Sight Beyond Site

From Knowing Your Place to Placing Your Knowing

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Abstract *This essay considers the relationship between imagination and lived experience, comparing the role that each has played in feminist politics. To do so, it returns to late twentieth- century standpoint theory and ideas about situated knowledge. The imagination is undeniably situated; what we tend to imagine is shaped by our own experiences and social positioning. And yet, the imagination can also operate as a tool of reason and as a means of better understanding that which we cannot experience. At the heart of my argument lies the suggestion that alienation—as a capacity for abstract reasoning—is facilitative of attempts to think the totality, allowing us to broaden our perspectives to identify common patterns and weave together different points of view. While empirical modes of knowing (i.e., those grounded in sensory immediacy) offer vital resources for understanding oppression, non-empirical modes of knowing (i.e., those dependent on an ability to get beyond immediacy) provide insights that are just as valuable. Lived experience can only take us so far. To claim as much is not simply a matter of the theoretical niceties of standpoint, epistemology but crucial for the practice of coalitional politics. After all, if our political commitments were wholly limited to or determined by direct experience, solidarity would be practically impossible.*

Keywords *Solidarity; Alienation; Situated Knowledge; Feminist Standpoint Epistemology; Multiple Consciousness*

Imagination and Experience: Who Knows Best?

In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Donna Haraway stresses the influence of one's social position upon one's comprehension of the world. She argues that feminist

approaches to knowledge must tread a path between relativism on one side and "totalization and single vision" on the other, and orient themselves via the webbing together of "partial, locatable, critical knowledges" (584). Her argument suggests that our perspective depends on our position; *sight* (our vision and capacity to envision) is tied to *site* (our location and social emplacement). Haraway's essay is a particularly influential contribution to standpoint epistemology—a theoretical tradition committed to accounting for "the social positioning of the social agent" (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 315). These approaches have gained significant traction within feminism and have been taken up by thinkers across various disciplines, but it seems to me that the role of *imagination* in situatedness (or of situatedness in imagination) is comparatively under-theorized. While, as Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis note, "we sometimes find the terminology of 'imagination,' 'imaginings' and 'the imaginary' being thrown in casually," these ideas typically go uninterrogated (316).

Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis set out to address this "conceptual lacuna and to present 'situated imagination' as a crucial component of feminist standpoint theory" (316). For them, "fantasy as much as memory carries traces of the social situatedness" of thought (324), and "our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning of our gaze" (327). At the same time, "it is our imagination that gives our experiences their particular meanings, their categories of reference. Whether it is 'borders,' 'home,' 'oppression' or 'liberation,' the particular meanings we hold of these concepts are embedded in our situated imaginations" (327). There is much to agree with in such an account of the process of knowing and imagining—"that it begins from a given situation, that it must begin from some location, from some body or entity" (Reed, "Freedom and Fiction"). But feminist standpoint epistemology has *not* gone unchallenged, and has been subject to debates and controversies. These affect not only its philosophical validity but (crucially) its feminist utility as well.

Building on the notion of the situated imagination, this essay considers how imagination functions in relation to situated knowledge, and stresses that it is not just *factual knowledge* (for want of a better term) that is situated—that is, the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information—but other forms of knowing as well. How can we understand the relationship between lived experience, abstract reasoning, and the situated imagination, and what are the implications of this for standpoint theory? Who can most readily practice sight *beyond* site (as an exercise in the rational imagination) and how does this in-

form feminist activist praxis and concrete attempts at solidarity building? And, when it comes to imagining better worlds, *who knows best*?

There are two broad responses to this question of *who knows best*. The first is that nobody necessarily knows best; no particular situation automatically ensures forms of understanding superior to any other. Hence, for Haraway, "there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated" (586). These standpoints are "not 'innocent' positions", and should not be fetishized, romanticized, or exempted from scrutiny (584). On the contrary, they are "preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge" (584). In short, the standpoints of the subjugated are better placed to resist the "god-trick" of unlocatable knowledge claims (581). Foregrounding such standpoints remains crucial, not because they are in themselves less partial, but because they problematize the hegemony of seemingly unmarked positions and act as a corrective to the overrepresentation of such positions within what counts as knowledge. We find similar ideas expressed in the solo work of Yuval-Davis. By her account, standpoint feminism "recognises that from each positioning the world is seen differently, and thus that any knowledge based on just one positioning is 'unfinished'—which is not the same thing as saying it is 'invalid.' In this epistemology, the only way to approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings" ("What is transversal politics?" 94–5).

Rather than claim that "a specific social situatedness (which in itself has been constructed in several different ways) endows the subject with a privileged access to truth," these accounts understand "the process of approximating the truth as part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differentially situated" (Yuval-Davis, "Dialogical epistemology" 47). If many different forms of situated knowledge can generate plausible accounts of the world, then we are likely to know the world better if we (like Haraway) attempt to weave perspectives together. As several critics have noted, however, this approach does not necessarily address the power dynamics at stake in knowledge and knowing. Millicent Churcher argues that "members of dominant social groups persistently fail to treat members of marginalized social communities … as 'trusted informants,'" and may not view them "as having valuable knowledge bases from which they might learn and benefit." As such, the perspectives of the marginalized tend to be neglected in the weaving together of knowledges.

