“Standpoint isn’t magic … it’s a matter of practice.”

An interview with Sandra Harding

Alison Wylie, Emily Tilton, Karoline Paier and Alex Bryant

In this first episode of our interview series we talk to Sandra Harding, Distinguished Professor Emerita of Education, and Gender Studies (UCLA), and her daughter, Emily Harding-Morick, about the very beginnings of standpoint theory. Sandra Harding recounts how she and her long-time friend and colleague, political theorist Nancy Hartsock, started a political discussion group in the 1970s in Baltimore inspired by their Marxist and feminist commitments. Their pivotal early publications on standpoint theory arose from these discussions including, for example, Nancy’s “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism” (1983) and Sandra’s *Science Question in Feminism* (1986). We talk with Sandra about consciousness-raising groups in the 70s, how she “learned to think about race” in the decades that followed, and her thinking about lesbian standpoints and queer research in the 90s. She describes how she moved from “theorizing to doing” standpoint, and explains why Tapuya, the interdisciplinary journal of Latin Science, Technology and Society, is such an important intervention.

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Alison Wylie: Welcome to standpoint theory, formation contestation, legacies. I'm Alison Wylie here with Alex Bryant, Karoline Paier, and Emily Tilton. We are a working group at the University of British Columbia who share a passion for standpoint theory: its history, the influences that shaped it, the influence that it's had, and how it has evolved in recent decades.

We've been struck by how dramatically and unexpectedly its fortunes have changed over time. It was explored with enthusiasm by feminist and critical race theorists in the 70s and 80s, and by advocates of research programs that start inquiry from the margins. But by the 90s, it drew some intensely hostile criticism.

It was seen as a form of epistemic identity politics gone wrong, that could not but entail a reductive relativism. It's now getting uptake among activists and scholars who see in it the prospect of moving beyond these stark oppositions.

It's a framework for understanding how marginalized forms of knowledge and a discerning standpoint on knowledge production can significantly raise the epistemic bar. But at the same time in this so-called 'post-truth era,' standpoint claims are not made exclusively by or on behalf of those on the margins.

As Anthony Appiah recently observed, "if lived experience was once viewed as a way to speak truth to power, power has learned to speak 'lived experience' with remarkable fluency."[1] We see this as a crucial juncture at which to get our bearings: gather the wisdom of those whose work has been formative of standpoint theory, who put it to work in various ways, [and] who have actively engaged with it and the controversies it generated.

Today, we're delighted to welcome Sandra Harding, whose work on standpoint theory has been an inspiration to many. So, greetings Sandra and Emily Harding-Morick, Sandra's daughter. We're just delighted you could join us today. Just to start, in 1983, you published an article – certainly, it was transformative for me – the title was, "Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?" That's in *Discovering Reality*, the edited volume you co-edited with [Merril B.] Hintikka[2].

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[1] Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2020. "Why are Politicians Suddenly Talking about their 'Lived Experience'?" *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/14/lived-experience-kamala-harris, last accessed October 28, 2025.

[2] Harding, Sandra. 2003. "Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?" In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka. Springer Netherlands.

You argue that a revolution in epistemology would be required to answer this, the title question, "why has the sex/gender system become visible only now?" And then, [you] set about fomenting revolution in the decades that followed. In *The Science Question in Feminism*,[3] in '86, you identified standpoint theory as one of several epistemic stances feminists were taking on the question of how science could serve emancipatory goals, and you raised some pointed questions about the viability of standpoint theory in this connection.

Then, a few years later, in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*,[4] you set out strategies for starting inquiry from the margins that have defined standpoint theory and practice, and reframed ideals of objectivity in terms of strong objectivity.

Our first question for you is: how did you come to work on standpoint theory? What was the context – activist, political, disciplinary – at the time?

Sandra Harding: That's a very interesting question and I'm not exactly sure myself, but I know who I did it *with*. I was in a political discussion group in the early 1970s. I started it with Nancy Hartsock[5] – the political theorist who has passed, a decade ago or so. I, with my graduate students from the University of Delaware, and Nancy, with a couple of hers from Johns Hopkins, and we were shortly invited in.

Liz Fee[6], who was teaching at a Baltimore medical college, and was a medical anthropologist. And there was a fourth person whose name I can't remember, she was an anthropologist from Johns Hopkins. I lived an hour from Nancy's. All these people were in Baltimore and I was in Delaware, teaching at the University of Delaware. I can't

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[3] Harding, Sandra G. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Cornell University Press.

[4] --- 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*. Cornell University Press.

[5] Hartsock, Nancy C. M. 1983. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka. Springer Netherlands.

--- "Feminist Theory and the Development of Revolutionary Strategy." In *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah R. Eisenstein. NYU Press.

[6] Elizabeth "Liz" Fee (1946-2018) was a historian of science, medicine, and health. Born in Northern Ireland, she studied Biology at Cambridge and received a Fulbright scholarship to study at Princeton with Thomas Kuhn, where she wrote her PhD dissertation "Science and the 'Woman Question,' 1860–1920" using Victorian-era periodicals to illustrate her analysis. In 1974, she became a professor at the John Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health (now Bloomberg School). She is known for her articles on feminist science as well as social-justice-based public health such as pathbreaking co-edited volumes (with Daniel Fox), *AIDS: The Burden of History* in 1988 and *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease* in 1992. Her collaborative periodical public health history series *Voices from the Past* showcased the impact of social scientists, activists, and politicians such as W.E.B. du Bois, Emma Goldman, and Salvador Allende on public health. She co-founded the leftwing public health collective called Sigerist Circle (1990) as well as The Spirit of 1848 Caucus of the American Public Health Association (1994). Throughout her career she was active in Marxist and feminist health movements.

remember exactly how I met Nancy, but I suspect that I went to an American Political Science Association meeting. I went to a number of social science disciplinary meetings, back in those days, because I was really working on philosophy of social science in a certain way. I probably went up to her after a lecture and said, "That was great," and we started talking and the rest is history.

