Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation

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Abstract
This article seeks to intervene in what I perceive to be a problematic opposition in feminist theory between ontological and epistemological accounts of existence and politics, by proposing an approach that weaves together Elspeth Probyn’s conceptualisation of ‘feminist reflexivity’ with a re-reading of feminist standpoint through affect. In so doing, I develop the concept of affective solidarity as necessary for sustainable feminist politics of transformation. This approach is proposed as a way of moving away from rooting feminist transformation in the politics of identity and towards modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance experience can produce. Moving beyond empathy as a privileged way of connecting with others, I argue that the difference between ‘womanhood’ and ‘feminism’ is critical for a universal yet non-essential understanding of what motivates gendered change.

Keywords
affective dissonance, affective solidarity, empathy, epistemology, feminist reflexivity, feminist standpoint, ontology

Introduction
This article seeks to intervene in what I perceive to be a problematic opposition in feminist theory between ontological and epistemological accounts of existence and politics. This opposition results in an over-individualising account of subjectivity, or a determinist account of the social world and the modes through which it may be transformed, that understate the importance of affect to gendered transformation. While I am critical of political approaches that privilege identity or marginality as the basis of sustainable change, or that prioritise empathy as the primary affect

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through which affective connections with others might be achieved, I acknowledge the need for transformation and its subjective dimensions as constituting the heart of a feminist political theory. Thus I want to propose here the beginnings of an approach through the concept of affective solidarity that draws on a broader range of affects – rage, frustration and the desire for connection – as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation, but that does not root these in identity or other group characteristics. Instead, affective solidarity is proposed as a way of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from. In what follows I develop Elspeth Probyn’s (1993) understanding of ‘feminist reflexivity’ as resulting from ontological and epistemological dissonance, through critiques of objectivity and feminist understandings of intersubjectivity, and through readings of work on empathy and standpoint epistemology.

One of the primary modes through which feminist theory has made its mark has been through its challenge to knowledge as objective, and through a focus on the importance of being as a mode of knowing. In this sense, feminist theory has always been concerned with the question of the relationship between ontology and epistemology, and has privileged affect as a marker of their intertwined relationship. Lorraine Code in particular has emphasised the importance of ‘taking subjectivity into account’ when considering the production of feminist knowledge, and thus I take her extension of ontological concerns to foreground the embodied and intersubjective nature of being as emblematic of feminist concerns with this relationship (1993, 1995). Feminist epistemologists have stressed the significance of intersubjectivity and relationality (MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000) not only as critiques of existing fantasies of objective knowledge produced by autonomous subjects, but also as ways of valuing other modes of knowing that prioritise dialogue and collectivity (Assiter, 2000; Collins, 2000). Such work highlights the importance of feeling for others as a way of transforming ourselves and the world, and thus renders affect as a way of moving across ontology and epistemology.

In her book Touching Feeling, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick laments the ways in which poststructuralist critical approaches reduce our lives to determinate power relations (2003). She argues that the ontological (life and difference) is subsumed in such work to the epistemological (social ordering of power and knowledge). For Sedgwick, this means that the texture of everyday life and the life force that characterises people and their engagements with one another and the world as distinct are reduced to oppositional categories and identities. Sedgwick joins others in calling for a re-centring of the ontological through a critical focus on and appreciation of affect (e.g. Massumi, 2002), considering it as a key of sorts to life lived beyond or beside the social regulation of our existence. Since ‘the ontological’ tout court cannot be directly accessed or understood, bodily states provide clues as to how we exist rather than how we describe or understand how we exist. I have written elsewhere of my difficulties with Sedgwick’s account of both epistemology and affect’s unique role in providing access to an ontological realm – at times it borders on the spiritual in its inaccessibility by conventional means.
(Hemmings, 2005) and my concern remains that work on the importance of ontology post ‘the cultural turn’ rather curiously instantiates the opposition it critiques. In both Sedgwick’s and Massumi’s work, epistemology is presented as a closed social system or theory of knowledge with little room for inclusion of the kind of embodied feminist critiques that Code develops; such overstatement is of course necessary if ontology is to be bracketed off from social, political or historical considerations. My own view of affect, in line with Sara Ahmed’s and Lauren Berlant’s incisive work (Ahmed, 2004a; Berlant, 2007), is that it does indeed offer a way into thinking about the relationship between the ontological and the epistemological, but as a resource for understanding their mutual imbrication or as a kind of knowledge about the interface between ontological or epistemic considerations. I do still think it is useful to hold the two apart for the purposes of theorisation, however, and this is one of the reasons that I am drawn to Elspeth Probyn’s early exploration of this relationship.

