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# White Privilege and Epistemic Polarity

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## **ABSTRACT**

White supremacy has roots in dominant epistemic methods. In this paper, I examine knowledge production for white people as it occurs both structurally and socially, where one's social position interacts with systems of oppression to manifest a certain kind of intelligence (or lack thereof) and epistemic polarity. This examination is done in light of a person's status of dissent to show that dominant knowledge is pervasive, and despite one's best intentions can harm an individual belonging to a marginalized community as they offer testimony. I utilize the Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, Oregon in 2020 to demonstrate how white, privileged people must acknowledge their status of dissent and the ways in which their social standpoint affects what they believe to be true about power and race.

## **KEYWORDS**

Dissent, Privilege, Testimony, Injustice, Standpoint

## INTRODUCTION

Learning is about opening yourself up to people and experiences and seeking to understand. And when you're talking about race, it involves making horrible mistakes and getting your feelings hurt and not closing the door when that happens. White people can't content themselves with asking questions of black people. They should be prepared to face a lot of anger and not shrink from it. Too often, they've shown themselves to be unprepared for the emotional heat, too willing to check out (B.L Wilson, 2020).

### I. A LOOK AT PRIVILEGED (WHITE) KNOWERS AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

I begin this paper with a discussion of systemic racism that entails reviewing the ways in which the most privileged members of society, predominantly white people, produce knowledge. I argue that knowledge production for white people occurs both structurally and socially, where one's social position interacts with the systems in place to manifest a certain kind of intelligence (or lack thereof). I refer to "privileged knowers" throughout this paper as those who operate from a dominant standpoint in their knowledge production practices. The practice I focus on is testimonial exchange, a method of gaining knowledge of the world by receiving testimony and evaluating it (with a default title to credit). The term "privileged," in this case, encompasses white people but is not limited to them specifically. Privilege may apply in any situation where a person achieves dominance over another in their epistemic endeavors (Toole, 2019). Because the context of my analysis emerges in light of the Black Lives Matter protests and civil unrest in the United States in 2020, I find it necessary to utilize the word privilege as it stands in popular discourse on this topic. And so the term "privileged" is applied to white people for the duration of this paper.

My goal is to analyze the epistemic consequences of white supremacist action that seized national attention in 2020. The bulk of this attention does not lean in favor or opposition to white supremacy; it suffices to say the nation stands at a point of exceptional polarity in terms of whether or not people believe systemic racism exists. The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, for instance, have made it so white people are prompted to decide whether or not they believe in

racist police violence and systemic racism at large. As a result, white people have shown up in new ways and embraced an “us vs them” mentality within their own communities, families, and predecessors. The polarization among white people is in part dictated by their knowledge production practices. The two sides of white epistemic agency for discussion are the “dominant privileged knower” and the “dissenting privileged knower.” They are two sides of the same coin, despite stubborn attempts to distance themselves from one another. In this paper, I argue that their polarization reveals testimonial epistemic injustices complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Dominant privileged knowers utilize dominant logic that reinforces systemic oppression. They represent a collective consciousness among white people, which Charles Mills identifies as “white ignorance,” an epistemology composed of social memory and mainstream political science based on mistaken beliefs. White ignorance strongly insulates itself to “ensure that whites will live in a “racial fantasyland, [or] a ‘consensual hallucination,” and that the root of all this is the “cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (Mills 2007, 49). Dominant identity is entwined with the perceptions of privileged individuals and creates the consensual hallucination.

This fantasy occurs due to selective accounts of history revered by social memory. The resources provided in public education and media purposefully support the paradoxical illusion of white people as both racially superior and the enablers of social progress. Popular sources of information set the foundation of the collective illusion in white people regarding their place in society. Take for instance, a CNN interview with National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien on the topic of systemic racism and police brutality. On May 31st 2020, following the death of George Floyd, O’Brien said “there is no systemic racism in U.S. law enforcement, 99.9% of our law enforcement officers are great Americans, and many of them are African American, Hispanic, and Asian... there are a few bad apples giving law enforcement a terrible name.” (O’Brien, 2020). O’Brien stands on a powerful media platform to commend law enforcement officers for being “great Americans.” Additionally, on October 27th of this year, CNN boasted about their place in the top-five most watched news sources for the past nine months (CNN Pressroom 2020). One may assume that the average American turns on their television to find their National Security Advisor praising law enforcement in

a conversation about the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year old, unarmed Black man by a Minneapolis police officer.

