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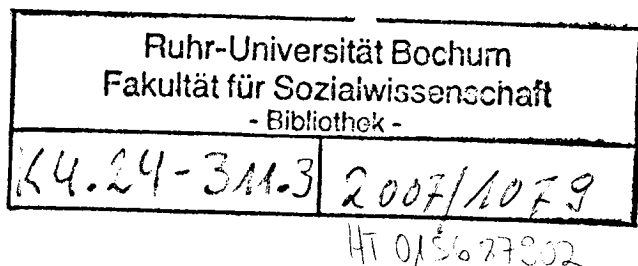
A Canon of Our Own?

Kanonkritik und Kanonbildung in den
Gender Studies

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

<i>Karin S. Wozonig</i> Dimensionen des Kanons	9
---	---

<i>Christina Lutter</i> Vorwort	15
--	----

DISZIPLINierter RAUM

<i>Aleida Assmann</i> Kanon und Archiv – Genderprobleme in der Dynamik des kulturellen Gedächtnisses	20
--	----

<i>Marlen Bidwell-Steiner</i> Kanonkritik zwischen Herrschaftsraum und geschütztem Raum	35
---	----

<i>Ilse Müllner</i> Der eine Kanon und die vielen Stimmen. Ein feministisch-theologischer Entwurf	42
---	----

<i>Hans-Uwe Lammel</i> Hippokrates, der medizinische Kanon und die Frauen	58
--	----

<i>Kerstin Palm</i> Kanonisierungsweisen von Kanonkritik – die Geschlechterforschung zu Naturwissenschaften als Reflexionsmedium disziplinärer Kritikoptionen	76
--	----

<i>Christa Binswanger</i> Shakespeares Schwestern, Medusen oder „Ich ohne Geschlecht“? Zu weiblichem Schreiben, Kanon und feministischer Literaturwissenschaft	90
---	----

ZWISCHENRAUM

Susanne Hochreiter

- „Das offene Netz möglicher Bedeutungen“.
Queere Positionen in der Debatte über den deutschsprachigen
Literaturkanon 104

Anna Babka

- ‘In-side-out’ the Canon.
Zur Verortung und Perspektivierung von postkolonialen
Theorien & Gendertheorien in der germanistischen
Literaturwissenschaft..... 117

Tatiana Barchunova

- A Library of Our Own?
Feminist Translations From English into Russian 133

Erzsébet Barát

- The importance of a discorsal approach to
translation as an organized practice 148

Marina Blagojevic

- Canons and Contexts: Beyond fragmentation 159

Raluca Maria Popa

- Communist Women Speaking Internationally:
A Revision of the ‘East’/‘West’ Divide? 175

Karin Harrasser

- Cyberfeminismus. Träume von Modellierbarkeit 189

VERHANDELTER RAUM

Gabriele Griffin

- Women's and Gender Studies –
The Quintessential Subject in Process 202

Victoria Robinson

- Internal and External Shifts and Constraints
on Women's Studies and Gender Studies:
Implications For the 'Canon' 217

Therese Garstenauer

- The inevitability of a Canon in Women's and Gender Studies,
and what to do about it 228

Anna Temkina, Elena Zdravomyslova

- Gender and Women's Studies in Contemporary Russia 240

Veronika Wöhrer

- "Doing Feminism" and other Theoretical Interventions 254

Diana M.A. Relke

- Loose Canons: A Canadian perspective on feminist
power relations and knowledge production 266

Die AutorInnen 275

Veronika Wöhrer

“Doing Feminism” and other Theoretical Interventions

In this paper, I would like to re-read texts by gender researchers from the Czech and Slovak republics, and question the supposition that gender theories have been developed mainly in “Western”¹ academic centers.

