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Epistemic Injustice in White Academic Feminism

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EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN WHITE ACADEMIC FEMINISM

by

MARY MEG DONNELLY

Under the Direction of Christie Hartley, PhD

ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the ways in which white feminist academics commit epistemic injustice in their approach to the work of women of color (WOC). Drawing from feminist epistemology, particularly the works of Miranda Fricker, Gaile Pohlhaus, and Kristie Dotson, I aim to show that white feminist academics' (WFA) treatment of WOC's work takes the form of *willful hermeneutical ignorance* that results in *contributory injustice*. Among the objections I address is the concern that attempts to solve the problem of contributory injustice may lead to the epistemic exploitation of WOC, as well as the fact that WFAs themselves face a second-class status within academic philosophy.

INDEX WORDS: Epistemic injustice, feminist epistemology, feminist philosophy

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to everyone who has supported me through this program. I am especially grateful to my parents; my sister, Monica; my boyfriend, William; my MA peers; and my students, who helped me remember why I came to love philosophy in the first place.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1989, Patricia Hill Collins described the double bind black feminist academics face when attempting to express what they know:

Black women who choose to remain in academia must accept the possibility that their knowledge claims will be limited to those claims about Black women that are consistent with a white male worldview. And yet those African-American women who leave academia may find their work is inaccessible to scholarly communities. (Collins 1989, 773)

This tension between an “academically acceptable”—but incomplete—expression of knowledge and a more authentic—but overlooked—articulation ultimately leads Black women and other women of color (WOC) to have their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences not fully recognized within academic settings. Although many of us would like to believe that academia has made great progress in the nearly thirty years since Collins wrote this piece, Black feminist voices are still rarely heard within scholarly communities, particularly within philosophy. According to data collected in 2013, “of the 13,000 professional philosophers in the country, 55 are Black women...Of the 55, 30% were Ph.D students; 35% held tenured positions” (Haslanger 2017). As Kristie Dotson has consistently pointed out, it is not clear “whether the field of philosophy has the capacity to sustain the work of diverse peoples” (Dotson 2012, 3). Black feminists, she argues, find themselves between a “rock and hard place” within philosophy, struggling to have their voices heard within a field that insists on writing about “original ideas” while at the same time ignoring the many ideas of Black feminists and other women of color (Dotson 2016, 47).

One of the greatest obstacles to WOC’s attempts to gain equal recognition within academic feminism, in particular, has been their white feminist counterparts. Though feminism

aims to end injustice for all women, white feminists and white feminist academics (WFAs)¹ have played a significant role in limiting the voices of WOC. From Sojourner Truth's landmark 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman" to Mariana Ortega's 2006 critique of white feminists as "lovingly, knowingly ignorant," a common theme in the work of women of color has been white feminism's historic misinterpretation, willful ignorance, and misuse of the lives and experiences of WOC.

In this paper, I use feminist epistemology to help explain the underlying epistemic causes and implications of this problematic relationship. Specifically, I will argue that white feminist academics' mistreatment of women of color is caused in part by willful hermeneutical ignorance, ultimately resulting in contributory injustice. I begin by summarizing the theories of epistemic injustice relevant to my argument, utilizing the concept of sexual harassment to help illustrate the theories. I then apply these theories to the ways in which WFAs interact with WOC and their work, arguing that their failures are not always the result of simple epistemic bad luck or a different standpoint, but at times due to a willful desire to avoid confronting their privilege. Finally, I consider both potential solutions and objections, focusing in particular on the burdens that overcoming this epistemic injustice may have on WOC and WFAs, as well as the implications that this problem may have for academic philosophy.²

¹ This paper will utilize the term "white feminist academic" to refer to white academics whose scholarly work focuses on feminism. Though the paper focuses on problems within the field of philosophy and subfield of feminist philosophy, I have decided to use "white feminist academic" instead of "white feminist philosopher" in order to show both the broader problems that occur (and potential solutions that can be found) within academic feminism.

² Though this paper will focus on the ways in which white feminists relate to the experiences of women of color, many of the arguments regarding epistemic injustices can likely be applied to other marginalized groups. This includes trans* folks, individuals with disabilities, and any other groups that have not received sufficient and fully engaged attention from academic feminism.

2 EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

2.1 Fricker: Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

Miranda Fricker's seminal work *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* has largely been credited with the recent surge in interest in epistemic injustice. Though my own argument relies more heavily on the epistemic theories that followed from it, particularly those of Kristie Dotson and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., explaining Fricker's theory helps to clarify both the origin and significance of these subsequent theories.

Fricker identifies two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. First, consider *testimonial injustice*. It occurs when an individual's expression of her knowledge is given less credibility due only to her "imagined social identity" (Fricker 2007, 16). That is, when a speaker is "wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower" (Op. cit., 20) due to a factor such as race, gender, or other marker of marginalized social identity. Thus, those who experience testimonial injustice have their knowledge—and their capacity to share that knowledge with others—questioned.

To illustrate this, Fricker gives the example of Tom Robinson testifying to a jury of white men in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Despite telling the truth, Tom Robinson suffers a credibility deficit in the eyes of the white jury members due to his race, and they refuse to believe him. Robinson's credibility deficit comes largely from the structural racism and prejudices of the Jim Crow South, but the testimonial injustice he suffers is not purely systemic; the jury members are agents, and though they are capable of looking beyond Robinson's race to see that he is telling the truth, they choose not to.

