



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 19 | Issue 6

Article 24

Aug-2018

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Recommended Citation

Yadav, Anupam (2018). Epistemology Revisited: A Feminist Critique. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(6), 374-381.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss6/24>

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Epistemology Revisited: A Feminist Critique

By Anupam Yadav¹

Abstract

The Platonic legacy of Western epistemology has been severely attacked for its dominant exclusivist and coercive rationality in the discourses of anti-foundationalism and anti-representationalism, which have also given rise to several alternative epistemologies. The feminist discourse challenges the exclusivist and appropriationist logic of Western epistemology, or science, for being highly gender-biased and oppressive. Weininger's remark that 'No woman is really interested in science, she may deceive herself and many good men, but bad psychologists, by thinking so'² is one of such silencing masculine diktats that have deeper roots in the sexist, racist and classist biases. The feminists' revolts against the power/knowledge dynamics and subsequent epistemological directions emerge from a reflexive undertaking into the nature and production of knowledge. The paper examines the objectivity debates within the feminist science circles in this regard and explores the space between the oppressive dichotomies of nature/culture, core/peripheral, absolute/historical to articulate an alternative epistemology in the feminists' larger political program of social justice.

Keywords: Alternative epistemology, objectivity, social constructivism, knowledge production, interdisciplinary, feminist epistemology

Introduction

Non-homogeneous and fractured to the core, feminism, a political ideology, harbors tensions and some circularity in its beliefs in which we can find the reasons for a vehement opposition against western epistemology and also a methodological defense to its own critique. As a methodology, it ruptures the dominant conceptual fabric and unearths biased perspectives. In terming the male-dominated biological conception of the sex/gender dichotomy and other claims about the cognitive incapability of women for science and rational judgment mere social constructs, a feminist critique finds a solid argumentative force. But the notions of objectivity and truth meet no such criticisms though they are equally socially constructed. In a similar vein, demanding that women's ways of knowing is cognitively different and contesting a proclamation that knowledge and science are gender-neutral are incongruous in nature. Similarly, in defending the individual knower in the complex web of her embodied experiences and saying that 'who knows is the community, not the individual'³ are paradoxical beliefs. It is within this web of inconsistent ideas that we can extrapolate the dimensions of feminist epistemology and efforts to

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² Weininger, Otto (1960), *Sex and Character*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, p. 194.

³ Longino, Helen (2010), "Feminist Epistemology at Hypatia's 25th Anniversary" in *Hypatia*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 733-741.

make various beliefs consistent. Bringing conflicts and biases into a realm of communicative-praxis, a rational and critical dialogue for better human conditions marks the general spirit of feminist discourse. If social justice is a political goal, transcendence and search for any absolute, redemptive truth is no answer. As Haraway remarks, 'feminists don't need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence.'⁴ Feminism raises the question of epistemic injustice and hence inquiries into epistemology that is fraught with the ethical-political. In what follows, the paper discusses feminist critique of western epistemology with respect to the objectivity debates which paves a way to articulate an alternative program of epistemology.

Western Epistemology vs. Feminist Standpoints

Grounded in the Platonic ideational/doxactic dichotomy, the western epistemology, continues the rational/irrational, ideational/sensible divide in the Cartesian search for the ultimate foundation, the epistemic certainty devoid of all pretensions and doubts in the self's immediacy and enclosure, to the cognitive essentialism in the Kantian transcendentalism. The language of bivalence, the rational/irrational, necessary/contingent, stable/precarious, core/peripheral, harnessed in the master/slave mentality, exhibits itself predominantly in the scientific-technological disembodied gazing and the desire to control everything. Epistemology shows tremendous faith in the cognitive abilities of men to know and master everything. Though the Platonic rationalism places self-mastery, a rational and just philosophical vision, within the cosmic-moral ordering of things, modern Enlightenment liberates humans to be the Lockean neutral-punctual selves⁵ asserting their absolute freedom in making their individual rational choices. The cognitively sealed subject is assertive of cognitive essentialism which results into an all-powerful controlling will to represent and recast the world accordingly, and make it technologically subservient. Science, with a strong commitment to discard every knowledge-claim that is unverifiable and, in tandem with the mathematical certitude, has made this coercive rationality a reality and is being blamed for committing an epistemic injustice.

