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Distinguishing Situated Knowledge and Standpoint Theory: Defending the Achievement Thesis

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Abstract

Original accounts of feminist standpoint theory emphasize its fundamentally critical stance toward situated knowledge (Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986). The function of a critical standpoint is not to carelessly accept the beliefs of marginalized people, but instead to interpret those beliefs in light of thoroughgoing and pervasive ideological distortions. Some formulations of standpoint theory capture this critical function in the achievement thesis. It claims that a standpoint is not obtained automatically but must be achieved through a struggle against a dominant ideology. Contrary to the standard acceptance of the achievement thesis, Bright has recently argued that the requirement of achievement can warrant the dogmatic exclusion of some perspectives from becoming standpoints. In turn, he advances an account of standpoint theory which abandons the achievement thesis. Against Bright's non-achievement account of standpoint theory, I argue that doing away with the achievement thesis abandons standpoint theory's original aim of being critical of the social structures which construct and legitimize situated knowledge. Further, I argue that Bright's concern with the possible dogmatism of the achievement thesis is better addressed by a commitment to the classic account of standpoint theory rather than a revision of it.

Many feminist epistemologists have endorsed the "achievement thesis" as an essential component of standpoint theory. The achievement thesis holds that a standpoint—as opposed to a social location—must be attained through political or intellectual struggle against a dominant ideology. Against this history, Liam Kofi Bright has suggested that the achievement thesis is actually a hindrance to standpoint theory, and, in turn, he has developed his own non-achievement account of the theory. Bright's worry is that whatever "counts" as achievement has already been decided by dogmatic elites—the result being that knowers who lack the pre-approved knowledge will tend to be excluded from practices of knowledge production and critique. As a remedy, Bright argues that

his account of standpoint theory—understood as a marginalized group's "hypothetical majority vote" on a particular question—can represent a marginalized group's perspective without relying on the achievement thesis (2024, 86).

This paper offers a critical response to Bright's account. I defend the value of the achievement thesis while at the same time embracing the rich history of feminist standpoint thinking. Classically understood, standpoint theory aspires to produce a critical understanding of *how* (while maintaining *that*) social structures shape epistemic practices—but I will argue that the accomplishment of this aim requires an account of the achievement thesis. Against Bright's non-achievement account of standpoint theory, I argue that doing away with the achievement thesis abandons standpoint theory's original aim of being *critical* of the social structures which construct and legitimize situated knowledge. Simultaneously, I suggest that an effective remedy to Bright's concern with the elitism of the achievement thesis is found in a deeper commitment to the classical account of standpoint theory—not a rejection of it.

The paper proceeds in four parts. In section 1, I explain how feminist epistemologists have conceptualized situated knowledge and standpoint theory. Then, in section 2, I juxtapose the classic account of standpoint theory to Bright's to highlight their differences; while the classical account aims toward a critical understanding of epistemic practices, Bright's account aims to be representative of the beliefs of a marginalized group. Section 3 contains the bulk of my argument: after clarifying how I understand the distinction between a social location and a standpoint, I explain what it means for a standpoint to be "critical" at all. I then follow up with an extended example from Toole (2021) to make this clearer. Drawing on my explanation of a critical standpoint, I pose two challenges that I argue Bright's account fails to overcome, but which are not so daunting for classical standpoint theory. Lastly, section 4 considers a Brightian objection against the achievement thesis—to which I respond that Bright's concern with the achievement might be less dire than he suspects.

1. Situated knowledge and standpoint theory

1.1 The view from somewhere

In order to defend the achievement thesis, it is important to grasp the difference between a social location and a standpoint—I'll start with a clarification of social location. According to Wylie's frequently cited elaboration, our "social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic content" (2003, 9). Here, "social location" does not refer exclusively to a social identity or a demographic category but is instead a generalization about the environments wherein knowers develop and utilize their epistemic resources. So, to say that social location shapes our knowledge is to say that social structures constrain and enable knowers' epistemic capacities. For Pohlhaus, it is the "particular habits of attention [or lack thereof]" that are generated by repeated "situations in which the knower finds herself . . . due to the social relations that position her in the world" (2011, 717). Social location is thus made from a knower's engagement from within a social structure; to a non-negligible degree, the development of epistemic resources from a social location is *facilitated by* social structures and regulated patterns of attention. In this sense, social location picks out both the general features of a knower's local environment and the ways these features enable the knower's epistemic capacities.

The term "social location" can refer to an individual's social location and to the shared characteristics of structurally defined groups whose members share a social location. Insofar as social location is interpreted as a structural position, such a position can be taken to describe the structural homogeneity of many individuals *in* a social location. The continuity in how social structures shape social location will tend to generate a pattern of epistemic resources. Take Dorothy Smith's classic example—written in the early 1970s—which focuses on how women's social location (shaped through the gendered division of occupational labor) grants unique epistemic resources which were not readily appreciated in the methods or theory of sociology—for example, a different perspective on familial relations. Women's social location enables access to such resources and offered a rare opportunity to challenge the then-dominant modes of sociological practice (Smith 1974, 8). For somebody like Smith, this "women's perspective" is not an essentialist claim about sexual embodiment—i.e., centered on an ahistoric conception of biological makeup determining knowledge—but instead a claim made in reference to the historically contingent divisions of public and private life and the social expectations placed on women in the United States in the 1970s. It is *because* of this historical contingency that the perspective of women (of Smith's moment) could speak to the methodological shortcomings of then-contemporary sociological practice. However, because epistemic advantage is always contingent on changing social structures, the phrase "women's perspective" from Smith's (1974) essay picks out different structures now than it did before.

On my account, a collective social location might appear equivalent to a demographic identity category (e.g., a particular race, ethnicity, or gender). Social location and identity categories are often formed *by the same social structures*, but these positions only approximate one another. This correlation can be stronger or weaker for different identities, at different historical moments, and in different global regions. For this reason, inferences from identity to social location, or vice versa, can be fraught. A collective social location is simply a model which attempts to emphasize the relative homogeneity of a structural position. No collective social location is representative of all its members *because* it is a necessarily idealized and distorted model of the target group. Nevertheless, even non-representative models—such as Smith's "women's perspective"—can be informative.