An authoritative claim portraying systemic racism in law enforcement as nonexistent is dangerous as Americans interact with information regarding this issue. Data from the Public Health Surveillance System examined circumstances of violent deaths by lethal force of law enforcement in 17 states from 2009-2012. Evidence shows victims were a majority white, but disproportionately Black with a 2.8 percent higher fatality rate. In 2015, researchers analyzed fatal police shooting data from the Washington Post for implicit bias. There were two indicators of threat perception failure they examined: "(1) whether the civilian was not attacking the officer(s) or other civilians just before being fatally shot and (2) whether the civilian was unarmed when fatally shot. The results indicated civilians from "other" minority groups were significantly more likely than Whites to have not been attacking the officer(s) or other civilians and that Black civilians were more than twice as likely as White civilians to have been unarmed." (DeGue, Fowler, and Calkins 2016). However, the researchers in this study acknowledge their access to information is limited. After Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director James Comey discovered that his agency does not collect reliable data pertaining to civilians killed by the police because it is voluntary to report police killings to the FBI. In 2014, only 224 agencies (approximately 1% of all police departments) reported a civilian killing by an officer to the FBI.

What O'Brien fails to acknowledge in his statement is the evidence that verifies the existence of racist policing. By announcing "systemic racism does not exist," he manifests a faulty understanding of the circumstances in the mind of the public. Accordingly, Mills writes on knowledge acquisition; "at all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted." (Mills 2007, 24). O'Brien's statement lacked factual information regarding police activity to support his claim; his authority nonetheless granted him excessive credibility and shaped the national opinion on the issue. The idea that law enforcement as a system exists to do anything other than "serve and protect" its citizens runs counter to mainstream American narratives that honor the morality of police officers. A kind of epistemic inertia then emerges, fostering an individual's disinterest in confronting the

oppressive policies evident in police work. Privileged Americans have no need to investigate the evidence because it is easier, comfortable, and more familiar to accept the predominant narrative.

There are two ways in which white privileged knowers arrive at their illusions of society: dominant logic and structural ignorance. I borrow from Linda Martín Alcoff, who articulates how a person's situatedness affects their position to know; "some situations are in positions of ignorance, even though the knowers in those situations may have identical access to the relevant facts." (Alcoff 2007, 39). The perception of the world held by an individual is altered by their heuristic meaning-making processes informed by the cognitive norms of assessment privy to maintaining systems of oppression. Dominant logic thrives in this space. Social memory solidifies the illusions among white knowers that actively distort inaccurate accounts of the world. Mills argues social memory is then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, and monuments. When I grew up, I was taught in public school that racism was an issue of the past. We learned the bare minimum in regard to oppression of people of color. Subjects included slavery, Abraham Lincoln, segregation, and Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The only required reading other than this speech for high school students was the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, written over one hundred and fifty years earlier. Our state-approved education overlooked the history of systemic oppression and thus perpetuated it. The standard American education led us to believe racism is finished due to the evolution of our collective moral consciousness with the moving words of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Misinformation paves the way to white ignorance, straightforwardly for a racist cognizer, but also indirectly for a nonracist cognizer who may form mistaken beliefs (e.g., that after the abolition of slavery in the United States, blacks generally had opportunities equal to whites) because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge (Mills 2007, 21). Mills identifies the two pathways as the non-racist cognizer and the racist cognizer. This is a point I expand upon in the next sections. There is plenty more to say about the production of white ignorance; for the sake of my argument, I move on to an examination of the other epistemic agent at hand: the dissenting privileged knower.

