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Assemblage? Power Dispositive? Constellation? The Coda

Brigitta Busch

Introduction

The contributions in this volume follow an ethnographic take to explore interactional spatial arrangements in and with physical or virtual spaces. They all embrace the notion of spatial assemblage in which the bodies of participants, their material being in the world and their lived experiences receive attention on equal footage as circulating discourses, semiotic resources, available objects. As the editors, referring to Pennycook (2020, p. 231), note such assemblages also include the researcher, as "perceiving subject, participating actor and knowing interpreter." This is the first thread I would like to pick up—not entirely by accident, but because I have long been interested in questions of lived experience, body image, biographic and autoethnographic approaches and therefore also in the role of the researcher. With regard to what Pennycook says, I would add

B. Busch (✉)
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
e-mail: brigitta.busch@univie.ac.at

that it is not only the researchers themselves who are integral part of the observed and related assemblage but even I as reader of a text or a listener of a presentation that analyzes such an assemblage become part of it. In this sense one could say that the contributions to this book are links in a chain of successive chronotopically layered assemblages.

The Researcher as Part of the Spatial Assemblage

If we raise the question of the impact of the researchers' presence in a spatial arrangement, we are touching on a problem that has been puzzling sociolinguistics right from its beginnings, when Labov (1972) introduced the observer's paradox into our discipline. It is not as 'invisible observers' but as bodily beings that we interact—or intra-act if we follow the feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad (2007)—in multiple ways with what we usually call the 'field': through our embodied presence and actions; through discourses that tell us how to 'behave' in the field, i.e. how to perform our researcher habitus; and through bodily affective responses that resonate with own earlier lived experiences. Referring again to Barad who has inspired many of the authors in this book, there is no categorial separation between being and knowing, between ontology and epistemology. Borrowing from quantum physics, she states in her concept of *agential realism* that a stable reality which exists independently from the observing practice is not conceivable; phenomena, with their specific qualities and delimitations, will only emerge from intra-actions. According to her, each 'thing' is entangled with everything else in materially specific ways and therefore every intra-action reconfigures the entanglements.

Some of the authors in this volume mention the impact of their own presence in the situations they describe and analyze. Even where the author's presence remains 'hidden', as in Kate O'Farrell's analysis of comments to documentaries posted on YouTube in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, e.g. the choice of the subject as well as the choice of the analyzed sites and comments always correspond to criteria and

affinities that reflect in a certain way researchers' subjectivity. On the other end of the spectrum, we find Michele Cunico who labels his contribution on his son's birthday party in a Pentecostal church explicitly as autoethnographic study announcing that the reader will encounter his "explicit presence." He appears in the text in the position of the "researcher, active church member and partner of a Nigerian woman member of the religious community", thus taking simultaneously Pennycook's roles of the perceiving subject, participating actor and knowing interpreter. For analytical clarity, it certainly helps to distinguish between these different roles and to make the different 'I's involved in the autoethnographic process transparent.

First, there is the 'I' of the researcher who 'selects' from their own lived experience critical moments or scenes that seem worth telling because they can be read as emblematic within the specific research topic. As lived experience is not directly accessible, the selecting 'I' has to rely on their remembering of the scenes in question supported by research notes, diary entries, photographs, video or audio recordings, sometimes stimulated by memory objects (Thüne, 2009) or sensory perceptions like smells, tastes, sounds, ambiances or tactile qualities that trigger processes of memory retrieval. What emerges then is of course not what was lived in the past but a re-construction, re-enactment or re-embodiment in the course of which bodily sensations and emotions associated with the 'pre-reflexive moment of happening' (Pitard, 2016, p. 9) can be recalled. Current memory research has abandoned the archival model of memory and sees memory instead as located in a broader framework of discursively constructed social and cultural practices and therefore as intermingled with narrative practices (Brockmeier, 2010).

