

Starting from Marginalized Lives: A Conversation with Sandra Harding

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For philosopher of science Sandra Harding, the dominant traditions of Western science suffer from a want of objectivity. As a major exponent of what has been called “feminist standpoint theory,” Harding argues that objectivity is maximized not by *excluding* social factors from the production of knowledge—as Western scientific method has purported to do—but precisely by “starting” the process of inquiry from an *explicitly social* location: the lived experience of those persons who have traditionally been excluded from knowledge production (for example, women). This methodological innovation turns the traditional standards of science and philosophy against themselves in what Harding describes as a “deconstructive” strategy. By taking the experience of “people of color and gays and lesbians and working class people and people of various ethnicities” as a starting point—rather than as a “foundation” in the traditional sense—standpoint epistemology seeks to produce a *stronger* objectivity, a more *generally* useful body of knowledge, and a way beyond the impasse between foundationalism on the one hand and relativism, or naive experientialism, on the other.

As a corollary, standpoint theory entails an epistemological as well as ethical obligation on the part of dominant groups to theorize as rigorously as possible their own position as socially situated subjects of knowledge. Thus transmuted in a process of what Harding calls “strong reflexivity,” the dominant position may itself become a positive resource in the production of a “more generally useful” knowledge. As these formulations suggest, standpoint theory participates in the postmodern turn away from foundational epistemologies without, however, abandoning the search for what Harding calls “the most comprehensive account of how things work.” For Harding, feminism “is a postmodernism,” then, in the sense that postmodernism is “part of modernity . . . a kind of later development of it.” In a similar spirit, Harding acknowledges that her own insistence on the language of “strong objectivity” represents a “calculated” attempt to appropriate the dominant “rhetoric” of science for the purpose of “changing how science is done,” but she also emphasizes that the notion of objectivity “has progressive possibilities” in what she terms a *substantive* sense.

Rhetorical analysis plays a vital role in the newer science studies because they are as much concerned with “the meanings of science” for non-scientists as with questions of scientific method and other more traditional topics of analysis, Harding indicates. By the same token, science studies have been enriched by contact with disciplines like psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and literary criticism, where, by way of contrast with the analytic tradition in philosophy, a text is conceived as “something whose meaning is created in a historical context of interactions with different readers and different historical periods.” The affinity of standpoint theory with such disciplines is perhaps most apparent in the idea of strong reflexivity, where a sense of the constitutive role of audience and reception is central. Harding prefers to speak of “cross-field appropriation” rather than “dissolving disciplinary borders,” and she emphasizes that such appropriation “is a crucial element in how knowledge advances.”

The broad methodological framework of standpoint theory generates insight into a wide range of issues discussed in the interview below. For example, just as standpoint theory denies that the dominant group enjoys a monopoly on objectivity, so Harding suggests that no single group enjoys a monopoly on literacy—scientific or otherwise. The widely reported “crisis” in literacy should be placed within the context of the “multiple competing literacies” that comprise contemporary American culture. Moreover, Harding “flips the metaphor” of scientific (il)literacy, asserting that “the best educated science people in the West are illiterate about the very nature of our own scientific project”—implicitly because their own socially and historically situated positions remain inadequately theorized. Standpoint theory might then be seen in part as a struggle against the illiteracy of the elite. Harding’s remarks on the experience of teaching in the environment of a public university are also informed by the notion of reflexivity and a rhetorical sense of audience. The instructor in such an environment often encounters an ethnically and economically diverse body of students to whom, as a practical matter, her explanations must seem not only comprehensible but also “reasonable.” This pedagogic and rhetorical pressure leads her to step outside and reflect on the framework she shares with her own group, again effectively “flipping” the metaphor of literacy or accountability from the point of view of those marginalized by it.

Harding suggests that the dominant perspective of teachers can be transformed in relationship with a heterogeneous student population and, similarly, that the dominant male perspective can be transformed into a positive resource for change and the production of new knowledge by a process of careful self-reflection starting from feminism. But because “dominant groups always think they know better,” the role of male feminists (and would-be feminists) is “difficult and problematic” as well as “crucial and . . . exciting.” Voicing the ethical as well as epistemological dimension of standpoint theory, Harding affirms that “Men have to work out their own

feminisms just as whites have to work out our own antiracism.”

Related to the problematic role of men in feminism is the problematic status of gender itself. Like the concept of “race” for African-Americans, the concept of gender for women has been both a source of oppression *and* a source of strength. Rather than theorizing gender mainly on the Marxian model of class—as something to be abolished—our discussions of gender should be informed by an awareness of this double history, Harding says. While feminist literature has presented the notion of masculinity “as primarily a problem,” it would do better to bear in mind the double nature of all such gender notions, including “even such conventional and problematic” ones as motherhood. In addition, as standpoint theory emphasizes, the social position from which such articulations are made remains always decisive: “for a white person to say to a black person” that race should be abolished as “a socially constructed system of hierarchy” does not contest but effectively reinscribes that hierarchy.

Harding explicitly acknowledges that standpoint theory is itself “historically located” and derives from “a particular” and “science-based . . . tradition” of Western thought—namely, from the Enlightenment by way of Marxism. What standpoint theory can do conceptually, and the audience to whom it can speak effectively, is therefore necessarily limited: “to try to justify a feminist work on standpoint grounds . . . to empirical researchers in biology . . . is not necessarily a good strategy,” she grants. Nonetheless, standpoint theory can contribute to creating a new and collective subject of knowledge, “not the kind of individualist subject who becomes a genius alone, and not the kind who joins a community and never has a thought outside the community either,” but a subject that can “go on to make history and knowledge” with a difference.

- Q. You’ve written many articles, chapters, and books directed to scholars in various disciplines. Do you think of yourself as a writer?
- A. Yes, I do. My seventh-grade journalism teacher, in the little memory book that your classmates write things in when you’re ready to graduate, wrote, “Sandra, you are going to be a great writer.” I found it so mysterious: how could this person tell? And for three decades it meant nothing to me. I think precisely because I write to people in different disciplines, I’m very conscious of the *writing*, of not just *speaking* what I’m thinking but very much trying to direct my writing toward one audience or another and of thinking about where readers are coming from. I try to key my writings into literatures that are familiar to the people that I’m writing for—with greater or less success, as the case may be. So, I do think of myself as a writer; it’s a very conscious process. But I think that coming from analytic philosophy is a serious obstacle to being a good writer for anybody but

analytic philosophers. On the one hand, I'm criticized for my writing: non-philosophers find it dull and turgid. I remember a review in *The Nation* said, "Unfortunately, a major flaw with this book is its turgid writing style." My department chair said, "That guy doesn't read any philosophy." On the other hand, philosophers regard my writing as not philosophical enough: it uses metaphors and does things that analytic philosophers are not supposed to do.

Q. We in English studies are interested in the writing processes of established scholars and writers. Would you describe your typical writing process?

A. I usually start with an argument in mind—some view I'm criticizing, not necessarily an individual, but some assumption or some claim—and develop a little paragraph argument. So, the beginning of the process is an outline and a short abstract. I then start writing. There are two things that I discovered are unusual, at least in talking with other people, about how I write (though I'm sure that other people do it too, that I'm not unique). One is that I don't write from beginning to end. I do the outline, then I do little abstracts of the arguments in the different sections, and then I start on whatever I think is the hardest section to write. So, I go from an abstract to an outline to say a six-page version of a forty-page paper, and then I pick whatever's the most problematic aspect—the thing that I can't envision, that is least clear to me—and I try to write that section up into, say, a ten-page version. (I aim for a paper that's at least fifty percent longer than what I'm going to have to end up with.) Then I go back and work with the other sections, kind of growing them up and keeping them in balance with each other, and keeping the outline and the text in some kind of positive relationship to each other. I adjust the outline to the text, and I have to keep the outline there continually or I lose where I am. So, the writing process for me is really a learning process. I don't just compose the whole paper in my head and then write it down, which some people do. Working with the arguments is a learning process. The other thing I do is throw away a lot of first drafts. Sometimes I throw away three drafts of a paper (I did that recently). I toss them and just sit down and start over. I don't look at them and pull things from them.

Q. You don't try to salvage parts of these drafts?

A. Well, I don't always throw them away. Sometimes I feel that they're not strong enough, that they're not powerful enough: either they're not addressing the right audience or they're not organized in the right way for that particular audience or they're usually too conservative. Often in the process of working on the first draft and then setting it aside for some period of time (at least three weeks, maybe longer), I realize that the heart of the paper is not where I thought it was, that it's boring or too hard to do, that it's somewhere else. And so I just set it aside. My computer directory is full of these different versions of the paper, and later I may go and take a paragraph or a section out of one after I've got the second paper well

formulated. But I start with the second paper in the same way that I did the first paper.

