NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Knowing How to Feel: Mapping Affective Epistemologies of Ignorance through Numbness

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By

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Abstract

In my dissertation, *Knowing How to Feel: mapping affective epistemologies of ignorance through numbness*, I examine the ways by which numbness contributes to harmful "epistemic resilience," or the phenomenon whereby systems of meaning remain stable despite counter evidence or attempts to alter them (Dotson 2014).[1] I am most importantly concerned with the dehumanizing power of such numbness, which works through engaging people (including ourselves) as *objects* (of fear, paranoia, judgment, etc), rather than as complex *persons* with our/their own needs for charitable and open interpretation. Furthermore, the project considers how we might combat such numbness through the development of emotional and other affective capacities using art, and especially storytelling. The overall aim is to create new interdisciplinary conversations between epistemologists of ignorance and decolonial feminists. *Knowing How to Feel* is divided into four separate but interrelated chapters. I'll give a brief outline of each.

In Chapter One, *Racism, Resilience, and Affective Resistance* (forthcoming *Hypatia* 36, no. 4), I give my account of numbness, offering six disjunctive characteristics. I then explore two ways that numbness perpetuates harmful epistemic resilience, namely, through the persistence of stereotypes, and "epistemic appropriation" (Davis 2018).[2] I argue that Kantian "disinterestedness" might provide a helpful tool for efforts of affective resistance. Chapter Two,

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[1] Dotson, Kristie. "Conceptualizing epistemic oppression." *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115-138.
[2] Davis, Emmalon. "On epistemic appropriation." *Ethics* 128, no. 4 (2018): 702-727.

Curdled Contracts (forthcoming in *Truth to Power: The Philosophy of Charles Mills*), thinks about these themes of numbness and resilience as they relate to academic philosophy, specifically in the context of social contract theory. I use deep textual engagement to interpret Charles Mills' notions of "the Domination Contract" and "white ignorance" in the context of María Lugones' work on purity and curdled logics. I argue that employing methodological insights from decolonial feminisms, ones which have not yet received much uptake by Mills, might deepen the liberatory potential of his apparatus. In Chapter Three, *Grieving Ghosts*, I situate the discussion of resilience and numbness in our everyday lives. Drawing on the work of Shannon Sullivan, I consider numbness as an unconscious habit of racial privilege that permeates resilient and dehumanizing understandings of self and world. I think about how we might resist such habits through the kind of "grief work" some storytelling provides. Finally, in Chapter Four, *NOA: a music film,* I bring the previous chapters together by embodying their theoretical commitments with my own storytelling, combatting numbness through encouraging an experience of deep feeling.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all collaborators of *NOA: a music film*

Thank you to my family, friends, and community

Thank you to Ininwewi-gichigami (Lake Michigan)
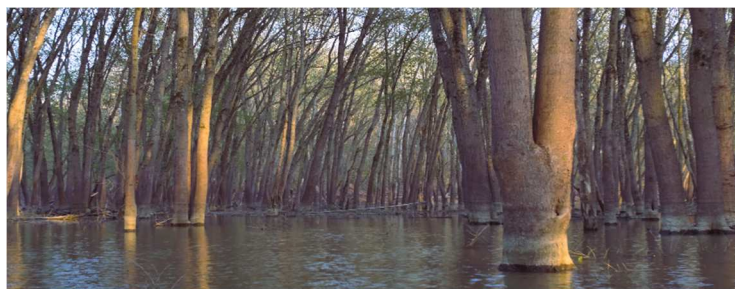
In gratitude and memory of María Lugones

(January 26, 1944 – July 14, 2020)

& For Staci, Sophia and Vita

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Arrange whatever pieces come your way

-Virginia Woolf

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Photo of my mother, aunts, and uncle

this is the journey of

surviving through poetry

-rupi kaur (milk & honey)

Introductions

I. Me

Language both describes and shapes experience and is a vehicle for both oppression and resistance. None of these three conjuncts are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the power of words is significant to both individual and collective healing. In terms of the former, in trauma studies we learn that "naming something" can be an integral part of healing by helping people make sense of harmful experiences that disorieneict and isolate. In terms of the latter, the literature on hermeneutical injustice[1] offers the idea that new concepts can offer pathways for social justice.

As a young philosopher, I found a lot of language in my studies which captured aspects of my experience I had not understood prior. I did not *know* that I didn't understand these aspects of myself; rather, I unconsciously obscured them through the many ways I was moving through the world, largely dictated by cultural norms I found myself in. Many of these norms I could not have embodied if I'd tried. For example, I was raised by working-class parents in an upper-class town (my parents moved from Durham, NC to Chapel Hill, NC because of the high quality of public education). No matter how much I wanted to wear the right shoes or shirts, I usually

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[1] See especially, Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

found myself in an off-brand or second-hand size too small/big version of the gold standard. I remember the girls on my sports team picking fun at these kinds of petty details, which felt existentially serious at the time. I have many unhappy childhood memories of social exclusion which still sting, if only slightly, with the feeling of "not fitting in." These kinds of experiences, coupled with growing up Catholic and in the south, meant there was no way I was coming out as a lesbian in a community where I did not have one gay (and out) peer. The only openly gay person I knew at the time was my aunt, who had been rejected by my grandparents, their first and last words to her upon hearing the news being "You're going straight to hell." And so I said to myself, unconsciously: "No thank you, I'll play straight."

Despite an awareness of my sexual preferences as soon as puberty hit then, I obscured this part of myself (even from myself). I came out to one friend in high school who was also closeted, but it wasn't until college at Oberlin, where I was surrounded by gender neutral bathrooms, school sponsored events like drag ball and safer-sex night, and an ocean of LGBTQIA individuals, that I felt safe enough to be more open within my intimate circle. However, even this friendly environment wasn't enough to fully liberate me in feeling free to choose my sexual and romantic partners more authentically (and less defensively). As I fought an internal war to feel validated by those who had rejected me, and especially by those social norms against which I had been deemed "not good enough in x & y ways," I remained either re- or de- pressed, in long-distance partnerships with men who I loved but did not desire.

In 2013, through a graduate feminist philosophy course at IU taught by Kate Abramson, I learned about Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Thank you, Katy). I could finally make sense of my queerness simultaneous with my heterosexual behavior

through this powerful idea which explained how "heterosexuality is assumed and enforced by a patriarchal and heteronormative society… able to be adopted by people regardless of their personal sexual orientation… [because it] is socially promoted as the natural state of both sexes, and deviation is seen as unfavorable."[2] A few years after reading the article, I broke up with my boyfriend at the time and came out publicly. I felt supported in this decision by a newfound queer community in Chicago, and also in part by these feminist insights which allowed me to recognize and legitimize my experience to myself and others, making sense of the dissonance between my behavior and being. In other words, by naming my experience, I freed up an abundance of energy which could be used towards creating the life I wanted to live, rather than towards defending against the possible pain of further social rejection. The problem wasn't me after all.

Unfortunately, as my graduate career in the discipline continued, the words I was writing and reading sometimes felt far away from their liberatory potential, more like cages than wings. I remember one instance in which a practical philosophy workshop in my department was exploring the question of how to teach controversial issues. The paradigm case in the literature concerned the moral case of homosexuality and the political case of gay marriage. The thesis was that if an issue is controversial, one should not lead students in any one direction, or put forward

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[2] Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

one's own view in a compelling way. Rather, one should remain neutral in one's pedagogical

stance. The reading for the workshop, which I had gotten up early to read, excited about a

renewed desire to engage in departmental life after a refreshing conference experience, felt

threatening to my fragile confidence in this period of transition. Was I really going to sit in a

room with a bunch of straight people arguing about the controversial nature of my sexual and

relationship preferences? I went back into the philosophical closet, a place in which my work is

solitary and often painstakingly lonely. A place that allows me to manifest the invisibility such

philosophical frameworks effectively impose.

There is a strong affective dimension to these experiences of "finding the right words,"

having the wrong words, or having no words at all. As Theresa Brennan (2004) notes: There is a

"clinical belief that relief and energetic release comes with the words to say it. Language releases

us…via words that express something occluded and thereby release the energy deployed in this

occlusion" (140).[3] But if this is true, then not having the right words or failing to understand

one's experience, depletes one's vital energy. For years, I used countless amounts of energy to

hide from myself and the world, in part, through a repression of *feeling.* I had learned to look

away from particular feelings for so long, that sometimes, I could almost get away with failing to

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[3] Brennan, Teresa. *The transmission of affect*. Cornell University Press, 2015.

notice them at all, leading me to (harmfully) ignore myself. How much collective energy could we save if we all stopped hiding? And what could we do with that energy?

I have become committed then, to the idea that noticing our feelings, both subtle and large, can be a truth-making feature of human experience, transformative insofar as we are stuck in embodied patterns of avoidance and ignorance. This doesn't mean, of course, that *all* feelings say something true, for one of the ways I best covered up inconvenient feelings was to redirect them. I could transmit my attraction to women coupled with my inability to pursue that attraction, for example, into a politics of sexual purity guided by Catholic values, often cashed out affectively in feelings of judgment towards more sexually liberated persons. However, the truths about ourselves seem to persist through deeper feelings, waiting to be discovered and named so that they might live themselves out (of the closet). Even after years of habituating myself in this self-deceptive cover up, one which kept me isolated from my community, the attraction never went away. Thank goodness for that.

Why do I tell you this story? Well I suppose in the end, it turns out that my intellectual passion for studying the topic of numbness insofar as it relates to group-based ignorance, both inside and outside of philosophy, has largely been about me. I don't say mean 'me,' in a narcissistic way, for the only kind of 'me' I'm interested in understanding is the one which is intimately connected to many others and the world at large. But even so, my others-oriented dissertation project unfolded into a path that was really meant for my own spirit to walk. It is this path which I share with you in the following pages.

II.   The Project

Knowing How to Feel: mapping affective epistemologies of ignorance through numbness, is divided into four chapters, each of which has been developed as a separate project with a scholarly contribution of its own. However, while each chapter creates a critical dialogue with different bodies of literature, they are all unified through shared thematic interests and aims, converging in significant ways. As a whole, the project examines harmful patterns of numbness insofar as they relate to structural-based ignorance, both in academia, and in the social world more broadly. More specifically, I am investigating how dehumanizing affective numbness contributes to harmful epistemic resilience (Dotson 2014),[4] or the phenomenon whereby systems of meaning remain stable despite counter evidence or attempts to alter them. I am using 'affective' in the widest possible sense, to include emotions, feelings of aversion and pleasure more generally, and other ways we bump up against each other in embodied and inevitable ways. I am thinking about numbness as the way by which we fail in being affectively, and especially emotionally, reachable or available to ourselves and others, both unconsciously and willfully. I am most importantly concerned with the *dehumanizing* power of such numbness, which works through engaging people (including ourselves) as *objects* (of fear, paranoia, judgment, etc), rather than as complex *persons* with our/their own needs for charitable and open interpretation.

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[4] Dotson, Kristie. "Conceptualizing epistemic oppression." *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014): 115-138.

Furthermore, I am interested in efforts of what I call "affective resistance," or in how we might combat such numbness through the development of emotional and other affective capacities using art, and especially storytelling. The primary aim is to create new pathways for interdisciplinary conversations to occur between epistemologists of ignorance and decolonial feminists. In what follows, I'll give a brief outline of each chapter.