Not making an active effort to center certain standpoints can result in such standpoints being routinely overlooked. Hence, the second response to this

issue asserts that some of us *do indeed* know better than others and that some perspectives should be differentially weighted in our assessment of the social world. Frederic Jameson describes the central tenets of standpoint theory thusly:

> [O]wing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups. (65)

Nancy Hartsock, meanwhile, argues that "the experience of domination may provide the possibility of important new understandings of social life" (240); that is to say, the lived experience of having power exercised over one's existence by other people or by institutions can provide important insights into how societies are currently organized. For some feminist epistemologists, then, certain standpoints enjoy a particularly clear view of the world as it stands, and, as a result, we should seek to privilege these positions if we are looking to pursue emancipatory aims.

The implications of this for movement building are profound, as Churcher makes clear. She claims that "an oppressed subject will typically have an epistemic advantage when it comes to knowledge of their own oppression and the oppression suffered by the group to which they belong." This leads her to favor what she calls "epistemic apprenticeship," a reparative approach based on "seeking out and engaging with unjustly marginalized epistemes." Such apprenticeship would involve more than simply giving "marginalized epistemic actors a 'seat at the table,' and endowing them with equal epistemic authority vis a vis their socially privileged counterparts," rather, it would be "geared towards positioning marginalized actors as epistemic authorities, and endowing them with the power to set the terms of engagement within institutional settings." While Churcher acknowledges that marginalized viewpoints are not automatically more correct than others, she nevertheless stresses the necessity of such approaches to ensure that those closest to the hegemonic center forfeit any outsized institutional influence.

The underlying political commitments of this approach are certainly admirable—but, as Olúfémi O. Táíwò suggests, such a perspective may bring drawbacks of its own. The expectation of *epistemic deference*—that is, the idea

that the mic should always and only be passed to those who are most marginalized or most affected by whatever issue is under discussion—can, while being based on sensible theoretical foundations, end up providing "social cover for the abdication of responsibility" ("Being-in-the-room privilege"). These norms shift "the accountability that is all of ours to bear onto select people," Táíwò argues, "and, more often than not, a hyper-sanitized and thoroughly fictional caricature of them" ("Being-in-the-room privilege"). Thus, the "very strength of standpoint epistemology—its recognition of the importance of perspective—becomes its weakness when combined with deferential practical norms," which focus us "on the interaction of the rooms we occupy, rather than calling us to account for the interactions we don't experience" ("Being-in-the-room privilege"). This framework results in certain social actors lacking the requisite authority to intervene in the political world beyond their lived experience.

There is thus a risk that static understandings of situatedness can be used to "not only reinforce existing frames of reference, but participate in the perception of their immutability" (Reed, "Freedom and Fiction"). Rather than enabling a politics that goes beyond immediate self-interest, discourses that read *emplaced* knowledge as *entrenched* knowledge allow people to sidestep issues that do not directly concern them. Critics have long been aware of these potentially problematic implications. Patricia Reed, for example, wonders if "boundedness to a 'site'" might not end up "reinforcing habits or customs of seeing. Patterns of seeing that today tend to obscure nested, planetary relationality" ("What Is Care at Planetary Dimensions?"). She stresses the need to foreground the mobility of knowledge if "situatedness is not to fall into the static trap of equating immediate, given experience with knowledge; of monumentalizing the site as permanent" ("What Is Care at Planetary Dimensions?"). Sylvia Walby, meanwhile, argues that, following Haraway, "[d]ifferences of social location have been taken to mean that we can aspire merely to … a series of incommensurable knowledges, of forms of knowledge fundamentally separated from each other" (189). When the differences of perspective implied by the idea of situated knowledges are seen as static and entrenched in this way, they can be positioned as generating obstacles to solidarity.

Jodi Dean makes this point while engaging with Haraway's legacy, she declaring herself "convinced that a major barrier to women's working together has been our inability to conceive of connecting with each other through and across our differences" (5). With differences thus understood as barriers, feminists have "understood relationships as premised on agreement. This has kept

us from working together when consensus is not possible" (5). Within such conceptions, one's location is taken to be fixed; one can neither see nor imagine otherwise. This inability to shift positions means that one cannot work for and from other perspectives. Despite claims about the webbing and connectedness of knowledges, then, theories of situated knowledge are sometimes read as arguing for the *impossibility* of truly appreciating the other's point of view. It is lived experience—as a directly empirical form of knowing—that supposedly enables us to know better, and we cannot hope to fully understand that which sits beyond it.

The idea that Haraway's version of situated knowledge wants to enshrine unmediated knowing or to "give up on routine knowledge development through theory and data" is a misreading (Walby 193). Howsoever her ideas have been interpreted and used, Haraway remains at heart a scientist. She writes on behalf of those who would "still like to talk about *reality*" and is scathing about postmodern feminism's willingness to reject the notion of truth (577, emphasis in original). She notes wryly that "[w]e unmasked the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened … our 'embodied' accounts of the truth, and we ended up with one more excuse for not learning any post-Newtonian physics and one more reason to drop the old feminist self-help practices of repairing our own cars" (578). Despite some elements of her reputation, then, Haraway is committed to a knowable reality beyond lived experience; situated knowledge is a route towards, rather than away from, this destination. If anything, it is a misunderstanding of situated knowledge as entrenched knowledge which generates the kinds of deleterious political effects sometimes attributed to it.

