

## **Standpoint Theory: Formation, Contestation, Legacies**

Standpoint Theory working group: Alex Bryant, Karoline Paier, Emily Tilton, Alison Wylie  
Department of Philosophy, University of British Columbia

### **Workshop: November 16-18, 2023**

#### **Program**

#### **Thursday, November 16**

##### **Workshop Keynote & Green College Special Event**

[Sally Haslanger](#), Ford Professor of Philosophy, MIT

*The Path-Dependency of Knowledge and Value: Co-Designing Critical Social Interventions*

**5:00-6:30 pm – Green College Coach House**

6:30: reception in Graham House (Green College)

7:00: dinner in the Great Hall, Graham House (the GC servery is open from 6:15 to 7:30)

#### **Friday, November 17**

##### **Workshop sessions: Green College Coach House**

9:30: Coffee/tea

10:00-10:45 Standpoint Theory working group: introductions

11:00-12:00: [Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.](#) (Miami University), *Epistemic Pressure Points & Intersectional Interdependence*

12:00-1:30: Lunch

1:30-2:30: [Wayne Wapeemukwa](#) (Pennsylvania State & UBC), *Speculative Expropriation: Marx's Late and Incomplete Critical Theory of Dispossession*

##### **Workshop Keynote & Philosophy Colloquium**

[Quill Kukla](#), Professor of Philosophy and Director of Disability Studies, Georgetown University

*Epistemic Diversity, Ignorance, and Nonideal Philosophy of Science*

**3:00-5:30 – Buchanan A-103**

5:30: reception hosted by UBC Philosophy in the lobby of Buchanan A

6:30: dinner on campus – [Brown's Craft House](#) (101-6111 University Blvd)

#### **Saturday, November 18**

##### **Workshop sessions: Philosophy seminar room, Buchanan D-324**

10:00: Coffee/tea and breakfast pastries

10:30-11:30: [Natalie Ashton](#) (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), *Social Change, Online Communities, and Collaborative Critical Reflection*

11:45-12:45: [Briana Toole](#) (Claremont McKenna College), *The Vanishing Self: Consciousness-Raising as an Epistemic Transformation*

12:45-2:00: Lunch

2:00-3:00: [Jingyi Wu](#) (LSE), *Five Faces of Epistemic Marginalization*

3:15-4:15: [Lidal Dror](#) (Princeton), *Theoretical Knowledge, and the Role of Allies in Social Movement*

4:30-6:00: Closing panel – a discussion of the current state of standpoint theory, directions forward and implications for practice.

6:45: transportation to dinner from Buchanan D main entrance (across from the Allard Law School)

7:30: Workshop banquet – [Delara Restaurant](#) (2272 W. 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue)

For conference locations: [UBC Wayfinding Map](#)

## Standpoint Theory Workshop – titles & abstracts

### Keynote speakers

Sally Haslanager, Ford Professor of Philosophy, MIT

*The Path-Dependency of Knowledge and Value: Co-Designing Critical Social Interventions*

An important feature of theoretical projects that aim to promote social justice is their commitment to empowering those in oppressive circumstances so that they can solve their own problems. One reason for this approach is that the oppressed have situated knowledge of the circumstances that others lack. But situated knowledge may not be enough to prompt critique. A second reason is that opportunities for collective self-governance is central to autonomy. I argue that a collective engagement with historically and materially grounded practices can provide a new frame for agency that enables a creative and potentially emancipatory restructuring of social relations. To achieve social justice, our knowledge and values should not just reflect reality; instead, informed by critical knowledge and values, we need to make a new reality together.

Quill Kukla, Professor of Philosophy and Director of Disability Studies, Georgetown University

*Epistemic Diversity, Ignorance, and Nonideal Philosophy of Science*

It has been a largely unquestioned assumption in the philosophy of science, even among those who are interested in the essential role of values and standpoints in science, that *knowledge* is the epistemic attitude that scientists primarily strive to attain. In contrast, I argue that scientific practices aim at managing, producing, communicating, and transmitting a diverse range of epistemic attitudes, including not only knowledge, but also ignorance, curiosity, suspicion, provisional acceptance, uncertainty, doubt, concern, attention, and more. Scientific practice often aims at *unsettling* our epistemic security rather than settling or enhancing it, or at *redirecting* our attention rather than offering a secure piece of knowledge. My claim is not just that scientists often have and articulate these various epistemic attitudes along the way in their march towards knowledge, but that having and transmitting such attitudes is often the *goal* of scientific practice. Scientists do not just pursue knowledge; they do things like try to undercut one another's certainty; build openings for future research programs; debunk methodologies; recruit more researchers to their programs; and so on. Scientists are ineliminably embedded in social contexts and power relations and situated within epistemic perspectives, and these concrete situations shape not just what they can *know*, as standpoint theorists have emphasized, but what epistemic attitudes and goals it makes sense for them to value and pursue. It is artificial, I will try to show, to see all this activity as ultimately organized by a pure quest for knowledge.

