# Reading *Situated Knowledges:* Perspectives and Reflections

Hao SHAN

**Abstract:** In *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, Donna Haraway proposes a new epistemology. This epistemology argues that knowledge production should be embodied and situated, meaning that all perspectives and understandings are rooted in specific historical, bodily, and social contexts, rather than arising from a detached "god trick" perspective. We cannot argue that this epistemology is simply a reshaping of the existing knowledge system. Reshaping reframes the object of knowledge as passive material, diminishing its inherent agency. This contradicts the continuity and multiplicity of knowledge and denies the critical potential embedded in existing knowledge traditions. Therefore, any explanation or translation of this epistemology must align with the principles of the epistemology itself. Additionally, this essay conveys a particular concern: Haraway critiques the notion of an absolute, metaphysical real world—a criticism that, while well-intentioned, could undermine the foundation for action. Haraway does not believe that we can only have a single real world, but when situated knowledges are produced by many, they can begin to "approximate" a shared reality.

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Donna Haraway's critique of mainstream epistemology first focuses on the problematic status of objectivity. She identifies a pervasive male-centered bias in mainstream science. The privileged status of the male-constructed hierarchy of knowledge has been elevated above knowledge itself. She argues, "traditionally what can count as knowledge is policed by philosophers codifying cognitive canon law."[1] For mainstream science, "we" as the others, "are not allowed not to have a body".[2] In contrast, mainstream science itself claims to be disembodied in order to preserve its image of omnipotence and neutrality. When objectivity appears in a universal form, it functions as a tool for controlling and defining what knowledge is considered legitimate. Faced with this situation, feminists have attempted to use two theoretical tools: social constructionism and feminist empiricism. However, Haraway argues that they fall into "two poles of a tempting dichotomy."[3] In the extreme expression of social constructionism, science becomes an art of rhetoric, falling into the trap of relativism and weakening the reliability of reality. In other words, although constructionism successfully reveals the power relations embedded in science, it ultimately denies the agency of the material world. On the other hand, feminist empiricism seems to fall into a new form of essentialism. It does not entirely reject objectivity; as Haraway puts it, it "insists on legitimate meanings of objectivity."[4] However, in emphasizing women's unique experiences,

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[1] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988), p. 575
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 576
[4] Ibid., p. 579

feminist empiricism may unintentionally treat “woman” as a unified and fixed identity, ignoring the diversity and differences within women. For example, it risks universalizing the experiences of white women as a universal truth for all women globally.

Haraway turns to searching for another strategy. For her, “feminists have to insist on a better account of the world.”[5] Methodologically, she paid particular attention to “vision” as a way to avoid the binary trap. This vision is not the ubiquitous and all-encompassing perspective long promoted by Western science and philosophy. Haraway refers to it as “The God Trick.”[6] She goes on to discuss how the development of visual technologies in modern science has amplified this God's-eye view and transformed vision from a neutral observational tool into a means of control and domination over the world. She lists a range of scientific visualization technologies, including the Microscope, Scanning Electron Microscope, MRI, Satellite Imaging, and Digital Image Processing. Haraway argues that these technologies continuously enhance human visual capabilities, leading observers to believe they can truly see the world. However, she cautions that under the male-dominated scientific paradigm, the so-called "truth" is predetermined.She uses two chapters from a volume celebrating the 100th anniversary of the National Geographic Society as examples. These chapters showcase images like: “displays the color-enhanced snapshots of the outer planet”[7] and “full-color snapshots of defending T cells and invading viruses.”[8] These two forms of “infinite vision”[9] represent the extremes of visual technology on both macro and micro levels. With a highly ironic metaphor, she refers to these visual technologies as the “cannibaleye.”[10] In response to the hegemonic “The God Trick,”[11] Haraway proposes an alternative epistemology—Partial Perspective. She argues that objectivity should be rooted in embodied and contextualized knowledge production. To achieve true objectivity, we must acknowledge the limitations and diversity of our perspectives. Maintaining an emphasis on the interconnectedness and mutual critique of various perspectives, as well as valuing sharing and dialogue, to some extent upholds an open rationality. She writes, “Only partial perspective promises objective vision.”[12]

The practice of partial perspectives must be responsible. Haraway says, “the patterns of reality for which we must be accountable.”[13] If this responsibility can be upheld, she does not reject technologies with strong visual power. She states, “The (visual) metaphor invites us to investigate the varied apparatuses of visual production, including the prosthetic technologies interfaced with our biological eyes and brains.”[14] When humans merge with technological devices while adhering to human ethics and the method of partial perspectives, technologically enhanced vision will no longer serve as a tool of power structures but can instead offer a clearer view of the real world. She also reminds us of the need to pay special attention to perspectives from the position of the oppressed. She believes it is crucial to

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 581
[7] Ibid., p. 582
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 581
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p. 583
[13] Ibid., p. 589
[14] Ibid.

develop the ability to see from the margins into the center. The position of the oppressed is preferred because, in principle, it is the least likely to permit the rejection of all critique and interpretation of knowledge. However, the position of the oppressed itself should not be exempt from critical scrutiny.

