

# KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN MIGRATION STUDIES. REFLEXIVE, FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES

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## **1. Why a joint seminar between the Universities of Bern and Neuchâtel on this topic?**

The question of knowledge production within social sciences is far from new. Put differently, the ways in which social sciences are embedded in and reproduce power structures has been widely debated, most prominently by feminist and postcolonial researchers.

Yet, in the last few years, this debate became particularly relevant in the field of migration studies. Indeed, we are witnessing an emerging debate which calls for reflexive and critical approaches that target knowledge production within this particular field. This endeavor scrutinizes the embeddedness of the field of migration studies in wider societal relations and the risk of reproducing dominant and hegemonic power structures of difference and inequality.

In a nutshell, we might say that two main lines of critique have emerged. First, scholars emphasize the ways in which migration and refugee studies continue to be characterized by a non-reflexive use of categories that derive from nation-state- and ethnicity-centered epistemologies and thus reproduce the idea of a “problematic migrant/refugee other”. This work goes back to the seminal article by Liisa Malkki (1992), which emphasized that the “national order of things” is not only built into everyday language but is often also implicit in scholarly work. A second critique targets the racist and neocolonial underpinnings of this field of studies and observes an “amnesia” within migration studies concerning coloniality and race (see for instance Mayblin and Turner 2021).

Both lines of critique raise an important question about the modes, knowledge is produced in this field of studies, under which conditions of power and with which effects. Reconsiderations of basic assumptions have paved the way for a reflexive turn in migration studies and new claims for an inclusive social science approach, such as migrantizing the citizen, de-migrantizing migration studies, or including postcolonial, critical race and whiteness as well as gender and sexuality theory in migration studies.

In other words, we argue that social scientists are actors in the struggles they describe. Yet, they are only one of many kinds of actors contributing to knowledge production. More than that, they are often weak actors when their objects of study are discussed highly controversial in public. Furthermore, these topics are debated not only among scholars but also between them and other social actors in the field (political stakeholders, NGO representatives, and in the media and public debates, etc.). In this sense, we consider that knowledge production is always situated and embedded in multiple systems of power relations and dominance.

Given our interest in this issue, we decided to organize a joint seminar between the Universities of Bern and Neuchâtel. During the seminar we reflected on knowledge production in migration studies together with our Master’s students and this Working Paper is the outcome. Given the high quality of many of the essays the students wrote for this seminar, we decided to publish the most outstanding ones in this series of Working Papers.

In the following we would like to give a short glimpse of the structure and content of the seminar.

## **2. Structure of the seminar: Workshop and Students Conference**

We started the seminar with a two-day workshop in which we encouraged the Master's students from both universities to engage with the wide body of literature that has raised this profound critique on the production of knowledge in migration studies.

The workshop was divided into four sections: First classics, such as Audre Lorde (1977), Sandra Harding (1992), Gayatri Ch. Spivak (1993) and Pierre Bourdieu (2001); second, relevant foundations for a critical re-reading of research on migration (Malkki 1992; Stolcke 1995; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002. Representing an ongoing debate on the "reflexive turn" (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014) in the field, in a third section we debated contributions by Janine Dahinden (2016) on "de-migranticization" and by Bridget Anderson (2019) on "methodological denationalism". Finally, we explored reflexivity in ethnographic examples, including Noémi Michel's "Sheepology" (2015), Anna Korteweg's (2017) analysis of integration as a border regime producing "non-belonging" and Sabine Strasser's (2022) contribution on neo-orientalism and homo-nationalism in resettlement programs.

During these two days, together with the students, we traced the emergence of what has recently been called "reflexive migration studies" and we worked towards various solutions for key challenges.

After this intensive work with texts we invited students to identify empirical examples in order to contribute to reflexivity in migration studies. We prepared a call for papers that would allow the integration of the readings from the first workshop and prepared a students' conference. The students had to write and submit a conference paper engaging with the following question: How can scholars through reflexivity – across different dimensions – reduce the risk of reproducing dominant forms of knowledge production and social structures within migration studies?

We assembled a program and organized a students' conference, which took place in Neuchâtel in December 2020. Abstracts and full texts were exchanged for the discussion of each contribution by one of the conference conveners.

Furthermore, we invited two keynote speakers who are widely published in the field of migration studies and have engaged extensively with reflexivity. In their presentations they also critically reflected on the significance of reflexive migration studies after around fifty years of migration studies in Switzerland. Tina Büchler from the University of Bern tackled the topic of "Queering Swiss migration studies". Faten Khazaei, from Goldsmiths, University of London, presented a personal account of what feminist epistemology has to offer to reflexive migration studies. Furthermore, both agreed to be discussant for one panel during the conference.

We have been impressed not only by the originality of the topics of these student papers, but particularly by their high quality and reflexivity. Furthermore, even though the conference took place online – due to the pandemic – the quality of the presentations was extremely high, such that they would not be out of place at our usual international conferences. For this reason we decided to publish the six best student papers. Yet, we would like to emphasize that many of the other papers were also very

good. In order to give an insight into the variety of topics and theoretical approaches we include below the program of this two-day student conference.

### 3. Acknowledgments

First, we would like to warmly thank all the students who participated in this seminar. They showed an extraordinary engagement, which culminated in excellent papers and stimulating discussions. We also would like to express our gratitude to Tina Büchler and Faten Khazaei. Their keynotes gave us important insights into two particular fields. We also very much appreciated their discussion of the students' papers and their contributions to our overall discussion during the two days of the conference. Finally, we owe special thanks to Julene Knox for the editing of the articles.

### 4. Conference program

**Thursday, December 3, 2020**

9:15–11:05

#### **Panel 1: Scrutinizing categories and alternative concepts**

Chair: Janine Dahinden

**Ayla Schudel**, University of Bern: *Rethinking the category of “the asylum seeker”: Reproduction of heteronormativity in Swiss asylum procedure*

**Justin Paroz**, University of Neuchâtel: *“We asked for workers. We got people instead.” ... but let's treat them as workers*

**Iga Slebioda**, University of Bern: *Women, LGBTQ+, AFAB trans and non-binary struggles in modern Poland – the Church, the state and a language of exclusion*

**Immo Finze**, University of Neuchâtel: *The statistic on crime and methodological nationalism. On the necessity of reflexivity when using nationality as a category of analysis on the example of the police statistic on crime*

Discussant: Tina Büchler

11:20–13:10

#### **Panel 2: Beyond the ivory tower: Knowledge production in academia**

Chair: Sabine Strasser

**Hadrien Laforest**, University of Neuchâtel: *Freedom to use the N-word in academic context: A misguided debate*

**Milena Michoud**, University of Neuchâtel: *Why are the experts white? Places of speech in question*

**Eliane Wälti**, University of Bern: *Reflexivity in migration studies: The example of a Chicana feminist researcher in the U.S.–Mexican borderlands*

**Claudia D'Andrea**, University of Neuchâtel: *An attempt at reflexivity on the political issue of human trafficking*

Discussant: Faten Khazaei

14:15–16:05

**Panel 3: Scrutinizing knowledge production and hegemonic power structures in films, museums and media**

Chair: Janine Dahinden

**Silja Gerhard**, University of Neuchâtel and **Marion Hischier**, University of Bern: *Museum as crime scene and archive of colonial thought: Unlearning “racist feminism”*

**Karen Buse**, University of Neuchâtel: *Filmmaking, knowledge production and reflexivity in a Danish context*

**Zoé Kraushaar**, University of Bern: *Hegemonic knowledge production, power relations and reflexivity in media representations: Discourses about “parallel societies” and Islam*

**Vera Zürcher** and **Pascal Kohler**, University of Bern: *Beyto: Cultural fundamentalism in the Swiss cinema*

Discussant: Sabine Strasser

**Friday, December 4, 2020**

9:00–10:35

**Panel 4: Approaching race and/or post-colonialism in CH**

Chair: Sabine Strasser

**Jillian Balandier**, University of Neuchâtel: *Where are Italians white? Contextualizing race and whiteness in Switzerland*

**Sandra-Flore Delaloye**, University of Neuchâtel: *Switzerland and “colonialism without colonies”*

**Nina Rast**, University of Neuchâtel: *Being white*

Discussant: Janine Dahinden

10:50–12:40

**Panel 5: Scrutinizing hegemonic power relations and knowledge production in politics and the state**

Chair: Janine Dahinden

**Kristina Wirth**, University of Bern: *Exclusionary logics of the Swiss People's Party – the incommensurability between immigration and the environment*

**Linda Pfammatter**, University of Bern: *Concealment of gender inequalities*

**Tania Carolina Schüpbach**, University of Bern: *Integration and de-migrantization: Cultural and economic aspects in Switzerland*

**Anaïs Mayra Gaggero**, University of Neuchâtel: *The state, multinational cooperations and forced migrations: A decolonial critique*

Discussant: Sabine Strasser

14:00–15:50

### **Panel 6: Representations and reflexivities**

Chair: Sabine Strasser

**Matylda Florez**, University of Neuchâtel: “Should the headscarf be banned in the public space?”  
The non-representation in headscarf debates

**Alain Leite Stampfli**, University of Bern: *Beyond migration and ethnicity: Syrian-Lebanese cuisine in contemporary Rio de Janeiro’s urban space*

**Charlotte Naab**, University of Bern: *(Im)possibilities of emancipatory migration research – problems and promises of encounter*

**Clara Rita Norambuena**, University of Neuchâtel: *Migration and domestic work: Reflexion on positionality and representation*

Discussant: Janine Dahinden

16:30–18:00

### **Keynote talks**

**Tina Büchler**, University of Bern: *Queering Swiss migration studies*, Introduction by Sabine Strasser

**Faten Khazaei**, Goldsmiths, University of London: *What feminist epistemology has to offer to reflexive migration studies: A personal account*, Introduction by Janine Dahinden

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## ***Claudia D'Andrea: An attempt at reflexivity on the political issue of human trafficking***

### ***Abstract***

In the wake of the imbrication between sex work/prostitution debates and the development of the United Nations' Palermo Protocol on human trafficking (2000), in this paper I focus on the specific purpose of sexual exploitation, pleading that it should be studied from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991).

As we will see, the Palermo Protocol is closely embedded in "the national order of things" (Malkki 1992) and a "femonationalist" political discourse (Farris 2012) as part of bordering tactics (De Genova 2017). Indeed, in the application of the law, it appears that there is a stronger interest in repressing illegalized border-crossing than in protecting migrantized exploited workers who must prove their "deservingness" in order to access financial help and a legalized permit (Morët, Efonayi-Mäder and Stants 2007; Strasser 2021).

Also, I argue that the practical category of "human trafficking" should be differently named in order to approach it from a social sciences perspective, to make it an "analytical category" (Dahinden 2016) and to problematize its complexity. Therefore, I refer to it as "illegalized labor exploitation" and the so-called victims of human trafficking as "migrantized exploited workers".

To finish, I present a short reflection on the empirical issues involved in conducting research on this topic, following Sandra Harding's argument that we should be "starting off thought from marginalized lives" (1992, 451) and avoid "silencing" subalterns, as criticized by Gayatri Spivak (1993). Also, I highlight the importance of analysing the "deservingness discourse" of the institutions involved (Strasser 2021).

## 1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to look back at some of my previous seminar work, from 2020, on human trafficking and focus on how I could study this politicized phenomenon in order to understand it from a more reflexive and scientific perspective. I will address the following questions.

- How to problematize the issue of human trafficking in social sciences without reproducing hegemonic forms of knowledge?
- How to unlearn my own representations and personal knowledge?
- How to label this issue to distance myself from common-sense?
- Which analytical concepts could help me?

I begin by outlining my specific interests regarding the topic. After that, I very briefly review the historical context of the emergence of human trafficking as we know it today (Darley 2006) and relate it to nation-state logic (Malkki 1992). Then I interrogate the social implications of naming the issue “human trafficking” and I propose an alternative terminology with the help of the work of Laura Agustín on human trafficking (2003, 2005). Finally, I come back to the question of how to do research on this topic by drawing on Strasser’s concept of “deservingness” (2021) and some suggestions from Janine Dahinden (2016) on how to “de-migrantize” migration studies, but also Harding’s “standpoint theory” (1992) and Spivak’s “silenced subalternity” (1993).

## 2. Development

### 2.1. *How to define my interest in the topic?*

In my previous seminar work, I focused on human trafficking more specifically from the perspective of an association that defends sex workers’ rights, partly because I had a facilitated access to the fieldwork (as I am currently working there as a social worker) and partly because of the absence of interest in this topic on the part of the direction of the association.

The differentiation I was making by focusing my work on the exploitation lived by sex workers bothers me now because it could serve the assimilation of sex work into human trafficking and of sex workers into victims. Furthermore, concentrating on human trafficking with the aim of sexual exploitation could occlude the fact that human trafficking, as legally defined, can also be experienced in other types of work (e.g. organ trafficking, domestic work or the construction market).

