Patricia Kaersenhout, *Proud Rebels* (Philomena Essed), 2015.
Bron: Collectie Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven met steun van Mondriaan Fonds. Fotografie: Peter Cox, Eindhoven

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What is Left Unseen

The organisers of this festive event have asked all of today's speakers to provide an autobiographical reflection. This reflection is guided by the question of how we have lived our lives as feminist scholars in the context of a university still dominated by masculine, white, neoliberal values. How have we managed to get our knowledge accepted as truthful and valuable? How have we negotiated the normative assumption that science should produce impartial knowledge? These are big questions – questions that for many years, indeed from the very beginning, have from various perspectives driven feminist scholarship. However, as this reflection has to be autobiographical in nature and, moreover, has to fit within the limited timespan of a conference contribution, I will confine myself to a few examples. In the course of this talk, starting from my own lived experience, I hope to arrive at the beginning of an answer to the questions posed above.

First, I would like to thank the organisers for this invitation to provide an autobiographical reflection in the context of an academic symposium. In fact, such an invitation, by its very nature, affords us the beginnings of an answer to the questions formulated above. Feminist scholars are interested in personal stories precisely because the personal is always political, and therefore also holds potential for the formation of new knowledge and theory. At the same time, this is also one of the most important observations made by feminist theory with regard to the genre of autobiography. Whilst the white Western male subject is keen to describe himself as

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unique and autonomous, autobiographies written by those representing political minorities are always aimed at connecting one's own story with one's peers. Where marginalised identities are concerned, the self cannot be seen separately from the group to which that self belongs – the group that is not male and/or not white, not heterosexual, not middle class etcetera, the group that is aware of how these social differences co-construct each other and are influenced by power structures. Erased by traditional historiography, such subjects are always faced with the task of telling the story of a life that has not been shaped along the lines of a written tradition, or a recognisable narrative plot. There is no given framework according to which events can be given a self-evident place and acquire meaning, and major and minor issues can be logically organised. Rather, that framework has to be constructed anew. In this sense, every autobiography of a marginalised subject is exemplary for the articulation of what has, thus far, remained unsaid.

Gender Programme

I first started teaching in the Graduate Gender Programme in Utrecht in the early 1990s, when the programme was still called women's studies. In those early days of feminist scholarship at the Dutch university, I delivered a course entitled 'From Margin to Centre'. I taught there as a feminist literary studies scholar, and together with the students and a historian colleague, we studied women's literature in its historical and cultural context. What can we learn about the lives of women in a particular historical period if we look at those lives from the perspectives of literature, fantasy and the imagination? What historical details do women writers invoke in order to bring female characters to life? What narrative figurations emerge when we consider feminine writing as a norm in its own right? How do the stories of female authors depart from dominant narrative structures, in which traditionally, the female subject was often little more than a decorative aside in the story of the male hero? How does a female subject take form as the main character, what goals does she set herself, what is important to her, what questions occupy her, and what problems does she have to solve? These questions were not only important for the students. They were also very important for me personally, as a first-generation scholar very much aware of being a representative of a culture without a name, let alone a recognisable structure, a young scholar working in an emergent field and very much in need of examples in order to recognise which biographical or professional details would be significant enough to share.

In one of the final assignments of the course, we asked students to write the short history of a random female subject who was at least two generations removed from the student. This could, for example, be a grandmother, but also a neighbour. The assignment was to have a conversation with that woman about her life – oral history as a source of knowledge. One of the most striking things reported by the students each year was the fact that the women selected for the interviews invariably said that they did not have anything special to tell. After some further questioning, they also invariably delivered the most fascinating and moving stories – stories packed with anecdotes, significant details and important knowledge about the position shared by women in a culture dominated by men. Being erased from history means occupying a position with hardly any written history: a shared culture that has no name. We mainly heard stories from behind the (public) scenes, many of which were about female solidarity: how women helped each other to cope with everyday life, and how solidarity and resistance were organised. However, such stories often only came to the fore following a long period of questioning by the interviewer, by listening carefully and, especially, by going into detail.

