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Temporal contextuality of agentic intersectional positionalities: Nuancing power relations in the ethnography of minority migrant women

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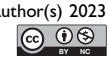

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Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot
Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium

Herbary Cheung
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Abstract
Researchers' reflexivity usually focuses on the spatiality and sociality of their ethnographic fieldwork. As a result, the temporal context of their positionality, whereby their various identities interact with one another at different research phases, is often overlooked. This paper adopts an agentic intersectional approach and draws from our separate studies of Thai migrant women in Belgium and Hong Kong to unpack the temporality of the power dynamics between study participants and us (the researchers). Through this reflexive exercise, we identify three salient aspects: first, different identities of the researchers intersect at each phase of the study; second, researchers are dependent on gatekeepers and study participants, notably during the data-gathering phase; and third, the changing researcher–participant dynamics throughout the research process are embedded in broader relations of power that encompass social institutions and migrant/ethnic networks. Hence, researchers' self-discipline and constant awareness of positionality are of utmost importance for achieving well-situated knowledge (re)production.

Keywords
reflexivity, agentic intersectionality, temporal contextuality, positionality, power relations, ethnography, Thai migrant women, Belgium, Hong Kong

Corresponding author:
Herbary Cheung, Department of Applied Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 11 Yuk Choi Road, Hung Hom, Hong Kong.
Email: herbary.cheung@polyu.edu.hk

Introduction

In social and natural sciences, the researcher–participant relationship has been widely discussed and reflected upon, notably since the discovery of the 'observer effect' in quantum physics. This effect denotes the influence of the very act of observation on the observed, be it an object, individual, phenomenon, or situation. In sociology, this has been known as the 'Hawthorne effect' (Mayo, 2004), and its counterpart – that is, the impact of the act of observation on the observer – has been called the 'secondary observer effect' (Baclawski, 2018). This relational dimension of scientific research indicates the inseparability of the observer from the observed, echoing Barad's 'agential realist account', in which 'human subjects are neither outside observers of apparatuses, nor independent subjects that intervene in the workings of an apparatus, nor the products of social technologies that produce them' (Barad, 2007: 171). Apparatuses refer here to 'boundary-making practices' (146) through which 'the very distinction between the social and the scientific, nature and culture, is constituted' (141). In Barad's view, reality is constantly shifting and affected by multiple forces that converge in the moment. Therefore, the researcher's reflexivity regarding their positionality and that of the study participants, the sociomaterial worlds they occupy, and the research design they adopt is part and parcel of these apparatuses (Rice et al., 2021).

In this paper, reflexivity is understood as a critical introspection and contemplation on how the researcher's multiple social identities shape their access to, and interactions and relationships with, their study participants as well as with other social actors (Fresnoza-Flot, 2016; Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Shinozaki, 2012). This intellectual exercise forms part of situated knowledge praxis (Haraway, 1988) and illuminates the power dynamics that transpire during knowledge production. To capture these dynamics during reflexivity work, we argue that the temporal context should be taken into account in the analysis. Since everyone is 'part of the world in its becoming' and 'there is no inside, nor outside' (Barad, 2007: 396) of this world, a processual ontological stance to understand apparatuses and the 'becoming' of the world is paramount. How do researcher–participant relations evolve through time? Which among the multiple identities of the researcher and the participant shape the power dynamics between them at a given moment in a specific social space? What are the implications of these changing dynamics on the research process?

Informed by critical feminist scholarship and building on the literature on researchers' reflexive praxis, we provide insights into these questions through reflexivity work on our previous ethnographic studies of minority migrant women in two different sociocultural settings. To undertake our analysis, we borrow Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality perspective that has been used, for example, to map 'the manner in which power dynamics interact to make black women marginalized by social systems' (Cooper, 2016: 389). This framework contends that 'institutional power arrangements […] confound and constrict the life possibilities of those who already live at the intersection of certain identity categories' (392). Its focus on interacting power arrangements appears useful to unpack the power dynamics that emerge during fieldwork. Since research is a social institution, adopting an intersectional perspective in reflexivity work can reveal the hidden mechanism by which power dynamics produce constraints and privileges on the part of the researcher and the study participant. By paying attention to temporal context, our

reflexivity work contributes to what Mahler et al. (2015) call 'scaling intersectionality', in which various sociospatial scales are simultaneously considered in the analysis of interacting identities and inequalities affecting people's lives. Bringing temporality to the fore in reflexivity work, we intend here to nuance the way we understand power relations between researchers and study participants. Drawing on Barad's (2007) agentic realism and following the works of Rice et al. (2021, 2022), we recognize that the identities of researchers and study participants are fluid and not predetermined by biology or social structures. These identities, shaped by or understood as 'categories of difference' (Crenshaw, 1989), are continuously (re)affirmed, (re)questioned, or (re)configured as the research unfolds. The positioning of researchers and study participants materializes during the confrontation of or the 'meeting' (Barad, 2007) of these identities. Hence, we argue that focusing on time-situated intersecting identities during the research process, from a comparative perspective, can uncover commonalities and differences between researchers and participants in terms of 'positionality' – the ways their respective social locations influence the research process and results (see McCorkel and Myers, 2003). Even more interestingly, it can reveal the subtleties in researcher–participants power relations, even in qualitative studies in different social contexts.

