

Segment Introduction

Elke Bippus

What if instability, or rather the indeterminacy of in/stability, is the condition for the possibility of taking a stand? (Barad 2012: 80)

Autonomy and independence are associated with being a self-sufficient “I”, a person who can act according to her own convictions, make decisions, and be self-reliant. This concept of personal autonomy reproduces the model of a self-governing, sovereign being, who can choose who she wants to be. Various feminist thinkers have problematized this concept, which is based in Enlightenment philosophy.

In her 1988 essay *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway outlines the production of knowledge in its local dependence and exposes the transcendent status of objectivity as already partial: “only partial perspective promises objective vision. [...] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” (Haraway 1988: 583)

Noting the plural in *Situated Knowledges*, it becomes obvious that Haraway’s stance far from idealizes knowledge as situated. On the contrary, she writes:

“There is a premium on establishing the capacity to see from the peripheries and the depths. But here there also lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, [...]. The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation [...]. The standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions.” (Haraway 1988: 584)

If, as Haraway writes, “‘subjugated’ standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (ibid.), the question is, whether we are able at all to decolonize modern epistemology and recognize the world from another point of view, whether from below, the periphery, or a marginalized position? I want to interrogate this through

thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Achille Mbembe, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Grada Kilomba, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and others not explicitly named. By focusing on epistemology and critique, I seek to describe in/stability, am/bivalence, and in/between as conditions of taking a side that are based in an ethical stance and move beyond colonial models of knowledge production and their epistemic violence.

Haraway's concept of situated knowledges articulates a vehement opposition to Western epistemology. This was not, as Evelyn Fox Keller puts it, to make a different science but to make "difference in science" (Keller 1987). This difference in science matters if it disrupts modern epistemology. From Linda Tuhiwai Smith we learn that the quest for knowledge is deeply embedded in imperial and colonial practices. She states that the "word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. [...] The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples." (Smith 1999: 1). Counting, measuring, and classifying were the methods used to gather knowledge about the other. In his published lecture *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive* given at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), philosopher and political theorist, Achille Mbembe identifies three central aspects that in-form our understanding of knowledge: the knowing subject, an impartial subject, and an objective universal knowledge. Global injustice and inequality make the urgency of decolonizing knowledge evident. But what does it mean to decolonize knowledge? Is it possible to constitute a situation that allows us to produce knowledges that neither follow the totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority nor various forms of relativism? What side are we able to take in knowledge-making?

How can we emancipate ourselves from the hegemonic notion of knowledge production which frames our thinking? And which "actively represses anything that actually is articulated, thought, and envisioned from outside of these frames." (Mbembe 2015)

Because research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise, the modalities of knowledge-making and research are essential. By modalities, I mean research methodologies but also research related issues – in the sense of what is accepted as a topic that we should know. I also have in mind the subject – who is empowered to be a researcher? Or, like Grada Kilomba puts it, "whose knowledge is acknowledged as such?" (Kilomba 2010: 13) Linda Tuhiwai Smith mentions more of such critical questions (Smith 1999: 10). I want to close with a remark related to the question of representation: How can or how "should one speak about what has been silenced?" (Kilomba 2010: 13), what has been objectified, what is researchable within the colonized research field?

Even if decolonizing knowledge is condemned to fail, it is of worth to practice the (im-)possibility of decolonizing knowledge. Efforts that go in this direction can be found, for example, in the field of education in demands to have more Black, Indigenous, People of Color-Professors, in the culture of commemoration through monuments or street names, and in a postcolonial remembrance, that integrates colonialism and as well novels by PoC into school curriculums. In the existing constellation of power, which stabilizes the hierarchy between indigenous and European concepts of knowledge, the efforts of decolonizing are connected with the problem of cultural appropriation. Therefore, we must ask what silenced memories are included and “who is served by the inclusion of those memories.” (Frank 2015)

The normative and established narratives are crucial in representing colonized, marginalized, and oppressed histories, aesthetics or epistemologies. In this respect, mere inclusion is not possible, but it requires critical reflection on processes of ‘othering’, and an awareness of how our experiences and perceptions are shaped by colonial legacies.

Decolonizing knowledge confronts the person who seeks to do so with the pitfalls of their blind spots, and their own privileges. In what follows, I would like to mention some practices that sound promising to a white, European-educated person who has developed her thinking in the context of post-structuralist and feminist theories and wants to work critically on knowledge in the field of aesthetics and artistic practice. The following reflections are not so much about a decolonization of knowledge as an attempt to step aside from the legacy of modern epistemology without appropriating the so-called other side.

