Standpoint theory, situated knowledge and the situated imagination

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Abstract The aim of the article is to further assess and develop feminist standpoint theory by introducing the notion of the 'situated imagination' as constituting an important part of this theory as well as that of 'situated knowledge'. The article argues that the faculty of the imagination constructs as well as transforms, challenges and supersedes both existing knowledge and social reality. However, like knowledge, it is crucial to theorize the imagination as situated, that is, as shaped and conditioned (although not determined) by social positioning.

keywords *epistemology*, *social change*, *subjectivity*, *transversal politics*, *values*

One of the cornerstones of feminist theory, in all its varieties, has been its challenge to positivist notions of objectivity and truth. There is a large variety of positions among feminists concerning these issues, starting from – to use Sandra Harding's term – 'feminist empiricists' (Harding, 1993: 51), who do not intend to challenge or reinvent the framework of 'science' as such, but rather to do a better job in the existing one, to postmodernist theorists like Jane Flax (1990) who reject any notion of objectivity and 'truth'. Despite their differences, they have all challenged 'the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1991: 189) as a cover and legitimization of a hegemonic masculinist positioning.

Among those feminist theorists who did not completely reject any notion of truth as such, standpoint theories were developed that claim, in somewhat different ways, that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent. This accounting for the situatedness of the knowing subject has been used epistemologically in standpoint theories in at least two different ways: the first claims that a specific social situatedness (which in itself has been constructed in several different ways) endows the subject with a privileged access to truth; the other, closer to the theoretical view expressed in this article, rejects such a position and views the process of approximating the truth as part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differentially situated. In virtually all variations of standpoint theory, however, the reduction of knowledge to a simple reflection of

its social basis has been rejected. Experiences, social practices, social values and the ways in which perception and knowledge production are socially organized have been seen as mediating and facilitating the transition and transformation of situatedness into knowledge.

Between experiences and thoughts, social practices and conceptional knowledge, we sometimes find the terminology of 'imagination', 'imaginings' and 'the imaginary' being thrown in casually, but usually left unexplained. Being used in this casual manner, the implications of this particular terminology can be completely opposing; for example, when Dorothy Smith (1990: 36) talks about the 'imaginary premises for which a materialist method substitutes the realities of people's actual practices', she is implying that those 'imaginary premises' are something we should rid ourselves of. Conversely, Donna Haraway uses the terminology of imagination to denote something that we obviously should aspire to when she states that: '[t]he split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and *fantastic imaginings* that change history' (1991: 193; emphasis added).

The purpose of this article is to attempt to fill in this conceptual lacuna and to present 'situated imagination' as a crucial component of feminist standpoint theory. Our claim is that the situated imagination has two seemingly contradictory relationships with knowledge; on the one hand, imagination *constructs* its meanings while, on the other hand, it *stretches* and *transcends* them. As will become clearer in the article, we see the imagination as both *individual* and *collective*, *self-* as well as *other-*directed, a necessary *condition* as well as the *product* of the dialogical process involved in the construction of knowledge. Obviously, at this stage of the theoretical dialogue, our contribution might raise more questions than it can answer, but we hope that this article will be followed by a conversation with multiple (and multiply situated) participants.

In the first part of the article, we present what seem to us to be the most important and coherent features of *feminist standpoint theory* as it has been developed until now. In the second part, we outline a theory of the *imagination*, drawing on some of the contributions to that field that we find most interesting and useful for our purposes. In the third and concluding part of the article, we discuss the notion of the *situated imagination* and the ways it should be incorporated into feminist standpoint theory, complementary to situated knowledge. In doing so, we explore some of the relationships between the notion of the situated imagination and feminist dialogical transversal politics.

Standpoint theory and situated knowledge

That the parallel emergence of standpoint theories developed independently and at roughly the same time by so many feminist scholars and activists who were originally unaware of each other's work is, as Harding argues, in itself a case study in situated knowledge: '(F)eminist standpoint theory was evidently an idea whose time had come, since most of these

authors worked independently and unaware of each other's work. (Standpoint theory would itself call for such a social history of ideas, would it not?)' (Harding, 1997: 389). And yet the value of standpoint theory has obviously transcended specific spatial and temporal locations. It continues to develop and has become an influential part of a more general paradigmatic shift, in both political and scientific discourses, away from universalistic theoretical frameworks that would neither account for the particular location of the social subject, nor would they usually accept as a valid criticism that it is relevant to do so. Standpoint theory, as we shall demonstrate later, has encompassed several different but interrelated discourses – moral and political as well as epistemological and ontological. No discussion of standpoint theory is possible without relating to all of them.