Chapter One, *Racism, Resilience, and Affective Resistance* (forthcoming *Hypatia* 36, no. 4) critically engages with Dotson's (2014) account of epistemic resilience, arguing that 'noticing' such resilience in the first place is made more difficult because of affective numbness. I give my account of numbness, offering six disjunctive characteristics. In the second part of the paper, I explore the key role of numbness in perpetuating two primary forms of harmful epistemic resilience, namely, the persistence of stereotypes, and "epistemic appropriation" (Davis 2018).[5] I look primarily at the stereotype of Black and brown criminality as it works to support convictions on the basis of false confessions. I show how norms of 'impartiality' perpetuate a dehumanizing numbness which is harmful socially as well as *epistemically*. I then look at how the #MeToo movement has been appropriated by white culture, in part, due to a numbness towards experiences of sexual assault faced by women of color (insofar as those experiences diverge from white women's experiences). I also briefly consider how Kantian

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[5] Davis, Emmalon. "On epistemic appropriation." *Ethics* 128, no. 4 (2018): 702-727.

aesthetics might provide a useful tool for resistance. The primary purpose is to get clear on two major concepts of the dissertation, 'affective numbness and 'epistemic resilience,' how they relate according to my view, and the epistemic stakes of such a relationship in the social and political world (while also gesturing to possible sites of repair). More narrowly, I contribute a possible solution to the problem of epistemic resilience raised by Dotson in her influential paper (a solution which turns to the role of affect). In addition, I hope to have offered new possibilities for engagement with affect theory by those working in the epistemologies of ignorance literature.

Chapter Two, *Curdled Contracts* (forthcoming in *Truth to Power: The Philosophy of Charles Mills*), thinks about these themes of numbness and resilience as they relate to academic philosophy, specifically in the context of social contract theory. Methodologically, I use deep textual engagement to interpret Charles Mills' notions of "the Domination Contract" and "white ignorance" in the context of María Lugones' work on purity and curdled logics. Against a critique made by Alison Bailey, I argue that Mills successfully "curdles" the social contract tradition for aims of racial progress; however, I argue that harmful norms of numbness persist even within Mills' modified apparatus. I suggest that methodological insights (such as storytelling) from decolonial feminists might be reparative for resisting such numbness. The contribution in this chapter is thus twofold; first, in thinking about Millsian "white ignorance," an influential concept in the epistemologies of ignorance literature, within his broader philosophical framework of the racial contract, I hope to make deeper connections between social/political philosophy and discussions within epistemologies of ignorance. Second, I hope to illuminate new possible connections between Mills' work and decolonial feminisms. I believe

whole-heartedly that progress in nonideal philosophy will require a more significant turn to insights from women of color, and that Mills work can be a bridge.

In Chapter Three, *Grieving Ghosts*, I aim to situate the discussion of resilience and numbness in our everyday lives. Drawing on the work of Shannon Sullivan, I consider numbness as an unconscious habit of racial privilege that permeates resilient and dehumanizing understandings of self and world. I think about how we might resist such unconscious habits through "grief work," aimed towards affectively acknowledging individual and collective traumas which have been systemically disavowed, and which manifest as "social hauntings." I think about how storytelling provides a fertile context for this kind of affective resistance which works to transform privileged habits of numbness into practices of what María Lugones calls "faithful witnessing." This chapter therefore situates important insights from decolonial feminists and affect theorists (or what I'll call "decolonial feminist affect theorists") within the subfield of epistemologies of ignorance, forging new pathways between the literatures.

Finally, in Chapter Four, *NOA,* I aim to embody the theoretical commitments of the previous chapters through my own storytelling, bringing the other three chapter together by connecting them to my artistic practice. *NOA* is a music film which constitutes the bulk of the chapter's content, alongside an interview with Emmalon Davis which elaborates dialogically on some of the film's major themes. In putting forward artistic content as part of the dissertation, I aim to myself disrupt the harmful resilience of numbness I critique throughout the project. Insofar as each preceding chapter puts forward the thesis that numbness can be combatted through aesthetic experiences, what better way to illustrate the power of such a claim than by providing an aesthetic experience for my readers themselves?

Or, I hope to connect with you.

CHAPTER ONE
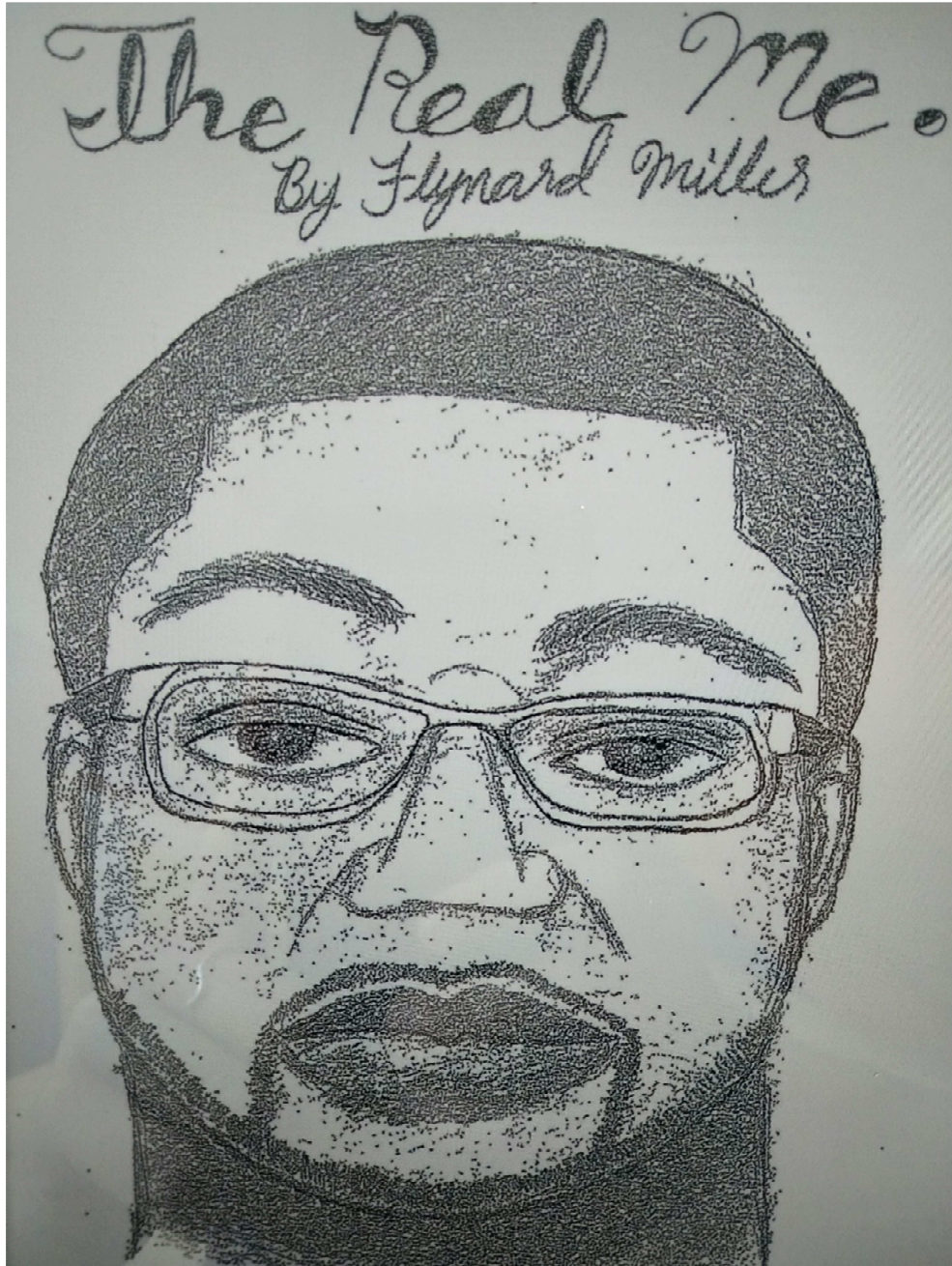
Figure 2: Self-portrait by Flynard Miller, member of Cohort One of Northwestern's Prison Education Program. "I am great because I strive to be so, and I will continue to earn the title of 'Greatness' because I own it." -Flynard Miller

weep.

into your shirt.

you're allowed.

-clouds

nayirah waheed

Racism, Resilience, and Affective Resistance

(*Hypatia* 36, no.4)

Abstract:

This paper explores the affective dimension of resilient epistemological systems. Specifically, I argue that responsible epistemic practice requires affective engagement with non-dominant experiences. To begin, I outline Kristie Dotson's account of epistemological resilience whereby an epistemological system remains stable despite counter evidence or attempts to alter it. Then, I develop an account of affective numbness. As I argue, affective numbness can promote epistemological resilience in at least two ways. First, it can reinforce harmful stereotypes even after these stereotypes have been rationally demystified. To illustrate, I examine the stereotype of Black criminality as it relates to false confessions (Lackey 2018). Second, it can encourage "epistemic appropriation" (Davis 2018), which I demonstrate by examining the appropriation of 'intersectionality' and #MeToo by white culture. Finally, I conclude that resisting harmful resilience requires affective resistance, or efforts which target numbness via different kinds of affective engagement. I consider Kantian 'dis-interestedness' as a candidate.

Keywords:

I.   The Question of Resilience

Imagine a white woman who has critically interrogated the construction of Black criminality[1]

and its harmful perpetuation in the media and beyond. She understands the way this stereotype

has been used to marginalize and oppress Black people. She knows that she is more likely to be

attacked by a white man than a Black man, and yet she still reflexively clutches her purse only

when Black men pass her on the street.[2] Or, consider this same woman has studied the over-

sexualization of Black women, learning how it has promoted their rape and forced sterilization,

as well as harmful perceptions of Black motherhood (Roberts 1997).[3] She has also encountered

evidence showing women of color are more likely to be sexually assaulted than white women.

Despite her rational de-mystification of the racist stereotype of Black promiscuity,[4] she found

herself less upset and vocally active when multiple allegations against R. Kelly came into the

public spotlight and #MeToo shifted its focus from white women to women of color.[5]

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[1] According to this stereotype, Black men in particular are problematically assumed to be "dangerous criminals."
[2] To consider the phenomenological experience of some Black men who experience fear and paranoia by white women, see Yancy (2016).
[3] In putting forward these stereotypes, I am aware that even in my attempts to counter them, there are risks of causing harm through their very positing. My hope is that benefits of consciousness raising might outweigh this risk.
[4] According to this stereotype, Black women are problematically assumed to be "promiscuous, immoral, and sexually available."
[5] Although the movement was popularized by Alyssa Milano, it was a Black activist from Harlem, Tarana Burke, who started #Metoo a decade earlier (specifically for women of color who were victims of abuse). More on the importance of this in Section II B.

This paper explores why harmful epistemic practices and resources remain influential even after they have been critically interrogated or rationally demystified.[6] To begin formulating an answer to this question, I explore the affective dimension of resilient epistemological systems. Specifically, I argue that responsible epistemic practice requires affective engagement with non-dominant experiences.[7] The argument proceeds in three stages. To begin, I outline Kristie Dotson's account of "epistemological resilience," the phenomenon whereby an 'epistemological system' remains stable despite counter evidence or attempts to alter it. Then, I show how Dotson's framework can be expanded to illuminate the role of affect in maintaining resilience. To do so, I develop an account of "affective numbness,"[8] a multifaceted mechanism through which epistemological resilience is maintained. As I argue, affective numbness can promote epistemological resilience in at least two ways. First, it can reinforce harmful stereotypes even after these stereotypes have been rationally demystified.[9] To illustrate, I examine the stereotype

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[6] See Morton and Paul (2019) for why "epistemic grit" which involves resilient reasoning can sometimes be epistemically rational.

