THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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QUEER EPISTEMOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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One of queer theory's most influential claims is that sexuality delineates an epistemic rather than a primarily erotic space in western contexts (Foucault 1990; Sedgwick 1990; McWhorter 1999: 40–41). Queer theory challenges two prevailing assumptions about sexuality in Western contexts: (1) sexuality is a stable, fixed part of innate human nature and (2) sexual identities and acts exist prior to and independent of the need to know and catalogue them as such. Thinking queerly about sexuality denaturalizes sexual identities and acts and the presumed inevitability of connections between them.

Emerging as a scholarly field in the United States in the early 1990's and departing from the then-named gay and lesbian studies' emphasis on making visible and revaluing gay and lesbian people and experience, queer theory is a field whose genealogical approach to gender and sexual identity places the coherence of those identities in question. Queer theorists ask: what are the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of gender and sexual identities, and how does power operate as both an oppressive, repressive force and as that which enables resistance in the name of sexual subjects (Foucault 1990)? Queer theory is influenced by Michel Foucault's reconceptualization of power as both repressive and productive, as that which not only oppresses those deemed "perverse," but also produces a "reverse discourse," the possibility of those deemed "perverse" to resist and demand recognition (101).

A concern for testimonial injustice has been a foundational and abiding concern for queer epistemology. For example, within western contexts, compulsions to reveal one's sexuality (to "come out" and make known one's sexual identity) generate a fraught epistemic terrain in which the epistemic authority of sexually minoritized people is contested. As Eve Sedgwick points out, even when one announces the truth of one's sexuality (or gender) by coming out, that announce-ment is often met with questions like "How do you know?" or "Are you sure?" and it is not uncommon to be told that one is mistaken in what one thinks one knows about oneself (1990: 79). Furthermore, in the absence of any claim to sexual identity, one becomes the recipient of various forms of pressure to announce the truth of one's desire (Sedgwick 1990; McWhorter 1999). To be situated as gender or sexually deviant is to experience the truth about one's gender or sexuality as not in one's control.

Queer epistemology points to another form of testimonial injustice, namely the epistemic violence of compulsory testimony about one's sexuality and gender. Rachel Ann McKinney

analyzes the productive role of power on extracted or compelled speech, especially the injustice of forced confession in assigning criminal responsibility in racist contexts (2016). A queer epistemological approach to testimonial injustice attends not only to the silencing of those deemed deviant but also the epistemic violence perpetuated by the compulsion to occupy an identity category, to understand oneself as a certain kind of person because of one's desires and actions. The imperative to know one's own or others' sexuality has given rise to numerous forms of surveillance, all geared toward revealing the truth of sexuality. Regardless of how one might understand oneself, every minute aspect of one's behavior, appearance, and interests are taken as signs of the truth of one's sexuality (McWhorter 1999: 24–25). Testimony is not optional.

A queer epistemological approach to testimonial injustice contributes another perspective on hermeneutical injustice. Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) addresses the limitations of Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of hermeneutical injustice, noting that the problem is not only the absence of conceptual resources among marginalized knowers; the problem is also the refusal of dominant knowers to allow their interpretations of the world to be informed by the knowledge of those who are marginally situated. This is a form of injustice Pohlhaus, Jr. calls "willful hermeneutic injustice" (2012: 722). Willful hermeneutic injustice is an apt name for some forms of response to queer critiques of assimilationist politics, normalization, and binary conceptions of identity. As Pohlhaus, Jr. puts it, "those who are situated in positions for which epistemic resources are underdeveloped are well situated to know this: that there are whole parts of the world for which dominantly held resources are not very suitable" (719–720). From a queer epistemological perspective, binary conceptions of gender and sexuality are woefully inadequate for knowing the complex experiences and realities of gender and desire.

