

Article

## **CHALLENGES FOR INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHERS: ON THE PARADOX OF STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF DIFFERENCE**

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### **Abstract**

Feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) is an important form of writing from below; that is, writing from embodied experience. FSE and other forms of writing from below involve practices of representation that are mediated by ideology. In this article, I tease out some of the complexities and limitations of feminist efforts to use FSE to situate and embody thought. Some feminist standpoint theorists understand Cartesian dualism as a dualism or a division that can be collapsed or reversed, but I show that what is called “Cartesian dualism” is in fact a paradox and therefore cannot be overcome but must be grappled with on an ongoing basis in our efforts to write from below. Recognizing the paradoxical nature of the mind-body problem both clarifies the basis for critiques of positivism and the challenges and limits of situating and embodying knowledge as we try to write from below. The article begins with an exploration of the basic tenets and presumptions of two schools of FSE. While neither school can evade the politics of representation, I show that one is able to withstand an intersectional critique whilst the other is not. Having unpacked these schools of FSE, I reflect on Himani Bannerji’s ideology critique of intersectionality to lay bare the limitations of this concept that some writers from below deploy and to advance a reflexive materialist epistemology.

### **Keywords**

Feminist standpoint epistemology; institutional ethnography; reflexive materialism; intersectionality; experience; ideology; representation; subjectivity

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Editor Sandra Rein and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Some of the ideas presented in this article were discussed with colleagues while I was still at York University, particularly my friends Eric Mykhalovskiy and Marc Sinclair.

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## Introduction

I have invoked my positionality in this awkward way so as to accentuate the fact that calling the place of the investigator into question remains a meaningless piety in many recent critiques of the sovereign subject. Thus, although I will attempt to foreground the precariousness of my position throughout, I know such gestures can never suffice (Spivak 1988, 271).

Feminist standpoint epistemologies (FSE) were critiqued in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the interconnected rise to prominence of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, whose advocates raised questions about the politics of representation and how articulations of experience are and ought to be used in the social sciences and humanities. More recently, standpoint theories have been revisited (Hekman 1997) and re-imagined (Hemmings 2005; 2012), laying the groundwork for a refurbished reflexive materialist (Marxist feminist) epistemology capable of grappling with the paradox of standpoint epistemology and the complexities of difference.

Dorothy E. Smith (1987) claims that the roots of FSE can be traced back to feminist consciousness-raising efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. Smith describes how discussions among women led to a growing recognition of the disjuncture between women's embodied, situated experiences and disembodied, androcentric, objectifying theories referred to as positivist. These discussions, she argues, gave rise to a heightened level of feminist consciousness amongst women and to women-centered theories, concepts, and ways of knowing, including FSE. As Sandra Harding (1993) avers, "feminists are made, not born" (68).

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published her canonical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", arguing in the epigraph above that gestures toward positionality are insufficient in feminist and postcolonial research (Spivak 1988). She offers a reading of Karl Marx's ([1852] 1977) "Eighteenth Brumaire" to critique the politics of representation and the lack of attention to ideology at play in a transcribed conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Here, in an attempt to put forward a new reflexive materialist epistemology, I use Spivak's explication of the interplay of the two forms of representation – to speak for and to speak of/about – to tease out some of the complexities and limitations of some prominent past attempts at FSE.

I divide the FSE theorists into two schools based on their conceptualization of standpoint. The first I call "the double consciousness school" because of its use of W.E.B. Du Bois' ([1903] 2005) notion. Members of this school, including Sandra Harding, Alison Jaggar, Patricia Hill Collins, and Nancy Hartsock, understand standpoint as perspective/position/worldview/vantage point. Hartsock (1987) does not use the notion of "double consciousness" but her analysis of the "sexual division of labor" relies on a similar logic. Furthermore, as I will show, her argument has affinities with those of Harding and Jaggar, although Hartsock's use of standpoint has some unique elements related to her reading of Marx's standpoint of the proletariat. The second school, which I call "the bifurcated consciousness school", is identified with Dorothy Smith and

her reflexive materialist project of institutional ethnography (IE). In IE, the research problematic arises from a bifurcation of consciousness; that is, the experience of a disjuncture between one's situated standpoint and the trans-spatial, trans-temporal, trans-situational social relations that coordinate institutions (Smith 2005). In IE, standpoint is understood as embodied action.