Fricker's second form of epistemic injustice, *hermeneutical injustice*, occurs when there is a lacuna (gap) in what Fricker labels our "collective hermeneutical resources" (the shared

concepts we use to understand the world) such that marginalized individuals are prevented from understanding their experiences. This happens because our collective hermeneutical resources are generally created and maintained by dominantly situated knowers in order to explain their own experiences. This leads to frequent instances in which marginally situated knowers find themselves unable to understand and articulate the experiences they have which deviate from the dominant norm. Although the lacuna exists for all knowers, it does not manifest as an injustice for dominant knowers: first, dominant knowers are not precluded from understanding *their own* experiences of the world; second, the lacuna is not caused by structural injustices related to the dominant knower's social identity.

Fricker utilizes the true story of Carmita Wood to demonstrate hermeneutical injustice. Wood was sexually harassed by her boss before the term “sexual harassment” had been established as a widely accepted concept. After undergoing severe distress due to the harassment, Wood ultimately quit her job, but was unable to explain her reason for quitting to the unemployment office; concepts that already existed in the collective hermeneutical resource like “flirting” or “assault”—concepts that fit *men's* experiences of the world—were not suitable. Wood's inability to express what had actually happened to her ultimately led the unemployment office to deny her any benefits. Thus, in addition to the injustice of the sexual harassment itself and the material harm suffered after the denial of employment benefits, Wood experienced hermeneutical injustice; there was no concept available to her to understand or express what had happened to her.

Like testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice is dependent on a background system of structural injustices. In this case, men's experiences are considered to be the norm within society, which leads to a diminished interest in the ways that women experience the world

differently. However, while testimonial injustice focuses on the ways in which marginalized knowers are blocked from *sharing* their knowledge, hermeneutical injustice focuses on how the marginalized knower is precluded from *obtaining* knowledge about her own experience; she does not have the proper interpretative tools available to her.

Furthermore, hermeneutical injustice differs from testimonial injustice because it lacks an agent; it is a purely structural injustice caused by a “*collective* [mis]understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (ibid. 155, italics mine). Therefore, while the jurors in Tom Robinson’s case *commit* the testimonial injustice, no one in particular is culpable for the hermeneutical injustice Carmita Wood faces. That is, although her boss does commit the injustice of sexual harassment, neither he nor the workers at the unemployment office were responsible for Wood’s inability to understand or explain her experience. The gap in the hermeneutical resource is no particular individual’s fault, but instead the result of systemic disadvantages. Thus, Fricker summarizes her two forms of epistemic injustice in the following way: “We might say that testimonial injustice is caused by prejudice in the economy of credibility; and that hermeneutical injustice is caused by *structural* prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources” (op. cit. 1, italics mine).

2.2 Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance

It is here that I deviate from Fricker’s theory.³ Although it is undeniable that there are instances in which hermeneutical injustice is purely structural, the implication that gaps in the collective hermeneutical resource can *only* be structural is flawed. First, as pointed out by Kristie

³ When I refer to Fricker’s theory, I am referring to what she presents in *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), as it is what has inspired so many works related to epistemic injustice in recent years. It should be noted, however, that Fricker later acknowledged the importance of both Pohlhaus’s and Dotson’s critiques, stating that “The slippery slope to bad faith, and self-interested or plain lazy denial, is an ever-present factor in situations where the nascent content of the attempted communication is potentially challenging to the hearer’s status or, for whatever other reason, outside of their epistemic comfort zone. A number of authors [including Pohlhaus and Dotson] have rightly emphasised and explored this point in illuminating ways” (Fricker 2017, 53).

Dotson, it implies that there is only a single group of collective hermeneutical resources from which we all draw. However, such an approach “fails to take into account alternative epistemologies...that exist in hermeneutically marginalized communities *among themselves*” (Dotson 2012, 31, italics in original). That is, marginalized communities are very much capable of developing hermeneutical resources that help them to explain their experiences to themselves and one another, even if these resources are not widely accepted by dominantly situated knowers. Consider, for instance, the language used by LGBTQ+ community members to express their experiences. Although many terms—trans*, cisgender, gender queer, nonbinary—have become more commonly utilized outside of the LGBTQ+ community, they were initially created for and used solely within the community. Although Fricker acknowledges marginalized knowers’ ability to create their own concepts, as we will see below, she does not seem to recognize that “the power relations that produce hermeneutically marginalized populations do not also work to suppress, in all cases, knowledge of one’s experience of oppression and marginalization” (ibid.). In fact, marginally situated knowers frequently develop their own hermeneutical resources both due to *and* despite dominantly situated knowers’ ignorance and apathy towards marginalized experiences.⁴

To better understand how this can happen, let us return to Fricker’s example of Carmita Wood. After quitting her job and being denied unemployment benefits, Wood joined an all-women group committed to consciousness raising, a practice that gained popularity during Second Wave Feminism. During the group’s meetings, the members would discuss important though “scantly understood, barely articulate” (Fricker 2007, 148) experiences that they had in common as women. It was through these meetings that the concept “sexual harassment” was first

⁴ This is not to say, of course, that there is not injustice in such circumstances; marginalized groups’ capacity to develop their own resources and overcome *hermeneutical* injustice does not eliminate all epistemic or other injustices.

developed, closing the hermeneutical gap for the women present. When Wood's legal case later became public, the term was able to gain widespread acknowledgment and become a part of the collective hermeneutical resource.

