Positionality in IR: Concepts, History, and the Haitian Revolution

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Per the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, 'positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group. The position adopted by a researcher affects every phase of the research process' (Rowe 2014: 627). Considering the ways our identities tangibly affect our modes of knowledge production seems like a quintessential methodological issue, within or beyond social sciences. Such questions are gaining traction in mainstream IR, marked by the publication of *Reflexivity and International Relations: Positionality, Critique, and Practice* in 2015. Ground-breaking work is continually produced by theorists of race and racism in the discipline. In 2020, Robbie Shilliam curated a conversation among a generation of contemporary IR scholars, facilitating reflections on their personal engagement with race. Despite this work, the subject often remains neglected. Unfortunately, "positionality statements" can be lacking even when they are included, and do not guarantee more ethical research designs (Holmes 2020). How can we avoid reducing such a foundational ethical and intellectual exercise into a shallow and scripted recitation of veritable privileges?

To explore the implications of a deep engagement with positionality we need to move beyond IR, and even beyond academia. Genealogies tracing the concept to an originary point within feminist ethnography present a clear chain of continuity to facilitate an argument for contemporary relevance but do the disservice of effacing a long tradition of intellectual forbearers and political activists. Brah and Phoenix (2014) start our story in the 19th century when Sojourner Truth, an abolitionist and women's rights activist, asked, 'Ain't I a Woman?' Born into slavery, Truth's articulation challenged white feminist suffrage campaigns, rendering race, class, and gender inextricable.

This commitment to complex modes of analysing power and systemic oppression threads through Black and postcolonial feminisms, theorising the creative potential of difference (Lorde 1983) and problematizing positive identification on the basis of categories like "woman" alone (Mohanty 2003). The Combahee River Collective (1978) takes their central task to be the "(…) development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives". Crenshaw (1989) formulated the concept of intersectionality by centering the experiences of Black women, citing the failures of 'single-axis' analyses to describe experiences of discrimination. More than a performative disclosure that the author is compelled to make, positionality becomes an onto-epistemological interrogation of the "place" we produce our knowledge from.

In my own work, I write about how the Haitian revolutionary concept of 'liberté' remains central as we navigate the semiotic web of today's 'liberation'. My project is based on the conviction that the concept of liberation, the linguistic manifestation of the drive to struggle against oppression, is central to an articulation of the human condition. Because I trace the ways language captures struggles, dreams, and plans in the context of political ideologies and material structures, analyzing narratives of emancipation seems like more of an ontological undertaking than a semiotic exercise. A more sophisticated understanding of positionality facilitates an analysis of both the production of knowledge and the production of the Self.

How do I relate to these narratives that I study? The processes racializing my body as white have been reified and

normalized through the racist violence against other bodies. This relationship to racialization and social power allows me to study these processes academically and without the lived experience of this violence. In contrast, I can participate in an institution on the basis of social class that provides me with the access to literature, materials, and mentorship without which this text would not exist. Privileges accorded by white supremacy and ableism within the academy has further simplified this process, granting me the disproportionate ability to curate this narrative. History, to Trouillot (1995: xix), is an uneven patchwork quilt of narrative contributions "(…) of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production."

The selection of sources to be engaged is anything but a neutral act, and the principles by which the curation is done shapes the content of the narrative produced. The researcher as a curator exerts power over the archive by exercising an ability to choose and to delineate. The choice to focus on Toussaint L'Ouverture, for example, due to the relative prevalence and preservation of his texts and contributions, effectively silences other key figures. Instead of analysing each individual instance, an analytical focus on positionality allows me to ascertain larger trends and be accountable for the ways that my identity affects my research.

One of the most important limitations that I bring to my work is that of language. Speaking English as a first language allowed me the relative proximity to Western academic knowledge production. This is a direct result of the same settler-colonial assimilationist and genocidal practices that continue to erase Indigenous languages, rendering over two-thirds of those that are still spoken in Canada "endangered" and the remainder "vulnerable" (Coles 2018). The fact that this archive was curated from English sources and translations to English limits the scope of my analyses, silencing any contributions for which translations were not available. This produces, and reifies, a discursive field dominated by engagement and scholarship in English. Considering my own positionality, then, necessitates an engagement with translation.

Debates over translation address both a movement through and between languages and provide immanent commentary on larger issues of interpretation and representation: "(…) all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages," (Benjamin 1986: 75). The tension of translatability becomes relevant for this paper and its foray into the concept of liberation, but also for inquiries interested in the Haitian revolutionary context more generally. It encompasses both the transition from Haitian Creole to French and/or French to English, but also a stretching or rupture of discursive boundaries: transplanting a set of ideas into a geographically and temporally foreign conversation.