In the following three sections, I explore the basic tenets and presumptions of the two schools of FSE. I show both that the double consciousness school cannot withstand the interplay of the two forms of representation or an intersectional critique and that while the bifurcated consciousness school also cannot evade the politics of representation, it can withstand an intersectional critique. "Intersectionality" can be understood as a way of invoking positionality and is a concept used in some attempts to write from below. Having used the idea of intersectionality to pull out some of the complexities of FSE, in section four I provide an analytic reflection of Himani Bannerji's (2005) ideology critique of intersectionality to advance a reflexive materialist epistemology. In the concluding section, I explain why Cartesian dualism is a paradox, not a dualism or a "division" that can be collapsed or reversed with the use of FSE, as Dorothy Smith (2005, 24-25) would have it. I refer to this conundrum as "Descartes' paradox." Building on Spivak's work, I conclude that standpoint epistemology is necessary but ultimately insufficient for grappling with Descartes' paradox. Recognizing the paradoxical nature of the mind-body problem both clarifies the basis for critiques of positivism and the challenges and limits of situating and embodying knowledge as we try to write from below.

### **The Double Consciousness School**

Advocates of the concept of double consciousness in FSE argue that women's lives, experiences, work and ways of knowing – their consciousness, ontology, and epistemology – often remain invisible to men, who are conceived generally as the dominant social group (Jaggar 2004, 60; Brooks 2007, 63). Feminists such as Joyce McCarl Nielsen (1990) and Patricia Hill Collins ([2000] 2009) argue that other oppressed social groups, such as African Americans and, more specifically, black women in the US, have a similar capacity for double consciousness. Collins (2009) explains: "An experiential, material base underlies a Black feminist epistemology, namely, collective experiences and accompanying worldviews that U.S. Black women sustained based on our particular history" (274). Collins' conceptualization of standpoint as "worldview" (see also Hartsock 1987, 163; Jaggar 2004, 55 and 59) and analogous understandings of standpoint as "point of view" (Brooks 2007, 60), "position" (Hartsock 1987; Jaggar 2004, 59), "perspective" (Harding 1993, 54; Jaggar 2004, 65; Brooks 2007, 62), or "vantage point" (Hartsock 1987, 159 and 165) are typical of the double consciousness school.

Double consciousness, for this school of FSE, equates to, on the one hand, the dominant group's consciousness, conceptualized generally as men's consciousness and/or as white people's consciousness, and on the other hand, the subordinate or oppressed group's consciousness, conceived generally as women's consciousness and/or US black women's or African Americans'

consciousness. These binary formulations break down when we apply an intersectional critique to them. We cannot, for instance, compare the consciousness of a working class disabled black lesbian to that of an affluent able-bodied heterosexual white man in the same manner as comparing the general identity categories of women and men or of blacks and whites. In the former case, there are more than two “consciousnesses” at play. Moreover, these “consciousnesses” do not form in a mutually exclusive fashion: working class consciousness does not form solely in relation to capitalist class consciousness; the consciousness of a person living with a disability does not form solely in relation to the consciousness of able-bodied people; and so on. When we take into account several modes of differentiation, it becomes increasingly apparent that the idea of double consciousness necessarily mobilizes essentialist identity categories and will not do in a social world where co-constitutive, not ontologically distinct, modes of differentiation exist and persist. To further complicate the idea of double consciousness, what would happen if we inquired into the consciousness of a “mixed race,” transgendered person? The binary conceptualization of double consciousness essentializes subjects and speaks of general and generalizing “worldviews,” masking the particularities of these perspectives. It might be argued that some of these formulations are examples of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1988), but many standpoint epistemologists are not as self-conscious as Spivak about the limitations of their claims. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that for Harding (1993), Hartsock (1987), and Jaggar (2004) politically illuminating views on social relations are not inherent in a particular subject position, but rather only arise as the product of struggle (see also G. Smith 1990). There is, therefore, an important difference between “woman” or “female” and “feminist” (Hartsock 1987, 162) and, contrary to Hartsock’s essentialism, between “male” and “masculinist.”

