
Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition Politics

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INTRODUCTION

'Difference' has come to play a complex role in feminist theory and politics, as is increasingly the case in other liberatory social movements in the US. Feminists criticized the idea of 'universal man' and his transhistorical rationality; what has been claimed to be true for 'man' and 'reason' is in fact characteristic (at best) only of men in the dominant groups in the West and the forms of reason that they favour.¹ Neo-Marxists and post-Marxists have continued the older critique of 'rational economic man' and his bourgeois reason;² critics identified the distinctively Eurocentric character of Western assumptions about man and reason (Mudimbe, 1988; Amin, 1989; Said, 1978); and criticisms of the 'straight mind' have added compulsory heterosexuality to the coercive social structures that generated partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life (Wittig, 1980; Frye, 1983).

However, these groups are increasingly forced to recognize that the logic of each of these critiques also undermines the legitimacy of generalizations from the speaker's situation to *all* women, or workers, or people of colour, or lesbians/gays, as the case may be. If there is no universal or even typical man and his transcendental reason, then there also can be no universal or typical woman, worker, person of colour, lesbian or gay person and her or his unified and uniquely legitimate reason either. Many different feminisms are generated from different conditions of women's lives. Feminism and the other new social movements must have multiple subjects of their history and knowledge projects. In so far as women,

for example, live in oppositional race, class and sexuality relations to each other, the subject of feminist knowledge will be not just multiple, but also contradictory or 'incoherent'. I shall refer to this second difference concern as one about the multiple subjects of liberatory knowledge and politics.

Since Western thought has assumed only unitary and coherent subjects, it can feel as if one has dropped through Alice's rabbit hole when one tries to pursue the consequences of multiple subjectivity for conventional philosophic issues and conventional understandings of progressive politics: assumptions that appeared virtually unquestionable suddenly appear quite problematic. Here I want to explore some consequences of the logic of multiple subjects for thinking about who can make liberatory knowledge and history, the relationship between experience and knowledge, between subjectivity and experience, and between subjectivity and objectivity. These are huge topics, but I hope to make at least some small progress towards clarifying and complexifying them even in so brief a discussion. I begin by reviewing what is meant by the claim that the subject of feminist (or any other kind of liberatory) knowledge is multiple.

MULTIPLE SUBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE AND HISTORY

The logic of difference developed by the new social movements in opposition to the dominant culture returns to undermine tendencies within those movements to generalize from the patterns of life and thought of an imagined 'revolutionary subject' to all of the marginalized peoples for whom the movement purportedly speaks. Not only is there no typical 'woman' about whom feminism can make claims regarding her situation in family life or wage labour, her sexuality or her political priorities; there is also no such typical or ideal woman who is the author/subject/agent/speaker of feminist thought. Gender is supposed to be both the distinctive subject matter and analytic tool of feminism. But the logic of multiple subjects has led some feminists to think that feminism must choose between this logic and feminism's focus on gender. This perception leads some feminists in the dominant groups to feel threatened by the insistence of women of colour, poor women, lesbians and 'ethnic' women that difference must be centred within feminist analyses, and not just between them and the dominant culture, so to speak. Of course the

same kind of point can be made about the archetypal worker who is the political and epistemological subject of Marxism, and about 'the African-American', 'the lesbian', etc. Indeed, many analysts and political workers in the other new social movements (but certainly not all of them) consistently resist dealing with the sexism, racism, Eurocentrism, classism and/or heterosexism that infest their analyses and politics. Moreover, the bad consequences of relegating difference only to the object of study within these movements has been widely criticized. Of course, an 'imbalance of historic ignorance'³ leaves white women ignorant about the material conditions, feelings and thoughts of women of colour, and this uneven development of knowledge must be straightened out. However, my concern here is with difference in the *subject* of knowledge, not as its object.

Two unfortunate tendencies have prevailed in mainstream feminist attempts to deal with the differences between women as subjects of knowledge only by including (adding to) the mainstream analyses the perspectives of marginalized women. The first tendency notes the necessity of acknowledging difference, but then offers a number of reasons for actually refraining from providing any analysis of difference and its consequences.

