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Author(s): Nancy Hartsock

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Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory

Nancy Hartsock

Throughout the eighties, white North American feminist theorists have been responding to arguments originating from radical women of color that feminist theory must take more account of diversity among women. Too much feminist theory was written from a perspective in which white middle-class women were seen as the norm and women of color were excluded and devalued. This exclusion had important effects on the theories white feminists developed. To give just one example, white feminist theory assumed a split between the private world of the family, on the one hand, and public life on the other. Yet black femi-

This article builds on and may be read in conjunction with "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (Fall 1987): 187–206, and "Foucault on Power" A Theory for Women?" in *The Gender of Power*, ed. Monique Leyenaar et al. (Leiden, Netherlands: Vakgroep Vrouwenstudies, 1987), reprinted in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 157–75. I would also like to thank those who responded to the paper at the conference on "Marxism Today" in December 1989 and groups at York University, the University of Chicago, and UCLA. The problems that remain are, of course, my own.

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nists have pointed out that in the black community there is no private sphere protected from state intervention. Social workers, police, courts, and other state agencies all intervene on a scale that does not allow for a private familial world insulated from the state.¹ Feminist theory must take account of these structurally different situations. Note, too, that given this example, it is not a matter of simply adding women of color and their situations to the list of things feminist theory is concerned about. The inclusion of many different women will and must affect the concepts and theories themselves.

I believe that it was in response to these arguments that a number of feminist theorists found postmodernist theories attractive. Here were arguments about incommensurability, multiplicity, and the lack of definitive answers. These writings, many of them by radical intellectuals, ranged from literary criticism to the social sciences. The writers—Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Lyotard, and others—argue against the faith in universal reason we have inherited from European Enlightenment philosophy. They reject stories that claim to encompass all of human history. In its place they propose a social criticism that is *ad hoc* contextual, plural, and limited.

Although feminist theorists have noted that postmodernist theories may contribute to the development of less totalizing theories, they have also recognized that postmodernism develops only an “anemic” politics and therefore that postmodernist approaches need to be supplemented with feminist politics.² My own view, however, is that postmodernist theories suffer from a number of epistemological difficulties that cannot be fully remedied by the addition of a dose of feminist politics.

The Enlightenment Tradition

Postmodernism is reacting against a particular body of thought that postmodernists argue is characterized by several im-

1. Aida Hurtado, “Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 833–55.

2. See, for example, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1989), 19–38.

portant features. Most frequently, this body of thought is termed “the Enlightenment.” This specifically modernist and Western tradition of political thought, which emerged in western Europe over the last several hundred years, is characterized by several distinctive epistemological features. First, the “god-trick” was pervasive, and the tradition depended on the assumption that one can see everything from nowhere, that disembodied reason can produce accurate and “objective” accounts of the world.³ Second, and related, the Enlightenment was marked by a faith in the neutrality of reasoned judgment, in scientific objectivity, in the progressive logic of reason in general and of science in particular. Third, it claimed to assume human universality and homogeneity, based on the common capacity to reason. Differences were held to be fundamentally epiphenomenal. Thus, one could speak of human nature, truth, and other imperial universalities. Fourth, all this had the effect of allowing for transcendence through the omnipotence of reason. Through reason, the philosopher could escape the limits of body, time, and space and could therefore contemplate the eternal problems related to man as knower. Finally, Enlightenment political thought was characterized by a denial of the importance of power to knowledge and concomitantly by a denial of the centrality of systematic domination in human societies. The subject/individual and power were held to be distinct.⁴

It is worth remembering that these fundamentally optimistic philosophies both grew out of and expressed the social relations of the expanding market/capitalist societies of Europe.⁵ At the same time, many of the philosophers who were central to Western political thought also contributed to the development of ideologies that supported colonialism, the slave trade, the expansion

3. I owe the phrase “god-trick” to Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 575–99.

4. This is a case made about Enlightenment epistemology. Clearly there were other world views extant, but this is the one that seems to have come down to us as the dominant one and the one against which postmodernists argue.