### The Dissenting Privileged Knower

Moments arise when privileged epistemic narratives are pierced. There are white people, privileged knowers, who utilize sources of information offered by (or more likely, demanded from) individuals from marginalized communities when producing knowledge. However the information enters this knower's circle, be it university studies, social media, pop-culture— the privileged knower's dominant position is challenged by counterevidence and taken into consideration. Consideration does not equate to integration of such evidence, therefore the privileged knower is not absolved of their dominant positioning and the consequences that flow from it. I call this privileged knower the dissenting privileged knower, because this person allows counterevidence to oscillate them away from the ideology that reinforces domination. "Dissenting" is preferable to "dissented" because this position requires continual awareness of non-dominant informative sources and self-reflection.

Dissenting knowers take the time and effort to learn about realities outside their own within the comfort level their privileged positioning allows. For instance, this knower may take part in a meeting where HR representatives mediate a conversation about sexism in the workplace. In a constructed arena, he is entitled to participate in a discussion as to how it exists and what to do about it. This dissenting knower pays attention and listens to this new information, whereas a dominant privileged knower might roll his eyes and watch the clock for the duration, or opt to play devil's advocate to agitate the room.

On the subject of systemic racism, the dissenting knower has a myriad of evidence at their disposal. And it seems to be making a difference. During 2020, Americans engaged in what New York Times crowd data analysts call the biggest movement in U.S. history. It is important to note who exactly protested: "More than 40 percent of counties in the United States — at least 1,360 — have had a protest. Unlike past Black Lives Matter protests, nearly 95 percent of counties that had a protest recently are majority white, and nearly three-quarters of the counties are more than 75 percent white" (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, 2020). Perhaps it is the video footage of police murdering Black people, like George Floyd in Minneapolis or Breonna Taylor in Louisville, that has awakened a distrust in the status quo, something that is lost to the privileged knower, whose conceptual barriers lead her to believe it's just a few bad apples. Nonetheless, a movement of

dissenting knowers, integrating non-dominant information in their consciousness, has emerged.

Despite his intention, this knower still operates from a privileged standpoint, therefore seeking to operate with themselves at the center of their understanding. With this behavior, the dissenting knower's focus is off-balance. On standpoint epistemology, Brianna Toole argues "although newly developed conceptual resources may become intercommunally shared, dominantly situated knowers may be initially reluctant to adopt the resources developed by marginalized communities" (Toole 2019). Conceptual resources of the non-dominant knower develop so individuals may better understand their experiences in virtue of belonging to a marginalized group. These resources are not included in the meaning-making processes of dominant groups, and so even as the dissenting privileged knower attempts to form an understanding of non-dominant logic, they inevitably error because their conceptual resources are not suited to make sense of the experiences of marginalized people.

All this is to say the dissenting privileged knower is not exempt from perpetuating epistemic injustice. While the latest information may influence one's intent for the better, their privileged standpoint prevents them from complete awareness of how dominant logic affects their epistemic processes.

## **II. EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN TWO FORMS**

### **The Dominant Privileged Knower and Testimonial Injustice**

On June 6 2020, filmographer Mandy Rosen recorded footage of an altercation between a Black woman (P1) and a white man (P2) at a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest. This took place in Huntington Beach, California.

P1: "I have walked down the streets in my own community of Huntington Beach, where I'm from, and people have told me they were gonna shoot my n\*\*\*\*\* head off."

P2: "No they didn't."

P1: "Yes, they did! Yes, they did! The police were there!"

P2: "No, they didn't. Don't make s\*\*\* up. No one feels that way. Nobody hates you guys." (Rosen 2020)

Yelling surrounds them with the phrase "white privilege! white privilege!" The man asks the crowd of protestors what they are doing, protesting for Black Lives Matter, to which the woman responds on their behalf that they are hurting. He demands that she quit being the victim and the crowd shouts back at his rebuttal while preventing a physical altercation from unfolding. What I find most compelling is that the protestors are using the words "white privilege" at the time of this altercation to describe the wrongdoing on the man's behalf.

