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# **STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS OF MODERNIST THOUGHT**

## ***Collins, Smith, and the New Feminist Epistemologies***

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*Recent debates between modernists and postmodernists have shaken the foundations of modern social science. The epistemological assumptions of long-established procedures for constructing and validating knowledge claims have been called into question. This article discusses how two major contributors to the "new feminist epistemologies"—Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins—selectively integrate premises of modernist and postmodernist thought into their standpoint approaches. However, the particular premises they select result in significant ontological and epistemological differences between their works. These differences reflect major controversies over materialism versus idealism, as well as essentialism versus diversity. As such, these different standpoints have important implications for feminist scholarship and political practice.*

**R**ecent decades have witnessed a virtual explosion of criticisms leveled against the epistemological assumptions of modern social science. This juncture in the history of social thought has been referred to as the "Big Bang" in that former trends toward theoretical convergence have given way to theoretical pluralism (Cheal 1991, 153). In the past, theory construction was directed toward building a single, universalizing perspective that could more adequately explain social life than its predecessors. Now critics frame such pursuits in "cyborg imagery" as "power moves" to dominate others through discourse rather than as "objective" attempts to discover "truth" (Haraway 1991, 181 and 184). In place of the privilege given

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to dominant paradigms and empirical validation in the modernist world, postmodernist critics present a world of plural constructions and diverse realities that call into question the entire edifice of conventional social science (Cheal 1991, 153-54).

These epistemological debates followed closely the rise of a vast new scholarship that depicted the diverse experiences of men and women from different classes, races, and ethnicities. Globally, this diversification of studies has been linked to the collapse of Europe's hold on its colonial empires in the 1950s, as well as to the social conflicts within European and American societies in the 1960s (Lemert 1993, 9). More locally, these new voices were spawned, in part, by the U.S. civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the modern women's movement, which highlighted the conflict, inequality, and diversity that characterized the United States. These movements sparked struggles for greater equality by other minority groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, this new scholarship both fostered and was fostered by the politics of difference.

One of the major contributions of feminist theorists to this new scholarship of diversity is standpoint theory—an approach that argues that knowledge is and should be situated in people's diverse social locations. As such, all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed.

Two contemporary sociologists—Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins—have been especially lauded for their contributions to feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1996). In recent years, Smith's works have gained prominence in widely used sociological theory texts, suggesting that both inside and outside of feminist scholarship, she is recognized as one of the most important contemporary theorists in our discipline (Ritzer 1996).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Collins' writings on Black feminist thought often are cited as a cornerstone of “third wave feminism”—modern feminism's newest wave that builds primarily on the theme of difference (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1996).

Given the link these writers posit between social diversity and the social construction of knowledge, their approaches have been used to illustrate fundamental features of the “new feminist epistemologies” (Alcoff and Potter 1993; Stanley and Wise 1990). However, there is much disagreement about how Smith and Collins address certain epistemological issues. Some writers suggest that they share similar epistemological assumptions, whereas others highlight their differences (Haraway 1991; Harding 1991, 1993; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1996; Stanley and Wise 1990). These contradictory assessments of their works make it difficult for many readers to place their writings within the current debates between modernist and postmodernist thought.

Our goal is to add greater clarity to the issues raised by these important feminist writers by illuminating both the common ground and the points of divergence between their works. In addition, we examine how each of these writers addresses key issues in the modernist-postmodernist debates. For this latter comparison, we rely heavily on Pauline Rosenau's (1992) formulation of the basic assumptions of postmodernist thought in her book, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences*:

*Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions.*<sup>2</sup> It deserves mention that we are basing our analysis of Collins' work on a smaller collection of writings than is the case for Smith. Smith is a senior scholar of international renown with a career's worth of publications. As such, she has had more time to fashion and polish the logic and consistency of her ideas. Collins is a young scholar whose first book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), not only won the prestigious C. Wright Mills Award in 1991 but also placed her in the forefront of third wave feminism. Indeed, it is a tribute to both of these scholars that their work is often discussed together as representing some of the most challenging feminist scholarship in contemporary sociology. Our interests are both political and pedagogical since we argue that major differences between the approaches of Smith and Collins have important implications for feminist politics and studies. Before examining these differences, let us first focus on their common ground.

### STANDING ON COMMON GROUND

While neither Smith nor Collins claim to be writing outside of the modernist tradition, they both adopt new strategies for doing research that result in innovative critiques of conventional social science. A number of these new strategies, such as their reflexive methodologies, their critiques of master narratives, their acceptance of alternative knowledge claims, and their recognition that all knowledge is socially situated and constructed, are shared by postmodernist thought. Yet, other strategies employed by these scholars remain firmly grounded in the modernist tradition. Below, we address each of these strategies in turn.