However, despite these fears, focusing on the specific category of sex workers remains interesting because of the particular forms of oppression and inequality at stake. Moreover, following Gail Pheterson’s assumption, sex workers share the “whore stigma”, as does every woman who takes the initiative in sexuality in the eyes of hegemonic and normative society (1993). In this sense, and with regard to Swiss law, I draw on what Bridget Anderson (2019) conceptualizes as the “migrantization” of citizens, which, in this case, is related to sexuality and gender. Indeed, in Switzerland, no matter where you come from (including if you are Swiss), if you are a sex worker and you engage in your work outside the appropriate and legally designated area you could

be considered a threat to the general population and therefore be fined (Swiss Penal Code, art. 199)<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, the specific situated oppressions that could be lived by part of this population are particularly noteworthy. For instance, in comparison with people from EU/EFTA countries or from Switzerland, there are institutionalized differentiations that imply specific experiences of inequality for “third-state migrants”. That is why, if you are a sex worker from a non-EU/EFTA country you have to complete various steps that are difficult for you because they are all defined as illegal in relation to your chosen profession (cross border/s, find a house, secure an income, etc.). Therefore, you would probably be more vulnerable than other sex workers to all kinds of exploitation and violence from traffickers but also from clients or from your peers (Mathieu 2002; Chimienti and Földhàzi 2007). More precisely, I think it would be interesting to adopt an intersectional approach to see how “sex worker” intersects with other categories, such as “race” or “ethnicity”, and therefore implies different experiences of inequalities when in the case of sexual exploitation (Crenshaw 1991).

## *2.2. The context of the emergence of human trafficking as a political issue*

Interest in the issue of human trafficking began at the end of the 19th century. It lasted into the first half of the 20th century until the ratification of the “Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others” in 1949. Back then, it was termed “white slavery”.

After that, the international community lost interest until 1990, when an increasing number of sex workers began to come to Western European countries from Eastern European countries after the borders with the former Soviet bloc countries opened; at that time the issue was referred to as “women trafficking” (Darley 2006).

The latest international instrument is the Palermo Protocol: “the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime”. It was adopted in 2000 and approved by the Swiss Federal Assembly in 2006.

The Palermo Protocol is the result of a shift from the previous Convention of 1949 in terms of how the issue is understood and now includes not only sexual exploitation but also other forms. It appeared after the crisis of the welfare state and tends to be focused less on prostitution (although we can see in Darley’s article that the Palermo Protocol has a strong link to the debates on prostitution) and more on situations of exploitation lived by “vulnerable” people, who the Protocol defines as being “especially women and children”, as we can see in the following definition:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over

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<sup>1</sup> In Switzerland, sex work is regulated by “cantonal laws on prostitution” that define under which conditions sex work can be practiced. The article 199 of the Swiss Penal Code provides sanctions when the cantonal rules are not respected.

another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (Palermo Protocol, 2000: article 3 paragraph a)

In this definition, the natural fit between human trafficking and sexual exploitation caught my attention. It could be interesting, in relation to the debates on sex work/prostitution, to explore in which legal contexts sex work/prostitution is apprehended as human trafficking by institutions.

Also, it seemed legally established through the Palermo Protocol that “human trafficking” denotes mobile rather than “sedentarized” forms of exploitation, perhaps because it is considered “natural” that in essence these forms of exploitation differ. Hence, I think the Convention is anchored in the so-called “national order of things”, a concept that Liisa Malkki (1992) problematizes as the natural order according to which we expect people to be “rooted” in places. This national order of things assumes that people who are not living in their country of origin are “uprooted” and should be considered as a specific threat to the nation or as especially vulnerable (Malkki 1992)).

### *2.3. How to label the issue of human trafficking?*

Speaking about human trafficking risks reproducing the normalization discourse and therefore the status quo. It is the term already used in political discourse, such as in laws, newspapers and other mainstream mass-media, therefore it is clearly a practical category (Dahinden 2016). However, Janine Dahinden suggests that it is preferable to use analytical categories in our work (2016, 2214):

My argument is that these common-sense categories and the social-realities they help constitute are part of our object of study and should be investigated using analytical categories.

The label “human trafficking” presupposes that there are “victims”, the passive human beings that are trafficked, and “criminals”, the traffickers. Both categories are strongly associated with people who are migrantized because of their passport and/or their origin and/or their supposed ethnicity or race. Hence, this terminology tends to reproduce the widespread polarized categorization of migrantized people either as vulnerable victims or as criminals (Augustín 2003, 2005).

For the time being, I have chosen to designate the issue represented by “human trafficking” as “illegalized labor exploitation” and the so-called victims of human trafficking as “migrantized exploited workers”. At first “labor exploitation” per se seemed acceptable, but I realized that it is not any “labor exploitation” we are looking at but “illegalized labor exploitation”. Indeed, as Maud Simonet argues, there are various unquestioned forms of free labor that could also be seen as labor exploitation (2018). For instance, she gives the example of internships in which people work for free in the hope that perhaps one day this will lead to a paid job (Simonet 2018). That is why I consider it more accurate to use “illegalized labor exploitation” when referring to the political category of “human trafficking”. Also, for me the specificity of so-called human trafficking is that it mainly involves people who are migrantized by the national order of things (Malkki 1992). Indeed, these exploited workers have no access to the welfare

state or to a residence permit, and they are therefore migrantized by these “tactics of bordering” of the nation-state logic (De Genova 2017; Anderson 2019).

Furthermore, within the framework of the paid sex market, I would prefer to speak about “sexual exploitation” to a clear distinction from “sex work”. In this sense it would be oxymoronic to associate “sex work” with “exploitation” and could be confusing, including because different types of exploitation exist in sex work (as in other types of work) but they are not always (legally) considered as human trafficking or sexual exploitation.

#### *2.4. How to produce knowledge on illegalized labor exploitation?*

In this context, to gain some distance from the dominant standpoint, and also to hear people who are actually living illegalized labor exploitation, I think it would be interesting to interview migrantized exploited workers, although it is undoubtedly a delicate ethical issue. As Sandra Harding explains:

“Starting off thought from marginalized lives provides fresh and more critical questions about how the social order works than does starting off thought from the unexamined lives of members of dominant groups.” (1992, 451)

Moreover, sexual exploitation is usually presented in a way that fits well with Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “White men saving brown women from brown men”, which captures the stereotype imposed on Others (1993, 93). In fact, if we follow the common discourse on human trafficking it seems that brown women (or men from outside the EU) are deceived and transported by brown men (or men from outside the EU) to Europe and are then forced to practice sex work, while white men and women engage in actions (e.g. creating laws and associations) with the aim of fighting “human trafficking” and saving the brown women. Following what Sarah Farris conceptualizes as “femonationalism”, it seems that the femonationalist discourse (“we have to stop these brown men from smuggling and trafficking brown women in Europe”) is used here to occlude the broader nationalist processes at stake, the main idea of which seems to be to stop third-state nationals from entering Europe rather than to protect women from sexual exploitation.

Regarding access to the welfare state, it would be interesting to analyse the “discourse of deservingness” as suggested by Sabine Strasser in her text (2021). Indeed, in Switzerland if you are a recognized victim of human trafficking and you want the protection of the state and apply for a permit and financial help, you have to deserve it. In other words, you need to prove your victimization to avoid the consequences of being migrantized as a person that is not allowed to stay in Switzerland because of your third-state passport. For this purpose, the law expects you to report your traffickers and go through a judicial trial. As Joëlle Moret et al. state, it is currently difficult to protect victims of human trafficking because their protection convicting the traffickers is prioritized over protecting their victims (2007). The law on human trafficking can thus be seen as more oriented to people from non-EU/EFTA countries, because it offers the possibility that they will be “citizenized” if they help to stop the criminal network (Anderson 2019). Also, people who have the right to stay in Switzerland (i.e. those with EU/EFTA passports) do not in any case need to report anyone to apply for a permit or for financial help. Here the welfare state is clearly part of a strategy of bordering that

offers assistance to people only if they are willing and able to give information to potentially stop illegalized border-crossing.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, I reflected on the production of scientific knowledge on the political issue of human trafficking. I focus on how the concept of “human trafficking” could be operationalized in a form that does not reproduce and therefore reinforce the nation-state logic of the migration regime.

I chose to concentrate on the example of human trafficking in the paid sex market, although I am conscious that other types of work could involve human trafficking. Indeed, the origin of the Palermo Protocol is closely linked to the debates on prostitution/sex work. Also, I argue that it is an interesting topic to look at from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991).

Later, I analysed the consequences of the use of the practical category “human trafficking”, which implies the polarized representation of either victims or criminals. I deconstructed its meaning, in addition to looking for the best form to express the issue; in the end I chose “illegalized labor exploitation” following a specific argumentation that leads me to conclude that “human trafficking” is more related to “migrantized” people than to “already citizenized” ones, although I know the Palermo Protocol’s definition of human trafficking supposedly also includes the exploitation of the work of mobile nationals.

To finish, I follow Janine Dahinden’s advice to “de-migrantize” migration studies and use analytical categories to avoid blindly reproducing the normalizing discourse of the nation-state apparatus. Also, I reflect on how to begin empirical research on the topic by focusing on “migrantized exploited workers” in order to capture the subaltern standpoint (Harding 1992; Spivak 1993) and/or by concentrating on institutions and analysing their “deservingness discourse” as did Sabina Strasser (2021).

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## **Marion Hischier and Silja Gerhard: “Museum as crime scene and archive of colonial thought”: unlearning “racist feminism”**

### **Abstract**

Switzerland – an inclusive, neutral and humanitarian country? This paper is an effort to highlight some questions we encountered when visiting the exhibition “Having a voice: 50 years women’s suffrage Lucerne” (translated by the authors), hosted at the historical museum of Lucerne from the 23.10.2020 to the 29.08.2021 (Kanton Luzern 2021). More than one third of the Swiss population is not allowed to shape the country via voting on a national level. The largest part of this group (25 percent) comprises people who do not have Swiss citizenship. Those might be people who were born and raised in Switzerland and have never lived anywhere else. They have to live with decisions of a majority without even being able to express their political opinion via voting on a federal level.<sup>2</sup> Why does the Swiss government not want to hear the voices of everyone who lives there? Is a change coming? And if so, will we have to be as patient as we were for the introduction of women’s suffrage 1971? Questions about questions which we asked ourselves once again after visiting the exhibition.

<sup>2</sup> The Pie Chart shown in the exhibition “Having a voice: 50 years women’s suffrage Lucerne”, hosted at the historical museum of Lucerne from the 23.10.2020 to the 29.08.2021, talks about who has a (political) voice. The Pie Chart is divided into four parts: The patterned part represents 38 percent of people living in Switzerland who are not allowed to vote. This percentage includes three population groups who are excluded from voting: 13 percent comprise people under eighteen years old, 0.2 percent are people with legal guardians (people who are deemed incapable of taking their proper decisions) and 25 percent are people without a Swiss passport and consequently they don’t have the Swiss citizenship. The unicolored part represents the Swiss who are allowed to vote (68 percent).

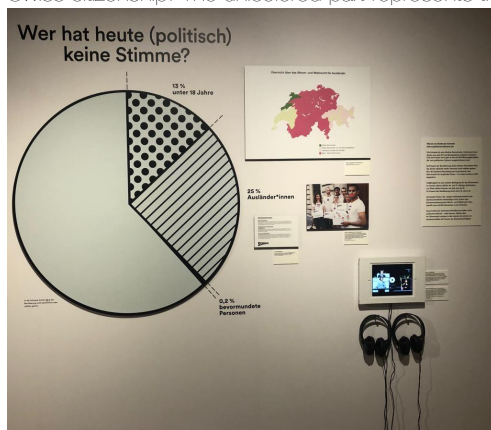


Fig. 1: Pie Chart, (photo taken by authors at the exhibition)



## 1. Introduction

Museums represent a link between academic and common-sense knowledge, and thus particular exhibitions can shape common-sense categories of thought. This paper critically investigates such knowledge production, in this case concerning the entitlement to vote based on the aforementioned exhibition. It is an attempt to “unlearn one’s privilege”, to use Spivak’s words, in reflexively questioning the standard citizen displayed in the exhibition. Our intention is to provoke debate, without claiming completeness.

In order to tackle this issue in a reflexive way and to be transparent about the possibility of our own ideological backgrounds influencing us as “investigating subjects” (Spivak 1993, 92), we will deploy Bourdieu’s notion of the threefold reflexivity of positionality. He highlights the necessity of “epistemological vigilance” (2001, 89): the subject practicing the research has to reflexively engage with their position as scholar on three levels: the habitual, the academic and the scholastic. Starting with the latter, in hegemonic terms our impact as students is relatively small, which also applies to academia in general. However, undergone Bachelors of Social Anthropology and International Relations certainly have left an epistemological trace. In attempting to engender transparency, a disclosure of our habitus as white Swiss citizens is necessary to grasp our understanding and shaping of the issue we are trying to address.

## 2. Presentation versus representation

The feeling of being a role model because of its humanitarian tradition, the Swiss “special case” (*Sonderfall*<sup>3</sup>) based on helvetic neutrality, is a denial of Switzerland’s own involvement in colonialism. In the postcolonial discourse, on the other hand, it becomes clear that Switzerland can be seen as an example of “colonial complicity” or “exceptionalism” (Purtschert, Falk and Lüthi 2020, 8-9). These terms refer to a “colonialism without colonies”, which in the case of Switzerland meant profiting economically from imperialism without having to take the risks of mobilization. In addition, having no active colony helped Switzerland gain moral prestige through the neutrality narrative.