1. The speaker does not have enough information to carry out such a project. Now it is indeed true that processes of marginalization succeed in part by silencing the marginalized (denying them literacy, public voice, 'history', etc.);⁴ but it is rare for the marginalized to be quite as silent as this excuse claims, as mainstream feminist scholarship itself has testified when faced with analogous claims by sexists.

2. There is not enough time or space available to provide such an analysis just now or here.

3. It is not the speaker's main concern here, which is to provide a 'feminist analysis' *rather* than one that considers perspectives from the lives of marginalized women on the topic of concern or why it is that marginalized women are *not* concerned with this topic. However, even the briefest reflection on the history of feminist responses to similar claims by sexists should lead immediately to the recognition that temptations to these responses show that there is something wrong with conceptualizing the issue as an additive one.

4. The speaker is not qualified to engage in such a project since the speaker has not had the experience of, say, African-Americans; and so only African-Americans can speak to (or from)

the conditions of African-American lives, etc. Articulating experience is a crucial means of creating knowledge for everyone, and in special ways (to be discussed below) for marginalized peoples. But this reasoning about the relationship between experience and knowledge asks us to accept the counterintuitive claim that we should speak *only* of what we have directly experienced. While eye-witness accounts are valuable indeed, following such a principle would have serious consequences. For example, it would shut down science, since no scientist could possibly directly certify the reliability of every claim or assumption s/he made about her or his instruments, the irrelevance of background phenomena, the empirical support for the theories s/he used, etc. Whatever vulgar readings of scientific method may lead one to think about the relation between experience and knowledge, this claim would seem to limit everyone to a kind of solipsism or, at least, relativism. It would have the depressing and counterhistorical consequences that whites cannot create anti-racist knowledge, men cannot create anti-sexist knowledge, etc. — in short, that no one can ever learn anything from *anyone else's* experience.

A second unfortunate tendency actually carries out the additive project only called for by the first. However, while these accounts often provide plenty of descriptive details that marginalized women have reported about their lives, little attempt is made to explain the origins of such patterns of difference beyond references to the sexism of the men in these other cultures or the relation between the lives of marginalized women and women at the centre. Consequently, they do not reflect on the challenges to the speaker's agenda and conceptual scheme created when marginalized women can structure the research or political agenda rather than only 'appear' in feminist agendas constructed by dominant group women. These accounts frequently take the form of only 'studying down'. The speaker refrains from analysing how racism, imperialism, class exploitation and compulsory heterosexuality also structure the lives and thoughts of women in the favoured groups, such as the speaker's.

Popular opinion, supported by the dominant tendencies in US social science, conceptualizes gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation in ways that make it difficult to move past these additive approaches to difference. In order to do so, it is helpful to keep in mind three points. First, each must be reconceptualized as a relationship rather than as a 'thing' or inherent property of people. Race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality do not designate any fixed set of

qualities or properties of individuals, social or biological, such that if one possesses these and only these properties then one is African-American, a man, an 'ethnic' or heterosexual.⁵ Instead, masculinity is continuously defined and redefined as 'not femininity', 'coloured' as 'not white', etc. Second, these relations are deeply embedded in the structures of societies. Thus, sexism, racism, the politics of ethnicity (starting with who gets counted as ethnic) and compulsory heterosexuality are fundamentally matters of social structure, not of prejudice — that is of individual bad attitudes and false beliefs. The tendency to define racism as 'race prejudice' settles for an account that lodges responsibility for racism only on the already economically disadvantaged poor whites — the Archie Bunkers — who have not learned to avoid making overtly racist statements or have been rewarded for doing so as have middle-class people, and who are forced to bear a disproportionately large share of the burdens of affirmative action and equal opportunity programmes. Racism is enacted in many different ways, and overt individual prejudice is just one of them. It is fundamentally a political relationship, a strategy that 'systematically provides economic, political, psychological, and social advantages for whites at the expense of Blacks and other people of colour' (Wellman, 1977: 37), and it is a dynamic relationship that is flexible enough to adapt to changing historical conditions. Individuals *should* be held responsible for their beliefs and behaviours; it is wrong to express or enact these kinds of prejudices. But to rest satisfied with this analysis and its recommended remedies is to fail to come to grips with the institutional race (or gender, ethnicity or sexuality) supremacy that non-prejudiced individual beliefs and behaviours support and maintain.

