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# Critical Realist and Postpositivist Realist Feminisms: Towards a Feminist Dialectical Realism

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Current inquiries into the meaning of feminist concepts, such as the third world woman worker, seek to explain contemporary social relations of global capitalism within the context of the legacy of post-colonialist structures. At the same time, these very concepts draw attention to the limitations of language to adequately approximate the world as it is in order to capture some truth about its categorical entities, in particular, about the embodied experiences of the third world women worker. Through a comparative analysis of critical and postpositivist realisms that highlights feminist interventions in the context of standpoint epistemology, and the evolution in both towards dialectics, I argue that feminist dialectical realism offers an alternative to feminist poststructuralist materialisms as well as addresses limitations in prevailing standards for truth in social theory and philosophy.

**KEYWORDS** Adorno, constellationality, dialectics, postpositivist realism, dialectical realism, feminist dialectical realism, feminist standpoint epistemology

Feminist scholars have produced a rich repository of work on the body and its theoretical linkages to gendered and raced subjectivity, identity and knowledge; yet we have been reluctant to privilege ontology as a theoretical resource. This is perhaps, Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price suggest, due to an enduring somatophobia within feminist thought (1999, 3). Originating in second wave feminist discourse, these critics argue, an ontological anxiety emerged in response to modernist discourses in which sexual and racial difference have been invoked to subjugate and reify the bodies of racialized and gendered others. Even when feminists have theorized the body in its materiality, critical attention has continued to explain the body and nature not as real entities but as products or effects of discourse (4–5).

Against claims that ontological approaches will inevitably result in the reproduction of reductionist reinstatements of bodies and subjectivities, I argue in this article that realist ontological approaches can address feminist concerns, namely, the enduring existence of structures of racism, sexism and classism and their impact on differently situated women, while also accounting, along with poststructuralists, for change and becoming. Moreover, unlike poststructuralist approaches, these same approaches can account for how the real becomes stable within historical relations. They also offer, as I will argue, a reconstructed empiricism that pivots ‘what is’ not just on experimental knowledge but also on components of existence that cannot be grasped from sense-based experience alone. A realist ontology, moreover, is intrinsically wedded to politics and value. By emphasizing the somatic expression of thought, realists can both explain and disrupt reification of thought (itself a part of ontological existence) and being in the world, thereby enacting an agentic resistance to the closure of thought.

In this article, I put into conversation two approaches to realism that feminists have already developed, noting their critical-emancipatory potential: critical realism and postpositivist realism. I additionally trace the ways that feminists in both camps have integrated dialectics into realist thought. As a newcomer to critical realism, my aim is to develop an exploratory analysis, highlighting similarities and differences between the two realisms. Entering the conversation from within the terrain of postpositivist realism, however, my goal is to wed feminist theory to dialectical realism, which is not to be confused with Roy Bhaskar’s dialectical critical realism, but represents the second phase of postpositivist realism. My aim here is to contribute a new line of feminist inquiry, that of feminist dialectical realism.

In the first section below, I provide an overview of the two phases of critical realism, original critical realism and dialectical critical realism, as well as of the first phase of postpositivist realism. In the next section, I define feminist standpoint epistemology and compare the ways in which feminist critical and postpositivist realists have deployed this theory. In the following section I examine postpositivist realism’s second phase, dialectical realism, drawing on Linda M. Alcoff and Alirezi Shomali’s article ‘Adorno’s Dialectical Realism’ (2010). I compare dialectical realism with Alan Norrie’s dialectical critical realist view on Adornian dialectics. In the final section of the article, I offer a qualitative study to illustrate the explanatory power of a feminist dialectical realism. I compare two feminist texts on global capitalism, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) and Alicia Schmidt Camacho’s *Migrant Imaginaries* (2008). The analysis suggests that by engaging with materiality as the first moment in the dialectical engagement of ontology and epistemology, feminists can disrupt subject-centred reason in order to grasp the real, allowing us to come closer to achieving our critical-emancipatory ends.

## Critical realism and postpositivist realism

Critical realism, developed by Roy Bhaskar but here reviewed on the basis of Norrie’s (2010) account, emphasizes the instrumental role that ontology – theories

of being – play in our capacity to understand how knowledge is possible. Simply defined, philosophical realism is the doctrine that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it. In its first phase, original critical realism systematizes ontology, providing an account of being that is stratified into three domains: the ‘empirical’, which includes the actual experiences of events on the part of knowing subjects; the ‘actual’, which includes events whether or not they are experienced by the knowing subject and the ‘real’, the most significant for Bhaskar, which includes the latter two but also includes the enduring, non-observable generative mechanisms, laws and structures that produce them. The domain of the ‘real’ illuminates a depth of being not directly graspable through the other two domains. The unobserved underlying mechanisms and structures are the ultimate objects of knowledge, requiring that knowers develop a theoretical account of observed events in order to discover their operations (Norrie 2010, 8).