In this paper, we reflect on our respective work on Thai migrant women in Belgium (an economically developed country in Western Europe) and Hong Kong (a former British colony and now a Chinese special administrative region), amongst whom scholars have widely observed a recent and rising phenomenon of marriage migration (see Fresnoza-Flot, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Timmerman, 2006). In 2018, women comprised the majority of the 3769 Thai migrants in Belgium (Statbel, 2019), while in Hong Kong, women accounted for 87% of the total 10,215 Thai migrants in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). Most of these women migrate for the purpose of building relationships with citizens of Belgium and Hong Kong. In both social settings, Thai women are socially viewed as minority 'others' in ethnic and social class terms, as are migrant women from other developing countries. In Belgium, Thai women are socially viewed as 'exotic partners' of Belgian men, a stereotype accompanied by suspicion that they only enter into relationships with Belgians 'for money' or in order to migrate to Belgium (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022). Compared to migrant women from economically affluent countries, Thai migrant women occupy a minority social position in Belgium, which stems from the intersection of multiple categories of difference such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. In Hong Kong, Thai migrant women – like their counterparts from other Southeast Asian countries – are viewed negatively: they are seen as 'money-grubbers' and 'sex workers' (Constable, 2014; Lai, 2011). These negative stereotypes have no regard for the migrant women's voices and multiple identities. Nor do they take account of recent changes in the migration patterns of Southeast Asian women: many of them are middle-class workers who are increasingly pursuing white-collar jobs in Hong Kong, unlike earlier waves of migrants who mainly worked in blue-collar jobs. This change allows us to move beyond trite anecdotes of seemingly victimized migrant women (Zhang, 2023).

Before we delve into our reflexivity work, we first revisit the literature on reflexive praxis in qualitative research and present our analytical and methodological frameworks of agentic intersectionality. The aim of this presentation is to highlight the usefulness of the intersectionality perspective in uncovering the lived experiences of minority women

and the power relations in which they are enmeshed. The core of our paper unveils our personal stories and the development of our respective research. Specifically, we reveal our shifting positionalities (the 'apparatus' in Barad's terms) during three main stages of our field research: study elaboration, data gathering, and data analysis/writing. During each phase, we reveal our intersecting identities and those of our study participants. We also reflect on how this process affects our data gathering and analysis on the one hand, and how it reflects larger social inequalities on the other hand.

Reflexivity in qualitative research

The literature on researchers' reflexive praxis is particularly rich and has continued to burgeon over recent decades. This corpus of work suggests that reflexivity entails self-reflection that 'might scratch the surface' and 'self-reflexivity' that 'cuts to the bone' as it 'implicates' the researchers (Jones, 2010: 124). Such a demanding process calls for scholars' full attention to carry out reflexivity effectively.

In many cases, shifting relationship dynamics between the researcher and study participants have been framed through an *insider–outsider* perspective (see Evered and Louis, 1981; Gold, 1957–1958) or through a *studying-up* approach (Nader, 1969) during which researchers proceed to a context in which they have less power. Some scholars focus on the researchers' membership role(s) during fieldwork (Adler and Adler, 1987): are they 'peripheral member researchers', who do not implicate themselves in the study group's activities, or 'active member researchers', who participate in the group's activities but do not follow its values and goals, or are they 'complete member researchers' during the research process? Other scholars follow Fine (1994) by 'working the hyphen' – thinking about the relationship between the researcher and their study context(s) on the one hand and between the researcher and study participants on the other hand (see also Wagle and Cantaffa, 2008). In this approach, the social and spatial contexts in which the study takes place have been shown to be crucial in understanding the power dynamics between researchers and participants. MacDonald captures these dynamics by not only focusing on the 'Self–Other relation' but also on what she calls 'self–other–other' relations in which the second 'other' refers to 'in-betweeners' – the volunteers (2020: 255). This approach highlights the importance of considering the role of gatekeepers (see also Horowitz, 1986). As regards space, inspired by Fine's 'working the hyphen' perspective, Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) decorticate the multiple researcher–respondent identities using four hyphen-spaces: insiderness–outsiderness, sameness–difference, engagement–distance, and political activism–active neutrality.

What is striking in the literature is that the 'temporal context' is most often overlooked, that is, the period of time during which each phase of the research process takes place. If temporality is considered, the analysis tends to focus either on one specific phase of the study (e.g. the data-gathering stage; see Råheim et al., 2016) or on just one shifting social category before and during data-gathering (such as embodiment; see Rice, 2009, 2018). As Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009: 282) point out, a research project involves various stages and each of them has a 'different purpose that, to a certain degree, shapes the respective roles of the participants and the researcher' resulting in 'changes in power relations'. This implies that the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched are not static but fluid (Råheim et al., 2016), as are their membership roles. In this case, the analysis

should give equal weight to reflexivity as to the social and spatial contexts. Another striking feature of the literature on reflexive praxis is that accounts are mainly from an individual researcher's vantage point (e.g., Blackwood, 1995; MacDonald, 2020; Rice, 2009) but very rarely from a comparative perspective (exceptions include Ellis and Berger, 2003). This tendency overlooks the 'researcher–researcher' hyphen-space.

The above lacunae inspired us to carry out reflexivity on our separate works on Thai migrant women by examining the temporality of our positionalities and by adopting a comparative stance through the prism of intersectionality. Specifically, we offer in this paper a comparative reflexivity at two levels: first, in terms of approach, we offer a comparison of our research experience as a female senior researcher and a male early career researcher; second, in terms of focus on positionalities, we make a comparison between researchers (us) and our respective study participants (minority migrant women), among participants themselves, and between researchers (us) and gatekeepers. Since '[r]eflexivity is laborious' (Jones, 2010: 124), applying an intersectional approach to it compels us to step out of our comfort zone and confront ourselves, including both our privileged and our marginal identities.