“Instantiating knowledge orders that rely on a Eurocentric ‘universal truth’ has effects that reach beyond these concrete colonial conquests and forced displacements, and serves to legitimize expansions or justify certain lifestyles.” (Purtschert et al. 2020, 74). Although this colonial epistemology is often ignored, it is still being taught and therefore built up. An example of this is the exhibition at the historical museum, which wants to portray the struggle of a “normal Swiss woman” and in doing so adopts a femonationalistic lense. The framework is clearly white and secular: “As current research demonstrates, Swiss citizenship is still intrinsically connected to whiteness, while the foundational role of these processes of racialization is strongly negated by hegemonic discourses within Switzerland, not least due to the prevailing silence around its colonial past (Purtschert et al. 2020, 79).”

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<sup>3</sup> The Swiss “special case” builds on narratives like Switzerland as a neutral country because it did not have any colonies. Furthermore, Switzerland holds influencing diplomatic positions on the international stage as a condition of its reputation of neutrality and of a humanitarian tradition.

In her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), Audre Lorde used the expression “racist feminism”. This term should not be ignored whilst discussing the exhibition, since there are only white women’s stories and endeavors represented there. This selection is unfortunate because it risks only addressing white women and thus perpetuating the idea of the white woman as the “Swiss norm”. Therefore, in this case, we would agree with Lorde’s argument academic feminists fail to include women of color. The exhibition appears as a lost opportunity to include women of color as subjects of the exhibition, rendering them invisible and nonexistent. Such a lack of reflexivity regarding representations results in a unilateral knowledge production. The exhibition creates the impression that there have been no women of color in Switzerland until today and does consequently not present an accurate image of the whole society. We are aware that museums have to make choices in order to fully exploit the spatial opportunities available to them. However, their institutional aim should not be to reproduce discriminative knowledge.

A further concept, relevant to this paper is methodological nationalism – an assumption that “the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 301). The world today is ordered into nation-states and this territorial limitation plays an important role. As a consequence, methodological nationalism takes nationally bounded societies as naturally given entities for study. However, describing processes within nation-state boundaries can lead to a great deal of ignorance: Wimmer and Glick Schiller point out that most theories of modernity were nation-blind, and they identify ignorance as the first mode of methodological nationalism. They describe the naturalization of the nation-state as the second mode, in which the nation serves identity development and the state as sovereign system. Territorial limitation is named as the third mode (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). They continue their enumeration by listing why immigrants became objects of migration studies: Because they were seen as destroying the isomorphism between 1) people, sovereign and citizenry, 2) people and nation, 3) people and solidarity group and 4) every move across national borders was viewed as challenging the sedentariness of the nation-state. Wimmer and Glick Schiller highlight that nation-states must be perceived as categories of analysis, rather than using the naturalization metaphor to maintain this constructed reality of the classification of the world into nation-states as truth (2002).

### *2.1. Epistemic violence: bordering the mind*

In addition to our visit to the historical museum of Lucerne we attended a symposium, which was hosted by the art museum in Zürich entitled “Die postkoloniale Schweiz”. The host, Marcy Goldberg, film historian and media consultant, talked about museums as places where power positions come into play. She explained that museums are “a kind of a crime scene and archive of colonial thought” (Kunsthaus Zürich 2020, 40.30’) – a suitable description in our opinion. Noémi Michel, who also took part in the symposium, emphasized that museums should be recognized as a complex set of relationships. As a relational place, the question of the museum’s construction presents itself. The fact that museums are institutions, that employ people and give power to people who arrange the displays and to those whose knowledge or art is presented, should not be ignored. Even the simple fact where of the museum’s location and who is attends an exhibition leads to this complex set of relationships and at the same time to the production of non-belonging, mentioned in Anna Korteweg’s text: “At its most basic, intersectional theory argues that instead of calculating people’s position in social hierarchies by adding up the effects of discrete aspects of their identity, each inequality-

producing difference becomes meaningful in reference to the other differences at play” (Crenshaw 1991 in Korteweg 2017, 433).

Dahinden (2016) summarizes the normalization discourse with which migration studies reproduced the (unconsciously) hegemonic structures of nation-states, resulting in the creation of the above discussed social realities and inequalities discussed above. Through the institutionalization of nation-states’ migrant/citizen distinction, a dialectic labeling occurred. This question of categories can never be neutral. In order to break up the migrant/citizen binary, Dahinden proposes a migrantization of the citizen. In this paper we take the citizen, more precisely the Swiss female citizen, as a departure point for rethinking these categorizations made through a nation-state lens. This notion plays into Korteweg’s “‘Immigrant integration’ as a discursive practice that positions social problems within ‘immigrant’ communities as the result of a social, cultural, political or economic distance between immigrants and non-immigrants” (2017, 428). With this process, the binary between the “Swiss norm” and immigrants is enforced, subalterning about a third of the people living in Switzerland by not letting them vote - engendered through the nation-state lens of a country that is supposed to be a direct democracy. This can be explained using the terminology Spivak coined: the problem lies in the dual sense of representation, in this context *vertreten* means “to speak for” (1993, 70). A muting in the form of epistemic violence is happening through knowledge production, power relations and not giving the right to vote. Korteweg explains the role of language as allocating the immigrant an outsider status, pushing the responsibility for overall societal problems onto the “immigrant”. The author states that through the homogenizing of the integration discourse, belonging as narrative is erased because immigrants are seen as “always just arrived” (Korteweg 2017, 434). The question of who belongs and who does not arise within this logic of the nation-state, whereas integration is a part of the border regime. In addition, border regimes start with a principal distinction between citizens and Others, a differentiation that takes place in the head - a “bordering of the mind” so to speak. Malkki’s (1992) explanation of the sedentary logic about the boundedness of nation and culture is relevant to our example as well. Even though her text is about refugees, the naturalization metaphor she employs can also be applied to people without citizenship: the state of homelessness, in which refugees find themselves, fundamentally challenges “the national order of things”. This is how Malkki describes the mindset that is the basis of nationalism today. She explains this using the notion of a kind of metaphysics that is linked to a specific territory, which means that nations are founded on the perception that culture and identity are tied to a particular place. A nation is characterized by an unbreakable correlation between one physical territory and one cultural and national identity, derived from and bound to its territory, and by citizens with physical roots in a country. Malkki argues that the notion of conflict between the national order and rootless refugees should be challenged. Identity is not tied to a place and is not stable: it is flexible and can change. Identity should therefore not be perceived as something that is eternally tied to one place; instead it should be understood through our movements and through the processes of which we are a part.

We found on Instagram an interesting post<sup>4</sup> on “things you can’t decolonize”. Besides nationalism and whiteness, the list also included voting, museums and academia. The post explained: “You simply can’t decolonize constructs that were intended to serve the frameworks of white supremacy as that is their only function.” As radical as this sounds, it deserves further investigation, because a parallel to Audre Lorde’s “the master’s house can’t be dismantled with the master’s tools” can be drawn. It is important to be conscious of our pasts and to reflect on their consequences. We were quite disillusioned after our visit to the historical museum, for the simple reason that to a certain extent we had to admit the truth of the Instagram post.

## 2.2. Who is entitled to vote?

One board in the exhibition asks the following question: Who does not have a (political) voice today? Underneath this question the aforementioned pie chart shows that in Switzerland 38 percent are not allowed to vote. This percentage includes three population groups who are excluded from voting: 13 percent comprise people under eighteen years old, 0.2 percent are people with legal guardians<sup>5</sup> and 25 percent are people without Swiss citizenship. Although, there are several cantons where foreigners can vote on the municipal level – frequently after a minimum period of residence in the canton or municipality (The Federal Council s. d.) – the latter are not allowed to participate in the federal vote. In contrast Swiss residents in Sweden, the Netherlands or in Belgium, for example, are allowed to vote after three to five years of residence.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2: Instagram Post, (Screenshot taken by authors)

<sup>5</sup> In this context we understand people with legal guardians as people who are deemed incapable of taking their proper decisions and have therefore a legal guardian who supports them.

<sup>6</sup> This information stems from a poster entitled “to take part in decision-making” in the exhibition “Having a voice: 50 years women’s suffrage Lucerne”, hosted at the historical museum of Lucerne from the 23.10.2020 to the 29.08.2021. The short text talks about the refusal of the right to vote for people without a Swiss passport and hence without the Swiss citizenship. Underneath the last subtitle “Positive experiences” one can find the comparison to other countries as mentioned in the text above.

These facts and figures call for a reconsideration of Switzerland’s famous direct democracy. People who might even have been born in Switzerland and have never lived somewhere else are excluded from voting, which raises the question of the entitlement to voting and having a voice: “Membership in this group of solidarity was a privilege, and state boundaries marked the limitations of access to these privileges” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 318). Membership is about the arbitrariness of borders and their affiliation with perception of identity, which tend to pop up in everyday social life - or in this case are reproduced in the exhibition: the passport as a constraining border of privilege. This exclusion stands in strong contrast to Swiss abroad, who are allowed to vote in Switzerland and therefore shape a country where they do not even live in. Sabine Strasser’s text on the “Ambivalences of Un/Deservingness” seems to provide a suitable way to describe this paradox: Only people with a Swiss passport deserve to vote on the national level. Anyone not in possession of this little red document with the white cross on the cover does not deserve to take an active part on the political stage in Switzerland. One could argue that to participate in the political debate you just have to get enfranchised. However, this procedure is not straightforward. Switzerland is known for its strict naturalization policy and its strong border controls. The summer of migration in 2015 showed once more that Switzerland, contrary to its well-preserved image of a humanitarian country, and unlike Germany, Sweden and Austria, did not adopt an open arms policy towards migrants. Eventually, those countries found themselves no longer able to cope with the influx of “migrants” whilst Switzerland stated that “Switzerland was comparatively little affected by the additional migration movement of 2015, but the Swiss asylum system also reached the limits of its resilience in late autumn 2015” (Staatssekretariat für Migration 2016, 12, translated by the authors). This underlines once again the importance of questioning Switzerland’s humanitarian reputation.

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, the exhibition at the historical museum of Lucerne is an illustrative example of the zeitgeist: whereas the enfranchisement of women is actively demanded, discursive intersectionality is still widely ignored. Shown by the issue of Audrey Lorde’s “racist feminism”: The unlearning of one’s privilege continues for a lifetime as it is deeply rooted in the “bordering of the mind” that originates in the nation-state logic. For racist categories are internalized and latent in the subconscious, our aim should be to unlearn this categorization. Moreover, the exhibition on Swiss women’s suffrage reproduces privilege in the sense of affirming the image of the Swiss woman as white, Western-biased/Eurocentric and non-inclusive. At the same time as bordering is taking place in asylum decisions, as in the case study by Strasser (2021); the exhibition is “bordering

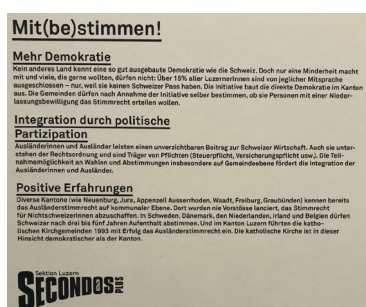


Fig. 3: Voting. (Photo taken by authors at the exhibition)

the mind” of the people visiting the museum by reproducing migrants as non-passport-bearing Others who are not therefore deserving of citizenship.

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## **5. List of Figures**

Fig. 1: Pie chart (Photo taken by the authors at the exhibition, 29.10.2020)

Fig. 2: Instagram Post (Screenshot taken by authors on 01.11.2020, account unavailable on the 02.04.2021)

Fig. 3: Voting (Photo taken by the authors at the exhibition, 29.10.2020)





## ***Pascal Kohler and Vera Zürcher: Beyto: cultural fundamentalism in Swiss cinema***

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the 2020 movie *Beyto* by Gitta Gsell from a critical feminist and postcolonial perspective. Our analysis shows that the movie's narrative and representational techniques are deeply saturated with a homonationalist, femonationalist and orientalist imaginary. Within this imaginary, Muslim culture in general and Turkish culture in particular emerge as Europe's homophobic and sexist primitive, ancient and backward other, whereas Switzerland emerges as the privileged site of modernity, liberalism and sexual radicalism. We argue that the discourses of homonationalism, femonationalism and orientalism join forces in the movie to produce cultural fundamentalism that constructs Turkish and Swiss society as radically different and irreconcilable. Ultimately, this leads to a tale of Western modernity and superiority and the imagination, reproduction and demarcation of an "us" and "them".