- Q. For many years you've been a teacher at a major *public* university. In what ways has your experience as a teacher in this setting had an impact on your theorizing?
- A. For one thing, it's forced me to think more clearly about race, class, and sexuality. Of course, that's not the only source of that more reflective thought that many of us are doing these days. It's certainly out there in our peers' work and our colleagues' work, but the students are important. It's the looks on the faces of students at UCLA, for example, when I use the word *race* and realize that I have very clearly in mind descendants of slaves, but African-American slaves, yet I'm looking at a room that's maybe fifty percent hispanic and Asian-American. The diversity of students is so much greater than the diversity of colleagues in many fields, certainly in my field. Of course, women-of-color, feminist theory is very powerful, and I've learned an immense amount from it and don't mean to devalue it, but there's something about the continuing presence in the classroom of students to whom one's analysis should appear reasonable and frequently doesn't. So, I would say that that's one major way. Another is that students are very much like my lecture audiences and have helped me think about audiences, in that it's important to learn how to explain complex and difficult ideas in ways that enable students to grasp them. I don't think there's anything peculiar to me about this; we all do it. But I would say it's been very useful in working out new ideas. I think feminist work tends to get immediately delivered into classrooms more quickly than perhaps other philosophic work at undergraduate levels, so there's a kind of necessity to get it available quicker. I usually intersperse into my two-hundred-level feminist theory course issues that I'm thinking about in my own writing. That's harder to do if you work in more traditional areas of philosophy, though it's not impossible. So I would say that working in a public university has had an impact on my theorizing in those two ways: my attempt to make my writing more comprehensible, and my attempt to keep in mind who humans are, that they're not just people like myself.
- Q. Natural scientists have not always been receptive to the philosophy of science, and philosophers of science have not always been receptive to the insights of feminism. Given your situation as a feminist philosopher of science, is there a polemical element to your work?
- A. Sure. Let's take the two parts to this question. The first part is the relationship between science and philosophy of science. Certainly, that's an issue, but I think even greater for me is the ignorance (I'm not blaming individuals; it's a matter of the way scientists are trained) about the social studies of science. They get very little history and sociology of science. Philosophy of science, in some ways, is not so problematic for them because empiricist philosophy of science is what they assume anyway. You

may be doing a more highfalutin and complex form of it, and they may not get it and say, "What the heck are you talking about?" but it doesn't strike them as treacherous and as undermining their own project, as anti-science. Even if you take Thomas Kuhn and the history of science and his discussion of the importance of dogmatism in science and of paradigm shifts as irrational shifts. That's not how scientists think of their own work. That's not the story traditional empiricist tendencies in the philosophy of science give. And Kuhn is quite conservative. He's not a raging radical; he certainly wouldn't characterize himself that way, and nobody else does. He's extremely important and valuable, but the recent cultural and social studies of science are really difficult for science people. And so, it's there that I find both philosophers and scientists having problems with my work.

Let me set the second part of the question in that context, because feminist approaches to science are part of the history and sociology as well as the philosophy of science. If they've had no exposure to Bruno Latour's work, or the social construction of science, if they've had no exposure to the non-feminist forms of the social studies of science, then feminism appears really off the wall to them because it's not only political in the sense that it's feminist and therefore a threat to science (that's the way they talk about it), but it's sociology of science, which is highly devalued by both the natural sciences themselves and the philosophic traditions that have regarded themselves as handmaids to the sciences, using Locke's phrase. That's where a lot of the critique of feminist philosophy of science comes from among philosophers and scientists: it comes out of an inability to locate it vis-à-vis other intellectual tendencies in contemporary thought that they're unfamiliar with or devalue.

Now, is there a polemical element to my work? Sure. I'm trying to contribute to changing the way science is done, to changing the way philosophy is done, to improving womens' conditions. Is there any philosopher who isn't polemical? Philosophers set out to be polemical; they set out to argue with people. So this is just a particular range of polemicism. Certainly, feminist philosophers aren't unique that way. After all, John Rawls or other people working in social and political philosophy are in a certain sense polemical also. Their writing may have a very calm tone, but they're concerned with giving voice to a certain kind of theory of how society should be structured, and so forth.

- Q. It's clear that feminism has made substantial contributions to literary criticism in the last twenty-five years. Does literary criticism have a commensurate contribution to make to feminist inquiry?
- A. I think it has, particularly in, very broadly speaking, the social construction of knowledge. A lot of us working in science studies have learned from the textual analyses in literature. We kind of struggle through them if we're as ignorant as I was about how to read those literatures. The whole idea of looking at a text, for example, as something the meaning of which is

created in a historical context of interactions with different readers and different historical periods surely didn't come from at least the analytic traditions in philosophy that *I've* come from, and I think it's made important contributions to feminist analyses of the natural and social sciences. It's very active among those concerned with social constructivist tendencies (of course, those also come from the social sciences), but it's been extremely important to me. I'm usually surprised when I find people in literature reading my work because I thought it was *I* who was reading *their* work. I don't know what their taking back from my work, but it's interesting to me that there's some kind of exchange going on.

Q. You have suggested that psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and other interpretive disciplines are needed to theorize the effects of gender symbolization. Would you elaborate on this point, especially with reference to rhetoric and literary criticism?

A. Well, let me focus on the natural sciences. The mainstream traditions in science have always avoided dealing with the *meanings* of science. They have not liked dealing with the *meanings* of science, the *meanings* of scientific terms. They have wanted to restrict their concerns to the *references* of science. They count as "not science" the meanings of science, the institutions, the technologies, the applications, and a whole range of aspects of science as culture and practice. Coming out of that tradition, it's not just philosophers and scientists but the general public that believes this also. And yet, one important part of the feminist critiques of science has been of the meanings of science, of gender symbolizing. Where we learned to talk about that is through psychoanalysis and literary texts. For example, both Susan Bordo in *The Flight to Objectivity* and Evelyn Keller use psychoanalysis in very sophisticated ways to talk about the psychic drives that function in doing science and in gathering social resources for the advancement of science at different historical moments. They're not putting scientists on the couch; they're putting the age on the couch and looking at, say, what "mechanism" meant to people in the fifteenth to seventeenth century. One can do it without psychoanalysis. For example, Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature* doesn't draw on psychoanalytic theory at all but talks about the meanings that the shift from organicism to mechanism had for people and how gender symbolization was part of that. So, the rhetoric of science and the rhetoric of philosophy of science are among the objects that feminist critiques have been concerned with: How is it that resources are gathered? In what ways is science presented to people? How do scientists talk to each other? How do they talk to the public? Initially, there was puzzlement about why all this "sex talk" was going on in a field that supposedly is only concerned with the abstract laws of nature, rigorous mathematical quantifications, and so forth. You find that the early work of Keller and others was just asking, "What's going on here? Is it that these guys are sexist?" But it was clear that this was not the

issue. I mean, sure, why not, there was sexism; but the issue of the use of this gender symbolization was more about the cultural resources that were being used in order to advance a particular project. I'm not used to talking about this in terms of the rhetoric of science, but I think that's what it is. It's a discussion of the rhetoric of science, and so of course here the literary criticism traditions have been useful in helping us understand how to do that and what is and isn't at issue in those kinds of analyses. I'm not claiming that I've gone back and studied them; people kind of picked them up by osmosis and started to use them.

- Q. In the Introduction to *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*, you suggest that "scientists and other members of dominant groups in the West suffer from a kind of scientific illiteracy" in that the "understanding of science as a fully social process" has been hampered by "the Eurocentrism or androcentrism of many scientists" and policymakers. In what ways do you see your own work as a kind of struggle against illiteracy?
- A. My work joins other philosophies and social studies of science in attempting to set science in its historical contexts. I'm not a historian of science or sociologist of science; they do that work very well, but we use their work. And, as you know, the earlier work attempted to set it in the context of gender projects. The work I'm turning to now is partly for feminism and partly for everyone else. It's an attempt first to understand how there are very important issues about the social location of science that have not been addressed in the Western feminist critiques, or have been addressed only marginally, and to help Westerners (and by that I mean *anybody* living in the West) understand how the successes of Western science are partly dependent upon the successes of European expansion (the new Third-World histories coming out recently are really clear about this and actually enable us to reread some of the Western histories and pull the story out pretty clearly), and also to understand the overlooked value of other scientific traditions. Joseph Needham's books on the sciences of China started coming out in the late 1950s. They're well known to historians of science and are about the greatness of those scientific traditions and the Eurocentrism of the leading historians of the West, whom he takes to task again and again for insisting that science is only a Western invention and that it's never existed in any other society. He shows again and again how that isn't true. What's interesting is that we're at a moment of postcolonialism when new critiques are emerging, but there are older ones. Needham was doing this research in World War II: he was out in the trenches and got to know and work with Chinese historians of science, engineers, and technicians and started developing his work then. I think that at this moment in history it behooves the West, and feminists within the West too, to get a much more realistic understanding of the relationship between Western science and European expansionism of the past and

of the continuing present, and to look back and across to these other scientific traditions so as to be able to envision different sciences for the future. (People usually think, “What do you mean *other sciences*? What could be an *other science*?” The word *science* has gotten so identified with a particular three-hundred or four-hundred year old Western tradition occasionally falsely claiming to have the sole right to claim roots in Aristotle and Greek societies, as if Islamic society in which Western culture was stored for hundreds and hundreds of years also didn’t have a right to claim roots in ancient Greek societies.) This expanded vision will enable us to understand who speaks when we speak from the West in scientific voices or “philosophy of science” voices. These are not universal voices; our voices emerge out of a particular historical tradition that has a determinate relationship with a variety of other scientific traditions, and we are ignorant of that. And so I do see my work as a struggle against illiteracy, just as I think every intellectual struggles against illiteracy. That’s one way to put it, but I think it’s useful to flip the reference here: usually scientific illiteracy refers to people of color and to girls who drop out of science classes, right? Let’s flip the metaphor and say, “Look, there’s another context in which those who are the best educated science people in the West are illiterate about the very nature of our own scientific project and of the possibilities for developing in more progressive ways; we think that the way we’ve got it is the only way it could be.” So, I do see myself as being concerned with literacy in a variety of ways.

