"... Casting Our Lot with Some Ways of Life and Not Others": Epistemic Reflexivity, Diffraction, Epistemic Responsibilities

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REFLEXIVITY HAS BECOME SOMETHING of a truism in sociology. It is perhaps best known through the work of Bourdieu and his "obsessive insistence on reflexivity" (Wacquant 1992:36) as a way of recognizing how the social positioning of the knower/researcher matters in knowledge making practices, affecting our "relationship to the object in many ways" (Bourdieu 1993:10). Yet, most approaches to reflexivity are informed by *representational* ways of knowing that give little attention to how values within our research practices are part of how we define, approach, and negotiate the making of evidence, data, and narratives. These external processes of affecting are part of what feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (2006:41) refers to as "spectator epistemologies" wherein "(o)bjects remain inert in and unaffected by the knowing process" (Code 2006:41) or where, as Karen Barad (2007) notes, we "uncover preexisting facts about independently existing things as they exist frozen in time like little statues positioned in the world" (p. 90).

I argue here that sociological research practices are unavoidably value laden. Yet, my argument hinges on particular understandings of reflexivity and of knowledge making. I begin with Bourdieu's compelling concept of *epistemic reflexivity*, which, highlights how "one cannot disassociate the construction of the object from the instruments of construction of the object and their critique" (Wacquant 1992:36), and expand it to embrace diffraction and diffractive methodologies. Rooted partly in Haraway's

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(1997:273) concept of diffraction as "heterogeneous history, not about originals," diffractive methodologies approach research objects, narratives, and knowledge making through/with relational ontologies, highlighting how what something *is* depends on its sociocultural and relational nexuses and its constant unfolding within specific, temporal, performative, and nonrepresentational knowledge making practices. Recognizing ontological multiplicity in data and research objects, diffractive approaches offer a different "politics of possibilities" (Barad 2007:46) and entail a shift from collecting and representing data or evidence to "intervening" in (Hacking 2002) and "intra-action" (Barad 2007) *with* data and research subjects and their worlds. This position is not only epistemological, but "ethico-onto-epistemological" (Barad 2007:381; for more detail, see Doucet 2018b).

Some challenges I have faced in working with nonrepresentational and diffractive approaches to knowledge making include finding ways to speak authoritatively in policy settings and to allow representational spaces for stories of vulnerability and abuse (see Doucet 2018a). How can we engage in nonrepresentational thinking and in "committing sociology" while pushing against the dangers of a postfact, posttruth world? On this point, Code and historical sociologist Margaret Somers have guided my thoughts in several ways. First, both work from a position of relational and pragmatic realism, which entails recognizing "the impossibility of an innocent positioning, while striving to achieve a politically-epistemically responsible one" (Code 2006:219). Second, they envision knowledge making as negotiated politico-ethico-onto-epistemological entanglements. As Somers (2008:9) puts it, the questions we pursue *"are driven by [our] place and concerns in the world"*; they are "inherently ontological" [because they] "contain a priori decisions about *how we understand the social world to be constituted*" (Somers 1996:71; emphasis added; see also Sayer 2017), and how we *want* it to be (Code 2006). Joseph Rouse (2016:np, emphasis added) concurs and adds that "conceptual understanding and ethical accountability are always entangled" and this "establishes an accountability *for what we become and how we live"* (see also Code 2006). Finally, since epistemic communities are not "benign" (Code 2006:v), researchers must collaboratively *negotiate* evidence and knowledge in epistemic communities in order to "counter the excesses of demonstrably unjust social-political-epistemic orders" (Code 2006:vii).

Diffractive methodologies lead to a reconfigured sense of what we are *doing* when we engage in research. This is knowledge making that "is always an interpretive, engaged, contingent, fallible engagement" (Haraway 2000:167) through which we are "casting our lot with some ways of life and not others" (Haraway 1997:36).

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