With the second domain of the actual Bhaskar puts constraints on idealist, subject-centred conceptions of knowledge that are salient in the first, empirical domain. This second domain delimits philosophy’s overreliance on epistemology, one that reduces understanding of being to our knowledge of it, producing what Bhaskar calls the ‘epistemic fallacy’, widely permeating Western philosophy. But with the third domain of the real, Bhaskar puts constraints on knowledge derived from the second domain. This is necessary, given that knowledge derived from this domain is object-centred, relying too exclusively on a ‘flat, atomistic, actualist ontology of events’ (Norrie 2010, 9).

Dialectical critical realism, the second phase of critical realism, elaborates on the concept of depth and is encompassed by four terms: nonidentity, negativity, totality and praxis. Nonidentity highlights real difference that exists in the world, thereby emphasizing ontology over epistemology. From there Bhaskar moves to real negativity, provoked by contradictions revealed by things in the world. In contrast to poststructuralists’ rather abstract understandings of difference, one that posits the impossibility of having knowledge of things in the world as due to the vast difference among things, Bhaskar posits nonidentity as difference in order to highlight ‘what is’, namely, the different ‘natural kinds’ or ‘natural necessity’ of things in the real world. We might think of ‘natural kinds’ as groupings of entities or objects that reflect the structure of the natural world rather than the interests and actions of human beings. For Bhaskar, nonidentity as difference additionally encompasses the stratification and differentiation of the world (Norrie 2010, 13).

The concept of negativity is constituted by Bhaskar’s notion of real absence in the world. An example would be that an entity that exists is not there, no longer there but somewhere else, or has ceased to exist. Beyond being ontologically real, absence also functions as real negation, triggering the world’s dynamic and ‘processual quality’ (Norrie 2010, 15). A dialectical ontology emerges in this moment that encompasses becoming, but that is nonetheless grounded in the real.

The idea of negation is that real objects in the world cannot be reduced to our concepts or knowledge of them because what is inevitably enacts resistance against our knowledge. While concepts and objects are dialectically linked, they are also autonomous. This basic realist tenet, as Lena Gunnarsson underscores, ‘is a precondition for any meaningful quest for knowledge, since without a notion of reality as

exercising some kind of “resistance” against our notions of it, there is no ground for claiming one piece of knowledge to be more adequate than another’ (2014, 11).

Totality comes into play as Bhaskar develops the notion of constellation or constellationality, the idea that different layers of being are linked without being reducible to one another. For example, epistemology, while distinct from ontology, is intrinsically wedded to ontology, because knowing is ‘a subset of being’, and ontology is ‘epistemically committed’ (Norrie 2010, 17).

Ethical agency is the fourth dimension of dialectical critical realism. For Bhaskar it entails creating a ‘eudaimonic’ society in which moral freedom is individually, collectively and universally achieved. The universalizing dimension presupposes that a ‘historical structuring of ethics’ is constellationally embedded with ‘a dialectical rationalization’, each maintaining their connection and their separateness within a totalizing dialectic (Norrie 2010, 18).

Although differing in their critical vocabularies, disciplinary contexts and genealogies, postpositivist realists share a sort of family resemblance with critical realists. Postpositivist realism in its first phase shares many of the features of the first phase of critical realism, in particular, in terms of its conceptualizations of the various interlaced components of social reality that correspond to the domains defined above. However, as I will show, it emphasizes epistemology rather than ontology. It also provides a conceptualization of ethical agency corresponding to the fourth dimension of dialectical realism, through its conception of moral universalism.

Postpositivist realism was developed by Satya Mohanty. While rooted in minority discourses, it aims to provide additional epistemic resources derived from philosophical realism as encountered in analytic philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, W. V. O. Quine, Richard Boyd and Donald Davidson, as well as from feminist standpoint epistemologies (Moya 2000, 11). Like critical realists, postpositivist realists provide alternatives to poststructuralist views of knowledge. They develop an alternative account of the social world that depends upon theoretically mediated knowledge of unobservable hierarchical structures. Yet, their initial focus is the examination of experiences constituting (their own) individual and group identities, to discover their social meanings and reclaim the power to redefine them. This critical focus corresponds to Bhaskar’s domain of the empirical.

For postpositivist realists, identities refer outward to objective and non-arbitrary, causally significant features of the world. When experiences constituting identities are analysed in light of these features, they can, as Alcoff suggests, provide an ‘epistemic and political basis for understanding and acting’ (2000, 315). These identifiable features correspond to Bhaskar’s domain of the real. Postpositivist realism thus attempts to elaborate an alternative paradigm of knowing that is dialectical or dynamic, hermeneutical – depending upon human interpretation of invisible structures and mechanisms generating lived events and experiences – and situated – the product of engagement with the content and implications of theoretical and ideological presuppositions.

The strong epistemological and political emphasis becomes evident in the ways identities are conceived as bifurcated. On this account, it becomes possible to explain how the real can fall prey to ideological mystification. Identities are both real and constructed. Rosaura Sánchez (2006) uses two different terms to distinguish

between the two: positioning and positionality. Identities are real because of ‘positioning’, one’s location within social hierarchical structures from which volition does not allow us to escape and which are not immediately graspable.

Paula Moya (2000) provides an example of positioning. She recounts going away to college to Yale from New Mexico. For the first time, she found herself being treated as ‘different’ because she was perceived as ‘Mexican’ by her peers. Confused because she had always identified as ‘Spanish’, and been well liked, she began to reinterpret the historically constituted social categories constituting her social location that gave salience to her identity to learn how these were causally relevant (83).

