Persistent Corporeality: Early Modern Natural Philosophy meets Postmodern Gender Theory

This project will congregate two text corpuses that seem rather incompatible at first glance: Postmodern feminist and gender theories and early modern natural philosophy.

I developed the very plan for this unusual investigation during my dissertation research that comprised the analysis and translation of a dialogue by Oliva Sabuco de Nantes y Barrera, a female Spanish philosopher from the 16th century (Bidwell-Steiner 2009a). In her *Nueva filosofía de la naturaleza del hombre* (1587) she developed a surprisingly philogynous materialism. The reconstruction of her central concepts demanded for its contextualisation in an intellectual environment, namely a materialistic formation within the Renaissance scientific discourse: Jean Fernel, Girolamo Fracastoro, Leone Hebreo, Juan Huarte de San Juan, Miguel Servet and Bernadino Telesio.

Some of their epistemological ventures convey striking parallels with today's inquiries on embodiment: these Renaissance authors offer highly original approaches on corporeality which are related to a specific Mediterranean heritage of materialistic ideas. Their concentration on the interplay between body and soul, matter and form gravitate towards relational models of nature and nurture, ideas which they for instance convey in frameworks on the significance of affects.

The complex field of mutual influences between the "inside" and the "outside" of the body that preoccupy Early Modern philosophy is also a core problem in recent theories on body regimes. Especially today's Gender theorists (for instance Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Ann Fausto Sterling) depict the idea of an embodied mind, which subverts the dichotomist order of matter and form. Principles of order are always rhetorically constructed. Therefore it comes as no surprise that most scholars in the field of Gender and Cultural Studies set out their analysis by uncovering the metaphorical origins of scientific “truths” and canons (cp. Bidwell-Steiner/Wozonig 2005, Bidwell-Steiner/Zangl 2009). It is a vital concern of the proposed project that this is a strategy contemporary feminist scholarship shares with the mentioned Renaissance philosophers.

Hence, my commitment to this specific historical survey of materialistic body models: a perspective of historical otherness reveals important insights into the construction of embodiments of the "other" of the (male) subject, one of the key paradigms of gender theory. Since gender regimes rely on orders of body and mind (as is shown in a lecture series I organized for the ongoing academic year at the University of Vienna), it will be instructive to investigate their “entanglement” (notion w.r.t. Barad 2008) with technological, social and cultural beliefs. Therefore I will not only address issues pertaining to the history of ideas on embodiment but also trace responses in literary texts of the Early Modern Mediterranean to the revisited philosophical body concepts.

In doing so, I shall identify some important cultural and social preconditions for the production of scientific knowledge(s) in a historical perspective. This strategy will convey a sense for the embeddedness and situatedness of scientific innovation in specific world views and world experiences.