

# Beyond Haraway? Addressing constructive criticisms to the ‘four epistemic gaps’ interpretation of positionality and situated knowledges

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## Abstract

The ‘four epistemic gaps’ interpretation of positionality and situated knowledges developed in the anchor article goes significantly beyond Donna Haraway’s original formulation of the thesis of situated knowledges. It does so by organizing the study of the processes that provincialize and politicize perception and cognition alongside a logical sequence of epistemic gaps that shape the quantity and content of information accessible to different subjectivities. In this contribution, I address four sets of productive tensions and constructive criticisms sparked by the anchor article and highlight how they can help fulfill the promise of a generative research program that engages multiple other voices.

## Keywords

critical social theory, Donna Haraway, embodied and situated cognition, feminist and queer epistemologies, intersectionality, social difference

The anchor article for this debate developed a novel articulation of positionality and the thesis of situated knowledges that built on, but went significantly beyond, Donna Haraway’s (1988) original formulation (Simandan, 2019a). For ease of reference, in this commentary I will refer to it as the ‘four epistemic gaps’ interpretation of positionality and situated knowledges. As I hope I have made clear, this new interpretation does not attempt to rank, discard, or replace alternative articulations of these ideas. Each interpretation is a distinct constellation of epistemic gains and losses. Given the pragmatic reality of diversity of intellectual backgrounds and potential usages of these ideas (theoretical

framework, methodological tool, teaching, political activism), it is likely that different people in different contexts will find different interpretations as most useful for the task at hand. In other words, the spirit in which the anchor article was written was to enrich the conversation on these topics, rather than redefine it altogether. This attitude of collaborative (friendly even), open-minded, and open-ended

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knowledge-making is further reflected in the distinction I drew between the anchor article and the broader research program of which it is a part, as well as the associated invitation to other scholars to join me in fleshing out more fully the ‘four epistemic gaps’ interpretation and explore its potentials and pitfalls. *Dialogues in Human Geography* has thus naturally arisen as the ideal home for this approach to doing research and scholarship. Situating an article on situated knowledges in a journal venue that promotes debate and dialogue from the get-go thus has the advantage of making evident political and meta-theoretical questions that are the bread and butter of critical epistemologies: Who gets invited to the dialogue, and why? What are the terms of the debate? Who was invited, but declined, and why? Who could have or should have been invited? What are the conditions of possibility for the debate, in the first place? Where are the participants speaking from? I invite the readers of this exchange to ponder these questions as they go along reading the conversation. Doing so is a useful exercise in both critical reflexivity (cf. Rose, 1997; Rose-Redwood et al., 2018; Rosenman et al., 2019; Simandan, 2011a) and the ‘practice of speculative world-making’ (Catungal, 2019: 153) that politicizes the gap between the possible worlds and the realized world.

I am grateful to the four scholars who wrote commentaries on the anchor article for the depth and breadth of their engagement with its ideas. The fact that most of their criticisms fall under the ‘constructive criticism’ category bodes well for the future of the research program of which the anchor article is a part. In what follows, I respond to the most important issues raised, while also providing an overview of the structural differences between the four commentaries.

Catungal’s (2019) commentary focuses on the first of the four epistemic gaps and enriches my discussion of it by drawing on the work of Black and Chicana feminists to illustrate ‘marginalized people’s creative engagements with social differentiation as political forms of world-making that exist between and alongside the possible and the realized’ (Catungal, 2019: 151). His fascinating contribution thus answers the call in the anchor article:

to explore in depth, and by way of empirical illustrations, how the four gaps affect different social groups in different ways . . . by showing, specifically, how the four gaps are political and how different subject positions in networks of power intersect with one another to produce different experiences and perceptions of these gaps. (Simandan, 2019a: 131)

