should be accommodated by conducting the event in English. Academically, it should offer a dense, high quality, interdisciplinary curriculum based on the premise that gender, race, and class deeply structure all aspects of life. Through these aims, the event is presented as hopeful of a better future for academic feminism, and determined to further enhance women's possibilities to network across disciplinary and geographical borders. [14]

Most importantly for my argument here, networking and enduring connectivity among the student population should be sustained by and through a <u>virtual platform</u>. [15]

3.1 Virtual *ifu*: *vifu*

The virtual *ifu* was imagined to enable and establish a network of women that was not limited to or restricted by a particular time and space. *Vifu* is an example that both contributes to and is influenced by the context of debates about the increase in mobility and the decrease in distance due to computer-based communication (see above). Those of us privileged enough to have frequent and working internet-access are forever but "an e-mail away" and academic life in particular is one arena which is characterised by a sometimes overwhelming onscreen dwelling. It is thus not surprising that *ifu*'s virtuality has been regarded by its founders as representative of "the development and implementation of visions of the 21st century university" (METZ-GÖCKEL, 2002, p.346, my translation). *Vifu* aims to resemble the alumnae activities and networks which have long been com-mon in the Anglo-American academic tradition, where affiliation with one's educa-tional institution does not end on the day one graduates but is sustained—often for a lifetime—via newsletters, university magazines, and reunion meetings. [16]

"Virtual university", as Heidi SCHELHOWE (2001) coordinator of the *vifu* project explains, means initially nothing else than a traditional university setup facilitated by computer technology to allow for long-distance learning. *Vifu*, however, wanted to achieve more than that. It was imagined as a "lived in" space, a truly user friendly platform for networking in which focus was on the "being together", rather than technological know-how. "Our approach" Gabriele KREUTZNER (in KREUTZNER & SCHELHOWE, 2003, p.111), another team member, puts it, is one that thus "subordinates technological invention to social innovation". [17]

Ifu's long-term existence in cyberspace was thus not considered the "next best thing to the real thing" but a necessary and timely extension of and addition to

ifu's onsite-ness. Six years on, the continuing online activity and exchange among *ifu* participants indicates the "realness" of *vifu*. [18]

So when *ifu* became *vifu*, a corporeal, on-site community was meant to become a virtual one—a networked web of attachments and connections. This network, it was hoped, would further aid "relating the global and the local". Consequently, virtual connections were not so much seen as created by electronic networks in and of themselves but rather as an "intercultural exchange" in which one's local context becomes visible and forms the "basis for mutual understanding and diversity at the same time" (SCHELHOWE, 2001, p.15). [19]

In sum, *vifu* enabled communication between *ifu* participants beyond *ifu*'s three-months on site period, thus enabling participants to "speak and act in local contexts with the new experiences and the knowledge you have gained at *ifu*" (SCHELHOWE, 2001, p.16). With this in mind, SCHELHOWE would like to see *ifu* as a starting point for a rich offering of academic and other information about subjects which are important for women—some of which she sees represented in the interdisciplinary themes of the event's project areas. [20]

