

## Introduction

‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me.’ This is the striking formula with which the narrators in Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Passion* (1988) lure their readers’ attention. A strange reassurance indeed. Telling stories, isn’t that the art of make believe? How could that be trusted? Would it not be better to reserve our trust for more veracious narrators, for reliable accounts of the real world? But, who might count as a veracious narrator? When may a subject be considered a reliable witness? What are the competency standards to which one has to comply in order to be trusted? These questions have become pertinent to contemporary philosophy.

The linguistic turn in Western philosophy is often taken to imply that, indeed, stories are all we have. In epistemology and social studies of science, the linguistic turn is most radically carried through by what is often called ‘constructivism’. A constructivist approach of knowledge turns away from the notion of knowledge as the adequate *representation* of an already given world. Instead it subscribes to the insight that all knowledge, whether ‘true’ or ‘false’, consists of constructions of reality as (if) already given. A constructivist approach also takes leave of the notion of the *subject* as the assumed source of knowledge, to focus on the constitutive role, the ‘performativity’ of *language* or *discourse* instead. From a constructivist perspective, the dividing line between literary, fictional accounts and scientific, factional accounts gets blurred: both consist of stories which try to be as convincing as possible - which want to move, teach, change their readers. Their truthfulness can no longer be taken as a distinctive criterion, since both genres use the same kind of discursive devices to achieve to what now appears to be a ‘truth-effect’.

In the present study, I line up behind the banners of constructivism. But not whole-heartedly so. My hesitation stems from the relativistic implications of the constructivist skepticism regarding truth. It seems only too small a step from observing that there are no fixed foundations, to concluding that we are left in the quicksand of no foundations. Does not constructivism deprive us of the means to assess the solidity of some knowledges over and against others?

The question is not mine alone; it is shared by many critical scholars who are reluctant to radically throw away the Enlightenment assumption that some knowledges might be ‘better’ than others. They wish to hold on to the idea that knowledge practices can contribute to processes of emancipation and empowerment - if not for this abstract entity called ‘Humanity’, then at least for these groups of people, such as women, blacks, homosexuals, disabled persons, or ‘third world’ citizens, who frequently get discounted when it comes to the attribution of humanity.

The central question guiding this study therefore will be, how to keep up the constructivist view of knowledge as a practice of *making* rather than *finding* facts, and at the same time do justice to the critical intuition that some knowledges are nevertheless more valuable than others. Or, as Donna Haraway phrased it eloquently:

“how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness” (Haraway 1991: 187).

The present study is an attempt to assess the meaning and value of Haraway’s answer to this question,

which is comprised in her concept of *situated knowledges*. In my opinion, *situated knowledges* contains the most elaborate and challenging attempt so far to combine critical and constructivist views of knowledge. But Haraway's concept does not allow for any conventional, scholarly definition. It contains a complex and multi-layered program to describe, develop and evaluate actual practices of knowledge, which, moreover, is self-reflexive in its effort to account for its own practice in terms of situated knowledge. Coming to terms with Haraway's interdisciplinary and iconoclastic work requires a new, a more innovative approach.

This thesis therefore mixes different disciplines: it derives its problem from feminist theory, it is inspired by constructivist philosophers and social studies of science, it includes insights from Black theory, makes use of narratology, takes a stand in political debates and interferes in the field of Dutch minority studies. Consequently, it speaks to different audiences: while the heart of this thesis addresses the international community of scholars in anti-racist feminist studies, it also addresses those who are interested in issues of ethnic minorities and racism in the Netherlands.

The interdisciplinary character of this thesis could be summarized by different labels, such as 'cultural studies of science', a term coined by Joseph Rouse<sup>1</sup>, or Mieke Bal's notion of 'cultural analysis'.<sup>2</sup> For the moment, I prefer to see this study as an attempt to practice *empirical philosophy*. The denominator 'empirical philosophy' has gained considerable popularity amongst the younger generation of Dutch philosophers since its joint introduction in the Low Countries by Annemarie Mol and Lolle Nauta.<sup>3</sup> This notion aptly indicates how, in the course of my research, I have consistently tried to link up a philosophical concern, i.e. the status of knowledge practices, with my concern for an empirical issue, i.e. the position of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands in the 1990s.