At any rate, I remember we had this discussion group – it was maybe every other week or something like that on Thursday afternoon – and then we'd all go out to dinner together, the four of us. After about a year, it started expanding. My initial writing was, in effect, *to* Nancy. I was arguing with her about standpoint theory because she had published a paper – wrote that paper I'd heard of hers, that I think she subsequently published – we were trying to, between us, get clearer about what was it; what was this standpoint project?

Both of us were Marxist feminists – and so, of course we modeled it on the standpoint of the proletariat. From the Marxist theorist [György Lukács].[7] "The standpoint of the proletariat" was the title of his book I think, in the 1930s. I think he was a Brit [sic, Lukács was Hungarian].

Anyway, we were developing the standpoint of women on the model of the standpoint of the proletariat. It was very heady and exciting and I couldn't wait to go each week. We'd give each other readings to do and it was just… [sigh]. This was the early 1970s, I think. In the 1960s I was having babies like this one [gestures to Emily Harding-Morick].

Emily Harding-Morick: Yeah, it was later. I think it would have to be more like '76, '77, '78.

Sandra Harding: That sounds right because I got my doctorate in '73. I went back to grad school late. I went back to school *because* I had a one-year-old and a two-year-old. Not in spite of it. I needed it. I'd spent a year – the first year of my life – neither working nor as a student. I adored my babies, but this was a pitiful life to me. So I started [grad school], poor little things. Look at her [at Emily Harding-Morick] smiling.

Alison Wylie: Where did the term 'standpoint theory' come from? Was that term already in the Marxist literature?

Sandra Harding: Yes, 'the standpoint of the proletariat'.

Alison Wylie: How did your position and your thinking – about modeling a gendered standpoint on the standpoint of the proletariat – differ from Nancy Hartsock's?

Sandra Harding: I'm not sure initially it did. The two of us were kind of working together, working out what this should look like and what its implications were. And, of course, it was *scandalous* to the natural scientists. **I**t became so important because it provided the

[7] Lukács, György. 1971. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. MIT Press.

possibility of a critical social studies of the natural sciences – of physics, chemistry, engineering – and the natural scientists were not happy campers. Their idea was they were doing 'eternal truth, beauty, and goodness,' and what these *girls* were doing was failing to understand the importance of their philosophies of science. It was quite a wild scene.

Alex Bryant: Were those early discussions with Nancy – and at those reading groups – were they specifically about the natural sciences? Did they have anything to do with scientific inquiry? Or were they specifically about, say, women's standpoint, and the feminist standpoint, and Marxist epistemology?

Sandra Harding: They were more about women's and feminists' standpoint because I had been working in philosophy of the natural sciences and Nancy was a social scientist, right? So she was pretty disinterested in physics, and I was very interested in it. At the University of Delaware, where I taught, the physicists were up in arms against me. There was a period of time when I had to go explain to the Dean what I was doing.

The Dean was the ex-wife of a very famous sociologist, Alvin Gouldner[8] – she was the Dean of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Delaware – and she called me into her office to find out what I was doing that was driving the physicists so crazy. It was wild. It was a wild world – is all I can say – for a couple of years there.

Alison Wylie: Especially with standpoint theory getting uptake in context of political activism around you.

Sandra Harding: In the 1960s, I was having babies. I wasn't marching to Washington. I didn't really get involved in political activism of the 'March to Washington' sort until later, when they were teenagers and we would go down to Washington on weekends on buses.

Emily Harding-Morick: Yeah, like the early '80s, late '70s.

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[8] Helen Patricia Beem Gouldner (†2007) was Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1974-90 and Professor Emerita of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware, Baltimore. She co-authored books such as *Introduction to Modern Sociology* (with Alvin W. Gouldner) and *Speaking of Friendship: Middle Class Women and their Friends* (with Mary S. Strong).

Alvin Gouldner (1920-1980) was a critical sociologist and public intellectual researching bureaucracy, strikes, and the role of reflexivity in sociology. His research was influenced by Max Weber and Marxism, as well as his dissertation supervisor Robert K. Merton ("Industry and Bureaucracy", 1954), among others. In 1957, he joined the Anthropology and Sociology department of Washington University in St. Louis. In 1968, he became the Max Weber Research Professor of Social Theory and chair of the department. Notable works are *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) and *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (1979).

Sandra Harding: I think it was the beginning of race issues, wasn't it? When racial issues first started to pop up on the national agenda.

Emily Harding-Morick: We went down for the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] March in 1976, I remember that.

Sandra Harding: That's right.

Alex Bryant: Any consciousness-raising groups in that period? Any time spent even with other mothers?

Sandra Harding: [to Emily Harding-Morick] When did I start a CR [consciousness-raising] group?

Emily Harding-Morick: It would be when we were really little, like '73 or '74.

Sandra Harding: Yeah, you were babies, weren't you?