This man's privilege prevents him from being a decent participant in the testimonial exchange. Credibility excess inflated the sense of entitlement in his perception of the event, hindering his ability to engage responsibly with the speaker. Recall that during testimonial exchange, there is a title of credit inherent in the speaker's statement necessary for this type of exchange to be epistemically justified. Miranda Fricker's Acceptance Principle acknowledges this; "in the absence of cues for doubt, we surely accept most of what we are told without going in for any active critical assessment, and so our experience as hearers can seem to be that we are trustful unless and until some prompt for doubt is picked up on" (Fricker 2007, chap. 3). The Acceptance Principle entails a reasonable default credibility in one's interlocutor. Kristie Dotson extends this theory; "a transaction is a social act for which the self-conscious awareness by both agent and patient of their respective and complementary roles that comprise the act's structure is part of the very idea of the act itself" (Dotson 2012). If this man were to follow the typical terms of testimonial exchange in this transaction, one could assume he would have behaved differently. Rather, he deviated from the respective structure of testimonial exchange, his reason being identity prejudice held against his interlocutor.

As we know, testimonial injustice "occurs when a speaker is given less credibility than deserved (suffering a credibility deficit) because of an identity prejudice held by the hearer" (Fricker 2007, chap. 2). Often identity prejudice is "sufficient enough to cross the threshold for belief or acceptance so that the hearer's prejudice causes him to miss out on a piece of knowledge." The dominant privileged knower that this man represents interacts with testimony from a person within a marginalized community to the extent his privilege allows. The power of his identity prevents him from looking further than the bounds of



his own perspective, because dominant logic suggests that what he would find outside of matches his preconceptions. Tirelessly the non-dominant knower is denied credibility despite a collection of conceptual resources obtained in their lifetime; when the dominant member of society determines what is and is not epistemically verifiable, the conceptual resources made available, from which a dominant knower could learn, are lost.

Both identity prejudice (along with the credibility deficit it beckons) and systemic ignorance are what drive testimonial injustice in this event. Identity prejudice is the criterion inseparably tied to structural prejudice that materializes in testimonial exchange. Dotson argues "to understand this criterion for testimonial injustice, one need only imagine all of the ethically suspicious reasons one could have to hold the judgment that African Americans are liars or paranoid, especially when testifying to continued racial discrimination" (Dotson 2012). Using identity prejudice as his foundation in the exchange, the man in the video attacks the information he receives according to stereotypes of his interlocutor. He asks the crowd why they protest, to which the woman replies that they are hurting. He says no you are not, quit being the victim. He utilizes the emotion driving her testimony in his attempt to deny its truth value. The dominant privileged knower in this video sees himself as omniscient and the protesters as overly-emotional people "playing the victim." His identity prejudice reinforces his illusion despite the fact that he is the odd one out at a protest that blatantly identifies the contrary.

The dominant privileged knower does not seek to understand but finds grounds to reinforce what he believes to be true about the world. Knowledge production continues to be an insulated, circular process that leaves the agent stagnant and brutally unaware of reality that exists outside of his dangerous solipsistic perspective. His situatedness makes it so he does not have to do the epistemic work necessary to find truth, because finding truth provides him with no benefit in a world that seeks to justify the experience of the oppressor. Toole uncovers the nature of epistemic oppression; she argues:

The situatedness of the dominant knower will not make salient those features of the world that the marginalized knower's conceptual resources attend to. As a result, the dominant knower can use this fact to preemptively dismiss the knowledge claims of a marginalized knower, as well as to dismiss the conceptual

resources required to understand those knowledge claims. (Toole 2019)

Without access to the non-epistemic social facts that support what an epistemic agent is in a position to know, he is unable to claim any stake in the truth of the world outside of his own experience. His social perceptions of his interlocutor go unchecked, and so he is epistemically culpable. This injustice is unethical because it is an obstacle to truth and denies the speaker her capacity as a knower. Denying credibility to her testimony erases the danger of the racial prejudice she has experienced. If this man carries on with the preconception that he lives in a post-racial society, he will not notice racist behavior or policy when it is in his midst, therefore allowing it to continue. On top of this, denying truth to her experience gaslights her, which is a form of emotional abuse.

