

## **A Critical Reflexive Politics of Location, Feminist Debt and Thinking from the Global South<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I raise a question and acknowledge a feminist debt. The ‘feminist debt’ is to the politics of location, and the question asks: what particular stipulations and enablements does a critical reflexive feminist politics of location put in place for doing feminist theory? I suggest that there are at least three stipulations/ enablements that a critical reflexive feminist politics of location puts in place for knowledge production. Firstly, a politics of location demands/enables accounts of knowledge production which reveal the entanglements of power relations that underpin it and highlight the politics of struggle that underwrite it. Secondly, a critical politics of location demands/enables conceptual work in different geographical spaces—and in particular, it facilitates conceptual work in non-standard background contexts and conditions. And finally, a critical politics of location demands/enables a methodological response to capture the different conceptual and analytical and empirical knowledges produced in different locations.

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In this article, I raise a question and acknowledge a feminist debt. The ‘feminist debt’ is to a critical reflexive politics of location, and the question asks: What particular stipulations and enablements does a critical reflexive feminist politics of location put in place for doing feminist theory? And, furthermore, what does it mean for doing feminist theory from the global south? Through invoking the metaphor of a feminist debt, I acknowledge the work that a critical reflexive feminist politics of location does, and in particular, of rendering the very ‘thinkability’ (Trouillot 1995) and intellectual possibility of producing knowledge from different locations. Now, to centre location and to think with the global south, is to already establish two things right away: it is to flag the ‘provincial’ location of all theory and also to signal the specific context of unremitting power relations that inform theoretical and representational endeavours (Said 1978): the imperial, colonial entanglements of epistemologies with contemporary global geographies, prevailing political economies (Cusiqañqui 2012), and the transnational circuits of power through which knowledges travel and assume authority (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mohanty 1995, Alexander and Mohanty 2010). In recent years, scholars have drawn attention to the ‘planetary imperialising expansion of global coloniality’ (Wynter in McKittrick 2015) and to the institutional power of the ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ (Mills 2007) and forms of ‘colonial unknowing’, (Vimalassery et al 2016; Stoler 2011, Lugones 2010 ) that drive, sustain and reproduce the coloniality of knowledge production. A key concern in many of these debates is to do with the location of knowledge production itself, with some scholars explicitly bringing their location in the ‘colonial present’ under epistemic and ethical scrutiny to ask: ‘how do we understand our locations in the colonial present, as we contemplate and work towards the imperative of decolonization’ (Vimalassery 2016:1)? While

others are calling for a re-location of theory building to and from the global south' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, Connell 2014) and the 'third world' (Mignolo 2018). I acknowledge these important and crucial interventions on 'doing theory from the global south' but also suggest that the problem however, lies not so much at the level of theory production, for that simply reflects on the patterns that one looks at and assumes but at the level of concepts. In other words, it is not so much the lack of diversity in theory production that is the problem but the lack of diversity of conceptual production which is the key difficulty. For quite simply, there are not enough concepts in place to capture but also produce theorised accounts of different, historically specific and located forms of worldmaking in 'most of the world'.

Many feminist scholars have written influentially about location as a place in space and in time but also in history and epistemology. They have invoked location to draw attention to unequal distribution of intellectual and institutional capital and production of knowledge around the globe but also to the entanglements of theory building with the heteropatriarchal, racist, capitalist geopolitics and power relations that structure and inform knowledge production (Cusiqaqui 2012; Rich 1986; Mohanty 1995, 1991; Smith 1999; Wynter 2003). Questioning the location of knowledge production is, of course, hardly confined to certain strands feminist thinking alone. Within wider scholarship, location has been used to draw attention to the interstitial and 'in between spaces' where differences are negotiated (Bhabha 1994), to the 'provincialism' of the universalist pretensions of thought (Chakrabarty 2000), to 'place consciousness' (Dirlik 1999) and to the historicity of concepts (Hacking 2002). More recently, location has come inform 'border thinking' espoused by the decolonial scholars ( Mignolo 2011). However, what is perhaps, unique to feminist scholarship on location is its insistence on location as a critical reflexive

ethics. This critical reflexive ethics comes into two forms: the first helps register and document the global power relations that underpin the production of knowledge and privilege particular sites of knowledge production and dissemination. It insists that the theorist declare their location and position within the global circuits of intellectual division of labour ( Spivak 1987) and account for the epistemic tracks of their location upon their theorising. In other words, a critical reflexive politics of location demands an answer to the question: from where are you looking, and whom/what are you seeing? And, the second, forges a dynamic ethical relationship 'between the self and the collective...a relation to the self that is constantly made and remade depending on the location of self in specific contexts of struggle' (Mohanty 1995), but also redraws the ethical relationship of the self or selves to the site(s) of knowledge production. Acknowledging a feminist debt is one such ethical redrawing of a relationship, that between the self and the institutional production of knowledge. Here, acknowledging a feminist debt, is to actively interrupt the neoliberal politics of knowledge production and its exalted ethic of individuation, ruthless competitiveness and general intellectual disinterestedness and lack of reflexivity on one's complicity and implication in upholding and reproducing the material structures of epistemic inequality and injustice. At this point you might say to me, well, why feminist debt, though? And, what about citational practices? Are they not the primary form in which acknowledgement works in the academy? And, you'd of course be right; well, at least, for most part. To be sure, citational practice is certainly one form of acknowledgment of course, but a feminist debt that I have in mind goes beyond citation. While a citation brings scholars into existence (Ahmed 2013), a feminist debt on the other hand is an acknowledgment of the possibility of doing particular research in the first instance; it is an acknowledgement of the intellectual, institutional and political practices and interventions that makes particular kinds of

