

Entangled Subjects - Reflections on Epistemic Collectivity in Migration

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ENTANGLED SUBJECTS –
REFLECTIONS ON EPISTEMIC
COLLECTIVITY IN MIGRATION¹

Ich bin einverstanden mit dieser Stadt und ihrer verschwindend kleinen Umgebung, die aus der Geschichte ausgetreten sind. [...] Man könnte sagen, daß, als Beispiel für die Welt, hier ein Imperium aus der Geschichte verstoßen worden ist, mit seinen Praktiken und von Ideen verbrämten Taktiken, ich bin sehr froh, hier zu leben, denn von dieser Stelle der Welt aus, an der nichts mehr stattfindet, erschreckt es einen viel tiefer, die Welt zu sehen, nicht selbstgerecht, nicht selbstzufrieden, weil hier keine verschonte Insel ist, sondern an jeder Stelle Untergang ist, es ist alles Untergang, mit dem Untergang der heutigen und morgigen Imperien vor Augen.²

Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*

In 1992, when I migrated from Germany to Austria, the impressive imperial buildings that line the so-called “Ringstraße”, a grand circular

¹ Before presentation at the SWIP Austria Symposium, a first version of this paper was presented at the *International Conference on Intersectional Perspectives on Migration, Displacement and Human Rights*, 26–29 October 2016, Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan, Taiwan. This was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

² BACHMANN 1971, 97: “I agree with this city and its evanescent surroundings, which resigned from history. [...] One could say that here, as an example for the world, an empire has been repudiated from history, with all its practices and its tactics gilded with ideas. I am very happy to live here, because from this positioning in the world, where nothing happens anymore, one becomes terrified much more thoroughly, to see the world, not self-righteous, not self-contended, because it is not an untroubled island, but ruin at each and every place, it is all ruin, facing the ruin of today’s and tomorrow’s empires.” (Translation by the author)

boulevard that surrounds the centre of the capital, Vienna, puzzled me. Having never travelled to Vienna before, its long and extensive imperial history, which persisted until the end of World War I (1914–1918), was not part of my wider historical consciousness. Only when I read the work of one of the most important Austrian poets of the twentieth century, Ingeborg Bachmann, did I understand the existence of the buildings. Only then did I fully understand the scale of the former empire, and that, with the vanishing of the imperial status of a nation, there may come liberating epistemic effects. This materialisation of change – that of a nation’s identity – which became so evident in Vienna, gave me a new awareness of the transience of national borders. With Ingeborg Bachmann’s poetics of ruined empires in mind, I want to invite us to take a step aside as epistemic subjects and to distance ourselves from the entanglements of personal and national migration histories. Let us seek a more general view on the subject of migration and the epistemic endeavour, to recognise the knowing migrant and the knowledge produced about and within migration.

From an intersectional perspective, human subjects are entangled in multiple normative frameworks of power.³ Yet neither subjectivity nor humanity are static entities. This means that who counts as a “relevant” human subject, and in what sense, is under constant negotiation via manifold processes of knowledge production. These processes of negotiation render the position of some human subjects more precarious than others. As Judith Butler notes, this is especially true when it comes to gender, sexuality, and transnational movements.⁴

In this paper, my aim is to analyse these normative systems of knowledge production from a feminist epistemological perspective and search for liberating epistemic strategies. Yet what actually constitutes liberating knowledge for subjects who are variously gendered and differently situated in transnational movements? How might one establish insight into the multifaceted relatedness of human subjects in globalised economies? How might one analyse and perhaps raise consciousness of the emancipatory potential of such interrelatedness? In these times, in which patterns of local and global political, cultural,

³ LÉPINARD 2020.

⁴ BUTLER 2009.

epistemic, and economic entanglement are in constant motion, the answers to the aforementioned questions are far from obvious. What are the methods and models of knowledge production upon which it is possible to rely? These questions are addressed below.

The argument is developed in several movements. First, the subject is introduced as a moving subject, and migration is established as a basic feature of human existence. Second, epistemic entanglements are claimed as the necessary condition of the knowing subject and the epistemic collective transgressing scientific institutions is discussed as potential for a liberating epistemological strategy. Third, transnational movements are presented as specific locations and processes where, and in which, specific knowledge is both needed and acquired. In conclusion, by learning in solidarity within and with transnational movement and celebrating the fluidity of gender, sexual, and national identity, this paper suggests a practice of sharing knowledge that goes beyond border policing and towards identifying liberating epistemic strategies.