What did and does *vifu* look like, then and what does it offer its users? Most basically, from a user and member's (but also visitor's) point of view, it is a website:
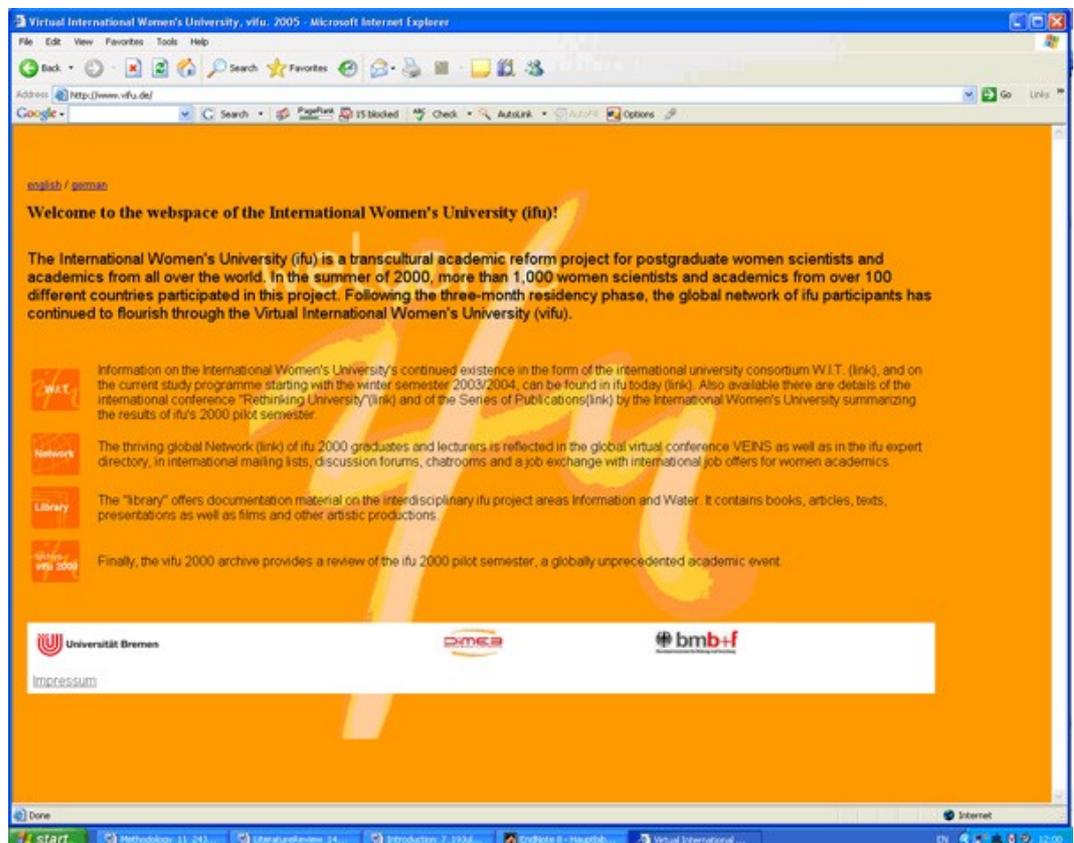

Figure 1: A vision of *vifu*'s website [21]

On http://www.vifu.de/, after a brief introduction to *ifu* as a transcultural academic reform project for postgraduate women scientists and academics from all over the world, you find a number of portals into different parts of this global network of *ifu* participants which continue[s] to flourish through the Virtual International Women's University. These portals are a link to the proposed continuation of *ifu* in the shape of a Masters programme; a link to the Network section which includes a directory of participants and their various expertises, discussion forums, and a platform for the circulation of job advertisements and other information. In addition, it offers a link to the Library section, in which documentation of *ifu*, such as media coverage, can be found. Older documents and links can be accessed via the fourth link to the *ifu* 2000 archive. When using this website you will find that some of these links lead into dead ends or "under construction" alerts. This is in part due to the fact that in 2003 the server was attacked and severely damaged. As a consequence some information was irretrievably lost. In addition, due to the precarious funding situation of the team of researchers who maintain the server, reconstruction has been a patchy and slow process. [22]

Arguably the most important component of *vifu*, from a participant's point of view, are *vifu*'s mailing list facilities of which the students@*vifu* list is to date the most active and comprises the largest number of subscribers. A number of other, smaller (and often purpose and/or topic bound) lists also exist. It was on the students list where most of my research took place. [23]

It is clear that *ifu* was designed as an international project, bringing together women from all over the world. *Ifu*'s virtual component was designed to help facilitate sustained connections between these women beyond the event's relatively short onsite period of three months. *Vifu* should help eliminate some of the geographical (as well as cultural) differences between *ifu*-participants, making *ifu* a truly "mobile" event by carrying on its ripple effects in the various locations its participants inhabit. [24]

In my research on *ifu* and *vifu* I wanted to understand how this highly mobile group of women experiences and reflects upon their mobility practices, and how these are also but not only shaped by the event *ifu* itself. In addition, I was interested in how such mobility affected their understanding of home and belonging. And thirdly, I wanted to explore whether online networks such as *vifu* can become places of belonging when belonging "in the real world" might not always be straightforward. These questions, I think, can only be explored by looking at the ways in which on-site dwelling and subsequent online-dwelling inform and mutually constitute each other. [25]

Whilst carrying out my research, I realised that each of these questions required me to not only take on a slightly different researcher position but also to adopt a different set of research tools. Consequently, my research combined fact-to-face interviews with online research and textual analysis. Conceptually, it is my suggestion that when examining mobility it is also, but by no means merely, "movement" that requires attention. Instances of togetherness and belonging,

both online and onsite, should not be understood merely as evidence of movement. It is also the way in which we need to think about mobility itself that needs to be rethought. [26]