I learned from this experience that we live in a culture in which dominant discourse and narrative structures place the experiences of subjects that are not white, male and/or heterosexual outside the realm of signification. If there are no signs or symbols to represent them, then it also becomes very difficult to conceive of those experiences as being of any importance and as starting points for knowledge and debate. In other words, if what makes a story "a story" is based on the shared experiences and preoccupations of the dominant male subject, then much potential knowledge remains unarticulated and unnoticed. I think this also motivated my PhD, which was about the biographies of five famous women written by their daughters, who were all carving out a narrative structure to tell the mother-daughter story that had been erased from the formal accounts and biographies.

This example from the practice of early gender studies education clearly underlines the reason both for the existence of our field and for my investment in the development of this field. During recent decades, we have studied the dynamics between the subject and the object of knowledge from a variety of perspectives. We have paid attention to the processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the accompanying workings of erasure and neglect.

From the very start, we in gender studies have dismissed the idea that science should produce impartial knowledge. This impartial knowledge claim is in itself a biased argument, in which knowledge based on the perspective of the dominant white male counts as universal and objective, whilst minority views and knowledge produced from the margin are considered biased or deviations of the norm. In those same early days of gender studies education, a male linguist unashamedly claimed in a guest lecture for the gender programme that phonological knowledge in the field of measuring the human voice was not based on the female voice because the measuring equipment was unable to process it. At the time, I questioned whether those measuring devices could then still be considered adequate to draw conclusions about the human voice based on those measurements. However, my male colleague saw this very differently: the female voice is simply too high, and for that reason fell outside of phonological research. We now have myriad examples of how precisely this supposedly universal view is based on what feminist biologist and philosopher of science Donna Haraway refers to as the God trick: a divine truth that comes to us from heaven, but that is in fact based on data and eviden-

Iris Kensmil (1970)
Sojourner Truth, 2018
olieverf op doek

Bron: Collectie Centraal Museum, Utrecht.
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ce that have discounted the existence of the non-male body. One of many, yet also a particularly arresting example, is the fact that today, modern health care is only just beginning to gather specific knowledge pertaining to the female heart, the trans body, and other variations on the dominant norm.

All knowledge is situated knowledge. However, it does seem that not all knowledge is equally so. The female voice, in the literal sense of the concept of voice, was considered a mere detail in twentieth-century phonology. In a symbolic sense, we are still dealing with this history today: the female voice as an incident, as something easily overlooked when we're dealing with things that really matter.

I argue that this legacy of what is considered important and what is not, of what is considered a major issue and what a minor issue, still affects us in our professional practice today. The knowledge we produce as feminist scholars is not so much concerned with the struggle for truth or objectivity, but with the struggle for how relevant the knowledge is that we produce, and for whom. Therefore, the task we face as feminist scholars here today is how to perform the balancing act of mainstreaming on the one hand, and staying conceptually cutting-edge on the other. So, whilst it is very important that feminist knowledge continues to specialise and remain present in teaching and research programmes, we also face the task of continuously highlighting the relevance of our knowledge, both within and beyond the academy. And to stress what knowledge we miss if we do not use the feminist lens.

The strategy I have chosen to do this builds upon the examples I have just cited. It concerns a reparation of the lack of adequate structures within which the presence of the underrepresented becomes a given, rather than a mere detail or a deviation from the status quo. This strategy of working through the old structures and eventually working on strategies of repair has brought me the most joy in my collaborations with artists and museums in the context of what has become known now as the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED).

MOED

When viewing the permanent collections of most museums, we see the world primarily through the lens of white male creators. Of course, there are many historical explanations for this situation. For example, until relatively recently (in

Patricia Kaersenhout, *Proud Rebels* (Gloria Wekker), 2015.