A very pertinent way of examining feminist attack on the western epistemology, or alternately, science could be the question of objectivity in the feminist science circles. There is a massive discussion on whether there should be a separate feminist science, as opposed to the oppressive, masculinist hegemony, and a unique research program that speaks of the distinct feminist science. Keller, Haraway, Harding and others, in this regard, say that their voice is not a struggle for an exclusive feminist science and a specific research method, rather; for an alternative understanding - a viable possibility to do science which is consistent with the feminist commitments, values and emancipatory projects for women's social position. As Keller has put it, an approach that makes 'difference in science' rather than a 'different science'.⁶ Haraway concedes that "Immortality and omnipotence are not our goals".⁷ A distinctive feminist method, Harding says, "is misguided and should be abandoned".⁸

⁴ Haraway, Donna (1988), "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives" in *Feminist Studies*, Vol.14, No. 3, pp. 575-599.

⁵ See Taylor, Charles (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press.

⁶ Keller, Evelyn Fox (1987), "The Gender/Science System: or, Is Sex to Gender As Nature Is To Science?" in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No.3 pp. 36-49.

⁷ Haraway, Donna (1988), "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives" in *Feminist Studies*, Vol.14, No. 3, p. 580.

⁸ Harding, Sandra (1987), "The Method Question", in *Feminism & Science*, Vol.1, pp. 19-35.

Many feminists challenge this positivistic arrogance of terminating every non-science as nonsense by examining the socio-communal production of knowledge itself. The feminist undertaking here is 'reflexive', as Bruno Latour uses this idea 'to denote any text that takes into account its own production'.⁹ The critical analyses of knowledge-questions woven in the social fabric reveal how gender hierarchies, linked with other social axes like race, class, sexuality, nation, culture and age constitute the idea of epistemic authority and are responsible for the history of subjugation. The exclusion of women and their experiential phenomena from the program of knowledge-production is a result of the social-political dynamics embedded in the Western *logocentric* epistemology. Central to the power-knowledge nexus is the reason-centricity of the male, white, Euro-American community. Against this *Cogito*-centric pole of autonomous knowers, the feminists demand a shift to the communicative-'we' pole of the 'effective-historical-consciousness', to use Gadamer's phrase. Nelson argues that 'you or I can only know what *we know* (or could know)'.¹⁰ The self is in relation with others and the knower is also an actor, an experienced, and engaged person in the historically situated contingencies. From this marked, embodied position the notions of objectivity and truth lose their neutrality and human cognitive apparatus no longer remains confined to the detached scientific rationality.

Haraway reconstructs the idea of objectivity as situated or positioned knowledge. To her, "feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*".¹¹ Her social constructionist stand is not about making science perspectival and it is also not entangled in the bias vs. objectivity, science vs. pseudo-science debate. It is about unearthing the politics of positioning, science situating itself at the apex of the hierarchy of all knowledge-claims, claiming a God's eye-view, an unaccountable, disembodied gazing. Haraway chooses the metaphor of 'vision' to unmask the politics of gazing and proposes a better account of objectivity, or science, or a conception of the world. Vision, she argues, is embodied. But, science asserts its power-rhetoric by turning vision into gazing, a leap out of the marked body, a gazing 'that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not to be seen, to represent while escaping representation... the unmarked positions of Man and White...'.¹² Science with technologically produced instruments enhances our visual possibilities, penetrating and over-arching vision to see far and wide. The supremacy of science, a vision from everywhere is a political position of unfettered control and power. Haraway calls this optics an illusion, a god trick, a politics of gazing and remaining elusive. It's a false promise, an unaccountable imagery, a myth in the rhetoric of science. We need to be disillusioned from this science imagery and its tricks and 'need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision'.¹³ This learning of the situated vision, Haraway says, 'allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see'.¹⁴