In the remainder of this article I highlight thus how a) geographical mobility challenges not only where and what belonging means but also b), with what methodological tools we can explore mobility. Below I give two examples. First, I give an insight into the research process itself, some of the questions I had and methodological decisions I took. Secondly, I give an example of mailing list discussions among *v/ifu*-participants in which different meanings of home, belonging and mobility are discussed with regard to *ifu* and *vifu*. [27]

4. Tracing Mobility, Making Belonging

4.1 Becoming online researcher

Ethnographic research has seen fundamental changes from its colonial origins (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986), especially in so far as it has begun to take into account the increasing and diverse mobilities emergent in the processes of globalisation (e.g. GILLE & O'RIAIN, 2002). As a methodology, it has become more multifaceted, and more often than not multi-sited, than it once was. [28]

Informed by these changes, I take ethnography to be both a set of research practices such as data gathering through careful observation and a politically aware approach towards the materials one comes to call the empirical fabric of one's study. Donna HARAWAY (1997, p.191) has called such an approach "a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining mindful and accountable". [29]

A number of methodological characteristics mark thus what I come to call my cyberethnograpy: having been immersed in the group of people populating this project, there are elements of participant observation (or rather, observing participation) in this study; my own involvement in *ifu* and its aftermath and my memories thereof (some captured in writing, some experiences, encounters and impressions that came and went, leaving their marks on my memory) strongly resembles the collection of "fieldnotes" the ethnographic researcher is traditionally expected to bring back from the field. [30]

In other ways however, my research forced me precisely to move away from classic understandings of ethnographic research, where those to be studied are often located in a bounded (and exotic) "elsewhere", to be visited and dwelled with for the duration of the research process. Whilst conducting research, such an understanding was disturbed in two ways. First—and, you will by now have understood, crucially—my research participants are not easily located. In fact, their participation in *ifu* was their only moment of common fixedness in the same physical space. However, I was interested in them *precisely because* of their mobility and non-fixedness. Consequently, I would be hard pressed to define the

spatial boundaries of my field, as these are a) constructed retrospectively (ROSENEIL, 1993) and b) shifting from corporeal sites to virtual sites. [31]

Wanting to research the mobility practices and the ways in which the women in this network negotiate belonging, I found myself confronted with a number of questions, some conceptual, some mundane and practical. How could I reach potential research participants? How could I "interview" them, given that I was "here" and they were scattered elsewhere? Where exactly *were* the boundaries of my field? Was my participation in *ifu* "fieldwork"? Does my own dwelling in *vifu* count as fieldwork or is it only fieldwork when I hang out there "as a researcher" and how would I be different then from being "me"? [32]

4.2 Meanings of "home"

My research of the *ifu* network did not begin in cyberspace. Rather, it started out with a number of face-to-face interviews with *ifu*-participants during my own participation in the event as a student in the project area Body. Given *ifu*'s parameters of internationality it was not surprising that whilst attending the event I encountered a substantial number of women who are indeed, academically, geographically and socially extremely mobile. While talking to other *ifu* participants I also learned that women's mobility patterns are coloured by particular contradictions and challenges. These women seemed to have reflected a lot about their own mobility, including the weighing of the personal costs and benefits of being mobile, especially when the driving force behind their mobility was professional advancement. I was curious what those negotiations and possible trade offs were. [33]

The stories that emerged from these interviews pointed to several layers of the meanings of "home" and belonging and of how they are constructed and experienced. Home was something that none of the women took for granted and that they had, indeed, spent a good deal of time thinking about. Often, home was experienced as an absence or a progressive loss. This loss was mainly based on either having left a childhood home in order to pursue education and/or travel or never having experienced what was romantically imagined as an unspoiled childhood home. Consequently, home had to be grafted in the comings and goings of one's biographical and professional trajectory. "Where" home was located differed from interviewee to interviewee. For some it was a geographical concept, for others a more emotional-intellectual one. For some, home was a constantly evolving and emerging concept that changed shape and meaning alongside other factors. Notably, all the women I interviewed were in an economic and social position to move freely (geographically as well as socially). Such a position will necessarily have had an impact on how they perceive their experience of being-at-home and the privilege to mourn the loss of home that, in one way or another they feel entitled to. [34]

Arguably, mobility can be seen as one of the core conditions of modern consciousness (e.g. BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1983) and Europe as a socio-geographical formation is in fact the outcome of mass movements. Furthermore,

the formation and the notion of the "homelessness" of mind has been described as a specific modern form of consciousness (BERGER, BERGER & KELLNER, 1974). In contrast, *contemporary* mobility, and especially that of women, is marked by an apparent paradox. On the one hand there is an increase in agency of some over their mobility[4], on the other hand, being highly mobile is now often seen as a *required* necessity of professional advancement, thus challenging many of the characteristics of women's biographies. I suggest therefore, that the emotionally informed accounts of home and belonging as I just described them can be read as confirming long-standing dilemmas while simultaneously addressing new complexities. Making sense of being part of a globalised elite of female academics requires a more nuanced conception of mobility and belonging. [35]

