

Feminist epistemology and the politics of knowledge: questions of marginality

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Epistemology was a late-comer to feminist analysis and critique. Although various explanations for its tardiness might be advanced, central among them must surely be the intransigence of a conviction that, while ethics and politics might well be shaped by gender relations and other human 'differences', knowledge worthy of the (honorific) title must transcend all such specificities. Thus, although feminist ethical and political theory were rapidly growing areas of inquiry during the 1960s and 1970s, only in the 1980s was a set of questions and proposals articulated to address the possibility that there could, after all, be so seemingly oxymoronic an area of inquiry as feminist epistemology. In twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy there were good reasons for such resistance. Epistemologists sought to establish universal, necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of knowledge in general: knowledge that could serve as a model at which knowledge-seeking as such should aim – that could yield empirical certainty, and

silence the sceptic. Any hint of relativism such as is implicit in the suggestion that sex – a non-intellectual, non-rational, individual characteristic of putative knowers – could play a constitutive part in the production of knowledge threatened to undermine the founding principles of 'the epistemological project'. It unsettled taken-for-granted beliefs about human sameness across putatively incidental and inconsequential bodily differences, and thus appeared to contest the very possibility of achieving knowledge worthy of the name. It is no surprise, therefore, that few epistemologists, feminists or other, would have given an affirmative answer to my 1981 question: 'Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant?' (Code, 1981). Indeed, to some interlocutors the implications of responding in the affirmative seemed, in those early days, to suggest that if indeed the sex of the knower were declared epistemologically significant, then it would be to the detriment of women's aspirations to knowledgeability. It would consolidate the time-worn assumption that women could not

know in the well-established, descriptive and normative, sense of the word.

Yet whether such a confirmation would amount to reaffirming women's epistemic marginality is a more subtle issue. So long as the view prevails that women cannot know according to the highest criteria for establishing knowledge, it seems that they are in fact not just marginalized but excluded, confined somewhere beyond the limits of both marginality and centrality. This way of putting the point may exceed the parameters of an analysis designated specifically to address marginality, but I think it does not stretch the purpose of the discussion to observe that in at least one sense of the word, in one central exclusionary preserve – namely, universities and other institutions of higher education – when women are refused admission then the implication seems to be that they cannot know, that they are incapable of, not marginalized within, the kinds of knowledge disseminated there. So even moving to the fringes in the form of women's colleges, colleges of 'home economics', nursing schools is, in the institutions of knowledge-production and validation, already a move to the margins – if indeed only there. When women are restricted to studying/learning in such institutions, which claim less prestige than universities, they clearly are marginalized, both institutionally and epistemologically (cf. Rossiter, 1982: esp. 65–70, 240).

Nonetheless, with respect to the content and methodology of the empirical knowledge that functions as exemplary for early-to-mid-twentieth-century epistemologists, both descriptively and normatively, the contention that women are marginalized is apt in the sense – and this is no small point – that the subject *S*, in the standard *S*-knows-that-*p* formula in which propositional knowledge claims are ordinarily stated, is presumptively male to the extent that there is no need even to mention his maleness. That he is white and of the privileged classes is also an uncontested given. Thus women enter the philosophical scene as would-be knowers

usually in token substitutions of female for male pronouns: instead of 'Sam knows that the book is green' we read 'Sally knows that the book is green'. Ordinarily, such knowledge claims are made about perceptual 'simples': they refer to medium-sized physical objects that are presumptively part of everyday life in the materially replete societies tacitly taken for granted as the backdrop for references to such knowing. Normally, too, the sex of the knower would in such circumstances be regarded as being of no greater significance than the size of her or his feet, while her or his race, ethnicity, sexuality, age would figure not at all in the analysis. In short, the formal structure of empiricist/post-positivist twentieth-century Anglo-American epistemology prior to the feminist challenges of the 1980s was such as to reinforce settled presumptions of human homogeneity.

The idea that the *sex* of the knower could be epistemologically significant gives rise to a range of questions about knowledge and subjectivity which were just as startling at first posing, but have come to be integral to subsequent feminist inquiry. No longer is 'the knower' imaginable as a self-contained, infinitely replicable 'individual' making universally valid knowledge claims from a 'god's eye' position removed from the incidental features and the power and privilege structures of the physical–social world. Once inquiry shifts to focus (following Haraway, 1988) on 'situated knowledges', it is no longer feasible to assume before the fact which aspects of situatedness will be significant for the production, evaluation and circulation of knowledge. Inquiry opens out into analyses of multiple intersecting specificities of subjectivity and positionality in their social, political and thence epistemological implications for the production of knowledge and knowers; and into questions about credibility, marginality, epistemic responsibility and the politics of testimony, none of which would have been meaningful in the discourse of orthodox epistemology. My analysis in this essay pivots on these questions.

BEGINNINGS

In the mid-1980s Sandra Harding, in *The Science Question in Feminism* (Harding, 1986), began to map the developing theoretical divisions in feminist epistemological inquiry, first distinguishing between feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory. Empiricists, on this analysis, sought to develop a method of evidence-gathering that would be cleansed of androcentrism, paying attention to evidence neglected or discounted as worthy of notice in received theories of knowledge. The idea was that an empiricism committed to objective evidence-gathering and justification, yet informed by feminist ideology, could produce more adequate knowledge than classical empiricism, which is ignorant of its complicity in sustaining a ubiquitous sex/gender system. An enhanced sensitivity to such issues enables feminists to enlist empiricist tools to expose the sexism, racism and other 'isms' that (often silently) inform knowing. Such exposures often depend on examining the so-called 'context of discovery', where aspects of a situation, inquiry or experiment are singled out for investigation, yet where sex/gender specific features may be ignored or deemed irrelevant from the get-go, so to speak. A well-known example from the 1990s is the tardy recognition in cardiac medicine that symptoms signalling heart disease in women commonly failed to show up in standard tests developed from testing male patients alone. Only in consequence of persistent feminist lobbying were testing practices revised to address specifically female manifestations of the disease (Harvard 1994). Investigating assumptions that structure and pervade processes of experimental design – contexts of discovery – often expose limitations whose effects are analogously gender-specific. The 'strong objectivity' feminist empiricists and standpoint theorists demand, if differently, opens the way to generating more inclusive, and hence more just, inquiry than older conceptions of objectivity had allowed (cf. Harding, 1993).