[7] One might ask, how is 'epistemically responsible' distinct from 'morally responsible' or 'socially responsible'? My answer follows Davis (2018, 725-727) in claiming that although I am only interested in the epistemic to the extent it is salient for justice, focusing on this dimension makes clearer some relevant harms and skills that might otherwise occlude us. For example, understanding how systems exclude insightful knowers from contributing to social meaning is important for any moral/political agenda, but it best comes into focus through epistemic terms. For more on epistemic responsibility and the relationship between epistemic justification and ethical justification, see Code (1987).

[8] I first encountered the term from Medina (2013, 210) who uses the phrase "affectively numbed" to describe being ignorant of the racial aspects of social experience. My use is more general but includes and builds upon this idea.

[9] My view is sympathetic and consistent with Basu (2018) and Moss (2018)'s thesis on moral encroachment in which the epistemic status of a judgment or opinion can depend on its moral features. While my view focuses on the emotional or affective dimension of judgments, these features undoubtedly overlap with moral features at times.

of Black criminality as it relates to false confessions (Lackey 2018). Second, affective numbness

can encourage "epistemic appropriation" (Davis 2018). I demonstrate this claim by examining

the appropriation of 'intersectionality' and #MeToo by white culture.[10] Finally, I conclude that

resisting harmful resilience requires 'affective resistance,' or efforts which specifically target

numbness via different kinds of affective engagement. I consider Kantian 'dis-interestedness' as

a candidate.

II. The Problem of 'Noticing'

In 'Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,' Kristie Dotson (2014) offers an account of epistemic

oppression, or the "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge

production" within an epistemological system (1).[11] Drawing on an order of change heuristic in

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[10] Intersectionality is the idea that single-axis frameworks for understanding oppression are inadequate for addressing individuals or groups who simultaneously experience multiple forms of oppression; this is because those forms of oppression overlap and are interdependent. "The 'me too.' movement was founded in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing… In less than six months, because of the viral #metoo hashtag, a vital conversation about sexual violence was thrust into the national dialogue" (See Me Too website).

[11] Dotson defines an epistemological system as "all of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession" (2014, 121). This notion of 'possibility' is crucial because Dotson (2018) in her later work emphasizes the importance of remaining "neutral" with respect to whether an epistemic resource contributes to knowledge or ignorance when considering it for purposes of resistance. She distinguishes between 'knowledge attribution' on the one hand and 'knowledge possession' on the other: One can be attributed with knowledge without really possessing it and vice versa. The 'epistemic' in "epistemic conditions" is therefore not (or at least not only) normative but

organizational literature, Dotson posits three forms of epistemic oppression distinguished by the difficulties encountered when addressing each. According to the picture, first- and second- order epistemic exclusions are exemplified by Fricker's (2007) heavily theorized notions of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices; they are caused by the inefficiency and insufficiency of epistemic resources respectively.[12] Dotson says these exclusions can be addressed while leaving in-tact systemic values or governing rules, aiming to alter only how these values or rules are achieved or followed.[13] In contrast, addressing third-order epistemic exclusion requires altering the 'rules of the game' because it is caused by the *inadequacy* of epistemic resources and the preservation of those same resources.[14] These different orders of exclusion are not mutually exclusive, but they face different kinds of challenges.[15] The central obstacle for the third-order case is 'epistemic

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concerns at least in part de facto practices of knowledge attribution in a given society. For Dotson, inquiries into knowledge attribution concern whether one would attribute some knower with knowledge capacities where knowledge capacity refers to "someone's real, imagined or potential capacity to…be epistemically competent with respect to some domain of inquiry…" (Dotson 2018, 476). Within epistemologies of ignorance, such as those informed by patriarchy or white supremacy, non-dominant subjects are often wrongly assumed to lack such capacities while dominant subjects are often wrongly assumed to possess such capacities. As this is already well-treaded ground, I assume rather than argue for this, instead exploring how processes of differential knowledge attribution *work* within epistemologies of ignorance.

[12] Testimonial injustice occurs when a listener makes a judgment of a speaker's credibility that is deflated. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when an aspect of one's experience is obscured from collective understanding because of social marginalization (Fricker 2007).

[13] On Dotson's picture, testimonial injustice can be addressed through re-distributing credibility, a resource already in use for knowledge production, and hermeneutical injustice can be addressed through the introduction of new concepts.

[14] In earlier work, Dotson (2012) says third-order harm results in "contributory injustice," which is caused by willful ignorance (Pohlhaus 2011).

[15] While addressing first- and second- order exclusion can be 'reduced' to a re-distribution of social and political power on Dotson's view, resistance towards third-order exclusion is 'irreducible' to these factors. This distinction does not mean, as Dotson assures us towards the end of the (2014) paper, that these efforts can or should be sought

resilience,'[16] or the phenomenon whereby an epistemological system remains stable despite counter evidence or attempts to alter it.

As Dotson notes, epistemic resilience is not always bad because we need epistemological systems to be relatively stable insofar as we rely upon them to make sense of our world. But, when such resilience "upholds and preserves" (Dotson 2014, 32) *inadequate* resources that harm some knowers by thwarting their contribution to knowledge production, we should resist it. In these cases, "one's epistemic resources and the epistemological system within which those resources prevail [are] *wholly* [my emphasis] inadequate" for the task of resistance. Rather, one must proceed from *"outside"* the set of resources since the inadequacy is so thoroughgoing (Dotson 2014, 129).[17]

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in isolation from each other. Rather, it illuminates that there are different kinds of strategies and skills needed for resisting epistemic oppression (even if these efforts are often complementary). See Rogers 2021a for a longer discussion on this point.

[16] I prefer my use of 'epistemic' to 'epistemological,' though the terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, insofar as the latter word technically refers to a 'theory of knowledge.' 'Epistemic' is thus more apt for referring to those epistemic practices, resources, and modes of resistance which constitute factors of resilience.

[17] This does not mean, however, that alternative resources lie 'outside' of the system in any ontological way. Given Dotson's definition of an epistemological system as "all of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession" (2014, 121), it would be fetishizing at best, and dehumanizing at worst, to assume the resources generated by nondominant knowers exist outside of these conditions. I thus align myself with others who argue that many of the concepts and resources needed for epistemic resistance *already* exist within nondominant communities (Mason 2012, Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012, Medina 2011a, Dotson 2014). And this makes sense, insofar as it is *active* exclusion of marginalized resources in contemporary society (rather than, say, isolation) which often constitutes the inadequacy of governing epistemic resources. This also illuminates why Dotson's epistemological system includes *both* conditions for knowledge attribution *and* conditions for knowledge possession (See note 18). This distinction was made after her 2014 paper upon which my own analysis is based. It's therefore helpful to re-read the earlier paper in light of these later insights.

What is characteristic of third-order epistemic exclusion then is the skill needed to go outside of one's epistemic resources to contend with resilience. Dotson says this is a distinctively epistemic skill because "going outside" just means being able to put one's resources into question (for the sake of modifying their underlying structure).[18] And now the central worry concerning third-order resistance emerges: how can one put into question epistemic norms that provide the very conditions for such an interrogation in the first place? One is epistemically dependent upon what one hopes to change; and, as Audre Lorde famously argued, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (Lorde 2007 [1984]). Countering harmful resilience seems impossible, or at least very challenging to conceptualize practically.[19] Given our deep reliance upon the inadequate epistemic resources which preserve governing rules, the central obstacle for resisting third-order harm is "noticing" the inadequacy of these resources in

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[18] When Dotson says we have to go 'outside' the set of resources, it's important to keep in mind that this 'going outside' is an *epistemic* exercise, not an ontological one (See note 12). Dotson's use of Loraine Code's (2008) distinction (drawing from Castoriadis) between the 'instituted social imaginary' and the 'instituting social imaginary' is helpful here. The institu*ted* social imaginary "carries normative social meanings, customs, expectations, assumptions, values, prohibitions, and permissions——the habitus and ethos——into which people are nurtured from childhood" (Dotson 2014, 119). The institu*ting* social imaginary, on the other hand, is the creative-critical activity of a society in which it exercises its ability to put itself into question.

[19] It is helpful to see that a distinction between *systems* and *resources* is importantly at play in Dotson's account yet is not always obvious. It is the inadequacy of epistemic *resources* which cause an epistemological *system* to be harmfully resilient. Furthermore, those resources primarily responsible are those which have a disproportionately greater influence on a system's workings, namely, 'dominant epistemic resources,' or 'governing epistemic resources.' It is the inadequacy of *these* resources then which must be noticed for the sake of resisting resilience. For, it is because of both the undue influence dominant resources enjoy throughout multiple areas of the social landscape (media, politics, education, etc.), and also because of the deep structural assumptions which accompany these resources, that widespread uptake of alternative resources would require *radically* different practices (which follow different rules), or the kind of deep structural change third-order resistance requires.

the first place.[20] Insofar as my interest here lies in better understanding and resisting racism and sexism, my own analysis examines an epistemological system of 'white supremacy patriarchy,' or those epistemic resources and de facto epistemic norms which are inadequate because they assume and preserve white supremacy and patriarchy.[21]

Let's look at an example. Suppose a white woman is purchasing a light peach-colored bra labeled 'nude.' For our discussion, what's important to point out is that it will be difficult for her to notice 'nude' is an inadequate concept because it causes no dissonance with her experience. And this is precisely because the epistemological system is structured in favor of white subjectivity; its resilience depends upon a governing rule of white neutrality that is concealed by common usages of concepts like 'nude,' usages that harmfully reinforce and preserve such problematic assumptions. In what follows, I show it is often *affective* failures which prevent us from noticing the inadequacy of exclusionary dominant resources. Resisting resilience will

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[20] This is related both to Medina's notion of 'meta-blindness' in which one is unable to detect "one's inability to understand certain things" (Medina 2011, 28), and to Mills' (2019) work in which he thinks about the obstacle to combatting white ignorance (2007) for the sake of a new Black Radical Liberalism in the following way: "How can you critique what you don't even see."

[21] Both Dotson and I are indebted to Mills (2007) account of 'white ignorance' in which he considers social-based mis-cognition caused by racialized patterns of domination and subordination. In much of Mills' work, drawing from Marxism, he emphasizes the shortcomings of ideal theory, prescribing that we rather begin our theorizing from the non-ideal, material conditions which we inhabit. Dotson suggests that inquiries into knowledge attribution, rather than knowledge possession (see footnote 12), heed this call for non-ideal theory. "Real world dynamics and possibilities serve as the engine of Knowledge Attribution accounts" (Dotson 2018, 478).

therefore require contending with affect, and specifically with something I call "affective numbness."

III. Affective Numbness

Although much theorizing has been done regarding epistemic lacunas and how they thwart suitable collective understanding, less has been done regarding the 'affective gaps' which do so.[22] In this section, I turn to the affective dimension of our knowing practices. In doing so I align myself with many feminist epistemologists (Anzaldua 2007 [1987]; Shotwell 2011; Dotson 2012; Medina forthcoming; Hill-Collins 2011; Alcoff 1999; Lorde 1993, [1987]; Jaggar 1989; Pohlhaus 2011, and others) who want to theorize knowledge or the 'epistemic' more broadly, as it connects to emotion, skill, social situation, and embodiment.[23] On these pictures, we need to consider more than traditional cognitive epistemic resources [24] to make sense of our knowing practices; 'affective,' 'imaginative,' and other resources also have epistemic salience.