Emily Harding-Morick: Yeah, I think we were like 4 and 5, maybe 6 and 7.

Sandra Harding: I was in a CR [consciousness-raising] group with Catherine, was it?

Emily Harding-Morick: With Gloria deSole.[9]

Sandra Harding: Yeah, Gloria deSole.

Emily Harding-Morick: And... Joan and Judy[10]?

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[9] Gloria DeSole has been actively writing and institutionally organizing against the discrimination of women, Black people, lesbian, queer people, and other marginalized groups in academia throughout her career. She received her Ph.D. at SUNY Albany in 1969 and became an English Professor at Skidmore College. From 1982 to 2000 she was the senior advisor to the President for Affirmative Action and Employment Planning and Director of affirmative Action at the University at Albany. She has published on affirmative action (1976), sexual harassment in academia (1997) and effective institutional change. Together with Leonore Hoffmann she published *Rocking the Boat: Academic Women and Academic Processes* (1981), an edited volume which has been described as "a handbook on sexism and racism in academic – essential knowledge for the very difficult period ahead" (Brown, 1982). In 2024 she was named one of the Citizen Laureates by the University Albany Foundation.

[10] Judith E. Barlow is a Professor Emeritus of English and Women's Studies at the University of Albany, SUNY. She received her B.A. from Cornell University and her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. She wrote and edited several books on American Women writers such as *Final Acts: The Creation of Three Late O'Neill Plays* (1985), *Plays by American Women: 1900-1930* (1981), and *Plays by American Women: 1930-1960* (1994).

Joan Schulz (1930-2016) was a professor and educator at the University at Albany/SUNY for over three decades and was instrumental in the creation and development of the Women's Studies Department – now the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department. She received her B.A. degree from Northern Illinois and her Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Illinois. Her research interests were in southern American literature and feminist studies.

Sandra Harding: Oh, and Joan and Judy. So some of the faculty from the English departments at SUNY Albany and at Skidmore – a couple them and I.

Emily Harding-Morick: And Shelia Berger?[11]

Sandra Harding: Shelia Berger, right. We knew each other socially. We women formed the CR [consciousness-raising] group, and our partners were scandalized: that we women were meeting together to talk about something other than kids and cooking. They couldn't believe they weren't allowed to attend. It was quite fun. We had a good time.

Alison Wylie: Did you talk about standpoint theory in that context?

Sandra Harding: I don't remember that I did. We were talking about our everyday lives: who did the cooking and who took care of the kids. We weren't doing theory.

Emily Harding-Morick: It was the 'personal is political' kind [of discussion], wasn't it? The feminist movement of the personal is political and what that meant for everyday lives.

Sandra Harding: Yes, exactly.

Alison Wylie: So the grounding for theory was political in a lot of ways.

Alex Bryant: How has your thinking about standpoint theory changed over time?

Sandra Harding: I guess the most important way is that I learned to think about race. I think I *thought* I already knew how to think about class, but I didn't know how to think about race. Meanwhile, the Black activism was revving up at the University of Delaware and I was the only white person at the meeting of Black feminists in town. I talked all the time to my friend Gloria Hull – she became Akasha Hull.

[The University of] Delaware is below the Mason-Dixon line. There were about one hundred faculty when I was there, and there was one Black person. As a matter of fact, New Castle County – the county the university is in – was a party to the 1969, I think it was, Supreme Court decision[12] ordering desegregation of colleges. It was quite an environment in which to think about these issues.

Alex Bryant: Any specific events or challenges around that time that you can think of?

Sandra Harding: Well, there's the Sokal affair, 1996.[13] If you look Alan Sokal up, you'll see the Sokal affair. It doesn't mention me in any way, but that social text article was focused on one of my articles, as an example of bad work. He taught at NYU, and I had been a

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[12] This case mentioned here was likely: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_v._Holmes_County_Board_of_Education

[13] Hilgartner, Stephen. 1997. "The Sokal Affair in Context." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 22 (4): 506–22.

graduate student – my doctorate is from NYU. This was shortly after I got out of NYU, and I was getting recommendation letters from my profs. I made an appointment with each of the guys I was asking for a recommendation to talk about this and they said, "Oh, Sandra, don't worry, don't worry. It'll just disappear." Well, of course, it didn't disappear. But they were true to me, which was good.

Emily Harding-Morick: Remember when the John Birch Society put you on some sort of 'hit list'?

Sandra Harding: Yes, yes. I was on the hit list. [laughs] The Dean called me. Again, she got tired of calling me, but she did it every time. She was not a fan of feminism. I was directing the Center for the Study of Women, or I was an administrator at that point of one of the women's programs at [the University of] Delaware. And [the University of] Delaware is the wealthiest state college in the country. Can you guess why?

Emily Harding-Morick: Uhm, no.

Sandra Harding: DuPont, DuPont. Endowed DuPont *this*; endowed DuPont *that*. The university is incredibly wealthy.

Alex Bryant: Here's a basic standpoint question: what do you take the distinction to be between situated knowledge and standpoint?

Sandra Harding: You know, I don't know the answer to that question. I mean, I think I don't. I never thought about it. I haven't thought about standpoint theory for a decade. I'm not really up on it and that's because I switched, so to speak, and *do* it. I took up Latin American Science and Technology Studies and I co-founded a wonderful journal.

