

I am

loosing

my Mind

while

thinking

about

the

Body

A Note:

Before the beginning I want to notice that the following Text does not claim completeness as a summary of the Seminars contents. Rather it could be understood as a subjective try to reflect some of the texts central messages, draw relations and formulate my thoughts on them. Some positions we have discussed will be more present than others. Some positions may appear that we haven't talked about, some others will be left out. That shouldn't give one position more importance than the other, but rather happened out of my own ability to understand and grasp the text.

Beginning:

The Seminar title „Bodys that Struggle“ immediately reminded me of Judith Butlers Book „Gender Trouble“. Maybe because in that moment something in my memory got mixed up and I remembered Butlers book to have the title „Gender Struggle“. Only later when we talked about Butlers text „Bodies that Matter“, and It's reference to the seminar title, recognized my mistake.

Inbetween:

The term „matter“, which Judith butler uses in her before mentioned book, is a verb, that can be understood in two ways. Verbs are words that show an action (sing), occurrence (develop), or state of being (exist). To matter can be used with the meaning „to have a material character“ or „to have a signification, a meaning“. In both senses Butler claims the corporeality, the matter of the body, to be classically associated with the feminine body through the problem of reproduction<sup>1</sup>. On the opposite side stands the male who is associated with the mind. These dichotomous understandings of the human in western philosophy can be traced a long way back:

*Aristotle, in continuing a tradition possibly initiated by Plato [...], distinguished matter or body from form, and in the case of reproduction, he believed that the mother provided the formless, passive, shapeless matter which, through the father, was given form, shape, and contour, specific features and attributes it otherwise lacked<sup>2</sup>.*

Dichotomous thinking in binary categories such as mind and body, reason and passion, psychology and biology<sup>3</sup>, is what modern western „truth“ is based upon since its very beginning. Through that, hierarchies between both terms and the subject they signify have been created and still uncsciously influence our worldview. Philosophy commonly undertood itself as a discipline concerned only with ideas, concepts, reason and judgement. With „terms clearly framed by the concept of mind - terms which marginalize or exclude considerations of the body<sup>4</sup>“, knowledge, as Elizabeth Grosz states, is seen as purely conceptual, its corporeality considered invalid or not considered at all.

Which „other“ forms of knowledge are there? What could be considered as corporeal knowledge? Is it what we describe as fairytales, myths, phantasy and read to children? what has been, and in non western parts of the world still is, one of the main forms of information, handed down through oral sources? In his Essay „An Apartment on Uranus“ Paul B. Preciado writes about his dreams

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Judith „Bodies that Matter, On the discursive Limits of Sex“, 1996, p. 6-7

<sup>2</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth „Refiguring Bodies“, Introduction, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth „Refiguring Bodies“, p. 3

<sup>4</sup> ebd. p.4

in a way that shifted my own perception of that. Other than referring to his night-time dreams as pure phantasy or random happenings, he validates them, just as a thought he would have during daytime. What „messages“ from our body do we listen to and value as knowledge? And what appears as just another issue that one has?

Lately I dreamed that I got infected with the covid virus, feeling that my body aches because of the fever, suddenly waking up, the pain that I felt still being there but not because I have covid, but because I have been up, dancing the whole night. Or is corporeal knowledge to be understood in a more direct way, the ability of my grandmother to cure every illness with wet towels and other things that she finds on her shelves? Healing, I think is in any form an important part of it, as it's just like the body itself, associated with women, witches, care-, and domestic work.

### Reclaiming:

From the early beginnings of the women movements on, activists and theorists grasped the concept of the body as key to understand hierarchies of patriarchal power, male exploitation of the female labor and female social identities.

To revalorize the body was an important step in feminist movements, to counter the negativity that was properly attached to it and to create a new, more holistic understanding of the human being<sup>5</sup>. As Rosi Braidotti points out, the body that is reclaimed is never to be understood as a biological given. Therefore it has the power to free itself from limiting concepts like „nature“ or „sex“.

Can hypes that we recognize around practises like „Selfcare“ and „Bodypositivity“ also be understood as reclaimings of the body? Or rather as the opposite, in the sense of female bodies doing what's expected from them: caring about the body? What marks the thin line between conscious reclaiming of former oppressive practises and acting according to patriarch structures?

As I read further into the End Notes of the Introduction to „Caliban and the Witch“ Frederici herself claims that „It is an illusion, however, to conceive of women's liberation as a return to the body. [...] The body is the site of a fundamental alienation that can be overcome only with the end of the work-discipline which defines it.“ Reclaiming, here, might not be possible within the structures that still exist.