Power relations and intersectionality

As a framework 'to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine' (Knudsen, 2006: 61), intersectionality is arguably a crucial conceptual and even theoretical tool in contemporary gender studies to question power (Conaghan, 2008; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). According to Davis (2008: 71), 'intersectionality coincided with Foucauldian perspectives on power that focussed on dynamic processes and the deconstruction of normalizing and homogenizing categories'. Power relations have been central to this analytical approach, providing a heuristic lens in the theorisation of social inequalities (Anthias, 2005).

Feminists, antiracists, and anti-Eurocentrism scholars adopt an intersectionality perspective to theorize two exigent factors of life – identity and oppression. Intersectionality's attention to the 'gender–race–class' trio in examining the axes of domination affecting the lives of black women has proved imperative to understand the complexity of this marginalized group's situation. Since the advent of intersectionality in women and gender studies, its use as an analytical tool has multiplied. By applying an intersectional approach to study marginalized women in the global South context, many feminist scholars have highlighted the complexity and dynamics of social categories through time and space (Bilge, 2013; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006). These existing studies suggest the possibility of expanding the focus of intersectionality beyond the 'gender–race–class' trio, which is prominent in the United States, to multilevel contexts of social differences in global settings. As Shields (2008: 303) points out, intersectionality illuminates 'race–class–gender, but also age, ableness, sexual orientation, to name the most salient'.

This is echoed in migration studies. Scholars in this field have revealed the multiple interacting categories of difference beyond the 'gender–race–class' trio. For instance, in their study of Southeast Asian migrants and their families, Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki (2017) show how generation intersects with gender and social class, and they highlight the importance of generation in the transnational migration scholarship.

A study on Thai migrant women in Hong Kong by Ng and Zhang (2022) also highlights the salience of generation, specifically how it intersects with gender, leading to different ways of navigating and crossing ethnic boundaries that transform migrants' self-defined ethnicity. Foreignness has been identified as another salient category of difference in the lives of migrant women. Rodriguez and Scurry (2019) observe how intersecting gender and foreignness shape the experiences of skilled migrant women in Qatar. They argue that the intersectional double-burden as a 'foreign woman' is used by the receiving state in the context of its patriarchal regulatory regime to locate women within fixed social categories, sustaining narratives of difference. In other studies, scholars have questioned and complexified the simplified classification of discrimination and privilege by examining the case of highly skilled migrant women. For example, Kynsilehto (2011) adopts an intersectionality perspective to understand the experiences of highly educated migrant Maghrebi women living in France, who can be considered privileged. All these studies confirm that intersectionality has become a crucial concept to expose how interacting categories, factors, or phenomena shape women's life experiences in their migration journey.

This inevitably brief review of the literature shows the empirical effectiveness of an intersectional approach in uncovering multiple interacting categories of difference that bring minority women into marginal situations – and, in a few cases, into privileged social positions. In this paper, we are therefore alert to multiple categories of difference intersecting in the lives of our study participants and in our lives as researchers, which become imbricated during the different stages of our respective studies. Adopting an intersectional stance, our intention in this paper is to better reflect the complexity of power relations in the context of knowledge (re)production through time.

Agentic intersectionality as a tool for reflexive work

Many feminist scholars from a range of disciplines saw the importance of consolidating intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as a methodology (Cho et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2013; Nash, 2008). Intersectionality has thus become a powerful analytical and methodological tool, which allows researchers to reflect on their different identities and positions in their ethnographic fieldwork (Adams, 2021).

Recently, increasing numbers of sociologists and anthropologists as well as queer scholars have adopted intersectionality in their reflexivity and positionality analyses (e.g., Anthias, 2008; Faria and Mollett, 2016; Jones, 2010; Rice et al., 2020). Carstensen-Egwuom (2014) argues that not only can intersectionality be employed to shed light on social relations of dominance, but it also allows personal experience to challenge and extend predetermined understandings of power, inequality, and difference. Using their fieldwork experience on the impact of body standards on queer women, Rice et al. (2020: 186–187) stress the effectiveness of an 'intersectionality-as-assemblage' approach in revealing that 'the dynamic processes of power that shape possibilities for identification and embodiments' are 'always processual'. Couture et al. (2012) call for the adoption of an intersectional approach to reflexive accounts of qualitative research, to take account of the role of the researcher's multiple identities in shaping and negotiating insider/outsider status and the influence of this on the collection of data. They explore the fluidity of their insider/outsider statuses resulting from their

multiple and intersecting identities such as ethnicity, religion, age, and sex. They argue that these multiple identities can lead to the researcher being perceived as both insider and outsider simultaneously, and they can play a significant role in shaping the interactions and power relations between researcher and participants. These studies into insider–outsider dynamics in research challenge scholars to go beyond such dichotomies through the use of an intersectional approach.

McCall (2005) suggests that the focus on power in the theory of intersectionality may be related to the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in the Foucauldian sense of power. McCall's three approaches to intersectionality – anticategorical, intercategorical, and intracategorical – enable researchers to understand multiple, intersecting, and complex power relations in any field of enquiry. Whereas the anticategorical approach rejects categories in the analysis, the intercategorical approach 'requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions' (McCall, 2005: 1771). The intracategorical approach, on the other hand, fits between the two aforementioned approaches, as 'authors working in this vein tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection'; it facilitates the analysis of individual-level subjectivities and experiences (McCall, 2005: 1771). Depending on the research questions and goals, categories examined using intercategorical and intracategorical approaches address the deconstruction of difference.