Another 'I' present in autoethnographies is the one of the narrators who exposes the remembered 'I' as a narrated 'I' and who rhetorically arranges the experience as a story or vignette to achieve an understanding of the scene or even an emotional response from their readers (Humphreys, 2005, p. 842). A further 'I' is the one that becomes, with all other components of the considered assemblage, an object of the analysis, a process in which biographical events are understood as placements and displacements within the social space and its successive transformations (Bourdieu, 1999). And finally, there is the 'I' of the researcher who is positioned

within the academic field and re-positions themselves with regard to current discourses when publishing the results of the ethnographic study. Making autoethnographic elements and one's own affective involvement transparent is not an end in itself and certainly not intended as a 'soul striptease'. Rather, the intention is to understand mechanisms of symbolic power and social inequality on a societal level through exploring peoples' (and one's own) lived experience and to understand accounts of lived experience as a reflection of, and response to, power relations and social changes.

The Researcher as Resonant Subject

Autoethnographic studies are still rather the exception than the rule in academic literature. Nevertheless, in ethnographically oriented studies as in this volume (auto)biographical 'I's often appear not from the perspective of the researcher but through the accounts of other research participants. This is, for instance, the case in Tim Roberts' study where the participants were invited to talk in biographical interviews about their experiences in multilingual families. The empathic relation that he establishes with the interviewees suggests that their related experiences resonate with his own. What I would term as *resonance relationship* between research participant and researcher becomes perhaps even more obvious in Anna Mammitzsch's chapter. She describes how a focal participant, a female German migrant in Sweden, introduced her in the course of a guided walking tour to the German embassy in Stockholm. The site turned out to be one of specific personal significance for the participant. The author writes: "Due to our interactional engagement about the involved sites, the stories are co-constructed." Co-construction, in the case of this walking tour, involves the bodily presence of the researcher, the common experience of the research site, the shared feeling of an unfriendly policing atmosphere. The researcher is turned into an active participant who, with the camera, contributes to reconstitute the initial assemblage as experienced, remembered and narratively enacted by the participant. What is reconstructed is the critical moment when the

participant lived through feelings of being misrecognized and excluded when hoping to renew her passport.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, one could understand the effect that the described assemblage has on a beholder (here the researcher) in terms of transference and countertransference. The psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer (2006)[1] speaks of scenic understanding, which he distinguishes from 'logical' and from 'narrative' understanding, and which, according to him, is based on the possibility that the analyst (or the reader) can relate the presented scene to scenes experienced by themselves or mediated by others. From a sociological point of view, Hartmut Rosa (2016) explains such transmission phenomena as *resonances*, by which he means that human as well as non-human beings that interact with each other can 'tune in' to each other and respond to each other, not through mechanical causality, but through felt mutual reciprocity. Both of these psychoanalytical and sociological models attribute an active role to the respondent.

And, I would like to stress again that there is still another actor taking part in such an assemblage: it is the listener, the reader with their specific horizon of experience and knowledge, in short, the audience who, as we know since Roland Barthes' (1968/1994) *Mort de l'auteur* is co-responsible for the text. I would like to explain this in the form of a small digression using an example from Natalia Volvach's text on signs and absences in the semiotic landscape of occupied Crimea. Volvach tells about a bullet-ridden sign-plate that she encountered during her fieldwork. The bullet holes had almost invisibilized the Ukrainian code of arms on the plate. The author writes that she perceived this sign-plate with her body as "a wounded object" that "acts as a speaker", as a "materialization of violence through forceful absencing." Here, the shocked, experiencing body of the researcher is explicitly acknowledged as co-actor within the signifying spatial assemblage. The accompanying photograph shows the bullet-ridden plate with the almost erased insignia of the Ukrainian state against the background of a calm, sunlit water surface.

My point is that the body feeling Volvach describes she had had when she became aware of the object can be transferred to the beholder of the

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of scenic understanding, see Busch (2022).