However, there was a time in which Wood and the members of her consciousness raising group were the only ones aware of the term. Though they had their own understanding of the world and their experiences made clearer, many outside the group—including dominantly situated members of society, particularly men—still had a lacuna. Thus, this case exemplifies the ways in which marginalized groups and communities are, in fact, capable of creating epistemic tools that are not a part of the dominant, “universal” collective hermeneutical resource. While the term's addition to the common hermeneutical resource allowed us to tackle sexual harassment more easily, Dotson's point still stands: men's power (and ignorance) did not prevent the women from understanding their own oppression and marginalization.

Some may remark here that many people still do not have a good understanding of the meaning or severity of sexual harassment, even forty years after the Carmita Wood case. Current events in particular have brought this question forward. As an outpouring of allegations have arisen against prominent men—from Donald Trump to Harvey Weinstein—it seems that many would prefer to downplay instances of sexual harassment as normal interaction between the sexes. Frequently (in fact, overwhelmingly), those who fail to take the concept sexual harassment seriously do not actually perpetrate sexual harassment themselves, and yet still commit injustice through their unwillingness to acknowledge its significance. One need only watch a small sample of cable TV to understand that many are reluctant to fully recognize the prevalence, seriousness, and actual definition of sexual harassment.

This leads us to the second problem with a purely structural, non-agential conceptualization of hermeneutical injustice: when “marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers”—as in cases of consciousness raising—but “dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” (Pohlhaus 2012, 716), it appears that dominantly situated knowers are acting as *agents* of epistemic injustice, not merely instruments of an unjust system. Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. identifies this behavior as *willful hermeneutical ignorance*. That is, marginally situated knowers may be able to develop suitable epistemic resources to identify and explain their experiences and thus overcome hermeneutical injustice, but dominantly situated knowers willfully refuse to acknowledge these new epistemic resources by ignoring them, minimizing them, mocking them, or otherwise disregarding their importance in the lives of marginally situated knowers.

Pohlhaus argues that continued misuse of the term “sexual harassment” is a form of willful hermeneutical ignorance. Despite the concept’s continued presence in the collective hermeneutical resource, some men still dismiss its legitimacy or willfully don’t believe that what they or their peers are doing constitutes an instance of the practice. They insist that women who charge men with sexual harassment lack a sense of humor, are too sensitive, or simply do not belong in the workplace if they are unwilling to adjust to its male-dominated culture. They claim that sexual advances should be categorized as flirting or friendly rapport, and that concepts like “sexual harassment” are just another example of unnecessary political correctness. These men are not committing testimonial injustice; they do not say that a woman who accuses her boss of sexual advances is lying, since they do not deny that the sexual advances occurred. Nor is it a case of hermeneutical injustice—women now have suitable concepts available to them to

understand their experiences and to express what happened, and thus they do not have a lacuna in their hermeneutical resources. Instead, these men's dominant position allows (and, to maintain their dominance, motivates) them to ignore the claims that women make about their experience and to determine that their concept does not reflect the true state of the world. Though they have been provided with the proper epistemic resources to be able to understand women's claims, these men willfully do "not enter into a relation of true epistemic interdependence" with them (Op. cit., 726). As Pohlhaus argues, this interdependence is essential to obtaining authentic knowledge. A refusal to relate interdependently therefore results in the dominantly situated knower having an incomplete, inaccurate, and problematic understanding of the world, causing them to commit even further injustices.

2.3 Contributory Injustice

Utilizing Pohlhaus's theory, Kristie Dotson developed the concept of *contributory injustice*, essentially the injustice committed by an agent when engaging in willful hermeneutical ignorance. When a dominantly situated knower commits contributory injustice, she refuses to acknowledge the epistemic agency of a marginally situated knower. Similar to testimonial injustice, contributory injustice involves doubting, ignoring, mocking, or otherwise compromising a marginally situated knower's capacity to share knowledge. Unlike testimonial injustice, however, contributory injustice focuses on marginally situated knowers' capacity to share the hermeneutical resources they had developed in order to overcome hermeneutical injustice. In doing so, the dominantly situated knower continues to use only those hermeneutical resources that are already a part of their (dominant) world view. Thus, the marginally situated knower's capacity to have others understand her experiences is greatly diminished, since the

hermeneutical resources necessary to understand those experiences are purposefully excluded from universally accepted discourse.

I will emphasize again, however, that this is not simply another form of hermeneutical injustice, since the marginalized knower possesses the knowledge and resources to explain her experience. Indeed, “those who experience contributory injustice find that they can readily articulate their experiences” (Dotson 2012, 32). The injustice, then, is not that the marginalized knower is prevented from understanding her own experience, but instead that the marginalized knower *does* have the hermeneutical tools available to her, and yet dominant knowers refuse to acknowledge them. Thus, contributory injustice occurs when

an epistemic agent's willful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower's ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency. (Dotson 2012, 32)

Continuing with our previous example, men (and others in power) practice contributory injustice when they reclassify women’s claims of sexual harassment by utilizing their own dominant (and inaccurate) hermeneutical resources. Imagine, for instance, that a woman files a complaint against her male coworker for making sexist comments; he makes inappropriate remarks about her physical appearance, “jokes” that someone as pretty as her shouldn’t worry herself with the corporate world, etc. Although he does not grope her or make overtly sexual comments, he still refuses to acknowledge his coworker’s qualifications and fails to consider the harmful implications that his comments may have on her status in the office, ability to continue performing, and sense of self-worth.