In the present paper, built on Barad's (2007) agentic realism and McCall's (2005) intercategorical and intracategorical approaches, we adopt 'agentic intersectionality' as a new typology that recognizes the movement of the self, the other, and the social in research processes. It allows us to identify the way researcher–participant relations evolve through time and the multiple identities that intersect at different stages of our reflexivity work. In Belgium and Hong Kong, we initially considered the 'gender–race–class' trio on which intersectionality mainly focuses, while at the same time being attuned to other categories of difference that may also influence researcher–participant relations. While being sensitive to intersecting categories, we align our reflexivity to Foucault's view of power as running 'through the whole social body' (Foucault, 1980: 119) and as circulating in all fields of life. This view suggests that everyone (researcher and participant alike) is part of power circulation and that at one moment or another, one becomes the oppressor or the oppressed. As Jones (2010: 124) remarks, 'reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression'. In our paper, we examine the circulation of power in which we as researchers and the study participants were caught during the research process. We examine how power is produced, sustained, and subverted in such situations by reflecting on our experiences of boundary making against the backdrop of within-group complexity (Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore, 2018). We also explore the different meanings, values, norms, and ideologies associated with specific categories while uncovering the differences and complexities of experience embodied at the intersection of multiple categories, which allows us to capture an individual's subjectivities and agency.

In short, we apply agentic intersectionality as both an analytical and a methodological tool to examine power dynamics in our respective studies of Thai migrant women in Belgium and Hong Kong. Our reflexivity work focuses on time-situated intersecting categories of difference such as gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and nationality. We

consider these categories as operating interactively as part of a dynamic process of knowledge (re)production.

Temporal contexts of intersecting categories in researcher–participant relations

Study-elaboration phase: the scientific is personal

Our choice of topic and target study group stemmed from our intersecting research backgrounds, personal situations, and interacting identities. This intersection occurred in the elaboration phase of our respective studies, during which we imagined how we could access our target study participants and immerse ourselves in their social worlds.

The preparation of the research project on Thai–Belgian families in Belgium took place when Fresnoza-Flot was engaged in a collaborative study centred on migrant children. This engagement led her to an in-depth immersion in the domain of studies on children and childhoods, which provided the ground from which to design her next research project on children in the context of migration. The literature on marriage migration from Southeast Asia to Europe pointed to parallels between Filipino and Thai women, which suggested the feasibility of a comparative study on the mixed families of Filipino and Thai migrants. When Fresnoza-Flot received very positive feedback about her proposed project on Filipino and Thai migrants' mixed families from one of her postdoctoral supervisors, this motivated her to pursue her postdoctoral fellowship application, which was ultimately successful.

Aside from this institutional interest in her project, Fresnoza-Flot's family background inspired her to study children of mixed couples in the context of migration. Being part of the 'third generation' (*sansei*) of the Japanese migration as the granddaughter of a Filipino–Japanese couple, she extended her scientific interest to contemporary cases of mixed families. She found herself sharing certain similarities with many Filipino and Thai women in Europe – as a 'migrant from Southeast Asia' and as 'a spouse of a European man'. Raising her children in her ethnically mixed family also drove her to pursue a project on the offspring of mixed couples, which she thought might not only bring useful insights to science and society but also help her to better situate her own family socially. We can observe here the simultaneous intersection of Fresnoza-Flot's multiple identities as a social scientist, a descendant of a mixed couple, a mother, a spouse, and a migrant. This intersection resulted in her interest in embarking on a project on children of mixed families in Belgium. The final push to propose the project for funding came from her sense that access to the target group might be easy given that her migrant, mother, and spouse identities were close to theirs. At this point, she positioned herself vis-à-vis her future study participants as someone on an equal social footing with them, without yet reflecting on the possible impact of her researcher's identity on this interaction. In short, before her research was conducted, Fresnoza-Flot did not perceive any important differences between herself and future study participants.

In the case of the research project in Hong Kong, Cheung was born and raised within a Thai–Chinese diaspora in the United States, Thailand, and Singapore, before finally

moving to Hong Kong. The people he met in different countries often told him that he embodied a 'global identity'. Along with his life experience as a transitional migrant, he was particularly interested in identity issues, which had become a difficult question for him. After receiving a scholarship for his postgraduate study, he moved to Hong Kong in 2015. As 'Asia's World City', Hong Kong provides him an ideal vantage point to study migration and identity issues. His specific interest in Thai migration to Hong Kong was sparked by a chance meeting with Miss Warunee, a 65-year-old retired Thai migrant woman at Wat Buddhadhamaram,[1] who told him that there was 'no position for her in the Hong Kong society'.

Warunee's view reflects the identity dilemma that she and many other Thai migrant women have to face. A migrant himself, Cheung shared similar feelings, which made him very interested in the situation of Thai migrant women in Hong Kong. He reviewed the relevant literature on this topic and found out that the few existing studies on Thai migrant women had mostly been conducted in Western countries. However, there was a dearth of research on this phenomenon in Hong Kong, apart from a few studies focusing on domestic workers from Southeast Asia. With Hong Kong recognized as a city where the East and the West meet and where significantly different social and cultural contexts intersect, he felt this was a very worthwhile topic to study, and that this research gap should be investigated.