- Q. Many commentators complain that the U.S. is undergoing a “literacy crisis,” by which they usually mean a widespread inability to read and write standard, edited English. Some literacy theorists, however, claim that this is only so if we define literacy as that version of linguistic ability privileged by dominant culture, and they insist that we need to understand that there are really multiple competing literacies. What are your thoughts on this subject?
- A. Yes, I think there are multiple competing literacies, and I get very angry with Europeans who like to harp on this because their colonies are for the most part external and ours have been internal (they’ve also been external, but they’re continuing to be internal). If the Europeans had flooding into their countries the numbers of people that we have from other cultures with their own cultural and linguistic traditions, they wouldn’t be quite so arrogant about this whole issue. I’m sure there are problems in the schools with declining literacy rates. I don’t want to deny that the quality of high-school and elementary-school education has gone down; as far as I see it has, but this is just an impression. Certainly, the first-year students who are white anglos from bourgeois families in Delaware seem to *me* to have a pretty low level of literacy. I don’t know if it’s due to television. I hear what everybody says, and I have no idea, but I do believe there are many people in this country who do have other literacy traditions. I don’t think

it's fair or that people know what they're talking about when they insist that not having command of the King's English should count as illiteracy. These literacy traditions are particularly visible in California, where frequently I'm in the presence everywhere around campus of non-native English speakers and people who choose to speak in a language other than English. And most of them are citizens of the country, but that's the language they're choosing to speak.

So, yes, I think there are multiple literacies. I believe that one thing that motivates the other view, though, is the question, "How can we have a public civic polity if people can't converse with each other?" That's a very difficult problem, and I don't know the answer. Of course, there are other countries that have that problem; we're not unique. For example, there's Switzerland (where I just spent three months) with its traditions of French, Italian, German and Romansh, but it still manages to have national discussions. In Europe there's now a bureau of one of the European community organizations (I forget which one it is) that's a bureau for minority languages and cultures, and it's awarding big grants. I read an article in one of the Swiss papers on how (I couldn't believe it) the French government is funding cultural events and teaching in the schools in minority languages, and it turns out there are about five or six minority languages in France. (What would de Gaulle say?!) So, maybe we can learn some things from Europe. There are different histories to those multiculturalisms than to ours, and certainly where they have Turkish or southern European immigrants of some sort or another coming into European countries, they have many of the responses that we do here; but, on the other hand, they have these long traditions of multi-language, multi-literacy cultures. I think maybe we need to rethink this whole issue.

- Q. In many of your works you have argued that "maximizing objectivity in social research requires not total value neutrality, but instead, a commitment by the researcher to certain social values." You then demonstrate that "social research directed by *certain* social values can be more objective than research in which these values play no role." Would you elaborate on this notion of "strong objectivity"?
- A. For one thing, there's a certain range of social values (if you want to talk about it that way) and interests that the conventional standards for objectivity have no way of getting at—namely, the values or interests that are shared by an entire, let me put it in these terms, "scientific community." This is not a problem that feminism or, certainly, that I have invented. It's one that Kuhn is talking about when he's discussing paradigm shifts; it's the problem of the episteme. There's a long history by now, three decades or more, of suspicion in the West that the objectivity that the West prizes so highly has been flawed and that the standard ways of trying to maximize it in fact have not been effective. Again, I'm trying

to indicate it's not just the "radical" groups that have raised this; it's somebody like Richard Bernstein, for instance. In his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, he reviews the problems in a variety of different social science and philosophic tendencies that are associated with a notion of objectivity, and in each case it seems to come down to pretty much the same thing: the paradigms, the conceptual frameworks, within which methods are defined. Those methods can't then turn around their lens and look at the conceptual framework that generated them in the first place, right? And that, of course, has been the kind of argument that's been so powerfully mounted in feminism and antiracism and so on. The issue is not the sexism of individuals; it's the androcentric assumptions of the conceptual schemes of philosophy, of sociology, of economics.

Let me give some pointed examples from my own discipline. Look at the dominant conceptions of human nature in philosophic traditions. Aristotle says that man is a rational animal, and yet women have been persistently described, by him and everybody else all the way up, as emotional, as concerned with their passions, as irrational. So we would say that you can't add "women as rational animals" to a conceptual scheme that in the first place has been defined *against* the feminine. It ends up that a rational woman is in a certain sense a contradiction in terms of that conceptual scheme. But that's an assumption that escapes notice until you try to bring into that category a group that's been excluded from it. Aristotle also says that what's distinctive about man is that he's a political animal—he constructs his way of life through public discourse, public meetings—and yet women have been excluded from participation in the public realm. We could pretty much go through every definition of what's distinctively human and notice that women have been excluded from it. The "worker" that Marx is particularly concerned with: women have been excluded from positions in wage labor of the sort that Marx had in mind when he was looking at the nineteenth-century proletariat. Then we could come to "humans as language users," and yet a good woman is like a child: seen but not heard. Women have not been permitted *public* speech. We could look at sociology's ways of defining community as constructed by public and visible and dramatic actors rather than the informal and less-visible and less-dramatic ways in which women and other minority groups have in fact contributed to community organization. We could look at any discipline and see that the standard methods for maximizing objectivity are unable to get at these large widely shared assumptions and interests that in fact define the conceptual framework of the field. Another way to put the issue is that the way scientific method in any discipline tries to identify and eliminate social factors is by repeating observations across individuals—you repeat the experiment, having somebody else test out the validity of your claims—but if all the people who are repeating the experiment share the same values, as members of any culture would do,

then that method is flawed. So, a strong objectivity is an attempt to develop stronger standards. Feminists and antiracists and other members of the new social movements have certainly criticized the notion of objectivity in a variety of ways, but for the most part they want *more* objective accounts. We need more objective accounts of how our bodies work, how the international political economy works, what causes environmental destruction, what effects industrialization is going to have on the environment and on the social structure, and so forth. We don't need *less* objective accounts, and we don't need subjective accounts. The problem is that we've *had* subjective accounts—or ethnocentric accounts, I guess we could call them. So, strong objectivity is an issue, to put it in an extremely simplistic way, of learning to see ourselves as others see us. (What's that Robert Burns said, "Oh, would some power the gift give us / To see ourselves as others see us!") It's an argument for stepping outside of the conceptual framework, starting off research projects, starting off our thought about any particular phenomenon, from outside the dominant conceptual framework. Marginal lives are at least one good place, one good strategy for doing that. Starting off thinking about Western conceptions of rationality from the lives of people who have been excluded and who are claimed to be constitutionally unable to exhibit that rationality—racial minorities, the working class, lesbians and gays, women of ethnic groups of various sorts—is a good way to be able to identify those widely shared values and interests that have framed the dominant ways of thinking about the notion of rationality.

We could do the same thing with dominant ways in sociology, for example, of thinking about the family—the family, beloved of sociology texts. Of course, this postcolonial work with the sciences (or anti-Eurocentric work, let me put it that way) is, in my view, a case study of the value of this kind of approach. We get a much more objective account of Western science once we start looking at it from the perspective of the Chinese sciences that Needham's talking about, or the needs of sciences in Third-World countries. Let's take the Rio Conference and what the south was saying to the north. You could read a story about science out of that as well as one about polluting, politics, and the environment: that the kinds of sciences and the kinds of relationship to nature the south needs is one the north doesn't even envision yet. It's only by stepping outside and looking at the way we've treated our forests from the perspective of Third-World lives that I think we can begin to get a more objective understanding of Western sciences and ways of thinking about ecology and so forth.

- Q. How is a researcher to achieve the "strong reflexivity" that you often describe as prerequisite to "strong objectivity"? What form might strong reflexivity take in different kinds of discourse?
- A. It's useful to link together strong forms of three terms: *reflexivity*, *objectivity*, and *method*. They all develop together; one isn't a preamble for the

other. They are kind of different ways of talking about the same issue. We're talking about a stronger method, using "method" in a broader sense than it's understood by methods courses in sociology or physics, but as "how to do research." For example, Dorothy Smith, the Canadian sociologist of knowledge who's been extremely important in formulating feminist standpoint theory (though she refers to it as the "standpoint of women"), always talks about it interchangeably as a feminist method for sociology and a feminist epistemology (she actually uses the word *epistemology*, though she will not admit she does). So, we're asking for a stronger method. There's a very interesting publication put out by the National Academy of Sciences in 1989 called *On Being a Scientist* which, in a section on method, talks about the necessity for expanding the notion of method beyond the usual ways of thinking about it to include what problems get selected for research in the first place, how scientists communicate with each other, and so on. So, some people are coming to understand that maximizing objectivity requires a stronger method, a more expansive notion of method, and what that is is a production of strong reflexivity. That is, it's coming to see that the fact that the observer changes, interacts with the object of observation, with what he or she's looking at, is not necessarily a negative, having a negative influence on the results of research, but can be used in a positive way. That is, it's understanding that we can use the resources of the particular place from which we speak in order to gain stronger method and stronger objectivity; strong reflexivity requires that.