knowledge production possible. Critically, however, it is to do with the ‘thinkability’ of particular knowledges and of their being counted as knowledge. A feminist debt cannot be repaid. But to acknowledge one’s feminist debts is to acknowledge a responsibility and an ethics, where ethics is not limited to knowledge making but involves a call to responsibility: a responsibility to (re)produce conditions of thinkability and also possibilities of/for different knowledges.

A feminist debt to a critical politics of location, however, not only demands a responsibility to produce conditions of ‘thinkability’ but also institutes certain demands and constraints on how one produces theory and knowledges. These demands and constraints require: asking different questions, naming the epistemic ground one speaks/writes from, of refusing a technical application of theory, while insisting on ‘speaking back to it’ and of working to/ for justice: i.e. to work towards shifting the epistemic centre of knowledge production. But, what in effect do these stipulations put in place by a politics of location actually mean on how knowledges are produced, not least from the global south? Well, there are at least three concrete ways in which these stipulations bear on knowledge production. Firstly, a politics of location demands/enables an account of knowledge production that draws attention to the entanglements of power relations that underpin knowledge production and highlights the politics of struggle, that underwrites it. Secondly, a critical politics of location demands/enables the production of conceptual work in different geographical spaces—and in particular, it facilitates conceptual work in non-standard background contexts and conditions. And finally, and relatedly, a critical politics of location demands/enables a methodological response to capture the different conceptual and analytical and empirical knowledges produced in different locations.

In acknowledging its feminist debt, this article refuses the relentless theoretical incitement to identify limitations of existing frameworks, and in this case, those of the politics of location. Instead, it highlights and extends the generative and productive epistemological and methodological interventions that a critical reflexive politics of location enables. In what follows, I will elaborate on the three extensions or demands/enablings instituted by a critical reflexive politics of location through a discussion on how these enable thinking about questions of agency, rights and human rights, both of course, key questions that animate feminist theory and politics. In particular, these enablements/constraints insist that questions of agency and human rights are relational and contextual in nature and therefore require specific conceptual descriptions of their complex articulations in different locations. By demanding an epistemic accounting of the specific historical specificities of the politics of agency and that of rights and human rights, a critical reflexive politics of location calls for radically shifting the standard background contexts that informs theory building and for curating, assembling and documenting different registers, imaginaries and possibilities for thinking otherwise. To identify and envision different epistemic registers and possibilities is to go beyond recognising and documenting the prevailing forms of eurocentrism and subjectivities. It is to focus on generating intellectual resources embedded in materially and intersectionally informed concepts arising from historically specific locations and encounters in the world, including on the different modalities of agency and the particular stakes and struggles that animate the politics of rights in the global south.

### **Location of/as Struggle**

For some years now, I have been somewhat insistent to tell a different story of rights and human rights. I tell a story located in contemporary struggles of subaltern groups in rural India and Pakistan. My starting point is to ask: What different stories of human rights would we tell if we produced human rights scholarship from the standpoint of the stakes and the struggles of subaltern groups at the frontline of human rights mobilisations in ‘most of the world’? The subaltern struggles I study tie rights firmly to gendered struggles for socio-economic, political, epistemic and ontological justice. They interrupt state centric but also well rehearsed originary stories of temporalities, global institutional histories and abstract subjectivities, which are the staple of global human rights discourse, to generate historically specific discourses of rights replete with their own languages of claim making, subjectification, and worldmaking. Their stories of rights and human rights highlight intersectional, gendered and interdependent content of rights firmly tied to economic redistributive justice, and open up not only a different epistemic terrain for rights talk but also register their epistemic presence in the face of wilful ignorance and epistemic erasure. This epistemic erasure is mostly maintained and kept in place through a lack of theoretical, conceptual and philosophical scholarship on the different normative languages and political anxieties animating rights struggles in different parts of the globe. Driving the scholarship on global human rights is an inordinate preoccupation with the politics of origins, which stipulates that human rights originate, belong, travel from and operate for the west. This politics of origins is shared by both celebrators and detractors of human rights and is not without effects. In the hand of the detractors, it places a politically expedient argument to delegitimise modes of protest and questioning of excessive state power on the basis that human rights are illegitimate and foreign and therefore with little traction and legitimacy. In critical/progressive scholarship on human rights, this originary story shores up the ‘West’ as the epistemic

subject of human rights, although this time *via* critique and through displaying wilful ignorance and historical amnesia around rights struggles in most of the world. At stake therefore, in displacing the politics of origins lie questions of epistemic authority, agency and democratic politics.