In the following pages, we will sketch out a few of the more central issues in the debate about standpoint theory, including the extent to which positionality and standpoint are bound up with each other; whether individuals or social groupings are the basis of standpoints; whether some social positionings provide a privileged access to truth over others; and whether or to what degree the knowledges that can be won at different locations are incommensurable, that is, separated by deep 'epistemic chasms' (Walby, 2001). We will further argue that, for the last three of these issues, the more general problems of the intersectionality and the mutual construction of social divisions are of decisive relevance as well as the interrelationships of positionings, cultures and values.

Nancy Hartsock asserts (in a note in which she strongly rejects a presentation of standpoint theory by Susan Hekman [1997]) that the concept of the 'feminist standpoint' had been developed in the first place in order to *oppose* the view that social groups 'see . . . the world in a particular way' just because they exist 'in a particular social location' (Hartsock, 1997: 371ff.). She reminds us that the concept of a 'feminist standpoint' was meant to *contrast* the epistemologically naïve notion of a 'women's viewpoint'. She quotes Kathi Weeks's (1996) reformulation of this point, stating that a 'standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given', and emphasizes that 'the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others' are not the subject matter of (the academic discipline of) epistemology, but are 'ethical and political' (Hartsock, 1997: 372–3).

Most standpoint feminists, therefore, reject the notion of an automatic correlation between social location and standpoint. Dorothy Smith (1990) has most clearly emphasized the need to differentiate between social positioning and social practice. She links her approach to Marx's work in *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1977), which she presents as an alternative way of theorizing, both to positivistic, 'objective' sociological theory and to ideological ways of thinking as developed by Karl Mannheim (1998) and others as the 'sociology of knowledge'. Following Marx and Engels's definition, Smith labels as 'ideological' such thinking that simplistically reduces knowledge to its social base. She opposes this to the anchoring of situated knowledge in actual *social practices* (that are linked, but not reducible, to certain social positionings) rather than *immediately* to social positionings. This can facilitate the recognition that a variety of practices

can be related to the same positioning as well as provide a basis for a dialogue with people who, although from other social positionings, share similar practices (as well as similar goals and values, as we will discuss further on) across borders and boundaries.

Another facet of the debate has been 'the difference between the individual and the group as units of analysis', to use Patricia Hill Collins's formulation (1997: 375). Given the importance of the collective experience in the epistemological process, the definition of 'a group' is obviously one of the most important issues in standpoint theory. Due to differing understandings in this context, 'group' can refer to those who: are commonly located in a particular positioning; belong to the same 'identity community'; share a 'social network'; or associate with a common 'political community'.

While early formulations of standpoint theory defined all 'women' as a grouping (as, for example, Dorothy Smith tends to do), gradually such groupings became fragmented (for example, Collins [1990] talks about black women) and then (notably via Harding's reformulation of her position in her 1991 book) a more encompassing notion of difference and intersectionality was presented. It is obvious that not all women hold the same views or share the same political goals, moral values or even the same interests. No theory that fails to recognize this can be considered seriously. Moreover, such a position would also fail to allow agency space to individual women as subjects. Standpoint theory is neither based on 'methodological individualism' (in the sense of the Weberian sociology that Hekman [1997] is inclined to), nor is it a form of communitarianism. Standpoint theory as a dialogical epistemology leaves the conceptual tension between 'group' and 'individual' *un*resolved.[1]

More recently, Silvia Walby (2001: 498) has argued that the uncritical use of the concept of 'community' in standpoint theory evokes exaggerated notions of 'epistemological chasms' between the groups that hold the situated knowledge. She reminds us that 'the social' is not exclusively (nor even primarily) constituted in 'communities' and warns that thinking too much in terms of communities 'leads thinking about the social in too narrow and bounded a direction'. In her response to Walby, Joey Sprague (2001: 528) warns of a 'simple version of standpoint theory' that 'breaks down into a kind of relativism that typically gets resolved by romanticizing the oppressed'. As we will return to later in our discussion of the concept of 'epistemic communities' (Assiter, 1996, 2000), we strongly agree with Walby's argument. However, while Walby tends to turn this issue against standpoint theory as such, we think that the latter is usually not based on a strong and narrow concept of 'community', but on a much wider, more heterogeneous concept of dialogical relations among women as elaborated in standpoint theory (probably first by Collins [1990]).