The situated objectivity is a critical evaluation of how meanings and bodies are formed, a story that does not lose track of its mediation, knowing the process of what we learn how to see and where we stand in physical and mental space. It is a knowledge that does not work on the mind/body split; rather, sustains with other positions for a larger and transformative account of the world. It is a hermeneutical stance of articulating one's vision, ways of knowing the world, taking

⁹ Latour, Bruno (1988), "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative" in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Steve Woolgar (ed.), Sage, p. 166.

¹⁰ Nelson, Lynn Harkinson (1993), "Epistemological Communities" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.), Routledge: New York & London, p. 124.

¹¹ Haraway (1988), p.581.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 581.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

interest in one's own and others' positions, connecting and building meanings rather than denying them. A larger vision, a better objective account of the world is possible because 'subjectivity is multidimensional'. Haraway remarks, "the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the perfect promise of objectivity..."¹⁵

The seeing from below, from the subjugated view-points is privileged as it is an encounter with how meanings are written or rather denied and repressed. But, this is also not unproblematic; for, the web of conversations here resonates with multiplicities, distortions, and repressions. Nonetheless, turning our vision to this open field of human semiotics resists splits, dichotomies and transcendence, an unmarked position of the master, one God from which, Haraway argues, the objectivity is not possible. The situated objectivity, making knowledge-claims from one's own position and assimilating others' positions, is a mediated self-understanding which is not hostile to contestations, deconstructions, webbed connection, a vision that is not fixed but *usable*. The visual metaphor, in this context, allows us to see limitlessly, beyond fixed appearances, and into the making of the visual production. The epistemology of location, the partial view, resists closure, finality and, as Haraway puts it, 'simplification in the last instance'.¹⁶ Scientific objectivity desires total single vision, the self-identity, a God's position but Haraway argues that subjectivity is shot through with historicity and hence being in all positions is an impossibility. The feminist objectivity, in the Popperian sense of scientific rationality, is an ongoing critical and rational engagement with the human conditions for better visions, better accounts of the world which have no escape from human agency and responsibility.

Haraway writes:

"Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere".¹⁷

The idea of positioning, the embodied objectivity in the feminist fabric makes epistemology interpretive, multifarious and perspectival which makes it amenable to the risk of unpalatable relativism. But, an embodied vision, Haraway argues, is not a relativistic position; instead, it is a partial position. It is also an accountable position; for, relocating one's position demands justification. From this standpoint, homogenization is an unaccountable position. Haraway rejects relativism as she rejects totalitarianism or absolutism. To her, both are views from nowhere and everywhere, illusions to have self-enclosed vision, holding no responsibility. The positioned objectivity between the two is a space filled with resonances and multiplicities, the epistemological field that not only makes us understand the ways of knowing, ways of positioning, the semiotics of meaning and bodies but also makes us accountable for them. It is a larger vision to understand ourselves better in power-politics, gaining access to agency and resources, thus,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 586.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 590.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 590.

getting a chance to live better. So, it is only in partial positions (that defies encroaching others' positions) that the rational and objective inquiry sustain and 'have a chance for life'.¹⁸