The preparation of Cheung's research project took place when he was deciding on his MPhil thesis topic. Himself a migrant from Thailand, he believed that his life experiences in both Thailand and Hong Kong, and his language ability in Thai and Cantonese, equipped him well to start a research project on Thai women in Hong Kong. However, as a young male researcher studying a group of migrant women, Cheung has been keenly aware, throughout the whole process of his study, of the need to develop and maintain a sense of gender sensitivity.

In summary, our positionality with regards to study participants started during the elaboration phase when we were reflecting upon the feasibility of our projects, notably our access to the target groups. This initial positioning was predicated upon our personal situations and views originating from our social and scientific knowledge regarding the migration of our target participants. Several factors and identities intersected during the early phases of our respective projects, influencing our choices of research paths. We both adopted McCall's (2005: 1771) intercategorical approach by drawing from 'existing analytical categories' associated with Thai migrant women in Belgium and Hong Kong: as migrant spouses/mothers (the case of Fresnoza-Flot) and as part of the Thai–Chinese diaspora in the world (the case of Cheung). We particularly considered the similarities between our own identities and those of our potential participants when designing our studies. This brings to mind prominent scholars with similar identities to their informants, such as the Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki who, together with William Thomas, examined the case of Polish peasants in Europe and America (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918–1920), and the musician sociologist Howard Becker who studied jazz and dance (1963). The personal dimension of the researchers' lives clearly had a strong link to their research. Indeed, scholars need to consider their social position with regard not only to their participants but also to themselves, to fully understand how knowledge is produced in ethnographic research. Through an agentic intersectional approach, they can reflect on how their choices of research

topics and target groups are shaped by their multiple identities, personal biographies, and encounters in the field. Recognizing that power is central in an intersectional approach, scholars should be cognizant of the dynamics that occur during the entire research process (Collins, 2019; Rice et al., 2019).

Data-gathering phase: shifting power relations and positionality

Accessing the target population. The first stage of our data-gathering process was accessing our target study populations. During this stage, we came to understand how the researcher–participant relationship is embedded in and shaped by larger social relations of power at the intersection of different categories. Owing to this, researchers have no monopoly of power during fieldwork, as their relations with study participants change throughout the research process.

In Belgium, finding the entry point to the Thai migrant population was an important challenge to Fresnoza-Flot, who had no prior contacts with this group. To facilitate her fieldwork, she took basic Thai language class in a Thai association, and her Thai language teacher became the key facilitator of her fieldwork, providing contacts with social actors within the Thai migrant population. Owing to her low proficiency in Thai and Flemish, establishing contacts with possible study participants was initially not easy. Speaking English or French limited her chances of meeting possible informants of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. At the beginning of fieldwork, therefore, it was mostly English- or French-speaking Thais who talked to her. These women had reached a tertiary level of education, and a few of them were active in Thai migrants' associative milieu.

To increase the possibilities of meeting potential study participants, the researcher frequented Thai migrants' social spaces (temples, restaurants, shops, embassy) and participated in their activities (festivals, Songkran celebrations, etc.). She relied on referrals from Thai association leaders she interviewed. For instance, she collaborated with the Thai Women's Network in Europe, which gave her the opportunity to participate in its meeting in Sweden in 2013 and to take part as observer in two activities it organized in Thailand in 2014. She also decided to emphasize, during her interactions with Thai women, her identities as an Asian migrant woman, spouse of a European man, and mother of ethically mixed children (*luk-kreung*). By highlighting her intersecting identities that were similar to those of her target informants, she was able to meet Thai women of modest social class background. Her decision to present herself in this way stemmed from two factors. First, she observed that many Thai women often brought their young, ethnically mixed children with them to their social spaces, notably to Thai Buddhist temples. Second, her researcher identity was mainly attracting university-educated Thai migrants. This began to change when the Thai monks in two Thai temples she frequented presented her as a 'researcher' whenever Thai migrants in the temples inquired about her. Interestingly, Thai migrants in the temples began to trust her thanks to the encouragement of the monks, who told them to help her in her research. As the key facilitator of her fieldwork told her, 'when the monks talk, Thais listen and follow'. In this case, her difference from her study participants (being a researcher) became productive in research, and this difference intersected with her acquired identity as someone who gained the support of a monk. This experience resonates with Foucault's

conception of power as nonnegative but 'a productive network' inducing 'forms of knowledge' (1980: 119).

In Hong Kong, Cheung encountered some surprises during the first stage of fieldwork. After obtaining the initial approval of his supervisors, he started to establish connections and relations with the Thai community. With support from the Royal Thai consulate in Hong Kong, he had opportunities to meet many of the well-established elite Thai migrants in Hong Kong. With their invitation, the leaders from the Thai migrants' community were willing to help him recruit research participants and to act as gatekeepers in his research. When meeting the stakeholders of his research, he had the impression that his identities as a student researcher introduced by the Consul General, and as a young male migrant who had rich international experiences, intersected with his status of being a Thai–Chinese descendant from a well-established middle-upper class family. This intersection gave him the advantage of being able to play around with his multiple identities, facilitating his access to the Thai migrant community of which he was also a part. However, before he began fieldwork, two of his supervisors had raised their concerns around his position as a male researcher aiming to study a group of migrant women. His chief supervisor, a British-trained female professor, had discussed the power dynamics that are conflated between female researchers and male participants, and vice versa; she also told him of some sexual harassment and racism cases in other researchers' fieldwork, to remind him of the potential bias and risks he may encounter. His cosupervisor, a Hong Kong locally trained male professor, had more practical concerns: 'how do you introduce yourself to participants' husband and family in law?'; 'this is Hong Kong, people care about their privacy, it is impossible to conduct your participant observations and interviews at their tiny home'; 'how could a man become a feminist? This is controversial, and your research will be challenged by many of the female scholars later'. Unlike the preparation phase, where everything seemed to be going well and fitting his preconceptions, the concerns and advice from his supervisors made him realize that his intersected multiple identities could be a double-edged sword: they could place him in a privileged position to conduct the research, but could also bring numerous unexpected criticisms and dilemmas. Following the Foucauldian argument that the power/knowledge relationship in which researchers engage is intrinsically neither good nor bad, but has the potential to be dangerous (Foucault, 2008), Cheung was hopeful of being able to tread the fine line between the two during his observations and interviews with Thai migrant women.

