

Embodied Knowledge

Nela Adam & Sylvia Agbih & Cara-Julie Kather

1. Leveling the Field: Knowledge Creation and Violence

Cara: Would either of you like to start sharing from your respective perspective what brings you to this conversation today?

Sylvia: I participated in a conference on epistemic violence and injustice at the Munich School of Philosophy because of my work at the Institute for Ethics and History of Health in Society. This conference started off with a one-day workshop on forum theatre. That is when I met Nela. This workshop was followed by two-day conference on epistemic injustice and violence. There, I met Cara.

Cara: Thank you! Nela, do you feel like sharing how you came to be in this workshop where you met Sylvia? How did you experience the workshop and the university-setting?

Nela: I was invited as a trainer for this forum theatre workshop where I met Sylvia.

In the evening of this workshop day, we performed the collectively developed scenes in the auditorium of the Munich School for Philosophy. That was great! Because only through visibility and collaboration with the audience can 'the theatre of the oppressed' become effective.

As a dance – and theatre – pedagogue, I work mostly body-oriented. Thus, I could feel a specific excitement before the workshop: What would it be like to give such a body-oriented input at the Munich School of Philosophy?

The answer is: It works! It works great! I was just very, very touched by the uptake of the workshop, by how open and receptive people were to this input. There was some great collaboration happening and a lot of joy seemed to be present in this workshop space.

Cara: Thank you! Shall we try collectively to describe what we consider to be the common thread pulling us together and into this conversation?

Nela: I perceive a hierarchical categorization between “body-oriented knowledge” and “scientific knowledge.” The two are often treated as set categories and whatever counts as “scientific knowledge” tends to hold more power.

This was also the source of a specific tension for me moving into this philosophy-based space with my workshop. I was nervous about the uptake this approach would receive in such an academic setting.

I am interested to question this hierarchical order and this categorisation between “body-oriented knowledge” versus “scientific knowledge.” Where do the two overlap? Are they this separated? Where does this implicit hierarchy come from? I have many questions.

Sylvia: To me, a connecting keyword is that of corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*). *Corporeality* emphasizes experience and what we can know through lived and unlived lives and moments. To me, this forms a connection: body-oriented knowledge and knowledge through lived experiences tends to be less present in academic philosophy than what is perceived as “theoretical knowledge.”

And possibly, this should be different since there are many forms of knowledge and knowing. And I agree with Nela, that body-oriented approaches and forms of knowing are often diminished in their value: this diminishing can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice or epistemic violence.

Knowing through and with bodies tends to be marginalized through academic institutions. But that is what forum theatre offers: knowing bodies, embodied knowledge, knowing through living and moving and knowing through collective experience and exploration.

Cara: Thanks!

Nela, through your thoughts different forms of knowing and their hierarchization came up. And you Sylvia, talked about corporeality and experience as a form of knowing. Both aspects are part of what is being discussed in the discourses around epistemic violence and injustice. In a nutshell, these are discourses concerned with exploring how knowledge and power are interwoven with one another. So, they ask exactly your question, Sylvia: Which kinds of knowledge are taken seriously under which conditions? What is regarded as “practical knowledge” and what as “scientific knowledge” and what dimensions are there to this distinction?

The exclusion of corporeality and autobiography from certain spheres of knowledge is one of the dynamics analyzed and troubled by discourses on epistemic violence and injustice. These are exclusions closely related to marginalization and violence: they govern whose knowledges, voices, concerns, and perspectives are heard and under which circumstances they are heard. Oppression very often bears a physical dimension, a corporeal manifestation. Methods of the forum theatre form modes of experiencing and visibilizing these physicalities as forms of knowledge.

Sylvia: That is so exciting, because precisely these corporeal manifestations of oppression need expression! This visibility already is a form of resistance.

Nela: This is exactly the approach of forum theatre: forming modes of expression that do not center the verbal, the language, but the body – what it knows and what it does; what it can know and what it can do.

It can create forms of expression or knowledge that may not have been there before.

2. Forum Theatre: An Epistemic Practice

Cara: What actually is *forum theatre*? Nela, can you provide us with some historical context and the core thoughts of these practices?

Nela: Gladly! Forum theatre is a form of the *theatre of the oppressed*. There are different forms of it, i.e. *legislative theatre*, *invisible theatre*, *newspaper theatre*.

Augusto Boal, Brazilian artist and thinker, is considered to be the founder of the forum theatre. He developed and elaborated these forms of theatre in the 1960s and 1970s. One of his concerns was to provide people with a space to make their voices heard within the military regime governing his homeland at that time. He aimed to use theatre as a political action, political mouthpiece. Many scenes were set in the street and the work was very creative. For example, the classic separation of audience and performers was dissolved. And the hierarchization of knowledge was addressed through this collective work. This practice was not without its danger, precisely because it was so political. Augusto Boal himself suffered torture at the hands of the military dictatorship as a consequence of his resistance toward the regime.

