

# Meaning and validation through alternative epistemology (sidewalk and real women ...

[Entertainment](#)



In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins responds to the idea that institutionalized oppression is the result of distorted identity, in which marginalized groups either identify with their oppressors and thus lack the means to validate their experience or are somehow inferior to their oppressors and do not have the agency to recognize their maltreatment. However, she suggests that rather than being unable to consciously perceive their subordinate position, oppressed groups experience a different reality that is invalidated by the reality imposed by the dominant group. Collins adds that rather than yielding to both the standard roles and epistemology defined by society, individuals create their own understandings of the world through experience. This theory, expanded in application of other marginalized groups, is exemplified in Michael Duneier's *Sidewalk* and Josephina López's *Real Women Have Curves*, which both highlight the experiences of marginalized people who recognize their discounted existences and resist the invalidating demands of their respective society's formal economy. Duneier displays this through New York sidewalk life and its vendors, who face pressure from both their community's legislative measures and the social stigma that oppose their unconventional lifestyle, while López presents this through the intersectional experience of low-income, Hispanic women. Although the people in *Sidewalk* and the women in *Real Women Have Curves* endure different afflictions, both simultaneously persist and resist within their respective societies through the mediatory world of an informal economy, allowing them to acknowledge their subordination and find meaning despite their oppression. I will defend this thesis by first explaining how both groups experience and recognize

marginalization by their respective society's reigning epistemology, then describe the role of the informal economy and alternative forms of knowledge, and finally illustrate how both texts' marginalized people embody Collins's theory of resistance through awareness and the development of self-defined meaning.

In both *Sidewalk* and *Real Women Have Curves*, the marginalized groups recognize their subordinate social positions, which are caused by invalidation from the predominant epistemology overruling both their material and ideological existences. Although Duneier observes that sidewalk vendors can be seen as beneficial public characters, who act as “ eyes upon the street” (Duneier, 8), their presence still seems to oppose a greater social ideal of moral worth, which extends beyond the daily happenings of sidewalk life. This is caused by the stereotypes against sidewalk vendors, which Duneier attributes to the “ broken windows” theory, suggesting that “ minor signs of disorder lead to serious crimes” (Duneier, 10). This mentality is not only embodied ideologically but is reinforced physically, through government mandated social controls, such as decreasing the space for vending or throwing vendors' belongings in the trash – direct means of ridding the streets of their unconventionality, appearing as ‘ signs of disorder.’ This is further perpetuated by informal controls, such as restaurants requiring purchase before using the bathroom. Even though this could be seen as a means to keep bathroom commodities for the use of just customers, Mudrick, one of the street vendors, suggests that this is a false justification by pointing out that others were allowed to enter the restroom despite not being a customer, while he was not (Duneier, 174). These are manifestations

of the primary epistemology, which generally disregards the reality of sidewalk life, constituting a close community and fostering trust, and instead, relies on stereotypes, specifically against the lower socioeconomic class. The women in *Real Women Have Curves* similarly experience marginalization through stereotypes. The dominant epistemology is displayed through their internalized views and conflicts with social controls, one of which is the body ideal. It imposes a standard on not only how women's bodies should look, but also how they should be used. While flipping through a porn magazine, Estela exclaims, " People this fat shouldn't be having sex! Ichhh!" (López, 29) and Rosali, who is has been starving herself and regularly consuming diet pills, later confesses, " I've felt fat ever since I can remember, and I didn't want anybody to touch me until I got thin," (López, 67). Both directly exemplify the internalization of the ideal body image, as Estela is bewildered by the idea that fat women could be sexy, and Rosali is ashamed, because she does not fit the archetype. However, this ideal is more complex than the fact that ' slim' bodies are considered a prerequisite to being beautiful or sexy, for this is not always true. Estela sees another kind of beauty. She does not want to be praised for how she looks, but instead by her intelligence. And even though she does not fit the ideal body type, it does not prevent her from being objectified for her looks. Estela illustrates this in describing her date with Andrés, when he says, " I don't care if you're fat. I like you even better, more to grab," (López, 67). Thus, even though ' slim' bodies seem to be favored by the general consensus, the ideal body is beyond how it looks, also including how it is used. These women recognize the oppression caused by this body ideal, and

show that the dominant epistemology, which values women's bodies as submissive entities, still overshadows opposing ideals, which are created from the women's experiences. Despite recognizing their subordination, both Mudrick and the women show that the epistemologies formed by marginalized groups are invalidated by the primary epistemology embodied by the society as a whole.