Alison Wylie: *Tapuya.*

Sandra Harding: [*Tapuya:] Latin American Science, Technology, and Society*.[14] It's hugely successful and it has no competition. It is a standpoint project. It publishes *in* English. But the editorial boards are 90% – maybe 80% or something like that – Latin Americans. The focus is on science, technology, and society that is Latin American, whether that occurs in Latin America or in the US. There's lots of science done by Latin Americans in the US, and it [*Tapuya*] reads science as knowledge production of any sort – including Indigenous knowledge.

Alex Bryant: Some of us have heard you talk about the founding of this journal, and one of the questions that we had was: what does it mean to start inquiry from the margins? I think we've heard you, in a different context, talk about how this is the kind of project that

[14] Rajão, Raoni, and Sandra Harding. 2018. "Why 'Tapuya?'" *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 1 (1): 87–91.

involves “doing standpoint”. I wonder if you think starting inquiry from the margins *means* starting journals of this kind or something similar.

Sandra Harding: I think of it as a standpoint project, if that's your question. I'm starting off thinking from non-white Western elite lives, [thinking] about how knowledge production works for them.

You know, I have backed out of thinking about the details of what a standpoint theory is and so forth – for close to a decade, certainly 5 or 6 years – because I just wasn’t interested in it. What I was interested in was doing it. *Tapuya* is revolutionary because it takes up issues that modern Western sciences have not taken up and/or have not understood *how* to take up. There are Latin American journals in English devoted to history and to literature, but not to knowledge production as such, [not to] science and technology.

In a certain way, I don't know anything about how standpoint theory itself has fared in the last few years. I just haven't followed the disputes. I'm sorry to disappoint you.

Alison Wylie: No, not at all. This is really significant. I would say that you are enacting the kind of starting inquiry from the margins that you were theorizing.

Sandra Harding: Well, so is everybody else! So are all these authors I'm publishing [in *Tapuya*].

Alison Wylie: Yeah, exactly. I was going to ask, are there other projects that others have taken up along these lines that you find particularly inspiring?

Sandra Harding: Yes, there are. There's a series of African science publications – I mean books and so forth – that are sponsored by a guy whose name is escaping me. The Internet has made possible kinds of communication and exchange of ideas that wouldn't have been possible prior to it. **E**verybody can read *Tapuya*, it’s online. They can read it all; they can read it in China and Japan, and they do! I mean, we had an article by a Latin American and we invited an African and a Chinese commentator.

Karoline Paier: From other interviews I've heard of you and the texts I've read, interdisciplinarity and collaboration seemed to be really important. I wondered if, especially in these last projects, you encountered particular challenges in terms of collaborating with people from different perspectives, different social locations. If something comes to mind that was a particular challenge or maybe something that was particularly rewarding?

Sandra Harding: Well, my work from the beginning has been *with* people, *with* scholars in other disciplines, initially mostly in sociology. Women's studies has always been interdisciplinary anyway. Sociologists talk to economists, talk to political scientists, and so forth. I grew up, intellectually, in an interdisciplinary – as they say – world, and

philosophers have frequently been the *least* happy with my work because I disobey the boundaries that they have set around themselves. They count me as a sociologist, but not as a philosopher. In my, whatever it was, 40 years of teaching, 40, 50, 60 [years of teaching], only one year did I *not* have an appointment in a sociology department.

I always got myself a joint appointment from philosophy to sociology and taught a sociology course. I usually taught "the methods". Not the methods course, but a course on philosophy of science . I've worked in those interdisciplinary contexts from the beginning. I don't regard the disciplines' borders as inviolate, or necessarily a good thing.

Alison Wylie: Definitely not inviolate. [laughs] The revolutionizing epistemology that you set off to do – in the early '80s, late '70s – involves reconfiguring who works together and how they work together, and requires creating venues where you can publish together like *Tapuya*.

Sandra Harding: Yes, and when I directed the Centers for the Study of Women, I put on these interdisciplinary programs. Like we'd have a topic, and we'd have a sociologist and a political scientist. Sometimes a physicist. I was always inviting the audience to think across disciplines rather than be confined. I mean Women's Studies, like Black Studies and some other fields, is itself multiple disciplinary.

Alison Wylie: Did the physicists ever come around?

Sandra Harding: They got very upset with me at a certain point and some went to the Dean and tried to get me fired. She got used to this eventually and gave up trying to deal with it. Because meanwhile I was collecting award after award from the international societies, and I just presented those to her all the time. I kept publishing books, and they kept selling. I think she thought – which is what I intended – that it was too big for her to handle. And she finally did just give up.

Emily Harding-Morick: Is Sharon Traweek[15] a physicist?

Sandra Harding: Yes, that's right. At UCLA, Sharon Traweek had gotten involved in women's studies and did wonderful work, yes. So there have been a few women in physics. But

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[15] Sharon Traweek has been an Associate professor at UCLA since 1994, first in the History Department and then at the Gender Studies Department since 2008. In this context, especially her early ethnographical research of high energy physicists called *Beamtimes and Lifetimes* (1988) should be noted.

For more on Sharon Traweek life and seminal work, we recommend this interview: Sharon Traweek, Duygu Kaşdoğan, and Kim Fortun. 2021. "Searching for how Epistemic Power is Made, Appropriated, Circulated, and Challenged: An Interview with 2020 4S Bernal Prize Winner Sharon Traweek." *Engaging Science, Technology, & Society* 7.2: 97–119.