### **Acknowledgment**

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## 1. Introduction

“It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories”  
– Donna Haraway (2019)

In November 2020, we watched Gitta Gsell’s movie *Beyto* at a cinema. Based on the novel *Hochzeitsflug* by Yusuf Yeşilöz, Gsell narrates the story of Beyto, a son of Turkish immigrants. His family came to Switzerland when he was six and now runs a kebab restaurant where Beyto helps out alongside his professional IT training. Beyto is a top pupil and a talented swimmer. Beyto and Mike fall in love and start a relationship. Beyto accompanies Mike to Zurich Pride, where they are spotted by Beyto’s aunt, who tells Beyto’s parents about his attendance. After fighting with him, Beyto’s parents come up with an idea to save their family’s integrity. They pretend that his grandmother is dying and lure Beyto to Turkey. Soon after arriving, their true intentions are revealed: they want to marry him to his childhood friend Seher. When Beyto becomes aware of this plan, he refuses to comply. After a violent outburst by his father, Beyto’s passport is confiscated by the parents and will only be returned after the marriage has taken place. Back in Switzerland, Beyto struggles to navigate his forced marriage with Seher and his relationship with Mike. After arguments between all the involved parties, Seher, Beyto and Mike decide to abandon Beyto’s family and migrate to Leipzig, where they want to lead a free life.

The movie offers a good starting point to reflect upon issues of homonationalism (Puar 2008; 2013), femonationalism (Farris 2017), orientalism (Said 1978; Abu-Lughod et al. 2001) and cultural fundamentalism (Stolcke 1995) in postcolonial Switzerland and how these discourses are represented and reproduced through cinematic productions. In what follows, we analyse the movie’s narrative and representational techniques from a critical feminist and postcolonial perspective. We argue that the movie deploys orientalist and homo- and femonationalist tropes and positions a liberal, empowered White subject vis-à-vis a Muslim, traditionalist, misogynist and homophobic other. Doing so, it stabilizes (post-)colonial and orientalist notions of progress that frame current sexual politics in such a way that the West emerges as the “sphere of modernity, as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place” (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 141).

Our goal is to attack neither the filmmaker nor the movie. We are not film scholars or critics. We focus on how the film narrativizes a generalized account of Western superiority through orientalist and homo- and femonationalist tropes. Furthermore, we do not argue that such stories cannot or do not happen. Violence against women and queers is a pressing issue both in Turkey (Arat, Ayse Gül and Spangler 2009; Engin 2015) and in Switzerland (Amnesty International 2019; TGNS et al. 2018). Rather, we are interested in how the narrative rises to the level of symbolizing Turkish and Swiss culture in general and contributes to the problematized figure of the migrant that structures public and academic discourses (Dahinden 2016; Korteweg 2017; Anderson 2019;).

## 2. Homonationalism, femonationalism and orientalism: the production of cultural difference

“You don’t know how it is among us: it’s not like it is among you.” – Beyto to Mike

This quotation illustrates the film’s key narrative. Throughout the film, it is conveyed that cultural differences are irreconcilable and that homophobia and patriarchy are problems primarily within immigrant cultures, and thus are imported from “the outside”. Switzerland is represented as the place where sexual orientations and relationships can be openly celebrated, as opposed to Turkey (or Turkish communities abroad), where homosexuality is condemned and must be lived secretly. Shots at Zurich Pride contrasted with rural Turkey underline this imagination. We will identify this as cultural fundamentalism, which Stolcke defined as the idea of humanity being composed “of a multiplicity of distinct cultures which are incommensurable” (1995, 7).

An important domain through which the movie constructs fundamental cultural differences is the status of LGBTIQ+ people. This process of construction has been theorized by Puar (2008; 2013), who coined the term “homonationalism”. With it, she describes the association or alignment between nationalist ideology and LGBTIQ+ rights, in which actors such as right-wing parties line up with the claims of the LGBTIQ+ community to justify racist and homophobic positions and discrimination. In her view, migrants and Muslims are especially marked through this discourse. They appear as homophobic and misogynous in contrast to queer-friendly and gender-egalitarian European societies. Islam thus becomes the antitheses of Western liberal democratic values. Importantly, as Purtschert and Mesquita (2016) insist, homonationalism is enacted by both state-related and non-state actors.

We do not argue that Gsell is intentionally homonationalist. Rather, her movie taps into homonationalist imaginaries by representing homophobia as the problem of Beyto’s relatives and Turkish culture in general. “You have no idea how it works among us. Among us, gays are seduced by the devil”, Beyto exclaims to Mike. Beyto’s aunt even lacks the language to speak about homosexuality. Instead, she describes Zurich Pride as a demonstration, where “men kiss men”. Beyto’s uncle urges Beyto’s father to get his family under control. Later on, the father threatens to send Beyto into the military, where he will be made “a real man”. When Beyto attempts to escape the marriage proceedings, Seher’s father comes to get him back from the airport, where he explains to Beyto that it is not love, but only family that counts.

Interestingly, family relations are absent from Mike’s life. In a moment of intimacy, we learn that Mike grew up in an evangelical and homophobic context. Mike, then, abandoned his parents and no longer engages with them. The contrast with Beyto is remarkable. In Beyto’s case, homophobic family structures are all-pervading and cannot be reconciled with his sexual orientation which he is able to express in a Swiss locale. Whilst Mike is represented as stigmatized by the individualized homophobia of his nuclear family, Beyto’s story represents homophobia envisaged as a cultural trait representative of all Turks. Beyto, thus, is depicted as a Muslim victimized by his own culture (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 145).

For Beyto, then, reconciliation between “his culture” and his sexual orientation is not possible. It is only through his exile in Germany that he manages to free himself from his family to become “properly gay” (El-Tayeb 2012). For Mike, on the other hand, there was no need for exile. As a Westernized subject, he simply abandoned his parents and moved to the city. Through this representation, viewers are made aware that the two

men live in “different worlds”. Whilst Mike is portrayed as an urban, individualized and progressive subject, Beyto is primarily portrayed as a queer held captive by his culture.

In an interview on Radio Bern RaBe (Feuz 2020), the filmmaker, Gitta Gsell, talks about her film. In her understanding, Beyto’s parents “still live according to their tradition”, whereas the younger generation, who grew up in Switzerland, have experienced a “totally different culture”. The characterization of the parents held captive by tradition and living in a “totally different culture” mirrors what Stolcke (1995) has identified as cultural fundamentalism, according to which cultural differences are accented and understood as incompatible. This, then, leads to the construction of a homo-friendly “us” and a homophobic “them” that are envisaged as incompatible, thus excluding the other.

The role of women is another important and closely related resource for the construction of fundamental cultural difference. With the term “femonationalism”, Farris (2017) describes the instrumentalization of feminist issues by Western and neoliberal governments in anti-immigration (especially anti-Muslim) campaigns and the stigmatization of Muslim and migrant men by feminists under the guise of equality (Farris 2017). An externalization of female oppression, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia takes place and denies the many forms of inequality that still affect Western European women (Farris 2017, 9).

In the movie, Beyto’s migrantized friends are depicted as misogynist machos. They talk about women vulgarly, and this mirrors a boundary-making process that operates through culturalized gender relations, which Dahinden (2014) has already identified elsewhere in Switzerland. Whereas Beyto’s friends call women “hot cunts” and drive their fancy cars too fast, Mike is presented as a responsible and exemplary man. He drives a bicycle and saves vegetables from being thrown away as a food saver. The movie thus creates a polarization in which the orientalized subject is deemed unfit for Western (supposed) gender-egalitarianism, mirroring the discourse of femonationalism.

The culturalized polarization becomes especially salient in relation to marriage. As Strasser has shown, transnational marriages are increasingly problematized (2014, 319). She conducted fieldwork in a small Austrian town, where forced marriage was seen as a common problem among Turks, although most of the incidents could not be verified (2014, 323). This created tensions between Turks and Austrians in everyday life, as the former were under constant suspicion of forcing their children into marriages (2014, 326). The movie taps into a similar narrative. Instantly after Beyto’s sexual orientation is revealed, his mother comes up with the idea to force him into marriage with Seher. This ready availability suggests that forced marriage is a common practice among Turks, a perception that is strengthened for the audience by the (extended) family’s attitudes, according to which love has no relevance for marriage.

The final scene is similarly saturated with femonationalist imaginaries. Seher, Mike and Beyto discuss moving to Leipzig, where they will share an apartment. Seher expresses her wish for an independent life, which includes a room of her own, parties, friends, romantic relationships and a professional training, things she seemingly can have, now that she is in Western Europe. The viewer is thus made aware that emancipation for Seher is only possible in a Western society and only after abandoning her community. Seher is thus juxtaposed with female immigrants who are often represented as victims

of their sexist culture, or Islam more specifically (Dahinden, Fischer, Menet, and Kristol 2018).

The movie also others its Turkish subjects through orientalist tropes. Said (1978) and Abu-Lughod et al. (2001) used the term “orientalism” to describe the Western and Eurocentric view that exoticizes and essentializes societies in the Middle East. It must be said that the term “Middle East” is problematic in itself, as it expresses a Eurocentric and imperialist concept and is geographically imprecise. The term “othering” defines the process through which a group is constructed as a norm by juxtaposing it to another group that is imagined as opposite and different. Positive characteristics are often attributed to the normed group, which differentiate them from the “other”, thus making clear-cut demarcation possible (Mohanty 1984, 335).

From the moment the plane lands in Turkey, “oriental” music is used to underline the shots, although, interestingly, such music had not been played before. However, as soon as we step onto Turkish soil, the score operates to create an unambiguous spatial boundary, establishing Beyto’s village as a faraway place subjected to traditional rule. This depiction is further intensified through the representation of the extended family and their village: there is no cellphone coverage and the people live by rearing sheep. In passing, we learn that they had lost fifty sheep the previous year, which put them under tremendous economic pressure. Despite the obvious presentness of transnational relations and objects, the family is portrayed as living a simple and traditional life, faraway from the ills of modernity.

On the wedding night, orientalism takes an erotic turn. Seher, until then subservient and quiet, is suddenly depicted as a highly sexual subject. The imagery speaks quite clearly. It is only through the marriage that Seher establishes herself as a sexual subject. At that point, however, all the servitude and subservience vanish in an explosion of lust and desire, which Beyto is hesitant to reciprocate. The sexualized depiction of Seher (only after the proper traditional marriage has taken place) serves to stabilize a racially objectifying gaze on the part of the audience, which Dos Santos Pinto (2013) has identified elsewhere as the (s)exotic spectacle of the other.

Ultimately, the entanglement of homonationalism, femonationalism and orientalism all work together to create the image of two entirely different cultures that are incommensurable. Switzerland is granted the image of Western superiority whereas Turkey (and Turks abroad) are portrayed as morally inferior. Homophobia and the oppression of women then appear as an external problem, a problem of “the other”, which is brought to Western countries by immigration (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 144). In this tale of cultural fundamentalism, Western superiority takes the form of a sexual democracy, which Fassin defines as “[t]he construction of national identity in different European states, which make use of gender equality and sexual liberty in order to set up and legitimate a racist and xenophobic politics, especially in view of migration and naturalization” (Fassin cited in Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 141).

Certainly, the movie does not stand alone. Rather we suggest that it is part of a wider discourse that juxtaposes European cultures, depicted as accepting of “progressive” women and LGBTIQ+ communities, with “backward”, sexist and homophobic immigrant cultures. The film reproduces the idea of the binarity of Islamic and Western

societies and Western superiority in terms of LGBTIQ+ and women's rights. In this view, the West serves as a model, whilst Muslim countries are seen as lagging behind (Wiedlack 2018, 13). Doing so, the film contributes to the changed discursive landscape in which homophobia is the problem of Western Europe's other (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 145).

### 3. Discussion and conclusion

Filmmaking is a political enterprise that requires reflexivity. In the interview mentioned above, the filmmaker is confronted with the politics of representation. Gsell clarifies that she did not want to stigmatize Turkish culture. Because of that, she decided to depict Beyto's parents as "relatively modern". Relatively modern, she adds, means that "they" do not pray and that the mother doesn't wear a hijab. Specific Muslim practices thus turn into signifiers of traditionality, backwardness and, ultimately, the antithesis of Western liberal democracies. Additionally, the filmmaker mentions that it was difficult to find a Swiss-Turkish actor for the role of Beyto, as half of the casting participants withdrew after finding out that they were auditioning for a gay role. This, in Gsell's view, shows how big the problem is – the problem being homophobia of the "other".

Gsell then talks about their experience of shooting in Turkey. After enthusing about the Turkish film industry and the filmogenic landscapes Turkey offers, she mentions a difficulty they encountered. In her view, they couldn't tell the villagers what the film was really about. Unfortunately, we learn nothing about how the filmmaker came to this conclusion. Importantly, the withholding of information reflects the power asymmetry in the production process. The villagers, without knowing it, were used as a mere screen onto which a tale of Western sexual superiority could be projected. Further, this implies that there is no local understanding of or language for homosexuality. An idea that is also predominant in the representation of Beyto's family.

The story, with all its particularities, rises to the level of making a general, homogenizing and Western-centric statement about "Turkish culture", which ultimately problematizes migrantized subjects and demarcates them from their Western cohabitants. In its binary representation of homophobic and misogynist Turkey and liberal Switzerland, the latter appears as a sphere of LGBTIQ+ and women's rights, in which discrimination and violence against sexual and gender minorities are invisible and denied (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 147). Further, homophobia is represented as the problem of "the others", as something that has been imported to Switzerland (Purtschert and Mesquita 2016, 149).