Well before what we have come to call the ‘affective turn’, Probyn conceives of ontology and epistemology in two ways that are central for the development of my argument here. First, in her work on *Sexing the Self*, Probyn foregrounds the dynamic nature of the relationship between ontology and epistemology, and the ways in which the category of ‘experience’ (so contested in feminist theory) is an important resource for understanding that relationship (1993). Second, Probyn insists that reflection on the lack of fit between our own sense of being and the world’s judgements upon us constitutes a kind of feminist reflexivity, a *negotiation of the difference* between whom one feels oneself to be and the conditions of possibility for a liveable life (1993: 16). Indeed, for Probyn, it is in theorising experience in this way (shuttling back and forth across ontological and epistemic dimensions) that feminist theory finds its *raison d’être*. Experience is thus anything but a given or natural category for Probyn, but rather one that can be a starting point for thinking through both feminist process and the process of becoming a feminist. A feminist reflexivity uses our ‘sexed selves’ not as part of establishing truth claims, but in order to ‘engender alternative feminist positions in discourse’ (1993: 1). Over the years, I have come back to Probyn’s distinction between an embodied sense of self and the self we are expected to be in social terms, between the experience of ourselves over time and the experience of possibilities and limits to how we may act or be. In particular, I have found her description of feminist reflexivity to be compelling and moving since it prioritises feminist activity (reflexive disruption) over identity or belonging and has helped me make sense of why affective solidarity may be a useful basis for engaging others.

I think my attachment to Probyn’s view of reflexivity arises in part from the way in which it reframes my own history of marked *dis-*identification from feminism. Aged seventeen, I remember being enraged by my experience of a lecture at Sussex University we were taken to as A-level students, in which a feminist literary scholar made the case for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* being a feminist text. Complaining bitterly that this was biased nonsense that had nothing to do with the objective value of a Shakespeare text, I also insisted on feminism more generally as nonsense.
When quizzed by parents perhaps too easily amused by my opinionated rants, my reasoning was as follows: I was a strong, self-reliant, intellectual equal to any boy or man and would not be told that my chances in life were any less than theirs. I simply would not accept there was something that needed changing, and my rage at the very thought found feminism as an object, since the social world could not be its object. My indignation, if we follow Probyn, arose precisely because I did not see a difference between ontological and epistemological possibilities. Experiences had not taught me this. Rage here marked me as marvellously privileged in class and race terms, as well as fortunate in my family support, and remarkably unempathetic in my orientations towards others. It will come as no surprise that as time went on I discovered rather profound differences between my sense of self and the social expectations I occupied with respect to gender and sexuality, and the reflections on my experience of these differences also, I believe, helped me gain some feel for other onto-epistemological gaps with respect to e.g. race, ethnicity, disability or class. My outrage found another object – social and cultural inequalities and the knowledge systems that naturalise these – and I attached to feminism which now offered a way both of preserving a coherent sense of self (still equal to any boy or man) and of bringing ontology and epistemology closer together again (through politicised intervention). What at one time was an affective impulse that made feminism repellent became an impulse that made me cling to it for dear life. Not all feminists come to feminism through self interest as I did, of course, but nevertheless I want to insist that it is this question of affect – misery, rage, passion, pleasure – that gives feminism its life.

