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Feminism and the Politics of Representation: Towards a Critical and Ethical Encounter with “Others”

By Amy Hinterberger¹

Abstract

This essay begins from the position that a speaking subject in feminism occupies a place of power and authority which requires a commitment to an ethical involvement in the representation of ‘others’. Specifically, this essay will address feminist concerns of speaking for others and the concerns raised by the dangers of representing across differences of race, sexuality, gender and cultures. First, it will critique feminist claims to political effectivity as a solution to ethical representation. Second, it will look at how hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions are inconsistently represented in feminist discussions. Lastly, it will briefly examine how differences between ‘others’ are increasingly being represented as cultural in potentially problematic ways. The essay will argue that feminist discussions of representation must be self-critical, but at the same time not abandon the task of working towards an ethical involvement with ‘others’.

Keywords: gender, representation, epistemology

Feminist researchers and theorists are implicated in both the process of speaking for and representing others. These practices of representation are directly tied to the production of knowledge and power and are thus ethical and political. Given this, the politics of representation pose particularly troublesome issues for feminist theorists. Indeed, the feminist project of transforming power relations and improving the material conditions of people’s lives is complicated by the contradictory and difficult problems of representing the subjectivities and identities of ‘others’. In light of this concern, this essay examines how representational practices are tied to epistemological debates about working toward an ethical involvement with ‘others’.

The parameters of concern within this essay are marked by my engagement with feminist epistemology during my Master’s degree. As a student of feminist theory, I have sought to critically interrogate how practices of representation, which feminist epistemology has so effectively criticized and theorized, are often recuperated as the ground to feminist claims of political efficacy. As such, this paper will seek to make theoretical connections between three areas of feminist concern. First, it will critique the notion that feminist claims to political effectivity provide a solution to questions of ethical representation. Second, it will explore how feminist epistemologies reproduce hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions that problematically rely on binaries such as ‘western/non-western’. Third, it will examine how within feminist epistemology, differences between ‘others’ are being represented as culturally incommensurable in potentially problematic ways. By working through these three areas, the essay will argue that a full ethical engagement with ‘others’ is a misguided approach,

¹ This paper was originally written for a course on gender, epistemology and research methodology in 2004/05 during Amy Hinterberger’s MSc in Gender at the London School of Economics (LSE), Gender Institute. Since 2006, she has begun a PhD in the Department of Sociology at the LSE.

which needs to be displaced by a politics of representation that stresses the impossibility of ever fully knowing 'others'. As such, the essay will contend that feminist discussions of representation must be continuously self-critical, but at the same time not abandon the task of working towards an ethical involvement with 'others'.

The recognition that there is a problem with speaking for, or representing others, stems from two connected points. First, that a speaker's location is epistemologically significant and second, that certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous (Alcoff, 1995: 100). According to Alcoff, both speaking *about* and speaking *for* others is problematic, namely because these both engage in the act of representing others (Alcoff, 1995: 101). As such, any feminist theory which involves either 'subject construction' (or 'object formation') involves representation and therefore cannot be separated from power inequalities. The terms 'subject construction' and 'object formation' are used by Spivak (1988: 306). Both terms are crucial to discussions of representation because while some feminist theory has critiqued traditional knowledge models as being *of* objects (Code, 1993: 39), engaging in the construction of subjectivities of 'others' for the purposes of making knowledge claims is also problematic. Indeed, this is what Alcoff refers to as the "crisis of representation" (Alcoff, 1995:100).

Yet, feminist debates on representation, which are productive of representation themselves, reveal that the meanings and practices tied to this realm are not agreed upon or transparent. In some cases, feminist representational practices and debates tend to disguise the messy and complicated aspects of representation. For example, Spivak (1999) identifies two different types of representation. These are *darstellen* (to represent in the aesthetic sense) and *vertreten* (to represent or to speak for politically) (Spivak, 1999: 256). Spivak argues that there is a tendency in feminist identity politics to conflate these two types of representation in order to move "beyond representation" and its problematic aspects (Spivak, 1999: 257). Spivak's distinction between different types of representation, along with her insistence that these different modes of representation not be conflated requires specific attention from feminist theorists concerned about representing others. Indeed, Spivak's charge requires feminist theorists to question how their work is implicated in power relations and in the production of knowledge about 'others'. In this respect, it is crucial that feminist theorists question how their work is productive of representing 'others'.