The narratives in the initial interviews confirmed that *ifu* did indeed attract—and arguably help to create—women who were highly mobile and who did intellectualise *as well as* "emotionalise" the experience of their own mobility, including the impact this has on the meanings of home. I wondered what are the gendered social, political and subjective configurations of being mobile? How do these women negotiate the question of "home" in the making of their identities? And how does trans-national mobility variously refigure what is meant by "home" and "belonging"? In addition, I began to wonder whether an event such as *ifu* can become a reference point of belonging as well as a platform for the expression of social changes, such as the existence of a growing number of (geographically and intellectually) mobile women. [36]

Thus, the necessity for online research began to emerge. For, quite simply, if I was to reach and research the members of this dispersed network, I had no choice but to do so on the basis of the experience they all shared—attending *ifu*—and in the one place they all shared—*vifu*. The very fact that my research participants are mobile necessitated moving my research online. [37]

Despite having been a member of my field and despite having conducted face-to-face interviews, I experienced the moment of beginning to conduct online research very much as a second entry into the field and almost as a "starting over" of the entire research process, including a re-positioning of myself towards the project, the field, the participants, and what it was I wanted to find out. When I first approached *ifu*-participants through *vifu* platforms I was reminded of Christine HINE's (2000, p.74) experience of initiating a cyber study, where the initial e-mail one sends seems to take on monumental significance "as [the] first and possibly only opportunity to perform [one's] identity as a researcher". Unlike HINE, however, I had already met and formed personal relationships with some of the women I knew to be present online. I also already had first hand experience of the event I studied as well as a period of dwelling "privately" (as a "normal participant") in the online spaces that I was now to study and to draw on as a resource. However, I felt that this personal knowledge and experience was pre-

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4 Of particular political importance when read in relation to the persistent powerlessness others have over their mobility.

cisely what made the shift from "participant/member" to "researcher" rather tricky indeed. [38]

My mixed feelings toward beginning online research, and thus necessarily transforming my own position in this online community that also formed an important part of my personal life, are aptly reflected by Radhika GAJJALA's (2002) warning that doing ethnographic work in cyberspace might change the dynamics of power and agency between researcher and participants. In "An interrupted postcolonial/feminist cyberethnography" she says that "considering the interactive nature of online participation […] questions arise as to who is an ethnographer, who qualifies to be a 'native' informant, and what the options are for refusing to be a subject" (GAJJALA, 2002, p.179). I was more than aware that it is extremely difficult to not only spot, let alone discuss, inequalities in online spaces for, as Chris MANN and Fiona STEWART (2000, p.141) point out, online interactions need "to be expressed as words, not silence". In other words, online it is difficult to detect what is not directly expressed and visibly, openly "there". Despite anticipating similar challenges, I found the women on the *vifu* network to be extremely helpful and interested in the project, eagerly sharing their thoughts and experiences with me. In fact, and to my own surprise, in more than one instance, participants' accounts had an almost confessional tone and were characterised by a sense of gratitude to have been given the opportunity to contemplate and express issues that usually only lingered in the back of one's mind yet affected many areas of these women's lives. This can be interpreted as further proof for the ongoing resonance of questions of home and belonging (see above). I believe that one beneficial consequence of the "sameness" between myself as a researcher and the women who were my research subjects, was a high level of understanding and shared theoretical background. I take my acceptance as a researcher as much as an expression of this as some aspects of the content of replies. In some instances research participants did, for example, discuss the project with me and/or ask questions of clarification where they did not feel that my introduction gave them sufficient information. It seemed as though my insider status facilitated such questioning and debating. [39]

When I initially introduced myself and my research I summarised the aim of my research as being about "how 'home' is experienced by people like 'us' *ifu*ites". It was one of my goals to understand how, within our mobilities and understandings of home, we know "how and where we 'belong'". [40]

In the hope to spark a sense of recognition in recipients, I began the e-mail with a number of questions, ranging from associations of home with a geographical place, to the role of online connectivity, to, lastly, the question how *ifu* and this network of women features as a "homely" point of reference:

- • If someone asked you "where are you from", would you not really know how to answer that question?