While *who knows best?* remains an open question—and one to which we shall return towards the end of this essay—I am of the view that the undeniable situatedness of knowledge does not determine in advance our possibilities for understanding. While all thought does indeed originate from somewhere, it is not necessarily confined to the parochial. As Reed notes, "Humans are historical creatures—temporal beings not only invested in our immediate, present situations, but infused by the past and able to imagine and care about the future—that is, creatures with the capacity to cognize the condition of worlds that do not yet concretely exist, and that we have never experienced" ("The valuation of necessity" 134). These debates are another way in which to approach the issue of the situated imagination; not just in the sense that they foreground the connection between our embodied social emplacement and the ways in which we both know and imagine, but in the sense that they speak to the role of imag-

ination in *non-empirical* knowledge. While situated knowledge stresses the importance of lived experience in terms of what and how we know, we must not foreground it at the expense of recognizing *alienated* forms of knowing.

Thinking Together: Alienation and Solidarity

As Reed puts it, "[d]espite the term having been locked down in a negative register, signaling social anomie or dehumanization and positioned as something to be overcome, on a perspectival front, alienation is a necessary force of estrangement from *what is*" ("Xenophily", emphasis in original). Alienation is thus positioned as a *capacity*. It is understood not simply as epistemic severance from one's role or contribution to the wider social totality (as in Marxist conceptions of alienation), but rather as the *inverse* of this: the ability to understand complex or otherwise slippery phenomena that cannot be grasped in their immediacy. After all, the "totality is not given to you in experience" (Fisher 118). While we are subject to its influence and feel its effects, it is nevertheless a realm of abstraction, and inconceivable via empirical means of knowing alone. In the words of Mark Fisher, one cannot grasp "any bit of a system without understanding the whole system, and the whole system is not a thing—it's a set of relations. This is why immediacy is such a problem. Immediacy is inherently ideological, and ideologically mystifying. Because the totality is not given in immediacy" (117).

Perhaps the clearest way to think about this form of productive alienation is in terms of the difference between our sentience and our sapience. Sentience, as Robert Brandom puts it, is "the capacity to be *aware* in the sense of being *awake*"; sapience, on the other hand, "concerns *understanding* or intelligence rather than irritability or arousal" (157, emphasis in original). Brandom characterizes the sapient being as one that can responsively classify stimuli as falling under concepts; for example, the ability to understand 'red' as an idea, and not just the ability to sort red things from non-red things. In his words, "[m]erely reliably responding differentially to red things is not yet being *aware* of them *as* red. Discrimination by producing repeatable responses (as a machine or a pigeon might do) sorts the eliciting stimuli, and in that sense classifies them. But it is not yet *conceptual* classification" (17, emphasis in original). It is sapience, then, which allows us to use concepts as tools and as a means to understand and act upon the world, whereas sentience is simply the awareness of being *in* a world. For the artist and philosopher Diann Bauer, as soon as our species

could reason beyond its biological needs, it was *alienated*. In this sense, the sapience/sentience spectrum ranges from immediate embodied experience—feeling the forces, conditions and chemistry of being in a body—to the ability to not only *experience* this condition but also to reflect upon it collectively and individually.

Reason grants us some (albeit limited) critical distance from the vicissitudes of instinct and affect, which in turn facilitates a capacity for self-reflection. With this in mind, we can see that (partial and contingent) alienation from raw sensory data constitutes a productive force. Again, it is not simply a burden or a loss of some prelapsarian cohesion, but the foundation for various *capabilities*, allowing our species to undertake and achieve distinctive things which would otherwise be impossible. It is also a rejoinder to any tendency to over-emphasize the knowledge gained through lived experience and direct sensory encounters. Such knowledge is vital and has, historically, been too often overlooked; but it is not necessarily superior to or disconnected from what we might understand as alienated forms of knowing. Collective endeavor depends in part upon our abilities to think, and to think about thinking, as a group. Without alienation, action "is reduced to meaning 'just do something,' collectivity can never be methodological or expressed in terms of a synthesis of different abilities to envision and achieve a common task, and making commitments through linking action and understanding is untenable" (Negarestani). It is thus unhelpful to frame less mediated forms of experience as the best or primary route to trustworthy knowledge, as this framing risks underplaying the contributions to understanding that can be arrived at through abstract reasoning.

To summarize: Feminist epistemology reinforces the message that knowledge is situated. For some, this idea of situatedness suggests an incapacity to understand other points of view, situated knowledge comes to be understood as *entrenched* knowledge, and norms of epistemic deference emerge. But knowledge is never truly entrenched given that we can know more than we directly experience, thanks to the operations of alienated reason. It *is* possible to achieve sight beyond site. For many of us, these points may seem straightforward or commonsensical, but there are nevertheless real political stakes involved. Remember, critiques of standpoint epistemology have argued that the idea of unavoidable emplacement risks becoming a barrier to coalitional feminisms, while the navigation of difference has long been seen as a stumbling block for inter-group solidarity. While the claim that we can know more than we experience is still widely accepted (even within the counter-intuitive

realm of feminist critical theory!), an assertion of the potential validity of our opinions on matters beyond our lived experiences remains rather more contentious. This is a matter not simply of knowing or reasoning, but of perceived authority and the politics of legitimacy.