## Workshop presenters

**Natalie Ashton**, Research Associate, Humanities, Reasoning & Argumentation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

*Social Change, Online Communities, and Collaborative Critical Reflection*

There's a tempting, optimistic view of social media which says that it can be a tool for positive social change. It connects people, allows information to flow quickly, and offers a platform to those who wouldn't otherwise have one. All of this helps to raise awareness and increase understanding of important, overlooked issues and - the thought goes - this is an important first step to resolving them. A much-lauded example is the #MeToo campaign, which raised awareness of the prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment, and started international conversations resulting in a number of high profile resignations, firings and criminal prosecutions, as well as the passing of a sexual harassment bill in US Congress.

Feminist standpoint theory seems to support this idea. Marginalised, or oppressed, standpoints confer an 'epistemic advantage' that other standpoints don't, which leads the oppressed to develop more knowledge, or better understanding, than their oppressors. And while traditional media is likely not a viable route for sharing this knowledge with a wider audience (because it's hard to get column inches or airtime without money, prestigious qualifications, or the right connections - especially if you want to say anything that challenges the status quo) perhaps social media can be utilised more successfully. It offers the potential to go viral, or establish a significant long-term following, with little more than access to a mobile phone, and so could be the key to widespread improved understanding of social issues and how to respond to them.

I share some of this optimism about the potential of social media. But in this paper I want to emphasise one important, sometimes overlooked condition that's necessary for realising this hope: collaborative critical reflection. I think this idea is already implicit in much standpoint theory literature, and is definitely known by actual activists. But a detailed, systematic treatment could supplement and clarify existing literature, whilst also helping to identify concrete improvements that could be made to social media and other online (and offline) spaces, to help support social change.

I'll highlight the importance of collaborative critical reflection – and some of the problems that can arise when it's under supported, or otherwise not present – by talking about two online disability groups. MadCovid is a Twitter-based organisation run by and for people who are neurodiverse and/or experience mental illness, and Long Covid Support is a Facebook group run by and for people with Long Covid. Both were formed in 2020. I'll argue that the members of MadCovid have successfully undertaken collaborative critical reflection, and seem to have developed (or are utilising) an epistemic advantage, whereas Long Covid Support have the potential to develop an epistemic advantage, but haven't yet done so because they haven't had the time, or perhaps the need, to undertake collaborative critical reflection.

I'll then talk about each element of collaborative critical reflection individually. Collaboration points to the importance of building and maintaining communities; reflection highlights the need for enough safety and privacy to share experiences; and a critical approach indicates that the goal is to uncover inadequacies and challenge inaccuracies. Finally, I'll identify some lessons for social media and designers, those who work in traditional media, and new activists, about how to foster collaborative critical reflection.

**Lidal Dror**, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Princeton University

*Theoretical Knowledge, and the Role of Allies in Social Movement*

Many social movements fight oppression or injustices that affect a particular group of people. One fraught question for such movements is what role should be played by allies, that is by privileged out-group members who are not the (primary) victims of said injustices. This paper defends the role of such out-group members in social movements. I first defend the role of allies against skeptics, who are wary of allies on epistemic grounds. To do this I defend the value of allies contributing "theoretical knowledge", against those who excessively emphasize knowledge from "lived experience". I further argue that allies with the right lived experience can also achieve the requisite knowledge to participate fully in social movements, even if there's some epistemic advantage to being oppressed. Drawing on skeptics of "allies", including Malcolm X's suggestive remarks on John Brown, I then argue that we should focus on the knowledge, dependability, and lived experience participants in social movements

in fact have, instead of being primarily concerned about their social identities and the advantages that could be occasioned by having some identity. Moreover, I explain how this call to focus on the epistemic position people actually have follows from the best versions of various radical emancipatory traditions, including standpoint theory. Taking all of these arguments together, the paper ends by suggesting that we should be skeptical of notions of “allyship” for the right reason. That is, instead of worrying about the possibility of socially privileged people being dependable allies, we should worry about the notion of “allyship” fetishizing social identity in a way that obfuscates what should really matter to those fighting together against oppression. Social movements should welcome all those that are genuinely committed to fighting injustice.

**Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.**, Professor of Philosophy, Miami University (OH)

*Epistemic Pressure Points and Intersectional Interdependence*

In *Elite Capture*, Olufemi O. Taiwo questions the liberatory nature of identity politics and standpoint theory, suggesting that the language of identity and standpoint merely shifts attention to elite members of marginalized groups thereby creating new hierarchies instead of liberatory knowledge. In this essay I supplement the language of standpoint theory with the idea of epistemic pressure, which I divide into two types: 1. worldly or material pressure and 2. epistemic norms or discursive pressure. Utilizing the language of epistemic pressure in conjunction with standpoint, I identify and diagnose what is happening in the sorts of cases with which Taiwo is concerned. My remedy, however, is not to abandon the language of identity and standpoint, but rather to re-root these terms within the context of Black feminism. Doing so reveals the importance of what I call “intersectional interdependence” within truly liberatory standpoint communities.