In a number of texts written in post 1989 discussions around feminisms in capitalist and post-socialist countries, “Western” approaches are associated with theory, while “Eastern” contributions are seen as empirical data and experience. The assumption that over the last 30 years feminists in the “West” have developed a broad variety of academic approaches, theories and methods, whereas in post-socialist countries just a few researches and academic works have been carried out on the topic of “women,” but hardly any theoretical input has been given to international feminist or gender debates, seems to be widespread and comprehensible. Not only so-called “Western” authors like Nanette Funk or Laura Busheikin (Funk 1996: 38, Busheikin 1993: 71-72), but also Czech and Slovak scholars recorded the difference between a relatively long tradition of feminist theory in the “West” and the very newness of the topic in post-socialist countries. Lubica Lacinová, for example, wrote in 2004:

Ich habe keine Erinnerungen, die sich auf Feminismus beziehen – weder positiv noch negativ – die von vor 1989 stammen (...) Erst im Jahre 1991 habe ich sie mir [feministische Konzepte] – zusammen mit einem Computer – aus den Vereinigten Staaten mitgebracht. Beide waren damals bei uns nicht selbstverständlich und daher waren sie für mich wichtig.

¹ I use the terms “East” and “West” in quotation marks because I am very sceptical of their exact meanings and their frequent usage: Even though they come out of geography, they do not refer to geographic locations but rather to the belongings to former political blocks. This can for instance be seen when Prague is considered as “East,” but Vienna as “West,” Romania and Bulgaria as “East,” but Greece as “West.” Besides, they carry connotations which date back to the age of Enlightenment and are connected to “being civilized” and “being in between civilization and barbarism.” (See, for instance, Wolff 1994)

[I do not have any memories concerning feminism – neither negative nor positive – which date back to before 1989. (...) Only in 1991 I brought them [feminist concepts] along with me from the United States – together with a Computer. Back then, we did not take both of them for granted, therefore they were important for me.] (Lacinová 2004: 12)

Jiřina Šiklová, Libora Oates-Indruchová, Alena Heitlinger or Zuzana Kiczková similarly stress that, in contrast to “Western” societies, there was no critical or feminist analysis of gender issues before 1989 in the ČSSR (Šiklová 1996: 7f, Oates-Indruchová 2002: 11, Heitlinger 2004: 82, Kiczková 1998: 298). Other authors connect this with the existence or non-existence of *theoretical* analyses. Already in 1974, Alena Wagner-Köhler wrote:

Wurde im Westen bisher die Frauenfrage vor allem theoretisch durchdacht und formuliert, so in den sozialistischen Ländern vor allem durchlebt. Die Fülle an Erfahrungen und Lebensmaterial, die die Entwicklung in den sozialistischen Ländern bietet, wurde bisher weniger theoretisch analysiert und gewertet, die unmittelbare Aktualität der praktischen Probleme ließ die Theorie vielmehr in den Hintergrund treten.

[While the women’s question was primarily thought through theoretically in the West, in socialist countries it was primarily lived through. The richness of experiences and life-determining events which is offered by the development in socialist countries was hardly analyzed and assessed theoretically ; the immediate topicality of practical problems made theory take the back seat.] (Köhler-Wagnerová 1974: 132)

Some of the scholars I interviewed for my PhD project on “Border Crossers. Gender Discourses between Capitalism and Post-Socialism,” similarly located *theory* in the “West” and *experience* in the “East”. One interview partner from Bratislava, for instance, said:

The theory was interesting for us from the West. There was no theory in the East, and some activism from East it was not reflected, so it was not interesting. But things, which were lived through in 70s, 80s, 90s, during backlash and of course the whole theory was interesting and I can still learn from that, it’s still the source of my work. (Interview, Bratislava July 2004)

Other statements by Slovak scholars give similar descriptions:

Es gab bei uns viele Jahre zwar keine theoretische Selbstreflexion der Frau, die weibliche Literatur bildete jedoch ein Gebiet, in welchem es wahrscheinlich mehr spontan als zielbewusst zu manchen Versuchen von Reflexionen des Frauenlebens gekommen ist.