As already mentioned, the standpoint that is expected to emerge from a specific positioning has sometimes (especially in earlier versions of standpoint theory) been expected to provide a *privileged* access to liberating insight while the more common position (more modest and closer to the general academic debate on the 'sociology of knowledge') seems to be that

it produces merely *different* insights. The 'stronger' claim, as it has sometimes been constructed in the context of 'identity politics', has been (polemically) summed up by Collins as: 'the more subordinated the group', the 'purer' its 'vision' (Collins, 1990: 207). Some standpoint feminists such as Zillah Eisenstein (1993) recommend, for example, specifically taking the positioning of women of colour and their multiple oppression as epistemological starting points. This viewpoint, however, is not intended to imply that only those who share a certain marginal or oppressed positioning are able to really understand it (and therefore only women should study women, only blacks should study blacks, and so on) or enjoy, thereby, a privileged access to understanding society as a whole. The 'ethnocentrism' of such a position has been rejected by Harding: 'The claim by women that women's lives provide a *better* starting point for thought about gender systems is not the same as the claim that their *own* lives are the best such starting point' (1993: 58; emphasis added). She points out that Hegel was not a slave,[2] Marx and Engels not proletarians. She and other feminist theorists advocate that people from the centre use 'marginalized lives' as 'better places from which to start asking causal and critical questions about the social order' (1993: 59). However, valuable as this exercise in imagining oneself into what one believes to be the worst conceivable social positioning is, two problems remain. First, as Collins rightly comments, the single worst positioning simply does not exist: 'Although it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else . . . this simply may not be the case' (Collins, 1990: 74). We agree with Collins's rejection of any mechanistic construction of hierarchies of oppression and her call for a dialogue between people from different positionings as the only way to 'approximate truth'. However, there is also a second problem. Even prioritizing non-hierarchically the 'view from the margins' might lead to underestimating the relevance of the knowledge of the dominant centre. Although the view from the margins produces other kinds of knowledge that are valuable (and often also more attractive to study), it is crucial for any emancipatory movement to understand the hegemonic centre and the ways people situated there think and act. After all, it is from this powerful position that most political decisions affecting the largest number of people in society come. Not surprisingly, however, access to the study of hegemonic positions of power is the most difficult to attain. Emphasis on the importance of the lives of the most marginal elements in society can sometimes collude with the attempts of hegemonic centres to remain opaque, while at the same time maintaining the surveillance of marginal elements in society.

Various axes of social, political and economic power have been identified by different theorists and social movements. Class, gender, ethnicity and race have been the most common ones, although sexuality, ability and stage in the life cycle, for instance, have also often been mentioned. Debates concerning these axes relate to the question of whether any of them, such as class or gender, has a privileged ontological position, as traditional Marxist and radical feminist theorists have argued, or whether they each have an autonomous ontological basis and are irreducible to one another.

Another related debate concerns the question of whether the specific oppressions associated with these particular axes should be seen as additive (see, for example, Bryan et al., 1985; Crenshaw, 2000) or as intermeshed and concretely constructed by one another (on the critique of the additive model of 'triple oppression', see Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983, 1992; Brah, 1996).

The debate, both sociological and epistemological, as to whether or not or to what degree knowledge and meaning are bound to particular social locations can be perceived both in relation to systems of power and in relation to traditions and genealogies of meaning and culture. Harding (1997: 385) also mentions differences among women that 'were not initially centred in standpoint logics and epistemologies [of] "mere difference" – the cultural differences that would shape different knowledge projects even where there were no oppressive social relations between different cultures'.

Even more than many other central concepts in the social sciences, the definition of the term 'culture' has been contested. Over the last decades, under the influence by both Gramsci and Foucault, cultures have become increasingly conceptualized as dynamic social processes operating in contested terrains in which different voices are more or less hegemonic at different times, highlighting selectively different elements from the rich resources that various cultural traditions and customs offer (Bhabha, 1994; Bottomley, 1992; Friedman, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1997: Ch. 3).

To the two dimensions Harding relates to, we need to add a third one which is not necessarily implied in either of the other two: Alison Assiter's (1996, 2000) notion of 'epistemic communities' in which political values rather than location along intersecting/intermeshed axes of power or cultural perspectives become the unifying factors. Such 'epistemic communities' shape their access to knowledge collectively rather than individually.

Such collective access to knowledge can be carried out in a variety of ways. Assiter talks about relations of teachers and pupils, artisans and apprentices. Other feminists (such as those who have developed the notion of 'transversal politics'; see *Soundings*, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1994, 1997) put the emphasis more on the dialogical process that is required in order for participants in the 'epistemic community' who are positioned differentially to establish common narratives. We shall return to and expand on this point in the third part of the article.

We would like to end this part by pointing out that there is an element that is missing in the various discussions on standpoint theory: there is little discussion as to how the transitions from positionings to practices, practices to standpoints, knowledge, meaning, values and goals, actually take place. We would like to argue that one of the central ways in which these transitions and transformations take place is by various processes of imagining. Based on a critical understanding of 'standpoint theory' and the concept of 'situatedness' as outlined above, we want to argue that feminist epistemology will have to extend the discussion of (situated) *knowledge* to include also the notion of the (situated) *imagination*. At the same time, we will try to present a 'standpoint theory version' of the concept of the

imagination by claiming that imagination needs to be understood as *situated* as much as knowledge does. Before that, however, we need to present the notion of 'imagination' as it has been debated in the literature in general. We will try to demonstrate that some of the most valid theoretical-philosophical approaches to the problem of understanding rely on using the concepts of knowing and imagining as complementary, so that the one indispensably depends on the other, and will suggest that a feminist epistemology that excludes the one in favour of the other will (continue to) deprive itself of a crucial conceptual tool.