Hence, for example, in Helen Longino's social empiricism (1993), it is communities,

not individuals, who are the knowers: their background assumptions shape knowledge as process and product. In genetic research, Longino shows how assumption-(value-) driven differences in knowledge-production contest the possibility of value-neutrality. Yet she endorses community respect for evidence and accountable, collaborative cognitive agency. Similarly, Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990) develops from (Quinean) 'naturalised epistemology' a neo-empiricism for which again communities, not individuals, are the primary knowers; and knowers come to evidence through webs of belief, open to communal endorsement and critique. Because those who are socially marginalized cannot realize their emancipatory goals without understanding the intractable aspects and the malleable, contestable features of the world, they have to achieve a fit between knowledge and 'reality', even when 'reality' consists in such social artefacts as racism, power, oppression or pay equity. Because an empiricism alert to gender-specificity (and, latterly, a range of other specificities) is well equipped to achieve just such knowledge, politically informed inquiry, according to Harding, yields a better empiricism than the received view allows, based in what she has called 'strong objectivity'.

Standpoint theorists, by contrast, were turning their attention to the historical-material positioning of women's practices and experiences. For such theorists as Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Hilary Rose (1983), empiricists do not have at their disposal the conceptual tools required to address the historical-material diversity from which people produce knowledge. Standard-setting knowledge in western societies derives from the experiences of white, middle-class, educated men, with women (like the marxian proletariat) occupying underclass epistemic positions. As capitalism 'naturalizes' the subordination of the proletariat, patriarchy 'naturalizes' the subordination of women; and as examining material-social realities from the standpoint of the proletariat denaturalizes these

assumptions, so starting from women's lives denaturalizes the patriarchal order. A feminist standpoint is a hard-won product of consciousness-raising and social-political engagement in which the knowledge that enables the oppressed to survive under oppression becomes a resource for social transformation.

While these two positions seemed to capture the principal differences between feminist approaches to epistemology in the late 1980s, neither empiricist nor standpoint feminism succeeded in resolving all of the issues. Empiricists were unable fully to address the power-saturated circumstances of diversely located knowers or to pose interpretive questions about how evidence is discursively constituted and whose evidence it suppresses in the process. Nor, in the absence of a unified feminism, could standpoint theorists avoid obliterating differences. The theory's 'locatedness' offered a version of social reality as specific and hence as limited as any other, albeit distinguished by its awareness of that specificity. But empiricism's commitment to revealing the concealed effects of gender-specificity in knowledge-production cannot be gainsaid; nor can standpoint theory's production of faithful, critical, analyses of women's experiences, with its focus on how hegemonic values legitimate oppression. Thus, in the years since empiricism and standpoint theory seemed to cover the territory, with postmodernism addressing anti-epistemological challenges to both, feminists have found these alternatives neither mutually exclusive, nor able, separately or together, to explain the sexual politics of knowledge-production and circulation. Indeed, perhaps a more accurate reading of the positioning of all three approaches – feminist empiricism, standpoint theory and postmodernism – would be to emphasize the postmodern implications of all three as they are manifested, for example, in a sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit rejection of the very possibility of dislocated (=un-situated) knowledge, epistemic individualism, perspective-less a-political knowing and top-down positivistic-empiricist

methods of inquiry. Among its commendable aspects are an acknowledgement of the productive, innovatively postmodern implications of feminist inquiry that distances itself from the 'essentialisms' that characterize modernity, with its convictions about the singularity of method, the replicability of knowers, the affect-free nature of knowledge-production and the universality of knowledge worthy of the name.

I have noted that a commitment to 'strong objectivity' seems to inform both feminist empiricism and standpoint theory, albeit differently. Indeed, cross-fertilizations across disciplines and methods have often proven more productive than adherence to any methodological orthodoxy. Nor do all feminists cognizant of the differences that difference makes hope to achieve a unified standpoint, given that it is impossible to aggregate such differences either in their empirical detail or their effects, and imperialistic to attempt to do so. Hence, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) advocated an 'outsider-within' black feminist standpoint: an Afro-centered epistemology which she adduces as exemplary of how knowledge produced in a subordinated and marginalized group can foster resistance to hegemonic norms while producing knowledge good of its kind; and Maria Lugones, writing from within a different difference from an uncontested white-affluent norm advocates 'world travelling and loving perception' (1987) as a practice that can afford a way of escaping too-particular, self-contained and, indeed, self-satisfied locations. Donna Haraway (1991) recasts both the subject and the object of knowledge as radically located and unpredictable, conceiving of knowledge-construction as an ongoing process of learning to see, often from positions discredited or marginalized in dominant accounts of knowledge and reality. Pertinent here is Evelyn Fox Keller's (1983) biography of Nobel laureate geneticist Barbara McClintock, where she shows a hitherto marginalized scientist attuned to unexpected differences and anomalies in her objects of study, dwelling with those differences to initiate a major

theoretical breakthrough. Lorraine Code (1991; 1995) examines how power and privilege yield asymmetrically gendered standards of authority in medical knowledge, in the experiences of welfare recipients, in testimonial credibility and in women's responses to sexist and racist challenges. Her ecological model of knowledge and subjectivity (2006) challenges the hegemony of the model of 'mastery' that governs mainstream Anglo-American epistemology. Taking women's cognitive experiences seriously enables feminists, in these diverse ways, to eschew the individualism and universalism of mainstream theory and to examine specifically located knowing, where theory and practice are reciprocally constitutive and knowers are diversely positioned and active within them.