[Here there was no theoretical self-reflection of woman for many years, but female literature was an area in which – probably more spontaneously than on purpose - some attempts at reflections of women's lives were made.] (Farkašová 1992: 107)

Die Zeitschrift veröffentlichte originale literarische oder künstlerische Werke, sowie theoretische Essays, die westliche Feminismen zwar reflektiert, analysiert, manchmal vielleicht sogar leicht extra-polier haben, grundsätzlich neue Konzepte aber nicht formulierten.

[The magazine published original literary or artistic works, as well as theoretical essays, which reflected, analyzed, and maybe even slightly extrapolated Western feminisms, but did not draft fundamentally new concepts.] (Lacinová 2004: 12)

Researchers from Austria or the United States, whom I also interviewed, were more cautious to explicitly formulate these classifications, but some statements implicitly expressed related ideas. One scholar said:

Ich hab mich, ehrlich gesagt, nicht so für feministische Fragen in Ost-europa interessiert, denn ich bin beschäftigt mich mit *Gender-theorie*, und dort ging es ja doch eher um empirische Fragen.

[Honestly, I have not been that interested in feminism in Eastern Europe, because I am engaged in *Gender theory* and there it was more about empirical issues] (Interview, Vienna January 2005).

Another scholar classified papers from her colleagues from Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia at a conference in the early 90s as follows: “Na ja, wie soll ich sagen, vielleicht sozialgeschichtlich [Well, what shall I call them, maybe social-historian]”, because they did not deal with any philosophical issues in her opinion (Interview, Vienna January 2005).

But one interview partner, who lives in the USA, explicitly criticized these perceptions and inequalities. She said:

There's a lot of great feminist thinking going on and it's a pity, it's always sad, that we cannot get access to their knowledge. The pressure is always put on: How our knowledge can be made available, but there's little recognition that there is a tremendous knowledge in all these communities and a vast experience and understanding of that experience and placing that experience in a feminist framework." (Interview New York November 2004)

A closer look at available literature seems to support the perception of a "Western" dominance in theory. Whereas the publishing houses "One Woman-Press" in Prague, and "Aspekt" in Bratislava², published far more translations of "Western" academic books on gender issues than Czech or Slovak originals, publishing houses in Austria or Germany primarily focus on their own context. One Woman-Press published 48 books since 1997, 45 of which were translations; out of 12 academic books only 3 were Czech originals. Aspekt published 56 books altogether, 34 of which were translations. Out of 22 academic works, 14 were translations, 5 anthologies edited by Slovaks and only three Slovak monographs. The Viennese feminist publishing house "Milena" lists 150 different books on its homepage (<http://www.milena-verlag.at/frames.htm>). Most of those books are by Austrian authors or editors, some by other German speaking persons (altogether 128 works), only 5 books (or 3%) are translations of works by authors from post-socialist countries. None of these works is considered to be *theory*. "Orlanda Frauenverlag" in Berlin, which puts its emphasis on migration and post-colonial issues, gives information about 105 available books on its homepage (<http://www.orlanda.de/>). 51 of those books are by authors or editors living in Germany, the others are co-operations with other authors/editors or translations, but only one book, a biography, is situated in a post-socialist context. In the libraries of Gender studies, o.p.s. (Prague) and Aspekt (Bratislava), the two biggest libraries with a specialization in gender issues in these countries, the majority of titles has always been in English (In Aspekt there is also a great number of German books). At the beginning, almost all books and journals were donations from foreign foundations or authors themselves. Later, smaller grants for buying literature could be obtained, but still most available books were published in the USA, Great Britain or Germany.³ It seems that literature from some

² These are the only publishing houses with a feminist agenda in these two countries.

³ Of 82 titles classified as "feminist theories," 45 were published in the USA, 18 in Great Britain, eight in Germany, only six in the Czech Republic and one in Slovakia.

of the so called "Western" countries was, and still is, very prominent in Czech and Slovak contexts. Accordingly, the keyword system in the Gender studies, o.p.s. library is in English, not in Czech.