The two senses of representation – to speak for and to speak of/about – also have to be taken into account in conceptualizing and practicing standpoint. Both forms of representation are constituted through enunciations that are produced in and through language and discourse. Through her reading of Marx’s (1977) “Eighteenth Brumaire”, Spivak (1988, 271-280) develops her anti-essentialist explication of representation and points out that speaking for a political constituency or subject position presupposes a re-presentation of that subject position, which requires an enunciation of “self” and often involves the evocation of an essentialist identity, such as the standpoint of women or the standpoint of African Americans. Spivak’s argument is that the re-presentation of a standpoint as position figures the researcher as a proxy to a portrayed actuality and to a portrayed subject position through a series of substitutions of actuality for re-presentations of actuality. Subject positions are constructed through enunciations in language mediated by discourse and coordinated by ideology (Hall [1990] 1996, 110). They cannot be taken at face value and it is impossible to give a full itinerary of a subject position, even one’s own (Spivak 1988; Scott 1991; Smith 2005). In light of such analyses, thinking in terms of perspective or positionalities is fraught, ambivalent and insufficient on its own; Spivak (1988) still feels the need to “foreground the precariousness of [her] position” (271).

## Strong Objectivity

The notion of “strong objectivity” is important for Sandra Harding’s (1993; 2004) and for Alison Jaggar’s (2004) theorization of FSE. The idea behind “strong objectivity” is that “[s]tarting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order” (Harding 2004, 128) because beginning from women’s experiences means “certain areas or aspects of the world are not excluded” (Jaggar 2004, 62). While Hartsock (1987) does not use the term “objectivity” she nonetheless advances a similar argument to Harding and Jaggar: “A standpoint...carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (159, emphasis added). Given that standpoints are inherently biased, the idea that one or another unearths “the real relations of humans” is dubious. Clare Hemmings’ (2012) re-imagining of standpoint reproduces the idea that marginalized subjects necessarily produce “more reliable” knowledge (155).

In her revisiting of FSE, postmodern feminist Susan Hekman (1997) is critical of this idea; however, there are three other problems with her argument. First, she understands standpoint as perspective, which I have shown to be problematic. Second, she does not recognize that Dorothy Smith’s conception of standpoint is different than this (see the next section). Third, while her reading of how Hartsock’s and Collins’ standpoint theories changed over time in trying to address the challenges of taking into account various modes of differentiation is valuable, Hekman (1997, 349) thinks of difference in terms of an axial logic. This logic also underpins theories of intersectionality, which I critique in section four. Hekman’s (1997, 352-353) assertion that Collins (1989, 773) advanced an argument in the late 1980s similar to strong objectivity is noteworthy because, as I show below, unlike Harding, Jaggar and Hartsock, Collins comes to reject this thesis by the 2000s.

“Strong reflexivity” is a central element of the strong objectivity argument. This notion draws on Dorothy Smith’s (1986; 1987; 1990) and on Donna Haraway’s (1988) theorization of socially situated knowledge. Harding (1993) claims that “[t]he problem with the conventional conception of objectivity is not that it is too rigorous or too ‘objectifying,’ as some have argued, but that it is not rigorous or objectifying enough” (50-51). She thinks that re-conceptualizing objectivity will enable “scientific method” to identify androcentric and otherwise sexist assumptions underpinning prevalent ideas (ibid, 52). Marginalized and oppressed peoples’ experiences, she argues, are central resources for socially situating knowledge and “a source of objectivity-maximizing questions” (ibid, 54).