Conceptions of 'margin' and 'centre' have functioned variously in feminist epistemology, from critical analyses of the situations of putative knowers at the centre or at the margins of the social order to the marginalization of women as philosophers and to the marginalization of feminist epistemology within epistemology as such, to name only the most salient variations. These factors may operate separately or in concert, but either way they work to reinforce a cluster of hierarchical divisions and evaluations whose effects are to sustain patriarchal structures of centre and margin within philosophical practices that mirror those within the larger society in the affluent western-northern world.

In a landmark analysis of the politics of marginality in feminist theories of knowledge, Bat-Ami Bar On engages critically with the contention that living on the social-political margins affords epistemic privilege in the sense that 'subjects located at the social margins have an epistemic advantage over those located at the social center' (1993: 85). The central idea, derived from Marxist theory and endorsed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by such socialist feminists as Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Ann Ferguson (1979), is that people who live at a distance from the social-epistemological centre are epistemically

privileged in the sense that, simply in order to survive, they must know the structures and implications of lives at the centre more accurately than those at the situated at the centre have to know their (=marginalized) lives. Thus, for example, workers have to know how to navigate and negotiate the structures and strictures of the social-political order in which they occupy the underclass positions far better and in greater detail than those at the centre need to know their (=the workers') lives. For those at the centre the workers are mere place-holders, cogs in the wheel: the detail of their situations beyond their place in keeping the machinery, both literal and metaphorical, operating smoothly is of no consequence. Yet standpoint epistemologists, as they came to be called, maintained that starting epistemic inquiry from the position of the workers' lives – and subsequently for feminist epistemologists speaking from within patriarchy, starting epistemic inquiry from the standpoint of women's lives – made it possible to see, understand and ultimately unsettle the structures of centre and margin that had been hitherto invisible in 'one-size-fits-all' epistemological inquiry. Hence Hartsock, for example, maintains: '(L)ike the lives of the proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy ... which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogocentric institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy' (1983: 284). While such claims have not been universally accepted by feminist theorists, they have generated productive debates in the development of a feminist politics of knowledge. Following Marx, Bar On notes the basic idea is that although all knowledge is perspectival, some perspectives 'are more revealing than others ... [especially] the perspectives of [those who] ... are socially marginalized in their relations to dominant groups' (1993: 83). The claim, then, would be that a feminist standpoint gives access to epistemic privilege by virtue of removing the blinkers that inhibit a clear view of the

unnaturalness of the entrenched patriarchal order in knowledge, as elsewhere in gendered social–political–epistemological power–knowledge structures.

These claims are both provocative and contentious in bringing feminist issues into the hitherto putatively neutral domain of epistemology. Noteworthy and in some ways definitive for thinking, now, about standpoint is Alison Wylie's (2003) analysis of 'why standpoint matters', especially in social science. Numerous questions arise, many of which bear on issues of epistemic marginality. Among the most probing is the question of whether standpoint really is a theory, or more properly a methodology. Wylie writes: '[T]o do social science as a standpoint feminist is to approach inquiry from the perspective of insiders rather than impose upon them the external categories of professional social science, a managing bureaucracy, ruling elites' (2003: 27). Here there is no place, and indeed no residual longing, for any idea(l) of a view from nowhere, a god's eye view, as the vantage point from which accurate, neutral vision and hence the best objectivity possible can be achieved, nor can 'the knower' any longer be conceived as a faceless, disembodied place-holder in old and now-tired 'S knows that *p*' formulaic knowledge claims. Taking subjectivity into account becomes a worthy and indeed an urgent practice for feminist epistemologists and moral–political theorists (see Code, 1995).

Noteworthy and initially promising in the 1980s, among attempts to contest the putative neutrality yet tacit masculinity of established conceptions of knowledge worthy of the name, and the consequent invisibility/erasure of female subjectivity and women's experiences, was Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986). In my discussion of the text (Code, 1991) I note its appearance on the epistemological scene as a challenge to established convictions that it is logically possible for every human mind, at least in principle, 'to attain knowledge defined as the ideal product of closely specified reasoning processes'. Yet I also observe that such logical

possibilities 'are of little relevance when practical–political processes ... clearly structure the situations under analysis' (1991: 251). *Women's Ways of Knowing* initially garnered some feminist approval for its careful charting and analyses of women's experiential reports as these had routinely been silenced, marginalized in and indeed excluded from the epistemologies of the mainstream. Ironically, however, the promise of the analysis was truncated in ways that work inadvertently to reproduce women's marginal status even as they endeavour to contest and challenge it. As I have observed, the book 'risks making of experience a tyranny equivalent to the tyranny of the universal, theoretical, and impersonal expertise it seeks to displace' largely in the ways the authors assume that 'autobiographical evidence can be read "straight", unequivocally, without subtexts, hidden agendas, or gaps in the narrative line' (1991: 256). The point is not that women's experiential knowledge claims should not be accorded a fair hearing after all: the purpose of the project was to open spaces for just such a hearing. But overarching assumption of experiential validity refuses to bring those experiences into the kinds of conversation, the debates among putative 'equals', into which experiential claims among colleagues and other interlocutors would ordinarily enter. The idea that no one's experience can be called 'wrong' closes the door on potentially productive discussion: indeed, on the interpretations and debates feminist consciousness-raising practices sought to foster. Such closure counts among the practices a viable standpoint approach aims, I believe, to avoid.

