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*Anne-Claire Mulder*

## **Intersectionality. In-Between Spaces. Authority. Some Concepts to Reflect on the Relations between Insider and Outsider**

### **Introduction**

When the members of the Dutch-based Network of African Female Theologians in Europe invited me to contribute to their reflections on the tension between insider and outsider, I felt both honoured and challenged. Honoured to be asked to contribute, although I am in so many ways an outsider to their network. For although I have learned a lot from the international students whose theses I supervised through the years, I do not have the experience of living and working in Africa, nor am I familiar with African Theology;<sup>75</sup> and challenged to think through my position as an insider – being a native Dutch theologian with a permanent position as Associate Professor.

On the other hand, being a committed feminist theologian at a theological university often brings me in an outsider position, or in the more ambivalent position of being recognised as part of the group as long as I participate on the group's terms.

In the following, I will reflect upon these experiences of being both an insider and an outsider, using three concepts from the feminist discourse developed in my world – the Minority World – notably location and intersectionality, boundaries and in-between spaces and authority.

### **Location and Intersectionality**

I will start my reflections with the text “Notes towards a politics of location” by Adrienne Rich.<sup>76</sup> In that text, she suggests to “Begin with the body” when thinking about differences between women: with a concrete body and not with

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<sup>75</sup> For example, reading Heleen Joziassse's PhD *Women's Faith Seeking Life. Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches*. *Questiones Infnitae* Vol. 127 (Publications of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies: Utrecht 2020), made me very aware of the extent of my ignorance of African (Feminist) Theology.

<sup>76</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Notes towards a Politics of Location”, in: Myriam Díaz-Diocoretz and Iris M. Zavala (eds.), *Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980's: Selected Papers* (John Benjamins Publishing Company: Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1985), 7-22.

an abstract, indeterminate, non-gendered, non-coloured, ageless or asexual body: my body, your body; a sensible body through which a subject gathers knowledge of the world through smelling, tasting, touching, seeing and hearing.<sup>77</sup> According to her, this emphasis on the embodied-ness of the knowing subject would make it impossible to lump women together into an indeterminate collective or category 'woman'. For that would deny the constraints of time and place and, therefore, the differences that come with their embodied-ness. Rich points out that "location" is a thoroughly political category, a category in which power differences, of privilege and disenfranchisement are played out. The following observation about her location illustrates this:

This body. White, female, or female, white. The first obvious lifelong facts. I was born in the white section of a hospital which separated Black and white women in labor and white babies in the nursery, just as it separated Black and white bodies in its morgue. I was defined as white before I was defined as female. The politics of location.<sup>78</sup>

Taken together, these ideas illuminate that knowing subjects cannot claim that their points of view are universal because their knowledge is limited by their location and the symbolic order in which they are raised.

The discourse of intersectionality further develops the importance of one's standpoint for one's knowledge formation. Intersectionality understands personal and social identity as constituted by multiple, overlapping or intersecting social categories such as gender, class, education, age, sexuality, religion and more.<sup>79</sup> Thus, personal and social identity are understood as constituted by the intersection of these categories in one's lifetime. Each of the categories I mentioned is made up by an axe of difference or basic opposition, and all categories come with their concomitant system of privilege and disenfranchisement. To give an example: the axe of difference of the category "education" spans the opposition between "highly educated" and "poorly educated" or "(functionally) illiterate" and influences the options in one's professional life.

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<sup>77</sup> See also "Body", in: *ABC of Good Life. A Postpatriarchal Ethics in 56 Keywords* (<https://abcofgoodlife.wordpress.com/category/body/>, 30 March 2022).

<sup>78</sup> Rich, "Notes", 10-11

<sup>79</sup> To visualize the kaleidoscopic nature of intersectionality Herma Tigchelaar developed 'the circle of diversity'. See Toinette Loeffen and Herma Tigchelaar, *Retourtje Inzicht. Creatief met diversiteit voor sociale professionals (Return-ticket Insight. Creative with Diversity for Social Professionals)* (Coutinho: Bussum 2013).

When I look from an intersectional perspective at the manner in which the categories colour, class and education have influenced each other in my identity formation and social position, I see that my position is one of privilege, constituted by the fact that the privileges which come with being white, middle class and highly educated have reinforced each other in my course of life.