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[22] I build here upon José Medina's (2019) work on the desensitization of publics to the struggles of marginalized groups and upon Judith Butler's work on 'ungrievability' (2004, 2006). According to Butler, within dominant epistemic frameworks some lives do not "count" as lives worthy of consideration because dominant subjects are rendered "senseless" or desensitized before them. This results in affective distortions that further violence against these lives.

[23] Black, Latina, and (other) decolonial feminisms have developed robust literature on the importance of including embodied experiences for purposes of knowledge production. See Ortega, Medina, and Pitts (2020) for recent work in Latina feminism on the issue, and Rogers (2018) for a list of texts on the topic of 'embodied epistemology.'

[24] These resources include "resources of the mind, such as language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experiences" (Pohlhaus Jr. 2011, 718).

Within epistemologies of ignorance, 'epistemic resources' will also include those resources which promote knowledge attribution, even if they fail to promote knowledge possession because of problematic and inadequate standards for what counts as 'knowledge' [See note 12]. In particular, my analysis highlights those resources assumed to be knowledge producing when they are in fact ignorance (re-) producing due to racism and sexism. Affective numbness is one of these resources. It refers to the phenomenon whereby one fails to emotionally or 'affectively' engage with non-dominant experiences, rendering one emotionally unavailable or unreachable to those experiences. While some might think being impartial or neutral requires a kind of affective numbness, I show how such an approach can fail on epistemic grounds, re-producing ignorance as a result. However, I'm not assuming affective numbness is *always* bad, or that any non-cognitive epistemic resource is always good or bad. Sometimes an epistemic resource may be valuable for knowledge possession in one case, while inhibiting for knowledge possession in another, and affective epistemic resources may be especially vulnerable to playing this dual function.

For example, being affectively numbed is sometimes an important strategy for preserving a corrective viewpoint: if an abusive husband is crying and begging his wife not to leave him, becoming affectively numbed towards his pain might be a necessary survival strategy for his

wife to keep the reality of his abuse to the forefront. Or, we can imagine a group-based strategy of people of color intentionally numbing themselves to 'white guilt' and 'white tears' in order to focus on the urgent work of resistance that such guilt and tears might distract from.[25] In contrast to these cases, I am concerned with situations in which non-dominant experiences that would pose friction [26] and correctives to dominant epistemic norms are rendered irrelevant to judgment due (at least in part) to affective numbness (which is both itself a dominant epistemic norm, but also embedded in other dominant epistemic norms like stereotyping and exclusionary conceptual framings). Such numbness makes 'noticing' corrective alternatives, and also 'noticing' the inadequacy of our dominant norms, especially difficult. In other words, I'm interested in those cases of affective numbness which perpetuate the status quo in racist and sexist epistemologies of ignorance. The upshot of my analysis is that countering racism and sexism requires taking seriously the epistemic role of affect (or lack thereof) in promoting knowledge and ignorance.[27]

But what exactly does affective numbness consist in? I will briefly outline six characteristics which are further developed by the examples which follow. First, the object of affective numbness is some non-dominant experience, or any experience which counters the governing norms of white supremacy and patriarchy (norms often structured by white

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[25] See DiAngelo (2018) on 'white fragility.'
[26] See Medina (2013, 2011) on 'epistemic friction.'
[27] See note 12.

subjectivity, masculine subjectivity, and especially white-masculine subjectivity).[28] While race and gender identity markers mean some will have their experiences become objects of affective numbness more often than others, even the most privileged can have non-dominant experiences become the object of harmful numbness at times. Consider a young wealthy cis white boy, Michael, who is crying. His father exclaims "Dry it up, boys don't cry!" In this case, it is not that his father is affectively numbed towards his son full stop. He finds himself emotionally engaged in Michael's life more generally, celebrating his successes, and caring deeply about how his son is doing in sports, dating, school, etc. Yet, when it comes to loss and sadness, his father fails to exhibit affective engagement with his son's experience. If 'Boys don't cry' is a governing rule of patriarchal systems, then boys expressing grief will be considered a 'non-dominant experience' on my view, and it will be important that my account of affective numbness can capture it when thinking about how numbness promotes resilience. If I were to focus on non-dominant identity, rather than non-dominant experiences, these kinds of cases would be elided.

Second, affective numbness is self-reflexive, that is, affective numbness can occur towards one's own non-dominant experiences, as well as towards those of others. Work in trauma studies has shown that traumatic experience brings with it an onslaught of emotional content that often precludes comprehensibility. Traumatic experiences, in a very real way, cannot

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[28] Keeping these two analytics separate is important for intersectional considerations regarding white women's racial privilege, and Black men's gender privilege, or taking seriously their "sub-contractor" status (Pateman and Mills 2007).

be made sense of. Such violence is unconceivable, unbelievable even.[29] Unable to conceptualize what has happened (or continues to happen), many trauma victims develop numbness towards memories of assault, abuse, experiences of bias, etc., as well as implement strategies of numbness to avoid the possibility of destructive emotional overwhelm in the future. I want my account of affective numbness to be able to capture these kinds of cases, too. Because traumatic experiences hold potential for transforming and combatting the resilience of oppressive norms by illuminating their harm, combatting the numbness which prevents these stories from coming to the surface is crucial.

Third, affective numbness can occur when one has an experience that is either too distinct from, or too similar to, some non-dominant experience. A wealthy white woman's lack of experience with gang violence, or abundance of experience with diet culture, could result in affective numbness towards others' (or her own) salient experiences. Fourth, affective numbness can result from too little or too much exposure to a non-dominant experience, such as the under-exposure, in mainstream media, of Black women's vulnerability to sexual harassment, or the over-exposure of Black men being murdered by the police. Fifth, affective numbness can be indicated by unresponsiveness, or exhibiting a lack of curiosity towards some non-dominant experience. For example, when person after person walks by someone on the street outside of the

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[29] See Cvetkovich 2003, De La Costa (2019), Scarry (1987), Van Der Kolk (2014).

grocery who is requesting financial help, never thinking about this person again, we have an instance of collective affective numbing towards a non-dominant experience of poverty.[30] Sixth, numbness is often (and peculiarly) constituted by affective *investment,* namely, an affective investment in *dominant* experience (which occludes and renders unnoticeable non-dominant interpretations). When our passerby is numbed to the person outside the store, she is simultaneously affectively invested in her own hurry, judgment, or sense of being bothered. In cases of negative stereotyping, we see this dominant affective investment work to interpret non-dominant experiences through affective lenses like white paranoia, fear, or helplessness. I sometimes refer to this phenomenon as the 'dominant interpretive affect' of affective numbness, and this will have special importance in the analysis that follows.

A. The Persistence of Stereotypes

In this section, I consider affective numbness as it relates to false confessions and the harmful stereotype that 'Black and brown men are criminals.'[31] My claim is that this stereotype, in order

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[30] This example is building in assumptions about class which often, but not always, accompany white supremacy patriarchy.

[31] Stereotypes often function as implicit biases (Brownstein and Saul 2016) or "controlling images" (Hill-Collins 2000), operating under the threshold of consciousness or explicit cognition. We should therefore pay attention to the way in which they function affectively despite the implicit bias paradigm being notoriously cognitivist. Insofar as stereotypes have both affective and cognitive content then, we might consider them to be 'cognitive-affective

to be operative, requires affective numbness towards Black and brown men *as persons*, rather

interpreting them as *objects* of fear and paranoia.[32] This numbness hinders the proper

consideration of alternative epistemic resources stemming from Black and brown subjectivity,

resources which could illuminate the stereotype's inadequacy.[33] Please note the analysis contains

triggering content concerning racial violence, sexual violence, and discrimination.

In "False Confessions and Testimonial Injustice," Jennifer Lackey (2020) puts forward a

view of "agential testimonial injustice" which can occur in two ways, either through obtaining

testimony in ways which subvert or deny epistemic agency (by coercion, manipulation, or

deception, for example), or through believing someone only when they are stripped of epistemic

agency. She specifically looks at men of color who confess to crimes they did not commit. In

order to appropriately consider the stakes, let's look at one of the many examples Lackey uses:

> Appleby and Kassin discuss the case of Juan Rivera, who was convicted of the rape and
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> murder of an 11-year-old girl in Waukegan, IL on the basis of his confession, even after
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> DNA testing of semen at the scene excluded him. "The state's theory of why DNA

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epistemic resources.' When false, they will be inadequate resources for producing epistemically responsible beliefs
and judgments.

[32] This will hardly be a new insight for critical race theorists like Charles Mills (2015), who have argued that
personhood cannot be taken for granted within a racist social world, or for many working within the tradition of
Afro-pessimism (see especially Wilderson 2020) which theorizes blackness using Hartman's (1997) term of
"ontological death," as opposed to human subjectivity.

[33] This claim builds upon Moss's (2018) thesis that "Opinions formed by profiling can be epistemically deficient in
virtue of failing to constitute knowledge, or more generally, in virtue of lacking any number of positive epistemic
features" (2018, 180).

belonging to someone other than the defendant was found in the victim was that the young girl had prior consensual sex with an unknown male, after which time Rivera raped her, failed to ejaculate, and then killed her" (Appleby and Kassin 2016, 127). The fact that Rivera was convicted of the child's murder shows that the state's outrageous theory was regarded as more credible than the possibility that he confessed to a crime he didn't commit—in other words, a single confession trumped evidence that would otherwise be taken to be decisively exculpatory.

The evidence in favor of Rivera's innocence was not only DNA. He was young, a former student in a special-education program, and had been under interrogation by detectives for four days, the duration of which he denied any knowledge of the crime. But when the detectives became accusatory, he eventually broke down and nodded when asked if he had raped and killed the girl.[34] He continued to recant this testimony in the months that followed. Crucially then, Rivera is considered a 'truth-teller' insofar as his (false) testimony is being taken by jurors as sufficient evidence for conviction. But since this testimony was only obtained coercively under conditions which subverted agency, he's only considered a truth-teller to the extent he has no agency.

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[34] "It wasn't until the Center on Wrongful Convictions became involved that the Illinois Appellate Court ruled in 2012 that Rivera's conviction was "unjustified and cannot stand," and thus that the state would dismiss all charges. Rivera had served 20 years in prison" (Lackey 2018, 12).

Someone might object that Rivera was believed not because he was stripped of agency, but because he was confirming what the jurors had expected or wanted to hear. If he had said of his own free will that he was guilty, then they would have also believed him. But this is precisely the point, namely, that Rivera is only believed when he confirms a false stereotype; it is the false stereotype which becomes epistemically salient in the formulation of a judgment, no matter what Rivera says or doesn't say. In other words, when Rivera confirmed the stereotype through his false confession, it was not he who was believed, but the stereotype which was assumed. The fact that he was coerced and manipulated is irrelevant to the juror's judgment (despite our knowledge about the negative epistemic effects of torture [O'Mara 2015]). Black and brown criminality thus builds into its very operation a lack of epistemic agency attributed to men of color by providing a *default* interpretation of these men as monstrous *objects* of white paranoia and fear, rather than as *persons* with epistemically salient experiences.[35]

This objectification just *is*, crucially, a numbness towards men of color as persons with their own needs for protection, their own desires, goals, and experiences, and their own needs for charitable (or evidentiary appropriate) interpretation.[36] Such numbness is perpetuated through an

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[35] As Dotson points out, the different varieties of epistemic exclusions are not mutually exclusive. While this is clearly a case of first-order epistemic exclusion, or testimonial injustice, it can also be a case of third-order epistemic exclusion, or of epistemic resilience (especially because the case is exemplary and not merely a one-off case, representing systematic governing assumptions about Black and brown men).

