

What We Sense

Experiencing, Articulation, and Gender

Tomke König & Benedikt Wolf

In the title of one of her early poems, Ingeborg Bachmann asks the question “How Shall I Name Myself?” The poem’s speaker tries to grasp herself in a series of images including “a tree,” “an egg [...] covered with dirt,” “a deer that fled” and others. The speaker lives “in several bodies”; there is something, it seems, that is not easily articulated. The last stanza makes this uneasy situation explicit:

Vielleicht kann ich mich einmal erkennen,
eine Taube einen rollenden Stein...
Ein Wort nur fehlt! Wie soll ich mich nennen,
ohne in anderer Sprache zu sein.
(Bachmann 2024: 306–307)

Perhaps I can once more see myself,
maybe a dove or a rolling stone...
Words fail! How shall I name myself
without living in another tongue.

This is the basic situation of women who want to speak in an androcentric society: To have to try to articulate something—the multiplicity of the “several bodies” that cannot be articulated in the ‘other tongue’—but to have only this language and no other at their disposal. The images employed in the poem are very important for this attempt at articulation—but they are not able to articulate what it means to live “in several bodies”: “Words fail!”

In his essay on *The Sayable and the Unsayable*, Cornelius Castoriadis meditates on exactly this situation of searching for the missing word, although not from the perspective of a woman trying to articulate her existence in a masculine language. Building on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work, Castoriadis talks about a semantic

void which swells in the already expressed; a void which is determined in the sense that the one who is about to speak knows that there is something other and more to be said than what has already been said, but knows nothing positive beyond

that fact, beyond the fact that it is not said by what has already been said. (Castoriadis 1984: 132)

Alluding to a formulation used by Merleau-Ponty, Castoriadis wonders:

How are we to think this ‘determinate gap’? Certainly not as a sum of determinate negations; it is true that thought in *statu nascendi* knows full well what it does not want to say, what it is not to be confused with; or that it has no problem in saying of any hazarded formulation: no, that is not what I meant. But this is a virtuality kept in reserve, which is only mobilised accidentally and partially. (Castoriadis 1984: 134; see Joas 2002: 509)

As in Bachmann’s poem, one word, one formulation is missing. But whereas Bachmann’s poem is about the impossibility of going beyond this lack of words, Castoriadis, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, is addressing the advent of the new in language. Must the heroic quest for the new remain a prerogative of male philosophers? Or can Castoriadis’s phenomenology of searching and finding words be made productive for the articulation of gender within an androcentric situation and beyond?

In this volume of essays, we are interested in exactly this: dealing with the situation of not having words for gendered experiencing. This often means trying to find the missing words. Sometimes, however, it is not possible to find the one missing word; maybe it does not even exist. In her essay in this volume, Patricia Bollschweiler considers the situation of the narrator of Annie Ernaux’s *Happening*, who is neither allowed nor has the language to speak about experiences of abortion. As Bollschweiler’s reading shows, this can be addressed through tentative attempts at formulating stand-in language that might be able to approximate experiencing. Articulation, however, is not only about finding the “right” word, stand-in formulation, or other kinds of sign, but also the gaps between signs—that which is not said. These gaps are to be understood as an intrinsic part of articulation (Wolf 2024).

By means of the terms *experiencing* and *lived experience* (*Erleben*), we seek to conceptually grasp the sensible (*spürbar*), bodily (*leiblich* in the phenomenological sense), spontaneous dimension of *experience* (*Erfahrung*) (Stoller 2010; Kallenberg/König/Erhart 2024b: 29). Experiencing can become symbolized in a process of articulation but is not identical with symbolizations that stem from it (König 2024; Deloch 2025: 226ff). This distinction is not merely one that can be perceived in academic contemplation; it refers to processes at work in all kinds of common day-to-day practices and interactions. We propose that it is crucial for research in gender to not only take into consideration this dimension of experiencing, but to even take it as a starting point. Though this might appear, at first glance, to be a very subject-centered or even esoteric, perhaps almost naturalizing starting point, we argue that it is none of these: By focusing on experiencing, and, in particular, on

the articulation of experiencing, it is possible to grasp the interdependency of social structures, subjects, bodies, media, and modes of articulation. Jessica Wagner's essay in this volume on the gendered body in gaming and live-streaming unfolds a highly complex constellation of this kind.

