

Let's Recommit to Just and Democratic Truth-Telling Practices

Brenda Solomon

Abstract

As it seems more difficult to rely on points in common and shared terms to make sense of what is happening among and between ourselves and others in the world, it is critical that we remember the strides we have made in our relationship to truth and truth-telling and carry on with our shared project toward a more complex, just, and democratic truth. Considering the dishonest tactics, outright lies, and manipulations that threaten our aims, we should not relent by countering with a comparably narrow, absolute, and simple truth, or with claims that we indeed have the truth. Instead we should commit to building trust and extending our practices of truth-telling that take time and a good deal of care.

Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

—John 8:32 (King James Version)

I am most familiar with this well-known reference to truth as the inscription encircling the bottom of the dome at Hendrick's Chapel on Syracuse University's campus, where I was a graduate student. Sometimes when I was unsure about the direction of my life, I would go to Hendrick's and invariably read that inscription and wonder what it must be like to believe in *the truth*. It was hard for me to fathom; the truth was not kind to me.

Know your truth.

This is something that may be said to someone struggling with a vision and direction for their life and likely was said to me during my own times of uncertainty. I have wondered about the relationship between *my* truth and *the* truth. Is my truth a way of expressing *the* truth? A deviation from the truth? Can *my* truth be good and right if it is not *the* truth? Will truth ever open up enough for my truth to fit in?

As a doctoral student, I had the privilege of learning Dorothy Smith's ideas about truth from Dorothy Smith herself. In Smith's teachings about "telling the truth after post-modernism" (see Smith 1996 and 1999), she discusses the social act of "referring" (1999, 114) that has stayed with me through the years. To begin with, Smith tells of the seemingly simple act of naming: "First, point a finger toward something you wish to name. Second, as you align another's gaze with your

own, say, 'Look!' Third, turn in the direction of where you are pointing and name the object. And finally, when the person locates the object and repeats the name, say, 'Yes!'"

As Smith (1999, 114–27) asserts, this is how we begin to index our world as small children, learn the features of a subject taught at school, and perhaps, in a less conspicuous way, reference and navigate our everyday lives. In one way or another, it is how we know our world and our place in it. This social relational process of referring that seems so simple and common and settled and essential, is, after all, invariably connected to a history of contestation whereby some claim-makers' ways of naming and terms were accepted and some were not, and where some meanings fell away and others took hold. Perhaps agreeing to a term such as truth is much more charged because it is not so easy to point to and identify as a bird, a plane, or an apple. The claims to the term and its meaning are ambiguous at best. At any point, truth is more complicated than just that.

The term itself and what is accepted as the truth occur within a social process of forming terms and agreements about the meaning of those terms. Those agreements appear to be inevitable as they are repeated over an extended time. But if called into question, the social-relational features of the term and the practices and agreements that hold the term as a stable reference may be unsettled (Derrida 1978).

It seems to me that what feels particularly destabilizing is that we are not examining the truth about birds or planes or apples but, rather, at this time, most critically, our examination is about truth itself—the truth about how we know our world and what we believe we know about it and ourselves in it.

We are asking questions that point to the processes and substance of our claims. That is, we are examining the actual act of claiming truth: our use of language to make claims, our practices of telling, and the meanings we assign to the terms we use in everyday speech (see Berger and Luckmann 1966).

In a general sense, throughout history, our inquiries have focused on what seems to have mattered most. In Western historical accounts, it is common to note how, over time, societies have oriented attention to the sun, to God, and then man. Most recently, there has been attention to the production of knowledge itself. How knowledge relies on the observations of an observer, the period in which the observations are made, and the distribution of social power to frame questions, make observations, and tell *what is*. Thus, our interest has shifted away from what we can learn about our world to wondering how people have put the world together as it is. Considering Dorothy Smith's remarks once again, you could say social inquiry has taken a critical interest in the simple act of referring that is informed by and informs the shape of our lives and the world we live in. And we are doing so with an urgency to address harm, right wrongs, and try to save the planet. Not so simple at all.

And so if truth is not a given, something pre-textual or essential but rather a social action, then how did we get to what we take as the truths of our time?

