»Feminist Objectivity in Understanding Community Economies«

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Abstract *This paper delineates the feminist epistemology underpinning Gibson-Graham's (1996) Community Economies (CE) concept and its empirical applications. In doing so, it examines how the key elements of feminist objectivity (Haraway, 1988) are used to recognise and rethink economic language, subjectivity and collective action. Imbued with a feminist perspective, the CE framework provides conceptual tools for identifying the often overlooked or undervalued economic practices flourishing within communities. This includes alternative, nonmarket and unpaid activities such as social reproduction, barter, self-provisioning, volunteering and employment in the informal economy. Both frameworks intend to critically understand, challenge and reimagine what the economy is, what it can be, how it is studied, and by whom.*

Gibson-Graham recognise communities to be perpetually open processes of becoming; neither fixed nor bounded but rather in a never-ending, dynamic state of negotiation. Economies are considered inherently plural, complex, contextual and comprised of all the practices which people engage in to sustain life. Using a language of diverse economies, CE studies thus challenge conventional ideas about »the economy« as a singular, monolithic and naturally capitalist entity. This approach is founded inter alia upon ideas of feminist scientific theory, which highlights the social setting in which research takes place and asks how it influences the questions asked, methods employed and interpretations of results. Donna Haraway challenges traditional scientific notions of objectivity as impartial, disembodied and universal, calling instead for a feminist objectivity of situated knowledges.

In this paper I discuss how the core characteristics of feminist objectivity – situatedness, partiality, responsibility, recognition of power dynamics, and collaboration – inform

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both theoretical understandings of and empirical engagements with CE. In doing so, I will explore the contribution of these ideas to building richer, more holistic accounts of the diverse interactions and practices economic agents perform in providing for themselves, their families and communities. Finally, I will argue that such principles need not be isolated to the critical epistemological approaches but can be, perhaps partially but always responsibly, adopted by any researcher who recognises the underlying values and potential implications of their knowledge claims.

Zusammenfassung *Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Anwendung der feministischen Epistemologie in Bezug auf Gibson-Grahams Konzept der Community Economies (CE) und dessen empirische Anwendungen. Dabei wird analysiert, wie feministische Objektivität genutzt wird, um ökonomische Sprache, Subjektivität und kollektives Handeln neu zu konzipieren. Durch eine feministische Perspektive bietet das CE-Framework konzeptionelle Werkzeuge zur Identifizierung oft übersehener oder unterbewerteter wirtschaftlicher Praktiken in Gemeinschaften, wodurch konventionelle Vorstellungen von »der Wirtschaft« in Frage gestellt werden. Der Beitrag diskutiert auch die Auswirkungen feministischer Objektivitätsaspekte auf das theoretische Verständnis und die empirische Auseinandersetzung mit CE sowie deren Beitrag zu einer umfassenderen Darstellung wirtschaftlicher Interaktionen und Praktiken. Schließlich wird argumentiert, dass solche Prinzipien von jedem Forscher übernommen werden können, der die zugrundeliegenden Werte und potenziellen Implikationen seiner Wissensansprüche anerkennt.*

1 Introduction

This anthology critically discusses the opportunities and limitations of openness, tolerance and community spirit as values of modern democratic societies, covering both their theoretical rationale and some empirical explorations. My contribution aims to further this discussion by examining how feminist scientific principles have enabled one body of research to reimagine communities, economies, and the agency of economic subjects operating within both. The essential question is: how do we understand an economic »community«? The term community itself is contested if not controversial, often tending towards romanticisation of the disadvantaged and homogenisation of the innately diverse. Furthermore, how does our conception of a »community economy« shape the ways in which we talk about, plan, engage with, and envision them? The concept of »community spirit« implicates ques-

tions of togetherness, reciprocity, interdependence and solidarity that are not thoroughly explored in mainstream economic theory.

This chapter therefore contributes an alternative perspective by delineating the feminist epistemology underpinning Gibson-Graham's (1996) *Community Economies* concept (CE) and body of research. It examines how the key elements of *feminist objectivity* (Haraway 1988) – situatedness, partiality, responsibility, recognition of power dynamics, and collaboration – are useful in theoretically and empirically recognising the existing diversity of economic practices and subjectivities present within community economies. This discussion is an introductory overview of not only the theoretical arguments for applying feminist objectivity to the study of economies, but also how CE scholarship embodies, instrumentalises and practically applies feminist methodology in empirical research. That is, how CE research theoretically recognises economic subjectivity and agency, interrogates power dynamics and rejects hierarchical dualisms, while practically instrumentalising these principles through collaborative and ethically-informed research processes[2]. These aspects of feminist objectivity offer opportunities to critically conceptualise an economic community spirit, recognise where and how it manifests, and to engage in collaborative research efforts towards building it.