I would like to stress that I do not want to question inequalities in resources and in self-confidence that stem from different developments, but I argue that the attributions of "West" with theory and "East" with experience result from a certain perspective, namely from what Marina Blagojević calls "putting dominant theory into the center" (Blagojević in this volume). If women's movements, which began in the 1960s in capitalist societies, and their issues are made the norm of feminist concepts, then every other development seems to "lack" important points. Women's activities under socialist regimes and during the (early) transition period, as well as the knowledge they created, were not perceived as "theoretical contributions," because they did not fit into the dominant paradigms: They worked with different terms and concepts (the term "feminist," for instance, was often avoided, "gender" did not exist), with less resources and often without (academic) institutional background.

In contrast to many of the statements given above, I want to argue for a re-reading of Czech and Slovak texts on gender issues, while acknowledging their theoretical implications. In my opinion, the distinction between *theory* on the one hand, and *experience* or *reality* on the other, is not very helpful. While there is always *experience* or *context* underlying *theory* ("Western" or not), theoretical insights of their *realities* have been developed by scholars located in post-socialist countries. As examples I will outline critiques of unreflected generalizations within "Western" mainstream feminism by Czech and Slovak Gender scholars, and personal positioning to feminism via "doing" instead of "being."

Authors like Jiřina Šiklová and Hana Havelková stress the contextuality of gender theories developed in capitalist societies, and argue that these analyses are not necessarily valid for post-socialist countries (See e.g. Havelková 1995, Šiklová 1992, Šiklová 1998a, Šiklová 1998b, Šmejkalová 1995). In my opinion, the inherent theoretical aspect in these critiques is hardly recognized. What is sometimes perceived as "rejection" of "Western" knowledge (Nash 2002: 305) is informed by a sociological insight on the construction of hegemonic scientific knowledge. One of my interview partners from the Czech Republic described her frustration about

Three of the latter are translations of US-American originals. (The missing entries are one title from each of the following countries: Australia, Canada, Belgium and Austria.)

contradictory claims by “Western” feminists at conferences: While they presented their theories and research without any contextualization, arguing that these were “general” sayings, they required women from post-socialist contexts to describe their experiences and locate their concepts. She was not the only scholar who described a pressure to explain her own backgrounds and experiences, and to justify the “otherness”, the “deviance” of her approaches (Another example is Šiklová 1999). Like Hana Havelková in a panel discussion in June 2003 in Vienna⁴, she also called for the inclusion of contexts and personal experiences in theoretical works by all scholars:

... die westlichen Feministinnen haben sehr selten ihre Theorien mit dem sozialen Kontext oder mit den konkreten Erfahrungen verbunden, sie haben's sogar abgelehnt. ... Und wenn ich das an einem Seminar gesagt hab, dass für uns die westlichen Feministinnen zu wenig kontextualisieren dann waren sie ganz empört, ,also: wieso?' Weil sie immer von Kontext reden, dass es so gehen soll, aber sie machen's nicht.

[Western feminists very rarely combined their theories with the social context or with concrete experiences, they even refused to do so ... And when I said that at a seminar, that according to us Western feminists contextualize too little, they were outraged – ‘Why should we?’ – because they always talk about context, that it works like that, but then they don't do it.] (Interview, Prag Juli 2002, bereinigt)

In my point of view, this analysis of a disparity between claims and reality in the works of “Western” gender researchers is an interesting theoretical contribution – but it is an inconvenient one.⁵

Another challenging approach is what I want to call “doing feminism”. In my interviews it turned out that most answers to the question “Would you call yourself a feminist?” given by Slovak scholars were not “Yes” or “No” or “I don't want to answer this question,” as I would have expected, but narrations about their activities, for example being active in a women's

⁴ “Gender Studies und EU-Erweiterung – ein Gedankenaustausch“ on June 13th, 2003 at the University of Vienna

⁵ Other appeals to contextualize were made by Blagojević (“contextualized knowledge”) and Lorenz-Meyer. Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer calls for a careful location and reflection of one's own standpoint, and records that even though feminist epistemologies call for such an approach, most feminist scholars actually write themselves “out of” their analyses. (Blagojević in this volume, Lorenz-Meyer 2004: 76).