What my reflections regarding Probyn’s insistence on where the point of feminist reflexivity arises make plain, I hope, is that in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance. Other feminist theorists have developed complementary arguments. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise indicate that ‘feminism appeals because it means something – it touches deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions’, suggesting further that without that affective dimension feminism ‘means very little except as an intellectual exercise’ (1993: 66). Sara Ahmed insists on the importance of rage for moving feminists, cautioning against trying to domesticate feminist affect in the face of stereotyping of feminists as angry and uncooperative (2004b). While for Rosi Braidotti, it is passion that lies at the heart of a transformative feminist knowledge project. Passion provides the basis of critique but also sustains feminists, in the sense that it generates community and pleasure in its own right, operating in a kind of feedback loop (see particularly Braidotti, 1991, 2006). It grounds a counter-episteme that resonates more productively with a feminist sense of self, allowing for the generation of alternative values. It is the question of how we move from affective dissonance to affective solidarity that concerns me, then, particularly in terms of how we might move from individual experience to collective feminist capacity.
Being moved

If, as I want to argue, the relationship between ontology and epistemology is precisely that, a relationship, and if the experience of that relationship is one of critical dissonance that has a politicising potential, then we might say that politics can be characterised as that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know. This dynamic understanding of knowledge and politics is central to feminist epistemology, both through the challenges to objectivity that prioritise embodiment and location, and very importantly through a focus on knowing differently, as well as knowing different things or knowing difference. Code has articulated this as knowing how rather than knowing that (1993), highlighting the centrality of process as well as content in feminist epistemology. And for feminist theorists this question of process is a political as well as methodological concern, in that it seeks to enhance knowledge and create the conditions for transformation through an engagement with others across difference. In this respect, feminist epistemology has prioritised the ability to appreciate the other, to render them a subject rather than object of inquiry, as central to an alternative, politicised epistemology. This is indeed one way in which feminist theorists have sought to move beyond an individualised account of the world. Relationality and intersubjectivity are thus affectively as well as abstractly conceived, and are intimately related to care and empathy. Challenging the status of the expert, considering the importance of shared epistemic claims from below, thinking outside of one’s own initial investments in the desire for clearer and more accountable knowledge; these are all features of an affectively attentive epistemology that allows for transformation of all participants in the research field as well as knowledge itself.

I take empathy as paradigmatic of this approach, since it has been centrally elaborated within feminist epistemology as key for challenging the opposition between feeling and knowing, self and other, that this article is concerned with. Empathy foregrounds the importance of feeling as knowledge; it opens a window on the experiences of others and stresses their importance for an ethical feminist epistemology. Rosemarie Tong considers empathy to be an essential part of an ‘ontology of connectedness’ that ‘reflect[s] life’ as it is lived by most of us (1997: 156). In both psychological and political theory perspectives, being able to empathise is thus a minimal requirement for caring for others at all (Koehn, 1998: 59), and, from a feminist perspective, for being able to counter rationalist approaches to knowledge in the first place (Meyers, 1994). For Patricia Hill Collins, the ability to empathise is not only important for a feminist subject committed to knowing differently, but may also be a condition of being understood as trustworthy by those within marginal communities used to being misrepresented (2000). In this insistence, Collins joins others who stress empathy as necessary for white feminist engagement across cultural, ethnic and racial privileges (in particular, Mohanty, 1988; Lugones, 1990). In effect, empathy prioritises embodied knowledge, affective connection and a desire to transform the social terrain.

Critics of empathy’s prized position within feminist epistemology have pointed to its facilitation of the slip between feminist empathy and women's natural
capacities for care. The intransigent differences between women may be glossed over and thus strengthened rather than displaced, and the fiction of empathy may in fact be one of the factors blocking a move from individual feminist reflection to collective engagement (Bar On, 1993; Bailey, 2000). For sceptics, presumptions of empathy underplay the profound classed and raced differences within feminism that cannot simply be transcended by a feminist will to connection. In the political desire to close the gap between epistemology and ontology we may misrecognise the other, trying to bend their experiences to the service of our own feminist knowledge project, whatever the lack of fit. Empathy may lead to sentimental attachment to the other, rather than a genuine engagement with her concerns, then; or worse, it may signal a cannibalisation of the other masquerading as care (Kaplan, 1994). This has been a particularly important strand in transnational feminist perspectives, which have highlighted a further likely slip between empathy and pity in white Western consideration of ‘global others’ (Trinh, 1989; Doezema, 2001), and emphasised the struggles and loss of authority that real empathy requires (Lugones and Spelman, 1983).