Catungal argues that my use of the vocabularies of probability theory and statistics to formulate the first epistemic gap has ‘the perhaps unintended consequence of smuggling in randomness and chance as crucial factors’ (Catungal, 2019: 152) to the making of the ‘realized world’. This contribution, however, is hardly unintended, and hardly an act of smuggling. It comes instead in the footsteps of prior work I have done on the epistemology, ontology, and politics of randomness, contingency, and chance in the social sciences (e.g. Simandan, 2010, 2018a, 2018b, 2019b). Part of that work was concerned with the key problematic of ascribing moral responsibility and culpability against an ontology of the subject that sees conscious free will as a recalcitrant illusion. I think geographers have yet to appreciate the depth and difficulty of the tension of wanting in the same breath to think of the world as contingent (or chancy), and to think of their discipline as a moral project (where guilty perpetrators can be readily and unequivocally identified).

Sneha Krishnan’s (2019) commentary is the only one that contextualizes the anchor article against the background of my prior related work (cf. Simandan, 2002). Specifically, she engages in a constructive spirit the anti-humanist ontology of the human developed under the banner of ‘demonic geography’ (Simandan, 2017) by noticing its centrality to understanding the anchor article and by cross-fertilizing it with Sylvia Wynter’s related trope of ‘demonic ground’. This striking articulation, she argues, has the potential to develop the political implications of my framework by enabling a ‘fundamental critique of the geopolitical location of post-humanist thought itself’ (Krishnan, 2019: 154). Whereas she notes that ‘an explicitly disenchanting view of the human is central to Simandan’s discussion of cognition and perception’ (Krishnan, 2019: 156), I would point out that there is forthcoming work where I

explore new ways of finding enchantment that do not presuppose the humanist baggage (Simandan, 2018a). Krishnan problematizes social difference by suggesting that ‘race and gender are . . . not so much positional locations that might shape perception . . . but fundamentally shape the terms on which perception is made possible and socio-politically legible’ (Krishnan, 2019: 156). This problematization echoes both the anchor article’s revisiting of situated knowledges in ways that go beyond ‘simply social difference’ (Simandan, 2019a: 131) and recent articulations of Deleuzian and feminist ontologies of difference in the work of Cockayne et al. (2017) and Kinkaid (2019).

Jesse Proudfoot’s (2019) commentary is close to my heart because of the shared obsession with operationalizing and making politically relevant the problematic of positionality and situated knowledges. As it happens, he is the only one of the four commentators whose work I quote extensively in my anchor article in the context of providing a psycho-analytical critique of transparent reflexivity that goes beyond Gillian Rose’s (1997) landmark article. I am especially grateful for his elaboration of the practice of folding (Proudfoot, 2019) as an explicit answer to the anchor article’s call for ‘further scholarship . . . to explore in detail [the framework’s] implications for geographical methodology and to operationalize the four epistemic gaps in, and for, situated research’ (Simandan, 2019a: 131). One aspect where I distance myself from Proudfoot is in his repeated less-than-generous references to logic, metaphysics, and philosophy more generally. He claims it is ‘hard to see how [the framework] is enhanced by reading it through metaphysical speculation about alternate realities’ (Proudfoot, 2019: 159) and rhetorically reinforces the political irrelevance of this ‘vacuum of scholastic speculation’ with the mocking remark: ‘according to the metaphysicians quoted by Simandan, there are “possible worlds” in which pigs fly and donkeys talk’ (Proudfoot, 2019: 161). Leaving aside the misrepresentation of the specific and carefully contextualized way in which modal realism is deployed in the anchor article to help formulate the first epistemic gap (cf. Simandan, 2019a), disparaging logic and metaphysics as politically irrelevant or as

detracting attention from more pressing political concerns is, I believe, a mistake.