Here, we would like to come back to the quote by Haraway (2019) with which we opened this analysis: for it matters what and whose stories tell stories. Again, we do not want to play violence against women and queers down, neither in Turkey nor in Switzerland. However, it is the particular story of orientalized oppressed subjects vis-à-vis an enlightened West that becomes popularized and legitimized through the movie. One could turn the narrative around: What would a story look like in which a highly urban subject, not from a village without cellphone coverage, but from Istanbul or Ankara, fell in love with the son of an Appenzeller shepherd? Would it allow for a similar juxtaposition of an oppressed Orient and an enlightened West? What would a story look like in which two subjects, whether migrantized or not, could meet on an equal footing? Could it lead to similar tropes of cultural essentialism?

Turning the narrative around would entail a process of unlearning through reflexivity (Spivak 1993), because hegemonic representations of “the other” come to hand readily. However, the process of unlearning, for which we argue, cannot be built from nothing. Novels and films that resist engaging orientalist and homo- and femonationalist narratives of Western superiority abound. Instead, they explore the complexities that queer and/or female Muslim subjects navigate in a postcolonial world. Writer and filmmaker Saleem Haddad is an outstanding role model in this regard. His work, among others’, is a helpful resource in a process of unlearning that we all have to undergo and which will hopefully lead to the deconstruction of our objectifying gaze of the “other” and open up new avenues for conversations and encounters.

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## ***Hadrien Laforest: Freedom to use the N-word in the academic context: a misguided debate***

### **Abstract**

On September 23, 2020, a Canadian professor at the University of Ottawa used the N-word in a lecture about artistic reappropriation (Friesen 2020). Following a student's complaint, she was suspended, which sparked a public controversy about academic freedom, followed by a debate on the treatment of francophones in Ontario (the province in which Ottawa is located). Such arguments denote a lack of understanding that scientific knowledge is embedded in relations of power and rooted in colonial values (Harding 1992). They also illustrate how multiculturalism and the French–English binary opposition still overshadows racial questions in Canada (Abji, Korteweg and Williams 2019). This paper thus asks the following questions: 1) How can we decolonialize scientific research and teaching? 2) How can we address racial questions without diverting the controversy towards the *usual suspects* of discrimination? I argue that the use of historicizing and reflexive tools illuminates these questions. In conclusion, I call for a generalization of the methods suggested herein to a broader range of social situations.

## 1. Introduction

Recent reconsiderations of basic assumptions in social sciences have paved the way for a reflexive turn in migration studies and new claims for an inclusive social science approach.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I aim to join the growing body of researchers calling for this change. Using the recent Lieutenant-Duval controversy in Canada, I argue that there is a critical need to highlight the subjectivity of scientific knowledge in Western universities, and to demonstrate how underlying ethnonationalism can co-opt racial debates.

On September 23, 2020, Canadian professor Verushka Lieutenant-Duval used the N-word in a lecture on artistic reappropriation. Following student complaints about this event, she was suspended. However, the debate was taken up by the public across the country.<sup>8</sup> While some people argued the N-word should be avoided altogether, others claimed that teachers should be allowed to use whatever words they deem useful in their classes. Furthermore, a second group of people, including the prime minister of Québec (the head of the only officially francophone province in Canada), felt Professor Lieutenant-Duval had not been defended by the administration because she was francophone. This in turn rekindled a long-standing debate on discrimination towards Canadians of French descent. Whether or not this was the case, this debate overshadowed the initial question of racism in Canada.

The first section of this article seeks to demonstrate that arguments in favor of academic freedom ignore how scientific knowledge stems from past and present forms of hegemonic thought (Spivak 1988). I will then offer solutions to encourage the use of more reflexive tools in Western universities' knowledge production. The second part of this paper aims to explain how and why racial debates are hindered and co-opted by a hegemonic regime of multiculturalism in Canada, building on the ideas of Noémi Michel (2015). A plea will be made to historicize and de-ethnicize these questions in order to avoid diverting racial controversy towards a French–English binary opposition. Finally, I call for an extension and a broader use of reflexive tools to maximize our objectivity as social scientists and actors.

## 2. A call for freedom of speech in academia

Many advocates of freedom of speech perceived suspending a teacher for using the N-word in her class as excessive. In their view, professors should be allowed to use whichever word they deem useful to their teachings, and they compared the dean's reaction to that of *censorship police*. I contend that this argument denies that scientific knowledge can be subjective, even harmful, and that professors are fallible and might make errors of judgment or carry personal and social biases into their teaching. Such

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<sup>8</sup> Prof. Lieutenant-Duval did not participate in these debates. She apologized publicly and qualified her use of the N-word as an ill-advised, regrettable mistake. Furthermore, she accepted her sanctions and offered reparations to her students, whilst calling for a peaceful debate. Nevertheless, the affair had been overtaken by ethnic entrepreneurs and freedom of speech advocates and was now instrumentalized against her will. This paper does not aim to criticize her in particular.

rhetoric fails to recognize that scientific knowledge is embedded in politics and history, and generally emulates hegemonic views on society (Harding 1992). Moreover, it has been used repeatedly to justify a dominant group's position in the hierarchy and claims for power, e.g. in colonization, racism and sexism (Spivak 1988).

Several social scientists offer keys to tackling these biases. For example, in her paper "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?" (1992), Harding argues that there is no fundamental difference between the subject and the object of knowledge. In other words, one must recognize that scientists are not neutral: they carry preconceived notions, ideas, and values. Furthermore, the society and the institutions in which they operate also influence their knowledge production. Moreover, their objects of inquiry are not neutral either. In this particular case, it would seem obvious that the N-word is not neutral, but denying the possibility that it could be inappropriate in a classroom indicates that advocates for freedom of speech either do not know or do not care if it is still being used as a racial slur today, or how damaging it has been to black communities in the past. This lack of ability or will to question one's own perspective and to take into consideration the historical significance of the N-word invalidates the arguments of victims of racial violence.

Harding suggests several reflexive tools to increase scientific objectivity, which prove enlightening in this situation. First, she suggests we, as social scientists and actors, ask ourselves *where am I speaking from?* This question highlights that all points of view are partial knowledge, no matter how well informed they might be. Furthermore, she claims that we should start thought from marginalized points of view, because what we perceive as true might not apply to them. In other words, teachers talking about racially sensitive subjects should consider that they might not be aware of some forms of discrimination people of color have to live with. In this situation, Professor Lieutenant-Duval could have taken into consideration that her position of authority within the university and her whiteness might make her more susceptible to unwittingly committing symbolic violence. Finally, Harding prompts us to wonder *who am I speaking about, speaking for, or speaking with?* In scientific and educational settings, it is of particular importance to ponder potential relations of authority that we might have with our subjects, because we are in a position to validate and perpetuate hegemonic knowledge. Additionally, we must ask ourselves whether we are legitimized to speak about them or on their behalf, and, if not, how we can give them a voice. In the case at hand, the teacher could have, among other things, invited a black speaker to give that lecture.

### **3. A French–English binary**

In the aftermath of the controversy, groups of French advocates in Canada, including the head of Québec's province, Premier François Legault, denounced what they perceived as unfair treatment of a public servant because of her ethnic origin – Professor Lieutenant-Duval being French-Canadian. This question became central to the affair, even overshadowing the initial racial queries. It is important to note here that the French–English duality is crucial in Canadian history (for a brief but astute summary, see Abji, Korteweg and Williams 2019). However, this binary opposition hides underlying ethnonationalism, which postulates that Canadians should be white and of European descent (Thobani 2007).

To paraphrase Noémi Michel's words in "Sheepology: The Postcolonial Politics of Raceless Racism in Switzerland" (2015), hegemonic discourses condition public discourses on race. In the Canadian context, multiculturalism was adopted in the second half of the 20th century to appease strong social tensions between Canadians of French and English descent. This duality, however, invisibilizes the oppression of immigrant and native peoples. Moreover, it tacitly offers only two white, European alternatives in public identity imagery. Race is thus an unspoken signifier of belonging or exclusion in Canada (Thobani 2007). This makes it very difficult for racialized people to challenge racial discrimination. Indeed, as shown in this affair, accusations of racism are easily eluded and deviated towards questions of freedom of speech or the dominant ethnic rivalry. Similarly to what Michel describes in her paper, the rivalry between hegemonic ethnopolitical factions overpowered the voices of racialized people in the debate. In this sense, Canadian multiculturalism acts as a rhetorical duopoly on ethnicity and makes it almost impossible to address questions of racialization. Only by taking into consideration Canada's colonial history can we shed some light on this silencing device.

Following Janine Dahinden's advice in "A Plea for the 'De-migranticization' of Research on Migration and Integration" (Dahinden 2016), I argue that we ought to think of other modes of categorization and search for new epistemologies that do not focus on the separation between French and English. As I previously attempted to demonstrate, this dichotomy is unable to account for racial questions. It is necessary for social scientists and other actors to question the blind spots this epistemology (and others) might have. Furthermore, since every point of view is a view from somewhere, no analysis can be exhaustive on its own. This means that when addressing complex social questions, a single epistemology will never be enough to capture the complexity of reality. Strong objectivity thus calls for an intersectional approach. In her article "The Failures of 'Immigrant Integration'" (2017), Korteweg argues in favor of applying an intersectional approach to racial questions. In this context, it would prevent the French-English narrative from obscuring racial questions, without having to get rid of it completely. Moreover, it would allow us to detect potential interactions between social identities, such as gender, race and ethnicity.

Another possible approach to improve objectivity is to conduct data-driven research, according to Dahinden (2016). This entails not deciding ahead what categories are going to be important for our analyses and let them emerge from the actors' perspectives. This method avoids biasing results before even collecting our data. However, it requires careful separation of analytical categories from common-sense or hegemonic discourse. In the case of Professor Lieutenant-Duval, for example, she herself never claimed that being francophone influenced the way she was treated by the dean's office. This explanation was proposed by observers intending to defend French interests nationwide. The analytical category "French" therefore did not come from the actors themselves, but from observers, and framed the debate around language rather than race.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I illustrated how the tools of reflexivity and historicity advocated by social scientists could apply to a public controversy. The racial query sparked by Professor Lieutenant-Duval's use of the N-word was diverted towards a debate on freedom of

speech, and one of French–English struggle, effectively ignoring the initial matter. This article argues that taking the following steps and applying them to public debates will help ensure that subaltern voices are heard: 1) Ask *Where are we speaking from? Who are we talking about? Who are we talking to?* to enhance reflexivity in the relationships between researchers and participants in the field. 2) Think about our own personal as well as society’s preconceived notions to detect potentially hidden biases. 3) Ponder any epistemological blind spots, to underline that all knowledge is partial, and never fully objective. 4) Start thought from marginalized points of view in order to maximize our objectivity. 5) Take context and past events and notions into account when analyzing social queries, to historicize them and see the bigger picture. 6) Keep the initial problem in mind, to make sure we do not get sidetracked. 7) Use an intersectional approach when asking questions about discrimination, to uncover potential interactions between marginalized identities. I urge readers to expand the scope of this situation. The tools described herein can and should be applied to a multitude of contexts. Finally, I want to highlight our personal agency: we must acknowledge that, as social scientists, our values and our words have an impact, and therefore we should aim to counteract them with these tools. This will empower us to elevate social debates to a more productive level, and make sure we do not co-opt them with personal interests.

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***Charlotte Naab: (Im)Possibilities of emancipatory migration research – problems and promises of encounter***

***Abstract***

In this paper I'd like to share some concerns and thoughts on power-asymmetries within ethnographic fieldwork in general, but particularly within the context of migration research. The constructed socio-political positionalities of the researcher and the researched and their embeddedness in systems of domination raise a number of ethical and epistemological challenges that will be addressed here. Whilst emphasizing the meaning of emancipatory or activist research modes, it will become clear how difficult it is to fully realize such a politically committed approach, since we cannot entirely escape the implications of privileges and marginalizations. Rather, we seem destined to reproduce the imbalance of power by the very nature of the research relationship itself. Thus, rather than asking how to emancipate ourselves and overcome all forms of domination, I reflect on how we can nevertheless collaborate with each other respectfully and how the knowledge produced can still be of emancipatory relevance. For this purpose I will draw on feminist and postcolonial theory, activist practice and unconventional ethnographic methodologies. Those could guide us to build liberating cross-border relationships, based on solidarity or friendship, which can inform not only critical academia but also activist engagement towards emancipatory ends.

## 1. Introduction

The origins of anthropology are deeply embedded in the imperial project of the Western world and its colonial enterprises. It functioned to produce knowledge to legitimize oppression, representing non-Western subjects as Others to the Western Self. This othering served not only colonizing policies but also the establishment of racism and cultural fundamentalism, entangled with the emergence of nation-states and their b/ordering regimes. Whilst the age of colonialization is over, and anthropology did its self-critical homework to reflect and shake off its complicity, colonial power-dynamics remain present in the encounter between the researcher and the researched. With this, the current “migration trend” (Andersson 2014, 234) in academia not only responds to the reality of increasing cross-border movements and the so-called “migration crisis”, but also continuously risks co-producing non-Western migrants as the “most absolute Other to the Dream of a mobile world” (Andersson 2014, 235) by representing them as optionally victims or threat. Whilst this is already violating in its essentializing and stigmatizing manner, the knowledge produced can indeed become life-threatening.

