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Travelling Concepts in Gender Studies

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Travelling Concepts in Gender Studies: Borders and Boundaries

The discussion on ‘travelling concepts’ in Gender studies has a long tradition of attempting to overcome dualisms through interdisciplinarity and eclecticism. The engagement with the ‘travelling concepts’ can begin from Mieke Bal’s claim that concepts ‘if well thought through, offer miniature theories’ and as such can be ‘tremendously productive’ (Bal, 2002). The functioning of concepts as ‘shorthand theories’ can be followed in their trajectory from scholar to scholar, through history, across disciplines, and among differently geographically located academic communities. This brief review attempts to engage with the concept of ‘borders’/‘boundaries’ as a travelling concept and follow its path in the interdisciplinary area of Gender studies.

Bal defines concepts as ‘tools of intersubjectivity’, as flexible and productive mediators between subject and object. They look like but are not words nor labels. Instead, they function as a ‘third partner’ in the relational interpretative work between critic/subject and object. They are not fixed but mobile across time, geographical and disciplinary boundaries, and need to be assessed after each of those ‘trips’. They are linked to certain problems and for this, productive and meaningful. Concepts are not discursive and thus are more flexible than theories. Bal refers to Deleuze and Guattari to clarify that concepts are ‘centers of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all the others; concepts resonate rather than cohere’ (p. 52).

‘Teaching Travelling Concepts’ is a project uniting more than hundred women’s and gender studies institutes and programmes across Europe as a part of Athena, a Socrates Thematic Network Project. The aim of ‘Teaching Travelling Concepts’ is to create an overview of the movements of feminist concepts in Europe and thus develop ‘educational tools’ that will facilitate but not simplify the

pedagogical potential of travelling concepts (Bahovec & Hemmings, 2004). The scholars involved in this mapping start from an assumption that concepts are changed through travelling across time and space, through translation and different usage. Bahovec and Hemmings situate the project as necessarily crossing the disciplinary boundaries and thus, hybrid and interdisciplinary, as well as methodologically innovative. They explain the process through which the 'Teaching Travelling Concepts' project abandoned the focus on trying to pin down individual concepts to be mapped, and instead started to look for conceptual clusters and their epistemological travel and translation processes. They give an example of the concept of identity which belongs to several concept clusters and if followed through, can give clues as to how these clusters relate to each other. Careful mapping of the movements and transitions between concept clusters and creation of concept chains thus provides an alternative approach that doesn't privilege a certain original term but highlights relationality of a set of terms. It also emphasises the centrality of the concept of location for feminist epistemology and reminds that 'processes travel as well as concepts' (pp. 337-339). Veronica Vasterling however warns against the 'weakness of interdisciplinarity' which she sees as one of the possible effects of using or teaching travelling concepts that unmoor the concepts from the clarity of their disciplinary definitions. She proposes the challenge of utilizing and teaching critical thinking, the labour of thought, that engages in rigorous examination of what is known but also opens up to the new and the interdisciplinary (Vasterling, 2008). Eniko Demeny provides an overview of how the term gender moves across the disciplines and while crossing disciplinary boundaries, from gender studies toward other more 'traditional' academic disciplines, it becomes an 'explicative/descriptive term' (Demeny, 2008). She claims that the concept of gender, as other concepts (power, difference, diversity

etc.), cannot in itself be thought of as a feminist concept. Instead, she interrogates the use of these concepts, their interrelations, as well as their transformative power when thought of or taught from differently engaged theoretical positions. Thus, thinking about gender from a feminist perspective would entail asking about its reproduction as a power relation in connection to other categories of inequality (pp. 2-3).

What seems to characterize the use of the concept of borders or boundaries in a number of texts in the field of Gender/Women's studies is its overlapping with the concept of identity. While some theorists are preoccupied with uncovering multiplicity and diversity within presumably compact identities, others utilize realist approaches to analyzing identity in order to show its continued salience in understanding social relations. In most of those approaches, the border/boundary appears as a metaphor that clarifies the ways in which these authors envision the porousness, stability, and productivity of identities. Linda Martin Alcoff and Satya Mohanty thus trace the changes in the public reception of the liberatory social movements: from their earlier success in representing disenfranchised groups to the post-modern suspicion toward identity politics and any identity as ideological fiction. However, they maintain that identities carry political importance and that taking them seriously entails evaluating the impact of the 'global positioning' on local and national actors and groups (Alcoff & Mohanty). Hames-Garcia claims that a so-called realist theory of identity explains more adequately than postmodernist critiques of identity the complexities of identity-based social movements and lived experiences connected to them. He quotes Moya's realist definition of identity as 'socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world' (Hames-Garcia). From this follows that although identities can be based in ideological assumptions,

they nevertheless provide means for creative questioning and negotiation of social world. Hames-Garcia warns against basing identities on essentialism by drawing a parallel with nationalism: in both cases, the group is structured around a too hasty presumption of sameness and unity of its members. Also in both cases, this premise of unity conceals the difference of experiences in the group as well as the functioning of dominance within the group. Instead, the realist theorists of identity call for a variant of constructionism that explains identities in relation to intersecting oppressions (that get erased in essentialist approaches).