- • Are you one of those busy women who move around a lot (for whatever reason) and live "all over the place"?

- • Do you live (far) away from your "home" country and aren't sure anymore what that means anyway?

- • Do you lead a nomadic lifestyle in which most of your friends are only with you in virtual spaces?

- • Do you speak several languages and are not always sure which one is "yours"?

- • Do you feel that your experiences at *ifu* were somehow a rollercoaster of all those questions? [41]

Finally, I tagged the following postscript at the end of the invitation:

> IMPORTANT
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> I am sending this e-mail out now due to the upheaval concerning the future of *vifu* and the insecurity of our mailing lists' future. So, please, if you are interested in participating in my study, let me know as soon as you can (the latest by the 30th of June), so that I can reach you later even in the worst case ... [42]

I posted this invitation to the "students" mailing list almost one year to the day after *ifu*'s onsite period had begun. It was a time when the list was very lively indeed and *ifu*-participants had settled into the transition from onsite-ness to now having become an online community. I aimed to formulate this call for research participation as openly as I could.[5] I wanted the women's own associations with the questions and issues I offered them. In fact, in a second call I widened these possibilities even further by actively inviting women to contribute to the project not only in the form of writing, but also to draw on other artefacts such as photographs, objects and so on. [43]

My insecurity and apprehensiveness as a researcher seems obvious in this posting. In fact, I almost seem to "disappear" as a researcher by aligning myself to the women on the mailing list as sharing with them our attendance at *ifu* and pointing out to them that it is in their hands whether or not I will, in fact, "become a researcher" in and of this event, their lives and this online space. Expressing my own fears about taking on this researcher position as much as not wanting under any circumstances to impose power and authority, I downplay my function by pointing out that this is "nothing much different from what a lot of us *ifu*ites already do anyway". [44]

The postscript attached at the end of my e-mail points to another, noteworthy aspect of the precariousness of online research: As it happened, at the time of

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5   The fact that, seemingly in opposition to this aim, the questions in this research call are closed questions requires some explanation. The questions were not intended to be answered in a survey-like fashion. Rather, they were designed as "flash cards" for associations with the topics raised. As such they were successful in inspiring participants to produce their own accounts, using the voice and format best suited for each individual participant.

posting, the financial future of the server and, hence, the network itself, was very uncertain. Part and parcel of the financial support for *ifu* was sufficient funding for the *vifu*-server (the necessary technology as well as the humans maintaining it). It was unclear from the outset what would happen beyond *ifu*'s onsite period but around the time I sent this research call the server's future was more insecure than ever before. Consequently, there was a palpable, panicky unease on the mailing list. Some list members were in the midst of establishing alternative possibilities, such as creating a Yahoo newsgroup, frantically gathering e-mail addresses and instructing list members in how to subscribe to such a platform. The final paragraph of my e-mail reflects my own fear of losing track of my research participants. As it turned out, more funding was secured and the server continued to exist unchanged (at least to the face of its users). It was indeed, updated and expanded and went on to receive an ICT award [6]—until it was attacked and destroyed and had to be reconstructed almost from scratch. Unfortunately, some parts of the original website could never fully be rebuilt and much of the older information is no longer available.[7] [45]

Replies to my invitation took a number of forms. They varied from a simple "I am interested" to lengthy biographical narratives. I was touched by the supportive tone of the replies—in fact, there was often a sense of "thankfulness" that my e-mail had initiated the possibility to stop and contemplate personal and political issues that were somehow "there" but did not necessarily penetrate one's everyday living and thinking. Most women positioned themselves in their replies both biographically, professionally and in their relation to *ifu*. They detailed the various places in which they lived throughout their lives and some of the circumstances. In contrast to the previously conducted face-to-face interviews, the narrations seemed to raise more complex negotiations of mobility, suggestion a transformative impact of the event ifu. The sheer amount of movement present in these biographies was quite astonishing. Interestingly, in some ways it only became fully apparent to me when I compared it to some postings in which women pointed out their "lack" of movement, stating that they have "only" lived in two different countries. That is, what became apparent in these replies was an implicit understanding of mobility as a cultural currency and the more "exotic" the trajectory was perceived to be, the more authenticity those western women felt they had as members of my project. Levels of authenticity for a "truly globally mobile" trajectory were described as, for example, living, working and travelling in non-European countries, living and working in a language other than one's mother tongue, but also in the very scale of the mobility that had taken place. That is not to say that mobility is only to be considered or experienced as a matter of miles travelled but rather as an accumulation of difference. Often respondents shared with me their own research on related topics and opened up the possibility for professional exchange. A couple of respondents single-

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6   The "Multimedia Transfer 2003", a big German competition for young multimedia specialists, for which the *vifu* team applied with the *vifu* expert directory and *vifu* library. Having received this award meant that the team was invited go to the 11th (2003) European Congress for Educational and Information Technologies (LEARNTEC) in Karlsruhe in order to present *vifu* to a large, professionally relevant public.