The question remains open, then, as to whether or how speaking and knowing from the social–epistemic margins truly counts as a situation from which epistemic privilege can be claimed. As Bar On rightly notes, 'Both the assumption of a single center from which the epistemically privileged, socially marginalized subjects are distanced and the grounding of their epistemic privilege in their identity and practices are problematic'

(1983: 91). Part of the problem is the presumably guilt-infused view on the part of at least some of ‘the privileged’ that, once those from the margins speak, because they have hitherto been silenced, there is a tacit obligation on the part of the erstwhile silencers to take them at their word, to refrain from critique or challenge. Yet Elizabeth Spelman aptly reminds us that: ‘... white women marginalize women of color as much by the assumption that as women of color they must be right as by the assumption that they must be wrong’ (1988: 182). An analogous assumption restricts the promise of practices that attest to a conviction that ‘granting’ the subaltern a place to speak simultaneously confers a presumption of truth upon her/his every utterance. On such a view she or he remains excluded, if now differently, from full participation in the deliberative spaces where knowledge is made, remade, contested, established, put into circulation.

As I have noted, marginality has many aspects. At the very least, it includes being left out as known or knowable and being left out, side-lined, as a putative knower; being diminished or damaged by/in bodies of knowledge; being denied credibility in testimonial and other epistemic processes and practices; being discredited within a certain hegemonic formula or set of directives for what counts as *bona fide* knowledge. Although these aspects may appear to operate singly in some instances, often they overlap or are interwoven in silencing, ignoring or discrediting certain voices and points of view. In the next section of this essay I endeavour to elaborate these modalities of marginality singly and in some of their intersections.

MULTIPLE MARGINALITIES

Particularly insightful is Rae Langton’s analysis of how ‘when it comes to knowledge’, as she puts it, women get left out, or women get hurt (2000: 129). These are large claims, yet Langton amply illustrates their pervasiveness

in the history of western philosophy, from the writings of Mary Astell in the eighteenth century through to such twentieth-century philosophers and theorists as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Marilyn Frye. Being left out in this respect involves more than a simple (or not so simple) failure to take note of women’s contributions to the philosophical canon: it also, and frequently, involves figuring women as unknowable, mysterious, enigmatic and, hence, located ‘beyond the pale’ of who or what needs to be, or is worthy of being, known, addressed, taken into account. Notable is Beauvoir’s caustic reference in *The Second Sex* to the ‘myth’ of feminine ‘mystery’, whose pervasiveness enables a man who ‘does not “understand” a woman ... instead of admitting his ignorance’ to recognize ‘a mystery exterior to himself’, thus allowing him ‘an excuse that flatters his laziness and vanity at the same time’, offering what, for many men, is ‘a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being’ (2009: 268–9). Variations on such exclusions and ignorings are well documented. Throughout the so-called ‘second wave’, from Genevieve Lloyd’s detailed mappings in *The Man of Reason* (1993) of how ideals of reason and of masculinity have mirrored one another in their historical evolution and consistently defined themselves by exclusion of ‘the feminine’, feminist philosophers have, variously, chronicled women’s absence/exclusion from or denigration within the panoply of reason, rationality and knowledgeability. Peculiarly significant, in this regard, has been women’s lack of knowledge of their ‘own lives and experiences as women’ (Langton, 2000: 131). From Betty Friedan’s (1963) reference to ‘the problem that has no name’ to Nancy Tuana’s (2006) analysis of the significance of epistemologies of ignorance for the women’s health movement, startling lacunae have been exposed in women’s knowledge about their lives, bodies, selves and subjectivities: lacunae famously addressed in 1973 in the politically remarkable publication by the Boston Women’s Health Collective of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

(*OBOS*), since republished numerous times, with 'A New Edition for a New Era' appearing in 2005 (see Davis 2007).

According to Tuana, a major task facing women's health activists is still that of showing how women's bodies were ignored and/or their health issues misrepresented, partly in consequence of sedimented androcentric or sexist beliefs about female sexuality, reproductive health issues and/or responsibility for contraception, many of which persist even after *OBOS*. When women are constructed as 'objects of knowledge not as authorized knowers' (2006: 9) the situation is not significantly better, epistemologically, than it is in the passage from *The Second Sex* Langton cites. Here issues of women being left out and women being hurt overlap and reinforce one another: either way, a mode of marginalization is being enacted. Ignorance, as Tuana reminds us, is often constructed, maintained and disseminated. It is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing and uncertainty. But Langton's overarching point also needs to be underscored: 'Women may fail to be counted as knowers ... because of a spurious universality ascribed to a merely partial story of the world as told by men ...' (2000: 132–3). These sins of omission, as Langton calls them, translate or evolve readily into sins of commission, especially when it becomes apparent that traditional 'norms of knowledge' that leave women out can also have the effect of objectifying women simply by assuming that whatever needs to be known about them can be known without their participation or input, or can be derived without remainder from knowledge about or made by men. In this regard, Langton draws the reader's attention to circumstances in which the world can be said to 'arrange itself' to fit what the powerful believe – as, for example, in situations where 'believing women to be subordinate can make women subordinate: thinking so can make it so, when it is backed up by power' (2000: 139). Beauvoir's phenomenological analysis of what we might call the 'making' of woman into/as the second sex is

an elaborated case in point: 'She is determined and differentiated in relation to man ... she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other' (2009: 6). And, in a similar vein, Langton aptly cites Marilyn Frye's powerful image of 'the arrogant eye', where, as she puts it:

the arrogant perceiver ... coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes. ... How one sees another and how one expects the other to perceive are in tight interdependence, and how one expects the other to behave is a large factor in determining how the other does behave. (Frye, 1983: 67)