That there are many social locations beyond typical demographic categories is often underappreciated. On my reconstruction, social location is a model used to describe the continuity of epistemic resources shaped by social structure. Historically, these epistemic resources have been indexed to experiences of oppression, marginalization, and alienation—sometimes with explicit reference to identity categories (Lukács 1921 [1971]; Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986). However, one need not index to these features in order to articulate a coherent model of a collective social location. Consider regular public transit riders in an urban city (compared to car drivers) or overnight workers (compared to day shift). Both transit riders and overnight workers develop and utilize epistemic resources about their sectors of the social world due to their regular and unique interaction with the social world. Overnight workers, understood via social location, face many of the same social structures, even if they work for different employers or in different regions. The imposed challenge of, for example, having an inverted sleep schedule will feel much the same in Seattle as in Kansas City—in part because there will be few midnight coffee shops in either city.

In sum, social locations are facilitated by social structures and regulated habits of attention which are historically contingent. Every social location shapes the epistemic resources available to those in that location. Put positively, social locations can enable

convenient access to evidence, development of background assumptions, habits of inference, and additional time to weight evidence. Put negatively, social locations can weaken epistemic resources by making some evidence difficult to access or interpret by obscuring background assumptions, or by making one's knowledge appear more reliable than it is. Social locations can correlate with demographic categories, but this is merely accidental. Whenever a social location is marginalized, alienated, or oppressed, the epistemic resources generated from the location will tend to be novel—different from mainstream assumptions and habits of attention—enabling relative epistemic advantage over some other social location(s).

1.2 Standpoint theory

A common reconstruction of standpoint theory treats the theory as a bundle of interrelated theses. The bundle view appears to have been first articulated by Wylie (2003), but the basis for the core distinctions can be tracked across much of the original writing.[1] The bundle view differs from some of the original articulations of the theory which endorsed a broadly Marxist sociological paradigm where gender/sex stood in for a form of class (Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983; Collins 1986; Harding 1986). Bundle view theorists make explicit claims about the nature of the social world. The bundle view has three theses: (1) the situated knowledge thesis, (2) the achievement thesis, and (3) the epistemic privilege thesis. To some extent, the bundle view represents a stable form of pluralism because different theorists endorse different versions of each thesis. Talk of "standpoint epistemolog*ies*" is sometimes a more apt way of capturing the internal diversity of these views.

Standpoint theory is committed to (and *begins as*) an account of how social location shapes epistemic resources—this is the situated knowledge thesis, akin to what I described above.[2] The role of this thesis is generally to situate the onto-epistemic space on which standpoint theory relies: knowers are embodied, social, and relational beings who are shaped by local social structures. Some articulations of the situated knowledge thesis are expressed in generic terms (e.g., location is "shaped by social structures") in order to apply broadly (Wylie 2012). Historically some theorists have focused on specific structures like the oppositional division of sexual labor in Hartsock (1983).[3]

The achievement thesis holds that a standpoint (and its epistemic privilege) is not *automatically* held by people in any collective social location but is achieved through an explicit political or intellectual struggle. This "achievement" thesis is often evoked in response to criticisms of standpoint theory as essentialist or ethnocentric (Hekman 1997; Pinnick et al. 2003; Táíwò 2022; Mounk 2023).[4] The essentialist objection asserts that standpoint theory is committed to an essential relation between social locations (or identity) and the epistemic resources one develops therein. In response, advocates of the achievement thesis deny this essential relation.[5] They assert that epistemic privilege is never automatic, but that achievement requires that an additional condition be met. Everybody has a social location, but not everybody has an achieved standpoint. Most often, consciousness raising is taken to be the primary "method" of developing epistemically privileged resources. However, the meaning of this phrase has shifted in the past 50 years (cf. Ruth 1973; MacKinnon 1982; Fricker 2007; Toole 2023). Other methods of "achieving" epistemic privilege include appeals to critical reflexivity, engagement in political organizing, and appeals to political education (see Harding 1986; Rolin 2016). The commonality of these approaches is that each shapes the epistemic resources a knower has through the exercise that can amount to achievement. While there is

agreement that the achievement thesis is central to standpoint theory, there is no agreement on exact methods for achievement (cf. section 3).

The epistemic privilege thesis (or "inversion thesis") holds that an achieved standpoint will have relative epistemic privilege with respect to some domains of inquiry (Wylie 2012; Collins 1997; Hartsock 1997; Harding 1997; Crasnow 2008; Ashton 2019). The content of a standpoint's epistemic privilege depends on the method one adopts to collectively develop a standpoint. Most theorists limit epistemic privilege to specific contexts and define it in relation to another collective social location (Intemann 2010; Tanesini 2019; Ashton 2019). Additionally, some theorists take this thesis to prescribe a methodological claim that inquiry should start with the marginalized (Bowell 2011; Tilton 2024). I follow Tanesini's (2019) and Toole's (2023) suggestion that we should distinguish the epistemic effects of a marginalized social location (I will call these *epistemic advantages*) from that of a standpoint (*epistemic privileges*).

Taken as a bundle, these three theses shape one prominent iteration of standpoint theory as it has been articulated among feminist social epistemologists and feminist philosophers of science. I now juxtapose this classic account to Bright's new account standpoint theory.

2. Bright's account of standpoint theory

In his revisionist account of standpoint theory, Bright (2024) argues that the theory is made worse-off by the achievement thesis. As he puts it, "traditionally understood, the achievement thesis precisely involves an individual coming to achieve the perspective appropriate to the group" (Bright 2024, 92). His concern is that the thesis loads the dice in the attempt to understand a marginalized group's beliefs on a given issue. It is as if "to achieve a standpoint is to come to agree with what people with humanities Ph.Ds already think" (92). In other words, the concern is that "what the marginalized think" will be determined before carrying out a sincere inquiry into what they *actually* think. For Bright, the achievement thesis makes it possible for an account of standpoint theory to *purport* to be accurate of a group's belief (as in, it is practically representative) but in fact be nothing more than "car window sociology" (Bright 2024, 87).[6] Thus, the achievement thesis enables an elitist dogmatism which can exclude marginalized people from the processes of knowledge production and validation.