I have considerable sympathy with these assessments of empathetic gestures as just as likely to undermine as to strengthen feminist epistemology’s investment in transforming hierarchies. But some of these difficulties might be better thought of as outcomes of failed empathy, a ‘lazy and false empathy in which we take the other’s place’ (Dean, 2003: 96), rather than empathy per se. Indeed, a range of theorists of empathy would precisely mark the difference between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ empathy as hinging on the extent to which one starts from and seeks to transform, rather than overlooking, hierarchical relations (e.g. Slote, 2007). For Cynthia Ward (1994) and Rosemarie Tong (1997) a transformative empathy explicitly resists essentialising gestures and is a profoundly politicised rather than natural skill that requires struggle over and above passive recognition or advocacy. Yet even reframed in these terms, I find current framings of empathy to be inadequate to my task of developing an affective solidarity. My first lingering difficulty with empathy concerns what I consider to be its embedded assumptions about reciprocity, and the second concerns its emphasis on the reflexive capacities of the empathetic subject as the primary way of resolving difficulties of misrecognition or hostility that attend intersubjectivity. In both cases, it is the privileging of ontology over and above the negotiation of the relationship between ontology and epistemology that I find particularly problematic.

Affects do not only draw us together, whatever our intentions; they also force us apart, or signal the lack of any real intersubjective connection. In terms of reciprocity, feminists acknowledge that the other, the object of empathy, may not wish to be empathised with when empathy is ‘bad’, but tend to assume that ‘good’ empathy will always be appreciated. But what if the other refuses the terms of empathetic recognition? As Daryl Koehn notes wryly, the facets of another we think are significant in an empathetic encounter may be marginal to the other’s sense of self: ‘we may marshal all of our understanding to grasp a particular feature only to find out that the party on the other end does not think this trait is especially
important or revelatory of her character or being’ (1998: 60). To be empathised with could be a horrific prospect, indeed, one resulting in the dissolution of the other’s sense of self, if the empathetic subject is associated with violence, or if the terms of recognition (being ‘in need’, say) are resisted. In my view, the expectation of reciprocity central to empathy risks universalising the subject’s experience as a sound basis for engagement with others; it ignores the historical and political reasons why others may not be able or not wish to reciprocate. To return to my engagement with Probyn, an expectation of reciprocity fails to acknowledge the different onto-epistemological negotiations that constitute feminist reflexivity. The subject one is seeking to empathise with may already have you in their sights, may already consider your position as part of the epistemological terrain rendered problematic by their own experience. The condition of another’s reflexive feminist subjectivity may, in other words, be a refusal of recognition of one’s own political or intersubjective demands.

In response to propositions that a historically and politically grounded hostility is as likely as mutual understanding to characterise relations with others, feminist theorists have moved away from empathy and towards a renewed focus on self-reflection from a different angle. Thus Megan Boler advocates that instead of privileging empathy-based responses, feminists ‘bear witness’ and examine our ‘ethical responsibilities through our own ethical self-reflection’, without assuming an approving response from others (1999: xxiv). And in a related vein, Janet Borgerson suggests that ‘bearing witness’ might be conceived of not as static but as a form of intersubjectivity that presumes power inequalities and does not rush to resolve them (2010). Bearing witness does not assume a common position or even the possibility of one, but it does assume recognition of the other as a subject. What remains outside of this analysis, however, is the antagonism that is likely to arise from inequality of location: we do not quite get at the possibility of hostility as a genuine affective condition of some encounters (see for example Duhaček, 2006). Witnessing has a whiff of innocence about it, one that locates its subject outside rather than caught up in the conditions that make intersubjective recognition impossible in the first place. How could witnessing get at the dual investments or manipulations that also characterise intersubjective encounters, all the more so when inequality of access, resources or representation lies at their heart?

Turning to the reflexivity of the subject as a way of resolving problems of competing onto-epistemologies that are nevertheless bound up with one another is limited for other reasons too. While it makes sense to critique empathy for its reinforcing of hierarchies – empathy is usually only given to those perceived to be in need, those with less power or resources – it is perhaps unhelpful to consider the problem of unbridgeable gaps only in terms of failure. This may simply reinforce the view of the feminist subject as endlessly self-reliant, needing to still further extend her expertise through learning from others, and thus finally achieving a successful transformation of the terrain of feminist epistemology and politics. Not only does this fantasy return us to a highly individualised understanding of transformation, it also relies on a highly rationalised understanding of individuality itself.
In psychoanalytic terms this self-possessed individual is of course a fiction, pouring more and more energy into denying dependency and ambivalence. Importantly, for Jessica Benjamin (1990, 2010) and Amal Treacher Kabesh (2010), the essential relation to the other through which the self is constituted is riddled with the desire for domination as well as connection. Thus it is likely that the feminist subject wants to maintain as well as overcome the distance between the one who cares and she who is cared for. What a focus on empathy fails to address in these terms is the enjoyment of authority and judgement that remains with the one who empathises, all the more prized for its deflection through a discourse of care. To imagine a return to a subject who witnesses rather than is already enmeshed within a complex intersubjectivity is thus also to entertain a projective fantasy that continues to domesticate the rawness of global inequality.4