Imagine then that, in response, several men in the office argue that their female coworker is simply being overly sensitive—indeed, she should not risk “ruining an innocent man’s career” simply because she cannot handle the work environment. In this case, the charge of sexual

harassment is ignored and transformed into terminology that better fits a world view in which men maintain power. By claiming that the accusation is ridiculous and insinuating that she is too emotionally unstable to handle casual jokes, the woman's epistemic agency is denied. Second, the argument that the accused's own rights have been violated takes the focus away from the relatively new concept that a woman has a right to not be sexually harassed and places emphasis on the more widely accepted idea that everyone (i.e. men) has the right to maintain a job. Of course, such a world view completely ignores the experiences of marginalization that led women to develop terms such as "sexual harassment." Thus, in committing contributory injustice, the male coworkers willfully continue to utilize their own biased, dominantly situated epistemic resources to interpret the experiences of marginalized knowers so as to maintain—and avoid confronting—their privilege.

2.4 Nonconceptual Hermeneutical Resources

Before showing how these theories relate to the work of WFAs, I should emphasize that my argument diverges slightly from Fricker's in one final way. While Fricker emphasizes the importance of *concepts* as hermeneutical resources, I believe a looser interpretation of hermeneutical resources is essential to fully understand and overcome epistemic injustice. Fricker herself briefly acknowledges this at the end of *Epistemic Injustice*, noting that "a hermeneutical gap might equally concern not (or not only) the content but rather the *form* of what can be said" (Fricker 2007, 160, italics mine). Therefore, while concepts play an important role when discussing epistemic injustice, we must also be conscious of how the language and style with which marginally situated knowers share their knowledge may also determine whether their experiences are acknowledged or ignored. For instance, resources such as literature, queer theory, feminist journalism, and grassroots writings—all of which are frequently dismissed

within academic philosophy—should be valued as important epistemic tools that can help WFAs (especially those working within philosophy) to understand the experiences of those who create them.

3 ARE THESE TRULY CASES OF WILLFUL IGNORANCE?

Some may argue here that it is not entirely fair to claim that the men in the above examples are guilty of committing contributory injustice. First, as Polhaus and other social epistemologists argue, one's capacity as a knower is greatly linked to how one is situated within society (Polhaus 2012, 715). Therefore, they may simply be suffering from an unfortunate instance of "epistemic bad luck" (Fricker 2007, 103) and experience "meta-blindness"; that is, they are "blind to their own blindness, numbed or insensitive to the cultural blind spots that they have inherited and they recirculate in their epistemic lives" (Medina 2013, 75). Thus, the fact that they hold an inaccurate, caricatured understanding of sexual harassment may be caused by the sexist culture that they live in, not necessarily their own attempts to maintain power.

Indeed, some have argued that men are only acting as their culture has instructed them to; if they were not consistently taught by society that they have an epistemic and moral authority over women, they would not behave the way they do. According to this line of argument, the men themselves are victims of hermeneutical injustice, as the surrounding sexist culture prevents them from truly understanding the moral significance of their actions. (Beeby 2011, 482-485)

I do not believe these objections are particularly relevant to my argument. First, it seems clear that, although the men may have been raised in a sexist environment, they cannot be considered blameless for their lack of interest in women's experiences. Many companies now require their employees to undergo sexual harassment training. Men are surrounded by women who can—and frequently do—express their disgust for men's sexist actions, from coworkers and friends to mothers and daughters. Indeed, men *do* seem to understand that there is something wrong with sexual harassment when it is done to their own loved ones; one of the most common responses during the recent rise in attention to sexual harassment accusations has been that men

should improve their behavior because they would never want such a thing done to their female family members (as though blood relation was somehow necessary for women to obtain moral status). Similarly, WFAs may have been raised in a culture that has failed—and continues to fail—to take the voices of WOC seriously, but that does not mean that they are blameless if they do not properly consider the works of WOC. Just as men learn from the women around them, WFAs can hear from WOC, whether in their own personal friendships and daily interactions, or within their professional lives with their colleagues and students.⁵

Furthermore, white feminist academics claim to be *committed* to understanding marginalized individuals' lived experiences. Due to their very field of study, they have less of a claim to Medina's concept of meta-blindness than non-feminists, since the goal of their work is to understand and identify the deficient ways that prejudice causes us to interact with one another. Even if we were to claim the men in the above cases were not culpable because they may not have all of the tools necessary to understand the situation, WFAs *do* have those tools at their disposal. Their academic preparation allows them to identify the ways in which their own epistemic practices may be wanting. Even if they are not familiar with the details of feminist epistemology, their knowledge of feminist scholarship should help them recognize that (1) their own standpoint prevents them from understanding the experiences of WOC, (2) they should therefore seek out more information about WOC, and (3) that there are a number of ways that

⁵ I recognize that this claim presents several problems. As mentioned in the introduction, there is currently a dearth of professional Black philosophers, and more specifically, only about 4 of the 13,000 philosophers employed by North American universities "claim Black feminism as their primary area of interest" (Dotson 2016, 48). Even if we go beyond philosophy and instead look to include *all* Black academics, we find that "Blacks constitute less than 10 percent of the professoriate, and these numbers thin out the higher the academic rank" (Wingfield 2015). Black students are currently enrolled at numbers reflective of the overall Black population (14%), though these numbers are much smaller at more elite universities (Krogstad & Fry, 2014; McGill 2015). These numbers are even smaller for other minorities (Myers 2016). Furthermore, as I will discuss in more depth below, insisting that colleagues and students who have marginalized identities should help us to understand white academics' epistemic limits could be considered to be epistemic exploitation or objectification. Nonetheless, WFAs cannot claim mere lack of exposure to WOC as a reason for maintaining ignorance of their experiences.

they can obtain such information (easily accessed books/articles written by WOC, conferences on Black or Chicana feminism, and so on). Moreover, much of feminist literature has already addressed the failure of white feminists to fully engage with WOC and their work. Patricia Hill Collins (1989), Angela Davis (1983), bell hooks (2000), and Audre Lorde (1984)—WOC who have widely been accepted within the canon of feminist writing—have all written on this topic. Thus, just as it seems hard to believe that men can truly be ignorant of the meaning of sexual harassment, it seems nearly impossible for a WFA to be truly unaware of the problematic ways that academic feminism interacts (or fails to interact) with the works of WOC.