Bright's response to this concern—which he takes to broadly follow in the spirit of W. E. B. Du Bois' democratic thought—is to abandon the traditional achievement thesis.[7] Bright argues that "the standpoint of the pertinent marginalised [group] is the most popular view on the matter at hand, which I interpret as the winner of a hypothetical majority vote on the proposition in which all those affected and marginalised take part" (2024, 87). Bright's self-described "naive" account of standpoint theory is meant to enable the "Duboisian romantic leader" (who is paradigmatically akin to an effective labor union representative) to advocate for the group's standpoint.

By doing away with the achievement thesis, I worry that Bright is tossing the baby out with the bath water. Let me explain: Bright's version of standpoint theory asserts that the quality of a standpoint should be evaluated on the basis of how *representative* it is of a marginalized group's beliefs.[8] This idea—that the content of a standpoint is meant *only* to represent the views of what a marginalized group believes—is what leads Bright to suggest that what the achievement thesis calls for is "anathema" to this aim of group representation (2024, 85). I agree with Bright that a standpoint should be based on accurate beliefs of the group. But the concern I want to raise is that Bright has undersold

the importance of a standpoint's *critical* analysis of how social structures shape epistemic practices. That is to say, while it's important to represent the views of the marginalized, there are times where plainly deferring to the beliefs of a marginalized group does not equate to the kind of critical analysis a standpoint promises.[9] Bright could suggest that, in synthesizing the beliefs of the group, one can—and likely should!—be selectively critical of how to present the majoritarian point. But this presses against his own discontent with the achievement thesis—I consider this explicitly in section 4.

By giving up the achievement thesis, Bright's account misses an essential kernel from the classical account of standpoint theory: namely, that there is a difference between the knowledge which a knower has attained from her social location and the epistemic benefits she develops by critically inquiring into how her situated knowledge is mediated by the conditions of her social location. To highlight the importance of this distinction, I will start by fleshing out a classic distinction among standpoint theorists before returning to discuss Bright's account.

3. Social location/standpoint distinction

3.1 The distinction

Many feminist epistemologists have drawn a distinction between a "social location" and a "standpoint." This distinction has roots in some original texts on standpoint theory (see Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986) and has been referred to in ongoing debates (Hartsock 1997, 1998; Harding 1997; Collins 1997; Solomon 2009; Intemann 2010; Rolin 2009). But the richest discussion comes from Wylie (2003, 31–34). While situated knowledge is focused on the "epistemic effects of *social location*," a standpoint is a "differential capacity" to develop "a critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically" (Wylie 2003, 31). Though this difference is often mentioned, the meaning of this distinction is frequently unclear in contemporary debates on standpoint theory, so I want to clarify how I understand it.

First, I do *not* take the distinction to mean that a standpoint theory and a social location are constructed by different theories of epistemic access. It is sometimes suggested that the distinction means that a social location offers *mediated* (or biased) *access* to the world, while a standpoint offers *immediate* (or unbiased) *access* to the world—where the epistemic privilege of a standpoint is the lack of distortion that results from how knowledge acquired. This interpretation of the distinction is in the explanation of different kinds of epistemic access to the world.[10] However, this interpretation doesn't hold. All experience is mediated (e.g., theory-laden or socially structured)—it is contradictory to endorse both immediate knowledge *and* situated knowledge (Pohlhaus 2011, 718; Nelson 1993, 138). Moreover, standpoints are built *from* a knower's social location. A standpoint does not become a transcendent "view from nowhere." Thus, situated knowledge and standpoint theory are committed to the same account of epistemic access.

A second misinterpretation of the distinction is that the epistemic advantage offered by social location and the epistemic privilege of a standpoint are roughly equivalent. Put otherwise, one might accept a difference between a social location and a standpoint but then believe that the epistemic goods enabled by each are the same. Sometimes this is implied when words like perspective, location, and standpoint are used interchangeably. Other times this is more explicitly argued—for example, in Dror's assessment of

standpoint theory, he acknowledges this distinction but then suggests the difference between location and standpoint does not affect the epistemic goods (2022). Given this, he states that "one can be a standpoint theorist without endorsing the inversion thesis" (2022, 4).[11] His view, like Bright's, deflates the achievement thesis at the expense of showing how the epistemic privilege of a standpoint might differ from the advantage of a social location. In contrast, for many classical standpoint theorists, there *is* a difference in the epistemic goods of these two accounts (Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986; Collins 1997). Wylie writes: "*standpoints* (as opposed to *locations*) have the especially salient advantage that they put the critically conscious knower in a position to grasp the effects of power relations on their own understanding and that of others" (2003, 34, italics in original).[12] Collapsing the difference obfuscates standpoint theory's critical posture. Dror and Bright both deflate standpoint theory into an account of situated knowledge.

Instead of these two misinterpretations, I understand the distinction as follows. A *social location* is a knower's structurally defined position within a social system. The structure of a knower's environment will—with a degree of reliability—enable and constrain the epistemic resources she develops and uses. Conversely, a *standpoint* is a political analysis of a (set of) social location(s). The aim of the analysis is to explain *how* the epistemic resources of the target social locations are produced, authorized, and maintained.[13] The function of the analysis is to recontextualize a knower's understanding and use of the epistemic resources of her social location. Thus, while situated knowledge is a general claim about the socially structured nature of knowledge, a standpoint is an analysis a knower critically develops *from* her social location and *about* a (set of) social location(s).

While the epistemic advantage of a social location arises from relative differences among social locations—i.e., where some locations afford greater epistemic advantage—the epistemic privilege of a standpoint is that it contextualizes and clarifies the function of those epistemic resources and their authorization. What is clarified is contextual: a standpoint analysis might help to explain why some forms of knowledge receive poor uptake (e.g., because they contrast with a dominant paradigm), or might explain why particular kinds of knowledge are disregarded (e.g., because they are culturally taboo). The standpoint theorist holds that, when a knower understands the conditions of her social location, she can understand her (situated) epistemic resources *in light of how they have been produced*. Her inquiry into these conditions will be a situated inquiry (contrary to the first misunderstanding above), and the resultant epistemic privilege of that inquiry will differ from what she understood prior to the inquiry (contrary to the second misunderstanding).