As the English term 'liberation' derives from old French, with the root of both in Latin, the linguistic (not conceptual) gap is minimal, offering less syntactical room to manoeuvre. Due to the grammar and syntactical structure of Haitian Creole, however, the implications for a concept analyst are significant. Exploring these revolutionary documents in their translated versions, as well as in the original language, presents another avenue through which to explore the concept within its linguistic setting.

This is not to say there are no similarities between Haitian Creole and English: the noun for "freedom" is "liberté", which is used in a similar fashion throughout the documents in the three languages of inquiry. Structural linguistic differences must be considered, however, when the concept is applied as a descriptor. Haitian Creole has no verbal copula (i.e. "be" or "être") and no functional equivalent in non-past tenses (DeGraff 2007). This means that non-verbal predicates like "libe" (free) appear string-adjacent to their subjects, DeGraff continues, and that there is no functional replacement for the verbal copula in non-past tenses In Haitian Creole, describing an individual as "being free" doesn't make sense; "free" is not the state of being, it is the being.

Although all language may be inadequate, as Benjamin implies above (1986), in that the essence of the signified will eternally overflow any signifier, it is important to note that this (mis)representation or overflow of the signified does not occur in the same ways across languages. Unclear engagement with the process of translating meaning reduces any philosophical analysis to the level of analogy or attempts to ground the claim to translatability on an equally fraught claim to universal essence —another pitfall of epistemological "objectivity". My own engagement with translation is only one example of the productive tension at the core of positionality in IR research, and the generative capacity inherent when we allow it to destabilize the edifice of our work.

Another issue central to an inquiry into anticolonial sovereignty is the question of one's connection to land and the history that grounds that connection. I cannot grapple here with the entirety of the Canadian government's history of dispossession but must address my own position as a white settler: I lived for 20 years on stolen land in Treaty 6 territory, land of the Plains and Woodland Cree people. In a way, this is one of the answers to Haraway's question: "With whose blood were my eyes crafted?" (1988: 585). The freedom I have to travel and undertake this project abroad was founded on an original moment of dispossession (Simpson 2017). Growing up inspired by Indigenous struggle against the settler state, from Idle No More to the fight for Wet'suwet'en sovereignty, an anti-extractivist position is both a research methodology and a political commitment (Betasamosake Simpson: 2016). However, voicing this solidarity is both insufficient and empty on its own.

Grappling with positionality does not necessarily entail a static construction of the Self/Other, as Nencel (2014) argues, but moves away from a predetermined identification to a fluid focus on the way we live our relationship to the subject of the research. This relationship lives through the past, encompassing my experience of categories like race and land, and through the future, in the structure and scaffolding of this continued project. Nencel describes reflexivity as being both epistemological and methodological, addressing both the relationship to knowledge and the strategies one uses to procure it. However, it seems that a delineation of the Self also forces the researcher to confront more ontological questions. Of course, these two facets are inextricably intertwined as only certain subject positions are authorized to make claims of objectivity: in Haraway's terms, the western-epistemological 'god-trick' "(…) of seeing everything from nowhere," (1988: 581).

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact (Said 1978: 11).

Claims to research objectivity are salient within a masculinist science, in Haraway's terms, and an Orientalist one in Said's. Explicit positioning, then, represents a deep yet imperfect critique. It contains a denial of the possibility of objectivity in research and knowledge production (Davis and Knonach 2019).

Suddenly, positionality speaks to much larger disciplinary and philosophical debates. It seems easier to grapple with the epistemological implications of such a thesis on a more abstract or discourse-analytical level, debating the construction of an épistémè (Foucault 1971), instead of the ontological quandaries: why does acknowledging our positionality elicit reactions of defense, discomfort, or insecurity? Co-creating the immediate materiality of academic hierarchy, gatekeeping, and classism, affective elements that often undergird an alignment to certainty.

Ontological security literature in international relations, following Giddens (1984: 1991), emphasizes that a 'stable sense of Self' is a basic human need. Ontological security, however, is neither stable nor static: hedged in an existentialist framework, "(…) conceptions of agency cannot be derived from *being* ontologically secure, but are expressed in the attempt to *become* ontologically secure," (Berenskoetter 2020: 2). Fragility is at the core of our individual being (Sartre 2012: 40). To benefit from the security derived from pseudo-objectivity, one must consistently re-enact this hierarchy of certainty. Denying the fact that one possesses a finite social position becomes legible when we interpret such a performance as an 'anxiety controlling mechanism' (Giddens 1984: 50).

