

Writing through the Milieu

Social Mobility and Queer/Feminist Critique as Existential Practices

Julia Bee

In this paper, I will discuss Didier Eribon's recent books *Retour à Reims*, *Société comme verdict* and more specifically, his more conceptual collection of essays *Principes d'une pensée critique* in relation to my own teaching and writing as well as in regard to modes of writing in academic contexts. Both teaching and writing are key scenarios of taking a side/site. I want to propose re-thinking forms of academic and biographical writing like Eribon's as an "existential territory" (Guattari 1996: 134) which is not simply a place but a milieu for new individuations or subjectivities to emerge. By producing situated knowledge of and from the side/site of his social background, Eribon entangles two operations: in considering his social milieu he both affirms his background and investigates it as a place of departure or 'anchoring point' by leaving this place of shame and self-destruction. Thus, *Retour à Reims* is at once both a return and a new becoming, an entanglement of past and future acts of subjectivation (Foucault 1986, 2005).¹

Eribon's more recent work is situated in a genealogy of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory and is markedly influenced by the latter's *Sketch for a self-analytic / Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004). The notion of the side/site in Eribon can be traced in at least three ways: First, in his biography as he, at least institutionally, transgressed social classes by becoming a university professor. Secondly, in his combination of social and queer theory. Thirdly, and specifically of interest here, in his style of writing through experimentation with combining theory *and* biography, thinking *and* feeling, the personal *and* the political in the very same text. His project of self-analysis is the reason for his return to Reims after the death of his

1 In this regard I want to acknowledge Max Walther's current PhD project at the graduate school media anthropology at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. In his dissertation he shows how feminist writing constitutes acts of subjectivation in the work of Simone Weil, Chris Kraus, Kathy Acker and Annie Ernaux. Particularly self-reflexive literature not only constitutes biographical accounts of lives but is very much a technique of existence and a "performative philosophy" as Walther writes in his exposé (2).

father. The return is to be understood literally and philosophically. It considers not only a return but also a method of writing the future by writing through past and therefore present.

His academic writing is entangled with his life since the place where Eribon writes from – now as a Sociology professor in Amiens – is itself marked by his situation of double oppression as a queer person with a working-class background. As I want to propose, this is not only his topic in terms of content but informs his method or say, technique of writing. This writing style is very much entangled with the production of subjectivities, reminiscent of Michel Foucault's aesthetics of existence (2005, 1986).²

Habitus

In his semi-autobiographical, semi-theoretical book *Retour à Reims*, Eribon invites the reader to think of the university as an institution not only key to the regulation of knowledge production but also to the act of learning as gaining access to symbolic and economic capital, which in turn stabilizes social hierarchies. In other words, *Retour à Reims* contributes to the ongoing debate and class struggles not only between France's elite school and university system with its prestigious *Grand Écoles* in Paris on the one hand and the regional schools in the periphery on the other, but also beyond its borders. The German education system, for example, has often been described as one that perpetuates class differences and having 'very low social mobility'. In fact, studies have repeatedly revealed how non-permeable the German education system is compared to other European countries.³ Eribon's

2 In Germany especially, *Retour à Reims* has been widely acclaimed and was broadly discussed as an academic bestseller. A play has been written based on *Retour à Reims* and an opera has just premiered in Berlin. It has even been cited in the German Bundestag. Its reception was accompanied by Eduard Louis' biographical book *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueul*. For the discussion in Media Studies, see the issue *Class* of ZfM, edited by Ulrike Bergermann and Andrea Seier (2).

3 For example, the recent PISA study showed the relation between social background and grades in school, especially reading capacities, which are much more elaborate even at a young age among children from academic families. OECD states: "Chancengerechtigkeit bleibt eine der Herausforderungen für das deutsche Bildungssystem. So hat sich in Deutschland seit der letzten PISA-Studie mit Leseschwerpunkt (2009) beim Leseverständnis die Abhängigkeit der Leistung von der Herkunft noch verstärkt." / "equal opportunity is one of the challenges of the German education system. Since the last PISA study with focus on reading (2009) the connection between reading capacities and social background concerning reading understanding have even become worse." Press release OECD PISA study 2018: <http://www.oecd.org/berlin/presse/pisa-studie-2018-leistungen-in-deutschland-insgesamt-ueberdurchschnittlich-aber-leicht-ruecklaeufig-und-mit-groessem-abstand-zu-den-spitzen>

works are thus extremely insightful in that they highlight and address these experiences from within and from a more distanced perspective as a professor and author. In his writing, he folds inside and outside, creating an act of subjectivation (Walther 2018: 4).