Struggles over epistemic authority are of course, neither new nor novel questions in feminist scholarship. Feminist epistemologists have insisted on asking not only who is and can be the knower, but also what can be known, about what, and from which locations. They've unmasked, decentred and located the figure of the 'all seeing and all representing universal knower' and challenged the Archimedian position long held as the privileged location of theory building, and in so doing, identified the contradictory assumptions that underpin epistemological thinking. For instance, philosophical thinking not only presupposes only particularly located persons as knowers (Code 2012) but also presupposes these particularly located knowers are also located nowhere! Parsing through these contradictions, feminist epistemologists have unmasked the identity of the knower and located the knower in particular social and historical milieus, demonstrating thereby, not only the political and ontological entanglements of knowledge production (Alcoff 1993, 1991) but also the methodological individualism and the assumptions of 'human homogeneity' that underpin epistemological enquiry. Adrienne Rich, the feminist poet and author titled her essay, 'notes on the politics of location' and catapulted struggles over accountability, responsibility and ethical politics to the centre stage of feminist knowledge production. Exhorting white feminists to examine the 'thoughtlessly white' assumptions underpinning their feminism, Rich directs her ire at the deadly 'sameness' of abstraction that 'allows no differences among places, times, cultures, conditions, movements' (1981:221). As opposed to this ahistorical, 'lofty and



privileged' abstract theorising which centres white women and engenders a 'confusion between [our] claims to the white Western eye and the woman-seeing eye' (1981: 219), Rich demands that we recognise the location and 'name the ground we are coming from and the conditions we have taken for granted...' (219). As is well known, a significant effect of this refusal to locate oneself in the geopolitics of theory production has been the prolific circulation of the universalising representational manoeuvres that produce visions of 'global sisterhood' while erasing power differentials of race, class, caste, sexuality and geopolitical location (Mohanty 1996; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). As opposed to this feminist politics of 'global transcendence' and its denial of global power relations, Chandra Mohanty calls for a feminist politics of engagement that is located in the 'temporality of struggles' and draws on 'historically interpreted and theorised' experiences of differently located and ongoing struggles over what it means to experience gender/gender oppressions in different locations (1996:122). It is this centrality of and complicity within crisscrossing and dynamic entanglements of power structures and relations across different locations and their implications for knowledge production that distinguishes transnational feminist scholarship and practices from global and international feminisms (Mohanty 1995; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Alexander and Mohanty 2010; Swarr and Nagar 2010). This focus on uneven and unequal entanglements of power relations dispels any attachment to location as signifying difference for difference sake. If anything, invoking location as power saturated and as signifying 'specific relations of domination and subordination' institutes a meaningful corrective to the easy slip slide into 'neo relativism', where difference and multiplicity are celebrated without any recognition of the fields of power in which difference and sameness operate and invoked (Frankenberg and Mani 1993). But what might be the implications for knowledge production of taking into account unequal historical, geographical, political and institutional locations? In their

introduction to an important edited volume, Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr (2010) argue that taking entangled global locations seriously can result in refusing individualist modes of academic knowledge production by 'reclaiming collaborative praxis' as a keystone of transnational feminist scholarship and practice. Reconceiving collaboration as an 'intellectual and political tool' can 'consciously combine struggles for socio-political justice with feminist research methodologies' (2010:13), and thus, bridging the gap between those 'theorising the complexities of knowledge production across borders and those concerned with imagining concrete ways to enact solidarities across nations, institutions, socio-political identifications, and economic categories and materialities' (2010: 2). Vigilance and hyper reflexivity is key here ( Spivak 1999; Bjokert-Thapar and Henry 2004; Kapoor 2007), and it is critical that these collaborative exercises do not become yet another occasion for 'reproducing colonial power relations' all over again, and as Farhana Sultana ( 2019:36) cautions, scholars need to be reflexive on how their locations in global imperialist logics can potentially threaten best intentions.

But even as feminist scholars continue to challenge epistemology's 'irrepressible connection with social power' (Fricker 2007:2) and critique the epistemic exclusions that have denied (white) women a place at the epistemology table, questions of who, where and what possesses epistemic authority within feminist theory itself refuse to die down. And, while struggles over what counts as feminist theory and who can be a feminist theorist have been remarkably generative and productive in challenging the internal colonialism of feminist theory, opening up new intellectual directions and forging new conceptual and theoretical tools steeped in different realities and locations, these have done little to address the steep inequalities and coloniality that characterise the transnational institutional and political economies of knowledge

production (Cusiqañqui 2012, Boni 2017, Medie and Kang 2018, Mama 2007). It is striking of course, that a disproportionately large volumes of scholarship including by feminist scholars of colour, are produced by those located in the global north. Quite simply this scandalous state of affairs exists not only because struggles for epistemic authority have yet to be heard seriously enough but also because the operation of ‘epistemologies of ignorance’ and those of ‘colonial unknowing’ together with the vice grip of positivist knowledge production has meant that the coloniality of knowledge systems and their geo-political, and institutional entanglements have remained largely invisible but also unspeakable. Consequently, the key question demanded by a critical reflexive feminist politics of location: from where are you looking, and whom and what are you seeing? is often, resolutely refused.