While some have questioned the political usefulness of queer theory, queer theorists contend that a critically queer position, one attuned to the exclusions of unifying tendencies in political movements and the contingency of subject positions in whose name political resistance occurs, enables a more democratized politics (Butler 1993: 231). In this chapter I discuss the meaning and significance of queer epistemology by focusing on the following themes: (1) sexuality as a problem for truth, (2) queer epistemology and self-knowledge, (3) queer epistemologies and standpoint, and (4) queer and crip epistemologies. I highlight some of the questions and problems a queer epistemology strives to address, as well as some of the forms of epistemic injustice that a queer epistemic framework reveals and attempts to undo.

Sexuality as a problem for truth

Queer theorists approach sexuality and sexual identity as effects of what Foucault calls a "regime of power-knowledge-pleasure" (1990: 11). Thus understood, sexuality is reconceived as a site of the operation of power and not merely an inner, repressed truth (1990). Foucault uses a genealogical approach to sexuality and shows how sexuality is a problem for truth, not a fixed, innate truth of human nature waiting for discovery. Following Foucault, the history of sexuality in western contexts is a history of sexuality's emergence as a problem for truth, as something that can and must be known. One historical effect of this "will to knowledge" about sexuality was the emergence of the "homosexual" as a species, a kind of person.

Influenced by Foucault's understanding of sexuality, Eve Sedgwick contends that the problem of the homo/heterosexual definition is central to Western institutions and societies, so much so that any scholarly project that fails to critically contend with the homo/heterosexual binary will fail to understand whatever aspect of Western culture it seeks to know (1990: 1). The emergence

of the term homosexual in the late nineteenth century, followed by the emergence of the term heterosexual inaugurated

> the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. It was this new development that left no space in culture exempt from the potent inco-herences of homo/heterosexual definition.
>
> *(1990: 2)*

The crisis generated by the notion that something possibly unknown to oneself nonetheless pervasively influences behaviors and interests fueled intense interest in creating systems of sur-veillance devoted to cataloguing all evidence of a person's sexuality. Everything from the length of one's ring finger relative to one's middle finger, to one's gait and one's interest in music, could be taken as evidence of one's true underlying sexuality. As a result, one learned to monitor one's own and others' behavior for the least sign of sexual deviance (Foucault 1990; Sedgwick 1990; McWhorter 1999).

Sedgwick's turn to the implications of the "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition" questions the epistemological ground of what she calls "minoritizing" and "universalizing" discourses of sexuality. A minoritizing conception, Sedgwick explains, understands the question of homo/heterosexual definition as pertinent only for a distinct group of homosexuals; whereas, a uni-versalizing conception of sexuality understands the question of homo/heterosexual definition as bearing on all sexual subjects (1990: 1, 11). According to Sedgwick, these two conflicting approaches constitute the "common sense" about sexuality in Western culture, and both take for granted the possibility of knowing the truth of sexuality.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick adopts a deconstructive approach to the homo/heter-osexual binary, exploring the implications of how each term's definitional solidity is contingent upon the other term. What results, for Sedgwick and for queer theorists generally, is an appre-ciation of the ignorance at the core of knowledge about sexuality, an understanding of how "relations of the closet" put into play an ultimately unresolvable tension between knowledge and ignorance about sexuality (1990: 3, 8, 71, 81).

Sedgwick's framing of the closet as central to the circulation of knowledge and ignorance about sexuality is important for queer epistemology. From an Enlightenment perspective on knowledge, the closet functions as a source of possible certain knowledge. That is, behind its closed door, lies a truth waiting to be revealed. Thinking queerly about the closet suggests that any truth supposedly concealed there is actually contingent upon ignorance both inside and outside the closet. One implication for queer epistemology is the view that knowledge is not the opposite of ignorance.

The co-constitutive relation between knowledge and ignorance initiated by the closet is a site of epistemic injustice and harm. The relations of the closet present the truth of sexuality as a revelation of coming out and breaking silence, and at the same time coming out requires adopt-ing sexual and gender categories and speaking in particular ways about one's erotic experiences and identity. The requirement to categorize one's erotic experiences in a particular way and, as a result, to understand one's self as having a particular sexuality constitutes an epistemic harm.

