

## New Materialism (<https://newmaterialism.eu/../../index.html>)

HOW MATTER COMES TO MATTER

### Situated Knowledges

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Donna Haraway coined the term 'situated knowledges' in a 1988 essay entitled *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. The term was born of a specific situation: "in scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, and male-dominant societies... in the belly of the monster, in the United States in the late 1980s" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581) but continues to have far-reaching theoretical consequences that render it a useful and vibrant notion for *thinking-with* in many recent feminist debates.

The notion works on four planes simultaneously: epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political. Demonstrating also that such planes are interrelated and not separate.

On an epistemological level the notion of situated knowledges is an effort to think outside the duality of objectivity-relativism that is both ineffective and harmful for feminist purposes. On the one hand objectivity was compromised as only seemingly neutral and in fact overburdened by power relations. Furthermore, objectivity understood as impartiality and a "view from above, from nowhere" (589) is a perspective that under the guise of neutrality, or nowhere (but embracing all), hides a very specific position (male, white, heterosexual, human) and thus makes this position universal. This move described by Haraway as "the god trick" has deep ethico-political consequences: it renders all other positions invalid and subjective and – on this ground – denies subjectivity, voice, and presence. Relativism is denied any claim for objectivity by promoting a vision of differing opinions all rendered equal. In consequence all standpoints are seen as equally constructed and all claims to objectivity are annihilated. Social constructionists played a major role in uncovering how the "god trick" is constructed.

Against this dualist background Haraway explains: "We wanted a way to go beyond showing bias in science" (578), because uncovering bias does not provide us with a theory of the 'real' world that would enable anchoring feminist ethical and political stakes. Situated knowledges is thus thought to be "a strong tool" (578) that preserves claims to objectivity but without performing "the god trick". It is well-aware of how standpoints are constructed and how contingent they are, but it does not accept one of the consequences that it is simply all a matter of opinion.

In this I see ontological, but also ethical, and political planes (and their interconnections) within situated knowledges. Situated knowledges work like an apparatus of producing "[...] a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions" (579). Epistemology here grounds ontological claims that produce conditions for imagining feminist ethics (living well) and politics (practices of domination, privilege, and oppression and their role in constituting the positions) and acting in

accordance with them.

The notion of situated knowledges is further developed by Haraway via a metaphor of vision. Notions of vision, viewpoints, eyes, and seeing have dominated many philosophical accounts of how knowledge is created at least since Plato's famous allegory of the cave. Haraway does not abandon vision as a metaphor of knowledge production processes, choosing instead to revisit it. She describes how performing "the god trick" is enabled by "a perverse capacity [...] to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (581). The "god trick" is about enacting "a conquering gaze from nowhere" (581). This gaze is claimed to be immaterial while materializing what it embraces (particularly how bodies matter: which bodies have which meanings, which bodies are deprived of meaning, and how bodies (and meanings) materialize), it is claimed to have the capacity to see, but is itself unseen, "to represent while escaping representation" (581). This gaze also erases the semiotic-material conditions that enable vision (for example technologies of vision and how they were developed). The vision (as a metaphor) that Haraway proposes is embodied, partial, and accountable/answerable for what one sees and how one organizes what one sees: "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?" (585).

Importantly, there is nothing obvious about the practice of seeing, one needs to learn seeing "technically, socially, and psychically" (583) (I would also add organically). Eyes are not passive instruments of seeing, they are actively organizing the world: "*ways* of seeing" are "*ways* of life" (583). As such vision does not produce a sense of self-presence / self-knowledge / self-identity (rightly so). Subjectivity and vision are both multidimensional, partial, split, heterogeneous, incomplete, "complex, contradictory" (589), and able to enact only "partial connections" (586). Situated knowledges demand a practice of positioning that is about carefully attending to power relations at play in the processes of knowledge production. Haraway suggests the following questions: "How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision?" (587).

"Knowing subjects" on the one hand, eyes, technologies, and methodologies of vision on the other, are not only agents in knowledge production processes. "Objects" of knowledge (oftentimes presented in opposition to "knowing subjects" as passive and inert) are likewise active: "The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization; [...] the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity" (593). Presenting the world/nature/object of study as inactive is how power relations enslave, colonize, and dominate. Feminist projects attempt to recognize how power works and acknowledge that they do not rule over or control the world: "we are not in charge of the world" (594). Thus, feminist situated knowledges open themselves for new, unexpected, unthought-of, and surprising forms of knowledge production, which may unfold from interrelated material-semiotic worlds.

Situated knowledges are not only active instruments that produce knowledge, they are moreover "the apparatus of bodily production" (595) (this notion is coined with reference to Katie King's term "apparatus of literary production" and consists in rethinking how "facticity" and "the organic" are "produced" and / or "generated" (595)), which links to a discussion on how vision is productive of bodies-meaning (how bodies matter). As Haraway states:

"[B]odies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice" (595).

Bodies that matter are therefore produced as a consequence of "mapping practices"; the boundaries that limit them are tentative, volatile, and incomplete, always open for displacement from within; Feminisms use situated knowledges to enter into "power-sensitive [...] 'conversation'" (589) with "the world as coding trickster" (596), "witty agent", or "The Coyote" (593).

