Epistemologies of texture: Concerning text. Edited extracts from a BA thesis, May 2019

Theresa Kampmeier, mail@theresakampmeier.de, creative commons

I will use the footnotes [inserted here in smaller type] as an interface. They are a means of contesting the main body of text which, as these formats do, pretends to be continuous even though it grows through feedback loops in many places at the same time. A territorial map also shows more than that one line for that one way of getting somewhere. The footnotes also show the rereading of my writing and of plurivocally stretching its range, expanding on commentary and reference as a space into which the writing can spill over. (2)

In reading, my attention is directed by a set of theoretical premises. As mentioned earlier, these sources stand in relation to or inherit from phenomenological writing in Europe in the beginning of the 20th century. The most directly indebted text is that of philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels from 1985, but I think, also here, it is no coincidence he wrote about **the fundamental importance of meaning-making in everyday life** at about the same time as Donna Haraway shared her **radical perspectivism** of "situated knowledges" (1988) association among the "irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges" is essential to translate and relate (Haraway 1985: 579-80), to form a new understanding full of "webbed connections" (ibid. 585) – in spirit and ethnolinguist Paul Friedrich investigated the "poetic indeterminacy" of how meaning is made in language (1986) to face the "positivistic semantics of objective reference" Friedrich suggested "the importance of figurative and other poetic language" (1986: 10). **To differing degrees the poetic is always there in language** (ibid. 17). Slightly earlier (1978), Richard Rorty Rorty also showed "major similarities" between the theories of educator John Dewey and philosopher Martin Heidegger (one of Husserl's students and colleagues; Garrison and Shargel 1988: 240). Dewey is relevant in the context of how he conceptualized learning since he was an influential teacher of a number of the reformers (Smith 2015: 179) expounded that what Jacques Derrida had 'actually' said with "there is nothing outside of the text" (1978: 146) was that **"language is _not_ a tool, but that in which we live and move"** (ibid. 150; italics in original) **what does being enabled to read and write mean then, if language is at the bottom of intersubjective life, if it actually is the texture of meaning-making**? Drawing on such an expanded notion of writing, Lu Xun claimed in the Chinese literacy debates that there were for example authors among illiterate people (Lu 2005). Rorty posited **writing as a revolutionary practice, as the only way forward from a normalized state** (1978: 156-7), which coincides with Friedrich's notion of **the poetic as "rulebreaking"** (1986: 32). Also see notes 41, 42. All these, and the rest, are writings I relate to, because they affirm **a horizontal, embodied, and deflationary view of knowledge** with a "deflationary conception of knowledge", Allen (2016: 213) referred to Michael William's _Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism_ (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991). Considering that there is no right understanding, because meaning is construed (Ricoeur 1971: 205) and its negotiation never ends (since writing never ends), a perspectivist conception of knowledge is a necessary consequence, refusing the transcendental vision of a 'last truth'. **'Knowing' can still be practical to describe a thing humans (and probably many others) do.** Rorty also conceded that "of course language can usefully, for many purposes, be viewed as a system of representations" within the relative confines of a defined lifeworld. This set of representations is just never universal, but conditional (Rorty 1978: 154-5). It was a similar tenet in the work of the 平 [the _"ping"_, the Chinese Mass Education Movement, 平民教育新运动] which drew my attention to the movement in the first place although my different sources may be stating a relatively similar epistemological hypothesis, does not mean authors related. In fact they may have rejected each others' positions. **The associations I draw up only work as I take a stance from the situated present** (Felski 2011: 576) **in which they affect my practice through which the translation emerges which I aim at** (Vannini 2015: 10). The necessity to work against objectivist paradigms results from each of these positions and extends to let me also consider performance autoethnography "Performance autoethnography inserted itself in the picture when it was understood that all ethnographers reflexively (or unreflexively) write/ perform themselves into their ethnographies." (Denzin 2018: 2) and non-representational theory non-representational theory deals with "the intricate textures of the lifeworld subjects" (Vannini 2015: 1) on a heritage line with experiential learning and phenomenological relationality (ibid. 3-4). Knowledge is thought of in terms of weaving, assemblage, ecology or constellation (ibid. 8). **The text is not a representation of the world any more** (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23) for my writing.