Critical attention to sexuality as an epistemic space questions the assumption that more and better knowledge can eradicate prejudice by disarming erroneous beliefs. Instead, Sedgwick points to a double bind between knowledge and ignorance that structures the closet's relation

to sexual identity. Whatever truth is known about sexuality is dependent upon the ignorance of the closeted person and the people from whom the truth is concealed. As Foucault explains, one of the legitimating claims of the science of sexuality is that the truths it reveals are unknown to the individuals themselves. Queer epistemology aims to understand how relations of power, truth, desire, and identity are deployed from above and from below, as well as the implications of those deployments.

Queer epistemology and self-knowledge

In addition to critiquing what can be known about sexuality, queer epistemology raises questions about the nature and limits of self-knowledge. Far from offering a position from which one can glean a stable and unifying truth about oneself, queer self-knowledge is a critical position from which one must manage truths about sexuality and their implications for one's well-being. Such fraught negotiations are an inevitable part of the path to understanding oneself as queer (McWhorter 1999). Having a queer conception of identity means understanding one's identity as contingent and always revisable. It means understanding that one's authority and certainty as a knowing subject are perpetually at risk of being undone (56–57). While some may perceive this insight as self-defeating, Ladelle McWhorter contends that it is empowering precisely because it reveals that current social, political, and economic hierarchies are not inevitable consequences of an immutable nature; things can be otherwise (2009: 295–296).

A queer understanding of the heteronormative context in which one is forced to come out and claim a sexual and gender identity that purportedly matches one's erotic life reveals that the particular identity one is forced to claim is not historically inevitable; it is possible that the identity one is forced to claim in a particular time and place can be replaced by a category that does not yet exist (31). This awareness acknowledges the significance of experiences that exceed social categories. It also presents a different perspective on questions of epistemic authority and credibility. Queer epistemology cautions that more self-understanding does not necessarily entail more justice. Rather than shoring up epistemic authority in response to its denial, queer epistemology emphasizes greater epistemic humility in the evaluation of one's own and others' knowledge claims (McWhorter 1999; Medina 2013; Chen 2014). From a queer epistemological perspective, queer self-knowledge is a hard-won critical perspective. While one occupies (more or less comfortably) an identity category and thus has an identity, that identity is not reflective of a fixed, innate nature (McWhorter 1999: 30). Purported sexual truths do not mirror an individual's essential being; instead, knowledge about sexuality produces the very thing it supposedly discovers and describes.

Queer knowing risks the certainty of self-knowledge promised by fitting into identity categories. Risking self-certainty does not necessarily entail a rejection of identity itself or its political usefulness. After all, identity is an important part of people's lived experience. Rather than reject identity, queer ways of knowing identity understand it as historically contingent rather than an inevitable result of one's behavior, biology, or appearance. As Judith Butler's notes, the use of identity categories, while necessary, is always risky (1993: 227–228). In addition, José Medina notes the importance of attunement to *epistemic friction* within and between groups. Epistemic friction, he asserts, importantly decenters one's own perspective in ways that enable transformation of one's understanding of self, others, and the world (2013: 7, 10). Attention to the risks entailed in the use of identity categories, attention to what or whom they include and exclude, can be a source of queer epistemic resistance that denaturalizes dominant narratives and reconceptualizes, rather than rejects, identity.

E. Patrick Johnson describes queer epistemology as a way of knowing something again and differently that resists "narrative closure in relation to a knowable 'I'" (2011: 430). To know again

and differently is to know genealogically, a process that enacts a fierce knowing underscored in McWhorter's declaration that those who have been discredited and stigmatized as abnormal must "know actively and adamantly *what we know*" (2009: 326). This fierce knowing includes unmasking the networks of power-knowledge that structure dominant accounts of the world *and* exploring alternative knowledges unearthed by a genealogical approach to knowledge (295). Paying attention to discredited and unauthorized forms of counter-knowing and counter-remembering is empowering because it reveals that things can be otherwise, not because it enables a substitution of an account that is more truthful than the dominant account (295–296).