Positionality, on the other hand, conveys the constructed or imagined relation as well as the standpoint one achieves relative to that positioning (Sánchez 2006, 38). It is dependent upon interpretations that individuals carry out in collaboration with others and is therefore context-dependent and fallible (39–44). Moya (2000) is again instructive. She recounts how due to her experiences at Yale, that resulted in her spending more time with other brown-skinned women and her subsequent experiences in Texas, she began to define herself as ‘Chicana’ to reflect her identification and solidarity with Mexican and Mexican-American political struggles. In coming to understand, in collectivity with others, that causally relevant components of the social world – postcolonial relations of Mexico and the US – had been obscured to her, Moya reorganized her identity to better defend her political interests. She began to use her location – the epistemic as well as deeply embodied status of identity – as a site for productive social theorizing as well of social-political practice and identification with a community that had been ruptured by colonization (84–86).

Thus, identity, on the postpositivist realist view, is seen not as a private affair, but as an index of our relationship with the world and its unobservable causal mechanisms. By creating theory-mediated knowledge through narratives that make salient features of experience not transparently evident, and weighing those against other empirical features, individual knowers can render intelligible the unobserved rules, ideologies and practices that underlie power laden social categorizations (Mohanty 2000, 38).

On the postpositivist realist account, moreover, identities can objectively illuminate the experiences of socially marginalized people as well as serve as explanations of the world we share, pointing to the universality of knowledge (Mohanty 2000, 60). Once we accept as objective the accounts produced by members of marginalized groups, we must reconcile their universal value and implications, what Mohanty calls moral universalism (60–62). Moral universalism correlates with Bhaskar’s fourth dimension of dialectical critical realism, that of ethical agency.

Nonetheless, the postpositivist realist view of universality is one conceived not as abstract but rather, as I have argued elsewhere, as a situated universalism that ‘can facilitate the use of positional perspectives as the means to identify and evaluate the background assumptions and epistemic consequences of differently positioned individuals and groups’ (Gillman 2010, 10). Alcoff also underscores the situatedness of the universality of knowledge as it is coupled with ethical and political agency: ‘Transcending difference does not happen through the application of abstract

universal principles or by forcing the Other to accept what we “know” to be the unmediated truth but through a shared activity in a shared context. Thus do we achieve knowledge’ (2000, 335).

In the next section I examine feminist standpoint epistemology and its intersections with postpositivist realism and critical realism.

## **Feminist standpoint epistemology, critical realism and postpositivist realism**

As will become clear from my analysis below, feminist standpoint epistemology has been integrated into critical and postpositivist realisms, enhancing the emancipatory ends of both terrains as well as serving the goals of feminist thought. Before examining their respective integrative efforts, I will shortly present the basic tenets of feminist standpoint epistemology, relying on the work of Sandra Harding, generally agreed to be one of the most influential proponents of feminist standpoint epistemology (Alcoff 2001). Harding has also directly impacted postpositivist realism and actively engaged in critical debates with critical realists, as I will discuss below.

In her 1993 article ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is “Strong Objectivity”?’ Harding argues that standpoint epistemology is not in conflict with science’s aim of achieving objective knowledge. Developing the notion of situated knowledge, she proposes making central to the production of knowledge the role of the social location of subjugated knowers and their communities. She further contends that this shift will lead not to relativism but rather to a stronger objectivity (1993, 54).

Harding’s argument for a stronger subjectivity has two parts. First she claims that the methods of positivist science will not lead to objectivity because these methods exclude from examination the context of discovery, that is, the social context of the (predominantly white, Western male) researcher. This is because they are not set up to identify the social causes, interests and values that frame and produce scientific knowledge, but rather to present its findings as value-free, disembodied and context-independent (1993, 56–57).

Harding additionally makes the argument that the standpoint of the dominant group is epistemically limited. It is so homogeneous that scientists cannot acknowledge the standpoint of various socially marginalized groups or critically engage their own. Their shared assumptions and methodologies are invisible and hence perceived as universal, since there are no contrary assumptions present to bring them into relief. Harding affirms that in a society stratified by race, class, gender and sexuality, reliable knowledge requires a methodology in which ‘the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought – for *everyone’s* research and scholarship – from which humans’ relations with each other and the natural world can become visible’ (1993, 54). From these various and multiple starting points, ones that make salient the diversity of women’s lives, it is possible to detect the invisible background beliefs, assumptions and values driving scientific research, which operates under the guise of neutrality and universality (55–60).

Harding states, moreover, that she is not claiming that members of marginalized groups have particular capacities to produce better knowledge, but rather that

because they are most impacted by intersecting systems of social power, they will have ‘causal and critical questions about the hierarchical social order and science’s role, not their own, in maintaining it’ (1993, 59).

Harding further specifies how those questions – the privileged or epistemically advantaged starting point for better, more objective knowledge – become a standpoint. In her book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (1991) she explains that in order for questions arising from sensory experience to change from a claim to a grounded standpoint, it must be subsequently developed as a theory about the social world, and corroborated through a process that requires the subject to weigh her individual experiences against other empirical data, including the experiences of other members of the shared racial-ethnic and gendered group. Harding thus underscores that knowledge that pretends to be objective requires an egalitarian, participatory politics (124).