To establish a basic argument recognizable throughout the text, I want to unfold a slice of Waldenfels' position. He described Husserl's phenomenology see note 45 as an approach which, spare for its final

attempt to reinstate universal objectivity, radically situates knowledge formation in a lifeworld context where it can only be relatively true (2005: 39, 44). That meaning appears largely consistent in social space (*Sinnkonstanzannahme*), he ascribed to an intersubjectively produced (and contested) normalization process. But in this sphere of agreed meanings, one phenomenon does not necessarily constitute the same (ibid. 46) *Selbigkeit der Dinge* has been translated as "self-sameness" (Garrison and Shargel 1988: 241) from different perspectives, because its meaning is only realized through situated action (Heap 1991: 110) this is why Ricoeur suggested to **"consider meaningful action as text"** (1971). This is to acknowledge the situated difference of knowledge without resolving its contingency (the opposite of *Sinnkonstanz*). That which can function as a common order to existing difference, according to Waldenfels, lies in a concrete texture. Our knowledges inhabit this texture, and any bridging of gaps constitutes a lateral reformulation and translation of various existing points of reference in this texture. Understanding is a creative act taking place in an actual lifeworld. Accordingly, if **knowledge is conceptualized as a situated constellation in a texture**, then 'overview' as a mode of gaining knowledge has to be abandoned, because it detaches from anything that can be said – because **the only sayable things are said in a situated manner**. Instead, Waldenfels suggested to start speaking sideways and learning obliquely, "aiming at other worlds, but not higher worlds" understanding produces something different of the same order, which lies sideways, and not above or below. No matter how much I grasp, any product of this understanding will be part of the same texture, and the result is creative (Waldenfels 2005: 47-53). This is incompatible with the Platonic concept of ideas or the Kantian ideal of vertical truth. The mistake would be not to historicize them (Rorty 1978: 143). But history is not actually stable enough to provide a basis for historicism, because it cannot do justice to the resonance of texts across time and the constant renegotiation of history from the present (Felski 2011: 574). I take this as a philosophical call to **maneuver through interpretation poetically** (Friedrich 1986: 26), so as to render dogmatic knowledges or invisible common senses in our lifeworld texture visible and transformable, allowing for **the subjective participation in a "polylogue"** (Waldenfels 2005: 54) yes, reading is a party where I never dance alone. Also, in my poetic toolkit, repetition allows for oblique re-readings. And uncovered misunderstanding has a creative potential, such as when I was looking for a definition of 'pollywog' (see illustration 2). (3-4)

Footnote 41: South American grassroots activism started in the 1960s with **literacy** efforts, too, where it was seen as **a tool suitable for political empowerment** (Jaramillo and Carreon 2014: 397). I relate this specifically to the pedagogies of Paulo Freire and later bell hooks. The parallel can be seen more clearly in another passage attributed to Yan: "The solution as we see it lies in making the villagers themselves aware of their problem, arousing in them a sense of responsibility for it, and giving them the necessary training to work on it." (Buck 1945: 58) (14)

Footnote 42: Even just within China, though: while Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s were still debating what kind of literature would uplift the spirit of peasants, Yan and his colleagues had already realized in 1923 that alongside teaching useful literacy, people would need reading materials to practice with, which could be designed very intentionally (Li 2001: 52): "The two-fold objective of the Mass Education Movement is (1) to teach the illiterates to read and (2) to give them the right "stuff" to read." (Yan 1923: 214) The 平 developed their own simplified Chinese library, relying extensively on transcription with the national phonetic alphabet (注音符号 *zhùyīn fúhào*; Yan 1926: 10). They did empowerment like they meant it, and not only as a new theoretical occupation/alibi for socially discredited intellectuals. Corlin's biggest criticism of the 2010s Bishan Commune is that the "focus was on what rural China lacked, and not on what was already there – a matrix of power struggles and a continuous battle of resources." (Corlin 2018) This is a strong contrast to the Ding Xian Experiment, which set out to improve existing structures and create a community they could leave to its own direction under new conditions. Read against Corlin's description of Bishan Commune, the 平 approach is still exceptional today. (15)

Footnote 45: : Experiential learning is a term coined by Dewey with whom 平 reformers had studied at Columbia University, and with whom they supposedly kept in touch (Smith 2015: 158, 179). He coupled a philosophical position with a practical pedagogy: **"The everyday world of life presents problems or questions that naturally motivate students to seek their resolution; we need only be careful that the problems are the pupil's own."** (Garrison and Shargel 1988: 245) As I mentioned before, Bailey contested the general influence of US education concepts on modern Chinese education, but for the 平 this specific influence cannot be negated. Furthermore, what Dewey called "everyday or existential experience" corresponds to Husserl's phenomenological concept of the lifeworld (ibid. 240). This is not the only parallel, as Garrison and Shargel have shown for the epistemological layer of both philosophers' works stemming from the same period (Husserl was active ca. 1890-1936, Dewey ca. 1880-1940). (16)