If a standpoint is a situated analysis of a (set of) social location(s), then it is quite challenging to say with clarity what a "standpoint theory" is in general. Instead, a standpoint qua political analysis is developed *in situ*. Haraway says it this way:

> A standpoint is . . . a cognitive, psychological, and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the nonessentialist, historically contingent, situated standards of strong objectivity. [It] is the always fraught but necessary fruit of the practice of oppositional and differential consciousness. [It] is a practical technology rooted in yearning, not an abstract philosophical foundation. (Haraway 1997, 47)

On Haraway's presentation, standpoints are cognitive and embodied *tools*—they are a "practical technology" which one collectively develops for a definite project (Weeks 1998). The epistemic privilege of a standpoint comes from a knower integrating her political

analysis of her shared social location into her epistemic practices.[14] Solomon (2009) describes this integration of a standpoint analysis as adopting an attitude: "you get attitude not by being in a particular situation but by behaving in a particular way in that situation" (233). An attitude is a disposition to think or act in an anticipated way. As a knower develops a standpoint, she adopts an epistemic meta-practice that shapes her epistemic practices. Having adopted a standpoint, a knower's epistemic resources are locally contextualized in accordance with her political analysis.[15]

This presses the distinction further. There is not a one-to-one relationship between a social location and a standpoint: there are many standpoint*s* (and for that matter, many *feminist* standpoint*s*) which a knower might develop from her situated inquiry. But more critically, developing a standpoint requires that she understands the conditions of *another* social location in relation to her own. In this sense, a *feminist* standpoint does not focus exclusively on women's social location but requires an understanding of the broader conditions of other relevant social locations aligned with structures that condition gender, race, or ability, for example. This is a recognition of the structural relationality of social locations. Insofar as a feminist standpoint aims to understand the conditions of women's social location, it must *also* understand how those conditions are often the same structures which co-produce other social locations (e.g., men's or nonbinary people's). To flesh out what this sense of a standpoint is, consider an extended example.

3.2 A case study

By this point, it is clear that the epistemic resources of a standpoint differ in quality from those afforded by a social location. To see how the epistemic privilege of a standpoint may differ, consider this case from Toole's recent writing on the topic:

> Elsabeth and Janie are both students at Bovie College, a vertical campus located in a busy district in the heart of Manhattan. Elsabeth and Janie both have classes on the top floors of the building, which requires they take stairs, escalators, or elevators. Elsabeth, who uses a wheelchair, finds the trek especially tedious, as she can use neither the stairs nor escalator, and must wait for the elevator. . . . As there are no [automatic door] buttons on the floor where her class is located, she often must wait for someone else to open the door for her. [In an accessibility survey], Elsabeth responds that the building is not accessible to people with disabilities, and offers specific steps the college can take to improve. Janie responds that she doesn't know if there is any accessibility problem on campus, but notes that things seem fine to her. (Toole 2021, 338–39).

Though Toole gives proper names to discrete individuals, the details of this case are generalizable to social locations. In this case, Elsabeth's patterned interaction with the inaccessible environment generates specific epistemic resources. These resources are especially helpful—and advantageous, relative to Janie's—for the accessibility survey which is distributed by the college. Given that people must move throughout the building, those who do so with a mobility aid will frequently encounter imposed barriers which shape the way they think about that building. This is the basis of their differently generated epistemic resources. The central difference between Janie and

Elsabeth is that their commutes to the classroom present different barriers, and thus different responses to the accessibility survey. Elsabeth has spent far more time considering, strategizing, and anticipating the kinds of barriers which her commute has in store, whereas Janie can get by with far less intentional planning.

This social structure and built material environment shape forms of engagement (e.g., looking for and pressing automatic door buttons) and coincide with different motivations for inquiry. For instance, members of a marginalized group are more motivated in inquiry which aims to understand and resist oppression while aiding survival, while the non-marginalized tend to be more ambivalent about marginalization of others (Narayan 1988).[16] In this sense, "taking something personally" can guide an intentioned form of inquiry for the marginalized. Because social locations entail different structures, people within them develop different epistemic resources alongside their differential motivations.

This account of situated knowledge is not essentialized because social location is not categorical. Ability is something which can change over time, either due to changes of the body or changes of the environment. For instance, Janie's social location might change if she were to become physically disabled, or even if she were to become more attentive to the ways that Elsabeth's own world is made difficult to traverse. Similarly, if Elsabeth hired a full-time support assistant, then that assistant is likely to progressively develop a social location that is increasingly similar to Elsabeth's. The assistant would, by encountering the world as it is made difficult for Elsabeth, be forced to confront many of the same social structures as a newly recognized source of difficulty.

These have been claims about Elsabeth's social location, the epistemic resources it enables, and the epistemic advantage which resulted. Could it be said that Elsabeth has a standpoint?[17] Given the information in the excerpt, I am inclined to say no: the epistemic advantage was the result of her social location—i.e., the resources she developed by moving through the world—and was *not* a result of her coming to understand *how* these epistemic resources were produced. My claim here is that Elsabeth was able to develop epistemic advantage for the survey *without* needing to develop an analysis of her social location. This is not to say that Elsabeth's epistemic advantage was somehow inadequate—she still has epistemic advantage relative to Janie. Rather, it means that the advantage is *not best understood as a standpoint* in the way that classical standpoint theorists have described standpoint privilege.

3.3 What is achieved? Or some epistemic functions of "consciousness raising"

What epistemic difference might it make if Elsabeth collectively developed a standpoint? Or what are the tangible differences between the epistemic advantage of a social location and the epistemic privilege of a standpoint? By my account, there are no already-determined answers to these questions. Instead, I will briefly consider five epistemic functions with examples tied to Toole's case. While I speak of these functions with regard to Elsabeth, I do not mean to suggest that raising consciousness is an individualistic or armchair form of inquiry. A standpoint's epistemic privilege is necessarily social; it requires an understanding of one's own social location—which cannot be fully determined by an individual's experiences alone—and how their social location relates to others.