photograph. For me, in this picture (in contrast to other examples of erasure that she shows), the emphasis is less on the result of the erasure than on the process of how the Ukrainian insignia were erased, namely by a material act of violence and symbolic killing. It is less on *what* is perceived than on *how it feels*, thus on what Peirce (1866/1982, para 223) characterized with the term *quale*. For me as a reader of Volvach's text, the scene with the bullet-ridden plate is so striking because it evokes a very specific scene that I can retrieve from my memory: During an academic stay in South Africa a few years ago, on a weekend trip to the Cederberg Wilderness Area, I came across a poster with the portrait of a young ANC electoral candidate. The poster was perforated by bullets and lied in the sand near a fire place where the evening before I had noticed a vociferous round of 'white' locals entertaining themselves with target shooting. Looking at the photograph in Volvach's text evokes in me the disturbing bodily feelings associated with the scene of symbolic violence I witnessed in South Africa. Resonance, be it from one person to another or mediated by a text, a picture or other means, can primarily be understood as a bodily phenomenon or, to use a term developed by the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty in his later work, as a phenomenon of *intercorporeity*, meaning that subjects in interaction attune to one another. According to Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 143), it is the shared experience of the reciprocity between the touched and the touching that "founds transitivity from one body to another." In her reflections on the role of the research team in a large ethnographic project, Creese (2024, p. 1) pleads for the use of (autoethnographic) research vignettes as a genre well suited to documenting difference "illustrating how the researcher yields to the face of the Other in field work encounters." She thereby draws on Nancy's (2007) concept of the 'resonant subject', which is, from the very beginning, a listening and responding one.

Precarious Ethnography

The question is how to 'handle' the researcher's emotional responses. Of course, we can simply consider them from a positivist stance as disturbing factors to be overlooked and eliminated as far as possible, or we can

content ourselves with dutifully labeling our own positionality, e.g. as white, wealthy, Western, heterosexual or whatever. However, it is more interesting to choose another path by taking into account one's own bodily emotional responses in order to make them productive for the research process. From a phenomenological point of view (Husserl, 1960), it would mean to 'listen' to pre-reflexive experiences of irritation or unease one feels toward a perceived situation before immediately classifying and rationalizing it. Hassemer and Flubacher (2020) coined the term *precarious ethnography* to emphasize that ethnographic knowledge is produced in reflexive engagement not only with the research context but also with the researcher's experiences thereof. They understand precarity following Judith Butler (2009) as a generalized condition of interdependency and vulnerability. Taking examples from their own empirical work, they show how it is precisely in moments when the performed researcher subject is called into question, when they experience their own vulnerability and unease—specifically their positioning and self-positioning as gendered bodies—that unequal power relations and ideological ascriptions become palpable. Such moments then can serve as rich points for further analysis insofar self-reflection is considered as a diagnostic tool to understand symbolic orders and power relations. In Bourdieu's (2003, p. 282) words, quoted by Hassemer and Flubacher (2020, pp. 162–163), subjective experience has to be subjected to a rigorous analysis with the same instruments that are applied to the object under research: "Participant objectivation undertakes to explore not the 'lived experience' of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience, more precisely of the act of objectivation itself." Any ethnographically orientated research inevitably has an autoethnographic component. However, disclosing and reflecting on these aspects also means exposing oneself to experiences of vulnerability and precarity as discussed by Hassemer and Flubacher (2020) or by Creese (2024).

Observing Spaces: Situational Assemblages

The second question I would like to touch on is the use of the term assemblage itself. It seems to me that the strength of this term—its all-encompassing openness embracing people, objects, signs, discourses, technologies, physical and virtual sites, material and non-material phenomena, all relating to each other—runs a certain risk of suffering from a lack of analytical clarity. We all know that an inflationary use of certain 'new' terms in academic writing can contribute to degrading them to placeholders of what remains to some extent vague, a fate that one would like to prevent the concept of assemblage from. It is by no means my intention to start a school dispute on the 'true exegesis' of the term, but rather I would like to share, even in a very vague and sketchy form, some thoughts or questions raised by the reading of this book on how the notion of assemblage could in applied linguistics possibly be further developed for methodological and analytical purposes. I would like to suggest differentiating between different scales, depending on what is being focussed on: fluid situational inter-(or intra)actions on a micro level, solidified orders of power on a societal level or subjective meaning-making that mediates between the two. In the following, I will draw on Anna Mammitzsch's fine grained analysis of her focal participant's account of an unsettling encounter with the German embassy in Stockholm that encompasses these different scales.

There has for a while now been a large consensus in social and cultural studies that the container metaphor of space cannot account for the quality of space as emerging and becoming. With the so-called spatial turn, we have learnt to understand spaces, in line with theories developed, for example, by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991), as produced, reproduced and constantly transformed by social, meaning-making practices. The interplay and spatial arrangements of language, bodies and things—thus what we nowadays subsume under the term *assemblage*—have been a concern in linguistic anthropology and ethnography of communication at least since film and video recordings have become easily accessible allowing to capture the course of an interaction beyond the merely linguistic. Seminal studies that could be mentioned are, for

instance, those by Alessandro Duranti (1992) on sequential acts of ceremonial greetings in Western Samoa or by Charles Goodwin (2000) on a conflictual interaction between three young girls playing hopscotch.