In his biography, Eribon demonstrates how much of the power of the social world works through learned and internalized self-exclusion from institutions, particularly in higher education. This is what Bourdieu has long argued since his extensive studies in *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement / Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, originally published in 1979. As an illustration, in *Retour à Reims*, Eribon gives an account of how his school choices were influenced by what he himself describes as a stubborn inner drive for self-exclusion by not attending classes and engaging in political activities (2013: 176). Selecting Spanish classes instead of German for example, he adds, results from a lack of knowledge that academic families inform and often ‘silently’ guide their children that as a future Humanities scholar in the French philosophic-centric system, some knowledge of German is required to read the German philosophers. (Ibid. 177-178)

Bourdieu, as it is well known, hails from a rural non-academic family in the Pyrenees and became France’s sociology superstar in the second half of the 20th century by passing through the elite system at the *École normale supérieure*, Sorbonne. He went on to hold a chair for Sociology at *Collège de France* without ever losing his critical perspective on the academic world. In fact, most of his success is built (as he writes) on his critical distance as an outsider to the academic system, which provided him with an analytical clarity and almost brutal sharpness in critiquing that said system. This is what he has described at the end of his life in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* as a so-called “*cleft habitus*, inhabited by tensions and contradictions” (Bourdieu 2008: 100), enabling him to clearly see many mechanisms of how the social world reproduces itself on a daily basis.

The dominant mechanism of power in terms of social reproduction is the habitus, stemming from *habit*, practice, or repetition of customs and behavior. The principles of the habitus include the force of gravity of the reproduction of *doxa* through *hexis*, meaning values, opinions, and cognitive schema as well as bodily inscribed sets of behavior, feeling, pleasure, speech, etc. (Bourdieu 2008: 141). The *doxa* is the *hexis*: the position or attitude towards the world equals its cognitive schema and vice versa. (Ibid.: 184ff) The overall principle of the habitus is a constant effort applied to sustaining an equivalence between habitus and habitat, or social place and body. Here, too, correlate sites with sides. The mechanism of their amortization is socially determined. A habitus always seeks to be in sync with a place. People from families of non-academic or informal education often lack the impetus und the

enreitern-03122019.htm, translation JB. See also PISA 2018 results, “where all students can succeed,” Volume 2, chapter 4 “social diversity and equity in learning outcomes” (83-105)

social, economic and mental security to attend university and even the networks that help kick-start, sustain, or complete an academic education or career – or make sense of this form of abstract education.⁴ Alongside values, modes of thinking, behavior, dress, and tastes in art, food, clothing, and furnishings reveal one's belonging to a social group. Groups seek to include what they know: a group will include members with similar affinities, and a person having a background in a certain milieu will orient herself towards such a (familiar) milieu. Increase in formal education by university education will therefore often lead to an alienation between the family and a student, as seen in Eribon's account (2018: 115). In this way, people can become refugees of class (in the German translation 'Klassenflüchtlinge'). So, much more than being formally inaccessible, the social world consists of informal, habitual, and invisible regulations that prevent people from accessing positions of high symbolic and economic capital. One form of capital often leads to the other and relates to the former.

Exclusion thereby works in a double manner: Not only will those who profit from exclusion stabilize them, but also those who are excluded reproduce them with their actions and involuntary acts of self-exclusions. Bourdieu outlines a practical sense of one's place:

"The knowledge supplied by incorporation of the necessity of the social world, especially in the sense of limits is quite real[...] like the submission which it implies and which is sometimes expressed in the imperative statements of resignation: 'That's not for us' (or 'not for the likes of us'), or, more simply, 'it's too expensive (for us)'" (Bourdieu 2008: 185)

Because the social world gains a relative stability, making itself appear eternal, patterns of thinking, feeling, and judging seem to be naturalized. Hexis and doxa will act as mutual mirrors and orient the subject towards the familiar social world and will act as if the social world is eternal by naturalizing social hierarchies. Embodied patterns of recognition will lead to cognition and perception that stabilize these patterns (Bourdieu 2002). Following Bourdieu's theory of practice as well as Eribon's report of his childhood and youth, social exclusion operates in a very bodily way: "So as the child of a worker you experience in your very flesh the sense of belonging to the working class" (Eribon 2013: 99).

4 See for studies about social reproduction in academia and a practiced-based concept of "habitus sensitive teaching" in cultural and film studies Eckert/Martin 2019, for social security esp. 279–280. Eckert and Martin propose a concept of in-class-writing as a strategy to include diverse students and to informally address and prevent class hiatus in teaching that is often based on oral exams and therefore oral self-representation. On the contrary Eckert and Martin suggest a self-empowerment in writing practices according to bell hooks.