The work of bell hooks addresses this theme while advancing a forceful case for the possibility and necessity of what refer to as sight beyond site. hooks denounces what she knowingly calls "[s]pecial-interest groups," who "lead women to believe that only socialist-feminists should be concerned about class; that only lesbian feminists should be concerned about the oppression of lesbian and gay men; that only black women or other women of color should be concerned about racism," and so on (*Feminist Theory* 64). Her view (much like Táíwò's) is that:

> [e]very woman can stand in political opposition to sexist, racist, heterosexist, and classist oppression…. Women must learn to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals. Feminist movement, like other radical movements in our society, suffers when individual concerns and priorities are the only reason for participation. When we show our concern for the collective, we strengthen our solidarity. (*Feminist Theory* 64)

It is worth pausing to consider what 'solidarity' means here. How does it relate to the idea of the standpoint or the webbing together of knowledges?

Solidarity is an important concept for our purposes, given that it involves the interplay of identity and difference, and distance, identity and proximity, and mutuality distinctiveness and interdependence. On the one hand, it presupposes a certain amount of common ground, given that coalitional politics must be based on (at least loosely) based on compatible values that "cut across differences in positionings and identity" (Yuval-Davis, "What is transversal politics?" 96). As Jeremy Gilbert notes, "[r]elations of solidarity are always expressions of shared interests"; such expressions can go beyond "defending an existing state of affairs (a wage level, a hospital, etc.). They can also mean the expression of a shared sense of possibility, a shared desire for a different possible world". It is necessary to retain core values and perspectives when building coalitions, that is, to retain identity even as one seeks to be maximally responsive, respectful, and receptive to difference. But, of course, common ground does not automatically equal solidarity. What may, in some

ways, appear to represent a shared situation does not always result in a shared point of view.

Akwugo Emejulu offers a concrete example of this in her account of the 2017 Women's March in London: "In seeking to organise an 'inclusive' demonstration that crossed party political lines, the organisers initially invited representatives from all the major parties", including those pushing anti-immigrant sentiment and advocating for harsh austerity policies (270). Furthermore, "when these critiques were levelled at the organisers, the defensive responses and the branding of critics as 'divisive' seemed to bring into sharp relief the limits of feminist solidarity" (270). As Emejulu puts it, a "global call for sisterhood is not enough—it assumes a unity and shared purpose amongst women that does not exist. Feminist solidarity between women cannot be presumed—it must be fought for and made real through individual and collective action" (272). Such comments bring home the fact that, firstly, solidarity cannot be read out from identity, but rather requires assembly based on beliefs, commitments, and worldviews; and secondly, that the universal, in the form of an insufficiently qualified call for unity, can operate as a barrier to the operations of solidarity.

Situation may not function as an effective shorthand for beliefs, but when it comes to political organizing, claiming to be unsituated—to offer a position inclusive of literally all perspectives—is unsustainable (not to mention undesirable). Other feminist thinkers have raised similar points about so-called sisterhood. hooks, for instance, is quick to note that shared gender does not necessarily equate to mean shared interests; rather, an emphasis on sisterhood can serve as "the emotional appeal masking the opportunism of manipulative bourgeois white women" and as a "cover-up hiding the fact that many women exploit and oppress other women" (*Feminist Theory* 44). Rather than abandoning sisterhood, however, she calls for its re-engineering. "In recent years Sisterhood as slogan, motto, rallying cry no longer evokes the spirit of power in unity," hooks argues (44). "Some feminists now seem to feel that unity between women is impossible given our differences. Abandoning the idea of Sisterhood as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes feminist movement. Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle" (44). What is required is collaboration without amalgamation, coalition without subsumption—the construction of a "we" provisional and capacious enough to hold all who need to be held.

In hooks' words, women need to "come together in situations where there will be ideological disagreement and work to change that interaction, so com-

munication occurs. This means that when women come together, rather than pretend union, we would acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness" (65). While hooks continues to believe in the possibility of women coming together, then, she is clear that this happens through, with, and across difference. It is not the case that, by virtue of a shared gender alone, difference is transcended or rendered irrelevant, or that a single element of shared "social identity location" immediately and unproblematically equates to unity (Ferguson 249). It is quite possible to have a certain degree of sameness without any accompanying solidarity. And just as sameness fails to automatically generate solidarity, so too must the *absence* of a shared identity be seen as something other than an impenetrable barrier.

Just as one can experience sameness without solidarity, so too can one have solidarity without sameness: "the collective subject cannot be premised by principles of likeness, by principles of familiarity. It demands, rather, a mode of solidarity without homophily, without sameness" (Reed, "Solidarity without Sameness"). Of course, the very idea of collaboration presupposes difference. Solidarity is *necessarily* directed toward the other to some extent; it would be rather jarring to claim to be in solidarity with oneself! The very idea of collaboration presupposes difference. Hence for Gilbert, "[r]elations of solidarity are never based on the assumption of a shared or unitary identity. They work across differences without trying to suppress them, and they make those differences productive". This involves going beyond the kinds of selfish parochialism that have masqueraded as solidarity in the past.

In the concrete—that is to say, at the level of lived practice on which solidarity functions—solidarity demands starting from connections between struggles, and establishing a form of collaborative politics oriented toward assembly. We're talking about, in Verónica Gago's words, something like:

> a feminism of the masses, rooted in concrete struggles of popular economy workers, migrants, cooperative workers, women defending their territories, precarious workers, new generations of sexual dissidences, housewives who refuse enclosure, those fighting for the right to abortion involved in a broad struggle for bodily autonomy, mobilized students, women denouncing agrotoxins, and sex workers.