Racism, sexism, class exploitation, ethnic subordination and heterosexism have their own distinctive histories, institutional forms and dynamics; they are not identical in their histories or structures, as my account here might suggest. Nevertheless, they are widely recognized to be similar enough that they can be understood in these common ways. Indeed, analogical reasoning from the theories and analytical strategies developed within one new social movement to the situation of those apparently intended to be included as 'revolutionary subjects' but, in fact, marginalized within that movement, provides an important resource for grasping the logic of multiple subjects. Thus, analogous accounts can be provided of sexism, class exploitation, the oppression of ethnic groups, racism and heterosexism.

These two points lead to a third. Systems of political hierarchy based on differences of gender, race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation are not parallel to each other, as the preceding analysis suggests, but interlocked and mutually creating and maintaining.⁶ A setback or advance in one reverberates through the whole network of hierarchy creating consequences far away from where such change began. This point clarifies why, for example, feminism can and must try to centre analyses from the perspective of marginalized women's lives. There are determinate causal relations between the lives of Third World and Western women, economically privileged and poor women, heterosexual women and lesbians, ethnic and 'non-ethnic' women, as well as between the men and women who have been the focus of feminist concern. From the perspective of this kind of understanding, it appears odd that some feminists have thought that the consequence of starting from a conceptual framework that centres differences between women must be to abandon gender as an analytic category and, thus, the attempt to produce distinctively feminist analyses. It is only 'transcendental gender' that would have been abandoned, and that is no more real than the 'transcendental man' feminists have criticized. If women and men can only be found in historically determinate races, classes, ethnicities and sexualities, then a gender analysis — one that is from the perspective of women's lives — must scrutinize gender *as it exists* and from the perspective of *all* women's lives. There is no other defensible choice. Refraining from centring multiple subjects in feminist analyses distorts not only the lives of marginalized women, but also of those at the centre. I cannot understand my own life or the causal social influences on my thought if I cannot understand how my actions and beliefs are shaped by institutional relations of race, class and heterosexist supremacy as well as by male supremacy. Indeed, to understand the latter just *is* to understand the former.

This brings us to the next challenge: if I must understand my life from the perspective of, say Third World women's lives, it cannot be that I am to speak *as* or *for* Third World women. Men must learn to see themselves as they appear from the perspective of women's lives, but it cannot be that men are to speak *as* women or *for* women. How does the logic of multiple subjects work itself out in terms of such anxiety-producing concerns?

BECOMING A MULTIPLE SUBJECT

Western thought has 'started out' from the lives of men in the dominant groups. It is their agendas and issues that have energized and structured this thought. Western thought is not the pinnacle of human thought, but only of the thought of that particular social group whose concerns it centres. All human thought is partial in the senses both of interested and of socially situated. But some interests and social situations are worse than others with respect to the degree of narrowness and distortion that tends to be generated in the thought they produce.