The social background is inscribed into the body: reproducing what this body learned, by which principles it is formed on the one side, and on the other, the socially formed body contains an affective power that orients it towards places, positions, and hierarchies – and even desires and wishes. The body is the embodiment of a biography that inscribes itself not only superficially into one's thinking but produces a body open or foreclosed to certain impulses, such as learning and thinking, etc. Often affective registrations like feeling comfortable in a place, belonging to a place (like the classroom, a conference venue, etc.) create an affinity that prompts engaging with such places. Or, vice versa, feeling awkward in a place by feeling clumsy or shameful about one's speech, manners, accent, etc. leads to an avoidance of these exact situations and places. In other words, the *habitus* is first and foremost a set of affects that determine one's bodily response to the world: "the body is in the world as the social world but the social world is in the body" as Bourdieu summarizes it in his late work *Méditations pascaliennes* (2008: 152). Shame of inappropriate behavior, of not knowing codes or manners, or even laughing about these codes is a "political feeling" (Cvetkovich 2012: 132). For Eribon, it is the shame of being seen as having a worker's background that stimulates the dominant affect:

"Comme c'est compliqué, la honte! Un affect qui s'insinue partout, surgit tout le temps, sous des formes multiples, se déplace selon les situations, les espaces sociaux et relationnels dans lesquels on se trouve (au point de s'inverser du tout au tout : honte de ce que j'étais devenu devant ceux que j'avais quittés pour pouvoir le devenir en ayant honte d'eux)" (Eribon 2016 : 85-86).

"How complicated shame is! An affect, which insinuates everywhere, appears all the time in multiple forms, which shifts according to situations, to social and relational spaces one finds herself in (up to the point where it is completely reversed: shame for what I became, in front of those I had left to be able to become this by being ashamed of them)"⁵

Following Bourdieu's praxeology, Eribon analyses his social background, his affects, and his way into academia, which he vividly describes as a constant struggle in a world absolutely alien to him in the first place. In his report he depicts his queerness as both a vehicle into a different social world *and* an impetus to leave as he could not stay in Reims and reproduce his family's patterns of living. On the one hand, being gay was *why* his place of origin could not facilitate him with an environment he could live in. His psychological survival was nearly impossible in Reims. Homophobic violence and discrimination in Catholic France in the early sixties forced him to leave for Paris and later, University of California Berkeley and Princeton.

5 Here and below, my own translation, with the essential help of my colleague and native speaker, Marion Biet, to whom I am very grateful for her indispensable corrections.

On the other hand, being gay facilitated his access to networks providing him with his first jobs as an author.

His writing is not in a traditional sense autobiographical but a way to explore the *political* in his *personal* history, recalling this basic feminist axiom. Shame for example is not something personal since it belongs to the realm of social and political feelings (Probyn 2010: 81). Similarly, so is the I: The I is never just an individual being owned and known by the individual but partly impersonal as Eribon explains in regard to Annie Ernaux' biographical writings that often avoid the personal pronoun I (Ernaux 2018):

“Car si je dis ,je' tout au long de Retour à Reims, ce ,je' est toujours-déjà pris dans les filets et les jeux du monde social, et donc, d'une certaine manière, c'est un ,je' non personnel, ou ,impersonnel'. C'est d'ailleurs le cas de tout ,je', puisque le ,moi' est toujours produit par son ancrage dans le monde social, son inscription dans l'histoire (les époques dans lesquelles on vit) et la géographie (les lieux – notamment les milieux – dans lesquels les vies se situent)” (Eribon 2016 : 89).

“(Because) when I say “I” all along in Returning to Reims, this ‘I’ is always already caught in the nets and games of the social world and therefore, in a certain way, this is a non-personal or an impersonal “I”. This, by the way, is true for every “I” since the “me” (moi) is always produced by his situatedness in the social world, in history (the epoch one lives in) and in geography (places – and most importantly, the milieux — in which these lives are situated)”

Here, the places in particular – *lieux* and *milieux* as Eribon writes, are sites of de-/subjectivations of shame or of the illusion of the career awaiting one's becoming (Bourdieu 1986).

As I want to argue in more detail, Eribon does not use his biography and the “I” simply as an example but takes the social scenes of his life as well as those of his mother's in his later works as a point of entry into an exploration of the power structures of France's class society in the last decades.

The very key topic for participation, as is the topic of this volume, is education and the education system. In what follows, I reflect on teaching as a practice in the German academic context in order to analyze a few key aspects of exclusion and self-exclusion. The expression *self-exclusion* by no means places blame on the victims, on the contrary, it starkly underlines the power issue: both terms are interconnected since exclusion works as an indirect, unconscious form of power that is at the same time inscribed into the body *and* internalized through the habitus.

Teaching

What does the above mean for my own teaching and learning? I do not wish to include biographical episodes like Eribon's in teaching or install a culture of confession in my seminars. Although I encourage my students to test theories or concepts with their daily experiences, I want to propose that techniques of writing are not limited to a self-mirroring. Instead, it should facilitate teaching that is mindful of this very powerful and responsible practice (Eckert/Martin 2019).

"A master's degree? That's not something for me," was the response a student gave mine when asked about continuing her studies upon the completion of her undergraduate degree. The power of self-exclusion underlying her blunt answer struck me. The student was being graded outstandingly (I am consciously avoiding the problematic word *talented* here) and displayed a scientific interest in all her projects. How could I respond to her? How could I make her aware of what I consider to be an act of self-exclusion based on her social background without using words and terminology that would cross personal boundaries by analyzing a social background that I could only assume existed. One could give positive feedback and suggest practical possibilities about a master's program and other supporting practices. But where does one draw the line between offering support or guidance and imposing one's own or the university's sets of values?