In this sense, Gago argues, the contemporary feminist movement "constructs proximity between very different struggles"—even as those struggles might

share protagonists; (sex workers, migrants, students, those who support reproductive justice, and so on can of course be overlapping constituencies, and a single person could belong to any or all of these groups simultaneously). Some battles might be directly one's own, but others will represent a different front in the same shared and integrated struggle.

A relevant example from the UK can be found in the ongoing Palestine Solidarity Campaign, which works to bring people "from all walks of life together to campaign for Palestinian rights and freedom," and which has successfully mobilized several constituencies in mass protests against genocide. Marches in London regularly include a feminist bloc, a climate justice bloc, a health care workers bloc, a Jewish bloc, a Black liberation bloc, a trade union bloc, and so on. Here again, we find the interplay of distance and proximity, identity and difference, anchored in a common cause. Solidarity might be productively characterized as the principle of acting both with and for the other. As such, it depends on the ability to think within and beyond our own circumstances, experiences, and immediate position. Meaningful political coalition is tied to the necessity of reasoning from and beyond one's standpoint, to attempts to "see together without claiming to be another" (Haraway 586), and to the process and possibility of assembling a collective political subject; to what we might call *situated solidarities*, in other words. Conversely, situated solidarities—in which we think both from and beyond our specific social locations and bounded phenomenological conditions—are reliant upon alienation as the underpinning of non-empirical knowing.

It is important to note, in concluding this strand of our discussion, that solidarity should be understood as a starting point rather than an achievement in itself—a platform that "opens the way for informed affiliation on the basis of shared social desires and identifications, affiliations that have to be forged" (Lugones 79). And yet, this focus on grassroots activism and political praxis reminds us that seemingly rarified discussions of standpoint epistemologies have real political stakes. The idea of situated knowledge is at play in many of the norms and conventions shaping feminist politics, and as such we need to pay close attention to what our (often implicit) organizational logics assume we can know, and what they indicate we should be able to do with that knowledge. So, what is the role of the imagination here?

The Rational Imagination: Situation, Speculation, Solidarity

Alienated reason grants us a capacity to understand something of the world beyond direct lived experience, and this capacity is vital to the process of solidarity building—to recognizing the importance of struggles that are not immediately our own, and to understanding that causes or mobilizations which may, on the surface, appear disparate can in fact form part of the same integrated struggle. The language I have been using to articulate this idea leans heavily on philosophical terms associated with sapience—reason, rationality, and (more idiosyncratically) alienation. But equally important for our purposes is *the imagination*. Rationality is sometimes set against imagination; there remains a kind of crude binary shorthand in English, in which concepts such as mind, logic, universality and reason lie opposed to those of body, emotion, particularity, and imagination, with one set of coordinates enjoying perceived epistemic priority over the other. Such (highly gendered) distinctions do not hold. Reason demands to be seen as an imaginative faculty, while imagination is (by my account) implicated in all processes of non-empirical knowing. Imagination, minimally defined, is the capacity to envision (or the process of envisioning) that which is not and has never been fully or directly present to the senses—of representing, in the form of mental images or otherwise, that which we know not to be the case. It is a modelling faculty that involves an element of "mentally combining previous experience and knowledge" (Gabora 5) to envision things not fully encountered in actuality.

Imagination is thus characterized by the awareness of non-occurrence or non-presence. This is what distinguishes it from related processes of memory, perception, and hallucination, in which the requisite degree of self-consciousness or meta-reflection implied by the "what if" and the "as if" is missing. It is also what positions imagination alongside rationalism, in that it is set against a framework of the purely empirical. To hypothesize, to conceive of something of which we have no direct lived experience, depends upon the operations of the imagination. Ruth M. J. Byrne is among those who have made this point, gesturing to the practical connections between rationality and the imagination and noting that "to be able to reason well, people need to be able to imagine alternative possibilities" (347). In her analysis, "reasoning depends on cognitive processes that support the imagination of alternatives, and imagination depends on cognitive processes that are based on the same core processes" (339). Hence, we can agree with Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis when they claim that, while it may be analytically expedient to "distinguish between knowledge

and imagining, intellect and imagination, these terms do not refer to clearly separate faculties or 'spheres,' but merely to dialogical moments in a multi-dimensional mental process" (326). How, then, does imagination (as a faculty folded into situation-spanning reason) help us to understand—or better yet, to *build*—solidarity on a practical level?

There has been some interesting work on this, particularly by scholars researching cross-community campaigns for peace,—many of whom have also directly engaged with standpoint feminism. Yuval-Davis draws on the work of Italian activists in developing the concept of transversal politics (a concept she links to standpoint epistemology). The work of these activists involves engaging people in a form of dialogue organized around what they call "rooting" and "shifting." According to this framework, each participant in a political conversation "would bring with them the reflexive knowledge of their own positioning and identity. This is the 'rooting.' At the same time, they should also try to 'shift'—to put themselves in the situation of those with whom they are in dialogue and who are different" (Yuval-Davis 95). Transversal politics in general, and this notion of rooting and shifting in particular, seems to have struck a chord with the feminist left, particularly those with an interest in organizing at the grassroots level. For Cynthia Cockburn and Lynette Hunter, for example, transversality:

> answers to a need to conceptualise a democratic practice of a particular kind, a process [that] can on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other affirm difference without being transfixed by it. Transversal politics is the practice of creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicised differences. It means empathy without sameness, shifting without tearing up your roots. (88–89)

This process of "seriously trying to imagine what it takes to inhabit the situated perspective of [one's] interlocutors, but without pretending that different positionings can be collapsed and power differentials erased" is the activity of the situated imagination (Lykke 198). That is to say, it is a process of mobilizing alienated reason to decenter the self, while acknowledging that any such spatialized maneuver will inevitably start from a specific somewhere.