The most straightforward critique of empathy as the basis of an affective feminist solidarity is the one with which I want to end this section with, and that is the problem of naturalising empathy as a specifically feminist capacity, through its association with femininity and womanhood. This critique returns us to a central concern of feminism: the relationship between being a woman and becoming a feminist, a relationship that is anything but self-evident. If empathy draws on natural characteristics of care and warmth that women share then what of the relation between gendered ontology and epistemology that Probyn insists needs to be dissonant for a feminist reflexivity to be emergent? Let us return to the youthful refusal of feminism with which I began. If we recall, I was unable to reflect on the difference between ontology and epistemology because I had no sense that there was a difference between my own sense of self and the social possibilities afforded me. One might say that I did not see an epistemic realm as distinct from an ontological one precisely because of privileges. My commitment to being ‘equal to any man or boy’ naturalised the conditions of my own existence, obscuring social relations that enabled this happy belief in the first place. I was moved to become a feminist in order to maintain and value my self, and to find an alternate way of being in the world only once I had experienced the dissonance between my sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation. De-naturalisation produced a critical relation to the world providing new conditions for a feminist identity and community. Identity, in other words, resulted from an affective dissonance; it did not precede it, and might well not have come after it.

I want to argue that this affective dissonance is central to feminism and can be theorised as the basis of a connection to others and desire for transformation not rooted in identity, yet thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege. I start from the mechanisms of that impulse to change, from how it feels to experience the gaps between self-narration and social reality. This approach allows us to understand reflexivity as fundamental to feminism and also to see how it is that marginal subjects are so often not enraged at inequality – indeed may be heavily invested in sustaining fictions about present equality – without representing this simply as a failure of knowledge. One may experience affective dissonance in relation to gendering, but not develop or act on a political critique of inequalities, as I explore
further below. In light of my reflections about the limits of empathy, then, I also want to ask how we might square a focus on affective dissonance with the necessity of engaging others without a presumption of reciprocity. How to start from experience without making that the primary basis of relations with others or developing an unsatisfyingly individualised political theory?

Having enough

I have found it helpful to return to feminist standpoint epistemology in thinking through these issues, because of its concern with both the relationship between structure and subjectivity, and also the importance of struggle in the shaping of a feminist political consciousness. While feminist standpoint has itself been critiqued for its tendency to universalise womanhood as the ground of a more objective knowledge (e.g. Hekman, 1997), I have found re-reading a range of standpoint theories through my own interest in politicised affects helpful. Feminist standpoint epistemology understands knowledge as created through struggle between dominant and marginal voices and perspectives, and between one version of the truth and another. Knowledge is conceived of not as self-evident, static or neutral, but as emerging from conflicts of interest within an uneven epistemic terrain. Even in such a general description it is clear that questions of differing interests, power and relations between individuals and social contexts are fundamental to standpoint. Difficulty and difference are understood as constitutive parts of knowledge and making sense of these becomes a question of value judgements among divergent positions. Knowledge of and from the margins is considered more accurate and rigorous not because certain subjects have a naturally more truthful disposition, but because of the conditions of existence that provide differential access to power and authority. Marginal subjects produce different, more reliable, knowledge because of conditions of inequality that mean they (have to) know dominant frames of legitimation in order to survive or thrive, and generate local knowledges for the same reason.