Following Dorothy Smith (1987; 2005), institutional ethnographers are critical of notions of objectivity, “weak” or “strong.” Some members of the double consciousness school of FSE are also critical of claims of objectivity (e.g. Nielsen 1990; Brooks 2007; Collins 2009). Ideas of objectivity and of subjectivity are historical formulations (Daston and Galison 2007). The idea of strong objectivity, like the idea of double consciousness, becomes increasingly untenable as an

array of modes of differentiation is taken into account (Brooks 2007, 70). In quantifying, ranking, and comparing modes of differentiation, “standpoint theorists invoke criteria for methodological adequacy that resemble those of positivism” (Collins 2009, 290; see also Hekman 1997, 354-356). The reflexive materialist use of standpoint in IE as embodied, situated action does not have these problems.

### **Standpoint and Experience in Institutional Ethnography**

The use of standpoint in IE is not meant to “universalize a particular experience [but] is rather a method that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual [people] speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds” (Smith 1987, 107). Since Smith’s project of IE depends on the experience of the researcher and that of the research subjects, she engages the questions posed by Judith Butler and Joan Scott about experiential accounts (Butler and Scott 1992; Scott 1991). Smith (2005) declares: “I am unmoved by Judith Butler’s and Joan Scott’s dismissal of the importance of experiential stories” (124). I want to offer a different reading of Scott’s (1991) genealogy of how “experience” is understood and used in historiography. Scott (1991), by my reading, does not dismiss the significance of experiential accounts. Rather, she wants to use experiential narratives as data in a genealogical analysis (see Foucault 1977). Her analysis focuses on what experiential accounts can tell us about foundational categories and about the relationship between the analyst as experiencing subject and the analysis she provides. Smith is also critical of positivism and is not interested in treating experiential accounts as simply true but, unlike Scott, she uses experiential accounts to delve into moments of rupture between experiencing subjects and ruling relations, moments of a bifurcation of consciousness. Smith and Scott diverge on what is to be done with experiential accounts. In IE, experiential accounts are used to open up inquiry into translocal ruling relations and how ruling relations hook into and coordinate everyday social relations. By contrast, a genealogy or “nonfoundational history” of experience calls the category of “experience” into question as a foundational category and an origin on which explanation will subsequently be built (Scott 1991, 797).

Smith draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of discourse – “speech genres” – to theorize experience as dialogue. In IE, experiential accounts are constructed and used in a double dialogic process: the first is a dialogue between the research subject and the investigator; the second is a dialogue between the interview transcript and/or field notes and the researcher (Smith 2005, 137). Recognizing that the articulation of experience is dialogically constructed in language mediated by discourse and coordinated by ideology, Smith (2005, 124-125) agrees with Butler and Scott (1992; Scott 1991) that categorization excludes and constrains what can be said and how it can be said of actual happenings re-constructed as experiential accounts. Thus, Hekman’s (1997) claim that Smith “refuses to acknowledge...that ‘reality’ is [materially and] discursively constituted” is warrantless (348). Arturo Escobar (1995), one of the few scholars to

bring together in productive tension the theories of Smith and of Foucault, puts it nicely: “[f]rom a poststructuralist perspective...there cannot be a materialist analysis that is not at the same time a discursive analysis...[because] [t]here is no materiality that is not mediated by discourse, as there is no discourse that is unrelated to materialities” (130; see also Weir and Mykhalovskiy 2010). Smith is not a poststructuralist but her thought is also not, in my view, strictly opposed to poststructuralism.

According to Smith (2005), “experience is spoken or written directly from the actualities of a person’s life” (104). The use of the word “directly” here may seem to be a dismissal of ideology, but I suggest that Smith is arguing that a subject can speak their experience through a formal discourse of knowledge, say, biomedicine, but in so doing is still speaking from the actualities of his or her life. They are in their body in a particular time, place, and situation. This highlights an important difference in standpoint conceptualized as embodied action and standpoint understood as position. Institutional ethnographers aim to explicate part of what Smith (2005) calls “the actual”, which she understands as “always there...and always ultimately more than can be spoken” (104). Smith thus acknowledges that there are limits to the researcher’s ability to re-present a full itinerary of the social organization of local actualities and the translocal relations coordinating those actualities. By extension, there are also limits to how fully an institutional ethnographer can “adopt” the standpoint of the subjects for whom the research is being done, even if that standpoint is the researcher’s own.