Duranti (1992, p. 657) paid special attention to 'sighting', as an interactive step by which interactants engage in a negotiating process at the end of which they find themselves physically located in the relevant social hierarchies, and he highlighted "the interpenetration of words, body movements, and living space in the constitution of a particular kind of interactional practice." With his empirical findings, Duranti (1992, p. 663) explicitly contested the idea of supremacy of the verbal mode: "The body (e.g. body postures, gestures, eye gaze) not only provides the context for interpretation of linguistic units (words, morphemes, etc.), as argued by linguists working on deixis, but helps fashion alternative, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory messages." Goodwin (2000, p. 1498) shows how the participants in the hopscotch game deploy a range of different kinds of semiotic resources. Their positioning and gestures are, as he emphasizes, not "simply a visual mirror of the lexical content of the talk, but a semiotic modality in their own right." He pleads for an analysis of human action that "takes into account simultaneously the details of language use, the semiotic structure provided by the historically built material world, the body as an unfolding locus for the display of meaning and action, and the temporally unfolding organization of talk-in-interaction" (2000, p. 1517).

When we use the term assemblage in linguistics today, we are usually concerned precisely with what 'happens' at a specific point in time and space and what comes together to make this happening possible. The concept seems appropriate to grasp the dynamic quality of the situated interaction as emerging from the interplay between things, bodies, and places alongside the meanings of linguistic resources (Pennycook, 2017) that concur, more or less by coincidence, in momentary, constantly changing configurations. We find all these elements in the vivid description that Mammitzsch's focal participant gives of her experience in the embassy when she applied for renewal of her passport: the cold, nasty weather, the high fence surrounding the building, the perceived lack of signage, a bus with people in uniforms, the interpellation by a bodiless

voice from behind a mirrored window, the automated opening of the gateway … As unique as the coincidence of these elements in one place at one time is, the security system of the embassy is all but fluid.

Conceiving Spaces: Dispositives of Power

Though interaction is per definition situational, it is still subject to spatial constraints such as particular genre expectations, patterns of habitualized practices, local communication policies and regulations, history inscribed into the space, regimes of access and denial, of inclusion and exclusion—in other words, discourses or ideologies about spaces, about how to behave and to interact adequately. This applies to both physical and virtual spaces as we see in Kate O'Farrell's study. Although the identity constructions in the comment sections to documentaries posted by mainstream news corporations are, as she writes, "dynamic and unfixed and evolve with the comment sections", they still are subjected to certain rules, material affordances and genre expectations as the logics of attracting a maximum of attention.

For such temporarily entrenched orders of discourse, practice and things, Foucault (1977/1994, p. 299 in the translation of Raffnsøe et al., 2014) proposes the concept of *dispositive* (le dispositif), defined as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble, consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural planning, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proportions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the dispositive. The dispositive itself is the network that can be established between these elements." With the notion of dispositive Foucault aims to direct the attention to how the grand strategies of power lodge themselves in micro-relations that produce the conditions to exert power, whereby power is not only enacted in a top-down movement but diffuses in a capillary bottom-up way as well.

As Bourdieu (1999, p. 126) explains, power emanating from structures in social space unfolds mostly unnoticed as "mute injunctions and silent calls to order." And he goes on to specify: "Because social space is inscribed at once in spatial structures and in the mental structures that

are partly produced by the incorporation of these structures, space is one of the sites where power is asserted and exercised, and, no doubt in its subtle form, as symbolic violence that goes unperceived as violence."

Experiencing Spaces: Constellations

In her analysis, Mammitzsch shows how her focal participant becomes aware of the symbolic violence emanating from the embassy's security dispositive only when she experiences a mismatch between her 'body image' (Busch, 2021), the way she conceives of herself as a bodily being and the way she is addressed as a subject. Such a moment of irritation and disruption occurs when she is no longer addressed as "the wife of someone", as she was used to, but misrecognized as an average applicant whistled back by a bodiless voice. She says she felt "like a dangerous criminal" and describes the scene with strong emotional words as "an event out of this world."