Problematizing

There are many ways of recognizing *how* (and for this matter, *that*) the world falls short of normative expectations. To problematize an aspect of the world is to come to understand it as normatively inadequate, but there are different ways that an aspect of the world can be problematized (Smith 1993). Elsabeth recognizes lacking accessibility as a problem—but *how* accessibility is problematized matters. Does she merely suggest that activation switches are added for automatic doors? Does she also suggest that the elevator add Braille to the navigation buttons? Does she recognize this merely as a problem of the college, or of her commute to school more generally? Must the college be compelled to advocate for curb-cuts and accessible public transit policy? Often, coming to recognize something as a problem—or to reproblematize something old—is to challenge the relevant system which accepts or encourages these aspects of the world as *unproblematic*. A "problem" is always differentially laden with values such that to call something a problem is to attempt to reorient a shared scheme of valuing where "this is a problem" means "you should care about this too."[18] To problematize is to guide another's recognition of the world with normative force.

Altering social location

A knower's epistemic resources are not developed, used, and authorized within the confines of a static or fixed social location—this account of social location is not one of structural determinism. A knower's social location changes constantly by their developing new (or honing old) epistemic resources, interacting with new epistemic communities, or by losing capacities or simply forgetting. If Elsabeth hires a support assistant, that person can develop a new social location—the same could be said of Elsabeth entering a relationship. In this sense social location is akin to a relational view of identity, especially from care ethics: to be in a relationship of care is to slowly take up another's social location such that their epistemic resources become yours. Through this sharing, Elsabeth's own recognition of the world as problematic can be integrated into another's social location[19]—the "you should care about this" is personalized with "for me." To learn by the shrinking distance to another's social location is different from taking another at their word. Relationally, we do not know by testimony but rather come to know by developing our epistemic capacities *alongside* one another in shared responses to the environment.

Recognizing internalized affective oppression

A major challenge facing the liberation of most marginalized groups is that in-group members can hold—either explicitly or implicitly—false, distorted, or negative beliefs about themselves *as* members of that group. These beliefs can be self-reinforcing through features of one's psychology (e.g., self-sabotage) or of social structures (e.g., structural feedback loops which make false beliefs appear true).[20] Internalized oppression is partially a *felt* experience—shame, embarrassment, or hopelessness—and these negative feelings can diminish a knower's capacity to recognize any of the positive experiences of being a member of such a group. Rearticulating one's experiences can help to elucidate the meaning of these feelings and perhaps clarify their origin. In her development of a standpoint, Elsabeth might come to consider her own shame—not as a byproduct of the body she lives in but, instead, a harmful cultural ideal that has been forced on her. She might recognize that her shame is *not in fact hers,* but rather her

society's. She might even indulge in the counter-affective insurgency by affirming pride in her disabled body. By embracing pride, she is developing a new practice of *knowing* her body in relation to her society's norms.[21] By rejecting shame—and the force of the social structures which impresses it—Elsabeth challenges her understanding of the norms which construct her social location, and by leveraging this knowledge to change her affect, she problematizes the norms of her society for others.[22]

Identifying material constraints on social knowledge

Standpoint theory's early development as a materialist epistemology asserted that the present and historic configurations of *material* life are conditions for the manifestation of *social* practices—especially those that differentially structure epistemic activity. For Hartsock, the gendered distribution of *knowledge* was conditioned upon a gendered distribution of material activity such as paid labor, unpaid housework, family relations, and economic activity. This materialist schema focuses attention on material structures which are, as Jameson puts it, "the *conditions of possibility*" for knowledge; this targets "not the content of scientific thought, but its prerequisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it cannot properly develop" (1997, 66). This materialist focus highlights the contingency of one's knowledge; given another material basis, one's body of evidence and epistemic standards would differ.[23] Knowing contingency in such a sense has an anti-essentializing function which motivates the possibility of a different world and, by extension, a different kind of epistemology.[24] This kind of reasoning should not be construed as mystical or reliant on a materialist determinism, in fact such a claim might be bland or even straightforward. For instance, whatever Elsabeth recommends in the survey, she is unlikely to request that the entire building—or entire campus—be razed to construct an accessible utopia. In some sense this suggestion is possible—but presuming that Elsabeth knows much of anything about the administration of academic institutions, the costs of construction, and the difficulty of attaining even minimal accommodations, she is just unlikely to imagine that institutional rebirth is within the realm of structural possibility. And if she were to make such a suggestion, she would be more likely to be dismissed or disregarded in her response—a fact which she could also likely anticipate.

Building solidarity through structure

One hallmark of a standpoint is that it aims to understand how the conditions of different social locations relate to one another. These relationships are, prior to collaborative inquiry, difficult to identify. Sometimes these underlying relationships are antagonistic (e.g., when the perceived authority over one body of knowledge delegitimizes another), but other times they can be fruitful for coalitional organizing. For example, Elsabeth might come to recognize that *her* need for a safe and accessible bathroom overlaps with the same need held by many trans and queer people.[25] This recognition might help Elsabeth align her problemization of accessibility as a problem not specific to her. This can allow her to build political solidarity,[26] a broader community of support, and a more political impactful analysis.

This list is by no means complete, and there is no requirement that any given standpoint will exercise any of these epistemic functions; epistemic advantage is always contingent. We can therefore imagine Elsabeth developing many unique analyses from her social location. Her decision to accept or reject any of these analyses will be

responsive to her epistemic standards and her moral, social, and political values.[27] In this sense, the development of a standpoint is a space of playful social inquiry that encourages—and rewards—attempts to think otherwise. Or, as Solomon puts it, a standpoint is "an *exemplar* of creative ability" (2009: 235, emphasis in original).

3.3 Importance of a critical standpoint

I argued in section 2 that, by doing away with the achievement thesis, Bright's account of standpoint theory has given up much of its ability to be critical of socially located epistemic resources. I suggested that Bright's account diverges from a historically central idea of what a standpoint aims at: a *critical contextualization* of how the epistemic resources of a group are formed. This contextualization goes beyond understanding a group's view being *just* a synthesis of group member's beliefs.[28] With some of the above theoretical elaboration on the table, I now return to Bright's account of standpoint theory to identify what aspects of his standpoint theory are elided.

Recall that Bright takes standpoint theory to aspire toward an accurate representation of a marginalized group's beliefs on a particular question. In this sense, a standpoint is just a "group perspective" simpliciter. To speak for or about a group is, thus, to endorse a standpoint qua representative group perspective.[29] In so far as one might wish to know the standpoint (read: group perspective) of a marginalized group, one must simply inquire as to what that group believes—in fact, "there is no more immediate way of accessing it" than by looking to what people "do and say" (Bright 2024, 87). A standpoint aims to represent, simply and straightforwardly, what a marginalized group thinks such that the synthesized view can be advocated for on behalf of the group by the (Duboisian) leader.