7   Yet another element of the precariousness of online life and documentation but one that will have to be explored elsewhere.

handedly "globalised" (and refined) my project by forwarding my e-mail to people they considered interested and interesting but who had not attended *ifu*. I received 28 replies to my initial research call and 12 to the second. [46]

The wide ranging and surprisingly generous accounts, especially in response to my second research call, led me to enter a final stage of online research, in which my approach became more structured. Based on information I had gathered so far, I designed a questionnaire and circulated it via the students mailing list. The questionnaire was divided in several sections and asked for some socio-demographic pointers such as country of origin, current country of residence, countries lived in the past, reasons (professional/personal) for having lived in these places. Further I asked questions about linguistic mobility; how many languages do participants speak, how many languages they inhabit in their current daily lives and what they consider to be their "mother tongue". I inquired about their familial status—relationships, marriage, whether or not they have children, as well as about professional background (training and current profession). In a further section I inquired about self-definitions: I offer a number of mobility labels (such as migrant, exile, nomad, traveller, refugee) and ask participants whether or not they can identify with any of them. I asked a similar question about feminism. Finally, I attempt to locate *ifu* in their lives by asking whether they understand *ifu* and/or *vifu* as a place of belonging. Knowing that I am dealing with a predominantly academic target group I decided to ask as well for a theoretical/intellectual positioning of participants by asking them to name up to three texts (academic or otherwise) that have most inspired them. [47]

I decided on this final method of information gathering for two reasons. Firstly, I thought it useful to gain insights into the *ifu* population that would allow for more direct comparison between individual women. Secondly, it was driven by a certain degree of fear of not having "enough" data and my own feeling that information provided in a questionnaire would somehow be more "legitimate" than "just e-mails". [48]

The average age of my research participants was, at the time of fieldwork, 32, which also reflects the average age of *ifu* participants overall. Most of the women answering my online questionnaire would define themselves as feminists, although some are "undecided" and one woman answered with a distinct "no". Most of my research participants are originally from Western countries, ranging from Britain, Sweden, Germany, Italy to Greece, and the Netherlands but going as far as India and the United States as well as Israel, Turkey, Croatia and the Ukraine. In three cases, country of origin and nationality differ from each other. Almost none of them, however, were at the time of fieldwork resident in their country of origin—and surprisingly, all those women who were, were German, which makes this group of research participants the least mobile. Most members of this small group of women have also not actually lived in any other countries apart from Germany. Current countries of residence span a similar field to countries of origin. They range from Canada to Estonia and include the UK, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Austria, France and the Netherlands. The length of residency in any given case differs widely and ranges from "all my life" to just a

few months but averages at approximately three and a half years. Most of my research participants have lived in two or three different countries and most of them on a continent different from their original home place. There are a number of reasons for the women's mobility but in most cases, "work" or "research" is mentioned as the motor, and in one case "father's profession". The legal status of research participants in their respective countries of residence is either as a citizen, a permanent resident or on a visa (mostly as a student). One of them is resident as a political refugee and one is classified as "undocumented". All of my research participants share a similar professional background, namely in research and teaching. Interestingly, most women live in a long-term romantic relationship and approximately half of them live with a partner of a different nationality than their own. This applies equally to women who define themselves as "straight" and those who define themselves as "queer" (approximately two thirds and one third of participants respectively). Furthermore, many of these relationships are long distance. Mobility is thus not completely restricted to the professional realm but is also, one could argue, of a "cultural kind" in so far as there will be a number of negotiations (cultural as well as political and bureaucratic) that arise from these relationships. In some instances "love" is mentioned as the reason for one's mobility. That is to say, these women have decided to move to where their partners were located (ideally combined with a professional move/development of their own). It is perhaps not surprising that these mobile relationships are childless. In fact, only one woman who participated in my research has children and her biography is one that is marked by the absence of geographical mobility. [49]