The paper is structured as follows: First, I will introduce the general CE concept and theory, before explaining the underlying feminist scientific perspective and basic critique of mainstream economics. Section 3 then outlines each facet of Haraway's feminist objectivity in greater detail, how it underpins CE theory, and provides some examples of its empirical application. These sections cover the importance of (1) the *subjectivity* (encompassing situatedness and partiality) of the knower, (2) the role of *power* relations and dynamics, (2) the importance of responsibility and accountability, or *ethics*, and (4) the centrality of *collaboration* and coalition-building both within and outside of academia, in CE research. The first subsection is larger than the others since economic subjectivity forms a core component of CE theory as the essential site of transformation, as well as the rationale for engagement with the other principles of feminist objectivity. That is to say that recognising the agency of subjects necessitates processes of ethically-informed, power-sensitive and collaborative

2 This discussion does not pretend to be exhaustive, with many more theoretical discussions and empirical case studies of CE research available in resources such as the Handbook of Diverse Economies (2020) and the Community Economies research publication webpage (2023c).

knowledge generation. The final section will provide a summary and a brief outline of how the core elements of feminist objectivity can be accounted for in any research endeavour. In relation to the current volume this analysis provides an alternative theoretical framework for exploring questions of social embeddedness, power relations, ethics, interdependence and thus the idea of »community spirit« in local economies.

2 The Feminist Roots of Community Economies

CE is a scientific body of work that originated with Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham co-authoring publications under the name J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006; 2013; 2020) and has grown with and beyond them to a network of over 350 members in the Community Economies Research Network (CERN) (2023a). Research conducted within the network is intentionally ethical, political, practical and change-oriented: »Community Economies research and practice seeks to bring about more sustainable and equitable forms of development by cultivating and acting on new ways of thinking about economies and politics.« (Community Economies Institute 2023b) Gibson-Graham (1996) assert that this essentially entails the three strategies of engaging *a politics of language* (see section 3), *a politics of the subject* (see section 3.1) and *a politics of collective action* (see section 3.4), in which people work together to foster alternative economic organisations and local practices. This research approach follows alternative conceptions of both communities and economies than those often found in textbooks, mainstream academic research and popular understandings.

Gibson-Graham (1996) recognise *communities* not as geographic sites or exclusive social groups but rather as negative, empty and open spaces in which decisions can be negotiated in perpetual processes of becoming. The antiessentialist concept is based on Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991) theory of community as »being-in-common«, that is, a relational and embodied recognition of the interdependent state of being that is our unavoidable coexistence. Neither fixed nor bounded but rather in a never-ending, dynamic state of negotiation, the recognition of an economic being-in-common is a political precondition for building community economies (Gibson-Graham 1996). This is a fluid process for which there is no given blueprint and that cannot occur without struggle, deliberation, uncertainty or compromise. One must resist the urge to define a community economy as this would be to fix it as an imagined sameness of common being, to set a boundary of what it includes (and excludes), and thus

to close off opportunities for a community to become. »Coexistence is the basis for belonging, rather than being from a particular place, community of interest, class, or any conception of ›imagined community‹« (Healy et al. 2023, p. 12). This coexistence entails both human and non-human entities, recognising the inseparable interdependence and embeddedness of the economic within the social (Polanyi [1944] 2001), itself situated within the ecological world.

Gibson-Graham also challenge conventional ideas about *the economy* as a singular, bounded, monolithic, naturally capitalist and globalising entity that exists outside of social interrelations. In modern societies, capitalism functions as a complete »economic imaginary« – an essential narrative element of social life that provides a sense of agreement and identity (Graham et al. 2002). Gibson-Graham argue that this imaginary marginalises, co-opts and erases the true variety of activities which exist within, alongside or outside of it. Instead of simply accepting or opposing the given capitalist economy, CE scholarship therefore aims to discursively deconstruct, reconsider and rebuild it in a process that is both moulded by and in turn constitutes our economic subjectivity (Diskin 2013). This *politics of language* creates new ways of talking about local economies or economic practices as inherently plural, complex, contextual, and comprised of all the practices which people engage in to sustain life (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Cultivating *community economies* is therefore an alternative approach to local economic development that emerges primarily through small-scale, ethical and co-creative community-research collaborations. The underpinning theory of and principles informing these processes draw significantly from feminist perspectives to the economic and social sciences and an expanded conception of objectivity. In her seminal article »Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective« Donna Haraway (1988) challenges traditional scientific notions of objectivity as impartial, disembodied and universal, calling instead for a feminist objectivity of *situated knowledges*[3]. This is a call to acknowledge (1) the situatedness and partiality of knowledge and its production, while fostering (2) a sensitivity to power relations, (3) responsibility and accountability, and (4) coalition-building across disciplines, social movements and sectors in research endeavours.

3 Despite situated knowledges being the more common term in the literature, in this essay I prefer to use the term feminist objectivity in order to emphasise the *epistemological* focus of Haraway's critiques and to deemphasise the *spatial* aspect of situatedness.

Summarising key feminist criticisms in social sciences, Epstein Jayaratne and Stewart (1995) highlight that: 1) research that is said to be objective has often been sexist in intent or outcome, and therefore not objective; 2) idealising objectivity creates a hierarchical researcher-researched binary; and 3) the privileging of objectivity has excluded subjective knowledge from science and examination. As Harding (1995) states: »feminist research does not introduce political assumptions, values and interests into research fields that are otherwise value-neutral; it identifies the ones that are already there« (p. 7). Feminists economists critique the field not only for its over-emphasis of traditionally masculine economic activities (outside the home, market-based, paid) (Waring 1988), but also the over-emphasis of traditionally masculine theories and methods that define what acceptable economic knowledge is (based on formalised rules of logic, mathematics, rigour, impartial objectivity) (Nelson 1995). The claim is not that economics is too objective, but rather that it is not objective enough insofar as many uncritically accept, apply and teach core assumptions and methodological ideas as universal and impartial (Ferber and Nelson 1993).

