



# The question of subjectivity in three emerging feminist science studies frameworks: Feminist postcolonial science studies, new feminist materialisms, and queer ecologies



Landon Schnabel

Department of Sociology, Indiana University, 1020 E Kirkwood Ave, 774 Ballantine Hall, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA

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## SYNOPSIS

This paper explores the question of subjectivity, of who or what counts as a subject, bringing three feminist science studies frameworks into dialogue: feminist postcolonial science studies, new feminist materialisms, and queer ecologies. As critical frameworks, each challenges Western modernity and marginalizing exceptionalisms, hierarchies, and binaries, calling for a more inclusive subjectivity. However, they diverge on whether they seek to finish the humanist project and extend subjectivity to all humans or move to post-humanism and question the very notion of subjectivity. Feminist postcolonial science studies challenges the Western/Non-Western divide of subjectivity, queer ecologies challenges the human/non-human divide, and new feminist materialisms challenges the life/nonlife divide. In their calls for greater inclusivity, the frameworks move expansively from subjectivity located in all *human life*, to subjectivity in *all life*, to subjectivity—if there is such an individually located thing—in *matter*. I argue that bringing these perspectives into dialogue is useful methodologically and politically.

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## Introduction

Popular since the rise of post-structuralism and post-modernism, the question of objectivity has problematized knowledge in important ways. While deconstructing objectivity is an important project in its own right, the question of subjectivity, and its constructive political implications, is a necessary correlate to the question of objectivity. The notion of subjectivity can be used as a way to grasp agency, activity, and social action, as a traditional binary correlate of the subject–object dichotomy, and as the locus of political activity. In this paper, I emphasize subjectivity's connection with agency and subjecthood while recognizing that subjectivities are processes involving multiply constituted subjects through contradictory subject positions. While addressing and challenging notions of subjectivity more generally, this paper asks who or what expresses agency, counts as a subject, and has a consequential perspective in three emerging feminist science studies frameworks:

(1) feminist postcolonial science studies, (2) new feminist materialisms, and (3) queer ecologies.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I bring three distinct feminist science studies frameworks into dialogue, using the question of subjectivity to begin what I hope will be a continuing conversation among these perspectives. I do not cover the frameworks exhaustively and merely offer a starting point for further conversation. To do this, I provide a concise account of the similar and contrasting ways that the *question of subjectivity*, of *who or what counts as a subject*, is engaged by each of the three emerging feminist science studies frameworks, referencing seminal texts to raise questions and provoke further analysis. All three frameworks are in agreement that we need to radically rethink what subjectivity means, but differ in the direction they take us for this reconceptualization.

In this paper, I push the boundaries of traditional understandings of subjectivity, showing how these three frameworks problematize the subject/object binary, bringing recognition to difference and multiple subjectivities. First, I

briefly present the central ideas of the three frameworks in general and on the question of subjectivity in particular. Second, I bring the frameworks into dialogue with one another, comparing, contrasting, synthesizing, and critiquing their core theoretical and methodological arguments and assumptions. Third, I provide examples of how these frameworks can be applied to topics in science studies and beyond. Finally, I discuss implications and draw conclusions on the three frameworks.

### Central ideas and the question of subjectivity in the three frameworks

Though subjectivity has taken on rather broad and deep meanings in feminist science studies (see, for example, [Bauchspies & de la Bellacasa, 2009](#)), as well as philosophy, I offer an oversimplified definition for readers as yet unfamiliar with the topic. *Subjectivity* can most simply be understood as the process of becoming, or condition of being, a subject, or actor with agency, in relation with other subjects (or, alternatively, an interpretive frame that highlights the divergent perspectives and actions of subjects). To provide another oversimplified definition, a *subject* is an entity with a particular experience of reality, an agent acting in relation with other subjects, expressing agency beyond the discursive, an active participant in the social construction of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> While I provide these simplified definitions to help unfamiliar readers, this paper explores how three feminist science studies frameworks challenge assumed notions of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist postcolonial science studies, new feminist materialisms, and queer ecologies provide unique insights on who or what expresses agency and counts as a subject. These three critical science studies frameworks have not yet engaged one another's projects seriously, and I argue for the theoretical benefits of bringing these similar, yet also quite different, frameworks into dialogue. All three frameworks push the boundaries of subject–object dichotomizations and strive for greater inclusivity, responding to long standing demands that natural and social sciences end their exceptionalist assumptions about the objects of their studies (see [Benjamin, 2013](#); [Epstein, 1996](#); [Harding, 2008](#)). Furthermore, all three frameworks offer responses and critiques of post-structuralist models of subjectivity that privilege discursive and linguistic notions of agency to the neglect of material relations and processes. However, the frameworks differ on who, or what, is granted, or performs, subjectivity and expresses agency, leading to divergent scholarly and political implications.