Our experiences of accessing Thai migrant women made us realize our dependence on the support and referrals of key actors within the Thai migrant populations in Belgium and Hong Kong to facilitate our research, which highlights the relational dimension of knowledge production. We also realized that researcher–participant relations are embedded within and influenced by meso- or macro-level social structures (religious and political institutions, migrant associations), and specifically by the main actors within them acting as gatekeepers. For both of us, our researcher identity was not enough to gain the trust of Thai migrant women, requiring us to accentuate those parts of our intersecting identities that resemble those of our potential participants. McCall's (2005) intracategorical approach allowed us to pay attention to our taken-for-granted identities that go beyond the 'gender–race–class' trio in intersectionality perspective. As Locke argues, intersectionality can be performed, and this performance is an ongoing process to

engage in the 'intersecting and reflexive relationship' (2015: 179) between the researcher and the researched. The intersection of our different identities produced a desired result, that is, gaining the trust of Thai migrant women. Our positionality during the early stage of our fieldwork indicates our agency and capacity to construct different kinds of relationships in the field – researcher–gatekeepers, gatekeepers–participants, researcher–participants – using intersectionality as a frame in fieldwork (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Conducting observations and interviews. After accessing the Thai migrant populations and gaining the trust of Thai women, we continued our ethnographic observations in Thai temples, pursued our collaborations with Thai migrant networks, and carried out numerous interviews. During this data-collection stage, we observed that the power shifted from gatekeepers to study participants and that the latter also positioned themselves in relation to one another.

The main observation sites in Belgium were two Thai Buddhist temples: Wat Dhammapateep in the Flemish-speaking community of Belgium and Wat Thai Dhammaram in the French-speaking part of the country. Usually mistaken as a Thai woman due to her phenotypical appearance as 'typically Thai', Fresnoza-Flot's first visits to these temples went smoothly. Her physical appearance intersected with her gender to make it easy to access Thai migrants' frequented social spaces such as Buddhist temples. As Rice (2009: 262) remarks, '[a]ppearance has joined sex, disability and race as a powerful visual symbol of distinguished or devalued difference that variously shapes and constrains women's sense of identity and possibility as they make their way in our "body-centric" world'. With the welcoming support of Thai monks, Fresnoza-Flot felt progressively more comfortable in the temples during her fieldwork visits every weekend. She was invited to sit among Thai migrant women and eat with them while chatting and sharing Thai specialties, notably from Northeastern Thailand (Isan). Some of these women told her that she 'looked' Thai and that Filipinos and Thais resemble one another physically. A few of them mentioned the fact that Philippines and Thailand are Association of Southeast Asian Nations members. Their emphasis of these matters suggest that they were welcoming Fresnoza-Flot as part of the 'Us' and not the 'Others', such as a few Belgian men who were sitting in the corner of one temple separately from their Thai wives. For her part, Fresnoza-Flot emphasized her identities as migrant woman, spouse, and mother, which put at ease the Thai women who heard from the monk that she was a researcher – a privileged social position. This resonates with Schnapper's point regarding 'the interview relationship' that, for the researcher, is 'a question […] of not pretending to cancel the social distance, which is utopian, but of going beyond it to sympathize with the one he listens to'[2] (Schnapper, 1999: 65).

It took time before Fresnoza-Flot was able to interview some Thai women, often with their Belgian husbands and children present. During the moment of waiting, it was her potential participants who had control of the situation: to accept being interviewed, or not; to decide where and when to be interviewed; to allow their husbands and children to be interviewed, or not; and to determine how much detail to include in the stories they narrated to her. A few of the interviews she conducted took place in the temples with the encouragement of the monks. For example, in one temple, the monk provided

a room where Fresnoza-Flot and the study participants could speak alone and away from other Thai migrants visiting the temple. Other Thai women preferred to invite Fresnoza-Flot to their homes or to a restaurant to conduct her interview. She had the impression that the women entrusted their stories to her due to her intersecting and in-between 'insider' and 'outsider' identities: migrant woman–spouse–mother, Filipino nonmember of the Thai migrant population, and researcher. Interestingly, many of the interviewed women differentiated themselves from other Thai women by underlining that they met their husbands 'not in a bar' or in the sex work industry. It was a way for them to present themselves as respectable women in the eyes of the researcher. Fresnoza-Flot's interviews with them were not unidirectional as they also asked her about her ethnically mixed family in Belgium and sometimes about her migration experience.