A key site where contestations over geopolitical location, civilizational and representational politics and white saviour complex converge to overdetermine but also characterise great swathes of feminist thinking is over the status of agency, autonomy and rights/human rights in feminist scholarship and politics. If anything, feminist thinking on autonomy and agency and also human rights is heavily complicit in the transnational politics of judgmentalism, which has been so prolific in pronouncing on the quality, degree and nature of agency and also rights enjoyed by women in the ‘third world’ . Within various strands of feminist scholarship, the fierce, lively, fractious and contentious debates on the status of agency and autonomy within feminist theory and politics have very often than not pivoted on a set of paradoxical attachments. On the one hand, these critique hyper individualist masculinist, universalist, ahistorical, acontextual autonomous persons, while on the other, validate an enduring attachment to liberal ideas of agency and freedom and in particular, to a heroic agent capable of challenging/resisting power relations and embodying a global

feminist emancipatory politics. Unsurprisingly, these paradoxical attachments have meant that feminist theorising of agency has been mired in epistemic erasures and civilizational and representational dilemmas, traps and misdescriptions (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1987, Chow 2003 , Mahmood 2005, Madhok 2013, Abu Lughod 2013). However, such is the entrenched epistemic hold and cultural attachment to autonomy as an ideal of personhood, that it is has been so hard to shift intellectual perspectives and also the political expectations that are so tightly woven around the idea. Things are not much different in the arena of global human rights either, where critical progressive scholarship has, and as I noted earlier, resulted in shoring up and reproducing Europe as the subject, albeit, via progressive critique. These contradictory and paradoxical response to agency and also to rights/human rights in some ways reflects the double sidedness and the familiar push and the pull of the work that characterises their operation on the ground: the enchantments and the disappointments; the enablements but also regulatory effects; their mobilisational power and democratic potential but also their civilizationalism; the unremitting northern pressure behind their power but also their take up by the powerless and the precarious across the global north and south; and, their politically conservative effects but also the ‘insurgent imaginaries’ (Natera 2013) they produce in their wake that exceed existing terms of recognition/inclusion/justice and rights.

Acknowledging the double edged nature of the work agency and rights do in upholding civilizational and epistemic hierarches while also recognizing their indispensability for critiquing precisely what reproduce has led many scholars to argue for a need to rethink and reconceptualise and retool agency and rights. What is at stake in these efforts to reconceptualise agency is this: that ‘misdescriptions’ of women’s agency in the global south will continue until we do not reorient concepts to reflect the critical

politics of location of their articulation and deployment (Madhok 2013). And, it is this commitment to a critical politics of location that can be discerned when Saba Mahmood argues that “ we should keep the meaning of agency open and allow it to emerge from “within language and institutional contexts which make possible of relating to certain people, oneself and things’ (2005:15). Or when Lila Abu Lughod (2010) advocates for an ethnographic study the ‘active social life of Muslim women’s rights’. In my earlier work, I have queried the spatial geographies and intellectual contexts that operate as the standard background contexts for theorising autonomy and agency. I argued that negative freedom is the unquestioned standard background context for theorising agency and autonomy and that the governing measure of agency and autonomy privileges free action. The former institutes the latter together by shoring up the heroic unbounded white onto epistemic subject able to operationalise without exception this governing action bias. However, even a cursory regard for the realities of people’s lives show that lives and living are constrained in all manner of ways, and that agency thinking cannot continue to regard conditions of negative freedom as ‘standard’, a necessary given and, to insist that persons display their agentic selves through their ability to commit maximal free action in all circumstances. Therefore, conceiving agency of persons outside of imaginaries of full and complete negative freedom requires loosening agency’s reliance on negative freedom and its inherent *action bias* but also displacing the principal site of recognition and analysis of agency.

## **II The Location of Concepts**

Refusing *action bias* in conceptual descriptions of agency becomes thinkable because of a critical politics of location. As an epistemic intervention, location signifies the role of place in knowledge production, and as a generative site ( McKittrick 2011) in which concepts and persons come into being (Hacking 2002). Concepts are the ‘building blocks’ of theory and make our world ‘visualisable and discussable’ (Rabinow 2011: 122) and, therefore, the work of theory building requires concepts able to capture different encounters with the world in different locations. Furthermore, not only is there a need for concepts to describe and visualise different life-worlds but also for these different conceptual descriptions to intervene in and disrupt the normal and ordinary work of theory production that carries on thoughtlessly and wilfully ignorant of different life-worlds and their conceptual architectures. To put it differently, the problem in producing ‘theories’ for most of the world, is that concepts that are put to use in producing theoretical descriptions of the world are ‘provincial’ (Chakrabarty 2000) and reflect particular temporal, spatial, social and historical contexts. And, therefore, an important way to interrupt the pervasive epistemic violence is not simply only to refuse to misrecognise provincialism for universalism and refuse to know the world only through unidirectional translation. It is also to insist on directing efforts towards producing a wider array of conceptual descriptions. Critiques though hugely useful and significant demystifying the constellations of power and their entanglements must only be the starting point for the production of new intellectual and conceptual histories, geographies and epistemologies from different locations.