In response to this view, I want to suggest two challenges. First, and perhaps most obvious, Bright's majoritarian account is left endorsing almost any sort of belief by a marginalized group insofar as it is held by a majority. The issue is that conditions which enable "bad ideology"—be that misinformation, pseudoscience, noxious nationalistic rhetoric, or a corporate advertising campaign—are deeply integrated into the social world.[30] It is not too controversial to claim, I hope, that marginalized social groups are not immune to bad ideology either—it might manifest as internalized oppression or, instead, as beliefs about another marginalized group. If the mere *endorsement* of bad ideology is not a concern enough—for there might be something to be said for steadfast representative democracy—it seems concerning that the Duboisian leader is not able to challenge bad ideology *against* a group's beliefs. Bright might wish to bite both bullets— the endorsement problem and the uncritical leader—but I suspect these are the very concerns which motivated early standpoint theorists to argue for the importance of a critical account of social locations in the first place.

Using the Condorcet Jury Theorem, Bright argues that the majoritarian view of a marginalized group will cash out to greater epistemic advantage. However, I worry about representative beliefs alone being able to produce anything like a *critical* account of a given social issue, which I take to be the primary task of standpoint theory. The influential historian of difference Joan Wallach Scott has put it this way:

> When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as

different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. (Scott 1991, 777)

Scott's anti-foundationalist approach suggests that, when it comes to understanding the construction human difference, the constructions of differentiation matter in relation to the *presentation* of that difference.[31] Looking to the manifestation of difference in the absence of its construction threatens to hide the *contingency* of that difference, and in turn makes it difficult to imagine how it might possibly be otherwise.

Within the context of my argument, Bright's focus on the actual beliefs of marginalized individuals shifts inquiry away from understanding how those beliefs are *created* and *distributed* across the social world. In the absence of seeing how the epistemic resources of a social location are constructed, a knower might take for granted that those resources are fixed and unchangeable.[32] The result of seeing socially located epistemic resources as resistant or unchangeable inhibits a knower's ability to problematize her—and her community's—current ways of knowing and reasoning about the world. Thus, if Bright takes his account to enable a knower to "understand their world and act accordingly to change it," I worry that knowledge of a group's beliefs alone is insufficient.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is something wrong with understanding the perspective of a marginalized group via genuine empirical inquiry. Instead, I am suggesting that, in the absence of an account of how a group's perspective has been produced—e.g. linguistically formed, distributed among in-group members, cross-fertilized with out-group members, collected in inquiry, and interpreted for broader distribution—one risks valorizing a decontextualized depiction of the marginalized which can succumb to further distortion by travel.

Both challenges—that of bad ideology and that of uncritical appeals to a marginalized group's majoritarian experience—present a challenge to Bright's account. Contrary to his view, a critical and engaged standpoint is more resistant to the challenges of both bad ideology and to uncritical appeals to group beliefs. As Rolin has argued of social scientists, inquiry from a feminist standpoint is not dispassionate but instead "couple[s] the process of generating evidence with a process of empowerment" (2009, 219). Such empowerment is important *especially* when inquiring into the experiences of the marginalized, where "the difficulty of generating evidence [faces] the forces of shame, embarrassment, and other uncomfortable emotions" (Rolin 2009, 224). Contextualizing this evidence alongside an account of how such experience has been shaped as affectively laden is what makes standpoint theory a "methodology for the study of power relations" (Rolin 2009, 224). Through the study of how these relations of power constitute what counts as evidence, inquiry though a critical standpoint can manage the tension of representing marginalized group beliefs while situating those beliefs within a liberatory analysis.

4. Bright's rejoinder

I have argued that Bright's account of standpoint theory over-focuses on strictly representing the beliefs of a marginalized group and thus puts aside the critical aspirations of standpoint theory. Bright might be wary of my argument so far; namely, he may object that I haven't done much to ensure that his initial concern with the achievement thesis (that it can preclude knowledge production) was alleviated. He may agree that a critical epistemic advantage is preferable, but that it nevertheless comes at

the cost of potentially excluding marginalized group voices and—ironically—making the perspective of the marginalized *less* accessible. He might assert, in turn, that his account is instead highlighting the merits of an account of a "naïve" expression of a standpoint which side-steps the achievement thesis's exclusionary potential.

I suspect that Bright and I are working with different understandings of the achievement thesis. For Bright, achievement requires that an individual comes to believe *in line with* the perspective of the relevant group. He is explicit about this in saying that "the achievement thesis precisely involves an individual coming to achieve *the* perspective appropriate to the group" (2024, 92, emphasis mine). In this sense, an individual is comparatively powerless in the face of what appears to be an already established group perspective. Against the achievement thesis, he takes his own account of standpoint theory to have the advantage of requiring "no particular proposition [a] group or leader must endorse to have attained [a] perspective" (2024, 93). In this light, Bright's concern with the achievement thesis is made clear: it encourages an elitist dogmatism which is resistant to criticism and, for that reason, it would preclude any inquiry into the beliefs of marginalized people.

Nevertheless, this interpretation of achievement seems rigid. As it is historically interpreted, the claim that a standpoint is achieved *through* political and intellectual struggle is a claim that the fruits of one's labor (epistemic, political, etc.) are borne out continually (Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986). Bright's description of the achievement thesis (as requiring one to agree with an "appropriate perspective") suggests that such fruit is static on harvest—but a harvested fruit faces a future of senescence, not artificial suspension. In other words, achievement is much more ongoing than Bright suggests: the analysis of a standpoint is open to revision—on epistemic and political grounds— and is centered on the experiences of marginalized people (Sandoval 1991). A standpoint's failure to be representative of group member's experience is a kind of empirical inadequacy that precludes its ability to be critical at all.[33]

In this sense, Bright's concern with the achievement thesis may well dissolve through the practice of ongoing deliberation; the worry that the achievement thesis, understood as a knower's adherence to a "party line," is a false start. I am not so naïve as to suggest that the practice of developing a standpoint will be, by the nature of the theory alone, immune to the exclusionary problem. After all, exploiting the knowledge-power relationship is central to almost all political action. But isn't it the case that *understanding* these exploitations was one of the central aims of a critical standpoint in the first place (see Collins 1997)? If the time has come that standpoint theory has been so theoretically misconstrued that it cannot service this goal, then— rather ironically—standpoint theory may be given up in exchange for the spirit of a deeper commitment.