It is my field, academia, science, that I value so much and aim to defend against anti-intellectual impulses such as the extreme right that is currently spreading across Europe.⁶ As scientists, we tend to value our respective fields of knowledge production so much higher than others, and there is much informal and practical knowledge in the world that holds worth for people. Furthermore, do I really want to encourage a future in academia to someone in times of omnipresent job precarity, a lack of possibilities, and self-exploitation? Isn't that the same principle of self-reproduction Bourdieu criticizes and of which I am already part?

Despite all these rationalizations and self-preventions, it is one of the many situations which I observe as an act of self-exclusion. And there are many more nuanced ones and even further examples from my colleagues at different universities. Usually it is not *someone* that tells the students that they do not belong to a place or that a certain career path is blocked; more often than not it is the body that tells a person where – in the most violent and direct sense of the word – their place

6 This was discussed in a workshop within the conference "Taking Sides – Theories, Practices, Cultures of Participation in Dissent" with Athena Athanasiou in Konstanz in summer 2018 from which, among other activities, this book has materialized: The political situation characterized by austerity, neoliberal attacks on the university and right-wing opposition to academia often forces one to defend a place that has for so long excluded women, subaltern and other groups – and still partly does so.

is. When someone feels comfortable or uncomfortable, motivated, or excluded, the body will register these conditions of thinking and enfold the effect into thinking before self-reflection starts, and consciousness kicks in. Self-reflection and consciousness are by no means always rational choices or free of an embodiment of social background.⁷ However, investments in ambition and self-empowerment – which should not be underestimated – have also been critiqued by feminist scholars because of their overemphasis on the one-dimensionally strong and neoliberal subject that emerges instead of a collective solidarity and a perspective of structural power (McRobbie 2009).

The question of how to educate critical, self-reflective subjects is not new, but co-existent with emancipatory and decolonial movements leading to critical pedagogics such as bell hooks' (1994, 2003, 2010) teaching trilogy. However, the problem persists in everyday teaching: How to demonstrate the ubiquity of various and even paradoxical power relations to students without making them feel even more powerless? How to avoid addressing students as neoliberal subjects who can fully control their life choices and change them with pure will and effort? The latter solution would underplay the power situations that are structural. That is, the individual is not to be blamed for them, but first and foremost, there is emancipatory power in thinking that needs to and can be learned. Teaching in one of the less permeable education systems in Europe, with the highest rate of social reproduction in positions, such exclusions and self-exclusions need to be confronted, even if, as isolated teachers, it might not be our individual endeavor to change them. It is a systemic situation but at the same time we deal with individual social backgrounds in the classroom every day.

One approach to making conditions of teaching and knowledge production transparent is to 'situate' someone on the social landscape. Much power stabilizes itself by backgrounding itself or becoming invisible. But when we aim to make power relations visible, we are often in a situation in which we do not want to be victims or turn someone into a victim of power relations. That is, you make a person feel powerless or at least seen and marked in the field of power relations. But, again, the social world, as Bourdieu writes, gains its relative stability from people thinking their choices are theirs. Who owns their choices? – as he refers to in "a biographical illusion." The self-transparent subject making "rational choices" is an illusion as is the idea that someone could entirely self-analyze themselves and remove social backgrounds on that basis. This, furthermore, stabilizes current neoliberal regimes of individualization. With regards to the reaction to *Retour à Reims*, Eribon reflects on this mechanism of being 'placed' on the social map:

7 Self-reflection and consciousness are by no means always rational choices or free of an embodiment of social background.

“Je les situais dans l'espace social, et donc dans la hiérarchie sociale. Ce n'est jamais agréable : cela ne correspondait pas à la manière dont ils se pensaient eux-mêmes. Un point de vue est toujours situé, mais il ne s'éprouve pas toujours comme tel (ou peut à la fois s'éprouver et se dénier comme tel [...])” (Eribon 2016: 78).

“I situated them in the social space and therefore in the social hierarchy. This is not always pleasant: it did not correspond with the way they imagined themselves. A standpoint is always situated, but it isn't always felt as such (or can at the same time be felt and be in denial of itself[...])”

Although some reforms in pedagogics and academia have led to more social heterogeneity in the classroom, there is, in general, scant reflection in my field of how learning and networks form careers, theoretical schools, etc. When self-reflection does occur, it often takes place in semi-professional, often privatized spaces, deemed as gossip and not as necessary reflection. Learning is not just a cognitive act, but a cultural, gendered, and social one, among many others. It involves bodies in spaces. I have not, thus far, even begun to consider the historical and local (among others) exclusion of groups from the university which would extend to many more formal cases of exclusion – those we will *not* encounter in our teaching as I did with the student in the above-mentioned situation.

These encounters inform the system of self-production in academia in which projections of one's own biography are projected onto a young scholar's life: One sees him or herself in the next generation and therefore builds a school. In this way, the principle of one's own life is stabilized by the reproduction of the rightness of one's existence. In academia, not only schools and ways of knowledge production but also subjectivities become key to the system of reproducing of biographies and careers (Bourdieu 1986: 1995).