The concept of the imagination

The insight that one's knowledge, values, goals and, with them, one's political practices and involvements are not independent of one's positioning in society took decades to become a commonplace view. A dogged uphill struggle against 'the god-trick' of the claim to universal, disinterested, absolute knowledge has been fought over centuries by (among others) most Marxist and feminist theorists. Given that this struggle, which has always been of crucial strategic importance for various social movements, is centrally about how to theorize the ways we produce knowledge, it is surprising how very selectively theorists attached to such movements have tended to use the rich history of the philosophical discourse on the construction of knowledge. In particular, the tradition of feminist standpoint theory has tended to focus on criticizing paradigms of 'rational' if not actual scientific knowledge. We feel, therefore, that not enough attention has been paid to other aspects of the mental process, especially the imagination. Although the imagination has occasionally been seen as complementary to rational or scientific knowledge, we would like to argue that we need to incorporate the notion of the situated imagination into the heart of the construction of all kinds of knowledge. Our appropriation of the concept and its evolution is focused on two aspects: the *creative role* of the imagination (for which we draw on Kant and Castoriadis); and its mutually constituting relationship with the *political* and the *social* (for which we draw on Spinoza, Freud, Marcuse and Adorno).

Following the mediaeval reception and understanding of Aristotle, most philosophical accounts of the imagination start from positing it as the link between sensation and thought. A first difference of opinion refers to the nature of the sensations. The classical materialism of the Epicurean (and, in its footsteps, the Stoic) tradition holds sensation to be caused by 'simulacra', which are 'thin films of atoms drawn from the outermost surfaces of things' and which 'flit about hither and thither through the air' (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999: 15). In the Epicurean conception, the mind is passively 'invaded' by the 'simulacra'. For the imagination, there is not much more to do than translating the invading simulacra into 'head-stuff' and delivering the latter to the intellect. What seems to be the most important characteristic of a modern (as opposed to a classical) concept of the imagination was first clearly formulated in Kant's philosophy (1958; first published in 1781). In spite of a certain

ambivalence about this, Kant tends to emphasize the active and creative role of the imagination. He sees the incoming sensory data as being significantly shaped and transformed by the human categorical apparatus. In Kant's idealism, *the human being as subject* takes centre stage and assumes a more 'creative' role (Kant, 1958; Sallis, 1987; Warnock, 1980).

From Kant onwards, the creative side of the imagination seems to be on an unstoppable philosophical career.[3] The most systematic account of the 'creative imagination' is that by Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, 1994). Castoriadis's vantage point is his rejection of functionalist theories of state and society. He observes that societies 'flesh out' their necessary symbolic structures creatively with *social imaginations* that are not 'inescapably dictated by natural laws or by rational considerations' (1994: 145). Even societies that would have identical structural needs and necessities would still not actually be identical. He concludes that the determinate form of a society and its imaginings does not strictly follow from its functional needs and necessities. 'What appears here as a margin of indeterminacy' reflects, for Castoriadis, 'the dimension that idealist philosophers called freedom' (1994: 146). Further, and more importantly, Castoriadis asserts that the functional and structural needs themselves (a society's *rationale*) are based on a 'social imaginary' (i.e. not on *ratio*). Castoriadis refers to this as the 'central imaginary' (as opposed to the 'peripheral imaginaries'). It appears that society's *rationale* (or its symbolic and institutional structure) is sandwiched between the *central imaginary* that is its constituting core and the *peripheral imaginaries* that 'flesh it out'.

While common sense has it that something is 'imaginary' in the sense of illusory or faulty when it contradicts the efficient, ordered functioning of society, Castoriadis is interested in the imaginary character not of *dys*function, but of functioning. Castoriadis points here to Marx's concept of the 'fetishism of commodities' as a social imaginary that lies at the basis of the *normal* functioning of a modern capitalist society.[4]

While Castoriadis argues that 'the institution' (i.e. the rationale, symbolic structure, logic, laws and the dynamic) of *every* society is based on a 'radical imaginary', the actual *content* of that radical imaginary is specific to every single society. This specific content – Castoriadis refers to it as the 'actual imaginary' – is, for him, not causally determined by anything. This is, however, where Castoriadis's powerful rejection of the notion of a mechanical causality in history and society finds its limits: there is no way in his conception to account for how and why people choose the one and not the other 'actual imaginary'. So, while Castoriadis is central to our conception of the imagination, we need to turn to other theorists to supplement this account.