Understandings of one's own mobility vary greatly among the women who participated in my research, although most women would define themselves either as global citizens or travellers. A number of women identified with the category of the nomad and a small number thought of themselves as migrants, one woman respectively as refugee and as exile and two as diasporic. Disidentifications corresponded in a contrasting manner. That is to say, those women who identified their mobility as diasporic or exilic or thought of themselves as refugees were most likely to have a strong disassociation with categories such as global citizen. And vice versa, women who thought of themselves as travellers, tended to disidentify strongly with migrant or refugee. The latter, they explained has strong connotations with force and displacement whereas they perceived their own mobility as more privileged. Other categories given were "restless", "migrant by choice", "homeless", "illegal", "unsettled", "foreigner" and "globe trotter". [50]

When asked about their associations with home, the importance of roots, family and relationships is mentioned most often. A number of women mention "childhood" as a reference point of their definition of home. Also, "geography" plays an important role in whether one feels at home or not. This means, home is associated with a place but often a specific place with respect to its geography. "Safety" and "comfort" are mentioned as important characteristics of feeling at home. Interestingly, it is one woman who lives in Israel and one woman who is a political refugee resident in Sweden, who stress the latter. With respect to *ifu*'s

aim to attract internationally mobile women, the group of participants who contributed to my research certainly matched this expectation. What became strikingly obvious among this group of women is the high level of everyday introspection and reflexivity these women engage in with respect to their mobility. [51]

It proved useful to take this path as indeed the questionnaires did give me information that allowed for a comparative analysis between individual participants. This, in turn, allowed me to see certain patterns in their biographies and in the stories they told me that other kinds of data could not necessarily have achieved in such a clear fashion. [52]

Overall, the period of online research lasted several months, although, for the reasons outlined above, its beginning and especially its end are hard to pinpoint. My own participation in the network as well as the occasional research-related exchange continued even when I had officially completed my fieldwork. In addition to the online fieldwork, I was able to conduct two face-to-face interviews with participants who had also replied to my research calls and answered my online questionnaire. Doubtless, in these two cases, I was able to construct the cases with most depth. [53]

Although, as has become apparent, carrying out research online was necessitated by my research questions, I remain an uneasy cyberethnographer and there have been a few moments of discomfort. Despite having "outed" myself as a researcher to the *vifu* community, explaining my project and its aims, and despite having received much positive feedback by enthusiastic participants, I could never shed the uneasiness of feeling like a lurker at best, and a spying intruder at worst. In my particular situation, however, I also felt that my discomfort was related to issues of consent as well as anonymity. For I often felt that to a certain degree it was rather the absence of protest that formed the basis of the community's approval of my research, than a formal expression of consent (see MANN & STEWART, 2000, p.56). For those community members who did not reply to my research calls still remained members of the online forum, to which I had full access. Granted that I did not receive any specific information about their lives with respect to my research questions, I was still able to trace their online exchanges. [54]

But what about *ifu*? How, if at all, did *ifu* feature in the narrations of research participants? Frequently, *ifu* was mentioned as an intellectual as well as emotional home "where I touch base every so often … in order to reconnect with that home-feeling I had at *ifu*". In the final section of this article I elaborate on this latter version of home and explore how *ifu* and *vifu* interact with each other and shape each other as home-places. [55]

4.3 Making home online

After the 3-month onsite period, participants returned back home to re-root themselves in their respective home places. In addition, they constructed a collective sense of belonging to their "*ifu*-home". That is to say, for participants

the event itself did not end after its 3-month onsite period. Rather, this could be seen as just the beginning of something else. Namely, it was the beginning of becoming a geographically dispersed collective which creates togetherness "elsewhere". [56]

This begs the question whether and how in cyberspace belonging becomes not only collective but also transcends geographical definitions. Rather than posing a dichotomy of home versus not-home, I found in my research the co-existence of several homes: being at home in one's geographical location while simultaneously writing home in (and to) cyberspace. As participants claim *vifu* as a place of connectivity, the event *ifu* is viewed both more nostalgically as an unspoilt place of origin and more critically (with increased distance). Arguing with Sara AHMED (2004, p.37), we might call such collective attachment—to *ifu* as well as one another—"the *making* of ground, rather than the *settlement on* ground" (my emphasis). [57]

In an attempt to both soften and complicate the opposition of face-to-faceness and online dwelling, John URRY (2003) has contemplated the interrelation and mutual construction of both modes of being together. In "Social networks, travel and talk" he argues that physical encounters are both the premise and an effect of increased "networkisation" of social life. Crucial in URRY's (2003, p.156) argument is the function of co-present encounters, or the "meetingness", that is pivotal to social life increasingly involving "strange combinations of increasing distance and intermittent co-presence". Co-presence, he suggests, "is as significant to a networked society as are the extraordinary transformations of communications engendered by the Internet galaxy" (URRY, 2003, p.158) for it is this being together in a shared place that perpetuates the emotional bonds between people that the computer had allowed to emerge in the first place. I take from URRY's argument the importance of "being there in the flesh" for the creation of a deeper, more meaningful enactment of an online space. [58]