Learning is made up of diverse variables amongst which is the motivation to read complex texts, to trust that these texts can open ways to understanding the world, to stay with a subject even if it is very challenging, and, very importantly and key for every discussion about power at the university, to speak up in the class room. Didactics address the problems of multiple types of learning and of methods adapting teaching to learning styles. Yet, students with academic parental backgrounds often adapt much more easily to the academic world. They are able to mobilize knowledge about the importance of reading techniques, of establishing networks even as early as the undergraduate level, to have an opinion when it is asked for, and to mimic a neutral commentator when not. The adaption is intuitive and seems almost “magical” (Bourdieu 2008: 169). It actualizes itself in reading the signs and behaving ‘properly’.

It is worth underlining once more that not all these issues can be addressed by us as individual professors since they are obviously structural ones. But we can

attend to these by asking ourselves what will happen if we provide spaces for other voices to speak up, to facilitate spaces (and I mean literally physical space) that undo blockages to speak up as well as responding to less elaborate comments in the classroom. How can we avoid the danger of disciplining students into an academic habitus in discussions with the underlying paternalizing idea (in the back of our head) of wanting to ‘help’ them? And how can we address structural issues of our very situation without transgressing personal and professional boundaries?

These are pressing issues for scholars today and it often seems as if there is never enough time and space in our daily lives to turn to these questions for a genuine democratization of the university. Indeed, it is by no means a singular endeavor to solve these. It is, however, very much in our reach to re-connect spaces of teaching and research where situated knowledge production could take place. I do envision to some extent (see at least at some level) finding a solution by experimenting with methods and styles of writing. That is, importantly, to understand what is so important in Eribon's writing and not to reduce it as an instrument for socially analyzing the students in the classroom. More importantly, a new understanding of what methods *do* when we deploy them is required. Techniques of writing have the potential to reflect and inflect power relations. To situate writing is a key aspect of making power relations perceivable and debatable.

Writing

Eribon is not the first to experiment with biographical writing, oscillating between personal experiences and theory. In his work he is deeply influenced by writers like Annie Ernaux and John Edgar Wideman. Writing, for Eribon, is not only reflection and retrospective but a technique of subjectivation that opens up to future becomings. According to Gilles Deleuze, writing is becoming (1998: 1). It can be a technique of transformation; a performative practical thinking through one's own conditions of existence. These conditions are not necessarily an object but a field of thinking in Eribon. The social milieu becomes a power saturated conceptual milieu through which he thinks. According to Eribon, writing can become an “existential territory” (Guattari 1996: 134). And, as I want to discuss in more detail, writing is not about one's identity or habitus, it is about an *existence in writing*, a becoming in a technique – given the technique is not an instrument but a technical milieu (technical as in the meaning of *téchne*).

Donna Haraway (1988) and Didier Eribon (2013, 2016), two thinkers speaking from very different genealogies, places, and traditions, both underline the importance of situated knowledge and a voice that is situated rather than speaking from a universalist point of view (often the white, male, heterosexual, bourgeois and able bodied point of view). In their very different yet connectable ways, Eribon and

Haraway address the situatedness of the production of knowledge. In Eribon, I perceive situatedness to be a method (technique) (he uses the term “*méthode*” to describe his writing (Eribon 2016: 87)) of what I suggest is ‘writing of social immanence’ and through which he writes about his milieu and biography without taking it simply as an example of oppression. Rather, it becomes a complex scene in which he is involved and which has constituted him. The scene is multilayered and fractal; constituted not only by himself and his family but also friends, the university, and many theorists he engages with among which are Foucault and Bourdieu. Here, theory and experience are sides of a complex and ongoing dialogue that constantly feed into one another, providing sides/sites for subjectivations.

With the concept of *social immanence*, I propose a practice of situating oneself in the social world as a gendered being with a racial and cultural background amongst others. What often makes it so difficult to speak from a position that can be marked in a social hierarchy is the renunciation of (to give up) immunity which is postulated by academia. Speaking from nowhere is an ideal that ignores concrete bodies, partial perspectives, etc. Objectivity here is often taken as neutrality. However, neutrality is in turn never neutral – because there is no neutral position in the world from which to speak (Haraway 1988, Barad 2007). Objectivity might be understood as coming to life in the very articulation of situated knowledge. The acknowledgment of one being formed by others often goes along with fear of contingency of the social world. To be positioned means to be vulnerable and overshadowed by fear of being powerless. In fact, situatedness does not reproduce but changes the side Eribon writes from.