5. See Chantal Mouffe, “Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern,” trans. Paul Holdenraber, in *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 31–45. See also my critique of the ways assumptions express the epistemology of the commodity in chapter 5 of *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), 95–114.

of Western patriarchal relations, etc. One can recall J.S. Mill's statements about despotism being a proper government for savages or Montesquieu's views about the effects of climate on human nature—to the detriment of those who lived in the tropics—and his use of women in the harem as symbols of human depravity.

Thus, despite a stated adherence to universal principles, the epistemological and political thought of the Enlightenment depended on the dualistic construction of a different world, a world onto which was projected an image of everything that ruling-class, male Europeans wanted to believe they were not. Edward W. Said names the fundamental dynamic of the process clearly when he states that the creation of the Orient (and one might add, the creation of various other racial, gender, and even class categories) was an outgrowth of the will to power. "Orientalism," he said, is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."⁶

It must be remembered that this Eurocentric, masculinist, and capitalist world was constructed not only in theory but also in fact through such practices as the Atlantic slave trade, the development of plantation agriculture in the New World, the introduction of markets and private property in Africa, the colonization of large parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and the introduction of European forms of patriarchal and masculinist power. These were the means by which the duality and the domination of Europe, and later North America—the "rich North Atlantic democracies" as Richard Rorty has termed them—were institutionalized in fact as well as in thought. Duality, inequality, and domination were established in the name of universality and progress; ironically, power relations were institutionalized in and through a mode of thinking that denied any connections between knowledge and power or between the construction of subjectivity and power. The philosophical and historical creation of devalued Others was the necessary precondition, then, for the creation of the transcendent, rational subject who can persuade himself that he exists outside time and space and power relations. The subject is the speaker in Enlightenment philosophy.

6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 3.

The social relations that both express and form the material base for the theoretical construction of this Enlightenment subjectivity have been rejected on a world scale over the last several decades.⁷ Decolonization struggles, movements of young people, women's movements, and racial liberation movements all represent the diverse and disorderly Others beginning to take political power, to demand participation in the "public realm," and to chip away at the social and political power of the "individual."

I believe that, as a result of these social and political changes, some European intellectuals are beginning to reject many of the totalizing and universalizing theories of the Enlightenment. In efforts to develop alternatives to the imperialist universalities of the Enlightenment, a number of authors have argued that postmodernist theories can provide helpful guidance. For example, Chantal Mouffe argues that the postmodern critique comes into its own when one attempts to take account of the variety of democratic struggles in the contemporary world. As she puts it, "[T]o be capable of thinking politics today, and understanding the nature of these new struggles and the diversity of social relations that the democratic revolution has yet to encompass, it is indispensable to develop a theory of the subject as a decentered, detotalized agent." In these circumstances, identity is never definitively established.⁸

My own view is that postmodernist theorists remain imprisoned in the terrain of Enlightenment thought and fail to provide the ground for alternative and more emancipatory accounts of subjectivity. Moreover, despite the theorists' own desires to avoid universal claims and their stated opposition to these claims, some imperial and universalist assumptions creep back into their work. For those of us who have been marginalized and subjugated in various ways and who need to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodernist theories at their best fail to provide an alternative to the Enlightenment.

7. I use the term "subjectivity" rather than "identity" to mark what I see as the achievement of developing a political world view. Thus one can speak of Euro-American men of the ruling class, but to speak of subjectivity is to speak of the epistemology and account of the world that grew from this identity.

8. Mouffe, "Radical Democracy," 35.

The Failures of Postmodernism

Let us return to the several issues broached at the outset of this argument—the several characteristic assumptions of Enlightenment thought as characterized by postmodernist thinkers. Rather than simply argue against a generalized postmodernism, I will discuss the ways in which issues of concern appear in the work of two quite different theorists, Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault.⁹ Because they emerge from quite different intellectual traditions and have divergent political views, together they can stand for a substantial range of postmodernist thought. Both Rorty and Foucault reject (in different ways) each of the several Enlightenment assumptions I listed at the beginning of this paper. Yet despite profound differences in their stated projects and, indeed, in their work, both projects ultimately inhabit the terrain defined by the Enlightenment. At best these postmodernist theories criticize Enlightenment assumptions without putting anything in their place. And at worst they recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories that deny the dominated the right to participate in defining the terms of interaction.