Conversely, the feminist scientific perspective does not prescribe any given best method but rather emphasises using the method(s) that best answer the research question in a manner that is consistent with feminist values, goals and ideology (Epstein Jayaratne and Stewart 1995). As Nelson (1995, p. 141) says: »Formalization, rather than reflecting the height of objectivity, is simply seen as one tool in the toolbox.« There is therefore no single »feminist method« but rather a feminist scientific perspective and application of methods that are chosen based on their suitability to answer the research question and adherence to feminist principles (Reinharz 1992). A critical feminist approach seeks to dismantle the hierarchical binary of scientific and other knowledges, rejecting the imperative to separate the subject and the object of inquiry to instead engage with »place-based practices of subjectivity« (Peake 2016, p. 835). CE scholarship is similarly underpinned by a feminist engagement not with women or identities per se, but with *subjects* and *places* through research processes that reflect a decentralised »politics of becoming in place« (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. xxiv). That is, consciously entering into collaborative, critical, responsible, embodied and transformative knowledge generation processes that are sensitive to power dynamics operating within both the locality and the research context itself.

3 Principles of Feminist Objectivity in CE Scholarship

3.1 Subjectivity: Situatedeness and Partiality

Haraway claims that the feminist science is inherently one of interpretation, the incomplete, and a critical positioning of the »multiple subject« within heterogenous social spaces. She emphasises that all knowledge (and its production) is *situated* within specific social, historical and material contexts, and can therefore only ever be *partial*, that is, incomplete and imperfect. Admitting situatedness means forthrightly acknowledging that all knowledge is a view from a socially constructed »somewhere« rather than an impossibly totalising, disembodied and transcendent viewpoint »from above«. This means embracing the *subject position*, which may involve the physical location but rather refers to a single knowing subject that is always relative to others, multiple and mobile, and therefore not specifically located anywhere (Katz 2001). The situated viewpoint can only ever produce partial knowledge: objectivity cannot be divorced from the subject position of the knower since it is and can only ever been »about particular and specific embodiment« (Haraway 1988, p. 582). Then, »only partial perspective promises objective vision« (p. 583) since we forthrightly acknowledge that no other perspective is available to a person – all human knowledge, whether scientific or lay (Simandan 2019), is imperfect and incomplete.

Knowledge produced with feminist objectivity does not therefore claim universality or absoluteness. Researchers rather views themselves, the knowledge they produce and other participants as inextricably embedded within a social context which both shapes the research process and can in turn be shaped by it. Feminist objectivity is then rather concerned with seeking *positioned rationality*, in which one

> »does not pretend to disengagement: to be from everywhere and so nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or formalizable.« (Haraway, 1988, p. 590)

Positioned rationality embraces the limits and potential contradictions of situated and partial knowledge as one interpretation of reality, which can then be merged with other partial accounts to produce more detailed, complex and honest accounts. Reliable knowledge is thus produced through the linking of partial perspectives:

> »Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection.« (original italics, Haraway, 1988, p. 586)

An increasing engagement with the researcher's subjective position in the social sciences can be noted through a growing number of positionality statements and use of reflexive approaches (Holmes 2020). Critical feminist scientists also endeavour to recognise, understand and engage with the subjectivity of those who would otherwise be the objects of social scientific investigation. One of the reasons that feminists are critical of traditional scientific objectivity is »the suspicion that an ›object‹ of knowledge is a passive and inert *thing*« (p. 591) with no agency; they are only resources for the human knower to *use* in their production of knowledge (Haraway 1988, emphasis added). Employing feminist objectivity therefore entails accepting that situated knowledges are limited, socially constructed perspectives and seeking to use them to build richer depictions and understandings of the world through active collaboration (see section 3.4).

I would argue that valuing the combined situatedness and partiality of the subject position, what I will now refer to as an individual's subjectivity, forms the logical foundation for engaging with all other principles of feminist objectivity. Situatedness, or being somewhere, implies greater responsibility and accountability (principle 2 discussed in section 3.3) for that somewhere and its subjects. The knowing subject is always somewhere in relation to others in an ongoing, socially-constructed process which is influenced by and further informs intersubjective power dynamics (principle 3 discussed in section 3.2). Finally, as already mentioned, partiality necessitates collaboration and coalition-building (principle 4 discussed in section 3.4) in knowledge production to build a richer, more useful evidence base.

Subjectivity in CE Theory

For Gibson-Graham (2006), engaging with the subjectivity of economic agents means practicing a *politics of the subject* by recognising them as essentially negative or empty spaces that are capable of (self)transformation or resubjectivation. This conception follows, similarly to that of the community as

adopted from Nancy (1991), the antiessentialist view within feminist, post-structuralist, critical race and queer theory that questions fixed meanings, inherent characteristics, absolute truths and grand narratives. It encourages a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of identities and subject positions, recognising that they are shaped by historical, cultural and social factors, and are ultimately transformable. This perspective also resonates with Haraway's emphasis on the partiality of knowledge: An individual's context produces an identity based on an embodied perspective, which the subject can then reflect on, deconstruct and transform through cultivation of the self (Graham and Amariglio 2006) or critical consciousness (Freire [1970] 2005).