What Eribon demonstrates in his writing is that knowledge is not something pure that becomes polluted by secondary social conditions but always emerges from specific backgrounds (Lagasnerie 2017). “Thinking with,” as is proposed by Haraway, is constitutively connected not only to cultural or historical but also *social* situations. Thinking and feeling as well as learning and the affective body are constitutively intertwined. Once more, in line with Bourdieu and Eribon, affect becomes a bodily technique of power by making bodies feel uncomfortable or comfortable in certain milieus. It is precisely this affective power that transforms them into bodies with the (in)ability (including the desire) to learn. That feeds their trust in the outcomes of learning – or, contrarily, does not.

Thinking through the milieu is how Isabelle Stengers (2005) describes scientific practices by which she not only means the social but also the non/human milieu. Based on thinking through the milieu, writing through the milieu is a technique combining queer and class movements in Eribon. For him, his place of childhood, Reims, did not facilitate a milieu he could exist in and thus, he had to leave this

place in order to survive.⁸ As a gay man, his social milieu forced him into self-denial and flight. This writing about the past is also directed towards the future since it enables him not only to *reconstruct* but also to *construct* a place of writing: a technique of existence as a mode of “immanent critique.”⁹ In his books, he starts his analysis with a situation and a place, and this brings him to his life today: All his writing is a movement back and forth between place and time: Paris, Amiens (where he teaches at the university), and Reims, forming a constant struggle for a position and a side/site of articulation. This movement is, nonetheless, a vector of becoming even though it starts with destruction and shame. Struggle does not mean a lack of side/site but rather conveys or even embodies a process of de/sub-jection: a written existential territory. Eribon is writing himself in *and* out of his childhood milieu; he is writing himself from a precarious position, not a sovereign one, a position of being hurt and of existential vulnerability, as Judith Butler conceptualized throughout her late works (2009, Butler and Athanassiou 2013).

Writing in and *with* vulnerability in this case becomes an existential technique. Eribon begins *Retour à Reims* with his family, specifically his mother's and grandmother's living and working conditions. In this way, he repeatedly writes about (subjective) lived experience as a starting point for (objective) power analysis. Rooted in the social world and daily life as a site of constant struggle, he reports scenes of power from school, the factory, and the retirement home where his mother spent her final years. During his career as a scholar and author, it was his class background and not his homosexuality that caused his painful shame, as he has noted in various interviews. This is also what can be termed “writing shame” (Probyn 2010): In one of his latest books *Principes d'une pensée critique* (2016), the affect of shame caused by his class background stimulates and modulates positions of critique instead of preventing him from thinking. It is, furthermore, a notion of critique whose starting point is not a detached and distanced analysis, but with one's affective existence in the social world: A feeling that makes the conditions of existence felt.

“Une émotion, oui! Car si la pensée critique ne peut pas être éradiquée, c'est bien parce qu'elle ne se limite pas à énoncer des analyses destinées à porter au jour des réalités objectives : elle communique aussi des affects grâce auxquels nous sommes à même de saisir la force de vérité que contiennent ces analyses et, par conséquent, de résister, au nom de ce que ces affects nous permettent d'appréhender et de comprendre, à toutes les tentatives pour effacer les conceptions du

8 In Bourdieu, the concept of habitus is also developed in relation to space and time: In the colonial situation Bourdieu introduced his notion of a habitus that cannot actualize itself in relation to space and place since French colonialism fundamentally destroyed the subjects' milieu (Bourdieu 2010).

9 For the discussion of immanent critique, see Massumi (2010).

monde social qui parlent des classes, de la domination, de l'oppression, de la violence, etc." (130).

"An emotion, yes! So if critical thinking cannot be eradicated, it is precisely because it is not constrained to the realm of analysis aiming at bringing out the objective reality: it also conveys affects thanks to which we are able to unfold the power of truth contained in these analyses and therefore, in the name of what these affects enable us to understand and comprehend, to resist all attempts to efface concepts of the social world speaking of classes, domination, oppression, and violence etc."

Writing one's critical biography is, in the first place, a feminist practice and Eribon situates himself in this tradition and often repeatedly identifies with experiments like Simone de Beauvoir's, Annie Ernaux', and others'. About Saidiya Hartman's semibiographical account *Lose your mother* (2008), in which she returns to the places of slavery on Africa's west coast, there seems to be a similar feminist methodology as Ann Cvetkovich writes: "Hartman extends the feminist use of memoir as a research method by underscoring the historical and archival value of personal narrative. She must write a 'history of slavery that is a personal story'." (Cvetkovich 2021: 137) This is evidently a strategy of undoing the boundary between the private and the political: Today, the politicization of one's own biography could even be a side/site of experimentation to resist neoliberal forces of individualization and the production of self-responsible, economic subjects.¹⁰

Eribon's self-analysis are never just objective and neutral self-rationalizations enabling a masculinist self-creation. Regarding self-objectivation, he departs from Bourdieu who has conceptualized these techniques in depth. They are creative and emancipatory practices, as he underlines: Writing a self-analysis is a practice in which one radically thinks through one's social make-up without reproducing its underlying dynamics of determinism. Additionally, self-analysis is also a form of resistance against the neoliberal regime of self-improvement and identity management.¹¹ It could be related to what Butler famously wrote in *Gender Trouble* in the beginning of the 1990s about the subject of feminism being based not in same-

10 In neoliberalism, the individual is responsible for her own 'failure'. Shame, resulting from this, intensifies this process even more: "La honte isole! Nous le savons. [...] On se déteste soi-même, et donc on déteste les autres, qui sont d'autres soi-même" (115). "Shame isolates! We know it already. One hates oneself and therefore one hates others, who are only another self".