Feminist projects are dedicated to shifting, changing or revealing dominant understandings in order to challenge power relations and improve the material conditions for the lives of groups and individuals. However, as Alcoff argues, within these projects practices of representation carry high stakes. It is in this vein that Alcoff argues that "ultimately, the question of speaking for others bears crucially on the possibility of political effectivity" (Alcoff, 1995: 102). According to Alcoff (1995: 116), political effectivity should enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples. Alcoff's argument however, makes some rather hasty jumps from articulating the problems of speaking for others to assuming that it might be ethical to speak for others so long as it is empowering. This presupposes that one might have unmediated knowledge of who 'oppressed people' are and what is in their interests. I would argue that Alcoff's argument runs the risk of easily slipping into convenient categories of identity (such as the 'Third World woman'), where an 'obviousness' of oppression is simply assumed. Feminists however, cannot transparently know who 'oppressed people' are and what will aid them simply because

they are concerned with the politics of empowerment. Although Alcoff describes how privileged locations bear epistemic and discursive importance in representation, she does not indicate how one could ethically make knowledge claims about what is best for others, or for that matter even know what is in the interests of 'the oppressed'. Alcoff's claim to political effectivity has overriding epistemological and normative assumptions that are not fleshed out, thus undermining her discussion on ethical feminist strategies of representation.

A strategy of representational ethics cannot be sustained on a vague notion of political effectivity, which seeks to empower 'oppressed people'. If "source [for example the location of the author] is only relevant to the extent that it has an impact on effect" (Alcoff, 1995: 115), then political effectivity appears to be a shallow strategy for the legitimate concerns raised by Alcoff in the first place. In asserting that source is only relevant to effect, Alcoff might be arguing that using 'the masters tools' is an employable strategy for destroying the 'masters house' (Lorde, 1984).² And while this might be the case, an appeal to political effectivity still leaves unanswered just who decides what effects are desirable and empowering for others (or for themselves). As Ahmed (1998) argues, one must not lose sight of who is defining desirable effects for whom in feminist politics. She states, "to argue against the self-evident nature of the category of emancipatory values...is to argue that 'we' need to make decisions about what values are more emancipatory than others, as well as what may constitute 'emancipation'" (Ahmed, 1998: 55). In this sense, representations of 'others' within feminist theory are implicitly linked to normative assumptions about what effects are desirable. It is therefore crucial that feminist strategies of representation concern themselves with how assumptions of oppression and empowerment play out in their representations of 'others'. Although these representational practices might be designed to liberate the worry is that they reproduce the problems they seek to escape.

The slippage in Alcoff's argument between problems of representation and assumed self-evident knowledge of empowerment or oppression highlights Spivak's concern as to how intellectuals construct the wills of 'oppressed people' with transparent ease (Spivak, 1999: 265). I am not arguing that Alcoff herself does this, but rather that advocating political effectivity to empower oppressed groups needs to be put under the same scrutiny as her concerns for representation because they are inevitably linked. Spivak powerfully exposes the problematic ways oppressed groups are constructed by "benevolent" academics in posing her question "can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988: 271 and 1999: 269). She points to the paradoxical ways intellectuals claim to both deconstruct the subject and to know and speak for 'others'. In discussing and speaking about 'others' (specifically the 'subaltern woman'), Spivak argues that intellectuals place themselves all too easily as transparent communicators of the voices of oppressed peoples. Spivak argues that "between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development"³ (Spivak,

² For example, Alcoff refers to Spivak's point that just because the telephone was invented by a European upper-class male that this does not prevent it from being used as a tool for resistance (Alcoff, 1995: 115).

³ The original sentence in Spivak's 1988 essay does not include "culturalism and development"; it is an update for the 1999 revised essay. This addition points to the ways new discourses of the '3rd world

1999: 304). Thus, the subaltern cannot speak. The representational practices of the intellectual which serve to centralize the ‘western’ subject depend upon an unavoidable muting of the subaltern’s intent. As a result, Spivak argues that theorists must be attentive to their own work and how it is implicated in processes of representation.

The intellectual rendering of the subaltern as silent is not only the work of western male theorists; it is also a problem for post-colonial, feminist and transnational theorists. Thus Spivak warns “let us also suspend the mood of self-congratulation as saviors of marginality” (Spivak, 1992: 204). Feminist representational practices must therefore not assume to know, or have unmediated access to knowledge of ‘others’. Indeed, for Spivak, due to the structure of representation, full or complete knowledge of ‘others’ is an impossibility (Spivak, 1999: 283). Thus, ethical strategies of representing ‘others’ need to be based on working responsibly within this framework of impossibility, not trying to sidestep it.