Different feminist standpoint theories emphasise different aspects of this overarching frame, but importantly all of these include the element of struggle as central. Probably the most well-known feminist standpoint approaches are materialist ones such as Sandra Harding’s (1991, 1993) and Nancy Hartsock’s (1983, 1998) which focus on theorising a standpoint position for women based on the centrality of women’s reproductive labour, and the importance of its dismissal for capitalist functioning. These Marxist feminist approaches have been taken up and developed in a range of directions. Patricia Hill Collins explores the importance of black community validation of alternative knowledges as the basis for her black feminist epistemology (2000). For Collins, marginal epistemic communities continuously negotiate competing truth claims and prioritise certain histories and experiences over others, expanding a standpoint approach of knowledge as generated through conflict. Poststructuralist standpoint theorist Donna Haraway (1990) similarly seeks to elaborate epistemologies grounded in the partial perspectives of marginal
subjects as a counter to the ‘god’s eye view’ of objectivist approaches. While challenging the idea of a specifically female experience as the ground for feminist standpoint, poststructuralist approaches nevertheless extend standpoint’s insistence on knowledge as produced from particular locations and in a politicised social field.

A sticking point for standpoint has been the difficulty of explaining what it is that marks the difference between women’s experiences and the transformation of these into feminist knowledge. As indicated, the difference between women’s knowledge and feminist knowledge hinges on the question of struggle. And in the black and poststructuralist standpoint theories of Collins and Haraway, this difference also relies on an appreciation of empathy as a feminist capacity in ways of which I have been critical thus far. But I am not sure that we need to stress empathy over other affects in working with standpoint here. In fact, I think a reading of standpoint through affective dissonance may be more helpful in disarticulating women’s and feminist knowledge than an overvaluation of positive affect that often appears retrospectively applied: a desired outcome reframed as conditional. Consider Nancy Hartsock’s statement that ‘the position of women is structurally different from that of men, and... the lived realities of women’s lives are profoundly different from those of men’ (1998: 158). For Hartsock both things are important here: structural gender relations, within which production is valued over and above reproduction; and the ‘realities of women’s lives’ that are both linked to these structural relations but also not identical to them. At the heart of standpoint is a woman considering the difference between these two linked statements, then, struggling to make sense of their relationship and valuing herself and what she knows accordingly. In affective terms, the outcome of these reflections can never be assured: one might remain content with one’s lot, or become sufficiently outraged to resist existing social prescriptions (see also Weeks, [1998] 2004). This uncertainty of affective outcome may be a good place to start, in fact, since it brings us back to the fact that, even if we wish it were otherwise, women and feminists are different creatures, certainly in the sense that the one is not necessarily the other. The difference is marked by affect, by what it is that one can live with or cannot live with, and the extent to which one’s life is or is not bound up with a desire to transform gender relations.

Let us take the example often given in standpoint of the dual consciousness of a woman who earns a living by cleaning the house of others. Her standpoint is different from that of the man, woman and children whose house she cleans (in my heteronormative scene) because she – unlike them – knows both her own house and theirs, her own secrets and theirs, her own children and theirs, and likely her own language(s) and theirs. She knows more than they do, and she also knows that what she knows is not valued: it does not lead to authority. The woman, the man and the children whose house is being cleaned may also know different things and differently from each other. Via Hartsock, we might say that the woman of the house knows different things and differently because of her relation to caring and reproductive labour, and the children might know the relationship between violence and authority most intimately of all. In other words, this house is filled with subjects who know different things, know more than one another, and where authority is
likely to be in inverse proportion to what the material conditions of existence have required its occupants to know.

But to move from knowing more to valuing that knowledge requires a shift of some kind in this scene, a shift that will invariably call for critique. I suggest that an *affective shift* must first occur to produce the struggle that is the basis of alternative standpoint knowledge and politics. The different knowledges in the house could remain in static relation easily enough, their material histories and effects could be ignored, or understood as natural or appropriate. Either of the women in the house might occupy their positions happily enough (their situation could be worse), or unhappily enough but with resignation, depression or the kind of misery that makes breathing difficult. But for the women or children in the house to insist instead that what they know is of value, maybe of even *more value* qua Harding (1993), requires something particular. It requires a judgement of the conditions of possibility and value within the household as unfair; and that judgement can only arise from the changed experience of at least one of the participants in the scene. Someone has to look at those conditions and provide a counter narrative motivated by lack of acceptance, otherwise the conditions will remain understood as adequate (as they did for me at seventeen). And then everything about the house will be seen differently, will be understood as based on privileges undeserved perhaps, or labour not appreciated, or punishments unwarranted: and the affect itself will constitute that judgement, even if it is not transformed into action. That moment of affect – anger, frustration, or even rage – that I want to claim as the core of transformation is of course an unstable entity and its impact cannot be controlled. The possible next actions it results in are myriad. The affective dissonance, the judgement arising from the distinction between experience and the world, may be suppressed (it could be worse, remember), or the clarity it produces may be harnessed to foster advantages (if you continue to treat me like this, I will leave you), or it might be mobilised to justify lack of intersubjective care or withdrawal of labour. The one who has experienced affective dissonance may retreat into a taciturn non-acceptance, manipulate others in the jostling for position, and so on. Affective dissonance cannot guarantee feminist politicisation or even a resistant mode. And yet, it just might…