NGO or doing feminist philosophy.⁶ By giving such answers, these scholars did not identify themselves with feminism in the sense of *being* a feminist (or not), but by *doing* something feminist. Adapting the term “doing gender” by Candace West und Don H. Zimmermann, I want to call this approach “doing feminism” (West/ Zimmerman 1991). By telling me about their feminist activities instead of labelling themselves with the abstract term “feminist,” my interview partners referred to the (necessary) activity behind the concept feminism. They rejected the pressure to identify or not identify themselves as feminists that was implicit in my question.

Alice Červinková and Kateřina Šaldová found similar results in their research on female artists in the Czech Republic. They found out that female artists perceive feminism as a suspicious ideology which is imposed on their work from the outside. They do not want to be put into a “homogenous group” and therefore developed a strategy of using feminist ideas without calling them “feminist”:

Instead of asserting feminism they imbue their work with clear but implicit feminist meaning ... Instead of shouting ‘I am a feminist,’ women artists consider it more important to define, deconstruct and reconstruct expressive levels of the word feminism (Červinková / Šaldová 2005: 2).

The rejection of “being” something that is attributed from the outside corresponds very well with scepticisms against feminism as an ideology, and with the resistance to identify oneself as a feminist that, for instance, Jiřina Šmejkalová, Jiřina Šiklová or Hana Havelková described in their texts written in the early 1990s (Šiklová 1992, Šiklová 1998b, Šmejkalová-Strickland 1993, Havelková 1995). They explained the bad connotation of this term in Czech society and their suspicion against ideologies (as centralized great narratives), and they formalized organizational structures (as normalizing institutions) as a result from bad experiences during the socialist regime.

It seems an interesting idea to compare this resistance against unifying practices and rigid classification with other theories which question categorizations and fixed identities, as poststructuralist thinking for example. This raises the question in how far some concepts of post-socialist

⁶ For example: “Well, I always say that I also do feminist philosophy, that I am also devoted to feminist philosophy.” (Interview, Bratislava April 2000; translated into English by the author)

women and gender researchers match with post-modern or deconstructive critiques of identity politics articulated in the so-called "West."

Of course good arguments can be held against such a comparison. First, these approaches were elaborated in different periods and regions (France in the 1960s versus the Czech and Slovak republics in the 1990s) and did not refer to each other. A second objection that can likely be made is that deconstructive approaches do not offer much for women from post-socialist contexts. Jiřina Šmejkalová, for instance, argues that people in post-socialist countries rather fight for their right to become subjects instead of deconstructing it:

In order to deconstruct the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one; in order to subvert the existing order of signs, one must learn to use them. A feminist theoretical project sensitive to the local context will have to consider a further dimension of such issues: neither She nor He has spoken as a subject here; neither She nor He has constituted His/Her voice. Since the very construction of the ideal Subject is absent, its de-construction can not be part of any imaginable discursive and political project, and seems strange to anyone here when presented as something to strive for. (Šmejkalová 1993: 17).

This criticism is similar to arguments expressed by bell hooks and other post-colonial scholars, who underline the importance of identity politics in political struggles of minorities and record that deconstructive approaches of the autonomous subject became widely debated at "Western" universities exactly at that time, when people from minorities (for example Afro-Americans or Homosexuals) and people from former colonies began to gain the right to speak as such (See hooks 1990: 9, Sonderegger 2003: 67). A third point that makes it hard to compare these strands of criticism, is that the main objects of deconstruction were different: While the "autonomous subject" as a political entity, or biological sexes were under question, political identifications such as being a feminist, were not a prior issue of deconstruction within "Western" gender studies. Czech and Slovak researchers, on the other hand, were sceptical of ideologies, official organisations, or unifying group identities.