Read (2011) describes economic subjectivity as both *produced* through interactions with the individual's (human and non-human) ecosystem, and *productive*, in terms of value, wealth and general capacity to produce effects in the economy. CE scholarship has itself been characterised as the dialectic space »where the economy and subjectivity collide, where we enact the economy in our practices as well as in our conceptual modes of representing it« (p. 470), in which economic subjectivity acts as an »entry point« for understanding and transforming economic agency and capacity (Diskin 2013). Understanding and building community economies is thus grounded in the premise that subjects are able to understand and reconstruct their economic subjectivities:

> »acknowledgment that self-transformation is both possible and problematic, requiring social spaces and ongoing practices devoted to self-development…, we have been interested in promoting different ways of inhabiting the economy, of being economic subjects in a community economy, of taking action with others to shape economic possibilities.« (Gibson-Graham 2006, pp. 130–131)

Engaging with economic subjectivity is therefore a core element of CE research, as it forms the means by which individuals can recognise the diversity of their economic roles and actions, begin to take responsibility for them, and think about the ways in which they can be changed with ethical concerns in mind (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013).

Gibson-Graham (1996) argue that some people are structurally excluded from active economic citizenship by the dominant *capitalocentric* discourse, in which capitalist transactions, labour and enterprise are the only recognised or legitimate forms of economic activity. This means that many overlook or fail to grasp the full economic value of for example caring, growing, building, repair-

ing, volunteering, sharing and participating politically (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). Interrogating our economic subjectivity means understanding how we are shaped by the numerous economic activities that we engage in, how we feel about these experiences, and perhaps how we are able to change them (Diskin 2013). When we recognise existing, daily practices of economic diversity and difference we begin to see ourselves as active economic agents with the ability to enact a range of new capacities, instead of simply consumers who are affected by and subsumed within a monolithic global capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 2003).

CE scholarship therefore uses the language politics of *diverse economies* to deconstruct the dominant conception of the economic »imaginary« in order to rebuild subjectivity based on an expanded recognition of the various practices that economic agents engage in. The diverse economies framework (Figure 1 below) guides in identifying, recognising the significance of and seeking to build upon the diverse economic activities that people are already engaging in.

Figure 1: An example of a diverse economy

TRANSACTIONS	LABOUR	ENTERPRISE
Market	***Wage***	***Capitalist***
Alternative Market Barter, informal economy, alternative currencies, underground markets, sale of public goods.	**Alternative Paid** Self-employed, cooperative, in-kind, work for welfare, reciprocal labour, indentured.	**Alternative Capitalist** State enterprise, socially responsible firm, non-profit, green capitalist.
Nonmarket Gift-giving, state allocations, state appropriation, theft, poaching, hunting, fishing, gathering.	**Unpaid** Housework, family care, volunteering, self-provisioning, slave labour.	**Noncapitalist** Communal, independent, feudal, slave.

Source: Adapted from Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 71)

This recognition of *multiple subjectivities* (Cameron and Gibson 2020) enables new possibilities for individual and collective agency for, as Read (2011, p. 114) states: »It is only by examining the way in which subjectivity is produced

that it is possible to understand how subjectivity might be produced otherwise, ultimately transforming itself, turning a passive condition into an active process.« By highlighting economic difference and agency, economic subjectivity is newly positioned as something that people can actively shape through their daily, situated practices.

The importance of the subject's agency within this process is therefore closely linked to the theoretical and empirical focus on the »community« or »local« level within CE studies. In the dominant capitalist discourse, globalism is synonymous with an abstract whole within which money and commodities move seamlessly, while localities are subsumed, contained and ultimately dominated by the unassailable expansion of the international capitalist market economy (Gibson-Graham 2003). The local is therefore not only used to distinguish from the global and national scales, and is particularly not proposed as a marker of a geographical area, shared social identity or bounded group. The local community in CE scholarship is rather the realm in which agency manifests and decisions are made (Diskin 2013), in which one enacts the community economy (Gibson-Graham 2003). This focus also reflects the inherent spatiality of Haraway's *situated knowledges* that are produced within specific contexts, localities and embodiments. The local is the space in which subjectivity can be examined, discussed, understood and ultimately transformed through place-based action.

Empirical Explorations of Subjectivity

Understanding subjectivity and resubjectification are for example explored in studies of economic development following restructuring in Australia (Cameron and Gibson 2005) and of commoning practices following an environmental disaster in New Zealand (Dombroski et al. 2019). Cameron and Gibson (2005) explore contemporary experiences of subjectification in the Community Partnership project by engaging in reflective focus groups and photovoice analysis with community researchers, political and business representatives and local residents of the de-industrialised Latrobe Valley in Victoria, Australia.

The project aimed to develop and test a bottom-up economic development approach through community-based economic projects that build upon the skills, ideas and inputs of those most disadvantaged by economic restructuring. The local economy, considered by locals to be »real« and »natural«, was defined through a historically-produced discourse and associated (predominantly masculine) identities based on employment in resource extraction and

energy production industries. Photo essays by community researchers and conversations with retrenched workers revealed lingering nostalgia and attachment to their identities as productive, valued and privileged working-class consumers. Privatisation, downsizing and high levels of unemployment led to a dominant narrative of the community as now destroyed, plundered and downtrodden, with people describing themselves as powerless, disappointed and victimised.