Such patterns of conformity to the expectations of the powerful, even when these are not strictly codified or enforced, are apparent throughout the social structures of patriarchal, white, class-based and other power–privilege differentiated societies and social groups, from the family to the wider society. Women, blacks, other non-white persons, children, slaves and servants are enjoined to 'know their place' and to occupy that place as befits one variously subject to the expectations and limitations that infuse the social–political imaginary of a given society or segment thereof. Failing to do so routinely invites censure, or worse. Yet when their place is defined and monitored by others, knowing their place can hurt and diminish women and Others (from the white male norm), truncating their potential for achieving well-realized lives.

The imperative to 'know one's place' operates unevenly and with multiple degrees of hurting and discrediting across western/northern societies. So far, and presumptively, I have referred to 'women' generically in ways that fail to capture the complexity and indeed the epistemic injustice involved in adducing such a unified category. It may indeed be true that women 'as such' are hurt, diminished, left out in the epistemologies of the Anglo-American mainstream and in the knowledge produced under their aegis, but the identity 'woman' is never uninflected: poor women, black women,

old women, Hispanic women, uneducated women, highly educated women, indigenous women, eminent women, to name just the smallest sampling, are hurt and left out differently, required to 'know their place' differently across all known social orders. These so-called 'identities' rarely come singly: they intersect and function in complex intersectional ways across every society however large or small, where the term 'intersectionality' derives from a metaphor coined in the late 1980s by US critical legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw to explain how race oppression and gender oppression interact in black women's lives (see Crenshaw, 1991). More recently, theorists have expanded and elaborated the term to capture a greater range of the multiple aspects of 'identity' that may operate in diverse social-political-epistemological situations (see, for example, Bailey, 2010; Garry, 2012).

Some or all of these differences will undoubtedly be salient in all of the many situations where women are hurt, discredited, left out, ignored in knowledge and in their knowing practices. Here I will start with one particularly urgent example which brings together questions about knowing, testimony and epistemic agency that cut generically across the category 'woman' and specifically across diverse, intersecting groups of women. The issue is the testimony of female rape victims, which has notoriously and routinely been discounted and discredited universally, but is more viciously and egregiously discounted across certain targeted groups of women, who are exceptionally vulnerable to incredulity, indeed of the crassest kind. All of these practices reflect profoundly sexist assumptions: that rape happens only to sexually 'pure' or 'virtuous' women or that it matters only when it happens to them; that women are likely to lie about having been raped; that women who are raped 'have asked for it'. Demeaning references to a woman's appearance, attire, status, location, sexual history or relationship to the alleged rapist may be cited as evidence of consent, of 'asking for it'. Moreover, in the USA black

women's 'unrapeability' was written into law in a racial ideology that defined them as naturally lascivious and promiscuous; and portrayals of women in pornographic and mainstream media as enjoying, and therefore consenting to, forceful, violent sex reinforces these stereotypical assumptions and tells against according women's testimony the credibility it otherwise merits. Ann Cahill rightly observes: 'rape must be understood fundamentally ... as an affront to the embodied subject ... a sexually specific act that destroys (if only temporarily) the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman' (2001: 13). In my view, such a victim's *epistemic* subjectivity and agency is likewise fundamentally destroyed: an extreme form of marginalization in its erasure of a woman's capacity to know her 'own' experiences. (Germane is Wittgenstein's remark: 'If I were contradicted on all sides and told that this person's name is not what I had always known it was (and I use 'know' here intentionally), then in that case the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me' (1969: §614).)

Patterns of incredulity are widespread across social-epistemological exchanges and events: they are especially intransigent blocks to credibility and to claiming epistemic status in the rhetorical spaces of any society. In their intransigence they install and enforce marginal status, and are exceptionally difficult to dislodge. Thus, for example, in *Ecological Thinking* (Code, 2006) I read Rachel Carson's epistemological-scientific practice to show how she, as a knower who did not fit easily within the received scientific orthodoxy of her day, was and continues to be marginalized, discredited within 'normal science' for aspects of her life and work that were open to criticism as variously 'irregular'. That she had no PhD and no accredited academic position clearly counted against her, as did her practice of drawing just as respectfully on testimonial reports from lay people about ecological damage as she drew on reports of laboratory findings. Admittedly, Carson lived and worked at a time and in an epistemic

climate where (prior to the advent of social epistemology) testimony as such counted as a lowly and unreliable source of knowledge by contrast with the putatively greater certainty-achieving perception and memory favoured in empiricist orthodoxy. Many scholars now applaud the place she accords to lay testimony in documenting damaging practices. In her time, Carson was rarely discredited because she was a woman, although subsequent scholars have shown that such forms of denigration hovered just beneath the surface in evaluations of her life and work (Lytle, 2007; Sideris and Moore, 2008; Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Code, 2012a). But the larger point is to confirm what can reasonably be called the methodological tyranny of a scientific orthodoxy that discounts valuable and indeed life-enhancing knowledge claims that have not been derived in purified laboratory conditions. Biologist Karen Messing, whose work I also discuss in *Ecological Thinking*, documents a politics of knowledge and exclusion wherein women's experiential reports of workplace illness, suffering and long-term damage are routinely discounted as anecdotally unreliable by contrast with statistical analyses in which, because of their rarity and idiosyncrasy, the symptoms such women report often fail to register. Too briefly summarized, these examples tell of kinds of knowing that are readily sidelined, marginalized in analyses where they simply (or not so simply) fail to fit within an uncontested set of assumptions about how valid knowledge will look. It is by no means fanciful to suppose that some of Messing's subjects were not taken seriously because they were women: many were poor, uneducated, working in jobs that carried little prestige or status and thus, in view of the intellectual climate of the time and place, minimal presumptions of testimonial credibility.