One main tendency in feminist epistemology has insisted that starting thought from women's lives decreases the partiality and distortion in our images of nature and social relations. It creates knowledge — not just opinion — that is, nevertheless, socially situated. It is still partial in both senses of the word, but less distorting than thought originating in the agendas and perspectives of the lives of dominant group men. This is the feminist standpoint theory developed by Dorothy Smith (1987), Nancy Hartsock (1983), Hilary Rose (1983), Alison Jaggar (1983: Ch. 1), Harding (1983, 1986: Ch. 6) and others. But, of course, as we have already discussed, women lead different lives from each other; there is no typical 'woman's life' from which feminists should start thought. Moreover, in many cases women's lives are not just different from each other's, but structurally opposed. For example, in the US, African-American and European-American women's lives are defined against each other by racist policy. African-American and European-American women often 'collude' in this oppositional strategy by defining themselves as 'not her'. (I do not mean to give equal weight on moral or intellectual scales to such creations of self: the European-American woman generates racism in such opposition; the African-American woman generates potentially revolutionary understandings of womanhood.) Nevertheless, all of these women's lives are in different respects valuable starting points for generating feminist knowledge. Thought that starts off from each of these different kinds of lives can generate less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life. Thus, as explored above, there is not just one unitary and coherent 'speech' that is feminist thought or knowledge, but instead, these multiple and frequently contradictory knowings. Other liberatory movements have developed similar

standpoint epistemology projects, whether or not they articulate them as such.

However, the subject/agent of feminist knowledge is multiple and frequently contradictory in a second way that mirrors the situation for women as a class. It is the thinker whose consciousness is bifurcated,⁷ the outsider within,⁸ the marginal person now also located at the centre,⁹ the person who is committed to two agendas that are themselves at least partially in conflict — the liberal feminist, socialist feminist, Nicaraguan feminist, Jewish feminist or woman scientist — who has generated feminist sciences and new knowledge. It is thinking from a contradictory social position that generates feminist knowledge. So the logic of the directive to 'start thought from women's lives' requires that one start one's thought from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, and each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments. In contrast, the subject of knowledge for both the conventional liberal/empiricist philosophy and for Marxism was supposed to be unitary and coherent. The condition of one kind of idealized knower — the rational man and the male proletarian, respectively — were to be created and generalized for all who would know.

This logic leads to the recognition that the subject of liberatory feminist knowledge must also be, in an important if controversial sense, the subject of every other liberatory knowledge project. This is true in the collective sense of 'subject of knowledge', for since lesbian, poor and racially marginalized women are all women, all feminists will have to grasp how gender, race, class and sexuality are used to construct each other. It will have to do so if feminism is to be liberatory for marginalized women, but also if it is to avoid deluding dominant group women about their/our own situations. If this were not so, there would be no way to distinguish between feminism and the narrow self-interest of dominant group women — just as conventional androcentric thought permits no criterion for distinguishing between 'best beliefs' and those that serve the self-interest of men as men. (Bourgeois thought permits no criterion for identifying specifically bourgeois self-interest; racist thought for identifying racist self-interest, etc.)

But the subject of every other liberatory movement must also learn how gender, race, class and sexuality are used to construct each other *in order to accomplish their goals*. That is, analysts of class relations must look at their agendas from the perspective of women's lives, too. In the first place, women, too, hold class positions.

Moreover, as many critics have pointed out, left agendas need to deal with the fact that bosses regularly and all too successfully attempt to divide the working class against itself by manipulating gender hostilities. If women are forced to tolerate lower wages and double-days of work, employers can fire men and hire women to make more profit, as they have frequently done. Anti-racist movements must look at their issues from the perspective of the lives of women of colour, too. And so forth. Everything that feminist thought must know must also inform the thought of every other liberatory movement — and vice versa. It is not just the *women* in those other movements who must know the world from the perspective of women's lives. Everyone must do so if the movements are to succeed at their own goals. Most importantly, this requires that women be active directors of the agendas of these movements. But it also requires that men in those movements be able to generate original feminist knowledge from the perspective of women's lives as, for example, John Stuart Mill, Marx and Engels, Frederick Douglass and later male feminists have done.