This »emotionally draining narrative of regional destruction« (p. 137) was however in stark contrast to other discussions of the strengths and capacities of the community to cope with change, especially the artistic ingenuity and enterprise of locals, and the contributions of migrants and disabled residents (Gibson-Graham 2006). The local community sparked a process of reframing the economic agency of its residents by identifying the diverse skills and activities that people were already performing in. Using McKnight and Kretzmann's (1993) Asset-Based Community Development framework to build an inventory of the local people's skills, resources, gifts and capacities introduced new representations in which they no longer characterised themselves as deficient or subjected to victimization. Rather, they were encouraged to perceive themselves as capable and proficient (Gibson-Graham 2006).

While falling short of the ambitious aim to advance a new form of economic development in the region, »the project demonstrated that economic identities and forms of subjectivity associated with the diverse economy could be shaped through a focus on representation and micropolitical activities« (p. 329). Namely, community members recognised the limitations of individualised actions and the need for community initiatives that address general well-being, which allowed for the emergence of a new *collective* economic subjectivity based on an ethic of care. This project addressed both the situatedness and partiality of the participant's economic subjectivity by introducing new ways of viewing their interdependent roles, activities and practices as productive, meaningful and transformable.

3.2 Power: Deconstructing Hierarchical Dualisms

Feminist scholarship is essentially grounded in critiques of power relations and the implicit or explicit maintenance of an unjust status quo. Haraway highlights the ways in which power operates within knowledge production and calls for an analysis of power relations in both research practice and place. She criticises the dominance of certain voices and perspectives in shaping

what is considered valid knowledge and emphasises the need to challenge given hierarchies and power imbalances. Harding (1995) affirms that »legitimate« knowledge producers' ideas mirror and/or (re)produce those of policymakers: The social sciences reshape daily life to suit administrative needs, with scientific philosophy validating these adaptations as rational, objective and ethically superior. A feminist scientific perspective is however sensitive to power relations and inequalities, particularly those of a gendered nature, but also the diversity of marginalised experiences more broadly (Beetham and Demetriades 2007). Such power relations depend upon historically developed relationships between actors, which are usually hierarchical in nature but have the potential to be altered (Sarmiento 2020). The feminist research process should thus take a critical perspective from start to finish, analysing the relationship among all research subjects, including the researcher, and carefully examining the path-dependent context in which the research unfolds.

Nelson (1996) discusses how gender functions as a cognitive organiser for understanding the world and a metaphor for communicating our understanding with others. What is considered masculine and feminine (e.g. objects, activities, skills, attributes) is generally agreed upon within a particular time and context[4], thus varying historically and across cultures. »The dominant conception of gender is a hierarchical dualism« (p. 6) in which masculinity and femininity are understood to be opposites, with masculinity claiming the »superior« connotations and femininity the »inferior« (Nelson 1996). Figure 2 below depicts this hierarchical binary between »male« and »female« and some of the attributes, economic roles and spheres associated with each cognitive organiser.

There is a metaphorical connection of the masculine/feminine hierarchical duality with various attributes, behaviours, skills and spheres of activity (Nelson 1996), with power accumulating in the left column (A) and distinguished by not being the right column (not A). This results in a strict division of the »masculine« and »economic« from those »feminine« and »non-economic« traits, locations, roles and activities. The mutual association of otherwise disparate terms on the left (and on the right) »congeal into a strongly interlinked knowledge formation« which makes them often associated with each other in terms of economic competencies, decisions and practices (Gibson-Graham 2020, p. 480).

4 This essay is predominantly limited to Western, capitalist ideas of economic, feminist and social issues.

Figure 2: Hierarchical binaries

A	NOT A
Man	Woman
Reason	Emotion
Objectivity	Subjectivity
Economy	Society
Workplace	Household
Producer	Consumer
Commercial	Non-commercial (e.g. bartered, traded, shared)
Paid labour	Unpaid labour (e.g. care, volunteer, slave)

Source: Adapted from Gibson-Graham (2020, p. 480) and Nelson (1996, p. 7)

A feminist scientific approach seeks to dismantle not just male/female power differentials but also the unequal and unnegotiable antipodes of research, such as the dualisms of subject/object, theory/method, scientific/other knowledges (Peake 2016), qualitative/quantitative methods (Strassmann 1997), hard/soft economics (Nelson 1995), and the local/global spheres (Gibson-Graham). Nelson (1996) suggests that while we are perhaps incapable of »rewiring« our cognitive processes of using gendered categories, we can critically recognise and expand them towards more multidimensional conceptions of what is and is not powerful.

Power in CE Theory

CE scholarship pays particular attention to power in mediating and shaping economic practices and identities, and attempts to break down the hierarchical binaries that constrain their study. Gibson-Graham (2020) propose *reading for difference* as a scientific means of interrogating existing ideas about economic roles and activities in both empirical and theoretical investigations. Unlike the approach of reading for dominance, the feminist and anti-essentialist method of reading for difference involves actively embracing an open and exploratory perspective in order to expand the available perspectives on economic identities and to question established power structures that limit the emergence of various possibilities. This means reading and understanding the world in a way

that makes new worlds possible, rather than simply strengthening the dominance of existing systems.