Traweek, Sharon. 1988. *Beamtimes and Lifetimes*: *The World of High Energy Physicists*. Harvard University Press.

there were, as you can imagine, very few women in physics anyway, and one of them at UCLA was particularly pissed at me. She got herself on the board of the Women's Studies Center, before I was Head, and tried to stop me from giving lectures and so forth and so on. But, I mean, she didn't have anything better to do in her life. She finally gave up. I just ignored her, which is the worst thing that could have happened to her.

Emily Tilton: It's interesting that after doing pioneering work in standpoint theory, you then turn away from questions about the details and towards doing it or enacting it. I wonder if that turn amounts to a criticism of quibbling over the details of standpoint theory. Do you think that's a misuse of time and that we should instead be focused on enacting it? Or do you think that there are people who can – who should – quibble over the details, but it's not for you?

Sandra Harding: I think people should do whatever they want to do. But I'm not interested in doing that anymore. I don't have any basis for any authority. I've done my authority work around what standpoint theory is, and instead I *love* the *Tapuya* project because it establishes a whole new field. I spent my time in defining standpoint theory, defending it against critics X, Y, Z – other people can do it [now].

Emily Tilton: Very little academic work seems to get uptake outside of academia, but standpoint theory seems to be somewhat different. It seems it really did get taken up and responded to in various contexts. One question we have for you is whether there was some particular instance of it – outside of the academy, in activist circles, or as it shaped academia – that you saw as really illustrating the value of standpoint theory and how it can change our practices?

Sandra Harding: That's an interesting question. Now, I don't think I know an answer.

I guess I always look at everything with a standpoint eye. Here I am, living in a residential community. There are 50 apartments in this building and another couple hundred people living out in cottages. You know, it's a retirement community? We're all pretty old and crotchety and opinionated and wonderful in our own ways. … Are there any people of color? It's not what I would have chosen, but it's what's available.

We have meetings for about everything here. Everybody meets about everything all the time. Anytime they can find an excuse for a meeting, they have one. You don't have to go to all of them, but I go to *some* of them. It's mostly women, I would say. If there's 10% men, I'd be surprised. We take care of each other, in a standpoint kind of way. They make sure everybody's called on, right? "Who might want to speak?" They go out of their way to invite especially shy people to say something. It is just kindliness and appreciation of others. But you can think about it in a standpoint way too: that they want everybody heard from before they vote on something. It's kind of interesting.

Emily Tilton: The language of standpoint theory has been invoked in a lot of contemporary, political discourse, but sometimes it's invoked in service of very conservative aims. We're interested in some of your thoughts on potential misappropriations of standpoint theory. For example, trans exclusionary radical feminists or gender critical feminists will often use the language of standpoint theory to try to justify their claims, or to even demand deference to some of their conclusions. Basically what they'll do is say: "Well, the reason that trans *inclusive* feminists are supporting trans rights is that this is just old-fashioned misogyny. And what we really need to do is listen to the *women*."

This sort of standpoint inspired insight gets twisted to serve conservative aims. I'm wondering what you think about that use of standpoint theory? Whether you think that there's anything about standpoint theory that makes it vulnerable to misappropriation like that?

Sandra Harding: Well, I guess I don't think about it as about standpoint theory, so much as about reactions to the social justice movements that persist, [and] that some people don't want to hear from women. I mean, there's some guys here who are a pain in the butt, if you'll forgive my language.

There are very few of them and [they're] far between, and we try to make them unwelcome [laughs] when they're doing their nasty stuff. I just think about it as hangovers of old-fashioned misogyny, rather than a standpoint. They might claim: "Hey, I have a right to speak." We say, "Yes, you do. Now you spoke. Shut up." Or, we don't say it *that* way, but that's the idea.

Alison Wylie: These TERF [trans exclusionary radical feminist] debates are current, but were there times in the past where you saw people invoking *their* experience – "this is how I understand the world, grounded in my perspective" – to defend reactionary views?

Sandra Harding: Yes, sure. And, you know, some of them are very understandable to me. I mean, I don't approve of them. I think we shouldn't go vote *with* them. But I understand why they think the way they think. People have their experiences in their lives and their families and their loyalties and their commitments. Just because somebody came up with a fancy theory against it, doesn't mean they're going to stop caring about those things.

Emily Tilton: Earlier you said that one thing that's changed the most about your thought about standpoint has been your ability to think about race. And that was really interesting to me because one of the things that I've been really paying attention to lately is [the] invocation of standpoint type claims to defend ignorance about race.

So you'll see some contemporary feminists be like: "Well, I'm a white woman. And as a white woman, there are these limitations on what I can understand." Then they'll say something like: "I'm not in a position to speak to racist oppression, or even to understand

it." Standpoint ends up being twisted to defend ignorance.[16] Instead of as a tool to challenge it. That's pretty opposed to how you were thinking about standpoint theory, right?

Sandra Harding: People will use whatever arguments they think they can get away with, right? We're all like that. Supposedly we have our standards, but when push comes to shove – if we really want something – we find the arguments that are compelling to people, and so that's what they're doing.

Standpoint is not magic. I just got tired of refereeing these issues I guess, and headed into actually doing a project. I mean, I love the project I've been doing. I love working with those people. I love the effects it has. It has hugely powerful positive effects.

Emily Tilton: I am curious about how your work on standpoint theory informed how you went about trying to understand race and expand your own understanding.