However, if every other liberatory movement must generate feminist knowledge, it cannot be that women are the unique generators of feminist knowledge. Women cannot claim this ability to be uniquely theirs, and men must not be permitted to claim that because they are not women, they are not obligated to produce fully feminist analyses. Men, too, must contribute distinctive forms of specifically feminist knowledge from their particular social situation. Men's thought, too, will begin first from women's lives in all the ways that feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has shown us all — women as well as men — how to do. It will start there in order to gain the maximally objective theoretical frameworks within which men can begin to describe and explain their own and women's lives in less partial and distorted ways. This is necessary if men are to produce more than that male supremacist 'folk belief' about themselves and the world they live in, to which female feminists object. Women have had to learn how to substitute the generation of feminist thought for the 'gender nativism' androcentric cultures encourage in them; female feminists are made, not born. Men, too, must learn to take historic responsibility for the social position from which they speak.

But if having women's experiences — being a woman — is not a necessary condition for generating feminist knowledge, what is the relation between experience and knowledge for the liberatory social

movements? Is there no significant *epistemological* difference between a female feminist and a male feminist? Can whites produce 'African-American knowledge'? (Whether they should *claim* to do so is quite another matter!) From the perspective of conventional thought about the relations between subjectivity, experience and knowledge, an epistemological hornet's nest appears when one follows through the logic of multiple subjects and directs *everyone*, not just women, to start their thought from women's lives.

ACHIEVING SUBJECTIVITY AND GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE

Some feminists, and also some of their critics, have assumed that feminist-guided research and scholarship must be grounded in women's *experiences*. This assumption has been made for several reasons. First, feminism has argued that only the experiences of men in the dominant groups have grounded Western knowledge, so the generation of knowledge agendas and problematics, concepts, and interpretations of data originating in women's experiences would appear to provide a needed corrective for the distortions of androcentric thought. Second, consciousness raising — whether or not it is called that — has been an important *method* of gaining feminist understanding.¹⁰ Central to consciousness raising is the act of articulating perceptions of one's experiences that are usually censored by the culture. Thus women articulated their 'illicit' ambivalence about their husbands, male co-workers, teachers, marriage, sexuality, families, children, mothers, etc. The shared knowledge created through such practices appears to be grounded in women's experience. Third, the terms 'standpoint', 'perspective', 'view' and 'experience' are often used interchangeably in everyday talk. If women are to speak, if their voices are to be heard in this culture, will they not be speaking from *their* standpoint, perspective, view and experience? Thus critics of feminist standpoint theory, too, have appeared to assume that those theorists are arguing that women's experiences must provide some sort of absolute grounds for feminist research and scholarship.¹¹

Certainly one can learn from experience — and from others' reports of their experiences too. So experience must play some role in the creation of knowledge. However, I think that there is a second and crucial role that speaking of one's experience plays in the

generation of knowledge for marginalized people. But in neither case does experience *ground* knowledge in any conventional sense. The reason why this relationship between experience and knowledge for the knowledge projects of the new social movements is so troublesome is, I suggest, because the prevailing theories of that relationship are those that have been produced from the perspective only of dominant group lives.

First, note the relationship between experience and knowledge required by the logic of standpoint epistemology. All women have women's experiences, but only at certain historical moments do any of us ever produce feminist knowledge. Our experience lies to us, and the dominant gender, class, race and sexuality experiences produce more airtight, comprehensive, widely believed and tenacious lies. Dominant group experience generates the 'common sense' of the age that is such fascinating subject matter to anthropologists and historians. Subjugated groups, especially, are forced to internalize and act out what dominant groups believe of them.¹² All of us must live in social relations that naturalize, or make appear necessary, social arrangements that are, in fact, optional at the cultural level; they have been created and made to appear natural by the power of the dominant groups.

Women's reports of their experiences illuminate aspects of human social relations that would not be visible if women did not speak of their experiences. We learn from our own and reports of others' experiences. But it cannot be that women's experiences or 'what women say' in themselves provide reliable grounds for knowledge claims about nature and social relations. Women say all kinds of things — misogynist statements, illogical arguments, misleading statements about an only partially understood situation, racist, class-biased and heterosexist claims. Feminists have been discovered to be making all these kinds of politically and scientifically inadequate claims. Women, and feminists, certainly are no worse in these respects than anyone else, but we, too, are often blind to the social constraints on our belief systems. Furthermore, there are many feminisms, and these can be understood to be starting off their analyses from the lives of different historical groups of women. Liberal feminism initially started off its analyses from the lives of women in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and US educated classes; Marxist feminism from the lives of wage-working women in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrializing or 'modernizing' societies; Third World feminism from the lives of