Now, what does it mean to have socially situated knowledge, to use the place from which we speak as a resource, a part of the method, a part of the instruments of inquiry? Let me take myself as an example. Everybody writes about reflexivity in all kinds of different ways, but it's hardly ever seen as a resource. It's seen as a problem or a dilemma or something to be gotten around, or it's seen stoically: "Alas, there's nothing you can do about it." Consequently, the way it's enacted frequently is as a confessional: "I, a white woman from Newark, Delaware. . . ." You do the confession, and then you do the analysis as if your confession takes care of it. I won't even grace this with the language "weak objectivity." That doesn't even begin to get at the problem. It leaves all the analysis up to the reader. It leaves the reader to ask, "Well, what is the relationship between the fact that Sandra Harding is a white woman, an academic from Delaware, and her analysis? And she's a philosopher, and a feminist, and so forth; what effect does *that* have on her analysis?" The point is for the author, the observer, to make that analysis, to do that work. It's lazy and irresponsible to leave that work up to the audience. It pretends that it doesn't matter at all. The feminist standpoint theory which I've been a part of developing enables us to see the value of that. Strong objectivity asks us to take a critical look at the conceptual schemes, the frameworks, that

comprise our social location. What are the assumptions I'm making as somebody who comes from Anglo-American analytic philosophy at this moment in history and who's trained in logical positivism? How does that lead me to frame questions and projects that are actually less than maximally objective, that are constrained by my particular social location? So the first set of questions to enable one to strengthen reflexivity, to use reflexivity as a resource, is to do that analysis, to look at a field's conceptual frameworks. It's not so much, "I, Sandra Harding, white woman . . ." but that's an issue. The question is, "How have the conceptual frameworks that I'm using been shaped to fit the problems of white women in the West more generally?" There's not a lot of creative ingenuity in advancing racism and Eurocentrism. Most of us fall into it and use it, and occasionally a demagogue comes along and invents new forms of it. Most of us just *assume* it; they're questions we don't ask.

So the first step is to do the kind of critique the various new social movements in fact are doing of the conceptual frameworks of the West and its disciplines, its political policy, and its philosophy. But there's a step beyond that, and that's to try and rethink how one's social location can nevertheless be used as a resource in spite of the fact that we're members of dominant groups. There's been a tendency to think that only the dominated, only the marginalized can use their social location as an instrument of the production of knowledge. They certainly *can* use it and *do* use it, but it's also the case that the people in the dominant groups can learn how to use their position (as a white woman in my case; for another, say, as a white man) to ask the kinds of questions and think the kinds of thoughts that would make use of the resources of that particular position. For example, I'm very familiar with Western philosophy; insofar as I don't ask questions about those assumptions, that's an obstacle to my gaining a less Eurocentric perspective on the world and on philosophy. But I also know that tradition fairly well, so if I *do* turn the critical lens on it, I can learn; I'm in the place to be able to do that. And it's something that I have an obligation to do. I'm using my position in a way that somebody who comes from another tradition might not. Why should they spend all *their* time criticizing Western philosophy? I don't think we should leave to the victims of the West the burden of having to do the whole critique of the West. That's a resource that we have an obligation to use; we're familiar with it so we should learn to do that critique ourselves. Those of us who are in these dominant positions *are* in dominant positions: our voices have a lot of power, and that's a resource. It's unfortunate that the world is hierarchically organized, that we do have power relations; but given that we do, I think that those people who do have classrooms to teach in, and whose papers do get accepted in journals read all over the world, and whose publishers do publish their books, are a local resource that we can use in scientifically and politically progressive ways. It's a kind of resource

in that way, but there's another way in which the positions of people in the dominant groups is a resource.

Let me give some examples; let me switch and talk about men at this point. There are many male feminists who have made very important contributions to feminist theory. We could start with John Stuart Mill, who's very clearly thinking as a man about, for example, the disadvantages of growing up male. Now, he says that his beloved deceased wife Harriet Taylor Mill whispered these words, that these were all Harriet's words. But my view is that a lot of wives speak to their husbands all the time and few of these men publish very famous feminist tracts where they also credit their wives with them, so I think we should give Mill credit for developing a particular view that speaks partially from the position of women but partially also from his own life as a man. If you read *The Subjection of Women*, you can kind of see him walking around in the world and looking out at it differently from how he would have looked at it before he got feminism. He's looking at it as a *man* looks at it. There's a wonderful collection called *Men in Feminism* put out in 1987 by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith. It's very interesting because the women and men writing in that book are all over the map on feminism. You can't say that the women take this position and the men take that; they don't. They're all over the map over whether men can be feminists and what it would mean for a man to be a feminist. It's fascinating, and you hear a number of the men in that book speaking distinctively, I would say, as *male* feminists; that is, they're learning how to use (as we whites are learning how to use our particular social location) their masculinity as a way to ask the kinds of questions and think the kinds of thoughts women would not ask and could not ask. There's one place in that book where one of the female feminists gives to the men a list of the kinds of issues she would like to see them address. It's a great list, and she constructs it parallel to the kinds of issues that have been most painful and important for women to ask. She says to men that she would like to hear them talk about their relationship to their bodies, to their bodily fluids (and I'm too embarrassed to list the rest of the anatomy she wants them to discuss), not in the way they usually talk about these things; we've heard enough of *that*. She wants them to talk about their relationships to their mothers, to think that through in the way women did in consciousness-raising groups and in the way women continue to do in public writings; their relationships to their fathers (their biological fathers) and their mentor (their disciplinary fathers); what male friendships are about; why they like pornography. She has a whole list of issues that would be very good examples of men using their social location as men to make distinctive contributions to feminist thinking. These are the kinds of contributions that women could not make because men have different histories, different bodies, different access to different social patterns and practices.

My point is that this is a way to see how method, objectivity, and reflexivity—all three of which have been the center of a lot of diverse, conflicted, and interesting thinking over three decades—need to be thought all together. The clue to one is the clue to the other two. And there's probably more in here; there's probably strong rationality, and maybe we can carry out this rhetorical strategy through the key terms that have been the jewels in the crown of Western philosophy and of philosophic thinking in every discipline. The issue is fundamental and pretty apparent that if it effects one it effects the whole range of fundamentally Enlightenment notions.

Q. Traditionally, science secures its objectivity through scientific method. You're arguing on the one hand that feminism affords a stronger objectivity than the presumed value-neutrality of normal science, but on the other hand you assert in "Is There A Feminist Method?" that there is no distinctively feminist method. In what way does feminism secure its strong objectivity if not through feminist method?

A. I'm partially sorry, but only partially sorry, that I wrote that article. It's been widely reprinted and attacked. I had a certain target when I was writing it: the diverse attempts to claim that some particular, in my view rather narrow, conception of method (in a kind of traditional sense of method) was *the* feminist method. So you get many Marxist-feminists, socialist-feminists talking about dialectical historical materialism in one way or another as "the feminist method." Catharine MacKinnon talks about consciousness raising as the feminist method. A lot of the phenomenologists in sociology who are angry with the excessive positivism in sociology, the excessive reliance on quantitative methods and so forth, talk about phenomenological approaches as the feminist method. They're all right that feminism has done important things within these different methodological approaches; I'm not criticizing their perception that feminism can transform these approaches in ways that are useful to feminism. In that article, I wanted to say that feminism is much more inventive and creative than that; it uses *every* method. I tried to give an example by taking fairly well-known articles which weren't necessarily focused on method at all. I took famous papers by Carol Gilligan, Joan Gadol-Kelly, and various other people and showed that feminism uses every kind of method: it uses quantitative methods, phenomenological approaches, ethno-methodology, you name it—in brilliant ways and does brilliant things with them. I now don't repeat that argument, however, because I came to realize that what I was calling standpoint epistemology in fact is used as a method by people working in the social sciences in particular, and everywhere they see it as a method to do research, which is exactly right: epistemologies are methods at a certain level. That is, empiricism is a kind of method. It's proposing a kind of way of doing research, and phenomenology is a philosophy but it's also a method of

doing research in the social sciences, for example. And it's certainly true that standpoint epistemology is recommending a different way of doing research, of thinking differently.

So, you're quite right to note the conflict between arguing that there's no distinct feminist method, on the one hand and, on the other hand, arguing that there's a better way to do research. But as I say, I'm only half sorry I wrote that article because there's still a very powerful tendency in the social sciences to reduce political questions to methodological ones and to try to get rid of the political questions by discussing them in methodological terms (you know, what kinds of methods are you going to use here?), thereby silencing the most radical politics, presuming you can remove politics from science. And I don't think that's the case. So I still always want to clarify what's meant by a strong feminist method; in that sense, it's a very political approach, which in the fact of its being political is no different from any method that claims *not* to be political. Science and politics have always been intimately and intricately related to each other, and simply turning one's eyes away from the politics which in fact shape one's project and one's methods doesn't prevent one from doing politics; it just makes one stupid about what politics one will do.