One could argue that in an absence of sufficient evidence, it is necessary to critically observe testimony as it is received. This is the inferentialist approach defined by Fricker, where the obligation of a hearer—if she is to gain knowledge through testimony—is to go in for a piece of reasoning that justifies accepting what others tell us” (Fricker 2007, chap.3). The hearer must make an inference based on criteria such as “the reliability of people like that about things like this” (2007). This varies from the non-inferentialist, who enjoys a default uncritical receptivity to what she is told, therefore behaving in accordance with the typical mechanisms of testimonial exchange. Of course, default uncritical acceptance of what one is told poses issues of justification. Placing critical capacity on the back burner, according to some, is epistemically irresponsible. In the case of my presented example, it would then be reasonable for the man questioning the young woman to be critical of her experience because it is his duty as an inferential hearer to seek reason in accepting what he is told. She has no evidence outside of her testimony to verify the truth of it, therefore the man has grounds to discount what she tells him. This is especially true because their exchange reared on the emotional side.

I respond to this idea with the notion that there were more reasons than not to act responsibly in this exchange. For one, the exchange took place at a Black Lives Matter protest where hundreds of other people gathered in solidarity with the topic of her testimony—systemic racism. Their conversation occurred on territory dedicated to fighting against oppression, so it would have been the epistemically responsible choice to entertain information that sheds light on the reality of existing as a marginalized person in a predominantly white city like Huntington

Beach, California. Second, the objectivity inherent in Fricker's inferential approach is problematic given the non-epistemic social factors that drive this interaction. Dominant logic seeks to absolve non-dominant logics. The racially-motivated circumstances change the circumstances of testimonial responsibility on behalf of the hearer. It is not useful to analyze using purely epistemic factors when evidence of racial prejudice often does not exist in the conceptual awareness of the agent attempting justification. In a sense, "this dynamic is produced by the fact that dominantly situated persons frequently take their own misunderstandings to be substantive objections," and so a lack of quantifiable proof in testimony is taken to be a shortcoming of the interlocutor (Berenstain 2016, 3.3).

### **The Dissenting Privileged Knower and Conditional Testimonial Injustice**

The dissenting privileged knower is unique in his willingness to have non-dominant sources of information—epistemic and the non-epistemic conceptual resources belonging to individuals within marginalized communities— influence his knowledge production process. His perception of the world has been altered in some amount with the awareness of opposing standpoints from his own. In other words, the dissenting privileged knower has acknowledged that his privilege affects his efforts in understanding the world. Non-dominant sources of information originate from those who experience oppression. The dissenting privileged knower demonstrates a breakage in dominant logic when a variety of source information is explored, creating space for epistemic responsibility beneficial to the agent as well as those around him.

Taking a more objective view of the world than their counter-knower (the dominant privileged knower), the dissenting privileged knower does not subscribe to a particular perspective and aims to maintain rationality in their cognitive approach. The dissenting knower is more objective because their epistemic processes require acknowledging the opposing realities of others that fulfill their reformed sense of understanding. Traditionally, this is an acceptable epistemic move as rationality is a reliable pathway in finding truth. However, is there truth about the world that is universally accessible? Quill Kukla tackles this question as it assumes a tie between ontology and aperspectivity. Assuming the existence of universally accessible truth denies any epistemic advantages particular to social groups (in the scope of standpoint epistemology already established). My point is that objectivity in pursuits of truth is necessary, but there is a limit to what a

person is in a position to know—constructing the epistemic injustices a dissenting privileged knower is capable of inflicting. A dissenting privileged knower inflicts an epistemic injustice the moment one centers herself in discussion regarding her privilege. The information a dissenting privilege knower allows to alter their perspective of the world is filtered through what the comfort of white privilege permits. Consequently, the information that passes the barrier centers around their person; how they can do better, how privilege affects them, and how they can benefit with the humbling effect ontological objectivity allows. What remains impermeable are the discomfoting feelings necessary to truly transform their perspective. This is a process of internalization that the structure of privilege enforces.