In Hong Kong, Cheung conducted his fieldwork during weekends at Wat Buddhadhamaram monastery and at the Thai Regional Alliance in Hong Kong. The latter was established in 2001 to help Thai people in Hong Kong to gain rights, to educate them, and to provide essential skills training. The only young man in his field site, and introduced by a respected monk, the researcher recognized that he held certain privileges. He also had both insider and outsider identities. As an insider, he felt familiar with his participants' language, dress, behaviour, and devotion to the Buddha. Nonetheless, he felt an outsider or even stranger when he started to talk with them due to differences of gender, age, and social class between him and them. As Cheung had written in his fieldnotes, 'they are trying to be nice and friendly to me, because they are curious who am I and what I want to do, I feel it is strange and subtle, it will take me a long time to gain their trust and hear their stories'.

As a young male researcher, a number of issues related to the cross-cutting aspects of gender, generation, and ethnicity emerged during the data collection, and thus shaped the power relations between him and his study participants. Cheung anticipated that his gender would position him in a disadvantaged situation and affect how well he would be able to conduct his research with a group of marginalized migrant women. He had to deal with sensitive issues related to gender, which he might lack the competence to manage and negotiate. For example, many of his participants were initially accompanied by other participants or their husbands and preferred to conduct their interviews in open places such as cafés, restaurants, or public parks. His gender identity also shaped what kind of questions he would ask and how far he would probe in some sexually related topics. As a single young man with limited experience of romantic relationships, it was difficult for him to understand intimacy issues and family relations related to participants' husbands and parents-in-law. The Thai migrant women told him many times, 'you are a young man, you don't have a wife, so you won't know'. He understood that the lack of a 'common gendered experience' might disadvantage him in the interviews with a group of migrant women. At the same time, he felt that this could provide a useful excuse for the participants to avoid his questions, especially when insufficient trust had been built, and when some participants had concerns about their privacy and their reputation within their own community.

On the other hand, the intersections that led to Cheung being viewed as a younger brother (*nong chai*) with both Thai and Chinese backgrounds were central for him to build relationships with his study participants and facilitate his research. As an ethnic Thai–Chinese who speaks Thai, he can easily understand the life experiences of the

Thai migrant women within the Thai sociocultural context. He is also willing to share his experience of growing up as a 'good son' of a Chinese family, and to offer some advice on how to educate children well in a Hong Kong family. In short, although in some ways his differences (being a young male researcher) facilitated the building of good relationships with study participants, there were still many issues that arose during the research, which led Cheung to negotiate his different identities and navigate proximity and distance from his study participants within research relationships.

Reflecting on our data-gathering experiences through the lens of McCall's (2005) intercategorical and intracategorical approaches, we observe that the imbrication of our different identities – researcher status, gender, age, social class, civil status, nationality, ethnicity, family role, and assumptions based on physical appearance – affected the power dynamics between the participants and us, the researchers, during fieldwork. The combination and intersection of two or more of these identities can bring either privilege or disadvantage. If all the social values in the equation are 'wrong', researchers will find themselves in a disadvantaged situation (Loizos, 1992). Researchers do not occupy a fixed and clearly defined position in their relation to the study participants.

Data analysis and writing phase: regaining the privileged ground?

During fieldwork, the different social identities of the researcher and study participants can shape in various ways the power dynamics between them (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). This situation may persist even after data collection, which is what transpired in our separate studies: our intersected identities continued to shape the power dynamics between us and our study participants. These dynamics overlap with another form of power relations, that between the researcher and the larger scientific institution, which underlines the importance of researchers' continued positionality during data analysis as well as during the writing of research findings.

Our research backgrounds and training as well as language skills intersected with one another as we drew on them to carry out the thematic analysis of our empirical data. From afar, this stage appears a privileged moment for the researchers, who have the power to write and present the narratives of the study participants. However, this power is limited by considerations such as ethical guidelines and data protection regulations: for Fresnoza-Flot in Europe, there is the General Data Protection Regulation of 25 May 2018 that superseded the Directive 95/46/CE, whereas in Hong Kong, the University's Human Research Ethics Committee provides ethical guidance to researchers including Cheung. Aware of these guidelines, we made sure that our participants' identities were protected by pseudonymizing them and/or by slightly modifying certain demographic characteristics, such as their job or nationality. The data collected were stored in encrypted and password-protected computers that only the researchers could access. In writing the results of our analysis in the form of an article, book chapter, or presentation, we strive to highlight the voices of study participants to counter the negative stereotypes about them in their receiving countries, while at the same time ensuring that their privacy is respected. Russell and Barley (2020) argue that the ethnographer requires autonomy while managing ethics soundly in situ; our multiple identities intersected during this process, influencing the way we critically analysed our empirical data.

Fresnoza-Flot, who has the same gender identity, adult status, and mixed family as her study participants, found it easy to understand the latter's migration and family narratives. Her identities as a woman migrant and as a researcher intersected during her analysis, which made her very careful not to reproduce in her writing, existing stereotypes about Thai migrant women as 'passive' and 'poorly educated'. She ensured that she challenged social preconceptions about her study participants by highlighting their agency and by critically selecting nonessentializing terms and concepts. Nonetheless, having a different national origin from the study participants and limited Thai language proficiency, Fresnoza-Flot needed to ask a Thai language teacher to translate the Thai words from her recorded interviews, or to ask the participants themselves during informal conversations. Cheung, on the other hand, is an ethnic Chinese with a Thai background who speaks Thai; he could easily understand the life experiences of his study participants. However, being a male researcher considerably younger than his informants, he initially had difficulties in comprehending their in-between femininities and the meanings of their different life events. He resorted to two strategies: discussing with more senior and experienced people (parents, older friends, and supervisors), the issues he did not understand in his interviews; and double-checking the accuracy of some information with the participants and their in-laws in Hong Kong. The latter strategy gave the participants a chance to modify or manipulate their interview answers at a later stage. On many occasions, Cheung found the participants' later answers different from or sometimes contradictory to those they had given during the interview, which suggests the participants' shifting positionality vis-à-vis the researcher.