- Q. You mentioned that you've been a major proponent of feminist standpoint theory, arguing that "not just opinions but also a culture's best beliefs—what it calls knowledge—are socially situated" and that beginning research from women's experience enables feminism "to produce empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations than does conventional research." Do researchers need to balance the need to open science up to standpoints other than its traditional male one with the desire to generate knowledge that is generally useful?
- A. I think feminist standpoint *is* more generally useful. The problem is that knowledge that has been generated only from the lives of a small portion of the society (and, at that, the most powerful one) is not useful for most people's projects. It's only useful for the projects of that group, just as Western sciences, for example, have been extremely helpful for helping European expansion but not too helpful to the people who got expanded into by Europe. Those are not the kinds of sciences they want, nor the kinds of effects. They don't need bombs dropped on *them*; they'd just as soon there weren't faster navigation and better shipping from Africa to the United States. These innovations were not too helpful to the African, as it turned out. So, I think that the first thing that we need to think about is for whom (to quote the title of my book, *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?*) have our existing sciences and bodies of knowledge been produced? What have they been useful for? Feminists and antiracists and others in the new social movements are objecting to the narrowness of those projects and to the fact that they've been used so often for projects that exploited other people. Scientists may not have *intended* to do that. This

is not an argument about individual intentions; it's not an argument that individual philosophers are wicked, evil people, or that individual scientists are—I'm sure that there's one or two who are, but no more than there are in any other group; and I'm sure there are also a few wicked women here and there. Instead, it's an argument about how science and knowledge projects are located within particular cultural histories and particular cultural projects and help advance those projects in one way or another. Feminist standpoint intends to generate knowledge that is *generally* useful instead of useful for a narrow range of projects. Feminists have found the dominant body of knowledge in sociology or philosophy or history not useful for understanding women's lives; it distorts women's lives to have to try to fit women's lives into those categories, to try to understand the history of women through a history that focuses primarily on military and political history. It's not even helpful for understanding most *men's* lives; and it isn't helpful for understanding women's lives. To try to understand women's contributions, women's philosophic thinking (if I could put it that way), within frameworks that define women's thought as the absence of any philosophic thought, as irrational, as subjective, is difficult. The knowledge that has been produced by the dominant discourses is not generally useful.

Q. Recently you've defended standpoint theory against postmodernist charges that it is foundationalist, essentialist, Eurocentric, and overly preoccupied with science. Do you believe that standpoint theory and postmodern thought are irretrievably incompatible?

A. Oh no, not at all. I think standpoint theory (I'm speaking for myself because I'm quite sure that some of the other people who developed standpoint theory will take a different position) *is* a postmodernism, and I think that feminism is a postmodernism. The group that calls itself postmodernist has made extremely important and valuable contributions to my understanding, but this is not the only postmodernist group. That's what's been confusing, I think, to feminists: our critiques of the Enlightenment overlap with the critiques of Derrida, Rorty, Foucault, Lyotard, and so on, but they're not identical. And there's no reason from a standpoint perspective why they should be. They're starting off from different lives—not individual lives, but cultural locations—in order to think about what's right and what's wrong about Enlightenment histories. I count myself as a, let me put it this way, “postmodern feminist” (which is a different thing from a “feminist postmodernist”), who is trying to use the resources that this particular part of postmodernism has provided in order to get more useful understandings of history and knowledge, relationships of theories of representation, representations of realism, the problems of totalizing theories, and a whole range of issues that this group has particularly targeted but that we can find also addressed in other discussions. This is a place where it's extremely useful to look to

postcolonial, antiracist critiques because there's a third group (fourth, fifth, however many groups are in that category) that's also critiquing Western Enlightenment assumptions and yet also using them, as are in my view all of the people we're talking about. We're all still within the tradition of the Enlightenment even though we're coming *after* it (maybe *post-Enlightenment* would be a better term, though *postmodern*'s fine so long as one understands that it's part of modernity, that it's a kind of a later development of it). We can't escape our history, I guess is what I mean. We end up accepting much of what we reject all the time, and that's just the way things go and not a bad thing. In one of the chapters in *Whose Science, Whose Knowledge?* I talk about how in my view the postmodernists are too modernist; they still hold onto some assumptions that I, at any rate, want to question—such as the idea that everything that deserves the name “science” is covered by modern Western science. Forget it! That's a really arrogant view; it's racist and Eurocentric, among other things. They accept too much of modernism's understandings of its own history rather than trying to go a little further in thinking of alternative ways of conceptualizing these topics. But my major relation to them is not a critical, adversarial one; I'm certainly critical, but I'm trying to figure what's useful for my purposes. Part of the challenge is working within the philosophy and social studies of the natural sciences because that emerged primarily as a critique of the Enlightenment ideals that are exactly encapsulated in Western philosophy, philosophy of science, and the natural sciences. But I'm not alone there; people like Donna Haraway, for example, are very consciously using postmodern insights in order to produce more adequate accounts of Western science.

- Q. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* you say that “there are many projects for which feminist standpoint theory is more satisfactory, but there are at least a few for which it is not.” Does this imply that one can switch or alternate epistemologies at will?
- A. Well, let me come at that another way. Standpoint theory is itself historically located. It comes from a particular tradition, which I'm sure somebody from other cultures could describe even more clearly than I could, but I can delineate some of its clear resources that are also its limits. It's a theory that emerges out of Europe, out of the Enlightenment: it's an Enlightenment theory in that it's about progress and reason; and while it may reject certain other Enlightenment theories, it falls within that range. It started from Marxist epistemology, with that particular historical set of constraints. It's a science-based theory, which is part of its being partially an Enlightenment theory. It's an epistemology that takes as its model of knowledge science—maybe not the sciences we have but something that's science. It doesn't take literature, for example, or art or religious understanding as its model of knowledge. One might have a very different epistemology if one started from those places to think about the develop-

ment of knowledge, about how to construct an epistemology. So that's one set of constraints I was thinking about when I was talking about the limits of this view. But there's another set: one way to describe them is as strategic limits, though that's not the only way I'd describe it. I have frequently contrasted standpoint theory with feminist empiricism. (I gave that particular philosophy its name. I'm not bragging; I'm complaining, because they didn't think they were doing anything particularly unusual. They thought they were just arguing that researchers should do better science and that this is how feminism contributed to good science. So, they didn't see any reason to give their method, their philosophy, a particular name. They were just trying to improve the practice of the existing ways of thinking about how to do research and how to produce knowledge.) Feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory have different origins and different audiences, and I think that feminist standpoint theory is a better theory: it's more comprehensive, it explains more, it answers the kinds of questions feminist empiricism is unable to answer. It comes from the sociology of knowledge, philosophy, epistemology, and political philosophy. The early forms of feminist empiricism came from the way researchers in biology and the social sciences understood their own work. It came as a kind of intuitive theorization of what was wrong with biology, with empirical sociology, and so forth. People were saying, "*That's* objective? Look at the kinds of results they're getting. There's something wrong with the standards; there's something wrong with the way they're doing it." You can find these kinds of quotations all over the introductory paragraphs and chapters of feminist writings in the seventies and eighties coming from the empirical sciences. Those people working there are frequently unfamiliar with the sociology of knowledge and political philosophy, so to try to justify a feminist work on standpoint grounds (because an epistemology is a way of justifying beliefs) to empirical researchers in biology and the social sciences is not necessarily a good strategy. A theory should be "plausible" as well as "true" (such an unfashionable word). And plausibility (certainly "truth" also) is an issue of who the audience is: plausible to whom? That's a second thing I'm thinking about when I talk about the limits of standpoint theory. It's strategically not a useful way to justify feminist beliefs to people who don't believe in the assumptions of standpoint theory, who aren't used to thinking about the relationship between systems of ideas and social structures. People in political science and political history are used to thinking about, for example, how medieval people were living that they could end up with such an odd world view. In other words, they're used to asking questions about the relationship between the structure of belief and the structure of society. Biologists and sociologists, the empirical workers, are not. They tend to think in terms of individuals' opening their eyes, and the empiricist notion about getting the cobwebs off, and the idea that good method is careful and rigorous, and

so on; they don't think about cultural frameworks and cultural assumptions.

Those are two ways in which I think standpoint theory has its limits. It's not a theory for all times and places. It's a theory that's useful for people in the West who want to ask the kinds of questions that standpoint theory is asking. If they have different kinds of questions, they aren't going to use it. What's been striking to me is that the language that the particular articulation of it as standpoint theory uses has been used only by feminism, even though you find similar kinds of arguments in postcolonial, antiracist, gay and lesbian, and various other knowledge movements, knowledge projects. Why don't Africans and Third-World people who've come through Marxism go to Marxist epistemology? I'm not blaming, only saying that this may not be a useful thing for them to do; it's just one more European theory that they're using to justify their critiques of Enlightenment and European theories. It seems to me that this is something to be reflected upon: thinking about the historical lineages and the meanings our theories have. If I were a Third-World philosopher of science, of the social studies of science, I would want to draw on some of the indigenous traditions of thinking about the justification of belief. I wouldn't want to simply grab another European idea and try to adapt it. I might talk that way as a strategic way of talking if I were in a European group, but I would want to draw on the resources of my own culture that give honor to thinkers from my own cultural background. So we need to recognize the particular historical location of our theories in the West at this moment. Returning to the earlier question, this is another issue about reflexivity, about using one's own particular location as a resource—a resource that can't be used in other places. Being in the West means that standpoint theory and empiricism and the Enlightenment are going to be resources that can be used to help people think here in a way that may not be the case in other parts of the world for people who don't come from that European tradition. That's part of the issue about strong reflexivity, about seeing one's social location as a positive resource for advancing knowledge. They're rhetorical strategies and historical traditions that have meaning for people that we're talking to that may not have meaning for other people.