It bears worth repeating that the production of concepts from most of the world is a matter of urgency. But how to study concepts in ‘most of the world’ without either falling into the trap of violent commensurability (Tuck and Yang 2012) or radical

unintelligibility? The first trap of forced and violent commensurability leads to theoretical and conceptual misdescriptions, and the latter, down the poisonous hole of cultural relativism. Both traps refuse meaningful and careful theoretical engagement and shut down conversations. This urgency of studying concepts has informed my own work on theorising agency and coercion in non-standard background contexts but also how to conceptually capture the politics of rights and human rights outside the Anglo-American, European worlds. And, it is in thinking about these questions that I recognised the crucial work that a critical reflexive feminist politics of location does in making it ‘thinkable’ to do conceptual work in ‘non standard’ locations and contexts, i.e. contexts outside those of which concepts are standardly produced, described and visualised.

Important strands of feminist scholarship is admirably attentive to the coming into being of concepts at particular locations. Consider for instance how the emergence of certain conceptual categories within feminist theory challenge not only the epistemological privilege of unmarked, androcentric whiteness masquerading as unencumbered, placeless, disembodied knowledges but also provide alternative methodologies for knowledge production. Many of the key feminist conceptual categories that we have become accustomed to deploying in everyday theorising, empirical and in policy work emerge out of critical engagements with location of particular subjects. So, for instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term ‘intersectionality’ to visualise and describe the invisibility and erasure of the black women located at intersectional locations of hierarchy and oppressions. The political and intellectual roots of intersectional thinking run deep in black feminist thinking (Collins and Bilge 2016; Nash 2018) however, significantly, and this is crucial, intersectionality comes forth from a place that is a ‘non-standard’ background context

for conceptual/theory building. After all, how often does one come across or deploys concepts that do not emerge and in turn reflect hegemonic and privileged raced and classed world views and histories? Another feminist conceptual intervention premised on the epistemic authority of marginalised subjects whose ‘shared histories based on shared location’ within existing hierarchical power relations (Hartsock 1983, Harding 1987, Hill Collins 1997:376) is, of course, feminist standpoint theorising. Standpoint thinking itself has been a hugely productive site for a range of important conceptual interventions. Sandra Harding has argued for ‘starting off thought from marginalised lives’ (1993: 56) and for the necessity of ‘strong objectivity’ for critically evaluating which social situations tend to generate the most objective claims, and Donna Haraway has written of ‘situated knowledges’, arguing powerfully that feminist objectivity’ or ‘situated knowledges’ was “about limited location and enabling “us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (1988: 583). Haraway cautions against a single feminist standpoint arguing that a politics of location is ‘insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning’ and resists the politics of fixation, finality and closures to embrace ‘vulnerability’ (1988: 590). Also insisting on specific and different feminist standpoints, Patricia Hill Collins writes of a black feminist standpoint as a ‘subjugated knowledge’ located in a context of racialised and gendered economic and political domination that emerges from an ‘interdependence’ of the everyday knowledges of Black African American women and ‘the more specialised knowledge of Black women intellectuals’ (2000:269). And, Sharmila Rege (1998) writes of Dalit feminist standpoint that derives from and is located in Dalit women’s struggles but crucially, does not originate from an authentic well of Dalit women’s difference or experience. As opposed to the politics of authenticity, Rege argues that a Dalit feminist standpoint is not only a ‘liberatory’ feminist project but also one that is ‘multiple, heterogenous, contradictory’, which needs to be open to and in dialogue with



all other liberatory projects<sup>2</sup>. In a slightly different vein, but carefully locating and starting from poor rural women's 'contradictory experiences of globalisation' within transnational circuits of production and consumption, in Southern India, Priti Ramamurthy (2003) introduces 'subjects in perplexity', who 'experience both joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously (2003: 525). Perplexity, writes Ramamurthy, is the site of convergence of 'multiple ideologies that constitute subjects—cultural practice, temporalities and place...' (ibid 525). Drawing on intensely conflictual feminist struggles in different locations in Africa, Patricia McFadden (2018) conceives 'contemporarity' as a 'new framework for 'black resistances'. 'Contemporarity' is a critique and an alternative to neoliberal extractive capitalism and gendered nationalisms and envisages itself as an 'innovative feminist sensibility' and an epistemology located in imaginaries that sustain relationships between the self, feminist politics and the ecological universe. Locating herself firmly in the political economy of knowledge production in Latin America, and critiquing statist ideologies of hybridity and multiculturalism deployed to manage difference, especially, indigenous difference, Silvia Rivera Cusiquanqui (2012) writes of the notion of 'chi'xi', which is the 'most appropriate translation of the motley mix that we, who are called mestizas and mestizos are' (105). A hugely capacious 'notion' of many 'connotations', Chi'xi is irreducible to colonial governmentalising moves, capturing instead the 'parallel coexistence of multiple cultural difference that do not extinguish but instead antagonise and complement each other. Each one reproduces itself from the depths of the past and relates to others in a contentious way' (105). Crossing South Central America and heading north to the border lands of Mexico and South West USA, is the location of Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptual offering: borderlands. Also, the title of