[36] Relevant to the inability of whites to view Black subjects *as persons* is Bernstein's (2011) account of 'racial innocence' (and the way 19th century white girls, through 'doll play' learned to see black dolls (and black bodies) as incapable of experiencing pain).

excessive representation of men of color as monstrous in dominant culture, which contains its

own affective content (or, the 'dominant interpretive affect' of affective numbness). For, it's not

that jurors were numb full stop when examining the evidence; rather, their interpretive lens

carried destructive (and distracting) affective content because the perception that Black and

brown men are threats to public safety is embedded with paranoia and fear, and this paranoia and

fear prevent affective engagement with *Rivera's* point of view.[37]

Or, *jurors feel Rivera to be dangerous*.[38] And how can Rivera be both vulnerable and

dangerous? To preserve their way of knowing, jurors become unresponsive to Rivera's

corrective testimony because being affected by Rivera's vulnerability to a hostile racist justice

system would be to reject the stereotype and its accompanying paranoia and fear (or to notice the

inadequacy of the racist interpretive lens). In other words, affective attunement to Rivera would

have required a confrontation with (or noticing of) white supremacy. Returning to Dotson's

framework, it would have required a third-order change. But enacting such change would have

required more than intellectual or 'rational' engagement; the jurors were not at a loss for

evidence which should have been sufficient to exculpate Rivera. Given that stereotypes often

operate under the threshold of consciousness, the conclusion that we must also target affect to

resist harmful resilience should not be too surprising.

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[37] In his discussion of stereotyping, Blum (2004, 262) argues that "respect for other persons, an appreciation of others' humanity and their full individuality is inconsistent with certain kinds of beliefs about them" (Basu 2018, 1).
[38] Or, Rivera is 'framed' epistemically and juridically by this *affective* lens.

Sadly, Rivera's case is not the exception but the norm for how false testimonies by men

of color receive uptake in our legal system.[39] This is especially problematic because the

stereotype is preserved and more deeply reinforced (the very mechanism Dotson attributes as the

cause of harmful resilience) through greater numbers of false convictions. As with Rivera's case,

often the stakes could not be higher, and failing to feel the urgency of this work requires its own

form of numbness.

B. Epistemic Appropriation

In this section, I consider a second way by which affective numbness works to promote harmful

resilience, namely, by promoting the epistemic appropriation of resistant epistemic resources.

Specifically, I consider how intersectionality has been epistemically appropriated by white

feminism and white culture more broadly.[40] While I do not want to suggest there is a universal

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[39] This is consistent with Mills' (2007) suggestion that white ignorance is the norm rather than the exception in systems of white supremacy. My analysis is also sympathetic with Mills' (2007) suggestion that affect is part of white ignorance. He expands upon this idea in his forthcoming work in which he highlights the fact that racialized interactions are bodily and corporeal, phenomenologically experienced, as much as they are political, economic, or cultural.

[40] Nash (2019b, 43) importantly discusses the kind of "proprietary" relationship to 'intersectionality' that discussions of appropriation assume, and aims to replace such relationships (and the presumed identity politics which motivate them) with "black feminist love-politics" constituted by the affective investments Black feminists have in one another. I do not mean to assume that Black women, or anyone, "owns" intersectionality with my analysis. I do hope to motivate, however, a politics in which white culture develops more affective investment in the experiences of women of color through, in part, an appreciation of how those experiences are different than those of white women (especially, in this context, when it comes to issues of sexual assault).

experience of discrimination or sexual assault by women of color, I do want to suggest that such experiences are often caricatured within white supremacy patriarchy such that they fail to be considered as experiences which contain all of the complexities dominant experiences are afforded. Please note the analysis contains triggering content concerning sexual violence and racial discrimination.

According to Davis (2018), 'epistemic appropriation' occurs when 1. epistemic resources generated in the margins are "are overtly detached from the marginalized knowers responsible for their production" and so the role of marginalized contributors to knowledge production is obfuscated, i.e. 'epistemic detachment,' and 2. "when epistemic resources developed within, but detached from, the margins are utilized in dominant discourses in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful. That is to say, the benefits associated with the epistemic contributions of the marginalized are misdirected toward the comparatively privileged," i.e. 'epistemic misdirection' (703). To show that intersectionality has been epistemically appropriated, let's first consider what intersectionality as a concept was intended to illuminate.[41]

In what is sometimes referred to as the founding text of 'intersectionality,' "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Kimberlé Crenshaw

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[41] For a rich discussion on different ways the term 'intersectionality' has received uptake in Black feminist theory, see Nash (2019a).

(1989) examines the legal invisibility of Black women.[42] The erasure of Black women's

experience in antidiscrimination law, Crenshaw argues, is perpetuated by a single-axis

framework that treats race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. In one case she

considers, *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, five Black women charged General Motors (GM)

with perpetuating past discrimination against Black women through their seniority system,

which, in a seniority-based layoff, fired all Black women hired after 1970. This particularly

disadvantaged Black women because GM did not hire Black women prior to 1964. GM argued

they *had* hired *women* prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, albeit *white* women. Therefore, sex

discrimination was not relevant. The race discrimination claim was also dismissed through the

court's recommendation that it be consolidated with another case alleging race-discrimination

against GM by Black men (who were hired for very different kinds of jobs than Black women).

The court reasoned that the plaintiffs must state a cause of action "for race discrimination, sex

discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both" (1989, 141). Crenshaw

summarizes the import of such a ruling: "under this view, Black women are protected only to the

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[42] Heeding the caution of Patricia Hill Collins (2017), I resist claiming Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) 'coined' 'intersectionality' as it gives value to intersectionality only insofar as it has been recognized by the academy. Giving Crenshaw this kind of authorship erases the long history of Black feminist scholar-activists who have been theorizing about these phenomena for decades. While Crenshaw uniquely and very helpfully packaged these ideas into a form that was more readily theorized and digestible in academic philosophy, theorizing on these themes remains indebted to a long history of theorizing about multiple and interlocking oppressions. See, for example, Truth (1851), King (1988), Combahee-River-Collective (1995), Hill Collins (2000, 2003), Harding (2004). For more on how easy it is to perpetuate epistemic oppression when theorizing about it, even in our attempts to counter it, see Dotson (2012).

extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups. Where their

experiences are distinct, Black women can expect little protection..." (139).

Equipped with analyses of cases like these, Crenshaw puts forward the concept of

'intersectionality' to make legible experiences of multiple discrimination, and to thereby

illuminate the inadequacy of dominant single-axis conceptions.[43] Unfortunately, this aim has

sometimes been limited and even undermined by how the concept of has traveled, or by its

'buzzword' status.[44] According to a more recent interview with Crenshaw on the podcast

Another Round, she says the term is often "used in ways that undermine the point," (2017,

24:08). As Kathy Davis (2008) notes, one reason the concept 'buzzes' is because the crossroads

metaphor associated with intersectionality[45] is broadly applicable. One byproduct of

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[43] See Hammonds (2004) for an analysis on how one can avoid re-instantiating hierarchical power dynamics when making legible experiences which have occluded dominant consciousness.

[44] By 'buzzword,' Kathy Davis means the term easily captures interests, and therefore allows one "to express familiarity with the latest developments in feminist theory, without necessarily exploring all the ramifications of the theoretical debates" (2008, 75).

[45] "Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic in an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination…but it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: sometimes the skid marks and injury simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm." Crenshaw (1989, 149).

However, Crenshaw (1991) gives two different metaphors for depicting 'intersectionality.' While the 'intersection' metaphor is more popularly taken up, the 'basement' metaphor offers a hierarchical way at looking at marginalization that might be harder to subsume into white individualism:

> "Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex class, sexual preference, age, and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors up to the very top, where the heads of those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling.

Intersectional theory has thus resulted in the idea that 'everyone is intersectional' (Ehrenreich 2002-2003). But if anyone can lay claim to being intersectional, the queer poor white girl from Chicago, or the first-generation white disabled man from Poland, etc., then we have a case of epistemic detachment in which resources generated by marginalized knowers in order to illuminate differential harm are being detached from those knowers. As Ehrenreich notes, this is "dangerously depoliticizing, for the logical implication of a notion that everyone is oppressed is that no one is" (271).[46]

Now, it might not be the case that generalizing the applicability of intersectionality necessitates the assumption that "everyone is intersectional;" rather, such a generalization might

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Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside…Those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch. As this analogy translates for Black women, the problem is that they can receive protection only to the extent that their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine." (Crenshaw 1989, 151-152)

See Carastathis (2013) for more on how leaving the basement metaphor behind has resulted in an uprooting of the term from its origins in Black feminism and in an obscuring of the *hierarchical* power relations of Crenshaw's analysis.

[46] Ehrenreich goes on to attribute this universalizing move to a "myth of equivalent oppressions," which arises because of a "North American liberal culture on abstraction, formal comparisons, and myths of equivalence. Like color-blind, formal-equality-based definitions of discrimination…the notion that oppression is universal is an equalizing myth that threatens to obscure important structural inequalities in our society. Thus, some have criticized the "myth of equivalent oppressions" as a harmful-although probably unintended- byproduct of intersectionality theory" (271). Hill-Collins (2003) notes the importance of retaining intersectional analysis on groups in order to avoid these "assumptions of Individualism [which] *obscure* hierarchical power relations of all sorts [my emphasis]" (205-230). For more on the relationship between western individualism and color-blind racism see Mills (2007).

be guided by a desire to look at the multiplicity of ways oppression and privilege intersect and inflect each other. However, the fact that the inadequate legal framework being critiqued[47] by Crenshaw is left unaltered all the while the article rises to canonical status highlights the de-politicization which can occur from unmooring the term from Black feminism. The intended purpose of showing non-dominant subjects as *differentially* subjected to discrimination is elided due in part to the generalizing gesture.[48] Or, epistemic detachment has flattened 'intersectionality' in a way which allows for legal and social structures to go largely unchanged.[49] This works generally to benefit dominant subjects who are advantaged by the resilience of racist and sexist structures, and so we also have a case of epistemic misdirection.[50]

We can more directly locate epistemic misdirection through an accompanying intersectional analysis of the #MeToo movement. It was Tarana Burke, a Black activist from

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[47] According to the fourteenth amendment, gender-discrimination cases demand 'intermediate scrutiny,' while race-discrimination cases demand 'strict scrutiny,' requiring different burdens of proof for each (Wex Legal Dictionary 2017). The fact of these different levels of scrutiny (and thus different legal procedures) constructs the law such that Black women and other women of color have to *choose* which variety of discrimination, race or gender, to claim, "relegates the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (Crenshaw 1991, 1241-99).

[48] This is not to deny that intersectionality's 'buzz' hasn't also had many important positive byproducts, even if it illuminates some of the under-examined negative consequences of its popular uptake.