Thus, feminist standpoint epistemology posits three types of epistemic authority or advantage held by women across different marginalized groups: it provides opportunities to have deep knowledge over surface level knowledge of society; it provides opportunities to gain objective knowledge of social difference and it provides opportunities for awareness of how standpoints developed from marginalized lives have universal implications (Anderson 2015).

When turning to postpositivist realism, we find that Harding’s conceptualization of feminist standpoint epistemology is central to its basic tenet, namely, that minority experiences, when critically or politically reflexive, serve as starting off points for producing objective knowledge (Mohanty 2000, 51; Moya 2000, 85). But postpositivist realism goes beyond the more limited argument that minority social identities lead to new questions to affirm a correlation between social identity and epistemic reliability. Identities do not determine one’s capacity to develop reliable knowledge but they do function as what Alcoff calls ‘horizons’, perceptual access points from which the causal aspects of reality can become visible without requiring that interpretations within the identity group be uniform (Alcoff 2001, 69).

Feminists have also engaged with critical realism, finding it beneficial to their critical-emancipatory projects, the principle argument being that in gaining knowledge of the real, it becomes possible to change the social structure in a manner conducive to women’s empowerment (New 1998; Gunnarsson 2014). A feminist critical realist approach that has gained some traction has incorporated feminist standpoint epistemology and I now examine Madhu Satsangi’s and Caroline New’s interventions on this topic, to illustrate this integration. Although neither New nor Satsangi explain how their respective composite theories intersect with the different phases of critical realism, it is worth noting their fit with the second phase, that of dialectical critical realism, insofar as the integration of feminist standpoint epistemology leads to the constellation of epistemology and ontology.

Satsangi (2013) begins his critique of critical realism by noting the limitations of its emancipatory potential. Following Bhaskar’s critics, Satsangi argues that Bhaskar has not engaged sufficiently with debates developing within the ranks of critical realism in the moral and political domains (195–96). He suggests remediating this problem by wedding critical realism to feminist standpoint epistemology, given the latter’s intrinsic embedding of values with facts.

Standpoint epistemology, Satsangi further argues, is compatible with realist approaches: it acknowledges one social reality, defends notions of objectivity undergirding social reality and recognizes the historical embeddedness of knowledge which gives rise to competing conceptualizations. Additionally, in emphasizing feminist standpoint epistemology as politically motivated, Satsangi highlights what we might call the dialecticization of politics, epistemology and ontology. He asserts that for Harding, political struggle is necessary to generate the kind of group consciousness that can produce the knowledge oppressed groups have (political) interests in gaining, in order to redress power asymmetries (2013, 200). To further support his arguments, Satsangi retraces the debates between Harding and critical realist Tony Lawson that developed in the late 1990s and early twentieth century. Satsangi notes that Lawson's notion of 'contrastive explanation' resonates with Harding's notion of group standpoint.

Contrastive explanation, according to Lawson (1999), is a type of knowledge that is sought by identifying unknown causal mechanisms that result in surprising deviations or contrasts between groups sharing common histories and shared conditions. Contrastive explanation is sought precisely because the difference to be discovered is of interest to those carrying out the inquiry, namely, people that are predisposed, by virtue of both belonging with and being constrained from the centre, of detecting and identifying such contrasts in terms of unrealized needs (42). In his comparison of critical realism and standpoint epistemology, Satsangi argues that given that contrastive explanation is consistent with the critical realist notion of absence, it reinforces and legitimizes the idea of epistemic privilege.

New (1998), for her part, elaborates on the impasses epistemic advantage presents within feminist theory, as well as offers critical realist concepts as a path for resolving them. She affirms that while Harding best epitomizes the realist position among standpoint epistemologists, in her efforts to defend epistemic relativism she is unable to provide a mechanism for distinguishing between various rival standpoints (361). Foregrounding standpoint epistemology's interest in producing subjugated knowledges in order to transform social relations, New suggests that critical realism can provide additional resources that will allow feminist standpoint epistemology to develop a more robust realism. One such resource is the concept of ontological depth (366).

New thus asks for a primary shift: feminist standpoint epistemology needs to focus on ontology rather than epistemology. Rather than focusing on the (epistemological) justification of 'women's lives' based on what one knows or theorizes resulting from women's sense experiences, attention should be focussed on the domain of the 'real' – the (often invisible) mechanisms and structures that give rise to life events. At that level, New suggests, there are more commonalities in terms of the structural constraints women variously face. These include (1) social structures, conceptual systems and beliefs; (2) psychological processes which allow us to perceive, think and act and through which subjectivity becomes gendered and (3) capacities and limitations associated with sexual difference (1998, 367).