MOVING SUBJECTS

Since human life on earth was first documented, migration has been an important topic in narratives of cultural and religious myths, as well as in the sciences. Archaeology, for example, shows that migration has been a basic component of organic life, especially human life, from the very beginning.⁵ Moreover, evolutionary theory – which has been a founding principle of many approaches in the life sciences – holds that migration is a crucial factor for any development of life on earth.⁶ Acknowledging this, it is rather surprising that the general normative framework of human subjectivity contains a rather static, autonomous, and disentangled conception of the subject. As I intend to show in this paper, the neglecting of geographical movement and change on the one hand, and the hierarchising of development in an almost teleological vision on the other hand, risks ignoring the fluidity within human

⁵ KOCH 2013.

⁶ SUBRAMANIAM 2014.

identity, especially in terms of gender, sexuality, and geographical location, as well as the processes of change of a nation's identity through manifold relationalities and entanglements. This holds especially true for the supranational geographical entity known as Europe: What counts as Europe – for whom, and when?

Although humans have, for manifold reasons, always migrated from their places of birth and such freedom of movement is widely considered a basic human right, national and supranational institutions work in more (or sometimes decidedly less) subtle ways to regulate transnational movement.⁷ Indeed, migration is increasingly being regulated by many nation-states. Yet, whilst it seems that migration has been part of human existence since the beginning, nation-states have not. Today, European nations exhibit an almost paranoid eagerness to enforce legal, economic, and military means through which to regulate human migration.⁸ European authorities reach out systematically, even beyond European Schengen borders, to establish special contracts with neighbouring states in order to gain ever increasing control over migration.⁹

Whilst Europeans have for centuries migrated to other parts of the world, often in very large numbers, it seems that European governments now strive to limit migration into Europe.¹⁰ What has happened in Europe to make migration such a problem? Why is it that migrants become devalued and are now even deprived of their basic human rights when entering the Schengen region? New regulations in many European states, including Austria, now even challenge the foundations of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights, introduced in 1950.

⁷ HESS & KASPAREK 2010.

⁸ HESS et al. 2014.

⁹ HESS 2012.

¹⁰ BOATCĂ 2007; 2010.

EPISTEMIC ENTANGLEMENTS

Feminist accounts of subjectivity and epistemology criticise an idea of the knowing subject that pretend to be based on a generalised idea of human existence and of the human capacity for knowing, whilst disguising its support for the hegemonic knower.¹¹ Feminists have also challenged static and autonomous ideas of the knowing subject, claiming instead to take relational specificities and processes of social and individual change in connection with social power relations into account.¹² It has thus become evident that knowledge production has to be scrutinised in relation to social power, and to processes of unknowing and the suppression of knowledge – e.g., about natural and cultural facts that would challenge hegemonies.¹³ The contestation of the hegemonic epistemic subject and the claim to include subjects as knowers and experts beyond androcentric and Eurocentric institutional frameworks of power has been a classical claim of feminist epistemological approaches and transnational feminist movements.¹⁴ Some have called for a decolonial feminism.¹⁵ Others discuss dissident feminisms and their potential for counter-hegemonic knowledge.¹⁶ Therefore, I want to debate the following questions: How is it possible to rethink the knowing subject both as entangled and as moving? Is it even possible to conceptualise the knowing subject as an epistemic collective in migration? Can we consider the fluidity of the boundaries between science and non-science as a liberating epistemological strategy? Does this lead to relativism or to a cosmopolitical space, in which knowledge-sharing practices can be debated on equal terms?

¹¹ GRASSWICK 2011.

¹² CODE 1991.

¹³ SULLIVAN & TUANA 2007.

¹⁴ ERNST 2016.

¹⁵ LUGONES 2010.

¹⁶ ERNST & CAIXETA 2019.