- Q. In "The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African Moralities: Challenges for Feminist Theory," you claim, "What we need is something akin to a 'unified field theory'; that is, one that can account for the gender differences, but also for the dichotomized Africanist/Eurocentric world views. If we had such a theory . . . it would be able to chart the 'laws of tendency of patriarchy' and also the 'laws of tendency of racism,' their independent and conjoined consequences for social life and social thought." Is it possible to have a "unified" theory that would do justice to the very differences you're trying to capture?

- A. This passage was written about ten years ago, and I would not use that language now. I certainly wouldn't have used the language of unified field theories. First, it's a science theory, and I don't understand why science should provide all the good metaphors for everything we do. Also, it sounds totalizing in a way that's unfortunate. You're quite right that there's no reason why we should assume that every oppression has the same history, explanations, and causes; as a matter of fact, we shouldn't assume that at all. We should look at the historical particularities that gave a specific culture its shape, but I don't think we should turn away from trying to provide comprehensive theories. That's a part of postmodernism I have a lot of problems with. There's confusion between totalitarianism, a kind of enforcement of one's theory on everybody else, and an attempt to get the most comprehensive account of how things work. *We need* the most comprehensive account of how things work that we can get because we need to know how what we do here has effects there. In the last ten years, the theory of women of color (and men of color, too) has been extremely powerful. If I had been more familiar with it at that time, if it had been more developed at that time, instead of using the language I did use, I would have talked about exactly this project—namely, understanding the way that class, gender, race, ethnicity (and whatever else is a significant part of the social structure) shape each other. That certainly didn't start ten years ago; there are much older histories of it, but it's gotten incredibly powerful so that we can see how femininity and masculinity are constructed. As Sojourner Truth puts in her famous question, "Ain't I a Woman?" the femininity she was permitted was extremely different from the femininity demanded of the nineteenth-century woman on a pedestal, the white woman, just as the masculinity extolled for the slave owner was exactly what the black male slave was not permitted. Gender was constructed in oppositional ways for the two races and the two classes. The "laws of tendency of patriarchy" is a rhetoric left over from my high-Marxist days, but I think the issue of trying to get a comprehensive theory about how gender, race, and class have one structure in society but have many different features and aspects is incredibly complex. Forcing one's theory on others is a very different matter from trying to have a comprehensive theory, and I think that's what was confused in the postmodernist critique of totalizing theories.
- Q. You've written that for feminism "there are no contemporary humans who escape gendering" and that "gender is a fundamental category within which meaning and value are assigned to everything in the world." In reference to these comments, how would you position yourself vis-à-vis feminists such as Monique Wittig who advocate the abolition of gender, on the one hand, and on the other hand feminists such as Luce Irigaray who advocate the cultivation of gender difference (including, in Irigaray's term, a "sexed science")?

A. Gender is the site of some of the most fruitful feminist thinking because we don't know what to do with it. On the one hand, it's been the source of our oppression; and on the other hand, it's been a source of great strength. One can ask a similar kind of question about African-American culture. The culture of the oppressed is both a source of great strength and a kind of problem because it was created partly through colonization or imperialism or domination and partly elaborated as a strength, as a way to retain one's identity in a world that was trying to eliminate it. I don't know Irigaray well enough to go into a detailed discussion here, but I would say that the discussion itself is a very important one to have. Wittig is not the only one who said we should abolish gender. Gayle Rubin at the end of "The Traffic in Women" said maybe the problem is gender; we have to get rid of gender. I don't know if you can get rid of gender, but we certainly need to change the way it's functioning, and I think the people who want to get rid of it are thinking of it on the model of class: they want to get rid of class, and since gender is a similar kind of structure we should want to get rid of gender. Now, let's move over to race. The minute you think of race as a similar kind of system to class—namely, a socially constructed system of hierarchy—then you want to get rid of race too. But that's not the kind of thing for a white person to say to a black person because racial culture (and its history and its identity and its strength) has been an extremely important part and remains an important part of African-American identity. Gender is more like race in that way, in that it's been both a source of oppression and also a source of strength for women, and so I think we should simply continue to have this dispute all the time. Feminists have redefined femininity and strengthened it. Just as blacks have said, "Black is beautiful," we've said, "Femininity is beautiful too, and not in the way you thought it was." But it's got other kinds of strengths, and they've looked at what those strengths are. I think, for example, of Bettina Aptheker's wonderful book *Tapestries of Life*, which looks at women's oral histories and how women are creating meaning, creating significance, not only for ourselves but for everyone. So there can't be any definitive answer to what we should do about gender. There has to be a continuing discussion. One thing I find many of my students have a lot of problems with is that they think of their gender as something that comes prior to culture rather than as a cultural construct. They think of their project as (and this is one way in which postmodernism has been very helpful to feminism) discovering their true self, that women's true self has not been permitted out and if we'd just take away all of these patriarchal structures, then women would flourish and flower. They don't see femininity and womanliness as a choice, constructed by what they do and how they do it and by the discourses available to us. I think of myself, about white womanliness, *that* construction of gender, and the diversity of ways in which white-femininity has been constructed. It's been constructed in

racist ways. We can look at Kathleen's Blee's *Women of the Klan* or at Claudia Koonz's book on Nazi women, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, in which womanhood and fascism are tightly linked. On the other hand, we can look at the Mothers of the Plaza in Argentina, who are using a very conventional notion of womanhood—motherhood—to make a powerful, radical, and extremely effective political statement. Here is a conventional notion of womanliness, motherhood, used in each case (by the Nazi Germans and the Mothers of the Plaza) in politically, radically different ways. This is something that deserves a lot of reflection: how gender can be constructed in all kinds of ways. There are lots of ways that feminism can use even such conventional and problematic gender notions as motherhood. That's why I believe we need to rethink masculinity in the same way. Masculinity is presented in feminist literature as primarily a problem, and I wouldn't deny it's probably a problem, just as whiteness, white-supremacy, is primarily a problem; but there's no reason not to think of it as offering possibilities for a radical, feminist politics in the way motherhood—this problematic, sexist, patriarchal notion—was a base for a radical, feminist, and anti-fascist politic in Latin America (*I would call it a feminist politic; my Latin American feminist friends don't*). Masculinity is another gender notion that needs to be rethought (and feminists are already rethinking it) as offering powerful resources for resistance to the very patriarchy that insisted on it in the first place.

Q. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* you propose that both feminism and science contain “both progressive and regressive tendencies” and that it is important to “advance the progressive and inhibit the regressive ones.”

Toward this end, how do you determine the difference between the two?

A. Well, that's not something one person decides; that's something that comes out of exactly the kinds of political and scientific critiques we're talking about. Some progressive and regressive tendencies in both feminism and science are kind of obvious, at least to me. For example, racism is a regressive tendency in feminism; maybe some intend to be racist, but a lot of us don't intend to be racist but nevertheless make racist assumptions because we haven't questioned these assumptions as they arrived from the dominant culture. That's a regressive tendency that needs to be struggled against, and what it is that's regressive there emerges through political discussion. The same thing is true about science: exactly what is a regressive and progressive tendency is not always clear. For example, is advancing strong objectivity, strengthening objectivity, a regressive or progressive tendency? Many feminists and non-feminists think that it's a regressive tendency, and they make very good arguments—they've made terrific arguments, and I try not to forget them. For one thing, it reinstates the authority of science; it reinstates a kind of internalist notion of science and argues that this can provide the most powerful, critical perspective on science. Yet, in other ways, my work resists that. I talk about starting from

“outside” science. And so, there’s something a bit regressive about insisting on strengthening the notion of objectivity. Many critics of objectivity have made just that point. For instance, Feyerabend tries to strengthen relativism, and Lorraine Code works with subjectivity and relativism. They’re taking the other side of the dichotomy.

Now, my view on these matters is that if you are going to stick with that dichotomy, why take the weak side? Take the strong rhetoric. Call it “strong” and go for it—that is, if you’re going to remain within that dichotomy, which was itself constructed by the objectivist mentality. The objectivist mentality said, “*Après moi le deluge*,” “relativism or subjectivity.” Simply to take what they reject is not helpful. That doesn’t mean that this is the only way to go about deconstructing this opposition—that it even does deconstruct the opposition. I believe those of us who are trying to develop stronger standards of objectivity, whether or not we call it that, *are* deconstructing that opposition because many people see standpoint theory as relativist and subjectivist. Indeed, if you stay within those frameworks, it’s got elements of both in it, in the sense that it substantively refuses to stay on one side or the other of that dichotomy. So, I’m simply using the rhetoric of objectivity because it’s an incredibly powerful language. It’s a calculated attempt to make it progressive because (let me not sound too cynical here) my point is that notions such as objectivity are deeply embedded in the institutions of the West that we’re proudest of—the legal tradition, for example. Feminist jurisprudence and other radical jurisprudence are powerfully concerned with the notion of objectivity and the lack of objectivity in conventional jurisprudence. Objectivity is central to public policy; it’s central to Western democracy: the idea that decisions are made not as a matter of personal power but as a matter of a procedure, a method. So, when I’m saying that this notion of objectivity has progressive possibilities in it, I’m thinking both that substantively it does (I think it’s true, if I can use such an old-fashioned word, that conventional standards of objectivity are too weak and that the new social movements are demanding and providing stronger ones) but also that this is a *useful* way to talk about it. I think that we should conduct our intellectual and political struggles on the terrains where those struggles are taking place. And for anybody who works close to the natural sciences or the law or public policy, relativism and subjectivity are not the terrain where those struggles are taking place—that’s not a language that’s going to help people understand how to do better than we’ve been doing. So it’s hard to decide what’s a progressive and what’s a regressive tendency. It’s something we have to keep struggling with all the time.