Pivotal among them is Baruch Spinoza (1989; first published in 1670). Spinoza posits emotions, desires and affects at 'the core of political life' (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999: 26). Analysing political forms amounts, for Spinoza, to understanding the 'organization of passion' around images rather than on 'the deliberations of a supposedly rational will' (1999: 26). Fluctuations of affects, however, correspond to fluctuations of imagination.

Spinoza's starting point is the emphasis on the *corporeal* nature of sensation. Departing from the materialism of the Epicureans and challenging the mind/body dualism of their and other thinkers' (including Descartes') rationalism, he conceives of the mind not as an entity distinct from and opposed to the body, but as *the body's self-awareness*. For Spinoza, the 'experience of other bodies together with our own is the basis of imagination' (1999: 14). From 'other bodies together with our own', it is not far to the concept of society: 'Patterns of association' arise from 'occupational habits and dispositions' (1999: 26) – an argument by Spinoza that approximates a concept of situatedness – and feed into differing 'temper(s) of imagination' that cause conflicts both between individuals and within the same person.

While the imagination is central to any kind of human interaction and communication, it also gives rise to 'debilitating illusions' (1999: 34). Spinoza defines the 'critique of illusion' as 'an exercise in educating our powers of imagining' on a collective or societal basis, not, though, as an attempt to neutralize imagination (1999: 38).

Spinoza's twin theme of the corporeality of the imagination that is, as such, also central to the social and the political – linking the body, the mind and (political) society – has similarly been taken up by Theodor Adorno (Adorno, 1978: 122ff.). He holds that thought is nourished by impulses, and that, therefore, the attempt to eliminate emotion from the intellectual process is 'suicidal' for thought itself. Perceiving as much as imagining is 'shaped by fear of the thing perceived, or desire for it' (1978: 122ff.). Although thinking must not remain 'under the sway of desire', the 'thought that murders the wish that fathered it will be overtaken by the revenge of stupidity' (1978: 122ff.): 'Fantasy alone . . . can establish that relation between objects, which is the irrevocable source of all judgement: should fantasy be driven out, judgement too, the real act of knowledge, is exorcised' (1978: 122ff.). For Adorno, the thinking process that is enlightening (and thus implies liberation) emancipates itself from, but does not eliminate, the wish and desire 'that fathered it'. Without acknowledging the root of perception in 'anticipatory desire', it is forced 'into a pattern of helplessly reiterating what is already known'; 'pure reason', divested from the faculty of imagination, would amount to 'feeble-mindedness in the most literal sense' (1978: 122ff.). Adorno argues that, if thinking *rejects* its 'impulse' instead of *transforming* it, it will also sever the 'traces' of recollection and memory that connect it to its situatedness in society. Thought that denies its social location, its past and its corporeality is unable to 'perceive' and understand, and much less will it be able to project and anticipate change.

While Adorno understands the imaginary dimension of the mental process as the location of impulses, anticipatory fears, desires and memories, Herbert Marcuse (1998: 140ff.; first published in 1955) develops a complementary concept of the imagination as a 'reservoir'. He refers to Freud's vision of the imagination, which Freud described as an effect of the submission of the individual to the 'reality-principle' (Freud, 1958; first published in 1911).[5] Like 'a nation . . . sets aside certain areas for reservation in their original state', protected from 'the changes brought about by

civilization', the imagination is being split off from 'thought-activity' as a reservation that is 'kept free from reality-testing' (Freud, 1958: 222). In Marcuse's reading of this notion, the imagination provides a kind of shelter for those mental activities that can only survive by *resisting* the reality check. As Marcuse argues, different societies impose different 'reality principles' on the thinking of their members, which implies that different societies also provoke different imaginations as reactions to this.

The latter group of theorists thus provides crucial building blocks that can supplement Castoriadis's account of the 'creative imagination'. They can help formulate a theory of the imagination as rooted in corporeality as well as in society; as constructing the social world and its meanings as it is; as well as providing the 'anticipatory desires' and resistance to society's 'reality-principle' – which are necessary for defining the goals, values and ideas that any 'standpoint' or 'political community' is about.

To say that something is 'imagined' or 'imaginary' in this context does not imply its *falseness*; the point is *how* things are imagined. In particular, this aspect of Spinoza's account makes clear that the imagination *as such* should neither be rejected nor celebrated. The imagination that allows for emancipation and border crossing is the same faculty that constructs and fixes the borders. In both instances, the imagination is 'creative'. The 'creative imagination' is Janus-faced like modern bourgeois society which, on the one hand, promises emancipation but, on the other hand, creates borders and boundaries. The imagination is the source of freedom, change and emancipation as much as a source of the borders and boundaries that emancipation wants to challenge.