In order to show the full scope of Haraway's proposal of situated knowledges, Part I of this thesis will be dedicated to a comprehensive sketch of the territory of constructivist and feminist theories of knowledge. In these discussions, I will continuously return to the disputed issues of representation, language and the subject.

Chapter 1 focuses on the work of three renowned contemporary philosophers, who are generally considered as constructivist critics of epistemology: Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour. How do these different thinkers fit the label of constructivism, and how does each of them handle the familiar charges of relativism?

The subsequent chapters show the variety of feminist responses to prevailing theories and practices of knowledge. They specifically differ from each other in their digestion of the paradox of gender, which any critical feminist project inevitably invokes. Regarding each I set forth to which extent it goes along with the constructivist take on epistemology, and on which points their paths separate. Thus, chapter 2 provides a discussion of the projects of Evelyn Fox Keller and Lorraine Code, who both use the notion of gender as a critical prism to develop their views of science and knowledge. Chapter 3 goes into the recent versions of so-called standpoint thinking as developed by Patricia Hill Collins and Sandra Harding, and sets out the problematic sides of standpoint thought. I conclude this overview with an assessment of what I see as the necessary ingredients for an approach of knowledge which simultaneously accounts for the constructivist claim of the relative validity of all knowledge, and the critical assessment that some accounts are more valid than others all the same.

In chapter 4, I explain why the work of Donna Haraway manages to digest these different ingredients best. I put particular emphasis on what I perceive as the crucial, but frequently ignored differences between the knowledge-political programs of Harding and Haraway. At times also in disagreement with Haraway's own suggestions, I question the assumption that situated knowledges is merely a sophisticated version of standpoint thinking. To sustain this position, I will argue that

Haraway's concept contains at least three dimensions of meaning: a descriptive, a normative and a visionary one, and that ignoring either of these does injustice to the richness of Haraway's views.

From the mainly philosophical discussion in Part I, I turn to analyses of more empirical subject matters in Part II. Chapters 5 to 8 focus on different aspects of the recent discourse on ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. They are preceded by a short introduction, which supplies background information about the social and political landscape of Dutch society, and the position of Dutch ethnic minorities since the 1950s. The subsequent chapters are attempts to grasp the different dimensions of 'situated knowledges' more fully.

Chapter 5 begins with a reading of the discourse of so-called 'new realism' in the Netherlands. It discusses three significant moments in the Dutch public debate, instigated by different representatives of this position: by Herman Vuijsje in 1986, by Frits Bolkestein in 1991, and by Bernadette de Wit in 1993. This part of the case study particularly explores the descriptive meaning of the concept of situated knowledges.

Chapter 6 zooms in on one particular, much disputed study on the occurrence and mechanisms of everyday racism. Philomena Essed's contribution to the Dutch minorities discourse is in radical opposition to the 'new realist' interventions. I read her *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991) as a case of 'oppositional realism', and as exemplary for the normative dimension of situated knowledges. As such it also provides a telling illustration of the problems I discerned earlier in the logic of standpoint thinking. I therefore propose to shift the critical perspective, and conceive of the understanding of reality in terms of stories, rather than of knowledges.

Chapter 7 is a first attempt to explore the possibilities of a more narrative reading of knowledge practices. Within the variety of texts concerning the position of ethnic minorities, I discern three different genres. According to the different ways in which the relationships within the narrative triangle of author, protagonists and audience are organized, it is possible to distinguish the genres of denunciation, empowerment and emancipation. Each genre appears to represent a different case of situated knowledges.

Chapter 8 closes off the case study with the introduction of a fourth genre of discourse, that of heterogeneity. I will argue why the partial and risky stories of these texts come most close to the visionary dimension of situated knowledges.