When the barrier causes harm to an epistemic agent bestowing information upon a privileged individual, I call it “conditional epistemic injustice.” Conditional epistemic injustice is specific to the dissenting privileged knower when confronted with information regarding his role in oppressive behavior. It occurs when the hearer’s objective approach to absorbing new information filters testimony through the privilege barrier and prioritizes their experience (and comfort) as a dominant knower instead of the speaker’s. The injustice itself is rather insidious because the privileged knower may remain unaware of the barrier’s existence. In testimonial exchange, the barrier reflects the individual’s original status of dissent, and it creates conditions for testimonial exchange that will ultimately affect what information is allowed passage. The hearer yields to their privilege and stops listening when they feel attacked, typically when uncomfortable emotions arise. Their original status of dissent determines the limits to which they are willing to actively engage in testimony that challenges their privilege.

Conditional epistemic injustice is isolated in the terrain I have mentioned previously. That is to say there is a possibility that later on, the hearer may have a change of heart once they process the emotions that prevented them from responsibly engaging in testimony. However, regardless of the long-term effects for the dissenting privileged knower, the injustice has immediate consequences for the speaker who is willing to share information regarding their experience with oppression at that moment in time.

The terms of engagement set by the privilege barrier during testimonial exchange are honored so long as the speaker prioritizes the comfort of the hearer. The hearer may be fully prepared to listen to testimony that criticizes them, as their

reformed sense of understanding allows them to see that listening is a crucial step in changing behavior. The hearer may even be inclined to believe the testimony as all norms of testimonial exchange are followed up until the terms set by the hearer are broken, so the speaker feels relatively safe when beginning the exchange. Unfortunately, the speaker has no way of knowing beforehand how her testimony will be received by the hearer. But she will become aware when her testimony is discredited as the hearer retracts to the confines of their privilege.

Consider an example of a woman telling her boss that she was assaulted by a coworker in the workplace. She may approach him and tell him she was assaulted by a male coworker and is adamant that he needs to be taken off of the schedule. She felt safe doing so because this manager boasted about being a feminist and believer of women in a staff meeting regarding this topic. So the manager responds as she expected, with concern, and asks her what happened. She says it happened after their shift; she was finishing up side work when he grabbed her thigh, and it was not the first time he touched her without consent. He reminds her that he does not tolerate harassment and will handle it, because she has a right to be safe at work.

The manager later follows up saying that she must have had a misunderstanding. She says no, there's no misunderstanding, and asks why he would think so. He responds by saying that this coworker claimed it was an accident and showed remorse. Furthermore, he admits he has worked with this server for years and knows he is a good guy. He tells her she is overreacting but can adjust her shifts if she is that concerned. She responds with frustration, saying "I thought you said you believed women." He tells her he does, to which she replies "if you believed me, you would not have to ask for his side of the story. Also, it says a lot that you trust a man's word more than mine." He responds aggressively with "hey, believe me, I'm a feminist. I grew up with sisters. I'm just doing the right thing and getting all of the information before making a move." He then tells her she's being too emotional for work and sends her home.

In this example, immediately upon hearing that there was an event of harassment, the manager was inclined to believe the testimony provided to him by the server who experienced it. He has undergone the proper training to understand the in-and-outs of workplace harassment and pledged to be an ally. However, when engaging with the other person involved, a man like himself, he switched gears and believed that it was just an accident. The terms

of the testimonial exchange—unbeknownst to the speaker—were that she had credibility in her testimony, pending further investigation from the man involved. The manager's pronounced identity as a feminist gave her a false sense of safety in coming forward with such a difficult topic, only for the epistemic processes of the manager (namely, verification and conditional listening) to gaslight her and cause emotional distress on top of the trauma of sexual assault.