As McWhorter powerfully states, "The truth does not make deviants free" (1999: 13). Instead, as those who are deemed deviant know, the truth will lock you up (13). A genealogical approach to knowledge is not a failure to know; it is instead an account of what it means to know (and to ignore), of what knowledge (and ignorance) is. McWhorter thus also distinguishes between a genealogical conception of truth and relativism (42–43). As she points out, a genealogical description of knowledge does not deny the existence or possibility of truth claims; rather it understands truth as produced by contingent standards of justification (49).

One implication of queer epistemology's denaturalization of sexuality is the dominant conception of heterosexuality as normal and natural is revealed to be a product of contingent power-knowledge networks. Another implication is a critique of the notion of "born gay" (that being gay is also natural and thus normal) as a political strategy that reinforces dominant discourse of sexuality and thus fuels the very tactics of surveillance, containment, and normalization that have oppressed all labeled sexually deviant, including "homosexuals." From a queer epistemological perspective, adopting an epistemically resistant rather than an epistemically assimilationist strategy involves changing how one understands the normal and the natural.

The risk of losing self-certainty in queer epistemic space is the condition for the possibility of democratized knowing and politics, a space in which the meaning of queer is used critically and refers to "a site of collective contestation" and a "point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings" (Butler 1993: 228). This suggests the question: is the conception of queer as a critical point of departure similar to a standpoint as conceived in feminist standpoint epistemology?

Queer epistemology and the question of standpoint

Given queer critiques of identity, one might assume that queer epistemology necessarily rejects standpoint epistemologies. Such a stance, in my view, oversimplifies the meaning of standpoint within feminist standpoint epistemology. While it would be a mistake to equate queer epistemology and feminist standpoint epistemology, there are interesting areas of overlap between the two.

Feminist standpoint epistemology points out that knowledge is socially situated and that there is a relationship between knowledge and power that works to authorize the perspectives of dominantly situated knowers and de-legitimate the perspectives of marginally situated knowers (Collins 1991; Harding 2004). Importantly, standpoint is not another name for a perspective that automatically follows from one's identity; rather standpoint, as feminist standpoint epistemologists use the term, is a collective "achievement" founded on political struggle (Harding 2004: 6, 8). Within feminist standpoint epistemology, identity is a point of departure for the achievement of a standpoint, but identity alone does not ensure that a critical standpoint will be achieved. A standpoint results from the development of a politicized consciousness of the situatedness of one's group within structures of power in society. It is for this reason that Sandra Harding describes the achievement of a standpoint as a moment of epistemic empowerment for members

of oppressed groups, an empowerment that is based on a collective realization of "oppositional and shared consciousness in oppressed groups" (3). And it is why Patricia Hill Collins describes a black feminist standpoint as a "shared angle of vision" among Black women and "a key to Black women's survival" (1991: 26).

With this brief summary of feminist standpoint epistemology in mind, we are better placed to carefully reflect on similarities and differences between feminist standpoint epistemology and queer epistemology. Sandra Harding asserts that queer movements have themselves generated "standpoint themes" in their opposition to heterosexism and homophobia (2004: 3). Queer epistemology shares feminist standpoint theory's critique of dominant epistemic paradigms and the entanglement of knowledge and power. Nonetheless, there are important differences between the two concerning how each conceives of the relationship between a standpoint and political transformation.

As previously discussed, queer theory critically negotiates, rather than rejects, identity. Nonetheless, while queer theory has defined itself as a field attentive to the exclusions of identity categories, queers of color point out that the field itself has been largely shaped by an unacknowledged whiteness framing its analyses (José Muñoz 1999; E. Patrick Johnson 2001). Queers of color critique the persistence of epistemic exclusions even in scholarship (like queer theory) that aims to make visible and dismantle epistemic exclusions. Disidenfication is a concept that emerged from queer-of-color critique and names a queer critical relation to identity that neither uncritically claims nor rejects but "works on and against" identity (Muñoz 1999: 11–12; Johnson 2001: 12). While this position seems to reflect a "standpoint theme," queer critique of the relation between standpoint and political transformation shouldn't be ignored.