However, some may still feel uncomfortable with the idea that white feminist academics are *willfully* ignoring the experiences of WOC. First, it seems hard to believe that WFAs are treating WOC with the same scorn and dismissal that the men in the above examples showed their female coworkers. As will be outlined below, however, I do not believe that WFAs commit such obvious forms of contributory injustice, nor do I think that their actions need to be accompanied by contempt or ridicule to cause injustice. Indeed, their actions are generally far more subtle, and yet can still be harmful to WOC's careers and capacity to share knowledge.

Second, some may object that “willful” implies a certain level of consciousness or intent on the part of the agent that may not actually be present in WFAs. In particular, willful hermeneutical ignorance indicates that the agent is aware of marginal hermeneutical resources and yet chooses to ignore them or to utilize them incorrectly, with the added and even more controversial implication that the agent acts in this way in order to avoid confronting and/or losing her privilege. However, we must be careful when making the “*assumption of epistemic innocence*” (Medina 2013, 130, italics in original). That is, we cannot assume “that ordinary subjects in ordinary circumstances can remain unaffected by long-held and prevailing

prejudices...even when they are brought up and operate amid systematic injustices” (ibid.). Although WFAs should not claim *ignorance* due to the biases of their society, as discussed above, they should not assume that their academic training will allow them to easily overcome these epistemic biases. Therefore, we must not assume that their status as feminists prevents them from having a willful resistance to recognize their own commitment of epistemic injustices. Indeed, acknowledging that one is guilty of these epistemic and moral failures is difficult and painful for anyone, and particularly painful for those who believe they are fighting against such injustices.

That said, I acknowledge that proving the intent of all WFAs would be a nearly impossible aim; countless philosophers of law and mind have described the difficulty of determining an agent’s intent and this intent’s role in our assessment of wrongdoing, especially when questions of ignorance are raised.⁶ I also do not think that every problematic use of WOC’s work by WFAs must be the result of willful hermeneutical ignorance; I do not wish to exclude the possibility of honest mistakes. Therefore, the goal of this paper is not to prove malicious or selfish intent each time a WFA interacts (or fails to interact) with the work of WOC, but to (1) to help us to understand the epistemic conditions that may have led to the exclusion of the experiences of WOC within academic feminist work, and (2) to encourage WFAs to more closely examine their own epistemic failures, hopefully leading to a more mindful inclusion of the experiences of WOC.

⁶ See, for instance, Shannon Spaulding’s “On Whether We Can See Intentions” (2017); Nelkin and Rickless’s “The Relevance of Intention to Criminal Wrongdoing” (2016); and John Hyman’s “Voluntariness and Intention” (2016).

4 WHITE FEMINIST ACADEMICS AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

As mentioned above, the idea that white feminists are a stumbling block on the road to black women's recognition is hardly new. Instances of racism within the women's movement are well-documented; Susan B. Anthony herself "refused to support the efforts of several Black women who wanted to form a branch of the suffrage association," fearing that it would potentially "get in the way" of support from white women (Davis 1981, 111, in reference to a conversation between Anthony and Ida B. Wells).

While such explicit acts of racism have largely (though certainly not entirely) been eliminated from feminist movements, including within academia, the more subtle forms of discrimination that happen on an epistemic level can still have a major effect on the ways in which WOC are seen and heard. This happens primarily in two ways. First, WFAs simply do not consider the experiences of WOC when they are theorizing about women, gender, and injustice more generally. Second, WFAs do consider the works of WOC, but do so only partially or incorrectly, leading to contributory injustice.

The first form of epistemic injustice has received much attention from Third Wave Feminists. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is often cited as a classic instance of a white feminist failing to recognize how women of color's lives and experiences can greatly differ from those of their white counterparts. As discussed by bell hooks, Friedan only focuses on white women's repression as housewives, revealing her own ignorance about (or unwillingness to discuss⁷) the amount of time that women of color spent outside of the home, frequently working for white women:

⁷ Friedan did seem to be well-aware of the different experiences of women of color; when writing for the United Electrical Workers newspaper *UE News* prior to writing *The Feminist Mystique*, she "highlighted the 'even more shocking' situation African American women faced, having to deal with the 'double bars' of being female and African American" (Horowitz 2000, 139). The fact that she failed to apply this knowledge to her later works is

She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women...She made her plight and the plight of white women like herself synonymous with a condition affecting all American women...In the context of her book, Friedan makes clear that the women she saw as victimized by sexism were college-educated white women who were compelled by sexist conditioning to remain in the home. (hooks 2000, 2)

This unfortunate tendency is still so common that the term “white feminism” itself has taken on a derogatory meaning and is frequently used within grassroots and other non-academic discussions to indicate that someone is engaged in a form of feminism that is only concerned with white, middle class women’s liberation (see, for instance, Kent, 2017).