The power dynamics continued even after the end of fieldwork. Using McCall's (2005) intracategorical approach, we understood the 'invisible point of intersection' between our researcher status and membership of a particular research institution during the final stage of the research process. The centrality of ethical considerations during this stage points to the importance of researchers' self-discipline to ensure the protection of the participants' anonymity and privacy.

Discussion and conclusion

Inspired from Barad's (2007) agentic realism and using McCall's (2005) intercategorical and intracategorical approaches, we adopted in our reflexivity work a new approach we call 'agentic intersectionality'. This addition to McCall's approaches allows us to identify the evolving relations between researchers and study participants, the identities and positionalities of both parties, and the ways that each identity/difference shifts and changes over time, as well as across social encounters during each phase of the research process. Our key observations can be summarized in three points.

First, the identities that intersected were different in each phase of our studies, suggesting that our positionality and that of our study participants, as well as the power dynamics between us, constantly shifted from one temporal context to another. Whereas our migration background was salient during the study elaboration phase and during the early part of our fieldwork, it was our gender and researcher status that seemed to interact more strongly with those of our participants when we accessed our field sites and when we conducted data analysis/writing. Our field experiences differed, with one researcher mainly activating her identity as a spouse/mother in a mixed family, whereas the other researcher

emphasized his Thai–Chinese ethnic and social class origins. These positions that we took up in relation to study participants contributed to our knowledge making in the way that we earned the trust of the participants, which allowed them to share with us their migration and family stories. By drawing from our multiple identities, we were able to navigate the challenges in the field. Nonetheless, there are categories of difference that posed difficulties to us during the research process: her researcher status and different national belonging for Fresnoza-Flot, and his age and gender for Cheung. The identities that were not shared with our study participants most often hampered our full access to and understanding of their emotional universe, which points to our limited position of power as researchers.

Second, we confirm what other scholars have previously observed (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; Råheim et al., 2016): researchers have no monopoly of knowledge and power during the research process. We are dependent on the assistance of gatekeepers and the trust of our study participants. We must constantly engage in reflexivity work and discipline ourselves, particularly during data analysis/writing, following the ethical guidelines of the larger scientific institutions in which our studies are inscribed. This observation echoes Foucault's description of power in human relations as something 'exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations' (1990: 94). Our study participants occupied a position of power during our fieldwork as they decided whether or not to entrust their stories to us, and whether to narrate to us the full version of their experiences or only some parts of them. Aware of our researcher status, these participants continuously (re)positioned themselves in relation to us, even after our interviews with them.

Third, the changing relational dynamics between researchers and study participants are embedded in broader relations of power. Social institutions (religious, political, or scientific) and networks (migrant or ethnic) influence the success of our studies. Research is therefore a social field in which several social actors and institutions play a role in knowledge (re)production. The intricate relations among these actors, institutions, researchers, and study participants await further examination to reveal the different dimensions of scientific endeavours and the underlying inequalities they address and/or (re)create.

The above key findings demonstrate the effectiveness of an agentic intersectional approach in reflexivity work to understand the temporal positionalities and multiple identities of researchers and participants during an ethnographic journey. They highlight the importance of considering the temporal dimension of the research process in reflexivity work from a comparative perspective, which is often overlooked as researchers focus on the spatiality and sociality of their field experiences from an individual vantage point.

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ORCID iD


Herbary Cheung https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7842-5752

Notes

1. This is the oldest Thai Buddhist monastery in Hong Kong. It was built in 2006 in Yuen Long district on land purchased by a former Miss Thailand, who married a rich local Hong Kong man and established her family in Hong Kong.
2. This is the translation from the original French: 'la relation d'interview […] Il s'agit […] ne pas de prétendre annuler la distance sociale, ce qui est utopique, mais de la dépasser pour sympathiser avec celui qu'il écoute'.

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Author biographies

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot is a tenured research associate of the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) in Belgium and senior lecturer (*maîtresse d'enseignement*) at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC) of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Her recent publications include two edited Special Issues: 'Asia–Europe intimate links: family migration, binational couples, and mixed-parentage children' (with Simeng Wang, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 2021) and 'Mobilités dans le Sud globalisé : altérité, racialisation et fabrique des identités' [Mobilities in the globalized South: othering, racialisation and identity-making] (with Julien Debonneville and Gwénola Ricordeau, *Civilisations* 2019). Her ongoing research focuses on the contextual mobility of Belgian–Asian couples within their cross-border social spaces.

Herbary Cheung is a Research Assistant Professor at the Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and a Research Associate at Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Contemporaine, France. He is the awardee of the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme and Ernst Mach Grant-worldwide. Trained as a feminist sociologist and Southeast Asianist, his research engages with gender and migration, family, marriage and health, intersectionality, and contextual mobility, focusing on Hong Kong–Southeast Asia connections. He has published in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *Journal of Family Studies*, *South East Asia Research*, and *Journal of Sociology*, among others. His monograph, *Engendering Migration Journey: Identity, Ethnicity and Gender of Thai Migrant Women in Hong Kong* is published under the Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship series of Palgrave Macmillan in 2023.