[49] Patricia Hill-Collins notes that intersectionality's entrance into the academy was largely responsible for its epistemic appropriation: "intersectionality seemed to travel more smoothly through the academy when Black women and other subordinated social actors minimized forms of knowing that empowered them in social movement settings…What remained was pressure to produce a depoliticized version of intersectionality that was individualized and fragmenting" (Hill-Collins 2017, 118). For an interpretation of some of the racial temporal logics, both problematic and promising, that have accompanied intersectionality's institutionalization, see Nash (2014).

[50] For example, some subjects will appear as resistant actors in their use of the de-politicized term, increasing their credibility and social power in some contexts even when they are unknowingly (or knowingly) undermining the concept's intended aim. See Ahmed (2012) for how the concept of 'diversity' functions similarly as it travels in the university setting to increase a university's social power at the expense of nondominant staff and students.

Harlem, who created #MeToo in 2006 specifically for women of color who were victims of rape and sexual abuse.[51] Yet, it was only when the idea was popularized by Alyssa Milano, an Italian-American actress who prompted women to use "#MeToo" as a hashtag on social media in order to share their stories of sexual assault, that the movement went viral. Where women of color were the victims, the movement had less popular appeal. This asymmetry is apparent when one compares the media coverage and popular engagement of the case of Harvey Weinstein, on the one hand, and R. Kelly and Bill Cosby on the other.

In "#MeToo and Intersectionality: An Examination of the #MeToo Movement Through the R. Kelly Scandal," Rebecca Leung gives such a comparative analysis. She notes that the allegations against prominent film producer Harvey Weinstein by white actresses[52] created a 'Weinstein Effect' that was unparalleled in the case against R. Kelly. The 'Weinstein Effect' was a ripple effect in which following Weinstein's resignation numerous other white men had their reputations tarnished because of similar allegations.[53] We did not see a similar 'Kelly effect,'

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[51] See Burke (2017). This does not mean that the originators of the term meant for 'Me Too' to *only* serve Black women (even if they were initially concerned with women of their own race), but it would certainly be against their aims to exclude or only marginally include women of color in a movement using the term.

[52] This list includes, among others, actresses Ashley Judd, Angelina Jolie, Rosanna Arquette, Kate Beckinsale, Rose McGowan, Gwyneth Paltrow, Mira Sorvino, Uma Thurman, Heather Graham, Annabella Sciorra, and Daryl Hannah.

[53] This list includes, among others, Dustin Hoffman, Kevin Spacey, Louis C. K., Ben Affleck, Brett Ratner, James Toback, Matt Lauer, and Charlie Rose.

following the multitude of accusations against R. Kelly—which extended back decades—for the

kidnapping, grooming, raping, and abusing of under-age Black girls.

> While the #MeToo movement gathered momentum through the mainstream media
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> coverage of the Weinstein effect, the R. Kelly scandal, and its non-famous African
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> American female victims struggled to draw the same mainstream media attention even
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> though their stories came out 3 months earlier than the Weinstein scandal and featured
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> several similar circumstances. Kelly escaped the Weinstein effect, remained on RCA
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> Records' music roster, continued to tour and perform concerts, and enjoyed airplay on
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> radio stations around the nation.[54]

Furthermore, in comparing the case of R. Kelly with that of Bill Cosby, who *was* publicly

ostracized for his behavior, Leung (2019) notes that the media primarily shared stories of white

victims even though nearly a quarter of Crosby's victims were women of color. Especially

problematic is that this focus on white women enabled Cosby's defense team to claim racism as

a motivating factor of his trial, using the metaphor of lynching.[55] Leung notes how this even

further alienated some women of color from #MeToo, as failing to support Crosby could be seen

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[54] As of January 2020, charges have finally been brought against R. Kelly, decades after allegations started surfacing publicly. The mini-series *Surviving R Kelly* has played a large role in increased public outcry and demand for justice (See Leung & Williams 2019).

[55] The lynching of Black men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often justified through false rumors that they had raped white women.

as "dividing the race."[56] We thus have a case in which the epistemic contribution of #MeToo was

epistemically detached from the women of color who initially pioneered its revolutionary

potential, and then epistemically misdirected to disproportionately benefit white women. Why

does this happen?[57]

Tarana Burke, when interviewed for the Lifetime documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly*,

says Black women failed to get the media attention white women did with #MeToo because of

the problematic and harmful idea that "black girls don't matter. They don't matter enough, and

it's proven over and over again." What does she mean Black girls don't matter? Well, if in the

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[56] Note the same metaphor was also used in 1991 by Clarence Thomas, when he called hearings before the Supreme Court which concerned allegations against him of sexual harassment, as a "modern day lynching." This worked to further discredit and alienate Black victim Anita Hill from her Black community. See Stansell (1992). Crenshaw (1993) also considers this issue of "dividing the race" when considering the potential allyship between Black men and women in the 2 Live Crew scandal.

[57] If in the case of 'nude' the inadequacy laid with the concept itself being structured in favor of white subjectivity, then in the case of intersectionality and #MeToo it is dominant *usage* of the concept which begins to take on inadequate racist assumptions. This occurs through a universalizing gesture which obfuscates the *differences* these epistemic resources were meant to highlight. Crucially, I want to flag that many folks do not notice the inadequate ways 'intersectionality' and #MeToo are employed to flatten difference in popular discourse. This is precisely because resilient systems operate in sneaky ways, absorbing resistant resources in order to avoid deep transformation. Inadequate usages of resistant concepts are thus *hard to notice*, especially when operating under the guise of resistance, such as when a straight white woman says 'Yas Queen.' She may think she is expressing solidarity and inclusion towards queer POC culture by sharing and enjoying the sentiment, all the while she obfuscates the expression's origin (in drag culture) and it's resistant purpose to celebrate *difference,* in order to include herself. I do not want to claim every use of a resistant expression in dominant discourse is problematic, but rather that we may be able to more appropriately assess the harms of seemingly innocuous utterances through more appropriately considering the intentions and experiential origin by which these resistant resources are generated. Combatting numbness is important for such a consideration. Some helpful questions might be: Am I helping to increase knowledge about marginalized experiences when using this concept? Have I made myself aware of the origin of this term, and about the differences between my experiences and the experience such a term was intended to highlight or uplift? How am I accounting for these differences and contributing to the original cause the term was meant to serve?

case of false stereotypes one fails to register non-dominant experiences outside of one's *own* (very different) dominant interpretation of that experience (of threat, for example), in the case of epistemic appropriation, one registers non-dominant experiences only to the extent those experiences confirm, overlap, or resonate with dominant experiences. In both cases resistant experiences fail to be considered *in their own right*, as *different* experiences worthy of consideration in and of themselves. This is just what Crenshaw teaches us with *DeGraffenreid,* and this is just what Burke means when she says "Black girls don't matter." There is an unresponsiveness towards Black women's experiences *as* Black women's experiences.

To think about how affective numbness fits into epistemic appropriation here, let's think about the experience 'being sexually assaulted as a woman of color.' There are three elements to consider, namely, being a woman, being a woman of color, and being sexually assaulted. Given all three elements would be considered non-dominant experiences under white supremacy patriarchy, it's a good candidate for examining affective numbness. Additionally, I will consider potential numbness in relation to a white woman who has experienced sexual assault herself. She thus may be numb because of dissonance, resonance, or both dissonance and resonance with non-white experiences of sexual assault. Let's explore each of these options.

1. She could be numb to only those aspects of the experience she doesn't share, namely, the experience of being assaulted as a *non-white* woman. Such numbness might arise because of a false stereotype at play towards women of color. Black promiscuity in which Black women are

oversexualized (Roberts 2008) is one candidate.[58] Black promiscuity is perpetuated by an over representation of women of color in the media as sexualized, and an under representation of women of color's sexual vulnerability. Like Black criminality, this stereotype necessitates numbness due to the dominant interpretive affect embedded within it. In this case, Black promiscuity contains affective content of white disgust or blame which precludes affective engagement with (and thus appropriate consideration of) Black women's sexual vulnerability. For, armed with the stereotype, white women see themselves as purer or more innocent with respect to sexual assault than Black women who, through the stereotype, are interpreted as "asking for it." In this case, such a white woman might only be interested in #MeToo, either self-professedly or below the threshold of consciousness, insofar as it applies to, and is applied by, white women.

2. This white woman who has experienced sexual assault could also be numb to only those aspects of sexual assault experienced by women of color that she *shares*, such as being assaulted and being a woman. Regarding her being assaulted, she may be numb because of the self-reflexivity of affective numbness. Before undergoing years of therapy, she may have been

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[58] Another candidate for the dominant affective investment of numbness in this case is a distinct form of 'white paranoia' in which failing to protect women of color, whether in anti-discrimination law or in the case of #MeToo, is justified by the need to avoid 'opening the floodgates' on our legal system. In this case, those who are vulnerable are cast as parasites who could bring about the downfall of the state if their rights were protected, or their injuries were recognized. Such an affective state goes against the idea put forward by the Combahee River Collective (1986) who suggest that liberating the most vulnerable would liberate everyone (this is also implied by Crenshaw's (1989) basement metaphor [see note 46]). Rather, vulnerable populations fail to register as subjects with their own interests and perspectives to be protected, and rather register *affectively* as threats that need to be managed.

guilty of not taking women's testimony about their assaults seriously because of her own response to trauma. Because she had not accepted the horror of what had happened to her, she could not accept the horror of what was happening to others. Because she needed to "not make it a big deal" in order to move through daily life without emotional overload,[59] numbness towards her own experience precluded proper responsiveness to other women's experiences. Additionally, in regard to her being a woman, she might be numb because of the dominant interpretive affect of skepticism which accompanies stereotypes against women that they are 'irrational and uncredible,' and thus not to be believed when it comes to experiences of sexual assault. She may dismiss the movement altogether as a result, although she has no special stereotype against women of color (having done a ton of both cognitive and embodied anti-racism work, let's say).

3. Finally, this woman could be numb to all three non-dominant aspects of the experience under consideration (being a woman, being a woman of color, and being sexually assaulted). Notice this third possibility is likely for any person who has internalized the dominant stereotype against women mentioned above, in which case revisionary testimony will fail to be

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[59] See Van der Kolk (2014).

appropriately considered whether one possesses the racist stereotype or not. In this last case, she

might again discredit #MeToo altogether.[60]

But #MeToo wasn't discredited altogether. Rather, the movement was taken seriously

insofar as it was applied by and for white women, illuminating the likelihood of a false

stereotype at play. #MeToo benefited white women by resisting patriarchal norms that oppressed

them but failed to resist white supremacy and the distinct aspects of patriarchy that affect women

of color. In so doing, #MeToo was epistemically appropriated, contributing to the resilience of

racist patriarchy by obfuscating, through numbness, the very experiences #MeToo was meant to

highlight.[61]

C. Recap

And so, in order to appropriately consider non-dominant experiences within systems of

oppression, it is not enough to know the who, what, when, where, or even the how of these

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[60] Note, a fourth option would be to not be numb towards any aspect of the experience under consideration, in which case she might be able to consider and respond to the testimony of sexual assault by Black women with both appropriate interest and horror. In this case, she would have countered any numbness created by her own trauma, and also by false stereotypes. In the final section, we will think about how measures of affective resistance might help make this fourth option more prevalent and feasible.

