

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: “Trans*formative Experiences”

Author: Rachel McKinnon

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis:

Considering trans* people’s experiences, specifically their experiences of gender transition, has significant import for epistemology in two ways: 1) regarding transformative experiences, it reveals that while we may not be able to know what it will be like after we undergo such an experience, we may know what it will be like if we do not, which affects the rationality of our decision-making; and 2) these experiences reveal that “radical changes to one’s social identity and location give one important new access to knowledge that was unavailable or prohibitively difficult to obtain prior to the change.” This is an underexplored area within feminist standpoint epistemology.

Key Definitions:

Transformative experience – Certain experiences are “epistemically transformative” so that you cannot know what it is like to have undergone the experience without actually undergoing it, and also personally transformative, which means they alter your preferences. This means that you can’t rationally decide whether it’s a good idea to undergo such an experience, because you cannot properly weight the utility of it relative to your other options: “one cannot be rational in deciding what to do when faced with deciding about undertaking a transformative experiences[sic] because one cannot know ‘what it’s like’ or what it will be like, after one has made the choice....one cannot know what *one* will be like—what one’s preferences will be – after a transformative experience.” Examples include becoming a parent, or, as McKinnon argues, gender transition.

Brief Summary:

- McKinnon argues that gender transition is a paradigmatic transformative experience, in LA Paul’s sense of the term: it is epistemically and personally transformative
 - o So, choosing to transition is a “transformative decision” and runs into the problems that Paul associates with that
- Paul argues that “insofar as one must be able to at least attach approximate utilities to each of the possible outcomes of a transformative experience... one can’t make a normatively rational choice in transformative experience decisions”
- McKinnon argues that the transition case shows we can know what the expected utility of *not* undergoing the transformative experience would be
 - o Many trans* people know that not transitioning will likely be very bad
 - o And this means that it is rational to choose to transition, though you can’t really know what it will be like to do so
- McKinnon then turns to standpoint epistemology
 - o Feminist standpoint epistemology generally claims something like this: “members of oppressed groups are often in a better epistemic position to see the oppressive nature of social institutions”

- Three theses: situated knowledge, epistemic privilege, and achievement
 - 1) one's social location (in part determined by identity) is generally important to epistemic access; social location can be both a block and an asset to knowledge;
 - 2) epistemic privilege: "those with a particular situatedness...have, as a consequence of having their identity within a social structure, an epistemic advantage in accessing certain kinds of knowledge, especially of the structures of oppression themselves"; i.e. oppressed people might be epistemically privileged re: the systems of oppression that affect their lives, whereas those privileged by those systems may be less able to achieve that knowledge;
 - 3) achievement thesis: "knowledge isn't something passively gained from the world...knowledge is gained through struggling with the world, with particular attention to one's situatedness and social structures".
- But, she claims, little has been written about how changes in social position can affect you as a knower
 - "this is what a gender transition is like: one is forced to struggle with radically different experiences. One becomes changed as a knower, almost magically, often whether one wants to or not. So while changes in one's contingent second natures typically involves much conscious effort, the epistemic changes one faces when one radically changes one's situatedness, such as through a gender transition, is different in both degree and kind."
 - She considers whether other sorts of radical changes in social position are generally practically possible
 - What about changes in race?
 - McKinnon discusses the difference between gender transition and people who claim to change their race, using the example of "Black like me" – a book about a white man who "goes undercover" as black in the mid-20th century US; she argues that the man (Griffin) did gain some knowledge from this "experiment" but didn't properly inhabit a Black identity, because it was treated as temporary
 - She argues that race is different from gender and that racial "transitions" are not legitimate in part because of the way that race has a genetic/historical aspect that sex/gender do not
 - This seems to be a problem for anti-racist movements

Possible Applications:

Epistemology
 Gender & Feminism
 Social and Political Philosophy
 Bioethics

Complementary Texts/Resources:

L.A. Paul, "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting"
 L.A. Paul, "Precis of *Transformative Experience*"
 L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience*

Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl*

Charles Mills, "White Ignorance"

Linda Martín Alcoff, "Sotomayor's Reasoning"

Linda Martín Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment"

Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness"

WEB DuBois, *Souls of Black Folks*

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

Rachel McKinnon's Youtube video on feminist standpoint epistemology

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnTOnZUtz-g&t=1129s>)

Possible Class Activities:

- Have students discuss whether going to college/study abroad is a transformative experience
 - To inject some humor: <http://www.theonion.com/article/6-day-visit-to-rural-african-village-completely-ch-35083>
- Ask students if there are things that they understand now but that their high school selves *could not* have understood. Have them think about whether their high school selves were in a position to make informed decisions about these things.
 - Think about "rites of passage" (e.g. losing virginity)
- Have students think about whether, given the option, they would become vampires. Can you really know what it's like to be a vampire before you become one?
 - Have them watch Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*