

Histories, Methods and Current Practices of Feminist Situated Knowledges

Seminar and Conference

In 1988, Donna Haraway published "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". This text was originally a discussion with Sandra Harding (*The Science Question in Feminism*, 1986). More broadly, "Situated Knowledges" is also rooted in the debates raised by standpoint theory and the idea of a "feminist objectivity" in the field of natural sciences (Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, Ruth Hubbard) and social sciences (Nancy Hartsock, Jane Flax, Hilary Rose, Dorothy Smith, Joan W. Scott, Patricia Hill Collins). In "Situated Knowledges", Haraway claims her affinities with deconstruction, her link to science studies and her relation to the Marxist heritage. Nevertheless, the feminist critique of dominant science and epistemology differs from all of these fields of study. Undoubtedly, the attention to materialities and discourses, the historicization of knowledges, the awareness of domination, the critique of hegemony, the concern to hold together knowledge and emancipation, to make visible the point of view of the subjugated, and the will to provide a better description of the world remain on the agenda. However, these feminist approaches have renewed the ways of dealing with these questions.

According to Haraway, consolidating the proposal of feminist objectivity and making room for the standpoint in knowledge production requires to think about the embodiment of any vision. We see with our eyes and our bodies, but also through technical and semiotic systems, through visualization devices, which are all ways of seeing. This embodied vision - inevitably localized, limited, partial - makes the question of "how to see" a crucial one. To that extent, it challenges a double fantasy: the positivist one (the idea of an objectivity achieved "from nowhere", of a full and total position), as well as the relativist one (the idea of an infinite and indifferent interchangeability of perspectives). In that sense, to engage with situated knowledges is not to make partiality "for its own sake". What is at stake with this notion is not the defense of a given identity or position (deemed more just or true), but rather to account for the places and histories from which we see and produce knowledge. It also means to construct, from these locations, partial connections (Marilyn Strathern) with those, humans and more than humans, who share our worlds. This theory also departs from the understanding of the world as a passive object in order to consider it as an agent with which we seek to "enter into non-innocent conversations". Haraway invites us to inventing ways of knowing, acting and living with response-ability (i.e., in reference to Haraway's recent use of the term, accountability is associated with the capacity to respond). Thus, the proposal of situated knowledges is simultaneously epistemological, political and ethical, and suggests other ways of entering into the webs of knowledge and power.

While many researchers, activists and artists claim to be engaged in situated knowledge productions, we propose to explore their meanings along three approaches (that are not mutually exclusive):

The first approach consists in shedding light on the sources, which can be explicit or implicit, behind Haraway's "Situated Knowledges". The underlying idea of this first approach is that

“Situated Knowledges” is a polyphonic writing in which Haraway dialogues with various texts and, more broadly, with the epistemological, scientific and political debates that existed at the time her text appeared. How does “Situated Knowledges” relate to feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, Hartsock, Hill Collins)? How does it relate to the reception of Derridean deconstruction or psychoanalysis in the United States? How does it relate to the development of Black Feminist thought or to the postcolonial and decolonial theorizations proposed by women living and speaking in borderlands (Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Chandra T. Mohanty)? What is the specific contribution of ecofeminism to the feminist critique of science and to the elaboration of the situated knowledges approach, at a time when the nuclear escalation was once again raising the question of the survival of the earth and of its inhabitants?

The second approach consists in exploring the ways that the proposal of situated knowledges positions itself, with regard to the philosophical traditions and epistemologies of the social and historical sciences (which have also affirmed and claimed the situated character of knowledge and sought to give its full presence to an embodied subjectivity)?

This second approach of reflection raises questions such as: Which continuities and differences can we observe in comparison with the "perspectivism" of Husserlian phenomenology? Or with Merleau-Ponty's critique of the “high flying thought” and his claim that knowledge is rooted in perceptive activity, in the interweaving of the symbolic and the sensible? Or with Sartre's affirmation of the historically situated character of knowledge and writing, from which one attempts to build a posture of engagement? Or with the way Foucault considered the relationship between knowledge and power and sought to cultivate a critique inserted in his own present? Or with the way various traditions of social sciences have raised the question of objectivity? But also: how do the epistemological, political and ethical stakes of situated knowledges relate to and differ from those identified by E.P. Thompson's historiography "from below" and by Subaltern Studies (Ranjit Guha, Gayatri C. Spivak, etc.) - writings that are undeniably echoed in contemporary lively debates around feminist objectivity?

The third approach consists in drawing attention to the projects of those who, nowadays, reactivate the possibilities opened by the proposal of situated knowledges. Through this last approach, we wish to explore the current practices of situated knowledges. Why does it matter to us nowadays to engage with situated knowledges - whether in the academic field or outside of it, in traditional academic disciplines or in decolonial, feminist, queer or environmental studies? How does the proposal of situated knowledges challenge the boundaries of knowledge and power (between theory and practice, between academic and non-academic knowledge, between science and politics) and how does it renew critical thinking? To which needs and projects do situated and embodied knowledges, which are based on partial and open connections, respond in a period of time that is marked by strong political and environmental uncertainties on the one hand, and by the revival of movements against gender, race and class domination on the other hand? Do situated knowledges require the use or invention of specific modes of expression, and if so, which ones? What are their current epistemological, political and ethical meanings? How do situated knowledges reshape the relationship between ethics and politics?

The contributions to this seminar and to the conference will explore one or several of these three approaches through the analysis of feminist, decolonial, and/or queer epistemological texts, and/or through the sharing of experiences of situated knowledge production in various fields of science (i.e. human, natural, and social sciences).

Practical details:

Since we wish to create a community to reflect on the above questions, our project covers two years, starting with a seminar in 2022, and extended with a conference in March 2023. The seminar participants will be welcome to attend the conference as auditors, but the present call for contributions concerns exclusively the seminar since the program of the conference is still in preparation at this stage.

The 2022 research seminar will consist of four one-day sessions scheduled on the following dates at the University of Liege (Belgium):

- Thursday, March 3, 2022.
- Thursday, April 28, 2022.
- Friday, October 7, 2022.
- Friday, December 2, 2022.

Presentations will be 40 minutes long, followed by 20 minutes of discussion.

Proposals for contributions (400 words max.), as well as the title of the contribution, an indicative bibliography, and the author's affiliations must be sent by **January 15, 2022** to savoirssitues@uliege.be

Proposals will be in English or in French.

A peer-reviewed publication will be issued from the seminar.

Organizing Committee: Laura Aristizabal Arango ; Florence Caeymaex ; Marie Kill.

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