#### **Reflexive Methodologies**

Both Smith and Collins explicitly adopt reflexive methodologies that are designed to expose or make conscious the social organization and social relations through which objectified forms of knowledge are created (Collins 1990, 13-16; Smith 1990a, 7). Their calls for reflexive methodologies are integrally related to their critiques of positivist forms of social science that assume researchers can and should be objective. According to this positivist view, researchers who become too close or too interested in their subjects must find ways of cleansing their research from bias—of “converting their private interest into an objectified, unbiased form” (Smith 1990a, 16).

However, Smith and Collins argue that by disassociating themselves from the subjects of their studies, social scientists become removed from people's direct encounters with the everyday world. In place of the actualities of people's experiences, they frame the social world within conceptual structures, which they then mistake for reality. Such methodological and theoretical strategies separate a sociologically constructed world from the world as it is actually experienced. By

doing so, conventional social scientists create "objectified forms of knowledge" in which the researcher as subject disappears (Smith 1990a, 4 and 11).

By contrast, Collins and Smith argue that all knowledge is constructed by people who are situated differently in the social world, who have distinctive understandings of the world and access to privileged modes of discourse (Collins 1990, 13-16; Smith 1990a, 22). Hence, Smith and Collins share what may be the fundamental essence of standpoint theory—the view that all knowledge is socially situated and socially constructed.

### **Socially Constructed Knowledge**

Since all knowledge is "socially produced," no one, including social scientists, can "erase the fingerprints that reveal this production process" (Harding 1993, 57). This assumption is shared by postmodernists who reject what they see as the naive assumption held by positivist science of a detached, value-neutral researcher. In such cases, postmodernists contend that the narrator, the "camouflaged first person (I, we)" is "hiding in the bramble of the passive voice" and knowledge is presented—as "without a human narrator" (Rosenau 1992, 85). By exposing the social construction of reality by lay and scientific practitioners alike, postmodernist critiques of objectivity or value neutrality are similar to Smith's and Collins' approaches.

In turn, Smith and Collins discuss how objectified forms of knowledge "create an appearance of neutrality and impersonality that conceals class, gender, and racial subtexts" (Smith 1990a, 65). They reject the way in which the construction of reality by social scientists leads to "meta" or "master narratives" that claim privileged status as discourses and ignore or demean the voices and knowledge claims of more marginalized and oppressed peoples. For example, Collins writes:

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (1990, xiii)

Collins also discusses the privileged social location of African American intellectuals and the important role they can play in critiquing conventional knowledge claims (1990, 13-16). To illustrate similar privilege and the reflexive nature of her method, Smith tells the story of riding on a train and seeing through the window an Indian family watching the passing train. Smith realizes that she could describe this incident as she saw it, but to the Indians, this same incident may appear very different. She acknowledges that her account is the one that most likely would be accepted as "knowledge" because as a certified academic she is privileged to speak in contexts to which these Indians did not have access. She writes:

There are and must be different experiences of the world and different bases of experience. We must not do away with them by taking advantage of our privileged

speaking to construct a sociological version that we then impose upon them as their reality. We may not rewrite the other's world or impose upon it a conceptual framework that extracts from it what fits with ours. (1990a, 25)

It is clear from the above quotes that Smith and Collins advocate reflexive and critical approaches where researchers acknowledge their own roles in the production of knowledge, as well as the differential privilege given to certain people or groups in knowledge production. These quotes also demonstrate that neither of these feminist scholars ignore the diversity of oppressions. Rather, they recognize gender oppression as only one of multiple forms of oppression that characterize modern societies.

### **Bifurcated Consciousness and Alternative Knowledge Claims**

In discussing how marginalized or oppressed persons experience the world, they also both make use of the notion of bifurcated consciousness. Smith's "insider's sociology" focuses in particular on how women's relegation to primary responsibility for the domestic world of household, children, and neighborhood leads to a bifurcation of their consciousness since the domestic world does not and cannot operate on the bases of the formal rationality characteristic of extrafamilial institutions (1987, 64-69).

While Collins frames the idea of bifurcated consciousness in terms of an "outsider-within perspective," she is focusing, like Smith, on how the contradictions encountered by subjugated groups provide angles of vision for critical insights into relations and processes of oppression (Collins 1986). As Smith notes: "Collins' outsider's sociology is close to being what I mean by an insider's sociology" (1993, 190).