Unfortunately, however, attempts to ameliorate the first form of injustice have often led many to commit the second. As argued by Mariana Ortega, contemporary white feminists do have an interest in better understanding the lives of all women, including women of color. They also often know that their understanding of the experiences of women of color is limited by their own privilege, and they attempt to remedy this “by citing the work of women of color [and] by including women of color in [their] political and practical agenda” (Ortega 2006, 61). However, the knowledge that white feminists acquire “may be inaccurate or may inadequately represent the experience of actual women of color and consequently leads to ignorance” (ibid.). This shallow understanding of the works of WOC leads WFAs to construct “a reality...in which white feminists who read the work of one woman of color think they understand the experience of all women of color, in which the words of women of color are quoted briefly rather than analyzed in depth,... in which women of color are seen as half-subjects” (op. cit. 62).

Put in the context of epistemic injustice, we can see that the behavior which Ortega describes is a form of willful hermeneutical ignorance that leads to contributory injustice. The

confusing and difficult to interpret; I am not sure that it can be classified as “willful ignorance,” since she was not ignorant—she only failed to include or properly apply her knowledge. Unfortunately, a full exploration of Friedan’s particular epistemic failures is outside a critique of this paper.

“inaccurate or inadequate” representation of the works of women of color is similar to the reframing of “sexual harassment” as “political correctness” described above: although WOC’s voices are technically heard and their hermeneutical resources engaged with, their knowledge is distorted. While WFAs’ treatment of the works of WOC generally is not *aimed* at undermining them in the same way as the sexual harassment example, WOC’s epistemic agency is still ignored, and they are prevented from conveying the knowledge that they had intended their works to express.

To illustrate this, consider a 1993 exchange described by Kristie Dotson. Deborah Chay, a feminist academic specializing in “literary theory, African-American literature and feminist literary criticism” (Ammons 2015) and who at the time was an assistant professor at Dartmouth, critiqued two essays by Barbara Smith, a celebrated Black feminist writer and activist. Chay was particularly critical of the ways in which the essays, entitled “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” and “The Truth That Never Hurts,” had an “ineffective theoretical basis,” and therefore did not “‘appropriately’ theorize black feminist criticism” (Dotson 2012, 33). In response to Chay’s article, Smith wrote that Chay’s focus on high theory led her to misunderstand the two articles: “‘your assumptions about what I intended to do and your understanding of what I actually wrote are completely erroneous. You make dozens of points that are based upon inaccurate suppositions’” (Smith, quoted in Dotson, 2012, 34).

Although Chay had “‘obviously examined these two articles intensively’” (Smith, *ibid.*), she still failed to fully and accurately engage with the hermeneutical resources that Smith had developed. That is, Chay is willing to interact with Smith’s writing, but does so only using her own privileged, academic hermeneutical resources to critique them. She does not do enough work to fully understand Smith’s perspective; had she done more research, she would have

recognized that (1) Smith was writing for a magazine that appealed to a wider audience beyond academia; (2) Smith’s original articles were written in 1977, before “the privileging of theory had become popular” (ibid.); and (3) that these factors would have influenced the way she chose to write (ibid.). Instead, Chay maintained an academic, high-theorizing perspective that led her to incorrectly interpret Smith’s work. In assuming that Smith would be writing using the same hermeneutical resources that Chay had become accustomed to in academia, Chay distorts the knowledge that Smith had attempted to share.

It seems, then, that Chay practiced willful hermeneutical ignorance; she acknowledges the existence of marginalized hermeneutical resources, but she does not attempt to understand the experiences, history, or other background factors that caused the marginalized knower to develop those particular resources. This willful hermeneutical ignorance then causes her to commit contributory injustice⁸; by erroneously analyzing the essays and incorrectly presenting Smith’s work, Chay compromises Smith’s epistemic agency, and Smith is prevented from being able to have her epistemic resources (her writing) properly incorporated into the academic community.

A more recent (and controversial) example that has received substantial attention from the academic community and beyond is that of Rebecca Tuvel’s 2017 article “In Defense of Transracialism.” In the article, Tuvel argues that objections to individuals who wish to identify with a different race—such as the recent infamous example of Rachel Dolezal—are parallel to those against transgender individuals; since objections against transgender individuals are unjust, she argues, we should similarly reject those against potential cases of transracial individuals and

⁸ For reference, I remind the reader of Dotson’s definition of contributory injustice: “an epistemic agent’s willful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower’s ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency” (Dotson 2012, 32).

allow them to identify with whichever race they choose. A full discussion of the article, its arguments, and the critical response to it (as well as the response to the response) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the paper does serve as a good example to examine epistemic injustices that can occur within white academic feminism.

As was noted in an open letter to *Hypatia*, the journal that published Tuvel's article, the article failed to "sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color) in its discussion of 'transracialism.'" In fact, "Tuvel cites only one peer-reviewed black scholar working on critical race theory (Charles Mills)" (Winnubst 2017), and does not cite any Black feminist academics or theorists. This failure to even consider more traditional academic sources from WOC is a form of the first epistemic injustice discussed in this section. While there may be an unfortunately small number of Black women working in philosophy or in academia in general, there are still dozens of resources that were available to her which she ignored.

However, as stated earlier in this paper, I argue that WFAs should not only seek out traditional academic sources in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of WOC. It should be noted, therefore, that Tuvel does cite three articles written by Black women who are not currently involved in academia: Zeba Blay, Tamara Winfrey Harris, and Alicia Walters. However, even though she does cite these women's articles, Tuvel's shallow understanding of their works and out-of-context quotations reveal a willful hermeneutical ignorance in respect to their writings.