That sense of dissonance might become a sense of injustice and then a desire to rectify that. Affect might flood one’s being and change not only how the house and its circumstances are experienced and understood, but how everything else is seen and understood too, from this time on. What the women or children know, combined with their rage, annoyance or passion, might make them feminists even, might draw them to others who want to narrate the world differently, better, in ways that suggest it might change. Or they might become otherwise politicised through communities that, as Collins insists (2000), already value different ways of knowing and different knowledges as ways of surviving in the world. Thus standpoint as I have reimagined it here describes not just marginal experience and the critique of dominant knowledge, but the process of moving from affective dissonance to a struggle for alternative values, and even perhaps to a mutual recognition and affective solidarity (maybe even one that includes empathy).
My delineation of affective solidarity in this piece has been concerned to keep ontology and epistemology together within feminist theory, and to integrate an account of experience that is dynamic rather than essentialising. I have wanted to think through such an approach in order to move away from a feminist politics based in identity or a naturalised femaleness, while nevertheless retaining the importance of politicised transformation of gendered social relations. Starting from affective dissonance following Probyn, I have been concerned to imagine a politics that begins from experiences of discomfort without generalising these as shared by all subjects or as the basis of transcendence of difference. In the process I have been drawn to standpoint approaches because of their prioritisation of struggle as the basis of a de-naturalising feminist politics and extended these approaches to include a fuller understanding of affect as key for the difference that feminism might make. In centring affective dissonance as the basis for a possible feminist solidarity, I have highlighted all the different ways in which that solidarity is an unlikely outcome, of course. But this seems to me to be a faithful characterisation of feminism as a minority pursuit, and perhaps understanding better how feminist reflexivity does nevertheless sometimes emerge out of affective dissonance in the experience of onto-epistemological relations is a good place to start. Certainly, I want to close by insisting that whatever else may happen, that dissonance has to arise if a feminist politics is to emerge, and for that reason it may even have the status of a universal condition. When the kind of reflexivity activity I have been describing does lead to reflexive politicisation, this may be a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds.

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Notes

1. The concept of ‘affective solidarity’ includes a nod to Lilie Chouliaraki’s understanding of the importance of an ethics of solidarity as a way of interrupting problematic logics of intersubjectivity (2006).
2. At the time of writing for Probyn, a focus on ‘experience’ was deeply unfashionable, due to the careful work of historians such as Joan Scott (1991) and philosophers such as Judith Butler (1992), who emphasised the pitfalls of ‘the evidence of experience’ for a feminist political theory.
3. As Carolyn Pedwell has elucidated in this special issue, empathy as a prized skill does not belong to feminism alone, but also to a neoliberal prioritisation of a reflexive subject able to adapt to the many and varied demands of a speeded up, globalised world (2012).
4. These thoughts have been developed in conversation with Amal Treacher Kabesh.

5. The decision to focus on standpoint epistemology in this article is not intended to be an inverse prioritisation to counter the ‘ontological turn’. My argument here and throughout is that standpoint epistemology precisely addresses the relationship between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of knowing and the social.

6. See David Hansen-Miller’s *Civilized Violence* for an analysis of the importance of denying that the physical violence meted out to children is violence for the success of the processes of modern subjection (2011).

7. I have been troubled, in revising this article, by the possible transformations of everyone in my imagined household but the ‘adult man’. A real man might change as a result of ontological-epistemological discomfort and so on, like any other subject, and may himself be marginal, of course. But my household is filled with archetypes, and so I have to leave him stranded for now.

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