THE POLITICS OF TESTIMONY

Testimony as such, on which both Carson and Messing rely, occupies an unstable and

uneven place in the epistemologies of the mainstream well beyond its egregious discrediting in the politics of rape. That unevenness is exacerbated in places and circumstances where the putative 'knower' can, for a range of personal and situational reasons, be discounted because of who he or she is. Emblematic in this regard is black feminist legal theorist Patricia Williams's response to the incredulity she encountered in response to her attempt to publish an account of a blatantly racist incident at a Benetton's shop in New York City: 'I could not but wonder ... what it would take to make my experience verifiable. The testimony of an independent white bystander? ... The blind application of principles of neutrality ... acted either to make me look crazy or to make the reader participate in old habits of cultural bias' (1991: 47, 48). There can, I suggest, be no contest to the claim that being treated as crazy or viewed through lenses tainted with persistent cultural bias count as forms of blatant social-epistemic marginalization. The incident is continuous with a well-known history of testimonial marginalization in which, in the western world, only men counted as bona fide testifiers and at least in the southern USA blacks could not testify at all, in the sense that their testimony could not claim acknowledgement as evidence. I mention these facts not to ignore or discount the significance of 'taking subjectivity into account' in evaluating testimonial evidence, but to show how recognitions of subjectivity can be misused, can be turned into damaging '*ad feminam*' dismissals and discrediting of a woman's testimony on the basis of her female identity alone. Analogous claims of a black or Hispanic, unemployed or too-old person's evidence (to name just a few of the options) can readily be cited and invoked to justify or excuse acts of epistemic marginalization.

Such practices have acquired a new vocabulary and claimed new rhetorical spaces in consequence of Miranda Fricker's innovative work in introducing into circulation the discourse of epistemic injustice

(Fricker, 2007). The conceptual apparatus Fricker articulates and others have elaborated puts in place new resources for addressing practices of epistemic marginalization as they are enacted in gendered, raced or classed social spaces. Among other examples, Fricker details practices of discounting the testimony of a black witness in a courtroom, of concealment consequent upon the homophobia of a society where a young homosexual man is deterred from acknowledging his nascent sexuality, of perhaps inadvertent silencing when women cannot name behaviours that violate their personal, physical space prior to the conceptual breakthrough effected by inventing the language of sexual harassment.

Traditional adherents to epistemological orthodoxy who were sceptical about testimony from the outset will undoubtedly contend that such unresolvables are inevitable once testimony, with its subject-specific uncertainties, is accorded a respectable place in epistemic inquiry. But feminist and other social-political epistemologists welcome this new focus which, in effect, promises to relocate epistemology down on the ground, in the world, with its inevitable variations, instabilities and diversity. It opens the way to moving subjectivity and questions of credibility, responsibility and trust onto the epistemic terrain. Testimony will, inevitably, be someone's testimony, and will vary qualitatively (as well, perhaps, as quantitatively) according to who that knower is/those knowers are; to how well she, he or they adhere to principles of responsible epistemic inquiry which, variously, go beyond straightforward truth-telling, accuracy, to ensure that the knowledge conveyed is good of its kind (see Code, 1987). None of these admittedly vague requirements can be spelled out in a checklist of rules to be followed and errors to be avoided, but thinking about epistemic responsibility moves close to the realm of virtue epistemology where, indeed, no hard and fast rules are to be found, but where virtues are social attributes realizable by emulation and aspiration in social deliberative practices where the idea of epistemological

individualism recedes from centre stage and knowledge-construction becomes a communal, interpretive and deliberative practice. Developing practices of epistemic responsibility and trust involves moving away from a spectator epistemology to situations where speakers and hearers make, deliberate, take up or contest attempts to know as well as possible within and across situations and populations where knowing takes place. Shifting from a perceptual, top-down model of knowing to a horizontal model of knowledge-making as a communal activity requires rethinking some of the dominant assumptions of Anglo-American epistemology, especially those about the interchangeability of knowers, situations and subject matters. It opens the way to tacit or explicit reconsiderations of centrality and marginality: the issues that concern me here.

Although the language of margin and centre has been the point of entry for some of the issues I have been discussing, especially in its indebtedness to the title of bell hooks's landmark text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), it is worth reconsidering whether so seemingly linear a formula as the one about the superiority of and the epistemic privilege attached to knowledge from the margins can make sense, without merely replicating or reversing older hierarchical structures. It is with such cautionary thoughts in mind that I turn to revisiting these thoughts about 'the centre', thinking that while there can be little doubt about the centrality claimed for and occupied by white western affluent masculine lives and the knowledge made there, it also needs to be acknowledged that, of the many margins surrounding and excluded by this multifaceted – indeed, oddly shaped – centre, not all are equivalently privileged epistemically, if they are privileged at all; nor are knowers who are indeed commonly privileged by a single distancing-decentering aspect of their 'identity'. In short, it is important to contest the tacit assumption in western societies that there is only one 'centre', since it is clearly apparent that there are multiple forms of marginalization and

oppression that intersect variously and are variously distant from and occluded by the concerns of ‘the centre’.