First, both Rorty and Foucault claim to have rejected the “god-trick,” or the view of everything from nowhere. Rorty has done so in the name of rejecting “Epistemology.” It must be noted that his choice of terminology implies that the epistemology of the West constitutes the only possible theory of knowledge. Without *that* theory, we must give up claims to knowledge. Because of their different styles and intellectual ancestors, it may be surprising to argue that Foucault makes a very similar move. But Foucault’s arguments—that truth must be seen as simply legitimized errors, that what we have called reason is born from chance, and that the essence of things must be understood to have been fabricated “in piecemeal fashion from alien forms”¹⁰—represent a similar rejection of Enlightenment assumptions. He, like Rorty, has come to

9. I have analyzed their work in more detail in *Postmodernism and Political Change* (forthcoming) and simply summarize my conclusions here.

10. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142–43.

the conclusion that if one cannot see everything from nowhere, one cannot really see anything at all. Thus, both argue for taking parodic and satiric positions, for taking the position that one is not in a position to take a position, and their analyses indicate that they take the position that if one cannot engage in the god-trick, there is no such thing as knowledges.¹¹

It should be recognized that Foucault's attack is far more systematic and thorough than Rorty's. Not only does he reject the gaze from nowhere, but he is clear that the attack must also include the subject who claims to engage in disembodied knowledge gathering. Thus, unlike Rorty, Foucault argues that the question of the subject must be attended to by "creating a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject," or, as I would put it, are made objects or "objectified subjects."¹²

Second, both Rorty and Foucault reject the neutrality of reason. Rorty simply suggests abandoning claims to rationality, objectivity, and certain knowledge: one should give up the process of constructing theoretical schemes and be reactive and peripheral instead. Foucault, too, attacks the notion of reason, of the solemnity of history, and argues for a reverence for irreverence. One must reject, he states, the "great stories of continuity."¹³ Thus, once reason has been exposed as biased rather than neutral, the very possibility of knowledge must be abandoned. Once again, the assumptions underlying this form of argument point to the implicit conclusion that if the objective knowledge claimed (falsely) by Enlightenment thought is not available, then one must abandon the search for any knowledge at all.

Third, both Rorty and Foucault argue in their different ways that we must give up on human universals. Rorty proposes that instead we should accept the notion of incommensurable discourses and abandon the search for commensurability. Foucault's

11. In "Situated Knowledges" Donna Haraway has argued that relativism itself is another form of the god-trick.

12. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208.

13. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 140, 163.

argument takes a different form to reach similar conclusions: one must unmask the demagoguery cloaked by universals such as truth and laws of essences.¹⁴ One must be suspicious not only of claims to universal truths, but even of claims to reject these truths. Indeed, at least one commentator has argued that Foucault “doesn’t take a stand on whether or not there is a human nature. Rather, he changes the subject. . . .”¹⁵

Fourth, both Foucault and Rorty reject the search for transcendence and omnipotence. But they put forward alternatives that lead in the direction of passivity and immobility. Rorty tells us we must abandon the search for truth in favor of joining in edifying conversation. Because the great certainties available to omnipotent and eternal reason no longer obtain, one must settle for conversations rather than search for knowledge. Nor do there appear to be urgent issues of social change or justice that need to be addressed by means other than a conversation.

Foucault’s political commitments appear to be quite different, yet his counsels lead in very similar directions. He feels that we should at least unmask and criticize political violence.¹⁶ But at the same time his rejection of the hope of transcendence leads him to conclude that the only possibilities open to us involve the tracing of the ways humans have been subjugated. Marshall Berman has eloquently summed up the conclusion to which Foucault presses us:

Do we use our minds to unmask oppression—as Foucault appears to be trying to do? Forget it, because all forms of inquiry into the human condition “merely refer individuals from one disciplinary authority to another,” and hence only add to the triumphant “discourse of power.” There is no point in trying to resist the oppressions and injustices of modern life, since even our dreams of freedom only add more links to our chains; however, once we grasp the total futility of it all, at least we can relax.¹⁷

14. *Ibid.*, 158.

15. Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 4.

16. *Ibid.*, 5. Note that he argues that one should not fight for justice since it is a notion too tied to power.

17. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 34.

