

Jane Duran

Worlds of knowing: Global feminist epistemologies

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While 'Worlds of knowing' may raise more questions than it can answer, these questions are important to Western feminists. We pay lip service to the ideal of diversity, but are less faithful to it in practice, in part because of the barriers to which Duran draws our attention.

More than a decade ago, Sandra Harding urged feminist theorists to start their thinking “from women’s lives” (Harding 1991). While she was addressing feminist science critics, her advice is for epistemology generally. For Harding the best, and perhaps the only way to escape the hegemonizing force of abstract masculine reason is to focus on the concrete material conditions under which women live, work, and know. Of course women live in many different such contexts, and part of the task of feminist epistemology must be to uncover those differences, and explore their meaning for theories of knowledge. Jane Duran’s new book, *Worlds of knowing: Global feminist epistemologies*, is an ambitious attempt to conduct such an exploration.

Duran begins her project on a cautious note. While it is clear that the bulk of feminist theorizing has been based on the experiences of bourgeois white women, the limitations of this approach are obvious. The subtitle of her book embodies the tension that Duran tries to negotiate. The term “global,” especially in the current political/economic context, suggests a universalism that may be created and imposed by Western scholars, and through them the political and economic structures of the so-called First World. Yet Duran also uses the plural “epistemologies,” indicating that she is searching for a variety of ways in which knowledge and its practices can be instantiated in diverse contexts. She is particularly concerned that Western feminists neither accept the Eurocentric tendency to equate knowledge with objective reason, nor dismiss knowledge practices that do not conform to this model as mere myth.

Duran confronts these tensions and attempts to balance consideration and respect for the knowledge practices of women in many cultures with the seeming impossibility of doing so in an authentic manner. Is she successful? Yes and no. The reasons for a negative response here do not necessarily undermine the value of her work, and may even encourage readers to approach the text in a more radical fashion. But these worries do need to be addressed. Duran proceeds by examining the history and culture of eight regions of the globe, and looks for gynocentric elements in each. Her rationale for this strategy is to seek family resemblances between different ways of conceptualizing gender and knowing. Two difficulties immediately present themselves.

First, one might ask what gynocentrism means for Duran, and why it should play a central role in feminist epistemology. Elsewhere in her work (Duran 1991, 14-15), she contrasts gynocentric with androcentric epistemology, corresponding to Carol Gilligan’s work on the feminine voice in ethics. But clearly the case can be (and has been) made that “feminist” need not equal “gynocentric” when it comes to epistemologies. Gynocentrism may be defended as a description

of difference, a defense of separatist approaches to epistemology, a remedy for existing approaches to knowledge, or a basis from which to challenge women's oppression. Duran seems to have in mind the last of these when she writes, "Now we can see how it is that the project of attempting to discern a variety of gynocentric modes of knowing is a valuable one: it not only tells us about ourselves, but it has the incomparably greater value of at least making some small amelioration of suffering possible" (256-7). She is quite correct to point out that "The struggle to begin to find places for growth, movement, and change cross-culturally and globally can scarcely begin if we do not investigate or attempt to find out anything about other cultures and the positions of women within those cultures" (257). However, it is not clear that epistemology is required to do this work. *If* it is, and this question remains open, then Duran needs to make a stronger case for it. Only then can she begin to defend the view that gynocentric epistemologies are the appropriate ones for global feminisms. In several places throughout the text, then, one is inclined to be both impressed by the wealth of information that Duran has gathered about the regions that she investigates, and puzzled by what these data have to do with epistemology. However, this observation should be taken much more as a criticism of the stranglehold of philosophical views about the foundational importance of epistemology than of Duran's reluctance to free herself from such views.

The second major difficulty with Duran's general approach lies in her search for parallels. She repeatedly reminds us that postcolonial theory warns us of the risks inherent in investigating analogues between Eurocentric and other cultures. She states that "we must be aware of our tendency to see parallels (simply because finding parallels tends to make intellectual tasks cleaner and easier), and when we do think that we have good evidence for such analogues, we must also remember that the very fact that some European concept is taken as the exemplar against which the other concept is held already prejudices the circumstances in favor of the ultimate authority of Western theory" (11). Duran is willing to swallow this limitation, however tightly she may clench her teeth against it. She asserts that "there seems to be little or no way around this conundrum," and that "we cannot escape our intellectual heritage" (11). Yet the problem is not just that Western concepts are regarded as benchmarks against which all other ideas are deemed different or inferior. The trouble is that this is where epistemology does matter, but is not addressed.

What would count as good evidence that there was an analogy between, for example, the Dravidian notion of shakti and the Western notion of female empowerment? Specifically, are such parallels out there in the world, to be found by us via thorough, albeit postcolonially cautious, investigation? Are Duran's analogues discovered, or made? And how do we know? These are not questions about Eurocentric standards of judgment, nor even about the intellectual ease of finding parallels. They concern the nature of evidence and reality, and these are centrally epistemological issues. Nevertheless, it requires Duran's careful collection of evidence to recognize these underlying questions, and to begin to do the challenging work of answering them.

A related worry concerns Duran's reliance on secondary sources. She concedes early on that her work is not "global" in the sense of all-inclusive. The regions she examines are places where she has traveled, and the value of personal experience is vital to her work. Still, the work of Western scholars and representatives of NGOs working in some of the countries she studies inform her

histories and cultural descriptions. NGO workers in particular often provide direct reports of women's experiences, but not necessarily of their own perspectives on their histories and cultures. This may be one of those inevitable limits of which Duran is so aware, but there are other ways to meet Harding's proviso that we start our thinking from women's lives. When Duran discusses Chicana women and the African Diaspora in the U.S., she includes women's literature as an important source of insight into their lives. Yet when she examines India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Guatemala, women's literature is not part of the discussion. Admittedly, there may be less material with which to work here because of barriers in language and literacy. But there is some, and it must be sought out as an authentic source. For example, the work of the Bengali writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (both fiction and commentary) dates to 1905 and is available in English translation (Hossain 1988). It provides enormous insight into the experience of Bengali women under purdah, and would enrich Duran's analysis immeasurably.

While *Worlds of knowing* may raise more questions than it can answer, these questions are important to Western feminists. We pay lip service to the ideal of diversity, but are less faithful to it in practice, in part because of the barriers to which Duran draws our attention. Her work on particular regions is likely to inspire readers to learn more, and even to challenge her interpretations of history and culture. Her defense of the epistemological impact of this work may not satisfy either feminist epistemologists or postcolonial theorists, but she shows some boldness in trying to address both.

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