Consider, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of the epistemic space of mestiza consciousness. Mestiza consciousness is a queer epistemic space between worlds that questions the terms of authentic identity and loyalty that define membership in worlds. Importantly, borderlands are not, in Anzaldúa's account, stable points of reference or departure; they are "vague and undetermined" and constantly shifting (1987: 3). Anzaldúa writes, "*Los astrevesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). In this well-known passage, Anzaldúa articulates a queer (and crip) epistemology that is critical of norms that inform boundaries surrounding group identity.

Anzaldúa describes the borderland as "created by the *emotional residue* of an unnatural boundary" (3). In so doing, she characterizes the epistemic space of the borderland as an affective space, a space where queer knowing is an affective register cultivated in the fraught and shifting place between worlds. As an affective attunement, queer knowing in her account does not proceed from the stable ground of identity or belonging; instead, it is a feeling attuned to that which is below the surface (or to the side) of dominantly conceived realities. As Sara Ahmed explains, affective attunement to exclusions that structure dominant institutions illuminates how those institutions persist despite their claims of inclusiveness (2012: 14).

Attuned to the affective dimensions of queer knowing, it is possible to understand where queer epistemology differs from standpoint epistemology. Queer affective knowing does not have the certainty of identity as a point of departure for shared consciousness. Instead, affectively attuned knowing is inchoate, a sensibility of something other than shared understanding. As Alexis Shotwell puts it, affective knowing is not best understood as propositional knowledge claims; instead, affect is embodied involvement in the world that enables one to know otherwise (2011: ix, xii–xiii).

La facultad, "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface," is Anzaldúa's concept for the affective epistemic sensibility

available to those who do not conform to the norms of group belonging (1987: 38). Rather than a source of counter-beliefs, the queer affective knowing Anzaldúa describes opens space for a different sensibility attuned to that which is outside the bounds of the known in dominant and marginalized contexts.

Within standpoint epistemology, achieved identity generates perspectives on reality that make possible group solidarity and liberation (Harding 2004: 2). However, within queer epistemology, identity is an achievement that is always fraught, even if politically expedient. A queer epistemology is sensitive to that which lies beyond the edges of identity, to that which remains unknown and possibly unknowable but nonetheless beckons as an affective register of the experience of ambiguity in the face of identity. Queer epistemology does not offer oppositional knowledge. Oppositional knowing, Anzaldúa reminds us, attends only to two sides of the river, enabling reaction rather than resistance (1987: 78). Instead, queer epistemology desires possibilities for being and knowing otherwise (Shotwell 2011). A queer epistemology is a haunted epistemology alive to that which is outside the frame of intelligibility (Butler 2009). Thus understood, a queer epistemic space makes possible the cultivation of resistant imaginations necessary for personal, social, and political transformation (Medina 2013). Within queer epistemology, knowing is not democratized as a result of collecting dominant and marginal perspectives; instead, queer knowing understands those perspectives themselves as sites of "collective contestation" (Butler 1993: 228).

Queer and crip epistemologies

Crip theory is an area of disability studies influenced, in part, by queer theory's critique of identity (Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006). Crip theory calls into question normalizing, neoliberal assumptions within disability studies' understanding of disability, ableism within queer theory, and the systematic, interdependent institutions of compulsory ablebodiedness and ablemindedness (McRuer 2006; Kafer 2013). Crip theorists understand disability identity as "contested terrain," while cautioning against an uncritical assumption of identity's fluidity that characterizes at least some understandings of queer theory (Kafer 2013: 16–17). For example, Alison Kafer offers a political/relational model that both conceives of disability as "a site of questions rather than firm definitions" (11) and attends to the lived experiences of impairment (7). In their guest-edited special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, Robert McRuer and Meri Lisa Johnson invited reflection on the possible meaning of cripistemology, a term they coined for an approach to disability informed by queer, feminist, and disability epistemologies (McRuer and Johnson 2014: 149).