Finally, their quite different relationships to power both reject and depend on Enlightenment assumptions; Rorty recapitulates one of these assumptions by simply ignoring power relations. Moreover, his defense of the values of the Enlightenment amounts to an acknowledgement of his status as the inheritor of its values, and thus, the epistemology that supports them. It is implicitly a statement about the need to ignore power relations in order to adhere to these values.

On this point, as elsewhere, Foucault's case is more complex. He explicitly rejects the values of the Enlightenment and recognizes that a stance of ignoring power relations implicitly endorses domination. This he refuses, yet despite his efforts, these values creep back in, not with any explicit endorsement, but rather through his reliance on his reader's adherence to these values to give his project force. Moreover, his arguments that efforts at transformation are too dangerous, and that even attempting to imagine alternatives implicates us in the system, suggest that we should not change the power relations of our culture, which extend everywhere around us. Finally, by insisting on metaphors of web and net, rather than structures of domination, we are led to conclude merely that each of us both dominates and is dominated. We are all responsible, and so in a sense no one is responsible. Thus, the question of how to analyze structures of domination is obscured.

But if these two postmodernist theorists present less an alternative to the overconfident theories of the Enlightenment than a parasitic continuation of its preoccupations, positions associated with dominated and marginalized groups can offer quite different ways of looking at the world, ways that can situate not only these knowledges but also can reveal both Enlightenment and postmodernist theories to be the situated knowledges of a particular group—Euro-American, masculine, and racially as well as economically privileged.¹⁸ Postmodernist theories should be understood as a situated knowledge that reveals itself as “the felt

18. The phrase, “situated knowledge” comes from Haraway's essay, “Situated Knowledges.” My analysis here is indebted to this piece. The fact that a situated knowledge represents and expresses the experience of a particular group does not rule out the possibility that other groups may choose to subscribe to it. Indeed, the dominant group actively constrains others to accept their views.

absence of the will or the ability to change things as they are . . . the voice of epistemological despair.”¹⁹ Indeed, these moves represent the transcendent and omnipotent voice of Enlightenment subjectivity attempting to come to grips with the social and historical changes of the middle to late twentieth century. But there are alternatives to adopting the position of either an omnipotent god or an impotent critic.

Alternative understandings of knowledge are possible, and feminist theory faces tasks that require moving to a new terrain. Most importantly, I believe that the task facing all progressive theorists is that of trying to expose and clarify the theoretical bases for political alliance and solidarity. Such analyses are, of course, no substitute for collective action and coalition building but a necessary adjunct to it. What can be the bases of solidarity among those who have been defined as the Native, the Woman, the Oriental, the negative and enigmatic others who have experienced the powerful distortions, inversions, and erasures of oppression?²⁰ While these groups share the experience of being marginalized and devalued, the primary lived experience itself takes a variety of disparate forms. The question I want to address is what sorts of subjectivities—in this case, oppositional consciousnesses—can grow out of these experiences? Put differently, what are the epistemological features characteristic of marked as opposed to fictionally unmarked subjectivities?

Epistemologies of Marked Subjectivities

But what do these alternatives look like? First, it must be remembered that these epistemologies grow out of an experience of domination. And it must be recognized that the historical creation and maintenance of the dominance of Euro-American masculinist culture requires a series of renamings and redefinings.

19. Kum Kum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (Fall 1987): 161. She makes a case similar to my own when she argues that the tenuousness of knowledge in the West is but a symptom and critique of the contemporary social and economic situation of the West (185).

20. The use of the singular is important: it indicates that there are no individual differences among members of these groups.

For example, Eduardo Galeano, writing of the situation in Latin America, states that “‘Freedom’ in my country is the name of a jail for political prisoners, and ‘democracy’ forms part of the title of various regimes of terror; the word ‘love’ defines the relationship of a man with his automobile, and ‘revolution’ is understood to describe what a new detergent can do in your kitchen. . . .” He adds that perhaps one should recognize Latin America’s “inspired contributions” to methods of torture and techniques of assassination.²¹ Or consider the fact that the massacres carried out in Central America and elsewhere in recent years by the “forces of order” or “peacekeeping forces” are referred to as “normalization.” Driving people from their homes and destroying their crops are the actions of “freedom fighters.” The U.S. State Department has decreed that instead of “murder” one must refer to “illegal or arbitrary deprivation of life.” And of course the CIA has long since ceased to kill people—it “neutralizes” them.²² Condemning poor women in the United States to death from back-room abortions because no state funding is available is termed “pro-life.” These are not merely verbal sleights of hand, but are conditions of life made real through the power of the ruling group.