In both texts, the oppressed groups endure their mistreatment through an informal economy, which faces less pressure from the epistemology held by the formal economy and allows for the expression of alternative forms of knowledge. Duneier explains the idea of an informal economy through the degrees of a "Fuck it" mentality, in which people can choose to reject the formal economy but still care enough to recognize society's basic standards and uphold them (Duneier, 60). This standard primarily consists of productivity and psychological well-being. So, despite that sidewalk vending isn't considered a conventional career, it still enables people to reach a similar kind of self-fulfillment as in the formal economy. This is exemplified through Hakim, who is described as "a symbol of precisely those values necessary to live in accordance with ideals of self-worth," (Duneier, 38). Hakim tells Duneier that he had come from a corporate workplace, a standard field of the formal economy, but chose to work on the streets. Yet despite Hakim's understanding that, "many African-American students ... believe that it will be very difficult for them to maintain their integrity while working in corporate life," Duneier notes that "Hakim had clearly made what would be a radical... decision by the standards of African American students," (Duneier, 23). This juxtaposition between what the students feel is

true and how they choose to act further highlights the power of the society's central epistemology, which despite being unfavorable to African-Americans students is still held as a valid criterion by these students. But although Hakim's economic status isn't highly regarded, he believed that, " As a vendor of black books... he would have work that was meaningful – that sustained him economically and intellectually," (Duneier, 24), asserting his own value of worth over what others think. *Real Women Have Curves* similarly illustrates this through the informal economy of Estela's workshop. Ana demonstrates the internalized shame in working in these conditions when she recounts running into an old friend and describes, " When she was still in high school she told me she knew I was going to do something with my life. I don't want her to know I work here," (López, 46). Society's disregard for their work is also demonstrated when Ana says, " I never realized just how much work... went into making it. Then I imagine the dress at Bloomingdale's and I see a tall and skinny woman... she instantly gets it... She doesn't think of the life of the dress before the rack, of the labor put into it," (López, 57). While Ana recognizes the value of her work, she simultaneously embodies the dominant epistemology that undermines its worth, similar to the African-American students described in *Sidewalk*. Conversely, Estella asserts the value in her work when she fears being deported and says, " I would have let you and everybody down. I'll lose everything that I've worked for, the factory, and my self-respect," (López, 49) thus, identifying with her sweatshop as a validating means of work, like Hakim. In both *Sidewalk* and *Real Women Have Curves*, Hakim and Estela embody the benefits of an informal economy by saying " fuck it" to the

formal economy's ideals and epistemology, preferring their own values of worth and maintaining them in the informal economy, where they can embrace this value that is contrary to convention but nonetheless genuine.

Through awareness of their oppression and the creation of self-defined meaning, both the street vendors and women resist the coercive mechanisms of the formal economy, through what Collins describes as the creation of separate epistemological entities that validate their experiences and reconcile their reality with conventional values. She notes that in the typical "Eurocentric Masculinist knowledge-validation process," subjectivity is regarded as a bias that invalidates a knowledge claim (Collins, 751).

However, in both *Sidewalk* and *Real Women Have Curves*, experience is integral to understanding and navigating oppressive conditions. In *Sidewalk*, Jerome, one of Hakim's customers, recognizes the importance of "black books," explaining, "It teaches you about yourself... Because if you read what society says, then being black is like the sin of the earth," (Duneier, 33). And in *Real Women Have Curves*, Ana concludes that, "...in their subtle ways, [the women] taught me about resistance. About a battle no one was fighting for them except themselves... the loneliness of being an immigrant woman in a country that looks down on us for being mothers and submissive women. With their work that seems... unimportant, they are fighting," (López, 79). Both express that marginalized groups must find ways to validate themselves by their own means because their societies do not.

Thus, alternative epistemologies are necessary, since accepting the dominant epistemology would be to simultaneously accept their 'insignificance.' Furthermore, this requires the "capacity for empathy," in

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which knowledge is validated through the iterative dialogue of shared experiences. The sidewalk and sweatshop, as informal economies, foster the development of an “ epistemology of connection in which truth emerges through care,” (Collins, 767) through liaisons such as Hakim and Estela, who not only mediate their own existences but can help others do the same. Both marginalized groups uphold the most basic social values but must reconcile this with the invalidation of their means towards productiveness and well-being through adhering to alternative epistemologies that allow them to find meaning in their otherwise ‘ insignificant’ work.

Despite that the vendors in Sidewalk are invalidated by both government sanctions and stereotypes, while the women in Real Women Have Curves combat the discrepancies between their internalized conventions and their experiences, both utilize the informal economy to endure their hardships and resist the coercive ideals of the formal economy through the development of alternative epistemologies. Collins’s theory supports that marginalized groups’ mechanisms of knowledge-validation are no less valid than the dominating ones and further claims that they threaten the prevalent epistemology. Thus, through understanding and validating their experiences, the marginalized groups are able to find meaning and use it to empower themselves within a society that attempts to discredit them. However, Collins’s theory does not explain if they can overcome their oppression, or if they will always have to continue reconciling their realities.



## References

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