As Maurice Stierl emphasizes, the migration/knowledge hype is also becoming a “migration/policy hype” (2020, 3), because migration research is increasingly mobilized and utilized by policy-makers to adjust repressive and harmful, sometimes lethal, b/ordering regimes in response to academic insights. This creates ethical but also epistemological problems. To be relevant to policy (hence acknowledged), the knowledge produced has to be digestible by political institutions. Migration research therefore risks using “seemingly objective, value-neutral and technocratic” (Stierl 2020, 10) policy-categories, assumptions or modes of representation that eventually reproduce problematic labels (such as “the migrant” itself) (see also Malkki 1992; Andersson 2014; Dahinden 2016). Through methodological nationalism it can reinforce the state-centric gaze on migration with its sedentary bias (see also Wimmer and Glick 2002; Anderson 2019) and may also create “statistical migration spectacles” (Stierl 2020, 7). With this, migration research risks reducing the actual complexity of cross-border movements and silencing potentially counter-hegemonic knowledge and practice. To “do no harm” and still conduct relevant research, Stierl proposes three alternative modes of academic interaction with migration: 1) “epistemic interventions”, which challenge taken-for-granted ideas, definitions, labels, etc., 2) “counter-empirics” to expose violent migration politics and “border imperialism” (see also Walia 2013) and 3) “activist engagement”, which not only holds the researcher morally accountable but also could offer transformative insights outside mainstream (policy) migration research (Stierl 2020, 13ff). Such a counter-hegemonic and emancipatory activist approach in migration research can be a progressive way to deal with the inherent power-structures we face when doing fieldwork with marginalized people (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013). As in activist anthropologies, collaborative or participatory methodologies try to flatten hierarchies, whilst commitment to social change sets the agenda (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Hale 2006). This means that the researcher must understand themselves, if not primarily, then at least equally, as activists in the field. As De Genova reminds us: “we are of the connection because there is no ‘outside’ or analytical position beyond them. There is no neutral ground. The momentum of the struggle itself compels us, one way or the other, to ‘take a side’” (2013, 252). To “take a side” though, we have to be aware of where we are positioned. Hence, to unfold its emancipatory potential, activist research must be constantly evaluated and critically examined regarding its own

implications of power. It would be illusive though to expect all power-structures to just magically disappear by critically reflecting upon them. Even knowing beforehand where likely pitfalls will be, there is no guarantee of not reproducing hierarchical dynamics. It almost seems better to assume that the imbalance of power is unavoidable, and thus prepare ourselves to meet it head on “to do as little harm as possible”. With this in mind, I will first remind of some implications of power in migration research before offering ideas on how to deal with them.

## **2. Implications of power**

The majority of migration research is still conducted by researchers of Western academic origin, which echoes colonial dynamics and privileges them with scientific authority, definition power and access to broader audiences. More than likely, the researcher has access to greater financial means, as well as the necessary documents to cross borders and move freely. Meanwhile the migrants of concern, as holders of the “wrong” or even no passport, are often irregularized, forced to travel precariously and clandestinely. Another asymmetry is drawn along the lines of race, as we do still see mainly White academics researching non-White migrants. White privilege enhances, among many other things, security and ignorance, whilst migrants of Color struggle with racist discrimination and violence.

Educational class, passport and race are some of the important markers of difference that constitute the binary positionalities of privileged researcher and marginalized researched and an asymmetrical power-relation between them. These socio-political positionalities shape our experiences as they regulate access and agency. But they also shape how we perceive or give meaning to the world, the Self and the Other. Those subjective perspectives are diverse – and divided. The intersubjective encounter is hence always marked by differences and historically grown biases, which seem unavoidable and must therefore be considered in any attempt to build emancipatory connections.

As feminist standpoint theory attests, the different positions of researcher and researched create not only ethical or political problems, but also epistemological ones: Knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988), and therefore limited, never neutral or objective. The *epistemic potential* depends on the positionality of and between the subject(s). Marginality here holds what has been called “epistemic privilege” (Mohanty 2003, 511), the ability to make the workings of power visible and to provide “an oppositional worldview, a mode of seeing the unknown to most of our oppressors” (hooks 2004). The marginalized standpoint is thus the starting point for a critical epistemology (Harding 2004 [1993]). Therefore it is necessary to take migrants’ experiences and knowledges “as a vantage point from which to unpack the processes of subjectification emerging from (but also exceeding) the mechanisms for the regulation of migration, at the same time as allowing us to assess the conditions through which political subjectivities emerge as ‘other’” (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013, 245).

Questions formulated from an oppressed position could set the right levers to analyse modes of power, domination and oppression *together*. As Audre Lorde suggests, difference can serve here as a “dialective resource” (1984) to enrich understanding via intersubjective mutual exchange. A multiplicity of perspectives or “feminist objectivity” (Haraway 1988) could then eventually bring us *closer* to some kind of objective knowledge.

However, even if a process of collaborative knowledge production were achieved, the question remains of whose interests the research serves. If the outcome of the research ultimately only serves the production of knowledge *on* migrants, the power-dynamic has still not been completely resolved. This is because of the problems inherent to academic knowledge production itself.

Spivak (1988) identifies the very mode of hegemonial research itself – which is, after all, representation – as a mechanism of silencing. In essence, to represent is to present something that is *absent*. This very condition will always risk miss-representation, epistemic violence and epistemic failure. Representation as *speaking about* has been long contested within anthropology and it has become self-evident (at least for most researchers) that a representation of the Other tends to be a representation *as* Other, and is actually rather a representation of the researcher's perception. Transparency and self-reflexivity, informed by feminist and postcolonial critics, became helpful tools to avoid assumed objectivity and positivist traps. Still scientific authority is at work, and audiences will assume expertise, and hence some kind of objective truth (see Said 1976; Clifford and Marcus 1986). This inevitable authority has been increasingly redirected from *speaking about* to *speaking for* the marginalized, and anthropologists have become more and more involved in advocacy missions.

Whilst it is certainly sometimes an effective strategy to use academic privilege to amplify marginalized voices against oppressive structures, this kind of political representation also once more risks substituting and hence silencing the marginalized as political subjects, who represent themselves (see Spivak 1988). Also, the possibility of a humanitarian “White savior” attitude and resulting paternalistic behavior by the researcher installs a power-relation that evokes colonial patterns. Focusing on problematic issues within what Eve Tuck calls a “damage-centered approach” (2009, 413) might also lead to stigmatizing and reducing the margins as singular places of suffering. As bell hooks argues, though, marginality is rather a “site of resistance, a site of creativity and power, an inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer” (hooks 2004, 159).

How though to enter that space and encounter each other if, ultimately, within the dominant discourse and the historically developed power-imbalances the marginalized *cannot speak* and the hegemonialized *cannot listen*? How then, to produce knowledge *together*? This problem seems irreconcilable with our aims to conduct emancipatory research since the encounter remains potentially harmful.

As fully overcoming this dilemma seems illusory, I propose that we can still impact social change and emancipation by exploring the encounter itself. This could provide important insights not only for academia but for activists as well, especially concerning the challenges of cross-border solidarity. To do so it might be valuable to seek inspiration in activist practice and knowledge, which have evolved out of a long engagement with differences and diversity. In this spirit, elsewhere I've proposed a researcher's attitude as “ally” in the field and to frame “scholarship as allyship” (Naab 2017). With this and some additional considerations, here I hope to provide some assistance for the obstructed task of emancipatory research.

### 2.1. *Allies, friends and spaces of intimacy*

If we want to produce relevant knowledge that is supportive of migrants' struggles, without silencing or patronizing them, we could put ourselves at the service of social movements and their engagements towards freedom of movement. Exploring the cross-border encounter could therefore yield insights that help organize and strengthen solidarities. It could also contribute to a wider emancipatory pedagogy. Social (justice) movements have an inherently anti-oppressive, if not anarchist attempt, which requires creative practice and self-critical analysis to deconstruct hierarchies and be capable of acting. It is in this respect that I imagine anthropology can be a supportive force to "examine and address the varied – often unintentional and invisible – effects of systemic marginalization and differential power dynamics between individuals, groups, and communities by providing a critical analysis of the intersecting lived realities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability" (Walia 2013, 187). The question for anti-oppressive, emancipatory research must hence not concern "who is the oppressed" but "*how* oppression, which is relational and contextual, is specifically manifesting and impacting the orientation of our movement" (Walia 2013, 189).

Even if differently positioned, we are all dominated by relational and intersecting power-structures and we "all wear privilege, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees" (Walia 2013, 189; see also Hill Collins 1993). Without trivializing violations, this understanding opens up space to explore the interconnectedness of histories, experiences and struggles and allows keeping an eye not only on positionalities but also on the structures and behaviors that constitute them. Eventually, as Harsha Walia (2013) argues, we are all simultaneously separated and bound together by (embodied) borders. Chandra T. Mohanty calls such an approach that requires one to formulate questions about connection and disconnection, the "feminist solidarity model" (2003, 521), which potentially enhances the promises made by the epistemology of "feminist objectivity" (Haraway 1988).

However, there is a high probability that a solidary relationship will be obstructed by paternalistic attitudes, unreflexive domination or shame/guilt-driven motivation. I propose that an attitude as *ally*, could offer some assistance in dealing with these pitfalls. The concept of allyship originates from identity-politics and describes a subject that tries to overcome power-relations, from which it gains privileges. As Keith E. Edwards (2006) notes, motivation and the degree of self-reflection are the decisive markers of an ally. In short: An ally is willing to unlearn internalized modes of oppression and learn a liberating understanding of privileges and their strategic application. Furthermore, an ally declares solidarity with a common struggle, as s\_he recognize it as his/her own. Only then, the ally does not work *for* but *with* the marginalized (Edwards 2006). Having transferred to a potentially emancipatory, or solidary, approach to research, I applied the following criteria: 1) constant (self-)reflection, transparency and awareness of intersecting, relational positionalities, and 2) process-oriented, collaborative methodology 3) aiming at reciprocal transformation 4) within a field of common interest that, in the broadest sense, aims at social justice (Naab 2017, 18ff). Practicing "scholarship as allyship" could then also prefiguratively explore the practice of alliance, which is "not a static relationship, but rather a process of mutual education and transformation" (Walia 2013, 178) and provide useful insights for social movements in return.

Next to those rather formal criteria, it is crucial to build actual relationships of trust, comradeship or friendship. This not only tightens activist bonds and deepens levels of empathy and mutual understanding but also actively deconstructs the embodied

borders between us. “Friendship as Method” is how Tillmann-Healy (2003) defines such a relationship-centered, participatory research approach and emphasizes the epistemological, ethical and emancipatory value of conducting fieldwork as friends. Mutuality and honest involvement establish intimacy and enrich perspectives. They also offer deep insights into power-plays, and afford a great opportunity for interactive consciousness-raising and processes of unlearning. In this way, “[j]ust friends, can become *just* friends” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 731). Whilst friendships like other meaningful relationships have the potential to go beyond the “claustrophobic positionalities of oppressor/oppressed” (Walia 2013, 193), they are certainly not a guarantee of equality or non-violence. Still they enable us to hold each other accountable and to actually be concerned with each other.

Instead of *speaking about or for* the marginalized, an ally or friend is *speaking-nearby*, that is, “a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” (Minh-Ha 1992, 87). Elizabeth Dauphinee (2010) suggests therefore an application of auto-ethnography, which places “attention on the relationship of the self to the world that is investigated. In this sense, it is not an appropriation of others, but rather a reflexive awareness of the self as a perpetrator of a certain kind of violence in the course of all writing and all representation – a violence, incidentally, that cannot be avoided” (Dauphinee 2010, 807).

This emphasizes transparency and the “writing in” of emotional experiences and motivations. Feelings ranging from awkwardness to anger, affinity to apathy, all belong to and tell of the research encounter. Auto-ethnography could then be expanded as a collective methodology that would include mutual critical reflections and collaborative research modes to study (through) the borders around and within us, from different but relational perspectives. With this I suggest creating intimate spaces to explore together the messy intersubjective situation and facilitate processes of unlearning.

One such space could be established by means of art via collective creative processes. An empty canvas could open a space of communication, where individuals can move and meet freely, expressing themselves and their perception of each other and the world. This form of communication could hence offer fruitful insights into relational and internalized structures of power, without reducing participants to a positionality or an object of research. The results, as manifestations of diverse perspectives, could support the negotiation of relationships, whilst mutual reflection and collective interpretation can enrich the understanding with multiple subjectivities and enhanced empathy. In this way the challenges or contradictions of encounters can become visible and, potentially, simultaneously transformed. Whilst it is not possible to deconstruct all power and domination at once, here we can nevertheless start to form meaningful relationships and to build a “bridge over the split” (Desai 2006, 149).

### **3. Conclusion**

The big question remains of how conducting research with people who are struggling against the violence of b/ordering regimes can actually be beneficial to them. Ultimately, it seems that only if our observations and reflections serve to improve our abilities as *activists* can the whole thing start to make sense. If tangible change is our true goal we have to see the theoretical frameworks and analytical tools of ethnography as means to

the end of strengthening political movements. Research can be an important first step, to get to know a (socio-political) terrain and more importantly the people and struggles we want to work with. Ethnography can serve to explore the intersubjective situation and to develop responsive, emancipatory strategies. Understanding how power-relations affect us on a personal level may seem trivial, or at least not concretely productive, until the personal relationships become the foundations of collective action and social transformation. Then this knowledge becomes crucial. Ultimately, “[u]ndoing border imperialism requires that we undo power structures, while prefiguring the social relations we wish to have” (Walia 2013, 15). With this in mind, I would like to end by passing on De Genova’s recommendation regarding militant migration research, which is to “take as fundamental starting point the premise that ‘things’ could have been different, and that nothing has to remain as it presently appears” (2013, 251).