Just as Haraway unmask the biased 'vision' in the scientific account of objectivity, Lorraine Code unearths deeply rooted biases in the 'S-knows-that-p' mainstream epistemologies of positivist-empiricist nature that have dominated and controlled the nature and production of knowledge. They "are the artifacts of a small, privileged group of educated, usually prosperous, white men ... ideal objectivity is a generalization from the *subjectivity* of quite a small group, albeit a group that has the power, security, and prestige to believe that it can generalize its experiences and normative ideals across the social order, thus producing a group of like-minded practitioners ("we") and dismissing "others" as deviant, aberrant ("they")", argues Code.¹⁹ The propositional formula 'S-knows-that-p', under certain necessary and sufficient conditions, stands for a formal, distanced, dislocated, objective and value-neutral positivistic credo that presupposes the homogeneous human nature. The positivistic legacy encompasses the human-social sciences and wishes them to model themselves in the scientific rhetoric of quantifying 'data' and presenting reliable empirical results which the scientific community approves of. Both S and p are the place holders replaceable or substitutable for any knower and the known respectively in this scheme. This universalizing tendency of the Enlightenment liberal humanism, Code argues, essentializes or reduces the human subject/knower to 'surrogate knowers', a term she borrows from Naomi Scheman.

The politics of substitutability exorcises the individual knower from his or her historical circumstances and interests involved in the epistemic relation with the world. The positivistic purging of the context of discovery by the explanatory and justificatory standards for pure neutrality is exclusionary of the attributes and experiences of femaleness and often other so-called denigrated features like emotions, sensitivity and practicality. This standard epistemology, according to Code, is responsible for the knowledge production of the autonomous, dislocated reasoners who turn women and 'others' into interchangeable observable variables. The neutrality of epistemic agency in the fact-finding exercise and at the face value of "Science has proved...", at the same time, liberates it from responsibility toward the intellectual health of the community. The ideals of objectivity, truth, exact representation rest on the bias that 'if one cannot transcend subjectivity and the particularities of its "location", then there is no knowledge worth analyzing'.²⁰ Against this, the feminists in general, argue that the subjectivity of the inquirer is an integral part of any inquiry. Code retorts, 'objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account'.²¹

Code here intervenes that this paradigmatic model of detached observation is a failure, for example, in the case of a child's process of 'knowing others' which significantly affects his/her cognitive development. The knowledge of the other person, besides the known facts, transcends any such cognitive model. It is rather a continuous learning, positioning and responding in relation to the other. This interpretive engagement, though susceptible to skepticism, demolishes the model of reducing everything to the neutrality of observable simples and asserts that the human cognitive enterprise is more complex than the apparatus of propositional formula.

Feminist epistemology as a critique unearths the political dynamics involved in the production of knowledge and challenges the supremacy of scientific detached neutrality. The

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 580.

¹⁹ Code, Lorraine (1993), "Taking Subjectivity into Account" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds.), Routledge: New York & London, pp. 21-22.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 16.

²¹ Ibid. p. 32.

language of hierarchy, the metaphor of vision, the view from nowhere, the rhetoric that ‘Science has proved...’, the formulaic ‘S-knows-that-p’ are entangled in power/knowledge nexus and put limits to human cognition. To unfold the nexus is to question the perspectiveless position of epistemology that invests epistemic authority in the hands of few, the male, white, the capitalists, the scientists – the elite knowers who have the capital and resources. The knowledge-production thus goes into the arena that delinks the political with the ethical. The sites of the marginalized, the peripheral are the locations that the feminist thinkers choose to revisit epistemology. Speaking from the periphery presupposes the binary of absolutism and relativism, but feminist epistemology goes beyond and finds the vocabulary of integration, collaboration more useful. There are sincere efforts to evolve pedagogies that claim much richer understanding of the world not by discarding the opposites, the diagonals but by putting them together dialectically. In the following section, the paper discusses certain pedagogical stances that see interdisciplinarity - a way toward feminist solidarity.

Overcoming Binaries, Dialectic Mediation and Interdisciplinarity

Redefining the geography of the epistemic terrain, in the feminist circles, takes a social constructionist position but suffers the risk of relativism. A relativist position is precarious as it fails to address the libertarian program of feminism. One cautious safeguard, in this regard, has been to draw on the ethical-political underpinnings of different epistemic positions. Haraway particularly argues that both relativism and absolutism are non-accountable political positions from everywhere and nowhere, but situated objectivity is an accountable, larger vision conjoining partial views, though imperfectly. Similarly, when Code argues that the politics of substitutability homogenizes all knowledge-possibilities, she draws our attention to the matter of accountability toward the intellectual health of the society.