Part III, finally, consists of one, relatively short chapter. On the basis of a comprehensive recapitulation of the foregoing lines of argumentation, chapter 9 ends with a proposal to conceive of the knowledge-political program of situated knowledges in terms of style.

As this outline already indicates, the trajectory of this study deviates from the usual line of argumentation in a philosophical thesis. Rather than the circular route, which starts with and returns to the initial question or hypothesis, the subsequent chapters of this study require to be read in a more linear mode, like the episodes in a continuing story. Each takes up the thread of the argument where the previous one left off in a dynamic stream of interrelated yet shifting connections. Together, they make up a trajectory which takes the reader to quite a different destination from where s/he started off. Evidently, I will give ample directions for the journey, and explain when and why I shift my mode of discourse. But it might be wise to provide the reader with some preliminary indications at the outset.

Thus, the first marked displacement in the course of my account takes place in the transition from Part I (chapters 1 to 4), in which the problem of situated knowledges is discussed in a theoretical mode, to Part II (chapters 5 to 8), where I explore the notion of situated knowledges with the help of a

case study, with the help of a more empirical subject-matter. The second displacement takes place half-way the case study. That is, while the readings of the discourses of 'new realism' and *Understanding Everyday Racism* in chapters 5 and 6 are guided by epistemological questions concerning knowledge, representation and the subject, chapters 7 and 8 read samples of knowledge practices on ethnic minorities by looking at their narrative features. Thus, while my thesis starts with questions about how to produce reliable, 'true', knowledge, it ends with the problem of how to tell 'good' stories, stories that can be trusted.

'I am telling you stories. Trust me'. The incantation returns at the end of *The Passion*, when the reader has travelled through Winterson's enchanting imaginary world, a realistic fairy-tale, a fantasized historical account. She has read the stories told by two narrators, of whom she has never become quite sure whether they are male or female, human or monstrous, or whether she should take their accounts literally or figuratively. But she has been caught by their passions and obsessions. For they were recognizable, unambiguous, uncompromising - real. When the story of *The Passion* ends, its reader has already come to realize that the gift she is so urgently asked to accept, is not 'truth' or 'reality'. It is the stories themselves. As stories are all we have, so the narrator suggests, the quality of our stories matters greatly - and, trust me, I offer you 'good' stories, stories that will move you, teach you, change you.<sup>4</sup>

The author of the present study does not possess half of the literary self-confidence or skill of Winterson's superb story-tellers. The itinerary mapped out in this thesis - I will not deceive you, dear reader - is surely less enchanting and more trying. Nevertheless, it is my task to lead you through my empirical-philosophical account of situated knowledges in such a way as to make you feel positively challenged to confront it with other points of view - with equally but differently situated stories.

## Notes

1. See Rouse 1996 for an extensive and sympathetic explanation of this term. Sharon Traweek and Donna Haraway figure as Rouse's exemplary scholars of 'cultural studies of science'.
2. The reason that Bal wishes to replace the current term 'cultural studies' with 'cultural analysis' is that the latter puts more emphasis on the "cohabitation of theoretical reflection and reading in which the 'object' from subject matter becomes subject, participating in the construction of theoretical views" (Bal 1996: 11).
3. Opinions differ as to who first introduced the term in the Netherlands. Mol 1994 uses it in close conversation with Nauta's reflections on philosophy and the notions of 'exemplary situation' and 'context' (Nauta 1986; see also Nauta 1985 and 1990), whereas Nauta 1996 refers to 'empirical philosophy' as a practice introduced by Mol and Harbers 1994. In any case, the label of 'empirical philosophy' is gradually gaining popularity in the regions of Dutch philosophy. See for instance the editorial to the renewed edition of *Krisis* (Krisis 1997). Most telling, the journal *Kennis en Methode* [Knowledge and Method], which carried as its subtitle 'Journal for the philosophy of science and methodology' recently changed its title to: *K&M. Journal for empirical philosophy* (see *K&M* 1997).
4. With thanks to Rosi Braidotti who suggested reading *The Passion* at a time when I really needed a story like this.