As I have interpreted the account, these deeper commitments take shape as a kind of epistemic naturalism: especially as there is no essential completeness to our inquiry of the social world (Wylie 2003; Kukla 2006; Rouse 2009; Haslanger 2023). Thus the "development" of a standpoint has no trajectory or end point, only hypotheses and experiments. It would be counterintuitive to assert that the feminist standpoint today was "discovered" by (mostly) US feminists from the 1970s to the 1980s. At the same time, the claim that contemporary feminists have achieved a standpoint *today* does not deny that the analysis developed 40 plus years ago was also a standpoint. Thus, understood as an ongoing project which is inclusively open to criticism, the achievement thesis doesn't carry the dogmatic concerns Bright suggests.

5. Critical standpoints

I have argued that the achievement thesis—understood as a situated standard of evaluation—is an essential element of a robustly critical standpoint theory. Against Bright's account, this has meant that, first, standpoint theory ought to be critically concerned with the social contexts of knowledge production, distribution, and authorization *as well as* the accurate representation of marginalized people's beliefs. In this sense, a standpoint—with its achievement component—is an asset and not a hindrance; a critical standpoint enables knowers to engage in less biased inquiry. In short, standpoint theorists aspire to do more than uncritically represent marginalized people's beliefs. Second, Bright's concern over the elitist dogmatism of the achievement thesis is misplaced; if anything, a critical standpoint aims to bring to light and challenge the politico-epistemic distortions of Du Bois' disavowed "car window sociology." The challenge then is not just in developing a theory resistant to such distortions, but instead living up to the practice of the classical account of standpoint theory.

Notes

1 Compare Hartsock (1983) and Harding (1986). For more recent writing that adopts a form of the bundle view, see Rolin (2006, 2016); Intemann (2010, 2015); Bowell (2011); Wylie ; Ashton and McKenna (2018); Hundleby (2020) Saint-Croix (2020); Tanesini (2019); Toole (2021); Dror (2022); and Tilton (2024).

2 In some places, Toole seems to disagree in suggesting that the standpoints are a condition for situated knowledge: "It is the achievement of a standpoint that, in turn, enables situated knowledge" (Toole 2021, 342). This appears to be contrary to a mainstream position which understands the situatedness of knowledge to be *prior* to the achievement of a standpoint. Elsewhere Toole endorses the achievement thesis as a separator (Toole 2023).

3 Hartsock was later sympathetic to moving away from this oppositional structure and, instead, endorsed a mode of analysis which emphasized the "concrete multiplicity" of experience (1997; see also Welton 1998).

4 Ironically, Táíwò's materialist critique of deference encourages us to look to how social structure shapes experiences: "the rooms we don't enter, the experiences we don't have (and the reasons we are able to avoid them) might have more to teach us about the world and our place in it than anything said inside" (2022, 80). This comes to be almost exactly what standpoint theorists appeal to when they argue that "standpoint theory concerns . . . the emancipatory potential of a critical standpoint on knowledge production" (Wylie, 63).

5 This criticism has never quite been made in good faith, and as Wylie (2003) notes, it's not clear that feminists really endorsed an essentialist view (Anderson 2005).

6 "Car window sociology" refers to belief formation based on superficial engagement with a social group. For example, musing about the people of a neighborhood as one drives briefly through it (Bright 2024, 87).

7 Bright admits that his "no achievement" account of standpoint theory still requires some minimal threshold of group validation that might amount to a method of achievement (2024, 93). However, I argue this minimal sense of achievement falls below what standpoint theorists endorse.

8 See Bright: "Against any such presumptions to speak for a group, what is always needed, per Duboisian empiricism, is actual sustained inquiry regarding what people in the group actually do and say. . . . And the *naive standpoint theory makes it abundantly clear why that is so; the group perspective just is composed from what such people would do or say*, there is no more immediate way of accessing it" (2024, 87, emphasis added).

9 It might be the case that Bright and I disagree on the *goal* of a standpoint. While Bright takes the importance of a standpoint to be representing what a marginalized group believes about a particular issue,

I believe a standpoint is meant to develop a critical analysis informed by the social location of the relevant marginalized group.

10 This reconstruction has roots in some questionable interpretations of Marxist feminist theories as well as in early feminist critiques of science. See Hekman (1997) and Solomon's discussion of "spontaneous feminist empiricism" (2012). Mediated experience is biased because it is distorted by social structures; thus, the aim is to develop an epistemology which overcomes this bias to see the "truth."

11 In writing about the epistemic advantage of the marginalized, Dror does "not distinguish between epistemic privilege that accrues directly from being socially [in a] marginalized [social location] and epistemic privilege that accrues indirectly, via easier access to a standpoint" (2022, 4).

12 Here, Wylie draws a distinction between the kinds of epistemic advantage offered but uses "advantage" (rather than "privilege") to describe the epistemic significance of a standpoint because this distinction was not yet named with this terminology.

13 Intemann, through reconstruction of an empiricist standpoint theory, argues that standpoint theorists aim their inquiry at "empirically adequate theories, models, and explanations" (2015, 266). However, such "adequacy" is always contextually defined, as "judgements about whether a claim is empirically adequate depend on additional assumptions and standards about what data needs to be accounted for in a particular case, how we should understand an empirical success, and when it is reasonable to revise background assumptions or make ad hoc adjustments to claims in order to account for countervailing data" (Intemann 2015, 266).

14 This comes closest to explaining what the achievement thesis is getting at. While some theorists have interpreted the thesis as a claim that a knower *must accept* a particular proposition (see Bright 2024, 93), I suspect that the spirit of "achievement" was much more contextual. What "counts" as an achievement will largely be decided by the locally established epistemic standards of the community's deliberation. This point is in line with the idea that standpoint theory is not an established theory with fixed conditions but is instead an epistemically naturalized approach to understanding how epistemic standards develop over time—effectively leaving us within a necessarily open-ended process (Wylie 2003, 40; Rouse 2009, 207; Kukla 2021).