#### *Feminist postcolonial science studies*

Feminist postcolonial science studies is a recent synthesis of two related, but previously distinct, projects: feminist science studies and postcolonial science studies. While others had discussed feminism and postcolonialism in relation to one another (e.g., [Rosser, 1999](#)), [Harding \(2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011\)](#) is a central figure in the recent development of feminist postcolonial science studies as a distinct framework. Standpoint theory and difference feminisms (e.g., intersectionality) appear to have driven this synthesis, highlighting the situated nature of knowledge and the subjectivity of differentially oppressed groups ([Harding, 2008, 2009b](#); [Patil, 2013](#)).

Introducing a collection of essays on feminist postcolonial science studies, [Harding \(2011\)](#) discusses how gender and colonialism have coconstituted one another, highlighting the ways in which feminist and postcolonial theory provide complementary critical approaches, incorporating the intersectional standpoints, or subjectivities, of the oppressed.

The essays collected in Harding's anthology demonstrate how indigenous peoples and women have been, and often still are, viewed as lacking full subjectivity, particularly as subjectivity came to be associated with knowledge production, reason, and rationality following the Enlightenment ([Terrall, 2011](#)). In the Enlightenment, normative scientific constructions assumed subjectivity as a closed process associated with reason, rationality, and masculinity. Western white men, traditionally, have thus fashioned themselves as subjects worthy of refining, controlling, and disseminating knowledge, regarding women and indigenous peoples as irrational instruments that provide raw materials for their use and function as consumers of their refined products ([Appleton, Fernandez, Hill, & Quiroz, 2011](#)).

Whereas traditional science has neglected the historical contributions and current knowledge-production capabilities of both women and indigenous peoples, in feminist postcolonial science studies women and indigenous peoples become<sup>4</sup> subjects rather than objects of knowledge ([Harding, 2011](#)). While this framework respects nature and highlights its role in human subjectivity, feminist postcolonial science studies is generally a humanist project seeking to extend full subjectivity to all humans rather than a post-humanist endeavor proposing a breakdown of conventional notions of sentience-centric subjectivity (though see [Deckha, 2012](#) for an exhortation toward a post-humanist postcolonial feminism).

#### *New feminist materialisms*

Where feminist postcolonial science studies challenges the Western/Non-Western dichotomy, emphasizing the full subjectivity of all humans, new feminist materialisms challenges dichotomies of human/non-human and life/non-life in a post-humanist ([Coole & Frost, 2010](#)), or even anti-humanist<sup>5</sup> ([Bennett, 2010](#)), project. New materialists are responding to and criticizing post-structuralist attention to language, abstraction, and the discursive to the neglect of the body and matter more generally. Previous post-structuralist feminist debates over subjectivity limited notions of agency to the discursive. Recognizing vitality in even non-living matter, new feminist materialists call us to rethink subjectivity and agency, moving us away from singularity toward a collective distributive agency, centered not in a single living being but an assemblage of living and non-living vibrant matter ([Bennett, 2010](#)). New materialisms enables notions of subjectivity that take materiality and human/non-human relations into account when considering agency. In this framework, sentience, and even life, is dethroned and agency distributed, meaning that even non-biological matter is thought to be potentiating—and even agentic—in its facilitating of activity in assemblage ([Bennett, 2010](#)).

[Grosz \(1994, 2010, 2011\)](#), who produced early work on corporeality in feminism, discusses the potentiating agency of matter in a more nuanced fashion than [Bennett \(2010\)](#).<sup>6</sup> By remaining focused on the human and the interaction of

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