Claims to political effectivity fail to provide a solution to the dilemmas of ethical representation. However, dilemmas of ethical representation are also linked to how feminist epistemologies reproduce hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions that problematically rely on binaries such as ‘western/non-western’. In this sense, feminist epistemologies are implicated in legitimizing who can (and who cannot) employ representational practices for resistance purposes. And as my argument will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, feminist critiques of representation tend to fall suspiciously along divisions of ‘western-white’ and ‘non-western-non-white’, potentially reproducing these divisions.

In her critique of how “the politics of location” (Rich, 1986) has been taken up by various feminists, Kaplan (1997) argues that feminists need to be responsible in representing and investigating other cultures, so as to avoid the mystification and naturalization of ‘others’. According to Kaplan, the “politics of location” get taken up as the superficial celebration of difference and pluralism, or what she calls the “poetics of relativism” (Kaplan, 1997: 144). In this respect, what appears to be a commitment to global feminism easily turns out to be an act of Western imperialism. As an example, Kaplan takes issue with Elizabeth Meese and her analysis of Rigoberta Menchu’s testimonio⁴ in her effort to transcend differences between women, as well as gaps between theory and practice (Kaplan: 1997, 147). Kaplan asserts that Meese appropriates Menchu’s text granting ‘theory’ status to ‘activist’ intent and that this “might matter only to those who have the social power to discriminate between critical and cultural practices” (Kaplan, 1997: 147). In making this argument, Kaplan is highlighting the

woman’, render the subaltern silent. Humanitarian organizations such as the United Nations have created new discourses such as reproductive health programs and micro-finance in developing nations. Parpart’s essay on the rise of the “development expert” fleshes out the consequences of these discourses for theory and practice (Parpart, 1995). Similarly, discourses of culturalism are increasingly prevalent in liberal multicultural theory, which pits women’s equality in liberal states in opposition to the preservation of ‘3rd world cultures’. Within these liberal discourses Spivak’s phrase “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988: 297) takes on a disturbing new reality. For liberal positions see: Okin 1999, Coleman 1996. For critiques see: Phillips 2003, Narayan 2000 and 2002.

⁴ Kaplan is referring to Meese’s analyses of the 1983 book *I, Rigoberta Menchu* which recounts the life story of Menchu, a Guatemalan Indian women through the genre of the testimonial. Published as oral or written autobiographical narratives (for example Menchu’s life is recounted to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray) the testimonial genre works with hybrid authorial strategies often bringing to light accounts of social oppression, war and violence.

power dynamics at work in how particular acts or texts of resistance come to be important, and for who they come to be important to.

While Kaplan is correct to highlight this process, her selective critique of Meese becomes problematic when it is compared to other feminist strategies of representation and knowledge production. In her critique, Kaplan argues that the “politics of location” can either encourage resistance to hegemonic formations or become an instrument of hegemony depending upon “who utilizes the concept in what particular context” (Kaplan, 1997: 138). Yet, using lived experience as a basis for knowledge production and representation is central to various feminist theorists that claim to challenge dominant or ‘Western’ forms of knowledge. For example, Hill Collins argues that central to a black feminist epistemology are the lived experiences of black women (Hill Collins, 2000: 257). As such, Hill Collins presents us with a project of using black women’s lived experiences and turning them into theory, namely a black feminist epistemology. I would argue however, that it is unlikely that Kaplan would level the same critique of Meese against Hill Collins even though they engage in a similar practice of using lived experience or ‘everyday knowledge’ as a basis for epistemology. Thus, Kaplan’s arguments are implicated in legitimizing who can (and who cannot) use ‘the politics of location’ for resistance purposes and her selective critiques fall suspiciously along divisions of western/white and non-western/non-white, potentially reproducing these divisions.

In this respect, Kaplan’s critique of how the ‘politics of location’ have been taken up in feminist representational practices might itself be representative of an epistemological double-standard, whereby the ‘non-Western’ racially female voice becomes a “metaphor for the good” which unquestionably resists ‘Western’ hegemony (Suleri, 1992: 337). Suleri’s argument that racially-encoded feminism has taken on an “embarrassing privilege” (Suleri, 1992: 335) bears on the gaps between Meese and Hill Collins. It bears even more so however, on the implicit hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions that play out in feminist representational practices.