To illustrate such critical vantage points, Collins provides the example of Black domestic servants whose blackness made them perpetual outsiders to the White families they served, but whose day-to-day work within the intimate domains of these White households demystified certain White power relations. As one domestic servant put it:

You can't lay up on those flowery beds of ease and think that you are running your life, too. Some white women can run their husband's lives for a while, but most of them have to see what he tells them there is to see. (quoted in Collins 1990, 11)

Precisely because such critical insights are muted by the privileged forms of discourse claimed by master narratives, Smith and Collins accept alternative knowledge claims often ignored or demeaned by conventional social science. In particular, both authors discuss how everyday life experiences are undervalued either as topics of study or as the bases for knowledge claims. For these feminist critics, what goes on in the living rooms and bedrooms of "everyday/everynight" life is as important as what takes place in government or corporate boardrooms. Smith, especially, highlights how the latter is predicated on the former, since if

women take care of everyday life, then men can enter the extralocal and rationally organized world of working or governing without a sense of transition or bifurcation. Indeed, this analysis may help explain why meta or master narratives constructed in the extralocal world often ignore everyday life. By contrast, those women who move between these two worlds have access to an experience that displays the bifurcation of social life and consciousness. For these reasons, "an alternative sociology, from the standpoint of women, makes the everyday world problematic" (Smith 1990a, 27).

This emphasis on everyday life experiences is central to a critique of objectified forms of knowledge. If theories are only socially constructed realities by privileged experts, then if and when these theories guide social research, as in traditional sociology, the lives of the subjects of social inquiry are more likely to be molded into certain preconceived theoretical or conceptual assumptions. However, if the subjects' everyday lives are the starting point of research, knowledge emerges from lived actualities. Therefore, it is less likely to be shaped or constrained by preconceived notions. For similar reasons, postmodernists criticize meta narratives and the way in which conventional social science undervalues everyday experience (Rosenau 1992, 83-84).

To illustrate how practical everyday life experiences can challenge conventional knowledge claims, Collins uses the example of how Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" called into question patriarchal conceptions of women's work (1990, 207). She also discusses the importance of alternative knowledge claims based on emotions and common sense "wisdom"—sources of knowledge that often are not legitimized by conventional scholarship (1990, 206-19). Consider the following quote Collins uses to distinguish between conventional views of knowledge and common sense "wisdom":

Blacks are quick to ridicule "educated fools" . . . they have "book learning," but no "mother wit," knowledge, but not wisdom. . . . African-American women need wisdom to know how to deal with the "educated fools" who would take a shotgun to a roach. (1990, 208)

The acceptance by Smith and Collins of such alternative knowledge claims moves them closer to what Rosenau terms the "affirmative post-modernists" who look to feelings, personal experience, and empathy as adequate bases for knowledge claims. More skeptical postmodernists deny any bases for knowledge claims, since they argue we can never know anything. For such skeptics, myth and magic are "on the same footing" as science—a position Rosenau calls an "anything goes" methodology (1992, 117-19 and 128).

Smith's approach differs significantly from this "anything goes" methodology, since all of the alternative knowledge claims she discusses fall within the domain of the empirical or the sensory verifiable. She is most explicit about the empirical dimensions of her approach in one of her most recent articles that is rather sarcastically titled "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism" (1996b). Here she

discusses how “divergent perspectives are coordinated in the social act of referring” and how the act of referring directly “implicates and relies on the humanly shared senses of participants, their bodily being and activities of looking, touching, smelling, hearing, etc.” (1996b, 194). For Smith, both the *social* and the *empirical* features of referring are essential for adjudicating knowledge claims or “telling the truth.”

As we shall discuss later, Collins’ writings are less clear on this issue, but many of the alternative knowledge claims she identifies also fall within the domain of the empirical or the sensory verifiable. One can look at Sojourner’s strong arms, one can feel emotions, and one can observe the outcomes of learning through trial and error—which is the essence of commonsense wisdom. Even when Collins accepts knowledge claims based on accounts that are more dubious empirically, such as intuition, she argues that she is referring to intersubjective experiences that are “experienced directly in the world” (1990, 211).

Both authors also argue that some social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects that seek to understand oppressive social relations. They agree with bell hooks’ notion that by moving oppressed people’s lives “from the margin to the center” of social analysis, one starts social inquiry from vantage points that provide more critical insights into these relations of oppression (hooks 1984). While they place the relationship between knowledge and politics at the center of their modes of inquiry, this position should not be equated with identity politics. Neither Smith nor Collins embrace identity politics, unlike many postmodernists (Bologh and Mell 1994). Rather, these writers share with other critics the view that identity politics can be both “limiting and exclusionary” (Gottfried 1996, 5).<sup>3</sup>

Smith’s focus on the standpoint of women has been misconstrued as advocating a major assumption underlying identity politics that “one has to be one to know one” (Stanley and Wise 1990, 36). However, for Smith, it is the social location that holds the key to greater understanding of the relations of ruling, not the fact that the knowledge producer is a woman or a member of an oppressed group. This important analytic distinction is often misunderstood in discussions of standpoint methodologies (Harding 1993).