ENTANGLED SUBJECTS

In her paper "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics", Judith Butler connects her theory of gender performativity to her analysis of precarity and migration in a way that elucidates the subtle ways in which social and political institutions work to render the lives of some human beings more difficult than others. She also shows how, in this context, migrants enact human rights without actually possessing them. First, Butler defines gender performativity as a "certain kind of enactment [...] prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other".¹⁷ She conceives of the reproduction of gender as "a negotiation with power", which entails the risks of "undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines".¹⁸ Second, she defines precarity as something pertaining to all living beings, in the sense that their life can principally be ended "at will or by accident".¹⁹ For her, this simple fact is the reason that "social and political institutions are designed to minimize conditions of precarity, especially within the nation-state".²⁰

It is exactly at this point that a problem arises for the author, namely that "certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differently exposed to injury, violence, and death".²¹ Butler's choice of words here almost suggests that this suffering and failing might be the fault of "these populations" themselves, however, this is not the direction her argument takes. Instead, she writes, "precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression [...] against which states do not offer adequate protection".²² Here, the experience of sex workers is provided as an example, "who have to defend themselves against both street violence and police harass-

¹⁷ BUTLER 2009, i.

¹⁸ BUTLER 2009, i.

¹⁹ BUTLER 2009, ii.

²⁰ BUTLER 2009, ii.

²¹ BUTLER 2009, ii.

²² BUTLER 2009, ii.

ment".²³ Precarity is linked with gender norms, for which those, "who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence".²⁴

In this context, Butler defines the subject as a "socially produced 'agent'" and the question of "who qualifies as a subject of recognition, in politics, or before the law",²⁵ becomes crucial. Her far-reaching, complicating twist to this question is that "the subject is not a precondition of politics, but a differential effect or power".²⁶ On the one hand, this means that subjectivity and agency are granted differently to different modes of human existence: "The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility."²⁷ Here, Butler makes a strong point of the fact that someone has to be understood and recognised by social or political institutions to be a subject. Yet, on the other hand, agency is not something that can be attributed or "delivered" to an individual, in order for them to be recognised as a potential agent before acting. Butler clearly adopts a Foucauldian concept of power as distributed in manifold ways, when she gives the example of illegal immigrants on the streets of Los Angeles, California, who "sang the national anthem of the United States in English and in Spanish" with the aim to petition the US government, "to allow them to become citizens".²⁸ Butler writes that these people were "exercising the right of free assembly without having that right",²⁹ as well as the "right to free expression".³⁰ With this example, she asks how "a right can be exercised when it is not already conferred".³¹

Referring to Hannah Arendt's discussion of the production of stateless persons by the nation-state, Butler argues that such an endeavour

²³ BUTLER 2009, ii.

²⁴ BUTLER 2009, ii.

²⁵ BUTLER 2009, iii.

²⁶ BUTLER 2009, iii.

²⁷ BUTLER 2009, iii.

²⁸ BUTLER 2009, iv.

²⁹ BUTLER 2009, iv.

³⁰ BUTLER 2009, v.

³¹ BUTLER 2009, vi.

can never be undertaken by someone alone: "It has to be an action with others, and it has to be public."³² In general, she maintains, still referring to Arendt, that "the efficacy and the true exercise of our freedom does not follow from our individual personhood, but rather from social conditions such as place and political belonging".³³ Butler quotes Arendt with the famous phrase: "the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself."³⁴ Butler argues that this assertion is a performative exercise that, in a similar way to the singing of the immigrants, articulates "a right in the moment of enunciation".³⁵ She concludes that both are an exercise of freedom and, further, she makes a more general point: "There is no freedom that is not its exercise; freedom is not a potential that waits for its exercise. It comes into being through its exercise."³⁶ If freedom has to be enacted in order to exist, as this reasoning suggests, it might become a promising way to argue for the connection of epistemological and ontological claims: Perhaps knowledge also comes into being with the enactment of knowing in the moment of its public or collective articulation?

Since everyone is born within the territory of a nation-state, one could ask the even more general question of how it is possible that some humans are deprived of its protection. Butler compares Hannah Arendt's view with how Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the relation between the nation-state and stateless persons: "Whereas Arendt argued that the nation-state invariably produces stateless peoples, Spivak argues that the nation-state is brought into being on the backs of stateless peoples, and that this is the legacy of colonialism in the making and sustaining of the nation-state."³⁷ This means that in the state of colonialism and even during de-colonisation, who counts as a citizen is a crucial question. Hence, subjectivity is related to citizenship in a powerful way.

³² BUTLER 2009, vi.

³³ BUTLER 2009, vi.

³⁴ ARENDT 1966, 298.

³⁵ BUTLER 2009, vi.

³⁶ BUTLER 2009, vi-vii.

³⁷ BUTLER 2009, vii.

CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND COLLECTIVITY

For the epistemological argument, the epistemic potential resulting from transnational movements and from acknowledging migration as a basic human experience has to be considered more concretely. Butler takes up Spivak's argument that "the act of cultural translation is the way of bringing about a new understanding".³⁸ This is because "the borders of the state divide populations from one another, but also force populations together who do not share linguistic or cultural ties".³⁹ Further referring to Spivak, Butler promotes "the practice of translation as a condition of subject-formation".⁴⁰ First, for Spivak, it simply means that "the indigenous poor have to acquire the dominant language in order to be represented by politics and law".⁴¹ In the next step, Butler develops it as "the model for a collectivity that does not presuppose sameness".⁴² She continues to argue that to lay claim to rights when one has none "means to translate into the dominant language, not to ratify its power, but to expose and resist its daily violence, and to find the language via which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled".⁴³ For Butler, this demands "both translation and performative modes of expression" in a social space that demands "implicit relations to others" that are "conditioned and mediated by social norms".⁴⁴ Consequently, and similar to gender performativity, to "act politically, it is already within a set of norms that are acting upon us, and in ways that we cannot always know about".⁴⁵

Summarising her argument, Butler holds that "precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. And in this way, precarity is a rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless".⁴⁶ On

³⁸ BUTLER 2009, ix.

³⁹ BUTLER 2009, ix.

⁴⁰ BUTLER 2009, ix.

⁴¹ BUTLER 2009, ix.

⁴² BUTLER 2009, x.

⁴³ BUTLER 2009, x.

⁴⁴ BUTLER 2009, xi.

⁴⁵ BUTLER 2009, xi.

⁴⁶ BUTLER 2009, xiii.

the political and epistemic plane, this means that precarity can be turned into a basis for collective becoming by counteracting its disregard by hegemonic structures.

For the purposes of this paper, it is interesting that political performativity in general, as well as gender performativity, does not presuppose an acquired identity or a clear belonging. Instead, what the previous outline brings about is an understanding of collective agency in the social and political sphere as a way of collective becoming – differently positioned, albeit interrelated selves.

KNOWLEDGE FOR TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS

Whilst collective agency has received attention in the social and political frame, it has, thus far, remained rather neglected in the epistemological frame. This paper argues that, since the social and political frame is so deeply entangled with the epistemic, it is important to relate these realms, if innovative projects in feminist epistemology are to emerge. Therefore, the historic entanglements of epistemic, political, and moral strategies of postcolonial and decolonial approaches in feminist theory have to be considered. Thus, the following question needs more scrutiny: How can we develop anti-racist, queer-feminist theory beyond global powers and global players as forces of orientation?

In her attempt to characterise a decolonial feminist-queer epistemological perspective, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) criticises mainstream philosophical and historical accounts of European modernity for excluding the link between the period of European hegemony and the rise of colonialism, imperialism, Christianity, and patriarchy at the end of the fifteenth century.⁴⁷ She develops her position with Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualisation of the borderlands as a location where the capacity "to see the deeper structure below the surface" may be trained.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ GUTIÉRREZ RODRÍGUEZ 2010.

⁴⁸ Anzaldúa cited in GUTIÉRREZ RODRÍGUEZ 2010, 59.

Rodríguez holds that in historical locations where there is an "intersection between the fluidity and invasive force of capital, on the one side, and the violence of military border control stopping the flow of people, on the other", there is a potential and a need for a specific knowledge – "a knowledge conditioned by the historical and material circumstances circumventing this context".⁴⁹ This does not mean that the knowledge produced under such special conditions can be considered 'innocent' in an ethical, political, or epistemic sense – as something that cannot be contested because of some special claim to authenticity.⁵⁰ To claim authenticity does not provide epistemic authority. Donna Haraway's acclaimed thesis that all knowledge is situated, rather than transcendental or universally valid, renders the epistemic collective a basic feature and necessary precondition of knowledge production rather than an exceptional singularity. Thus, migration as a collective transnational movement seems to have the potential to challenge static and autonomous ideas of subjectivity and epistemology in a similar manner to fluid collective practices that challenge binary ideas of gender and sexuality.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the subject has been introduced as a moving subject, and migration has been established as a basic feature of human existence. Epistemic entanglements have been claimed as the necessary condition of the knowing subject and the epistemic collective transgressing scientific institutions has been discussed as having potential for a liberating epistemological strategy. Transnational movements have been presented as specific locations and processes where, and in which, specific knowledge is both needed and acquired. Thus, by learning in solidarity within and with transnational movement and celebrating the fluidity of gender, sexual, and national identity, this paper suggests a practice of sharing knowledge that goes beyond border policing, leading towards identifying liberating epistemic strategies. Do these reflections provide

⁴⁹ GUTIÉRREZ RODRÍGUEZ 2010, 60.