It is very important to differentiate the concept of articulation from that of expression. As Annika Klanke explains in her essay: reference to expression bears the danger of affirming an authentic and static interior self and, in consequence, of promoting an appeal to self-identity. "Expression" and "articulation" both have spatial and temporal dimensions. Whereas "expression"—from the Latin *ex-primere*, to press outside—presupposes an interior space that needs to be mediated towards an outside surrounding, "articulation" avoids such an interior/exterior divide and focuses on something else: the structuring of the material displays—from the Latin *artus*, joint, limb—i.e., the material and sensible dimension of the production of meaning.¹ Whereas "expression," with its spatial order of interior vs. exterior, suggests a linear temporality of putting outside that which was previously inside, "articulation," as we use the concept, works on a bi-directional temporal scale. While the speaker of Bachmann's poem is experiencing the lack of a word, she articulates the poem's words, and this process of articulation, for its part, changes the original experiencing in the sense of the psychoanalytical concept of afterwardsness (where a later event changes an earlier event's meaning). In this sense, Bachmann's poem is a performative answer to the question the title asks: "How Shall I Name Myself?" The poem is itself an articulation of the woman's experience in an androcentric society—an articulation at least equal to that of the heroic male philosophers of the Castoriadis and Merleau-Ponty type. While post-Marxist and radical democratic theories employ the concept of articulation for analyzing discursive formations and hegemonical practice (Franke 2017), and thus the power structures of societies, our focus is on the level of materially producing sounds, letters, movements, gestures, and so on. "Articulation," as we use it, is close to the term's sense in music and musicology—where it denotes the mode of separating sounds from each other—and in linguistics—where it refers to the phonetic realization of linguistic elements. According to such a concept of articulation, the sensual dimension and the dimension of meaning do not oppose each other but are understood as the two sides of the same coin: The same process or practice of articulation can be scrutinized in its sensual and in its meaning-producing dimensions at the same time. This focus does not ignore societal power structures but seeks to grasp them in individual articulation processes.

1 See the approach to the concept of articulation of the Research Training Group *Experiencing Gender. Constitution and Transformation of Being in the World* as formulated in its renewal proposal.

The understanding of articulation as the material and sensual production of meaning entails awareness that the production of meaning always also generates remainders of non-sense, of non-meaning, of the unknown and unknowable. This negative dimension of the production of meaning has been theorized, especially in psychoanalysis (Storck 2012). Sigmund Freud already spoke about the “navel” of the dream as that “spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable [...], that is its point of contact with the unknown” (Freud 2010: 135, n. 2), that point in the constellation of signs made up by a dream narration where the known is connected with the unknown. Jean Laplanche theorized the psyche’s attempt at integrating—translating—the non-integrable as a process that produces meaning together with new remainders that resist translation (Laplanche 2007). In articulations of experiencing, similar processes are at work. Meaning is produced (and changes the original experiencing); at the same time, the material and sensual dimension of experiencing and articulation partially evades and resists meaning. Research in articulations of experiencing should account for this dimension, too.

From this perspective, it does not make sense to differentiate the body from language—a distinction frequently made in gender theories, either assuming the primacy of language (especially in feminist discourse research) or emphasizing the special significance of the body (especially in feminist phenomenology). This differentiation makes no sense for research that is interested in speech (*parole*) in the sense of concrete linguistic realizations. Speech creates an area where the body and language cannot be differentiated from each other. We understand practices of articulation as bodily practices that may, but do not have to, be linguistic in a narrow sense. In order to avoid understanding the body and language as distinct and mutually exclusive entities, we have proposed the heuristic concept of the *Leibsprache* (König/Wolf 2024). We use this notion to emphasize the material and bodily character of speech in the widest sense of producing meaning in various modes—from linguistic speech to dance, art, sports, singing, and many more. It is always the lived body that speaks, and speech is always a bodily practice. The page from Konstantinos Papacharalampos’s poetic book project *Exchange* (2020, see Benedikt Wolf’s essay in this collection) on this volume’s cover plays with the two words “language” and “body”, *glossa* and *soma* in Greek, reconfiguring these words’ letters into a new text body in the middle of the page. This is commented upon by the picture of a mountain landscape on a map at the top, suggesting commonalities of the mountain body and the text body. We cannot think of any artwork more apt to accompany our endeavor of thinking about the *Leibsprache* and the gendered articulations it brings forward, and are deeply grateful to Papacharalampos for allowing us to use the picture. A few of the essays in this volume explicitly refer to the concept of *Leibsprache*, including Ru Kim Haase’s and Valerie Kastrup’s chapter on the articulation of non-binary gender in the context of physical education, or develop it further, as does Tomke König’s chapter on the possibility of articulating that which is not meant to be articulated

in the hegemonic gender order. This book deals with a variety of modes of articulation in the sense just mentioned, in fields such as literature (Patricia Bollschweiler, Lisa Jüttner, Filareti Karkalia, Annika Klanke, Benedikt Wolf, and Ivo Zender), physical education (Ru Kim Haase and Valerie Kastrup), doctor-patient interactions (Johanna Budke), pornography reception (Assia Alkass), and feminist activism (Alice Farneti).