Yet, Smith specifically cautions against “confining” social inquiry to the world of individuals’ subjective interpretations of their experiences (Gorelick 1996, 26). Rather, she realizes that the very organization of the everyday world of oppression often obscures structures of oppression. Smith writes: “The everyday world is not fully understandable within its own scope. It is organized by social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained in it” (1979, 176; 1987, 92).

Although Collins ultimately sides with Smith on these issues, she vacillates more in discussing identity politics and its more radical corollary of privileging the knowledge of the oppressed. She writes:

It is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression. . . . Only African-American women

occupy this center and can "feel the iron" that enters Black women's souls, because we are the only group that has experienced race, gender, and class oppression as Black women experience them. (1990, 33-34)

Such epistemological privileging of oppressed groups is in no way new but has characterized a good deal of radical literature—feminist and nonfeminist alike (Anzaldúa 1987; Bat-Ami Bar On 1993; Harding 1993; Hartsock 1983). While historically this epistemological stance is often traced to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, in contemporary feminist thought it is associated with feminists who advocate identity politics, such as the feminists in the Combahee River Collective (1977).

Yet, Collins eschews this position in other parts of her text where she argues that neither biology nor social biography are synonymous with authenticity and claims that other persons can contribute to Black feminist thought. She also acknowledges that not all African American women will respond to shared themes in the same way, thus highlighting the diversity *within* Black women's thought (1990, 33-34).

She finally concludes that both identity politics and privileging the knowledge of the oppressed are beset with serious problems. Not only are the perspectives of the subjugated "not innocent" and "not exempt from critical re-examination" as Haraway (1991, 191) argues, but also privileging their knowledge would ignore the costs of oppression to these subjugated groups—costs that limit access to the very privileges and opportunities that allow people to expand their awareness of the social world. Indeed, the simple fact that American slaves were prohibited from learning to read and write exemplifies these costs and limitations. Hence, by the last section of her book on "Black Feminism and Epistemology," Collins rejects some of her former statements by writing: "Although it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and, therefore, have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes, and effects of oppression, this simply may not be the case" (1990, 207).

Collins concludes that Black feminist thought represents only a "partial perspective" among many others and that a more developed picture of the social world can be generated by "pivoting" from the interpretations and knowledge of one group to the interpretations of the next group. By understanding the perspectives of many groups, knowledge of social reality can become more complete (Collins 1990, 234). Thus, social knowledge is constructed in a quiltlike fashion whereby the many and diverse social realities are interwoven to form a more complete fabric of the whole. "The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and, for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges" (Collins 1990, 234).

Both Smith and Collins advocate such webbed accounts of knowledge, but for different reasons. For Smith, webbed accounts that require researchers or knowers to identify their partiality are central to rendering visible the social construction and

politics of knowledge (Haraway 1988, 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1996, 483). However, Smith is more clear than Collins that “peoples’ subjective interpretations of their experiences must be grounded in definite material conditions” (1990, 23). By contrast, Collins appears to use the terms *experience* and *knowledge* interchangeably. This moves Collins’ work much closer to the idealist views of postmodernists, as we shall discuss below.

Indeed, we shall argue that major epistemological differences between Smith’s and Collins’ approaches are rooted in this materialist versus idealist debate. In turn, major ontological differences between these writers are rooted in their different standpoints. These important differences are the focus of our next section on how their paths diverge.

### STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

We shall first examine some important ontological differences that distinguish the works of Smith and Collins. We argue that these differences stem from the significance that each writer gives to the dichotomy between extralocal and everyday life. While, as we noted above, Collins certainly recognizes the importance of everyday life experiences, the dichotomy between extralocal and everyday life is not nearly as central in her approach. By contrast, this dichotomy is fundamental to Smith’s critique of objectified forms of knowledge.

#### Significance of the Dichotomy Between Extralocal and Everyday Life

For Smith, the very mode of operating, of relating to others, of acting in the social world is rooted in the distinction between extralocal and everyday life. She argues that women’s work routines and the organization of their daily lives do not conform to the “impersonal,” “voluntaristic,” and “rational modes of action” that are the *modus operandi* in the world outside of the home. Rather, a “loose, episodic structure” and a responsive, other-directed orientation govern social actions in the domain of everyday life (1987, 64-69). While women do not inhabit only the domestic world, for the vast majority of women it is the primary ground of their lives, shaping the course of their lives and their relationships with others.