This is easier said than done, of course. In practice, it is not so easy to decenter the self, even in the case of good faith actors who are fully committed to solidarity building. 'Shifting' is not an infallible approach to navigating differ-

ence. As Liane Gabora notes, following Piaget, there are at least two approaches to dealing with unfamiliar ideas or concepts: assimilation and accommodation. "Assimilation involves fitting new information into one's existing web of understandings, whereas accommodation is the complementary process of restructuring one's existing web of understandings to make sense of the new information" (2). Attempts to think beyond one's own standpoint could feasibly involve either. Thus, even when we aim to genuinely expand our understanding and imagine the world differently, we may end up fitting others' perspectives into our existing frameworks—reshaping their views to align with our established models. While it is essential to believe that accommodation between perspectives is possible, and that situated knowledges are not inherently incompatible, assimilation remains a pervasive possibility. Imagination, rather than operating as an untamed cognitive wilderness of radical possibility, can also serve the function of habituation; one can imagine one's way out of epistemic trouble (such as when confronted by unsettling new ideas) by pulling new data into existing frameworks, and by forcibly recontextualizing novelty in terms of the familiar. Alienation does not automatically equate to pathways to reliable empathetic understanding, then. Our reasoning can serve our own interests, and the rational imagination can be a mechanism of self-deception.

As Keith Tilford puts it, "pseudorational behaviour represents a meta-constraint to preserve stabilized intelligibilities in the world via a systematic distortion of understanding that manipulates the self-model into benefiting from its own illusions of rationality" (150). Here, he is gesturing toward the idea that we might (advertently or inadvertently) disarm perceived threats to our self-understanding,—that we may to some extent bend the operations of reason toward assimilation rather than accommodation. Such (perhaps unconscious) maneuvers help us avoid the partial self-transcendence that alienation affords in favor of buttressing a parochial perspective. This could be seen as something of a retreat toward entrenched knowledge—a concession to the idea that, in the end, where we are *does* determine how and what we know (the beliefs and commitments that we cannot away, however much we want to). I come at this claim from a different angle, however. We can flip the difficulty of so-called shifting on its head to recognize that it is not only the *other* that remains non-transparent to our thinking, but the self as well. This is, after all, why the process of reflecting on one's rootedness is just as crucial to transversal dialogue as any process of accommodating otherwise overlooked perspectives. As Tilford's analysis suggests, we are not always or necessarily the most trustworthy

witnesses to our own experiences, or the people best placed to develop political strategies based on them.

Such a position has significant ramifications for understanding standpoint epistemology and the forms of activist praxis associated with it, such as feminist consciousness raising (or CR) practices. CR arrived at the Women's Liberation Movement via the grassroots organizing of the American civil rights movement, and communist organizing techniques from Cuba and China. It involved women meeting to engage in structured discussion about their own lived experiences, to tease out what commonality in such experiences might reveal about the abstract social totality. This is the famous perspective of 'the personal is political,' where our everyday encounters can illuminate something important about our world. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, CR was "the major technique of analysis, structure of organizations, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women's movement" (MacKinnon 519). What standpoint epistemology tells us at the level of theory, CR demonstrates at the level of practice—namely, that "material life structures consciousness" (Hartsock 110). Where we are and what we do shapes our understanding, and our social identity location gives us access to a particular view from somewhere—site governs sight.

The approach of drawing on life as the basis for understanding social systems may seem to position the self as a repository of inherently reliable knowledge—to privilege the kinds of immediate, embodied encounters and lived experiences so central to much feminist thinking. And yet, the very recognition of the *need* for CR stresses that it can sometimes be very difficult to assess one's own position from where one stands. Táíwò makes a similar claim about trauma: "Suffering is partial, shortsighted, and self-absorbed. We shouldn't have a politics that expects different. Oppression is not a prep school" (*Elite Capture* 120). Indeed, the fact that consciousness must be *raised* at all suggests that knowledge of our situation is submerged or blocked in some way. This is one problem with deferring to experience; we are only imperfectly capable of knowing ourselves *via* experience. One's worldview—one's "way of *seeing* the world and *being in* the world that emerges as a result of the structure of one's web of understandings, beliefs, and attitudes" (Gabora 1–2)—can never be assumed on the basis of social identity location alone. The idea of a consciousness matrix, in which situation begets worldview begets class consciousness and so on, must be problematized at every turn.

Alienation is crucial here, given that "epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life" and our situatedness permits "a medi-

ated rather than immediate understanding" (Hartsock 108). CR involves actively crafting a standpoint that would not be available without a certain degree of epistemic estrangement. As one call to reignite a grassroots CR tradition puts it,

> […] we do not believe that any of us—even the most intersectionally-oppressed, even the most well-read—can simply look inwards and draw out sufficiently correct and powerful theory […] Consciousness-raising does not involve holding up individual experience as the truth, but collectively connecting experience to the world and transforming it into action. Experience is the raw material—but collective discussion and thought is the tool which will transform it into something capable of raising our consciousness. (WEAREPLANC).