Judith Butler's (1997) concept of performativity helps to understand in which way the gap between spatial structures and mental structures is bridged. Discourses addressing or interpellating individuals as subjects assign them possible (dominant or subaltern, gendered, racialized, etc.) subject positions they can inhabit. A recent strand of research developing mainly in German sociology, the so-called Subjectivation Analysis (Subjektivierungsanalyse) is interested in how (spatial) orders of discourse, practice and power become effective by finding, so to say, their way into embodied subjects, and how, in turn, those addressed as subjects respond to the discursive interpellations (Geimer et al., 2019). As Schürmann et al. (2018, p. 858) show, individuals are subjectivated individually and collectively, they align with normative and institutional orders, understand themselves in relation to already available categories and subject positions, and develop practices that meet the imposed requirements, oppose or transform them. As we can see from the contributions to this book, subject positions, or 'identities', are often negotiated in distinction from or in contrast to other (typified) social personae. This becomes particularly apparent in Tim Roberts' interviews with English origin adults who now reside in Sweden and are part of a binational family when "participants consistently compare and contrast

themselves against others in term of language and identity"—against the local population, against other immigrant groups, and even against other members of their own family.

What we perceive or 'read' is not the space as such but the way it relates to us, how it 'speaks' to us, how it addresses us as subject of such-or-such category. In connection with the discussion around Linguistic Landscapes, David Malinowski (2020, p. 23) reminds us that signs should best be understood in the sense of Charles S. Peirce as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." This meaning-making 'somebody' is not a blank slate but a bodily being with their specific horizon of experience and knowledge acquired along the life trajectory. Lived space, as it presents itself to our embodied experience, appears to us as a *constellation* in the sense of Walter Benjamin (1928) who discussed this term explaining that ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars, whereby the constellation is simultaneously subjective and objective: from the myriads of stars that are there in the sky, we select and configure those that we recognize as a zodiac sign.

According to Gestalt theory (e.g. Köhler, 1929), as originally developed by a circle of psychologists in Berlin who emigrated to the United States in the 1930s, it is precisely this (interpreting) process of differentiating, selecting, correcting and typifying sensory impressions, thus of configuring different entities to a meaningful whole, a gestalt, that form the syntax of perception. This applies, as the pioneers of Gestalt theory demonstrated, to the perception of objects, matters of facts, patterns and structures, and not only by humans but also by non-human beings. Objects that we make use of to create meaning and which thereby become elements of particular spatial repertoires are therefore not 'neutral' but they exist for us in view of doing something. As developed in Gestalt theory, they have a *Forderungscharakter* (Koffka, 1935/2014) or *Aufforderungscharakter* (Lewin, 1936), i.e. a prompting property of affordance, as, for instance, the chair an affordance for sitting.

To continue this digression to posthumanism *avant la letter*, let us turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty who integrated insights of Gestalt theory into his phenomenology of the body suggesting that it is the object that addresses us through "a certain relation of the thing to us, a certain behavior that it suggests or imposes on us, a certain manner to seduce, to

attract, to fascinate the free subject confronted with it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2023, p. 43, my translation). And, as he continues, it is this attraction that prevents us from understanding ourselves as pure mental beings separated from the things or to define the things as pure objects without any human attribute such as surface feel, color, sound, odor. Hence, for Merleau-Ponty (1962) language is primarily not a system of representations, but a bodily gesture toward the other: in order to make sense, we reach for words as we reach for things.

To sum up, let me return to Lefebvre (1991, pp. 38–39), who suggested that social space is constituted in a threefold way, namely by (observable) social practices, by (ideological) representations, and by how it is experienced. What we see in the contributions to this book as assemblage corresponds in a certain sense to what Lefebvre calls *espace perçu* (perceived space), what we see as dispositive, to what he calls *espace conçu* (conceptualized space), what we see as constellation, to Lefebvre's *espace vécu* (lived space). Of course, in the situated interaction, all of this comes together to form an ephemeral event, but both the power dispositives and the experiencing and interpreting subjects have a historicity that reaches beyond the here and now.

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