When we introduce ontological depth as a central focus, the epistemological emphasis also shifts. New thus argues that being impacted by generative

mechanisms and structures of racism, classism and sexism does not give women epistemic advantage. Rather, women's situatedness provides women 'opportunities for knowledge by virtue of their subordinate positioning and interests in using that knowledge to take collective action to bring about social transformation' (1998, 368). At the level of the actual, women's commonalities are contingent but on the level of the real, they are enduring. Thus, on an ontological realist account, there is no problem with the essentialization of the category 'woman'. Femaleness, as New cogently argues, is a more or less invisible enduring set of causal powers that produce events and/or effects at the level of the actual and empirical which are context-dependent and in which variation occurs (364; cf. Gunnarsson 2014).

In comparing postpositivist and critical realist deployments of Harding's standpoint epistemology, it is clear that while both engage a deeper knowledge of social structures, critical realism's emphasis is on ontology while postpositivist realists emphasize epistemology in order to discover the role of power in the construction of knowledge (Moya 2002, ch. 5; Gillman 2010, ch. 6). Nonetheless, postpositivists have fallen short of our goal of fully grasping the real because we have placed undue emphasis on the epistemic status of knowledge – our concepts (theories, paradigms, narratives) – and not enough on the object of inquiry or the ontological status of knowledge. In the next section, I examine a more recent development in postpositivist realism, the ontological turn, which aims to explain this deficiency as well as remedy it, bringing it in closer theoretical alignment with critical realism.

## Dialectical realism

In the first iteration of postpositivist realism, the dialectical components of identity were foregrounded in an analysis of the reciprocal impact of structure and identities: postpositivist realists exemplified the processes by which causal mechanisms embedded within social structures curtail identities and the capacity of identities to be used as a resource to transform social structures. But they also illuminated the work members of minority communities had undertaken to develop interpretive schemas for the purpose of bringing about structural change. In a more recent iteration of postpositivist realism, however, dialectics becomes more deeply triangulated as theoretical emphasis is placed on ontology as much as epistemology.

Linda M. Alcoff and Alirezi Shomali initiated the dialectical turn in postpositivist realism with the publication of their 2010 article 'Adorno's Dialectical Realism'. Several years earlier, Bhaskar's *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993) marked the beginning of the dialectical phase of critical realism. In 2004, Norrie published his article on Adorno and dialectical critical realism, 'Bhaskar, Adorno and the Dialectics of Modern Freedom'. In what follows, I explore Alcoff and Shomali's dialectical realism in order to show how engaging dialectics allows for the deepening of postpositivist realism's critical approximation to the real. I also compare and contrast postpositivist realist views with Norrie's critical realist's view on Adornian dialectics.

Alcoff and Shomali begin by affirming Adorno's constructive vision for philosophy. Against his critics, they support Adorno's claim that in his negative dialectics

the ultimate outcome of critique is not negation in the name of negation, a sort of defeatism with respect to the real, but rather the negation of transcendental arguments about the real, including the human (2010, 46–7).<sup>1</sup> A negative dialectics makes openness to the otherness of thought (epistemology) and being (metaphysics) possible. Dialecticizing thought and being, moreover, can provide a critical account of reality as we experience it through an awareness of the political mediations of knowledge. Negative dialectics is realist because it affirms the mediated character of the object by knowers without forgetting ‘its recalcitrant nature, its *otherness*’. It is also realist because it validates ‘the ontological primacy of the object, repudiates subject-centred idealisms and advocates for a kind of empirical openness to the irreducible particularities of the material world’ (48). In this manner it improves upon the first iteration of postpositivist realism, which unwittingly prioritized subject-centred idealisms.

With dialectics, a distinct change has been introduced into postpositivist realism. In ‘identity thinking’, privileged in the first account of postpositivist realism, objects (individuals and social groups) are collapsed under a particular concept, category or classification (identity), underscoring the assumption that concepts can be adequate to the particular objects to which they refer. In Adorno’s negative dialectics of non-identity, by contrast, the temporal dimension of reality is taken even more centrally into account, ‘without assuming a timeless account of the final structure of reality,’ allowing for an analysis of reality’s constant potential for change and becoming (Alcoff and Shomali 2010, 48). In this manner it is possible to track the limits of the concept.

Herein, dialectical realism deepens understanding of the real insofar as it demands that the knower seek a non-reified representation of the subject who knows, but also a non-reified understanding of the concepts the subject uses to refer to objects as well as of the objects that come under critical examination. Dialectical realism reveals the structure of reality to be like a continuous process. It is a method that allows for the real to be more than what is (Alcoff and Shomali 2010, 49).

In highlighting the temporal dimension of dialectics, Alcoff and Shomali make salient the political implications of dialectical realism, which they affirm is lacking in other realisms. Adornian dialectics requires a critical examination of how philosophical knowledge is embedded in the ideology of a given historical era. It also offers a method to avoid reverting to ideology by connecting and holding philosophical projects, reasons and methods up to reality rather than separating them off from it, thereby making possible the operations of dialectical approaches to knowledge (2010, 49). An Adornian dialectics thus overcomes a hubristic understanding of concepts while still retaining their usefulness, that is, their truth function, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of postmodernist thought, which fetishizes the fluidity of the concept or the object.

In order to accentuate the temporal dimension within dialectics with an aim to avoid reification and idealism, Adorno introduces the Weberian notion of constellation. As I noted above, Bhaskar’s notion of the constellation entails the linking of different layers of being without collapsing them into one another, with the distinct layers constituting a totality. Epistemology and ontology are an example of

autonomous but linked layers of being. In Adorno's concept of constellation, linkages are also formed between epistemology and ontology.