- Q. You and other feminist scholars have called attention to the role of gender symbolization in the discourse of science. It’s been said that mathematics is the “language” of science. Does mathematics exhibit gender symbolization?

A. Well, certainly not in the sense in which informal languages do, but the *preference* for math, for an abstract language, has been said to exhibit a gender tendency. I would say it's also an imperial one: it's one about running bureaucracies. Bureaucracies need to be run according to procedures that will hold anywhere. Some of the critiques of colonialism are really clear about this. They talk about the necessity of having a language that can be applied in India or Africa or the Americas, one that is not peculiar to the particular situation. An empire needs to be run from Rome (or from London or the Pentagon), and, so, abstract languages are useful because they don't depend upon local contingencies. Because science benefits from conversations across cultures, from people who have different cultural backgrounds, abstract languages are particularly useful. A Russian and a Brit and somebody from Japan and somebody from Canada can do physics together because they share a language that is not dependent upon their local, cultural histories. Other people have argued that mathematics exhibits gender symbolization, but I don't know enough about that, and I certainly don't agree with it offhand. But I think the tendency for these abstract languages is one that is part of ruling; it's part of bureaucracies.

And there's no reason why mathematics *shouldn't* be useful to physics quite apart from its cultural usefulness. There are certainly quantitative aspects to nature (or aspects of nature that are well understood in quantitative descriptions). The problem is when it's assumed that everything you want to know about nature can be well described in mathematical formulas; there are many aspects of nature that are not well described that way. At any rate, nature doesn't speak any language at all; it's we who speak languages. We speak many natural languages, and mathematics is part of all of them. I think that's a better way to think of it: mathematics always has to be interpreted. "Two plus two equals four" doesn't mean a thing. You don't have a clue about how to apply it until you translate it, until you put it in a particular context. There are huge arguments over what counts as "two" or "plus" or "equal." This is an argument I'm taking from Morris Kline, the internationally distinguished mathematician who wrote *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*, a book that won many prizes some years ago. It's kind of a history of mathematics and the search for certainty. He says mathematics is a lot like law: there's a law, but you don't know how to apply it until the history of case law takes over. It's the same thing with mathematics: you can have a formal statement, but exactly what it's useful for and how it bears on anything is a matter of how it's used within particular contextual projects, if we can call them that. Those projects will have gender and class and race and other constraints to them, and so the mathematical formulas will sometimes gain meanings that are gendered, but the mathematics itself does not have gender symbolization.

Q. Earlier you mentioned male feminists, and in the Introduction to *Femi-*

nism and Methodology: Social Science Issues, you suggest that despite arguments to the contrary male scholars can play a role in initiating and conducting “feminist” research. Would you elaborate more on the role of men in feminism?

- A. I see their role as parallel to the role of whites in antiracism: as an extremely important, distinctive, and difficult one. That’s not to say that female feminism is not a difficult role to play. As I indicated, men have important, unusual, distinctive contributions of their own to make to feminism and to everybody’s understanding of gender and social relations between the genders. Feminism has not always been, for understandable reasons, happy about contemplating the idea of male feminists, just as people of color have not always been happy to have whites in their revolutionary organizations. The dominant groups always think they know better. Even when they intend to do well and are very thoughtful, the cultural styles are different and there are certain topics that are very difficult to discuss in mixed groups. For example, issues about sexuality are extremely difficult for women and men to talk about in any group, but certainly in a mixed group because everybody feels defensive. And defensiveness is not a good context for thinking about anything. There are similar types of topics in white/non-white groups that are very difficult to have discussions about. So long as we stay on discussions about the law and about safely distant things, it’s fine; but once we start talking about the particular manner of conducting the discussion, for example, it gets really uncomfortable because we don’t realize that the normal ways that we’re used to doing things are alien and off-putting. So, I think the role of men in feminism is a crucial and an exciting one for them and for everybody else—and a very difficult and problematic one. Fortunately, there are many more men coming to feminism now who are producing feminist theory of a very useful sort. I always assign in my introduction to feminist theory course a text specifically for the men in the classes. I’ve been using for several years a wonderful book, *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity*, by philosopher Kenneth Clatterbaugh. It’s a critical review of different aspects of the men’s movement, including several forms of male feminism: male socialist feminism, black men’s feminism, gay men’s feminism, liberal male feminism—parallel feminisms to the standard female feminisms we teach, high-theory traditions. I think it’s important for men to create their own places within feminism. The men’s movement and men’s studies have tried to do that, and female feminists have been quite anxious about it, for good and bad reasons. Not all parts of the men’s movement are feminist, and that’s always been a problem. But we can’t control the ideas and movements we set in motion. I often feel that way about my own writing, my own books: they’re like children that you send out into the world, and you wouldn’t believe what they do out there. Then I try to get them back, straighten them out, shape them up, and send them

out there again. I feel that my own texts continually have to be struggled for; each time one's read, it's a different text that is read, and it's a new book that's out there. I do believe that its meaning is constructed by readers. You saw me smiling at some of the strange rhetoric I was using ten years ago; it sounds very different to me now than it did then. It's the same thing about feminism in general: we have to be able to let go of some of it and, on the other hand, go back and struggle with men over feminisms without assuming that we have the right to determine what kind of feminisms they're going to have. Men have to work out their own feminisms just as whites have to work out our own antiracism. But we'd better keep listening to what other folks say is not so good about the forms that we're working out. It doesn't mean we have to do what they say, but we sure have to take it seriously.

Q. In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* you discuss the "false" belief that "scientists can provide the most knowledgeable and authoritative explanations of their own activities, so sociologists and philosophers (including feminists) should refrain from making comments about fields in which they are not experts." Given recent intellectual trends toward dissolving disciplinary borders, how do you guard against the *misappropriation* of scholarship of one field by the scholars of another?

A. For me this isn't an issue about dissolving disciplinary borders, though I understand how disciplinarians could perceive it that way. It's rather an issue about having conversations across, from inside to outside, disciplinary borders. Let me be concrete. Scientists always talk outside science: they're always in Congress, on television, and down the hall being interviewed by *Newsweek*. It's not that they talk only to themselves; it's that they claim expertise about nature and about the nature of science. Philosophers do the same thing, so it's not peculiar to science; every discipline does it. We think that we're the experts about our own particular field. What else were we in college for all those years? Why else are we hired by these departments if we're not experts about our own particular field? I don't think you can guard against the misappropriation of scholarship of one field by the scholars of another. Cross-field appropriation is a crucial element in how knowledge advances; taking models, methods, metaphors, and ways of thinking from one field and applying them to another is exactly the way science progresses. Kuhn has a discussion of this, about how paradigm shifts are not generated by people *in* the field because they're too socialized into the field, too invested in the older ways of doing things. Such shifts tend to come about by people who are well trained in some discipline or another, so that they know what it is to be disciplined, to be a rigorous thinker; but because their thinking has not been constrained by that field, they're able to think new thoughts about that field and to ask new kinds of questions. What is a misappropriation? Is it taking my work and using it in ways I didn't intend? In literary studies they talk about the

death of the author; I think we should talk about the death of the scientist in the very same way: scientists can't—in fact, don't—control how their work is used. In one way they understand this; they always say, “We have no responsibility for our work once it leaves our laboratories.” In another way, they claim that their intentions are what constrains the way anybody can read their theories: if they didn't intend evil, then there is no evil that comes out of their theories; it comes from somewhere else. This is not helpful. So, what is a misappropriation of scholarship? I'm not arguing that there aren't misunderstandings and unfortunate uses of theories from one field to another—there are. But these are the very same processes that also result in very creative uses of work from another field. The way one not *guards* but *works* against non-useful appropriations of work from one field to another is by arguing against them. If we think that biological determinism is not useful for understanding social phenomena, then we need to argue against it, to provide evidence and show how models that work with termites may explain a great deal but may not be the best models for explaining the French Revolution, the American Revolution, or the writing of *Sociobiology*, that very book itself. We need to make the arguments themselves. That's probably the kind of thing someone would think is a misappropriation of one field to another.