Given the radical shifts in global politics during the first decades of the twenty-first century, with their exposure of global ignorance, and given the innovatively unsettling developments in feminist theory and practice, the very idea of ‘the centre’ is increasingly troubling, to the point where a new beginning seems to be in order. Such a beginning might be something akin to a quasi-Cartesian radical doubting, a phenomenological bracketing, or what Charles Mills calls ‘an operation of Brechtian defamiliarization, estrangement, on [y]our cognition’ (2005: 169). Mills’s recommendation derives from his distrust of ‘ideal ethical theory’ and the dislocated presuppositions on which it rests, but such a project has as much to recommend it with regard to ideal epistemological theory, in itself and in its uneasy relationship with the ethics and politics of knowledge. The thought is not new to feminist epistemologists, but taking it seriously involves recognizing that a significant component of responsible epistemic agency, now, across a range of issues, is for ‘us’ to come to *know*, responsibly and in its existential–ecological detail, the extent of ‘our’ ignorance. Such ‘estrangement’ – such acknowledgement of ignorance – need not paralyse inquiry. In response to the challenge early naysayers posed to Genevieve Lloyd’s *The Man of Reason*, asking her what she proposed putting in the place of Reason, she observed that it had taken so long to understand the changing historical inter-mappings of reason and masculinity that it would be facile, irresponsible, to offer up a new construct, at once, to take their place. Yet, equipped with the understandings her analysis made available, feminist and other post-colonial philosophy has proceeded with new, provocatively cautionary assessments of its own local character. An analogous situation could evolve from the kind of estrangement Mills proposes, as is evidenced more dramatically in the myriad debates generated out of his pathbreaking publication of *The*

Racial Contract (1998), which has been inspirational in generating creatively innovative feminist and post-colonial work in the new ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007).

An ‘estrangement’ or bracketing project, in my view, amounts, provocatively, to a plea for ignorance: indeed, to an acknowledgement of the need to *know our ignorance* so as to engage well with some of the most urgent conundrums of our time. It could not be addressed in disingenuous disavowals analogous to those white western women, historically, were trained to utter in deference to the superior cognitive powers of the white men of their time and station. Yet it points toward ways of counteracting the arrogance of white western perceptions (thinking of Marilyn Frye, 1983) while proceeding, if the lesson is well learned, with a renewed, but not deferential, humility. (As an aside, it is worth noting that humility is an intellectual virtue often attributed to Rachel Carson.) It is about acknowledging and countering white ignorance but, following Alison Bailey (2007: 81–2), not only about knowing and deploring injustices done but about learning – in her words – from ‘strategic uses of ignorance by people of color’, which is achievable, she maintains, not by moving out from the local with its presuppositions and its logic intact but ‘by learning to think in new logics ... developing (following Maria Lugones) an account of subjectivity that centers on multiplicity’, which turns away from the abstract individual of classical liberal ethics and epistemology, and the punctiform, monological propositional knowledge claim.

Epistemologically, certain narratives evince a capacity to map knowledge-enhancing and knowledge-impeding structures and forces, structures of ignorance and knowing, to derive normative conclusions that – deliberately, negotiably – translate from region to region, not without remainder, but as instructively in the disanalogies they expose as in the analogies they propose. In my essay ‘They Treated Him Well’ (Code, 2012b) I take as

exemplary of an ordinary ignorance that fails to see itself for what it is the situation of a woman named Maureen, the hitherto affluent white South African protagonist of Nadine Gordimer's novel *July's People*. She, in her everyday life, takes universal human sameness for granted: sameness of relationships and feelings, of conjugal arrangements and gendered divisions of labour, of the significance of places and objects. She persists in these assumptions even when she is uprooted from her affluent life to the village of her black African servant, July, and does so despite her avowed commitment to acquiring a sense of how it is for him and the people of his village, where he has provided refuge for her and her family from racial riots in the city. For her, Gordimer writes, 'The human creed depended on validities staked on a belief in the absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings. If people don't all experience emotional satisfaction and deprivation in the same way, what claim can there be for equality of need?' she wonders (Gordimer, 1981: 64). Even when she is removed from the taken-for-granted certainties of her then-time life she cannot recognize the specificity of her conceptions of sexual loyalty, 'suburban adultery' and love to the white middle-class society where she learned them; cannot wonder self-critically whether these apparently universal verities might not count as universal after all. Such a move is beyond the scope of her imagining. My aim in reading the novel is, in part, to show how little this white woman is able to realize of the sheer *local* character of the local, even in human intimacy: how ill-placed and ill-advised she is to make of that 'local' a touchstone from which to imagine the world from his position, for July, her erstwhile black servant, her 'boy'. (Bailey notes 'Ignorance flourishes when we confine our movements, thoughts, and actions to those worlds, social circles, and logics where we are most comfortable' (2007: 90)). A quasi-Cartesian bracketing might have served this woman well: had she been able to realize how narrow the range of the local

was, she might have been better able to see the presumptuousness of merely stretching its scope and terms of reference to explain the less local, the hitherto more remote, now right before her eyes. She fails to understand the value of engaging with July and with 'his place', of constructing a narrative that would enable her to know how it is for him and his people. That failure to move away from the tenacity of life at 'the centre' is ultimately her undoing.