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***Norambuena Clara: Migration and domestic work: reflections on positionality and representation***

**Abstract**

In this paper, I investigate knowledge production and the power relations that it (re-)produces. This paper is directly linked to my future thesis, which will be centered on the topic of domestic work in Switzerland. Here I hope to begin to question the reflexive position of the researcher. First, I address the researcher's positionality and observe how their position in the social space has an impact on their visions of society and thus on their production of knowledge. Then, I examine the representations that researchers produce on their object of study, and the practical consequences that these representations can have, taking as an example the question of the integration of migrant women in the labor market. In the second part of this work, I sketch out possible solutions to avoid these pitfalls.

## 1. Introduction

For my thesis I decided to study the domestic economy in Switzerland. This idea came to me after reading a text by the sociologist Sara R. Farris, who observes how in the Netherlands and France policies for the integration of migrant women into the labor market encourage them to work mainly in paid domestic sectors (2015, 12). I therefore thought it would be relevant to pursue this topic by taking Switzerland as a case study.

However, I was very quickly confronted with many questions and doubts. Indeed, focusing on the domestic economy in Switzerland means discussing the integration of migrant and/or precarious women in the labor market, some of whom have no legal status (Carreras 2008, 85). Inevitably, when researching with migrant women, there is a risk of reproducing power relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee, between the one who represents and the one who is represented. I am neither a domestic worker nor a migrant woman and I have a legal status. I am a woman, but in this context I am privileged because of my origin and status, as a Swiss-chilean citizen born in Switzerland, and a university student of middle class origin. Furthermore, writing this thesis will allow me to obtain a Master's degree, which will consolidate my privileges. Consequently, my social position will influence the ways in which the object of study is conceptualized, and at least some of the representations that come from my social position are likely to have an impact on the production of knowledge (Harding 1992, 442).

Moreover, as Ilan Kapoor explains, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes that the production of knowledge about "Others", the dominated, will always maintain a form of Western hegemony, and thus a reproduction of power relations (Kapoor 2008, 42). Furthermore, historically the knowledge produced by anthropology has sometimes been "willfully misread, misinterpreted and misused" (Fernando 2014, 241), with disastrous consequences for the populations studied.

On the other hand, according to Gayatri Spivak (as described by Kapoor), "our representations cannot escape othering" (Kapoor 2008, 59). Whatever the researcher does, it would seem that one cannot escape a form of discursive production of the Other while one produces knowledge about a situation. The question then arises: Should one therefore abandon all research if the subject of the research is linked to individuals or groups in a "subaltern" position? I do not think so. Anthropologists have a role to play "as counter-experts" (Fernando 2014, 242). However, Gayatri Spivak's assertion gives food for thought on how to get around this pitfall in research. I would therefore ask the following questions: How can we produce knowledge that can participate in deconstructing power relations, knowing that it is ultimately impossible to escape our representations? What attitude should we adopt in order to fight against these biases in the production of knowledge?

To answer these questions, I will first look at representations, questioning the role of social position in the production of knowledge, and the impact of this knowledge outside the academic space. To this end, I will use the example of my thesis on the topic of the "integration of migrant women" in the labor market. In the second part, I will look at some methodologies that I believe can be used to counter power relations.

## 2. Representations in the production of knowledge

### 2.1. *The position of the one who represents*

Whereas, in the 1970s academic feminists talking about free domestic labor produced knowledge directly from their own situations (and left aside the question of paid domestic work), nowadays academic feminists working on domestic work produce knowledge that concerns them less directly (Molinier 2013, 47). Indeed, when these academics are studying issues around paid domestic work, they are talking about labor that they do not themselves perform, and they may even hire housekeepers. However, it is those academic feminists who have the legitimacy, whose voices are heard. The voices of those engaged in paid domestic work are not heard, but rather are translated by the voices of academic women. This links to the question of the place of the “native voice” in anthropology. In this regard, Mayanthi Fernando says that – paraphrasing anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot – anthropology has an ambiguous relationship with this voice (Fernando 2014, 238). On the one hand, anthropologists claim to transmit the native voice and to take it seriously. But, on the other hand, they do not let informants transmit their voice themselves, as this would render anthropologists useless (2014, 238).

Even if researchers try to convey the voice of the informants as well as possible, the translation will always be tainted by the representations of the researchers, coming from the social world of which they are part, and from their institutional position. Indeed, as the philosopher Sandra G. Harding says, the social position of the researchers influences their representations of the world, and thus the way they represent their research subjects (1992, 442).

However, for a long time, scientists claimed that good science should be as neutral as possible, where researchers would be external to their field of analysis, indifferent to various interactions. However, as Pierre Bourdieu says (speaking of sociology but applicable to all fields of research): “[s]ocial facts are socially constructed and every social agent, like the scientist, constructs as well as he can, and aims to impose, with more or less force, his singular vision of reality, his ‘point of view’. This is what makes sociology, whether it likes it or not ... a stakeholder in the struggles it describes” (Bourdieu 2004, 172, my translation). Since the researchers are themselves caught up in the social world they describe, trying to be completely objective is impossible. The “discursive constructions” produced by academic researchers are “intimately linked to [their] positioning (socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, institutional)” (Kapoor 2008, 42). This is why Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains that “Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in such a global economic and political framework” (1988, 63).

## *2.2. The effects of the representation of the researchees*

The position of researchers has an impact on social world. Moreover, the way that they represent their researchees has concrete effects on the field, it participates (directly and indirectly) in shaping the world that researchers study.

For instance, according to Janine Dahinden, migration studies research participates in the “migration apparatus”, and thus becomes “an important ‘producer’ of a worldview according to which migration- and ethnicity-related differences are predominant” (2016, 2211). The revival in academic research of categories related to migration (e.g. “migrant women”, “undocumented persons”) commonly used in institutions dealing with migration, is an example in a sense of legitimization and normalization of these categories (2016, 2211).

Coming back to my thesis, this question is particularly relevant to the example of the integration of migrant women in domestic work. Anna Korteweg has clearly shown how, through discourses on integration, a “problem” is constituted, making a distinction between “integrated” and “non-integrated” people, whilst migrants “‘always already’ belong” to the host country according to the author (2017, 429). Sara Farris shows in this regard how “non-Western women, especially Muslim women” are often described as the “contemporary incarnation” of the “Third World woman” that Chandra Talpade Mohanty has analysed (2015, 29, my translation). Indeed, Mohanty has shown how Western feminists built the idea of the “‘Third World woman’ as a homogeneous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular cultural and socio-economic systems” (1988, 66, Mohanty’s emphasis). This image comprises multiple exotic, racist and sexist stereotypes, where “Third World women” are all said to come from patriarchal cultures of which they are victims.

Sara Farris explains that this vision has an important impact on the conceptualizations of public policies for the integration of migrant women (2015, 15). Farris shows that the idea of subordination of migrant women to their husbands remains very present in labor integration programs in France and the Netherlands, where (domestic) work is presented as a way for non-Western women to break free from their subjugation: “The integration of women into labor work constitutes the *telos* for their emancipation, or, to put it another way, work becomes the stage through which women can escape the condition of subordination, economic dependence and isolation that the reproductive, or private, sphere is supposed to represent” (2015, 29, my translation, Farris’s emphasis). Thus, using these same terms in my work, without contextualization, while having a position of “knowledge producer”, would participate in validating and legitimizing the current use of “integration”.

Thus, more generally, there is real continuity between the social position of women researchers, the representations of non-Western women that these researchers produce, and the public policies related to migration and integration issues.

### **3. Is it possible to go beyond these representations? Some proposals**

As we have seen, researchers are part of the social world they analyse. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to detach oneself from these representations. As Kapoor explains, regarding Spivak’s work, “[y]ou can never represent or act from an ‘outside’, since you are always already situated inside discourse, culture, institutions, geopolitics” (Kapoor 2008, 54). Thus, doing research on the assumption that the researchers will be able to get rid of all the representations they have of the social world, and therefore of their respondents, is not possible. This recognition could cause the researchers to want to give up, for fear of reproducing power relationships they would rather avoid.

However, still inspired by Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonial theories, I think it is preferable, rather than refusing to do research, to be as attentive and rigorous as possible about the position of the researcher: “let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it” (Spivak 1990a cited in Kapoor 2008, 55). In response, the author proposes, for example, the “unlearning process” (2008, 56), which suggests unlearning knowledge by constantly questioning ideas that seem known, obvious, natural. Thus, in the context of my thesis, questioning common-sense notions, for example the “migrant woman”, seems to me to be part of this unlearning process.

The unlearning must also be followed, of course, by introspection regarding the researcher's position. Without this, the researcher will be tempted, in the case of domestic work for example, to speak on behalf of migrant women from the point of view of the white middle-class and/or bourgeois woman. On positioning, Sandra Harding proposes starting directly from the experience of the subalterns, which "provide[s] particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas" (1992, 443, Harding's emphasis). Indeed, by starting from the experience of subalterns, researchers are able to make critical arguments that have never been heard before (1992, 445). As Sandra Harding says, the aim is to "produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people ... rather than *for* the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized" (1992, 444–445, Harding's emphasis).

Professor Ilan Kapoor explains that "it is possible to work within the belly of the beast and still engage in persistent criticism of hegemonic representations" (Kapoor 2008, 55). The question of "hegemonic representations" seems quite interesting to me because it also allows us to focus on power relations, whether institutional, political, economic or cultural. In fact, transforming these power relations into the focus of research allows us to decentralize our research by using the knowledge produced by the people surveyed in order to criticize Western hegemony. In this regard, I would like to mention the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who, according to Mayanthi Fernando, reflects upon the importance of differentiating between the "object of observation" and the "object of study" (Fernando 2014, 237). Whilst they are often considered similar, the anthropologist shows that the difference is significant. More specifically, in Trouillot's study on the historical silence regarding the Haitian revolution, the object of observation (in this case the Haitian revolution and its actors) provides access to the object of study: the "conditions of possibility" for this silence (Fernando 2014, 239).

To take another example, Mayanthi Fernando explains that by taking French Muslims as the object of observation, she was able to study "the French Republic's discourses, institutions, and political and legal practices" (2014, 239). Trouillot's methodology thus allows us to reflect on the relations of power produced by the West. Therefore, in the case of my thesis, it would perhaps be interesting to draw inspiration from this methodology, to take domestic workers as the object of observation in order to study and question my object of study, which would be the way in which public discourses, mechanisms and practices in Switzerland are the product of a double-speak addressing both the neoliberal economic context and restrictive migration policy. This may be a way to avoid the representations inherent to my position as a researcher.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, in this paper, I wanted to elaborate a proposal for answering the question of the production of knowledge that can deconstruct power relations, knowing that getting rid of these representations is ultimately impossible. By approaching the example of my thesis on the topic of "the integration of migrant women" in the labor market, I first reflected on how the social position of the researcher has an impact on the way knowledge about "subalterns" is produced, and on the consequences of this knowledge. In the second part, I made some suggestions regarding how to produce knowledge about subalterns, whilst not disadvantaging them. The concept of positionality (developed by Harding, among others) and Spivak's unlearning concept allow us to sketch out the elements of a response. I ended with aspects of Trouillot's methodology, which I believe can link the experience of the people surveyed with the

power relationships in which they are anchored. This question is, of course, very complex, and I am not sure that I have found a solution to these power relationships, or if we can escape from “othering” as Spivak puts it. As Mayanthi Fernando explains, the main contribution of anthropology is also the source of its weaknesses: “[i]t is precisely anthropology’s attention to the powerless and the marginalized – its commitment to justice, which is the source of its moral authority – that produces the ethical, political, and epistemological dilemmas sketched above” (Fernando 2014, 242).

Reflecting on all these issues is already a first and essential step, which, it seems to me, is more and more questioned in anthropology. However, it remains to be seen how these reflections, with their aim of improving the social sciences, are received more broadly within the discipline (for example, in renowned journals), and in social sciences more generally.

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***Ayla Schudel: Rethinking the category of “the asylum seeker”:  
reproduction of heteronormativity in Swiss asylum procedure***

**Abstract**

The following paper contributes to reflexive migration research by looking at the category of “the asylum seeker” through the lens of queer theory. As will be shown, the widespread representation of “the asylum seeker” as a heterosexual is reflected in practices of Swiss immigration authorities. By analysing accommodation conditions in federal asylum centers, this paper argues that nation-state structures reproduce and naturalize heteronormativity and the gender-binary through their repetitive performance. Whilst the prevailing heteronormativity tends to silence the non-conforming in the accommodation context, the asylum hearing itself requires immediate disclosure of non-normative sexualities to increase chances of receiving protection. It will be demonstrated that both contexts contain a normative disciplining of sexualities, relying on Western perceptions as well as on essentialist, clear-cut and binary understandings of sexual orientation and gender.