On a different front, Linda Alcoff argues how the conception of ontological reality governs the epistemological theories and refutes the belief that the absence of value neutrality is tantamount to radical relativism. She defends her position from the risk of slipping into political frame, as has been feared by Keller (for not believing in the positivistic standards), by advocating a constructivist account of truth, a matter of our perception of the social reality or how truth emerges from the social reality. While comparing the two models of a theory-choice in the field of feminist social science, namely, the holistic model (inspired by Peirce and Quine’s pragmatism), and constructivist model (by Gadamer and Foucault’s idea of the undeniability of prejudices or discourse as producer of knowledge), she argues that both rely on the principle of coherence which functions separately in two cases. While the holistic model takes into account the transcendental reality and talks about adjusting the beliefs within, the constructivist model observes no such independent reality. The truth is a product, a construct of the social processes. The constructivist approach to truth, Alcoff says, ‘is not just the criterion of truth that is relative, but truth itself that is relative’.²² That is, our beliefs do not become ‘less true’ in failing to correspond with some absolute, independent, static reality. ‘What is sacrificed by the Constructivist conception is not against the objectivity but merely universalizability’.²³

A general line of argument that emerges in the feminist discourse of epistemology is to question the unwarranted sanctity of the language of scientism, the unexamined assumption that

²² Alcoff, Linda (1987) “Justifying Feminist Social Science” in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No.3 pp. 107-128.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 118.

science and politics should not be seen together. It is rather the underlying politics of gazing in the unmarked, transcended self-enclosed vision that feminism strongly reacts to. The homogenization of knowledge-centres through the language of reduction, translation, substitutability in the name of objectivity is to play the politics of subjugation, radicalizing relativism and hence denying truth. The feminist question of epistemology is to find newer grounds for reconstructing epistemology within the space between the dichotomies of objectivism and relativism. The feminist stance is to turn to this discarded, alienating, marginalized space, marred with ruptures, that lacks clear binaries or diagonals to operate on. Turning to this space is not evading and escaping the nuanced reality for a desire for some 'redemptive truths' that science or philosophy, for example, may offer. The locus of webbed relations with inherent complexities, multiplicities, hiatuses denies any meaning in simplification and closure. What makes this a meaningful site for an alternative epistemology is the possibility of dialogue, negotiations rather than overcoming the conflicts with some overarching, unified theory. Epistemology from the subjugated position questions the language of disjuncture and binaries of more privileged and less privileged discourses and attempt to bring them into a sustainable mediation.

While talking about the heterogeneity within epistemology and its reconstruction on newer grounds, Alcoff and Potter point out how Philosophy itself must bring its privileged abstractness closer to the fluid applied discourses like ethics. Such a reconstruction, they argue, "promises to reconfigure the borders between epistemology, political philosophy, ethics and other areas of philosophy as come to see interrelationships and inseparability of heretofore disparate issues. Moreover, the distinction between margin and center or periphery and core within the domain of philosophy itself give way. Once we recognize that values, politics, and knowledge are *intrinsically* connected, the hierarchies and divisions within philosophy will be replaced by more holistic and coherentist models."²⁴ Against the androcentric, totalitarian vocabulary of asymmetries and the rigidity of the disciplinary boundaries, the feminist viewpoint is to explore the space between them as a rich epistemic field with diverse cognitive abilities and competencies and a possible mediation, an interdisciplinary discourse. Gilligan, in the context of moral reasoning, talks about conjoining the rather antithetical perspectives of inequality and abandonment as two grounds of ethical decision-making. To her, they cut across all human relations and not antithetical in the sense that 'justice uncaring and caring unjust'. They are cohesive as matters of morality are grounded in the interwoven complex relations of the self and others.²⁵