⁵⁰ HARAWAY 1988.

a framework to connect research on postcolonial conditions in order to specify and overcome power imbalances? In which way do these feminist epistemological perspectives form a reliable basis for such investigations? In shifting the focus (again) to the material conditions, challenges, and potentials of life, is it possible to make more sense of new emergent forms of sexual, gendered, and racialised subjectivities in global contexts? In other words, to not only acknowledge the fluidity of gender and sexuality but also the fluidity of the migrant condition of humanity, might provide an epistemic and political path via which to render migrant positionings no longer as an exception to a general population that has to be overcome via assimilation or integration, but rather as intelligible as the normal or natural mode of human existence.

Moreover, I have argued for the importance of a clear-cut analysis of our own position and that of others in epistemic frameworks of domination and subordination, but also for the sharing of knowledge beyond border policing, be these geopolitical, institutional, social, or cultural. I think that such a capacity for analysis, trust, and cooperation is vital when patterns of local and global political, cultural, epistemic, and economic entanglements are constantly shifting. Understanding collective agency as a way of collective becoming of differently positioned, albeit interrelated, selves may lead to the identification of liberating epistemic strategies. It is in this context that this paper discussed approaches from decolonial and transnational feminist knowledge production to contribute to a deeper understanding of the entanglements of subjects in transnational movements and the potential of a heterogeneous collectivity for a more promising knowledge production.



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SOME THOUGHTS
ON THE UTILISATION OF RESENTIMENT
AS EPISTEMIC PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I want to present some initial thoughts on how to connect the historical-philosophical discussions of *ressentiment* with more contemporary interpretations of social epistemology and discuss how we can understand the *utilisation* of resentment as an *epistemic practice*. While I cannot present a fully worked-out account here, I intend to use this space to introduce some initial ideas on how to think about these issues in connection with each other.

Some preliminary remarks: When I speak of resentment in the following passages, I pick up Max Scheler's general idea of resentment as a cumulative emotion, consisting of suppressed anger, unfaced fear, feelings of humiliation and powerlessness.¹ Often, resentment is understood as going back to an experienced injustice, and the subject's inability to *react* to this experience. In addition to this understanding, I add that resentment can evolve into an *as-if-feeling*, people feel *as-if* they have been treated unjustly or have been disadvantaged in some way (a notion I take up from Arlie Hochschild's book *Strangers in Their Own Land*).² As such, resentment is not only understood as a plain state of mind or emotion, it can be conceptualised as an epistemic stance towards the world. Moreover, while there can be various groups holding resentments, here I am interested in looking at the groups who seem to hold the most dominant, violent, aggressive and

¹ Cf. SCHELER 1998.

² Cf. HOCHSCHILD 2016a; cf. also HOCHSCHILD 2016b.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2017 the fourth symposium of the *Society for Women* in Philosophy* took place under the title *The Future of Europe – an Urgent Challenge to Global Philosophy*. The current volume of the series *Women* Philosophers at Work. A Series of SWIP Austria* brings together most of the contributions of the symposium. This publication once again reflects the wide spectrum of the philosophers' research work.

It is important to emphasize that the intention of the Society is the visualization of women* and LGBTIQ-people in philosophy from all disciplines, sub-disciplines and shades of opinion inside philosophy. SWIP is not only a forum for feminists, gender- and LGBTIQ-scientists, it should be a society including as well as philosophers who do not consider themselves feminists or feminist philosophers per se.

The targets and duties of the *Society for Women* in Philosophy* are as follows: the society is a non-profit organization to support women* and LGBTIQ-people working in and committed to the study of philosophy in Austria. Its purpose is to advance equal treatment and gender parity for everyone in philosophy, both students and professionals, philosophers at all levels of academia, colleagues in other institutions and also in our society as a whole.

SWIP will work towards the following aims: Fostering and facilitating cooperation between women* and LGBTIQ-researchers in philosophy; supporting them in philosophy in a holistic sense; building awareness of recent and past discrimination against women* and