Reading for difference involves both *deconstructing* the mutually-defined binary division of dominant-subordinate terms[5] that maintain the status quo (the necessary separation of the left and right columns in Figure 2), and *queering* (Sedgwick 1993) or undoing the supposedly natural amalgamation of the related dominant left-hand (and subordinate right-hand) terms into for example masculine/feminine traits or economic/non-economic practices. This framework of actively deconstructing and queering economic roles and practices thus challenges the capitalocentric discourse which relegates all alternatives as invisible, deficient, untenable, dangerous or already subsumed within the indomitable capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 1996). More so, it questions the repression of economic subjectivity within this discourse by highlighting the variety of economic roles, practices and spheres of activity people already perform, thereby enabling them to recognise their power as economic agents, and to enact new economic subjectivities and practices.

Recognising and Renegotiating Power

Challenging the meaning and study of power itself, Cahill (2008) describes the Jagna Community Partnering Project, initiated in 2003 by the Australian National University in the Bohol province of the Philippines. The framing of the project dismissed the dualism of ›empowered‹ and ›disempowered‹, instead following a post-structural understanding of power (Foucault 1991) as relational, contextual, multifaceted and ubiquitous. The prevailing mindset of *power in resources* (Allen 2003) had positioned the centralised national and international institutions as powerful, knowledgeable, effective and necessary to enact economic development projects. Conversely, the local community was seen as lacking, incapable and dependent on external interventions for resources and technical assistance. Cahill both deconstructed and queered this spatial binary of power by highlighting the ways that power is not only exercised through domination/resistance, but rather:

> »By accepting that everyone has access to some form of power and that this power is context dependent, local researchers explored the nature of economic power in the local area as a prelude to challenging existing power relations.« (Cahill 2008, p. 298)

5 Based on Derrida's (1978) post-structuralist concept of *Logocentrism*.

Through the process of collectively identifying, testing and mobilising the existing assets of the local community, participants worked together to start new businesses, learn skills that were useful in other areas of life, and foster a peer-support system that strengthened both their personal and collective sense of efficacy. In rejecting the hierarchical binary of the disempowered local versus the empowered national/international enactors of economic development, Cahill demonstrates how a feminist perspective enabled participants to see themselves as having power rather than dependent on assistance from outside or above.

Recognising and redefining diverse power dynamics in CE thus enables researchers and research participants to identify engrained subjectivities and diverse alternative economic practices. Reading for difference has for example been employed by researchers to identify, question and redefine gendered (Cameron 1996), residual (Gibson et al. 2018), disruptive (Wynne-Jones 2014) and racialized (Tadesse and Erdem 2023) economic activities and identities. The diverse economies framework and its application is however criticised for generally being colour blind and Eurocentric, which Naylor and Thayer (2022) claim could be strengthened through a decolonial approach to developing a more nuanced understanding of racial and imperial capitalist hegemony, while remaining attentive to its dominating power.

3.3 Ethics: Responsibility and Accountability

Centring situated knowledges transforms science from that which is universal, abstract and above or outside of human agency and responsibility into translations of partial, embodied and therefore *answerable* observations (Haraway 1988). Haraway emphasises the importance of acknowledging the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge production, arguing that objectivity should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility and accountability to the communities and environments being studied. Claiming objectivity, separateness and universality in the economic social sciences is not only irrational but also entirely irresponsible for, as Haraway succinctly states; »[t]hese are claims on people's lives« (p. 589). Researchers should thus be aware of the potential implications of their work and actively engage with the potential consequences for research subjects and others affected by their knowledge claims.

Despite being a profession in which research conclusions and policy decisions can impact the lives of millions of people across vast scales of space and time, economics has been characterised by a mixture of ethical naïveté and

excessive intellectual hubris (McCloskey 1997; DeMartino 2011). Nelson (2018) discusses how the metaphor of the economy as a machine driven by self-interest neglects the very *human* nature of economic motivations, decisions, actions and practices. She asserts that it is rather more analogous to a human body in that, to »remain healthy, our economic life must be vital, caring, and responsible« (p. 77). There is no less than an existential imperative for economists to inter alia take ethical positions and engage more actively in the study of how people collectively make decisions, take actions and adapt to economic and ecological crises (Nelson 2016). Therefore, instead of asking »if we can afford« to secure social and ecological wellbeing now and for future generations (Nelson 2018), feminist objectivity requires adopting an ethical approach in an effort to meaningfully contribute to social change now (Reinharz 1992). It also suggests that we seek to better understand the ethical dimensions of economic decision-making and practices that already exist, in order to critically interrogate, modify or strengthen them.

Ethics in CE Theory

While »the economy« is predominantly seen to be the outcome of decisions and actions made based on the privileging of growth (at any cost) and private enterprise, a community economy is shaped by ethical concerns for social and ecological interdependencies (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). The *ontological* understanding of a community economy as an open process therefore necessarily nests *ethical* negotiations and *political* implications of decisions made (Miller 2013). That is, a community economy is a space in which people negotiate ethically-informed decisions about collective survival, redistributing surplus, conducting transactions, consuming, using the commons and investing for the future, as presented in Figure 3 below.