Taking a somewhat blasphemous position within feminist theory, Suleri argues that she wants to dismantle racially-encoded feminism’s (namely, post-colonial feminist theory) iconic status (Suleri, 1992: 335). In this sense, Suleri’s critique of feminism as ‘skin deep’ (Suleri, 1992: 335) points to how representational practices in feminism might to easily turn on conventional categories of identity which read ‘location’ off the bodies of ‘others’ in problematic ways. Feminist theorists must therefore be attentive to the ways their discussions of representation might reproduce the unequal power relations and disparate speaking positions they seek to question and challenge.

A similar evaluation of feminist theory is offered by Bar On, who critiques the notion of “epistemic privilege” (Bar On, 1993: 83). Bar On argues that the idea of epistemic privilege (that some perspectives are more revealing than others) is ultimately based upon giving “authority” to certain viewpoints, which ends up being a tool designed to “silence and command obedience from the authorized voice” (Bar On, 1993: 96). From this perspective, the authorizing of particular kinds of representational practices (such as Kaplan’s) might be seen as antithetical to feminism because authorization is exclusionary practice. However, this is not to argue that feminist theorists should not engage in any authorization of knowledge. Rather, it is the process of allowing or accepting certain kinds of authorizations that requires further critical interrogation and analysis.

Haraway also cautions against the notion of ‘epistemic privilege’ by arguing that seeking out the “perfect” subject of oppositional history is misguided as “subjugation is not grounds for ontology” (Haraway, 1988: 582). Yet, in a similar vein to standpoint theorists such as Hartsock (1983), Haraway does argue for an epistemology of location and positioning, “where partiality is the condition of making rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988: 606). In this respect, Suleri’s argument that “lived experience as an alternative mode of radical subjectivity only rehearses the objectification of its proper subject” (Suleri, 1992: 339) might be simplifying standpoint theory’s complex epistemological positioning. Unfortunately there is not space in this essay to fully do justice to the wide-ranging debates on standpoint theory. Yet, it should be noted that standpoint theory has powerfully challenged dominant (or positivist) notions of objectivity and truth. This essay does not seek to represent standpoint as a simple theory that unequivocally believes some people have privileged access to truth, but rather that standpoint theory argues that “the process of approximating the truth is part of a dialogical relationship among subjects who are differently situated” (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002: 315). Nevertheless, Suleri’s argument does point to the flawed and contradictory ways ‘epistemic privilege’ might be granted to racially-encoded feminism. In relation to strategies of representation then, feminist theorists need to be aware of the ways their critiques and silences might be authorizing the ‘epistemic privilege’ of some groups in inconsistent ways.

Given these concerns, strategies of representation must also be mindful of the ways ‘differences’ between ‘others’ are invoked and relied upon. This is particularly important given the increasing ‘culturalization’ of representational debates that attempt to account for differences between and among women. Notions of culture are contested in both the theoretical and material sense (Narayan, 2002). Thus, capturing culture is not an easy task since it cannot be pinned down. Spivak notes that “culture is alive and always on the run, always changeable” (Spivak, 1999: 375). Despite this slipperiness of the ‘culture’ concept it often invoked and represented as the basis of differences between groups and individuals. For example, Schutte argues that “the question of how to communicate with “the other” who is *culturally different* from oneself is one of the greatest challenges facing North-South relations and interaction” (Schutte, 2000: 47 italics added). Schutte argues that there will always be a “residue of meaning” that will not be overcome in cross-cultural endeavors and that this produces a level cultural incommensurability (Schutte, 2000: 50).

I do not want to dispute the claim that there might be levels of incommensurability between cultures that feminists need to take into account when making normative judgments across cultures.⁵ Rather, I am wary of how levels of incommensurability are consistently represented and taken up as ‘cultural’ when speaking and talking about ‘others’. This is troubling because given the fluid and changing nature of ‘culture’ it is unclear how cultural differences are to be identified and defined. As

⁵ For example, Gloria Anzaldúa highlights the different meanings produced in English and Spanish cultures through the figure of the *mestiza*. This figure exists on the “borderlands” between cultures and understandings of different worlds. (Anzaldúa, 1987). Anzaldúa’s figure of the *mestiza* has offered other theorists ways to bring together different and disparate societal frameworks. For example, Sandy Stone uses the figure of the *mestiza* to articulate the meanings produced by participants in the virtual communities of cyberspace who live both in a virtual and physical world (See: Stone, 2000: 524).

such, simply relying on notions of incommensurability as necessarily cultural might potentially reify a western/non-western binary rooted in the idea of radical cultural differences which are left unchallenged and unaccounted for.