late twentieth-century women of Third World descent, and so forth. Moreover, we all change our minds about all kinds of issues. As Uma Narayan (1988) has put it, women's 'epistemic privilege' does not include a privileged knowledge of the *causes* of their situation; nor does it mean that their understandings are incorrigible, that is, in principle immune from revision by them or anyone else; or that their dominators can *never* come to understand what women understand; nor is the claim to epistemic privilege the same as the claim that the oppressed should speak for themselves.¹³ So women's experiences and what women say make important contributions to the creation of knowledge without providing conventional epistemic grounds for deciding just which among competing claims to knowledge should be regarded as preferable.

However, for women to name and describe their experiences in their own terms is a crucial scientific and epistemological act in another respect upon which the above discussion has not yet touched. Members of marginalized groups must *struggle* to name their own experiences *for* themselves in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency, that is given to members of dominant groups at birth (or at least, as psychoanalytic theorists report, in infancy). Dominant group males are inserted into language, history and culture as legitimate speakers and historical agents through no acts of their own, so to speak. They do not have to exert effort in order to 'see themselves in history', or to imagine themselves as authoritative speakers and actors. Their 'Dick and Jane' books, television programmes, observable family and community social relations and, perhaps most importantly, the structure of language itself already tell them that they are the 'right stuff' to make community, history and the subjects of sentences. They simply *are* the subjectivities who *have* experience that provides the raw material for creating dominant group conceptions of knowledge and history. For women and other marginalized groups, subjectivity and its possibility of 'experience' must be achieved; they are made, not born.¹⁴

This denial of subjectivity has material conditions. It has been illegal for slaves to read and write. Through formal and informal exclusionary policies, it has been difficult even for women in the dominant groups to gain access to read the languages used to create and report knowledge, social theory and public policy. It has been illegal for women to speak in public, difficult for them to publish their thoughts or to travel without male chaperones. It is hard to

teach philosophy without books, note several of the contributors to a special issue of *Philosophical Forum* (1987) on apartheid.

But even this way of putting the point is not quite right. It is too tame. It too quickly integrates the difficult and often painful struggle of marginalized people to name their experience and so to gain a self-defined self into the epistemological, scientific and political projects of élites. For marginalized people, naming one's experience publicly is a cry for survival. As the African-American literary critic Barbara Christian (1987: 61) writes, 'what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*.'¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates argues that Frederick Douglass, like other narrators of slave autobiographies, faced the difficult task of writing into subjectivity and into history both himself and all of the other slaves whose lives would be represented by his story.

... the black slave's narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual's autobiography. Each slave author, in writing about his or her personal life's experiences, simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive throughout the South. Each author, then, knew that *all* black slaves would be judged – on their character, integrity, intelligence, manners and morals, and their claims to warrant emancipation – on this published evidence provided by one of their number. (Gates, 1987: x)

For Douglass, his own survival and that of millions of others depended on his ability and that of other ex-slaves to fashion their self-understandings into narratives that voiced/'created' the humanity of the silent slaves. Abdul JanMohammed (1987) notes that for Richard Wright, the choices were literally death or the recovery/creation of his own subjectivity. So for marginalized peoples to speak of their experiences is a crucial ontological and political act, the act that creates them as the kind of people who can make knowledge and history. Knowledge from the perspective of women's lives could not occur without this public act of women naming their experience in their terms. It is subjectivities that legitimate knowledge claims, but it takes difficult, painful and frequently violent struggles to create these subjectivities. Marginal subjectivity is exactly what the dominant groups cannot permit.¹⁶

Nor is the naming and articulating of marginalized experience a task completed at any particular moment in history. It is a continuous process, as long as oppression, exclusion and silencing exist.