Later, when he lived in the European context, his focus shifted more towards internalized oppression. Because in a military dictatorship it is somewhat obvious who the oppressed are and who the oppressors are. In modes of oppression the core of the oppression functions through an internalization of oppressive systems – inner voices and beliefs, what Boal himself called “the inner police officer.”

Cara: Thank you so much! I also encountered Abdias Nascimento as a co-developer. He worked at the intersections of art, philosophy, and politics, opposing colonial devaluations and hierarchies with regard to knowledge.

Nela: That makes sense. Basically, the *theatre of the oppressed* was developed and practiced collectively. Boal is considered the founder, but his approach was, after all, to create a collective of oppressed groups of people that would make their own world of experience visible.

Cara: Can you give us a little more insight into the methodologies?

Nela: The methodology of forum theatre is very body-oriented and interactive. Scenes are created collectively, based on experiences of oppression by the participants of the practice. This is the core of it. And from there it can become more general or abstract. Often it is a challenge for people to really ‘stay with the body’. It is important not to get caught up in discussion. Rather, the question is: How can I translate this experience that I have had into the body, how can I express it, how does it feel, how did it feel, how could it feel?

Intuitive knowledge, embodied knowledge is addressed and sometimes even expressed in an intensified, a distilled way. This knowledge becomes tangible and visible through and with the body in extraordinary ways.

Cara: Would you each like to share a specific experience in the context of the forum theatre? Something that to you demonstrates this particular importance of corporeality and embodied knowledge?

Nela: I have a lot of memories of scenes that show my own oppression as a woman* in ways that give me goosebumps, touch me, and engage me.¹ But I can also share a scene that happened a while ago and is still very impressive to me. I’m thinking of a scene about racism and my internalization of it.

Back when I was a student in Vienna, I was part of a forum theatre group together with refugees from different African countries. Our main topic was racism. In one scene I played ‘the racist’ and I remember how shocked I was by the fervor with which this role and the racist behavior and sentences left me. After all, I had thought of myself as an open-minded, reflected, left-leaning student. At that time, this made me realize how deeply certain racist behaviors and ways of thinking are stored and socialized in me – in my body memory.

1 Marking the term “woman” with an asterisk (*) explicitly indicates that we are considering not only cis gender women, but all women. Additionally, this marking serves as a reminder of gender as a social category.



Participants playing a scene in the forum theater workshop led by Nela Adam at the Munich School of Philosophy in 2022.

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Sylvia: I am reminded of a scene we developed in the workshop in Munich. At one point I was also very shocked with and by myself – just as you describe it, Nela.

We played a scene where people were queuing. And I was the one who decided who could come in and who could not. It was very explicitly about inclusion and exclusion. Then I did something in the play that we did not discuss previously, it just happened: I let two people in and then made them my accomplices. And that just happened. I realized, I used the two for my own purpose; I let them do violent work for me, to exclude the others.

I found it really frightening that it was so clear to me: yes, I'm using these people now. I just knew how to exclude, how to enact power. I knew it almost frighteningly well, without having previously thought it through. That was quite terrifying. I was shocked how well I knew how to act violently and exclusionary.

Nela: I think both our stories show how unconscious power structures and dynamics can be felt and visibilized through practices of the forum theatre. Suddenly, these very deeply internalized knowledges have surfaced. Knowledge, we did not consciously create and maybe would not even want to possess.

Cara: Thank you! These scenes feel so powerful!

Just listening to your stories allowed me to feel with you this perceptibility constituted through corporeality, through embodiment – how knowledges are brought into existence through and with the body.

This reminds me that discourses on epistemic violence and injustice often entail the question of what is regarded as “violence” in the public consciousness and what is not. So much violence remains invisible and unnamed, for example any form of internalized or widely normalized modes of violence. I believe, these violences need to be visibilized and deconstructed collectively. Your two scenes seem to me to be very powerful examples of such visibilizations happening.

3. Body and knowledge: Touching Borders

Cara: We now want to collectively trace the common threads moving through the forum theatre as practice and epistemic violence/injustice as a discourse. Sylvia, what connections stood out to you personally between Nela's workshop and the philosophical conference?

Sylvia: Basically, during the conference classical academic hierarchies receded strongly into the background. There was this communality, which is also integral to the forum theatre. And also, this presence of corporeality – for example, we were frequently asked to share about how our bodies felt, we stretched and moved together during breaks.

Cara: I know exactly what you mean. And these two aspects – community and physicality – are indeed core elements of forum theatre! Nela, how are you feeling about these notions of *epistemic violence* or *epistemic injustice*? Is there anything about them that reminds you of your own work or speaks to you in some way?