Going back to the beginning of this text, where does *my truth* fit in, and does this inquiry into how we make our world with words suggest truth could be open-ended with opportunities for a way of telling truth that could include my truth?

It seems to me that thinking about truth as an ongoing striving among people rather than as something *out there* exclusively in the hands of the sun, or a God, or an all-knowing man of some sort that we must surrender to, at once creates possibilities for living a life that hold promise and may be quite liberating (DeVault 1999).

Power and Privilege and What Gets to Be Truth

Mostly, I think about truth beyond my relationship with inscriptions in chapels and the prospect of going to hell.

You could say that I have made a career out of accounting for the constituting elements of various truths. I am a sociologist and social worker who has written as an institutional ethnographer to show what we take as truth related to women in welfare and work (Solomon 2001, 2003, 2006a), attachment theory in child welfare (Solomon 2002), teachers' discursive practices to claim student violence (Solomon 2006b), and the extralocal notions of medicine, security, and mental health that elaborate the work of detection (Solomon 2014, 2023).

In the academy, attention to the processes and practices of claiming truth are hard to ignore.

Those of us who consider our work as social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966), postmodern (Bourdieu 1989; Derrida 1978; Foucault 1972, 1978), or, more recently, decolonizing (Held 2019; Jansen and Osterhammel 2017; Zamudio et al. 2010) and draw from critical theories such as critical race (Crenshaw 2019; Crenshaw et al. 1995) and queer theories (Butler 1999, 1997; Foucault 1978) and feminist and Black feminist standpoint theories (Crenshaw 1988, 1989, 1991, Haraway 1988, 1997; Harding 1995, 2017; Hill-Collins 1990; and Smith [1987] 2012, 1990, 2005), among others, together compel a sustained academic interest and attention to truth as social process. These inquiries into truth claims have been underway for years in the academy. And while the views stemming from these inquiries take various forms, their felt influence, if not acceptance, is undeniable.

Whenever someone acknowledges their social position (or positions) in relation to a subject matter, or how the supposition of their claims is embedded in Western practices or fails to account for subjugated points of view, they are acknowledging that the truth is not the truth. They are acknowledging that truth is not simple and settled and that this should be named and accounted for in any claim to know or tell truth.

The move to acknowledge and account for diversity, equity, and inclusion in all spheres of academic work, including our scholarship and teaching practices, could be anticipated from these kinds of critiques about knowledge and truth (Beavers 2018). Movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Occupy Wall Street likewise are part of this contextual work that shows the

relations between power and privilege and who may be accepted as truth-tellers and what may be accepted as truth.

The fragility of truth and the questioning of accepted truths have made their way into all spheres of life. Our wonderings in these ways connect with questions about truth raised in the academy but extend to our homes, workplaces, and communities.

The point of these challenges to truth is not to upend truth but rather to better account for it so that more people can participate more often in assessing and making claims, in some cases, about their own experiences or bodies. The intent is to expand democratic processes toward a more just and inclusive society that supports and extends the possibilities and prospects for living a good life.

Manufacturing Hypertruths to Discredit Challenges

Of course, this opening to examine truth in the academy and the public sphere that reveals the processes of power and privilege and how they are entwined with truth undoubtedly is viewed by some as trouble. It would seem those who have benefited most from power and privilege in truth-telling might consider these revelations threatening and be interested in attempts to put down perceived challenges. But more than that, they could exploit any challenge by using the methods of critique put forth by that challenge. That is, those who have benefited most by the way things are could assert that challengers are exerting power to discredit accepted legitimate truths and destroy an established way of life. The method of questioning truth claims once exploited could consolidate power and privilege and extend established social influence and control. After all, the new methods to assess the truth are emergent and unsettled and easier to call into question, while the long-standing practices of power and privilege are easier to recognize, accept, and follow (Solomon 2006b).

Taking the momentum generated by the methods of challengers and spinning them with the established practices of power and privilege, one could put in motion a hypertruth that insists, redirects, confuses, and disinforms.

Put simply, to defend established truths one could easily use the tactics of those who call truth into question and do so with impunity to disqualify the challengers' claims. In this way, methods to critique truth, rather than simply fueling social justice movements, could be used effectively against those movements.