Another useful site for seeing things across boundaries is to analyze the androcentric, technoscientific developments in the fields of genetic engineering (GE) and agricultural biotechnology. The feminist activism against GE for its impact on environment, women and the Third World is driven by a constructive approach to bring together the issues of women, environmental protection and social justice together. This requires mitigating rigid boundaries between humans and nonhumans and explore 'how ecological and social transformations can be geared towards a sustainable society'.²⁶ The idea of ecological rationality or ecological democracy thrusts upon the right vision to redefine human rationality in constructive rather than in the divisive

²⁴ Alcoff & Potter (eds.) (1993), "Introduction: When Feminism Intersect Epistemology" in *Feminist Epistemologies*, Routledge: New York & London, pp. 1-14.

²⁵ See Gilligan, Carol (1982), *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press.

²⁶ Kurian, Priya A. & Munshi, Debashish (2006) "Negotiating Human-Nature Boundaries, Cultural Hierarchies and Masculinist Paradigms of Development Studies" in *Feminist Futures: Re-imagining Women, Culture and Development*, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran & Priya Kurian (eds.), Zubaan, p. 149.

manner, in the direction of sustenance rather than control and hence talks about aligning the overwhelming dominance of the technoscientific discourse with the local common sense and affective wisdom. Kurian and Munshi argue that ‘a recognition of partial perspectives on all sides, across all actors, is ultimately what could allow concerns for ecological rationality, social justice and science to come together in meaningful ways. Thus, instead of the polarized discourses of technoscientific expertise and public skepticism, an acknowledgement of partial perspectives may give rise to a hybridized discourse where scientific analysis aligns with local, indigenous and popular knowledge with a central focus on ecological and social rationality’.²⁷ The idea of ecological rationality is a practical approach to sustain in relation to others where the ‘other’ is granted the agential role rather than erased in the homogenization. The idea of hybridized discourse is a novel epistemic position that emerges from the feminist thinking of social justice.

In another important context of antiglobalization, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2006) unearths the power-knowledge nexus in White feminist scholarship and evolves a pedagogy that rests on the idea of simultaneous existence of what is territorially antithetical as the global and the local. Mohanty’s idea of feminist solidarity stresses on a pedagogy to work out the ‘common differences’ through the cross-cultural specificities and sharing of women’s experiences of power and struggle which, she argues, is not tantamount to postmodern relativism. Her strategy is to exploit the most suitable binary of one-third/two-thirds world to develop a comparative feminist studies model which ‘allows for teaching and learning about points of connection and distance among and between communities of women marginalized and privileged along numerous local and global dimensions’.²⁸ This curricular strategy allows learning ‘the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between communities of women such that power, privilege, agency, and dissent can be made visible and engaged with.’²⁹ The feminist solidarity program, beyond the territorial polarity created between the local and global, thus revisits the epistemic privilege of the White, Euro-American scholarship through a pedagogy that is democratic and not colonizing in nature.

Conclusion

Situational knowledges, the marginalized locations are the sites from which feminists voice the culture of dissent against the assimilation of differences. Subverting the politics of binarisms becomes the centre stage for these critiques without compromising the feminist objective of social solidarity and just democratic conditions. The epistemic stance of making meaning from the web of socially excluded particularities and injustices unfolds the narrowness in the ideals of objectivity and propositional closure. The epistemology, enriched in the space of dialectic mediation of binaries, overthrows the artificiality of boundaries and enables us to see the ‘common differences’ for a better and larger understanding of the world. The epistemology revisited in the feminist discourse is reflexive, creative and *phronetic* toward the sustainable account of the world. This paper has explicated how feminist discourse demolishes the language of hierarchy and examined the relationality of the hitherto disparate epistemic positions for an enriched epistemology toward social justice.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

²⁸ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (2006), *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Zubaan, p. 243.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 243-244.