However, someone's position is constituted by many axes of difference. It is therefore important to ask "the other question"<sup>80</sup> because that might illuminate hidden dynamics of privilege and disenfranchisement. The question "what if I were an educated, female migrant from Poland in the Netherlands" would illuminate that my insider position is also due to my being a native Dutch inhabitant and even reinforced by it.

This position of privilege makes me an insider in many different ways – I know the customs and the rules, have learned "how to behave myself", I can understand the mechanisms of the bureaucracy and read its letters or emails. However, when I throw the category of gender into the mix, this insider position becomes relativised, for being a woman makes me "other", different from the other insiders. The most obvious example of this being "other" is the fact that the street or another public space is not very safe for me and other women; a position of privilege does not safeguard me from (verbal) harassment or the threat of sexual violence. The dynamics of insider-outsider manifest themselves also in more subtle ways, for instance, in the (customary) practice at Dutch universities to put women in a lower salary scale than men, indicating that they are still seen as a bit of outsiders.<sup>81</sup>

In short, making an intersectional analysis of one's own location and the location of the other illuminates the differences between two subjects that come with different locations. This is especially relevant in the encounter with the other because, in meeting the other, the differences and the boundaries that come with these differences become apparent.

### **Boundaries and In-Between Spaces**

This brings me to in-between spaces and boundaries. In the encounter of the other, an in-between space becomes manifest. This space connects *and* separates the one and the other. It is a site of co-creation and a site of struggle.

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<sup>80</sup> This analytical instrument is coined by Mari Matsuda. See, Loeffen and Tigchelaar, *Retourtje Inzicht*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> I use the conditional "a bit" to indicate the often unacknowledged and unconscious prejudices, expressed in this practice, which turn women into outsiders.

Mary Louise Pratt has called these in-between spaces “contact zones”. She describes them as

social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.<sup>82</sup>

I discovered the notion “contact zone” last year. It made me reflect critically upon my own writing on the encounter of the other and the in-between space that opens up in this encounter.<sup>83</sup> Inspired by Luce Irigaray’s text on the passion of wonder in encountering (the otherness of) the other,<sup>84</sup> I presented this encounter in my texts as governed by wonder. I wrote that amazement about the alterity of the other would have the effect of stopping the subject in her forward movement towards the other. The subject would be propelled to ask this other: “Who are you?” thereby creating a space between them. And lastly, I argued that the passion of wonder would bring the subject also to ask the self-reflective question “Who am I”. These two questions would open both subjects for an exchange in the in-between space.

I realised, however, that my description of the encounter of the other covers only the first step of the interaction of subjects from different locations. I had neglected the fact that after the initial amazement about the otherness of the other, one is confronted with boundaries created by the systemic asymmetries between the participants, by their different position and worldview. I attribute this omission to the yearning for co-creative encounters, on the one hand, a romantic yearning that effaces the reality of the often-painful struggles and experiences in encounters with others. On the other hand, this neglect can also be interpreted as a form of trivialising the extent of the divide between insider and outsider and the struggle between them.

Insiders often experience this struggle as a challenge to their worldview and position. It can make them uneasy, embarrassed or emotional when treasured insights are critiqued. The reaction of a pastor to the story of a female parishioner, saying “but you should not see it like that ...”, is a fine example of the

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<sup>82</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, in: *Profession* (1991), 33-40, here 34.

<sup>83</sup> See, among others, Anne-Claire Mulder, Sigríður Guðmarsdóttir and Erla Karlsdóttir, “In-Between”, in: *Journal of the European Society for Women in Theological Research* 21 (2013), 7-12.

<sup>84</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and New York 1993), 73-75.

resistance to a challenge of one's worldview. He universalises his own worldview and undermines the parishioner as a knowing subject. I know from experience how easily I blurt out such a sentence when someone else challenges my worldview; how I forget to count to ten or to step back and reflect before responding, let alone omitting to ask in wonder, "Who are you". The same goes for admitting to my ignorance when confronted with a different body of knowledge. It is a confrontation with the tendency to take one's own point of view as the common point of view, thus universalising this viewpoint. This is extra painful when one realises how much this tendency is bound up with a position of privilege.