For feminist new materialisms Haraway's essay on situated knowledges almost says it all: it shows the

interrelations between epistemology, ontology, ethics, and politics, the agentic capabilities of 'objects' and methodologies, human and non-human, the impossibility of clear-cut disconnections, and so on. As Iris van der Tuin stresses, Haraway "planted the seed of what are nowadays called 'feminist new materialisms'" (2015, p.21). Indeed, Haraway is in ongoing creative dialogue with other key thinkers, including Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad, and is frequently cited in the field of new materialism. For example, van der Tuin links with Haraway when she proposes her take on matters of the (feminist) canon. She offers two concepts: "jumping generations" (van der Tuin, 2009) and *classifi\_x\_ation* (van der Tuin, 2015) to stress the productivity of boundaries established in feminist genealogies and epistemologies. "Jumping generations" is "a methodology for capturing and creating third-wave feminist epistemology" (van der Tuin, 2009, p. 24) that avoids "linear conceptualisations of time and space and the trap of non-exhaustive dichotomies" (25); it is about "bridging of 'classes' that were previously considered to be incommensurable, while being, in fact, part of a non-exhaustive dichotomy" (24). As such it allows turning to the new (feminist materialisms) without turning away from the old. In fact, it allows to grasp the possible future of past feminist theories, methodologies, research by grasping the virtuality of feminist past theorizing. Another of van der Tuin's concepts – *classifi\_x\_ation* also alludes to "boundary projects" (such as classifications) and was introduced "to demonstrate how a classification is not a neutral mediator but is thoroughly entangled with the work that it does" (van der Tuin, 2015, p. 19). *Classifi\_x\_ations* work through establishing boundaries on the grounds of dualistic logic. As a consequence, "'feminist epistemic categories' that are incongruous phenomena or incompatible theoretical reflections" (28) are not included and – being generative as they are – produce cracks in the canon. Those "cracks – not expected and often actively dismissed by second wavers – allow for feminist futures of diverse feminist epistemic categories to remain active, even though the specific progress narrative structure which runs through textbook accounts of feminism might suggest otherwise" (29). Again, we do not have to turn away from past theorizing, but instead read it otherwise – outside linear and dichotomic structures of *classifi\_x\_ation* – read it diffractively.

Peta Hinton offers another example of thinking with Haraway, focused on the political stakes embraced in situated knowledges, Hinton investigates another example of a "boundary project": the production of perspective, positioning, and the "politics of location" (Rich 1986). She diagnoses the "problem of difference" (Hinton, 2015, p. 101) as linked to the practice of locating oneself: "reconfiguring of subjectivity disrupts the capacity to secure the identity of woman in any straightforward manner, while at the same time it requires something *of* this identity in order to ground its political aspirations" (102). According to Hinton, Haraway's essay is a potent contribution to a feminist understanding of positioning that enables thinking of positioning and displacement simultaneously, through its focus on the partiality of perspective: "an identity which assumes its place, its ability to *be* located, is still made available in her argument at precisely the same time as its claim to self-presence is displaced. The privilege of identity is not removed, but neither can it be assumed" (109). Hinton offers the concept of "annunciative politics" (110) that "address[es] the capacity *for* identity as a political gesture" (110) and directs feminists attention to the necessary violence of positioning.

In 2016, the 7th Annual Conference on the New Materialisms was entitled *Performing Situated Knowledges: Space, Time, Vulnerability* and was organized to celebrate the 30th anniversary of situated knowledges being published. The organizers invited "participants to explore, perform anew, and enliven the concept of 'situated knowledges'" (Call for Papers, 2016) in the hope that situated knowledges might add insights to ongoing debates on how knowledge is produced in precarious times.

Situated knowledges is now also used within environmental humanities and debates on the Anthropocene, which might open further future usages of the concept in question. Some conceptualizations of the Anthropocene may be understood as wiping differences and inequalities away under the guise of the *anthropos*. Suggesting that paradoxically the universal position has returned. Moreover, as Stacy Alaimo insists, the Anthropocene is envisioned by means of "the god trick": "God's-eye view" (Alaimo, 2017, p. 90). Thus, efforts to produce a vision from nowhere that embraces everything are still detectable and – in response – the need to enact situated knowledges is still urgent. Ecological thinking today – in view of ecological urgencies, extinction of species, and climate change – might be another way to practice situated knowledges and link this concept with the

posthumanities.

**KEYWORDS** : situated knowledges, Donna Haraway, material-semiotic nodes, boundaries, "the apparatus of bodily production", vision, objectivity, power relations, accountability.

**GENEALOGIES** : feminist epistemologies, feminist science and technology studies, feminist materialisms, Sandra Harding, politics of location.

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**ANTONYMS** : "the god trick", neutrality, universality, biased knowledge, "view from nowhere", "view from above", impartiality.

**HYPERNYMS** : (feminist) epistemology, ontology, ethics, politics, methodology.

**SYNONYMS** : feminist objectivity, embodied objectivity, partial connection, partial perspective, "mapping practices", accountable science, "power-sensitive conversation".

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