11 The German title of Butler's/Athanasios' *Dispossession* (2013) expresses this more clearly than the English one: *Die Macht der Unterdrückten*. Translation by Thomas Atzert. Zürich, Berlin 2014.

ness and identity but difference and heterogeneity: writing (in) difference ([to] one-self).¹²

In Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the subject*, which Eribon as his biographer knows very well, subjectivation is a technique to create new forms of desire (Eribon 2016: 215ff.). Unlike confessions which belong to an epistemic power of subjectivity, subjectivations can also be acts of inflecting power, as Elspeth Propyn suggests: "Thinking, writing, and reading are integral to our capacities to affect and to be affected." (Propyn 2010: 77)

Eribon's writing can be described as this very inflection of the powers of shame:

"La honte et l'abjection constituaient pour eux [Genet and Jouhandeau] le point d'ancrage et d'appui d'une reformulation de soi, d'une esthétique de soi. [...] La honte, l'abjection deviennent donc des leviers pour des pratiques transformatrices. Ce sont des chemins qui mènent quelque part, même si on ne sait pas très bien où." (221).

"Shame and abjection figured for them [Genet and Jouhandeau] as an anchor point and as point of departure for a reformulation of the self, for an aesthetics of the self, [...]. Shame and abjection become instruments for transformative practices. They are ways, leading to somewhere, even if you do not know exactly where."

In writing, the academy does not produce knowledge alone. It is widely claimed that we do write parts of our subjectivity into the processes of knowledge production. We not only construct subjective knowledge in the form of texts but conversely, one can write subjectivity anew by reformulating one's social heritage. According to Foucault, existential practices of subjectivation exist in different forms like bodily practices, diets, exegesis, etc.¹³ For Foucault in the 1970s and 80s, new forms of queer subjectivities were possible. New gay movements and life forms are also essential / key for Eribon to escape the homophobic background of his social milieu.

Deleuze reads these new forms of existence as individuations, with reference to Foucault and particularly Gilbert Simondon (following Foucault but having Simon-

12 Eribon obviously writes from a different conceptual background than Butler but in *Réflexions sur la question gay* as well as in *Retour à Reims* and *La société comme verdict* (2013), there is an insistence on the performative act of assembly in contrast to a politics of representation of already existing subjects, which Butler also emphasizes in *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly* (2015). This might seem a dangerous point of comparison since Eribon bases his writing on a critique of psychoanalysis, which is key to Butler's writing and understanding of precariousness.

13 Subjectivation is a process of iterative acts and not a substance expressing itself in acts of speaking (and writing), claims Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1995) and *Gender Trouble* (1990).

don in the back of his mind) (1997: 116). According to the latter, individuation does not necessarily result in the individual.¹⁴ The individual is more of a new platform for becoming, a metastable milieu.¹⁵ Deleuze describes writing with Félix Guattari as a relational practice of building a series of acts of writing. Not only a text but a subjectivity emerges from this act: he describes this as an act of creating a series between both writers and the text. Both become intercessors (“Intercesseurs”)/mediators for each other, helping each other to articulation. (Ibid.: 121-134) The series consists in acts of writing and acts of becoming. Becoming and writing are processual passages intersecting with each other.

There is an existential dimension to this writing which has consequences for media theory as well: the performative act of writing becomes an existential one creating an existence in writing.¹⁶ Similarly, for Probyn, “shame is produced out of the clashing of mind and body, resulting in new acts of subjectivity consubstantial with the words in which they are expressed.” (2010, 81) Furthermore, according to Probyn, shame can be recoded in writing. For both Probyn and Deleuze, writing is becoming and does not just represent it.¹⁷

14 Simondon emphasizes the process more than the individual herself: “In order to think individuation, being must be considered neither as a substance, nor matter, nor form, but as a system that is charged and supersaturated, above the level of unity, not consisting only of itself, and that cannot be adequately thought using the law of the excluded middle. Concrete being, or complete being – that is, preindividual being – is being that is more than a unity.” (Simondon 2009: 6)