15 This comes close to Flores' "epistemic styles," or "unified ways of interacting with evidence which express a cohesive set of epistemic parameters, and which agents can put on and take off" (2021, 36). While Flores treats epistemic styles as dispositions, I take standpoints to be attained with and through political analysis. In this sense, a standpoint may be understood as a specific kind of epistemic style.

16 Bright suggests that these shared motivations (in response to experiences of oppression) can contribute to in-group agreement on particular questions (2024, 89-90).

17 In this article, Toole argues Elsabeth *does* have some relative epistemic benefit, but it is not clear if this is advantage (social location) or privilege (standpoint). Consider her claim that a "standpoint epistemologist argues that facts about Elsabeth's situatedness . . . enable her knowledge of some proposition . . . , knowledge that Janie lacks. Thus, as this example makes salient, the central idea of standpoint epistemology is that knowledge is *situated*. In other words, what one knows reflects the particular perspective, or in our case, *standpoint*, of the knower" (Toole 2021, 339, emphasis in original).

18 Often, overt problematization is disincentivized—as Ahmed puts it, "when you name something as sexist or as racist you are making that thing more tangible so that it can be more easily communicated to others. But for those who do not have a sense of the racism or sexism you are talking about, to bring them up is to bring them into existence" (2017, 37).

19 For example, some college students have recently organized a campaign in which "able-bodied people and disabled allies would pledge to use only accessible pathways in solidarity with wheelchair users and other people with mobility impairments" (Fisher 2018). Such a campaign aims to highlight and problematize the inaccessibility of the campus by encouraging people to quite literally alter an aspect of their social location.

20 For an excellent example, see Haslanger's discussion of how many women are situated within a self-perpetuating economic system which leaves them disadvantaged and, due to that economic disadvantage, limits economic freedom which—as it happens—leaves them more economically disadvantaged (2023, 10–13).

21 Barnes, writing on the interconnections of gay pride and disability pride, writes that "the benefits of pride movements are not merely emotional or affective—what or how we *feel* . . . they affect what we can *know*. . . . By advocating pride, members of such social groups can reject these norms. They can say that the

very same features that dominant norms say should make them feel ashamed—feel *less than*—are ones that it makes sense to celebrate. In doing this, they aren't just promoting positive feelings; they're demanding epistemic justice. That is, they're demanding that norms and stereotypes about them be better informed by their own experiences" (2016: 183–84, emphasis in original).

22 One anonymous reviewer suggested that I speak more to the epistemic problem of circularity presented by internalized oppression—i.e., who recognizes these distorted beliefs, and how is that recognition not also distorted? I share with Bright a democratic sympathy that the recognition of oppression is a fundamentally social activity (not to be left up to sociologists alone). But I also reject that there is some "undistorted" position from which we may recognize oppression ahistorically.

23 Kukla has argued, in a related vein, that the "situatedness" of knowledge applies not just to evidential access, but to some concepts of epistemic evaluation such as warrant (2021).

24 "Possibility" may be best understood as a "structural possibility," following Wright (2010: 70). A structural possibility begins with social structures and attempts to chart the possible modes of development such a structure would enable.

25 Some disabled people *and* some queer and trans people are each subject to what Kitchin and Law refer to as the "bladder's leash"—the bio-temporal constraint some people face when they are not afforded safe and accessible public bathrooms (2001: 289).

26 For a political discussion of this kind of coalition, see West's discussion of PISSAR (People in Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms) (2010).

27 For an excellent discussion of the role of non-epistemic values in scientific inquiry, see Longino and Doell (1983) and Anderson (2004).

28 Or as Jaggar puts it, a feminist standpoint is "not discovered by surveying the beliefs and attitudes of women under conditions of male dominance, just as the standpoint of the proletariat is not discovered by surveying the beliefs and attitudes of workers under capitalism . . . [but it] is discovered through a collective process of political and scientific struggle" (1983: 61).

29 Bright calls this a "majoritarian" account, but he seems open to "a super majority or another more complex way of counting the votes" which means that a standpoint is "something in the spirit of a hypothetical majoritarian amalgamation of the individual group members' perspective on the question at hand" (2024: 85). Bright does not specify how the "Duboisian romantic leader" selects the vote counting method, nor how they synthesize disagreements in the "hypothetical majoritarian amalgamation" (2024: 86). Nevertheless, Bright emphasizes that "Right or wrong, it is not the place of a Duboisian leader to simply promote the truth or best course of action to the best of their knowledge" (2024: 86).

30 Borrowing from Srinivasan, "conditions of bad ideology" refers to those conditions "in which pervasively false beliefs have the function of sustaining, and are in turn sustained by, systems of oppression" (2020: 15). One example Srinivasan provides is of a woman in rural India who experiences intimate partner violence and has come to believe, after talking with her community, that this is a normal and even "natural" feature of gendered interactions (2020: 5).

31 Or, in a more recent formulation of this point by Alcoff discussing a relational epistemology, "The preferred language of 'discovery' (rather than 'making') has ideological effects: 'making' connotes craft, processes, and decisions, whereas the non-relational characterization of 'discoveries' may make dialogic approaches to knowing seem unnecessary, a political luxury without epistemic necessity" (2022, 6). In other words, to say that inquiry "discovers" the perspective of a marginalized group is to say that it was really there and not just a synthesis of one's inquiry.

32 I suspect this is what is happening on the (misunderstood) interpretations of standpoint theory as essentialist: the claim that social location or identity *always* enables epistemic advantage completely erases any *mechanism* by which epistemic advantage was—or was not—formed. At the same time, this happens on the inverted interpretation of standpoint theory that claims that—by the same essentialist logic—the dominant has relative epistemic *disadvantage* (see Tilton 2024). On this image the ignorance or "lack" of epistemic resources of the dominant is presumed to be essential *only when* a knower looks past her ability to learn and compensate for the ignorance.

33 Of course, there may be disagreements about which epistemic standards best determine empirical adequacy—see Intemann (2015) for discussion.

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