Ontological security theory can be applied to understand "(…) the psychological sensibilities of political actors," (Berenskoetter 2020: 1). "[A]ctors become ontologically insecure when critical situations rupture their routines thus bringing fundamental questions to the level of discursive consciousness," (Ejdus 2018: 2). In our case, questions of authority and expertise weigh heavily on the academic, especially one who had become accustomed to Haraway's epistemological god-trick (1988: 581) allowing them to produce exclusive truths.

Returning to the Haitian Revolution, "The stakes at play are significant: To theorise and narrate the Haitian Revolution is to necessarily take part in a struggle over the authorship of the meaning of global justice and modern freedoms" (Shilliam 2017: 269).

Claims to provide an authoritative retelling are weaker with every failure to engage with their foundationally situated nature. At the end of his article, Shilliam (2017: 291) challenges the reader who can only comprehend the events of the Haitian Revolution through their own conceptual categories:

I am sure that much of what you have read will have resonated with your existing apprehensions of the cosmos. You might have recognized comforting elements of cosmopolitan, communitarian and anarchistic ethics. Or felt, thank Bondye, a proper dialectics casting its subterranean magic. Sensed, even, a Machiavellian or Weberian critique of power. Perhaps you gleaned a north-eastern future in this Caribbean past, gesturing towards a critique of Weimar constitutions and fascist revolutions.

The way our embodied experience is marked, Shilliam (2017: 291) concludes, stunts our analyses: "Race: that which creates the profane and reasonable in opposition to the mystic and primitive; carves out a supernatural black in distinction to a real (Christian) white; faces humans in opposition to less-than-human natives and negroes." Referring to the lwa, spiritual agents in Haitian vodou, he writes: "The *lwa* are agents of international relations," (Shilliam 2017: 291). Shilliam (2017: 270) recognizes the discomfort such a statement might instill in adherents of colonial science aiming to gatekeep a sort of intellectual integrity rather than accepting its explanatory validity, beckoning us to face that anxiety head-on.

Analysing the Haitian revolutionary concept of liberty and beyond, facing our own epistemological uncertainty is generative. Making space for alternative conceptualizations is a production of possibility, creating new pathways for action and social change (Berenskoetter 2017). Within Koselleck's methodology, "(…) concepts are not only indicators of but also factors in change," (Berenskoetter 2017: 13). An analysis of the concept of liberty, then, has to seek out the impetus that liberation contains; in Getachew's words, how the Haitian Revolution is "(…) constitutive of distinctive political trajectories and generative of alternative ideals," (2016: 840). Making a home within our insecurity can be productive of both thought and praxis.

Considering our positions and identities allow us to make clearer connections between our ideas and embodied experience, Shilliam emphasizes the physicality and material circumstances of slavery, referencing Haitian revolutionary leader Jean Jacques Dessalines and the implications of knowledge emanating from that experience as opposed to the thought experiments undertaken by European philosophers:

Meanwhile, another Jean Jacques – Rousseau – writes that man is born free but everywhere lives in metaphorical chains.
Compare.
Might those who broke the physical chains have something valuable to say about present-day struggles over global justice? Is it intellectually satisfying to consider anything less? (Shilliam 2017: 291).

The Haitian revolutionary concept of liberty can be defined, then, not only in opposition to the French concept of liberty, but to entire systems of imperialist, racial-capitalist knowledge production. This concept carries traces of political, ontological, and epistemological conflict: the stakes, Shilliam reminds us, were enslavement, "(…) radical dehumanization and desanctification, literally genocide," (2017: 291).

We irrevocably mark, and are irrevocably marked by, the knowledge we produce. A deep understanding of positionality goes further than how the way I speak shapes the things that I say: it interrogates the histories within which those utterances are salient. The onto-epistemological question brings the ways I have come to know, and the person I have come to be, into conversation. "All consciousness is consciousness *of* something," (Sartre 2012: 21).

Stepping away from the façade of ontological security that privilege provides, especially in a field that rewards the authority of certainty, will be difficult. Grappling with positionality cannot be reduced to a procedural formality; it cannot be finished. Especially in a project tracking conceptual change, it seems counterintuitive to deny the Self the same space to fluctuate. Berenskoetter (2020: 3) theorises Heidegger's existentialism as a constant 'becoming' where the only closure of our ontological insecurity, and epistemological insecurity I might add, is death: "Until then, being remains incomplete."

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