However, I experience the struggles in the contact-zone differently when I am in the position of outsider. Then I have to deal with the experience of being discounted as a subject with knowledge and wisdom; of finding the corpus of knowledge produced within my social group – feminist theologians – ignored, trivialised or appropriated without acknowledgement. It also presents me with the question of how to respond to these humiliations – with anger, silence, withdrawal? With swallowing my anger and pain and choosing non-confrontational modes of encountering the other, trying to discover what I and the other in the encounter hold in common and what dreams we share? Research suggests that the latter response seems to be more effective in getting one's authority recognised,<sup>85</sup> but these modes of interaction also run the risk of co-optation.

### **Authority**

The last notion I want to discuss is "authority" because it plays an important role in the insider-outsider dynamics. At the core, authority characterises an asymmetrical relation in which someone places her/himself freely within the "jurisdiction" of another by granting this other authority. However, this voluntary element of granting authority to another is often forgotten in favour of an understanding of authority as "power over" the other or as the power of custom or the self-evident. These forms of authority relations are intimately connected with patriarchal and colonial power structures.

As "power over", authority is one of the instruments wherewith the insider-outsider dynamics are upheld. These insiders – both men and women – hold a position in which they can regulate the processes of attribution of authority

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<sup>85</sup> Naomi Ellemers, *Morality and the Regulation of Social Behavior. Groups as Moral Anchors* (Routledge: Abingdon and New York 2017), 243.

to knowledge and wisdom by barring the (knowledge of the) outsiders from becoming part of the discourse, for instance, through the practice of never referring to their work, texts, art.<sup>86</sup> This explains why the struggles in the contact-zone often take the form of the contestation of the speaker's authority.

But contestation is not the only form of interaction in the contact-zone, although it might occur the most often. An encounter of the insider with the outsider might also be marked by the passion of wonder for the alterity of the other, creating an in-between space between them in which a shift in the authority-relation of the insider to the outsider might occur.

Underlying the idea that an encounter with the other could bring about such a shift is the idea that authority is a quality that circulates within relations and is therefore not bound to fixed relations or existing authorities; it is rather attributed or "given" to (the words and practices of) another.<sup>87</sup>

That happens when the desire of the subject is put in motion through the touch of the words of the other; when s/he inspires the subject, for instance, generating new ideas, challenging, encouraging or showing hitherto unknown possibilities and so forth. In all these situations, the subject "takes the other's word for it" and places her/himself in this asymmetrical relation by attributing authority to (the words and practices of) this other, even when s/he comes to the conclusion that s/he disagrees with or decides not to heed the words of this authority-figure. Attributing authority to the other therefore does not diminish the agency or freedom of the subject. Rather the person to whom she has attributed authority becomes a kind of touchstone, someone who offers orientation in navigating through life.

However, "taking the other's word for it" implies that the subject trusts the interpretation or the judgement of this person to whom she has attributed authority and that s/he deems the opinion of the other to be trustworthy. This implies that s/he trusts that this "authority" is prepared to be held accountable for the points of view s/he holds. That asks from this "authority" that she will not shy away when points of view are contested but rather engage her/himself with the words, viewpoints and criticisms of the subject in search of (some) common ground.

However, as I already indicated in the above, the encounters in the contact zone are often marked by contestation and distrust. In such a context, it is not

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<sup>86</sup> Rhiannon Graybill, "Where Are All the Women?", in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140 (2021), 826-830.

<sup>87</sup> "Authority", in <https://abcofgoodlife.wordpress.com/category/authority/> (30 March 2022).

easy to arrive at the assessment that the other's viewpoints, ideas, or knowledge are trustworthy. It requires a gesture of opening oneself to (the viewpoints of) the other, of letting oneself be challenged by them and of engaging with them, perhaps of taking them to heart; in short, acknowledging the truth in and of the words of the other, thus giving authority to her/his words.

I discovered that this process is easier in the life-encounter and engagement with the other, even when this encounter was characterised by the struggle to understand one another and find some common ground or shared ideal. I have also learned that this engagement is rooted in my desire to build mutual relation, or better, to "translate" this desire into a practice of listening and exchanging ideas with others and being corrected or challenged by them.

This is a desire that the different presenters at the African Female Theologians in Europe Symposium share(d). It can be traced in the texts of this round-table discussion. They witness, each in their own way, the importance of exchange, of interlocutors and of sisters and sister-outsiders to turn the in-between space into a co-creative space of mutual relations.

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