While the first essay collection in the series *Geschlecht als Erfahrung* focused on gendered experience (Kallenberg/König/Erhart 2024a), this present volume, pursuing an equally interdisciplinary approach, deals with experiencing gender. The conceptual reflections we have introduced so far are inspired by a fruitful and dynamic dialogue in our Research Training Group *Experiencing Gender. Constitution and Transformation of Being in the World* at Bielefeld University.² The exchange among scholars with backgrounds in disciplines as diverse as sociology, literary studies, American studies, educational science, medicine, political theory, public health, health communication, and sports science opened perspectives beyond the usual ways of thinking gender, the body, and language, both inside and outside the field of gender studies. One of the contributions to this volume is a conversation between Merle Boedler, Sophie Halcour, and Diana Lengersdorf, researchers from at least three different disciplines, including medicine, sociology, and social work. This conversation exemplifies the kind of interdisciplinary work carried out in our Research Training Group, while simultaneously making it the subject of the conversation: Thinking processes starting from different perspectives but directed towards the same object not only add to each other but produce qualitatively new insights.

We want to give just two examples of these kinds of processes in our collaboration. When people trained in literature were involved in discussions of qualitative interviews, the topics that arose included the aesthetic structures of these interviews, leading to discussion of their meaning and the borders of meaning in general. At the same time, those participants who usually work in literature became increasingly aware of the concrete factors, both bodily and societal, involved in the process of reading literary texts, as can be exemplified by Benedikt Wolf's essay in this volume. In addition, our engagement with literary fiction revealed that social research cannot be confined to social facts but should also encompass interviewees' imaginations, dreams and desires.

The importance of fiction comes into view, for example, in Ivo Zender's work on trans literature, which posits that only when fictional writing was employed by trans authors was the repertoire of possibilities to deal with the "autobiographic imperative" (Viviane Namaste) that ruled trans writing until the early 21st century extended. In her essay, Tomke König brings one of her own dreams into dialogue with theoretical reflections, impulses from literature, and interaction with a group

2 See <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/zwe/izg/grk/>

of psychoanalytical dream interpreters. Productive interdisciplinary exchange processes of this kind are made possible by formats that break with academic routines, such as the assumption of an artificial detachment from the object of study, the decoupling of mind and body, and the basing of thinking around conventional or established concepts. Heinke Deloch, who has been involved in the Research Training Group's work both as a philosopher and a practitioner in experiential and person-centered counseling,³ positions herself against such routines in transposing experiential work from counseling contexts into the academic field (see her essay in this volume). Experiential approaches of this kind have deeply shaped the work of our Research Training Group on various levels: in the development of theory, in encounters with all kinds of materials, with respect to interview techniques, and in communication between disciplines.

Bachmann's poem starts from a common situation experienced not only by women but by any subject of any gender living under androcentric conditions: the situation of not having a language and the feeling that something needs to but cannot yet be articulated. This point is elaborated in Lisa Jüttner's essay, which focusses on French difference feminism and Bachmann's novel *Malina*. Jüttner's chapter is included in the first part of this volume, *Articulating Lived Experience*, which focusses on constellations of this kind, dealing with a lack of words and the need for articulation. This spans a range of phenomena: from analyzing situations of silence to various practices of finding words and creating new meanings.

But articulation is not only something that comes after experiencing. It is itself something that can be and always is experienced (*erlebt*). This is the central topic of the volume's second part, *Lived Experience of Articulation*. While Ben types these words into the computer, Tomke and Ben are sitting next to each other on a sofa in Tomke's home, with the living room table in front of us, with various papers and notebooks scattered about on it. Tomke's son Enno comes in now and then with a question about his upcoming surfing trip or to get cookies. Our experiencing is pre-conscious rather than conscious in this case, but it is ongoing and always there, connected to the arrangement of our bodies in the space we currently occupy, the relationships among us, the temperature, the weather outside, the coffee we just drank, the carnival fireworks we can see from the window, and innumerable other components that form a complex and dynamic situation (Gendlin 2004; 2018: 30f). The same holds true for qualitative interviews in which interviewees articulate their experiencing (Jäger/König 2020): Their speaking in the present situation is itself experienced on a bodily and situational level in which, of course, the interviewer also plays a crucial role. In the interview situation, both agents—interviewee and interviewer—are different from what they were and what they are going to be outside of

3 See <http://www.experientielle-beratung.de>

it. Thus, experiencing and articulating are not arranged in a linear kind of way but rather spiral into each other in a dynamic process.

As Ragna Verhoeven emphasizes in her essay on the concept of articulation in Jacques Rancière, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, and beyond, articulation is not (only) an individual subject's introspective engagement with their experiencing. Articulation is always directed towards someone, and only can gain value when it is actually listened to. This is the topic of the volume's third and final part, *(Not) Being Heard*. The conditions of the possibility of being heard in this sense lead back to the societal structures that already condition the processes of experiencing and articulating themselves.