Under the traditional gender regime, providing for a man’s liberation . . . is a woman who keeps house for him, bears and cares for his children, washes his clothes, looks after him when he is sick and generally provides for the logistics of his bodily existence. Women’s work in and around professional and managerial settings performs analogous functions. . . . Women do the clerical work, the word processing . . . they take messages, handle the mail, make appointments and care for patients. . . . The more successful women are in mediating the world of concrete particulars the more men do not have to become engaged with (and, therefore, conscious of) that world. (1990a, 19)

Hence, it is women's primary responsibility to reproduce the world of everyday/everynight life. This world is subordinate, suppressed or ignored, despite the fact that it is the social grounding—the taken-for-granted social context—for its superior. Smith takes the position of women as her starting point because the dichotomy between the two worlds of extralocal and everyday life, as well as the dual consciousnesses generated by this dichotomy, are organized primarily on the basis of gender. She writes: "Thus though an alienated knowledge also alienates others who are not members of the dominant white male minority, the standpoint of women distinctively opens up for exploration the conceptual practices and activities of the extralocal, objectified relations of ruling" (1990a, 65).

By contrast, this ontology of everyday life is absent from Collins' work. She does not give such preeminence either to the dichotomy between extralocal and everyday life nor to how it bifurcates consciousness on the basis of gender in a "distinctive" way. It is possible that Collins views Smith's distinction as simply the basis for yet another essentialist conception of women by singling out the reproduction of everyday life as a major unifying feature among all women. She might also reject this distinction because men and women of color, ethnicity, and lower social class are also disproportionately relegated to the reproduction of the domestic world as servants and/or to those "analogous functions" in the extralocal world such as clerical work, handling mail, cleaning offices, and caring for patients. Since Collins' work both emphasizes the multiplicity of oppressions resulting from race, ethnicity, class, and gender and also stands as a major critique of modern feminists' misuse of essentialist conceptions of women, more clarification of her position on these important issues would enhance her analysis.

Similarly, it would be interesting to know how Smith might respond to the claim that she contradicts herself by including in her examples of the reproduction of everyday life those "analogous functions" in the extralocal world since they operate (however incompletely) on the basis of formal rationality and, hence, are mediated differently from the particularities of the domestic world. Does this inclusion undermine the significance of her dichotomy between extralocal and everyday life and suggest a multitude of different levels of mediation of consciousness? Would Smith have been more consistent to limit her examples to the domestic world where formal rationality is presumed to be absent and where women of all classes, races, and ethnicities do have primary responsibility, whether or not they are employed in the extralocal world?

Whatever the case, the ontological differences in the significance each writer gives to the dichotomy between the everyday and extralocal spheres of social life result in epistemological differences between their approaches. In highlighting the significance of this dichotomy, Smith gives more importance to how the immediacy and particularities of everyday life have distinct implications for consciousness and for modes of operating and acting in the social world. By contrast, Collins is left with a rather simple sociology of knowledge where diverse social locations result in diverse consciousnesses or perspectives.

### Materialism and Idealism

Smith also grounds subjectivity in the practical, ongoing “activities of individuals under definite material conditions” using a materialist method she derives from Karl Marx (1987, 126; 1990a, 25; 1990b, 6–8).<sup>4</sup> Here she diverges significantly from the approaches of postmodernists who often equate experiences with subjective perspectives and argue that there are no real world objects other than those inherent within the mental makeup of persons (Rosenau 1992, 110). Rather, Smith argues that if one simply uses “subjectivist interpretations of experience,” we can “never escape the circles of our own heads” (1990a, 23; 1990b, 9).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, she distances herself from postmodernism’s “insistence on the subject existing only in discourse” (1996a, 54). For Smith, discourse is not simply subjective statements but a field of social relations. Discourse is a social act and, therefore, has social organization (1995, 24–25). These positions root her approach firmly within the materialist camp.

As Rosenau points out, materialist approaches are an anathema to many forms of postmodernism. Postmodernists of various persuasions (both the nihilistic “skeptics” and the more moderate “affirmatives”) reject those versions of modern social science that claim a materialist reality. This leads them to embrace idealist and relativist approaches to knowledge. As Rosenau writes: “Relativism and uncertainty characterize their views” whereby “a pluralism of more or less equal views exists” (1992, 22). This relativism cripples their ability to adjudicate between different knowledge claims. As we noted above, the skeptical postmodernists reject any bases for adjudicating knowledge claims (Rosenau 1992, 22–23).