Unless, for example, African-Americans have the resources continuously to name their experience in their terms — the literacy, the university positions, the government consultancies, the policy directorates, etc. — all of us, African-American or not, will be able to generate only partial and distorted accounts of nature and social relations.

TRANSFORMING SUBJECTIVITIES

But if the subjectivities required to create knowledge can be *made* through social processes, then they can also be transformed through such processes. Members of the dominant groups, too, can learn how to see the world from the perspective of experiences and lives that are not theirs. After all, no woman was born with a feminist subjectivity. Women have had to learn to think from perspectives about women's lives that were not initially visible to them from 'their' perspective on 'their' life. 'Their' lives and perspectives were structured by the patriarchal ideology of femininity, not by feminism. In order to transform feminine into feminist lives, they have had to listen to themselves and to other women telling about their lives, to reflect on the gender (and class, race and sexuality) aspects of their lives, to take on acts of resistance to male supremacy, to reflect on the consequences of those acts, to learn various feminist theories about gender relations that provided contexts into which they could insert their own experiences and perspectives, and so forth. They have had to *become* feminists. And if they are, say, European-Americans, they have had to start listening to women of colour — and then themselves in contrast — tell about their lives, reflect on the race aspects of their experiences, take on acts of resistance to race supremacy, reflect on the consequences of those acts, learn various theories produced by people of colour about race relations and imperialism that provided contexts into which they could insert their own experiences and perspectives, and so forth. That is, they have had to learn how to become feminists who can function effectively as anti-racists (who *are* anti-racist), rather than ones who, intentionally or not, perpetuate race supremacy. They have had to learn to take historical responsibility for their race, for the white skins from which they speak and act.

But there is nowhere in this process where it would be appropriate to say that such a white person spoke *as* or *for* women of colour.

Only a woman of colour can speak *as* such; and women of colour must be heard speaking *for* themselves. The reasons for this are many. Even though the claims of women of colour are not incorrigible, nor can they any more than anyone else be expected to grasp the causes of their experiences, they do have a certain epistemic privilege about their own experiences. They can more easily detect the subtle forms in which they are discriminated against and marginalized. They often feel differently than do whites or the men in their own groups about what is and is not oppression. Moreover, they will be more alert to issues of their marginalization and will tend to raise such issues more quickly than will white women. Furthermore, they must be heard as 'equal voices' in order to be equal voices in discussions (Narayan, 1988). The logic of multiple subjects requires that all of our subjectivities be transformed in the manner described, but it does not permit subjectivities to be interchangeable, or, most importantly, permit members of dominant groups to speak *as* or *for* the dominated. Thus I am not arguing that *being other* and *reinventing ourselves as other* are epistemically equal social locations. They can never be so. But members of dominant groups — all of us who are white, ethnically privileged, or men, or economically privileged, or heterosexual (have I excluded any reader of this article from this list?!) — can learn to take historic responsibility for the social locations from which our speech and actions issue. This is a scientific and epistemological issue as well as a moral and political one.

CONCLUSION

The recognition and exploration of the existence of multiple subjects of knowledge in all of the new social movements reveal that the relations between subjectivity, experience and knowledge entrenched in conventional epistemology and political philosophy appear reasonable only from the perspective of dominant group lives. There subjectivity appears on the one hand, in so far as it bears the markers of its social location and, especially, of the social location of 'others', as something to be excluded or at least rigorously controlled in the production of knowledge. Socially situated subjectivity threatens to overwhelm or pollute 'pure knowledge'. Marginalized peoples are thought to be the most irretrievably mired in their social situation; women, 'natives', the poor and other 'others' are the models for the irrationality, the social passions, the immersion in the bodily, and

the subjective against which dispassionate reason, social justice, historical progress and the objective pursuit of knowledge have been defined. On the other hand, 'rational man's' subjectivity is to be activated, nourished and encouraged to range freely in the pursuit of truth, justice and social progress. But if we critically examine these imagined relations between experience, subjectivity and knowledge from the perspective of those marginalized lives, these relations, too, begin to move back into the particular historical social locations that make them appear reasonable to the dominant social groups.