As seen above in the discussion of 'standpoint', we have in the 'imagination' a category that is simultaneously a category of epistemology and society, one that links knowledge to social agency and (social as corporeal) experience. Castoriadis argues that every particular society as a whole and also each of society's institutions and specific practices is based on a specific 'social imaginary', recalling the insight formulated by Spinoza that at the heart of politics lie emotion, desire and affect, which are corporeal as much as social. We cannot ignore Spinoza's conclusion that the powers of the imagination that manifest themselves in habits, dispositions, practices and institutions need to be educated no less than those of reasoning (not, however, suppressed). Marcuse and others point out that, in order to change the reality of any specific society, the imagination or fantasy is a necessary resource – although it is always constituted by what the 'reality-principle' of any specific society suppresses and bans from discursive 'rational' knowledge. Finally, Adorno makes himself a contemporary defender of the imagination or fantasy with arguments closely resembling those of Spinoza: the mind needs to transform, but not reject, its bodily ground, fear and desire; fantasy as much as memory carries traces of the social situatedness of the thought and also constitutes the drive behind possible change.

Standpoint theory and the situated imagination

In the first part of the article, we developed our understanding of standpoint theory and the 'situatedness' of knowledge. We also discussed the various ways subjects are located and how this relates to dialogical processes of approximating the 'truth'. We concluded that, when we want to speak about knowledge, understanding and truth, we need to incorporate discussions about imagination, imagining and fantasy, which is what we focused on in the second part of the article. We argued that the faculty of the imagination not only conditions *how* sensual data are transformed into conscious knowledge, but that the imagination is also fundamental to *why*, *whether* and *what* we are ready to experience, perceive and know in the first place. It is our contention that standpoint theory, in general, and the transformation of situated experience to situated knowledge, in particular, are impossible to understand without incorporating a notion of the *situated imagination*. Such a notion would be closely related, first, to Castoriadis's notion of the imagination as 'creative' of both the category 'society' itself and of the processes through which we perceive and know it. Crucially, the imagination in this context is not a straightforward faculty of the individual, but is (also or even primarily) a *social* faculty. Second, the situated imagination also encompasses Adorno's concept of fantasy which preserves the wish and the (bodily) impulses in thought and knowledge. In Adorno's concept, we see a reflection of a line of thought that reaches back via Freud to Spinoza. This tradition rejects the one-sided rationalist elimination of fantasy from mental processes and sees its epistemological importance as a gateway to the body, on the one hand, and society, on the other hand.

The emphasis on the concept of imagination thus allows for an additional critical perspective on epistemology that should be particularly relevant to feminist discussions on corporeality and criticisms of one-sided, abstractly rational notions of understanding. It is in this double sense that our (creative) imagination is situated. In addition – and here we are reinforcing what other feminist standpoint theorists such as Harding and especially Haraway have already hinted at (see also Felski, 2000a, b; Lara, 1999) – we are arguing for the establishment of a complementary space to fantastic, if not frivolous, imagination. It should occupy a place side by side with rational/scientific knowledge as a necessary object, as well as a product, of feminist social practices.

'The social' consists in the practices of individuals who relate to each other in a variety of ways. These practical relationships constitute the situatedness or the particular subjectivity of individuals as well as groups ('communities') or categories ('classes') of individuals. As discussed in the first part of the article, the positionings of social individuals or groups are multifaceted, intersectional, shifting and contradictory. They are also often antagonistic which is why positioning constitutes and shapes, but does not specifically, (directly) causally and predictably determine, their experiences and perceptions. Although one aspect or dimension of the 'force field' of social relations that constitutes one's 'situatedness' or subjectivity

might strongly push one towards a particular way of experiencing or acting, others will push in other directions and might prove stronger. As Seyla Benhabib argues, any dialogical approach (and we understand standpoint theory to be one) necessarily presupposes the existence of acting and responsible subjects, even if admittedly in a 'weak version' – as subjects that are situated 'in the context of various social, linguistic and discursive practices' (Benhabib, 1992: 214). Subjectivity in this sense is ambivalent, unstable and shifting and is not 'identical' (in the strong sense of the word 'identity', suggesting being stable and constant – 'the same').

This brings our argument back to the formulation by Haraway quoted at the beginning of the article, which brings together the concept of the non-identical self and that of the emancipatory potential of the imagination: '[t]he split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and *fantastic imaginings* that change history' (1991: 193; emphasis added).