[61] This is not to downplay the positive effects of #MeToo. In fact, the concept of epistemic misdirection builds into itself the idea of there being positive byproducts from appropriating an epistemic resource. It's just that these positive byproducts, such as the creation of a culture of more accountability, disproportionately benefit white women.

experiences. Oppression, through numbness and especially through it's dominant interpretive affect, works to prohibit a clear conceptualization of the harm it enacts (Cvetkovich 2003, De La Costa (2019), Scarry 1987, Van Der Kolk 2014). Despite a comprehension of the facts in Rivera's case, or the information made explicit by the lawsuits considered by Crenshaw, the resistance potential of the resources generated by Rivera and Crenshaw was severely limited. Failing to affectively engage with Rivera led not only to an immoral judgement of Rivera as guilty (despite sufficient exculpatory evidence in his favor), but to an *irrational* judgement. A more epistemically responsible practice regarding resistant knowledges will thus require something more than descriptive facts, it will require *feeling,* or affective engagement with non-dominant experiences. When such crucial affective data is lacking, divergent experiences will be precluded from posing sufficient friction with dominant resources for the sake of illuminating their inadequacy. This prevents the epistemic transformation divergent experiences seek and necessitate if they are to be taken seriously as epistemic contributions.

IV. Affective Resistance

The preceding analysis hoped to illuminate an epistemic responsibility for our affective engagement with others. The further question then arises: What does affective resistance look like? I do not intend to answer this question satisfactorily here, as it warrants a much richer discussion than I have time and space for. But, inasmuch as the problem is affective numbness, my general suggestion is that cultivating particular kinds of affective engagement with non-dominant experiences whose exclusions structure dominant epistemic resources can combat

numbness by enabling the inadequacy of those resources to be revealed.[62] This is because some ways of engaging affectively put false stereotypes and other inadequate governing epistemic norms aside[63] (or at least minimize their influence), fostering the kind of 'epistemic distancing' (or 'putting into question' of our epistemic resources) necessary for third-order change. Affective resistance is thus a mechanism for knowing in new and better, that is less exclusionary, ways.

There are many forms affective resistance can take, which will vary depending on one's social positioning, and on whether one is combatting numbness towards one's own non-dominant experiences, or towards those of others. Regarding the former, therapy and art making which work to renew victims' capacity for ways of feeling that have been cut off as self-defense responses to trauma might be two ways to resist affectively.[64] Regarding numbness both towards self and others, growing affective capacities like grief, empathy, rage, hope and pleasure will be important avenues for affective resistance (and there is already much literature on the importance

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[62] The argument that we need greater consideration of affect for resisting systems of oppression and epistemologies of ignorance is by no means a new argument or insight. Significantly, one reason many feminist scholars argue for embodied experience and emotions to play a more central role in our investigation into knowledge is because of a frustration with the norms of a "pre-social epistemology" in which there has been "a more rigorously individualist activity/practice than moral-political practices could be" (Code 2016, 91). Collins points out that it was when intersectionality entered the academy that it became de-politicized. This is because a seeking of objectivity leads many scholars to downplay or even reject the epistemic value of personal experience, emotions, and affect, making academic investigations themselves 'affectively numbed.' Or, as Williams (1991) articulates the point, governing academic norms have created "bad affective investments" through a guise of "neutrality." Affective resistance thus might find a particularly good starting point in the institutions we inhabit as scholars (See esp. Anzaldua & Moraga (2015 [1981]), and Anzaldua (2007 [1987]) for influential examples of how affect can be incorporated and epistemically valued within 'academic' texts.)

[63] Affective resistance is thus an important part of developing Code's institu*ting* social imaginary (see note 19).

[64] See Van der Kolk (2014).

of some of these affects for social justice).[65] However, I have aimed to move beyond the mere

idea that the emotions we feel are epistemically valuable, to an understanding that the emotions

we do not feel are also epistemically valuable. In order to confront affective numbness and get to

these other emotions, I hope to show in what follows that developing 'disinterestedness' as an

affective tool of engagement might be a good first candidate for affective resistance, especially

for combatting the dominant interpretive affect aspect of numbness which accompanies false

stereotypes.[66]

Dis-interestedness, drawing loosely on the Kantian concept, refers to a form of affective

engagement which is free of (self-) interest, or, on my less optimistic view, is a form of affective

engagement that contains at least *less* (self-)interest than usual. My own use of the term

approximates George Dickie's (1964) re-visiting of the theme in aesthetics literature. According

to Dickie, dis-interestedness is really about *attention*, or about the ability to attend to an aesthetic

object outside of distractions which often derive from one's own interests.[67] For example, my

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[65] For example, see Gould (2009) and Brown (2018) for discussions of pleasure, Nash (2019b), Cheng (2000) for discussions of loss and melancholy, Lorde (1981) and Cooper (2018) for a discussion of anger and rage, and others. While many of these texts primarily focus on affects experienced by nondominant subjects who are under conditions of oppression or resisting conditions of oppression, my own view of affective resistance, and especially when thinking about dis-interestedness, considers (also, and at times centrally) the affective dispositions of those who are dominantly positioned.

[66] See Code (2015) for a discussion of the relationship between care and epistemic practices in which she argues reclaiming care is epistemically vital. Such a reclamation might itself be another form of affective resistance (a form which, I think, can be supported by the form of disinterested engagement I am advocating for in this section).

[67] Also relevant is Hume's argument that aesthetic judgment requires the removal of biases and prejudices. See Hume (1874).

ability to attend to a piece of music disinterestedly requires that I am not just attending to it because I want to impress my girlfriend or put myself in a particular kind of mood. In these latter cases, I might miss something important for appropriate engagement because I am distracted from the music itself.

For our purposes, I extend this idea of disinterestedness to interpersonal engagements, the idea being that stereotypes and their underlying interests often *distract* us from properly considering people and their experiences for their own sake. This seems right. More specifically, dominant interpretive affects like paranoia or blame which accompany stereotypes of Black criminality and Black promiscuity *distract* us from revisionary resources (constitutively numbing us to such resources), even and especially when those these resources possess a host of epistemic and affective content which pose friction with the stereotype. If stereotypes are harmful epistemic resources which promote the resilience of epistemologies of ignorance, and specifically of 'white supremacy patriarchy,' then they operate as something like 'epistemic guards' which protect white masculine dominance, or the default (epistemic) interests of the group of white cis men. And they do so partially through their required numbness.[68]

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[68] Of course, this is not to say that only white cis men have interests in maintaining white supremacy, or that all white cis men share this interest. If, as many argue, white supremacy harms *everybody,* including white people and men (even while it privileges them as a group), some white people and men could develop more sociable and resistant interests through, perhaps, something akin to standpoint achievement for privileged subjects (See Hill-Collins (1995) [1977]). Furthermore, it is well trod theoretical ground that nondominant subjects can share interests with more privileged subjects in maintaining white supremacy patriarchy insofar as doing so maintains or advances

But if this is right, then dis-interestedness might be just the kind of affective tool needed for combatting the kind of numbness which accompanies false stereotypes. In the aesthetic case, one learns to puts aside distracting interests in order to engage with (according to Kant) the aesthetic experience of *pleasure* an artwork might provide (lacking or minimizing the role of *interest* in one's experience of events does not mean lacking or minimizing the role of *affect* such an experience affords). And in the case of interpersonal engagement with non-dominant experiences, one learns to reorient from distracting interests-- interests which harmfully preserve systemic ignorance and motivate the operation of inadequate epistemic resources like false stereotypes-- in order to engage with the affective and epistemic content non-dominant experiences afford. Equipped with disinterestedness, then, all kinds of new epistemically salient information can make itself noticeable which otherwise is eclipsed.

One might think there is a danger of a tautology here: How does one suspend false stereotypes? One does so by suspending stereotypes, i.e., being disinterested. However, this concern only makes sense if one conceives of disinterestedness as a state one is either in or not in, full stop. I am suggesting, on the other hand, that disinterestedness is or can be cultivated.

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their own individual social power (See Mills 2007, Du Bois 1995 [1905], Hill-Collins 1995). These interests to protect the system then (or to protect one's own privilege within a system) are paramount for the flourishing of harmful stereotypes and their constitutive affective numbness, and also for the flourishing of harmful resilience. See also Bheegly (forthcoming) for a discussion of the conditions under which judging someone by group membership is wrong.

One can thus be disinterested to more or less of a degree. Disinterestedness is more like a practice of attention than a state, allaying the concern of circularity.

In the case of Rivera, disinterested engagement could have made it possible for the jurors to engage with Rivera's vulnerability towards the aim of falsifying the dominant narrative of brown criminality. For, by not-permitting the motivating interests of the stereotype to totalize the juror's interpretation (thereby permitting the stereotype to be put aside or at least minimized), the hope is that jurors would have been able to suspend interpretation until they had appropriately considered the content of Rivera's testimony. After such consideration of evidence, the stereotype could have been critically interrogated in light of testimony which confirmed or falsified it. Without disinterested engagement, such critical engagement was unlikely to occur. And in fact, this is what happened; the stereotype totalized the juror's interpretation, thereby confirming itself and rendering any counter evidence epistemically irrelevant (after all, stereotypes often are just *pre-determined* interpretations of Black and brown men's actions as criminal). Armed with affective skills of dis-interestedness then, epistemically obstructive distractions can be put aside or minimized, enabling a more appropriate all-things-considered assessment or judgment of what's at hand.

Of course, it's not easy to engage disinterestedly even when conceived as a practice of attention. Rivera's jury undoubtedly made a pledge to judge, to the best of their abilities, without self-interest, yet stereotypes determined the irrational outcome. White feminists often intend to listen to women of color without appropriating their insights yet fail. Yet there might be contexts particularly fruitful for cultivating dis-interested (or *less* interested) engagement. Given that Kant cashes out disinterestedness in terms of how we respond to beauty, this might suggest the art

world could be a productive space for developing these capacities.[69] Insofar as practices of

mindfulness and breathing have proven to reduce feelings of threat and blame (dominant

interpretive affects which can promote numbness), these practices might also be fertile ground

for developing affective resistance through disinterestedness.

What's central to all these practices is that they are primarily *affective* in nature. They

may engage rational capacities (putting aside interests is partially a cognitive activity), but they

de-emphasize such capacities in order to make way for deeper and novel noticings. Participants

are overtly asked to re-focus, transitioning from a starting point of "what they think they know,"

or their governing epistemic norms, to sensory experiences which are occluded when such

epistemic norms are in the driver seat of experiencing self and others. In this space, emotional

and affective life becomes richer. We might notice tones of voices, gestures of hands and body

comportment, facial expressions that betray inner-feelings, and other sensory data that provides

an entryway into others' emotional experiences more deeply. Insofar as these emotional

experiences are epistemically salient, such access will be necessary for appropriate judgment.

And while there is more work to do in order to show that skills of disinterestedness developed in

less threatening contexts such as the artworld or a meditation class can find application in more

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[69] Though his form of disinterestedness is much narrower in scope than my own account, precluding emotions and "charms" from entering into judgment. See Kant 2000 [1790].

interest-heavy political realms like the courtroom and academia,[70] I hope to have at least

convinced readers that disinterestedness might provide a candidate for affective resistance when

it comes to our engagements with non-dominant experiences (both of self and others), and to

have gestured towards what this might look like.[71]

Affects like grief, empathy, hope, and pleasure will absolutely be other forms affective

resistance takes, as mentioned. My argument thus importantly builds upon Alison Jaggar's

(1989) claim that certain 'outlaw emotions,' like, for example, white people feeling outrage and

grief at the mistreatment of Black people (making them a "race traitor") are epistemically vital.