In his contribution to the virtual roundtable, Jack Halberstam associates the "crip" in cripistemology with forms "not knowing, unknowing, and failing to know" and "a refusal to inhabit the realm of action and activation at all" (152). Halberstam imagines that "any cripistemology worthy of its name" must negate the possibility of knowledge (152). Nonetheless, one might question the assumption that a crip or disability epistemology must always fail to know. In her critique of Halberstam's use of mental disability as a spectacular example of queer failure, Meri Lisa Johnson asserts that uncritical appropriations of mental disability as an example of radical queer failure undermine the epistemic authority of mentally disabled people (2015: 251). Johnson critiques Halberstam's embrace of failure as a radical queer practice (or art) from the standpoint of borderline personality disorder, thus forging a feminist queer crip epistemic perspective on failure. From this epistemic vantage point, Johnson critiques Halberstam's inattention to the realities of lived bodymind failure and his "rush to metaphor" rather than critical reflection informed by attending to disabled people's experiences (256).

While Johnson uses the term "standpoint" for the epistemic vantage point she describes, I suggest that hers is a standpoint that does not take itself for granted but instead works on and against itself and remains open to revision and transformation. A feminist queer crip epistemology (or a cripistemology) is not a failure of knowledge. It deconstructs the ablebodyminded/disabled binary (Kafer 2013: 13) and is a critical position from which knowledge and identities are known differently.

In addition, a crip epistemology considers the epistemic significance of unthinkability, comprehension, and agency and challenges ableist assumptions about these concepts. For example, ableist norms of sexuality cast as unthinkable disability as the object of erotic attention and desire (Wilkerson 2011; McRuer and Mollow 2012). The unthinkability of disabled people's erotic flourishing informs various forms of injustice against disabled people, including sterilization, euthanasia, and lack of access to sexual partners and sexual health information. One implication is the tendency to ignore disabled women's sexual agency and sexual health care needs in medical institutions (Wilkerson 2011). Crip epistemology challenges the norms that make sex in the context of disability unthinkable and contributes to a reconceptualization of sex and sexiness that does not perpetuate disability stigma (McRuer and Mollow 2012).

Cognitive differences, including the experience of an inability to think, are unthinkable within academia and are presumed to be epistemic obstacles (Price 2011; Chen 2014, 177). However, cripistemology considers how cognitive differences can be epistemic resources for developing resistant, transformative knowledge. Comprehension, as Mel Chen explains, suggests that to know fully is to know comprehensively, but such comprehension "feels impossible when brains are foggy" (2014: 172–173). Taking cognitive differences seriously means abandoning the myth of comprehensive knowledge and recognizing that the reality of partial perspectives necessitates greater epistemic humility and epistemic collaboration (174). For Chen, these epistemic collaborations "amongst our diverse embodiments and cognitions" result in a "hopeful blurring," not comprehension (174, 181). Thus, knowing, from a cripistemological perspective, is not the result of the comprehensive grasp of an individual rational epistemic agent; knowing is importantly "shared cognitive labor" (180).

The unknowability and not knowing that characterize queer and crip epistemologies are modes of reframing what one thought one knew without leading to any stable, unproblematically unifying ground from which to know. Queer and crip knowing is always in progress, always revisable. As Anzaldúa writes, "Because your reconstructions are always in progress, the world, society, and culture are always compositional/decompositional states" (2015, 43). Although she is writing before the emergence of crip theory as a scholarly field, Anzaldúa's characterization of "other epistemologies" that enable transformation reflects a queer crip feminist sensibility, a sensibility poised between life and death, between that which is allowed to exist within dominant epistemic frameworks and that which is disavowed and cast into the realm of impossible or non-existent within dominant epistemic frameworks (Butler 2009).

Related chapters: 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17

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