This is the weaving and webbing that Haraway emphasizes in her account of situated knowledge—the idea that better ways of knowing come from efforts to map and synthesize multiple viewpoints. But it is at this point that we return to the debates with which we began this essay; to the question of whether—within and beyond CR practices—all such viewpoints are equally valuable, or if they should be differentially weighted in some way. *Who knows best, and who's to judge*?

Situated Imagination and Multiple Consciousness: Who Imagines What?

While "the standpoint that is expected to emerge from a specific positioning" has often been assumed to produce "merely different insights," it has sometimes "been expected to provide a privileged access to liberating insight"—as suggested by practical norms of epistemic deference (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 318–319). As Sandra Harding puts it:

> although all knowledge claims are determinately situated, not all such social situations are equally good ones from which to be able to see how the social order works. Dominant groups have more interests than do those they dominate in not formulating and in excluding questions about how social relations and nature "really work."… In social relations organized by domination, exploitation, and oppression, the "conceptual practices of power" will construct institutions that make seem natural and normal those relations of domination, exploitation, and oppression. (385)

Churcher offers a similar argument, suggesting that "underprivileged persons will typically have a robust understanding of the knowledge systems of those in positions of privilege, whereas the same is not true of privileged actors vis a vis the knowledge bases of the underprivileged." By her account, understanding of "characteristic ways of knowing and being that have developed within particular social and cultural communities tends to be unequally shared and unevenly distributed across group lines." I have already outlined some of the ideas and controversies emerging around these sorts of claims—the suggestion that they tie our capacity to know to our social identity location, that they undermine coalition building and encourage the formation of political 'special interest groups,' that they unhelpfully delegitimize attempts to act in solidarity with others, and so on.

But the question of *who knows best* might yield more productive responses if we reframe it as *who imagines what*. In turning to the operations of the rational imagination, we have a slightly different route into the exploration of situatedness and relationality,—one which nudges us toward the idea that positions on the margins can create conditions facilitative of more expansive vistas. Epistemologists, sociologists, and political philosophers of various stripes have long commented on the influence of hegemonic knowledge upon other ways of seeing the world. The dominated, Hartsock tells us, "live in a world structured by others for their purposes—purposes that at the very least are not our own and that are in various degrees inimical to our development and even existence" (229). We are *all* trained in hegemonic epistemic traditions, regardless of our actual social identity locations, and it is only through learning to question, challenge, and refuse these traditions that our class consciousness is raised. It is not simply the case that "subjugated knowledge" is suppressed, however (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 269). Rather, it enters an uneasy co-existence with its dominant counterparts. This co-existence is manifested, at the level of self-experience and self-perception, as "the doubled or multiple consciousness of oppressed groups" (Hartsock 234).

This idea is expressed most famously in W. E. B. Du Bois's analysis of Blackness in post-emancipation America. Du Bois talks about a "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (8). Dominant knowledges are partially internalized, such comments suggest, and run alongside those generated from alternative standpoints, affecting both one's sense of self and one's understanding of the wider world. Double-consciousness also had a notable presence in much of the feminist ac-

tivism and literature of the 1970s, which similarly centered upon 'splitness,' though in a rather different form. Second-wave texts stressed the complexities of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other, particularly in terms of sexuality. One thinks immediately here of John Berger's comments on the female nude: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves…Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

It is little wonder that, as second-wave CR discovered, "feelings of dividedness… make the women who experience them doubt their own perception" (Hogeland 32). It is not simply a matter of the truth of one's identity, circumstances, perspective, and so on being obscured. Rather, these things are *constituted* in large part by the dominant discourses in and with which they are formed. As the idea of the (hailed and heterosexual) self-watching woman suggests, we are not dealing with something merely false or fake that can be easily stripped away, but rather with the "*creation* of women's *reality* by male epistemology" (MacKinnon 539, note 56, emphasis in original). In MacKinnon's words, "[c]ombining, like any form of power, legitimation with force, male power extends beneath the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who women 'are' in its view, simultaneously confirming its way of being and its vision of truth" (539). To my mind, this idea of multiple consciousness speaks immediately to the notion of the rooting and shifting—to the fact that how we variously identify, imagine, envision, and so on not only emerges from where we are, but is complicated (and enriched) by our projections concerning the inner lives of others. This is crucial for understanding the situated imagination.

In a recent essay, Frankie Huang points to the relationship between media consumption and multiple consciousness. "Many minoritized people of color (POC) don't know what it's like to consume a steady diet of popular media entirely populated by people who look like us," she writes, "so it becomes second nature to actively establish parallels between experiences we see in stories and our own. POCs are hardly given a choice to develop this skill, given the selection of popular art we have to consume." People of color are thus expected to "tailor narratives we consume to be able to relate to them, and do so by looking past superficial specificities to access the universal, human stories at their core." White critics, having never been placed in this position, tend to view the work of people of color as not *for them*—as excluded from the possibility of speaking to the universal—and therefore either ignore it or subject it to superficial

analysis. They need not do the work of multiple consciousness that, for most other audiences, is unavoidable. This is not an inevitable outcome of a particular social identity location, but a question of quotidian practices of situated imagining. As Huang puts it, being able to "resonate with stories from cultural contexts beyond our own is a mental muscle that gets developed through vigorous exercise. This trait is something POCs who are used to consuming art made mostly for the white audience are adept at." hooks makes a similar point about engagement with media and culture (including theory) when she argues that "diverse pleasures can be experienced, enjoyed even, because one transgresses, moves 'out of one's place.' For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination" ("Choosing the Margin" 15). There are interesting connections with transversal dialog here.