This can work on several structural levels. In the case of the Antigone-type characters Filareti Karkalia analyzes in her essay, a subject tries to articulate her resistance against patriarchal structures in the *polis*. The subject is not listened to by her fictitious counterparts: Thus, her articulations do not work in these fictitious worlds. In the case of Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone's disobedient articulation leads to her death. In the case of Christine Brückner's Gudrun Ensslin character, the attempt at forcing others to listen has led to terrorist violence. In literature, however, there is another layer: We—Karkalia and other readers—do listen; and we must take a stance toward Antigone's disobedience and Ensslin's terrorist violence. At an institutional level, articulation can also be prevented, as is in Alice Farneti's case study of student-driven anti-sexual-violence politics at a Canadian University. Here, the student activists articulate their issues again and again, but institutional power structures prevent them from being heard. One could, from Verhoeven's perspective, discuss whether the student activists' claims can be understood as articulations if they are not listened to. Is the addressed Other a necessary component in articulation? The necessity of being listened to can, however, not only be found on an inter-subjective, institutional, or societal level. Ell Rutkat's chapter can be interpreted as showing a dialogue process of a subject and their body. The body, in "intra-active" (Karen Barad) relations to other material agents such as liquids, articulates something, and the phenomena become articulations only when the subject starts listening to them.

We included Rutkat's essay in the second part of the book because the dimension of experiencing while articulating plays a central role in it. As the prior discussion has shown, however, it could be understood as a contribution to the third section as well. Our three-part structure emphasizes different aspects of the complex interplay of experiencing, articulation, and experience. This structuring is in no way meant to isolate these aspects from each other, but merely to make the thought contained in this book more accessible.

The question of persistence or change of existing gendered power structures is one of the core issues in gender studies. The Research Training Group's emphasis on the level of experiencing and articulation enables us to see the *relationship* between persistence and change, on the one hand, and between the individual subject and

society, on the other. Experiencing and articulation always imply both reference to existing structures *and* the search for the new in Castoriadis's sense. Every articulation not only builds on existing concepts but also produces new meanings (König/Erhart 2023: 367f; König/Wolf 2024: 244). Assia Alkass's chapter on her research into pornography reception shows that gaining sexual enjoyment is not the only function of watching pornography. Her participants experience their pornography reception as an expanding of the borders of the desiring self. At the same time, most of Alkass's interviews remain within the confines of affirming the participants' self-concepts.

In Johanna Budke's research on women under the age of forty who experience diffuse bodily phenomena, including the cessation of menstruation, the medical diagnosis of early menopause has the effect of granting them relief: At long last, they are provided with a concept that names their experiences. In this case, the introduction of medical knowledge bound to a binary sex concept helps to make sense of the women's diffuse experiences. The two elements at play in Alkass's and Budke's chapters—i.e. persistence and change—are intricately bound to each other in processes of experiencing and articulating. In concentrating on articulation, we focus on this contradictory entanglement of conflicting tendencies.

Gendered experience comes into view as something fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand, subjects hold on to their gender, to an experience that, for them, is clearly gendered; on the other hand, they experience (and articulate) transgression of gender, which includes the wish and the desire to get rid of gendered categories. Both experiences are intertwined and tangled up with each other and, therefore, may produce surprising contradictions at the very core of gender experience and the articulations of gendered experience. If gender studies want to live up to its prevalent self-image as emphatically critical, the field needs to become aware of the contradictory character of its objects—i.e. historical and contemporary genders and gender orders—and of the potentially and actually contradictory character of its own academic practice, which is never exclusively progressive and liberating. As Annika Klanke's essay about contemporary feminist theoretical work and its relation to its predecessors in 1970s feminism elaborates, in texts from both the 1970s and the 2020s, implicit neoliberal imperatives of self-optimization and explicit critique of societal structures are fundamentally intertwined. Klanke points out that the texts she looks at refuse at times to recognize how they are entangled in the situation they criticize. From this refusal, Klanke argues, a tendency arises to repeat failures that had already been criticized by other feminists. A critical practice that halts the dialectical process of scrutinizing the object and then looking back to the subject of the practice, then back to the object again, and so on, stops being critical.

In this sense, we champion a version of research in gender that takes the concrete, material level of embodied existence as its vantage point. In contrast to other approaches that turn to the material, however, we refuse to take the subject out of the game—quite the opposite: We practice research into the concrete modes of gen-

dered existence that, at the same time, scrutinizes the subject as the scene of mediation of society and individual, as feminist research inspired by Frankfurt School Critical Theory has taught us. With this vision, we hope to contribute to a self-reflexive endeavor that we understand as fundamental in any project of critical knowledge practice—by means of our research but also by establishing a fresh culture of self-reflexive experiential academic collaboration.

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