For Adorno, the object is deemed to be more than just what is, in the sense that it includes the mediations of the subjects that encounter it as well as the possibilities of the object to undergo more mediations and become transformed. As Alcoff and Shomali affirm, '[m]ediation is not simply a projection of knowers onto the object, but an interpenetration of subject and object' (2010, 54). Since there is the possibility of numerous mediations at any given historical moment, the mediations of an object will reverberate around it, forming a constellation, so that when the object is again encountered it can provide the knower access to a constellation of concepts, helping the knower to become released from the stranglehold of identity thinking. Additionally, Alcoff and Shomali state, by curtailing the constellational dynamic to a particular historical context, Adorno rejects not just the scepticism of postmodernists but also naïve realists, who would view the object of inquiry as simple factuality (50).

In his reading of Adorno's negative dialectics, critical realist Alan Norrie (2004) rejects Adorno's way of using the constellation as a dynamic device, arguing that it is irrealist. He suggests that simply bringing more concepts by diverse knowers around the object will not minimize the blocking of reality that concepts perform (33–34). He also finds unclear the seemingly paradoxical notion posited by Adorno that to get to the real it is necessary to be immersed in the object (objective context) and then break out of it (the concept). He concludes that the constellation lacks 'a conception of a stratified, depth ontology', which 'is required in order to reposition subject and concept fully in the subject-object dialectic' (42).

Yet, Alcoff and Shomali claim, along with Adorno scholar Simon Jarvis (1998, 183–84), that for Adorno the constellation is not simply the sum total of its classifications or subjectively derived mediations projected onto the object, for that would ascribe primacy to the subject, converting objects into mere examples of the concept. They argue instead that Adorno follows Marx's concept of materiality, in which materiality is the primary but not the exclusive element in the dialectic. Adorno insists on the preponderance of the object but against its exclusive supremacy or enthronement, in order not to lose the dialectic (Alcoff and Shomali 2010, 54–55).

Thus, Adorno understands mediation not as a subjective act that negates or transforms the material given but as something that follows from the dynamic nature of the object itself, its materiality. As Alcoff and Shomali state: 'Only in this way can we remain open to the possibility of recognizing the suffering of others who lie beyond our own hermeneutic limits of understanding and empathic identification' (2010, 57). The strength of dialectical realism is its negative insistence, which is born out of a concern for the true nature of the historical object itself (59).

In contrast to Norrie's claim that Adorno's constellation lacks stratification, Alcoff and Shomali argue that Adorno views a specific constellation as a mode and moment in the endless processes of dialectical mediations of subject and object constituting society, historical processes which *precede* individual consciousness and its experience (2010, 61). Adorno further provides for human agency. The constellation is political because in this dialectical interplay of mediations, there is a potential for societal change. Here, postpositivist realism, in its evolving into a dialectical realism, has left behind a residual or latent idealism, with its emphasis on

epistemology, moving towards material relations in their historical specificity through an emphasis on mediated objects.

The example that Adorno provides is the specific constellation of late capitalism, characterized by ‘objective abstraction.’ The example, as Alcott and Shomali (2010, 62) state, is useful today, ‘in a period when derivatives determine value’ to mark the ‘false constellation of the current exchange system’. Such abstractions or forms of identity thinking suppress the freedom of the object (the knower) – in a material sense and in a linguistic/cognitive sense – to formulate critical reflection. Nonidentity thinking, however, offers the possibility for the emergence of a dialectic of mutual criticism between concepts and objects, so that the object can become a new object (63; Apostolidis 2006, 253.)

Although Adorno says very little about women’s locatedness within social relations, feminist thought resonates with dialectical realism insofar as it seeks rigorous engagement with the concrete particularity of women’s lives, which can be a motivating factor for extending the method of dialectical realism into feminist thought. In order to illustrate the different analytical modulations of postpositivist realism and dialectical realisms, I compare below the work of two renowned post-colonial feminists, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Alicia Schmidt Camacho, both of whom provide a realist analysis of the third world woman worker as a lynchpin for the global capitalist economy.

### **The third world woman worker: postpositivist realist and dialectical realist approaches**

In her 2003 book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* Mohanty enacts a postpositivist realist analysis of identity. While making provisions for difference, she argues that there is a causal relationship between marginalized positionings and the capacity for human subjects to explain features of global capitalist structures. In postpositivist realist terms, third world women workers can use their identities to reveal the operation of capitalist interests within global structures of work and family that have produced their exploited identities. She also argues that third world women workers can use their identities to discover a potential identity in common as workers in a racial and gendered division of labour at this historical juncture. Mohanty consciously makes the decision to retain the term ‘third world’ as a descriptor for the global woman worker in order to retain its explanatory specificity in relation to current neocolonial economic processes within the era of globalization, as well as to encourage political solidarity based on shared material interests and identities (2003, 143–44).