As Briana Toole suggests, in line with ideas about alienation as an agential capacity, we can build out from the knowledge of ourselves "to 'imaginatively grasp' the first-personal perspective of another epistemic agent" (59). It is therefore possible to cultivate sight beyond site—to "know what those agents know" (59)—by imagining what it is like to be another. The capacity for self-decentering allows us to meaningfully understand things outside of our bounded phenomenological conditions. This is no small feat, and the greater the difference between the individuals involved, the harder this process is to realize. To quote Toole, "this 'imaginative capacity' is more difficult the greater the social distance between epistemic agents" (59). Such a perspective helpfully balances the possibilities of alienated reason and the rational imagination with the forces of social situatedness. Because we are "better able to 'imaginatively grasp' the perspectives of those who are most like us, … some epistemic agents are better placed than others to know certain propositions" (60). It may be that those outside the epistemic center have a leg up in this process. After all, as Huang's analysis suggests, positions of epistemic subjugation teach people to adopt multifaceted worldviews through everyday practices of imaginative identification across differences.

The tendency toward internal multiplicity characteristic of particular social identity locations may therefore, under certain conditions, prime the subject to be receptive to heterogeneous ways of knowing. This cognitive groundwork, when combined with "both analysis and political struggle" (Hartsock 105), can be cultivated into a standpoint—an alienated achievement, which is secured at some personal expense, and enables distinctive kinds of purchase on elements of the social totality. Experiences of multiple-consciousness work to de-

velop one's imaginative capacity. This does not mean that knowledge is ever any less situated, but that some positions typically involve the more regular and intense practice of a particular identificatory skill. The resulting standpoints, necessarily stereoscopic as they are, both build and build upon our species' capacity for alienation. Through an internal (and often painful) multiplicity, they cultivate an awareness of the formation of power relations and of one's position within these. Of course, there is always a lively, contentious, and sometimes violent conversation occurring between different worldviews and epistemic frameworks; multiplicity is the everyday condition of social existence. But while all social discourses exist in heteroglossic cacophony, the uneven distribution of power ensures that they are differentially amplified. Some voices sound more loudly than others, and the dialogical quality of social existence is perhaps more conspicuous, on an individual level, when contentious dialogue is itself internalized.

Conclusion

I share Haraway's view that subjugated knowledges are no less partial than dominant knowledges; the margin is a situation just as much as the center. However, what I have been exploring in this essay is the argument that those subjected to quotidian experiences of multiple consciousness may be more prone to possessing distinctive insights. This is due to the need to more frequently and knowingly confront their condition as situated knowers and to understand the complexities of hegemonic discourses in order to better contest them. This issue of political contestation is a crucial one. Given standpoint theory's roots in Marxist approaches to class consciousness, any discussion of situated knowledge misses something crucial if it reduces the stakes to truthfulness alone.

Because one (particularly influential) strain of feminist standpoint epistemology emerged specifically in relation to debates around the nature of scientific knowledge, there has been a tendency to overlook the fact that it does not simply strive to offer a more objective account of the world. As Patricia Hill Collins remarks, such an approach risks "decontextualizing standpoint theory from its initial moorings in a knowledge/power framework while simultaneously recontextualizing it in an apolitical discussion of feminist truth and method" ("Comment on Hekman" 375). In reminding ourselves of standpoint epistemology's role as the theoretical wing of consciousness-raising praxis, we

foreground the fact that the "amount of privilege granted to a particular standpoint lies less in its internal criteria in being truthful, … and more in the power of a group in making its standpoint prevail over other equally plausible perspectives" ("Comment on Hekman" 380). The questions of *who knows best* and of *who imagines what* come with high political stakes.

Let me conclude by summarizing three key ideas regarding the situated imagination:

1. What we tend to imagine is shaped by our social emplacement (*rooting*);
2. Going beyond immediate lived experience to think with the other is a process dependent upon the operations of the rational imagination (*shifting*);
3. Some of us have greater experience of rooting and shifting because of the demands for identification across difference that stem from engagement with hegemonic discourses from a non-hegemonic position. This includes, but is not limited to, our imaginative engagement with creative media.

Point Idea 2 means that point idea 3 is not absolute—we can imagine and appreciate the world beyond our situations—but point idea 3 helps to explain why visions of a better world so often emerge from positions beyond the social center.

My position throughout this essay has been that reason and imagination are related processes of alienated cognition, both of which are implicated in navigating identity and difference. I have paid particular attention to their role in the cultivation of transversal dialogue, noting that non-empirical knowledge, crucial for building political solidarity, is necessarily a result of alienation, in the sense of the capacity for abstract reasoning beyond raw sensory data that sapience affords. The ability to think beyond immediacy and personal circumstances, makes it possible (though not easy) to escape from a fixed position. Indeed, it is through the labor of attempting to see otherwise that new perspectives, new selves, and new sites might be generated. The self is remade in the seeing.

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