Let us take a look at the so called „Bodypositivity“ movement I mentioned before. Today it feels almost forced upon every young woman, mostly through social media. Missing is the consideration of the the bodies matter, its circumstances and histories, which one can't just break free from. Sure every body is beautiful and everyone should feel that way about it but there are hierarchic, discriminating constructions that influence our perception and judgement, even the technological ones. It's a tough discussion, but before I go on, I want to add, that the body is a field that has to be considered, but carefully and sensitive, because though it might seem superficial, there might be many things one can't get from first sight. Also, movements like that, which have gotten popular via social media, profit from capitalist and sexist structures, which is why they have a receiving rather than a destructing function in feminist discourses.

<sup>5</sup>Frederici, Silvia „Caliban and the Witch“, Introduction, p.15

<sup>6</sup>ebd. p.11

Labor:

In „Caliban and the Witch“ Silvia Frederici rethinks the development of capitalism from a feminist viewpoint<sup>6</sup>. The signification of the „Witch“ here describes female subjects, such as the healer, the disobedient wife, the women that lives alone, that had to be destroyed in order to establish capitalism. One of the pre-conditions for capitalist development was the process that Michel Foucault defined as the “disciplining of the body;” which consisted of an attempt by state and church to transform the individual’s powers into labor-power<sup>7</sup>. Pre capitalist societies had different structures, routines, time understanding and healing practices. The witchcraft back then played a central role as animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit<sup>8</sup>, but rather imagined the cosmos as a living organism thriving on occult forces and relations between everything. But Magic powers undermine principles of individual responsibility and Work discipline, they gave too much cosmic, arbitrary power to the individual to be compatible with capitalist work force. Witches, as distributors of magic, must die.

Frederici describes the persecution of witches as important to the development of capitalism as the colonization & expropriation of European peasantry at that time. These three processes never stood alone for itself, but are still deeply interwoven with each other:

*For while the body is the condition of the existence of labor-power, it is also its limit [...]. It was not sufficient, then, to decide that in itself the body had no value. The body had to die so that labor-power could live. What died was the concept of the body as a receptacle of magical powers<sup>9</sup>.*

Different from male, female bodies already have been associated to labor in pre capitalist societies, as mentioned in the first citation, dealing with ancient greek Philosophers Plato and Aristoteles. When capitalism rises women are reduced to the womb, the apparatus of labor, production and reproduction of workforce within, that does not belong to itself anymore. „Womens history is class history [...]<sup>10,4</sup>

Maybe the most dense accumulation of woman, labor and race struggles were female slaves, who had a premium for their fertility and reproductive fertility placed upon. They were ‚breeders‘ - animals whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply the numbers<sup>11</sup>. On the other Hand and different from their white owners, many hierarchies between man and women in slave communities were different or non existent. Slave men executed domestic tasks, such as gardening and hunting that were considered equal important and nessesary as the womens domestic labor work<sup>12</sup>. How could they turn the negative discriminating experience, both sexes shared equally every day through slavery, into positive equal distribution of their home labor work? Why is this seemingly not possible in white, western, domestic work?

Knowledge invention:

Coming back to the term Knowledge and its different forms, that had to be banned in order to establish western civilization I want to let Achille Mbembe speak: “[...] Blackness does not exist as such. It is constantly produced. To produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a body of extraction,

<sup>7</sup> Frederici, Silvia „Caliban and the Witch“, The Great Caliban, p.133

<sup>8</sup> ebd. p. 142

<sup>9</sup> Frederici, Silvia „Caliban and the Witch“, The Great Caliban, p.141

<sup>10</sup> Frederici, Silvia „Caliban and the Witch“, Introduction, p.14

<sup>11</sup> Davis, Angela „Women Race and Class“, The Legacy of Slavery, standards for a New Womanhood, 1981, p. 4

<sup>12</sup> ebd. p. 14

that is, a body entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit<sup>13</sup>.“ In his text „The Subject of Race“ Mbembe describes a western way of thinking and speaking about „other“ worlds, based on fantasizing and inventing facts as real<sup>14</sup>.

Who is the one now, that works with invented narratives? With the distribution of knowledge that is not nearly „true“, to accumulate wealth, to enrich itself? We banned whole groups of humans for creating knowledge, just to do the same thing.

Reading Donna Haraways essays about primates, cyborg feminism and kinship, I have been wondering about the invention of disciplines like Biology, concepts of Nature and the creation of natural Images from certain anatomies of the body, that are impossible to reach by cameras or microscopes. Who profits from those narratives and why? And what could be possible mechanisms to rethink, to reshape them?

Creating myths to justify its own power and superiority is central to the constitution of the Black Person, representing the prototype of a pre human figure. Hegel described Black People as statues without language or awareness of themselves<sup>15</sup>, as human entities which are unable to part themselves from animal presences with which they are mixed.