Let us consider more specifically the op-ed piece written by Tamara Winfrey Harris that Tuvel cites. Within the context of Tuvel's article, it appears that the only arguments that Harris presented against transracialism were that "it is easier for white people to darken their skin and

successfully be read as black” and that “a white-born person could always practice white privilege by returning to being white” (Tuvel 2017, 270). However, although Harris does discuss her concern about these issues, the discussion is based in a much deeper, more complex history than Tuvel’s description would imply. Harris’s piece focuses a history of the “one-drop rule” of racial identification in the United States and the effects that that history has had on people of color. For Harris, Dolezal’s identification as a Black woman was only possible due to a history in which anyone with Black ancestry, even someone “passing” as white, was forced to be identified as Black and therefore as inferior. For Harris, Dolezal’s identification as a Black woman was not just problematic because she could “return” to her white privilege, or simply because it was easier for a white woman to pass as black, but because this very ease was based within a part of the United States’ systemic discrimination against Black people. Dolezal was not just misusing her own white privilege, Harris argues, but “was able to trade on a racist element of history to pass believably as a black woman” (Harris 2017).

None of these elements of Harris’s article are discussed in any depth in Tuvel’s piece. Instead of fully engaging with Harris’s work and the important implications that the piece may have had for her argument, Tuvel took only a few out-of-context quotations from Harris’s article. This is not to say that Harris’s piece cannot be critiqued or her arguments found to be flawed. However, Tuvel was not countering Harris’s arguments with any kind of charity or nuance. Her brief quotation of Harris served only to move her own argument forward, not to actually grasp and challenge the knowledge that Harris presented. This failure to interact with Harris as an epistemic agent, not simply an epistemic object for her own use, reveals that Tuvel likely commits contributory injustice within her article.

Although the above examples have been of the ways in which *critiques* can mischaracterize the works of WOC, WFAs should also be careful when they *agree* (or believe they agree) with the works of WOC. Dismissal of ideas based on inaccurate or privileged assumptions is unfortunate, but so is acceptance of ideas without a thorough understanding. A WFA should be cautious of inserting quotations from famous Black or Latinx writers simply to “legitimat[e] her own status as a Third Wave feminist” (Ortega 2006, 62). Doing so may not only reveal a selfish intent on the part of the WFA, but may actually result in contributory injustice against the WOC that is cited.

5 POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Several solutions have been alluded to throughout the paper, but a brief overview here will be important to better address the possible objections that may be raised.

The first and already widely accepted step that white feminist academics should take is to incorporate more hermeneutical resources developed by WOC into their own research and writing. As stated by Gaile Pohlhaus:

When one genuinely cares to know something about the world as experienced from social positions other than one's own, one must use epistemic resources suited to (and so developed from) those situations. Prerequisites for acquiring such resources are, first, to allow the resources to be well-developed by persons situated in them; second, to trust those persons have developed them well, and third, to take an interest in learning to use those resources. (Pohlhaus 2012, 731)

These hermeneutical resources may not always take the traditional form that WFAs are accustomed to; as noted earlier in this paper, there are unfortunately few WOC working as faculty within academia, and even fewer in philosophy. Therefore, WFAs may need to seek out non-academic hermeneutical resources or hermeneutical resources that are not a part of their own academic field in order to obtain knowledge of experiences that are different from our own. Op-eds, interviews, activist writing, memoirs, literature, and personal essays can deliver far more knowledge than some fields of academia are willing to recognize, and WFAs should be open to utilizing the perspectives that they provide.

Engagement with the hermeneutical resources of WOC, however, must be done thoughtfully and with self-reflection so as to avoid willful hermeneutical ignorance and contributory injustice. WFAs should take care to make sure that we fully understand the works that we cite and incorporate that knowledge not just into the particular paper that we are working on, but more generally into our understanding of academia, society, and our roles within each. We need to be careful that we are not tempted towards the pitfall of “[t]heorizing about women

of color without checking and questioning about their actual lives” (Ortega 2006, 68). That is, we must very cautiously consider whether we have fully understood the hermeneutical resource that we are utilizing and be conscious of the ways that our privileged epistemic position may cause us to misunderstand or reject what is being stated. We should embrace the discomfort of “*beneficial epistemic friction*,” which forces one “to be self-critical, to compare and contrast one’s beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps” (Medina 2013, 50) and to “actively [search] for more alternatives than those noticed, acknowledge[e] them (or their possibility),... engage with them whenever possible and seek equilibrium among them” (Op. cit. 79).

6 OBJECTIONS

6.1 Epistemic Objectification and Exploitation

The potential solutions I have raised may cause concern about whether I am inadvertently promoting epistemic objectification and/or exploitation. That is, if I am asking WFAs to seek out knowledge about the lives of WOC, this search may actually cause them to objectify or exploit the group that they are attempting to better understand.

In the case of epistemic objectification, the subject is only considered “in so far as he might be made use of as an object of knowledge through others using him as a source of information...He is thus demoted from subject to object, relegated from the role of active epistemic agent, and confined to the role of passive state of affairs from which knowledge might be gleaned” (Fricker 2007, 132). Some may object that using the works of WOC relegates WOC to the position of epistemic object, only there for the purpose of WFA’s obtainment of knowledge.