Collins argues that her approach is not relativistic (1990, 235). However, her unwillingness to privilege any viewpoint, as in the quote below, resounds of relativism:

No one group has a clear angle of vision. No one group possesses the theory or methodology that allows it to discover the absolute “truth” or, worse yet, proclaim its theories and methodologies as the universal norm evaluating other groups’ experiences. (1990, 234)

Indeed, it appears from such quotes that Collins views any claims to having a clearer view of the truth as myopic and cyclopic—as simply partial views trying to claim dominance (1990, 234). She even more adamantly makes this assertion when she disassociates herself from writers who epistemologically privilege the oppressed: “approaches (that) suggest that the oppressed allegedly have a clearer view of ‘truth’ than their oppressors . . . simply duplicate the positivist belief in one ‘true’ interpretation of reality and . . . come with their own set of problems” (1990, 235).

Perhaps, if Collins maintained throughout her work the analytical distinction between the advantages that may accrue from generating knowledge from the *experiences of the oppressed*, as opposed to generating knowledge from the *subjectivities of the oppressed*, she would not be left with a perspectival sociology of knowledge that borders on idealist relativism. However, Collins does not unravel

these analytical distinctions in her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). Rather, she appears to have accepted the dilemma posed by postmodernists of either embracing “the evils of the Charybdis of scientific realism or the Scylla of social relativism” (Keller 1992, 9). In this dilemma, one either adjudicates knowledge claims by claiming the greater validity of a given view (which for postmodernists is only a partial perspective claiming dominance) or embraces the permanent partiality of multiple perspectives. Collins’ statements above suggest that she leans more toward the latter choice.

By contrast, Smith rejects the radical subjectivist world of postmodernism with its plural realities and its refusal to privilege any one interpretation. She is most explicit about these issues in her recent critiques of postmodernism (1996a, 1996b). However, almost a decade ago she stated that she “cannot rest” with an “acceptance of the intrinsic many-sidedness of our worlds” and that it “is essential to the most modest possibilities of knowing how things work” that other accounts “can be called into question” (1987, 121-22). She writes:

Inquiry itself does not make sense unless we suppose that there is something to be found and that that something can be spoken of to another, as we might say “Well this is the way it is. This is how it works.” It would not be enough to say “This is how it looks to me” . . . when that is all we are going to say. If we want to offer something like a map or diagram of the swarming relations in which our lives are enmeshed so that we can find our ways better among them, then we want to be able to claim that what we are describing is actual in the same way as our everyday worlds are actual (1987, 121-22).

Indeed, Smith is clear that if knowledge is to have an impact on politics, then there must exist “the practical possibility” that one account can invalidate another (1987, 122). Here, Smith embraces materialism and scientific realism, appearing less concerned with cyborg imagery than with political impotence. In her recent writings, she harshly criticizes the political implications of postmodernism’s idealist stance:

In the contemporary context, postmodernism has written the constitution that eliminates from the phenomenal domain of social and cultural thinking, the bases of oppression that Marxism had brought into view, replacing it with a self-reflexive critique of discourse within discourse. Feminist postmodernism is feminism’s own variant of the post-McCarthy redesigning of sociological discourse that stripped social science of its relation to political activism beyond the academy. (1996a, 54)

Since Collins shares Smith’s fundamental concern that thought be related to political action, she is forced to address the issue of how to adjudicate between different knowledge claims when she has argued that no one group has a clear angle of vision. Collins’ response to this problematic is an idealist response—“dialogue” (1990, 236). Quoting Alice Walker, she argues that dialogues can work so long as each diverse group speaks, listens, and “strains to encompass the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity” (Walker 1983, 5). Collins writes:

Those ideas that are validated as true by African-American women, African-American men, Latina Lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints, with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, thus become the most "objective truths." . . . Dialogue is critical to the success of this epistemological approach. (1990, 236)

This emphasis on dialogues for adjudicating knowledge claims places Collins much closer to the "affirmative postmodernists" who "gravitate towards narratives and center on listening to and talking with the other" for adjudicating knowledge claims (Rosenau 1992, 117-19). Here intersubjective consensus replaces empirical validation.

Yet, reliance on adjudicating knowledge claims through intersubjective consensus has political implications that are especially risky for women and other subordinate groups. If in such dialogues, majority consensus on the validity of knowledge claims rules, the tyranny of the majority could easily leave marginalized and oppressed minorities in their subjugated positions. Even when such dialogues lead to greater clarity of the multiplicity of perspectives on any given issue, those with the greatest power and resources have no reason to give up their privilege simply because they understand oppression better. Indeed, such clarity could be used to their advantage.

Ironically, early in her book Collins presents an interchange between Alice Walker and Walker's mother that highlights such problems:

Walker: "I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after."