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<sup>2</sup> For critical interventions on Dalit feminist standpoint see Gopal Guru (1995), Datar (1999), Lata PM (2015) and Arya and Rathore (2020).

Anzaldua's pathbreaking book, 'borderlands' locates the history of a people living in a specific geography; a geography spanning telling the history of the origin of Mexican origin US Chicanas. Straddling specific border geographies, imperial histories, racialised political economies of dispossession and psycho-sexual socialities, it tells the history of coming into being of a 'border culture' and of a 'hybrid subjectivity' informed and striated by histories of loss, psychic unrest, marginality, struggles to belong, displacement and perpetual transition. The borderland hybrid subjectivity is not one of a celebratory variety that confidently celebrates multi culturalism and diversity but is borne from an acute recognition of unequal power relations, and of alienation, 'cultural ambiguity', 'perplexity' But this 'psychic unrest', economic and historical alienation in the borderlands also produces an 'alien consciousness' --- a borderland consciousness, borne out of a 'struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war'... towards new possibilities'. (100,101). By highlighting these conceptual interventions, my aim is not to provide an exhaustive list of location based concepts, which of course, by any means, these are not, but rather to draw attention to some of the conceptual work that derives from and becomes available when we start paying attention to a critical reflexive politics of location. What is common to these conceptual interventions, however, is that they go beyond the production of critique to produce new knowledge constructs, and to powerfully capture the complexity of the different life-worlds, and by doing so, bringing these into conceptual existence.

An attentiveness to a critical reflexive politics of location allows one to see clearly the lack of conceptual diversity and the inadequacy of conceptual repertoires for describing the complexity of the life worlds of subaltern rights politics in 'most of the world'. And, to seek to unreflexively apply the global human rights framework to describe these would be to not only activate a technical application of theory but to

also invoke the serious charge of reproducing and authorising the epistemic and geo-political power of the global human rights discourse by (re) telling hegemonic stories of power and the powerful. Impelled by the theoretical, conceptual and ethical concerns galvanised by a critical reflexive politics of location, I needed to find another way of entering this field of human rights without either reproducing the huge epistemic power and the time space provincialism of the global human rights discourse or compromising the complexity, dynamism, difference and epistemic and political struggles of human rights mobilisations in ‘most of the world’. In effect, I had to find a way of forging a theoretical, empirical and conceptual path in order to engage global human rights in a critical, dynamic and generative way in order to bring to light new possibilities for imagining and expanding rights and human rights. This theoretical-empirical-conceptual formulation, that I have forged is that of vernacular rights cultures.

To think with vernacular rights culture is to signal an epistemic intervention into knowledge production from the standpoint of the marginal groups declaring and struggling for rights/human rights. The ‘vernacular’ here also signals that this is a rights politics that is linked to but significantly is *not* that of global human rights. These rights struggles are testimonial to the fact that rights/human rights are not only stuff of institutional and legal rights talk but that they are productive and generative; producing particular rights bearing subjects and also political cultures of rights. Viewing rights politics through the lens of vernacular rights cultures is to refuse binary rights talk of the local/global and ‘west/non west’ that characterise human rights discourses and to insist that rights politics in most of the world is not one that is simply mimetic, and engaged in the translation, enactment and localization of

‘global human rights’ but rather as one with its specific languages of rights and entitlements grounded in specific political imaginaries, justificatory premises and subjectivities. Key to vernacular rights cultures is that the subject of rights, is not an apriori person, always already given and non-gendered—but comes into being through particular institutional, policy, political and discursive interventions and contexts that are intersectionally gendered.

The vernacular in vernacular rights cultures flags the different literal and conceptual languages of rights deployed by marginal groups in different parts of the globe. In order to study vernacular rights cultures in my work, I’ve taken my cue from the principal word signifying a right in South Asia, which is *haq*. The word *haq* is hardly confined to south Asia alone, of course, and is also the word for a right across the Middle East, Iran, Turkey and North Africa, appearing in Arabic, Urdu, Manipuri, Persian, Turkish and Hindustani among other languages ( Madhok 2017). For the better part of the last two decades, I have been relentlessly tracking the deployment of the *haq* through the deserts of Rajasthan in North western India where subaltern groups have mobilised to demand rights to food, public information, gender and caste equality, and employment from the state, and where the indigenous peoples have demanded rights to sacred and ancestral forests, streams and lands. The word *haq* does not recognise national borders and formations; if anything, it undermines them. And, so, I’ve travelled with it further north west in the subcontinent-- from the lush forests of the Aravalli mountain ranges to across the border and into the green fertile plains of the Punjab in Pakistan, a land fed by South Asia’s five large rivers, where for the last 18 years very poor marginal peasants have taken on the great might of Pakistan’s military over their struggle for land ownership to emerge as most significant working class struggle against the military in postcolonial Pakistan .