## 1. Reflexivity in social anthropology

With the reflexive turn in social anthropology, questions regarding the possibility of objective research were raised. Since social scientists are part of the social world they study, their own biases, epistemologies and dispositions are inherently involved in research design, and knowledge production is always filtered through personal experience. Bourdieu argues that social science is a “social construction of a social construction” (Bourdieu 2004, 88), whilst the researcher and her position in social space have great influence on how this construction work is being done. The reflexive turn brought greater sensitivity towards the conditions of knowledge production, ethnocentrism, research practices, that perpetuate methods of the colonizer and the researcher’s own positionality. Central to reflexivity is awareness of the constructed nature of classification systems, since taken-for-granted categories are being further naturalized through unreflective usage in the academic field. In this sense, with their concept of methodological nationalism Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) offer a significant approach towards the de-naturalization of the taken-for-granted division of the world into sedentary, autonomous units. Furthermore, they show how migration research itself interacts with the nation-state building process and how, despite the transnational paradigm, the field treats the nation as an integrated unity and tends to essentialize communities (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 324). Malkki (1992, 28–29) argues that the conception of an ahistorical national order of things is furthermore connected to the idea of national belonging and culture and has a territorializing effect on identities. In her understanding, the resulting “pathologization of uprootedness” (Malkki 1992, 32) regarding forced migrants or refugees is reinforced actively through policy and scholarly discourse. Likewise, Dahinden (2016) discusses the usage of the “migrant” label, emphasizing that its unreflective application essentializes otherness and therefore contributes to a discourse that normalizes migration-related difference. She proposes analysing research on migration using concepts built outside of migration studies, whilst migrantizing social science and thereby establishing a “post-migration” social science (Dahinden 2016, 14).

### 1.1. Rethinking the “asylum seeker”

The present paper reflects on the category of “the asylum seeker” through the lens of queer theory, making visible how heteronormative and Western understandings of sexuality are embedded in the perception and treatment of people seeking protection in Switzerland. Through queering the category of “the asylum seeker”, I explore how structures within the Swiss asylum system reproduce, reinforce and naturalize heteronormativity. Therefore, as well as existing literature I also draw on data collected during fieldwork in spring and summer 2020. In the course of my Master’s thesis on arrival experiences of queer asylum seekers in Switzerland, I conducted five semi-structured interviews and several informal conversations with asylum-seeking people with non-conforming sexual identities. Furthermore, interviews with representatives of the immigration authorities, legal and medical support services, LGBTIQ organizations and caregivers at the accommodation center were carried out. Although limited due to COVID-19 (e.g. accompanying an asylum hearing was planned, but cancelled), participant observation took place in a legal support office (where I was working as a counselor) and three accommodation centers. Following Sandra Harding’s (1992)

concept of feminist standpoint epistemology, this paper takes the experiences of those at the bottom of social hierarchies as a starting point to identify critical questions on how the social order works (Harding 1992, 451).

## 2. Queer theory and its potential for disruption

People seeking asylum with non-conforming sexualities inhabit a social position that is exposed to intersectional marginalization and discrimination since in Swiss society stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc. they find themselves subjected to overlapping systems of oppression and othering. In public discourse, “the asylum seeker” is often represented as male and heterosexual, carrying criminal energy, intending to exploit “our” welfare system and being inherently homophobic and misogynist due to “his culture”. As Verena Stolcke (1995) shows, such culturalistic rhetoric served the establishment of differential racism, which treats nations as culturally homogeneous and incompatible with others. These essentializing discourses are also reflected in political initiatives on foreign infiltration, such as the one against the construction of minarets in 2009<sup>9</sup>, where the so-called inherent sexism of Islam helped the right-wing parties win the public vote. Instead of assuming identities to be ahistorical and frozen, queer theory offers a rather fluent and unstable understanding of identity. Even though queer theory is mainly used to describe sexual positionalities, Tina Büchler emphasizes its general potential for disruption: “It is exactly this engagement with the (shifting) lines of that which is naturalized as ‘normal’ and that which is constructed as its necessary ‘abnormal’ counterpart that puts queer theory in a position to potentially destabilize all identity claims” (Büchler 2015, 45). Regarding (sexual) identity, queer theory emphasizes fluidity and complexity and rejects essentialist as well as binary perceptions. Therefore, identities are not to be understood as delimitable but rather as resulting from ongoing intersectional processes (Büchler 2015, 43), or, as Judith Butler would put it, they never preexist their repetitive performance (Butler 1990). Besides its anti-identarian stance, queer theory also contests the (hetero)sexual norm through the critical concept of heteronormativity. This concept analyses the discursive and performative naturalization of heterosexuality and gender-binarity norms and criticizes the resulting perpetuation of suppression of the non-conforming. The normative assumption of the heterosexual, cis-gendered “asylum seeker” is to be found in public, political and media discourses as well as in (migration) research. As will be shown in the following sections, it seems to be deeply embedded in Swiss immigration practices and institutions.

### 2.1. *Reproduction of heteronormativity in federal asylum camps*

In March 2019 a new asylum law came into force in Switzerland that led to a far-reaching restructuring of the entire process with the aim of accelerating decision-making. In concrete terms, immigration authorities (Staatssekretariat für Migration – SEM) are required to conduct the asylum hearing within the first three weeks of arrival and decide on a case within 140 days after the application. During this period, marked by extreme

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<sup>9</sup> In 2009 Swiss right wing parties launched a popular initiative (Eidgenössische Volksinitiative gegen den Bau von Minaretten) to ban further constructions of minarets throughout the country. Due to anti-islamic rhetorics, the initiative was finally accepted with 57.5% of the public votes.

uncertainty about their future, protection-seeking people are accommodated in a federal asylum center (Bundesasylzentrum – BAZ), where the offices of several official actors (the SEM, security services, medical support, legal support, return counseling, caregivers) are also located. The BAZ can in many ways be described as a space where the heterosexual norm and the gender-binary are reproduced, reinforced and therefore naturalized. Throughout their entire stay in the BAZ, protection-seeking people are obliged to go through detailed bodychecks conducted by a private security firm every time they enter their temporary “home”. This process criminalizes asylum-seeking people by putting them under general suspicion of carrying illegal items or stolen goods. These bodychecks are executed in a binary way: depending on their officially registered sex, people are either assigned to a male or a female security guard. The assumption that this offers protection from sexualized abuses reveals how “the asylum seeker”, as well as the security guards, are considered to be heterosexual beings since no thought is given to the fact that people might feel less harassed if touched by a person of the other gender. Furthermore, the fact that not everyone identifies with their officially registered sex is not taken into account – for example gender identities of trans people are actively denied whilst their trans identity is simultaneously and repeatedly revealed to anyone present in the entrance area of the BAZ. The active complaint of a trans woman with the assistance of the Transgender Network Switzerland (TGNS) even resulted in an official refusal by a female security guard to search her, which was supported by the security firm’s supervisor.

## *2.2. Destabilization of heteronormativity and concealment strategies*

The naturalization of the gender-binary and heteronormativity is also found in the way the BAZ was constructed: people are accommodated in female or male dorms that hold eight people and no gender-neutral bathroom facilities are accessible with the exception of those for disabled people. The omission of gender-neutral sanitary facilities in a federal institution (constructed in 2019) shows clearly how needs of queer people were not taken into account, since heteronormative values guided infrastructure considerations. This is also reflected in the official accommodation guidelines, in which queer people are not mentioned. Furthermore, the responsible person at the SEM believes there are only “individual cases”. Conversely, almost all participants in the study noted that this restricted infrastructure puts them in a difficult situation and some of them even adopt avoidance strategies, like Berken:

For homosexual people or trans people the conditions in the camp don’t fit; they aren’t good, no. Personally, I always felt forced to, or I felt like I need to, shower at five in the morning before the others get up and start showering. (...) I am somebody who likes spending time in front of the mirror. I have the urge to pluck my eyebrows and, somehow, I could not do that. (...) I got looked at weirdly. (Berken, 27, homosexual, lived in Turkey before applying for asylum in Switzerland in 2019)

One trans person revealed to her counselor at the TGNS how she stopped drinking water to avoid using the toilet and instead organized painkillers to overcome the resulting headache. Lilly, a trans woman in her twenties, stated that she feels most vulnerable in the bath- and bedroom, and without any privacy she has been exposed to harassment in the BAZ. She actively fought for more privacy, including with the support of legal services and TGNS, which led to her gaining access to the bathroom facilities in medical services with highly restricted showering hours and someone guarding the

door, which for some reason did not lock from the inside. Widespread means of hiding non-conformity include staying closeted, avoidance strategies and social isolation, but these tactics are never accessible to all queer people and are often also unwanted. Some of them, like Lilly, decide to actively destabilize the repetitive performance of heteronormativity. Unlike other transgender participants, she chose not to hide her gender by wearing clothes that matched her biological sex, because she felt this was exactly one of the reasons why she had decided to leave her country of origin. When she was sexually harassed within the federal facility, instead of offering her support or at least information about reporting an offense, staff members suggested she fall back on concealment strategies and they offered her male-connoted clothing. The head of the caregiving team within the BAZ implied that Lilly was lacking some form of discretion:

He (sic!) also appeared accordingly [meaning a feminine gender expression] in the center, with painted nails, etc. This created the challenge for us of how to shut down the vulgar talk. Because, he (sic!) – to put it negatively – provokes it with his (sic!) appearance. He (sic!) didn't have the sense to be discreet in a collective facility like this.

Heteronormativity gets inscribed into spaces only through its repetitive performance, which leads to its naturalization (Büchler 2015, 53). But Lilly's experience shows that even in spaces like the BAZ, where structures and repetitively performed state practices work towards a reproduction of heteronormativity, the latter is never stable but has cracks and is thus open to subversion. As Büchler notes, such queering of space performs a double movement: Whilst increasing visibility of otherwise suppressed sexualities and sexual identities, it simultaneously exposes the dominant heteronormativity of a space (Büchler 2015, 54).

### *2.3. Western normativity and homonationalistic logic in decision-making*

Expectations that queer residents of the BAZ will adopt avoidance strategies and stay closeted contrast sharply with the requirements of the accelerated asylum procedure. Within three weeks of applying for asylum, applicants are invited to an asylum hearing to set out their justified fear or lived experiences of persecution. Especially in asylum claims relating to persecution because of non-conforming sexuality or sexual identity, the personal narrative is often the only source of evidence, hence presenting it in a credible manner is of great significance.<sup>10</sup> Büchler argues that Swiss asylum practices represent a violent narrative regime since queer people are forced to come out whilst (in great opposition to queer theory) presenting an inherent, irreversible and clear-cut sexual identity, which conforms to Western understandings and therefore is legible and classifiable by Swiss immigration officials (Büchler 2015, 262). During my fieldwork an asylum request by a Chinese man, who was claiming persecution due to footage showing him having sex with trans men, was rejected. His legal representative noted that his refusal to identify as homosexual, or, put differently, to categorize himself as a member of the LGBTIQ community seemed to have devalued his narrative of persecution. Bertschi further points out that certain kinds of appearance, gestures and ways of speaking as well as knowledge about the LGBTIQ scene in Switzerland or being

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<sup>10</sup> Due to the lack of statistics only very little data is available, but Achermann and Hruschka (2012, 12) note that most asylum requests based on persecution due to non-conforming sexuality are rejected because of lacking credibility

involved in sex work increase credibility (Bertschi 2007, 3). This shows that Western ideas of sexuality influence decision-making whereby non-conforming identities are essentialized and imagined as a clearly distinguishable counterpole of a hetero way of life. Moreover, Büchler shows that the reproduction of the Eurocentric and homonationalist logic of a gay-friendly West versus a homophobic South/Orient is essential for establishing credibility (Büchler 2015, 261). Deservingness of refugee status is therefore connected to a culturalistic representation of the self as a victim of one's "own culture".

### 3. Conclusion

In line with reflexive migration research, this paper has aimed to rethink the category of "the asylum seeker" through the lens of queer and postcolonial theory. In public and policy discourse as well as in research, "the asylum seeker" is mostly represented as a heterosexual male. Furthermore, such a normative assumption of heterosexuality is embedded in nation-state practices. As demonstrated, structures in federal accommodation facilities for asylum-seeking people reproduce and naturalize heteronormativity through its repetitive performance and tend to silence non-conforming sexualities and sexual identities. Subversive practices, like queering of space, serve as "cracks" in the prevailing norm and thereby reveal heteronormativity. The silencing of non-conformity contrasts sharply with the requirements of the asylum procedure, where coming-out in a credible manner is crucial. Through the legal notion of "credibility", nation-state practices connect deservingness of asylum to a narrative that reinforces the culturalistic externalization of homophobia and constructs a liberated, gay-friendly and therefore superior West. Looking at the category of "the asylum seeker" through the lens of queer theory made visible how Swiss asylum practices discipline sexualities in a twofold but partly contradictory way. As pointed out, practices within the very same immigration apparatus tend to suppress and silence non-conformity but on the other hand demand, or even force, the outing of queer people seeking protection. Receiving a legal status through asylum seems more easily accessible to those who present their sexual identity in a way that conforms to (stereotyped) Western understandings.

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