Sandra Harding: I don't know that that's what it was. I was interested in understanding how not to be racist. [The] kind of people who could tell me that were not at the University of Delaware, and they were not in the places that I frequented. I needed to put myself in places where I could figure that out, and so finding other people and doing that with them [was necessary].

I was in reading groups for years, of one sort or another. They were a lot of fun. There was a period of – maybe a couple of years? – where I was in a Black feminist reading group. It was half-Black and half-white, I would say, and it was very good. It was a lot of fun, and it was exciting to be able to explore these issues. The Black women were very sweet with us. It was new literature that they wanted to read anyway. They probably had their own reading groups without whites, but they welcomed the project of a multiracial discussion.

Alex Bryant: Some people have taken standpoint insight – from your work and around that period – to mean that there's some things that they're epistemically closed off to, and there's value in staying insular. That is: not to pursue engagement with people who have too much difference from you.

It sounds like in your discussion of interdisciplinarity, your interests in engaging with wide-ranging thinkers on many topics – diversity and reading groups being one example – you have the opposite kind of intuition about what, say, doing well epistemologically demands. I wonder if you could say a little bit about that.

[16] Tilton, Emily (2024): „'That's Above My Paygrade': Woke Excuses for Ignorance." *Philosophers' Imprint* 24.

Sandra Harding: Well, first of all, recollect that I'm a university professor, right? I talked to classes all the time that were full of knowledgeable people and ignorant people. As a teacher, it's my obligation to advance the growth of knowledge, so to speak, but also to teach respect for diverse views.

I haven't taught undergrads much for decades, many decades. I've taught only graduate students who are going on to become policymakers and faculty like me. They wanted to know how to teach and how to think about these topics. I wanted them to be able to be comfortable with encouraging people to express views that were different than their own and which they might think are wrong. Frequently there's a lot to be learned from somebody who does not hold your views. *Why* do they hold those views? What experiences have *they* had that led them to think those are the appropriate views? And so, as a teacher, I always try to pull out that background experience – respectfully – and teach students to be respectful to people they disagree with.

Karoline Paier: Do you overall think that standpoint theory is good to think with at this point in your career? Do you think that there's anything, in specific, that is maybe limiting anything that should be particularly carried forward?

Sandra Harding: You know what, I don't know how to think any other way. Once you get it, you get it.,you know? Don't you find that? I can look back at some of my early writings and think, "*I* said *that*?" But I don't know how to think that way anymore. I only know how to think in what you would call a standpoint way.

I don't think about standpoint theory at all, to tell you the truth. I haven't thought about it for years. It was quite exciting to me to think about this interview and what on Earth I could say when I haven't thought anything about it for years. But the reason I haven't thought about it is because I've been doing it. Lots of people do it all the time. I bet you folks do too.

There's the move from theorizing standpoint to living it [which] is, I think, an important one.

Emily Tilton: Can you identify what the main thing was that changed when you started thinking in terms of standpoint theory? Is there a shift that stands out to you?

Sandra Harding: No. Gloria Hull – who's now Akasha Hull[17] and she's at Santa Cruz and is this very distinguished scholar – was the only Black person on the faculty at the University of

[17] Akasha Gloria Hull began her academic career in 1971 at the University of Delaware. In the late 1970s she was a member of the Combahee River Collective in Boston. It was during this time period that she co-edited the influential anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) with Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith.

Delaware when I arrived. Can you imagine? She was in the English department. [to Emily Harding-Morick] When did I arrive at Delaware? 19--

Emily Harding-Morick: '76.

Sandra Harding: '76. So the civil rights movement had happened. She was the only Black person in the 70-80 person English department. Or in any of the other departments. Maybe there was somebody out there in engineering. I didn't think about it as thinking in standpoint theory. I thought about it as thinking right. This is the right way to think.

I just don't think of it as applying standpoint theory. I think of it as living in a certain way. I mean, applying standpoint theory is maybe something I did 50 years ago.

Alison Wylie: It sounds like thinking *in* standpoint theory – just *the way* you think and act now – emerged out of practice, emerged out of engagement.

Sandra Harding: Yes, I think it does for everybody. I mean, I don't think Emily [Harding-Morick] is a standpoint theorist, but I think she thinks the way I think.

Emily Harding-Morick: Yeah.

Sandra Harding: I mean, my Emily.

Alison Wylie: This Emily too [indicating Emily Tilton]! [laughs]

Sandra Harding: I mean, it's just that you grow up in some ways and you get to think differently.

Karoline Paier: Do you think there are any particular issues or questions – work undone, promising projects – at this point, that you'd like to see from standpoint theorists? [From] academics in general maybe?

Sandra Harding: I didn't even know there were any standpoint theorists around. I thought [standpoint theory] was settled some decades ago.

Karoline Paier: That's interesting!

Sandra Harding: I don't know what new stuff has come out that you would call 'standpoint theory', do you?

Alison Wylie: Oh yeah, there's some. Part of the motivation for this project is that there are new projects in standpoint epistemology. As epistemologists are moving more in the direction of taking seriously social context and moral dimensions of epistemic judgment and action, *they're* starting to write papers on standpoint theories. And they typically don't engage standpoint theory of the politically grounded sort that you have articulated.

Sandra Harding: I've been so busy for six or seven years with my particular project. As I said, I'm almost 88, so I'm kind of trying to get myself retired from everything. I don't keep up with those literatures at all. This is a huge literature for me to keep up with. With that project preoccupying me, I'm backing myself out of it.