MARGINALIZATION WITHIN

So far I have been discussing centrality and marginality as they are internally operative in cognitive practices within the feminist epistemologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But it is crucial, too, to turn our attention to a quasi-meta-epistemological issue that is also of notable concern: the marginalization of feminist epistemology as such, within the epistemologies of the mainstream. For many feminists and other post-colonial theorists, epistemology is not a self-contained philosophical pursuit engaged in for the sake of resolving perennial intellectual puzzles. Indeed, Heidi Grasswick (2012b) rightly observes that many feminist social epistemologists are committed to establishing connections between knowledge-producing practices and democratic social-political social orders. For my purposes here, one of the most telling implications of such a commitment would be in its (learned) capacity for addressing and countering some of the modalities of marginality I have articulated, with the injustices they produce. Such overarching goals do not dispute the more narrowly epistemological principle that knowledge pursuits have to be evaluated for their empirical-historical-situational adequacy, although they do contest the narrowness with which 'adequacy' has often been conceived. Thoughts such as these prompt my contention in *Ecological Thinking* that 'thinking ecologically carries with it a large measure of responsibility – to know

somehow more *carefully* than single surface readings can allow ... ecological thinking is about imagining, crafting, articulating, endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation' in epistemic and moral-political deliberation (Code, 2006: 24). Crucial here is the challenge such an exhortation presents to traditional divisions between ethics, politics and epistemology. Many feminist analyses of the social implications of knowing suggest that there are choices to be made in matters of knowledge-production that go beyond simple verification or falsification of *S* knows that *p* claims (and sometimes even there). Eschewing epistemic individualism opens inquiry into larger and arguably more complex questions about credibility, testimony, ignorance and trust where decisions have to be made that are responsible to the subject matters under investigation – be they animate or inanimate – and responsive to the specificities and larger commonalities between and among knowers and known. None of this is easy, but all of it is richly promising and seriously challenging. Such thoughts underscore the imperative of 'taking subjectivity into account' I have referred to earlier: knowing people well, whether singly or in groups, requires knowing them at least in some aspects of their specificity, their distinctness from and their commonalities with others; their circumstances of privilege and/or oppression: knowing what matters to them, the detail of their 'situations'. Epistemologically, once testimony moves onto the epistemic terrain as a recognized source of knowledge, aspects of subjectivity – testifiers' trustworthiness, their credibility, reliability – come to play a part in how their testimony is received, evaluated, acted upon. Such factors pertain variously in specialized scientific and social scientific inquiry, and variously again in a range of everyday circumstances from quotidian to legal to medical exchanges of knowledge and information, and beyond. For feminist epistemology, with its commitment to fostering deliberative democratic knowledge exchanges, it matters to nurture inclusive knowledge-making and respectful

critical-contestatory practices. Hence, for example, when Elizabeth Anderson proposes that justice and equality of respect are crucial for realizing the goals of higher education, in an article entitled 'The Democratic University: The Role of Justice in the Production of Knowledge' (1995), I am proposing that the title can and indeed ought to be read two ways, where the second reading would be 'the role of knowledge in the production of justice', thereby signalling the multiply entangled nature of these issues and the difficulty of determining which of these requirements is fundamental. The inquiry feminist epistemologists are engaged in has to go both ways.

These thoughts refer back to the quasi-meta-epistemological issue I have mentioned. In a sobering and wholly persuasive diagnosis of 'the marginalization of feminist epistemology' Phyllis Rooney observes that, in the eyes of mainstream epistemologists, the conviction persists that feminist epistemology is not epistemology 'proper' (2012: 3). Startling within the body of significant evidence she adduces in support of this claim is the observation that critics of feminist epistemology commonly develop their critiques without adhering to the norms of research, reading and reasoning they would bring to bear on critiques of positions and subject matters they were prepared to take more seriously. Rooney's apt observation conjures up a reversal of Spelman's contention about marginalizing a woman of color by assuming she must be right (cf. *supra*, p. 11): clearly, from such a dismissive point of view feminist epistemology has no claim even to be taken seriously enough to demonstrate why or how it must be wrong. To suggest that this issue is meta-epistemological has a certain plausibility, for the marginalization of feminist epistemology seems to derive from some intransigent assumptions about the 'nature' of epistemology as such, so to speak, in standing above and remaining impervious to issues of human specificity and/or embodiment in an ongoing if tacit commitment to the goal of determining

necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of knowledge ‘as such’. The very attribute ‘feminist’ vitiates the project. But this issue is also, and equally significantly, ‘sub-epistemological’ in a perhaps curious sense, for the very act of ignoring the claims of feminist epistemology to occupy a position on the epistemic terrain seems to rely on certain antiquated and sedimented subterranean convictions about the very possibility of there being, in women (here generically conceived), a capacity for reason, rationality, judgement, objectivity, clarity, discrimination, intellectual authority. Hence Rooney notes that feminist work in epistemology ‘is still regularly framed as an attack or “assault” on reason and objectivity, as something hostile to the very ground of epistemology “proper”’ (2012: 12): a point Carla Fehr underscores in her subtle analysis of diversity in epistemic communities, where she offers impressive arguments in support of her contention that, for women, ‘uptake and equality of intellectual authority prove to be particularly challenging criteria to meet’ (2012: 135). Women, Fehr notes, tend still to be ‘in marginal positions within the academy’ (2012: 151) now, more than three decades since questions about the sex of the knower were first articulated.

Rooney returns to the question of marginality and epistemic privilege with which we began, to contend that ‘being on the margins is not all bad – especially when one has good company there!’ (2012: 14); and she allows that there may indeed be some advantages to this location. Cautioning against the implausibility of claiming that epistemic privilege automatically follows from or counts as an adjunct benefit of marginality, she nonetheless observes ‘the lived experience of marginalization can enable one to see and understand things that are quite ‘invisible’ to those not marginalized’ (2012: 14), here referring again to Patricia Hill Collins’s claims for the value of the ‘doubled consciousness’ available to the ‘outsider within’ with the creative tensions it generates (2012: 14). It would be a mistake to revalue marginality with a ‘sour

grapes’ argument to the effect that the inside is so uncomfortable that no woman would want to be there anyway. But it is important not to undervalue what women – many women, of multiply intersecting colours, races, classes, capacities, nationalities and other Otherings – have achieved in their/our excluded situations.

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