The problem posed for the oppressed and marginalized is clearly stated in Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s Nobel prize address: “[O]ur crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude. . . . The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary. . . .”²³ The result is that the dominated

21. Eduardo Galeano, “In Defense of the Word: Leaving Buenos Aires, June, 1976,” in *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multi-Cultural Literacy*, ed. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1988), 124, 114.

22. See Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 14, 270.

23. *Ibid.*, 262. Márquez’s work makes similar points about incommensurable realities. He argues that ordinary people who have read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have found no surprises, because “I’m telling them nothing that hasn’t happened in their own lives” (*The Fragrance of Guava*, trans. Ann Wright [London: Verso, 1982], 36, and cited in Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” 164). The links between female, the powerless and colonized, chastity—the unknown to be conquered—are all explored in his fiction (Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” 169).

and marginalized are forced to inhabit multiple worlds. W.E.B. DuBois has described this situation well: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."²⁴

This situation leads to a number of epistemological results and to an elaboration of knowledges of the world that grow out of and express the specific forms of oppression and exploitation experienced by each group. While the content of these knowledges is specific to the group in question, the similarities some scholars have pointed to between Afrocentric and feminist epistemologies mark one instance that supports my contention that material conditions of existence may differ profoundly but still generate some uniformity in the epistemologies of subordinate groups.²⁵ In addition, one must recognize that not all members of a group will uniformly share an epistemology. Thus, Patricia Hill Collins argues, despite the presence of a black women's standpoint, the material conditions structured by social class will have effects on the perspective.²⁶

As Fredric Jameson has put it: "the presupposition is that owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups."²⁷ One must also recognize that these situated knowledges are at once available to members of oppressed groups and at the same time represent an achievement in the face of dominant ideologies. There is a role for intellectuals in making these knowledges clear, in explaining a group to itself, in articulat-

24. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett World Library, nd) 16, cited in Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 273–274.

25. See Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) and Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 745–73.

26. Collins, "Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 758.

27. Fredric Jameson, "History and Class Consciousness as an 'Unfinished Project,'" *Rethinking Marxism* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 65.

ing taken-for-granted understandings. As one author put it, intellectuals can be historically useful if they can help others become aware of who they are and can help to reveal collective identity.²⁸

The significance of experiences of marginalization and subordination for developing knowledge and subjectivity has been described in a number of ways. I have argued elsewhere that for Western (white) women, the experience of life under patriarchy allows for the possibility of developing an understanding both of the falseness and partiality of the dominant view and a vision of reality which is deeper and more complex than that view.²⁹ Several others have put forward similar accounts of the nature of the knowledge available to the subjugated. Thus, Sangari writes that for Third World people, the difficulty of arriving at fact through the "historical and political distortions that so powerfully shape and mediate it" leads them not to destroy the status of fact (as she argues postmodernist theories do), but rather to assert a different level of factuality, "a plane on which the notion of knowledge as provisional and of truth as historically circumscribed is not only necessary for understanding but can in turn be made to work from positions of engagement within the local and contemporary." Her conclusions about Márquez's marvelous realism as one response to this situation are similar to my own quite different argument about the possibilities made available by the experiences of patriarchy in women's lives. She argues that marvelous realism operates because, "If the real is historically structured to make invisible the foreign locus of power, if the real may thus be other than what is generally visible, . . . then marvelous realism tackles the problem of truth at a level that reinvents a more comprehensive mode of referentiality."³⁰

Gloria Anzaldúa, writing out of the experience of a Chicana living on the Mexico-Texas border, describes a similar phenome-

28. Galeano, "In Defense of the Word," 116. See also Collins, "Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 750.

29. See my argument in chapter ten of *Money, Sex, and Power*. I add the parenthetical "white" in the text because that was the focus of my analysis. Collins has produced a much more nuanced account of a feminist standpoint in the context of black women's experience which shows the utility of the concept for other groups, see "Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought."

30. Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible," 161, 163.

non in terms reminiscent of Sangari's discussion. She points not only to the experience of living in two realities and thus being forced to exist in the interface, but also to "la facultad," the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meanings of deeper realities, to see the "deep structure below the surface." And she argues, "Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign." It is a survival tactic unknowingly cultivated by those caught between the worlds, but, she adds, "it is latent in all of us."³¹

Sylvia Wynter, self described as a dark-skinned, middle-aged Caribbean woman, has made another similar argument about our shared identity as a "set of negative Ontological Others." (She includes women and minorities in opposition to "man-as-a-natural-organism.") From our systemic role, she argues, we can make potentially innovative contributions based on our liminal status as defined by our location in the social structure. As liminal subjects who experience to varying degrees the injustices of the social structures that define us, we can disenchant our fellow systemic subjects. The status of liminality gives us a "cognitive edge."³²

The knowledges available to these multiple subjectivities have different qualities than that of the disembodied and singular subject of Western political thought. Moreover, despite the specificity of each view from below, several fundamental aspects are shared. While I cannot discuss these qualities in detail here, I will describe some of their general outlines.³³

Most fundamentally, these are situated knowledges—that is,

31. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 37–39.

32. Sylvia Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (Fall 1987): 235–37. I should note that she argues not for the development of totalistic narratives or any narratives at all but, rather, that minority discourse must call into question the grounding premises of all the systems of the West.

33. I want to acknowledge my important debts to several theorists. Most important is Donna Haraway, whose term, "situated knowledges," I have appropriated. I use it in slightly different ways than she has. I also found Kum Kum Sangari's article, "The Politics of the Possible," very suggestive. Finally, I have drawn on Fredric Jameson's essay commenting *inter alia* on my work: "History

they are located in a particular time and space. They are therefore partial. They do not see everything from nowhere but they do see some things from somewhere. They are the knowledges of specific cultures and peoples. As an aspect of being situated, these knowledges represent a response to and an expression of a specific embodiment. The bodies of the dominated have been made to function as the marks of their oppression: we are not allowed to pretend they do not exist.

Because situated, these knowledges cannot be other than social and collective. Those of us that Euro-American masculinist thought marked as Other cannot but experience the world collectively since our stigmatized identities are formed as members of groups. As Albert Memmi so powerfully noted, we carry the “mark of the plural.”³⁴ This profoundly affects the possibilities of perception and makes it far more difficult (though certainly not impossible) to imagine ourselves as isolated and abstract individuals.

One can describe the shape of these knowledges in still more detail by attending to the features of the social location occupied by dominated groups. These knowledges express multiple and often contradictory realities; they are not fixed but change with the changing shape of the historical conjuncture and the balance of forces. They are both critical of and vulnerable to the dominant culture, and are separated off and opposed to it, yet also contained within it. Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem expresses and enacts these characteristics:

To live in the Borderlands means
 you are at home, a stranger wherever you are
 the border disputes have been settled
 the volley of shots have shattered the truce
 you are wounded, lost in action
 fighting back, a survivor.³⁵

and Class Consciousness as Unfinished Project.” Where possible I have noted specific debts to them.

34. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 85.

35. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera*, 14.

All these characteristics mark the fact that these knowledges represent a series of achievements: they result from and express a series of ongoing efforts to keep from being made invisible, to keep from being destroyed by the dominant culture. The struggle has very high stakes—survival itself. As Audre Lorde has put it: “we were never meant to survive; Not as human beings.”³⁶

In addition, the knowledge of marked subjectivities opens possibilities that may or may not be realized. To the extent that these knowledges are self-conscious about their aspects and assumptions, they make available new epistemological options. The struggles they represent and express, if made self-conscious, can go beyond efforts at survival to recognize the centrality of systematic power relations; they can become knowledges that are both accountable and engaged. As the knowledges of the dominated, they are “savvy to modes of denial” including repression, forgetting, disappearing.³⁷ Thus, while they recognize themselves as never fixed or fully achieved, they can claim to present a truer or more adequate account of reality. As the knowledges that recognize themselves as those of the dominated and marginalized, these self-consciously situated knowledges must focus on changing contemporary power relations and thus point beyond the present.