Institutional ethnographers theorize language because language is necessary for a spoken or written dialogue. Dorothy Smith (2005, 129) understands language as constituted in and through social relations and organization. George Smith (1998, 324), a student of D. Smith, draws on *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels [1846] 1970) to argue that a subject’s social consciousness is produced through social activities organized reflexively through language mediated by ideology. This idea of consciousness contrasts the idea that consciousness is a private mental state and raises the question of how institutional ethnographers understand subjectivities to be formed.

This is not a topic often discussed in IE: D. Smith ([1990] 1993) is more inclined to explicate how text-mediated relations suspend embodied, socialized subjectivity. G. Smith (1998), however, discusses subjectivity formation in exploring the experiential accounts of gay teenagers in school. The students’ experiential accounts were co-produced as data in dialogue with Smith. G. Smith (1998) purports to explore the contemporary educational regime in schools “from the standpoint of the informants” (309, emphasis added). But, it is clear these young gay men do not share a general consciousness or standpoint. The experiences of “closeted” and “out” students are reported to be different in many ways; they are not unified or internally congruent but rather fractured, contradictory, and mutable.

G. Smith (1998) designed his research “to understand how school works for gay students” by explicating “the heterosexist/homophobic social relations of the current educational regime in schools” (310). He interrogates how subjects practice thinking and emotional work in navigating a dialogue with various ideologies and discourses. In this case, young gay men, some of whom

are reflecting on a time when they were unsure about their sexual orientation, are thinking about their sexuality through a dialogue with the ideology of “fag” and homophobic discourses embedded in broader relations. Smith shows that subjectivities are formed on an ongoing basis through complex, reflexive, at times contradictory, dialogic processes. These subjectivity-producing dialogic processes are performed in and through co-constituted, not ontologically distinct, modes of differentiation produced by people’s coordinated activities. Himani Bannerji, another student of Dorothy Smith, uses the contention that modes of differentiation are co-constituted, not ontologically distinct, to critique the idea of intersectionality and advance a reflexive materialist epistemology.

### **A Reflexive Materialist Critique of Intersectionality**

For Bannerji (2005), the concept of intersectionality in mainstream feminism has come to be used to refer to the combination of race, gender, and class as “three particular strands of social relations and ideological practices of difference and power [that arise] in their own specific social terrain, and then [crisscross] each other ‘intersectionally’ or aggregatively” (144). Yet, Bannerji argues, the social is lived and experienced as an integrated whole all at once. Instead of a theory of difference that relies on axial/sectional and aggregative logics, Bannerji puts forward an integrated, reflexive materialist epistemology.

Bannerji does not look at the diverse array of feminist theorizations of intersectionality (see Pedwell and Whitehead 2012; Pedwell 2010), but this, in my view, does not invalidate or even take much force from her ideology critique. Carolyn Pedwell’s (2010) relational web approach, for instance, is more nuanced than the idea of intersectionality that Bannerji critiques. However, the idea of intersectionality can only be bent so far, so Pedwell’s (2010) formulation “of multi-axial accounts of simultaneous oppressions” (11) cannot help but echo Avtar Brah’s (1996) “multi-axiality” (16) understanding of intersectionality. Pedwell’s formulation of modes of differentiation as “axes” that intersect fundamentally differs from a reflexive materialist integrated understanding of the social and still falls within the logic Bannerji critiques, as we shall see.

As a Marxist, Bannerji (2005, 146) understands that the particularity of local events and issues always arise in a translocal context of socioeconomic and cultural relations. She sees every moment or aspect of the social as reflexive of others, and understands the imagined ontological distinction between “the micro” and “the macro” as a trick of ideology that ruptures the integrity of the social. The social is not the sum of its parts and is not made up of functional or regulatory parts like a machine or organism. In order to overcome this fallacy, Bannerji (ibid) puts forth an interpretation of Marx’s conceptualization of “the social” as involving the sensuous, conscious, practical activity of people embedded in and helping to produce on an ongoing basis a complex cultural and politico-economic formation in and through innumerable determinate and particular socio-historical relations and organizations. She discards the notion of a mechanical