'Understanding reality' is supposed to require not just knowing what we think of ourselves and the world, but also what others think of us and our beliefs (Mura, 1988: 152). We must 'reinvent ourselves as other' in order to develop those kinds of doubly multiple subjectivities that are capable of understanding objectively their own social location, not just imagining that they understand the social locations of others.¹⁷ This project will require sciences with stronger and more competent criteria of objectivity, rationality and reflexivity than the only semi-sciences with their weak objectivity, rationality and reflexivity that the West has centred. But this is a topic for another time (Harding, 1991).

NOTES

Since this paper was written, my 1991 book, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* has appeared. Parts of this article draw on that material, especially Chapter 11 (pp. 268-95).

1. See, for example, Lloyd (1984) and Hartsock (1983), especially her discussion of 'abstract masculinity' (p. 296ff).

2. For such a 'neo-Marxist' critique see, for example, Aronowitz (1988). For a 'post-Marxist' one (with 'equal weight on both words', they say) see Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

3. This phrase is Uma Narayan's (n.d.).

4. For discussions of the silencing of marginal peoples — denial to them of literacy, of access to dissemination of writing, of institutional resources, and even of the right to consciousness, 'experience', subjectivity and history — see Spivak (1988), Gates (1987) and Wolf (1982).

5. It is not that long ago that class, too, was claimed to be biologically determined.

6. The literature on this topic is by now large and diverse. For a couple of representative examples, see Mies (1986) and Enloe (1990) on how gender is maintained by and maintains imperialism; D'Emilio and Freedman (1988) on how sexuality reproduced and was reproduced by class, race and ethnicity in the US.

7. This phrase comes from Dorothy Smith (1987).

8. This is Patricia Hill Collins's (1986) phrase.
9. bell hook's (1983) concept.
10. Catherine MacKinnon (1982) argues that consciousness raising simply is feminist method. For alternative understandings of feminist method, see Harding (1987).
11. See, for example, Mary Hawkesworth (1989).
12. See the interesting discussion of how African-American novelist, Richard Wright, came to this understanding, in JanMohammed (1987).
13. See Narayan (1988). Narayan's illuminating arguments for the importance in the creation of knowledge of expressions of the emotions of the oppressed as they report their experiences may be read as providing additional arguments to those above for the important role that experiences play in the creation of knowledge from the standpoint of oppressed lives, and without claiming that experience *grounds* that knowledge.
14. See Spivak (1988) and Belenky et al. (1986). Belenky et al. point out that 'It's my opinion' means 'I have a right to my opinion' for men, but it means 'it's just my opinion' for women. They also discuss the 'women of silence' who do not yet 'have' self, voice or mind, whom some of their interviewees report having been.
15. See the discussion of this issue in Ellsworth (1989: especially 301ff, where she also cites the Christian passage quoted) and Lugones and Spelman (1983).
16. Hence I 'read' the early feminist standpoint writings that give considerable attention to articulating the different 'human' experiences that women have through their socially assigned activity in mothering, housework, emotional labour and caring of others' bodies (e.g. Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Rose, 1983) as making this point: there is a different subjectivity from 'the human' (i.e. the ruling group men's). It is created through certain different 'material' activities. That is, 'women's experience' function in these accounts both as something to be explained, and as a clue to the different 'social location' from which much feminist research has emerged, and from which everyone — not just the women who have some particular experiences or other — should start off thought. 'Women's experience' does not function as the *grounds* for feminist claims on these standpoint accounts any more than 'proletarian experience' provides the grounds for Marx's *Capital*. In contrast, it does function as the grounds for knowledge in some feminist phenomenological sociology and radical feminist writings.
17. V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) argues that African philosophers must reinvent the West as a bizarre and alien tradition from which they can learn important techniques but also ambiguously define their alterity. I am arguing that Westerners — and, more generally, members of dominant social groups — can also engage in this reclamation of self and historical agency.

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