Bron: Collectie Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven met steun van Mondriaan Fonds. Fotografie: Peter Cox, Eindhoven

the history of art), women in the West only had access to art education as nude models rather than as students. Works that indigenous people in their specific geopolitical contexts and women in general did create (for example, ceramics or textiles) were often associated with either folklore or the domestic sphere, and hence were not considered museum pieces. Such a gendered and racialised history of presence and absence has influenced the tastes we have been able to develop – what we consider beautiful and what is allowed to become conspicuous. Contemporary museum collections represent a canon in which aesthetics and stereotypical representations of gender, race and ethnicity often go hand in hand. Such stereotypes tend to make different aspects of the same history invisible.

MOED's point of departure is that, as long as we remain unable to structurally envision processes of equality and difference, change, both within museums and throughout the broader social landscape, is doomed to fail. This is because so often, we unwittingly reinforce the political power relations we aim to dismantle. Therefore, working through the past – as politically engaged artists all over the world are doing – not only contributes to a better understanding of the fabric of the present, but is also a necessary pre-condition for implementing cultural change. It thus has become a major part of our methodology to return to significant historical material and address the *other* question: what is left unseen?

When we were approached by Utrecht Centraal Museum in 2019 to guide them in presenting their permanent collection differently – to develop a feminist, decolonial approach to the Museum's collection – we chose an example that enabled us to demonstrate the new knowledge that can be produced when an overdetermined artefact is revisited and placed in a new context. As a starting point for this particular exhibition, we chose to work with the museum's collection of artefacts concerning the life and work of Utrecht writer, professor and abolitionist Nicolaas Beets (1814-1903). This collection includes a portrait painted in 1881 by the Dutch female artist Therese Schwarze (1851-1918), a bust, the author's writing desk, and facsimile publications of his manuscripts. Nicolaas Beets was part of the Utrecht elite, a full professor in church history at Utrecht University. He is also known as the author of the canonical novel *Camera Obscura* (written under the pseudonym Hildebrand in 1857), in which we are introduced for the first time in Dutch literature to a family of colonists (the Kegge family) upon their return from Surinam. In 1856, Beets gave a historic public speech at the Building for Arts and Science (the current-day conservatory). This speech was published under the title *De Bevrijding der Slaven* (the liberation of slaves) and provided four arguments for why slavery was untenable. To Beets, abolishing slavery was first an act of humanity; second a matter of civilisation; third a righteous interpretation of Christianity; and fourth a gesture befitting the times.

The re-curating of this cultural heritage from a decolonial and feminist perspective made us aware of the stereotypes that are embedded within it and that are only too easily reproducible: that of the enslaved who must be freed from their chains, and that of the white male saviour singlehandedly saving those who are in need of help. In the first case, we deny enslaved people agency, voice and a history of their own. In the second, we risk falling into the trap of the romantic and heroic image of the autonomously acting white man who embodies rationality and the law, "putting the world to rights". The stereotypical approach to the history of slavery as predominantly a history of humiliation and alienation makes it hard to imagine black resistance and agency. Too often, stories of resistance and the agency of the oppressed are erased from these histories of oppression. A division of roles with the victim on the one hand and the white male saviour on the other is self-evident in many narrative structures. The white male saviour here represents the *de facto* obstacle for actual inclusion.

To break this impasse, we chose to divide the exhibition space into two unequally sized semiotic fields. In one third of the room, we placed all the paraphernalia related to the history of Nicolaas Beets. We then dedicated the major part of the room to the history of black resistance, featuring women of colour who co-operated with Beets, or who could be presented as his political and intellectual successors. This curational decision epitomised a working through of a common museum practice. In many museums, artefacts from the West are exhibited centre stage, whilst objects from "the rest" are hidden in overcrowded back rooms or depots. In the British Museum, for example, Rodin's immensely famous statue *The Thinker* has a room of its own, whereas the entire history of African objects and artefacts, from the Benin bronzes to Anatsui's contemporary masterpieces, are stuffed into one overcrowded room a little further away. We therefore reversed this practice and dedicated most of the exhibition space to the images of three significant women of colour, juxtaposing these artefacts with Schwarze's painting of Beets. We also contacted Iris Kensmil, a Dutch painter of Surinamese descent, to ask her to make a portrait of Sojourner Truth for the occasion. Which she kindly agreed to. We hung this portrait diagonally across from the portrait of Nicolaas Beets, as if the two were having a conversation that visually dominates the room.

Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) was an enslaved black woman who lived in New York State. Truth spoke Dutch as a child and was owned by a Dutch-speaking slave owner until the age of nine. As a free woman, she became an outspoken abolitionist and advocate for women's rights. In feminist circles, she is considered the foremother of intersectionality. Truth worked at the National Freedman's Relief Association, an organisation based in America that helped millions of formerly enslaved people. The association was financially supported by an organisation based in Utrecht, set up by Nicolaas Beets. He and his colleagues took the initiative in 1863 to collect money for the American association through the Dutch Society for the Advancement of the Abolition of Slavery.

Thus, in the exhibition we placed Beets' story within a transnational context of Black resistance, highlighting a plotline that emphasises relationality, co-operation and the agency of all those involved, rather than reaffirming the saviour-victim and active-passive dichotomies. Consequently, we decided to critically situate this cooperation in a genealogy of abolitionism and anti-racist struggles and scholarship in the Netherlands to counteract the image of an isolated incident of abolitionism in Dutch history. We therefore used the rest of the wall upon which Beets' portrait was hung to display two portraits from the series *Proud Rebels* (2015).

Proud Rebels is a series of portraits of black activists and scholars embroidered with beads on textile by an artists' collective from Senegal, led by Patricia Kaersenhout, a leading Dutch female artist of Surinamese descent. This collaboratively produced work is a critical intervention in its own right, deconstructing the stereotype of the modernist autonomous genius. It enacts a materialisation of feminist and decolonial relationality and co-operation, as well as rehabilitating textile as an art form. In the series *Proud Rebels*, Kaersenhout portrayed our colleagues Gloria Wekker (Professor of Gender and Ethnicity at Utrecht University in the period 2001-2013) and Professor Philomena Essed (affiliate of the Gender Studies department at Utrecht University), amongst others. We borrowed these two portraits for the occasion from the Van Abbe Museum in Tilburg and exhibited them next to the portrait of Beets. In this way, we aimed to visualise the genealogy of those colleagues and successors of Professor Beets who continue Truth's important work. Thus, in this first exhibition room of *What is Left Unseen*, we acknowledged the agency of all those involved in this abolitionist history, re-balancing the hierarchy between perceived main and side issues, and counteracting the notion of the male white saviour who grants the Other their existence. Sojourner Truth, Beets' contemporary and colleague, takes centre stage here as the person who inspired feminist scholars across the world. By juxtaposing these different patterns emerging from our doing history differently in the exhibition space, we intended to connect past and present, whilst simultaneously providing alternative scenarios to stereotypes of race and gender. Interestingly, shortly after the end of the exhibition, the Centraal Museum decided to acquire Iris Kensmil's portrait of Sojourner Truth. It is now one of the works most frequently put on loan in the Museum's collection.

What does all of this mean concretely for our field? How can this approach of working through and moving along encourage us as intersectional feminist scholars to remain present, flexible and in motion? Using the examples cited above, I aim to illustrate that precisely by looking at images and listening to texts anew, we can shape previously hidden or neglected worlds, opening up new possibilities for What is Left Unseen. On the one hand we need to develop our strategies and methodologies in a context of theoretical experts and thinkers, but on the other hand we also need to work with societal partners in order to help nurture and spread a new way of thinking and acting that is not uncontested, as we can all witness in the here and now.