Experience, made by the senses and mediated through the faculties of the intellect and the imagination, produces knowledge as well as imaginings, and along with them meanings, values, visions, goals, and critical and creative, along with reactionary and destructive, potentials. Here lies rooted the possibility and indeterminacy of (or else the 'freedom' to) social change. Although it is important *analytically* to distinguish between knowledge and imagining, intellect and imagination, these terms do not refer to clearly separate faculties or 'spheres', but merely to *dialogical* moments in a multidimensional mental process. Imaginings build on and are informed by cognitive processes as much as the latter depend on and are shaped by the imagination. Whatever meaning we attribute to experiences or specific sense data is as much an imaginary as it is an intellectual interpretation of sensual perceptions. Furthermore, what we expect, are ready to perceive and admit as (valid) experience depends on the particular mental setting that lies within the faculty of the imagination – which in this sense both constructs and is constructed by experience. The same holds for whatever concept we have of 'truth'. Whether we talk about approximate or absolute, accessible or inaccessible truth is not primarily the outcome of rational arguing, but of what Castoriadis calls the socially constitutive imaginary. Whatever we consider to be a currently impossible, but perhaps desirable, goal or value is always modelled – *ex negativo* – on whatever we perceive and imagine to be the actual and the possible in existing society. It would be very naïve to assume that the understanding of what is 'actually possible', feasible, affordable or a 'reasonable demand' in any particular society at any particular point in history is determined by a socially organized argumentative debate. Differing notions of what can and cannot be done are so rooted in the 'deeper' realms of the 'social imaginary' that rational debate (almost any current example will do: how to organize the relations between humans and nature, between humans and humans, men and women, old and young, and so on) regularly hits on rock solid limit lines.

However, social agency, which is always informed (and sometimes

explicitly driven) by values, ideals and social goals, regularly changes society to the effect that what used to be an impossibility becomes a possibility. The (largely imaginary) status of a goal or value might change from impossible to possible, from 'utopian' via feasible to matter of fact. Without the agency of the human subjects that form society, this change in the social imagination and the order of meanings and values would never happen.

Like the cognitive side of the mental process, its imaginary side is shaped by the many intersecting aspects and dimensions of society, on the one hand, and the individual reality of sensual and thus corporeal experience, on the other hand. Or, to be more precise, it is shaped by the contradictory unity that 'the social' and 'the individual' form. An examination of the history of the concept of imagination shows that whenever the dominant discourse tended to cleanse intellectuality of the 'impurities' of the bodily, the irrational and social situatedness, and conceived of it one-sidedly in a rationalist, individualist, universalist way (a modern tendency in which usually the Cartesian claim of a strict mind/body dualism is invoked and, conversely, is held responsible and attacked), the concept of the imagination served as a corrective and a weapon of defence. It then offered a conceptual shelter for the human potential for social change (although 'change' does not, of course, necessarily mean *emancipatory* change). The concept of the imagination has been used as a conceptual tool that allows society (and thus social domination), on the one hand, and the body (and thus needs), on the other hand, to enter the formation and articulation of social goals, values and meanings. It takes its place, therefore, in the process of mental negotiation between the contradictions of experiences and perceptions as well as between what 'is' and what 'ought to be'.

Imagination is situated; our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning of our gaze. But, at the same time, it is our imagination that gives our experiences their particular meanings, their categories of reference. Whether it is 'borders', 'home', 'oppression' or 'liberation', the particular meanings we hold of these concepts are embedded in our situated imaginations.

Hegemonic 'universal' knowledge has tended to ignore and render invisible marginalized experience, imagination and knowledge. Marginal political movements struggling for recognition have called for the validation of their own perspective. As Harding rightly points out, hegemonic powers have parried this using the relativist paradigm of knowledge in which 'their' truths and 'our' truths are said to be both valid in their respective proper realms: 'OK, your claims are valid for you, but mine are valid for me' (Harding, 1993: 61–2). Marcuse (1969) once described this strategy as 'repressive tolerance'. Standpoint theory has attempted to oppose this with a dialogical notion of truth that would overcome the universalist/relativist controversy. Dialogical truth is always an approximation, as Collins (1990: 234–7) argues. Such a paradigm of knowledge is therefore always unstable and shifting, open to different readings, and is not the exclusive property either of the hegemonic elite or of any particular identity grouping.

The situated imagination here plays several important roles (Yuval-Davis, 2000), first, in relation to the construction of the subject. As we

mentioned before, a dialogical approach must assume at least a 'weak' version of the subject (Benhabib, 1992). Creative imagination is crucially involved in the construction of the situated subject, the individual and, even more obviously so, the collective subject. While situatedness is always embodied and multiple, the dialogical process usually involves only those dimensions of the specific situatedness that are considered/imagined to be the most relevant to it and to the politics involved. As Yuval-Davis (drawing on Italian feminists such as Rafaella Lambertini and Elizabetta Dominini) has elaborated (1994, 1997, 2000), transversal dialogue involves 'rooting' (in one's own subjectivity) and 'shifting' (to that of the partner[s] in the dialogue). The imagining involved in the 'shifting' process is the same one involved when Harding (1993) or Eisenstein (1993) call for the critical thinking process to start not from their own lives, but from the most marginal lives they can think of – or, rather, *imagine*.