- Q. Your discussion in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* of standpoint theory in relation to lesbian lives seems to assume that knowledge is always and everywhere desirable. However, the work of writers such as Michel Foucault suggests that knowing is as often a means of control as it is one of liberation. Is “knowing”—from a lesbian or any other perspective—the necessary telos or *desideratum* of feminist inquiry?
- A. What *would* be the appropriate goal of inquiry if it isn't knowing?
- Q. Well, your response to the question about the abolition of gender, for example, suggested that we need not resolve this issue, which in some sense means that we're not trying to know the answer to this dilemma, so that might be one way of talking about inquiry not directed toward knowledge.
- A. I think it's important not to close questions, if you're thinking of knowledge as a way of closing questions, saying, “This is knowledge now, so there's no room for further discussion.” This is frequently the way knowledge is presented, even though we all know that's not true. If we think sciences are our model, the sciences (theoretically, supposedly) never hold their claims that way. They always have to hold them as open to future revision on the basis of further evidence or a conceptual shift of one sort or another. Truth is not actually a notion that should be appearing in science according to their own principles; philosophers tend to talk about it more. Scientists may talk about something being “less false,” but not “true.” I think feminism especially should not want to close

down disputes, close down debates. You're right, the word *knowledge* is a very difficult one. Once we're talking about something like socially situated knowledge (such as thinking from lesbian lives, or women's lives more generally, or black lives), it seems like a contradiction in terms because "socially situated" always meant "mere opinion." The conventional philosophic contrast of course is between knowledge, which escapes social location, and opinion, which is flawed exactly because it has a determinate social location. So, you're right, there is something contradictory in our continuing to use this word *knowledge* to talk about the production of results of inquiry which are supposed to be escaping those Enlightenment, and older, assumptions. But I think feminists need (we all need) to understand how the world is put together. We've been handed distorted understandings about how the world is put together, and heterosexism is one way in which those understandings are distorted. As I indicate in that chapter, thinking from lesbian lives enables us to ask a lot more interesting questions about women's lives and men's lives. We can look at heterosexuality, sexual identity, as a property of individuals; as a structural property, just as gender is; and also as a symbolic property, a property of ideas. Subjugated knowledges are important to advance; when they have succeeded in becoming advanced, they are no longer subjugated. But then there is always some other subjugated knowledge to think from. I don't think that knowledge changes the world, but I think it's better to have than false beliefs if you're trying to change the world.

Q. Much of your work has been controversial. Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you'd like to address?

A. Well, there are plenty. Let me limit myself to two: one is a misunderstanding, and the other is half a misunderstanding and half a problem that's unresolved (and who knows how to resolve it? We'll have to work on it). A number of critiques of my work come from, on the one hand, philosophers who insist it's mere sociology and not philosophy; and, on the other hand, people in the social studies of science or social scientists more generally who think it's philosophy. Both of these critiques are confused because every philosophy assumes sociologies and histories of knowledge, whether or not they articulate them, and every sociology and history of knowledge assumes philosophies of science, whether or not they articulate them. After all, the historians and sociologists are taking themselves to be producing knowledge, so they must have some theory about how one should go about doing it, whether or not they're articulating that theory. And, on the other hand, philosophers—epistemologists—make recommendations; that's supposed to distinguish them from historians or sociologists, who merely provide descriptions. But as philosophers like to put it, "No ought without a can." They must have ideas about how one *can* produce knowledge if they're making prescriptions about how to go about doing it. It's simply a confusion on the part of both parties not to see that

any theory of knowledge involves both the empirical and the prescriptive. It involves some understanding of what the history and sociology of knowledge is, some correct or incorrect one, and some kind of prescription for how one should go about doing it. Feminism has to articulate these because it's contesting them. It's contesting the standard histories and sociologies of knowledge, on the one hand, so it has to provide alternative ones. It's saying, "Look at the way that knowledge was produced." We're objecting to the particular ways in which knowledge has been produced and the particular accounts of it. We're saying the history of science has a quite different history that includes a history of gender, for example, which has not been included in the standard histories and sociologies of science. You can't understand the results of research in sociology and history of science until you look at the role gender dynamics is playing in it, for example. And, on the other hand, we're contesting the philosophies of science as we do those sociologies and histories. We're saying, "Look, if you want to understand the history and sociology of science, you have to start from the lives of marginal people in order to ask questions about it." That's an epistemology or a methodology, depending on whichever side you take in looking at it. That very interplay (or conflict, or confusion, however you want to characterize it) between whether standpoint theory is an epistemology or a methodology is important. It's both, in this broader sense. The methodology description puts it on the side of social science in a way, and the epistemology description puts it on the side of philosophy. Those disciplines—philosophy on the one hand, and the history and sociology of knowledge in science on the other hand—take pleasure in taking pot shots at each other and in drawing serious borders between their activities, but they simply have misunderstandings of their own projects, of the history of their disciplines, and of what's necessary in order to produce the most adequate accounts of the sort they want to produce. You need to have a better account of how the history of science has functioned, of what has been responsible for the great advances in the history of science. We need to talk about how the successes of Western science are in part due to European expansion. That's about the history and sociology of science; that's an alternative history and sociology of science. And, of course, the historians and sociologists are going to object to that; so then you have to give them a philosophy of science—standpoint theory, for example—to say that you get more objective understandings of the histories of Western science if you start from the lives of people who didn't make out so well under it.

That's one confusion I would like to clarify. A second one has been posed as a critique of my work: it's been claimed that standpoint theory is another form of experientialism, that it claims a different kind of foundation for knowledge—namely, women's experience. There are a lot of good objections to that. If you think of "foundations" in the conventional way,

what it looks like is that feminism is simply substituting women's experience for men's experience in grounding knowledge claims. It's true that women's experience has been extremely important as a place from which critical questions have emerged to challenge conventional knowledge, but that's a very different sense of foundation from the conventional notion of foundations which takes experience to be a kind of unmediated, pre-social basic—that you can reduce knowledge to its experiential components and thereby ground it more securely. It is part of the brilliance of feminist epistemology to articulate this different place for experience in the production of knowledge. Of course, I'm sympathetic to the critiques that say, "You're not seriously grounding a knowledge base on women's experience, are you?" I answer, "No, of course not. But, on the other hand, women's experience, marginal experience, has a crucial role to play in this production of knowledge." I've articulated this in the way that I feel best about articulating it now, as the place from which different critical questions arise. This difficulty reflects a larger difficulty in epistemology, and Western thought more generally, about the relationship between experience and scientific knowledge. It's never been satisfactorily worked out. Experience, as it appears in writings about science, is a highly theoretical term. It's used to mean a whole range of different things. The most problematic aspect of it is the way it's regarded as prior to social construction, prior to the social, so that people want to talk about "interpretations of experience." There's experience and then there's different interpretations of it. That leaves it prior to the social. It's not interpretations of it; it's constructed through those interpretations, so to speak, and comes into existence as we articulate it within one discourse or another, whether we're articulating it to ourselves or in print. In standpoint theory the attempt to, on the one hand, articulate the important role that the experience of marginalized people, women's experience, has had in generating feminist knowledge, and, on the other hand, the attempt to escape foundationalism, has made it difficult to understand what the role of experience is. But I think this is something that needs a lot of further thought by everyone. Standpoint theory is proposing a third way: experience is not the foundation for knowledge in that conventional sense, nor is it irrelevant to it. It's relevant in many, many ways, but certainly as a generator of critical perspectives. That's why I've tried more recently to bypass the experience problem (because experience gets off into endless difficult and not necessarily clarifying discussions) by talking about "starting from women's lives." It's not all that more helpful, but it's a little more helpful because lives are an objective place, and that's the point of standpoint theory. Think of how standpoint theory borrows from the Marxian "standpoint of the proletariat." Marx was not grounding *Capital* in the experience of the proletariat in the sense that such experience, what the proletariat would say, was the measure of the adequacy of *Capital*.

That's such an absurd thing to say that we don't even know how to react to it. Yet, the experience of the proletariat was important. Now, I'm not saying Marx had it worked out; he kind of bypassed the whole issue, and the tendency there to give a special role to intellectuals was one way of bypassing the problematic role of experience.

So I think feminism inherits the legacy of Western inadequate accounts of the relationship between experience and knowledge, to put it in the most Freshman 101 form. We really are not quite sure how to think about that relationship, but people coming from marginalized groups and testifying to their experience is crucial. In an article that's not yet in print, I talk about this, borrowing from the writings of persons of color and other feminists. First of all, it creates the kind of subject that can go on to make history and knowledge. It comes into being as a subject with one's own history (this is the kind of discussion the postmodernists hate). By articulating one's experience, one reclaims one's history through, say, the slave narratives. The slave narratives are reclaiming a history there. Feminist consciousness raising is reclaiming a history that is not to be defined by the way the dominant group defines who you are. It's creating historical subjects located in a certain historical position who must come into existence in order for the production of knowledge and history to occur, who become agents of knowledge and agents of history only through this process of testifying to one's experience—which is, of course, a collective process. It's done in front of other people; it's done together. The slave narratives are not reporting individual experience, though of course they are; they're reporting individual participation in a collective experience. The same thing is true about consciousness raising in women's groups. *Of course* they're reporting individual details, but these are details of a collective experience that is occurring at this moment in history to these people. Thinking about it that way, we can see how it creates a subject of knowledge, a collective subject of knowledge, not the kind of individualist subject who becomes a genius alone, and not the kind who joins a community and never has a thought outside the community either. (So many people retreat to the community of science as the appropriate body to pass judgment on the adequacy of any claims; that's of course a problem if they're all from the same class, race, and moment in history.) So, at any rate, I'm thinking in a variety of ways here about how feminism and the marvelous new writings of people of color and gays and lesbians and working class people and people of various ethnicities have forced us to rethink the relationship of experience to knowledge and to reject the simplistic ways in which Western thought thinks about it. And that, in the case of my own writing, has led to criticisms, and I never can decide whether these criticisms are misappropriations or misunderstandings of my work, or whether they're putting their finger on something that we haven't quite figured out and therefore must think more clearly about.