I must insert a caveat here. I do not contend that white Western women share the situation of either Western women or men of color or of colonized peoples. In any effort at alliance, close attention must be given to the specific situations of each group as defined by axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality. I hope to avoid the “we are all sisters in struggle” move in which the feminist subject is unmarked and therefore implicitly Western.³⁸ It is important to locate white feminist theory in terms both of victimhood and complicity.³⁹ It is certainly true that white femi-

36. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Spinsters Ink Press, 1982), 42.

37. See Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” on this point.

38. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3/13, no. 1 (Spring/Fall 1984): 333–58.

39. It may begin to sound as though I am replicating Foucault’s move of locating oneself in a web of power relations. But I am arguing not so much for examining the “capillary” actions of power as for giving attention to location in structures of domination.

nist theory has made a number of moves which failed to include the situations of many women of color. These included such things as assumptions that the family is by definition patriarchal and an advocacy of female separatism.⁴⁰ Attention to the specifics of each group's situation can allow for recognition of the fact that the subordination of different groups is often obtained and maintained by different mechanisms. Aida Hurtado has pointed to the differing strategies of rejection and seduction in subordinating women of color as opposed to white women. And she points out that when white middle-class women rebel they are likely to end up in mental hospitals, as opposed to people of color, who are more likely to go to prison.⁴¹ Lorde has made the point very clearly: "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you. We fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying."⁴² As a result of these differences, one must expect the feminisms of different groups to emphasize the political issues that are most salient in that particular social location: white feminists' efforts to bring the concerns of the private sphere into public life, black feminists' emphasis on economic issues, and Chicana feminists' attention to issues of language and family illustrate the ways in which certain issues become unavoidable for some groups while they remain less salient for others.

My argument here, however, is that at the level of epistemology there are a number of similarities that can provide the basis for differing groups to understand each other and form alliances. In addition, attention to the epistemologies of situated knowledges can allow for the construction of important alternatives to the dead-end oppositions set up by postmodernism's rejection of the Enlightenment. Rather than attempt the god-trick or reject the possibility of knowledge altogether, these alternatives to Enlightenment thought recognize themselves, as well as Enlighten-

40. See Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 58.

41. Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege," 849.

42. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 131–32, and quoted in Hurtado, "Relating to Privilege," 851.

ment and postmodernist theories, as views from somewhere. They recognize that the knowledge we claim is conditioned by the locations we occupy.

Second, rather than insist on the false dichotomy of the neutrality of reason as opposed to bias, these views from below recognize the multiple and contradictory nature of their reality. Lack of neutrality need not mean lack of knowledge; indeed, when self-conscious, these knowledges can help us recognize how doctrines of the neutrality of reason have been used to distort, deny, and erase realities other than that of the dominant group.

Third, the oppressed have experienced the murderous effects of the exclusive universalities promulgated by the West, which are predicated on the disembodied status of reason. The situated knowledges of the oppressed make no claim to the disembodied universality of reason. Because of their embodied, social, and collective nature, they can also avoid the opposite problem of a descent into a particularistic relativism.

Fourth, rather than accept the false choice of omnipotence or impotence, these knowledges can be recognized as limited and changing, as ongoing achievements of continuing struggles. Finally, as engaged knowledges, born of struggle and survival against the odds, they must give close attention to issues of power. Fear, vulnerability, struggles to survive, and thus issues of power and empowerment are at the heart of these knowledges.

Therefore, to develop an alternative account of the world requires both the changing of power relations and the development of subjectivities grounded in the experience of the dominated and marginalized. Those of us who have been constituted as sets of negative qualities need to engage in the historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of history, subjects who inhabit multiple, superimposed, and opposed realities. We must recognize ourselves as both makers of history and the objects and victims of those who have made history. Our nonbeing was the condition of being of the One, the center, of the taken-for-granted ability of one small segment of the population to speak for all. Our various efforts to constitute ourselves as subjects (through struggles for colonial independence, racial and sexual liberation struggles, etc.) were fun-

damental to creating the preconditions for the current questioning of claims to universality.

Attention to the epistemologies contained in our various subjugated knowledges can allow us to shift the theoretical terrain in fundamental ways and to exit from the false dichotomies that define and limit both Enlightenment thought and postmodernist efforts to reject it.