Nela: Yes, I realize that these terms do a lot to me. They give me the feeling of a very academic context and that quickly feels kind of debilitating if I'm being honest. Cara, could you speak more about these terms again?

Cara: Thank you for saying that!

The three of us are in a very peculiar situation here: we want to talk openly, on eye-level, touching borders together and being in a conversation that entangles all of our feelings, bodies, thoughts and experiences. Yet we remain part of a societal structure that strongly differentiates knowledge and modes of expression and also values them differently.

So, in this sense, even right now, we may experience exclusion through knowledge. And epistemic injustice is just that: injustice with regard to knowledge that can show in academic language, access restrictions to universities, exclusion of women or people of color in philosophy and so much more.

Discourses on epistemic violence and injustice often seek to explore and break down precisely such dynamics. They try to figure out how power and knowledge are entangled with one another: Who gets to be recognized as “knowing” under what conditions, in what spaces, and through which modes of expression?

There are countless exclusions in terms of who gets to count as a knower and *how* they get to count as a knower. These notions and dynamics are easily internalized. They have a life of their own and they creep up on us in many ways: one of them being this sort of unease you have just described, Nela – a weird sense of “not belonging” that can easily be alienating and debilitating.

These borders, these categorizations of forms of knowledge triggering unease and exclusion – they are symptoms and symbols of epistemic violence and injustice. And it might very well happen that we feel a lot of this unease whilst questioning and deconstructing the conceptual grounds these forms of unease stand on. I think that is because it is such a complex process, one we can only form collectively, with time, and with allowing ourselves to grapple with all these feelings these complex endeavors bring up.

Throughout this conversation we have often hinted at this notion that “the corporeal” as somehow mutually exclusive with “the intellectual.” This is an important example of violent exclusions of knowledge and of a conceptualization of “knowledge” that enacts violence. I often think of a scene from my favorite novel here. The scene goes as follows:

Two women who have been friends for ages talk to each other – one of them a philosopher, the other a physicist. The physicist says that her physical appearance and the way she treats her own body have changed quite drastically over the course of her academic career. She describes making her experience “less feminine” over the years. She retells this process as a necessary decision: she says she had to choose between a body that is labeled “feminine” and between being a physicist, an “intellectual.” She tells this as a story of having to choose between body and mind – a decision she believes women* are forced into under patriarchal systems.

To me, this scene is one that showcases that this exclusion of corporeality from concepts of knowledge is a question of power, even a tool of power: oppressed social groups have historically been and still often are assigned to the sphere of “the corporeal” in order to exclude them: to exclude them from “the domain of knowledge” and thus from the ever so powerful event of knowledge production, which simply remained a white and male sphere for many decades. And I believe we are still experiencing this imprint now. It is becoming somehow subtler. But it is still there. This exclusion of the body as a form of power is examined a lot in these philosophical discourses about epistemic violence and injustice.

In our exchange I found it so exciting and powerful that forum theatre is a practice that breaks down this impactful and violent demarcation between bodies and knowledge by openly regarding bodies and physicalities as modes of knowledge, as *being knowing*. The body then is not “the other” to the intellectual and to knowledge, but rather so very entangled with forming knowledges.

Nela: This scene you described touched me deeply just now. Functioning and being able to function in certain spaces are so often connected to such an unmarking of your own body. Appearance and bodies thus hold so many questions and also many fears and power games.

Sylvia: I agree! I feel like stressing the aspect that – to me – these deconstructions are not about dismissing science or the academic sphere. Rather, this is about the fact that knowledge can and may arise in many ways. And that the bodily aspect – this physicality and corporeality should not be excluded *per se*.

Nela, I find the idea of mutual complementation beautiful. The dichotomy between “practical knowledge” and “theoretical knowledge,” between “the body” and “the mind” is utterly constructed. And I think it is time we stop believing there is a dichotomy there – so that different threads are allowed to merge and flow.

Cara: Yes! Absolutely! And I think that’s what makes certain processes of deconstruction possible. I like these descriptions of collectives that form knowledge. Because I think that makes it necessary to question certain borders and to deal with them in some way and to relate to them. I think that’s exactly what we were about in this process: touching the borders created through categorizations of knowledge, daring to touch, daring to question – together.

If we had to end this conversation with a kind of appeal, it would perhaps sound like this: we don’t want to simply believe all categorizations with regards to knowledge. We want to form collective spaces and modes that touch the borders these categorizations make – touch them, question them, feel them, taste them, restructure them and tear them if we choose to.

So that we can decide together about borders and categorizations: which ones do we keep, which ones do we break down?

For this to happen we need collectives that are diverse in each and every sense of this word. This cracking open of borders means, among other things, to break with the separation of body and mind, with the separation between corporeality and knowledge!

Nela: Yes!

Sylvia: You have put that very beautifully. Thank you.