This example demonstrates the role of the dissenting privileged knower observing testimony from a knower of a marginalized group (in this case, a sexist male superior and a female employee). He was open to her testimony initially but his privilege filter rendered her credibility conditional. It caused her emotional harm when she criticized his behavior; no longer was he supportive, and he sent her home rather than allowing her to finish out a shift. My goal with this example is to identify how privilege is still inherent in the dissenting knower, despite their status of dissent. The manager in this example knew the proper moves to take when handling sexual assault in the workplace, signifying his understanding of the issue at hand. However, when his own behavior was challenged, the conditions of his epistemic approach became clear and he ensured that his comfortability was at the center of the experience.

Conditional epistemic injustice is harmful because it gives the speaker a false sense of security during testimonial exchange. The dissenting privileged knower centers themselves when partaking in testimonial exchange with a person belonging to a marginalized community. Conditional epistemic injustice is specific to an interaction between a dissenting privileged knower (who has taken steps to dismantle their oppressive behavior) and an epistemically oppressed knower in times when testimonial exchange covers issues of privilege. An exchange of this kind covers oppression—be it racial discrimination, police brutality, workplace harassment, and the like—and identify it for the sake of fixing it. This transformative discussion territory is imperative for dominant knowers who wish to join marginalized persons in solidarity with their own liberation efforts. It is imperative in the elimination of systemic oppression. The insidious nature of conditional epistemic injustice does the dirty work of centering privileged people in conversations meant to break them from their oppressive perspectival tendencies.

### **III. PRIVILEGED EPISTEMIC AGENTS AND THE PERPETUATION OF WHITE SUPREMACY**

Thus far I have explained two versions of the privileged knower as they exist apart from one another. I homed in on privileged white knowers in my claims. In this section, I will bring these two knowers together in terms of a similar issue they enable, that being the perpetuation of white supremacy. I plan to utilize the aforementioned behaviors described as substance to support this claim.

The dissenting knower has entertained information from sources outside of their epistemic community. This person obtains awareness of their privilege and begins to perceive the world having a grasp of the role it takes in their perception. The point I have made is that despite their status of dissent, the dissenting privileged knower is still operating from a position of dominance and that comes with its own epistemic problems. Sarah Hoagland writes "dominant logic not only works to obscure interdependent relation, it is a practice of conceptual coercion; in significant ways it forecloses the possibility of a destabilizing critical response, recognizing only those responses that reinforce its own status" (Hoagland 2007, 102). The dissenting privileged knower has a unique status wherein they maintain epistemic patterns of domination while pursuing an engagement with other realities that challenge the privileged illusion they have come to know. The process of being an ally requires a breakdown of this illusion, and it takes tremendous work. Dominant logic affects privileged knowers when they receive new information. What they allow to pass through their privilege barrier is contingent upon how it affects them and how they perceive themselves.

This behavior is almost identical to that of the dominant privileged knower, whose status is maintained by insular practices of information-sourcing to actively discount conflicting views of the world. The difference between the two is their intent and the degree of severity in their behavior, but the impact is the same: the privileged knower sources information that centers themselves and their privilege when making an effort to understand issues of oppression. They discount information crucial to gaining ontological objectivity regarding their privilege and uphold white supremacist ideology. Because of this, the status of dissent held by a privileged knower matters greatly. The on-going work of self-reflection is mandatory for the knower to be labeled as "dissenting." Epistemic humility is at the heart of this process.

Dissenting privileged knowers and their status of dissent resemble the phenomena of white redemption. The epistemic centering of oneself—in the case of white redemption— reinforces white supremacist systems with dangerous consequences for those who continually suffer from it. Sullivan writes “white redemption is a troubling goal for racial justice struggles; it has very little connection with ending white domination of people of color” (Sullivan 2014, 70). It centers the white person on issues of racial injustice. The epistemic agent then seeks to understand their privilege to stand in solidarity, but more importantly, showcase themselves as an ally. In the case of 2020 BLM protests, for instance, filmmaker AJ Lovelace spoke about protestors to the Los Angeles Times: “It was obvious to me that people were out there to say they were out there,” Lovelace said. “White girls would agitate the police and then cry when they responded. This isn’t how a protest works” (Logan, 2020). In July of 2020, I witnessed at a Portland protest white protestors stopping at various points of a march to take photos of themselves and graffiti property in iconic areas. Not once did they join the chanting of the names of those who had been murdered. Behaviors like this distract from the purpose of civil disobedience. If they were not there to support the movement and protect Black protestors, they were there for the wrong reasons. Insincere solidarity, a symptom of self-centeredness, is damaging to the integrity and impact of the BLM as well the lives of those it’s meant to protect.