Most importantly, such processes of shifting involve imagining a common denominator that would transcend the differential positionings and identities and establish common ground. Such a common ground would challenge and subvert simplistic notions of the 'other' as merely the 'not self' and vice versa on which many theories of 'the subject' are based (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000; Oliver, 1998; Passerini, 2000). As mentioned earlier in the article, Assiter (1996) has similarly suggested the notion of 'epistemic communities' in which subjects from differential positionings and identities share the same values.

Common values, as Yuval-Davis (1994, 1997) has suggested, are not only the condition, but also mark the boundaries, of transversal dialogue. They therefore function in two directions: denoting common goals of political struggles and also providing signposts for the creative imagination, illuminating the way for transformatory dialogues leading beyond situational differences.

Up to now, we have talked about the critical role that creative situated imaginations play in feminist politics and scientific knowledge. We would like to end this article, however, by emphasizing the role of the imagination in feminist pleasure. As Donna Haraway wrote (1991: 192): 'the imaginary and the rational . . . hover close together – the one cannot and should not replace the other'. As followers of Emma Goldman's famous claim that 'if I can't dance to it it's not my revolution', we feel that fighting against social and political injustice, and people's suffering should not replace, if at all possible, experiencing pleasure. Similarly, we consider that giving space to flights of fancy and the fantastic is a good counterbalance to the pursuit of scientific knowledge and theoretical analysis!

Notes

1. Walby's rejection of standpoint theory in the name of the individual (2001) is based on her reduction of it to a variation of a Mannheimian (group-based) 'sociology of knowledge'. It would be worth examining to what degree the debate about the relation of 'situatedness' and 'standpoint'

repeats or transforms the older debate (not only in Marxism), whether, how much and in what ways 'being' determines 'consciousness', and whether these are the being and the consciousness of individuals or of social groups, classes or categories of people.

2. Harding, together with most of the earlier (more clearly Marxist-influenced) articulations of feminist standpoint theory, points to Hegel's discussion of the dialectic of master and slave in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as its reception by Marx and Lukács, as its starting point (Harding, 1993: 53–4).
3. We do not have space here, nor is it appropriate, to present 'the history of the notion of the imagination'. Castoriadis tried to outline the scope of the subject as follows:

> the history of the subject . . . includes the vacillations of Aristotle in the treatise 'De Anima' (*On the Soul*), the Stoics and Damascius, a long development in Britain going from Hobbes to Coleridge, the rediscovery of imagination by Kant in the first edition of 'Critique of Pure Reason' and the reduction of its role in the second edition, the rediscovery of the Kantian discovery and retreat by Heidegger in the 1928 'Kantbuch', the subsequent total silence of Heidegger on the subject, the hesitations of Merleau-Ponty in 'The Visible and the Invisible' as to what is 'reason' and what is 'imaginary', not to speak about Freud, who talks throughout his work about what is in fact imagination. (1994: 137)

   Spinoza, Hume, Sartre and many more are missing from this construction of history, to name just a few within the boundaries of Western European thought alone. For some overviews on theories of the imagination, see, for example, Brann (1991), Robinson and Rundell (1994) and Sartre (1972). An excellent (and rare) feminist work on the imagination is Gatens and Lloyd (1999).
4. Also, for Lacan, the imaginary is at the basis of 'normal functioning'; however, the imaginary is nevertheless a 'distorted' representation of reality while, for Castoriadis (following Marx), the apparently 'distorted' consciousness is a quite correct apprehension of an insane and 'inverted' reality.
5. For the sake of clarification, it should be added that the Freudian concept as it is referred to here differs significantly from Jacques Lacan's (1977), which is not implied in our use of the word. Lacan describes as 'the imaginary' a mode of thinking and knowing that ontogenetically originates in the 'mirror phase', a prelinguistic phase in which the infant seems to develop an early sense of selfhood and self-identity with the help of its reflection in a mirror (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988). The 'imaginary' mode of the mental process is, for Lacan, a mode that looks for and reacts to homomorphisms (similarities in form) that imply sameness or relatedness. Crucially, the imaginary is seen by Lacan as a distortion or a misrecognition of the self and is subsequently replaced by *discursive* cognition, the 'entry' into the *symbolic* realm that is organized through and according to language and reason. The imaginary is thus not a psychic or mental realm that preserves the memory from the violation through the reality principle, like Freud's fantasy, but results from a transitory state on the way to the 'symbolic' (which in turn could be understood as a dimension of the 'reality-principle') – very different from Freud's concepts of fantasy and fantasying which do not carry a negative connotation.

Cognition in the imaginary mode is seen as regressive and inferior by Lacan, although some feminists (most famously, Irigaray [1985]) have used the concept for a criticism of the 'symbolic' as the male domain of language and reason.

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