And yet, URRY's argument does seem not extend to a reworking of the very structures and meanings of face-to-faceness and virtuality respectively. Nor does he seem to take account of the full complexity of how these two modes of being influence each other in the emergence of a shared identity. I would thus like to extend URRY's argument by stressing the importance of the corporeal event as a reference point for a sense of belonging and through that, shared identity as "*ifu* women". It seems thus important to not simply oppose "real" space and online space, but to consider that it might simply be that the very "stuff" of togetherness changes. [59]

How might we think about the relation between experience-based or face-to-face (co)presence on one hand, and online belonging/connectivity on the other? What are we to make of the contradicting "layers of signification" of *ifu* and *vifu*, which are, as one list member describes, divided into "a real small group of people that I have a strong impression of and feel attached to" on the one hand and on the other "1000 or so women who actually attended *ifu* and we share this identity by imagination (I don't actually know them)"? [60]

In vifu, "having been there" is not constructed with reference to geography, but rather in reference to a shared event. The event is constructed as a reference point for imagined community. The "realness" of *vifu* is thus neither reducible to physical co-presence, nor to the realm of imagined togetherness in the way Benedict ANDERSON (1983) for example defines it. *Vifu* is seen as an affective, emotional space based on an imagined shared experience, as another list member puts it: "The actual power of *vifu*", she writes in an e-mail to the mailing list, "is the strong emotion that we've been preserving since three years and the emotion was developed from our live participation in the three months pilot project" (posted 29/10/2003). Whereas it could and has been argued that emotional online-attachment gets established through meeting (likeminded people) in e-spaces (e.g. RHEINGOLD, 1994) and/or as suggested by URRY through a combination of virtual and face-to-face encounters, the strong emotional attachment to *vifu* is explained by the shared experience of having participated in *ifu*. On the students mailing list, the *vifu* network is frequently described as a web of connections and support that feels comfortable because there seems to be a understanding of its members as having a high level of intercultural and global "literacy". One list member describes it as follows:

> "I have found myself more and more participant in a large loose web of (European) feminists who read each other and think with each other and more and more support each other also emotionally and personally: in short some kind of non-local feminist post-family is forming bit by bit and I am continually amazed to feel so comfortable in it." [61]

In *vifu*, another list member writes, she feels as so she is "part of a global group of women with a shared past and sometimes shared goals, interests, worries". *Vifu* thus becomes a place of possibilities to re-shape and invent versions of belonging that takes mobility into account because, as yet another list member put it "no other forum in my life offers a possibility to dream of a real global women's network". [62]

Read in dialogue with the empirical data above, these examples of discussions on the students mailing list illuminate the necessity to rethink feminist places and modes of belonging and, as part of a larger and wider project, invite us to critically assess the multiple dimensions of the changing nature of feminism as a "mobile project". Increasingly, as I have demonstrated throughout, geographically rooted and institutionally grounded settings are only one way to carve out "places of our own". [63]

5. Conclusion

Online connectivity, alongside a differentiated understanding of mobility patterns, plays a shaping role in the making of global feminist belonging while academic feminism, simultaneously, poses both challenges and opportunities to the ways in which belonging is created and experienced. I have demonstrated this here by giving two viewpoints onto and into the networks emerging from *ifu* and *vifu*. Firstly, I offered an account of my position as a researcher who inevitably had to

go online in order to reach her research subjects. It was my aim to demonstrate how conducting research online came to be the best possible method for this project, most crucially because it allowed me to reach a geographically dispersed group of women. This would not have been possible by other means of research. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of the material gathered in face-to-face interviews with the material gathered online suggests the need to remain mindful of the limitations of online research. This caution is best reflected in the very object of my research—online belonging, as I have demonstrated throughout, gained layers of meaning due to the having-been-together on-site (at *ifu*). Secondly, I offered examples of mailing list discussion among members of the *vifu* network which highlight the importance of *ifu* and *vifu* as places of transnational and multi-sited belonging. My argument here can thus be read as a contribution to current debates in feminist theory, mobility and belonging by highlighting the increasing importance of communication technologies and the "homing work" that is necessary and possible in online forums. [64]

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