As Gordon (2018) discusses, this framework enables researchers to adopt methodologies in which research is viewed as an ongoing, co-creative and ethical process of economic interdependencies. Gibson-Graham don't outline specific ethical principles that such CE research processes should follow, rather they encourage ethical practices of self-formation (see section 3.1 on subjectivity) by recognising particularity and contingency, honouring difference and otherness, and cultivating local capacity (Gibson-Graham 2003). The research should therefore be characterised by a sense of curiosity and openness to the ways in which ethical decision-making manifests within the given context.

Figure 3: Ethical coordinates of a community economy

Survival	Survivingtogether well and equitably, balancing our own survival needs with the wellbeing of others and the planet;
Surplus	Distributing what is left after our needs are met to enrich social and environmental health;
Transactions	How we obtain the things that we cannot produce ourselves, transacting with and encountering others in ways that support both our wellbeing and theirs;
Consumption	How we can consume sustainably and justly;
Commons	Sharing with other humans and non-humans, caring for — that is maintaining, replenishing and growing — our natural and cultural commons; and
Investment	Storing and investing our wealth so that future generations can live well.

Source: Synthesised from the Community Economies Institute (2023b) and Gibson-Graham et al. (2013, pp. xiii-xix)

Instrumentalising Ethics to Understand CE

Some CE studies focus on how economic activities are informed by ethics of care (Naylor 2022a), solidarity (Naylor 2022b), and interdependence and collective well-being (Gibson et al. 2018). Similar to the framework presented in Figure 3, Gordon (2018) uses four ethical coordinates (necessity, surplus, consumption and commons) as an analytical research tool to deconstruct and understand the economic practices of a food sovereignty collective in the Spanish province of Asturias. He describes how, instead of trying to discover a universal truth with predictive abilities that will allow the researcher to design an improved economic practice, the CE ontology positions the researcher to explore moments of ethically-informed decision-making and the resultant economic practices.

He uses the ethical coordinates to discuss how collective members negotiated and decided the balance between *necessity* (wages, conditions, support, surviving well) and *surplus* (reinvesting for the future), and between *consumption* (vegetarianism) and managing the *commons* (sheep farming). To further elaborate the second tension: there was a disagreement between some members of the collective who chose to be vegetarians and others who were pro-

ducing lamb on otherwise unusable common land and wished the collective members to purchase their sustainably-produced meat. By outlining such negotiations, Gordon develops insight into the collective's processes of decision-making based on the ethical priorities of interdependence, communality and empowerment of the producers and consumers to determine how their economy is managed. Furthermore, this research project explicitly aimed to not only understand but also to ultimately help foster these processes, while remaining critical of the idea that small-scale, local economic practices will *necessarily* deliver the desired ethical outcomes.

3.4 Collaboration: In Research and Community

Haraway advocates for collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production, both between scientists and in cooperation with non-scientists. Since feminist objectivity embraces the incomplete »multiple subject« within heterogenous social spaces, the coalescence of several situated knowledges contribute to build more reliable, legitimate and useful accounts (Haraway 1988). She argues that building coalitions with people from other fields, disciplines, institutions, social movements and parts of the world is therefore a core characteristic of feminist scientific investigation. Cooperation allows the researcher to practice accountability by acknowledging shared work, while building a more comprehensive knowledge base comprised of partial evidence.

Feminist scientific inquiry therefore often endeavours »to enter into a partnership with the Other of the inquiry and thereby to share out authority in the research process« (Mehta 2008, p. 89). The otherwise strict separation between the producers and the sources of knowledge, as well as between its production and diffusion, constitutes and perpetuates the division of (a) theory from method and (b) the processes of research from its outcomes (Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010, p. 7). The intention is to reject the hierarchical researcher-researched binary by embracing subjective and place-based knowledge production (Epstein Jayaratne and Stewart 1995; Peake 2016). Furthermore, although

> »collective praxis has been marginalized in academic sites of knowledge production, it can be a rich source of theoretical and methodological interventions and of breaking down the hierarchical relations between theory and method. In enabling feminist alliances across difference, collaboration,

> for example, not only serves as a methodological tool but also facilitates theory building through dialogue.« (Peake, 2016, p. 834)

Such collaboration enables the *translation* of knowledges between different communities, furthering deconstruction, contestation, theory-building, connective knowledge networks and the potential for transformation (Haraway 1988). Lock Swarr and Nagar (2010) highlight the role of transnational collaboration in feminist praxis as an »intellectual and political tool« for reconciling the seemingly growing chasm between globalised social justice issues and an emphasis on voice, identity and representation. They suggest that collaborative dialogue is a means of producing knowledge that intertwines theory and praxis, and resists (as far as possible) given dichotomies of individual/collaborative, theory/method and academic/activist.

Collaborative CE Research and Practice

The emphasis on feminist, non-hierarchical collaboration in CE research is itself obvious in the choice of Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham to amalgamate their scientific work under the single author of J.K. Gibson-Graham. Collaboration is furthermore a core characteristic of CE scholarship manifesting not only through the various participatory and place-based research projects but also through the international Community Economies Research Network (CERN). In this regard, CERN goes some of the way to fashioning Haraway's call for an »earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different – and power-differentiated – communities« (Haraway 1988, p. 580). Consistent with Haraway, knowledge generated through this network is not to be generalised or universalised, rather it serves as »a ground for conversation« through power-sensitive interpretation and critical translation (p. 589).