Only through the invention of the Blackness, wealth accumulation and acceleration of capitalism was possible. We can not skip the subject of race when talking about the body, because racism as a deeply established structure, constitutes the debate at least as much as the subject of labor or the female body. All together but in their own way, reduced to being bodies, connotated with the negative associations that have been made up during the last hundreds of years and sadly have been pushed and confirmed by some of the best known thinkers.

Words:

Language and written text are still the most acknowledged types of publication in theoretical and scientific disciplines, which is why they play a central role to the development of the body - mind dichotomy and all the issues that come with it. As the body is assigned to the female, the black person, the labor worker and all other possible discriminated perspectives, what's left is the unnamed view. The view that still appears god like, without the need to name or position it, because it is the universal male view. It has no body, through which it could be recognized, so it is commonly perceived as „objective“ and „factful“.

In her Essay „Situated Knowledges“ Donna Haraway pleads for a feminist reformulation of what we perceive as objective. That shouldn't be a single, unnamed position, but rather a multitude of particularities. A canon or maybe a mess of many situated voices. How can we enrich processes towards that? Can we shift the main narratives of Science and Knowledge? I think there are some interesting movements developing, collective and feminist forces getting more central to certain discourses. Not to forget: there has already been a lot of work, research and powerful ideas during the last hundreds of years, such as the Del-EM, developed during the 1970ies or the FFBIZ-Archive which documents feminist movements since over 50 years.

<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, Achille „The Subject of Race“, p. 18

<sup>14</sup> Mbembe, Achille „The Subject of Race“, p. 12

<sup>15</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller, foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Catherine Malabou's chapter „The Phoenix, the spider and the salamander“ also has interesting approaches regarding language and the body. She writes about the verb „to recover“ and the fundamental role of the concept of plasticity in Hegelian thought<sup>16</sup>. Malabou proposes three different paradigms of recovery as interpretation of Hegel's statement: „The wounds of the Spirit heal and leave no scars behind<sup>17</sup>.“ To explain the three paradigms and what differentiates one from another, she uses metaphors of (mystical) animals. The Phoenix, the spider and the salamander. The Use of (uncommon) metaphors break up with well known ways to think about more abstract concepts and hierarchic, scholar approaches to theory. Metaphors are able to connect ideas that would otherwise be hard to relate to and they leave open spaces for interpretation, failure, perspectives and counter-hegemonic understanding.

Not the End:

I have lost my mind, thinking about the body even before my writing process really started. This is a first attempt of my search for it, or for whatever I will find instead. I do not hope for entanglement, but rather for us to get woven in as the organisms we are, constantly changing and evolving through encounters inside and outside of matter.

*The body is regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a raw, passive nature that is civilized [...].*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Malabou, Catherine „Changing Difference, The feminine and the Question of Philosophy“, „The Phoenix, the Spider and the Salamander“, p. 67

<sup>17</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, „The Phenomenology of Spirit“, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 407

<sup>18</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, Refiguring Bodies p. 18

Literature:

Seminar readings:

Elizabeth Grosz, "Refiguring Bodies" (Chapter 1 from: *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press 1994)

Judith Butler, "Bodies That Matter" (Chapter 1 from: *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge 1993/2011)

Michel Foucault, "Heterotopias" and "The Utopian Body" (radio lectures, 1967)

Toril Moi, "Is Anatomy Destiny? Freud and Biological Determinism" (from: *Whose Freud? The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch, Yale University Press 2000)

Silvia Federici, "Introduction" and "The Great Caliban. The Struggle Against the Rebel Body" (from: *Caliban and the Witch*, Autonomedia 2004)

Achille Mbembe, "The Subject of Race" (from: *Critique of Black Reason*, Duke University Press 2017)

Catherine Malabou, "The Phoenix, the Spider, and the Salamander" (from: *Changing Difference*, Polity Press 2011)

Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Intruder" (from: *Corpus*, Fordham University Press 2008)

Marina Vishmidt, "Bodies in Space. On the Ends of Vulnerability" (in: *Radical Philosophy*, 2.08, Autumn 2020)

other (appear rather as inspiration/ resources):

Davis, Angela, „Women Race and Class“, *The Legacy of Slavery, standards for a New Womanhood*, 1981, p. 4

Preciado, Paul B., „An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing“, 2019

Haraway, Donna, „Die Neuerfindung der Natur: Primaten, Cyborgs und Frauen“, 1995

Halberstam, Judith, „The Queer art of Failure“, 2011

Gramlich, Naomie; Haas, Annika: *Situiertes Schreiben mit Haraway, Cixous und Grauen Quellen*. In: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*. Heft 20: Was uns angeht, Jg. 11 (2019), Nr. 1, S. 38–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3722>.