relation between base and superstructure, and posits all social activities as relational and “mediated and articulated with their expressive and embedded forms of consciousness” (ibid, 147). For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels ([1846] 1970, 51), language is practical consciousness, so communicative and signifying practices are inherent to one’s socialized standpoint (Bannerji 2005, 147). With this formulation of the social, Bannerji seeks to socialize the idea of “race” through an ideology critique of what race, gender, and class mean with respect to each other. The social, in Bannerji’s estimation, is not simply a thought object nor is it simply a product of discourse. Drawing on E.P. Thompson’s (1974) socialized understanding of “class” as an “active process that owes as much to agency as to conditioning” (9) and echoing G. Smith (1998) and D. Smith (2005), Bannerji (2005, 147) theorizes forms of consciousness and modes of differentiation as active creations, and sense making as a social and thus relational activity, not something that happens in individual minds.

Social organization is not simply a function or articulation of the economy as positivist/scientific Marxism, with its reified and truncated conception of the social, would have it (Bannerji 2005, 148). Ways of thinking that compartmentalize the social into self-contained spheres, such as “the cultural,” “the political,” and “the economic” rupture the integrity of the social and encourage us to think of race, gender, and class in aggregative/intersectional terms. Race, gender, and class do not arise in ontologically distinct spheres and cannot be disarticulated from one another (ibid, 148-149). Race is not a fact of nature and, like gender and class, is an active social organization and organizer. As modes of differentiation and power-inscribed ways of creating and reading difference, race, gender, and class mediate and intensify one another in particular ways in particular places, spaces, and situations. Reflexive materialism insists on particularity.

Bannerji’s integrated theory of the social also draws on Marx’s adaption in *Grundrisse* ([1857] 1973) of Georg Hegel’s notion of “the concrete.” Her reading is that the concept of the “concrete” as the social and as a reflexive epistemology of the social has a double meaning and purpose for Marx: “It is a mental or conceptual category, and an existing social formation. Thus, it is ‘a point of departure’ (as the social) and ‘a point of arrival’ (as theory)” (Bannerji 2005, 150). The “concrete” is not meant to signal a visible object like a piece of furniture; rather, “concrete” social forms have defined limits of social existence with specific perceptible features that involve them in other social configurations and render them particular. Yet, “concrete” social forms are active, mutable, meaningful formations produced and reproduced by experiencing subjects in and through actual lived space/time and situational contexts. Definite and particular social relations with signifying, mediating, and generative forms of practices and consciousness concretize the “concrete” as the social, understood as a constitutive complexity (ibid). The subject’s standpoint is not experienced mechanically and serially; rather, it is produced on an ongoing basis in and through both complementary and contradictory material and reflexive socio-historical relations (ibid, 151).

Marx understands “ideology,” according to Bannerji (ibid), as “the epistemology that ruptures the integrity of the socially concrete at a conceptual level and posits this as a property of

the social” (153). Ideology, for Marx, concerns thought content and the form of knowledge production that produces de-contextualized ideas. Discourses and ideological categories interpret the socially concrete in particular and partial ways; they do not explain it (ibid, 154; see also Foucault 1977, 154). Marx identifies three tricks of ideology. First, ruling class ideas, which are ideas of ruling, are detached from the ruling class and treated as having an independent existence. Second, having severed ideas from their conditions of production and their producers, these ideas take on the guise of simply being the dominant ideas of their time. Third, ideas and discourses torn from their social ontology appear to produce one another and shape, even produce, the actualities that gave rise to them. It comes to seem that consciousness produces existence rather than the other way around, and increasingly abstract ideas are ascribed causal emphasis (Marx and Engels [1846] 1970, 65; Bannerji 2005, 154-155). If ideas of ruling such as race, gender, and class are understood ideologically as the common good, and thus without reference to their conditions of production and their producers, then potentially critical concepts serve ruling interests through power-inscribed conceptual practices of exclusion.