A specific case of such a transnational research collaboration is the meta study »Community Economies in Monsoon Asia: Keywords and Key Reflections« by Gibson et al. (2018) featuring 22 co-authors researching in more than 10 southeast Asian countries. The research cooperation presents a short lexicon of everyday (non-scientific) terms for economic practices motivated »by place-based ethics of careful exchange, reciprocity and redistribution« (p. 4). The researchers present keywords and phrases that represent practices related to the ethical concern for (a) the *commons*, with sensitivity to the interdependence and human and non-human life, (b) reciprocal and interdependent *labour*, (c) the sharing of *surplus* and (d) redistributional *transactions* in community

economies[6]. The research collaboration highlights the ways in which socially-determined economic practices are still commonplace across southeast Asia, and how people use these strategies every day to support each other and their environments in surviving well.

This collective project illustrates the benefit of combining situated and partial perspectives to reveal potential pathways for supporting and developing alternative collective survival strategies. The project simultaneously embodies a collaboration between scientific communities as well as highlighting the value of (literally) translating situated knowledges. That is, of

> »the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions — of views from somewhere.« (p. 590)

Views from somewhere are also often gleaned in CE research projects through the use of participatory and community-based action research approaches to directly engage non-scientists as agents rather than objects of investigation. Participatory action research is particularly well-suited to CE research due to its emphasis on the lived experiences and practical problems of local people (Bradbury and Reason 2003), breaking down the subject-object distinction (Loewenson et al. 2014), and the intention to not only understand but also change local practices (Kemmis et al. 2013). Cameron and Gibson (2020) outline the core strategies of »Action Research for Diverse Economies« – following the politics of *language*, *subjectivity* and *collective action* – and how these were applied in three separate projects in a rural Philippine municipality, a United States fishing community and a collection of Australian manufacturing firms. They discuss how recognising new diverse, visual and ethical languages in each of these projects respectively accompanied shifts in subjectivity, and especially new collective subjectivities to emerge, which then enabled the initiation of collaborative economic actions.

6 Corresponding to the ethical coordinates presented in section 3.3

4 Conclusion

This essay has provided a brief introduction to the contribution of the feminist perspective to CE theory and some practical applications of Haraway's core principles. First, CE research can be characterised by an explicit engagement with a *politics of the subject* (subjectivity) through processes of critically deconstructing entrenched economic identities and rebuilding them using an expanded *politics of language*. Second, reading for difference is proposed as a means for questioning the repression of certain subjectivities by recognising hierarchical binaries, diverse forms of power, and creating opportunities for new economic subjectivities and practices to emerge. Third, understanding a community economy as an open space of continual negotiation implies agency, responsibility and accountability within the research process, and a keen attention to processes of ethical decision-making in community economies. Fourth, Gibson-Graham's *politics of collective action* implies entering into collaborative research processes with both scientists and non-scientists in order to translate partial knowledges, breaking down the strict division of theory and method, and sharing research processes and knowledge in order to enact change.

While this essay has sought to outline key elements of feminist objectivity in CE research, there is no single feminist standpoint. The feminist theorist is interested in the multidimensional web of positioning (Haraway 1988), which is always being newly constructed through interactions with others. CE is similarly proposed as an evolving, experimental term that forms a basis for situated, exploratory processes, rather than a »finished and coherent template that maps the economy ›as it really is‹ and presents (to the converted or suggestible) a ready-made ›alternative economy‹« (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 60). As Haraway suggests, we don't need knowledge that is universal, unchanging and all-powerful, but we do need descriptions that are reliable and legitimate outside of or despite power, rhetoric and status. The goal is ultimately to pursue »an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning…. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, ›science‹« (p. 590). Her proposal is that we do this by consciously entering into processes of embodied, responsible, and collaborative knowledge generation, while remaining sensitive to power dynamics operating within both the locality and research itself.

By reimagining communities as open, dynamic processes of becoming rather than fixed, closed geographical spaces or social identity groups, we enable an enhanced potential for openness, tolerance and community spirit to manifest. Community spirit can then be seen as something which develops

through the local economy, in so far as we consider the economy as a space in which people can actively and ethically negotiate decisions about surviving well given their local context. Such value- and change-oriented scholarship need not be isolated to those who call themselves feminist, but can underpin a broad range of theoretical and empirical investigations. As a final summary, the core elements of feminist objectivity that can be reflected and built upon in economic research are:

- Situatedness: critically reflecting and acknowledging the positionality of the researcher and the cultural, historic, geographic, etc. contexts of research subjects.
- Partiality: recognising the incompleteness and imperfection of knowledge production, and honestly accounting for limitations, compromises, pragmatic decisions and biases.
- Subjectivity: interrogating the multiple subjectivities of economic agents as a basis for understanding as well as transforming (individual and collective) subjectivities, roles and practices.
- Power dynamics: recognising, deconstructing and expanding entrenched power differentials, within both the research process and field.
- Ethics: practicing responsible and accountable science, as well as investigating the ethical dimensions of economic practices.
- Collaboration: joining partial perspectives through cooperation with scientists from other disciplines, fields, institutions and countries, as well as non-scientists in different sectors, social movements and parts of the world.

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