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Martinez Gonzalez argues that the complexity of contemporary feminism needs new metaphors for expressing identity and collective identity positions. According to her, such feminist metaphors question the 'modern' understanding of identity as based on unity – the notion visually represented by the image of the identity as the island used in the 'new social movements' theories. She opposes this view of clearly bounded identity to the metaphors developed by feminist theorists that conceptualize identity as the journey, as the border or as hybrid identity. In addition, she draws on the feminist metaphor of collective identity as the city to offer her own metaphor for the collective identity as the archipelago (Gonzalez, 2008).

According to Gonzalez, the modern thinking about identity is based on the notion of unity that defines the subject and separates it from others/outside. This image of the subject as the island is close to Adorno's concept of the 'logic of identity' that insists on thinking that unites and represents phenomena as whole and connected. This process of 'logic of identity' brings about the 'unitary fiction of identity' but as feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young explained, 'generates dichotomy instead of unity' (in Gonzalez, p. 3). The metaphor of the identity as an

island presents identity as at all times identical, possessing stable boundaries, as well as the centre and its peripheries.

However, Gonzalez argues that the island functions as the metaphor of the logic of identity and that it maintains the principal dualism of modernity: differentiation between the inside and the outside. She proposes rather to ask about the places in-between the borders and the spaces between two islands. In this way, she proposes to think about borders as social spaces where the emergence of new identities becomes possible. This is where she turns to new understandings of identity developed by feminist and some other theorists that transcend the problematic boundaries set out by the metaphor of the island. As examples, she cites: 'Maria Lugones's *world traveller* (1996), Zygmunt Bauman's *pilgrim* (1996), Rosi Braidotti's *nomadic subjectivity* (2004), bell hooks's *from the margins to the center* (2000), Audre Lorde's *house of difference* (1984), Gloria Anzaldua's *mestiza* (1987), Donna Haraway's *cyborg* (1991), and Diana Fuss's *fiction* (1989)' (p. 5).

Gonzalez focuses on three of those metaphors. An example of identity as the journey or the becoming i.e. constantly in movement and in process of changing, is Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti bases her concept on her life travelling that spanned Italy and Australia in childhood, France and Netherlands in later life. Her nomadic subjectivity is a chosen political and intellectual position that is based not so much on physical travelling as on trespassing the conventions. Her metaphor acknowledges the importance of identity, but tries to reformulate it: 'we need an identity (sexual, national, social), but not a fixed identity, valid for all time' (in Gonzales, p. 5).

The second metaphor presented by Gonzalez conceptualizes identity as the border where the border space becomes productive of new identities and of

multiplication of possible identification. Identity as the border highlights the differences within the presupposed unity and point to the intersections of oppressions. The example for identity as the border is Gloria Anzaldua's metaphor of the mestiza. Also her metaphor is based on her personal experience of living on the U.S.-Mexican border, but also of being a lesbian daughter of a mixed American-Mexican couple. For Anzaldua, the mestiza is the space where ambiguities and differences come in contact. At the mestiza, the 'phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs' (in Gonzalez, p. 6). Moreover, rather than just adding up different identities that come in contact, the border produces an additional element: a mestiza consciousness, that puts in doubt the binary between the subject and the object. Such understanding of 'bordered' identities as necessarily subversive has been criticized. Cristina Beltran claims that Anzaldua's concept of the mestiza corresponds uneasily to the historical heritage of mestizaje (Chicano hybridity) created through Chicano nationalist discourses at the time of the Chicano Movement, and so, bringing together the claims of hybridity and fantasies of privileged knowledge and wholeness (Beltran, 2004).

The third feminist metaphor of individual identity discussed by Gonzalez – that of the hybrid, also problematizes the dualism of modern thinking about identity and go beyond the dichotomies of man/woman, nature/culture, animal/machine etc. The example of this hybrid model for identity is Donna Haraway's metaphor of cyborg. Identity imagined as the cyborg spells an end for the subject based on unity, and ruptures the dualisms between animal and human, between animal/human and machine, and between physical and non-physical. The cyborg identity metaphor provides feminism with a powerful concept of politics based on coalitions and on affinity instead of on homogenized identities (in Gonzalez, p. 7).