Her mother's response: "Well, I doubt if you'll ever get the true missing parts from the white folks—they've sat on the truth so long they've mashed the life out of it." (quoted in Collins 1990, 17)

Despite these critical insights in her work, Collins appears to give greater priority to dialogue in adjudicating knowledge claims than to empirical validation. Perhaps she closely associates scientific realism with positivist science or, perhaps, her own social location makes her more fearful of relying on scientific realism. She writes:

Given that the general culture shaping the taken-for-granted knowledge of the community of experts is permeated by widespread notions of Black and female inferiority, new knowledge claims that seem to violate these fundamental assumptions are likely to be viewed as anomalies. (Collins 1990, 203)

Collins' fears are real for science is an intensely political process as Thomas Kuhn warned us more than three decades ago (Kuhn, 1962). Yet, revolutions in science have occurred and the demise of hegemonic theories and methodologies is linked, in part, to their inability to explain anomalies.

## CONCLUSION

The new approaches of Smith and Collins come at a time when both social theory and the world in which we live have undergone transformations. Their approaches reflect the diverse voices and experiences of oppressed groups who previously have been excluded from both the realm of ideas and access to material resources in this new world order. This study has argued that while these approaches share important common ground, they also diverge on certain major ontological and epistemological issues (see Table 1).

What are the implications of these differences? Clearly, such differences are important to pedagogical concerns—to our roles as teachers and students of feminist studies. As we argued in our introduction, the disagreements and lack of clarity in existing feminist literature regarding how Smith and Collins address certain major epistemological issues provide sufficient reason to have pursued this study. These various and contradictory interpretations also testify to the complexities of our task. Consequently, if we inadvertently have created any “StrawSmiths” or “StrawCollins,” this was done out of ignorance, not out of malice.<sup>6</sup>

We proceeded despite these difficulties because we view the implications of these authors' epistemological differences as extremely important for the relationship between thought and political action. The judgmental relativism Collins embraces in much of her book opens up a Pandora's box for any and every viewpoint to claim legitimacy—even those that are harmful to the interests of women or other oppressed groups. As Harding writes in her “rethinking” of feminist epistemologies:

Judgmental (or epistemological) relativism is an anathema to any scientific project, and feminist ones are no exception. It is not as equally true as its denial that women's uteruses wander around in their bodies when they take math courses, that only Man the Hunter made important contributions to human history . . . that sexual molestation and other physical abuses children report are only their fantasies—as various sexist and androcentric scientific theories have claimed. (1993, 61)

Interestingly, Collins appears to recognize the dangers implicit in her judgmental relativism near the end of her book. Here, to escape this relativism, she takes a sharp turn in the opposite theoretical direction. For example, she writes: “Existing power inequities among groups must be addressed *before* an alternative epistemology . . . (like the one she has described) can be utilized. . . . ‘Decentering’ the dominant group is essential and relinquishing power of this magnitude is unlikely to occur without struggle” (Collins 1990, 237, our emphasis). This statement suggests that contestants for power *cannot* have equally privileged knowledge so long as they have unequally privileged material resources. This rather confusing and abrupt reversal in her theoretical position places Collins back within the materialist camp.

**TABLE 1: Common Grounds and Crossroads: Summary Table**

<i>Theoretical/Methodological Assumptions</i>	<i>Dorothy Smith</i>	<i>Patricia Hill Collins</i>	<i>Postmodernist Thought<sup>f</sup></i>
Reflexive methodologies advocated	Yes	Yes	Yes
Knowledge is socially constructed and socially situated	Yes	Yes	Yes
Acceptance of objectivity/value neutrality	No	No	No
Meta or master narratives viewed as ignoring			
Experiences of oppressed/marginalized peoples	Yes	Yes	Yes
Everyday life experiences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Multiple forms of oppression addressed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bifurcated consciousness recognized	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alternative knowledge claims accepted	Yes	Yes	Yes
Certain social locations provide greater insights into relations of oppression	Yes	Yes	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Identity politics	No	No	Yes <sup>b</sup>
Privilege given to knowledge of the oppressed	No	No	Yes
Webbed accounts advocated	Yes	Yes	Yes
Extralocal/everyday life dichotomy given fundamental implications for consciousness and social action	Yes	No	No
Gender viewed as the distinct organizing principle of the extralocal/everyday dichotomy and of standpoint at everyday life	Yes	No	No
Materialist approach	Yes	Contradictory	No
Idealist and relativist approach	No	Contradictory	Yes
Primary means of adjudicating knowledge claims			
Empirical/scientific realism	Yes	Contradictory	No
Dialogues/intersubjective consensus	No	Contradictory	Yes <sup>b</sup>
No bases for adjudicating knowledge claims	No	No	Yes <sup>c</sup>

NOTE: Modernist thought includes too many conflicting perspectives on these topics to adequately include in this table.

a. Postmodernist thought is so diverse that the basic premises outlined above (and based on Rosenau's formulations) certainly will not be applicable to all postmodernist writers. However, Rosenau has made an impressive effort to capture the major tenets of these many, varied, and sometimes even contradictory postmodernisms (1992, 14-15 and 17).

b. Affirmative postmodernists only.

c. Skeptical postmodernists only.