In critiquing the idea of intersectionality and putting forth an integrated theory of the social, Bannerji also finds two things significant about Marx’s emphasis on thinking through the notion of a mode. First, the mode of the social is an integrated, not aggregative, formative process produced on an ongoing basis in and through historical-geographical-material relations. The fallacy of the intersectional method is that the mode of production of the socially concrete cannot be revealed and explicated as an active, integrated whole when considered as segregated or even, as Carolyn Pedwell (2010) would have it, simultaneously forming intersecting axes of forms of consciousness and social relations (Bannerji 2005, 151). Second, if all social activities are sensuous, practical activities of conscious subjects, then “‘practical consciousness’ [is] a fundamental moment of all aspects of ‘concrete’ forms of existence” (ibid, 152). Ways of thinking that rupture and truncate the integrated existence of modes of differentiation beget ideology. In opposition to these ways of thinking, Marx developed has anti-dualist, anti-positivist notion of a mode of production, which enabled him to think of local, particular social forms as embedded in, coordinated by, and reproducing in specific ways translocal relations. By using the idea of mediation between social relations and forms of ideological and practical consciousness, Marx, in Bannerji’s (ibid) estimation, “shows how an entire signifiatory/communicative and expressive social ensemble must obtain for any specific economy and polity to operate and be effective” (153). Race and gender, as modes of mediation and forms of difference, participate in the generation of a mode of production that involves the devaluation of particular people’s labour power and embodiment as cultural commonsense (ibid). We need to socialize and integrate our conceptualizations of various modes of differentiation as formatively implicated, while recognizing the need for critical concepts, such as race, gender and class, which cannot be collapsed into one another.

## Conclusion

Having explored the complexities and limitations of two schools of FSE and critiqued the concept of intersectionality, I want to return to the mind-body question because there is a more fundamental critique to be made related to the nature of what is generally referred to as Cartesian dualism and to Spivak's (1988) declaration that standpoint "can never suffice" (271). For me, at least one of the reasons Spivak is able to declare that standpoint will never suffice is because "Cartesian dualism" is not a dualism. It is a paradox. While at first glance Cartesian dualism seems to be impossible – the mind and body are not physically separated when a positivist claims to be unbiased and writes as if they are theorizing from an Archimedean point – yet completely undoing Cartesian dualism also appears to be impossible. We cannot accept Cartesian dualism given it is predicated on a disavowal of situated embodiment; yet, we cannot re-present the entirety of the actual and our re-presentation will always be an interpretation coordinated by ideologies and enunciated in and through discourses and signification. Neither feminist standpoint epistemologists nor anyone else trying to write from below can collapse or reverse Descartes' paradox. If analysis cannot pre-exist politics, cannot be extra-discursive, and cannot exist outside of signification, then there are limits to the extent that thought and the articulation of subjective, affective experience can be situated and embodied that must be grappled with on an ongoing basis but cannot be overcome.

My reflexive materialist theory of standpoint does not privilege ontology, but rather aims to explicate the complex entanglement of being and knowing. Hemmings' (2012) formulation "onto-epistemological" is a similar idea, but the notion that marginalized subjects necessarily create "more reliable" (155) knowledge finds its way into her re-imagining of standpoint despite her critique of what we might call the affective objectivist position that one can know the truth of one's being in the world through affect. Many critical scholars have troubled other forms of binary thinking in trying to show the complex imbrication of the emotional/personal and the structural (Ahmed 2004 and 2010; Pedwell and Whitehead 2012), the material and the discursive (Spivak 1988; Scott 1991; Escobar 1995; Smith 2005), and being and knowing (G. Smith 1990; Hemmings 2005 and 2012; Hussey 2012). My reflexive materialist theorization of standpoint assumes, as do these other theories, that we cannot privilege either side of a binary. Indeed, the formulation of "sides" represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Descartes' paradox and the constitutive complexity of the socially concrete.

What this means for our attempts to write from below is our efforts to speak from a critical standpoint are fraught. Like Spivak, our positions are necessarily precarious and our efforts to speak from below will never suffice. But, this does not mean we should abandon our efforts to write from below. Rather, our challenge is to grapple with Descartes' paradox through rigorous empirical analysis that takes seriously the politics of representation, the possibilities and limits of experiential data, and the coordinating role of ideology in the process of understanding.

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