In representing 'others', feminist theorists need to be concerned with how they participate in constructions of cultural differences upon which assumptions of incommensurability are often built. Spivak asserts that there is a radical un-translatability (or incommensurability) of the subaltern voice into dominant discourse and as such feminist strategies of representation need to be wary of the unmediated power of assumed 'cultural differences'. Given this, an ethics of representation must guard against uninterrogated notions of cultural difference, which can too easily become the basis for incommensurability. To do otherwise, risks reinforcing "cultural relativism as cultural absolutism" where cultural differences can be easily subsumed by the 'Western' subject (Didur and Heffernan, 2003: 11). As a result of this risk, I would argue that feminist strategies of representation need to be self-critical of the selective ways 'cultural differences' are employed as unquestionably incommensurable.

Feminist strategies of representation need to continue to seek out new ways for identification and representation of 'others'. In seeking ethical practices of representation, feminists need to keep in place the "(im)possible perspective of the native informant" in order to not get caught in some "identity forever" (Spivak, 1999: 352). Yet, this presents feminist strategies of representation with a difficult and frustrating mission. As Loomba contends, "we are interested in recovering subaltern voices because we are invested in changing contemporary power relations" (Loomba: 1998, 243). In this respect, feminist theorists have large investments in 'recovering' the voices of oppressed groups in order to challenge dominant social (and global) structures. Yet, it is often these investments that lead feminist theorists to seek out 'authentic voices' to represent oppressed groups. But as Chow argues "the native is not the non-duped" (Chow, 1994: 140). She asserts, "where the colonizer undresses her, the native's nakedness stares back at him as the defiled image of his creation and as the indifferent gaze that says, there was nothing – no secret – to be unveiled underneath my clothes. That secret is your fantasm" (Chow, 1994: 140). If there is nothing beneath the "clothes" of the oppressed then feminist strategies of representation must look to invent and imagine dimensions beyond the "deadlock" of colonizer/native and western/non-western (Chow, 1994: 141).

As such, ethical representational strategies, which seek to account for power and authority, might require a commitment to collective struggle supplemented by "the fact that a full ethical engagement with the 'other' is impossible" (Ahmed, 2002: 568). Ahmed argues that a feminist ethics of representation should not be for 'the other', but rather that "ethics involves responding to the particular other in a present that carries traces of the past, as well as opening up the future" (Ahmed, 2002: 572). In challenging the notion that feminism should always be future-oriented, Ahmed calls into question how feminists might re-imagine their encounters with 'others'. Similarly, Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler also argue that what is central to transformations and transitions in feminist epistemologies are various processes of imagining (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002). They state "experience, made by the senses and mediated through the faculties of the intellect and the imagination, produces knowledge as well as imaginings...here lies rooted the possibility and indeterminacy of (or else the 'freedom' to) social change" (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002: 320).

The processes of imagining discussed both by Ahmed and Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler might counter some of the problematic representational practices within feminist epistemology and theory. As Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler suggest, “the emphasis on the concept of imagination thus allows for an additional critical perspective on epistemology that should be particularly relevant to feminist discussions...” (2002: 324). For feminist strategies of representation then, a ‘critical intimacy’⁶ with the other which attempts to re-imagine what the intimacy of encounters might look like is an integral part of ethical representation. This is because “creative imagination is crucially involved in the construction of the situated subject, the individual and, even more obviously so, the collective subject” (Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler, 2002: 325). The notion of the imagination, as well as the process of re-imagining ethical encounters and representations of others, might therefore be useful within feminist epistemology to further explore how ethical representational strategies might be created and sustained.

Indeed, feminist theorists must be attentive to how, through references to ‘liberation/oppression’, or to ‘western/non-western’, practices of representation end up reproducing the very categories that they seek to escape. Similarly, it is crucial that theorists are self-critical of how particular arguments are implicated in legitimizing who can (and who cannot) employ representations of ‘others’ for resistance purposes. Despite these challenges of representation, feminist epistemology, which is already open to constant revision, continues to be a central space where dialogues and open critic might strengthen ethical approaches to representing ‘others’. Focused on the currents of historical and cultural influence, feminist theorists who are committed to theorizing contextualized accounts of the everyday, must work towards creating spaces for a ‘critical intimacy’ with ‘others’. What this continued commitment requires, however, is being attentive to feminist theory’s own work and the representational strategies employed in efforts to work towards an ethical involvement with ‘others’.

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⁶ ‘Critical intimacy’ is used by Spivak to re-conceptualize what it means to “speak to”, rather than “listen to or speak for” the subaltern. (See: Spivak 1988 and 1999).

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