In focusing on a particular type of work, homework, and the third world woman worker across three geopolitical sites – the lacemakers in Narsapur, India; immigrant women, primarily Asian, working in the electronics industry in Silicon Valley, California and migrant workers of Afro-Caribbean, Asian and African descent working in a variety of domestic work situations in Britain – Mohanty makes visible the continuities between homework and factory work. She also reveals the emergence of a particular organization of the structure of work within the global capitalist economy

based on an international division of labour, in turn accompanied by a narrative in which third world women's work is interpreted as non-work and their identity as workers is interpreted as non-workers (2003, 150). Mohanty also suggests that the recognition of the 'fact' of the identity of the housewife and homemaker as non-worker, causally linked to the global capitalist structure, can help women cross-nationally to reorganize their identities as workers.

A shift in the epistemic status of their identities can, Mohanty claims, aid third world woman workers in acknowledging objective common interests on the basis of their social positioning, as well as in exercising collective agency. Mohanty gives detailed examples of women's organizations, such as Working Women's Forum and the Self Employed Women's Association in India, to suggest the potential for coalitional work. These organizations have been successful on myriad fronts but especially in terms of making women workers visible as workers within the capitalist system as well as highlighting the common interests of homeworkers as workers and as women (2003, 165).

In her work on third world workers in the global economy, Alicia Schmidt Camacho (2008) delineates the real quite differently, exemplifying a dialectical realist approach. Mohanty, as shown above, highlights a shared social positioning of third world women workers as a reason for discovering common experiences within the global division of labour and for developing coalitions. She also acknowledges the on-going necessity of negotiating differences. Thus, her analytical emphasis remains more on the epistemic and political basis for women enacting solidarity acting across borders. Put differently, she focuses on identity. Schmidt Camacho, by contrast, focuses on the nonidentity of the third world woman worker, thereby invigorating the concept of 'third world woman worker' and of materialist reality, as well as intensifying the relations between the concept and its conceptual otherness. She does not specifically reference dialectics as her chosen theoretical lens, but I am trying to show here how her work exemplifies a dialectical realist approach.

Schmidt Camacho advances dialectical realist thinking by attending to that moment of thought that is immediate consciousness, bringing into view the somatic experience of the object, not as reified but as one among other seemingly unchanging elements in the dialectic. She infuses object and concept with new meaning, along the lines theorized by Adorno, evolving the chain of interactions of concept and object that shape dynamic reality.

Schmidt Camacho's 2008 work *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* analyses the accounts of young brown women, both single and married, employed as assembly line workers in the *maquiladoras* in Juárez, Mexico. These corporations, Schmidt Camacho affirms, followed established patterns of colonial extraction by employing poor women workers for labour-intensive operations, namely, the manufacturing of commodities on the Southern side of the border for consumption by advanced capitalist countries as a means to increasing profits (2008, 246). In effect, the identities and work of third world women workers within new global structures came into being as a contract between foreign CEOs, investors and Mexican stakeholders, whose shared interest

in increased wealth depended upon a shared conceptualization of the ideal worker in the global assembly line.

Schmidt Camacho examines how the aforementioned social actors drew upon developmentalist rationales and rhetoric to justify the designation of the concept of the ideal third world women worker by attempting to make it correlate with the object, the actual lived reality of women workers. The labouring brown woman had to match labour needs that required minute, timed and repetitive tasks (2008, 256). They thus conceptualized this ideal worker's labouring body as fragmented parts, like the parts that they were to assemble, highlighting two parts in particular, dexterity and docility, which they characterized as 'nimble fingers' and 'watchful eyes'. Based on that characterization, they proceeded to hire young, pretty and cheap women, considered more docile and less likely to demand a family wage or join unions. Where a worker fell out of line with the expectations, they were fired and replaced.

Schmidt Camacho concludes that stakeholders from home and host nations produced and then overlaid on economic exploitative practices restrictive patriarchal and racial ideologies undercutting women's labour power. In effect, a discourse of 'nimble fingers' and 'watchful eyes' represented and mandated third world women's high levels of productivity, justifying mandates based on biologically determined racial and gender traits rather than acquired skills that made the mandate appear as logical (2008, 241, 247). These same stakeholders used this discourse even as they claimed that in hiring these women, they were improving women's status by giving them skills and training. They thereby concealed their deliberate re-composition of race and gender difference within the labour process. The metaphors of freedom used by development agencies, corporate leaders and the nation state played a critical role in the construction of the 'ideal' labour force and its regulation.

Nonetheless, the discursive power exerted by stakeholders from home and host nations have not gone uncontested. Throughout the 1980s and beyond, working class and poor women talked back, contesting state and corporate authority by telling their stories through various mechanisms, including human rights forums and in interviews collected in ethnographic studies. Schmidt Camacho analyses some ethnographic interviews Sandra Arenal (1986) conducted in the mid 1980s with garment and electronic workers of northern Mexico. Schmidt Camacho (2008, 246) underscores the fact that Arenal wrote to refute the notion that Mexican women neatly fit with or internalized the hegemonic concept of the ideal third world women worker. The interviews, laden with descriptions of pain and suffering resulting from the physical toll of labour itself, as well as from the dehumanized identities foisted upon them, reveal these Mexican women's sense of displacement from their own labouring bodies, resulting in their alienation. They also reveal their refusal of the instrumental value assigned to their productive capacity (254–55).