The Subject of Critique: Reparative and Paranoid Reading

In the essay *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out the affinity between the methodological centrality of suspicion in critical practice and the concept of paranoia. A precarious kinship, Freud already noted between “the systematic persecutory delusion” (Sedgwick 2003: 125) and the psychoanalytical theory itself. In problematizing the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (ibid.), understood as a method of detection which privileges an idea of paranoia that had become almost synonymous with critique itself, Sedgwick develops an alternative: the reparative reading.

While paranoia tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular symmetrical epistemologies, and to form a strong theory, the reparative is additive and accretive. Like a classic camp performance, the reparative is sustained by passion, excessive erudition, or a “prodigal production of alternative historiographies.” (Sedgwick 2003: 150) Yet, Sedgwick is far from privileging the reparative and marginalize

the paranoid. Using Melanie Klein's notion of position, that is built on instability and mutual inscriptions, she succeeds in discussing paranoid and reparative critical practices as changing and heterogeneous relational stances instead of ideological theories.

A comparable figure to Klein's notion of position as read by Sedgwick seems to me to be Spivak's adoption of Gregory Bateson's concept of double bind. Along with Jay Haley, Donald Jackson, and John Weakland, Bateson developed the theory of the double bind, a dysfunctional paradox (of a common, pathological) pattern that occurs in the communication or interaction between parent and child. The phenomenon of double bind arises from a conflict between two messages or a "situation in which no matter what a person does, he 'can't win'." (Bateson 1956: 1)

Spivak employs the double bind in her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. The double bind plays an important role in her effort "to use the European Enlightenment from below." Spivak applies "the expression 'ab-use' because the Latin prefix 'ab' says much more than 'below'. Indicating both 'motion away' and 'agency, point of origin', 'supporting', as well as 'the duties of slaves', it nicely captures the double bind of the postcolonial and the metropolitan migrant regarding the Enlightenment" (Spivak 2012: 3f).

Spivak's sympathy for the European Enlightenment calls her to a subversive and critical engagement with this heritage. In other words: Her relationship to the Enlightenment is a kind of double bind that prevents her from taking a single side: for or against it. Unlike a classical ideological (paranoid) critique that seeks to reveal the false consciousness and unlike militant decolonial concepts that claim an independent, a non-Eurocentric knowledge, Spivak seeks to learn the double bind. Not to talk about it, or "resolve double binds by playing them" (Spivak 2012: 1). Rather she advocates facing the double bind, naming the contradictions, e.g. those of the Enlightenment, or of Aesthetics. For her, it is a training for the habit of the ethical, which she also found in the thinking of Melanie Klein, among others. The double bind is not a logical or philosophical problem that can be solved. It is an experience, and it is not possible to remain in it. Spivak insists that a double bind "is the condition of possibility of deciding". To decide in this double bind is "the burden of responsibility." (Spivak 2012: 105) The double bind is not resolvable and therefore the decision is not that of a self-confident, sovereign subject. "The typecase of the ethical sentiments is regret, not self-congratulation." (Spivak 2012: 105)

What can we learn from Sedgwick's and Spivak's proposed readings of the notion of position and double bind in relation to the decolonization of knowledge and taking side? For me, the readings open up a way to confront the dilemma, the contradictions in knowledge production in a postcolonial globalized world. Taking sides means considering my lack of knowledge, my partiality, and an ethical sense of regret.

The authors of this section reflect on the decolonization of knowledge and side-taking on the levels of theory, methods of translation, aesthetics, or critical activist strategies.

Emma Pérez attempts to queer decolonial imaginaries with the intention of developing a transformative and liberating decolonial method. The “decolonial imaginary” is for her “an interstitial space in which political and social dilemmas are negotiated and deconstructed.” (23) The way Pérez characterizes this space, reminds me of Sedgwick’s concept of positions as opposed to normative spaces ordered along binary patterns. The decolonial imaginary opens affective knowledges, especially for “brown imaginaries of femme, of butch, of trans, of gender-nonconforming selves, of gender-fluidity, and of sexual desire’s fluidity.” (Ibid.) Theorizing her approach using Gloria Anzúdua, Sara Ahmed, and Francisco Galarte, Pérez designates her technique as phenomenological, “autohistoria teoría”, that will “emerge from unseen and unheard life stories.” (24) To prevent the decolonial having a colonizing effect, Pérez suggests entangling intersectionality with queer and trans-imaginaries. By relating a personal experience with her daughter, Pérez evolves a decolonizing potentiality that resides within the imaginary and which provides orientation, in particular for queer oriented bodies who are confronted by disorientation in the heteronormative spaces the world is mostly comprised of. Pérez calls her way “the will to feel” (26).