## **The Methodological Imperative of Location**

But how does *haq* come into being as the principal word for a right in contemporary subaltern struggles in south Asia? What sorts of meanings does it acquire; how does it ‘make up people’, aid the production of subjectivities and produce new possibilities for relating to oneself? In other words, in what ways does *haq* enable but also constrain possibilities for being a (gendered) subject of rights? While I think these are not unreasonable questions, they do however, raise another set of questions, namely, how does one study these questions? Or to put it in a more stark way: what is methodologically involved in studying vernacular rights cultures? And, so, I am yet again back to the drawing board and to figure out a methodological entry point for this work. Through deploying a feminist historical ontology, I show how *haq* comes into being as the chief literal and conceptual term used to signify a right/human right; acquire meanings, ‘make up people’ (Hacking 2002), produce rights subjectivities, while also putting in place possibilities for becoming a (gendered) subject of rights and relating to oneself. Readers will discern that through assembling together a feminist historical ontology as a methodological device, I am both drawing on but also supplementing the work of the philosopher, Ian Hacking. An important element of Hacking’s historical ontology projects is the focus on words and concepts; of how concepts come into being and acquire traction at particular historical points. And, it is Hacking’s focus on words and concepts and their role in ‘making up people’ that draws me to his work on historical ontology. In part, it is also to do my longstanding interest in the processes of political subjectivation, and of self-fashioning processes undertaken by subject through speech practices (Madhok 2013; 2018)—for instance, reorienting agency in terms of speech practices rather than free action, in order to

counter the *action bias* in theoretical formulations of agency—but also in trying to think closely about the gendered stakes and struggles involved in the ‘politics of presence’ (Phillips 1993), and in the ‘performative politics of assembly’ (Butler 2015) for subaltern subjects assembling in public to stake a claim to the language of rights, and the ways in which their public assembly disrupts the normative constitution of the public/public space while also making them ever more fragile and precarious subjects.

However, even while I write this, I am acutely aware that Hacking is not interested in the coming into being of gendered concepts, nor in the gendered nature of power relations, imaginaries and subjectivities they put in place and nor even in the gendered process which ‘make up’ people. And, even though Hacking is deeply invested in the particular historical sites at which words develop into concepts, he does not acknowledge the feminist politics of location. And, if he did, then in thinking about the conceptual work of *haq* in South Asia, it would become evident to him, that the word *haq* is a masculine term, and the question of gender equality needs invariably to be begged separately in all the citizen mobilisations I am tracking. Quite simply, this means that *haq* puts in place particular gendered political imaginaries of rights, which in turn, engenders a whole new arena of a politics of struggle over *haq*.

Gendering historical ontology, therefore, is to infuse it with an awareness of the inhering power relations in the meanings that concepts take up in specific historical locations, and in the work they do. Gender is an intrinsically political concept and struggles over gender relations are political struggles that involve an attentiveness to multiply intersecting and interlocking layers of conflict. A gender lens is, therefore, manifestly important and crucial because bringing to bear a gendered perspective

means one is constantly aware of the intersectional and conflictual nature of rights but also of the limits of the normative ontological possibilities offered by *haq*. Accounting thereby, for the centrality of conflict and struggle through and within which gendered subjects operate and function is a key methodological imperative of feminist historical ontologies. So, for instance, rights claims by very marginal gendered subjects do not simply involve instrumental claim making for distribution of resources. When rights are seized to make political claims by these gendered subjects, what is claimed in effect, is also a particular subjectivity and relation to the self. It for this reason that when gendered subjects engage in claim making, it is almost always conflictual; their claim making is more often than not read as oppositional to and/or disrupting of an established normative gender order.

At this point, I imagine, that you might ask a series of questions starting with, why a feminist historical ontology, though? What does the coupling of ‘feminist’ with historical ontology bring to the methodological table? Why must Hacking’s historical ontology have a ‘feminist’ prefix? Is feminist historical ontology yet another addition to the growing list of ‘ontological turns’ declared by an ever-increasing number of disciplinary formations? What does ontology mean anyway? <sup>3</sup> Certainly, ontology means different things to different people depending on who you are asking, and if the ‘ontological turns’ declared by several academic disciplines is any indicator, then it is clear that ontology means a range of different things depending on the different disciplinary orientation. However, what is common to all these disciplinary ontological turns is the deep suspicion of epistemology, and consequently the drawing of a wedge between epistemology and ontology, and privileging the latter over the former. In

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<sup>3</sup> See Todd (2016) on the colonial assumptions informing the ontological turn.