Nevertheless, I think that ideas corresponding to deconstructive critiques were expressed by researchers in post-socialist countries, it is just that they used different terms. Despite all obvious differences, critiques by post-socialist and "Western" scholars have in common that they distrust great narratives, overall explanations and ready-made solutions. They are

suspicious of colonizing practices, patronizing attitudes and implicit hegemonies. Therefore, I suggest to interpret post-socialist criticism of ideologies, as well as rejections against labelling and fixed categories, in the face of their inherent deconstructive implications. The feminist theorist Donna Haraway calls for "mobile positioning" as a possible location for political activism. In her texts "Situated Knowledges" or "A Cyborg Manifesto," she stresses the necessity to take a stand against the rigid regimes of relativism and positivism, to situate knowledge and accept responsibility for one's texts and researches:

A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the impossibility of innocent 'identity' politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule -- or a woman, colonized person, labourer, and so on -- if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. 'Being' is much more problematic and contingent. (Haraway 1991: 190)

In my point of view, approaches towards feminist politics as expressed by Czech and Slovak gender researchers, seem to be good strategies of putting these ideas into practice. Describing one's identification with a concept like feminism by "doing" instead of "being," might be one possible way of practically refusing identity politics within feminist movements and helping to find useful modes of collaboration. As traditional forms of resistance, based on identity politics, appear to be growingly ineffective and power struggles become as transnational as global economy, "doing" (feminism, for example) might be a more interesting common ground of solidarity than "being" (for instance a feminist).

The criticism and approaches by Czech and Slovak gender scholars described above do not only challenge the assumption of the "non-existence" of feminist theories within post-socialist contexts, but show that very interesting new ideas and concepts have been developed. But the question remains whether they will be integrated into a feminist canon. If a canon is something that is formed by textbooks, introductory literature, encyclopaedias, and prestigious journals in a certain academic field, a closer look at those on feminist and gender issues does not seem very promising. An obvious characteristic of most of this literature is a lack of contributions from post-socialist societies. Only very few publications, which try to give an "overview" on gender studies, include post-socialist

perspectives, and if they do, it is mostly in an extra chapter on “contexts” or “regions.”⁷ One of my interview partners describes her experiences:

If you go to the library and go through all these women's history encyclopaedias – you have this French one and an American and whatever – and try to trace things on Eastern Europe (...) what you find is a collection of misspelled names and wrongly put data. I mean if you look, say, at resources: various sort of canonical encyclopaedias of women, when women got voting rights in Hungary, you come up with at least four various dates, which differ ten years from each other, right? (...) or some names of Czech feminists, sort of historical figures, Plamínková: I've seen five types of spellings, you know, it's not such a difficult name to spell.” (Interview, Praha February 2003)

It seems that the location of a scholar, or a concept, has an important impact on the fact whether (s)he, or it, becomes part of such a book or not. To avoid reduction and “othering” of non-white, non-“Western”, non-middle class approaches, I would call for permanent questioning, re-reading and re-writing of canonized literature and authors within gender studies. Following Blagojević, I favor more cacophony and dissonance in the configurations of “important” gender knowledge. I want to argue for interventions which question norms and deviances of feminist concepts. I do not think that scholars in the academic centres can afford not to know about concepts and approaches developed in other parts of the world. No matter if located in a so called “Western,” “Eastern,” or “Southern” country, we all miss too much if we cannot get access to the others' contributions, because they are silenced in the international academic market.

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⁷ Jaggar's and Young's “A Companion to Feminist Philosophy” is one of the few exceptions, with a chapter on “Eastern Europe” by Daša Duhaček. But even in this book other chapters do not include feminist contributions from this area: The chapter on socialism may serve as an example: The fact that socialism had been realized in a variety of countries and that there was and is feminist philosophy is neglected in this article.

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