Elke Bippus problematizes taking a side through the notion of double bind. In her close reading of the Artworks *Funk Lessons* by Adrian Piper and Iris Kensmil’s three-part installation for the Dutch Pavilion 58th Venice Biennale in 2019, Bippus discusses side-taking as an attempt to understand a situation in all its ambivalences and contradictions, while dealing with them without dropping into an anything-goes attitude. According to Bippus the art works critically address the systems of organization and representation of knowledge, and focus on what becomes visible and sayable through them, what is hidden and concealed through them. While Adrian Piper does not claim an external standpoint for art or the artist, she pursues the attempt of a change within using micro-practices. The artist confronts us with the double bind and reveals the construction of habitual ways of thinking, deconstructs them, and opens a site beyond them. Kensmil’s critical reading of the Western European (art) does not undertake a better art history. Her intervention into the “aesthetic regime” asks instead which exclusions, repressions, and exotifications accompany the aesthetic sensibilization of modernisms and the division of the sensual. In doing so, she raises cultural, political, and ethical questions within the aesthetic dispositive that is not reduced to art.

The notion of corpoanarchy as a form of protest is central to Kamran Behrouz’s text, which is based on two installations of his artwork. Corpoanarchy, connected with bodily disobedience, is described in a diagram by Behrouz as “body without leader” (57). Proceeding from the effects of biopolitics on normalization and con-

tainment of the corporeality of trans/queer/non-binary bodies, through the neologism 'corpoanarchy', Behrouz suggests a performative refusal on a molecular level. In his involvement with the historical picture of August Landmesser, a German citizen who refused to perform the Nazi salute, he visualizes on one side "the corporeality of 'corpoanarchy'" (53), on the other side he problematizes the untranslatability of the word anarchy, or the lack of a precise word to address transgender in Farsi and interrelates that to subjectivation processes through language. His research is an attempt at re-translations that seek to include the trouble of untranslatability during the act of translation instead of focusing on smoothing contradictions and removing ambiguity to avoid "cultural discombobulation". The second installation reflected on by Behrouz is a tribute to the unspeakable deaths of queer and trans people in Iran. As transition in Iran is a "normalization process: an obligatory rule for transgender people to turn into 'corrected bodies'" (60), and the histories of bodies who refused to be normalized in this way or who never came out have never been documented, queer and trans bodies have disappeared from the Iranian collective memory of queer culture.

Magdalena Goetz examines strategies that de-/colonize established rational knowledge in both institutionalized and everyday lives. In her engagement with the technofeminist strategy of noisification, used by the artist group *#purplenoise* for dealing with social media, Goetz expounds that queering becomes a tactic of 'feminist dissent', which subverts social media norms and proposes alternative practices through their emancipative knowledge-processes. Some of these practices work with contradictions to create disturbance "in order to challenge existing power relations surrounding social media" or apply affective infrastructures to expose how "affect is (made) infrastructural as well as how infrastructures are intrinsically affective." (74) Goetz reads *#purplenoise* as a highly self-critical group that is fully aware that social media have become a self-contradictory 'site' "where not just ordinary users but also the political establishment, [...] and hate groups can develop their greatest impact." (69) Through their manifesto these artists illustrate the double bind character of social media platforms. Unravelling the various practices of taking sides and sites *#purplenoise* negotiates practices of dissent and understands the internet as an extended site of feminist resistance.

The contributions of this section explore subtle knowledge practices which are difficult to grasp as such at first glance. Some elude language by making use of other forms of articulation. They can occur in non-propositional forms of knowledge building, for instance, through the use of objects, technical instruments, and digital media or in political activism.

References

- Bateson, Gregory et al. (1956): "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia", in: *Behavioral Science*, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 251-264.
- Frank, Chandra (2015): "Policy Briefing: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice, Discover Society, June 3 2015/January 8, 2016, <http://www.chandrafrank.com/towards-a-decolonial-curatorial-practice/2016/1/8/policy-briefing-towards-a-decolonial-curatorial-practice-discover-society-june-3-2015>, last access 3.15.2021.
- Haraway, Dona (1988): "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in: *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 575-599.
- Keller, Evelyn Fox (1987): "The Gender/Science System: or, Is Sex to Gender As Nature Is To Science?", in: *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 36-49.
- Kilomba, Grada (2010): *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, Münster: Unrast.
- Kleinman, Adam (2012): "Intra-actions. An interview with Karen Barad by Adam Kleinman", in: *Mousse* 34, no. 13, p. 76-81.
- Mbembe, Achille (2015): "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive", <https://worldpece.org/content/mbembe-achille-2015-%E2%80%99Cdecolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive%E2%80%99D-africa-country>, last access 3.15.2021.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (2003): *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai (2008): *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2012): *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