This is an extremely important point, and I wish to emphasize that WFAs—or anyone attempting to obtain information about the lives of marginalized individuals—should be extraordinarily careful that their subjects are never treated as mere epistemic objects. One must always remain cognizant of the personhood of one’s subjects and the complexities within their lives. In a field of academia that studies persons, we should not allow the analysis and abstraction of scholarship to turn one’s subject into a mere specimen on the dissection table.

However, reducing WOC to the status of passive objects is not the only way in which WFAs can exploit their knowledge. A frequent problem faced by WOC both in and out of academia is tokenism; WOC and other POC are frequently called on by their peers to speak for their entire race. In their paper “‘We need a woman, we need a black woman’: gender, race, and

identity taxation in the academy,” Laura E. Hirshfield and Tiffany D. Joseph describe the additional “burden of service responsibilities placed upon minority faculty members because of their racial or ethnic background” (Hirshfield & Joseph 2012, 213). According to their research, WOC are more frequently asked to speak on panels, mentor students, take part in hiring decisions, and generally act as “diversity representatives”; essentially, they are “expected to represent and advocate for minority groups that they may or may not be members of” (op. cit. 221). Although many of these academics feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in this work, “they sometimes feel that this commitment to advocacy and mentorship is overly taxing, and the additional burden of being the ‘expert’ on minority groups is an additional responsibility that they are uncomfortable taking on” (ibid).

Writing earlier, Audre Lorde felt a similar sense of frustration at the burden of explaining her experience:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of color to educate white women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (Lorde 1984, 113)

Due to these additional potential burdens that can be placed on WOC, I have limited my suggestions regarding how to move forward to those that involve the hermeneutical resources that WOC have already provided to the general public. Although WFAs should never hesitate to form relationships with WOC and should always be open when they wish to discuss their experiences,⁹ I am hesitant to suggest that WFAs should make it their goal to ask WOC to explain their experiences to them. I fear that such a suggestion may, in fact, lead to epistemic

⁹ In fact, very fruitful discussions have arisen due to the collaboration between WOC and WFAs; consider, for instance, María Lugones and Elizabeth Spellman’s famous article “Have We Got a Theory for You!: Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice’” (1983).

objectification, further exploitation, and take away some of the time and resources that WOC could be utilizing to develop their own hermeneutical resources, their careers, and their overall well-being.

6.2 Women's and Feminists' Diminished Status in Academia

My discussion may appear to ignore white feminist academics' own difficult situation within the academic realm, particularly within philosophy. Women within philosophy, no matter their specific area of interest, already feel that they must work harder to prove themselves among their male peers. In addition to completing all of the typical responsibilities of a professor, they may feel obligated to be more precise in their research and take on additional duties in order to obtain the same amount of respect as their male counterparts. Furthermore, feminist/social epistemology and feminist philosophy face a second class status within philosophy departments; according to Katharine Jenkins, feminist research "may be subject to de-legitimation on the grounds of supposed lack of objectivity, to marginalisation from the main body of a discipline and to conceptual hostility when operating within the main body of a discipline" (Jenkins 2014, 263). Thus, some may be concerned that my argument not only asks them to take on additional research, but also to further marginalize themselves within academia through the use of non-academic resources.

I would respond that WFAs have both practical and ethical reasons to seek out knowledge about the lives and experiences of WOC. WFAs' goal is often to theorize about women and women's experiences more generally. However, to do so without a concerted effort to engage with and trust the hermeneutical resources of WOC will almost certainly cause us to write from a situationally ignorant position. If I wish to write about the injustices that women face in the workplace, for instance, but fail to consider how WOC's experiences in the workplace

differ from those of white, middle class women, I would be doing poor scholarship. That is, I will have failed to properly include perspectives that are immensely relevant to my work, leading to gaps in my own understanding and an insufficient analysis of my subject.

Beyond good scholarship, though, feminists have a strong interest in achieving justice for all women. For those who work within academia, a small step towards this justice can be realized through scholarship related to women's injustices; bringing light to these problems, even from the ivory tower, can be essential to gaining a better understanding of how we should move forward. On the other hand, not engaging with (or not engaging *well* with) the works of WOC could cause *further* injustice. Therefore, from both the perspectives of scholarship and justice, WFAs should continue to work towards a greater, more careful incorporation of the works of WOC within their own work.

6.3 Implications for Philosophy

When looking more specifically at the field of philosophy, I expect two main critiques. First, some may argue that philosophers should not be required to turn to non-philosophical resources such as grassroots writings, literature, or other potential sources of marginalized hermeneutical resources; if one wishes to gain knowledge from those areas, one should work in a different department. Further, many of these resources may not contain important information, and asking academics to read through, for instance, the thousands of blog posts that are published by grassroots activists is simply unreasonable.

Second, in a similar vein, some may argue that what distinguishes contemporary philosophy from the other humanities is its intensive and analytical approach to difficult questions. This approach often includes—indeed, may even require—abstracting away from the concrete issues at hand to give us a better understanding of our own potential biases or other

failures in critical thought. In the Tuvel case, for instance, some may say that to critique her for her abstract approach shows a misunderstanding of the field of philosophy. If she wanted to take a more concrete perspective, she would have written in the field of sociology or history.

Both of these objections show a failure to understand both the limits and capabilities of philosophy itself. Although abstraction can be extremely helpful for coming to understand the world around us, such abstraction can be problematic when trying to understand the concrete problems that people face in their daily lives. Furthermore, philosophy will not be able to thrive as a field if it is unwilling to engage with new forms of knowledge. Although it will take time to develop a particular process for doing so (if a process is even necessary), that time will be worth it if philosophers are able to have a better, more authentic understanding of the world.

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