I've loved working with the editor in chief, Leandro [Rodriguez Medina][18]. He's an angel to work with and he's resigning. Also, we have a new editor in chief. She's excellent. She's Mexican. I've just shifted out of thinking about standpoint theory to thinking about this particular manifestation of it, [and] its issues.

Alison Wylie: So, more projects like *Tapuya*!

Are there any questions we haven't asked? Is there anything *you* wanted to say that we haven't asked you about?

Sandra Harding: Well, there was a certain series of public events that I had in mind. I spent a week at the United Nations, back in the 1970s. I started working with a Canadian standpoint writer, who was the assistant UN-whatever for Canada.

I was living in New York City at the time, and the UN was down the street, so to speak. The UN had a Commission on the status of women. But they'd never dealt with *standpoint* issues. They mostly were concerned with getting women into important positions in various governmental contexts, which was important, but they'd never taken up issues about the sexist bias of policies and principles and so forth.

And so, she and I took it on. It was a *hit*. Oh, my God. I'll never forget one meeting in which we had invited the heads of 12 different UN commissions. It was her and me and these 12 big guys. We had given them some readings to do. We were sitting in this room

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[18] On the *Tapuya* website, the initial inspiration and founding of Tapuya by Leandro Rodríguez Medina and Sandra Harding is described as followed:

"In May 2016, founding Editor-in-Chief, Leandro Rodríguez Medina, and founding Senior Advisor, Sandra Harding, met at a workshop at the University of Brasilia on "Postcolonial and Latin American STS," organized by Tiago Ribeiro Duarte and Luis Reyes-Galindo. They discussed the decision often faced by Latin American scholars, to either publish in English to attain visibility and reach, or publish in their own language and remain tethered to their local communities and discussions. The former choice often weakens social scientists' home-based scientific community by removing talented researchers from its publication ecology. The latter impedes their work from being read, debated, or cited by a wider international community. Could a trans-Latin American journal, published by a first-class English-language publisher, but with editorial decisions made by Spanish and Portuguese speakers in Latin America, intervene to transform this situation? Could Latin American STS scholarship enlarge the scope and depth of 'international' analyses that suffer from the lack of critical perspectives provided by peripheral social scientists? Since the publication of its first volume in 2018, *Tapuya* has affirmatively responded to these questions."

See "What does Tapuya Mean?" *Tapuya.org.* https://tapuya.org/about-us/wdtapuyamean/ last accessed October 29, 2025.

looking around this table at these very important men and they were all happy to do this. They were thrilled. They felt very adventure-some themselves and they wanted to lead the way to do the proper thing. But their idea of the proper thing was pretty weird in some cases, and it was a lot of fun.

I have wonderful memories of some of these events back in those wild and woolly days.

Alison Wylie: How did they respond to the readings? What did they take away?

Sandra Harding: They found them fascinating. They didn't always understand what they were talking [about], what gender was. "Gender" was mysterious to most people. They thought it was another name for sex, mostly, and they didn't think that men had gender. Only women had gender. They were very, very respectful. They were half – not terrified, but they didn't want to look like fools to the other men.

I mean, the fact that we got them to attend was amazing; I can remember making sure my stockings were straight. [Alison laughs] You know, that was a lot of fun.

Alison Wylie: You said you had a list of events you were going to mention. Are there others?

Sandra Harding: Oh, yes. I remember the first time I presented standpoint theory at *SWIP: The Society for Women in Philosophy*. It was early feminist, non-official, informally organized. We had a big *SWIP* meeting, and I passed out the first feminist syllabus that I had produced at this meeting. I remember people were so excited. I mean, none of us knew where the materials were to teach feminism? There were no books. There was nothing out there yet. There'd been a first women's movement, and there were some readings leftover from the early 1930s, and there were a few articles beginning to appear. But to get a literature back in that era was really hard, but it was exciting. I remember [it] being very exciting.

When I published *The Science Question in Feminism*, it got huge. It won all kinds of awards. I mean, it just won everything. It showed feminists and [critical] race theorists and others how to take on the natural sciences. They could figure out how to take on the social sciences, but how do you take on physics and chemistry and engineering? *The Science Question in Feminism* showed them how to do it.

I remember at that meeting, I passed out my first feminist syllabus. It was for a week's worth of courses, I think, or something like that – that would have been 1986.

Those were interesting [times]. The first time I presented at *The Philosophy of Science Association*. Oh, my God, they were so regressive. They had a feminist member – who was very feminist in terms of hiring women – but she was totally against feminist content in the issues in the natural sciences. It was something.

Alison Wylie: Was that Noretta Koertge?[19]

Sandra Harding: Yes. She eventually came around, but she was quite something at the beginning. I can remember, I was a keynote speaker as something or other, and I can remember her sitting in the front row and the light hit her red hair. She stood up and launched into – what seemed like an hour-long diatribe, but I think it was probably only two minutes. It was something.

Emily Tilton: It's interesting that you said that your book, and the impact you took it to have made, was teaching the feminists how to take on the hard sciences. Because, as we mentioned, there's been this contemporary revival of standpoint that's happening in analytic epistemology. In that sphere, you'll see them mostly say stuff about how marginalized people have advantages when it comes to understanding how oppression works, and so it is very limited to [epistemic] advantage in the social sphere. **O**ne of the things that Alison is always coming back to is trying to get the standpoint epistemologists to make the connection outside of the social sphere and to extend the standpoint claims further.