Modern Western science has long sought eternal laws behind the empirical world, effectively obscuring the concept of time. Newtonian classical mechanics was believed to apply universally—both in the past and future—rendering time irrelevant. It was not until modern physics revealed the nonlinearity and uncertainty of time that a trend toward the resurrection of time began to emerge. Haraway places great emphasis on time, viewing science as something that is generated within time and history. She advocates for exploring the cultural expansion of science within its historical and temporal context, thereby completely rejecting the framework of representational language. She points out that science has never been a singular category but rather a diverse field spanning physics, natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, constantly engaged in ideological struggles. Within this framework, the status of the object of knowledge becomes central to her analysis. In traditional science, objects of knowledge are typically depicted as passive and fixed entities, eventually reduced to resources for instrumentalist projects. As she states: "The object both guarantees and refreshes the power of the knower, but any status as agent in the productions of knowledge must be denied the object."[15]

The example of "sex" as an object of biological knowledge is particularly illustrative. Haraway explains that sex is often presented in the guise of biological determinism, which threatens the feminist concept of gender as a socially constructed, diverse phenomenon: "Sex as an object of biological knowledge appears regularly in the guise of biological determinism, threatening the fragile space for social constructionism and critical theory."[16] This biological essentialism reinforces existing gender hierarchies and strengthens power structures.

Haraway does not entirely reject science's capacity to interpret the world. Instead, she proposes that objects of knowledge should be seen as agents or actors. In her framework, knowledge production no longer relies on a "logic of discovery"[17] but is built on "a power-charged social relation of conversation."[18] This dialogic model not only emphasizes the interactive nature of knowledge production but also grants agency and generative power to the object itself. She vividly describes this: "The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read."[19] In other words, the world is not raw material waiting to be decoded but rather a dynamic entity continuously generating meaning. The perspective of ecofeminism serves as an important complement here. Haraway draws on the metaphor of Coyote and Trickster—figures from Native American mythology—to disrupt the traditional

[15] Ibid., p. 592
[16] Ibid., p. 591
[17] Ibid., p. 593
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

anthropocentric view of knowledge. She argues that the world is full of irony, unpredictability, and surprise, and scientists must engage in a dialogue with this "trickster" world rather than trying to control it: "Perhaps the world resists being reduced to mere resource because it is not mother/matter/mutter—but coyote."[20] This world's agency symbolizes nature as an active, lively, and diverse presence rather than a passive resource.

In the final part of her argument, Haraway introduces the unique term "material-semiotic actor" to break the boundaries between traditional biology and cultural analysis. She asserts that scientific objects, much like language in poetry, are constantly constructed and reconstructed through specific social interactions: "Bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction."[21] These boundaries are not fixed but temporarily shaped through dynamic interactions. The act of drawing boundaries is a risky practice, capable of generating new forms of knowledge but also potentially reinforcing binary oppositions or systems of power.

We cannot be certain whether Haraway has fully escaped the essentialist trap she criticizes, as she acknowledges the existence of a form of knowledge that is always external to social practice. No matter how much she emphasizes that this knowledge is decentralized, dynamically negotiated, and unpredictable, it still represents, at its core, a retreat from constructivist practice. Haraway argues that "better" knowledge can be achieved through partial, fluid perspectives, but this view is more of a patchwork attempt than a truly revolutionary subversion. When she accepts certain aspects of objective science, she implicitly endorses, to some extent, the male-dominated modes of production that have existed since primitive societies. The situated knowledge produced on this basis will inevitably carry traces of masculinist bias. Moreover, in her discussion of the partiality of cognitive subjects, Haraway presents partiality and diversity as strategies to challenge the centralized authority of traditional science, emphasizing that women and all oppressed groups are more likely to offer more objective perspectives. While this claim does reflect the postmodern features of her theory, it is riddled with contradictions and challenges. If we accept that oppressed groups possess a greater advantage in achieving objectivity, how do we define the knowledge they produce? By what criteria do we distinguish rational, profound insights from relatively shallow and unreliable views? Once we choose to define knowledge, we must establish consensus on the consistency of experience, which leads us back to a point that contradicts the idea of situated knowledge. However, if we avoid defining such knowledge, would it eventually grow into a tool that betrays and undermines the very subjects who nurture it? In fact, we must allow those in positions of power to continue producing structural knowledge and contributing to the maintenance of knowledge standards. For example, the International System of Units forms the foundation of modern science, engineering, and economic activities. Without such standardized measurements, global communication and collaboration would be nearly impossible.

This raises a crucial question: Does emphasizing the "partiality" of cognitive subjects unintentionally overlook or exclude the potential objectivity within mainstream perspectives?

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[20] Ibid., p. 596
[21] Ibid., p. 595

More paradoxically, Haraway's emphasis on partial and incomplete subjectivity stands in internal conflict with the quest for identity and self-affirmation pursued by oppressed groups in practice. Partiality implies de-universalization and de-essentialization, yet in real political struggles, oppressed groups often rely on identity politics to fight for their rights and affirm the legitimacy of their existence. This inherent contradiction remains unresolved within Haraway's theoretical framework, posing a key problem in her epistemology. Ultimately, this logic could evolve into an endless game. In the process of unrestrictedly emphasizing multiplicity and decentralization, the challenge of how to balance partial perspectives with effective action remains an issue that requires further clarification and response.

## Bibliography

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599.