**Briana Toole**, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Claremont McKenna College

*The Vanishing Self: Consciousness-Raising as an Epistemic Transformation*

Standpoint epistemology is best understood as a family of theses that when, taken together, comprise the following claim: that a standpoint represents an *achievement* that makes accessible *situated knowledge* that is *epistemically privileged* with respect to knowledge generated from dominantly-situated standpoints. Little has been said about one of the core theses that comprise this claim – the achievement thesis – or the process by which a standpoint is achieved. This paper is meant to address this gap. Drawing on the literature on transformative experiences, I argue that consciousness-raising – the process required for the achievement of a standpoint – represents an epistemic transformation. Consciousness-raising epistemically transforms who we are by changing our ways of attending to and interpreting the world, making us sensitive to information (and receptive to social explanations) that we were not before. Thus, I suggest that we can change what we know by changing who we are *epistemically*.

**Wayne Wapeemukwa**, Mellon Predoctoral Fellow, Pennsylvania State University / UBC

*Speculative Expropriation: Marx's Late and Incomplete Critical Theory of Dispossession*

I reanimate Marx's dismissed literature on anthropology, ecology, and pre-capitalist forms of property to excavate a critical theory of dispossession which I theorize as primitive speculation. I argue that Marx used Henry Lewis Morgan's anthropology and Justus von Liebig's ecology as scientific bases upon which to critique capitalist property relations. Specifically, Marx believed that the capitalist mode of production installed a historically-specific relation to land; and that this relation was abstract, accumulative, and proprietorial. I show that Marx began to develop a critical theory of dispossession that overflows the historical, metaphysical, and developmental sequencing usually attributed to him. In conclusion, I propose that a speculative expropriation of colonial territories birthed a partitioned historical trajectory of the capitalist mode of production.

**Jingyi Wu**, Assistant Professor, Philosophy, Logic & Scientific Method, London School of Economics

*Five Faces of Epistemic Marginalization*

The inversion thesis in standpoint epistemology claims that marginalized social groups are epistemic advantaged. But under what conditions does the inversion thesis hold is highly contested. On the other hand, many philosophers and social scientists have articulated distinct forms of epistemic oppression. But the epistemic consequences of those forms of epistemic oppression are under-explored.

In this talk, I will use computer simulations of network models to explore the epistemic consequences of five different forms of epistemic oppression. As I show, some forms of epistemic oppression give rise to epistemic advantage for the marginalized, providing support for the inversion thesis. However, not all forms of epistemic oppression do. The models I present thus help clarify the conditions under which the inversion thesis holds.

We first consider **epistemic ignorance**, a situation where a dominant social group ignores testimony or evidence provided by a marginalized social group, but not vice versa due to power asymmetry. The marginalized group in the model ends up developing more accurate beliefs than the dominant group. This is because the dominant group explores worse epistemic options for longer, while the marginalized group benefits from having access to a diverse range of options. Perhaps more surprisingly, the marginalized group in the model develops even more accurate beliefs than a community with perfect testimonial reciprocity, where everyone fully listens to everyone. This is a case where the inversion thesis holds.

The same structural asymmetry can be reinterpreted to capture **epistemic exploitation**, a situation where a dominant group exploits evidence provided by a marginalized group, while at the same time excluding the marginalized group from having access to the dominant group's evidence. Here the epistemic consequences are flipped. The dominant group in the model ends up having epistemic advantages over the marginalized group, and over a community with perfect testimonial reciprocity. This is a case where the inversion thesis does not hold.

What about **epistemic smothering**? One way to implement it is as follows: a marginalized agent shares evidence with a dominant agent if they are testing the same theory, but smothers their evidence from the dominant agent otherwise. In this case, the marginalized group still ends up developing more accurate beliefs than the dominant group. But they no longer have epistemic advantage over a community with perfect testimonial reciprocity. This is a case where the inversion thesis holds, but not to the same extent as in other cases.

We also consider **epistemic devaluation**, a situation where a dominant social group devalues testimony or evidence provided by a marginalized social group, without fully ignoring it. In this case, the dominant and marginalized groups develop beliefs with the same accuracy, but the marginalized group learns more quickly. This is a case where the inversion thesis holds, but not to the same extent as in other cases.

Finally, we combine epistemic devaluation with **self-doubt** from marginalized agents. In this situation, both the dominant group and the marginalized group devalue testimony or evidence provided by the marginalized social group. In this case, there are no differential epistemic consequences for the two groups, because every agent has access to the same amount of evidence. However, if the dominant group devalues evidence from the marginalized group more than the marginalized group does, the marginalized group gains epistemic advantages in the speed of learning. This is a case where the inversion thesis does not in general hold.

Through simulation models, we explore the relationships between different forms of epistemic oppression and the inversion thesis. These models do not exhaust all the possible forms of epistemic oppression, nor do they show that the inversion thesis necessarily arises in these ways. That said, these models are valuable in articulating the conditions under which the inversion thesis may or may not hold, and precisifying what epistemic advantage can mean.