

C/Artographies of Positionality

Or How We Try to Situate Ourselves as a Working Group in Academia

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"This is a map! Is it? It's a drawing! Is it really a map? It is!"

Welcome Confusion!

Confusion helps us to get our thoughts, emotions and boundaries moving and opens spaces for discussions and reflections on multiple levels. Being engaged as scholars in a neoliberalizing academy, we participate in the production and distribution of knowledge by writing articles about other people's lives, by researching (in) the global south, by giving talks, etc., on a regular basis. These practices generate a lot of confusion and challenges. As an academic working group under the label "Critical Geographies of Global Inequalities" (CGGI) we collectively decided on welcoming these processes of confusion. Inspired by joint readings and discussions of works on feminist slow scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015), decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2012), cultivating practices of joy (Kern et al., 2014) and wellbeing within academia (Mullings et al., 2016), we began to deal with questions around power relations and knowledge production and how we as a working group are situated within these, but also how we position ourselves to these.

Art Meets Cartography – Artography?

While trying to reflect on our own theoretical and methodological research practices individually and at the same time wanting to develop a stance as a collective, we quickly reached the limits of the conventional range of scientific practices. We realized that at this point thinking, discussing, and writing as our standard tools to acquire new perspectives on different themes was not enough for us. This is why we started to include creative and visual elements into our reflection processes. It became clear that engaging creatively with our own work also made it possible to deal with complex subject-related issues as well as theoretical questions and methodological approaches simultaneously on one piece of paper. In collaboration with Neele Bunjes¹ – a Hamburg-based artist and illustrator – we started a collective artistic mapping process based on the interdependencies of art and scientific knowledge production. Moving between the steps of reflection, imagination, visualization, representation and discussion over and over again, this map represents the current intermediate result of our discussion, which is part of the ongoing negotiation of our positionalities as well. It is therefore neither fixed nor final.

Within our working group we have multiple interests and positionalities. Subsequently we need to negotiate between different regional foci, subject matters and methodological approaches. Furthermore, our theoretical perspectives range from political ecology, poststructuralism, integrative geographies, global urban research to decolonial feminism, to name just a few. In order to accommodate these multiple aspects, the map is illustrated in a style of "hidden objects games". The different puzzle pieces represent this diversity on different layers; all the pieces of the puzzle are related through methodological tools, theoretical perspectives, subject-related aspects, etc., thus creating one whole picture and putting "us" in place. Without going into detail of the illustrated elements, we want to briefly highlight three dimensions of representation and their role in mapping our working group's positionalities.

Putting Our Cards on the Table

Table

The background of the illustration shows the surface of a table. What you cannot see is that this table is located in an office in a German university building surrounded and used by a mainly white, privileged group of academics. This table is not any table but the central meeting point of our working group. Sitting around this table, we work, chat, discuss, have coffee or tea (hence the cups), share ideas, laugh and cry. Thus, it is us looking at the table but at the same time we are also part of the picture in which we find ourselves visualized and (re)presented – e.g. at the speaker's desk or in the figure that is drawn by someone and simultaneously about to draw itself while still reflecting on its own drawers in the head. What is on the surface is therefore the result of multiple power relations around that table, negotiating, among other things, categories of power differences, positions in academia and the limits of reflection(s).

Topics

The visual elements on the surface represent selected topics that we consider relevant for the map. The different subject-related puzzle pieces highlight collective interests within the working group, such as different forms of knowledge production, impact of power relations or inequalities and resistance. However, it is not only about what actually comes up but also about how these topics are being represented from our perspective as European academics and put into context visually within the map. Who speaks, who acts, what does a scientist look like, how can we visualize othering processes without reproducing visual stereotypes? How do you depict water as a society-nature relation? And so on.

Tools

The presence of tools like the needle, the pen and the rubber illustrate the working group's active role in defining and framing contents within knowledge production by also questioning them at the same time. On the one hand, we "stitch" together perspectives and topics while, on the other hand, it may involve drawing lines or making them invisible. Different theoretical perspectives (glasses) highlight certain aspects more than others, and different scales (magnifying glasses) remind us of (hi)stories which are inscribed into our bodies and thus shape our positionalities as researchers and as individuals. These tools help to point out and to reflect on the researchers' impact in the making and unmaking (masking and unmasking) of knowledge.

Negotiating Positionality Visually

Mapping our working group involved and still involves a profound reflection of our individual and collective practices of doing geography. Presenting ourselves as a collective to others through this map can be understood as an effort to withstand current tendencies of individualization in science (my "Hirsch-Index" is bigger than yours!). It is also an attempt to follow calls for the decolonization of knowledge production. We consider taking the time to reflect and rethink our own entanglements within power relations in the academic universe as a first essential step within this process.

The creative approach to the negotiation process enhanced our ability for reflection. The visualization not only provided space for connecting different forms of knowledge (e.g. embodied, creative, theoretical, etc.), it also revealed prejudiced hidden mechanisms of imagination that affected our representations of things, people and beings. Setting out to create a critically engaged, reflexive, multifaceted map of our working group, it turned out that our imagination was not so diverse after all. An early version of our visualization of all persons pictured on the map represented a heteronormative society as white, adult, able-bodied, although in reality we work with all different kinds of people. Representations of diversity only became a question through the process of visualization itself. It revealed stereotypes in knowledge production as, for example, people of color were placed within "indigenous knowledge" while the scientist was depicted as an old white man giving lectures. Since this kind of visualization represents dominant global inequalities and hierarchical structures in academia, this could also be read as a critique, but at the same time it runs the danger of reproducing these power relations we actually want to overcome.

Bringing collective cartography and art together in a positionality-map allowed us to present different dimensions of negotiation on an equal level without prioritizing theory over subject and practice over reflection or vice versa. Processes of visualization called for a more careful engagement with knowledge production and imagination. Yet, the map is open for discussion and different readings for everyone, full of ambiguities and incomplete in its meanings. Every time we look at it, something else comes to the fore and demands interpretation and explanation. Every time the answer is a different one for each of us, since we and our positionabilities are not fixed and our ability to reflect will hopefully grow.

So, yes, it is a map, perhaps not in a conventional geographic sense but in an ideally (non-)materialistic and relational way, and yes, we are still confused.

Endnotes

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References

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