Footnote 47: The imported social sciences produced a conflict "between Rural Reconstruction's 'scienticity/externality' and 'non-standardized' rural society." Even **writing could become oppressive in rural China.** (Pan and Du 2011: 460-1) this is a consideration I haven't seen addressed elsewhere in Chinese reformist literacy debates and it twists my mind to imagine what it means when all I've been thinking about is writing as an existential mode of being. But **writing is also a technology**, see note 77. (17)

Footnote 50: The capacity to recognize what was coming at them is perhaps best illustrated by a metaphor paramountly employed in 平 literacy programs itself, that of illiteracy as blindness (Smith 2015: 243). The metaphor implies a broad notion of literacy as cultural agency which I have shown in this chapter to be part of 平 conceptions. this metaphor employed by the 平 made villagers feel like they were lacking. The 平 offered them the knowledge to grow into 'respectable modern persons'. Showing villagers why literacy was important, yes, but to me this technique appears manipulative. This might be *xuanchuan* (see next section in text) at work, but it has been discussed elsewhere that illiteracy runs the danger of being a fabricated rhetorical tool to patronize those who are called illiterate, as well as establishing sovereignty over the expert area defined by literacy (Rorty 1978: 142; Rutten and Soetaert 2013: 647). In this way, **the discourse of 'illiteracy-naming' runs along the same discriminating lines in which the term development has been used** (Ekbladh 2002). Also see notes 67 [sic, should be 68], 77. (19)

Footnote 68: Rutten and Soetaert saw "literacy development as ideological, as a product of discourse and as an expression of historical change" (ibid. 646), all of which can be read from the situation in China in the early 20th century. As Kaske stated, **"language cannot be divorced from questions of power"** (2008: xv), so **learning to be in control of languages and impositions of meaning – literacy – must be empowering** (Rutten and Soetaert 2013: 646). What is accepted as literacy furthermore substantially depends on the circumstances. In Ding Xian, literacy became a symbolic tool to communicate a utopian vision of empowerment. See notes 14, 77. (28)

Footnote 75: Reading perspective think of this text as an embroidered piece of fabric, first washed too hot, then stretched in a hurry, and thrown into the dryer on the most intense program. **It's all there, even if shrunk and crumpled**. Ideally, I would like to weave it again with time and song. But a text will remain a draft no matter how finished I feel with it also since it is part of textures much larger. (30)

Footnote 77: **Written text in the modern project produced objectivist authority and provided mobile knowledges** (Stafford 1991: 70). In this way, **it was written text providing the necessary authority for the 平 to work beyond a human scale** (meaning the connections 平 agents maintained in person). In written text the contestations I am able to still read about happened, too. This all points back to the urgent importance of literacy at a time when **much debate relevant to rural populations happened through written text.** Villagers submitting their own writing to the Farmer magazine produced literacy narratives, sharing their experience of being in a liminal space and performing it in their writing (Merkel-Hess 2016: 19-20; Rutten and Soetaert 2013). Literacy for them was meaningful. (30)

In some sense, every rewriting of the 平 becomes another version of history. Reading the writing of the 平 is like looking into mirrors. This here remains a draft to be continued for "Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more – just as history does not lead to Absolute Knowledge or the Final Struggle, but to more history, and more, and still more." (Rorty 1978: 145) There is no end to contestation (remember Waldenfels' lateral creation of understanding, or the 平 leveling of different knowledges) – just as there is no end to revolution, or democracy; the work must go on (Hardt and Negri 2017: 35). **Like writing, actualization remains in progress.** As such the work of the 平 cannot be finished either, for it resonates today. (30)

From my perspective, this reading of the 平 makes a case for soft activities and flexible activism, for **uncontained practices** such as practice-research, scholar-farmers, "long-term engagement in 'action-writing'" (Pan, Zhang and Du 2017: 798), to commit to going deep, to retain human scale as the basis for organizing, and **to perceive situated action with world sense**. Not least, it shows that **an expanded, situated notion of what it means to read and write is necessary for literacy to be empowering**. (31)

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