As long as there are those with power who can manufacture challenges to accepted truth as an existential threat (rather than a certain existential opportunity), there will be at least a part of the citizenry ready to reinvest in the way things are and set to oppose a thoughtful consideration of truth-telling that would most likely better serve their interests (see McGhee 2021).

The Possibilities Democratic Truths May Generate

It is important here to note that the stated intention of those who critique truth is to extend what may be considered true and who may be included in the truth-telling processes so more citizens may fully participate in the democratic process and have a say in the organization of their own lives.

When critical methods are used by those who view critiques of accepted truths as a threat, the aims are very different; they are to discredit challenges to accepted truth, consolidate power, and promote a sense of security related to the way things are or used to be.

Critical analyses of accepted truth are aimed at forming a more just society, including more people and perspectives, and opening more diverse contexts to explore and claim truth. Such critiques do not seek to corrupt, exclude, or displace anyone.

You may be able to understand how people who have, in some way, controlled the discourse and have had their say could feel uncomfortable with more people setting the agenda and discursive shape of the conversation, with time to speak and have a say themselves. Yet, to be sure, the discomfort of those who have been most comfortable doesn't make sharing power and privilege with more people less right, good, or fair.

A more just practice of truth-telling and assessing and making claims to truth means having more people in your hometown, community, country, and world who feel at home, content, and part of what matters, not to mention safe and secure. A way of carrying on together and assessing truth that could lead to wide-reaching mutual respect is exciting to most of us and has benefits for any of us who wish to contribute to the social good in a way that more fully acknowledges and rewards those at work in producing those benefits.

Striving toward a Just and Democratic View of Truth Practices

I am afraid that the extreme and sustained reaction to just practices of truth-telling has shifted attention away from our project of expanding the democratic terms of truth and that the tendency to protect our position has drawn us into the practices of power and control, to take a side and fight.

At the point we agree to these adversarial tactics, the conditions for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive approach to truth narrow and the promise of our gains diminishes. I'm reminded of Audre Lorde's (1984) vigorous warning against using the established mechanisms of power to dismantle power; her warning has relevance today and should be heeded.

It seems that when we feel a need to defend ourselves, it is too easy to fall back into more polarizing and narrow ways of assessing and claiming truth. As much as I empathize with this inclination, clearly, at times like these, it is important to refrain from such tactics and recommit to a more complex accounting of truth in our claims to it.

Holding Each Our Portion and Part Together

When I saw this call for papers that had to do with telling the truth now, with less and less confidence in what truth is and how to gather a truth together that can hold and people can hold to, I immediately thought about what has been bothering me lately. It is not that a shared reality is difficult to piece together because there is disinformation that purposefully misleads, or gaslighting that has you believing that what you take as truth is not truth at all, or fake images and manipulations of texts, photos, and videos that boggle the mind. I think all of these maneuvers are an extension of the dishonest practices that have become taken for granted as we've slipped little by little into despair about what and whom to trust.

What I find most troubling are signs that it has become more difficult to hold on to our carefully gathered and assembled democratic and just practices of truth and truth-telling to be drawn into a fight over the narrow and constrained notions about who can claim and what is *the* truth. I am concerned that things have gotten so contentious that those who for so long have been committed to a more complex account of truth at times feel compelled to claim, quite simply and defiantly, "We have the truth on our side!"

To me, what we have at best are good intentions and a method to tell and assess truth by way of sincere participation in a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable approach to being together—and, all and all, that is a lot.

What is dangerous and defeating is to retreat from the consequential strides we have made.

While it is important to acknowledge the effort, care, and time required, democratic and just truth-telling practices should not be abandoned when they are in peril. We should not involve ourselves in an inauthentic process to counter nontruths or fake and false tactics but rather continue unapologetically practicing truth on terms that we have generated. We should commit as a people, as a nation of people and beyond, to adhere to what we value in assessing and speaking truth toward a more complex truth that acknowledges and accounts for more of us and ways of being true to ourselves and one another, and to other nonhuman beings and the planet for that matter.

We should do so as if our lives, the whole nation, and the entire earth depended on it because our lives, nation, and planet are at stake.