Alex Bryant: The science doesn't come up and it's a wild anachronism. I mean, it's interesting in this interview too. We haven't talked about STS [science and technology studies] or science at all.

Alison Wylie: Apart from *Tapuya.*

Alex Bryant: Apart from *Tapuya*. You have brought up *Tapuya* and STS [science and technology studies], but we haven't been asking you science questions and maybe that's an artifact of this issue. You've told us about around 1976? Then there's a jump to the woman question in science about the mid '80s. What is your research life like in between those two periods?

You start to do this thinking with Nancy Hartsock, and then there's some percolation. There's the serious reading group; you're presenting papers at *SWIP* and things like this. Then, at least in the historical record, in the mid-'80s a whole bunch of books and publications pop up. It seems like you go back and look at the bibliographies for this

[19] Noretta Koertge is an Emerita Professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Indiana University. Her work in philosophy of science has been on scientific methodologies, rationality, Karl Popper and values in science. In the context of this interview, her publications critical of *feminist* epistemology and philosophy of science are most noteworthy. For instance, see Pinnick, Cassandra, Noretta Koertge and Robert Almeder (eds.) *Scrutinizing Feminist Epistemology: An Examination of Gender in Science* (2003), as well as Elisabeth Anderson's (2004) response: "How Not to Criticize Feminist Epistemology: a Review of Pinnick, Koertge and Almeder, *Scrutinizing Feminist Epistemology*".

stuff. So, what's happening in your life and around the feminist philosophers and sociologists?

Emily Harding-Morick: What years are you asking about?

Alex Bryant: A bit like ‘77 to ‘84.

Sandra Harding: That's very early in my writing career because my first article is ’73 or ’74. By 1980, I have only two articles. Before 1980, I have [counting out loud] 8 articles.

I mean, I have hundreds of articles – maybe a hundred – but I'm just starting to get in gear at that point.

Alex Bryant: I guess I'm wondering if this is a period where you are in a lot of reading groups? Are you sending a lot of mail back and forth with Nancy [Hartsock] about this? Not necessarily the publications coming out.

Sandra Harding: Yeah, I can't quite remember that. What I can tell you is that I was teaching at the University of Delaware starting in ‘76. I was a new faculty person; I was designing new courses.

Emily Harding-Morick: That's when we moved away from Albany, where our family was.

Sandra Harding: That’s true.

Emily Harding-Morick: She separated from my dad, and so she was a single academic with two young girls.

Sandra Harding: That's right, I forgot that.

Emily Harding-Morick: You did a lot of community stuff. You had grad students over and you had parties with the feminists at the University of Delaware.

Sandra Harding: These guys [Harding’s children; gestures at Emily Harding Morick] loved the parties. [others laugh] They’d come down, dip their fingers into the hors d'oeuvre bowl.

Karoline Paier: So in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* you also talk a bit about the other different standpoints – not just feminist standpoints, Black feminist standpoints – but I remember you also talk about what you learned from lesbian standpoints. So, I wonder what you learned, maybe, from queer activism at the time? Was there something that stood out to you?

Sandra Harding: So I came out myself in ‘78 or so.

Emily Harding-Morick: That's what she was doing when she wasn't writing.

Sandra Harding: She knows better than I did. [Emily Harding-Morick laughs] I was in a theory group. Everybody else in that group was a dyke – Gloria and Judith**.** We were all young

dykes, Assistant professors at this big fancy university, SUNY Albany. And surviving that scene took a lot of energy. It was wonderful to have these other scholars to talk to. I was the only one in philosophy. The others were mostly, or entirely in, literature. Just surviving in that department as the only woman was a challenge, and I certainly was not out in the department.

That activism was very important to me personally, and I think it was important intellectually for the era. People in the English department were doing this fantastic analysis of familiar literature and looking at it through gay, lesbian eyes and revealing kinds of aspects of that that we never would have thought of. It was very exciting. I would say it was an intellectually hugely exciting era.

Alison Wylie: You said you were developing syllabi and it was really hard to find the readings – you were also central to the collective that set up *Hypatia*. That would have brought together women philosophers, feminist philosophers who were in the field in the early '70s, early to mid '70s?

Sandra Harding: Yeah, and I also was involved in the founding of *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. I have been a writer since I was four years old. I love to write. The minute something comes along I start writing about it, and so I was involved in feminism and writing and in founding journals and the institutions that feminism needed very early on. I can remember having to argue with Helen Gouldner, Alvin Gouldner's [ex-]wife, about my publication history, because she didn't want to recognize 'girls' journals.

I remember holding the first copy of *Signs* in my hands and I couldn't believe it. It was a shiny cover, one distributing our literature. You know it. It was University of Chicago press. Oh, my God. I mean, it was a huge moment.

Alison Wylie: Well, I think we are overtime already; we're keeping you. I just want to thank you as warmly as possible. Thanks for talking with us and sharing all this background.

Sandra Harding: Well, thank you for doing this and for your great questions and the follow up and so forth. It's been very interesting to me. It makes me remember days that I feel very fond about.

Karoline Paier: You've been listening to *Standpoint Theory: Formation, Contestation, Legacies*. This podcast was recorded on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people. It was produced in the Community Engaged Documentation and Research (CEDaR) space by Alison Wylie, Emily Tilton, Karoline Paier, and Alex Bryant.

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