contrast with the 'ontological turn', a feminist historical ontology, however, refuses the disentanglement of epistemology from ontology. Epistemologies have particular ontological effects and are therefore, necessarily entangled. As the philosopher Sylvia Wynter has powerfully argued, our knowledge systems are explicitly organised around producing 'origin stories...of who/what we are' (Wynter in McKittrick 2015:10), and the 'role of such knowledge systems' is to elaborate the genre specific truth telling orders about who we are' from the 'no less genre specific perspective of who that we already are' (ibid; 32). Making explicit connections between epistemology and ontology, influential black and postcolonial scholarship has called for the 'need to develop feminist theory that emerges from 'individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center' (hooks xvii) and for 'understanding marginality' as a 'position and place of resistance' that is 'crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonised people' (1990:150-151). The Black feminist statement released by the Combahee River Collective ( 1977) established unequivocal umbilical links between epistemology and ontology and announced that 'we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro American women's continuous life-and-death survival struggle for survival liberation'. The epistemic and political importance of 'generating cultures of resistance' (Hill Collins 1997) is also a key insistence of standpoint theorists for whom standpoint thinking is 'a collective political project with both epistemological and ontological valences' (Weeks 2011: 245 16n). And, partly drawing on standpoint approaches, Clare Hemmings (2012) argues that the mutual relationship of epistemology and ontology could potentially spark off a 'critical dissonance' to generate possibilities for feminist solidarity and transformational politics; for a politics of solidarity not based not on essentialisms but on 'affective dissonance'... 'of also feeling the desire for transformation out of experience of discomfort' ( 158) rather than on any grounds of shared identity or assumed feeling.



A feminist historical ontology unequivocally locates itself firmly in the imbrication of epistemology and ontology as it works to make explicit the ways in which concepts come into being in different locations and within particular knowledge systems. It tracks the political imaginaries and justificatory premises, the political cultures they enable, the kinds of people they make up, and the politics in which they are invoked and sustained. The work of a feminist historical ontology begins with an insistence that concepts are gendered, that they are taken up and attach themselves to gendered bodies, and that ‘making up people’ is a gendered exercise as ‘people’ are intersectional subjects. By drawing attention to the different and historically specific and located languages of rights/human rights – both literal and conceptual in different parts of the globe, a feminist historical ontology attends to the political imaginaries these languages these make available, and to the subjectivities, forms of political subjectivation, conceptions of personhood and the claims for subject status and gender orders they render possible. In this context, it is important to note that accounting for conflict and struggle is central to feminist historical ontologies. Deploying a gender lens to historical ontology is to exercise awareness of the inhering power relations in the meanings that concepts take up but also in the work they do. Finally, ethical commitments to working to/for justice drives feminist historical ontologies. In particular, I want to highlight two issues in this regard: The first is to do with the thorny question of representation and the other is concerned with the relationship of marginal epistemologies to the politics of the marginalised. Driving both is the ethical question: how to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of the counterhegemonic ideological work that feminists scholars/activists do in the global south? And, furthermore, how to demonstrate ethical responsibility by not appropriating epistemologies of subaltern movements or indeed indigenous

mobilisations in the global south on the one hand, and/or by not displaying historical amnesia about their temporality, location, and counter hegemonic contributions, on the other hand? In other words, how to practice vigilance against an easy forgetting of the counter hegemonic work that is done by subaltern grassroots struggles or rights in the global south? These are hard questions, which must be a key focus of methodological investments.

Practising ethical vigilance, a feminist historical ontology of *haq*, attends to the gendered saturated sites of grassroots political struggles to document the different meanings of *haq* that are mobilised, towards what and by whom? Alongside tracking the forms of subjectification *haq* engenders and the political imaginaries it engages, a feminist historical ontology is attentive to the forms of rights politics and the erasures/silences it puts in place. It seeks to illuminate what *haq* allows, articulates, renders intelligible, refuses, and to highlight how the gendered articulation of concepts/rights exceeds both the purpose and nature of their mobilization. In other words, a feminist historical ontology of *haq* is explicitly concerned with processes and discourses of subjectivation and with how gendered subjects of rights come into being in the vernacular.

### **A feminist debt**

A critical reflexive feminist politics of location scaffolds and informs the work of feminist historical ontologies . As a methodological device, feminist historical ontologies draw on different conceptual and theoretical interventions made by feminist scholars who have insisted on historical and political specificity, and have stipulated on ‘naming the ground’ from where they speak. It acknowledges its debt

to the epistemologies that situate knowledge in multiple, interlocking and intersectional locations and circuits of global political economies in order to track the path of power that forges knowledge production in particular sites. By activating the question: from where are you looking and what/whom are you seeing, feminist historical ontologies demand to see and view all knowledges as marked knowledges, marked by those who inhabit particular locations and sites knowledge production. Finally, through insisting on locations as epistemically and politically generative sites, feminist historical ontologies focus on the production of conceptual languages and processes of subjectivation, and also on political mobilisations, in order to track gendered political cultures and intellectual histories of social transformation in different locations.

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