Thinking back, I consider the importance to my life that, as a student, I had some means to contemplate the meaning of the truth inscribed in Hendrick's Chapel on the Syracuse campus, and, at the same time, consider what was true for me in the moment. I had support for this wondering and concern. And in time, I listened and thought, tying things together and forming a tentative what-matters-to-me (within and perhaps stretching the possibilities of an accepted what-matters).

During a time when beliefs, affiliations, and membership may be privileged over thoughtful consideration of ideas and events, and technologies distort to the point of absurdity, it is even

more urgent that we wonder with concern for what matters, searching ourselves, listening, and attending for the sake of our time and future life.

Brenda Solomon is associate professor of social work at the University of Vermont, and yet a student of institutional ethnography, who has written about institutional and discursive practices governing welfare and work, child welfare, and school violence.

References

- Beavers, Dana. 2018. "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework." Greenlining Institute, March 5. <http://greenling.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Racial-Equity-Framework.pdf>.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1: 14–25.
- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. "Critically Queer." In *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories*, edited by Shane Phelan, 11–29. New York: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1988. "Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-discrimination Law." *Harvard Law Review* 101, no. 7: 1331–87.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139–67.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July): 1241–99.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 2019. "Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Formation of Critical Race Theory." In *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz, 52–84. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds. 1995. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. New York: New Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by A. Bass. London: Routledge &

Kegan Paul.

DeVault, Marjorie. 1999. *Liberating Method*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn): 575–99.

Haraway, Donna. 1997. "The Persistence of Vision." In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury 283–95. New York: Columbia University Press.

Harding, Sandra. 1995. "'Strong Objectivity': A Response to the New Objectivity Question." *Synthese* 104: 331–49.

Harding, Sandra. 2017. *Who's Science? Who's Knowledge?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Held, Mirjam B. E. 2019. "Decolonizing Research Paradigms in the Context of Settler Colonialism: An Unsettling, Mutual, and Collaborative Effort." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18: 1–16.

Hill-Collins, Patricia. 1990. "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination." In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 221–38. New York: Routledge. <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/252.html>.

Jansen, Jan C., and Jürgen Osterhammel. 2017. *Decolonization: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lorde, Audre. (1984) 2020. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, 100–03. Berkeley, CA: Crossing. Reprint, New York: Penguin Books.

McGhee, Heather. 2021. *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. New York: One World.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1987) 2012. *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Smith, Dorothy E. 1990. *The Conceptual Practices of Power*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1996. "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism." *Symbolic Interaction* 19: 171–201.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 1999. *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Smith, Dorothy E. 2005. *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2001. "The Ins and Outs of Welfare-to-Work: Women as They Enter and Exit a Nursing Assistant Employment and Training Program in Upstate New York." *Sociology and Social Welfare* 28, no. 3: 157–86.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2002. "A Social Constructionist Approach to Theorizing Child Welfare: Considering Attachment Theory and Ways to Reconstruct Practice." *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 22, no. 1/2: 131–49.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2003. "A 'Know It All' with a 'Pet Peeve' Meets 'Underdogs' Who 'Let Her Have It': Producing Low-Waged Women Workers in a Welfare-to-Work Training Program." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 6: 693–727.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2006a. "'Go It Alone' Poverty in a Small City: Pockets of Poor Housing, the Scrutiny of 'Busybodies,' and Difficulty Accessing Support." *Journal of Poverty* 10, no. 4: 27–50.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2006b. "Traditional and Rights-Informed Talk about Violence: High School Educators' Discursive Production of Student Violence." *Youth & Society* 37, no. 3: 251–86.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2014. "What Matters Most in Living and Dying: Pressing through Detection Trying to Connect." In *Narrating Social Work through Autoethnography*, edited by Stanley Witkin, 177–96. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Solomon, Brenda. 2023. "'Just Trying to Do My Job': Accounting for the Institutional Ethnographer's Sensibility in Everyday Life." In *Critical Commentary on Institutional Ethnography: IE Scholars Speak to Its Promise*, edited by Paul C. Luken and Suzanne Vaughan, 11–25. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zamudio, Margaret, Christopher Russell, Francisco Rios, and Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman. 2010. *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.