15 “The individuated being is not all of being, nor the first being; *instead of understanding individuation starting from the individuated being, the individuated being must be understood starting from individuation, and individuation from preindividual being*, according to several orders of magnitude.” (Simondon 2009: 10) The metastable is neither stable nor unstable: it is stableness as far as new becomings are based on it. To explain this, Simondon uses the image of the crystal growing on a solution. Eribon himself works with metaphors of figure and ground as Simondon does in his metaphor of the individuation as crystallization: “Car la cristallisation que constitue le ‘je’ est toujours fragile, provisoire, aléatoire, et, surtout, partielle. Le ‘je’ est hanté par les autres ‘je’, qui sont nécessairement exclus, effacés, expulsés du présent, mis de côté, même si ce n’est que provisoirement, pour qu’un ‘je’ puisse émerger et se définir comme tel” (51-52). “Because the crystallization that the self constitutes is always fragile, temporary, aleatory, and most importantly, partial. The ‘I’ is haunted by other ‘I’s, which are necessary, excluded, cut out and effaced from the present and who are even just put aside temporarily to let an ‘I’ emerge and become one as such.” Here, Eribon points to the powerful dimension of ‘emergence theory’: Reminiscent of Simondon’s theory of the transindividual in structure, it brings forth a whole different genealogy, requiring a more in-depth reading of both.

16 Here, Probyn again links the interest over the last few years in writing methods to the interest in the affective registers of power: “The gulf between research and writing is becoming especially fraught with the increase in academic studies about emotion and affects” (2010: 74).

17 Probyn advances the act of writing as “corporeal activity” (2010: 76).

Shame is the affective code of producing a site of subjectivity which immobilizes not only a self but also an affective power of working through one's social background. This can be linked to Butler's and Athena Athanasious' description of the agency of the powerless which is effectuated precisely by acknowledging one's own situatedness in a milieu. Shame also enables the production of insights into power relations as Ann Cvetkovich argues:

"[...] it has become important to take seriously the institutions where we live [...] and to include institutional life in our approaches to intellectual problems. At this point, theory and affect are not polarized or at odds with one another, and *Public Feelings* operates from the conviction that affective investment can be a starting point for theoretical insight and that theoretical insight does not deaden or flatten affective experience or investment." (Cvetkovich 2012: 133)

Following the approach of the political affects group *Public Feelings*, of which Cvetkovich is a founding member, affect can cause thinking – at the very side/site of one's own existence. Take for example the site of the university. Specifically, by feeling shame (or depression which is her more specific topic), one can learn about one's own embeddedness in power relations. As Probyn also argues, we can learn from the body, from shame. These feminist strategies also resonate in Eribon at a point where he writes much more from a Foucauldian perspective and less from a Bourdieuan: he invents strategies that inflect shame and build a technique of "writing shame," to deploy a term by Probyn.

Eribon re-owns his past through his writing and at the same time, he writes a nexus of historical and social belonging which undoes this individualized self. Furthermore, he writes a future by creating an existential form precisely through the creation of a public rather than a private self; a self as historical embedded becoming. This does not come out of the blue, it is not a willful act of masculine self-creation, but a collective formation, a concept with which he responds to theories of negativity in queer theory:

"[...] je voudrais opposer l'idée d'une créativité, d'une invention – individuelle et collective – de soi qui repose sur l'idée d'un futur, d'une transmission de l'héritage (il faudrait dire : de multiples héritages [...])" (217).

"I want to respond with the idea of creativity, of - individual and collective - invention of the self, which is based on the conception of a future, of a transmission of heritage (one should say: of multiple heritages)."

He meticulously works through the milieu of his past existence. Doing and undoing are producing some sort of agency here. The agency of the dispossessed, as Butler and Athanasiou would describe it.

Nowadays, humanities increasingly deal with methodology. Methodology does not imply the adaptation to a fixed procedure, what Stefano Harney (2018) terms logistical knowledge of the neoliberal university. Rather, in the genealogy of thinking along the lines of Foucault, Deleuze, and Eribon, media technics are techniques of existence, of “self-fashioning” (Eribon 2016: 219), like writing. The production of knowledge is not only a representation of the world detached from the subject, but an act of co-becoming of subject and knowledge. Not subjective knowledge, but subjectivation in knowledge production could provide a framework for critical scholarship.

By Eribon’s methodology, habitus (self-) analysis, facilitates the production of situated knowledges that acts through and in the body by writing through one’s social background. This might sound phenomenological, but it addresses no particular subject but subjectivities in the plural: collective individuations. These techniques intra-act in specific ways with contents and they produce a specific assemblage of knowledge: assemblages of methods *and* knowledge. They produce subjectivities, as Guattari once termed these self-relations coexisting in one body, around a body and in between bodies (1995, 2015: 167).

A (writing) technique cannot be isolated from its contexts as Eribon illustrates by addressing the social background and the power of the social world. Knowledge and subjectivation in *Retour à Reims* and his other recent books go hand in hand with the biographical background because this is his subject; a technique of becoming by returning to the scene of constitution, which will never be fully possible.¹⁸ The biographical turns this into a genre that is apparently well-known to the reader. Nevertheless, this form of situated knowledge can exist in all sorts of texts in our everyday academic life. As we write, we reproduce a site/side of knowledge production and create acts of subjectivations as well as existential territories from which new acts of speaking and writing can emerge.

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18 No psychoanalytical reference is implied here since Eribon is a prominent critique of Lacanianism and instead develops a working through of his œuvre in a sociological sense.

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