Besides metaphors engaging with identity on an individual level, Gonzalez also inquires into formulations of collective identities. According to her, the social movements understandings of collective identity have not overcome the modern unitary logic of identity. One of the reasons why the idea of unity, on which the metaphor of identity as an island is based, is problematic can be found in its disregard toward the idea of identity as a process. Once the unity is reached, it seems to suggest, the process is over and the 'final' identity has been achieved. Similar to the idea of unity, the image of the island evokes clear and stable borders. Contrary to this, the understandings of identity in gender studies prefer to think of identities as being constantly in process of renegotiation as well as allowing for complexities and ambiguities. The clear borders of an island do not allow for an understanding of those who for example do not belong clearly to any one island but to the *mestizas*, or those who constantly move from one island to another, as the nomadic subjects (p. 9).

This is where Gonzalez draws on Iris Marion Young's metaphor of collective identity as the city as an alternative model to the metaphor of the island and to the understanding of community subsumed to the logic of identity as unity. According to Gonzalez, the metaphor of the city has significant advantages: the city represents space open to difference that does not necessarily require exclusion or homogenisation; urban spaces offer a wide range of activities, and provide means for avoiding monotony; finally, cities have public spaces where people can interact and communicate without having to 'unite' around sameness. The borders between different neighbourhoods are unclear and it is possible to cross from one neighbourhood to another with ease.

Gonzalez's own model for opposing the reductive understanding of identity as an island is a metaphor of collective identity as archipelago. Similar to the city that is

composed of many neighbourhoods, the archipelago brings together various islands that have to connect and communicate taking into account their differences. Both the city and the archipelago are not 'natural' formations, they are both based on decisions and negotiations. Also, the boundaries in both cases are not unambiguous. According to Gonzalez, both of these metaphors create the possibility of 'social differentiation without exclusion', while at the same time providing helpful concepts for understanding the complex functioning of contemporary feminism (p. 8-9).

Apart from gender studies, the concepts of boundaries and borders have played important part recently across the social sciences. Lamont and Virag provide review of this vast terrain by concentrating on the differences between symbolic and social boundaries, and in this way, interrogating the functioning of boundaries in social relations. Symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions', classifying practices through which persons define the world around them and create feelings of similarity and group membership. Social boundaries, on the other hand, present objectification of social differences and are realized in unequal access to material and non-material resources and opportunities. According to Lamont and Molnar, the importance of the notion of boundaries/borders as a tool in social sciences is its foregrounding the social phenomena of relationality (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

According to Lamont and Molnar, the new research into the relationality of identity is interested in contrasting the defining of identity according to the binary logic to definitions of identity based on multiplicity. It doesn't privilege any of those vantage points but enquires whether identities are created in opposition to one particular 'Other' or in relation to a number of 'others' (p. 174). This relational social science research on boundaries covers work on social and collective identity, class,

ethnic/racial and gender/sexual inequality, boundaries in professions, science and knowledge, and communities and national boundaries. Lamont and Molnar advocate more integrative approach to analyzing the cultural dimensions of boundaries that would enable more detailed understanding of relationship between social and symbolic boundaries.

In the end, as a practical performance of some of the most interesting implications of boundary-crossings in theorizing travelling concepts in gender studies, I would like to mention one feminist cross-border action in which I had participated. In 2002, 47 women activists from all countries of ex-Yugoslavia and from Albania boarded one bus to take part in 'Balkan Women for Peace' cross-border caravan. In 2 weeks, we travelled around 3,000 km all across ex-Yugoslavia, with a visit to Albania, meeting along the way with women activists from some 70 local NGOs, around 40 local politicians, local authorities and representatives of international community (Deschaumes & Slapsak, 2003). On the way, we visited the memorials to the civilian victims of war, and every frontier we crossed, we passed on foot, engaging in some kind of collective symbolic action that drew attention to the artificiality of the frontier space and the presence of a multicultural collective of very different women engaged in questioning its stability.

Svetlana Slapsak in her essay 'Theorizing women's mobility' ties the very possibility of such a transnational crossborder action of women with a collective memory of a 'certain freedom to change' that belongs to the history of women's mobility in this region (Slapsak, 2003). She extends the term 'mobility', using its etymological potentials, to cover both physical moving, as well as the state of being emotionally 'moved' and 'motivated' (p. 299). It is also related to activist and theorist Zarana Papić's claim that the travelling of women in this region was 'itself a political

act' (p. 295). Slapsak also draws attention to the unease of this group of women activists at the sites of new monuments across the region. This troubled 'movements' at the lieu de memoire, at these new realms or sites of memory, that represent new symbolic borders created in recent wars and political transformations, were ones of the most important and most productive moments of crossing the borders together. Slapsak indicates that the crossing of borders that function as 'symbolic nodes of new politics, new ideologies, and new limitations' does not exhaust the possible modes of subversion but that the 'multible mobility developing from this ritual practice is very close to determining a location of 'agency'' (p. 301).

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