An even stronger materialist stance is taken in the Preface to an anthology on race, class, and gender that Collins coedited with Margaret Andersen in 1995. Andersen and Collins explicitly reject approaches that have been "exacerbated by recent postmodernist trends in feminist theory" in which experiences are viewed as "a matter of competing discourses, personifying 'voice' as if the voice or discourse in itself constituted lived experience" (1995, xiii). Rather, they argue that voices cannot be disembodied from particular social and historical conditions and focus their edited volume on the "institutional, or structural, bases for race, class and gender relations" (1995, xiv). Here we find Collins clearly distinguishing

between experience and subjectivity, as well as embracing a structuralist view of social reality that is even more fixed than Smith's notion of social reality as an "ongoing practical matter of accomplishing presence by and among subjects" (Smith 1987, 126).

These reversals in Collins' position leave her work as a whole with serious problems of logical consistency.<sup>7</sup> They also result in a teleological dilemma since it brings Collins back full circle to the problematic she faced at the beginning of her first book—explaining the dialectic between Black feminist thought and social action (1990, 5-6). Nevertheless, following the paths of her thought, even when they met with dead ends, was very instructive.

Indeed, it is interesting that while Collins and Smith diverge at certain crossroads, they arrive at a similar end point that rejects the idealist path of postmodernism. In the end, they share with critics of postmodernism the view that discourses and dialogues alone cannot substitute for political action, just as intersubjective validation cannot replace the material redistribution of power and resources (Wenger 1994).

Although Smith and Collins remain within the modernist camp, the particular insights they share with postmodernism could have positive implications for social change. The dialogues suggested by Collins may prove important avenues for building political alliances among subordinate groups (Hartsock 1996). In turn, the critiques of conventional social science leveled by these feminist writers provide new forms of inquiry that strengthen the knowledge claims of marginalized and oppressed people.

Clearly, the common grounds shared by Smith and Collins include both old and new territories of social thought. While both writers build on the foundations of modernist social thought, their critical insights into the shortcomings of dominant feminist and nonfeminist perspectives expand their analyses to include some features of postmodernist thought. By establishing certain social locations as more important standpoints for social inquiries into relations of oppression, these authors have interwoven knowledge and power into innovative critiques of conventional social science.

## NOTES

1. While Smith often is praised for her contributions to feminist theory, she describes her approach as a *method of inquiry*—a distinction that continues to be obscured in contemporary discussions of her work (Smith 1996b, 195).

2. Postmodernist thought is so diverse that any features we highlight in this article certainly will not be applicable to all postmodernist writers. We relied heavily on Rosenau's analysis precisely because she recognized these many, varied, and even contradictory postmodernisms and made an impressive effort to capture their basic tenets giving particular attention to those that are most relevant to social science. Her book is also especially useful to an examination of feminist epistemologies, because she frequently interweaves examples from a variety of feminist writings to illustrate various tenets she is discussing.

3. Identity politics privileges knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience. As Harding notes, this epistemological position has “tempted many feminists, as it has members of other liberatory projects” for its appearance of having more authenticity and verity. It also has been incorrectly equated with standpoint theory, especially by critics of standpoint theory (Harding 1993, 62 and 80). For these reasons, it is important to discuss Collins’ and Smith’s writings in relation to this perspective.

4. Smith is explicit that her materialist premise includes “no implication that social reality is fixed or final” or that social reality is an “objective reality” in the conventional sense (1990a, 36-37). Rather, for Smith, social reality is an “ongoing practical matter of accomplishing presence by and among subjects” that “conforms to real life” (1987, 126).

5. Smith describes her ontology of everyday life activities as “very similar” to ethnomethodology (1987, 126). However, unlike Smith, conventional ethnomethodology often treats relations of power and inequality simply as reified subjectivities or states of mind rather than as ongoing or accomplished forms of social constraint (Ritzer 1996).

6. Smith likens the misinterpretations of her work by Patricia Clough to the straw effigies of Guy Fawkes burned each November in England—“a straw Smith” made for “ritual destruction” (1993, 184).

7. Collins’ rejection of postmodernist trends in 1995 is even more confusing given her praise for a book by Cornell West and bell hooks in her 1994 review. Here, Collins applauds the way this book was written as a dialogue between these two authors and how this dialogue “maintained the postmodern notion of multiple voices” (1994, 178).

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