White redemptive behavior among dissenting privileged knowers prevents necessary discussion of systemic racism with dominant privileged knowers. Dissenting privileged knowers include in their process of radicalization cutting ties with other white people in their communities. They may consider themselves “good white people” in the sense that they are not-racist, placing them on a moral high ground in comparison to “bad white people.” Sullivan argues “distancing oneself from their white forebears can appear as the only viable way for contemporary white people to (not) deal with their racist history. It can seem to be the best way to demonstrate that they disapprove of slavery and that they are not racist like previous white generations” (Sullivan 2014, 60). The dissenting knower investigates their relationship with oppression as an individual rather than a piece of an expansive system; the individual therefore denies their proximity and interdependency to racist white people, generating a lack of accountability that perpetuates white supremacy.



Dominant privileged knowers have no reason to look beyond information that satisfies their illusions of the world; consequently, "if one insists on the public and counterpublic transcript as the only sense, one promotes both an epistemology and ethics of ignorance within the logic of oppression. For dominant logic must erase resistant logics, render them invisible, render them nonsense, to maintain its own legitimacy" (Hoagland 2007, 109). Dissenting privileged knowers have a proximity to dominant privileged knowers that creates space for sharing conflicting sources of information. They may not have the ability to radicalize their dominant privileged knower companions, but they have the responsibility to disrupt the epistemic processes that enforce their logic. It is necessary to uphold the obligation of dispersing counter information if the dissenting knower truly attempts to dismantle systems of oppression.

An objection to this responsibility is that it is in poor taste for a privileged person to invest themselves so deeply in liberation efforts and assume the white savior complex, a role that materializes when a white person attempts to help people of color in a way that is self-serving. The white savior complex is another instance of a privileged person centering themselves in their understanding of oppression and racial injustice. If a dissenting privileged knower takes it upon themselves to educate their peers on issues of oppression, they are actively silencing marginalized voices.

There is truth to this objection. It is inappropriate for a white person to speak over a person of color regarding their lived experiences. However, the responsibility to disperse information a privileged person receives from marginalized folks is contingent upon their proximity to both dominant privileged knowers and those who are epistemically oppressed. Their positioning provides them with the means to activate the information they have gained and inspire change without expecting this to be accomplished by marginalized persons. For too long, this sort of educational work has been demanded from marginalized persons, an occurrence Nora Berenstain calls epistemic exploitation:

Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face. Epistemic exploitation is a variety of epistemic oppression marked by unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labor. It maintains structures of oppression by centering the needs and

desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups who are required to do the unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons who demand it—and who benefit from those very oppressive systems about which they demand to be educated. (Berenstain 2016, 2)

The polarization of privileged knowers as an epistemic event inhibits social progress. The matriculation of information into one's conceptual practice has no use unless it is a continual practice that prompts self-reflection and changed behavior. In order to dismantle oppressive systems at work, a dissenting privileged knower must uphold a lifelong commitment to adjusting their perceptual capacity. Neglecting to do so places the burden on marginalized persons entirely, which not only allows the dominant logic supporting white supremacy to go unchecked, but also negates the cognitive labor of the agent. If the dissenting privileged knower fails to activate the information they have been given by marginalized persons and disperse it within their communities, there was no purpose in receiving it in the first place. The dissenting privileged knower has epistemically exploited a marginalized person's labor and made no effort towards eliminating the systems of oppression they sought to understand.

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