As argued elsewhere (Simandan, 2011b), having good critical thinking skills is a prerequisite to being an effective critical geographer. Given that logic and philosophy are crucial resources to the development of these critical thinking skills, they are hardly irrelevant to political activism. From my prior work on wisdom (Simandan, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2018c), I agree with Kahneman that ‘wisdom is breadth. Wisdom is not having too narrow a view’ (as cited in Agrawal et al., 2018: 210). Contemplating whimsical philosophies in which pigs fly and donkeys talk is an excellent exercise in de-centering one’s frame of reference, broadening one’s horizons and, thereby, becoming wiser. More generally, in a neoliberal academy where humanities departments risk being dismantled or underfunded for their perceived lack of utility, we need to think more carefully about how well-intended forms of ideological signaling and political posturing can undermine the very conditions of possibility for the diversity of ideas and the cultivation of critical thought (Berg et al., 2016; Mountz et al., 2015; Peck and Theodore, 2019).

Finally, Beth Greenhough’s (2019) commentary stands out for its comprehensiveness and systematicity. Indeed, it is the only one of the four commentaries that engages my framework both as a whole, and ‘gap by gap’, glancing at the forest, while also inspecting each of its individual trees. Starting from the observation that my approach is ‘an endeavor that sits well with Haraway (1988)’ and welcoming ‘the precise, analytical approach the article takes’, she warns that the anchor article is undersold since it ‘achieves far more than’ being a ‘user-friendly’, ‘logically-coherent’, and ‘easy-to-remember’ guide to situated knowledges (Greenhough, 2019: 162–163). I owe a debt of gratitude to her for helping me correct the habit of preferentially attending to the negative and to the dark side. She shows repeatedly in her commentary how the negative outlook through which I often see the four gaps can be complemented (or replaced altogether) with a positive outlook. A few examples of how she deploys this magic speak for themselves: ‘memories do not impoverish our capacities to know the world . . . they

add to and enrich it' (Greenhough, 2019: 164); 'the article dwells on the problems and pitfalls of co-authored memories... I wish instead to hang onto the political possibilities of the process of narrating and sharing memories' (Greenhough, 2019: 164); 'we tell more than we think we do' (Greenhough, 2019: 164, offered as a counterpoint to the anchor article's dwelling on 'we know more than we can tell'); and 'words subtract from the world, but they also add to it' (Greenhough, 2019: 164, offered as a counterpoint to my discussion of the limits of representation).

In reading the four commentaries, I have made a point of attending not only to what they say about the 'four epistemic gaps' interpretation of positionality and situated knowledges, but also how they relate to Donna Haraway herself. The differences found in this regard are, I believe, very telling. Catungal (2019: 151) notes that 'when engaging the question of positionality and situatedness, I consider as foundational as Donna Haraway's theories the works of women of colour feminists' and admonishes me for canonizing Haraway to the detriment of the latter. But how could I have canonized Haraway? It is the metaphorical 'pope' that has the power to canonize, and I am a very minor figure in contemporary geography. The same attitude to the anchor article's (excessive) focus on Haraway underpins Krishnan's commentary. She argues that 'while Simandan's framework of epistemic gaps proposes an important pragmatic way of operationalizing Haraway's concept of partiality, its conception of partiality and diversity do[es] not engage... the work of Black feminist scholars' (Krishnan, 2019: 156). Once again, I am grateful to both JP Catungal and Sneha Krishnan for highlighting this issue (although see the brief discussion of Black feminist theory in the context of intersectionality on page X of the anchor article) and for showing in their respective commentaries how the 'four epistemic gaps' model can be enriched through a deeper engagement with Black and Chicana feminist theory. I believe their observations hold true of geography and the social sciences as a whole: we need to ask ourselves how, why, and even at what cost we have collectively canonized Haraway (1988) as the key reference for the

problematic of positionality and situated knowledges (see also Allen et al., 2019; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In contradistinction to Catungal and Krishnan, Beth Greenhough's commentary defends a continuing close focus on Haraway's scholarship. Even as she acknowledges repeatedly the merits of the 'four epistemic gaps' model, she asks: 'what might be at stake in taking the rich, convoluted, and occasionally impenetrable writing that characterizes Haraway's original essay on "situated knowledges," and indeed much of Haraway's work, and making it "logically coherent and easy to remember"?' (Greenhough, 2019: 165). Different readers, with different values and priorities, will answer her question differently, and the option to stay with Haraway is always there.

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