One testimonial account, provided by a 22-year-old worker, is especially poignant in its foregrounding of the preponderance of the object as the first moment in the dialectic of object and concept, of thought and being. It becomes manifested as a moment of somatic consciousness: 'I am twenty-two years old and have been

working in the *maquila* for six years. I've lasted longer than the others'. Schmidt Camacho highlights the fact that the interviewer explains that the young woman 'makes this point at the same time that she shows the interviewer her hands, revealing fingers deformed in the bones, with enormous calluses stretching the length of both her forefingers to her wrists, a yellow-coffee color'. Arenal further includes her and her collaborator's description of the hands and their shared reaction to what they saw as well as the young woman's own reflection about the detrimental impact of global capitalism on her identity: "They look as if they were formed by layers of skin, one layer over another". Responding to our expression, she adds, "This is the cost of working there" (quoted in Schmidt Camacho 2008, 255).

This particular testimony provides us with a powerful example of the dialectical interplay and interpenetration of subject (and the subject's concept) and object in a manner that makes visible the unobserved causal structures defining the woman's identity instrumentally. Adorno's analytic of the dialectic of nonidentity is useful here. As Alcoff and Shomali underscore, he understands mediation not as a subjective act that negates or transforms the material given, but as something that proceeds from the dynamic nature of the object itself, its materiality (2010, 57).

Herein, the dialectics operates as a dynamic device, revealing that the object (here, the third world woman worker) is conceived through the subject (the stakeholders in the context of their positioning), but the object (the sensuous materiality of the experience of the object) remains otherwise than the subject's projection. In effect, as Adorno emphasizes, it harbours something beyond the concept (1973, 183). The 'more' in the object is immanent reality (161). Adorno thus affirms: 'Whatever part of nonidentity defies definition in its concept goes beyond its individual existence; it is only in polarity with the concept, in staring at the concept, that it will contract into that existence'. He goes on to state: 'The inside of nonidentity is its relation to that which it is not, and which its managed, frozen self-identity withholds from it' (163).

The object, in this case, the interviewee, who in this case is also a subject, includes the mediation of that subject in struggle with hegemonic identities attached to her objective location and imposed upon her by other subjects. Herein, this particular subject/object and other subjects/objects like her – poor brown women doing electronic circuitry work – showed that they were not 'nimble fingers', and in so doing, cancelled out the 'reality' such concepts can produce in the every day lives of workers.

The testimonial account makes visible one mediation in a constellation that makes possible the emergence of the object as this specific object (in its nonidentity). It also captures how the object shores up within itself the processes of material, sedimented history of previous moments within on-going, current processes of mediation, including the increased demands for productivity (exploitation) that eventually led to the calluses and to many girls leaving. In effect, the moment captures both how historical identities and relations become stabilized as a result of these processes of material, sedimented history as well as how they can change. This moment that the woman narrates concerning the bodily sensation of pain disintegrates the false identity (the ideal woman worker), and moves closer to the thing itself (the causal structure of global capitalism). The bodily sensation of pain also raises an ethical imperative. Adorno thus affirms: 'The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different' (1973, 203).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored two realisms: postpositivist realism and critical realism, focusing on their underlying or cultivated connections with feminist standpoint epistemology as well as on a move towards dialectics in their respective second phases. I have also offered a new line of theoretical inquiry, feminist dialectical realism and offered a qualitative study to suggest its theoretical utility. The feminist dialectical realist approach to knowledge, I have argued, does not entail moving beyond identity. Instead, it acknowledges the dialectical engagement of identities or subjects who are objects in the world and the objective, non-arbitrary, causally significant features of the world against which identities push.

Feminist dialectical realism also offers the potential to move previous iterations of postpositivist realism beyond its current impasses, in particular, in its development of an ontological approach to the real. Postpositivist realism in its first phase provided a complex set of frameworks for our understanding of the epistemic and political status of minority identities because of their positioning within the social structure. In this regard, it recognized the entanglements of the ontological and the epistemological. However, it remained too closely wedded to idealism, thereby privileging the cognitive status of the knower. On the other hand, critical realism in its first phase remained too closely wedded to the ontological, without necessary reflection on how knowledge of the real impacts moral and political concerns and, even, to a certain extent, epistemological ones. The feminist scholarship of Satsangi and New, which corresponds to the second phase of critical realism, addressed this limitation.

The feminist dialectical realism that I propose integrates the prominent feature constituting standpoint epistemology, that of positionality or achieved standpoint, but not as its first moment – that being reserved for the ontological features of human being and the linkages of these features to social structures. It foregrounds nonidentity thinking with an aim to illuminate social knowledge through its openness to generative acts of negation. A dialectics of nonidentity offers feminists working to gain knowledge of women's lives within the context of the accelerated pace of late capitalist global society the capacity to capture our objects of inquiry without reifying them or forcing their assimilation to existing concepts, thereby reverting to reified classificatory tendencies against which feminism has long pushed. In this resides its utility as a framework.

## Notes

- 1 Alcoff and Shomali are not alone in their reassessment of the 'negative' in Adorno's dialectics. See also Cook 2008; Foster 2007; and Jarvis 1998.

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