But insofar as affective numbness sometimes blocks the possibility of privileged subjects

perceiving non-dominant others *as persons* at all, dis-interestedness might be an important first

skill to cultivate, especially when it comes to negative stereotyping. For, only once able to

engage with revisionary knowledges on their own terms can we then learn to appropriately deal

with what is in front of us, or noticed. As a juror, I first need to notice or consider the content of

Rivera's testimony on its own terms before being able to grieve or empathize as a result of this

testimony, although these may be further affective capacities necessary for combatting numbness

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[70] Literature in political and reparative aesthetics provides much food for thought on this matter. See Ranciére (2015), Chanter (2017), and Best (2016). Insofar as politics are inherently 'interested' on Kant's picture, a strict interpretation of dis-interestedness could only appeal to aesthetic judgments, not political ones. However, insofar as aesthetic contemplation provides a kind of "preparation" for contemplating the moral law on Kant's view, he might very well be sympathetic to the social and moral import of cultivating dis-interestedness, even if he denies any strict application (See Kant 2000 [1790]).

[71] Dis-interestedness seems like just the kind of capacity needed for Code's 'instituting social imaginary' (See note 19).

altogether. And this seems likely, illustrating that affective numbness is multi-faceted and demands many strategies of affective resistance in order to contend with it. For now, I do not claim affective resistance efforts will be sufficient for resisting numbness and harmful epistemic resilience, but they can certainly help.

CHAPTER TWO

Figure 3: 'Park' by Niege Borges

I follow Plato only with my mind

Pure beauty strikes me as a little thin

A little cold, however beautiful.

I am in love with what is mixed and impure

Doubtful, dark, and hard to disencumber

I want beauty I must dig for, search for.

Pure beauty is beginning & no end.

Begin with the sun and drop from sun to cloud,

From cloud to tree, and from tree to earth itself.

And deeper yet to the earth dark root.

I am in love with what resists my loving.

With what I have to labor to make live

-Robert Francis

Curdled Contracts

(Forthcoming in *Truth to Power: The Philosophy of Charles Mills*)

Abstract:

This paper explores the affective dimension of Charles Mills' 'Domination Contract.' Section One outlines Mills' account of the Domination Contract, and the epistemic dimension of its racialized formulation (*The Racial Contract*), namely "white ignorance." I raise a critique by Alison Bailey (2007) who argues, drawing on María Lugones, that theorizing racial ignorance within the contract tradition, even as modified by Mills, undermines logics of resistance. In Section Two, I outline Lugones' account of purity and curdled logics as they relate to categories and concepts within racialized and gendered epistemologies of ignorance, while in Section Three I offer a reading of Mills through this framework. By the end of these sections, I offer new insights about the way Mills' commitment to social contract theory can be read as successfully resistant.

In Section Four, I argue that contract theory, even in Mills' modified formulation, maintains a commitment to rational abstraction as normative methodology for generating principles of (corrective) justice, sustaining a (purity) logic which has affective numbness (Rogers 2021) at its heart. On my view, this inhibits effective coalition building with decolonial feminists who argue for the importance of storytelling and embodied experience as crucial vehicles for responsibly theorizing oppression. In the final section, I offer new pathways for Mills to activate greater liberatory potential within his radicalized contracts framework. My aim is twofold: First, I hope to put Mills' project of retrieving social contract theory for aims of racial

liberation into deeper conversation with decolonial feminism than Mills has done at present.

Second, I advance Mills' most recent work on material constructivism in which he opens the

theoretical space more seriously to consider affective experience in his accounting of racial

oppression and resistance through the contract tradition.

I. Introduction

Throughout the corpus of his work, Charles Mills has often gestured towards the importance of embodied experience for constructing and resisting racialized oppression and ignorance. In his most well-known work, *The Racial Contract*, he says "there is the micro-space of the body itself (which in a sense is the foundation of all other levels), the fact, to be dealt with in greater detail later, that the persons and sub-persons, the citizens and noncitizens, who inhabit these polities do so embodied in envelopes of skin, flesh, hair" (1997, 51). Or, in 2003 he says race is fully material and even "more deeply material than class" (Sullivan summarizing Mills 2017, 21). And there are many other brief remarks of this kind,[1] remarks which name but do not substantially engage the role of embodied experience in racism and anti-racism. His newest book project, *White Leviathan*, however, more explicitly thematizes the racist "*body* politic,"[2] aiming to give an account of "materialist constructivism" in which we can understand society as being created by "interactions [that are] nonetheless bodily ones, phenomenologically experienced and cognitively and affectively interpreted through a politicized flesh, shaped throughout by social domination" (Forthcoming, Ch. 3). In the book, Mills expands our understanding of how

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[1] For example, See Mills' (1997) remarks, drawing on Alvin Goldman's work (1997, 95, 120), his remarks in *Blackness Visible* (2015a, 190), or in "White Ignorance," when he references the idea that conception informs perception and vice versa, clarifying that perception is perception of racialized *bodies* (2007, 27).

[2] Mills asks what happens when Hobbes' (notably the most materialist of the social contract theorists) metaphor of the great Leviathan is understood instead as a *White Leviathan, or as* "a mighty organization [or body] of white folk," a "vast remorseless machine" dominating people, and *bodies,* of color? (Mills quoting Du Bois 1995, 13).

embodied experience might be theoretically situated within social contract theory; however, in what follows, I show that "retrieving" a racist contract tradition for radical emancipatory ends, Mills' central long-term aim, requires an even more serious turn to the body. [3] I draw on decolonial (and especially Latina/x) feminisms to offer some direction for how this might work, thereby putting Mills into contact with salient theorists and insights under-considered in his work thus far.

The paper proceeds in five parts. Section One outlines Mills' account of the Domination Contract and raises a critique by Alison Bailey (2007) who argues, drawing on María Lugones, that theorizing within the contract tradition undermines logics of resistance. In Section Two, I outline Lugones' account of purity and curdled logics as they relate to categories and concepts within racialized and gendered epistemologies of ignorance. [4] In Section Three, I offer a reading of Mills through this framework which offers new insights about the way his commitment to the historically racist tradition can be read as successfully resistant, while in Section Four I expose the limits of Mills' strategy. I argue that contract theory, even in Mills' modified formulation,

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[3] To be fair, the book is currently unfinished, with one chapter left to be written. Given that this chapter is where Mills says he is going to explore how we might devise principles of corrective racial justice using the framework of materialist constructivism which he details in previous chapter, his turn to the body's role in resistance to white supremacy in this last chapter could constitute a more "serious turn to the body." However, I remain confident that the methodological themes I raise in this paper will still be of relevance.

[4] Lugones' account builds, crucially, on the account of 'mestiza consciousness' put forward by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). Mestiza consciousness is supposed to resist Western binary thinking by being rooted in mixed-race and other 'ambiguous' identities.

maintains a commitment to rational abstraction as normative methodology for generating principles of (corrective) justice, sustaining a (purity) logic which has affective numbness (Rogers 2021) at its heart. This inhibits effective coalition building with decolonial feminists who argue embodied experience is crucial for responsible theory-building about oppression. In the final section, I offer new pathways for Mills to activate greater liberatory potential within his radicalized liberalist framework.

II. The Domination Contract

According to Carol Pateman, "The most famous and influential political story of modern times is found in the writings of the social contract theorists" (1988, 1). Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and more recently, Rawls, have had widespread influence both inside and outside of the academy using a very simple but powerful idea meant to explain or justify (or both) the basic structure of society (or the State): the social contract.[5] In Rawls' widely influential formulation,

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[5] Although all of these theorists are considered "contract theorists," there is quite a variety within the tradition about what a contract *is*, whether literal, metaphorical, historical, hypothetical, descriptive, prescriptive, prudential, moral, constitutional, civil, regulatively ideal, either/and/or a device of representation (See Pateman and Mills 2007b, 81-82). Perhaps the most relevant distinction for Mills, however, is the distinction between contractarians and contractualists. *Contractarianism* has its roots in Hobbes and is based on the idea that morality is based on rational prudence, or mutual self-interest which results in cooperative behavior. In contrast, *contractualism* is grounded on the equal moral status of persons. Contractualism is rooted in Rousseau, then taken up in different ways by Kant and Rawls. Mills believes that contractualism can be used for moral progressive ends, even if contractarianism cannot.

one is to imagine an "original position" from which the social contract is forged. Here, one sits behind a "veil of ignorance" in which one knows nothing about the social position one might occupy in society, whether privileged, oppressed, or somewhere in between. As such, all contractors have a self-interest[6] in generating principles of justice[7] that would secure the best possible outcome for all groups of people once the veil is lifted. In this way, the State can be understood as "a cooperative venture for mutual advantage" (Rawls 2009 [1971]).

Mills believes contract theory can and should be salvaged for aims of social justice because it already enjoys such widespread authority in democratic political life. Therefore, he has spent much of his academic career aiming to "radicalize" the theoretical apparatus for liberatory anti-racist aims. To understand how this works, I want to remind us what Mills means by the 'contract' he wishes to salvage. He has a minimalist conception, wanting to retain only the "simple insight that humans create the sociopolitical, and in the process themselves" (2007b, 14).[8] This is important, because he doesn't think that it is towards *this* contract that critiques of contract theory or liberalism should be directed. For this minimal sense is not refuted by the history of social oppression: humans are responsible for this history. And crucially, this conception helps us see that fact; for without this model, we would be left with the alternative

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[6] This self-interest is long term, as against the kind of short-term self-interest which guides the prudential reasoning in Hobbes' contractarianism (See Mills forthcoming, Ch. 3).

[7] Specifically, for Rawls, these are principles of "the well-ordered society" (Rawls 2009 [1971]).

[8] Mills thinks that all those fighting against oppressive structures would need to agree with this minimalist assumption.

conception that racism and sexism are *natural* (or biological), rather than man-made. (If we did not make the social world, how else would we explain such dramatic inequality?) So we shouldn't "throw away contract theory" altogether but should assume its most minimal form— the human-created nature of the state—which in turn is a conceptualization that can guide rectification: If humans created it, humans can change it. Secondarily, Mills wants to retain a normative dimension of the contract, namely, a commitment to 'universal moral egalitarianism' in which the fact of all people being morally equal means we should strive towards political equality, or equal protection for all under the law. [9]

The problem with social contract theory then is not the idea of a social contract per se, but with the contingent, historical contract (whether actual or theoretical), or the "thicker auxiliary shaping assumptions" (2007b, 86) which considered only property-owning white men to be 'contractors' or 'persons' at all. For this historical fact has meant that only some people have enjoyed basic political rights, are protected by the state, or are participants in the "cooperative" State project at all. Given Rawls' aim to provide tools for generating principles of the just society, it seems odd that issues of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc., are absent from his writings altogether, given their role in preventing justice from emerging in the

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[9] Mills assumes, without argument, moral realism, or the idea that there are objective moral facts, including the equal moral status of all people. This contrasts with Hobbesian *contractarianism* which assumes morality results from mutual self-interest. On Mills' position, drawing from the *contractualist* line of reasoning, "human beings have an equality in the pre-social state of nature that should be preserved in the sociopolitical institutions they create once they leave it" (Mills, 2015b, 545).

contemporary world.[10] In his groundbreaking book, *The Racial Contract,* Mills argues that if the social contract is to serve anti-racism or other forms of social justice, it must avoid the kind of idealizing that Rawls' thought experiment requires. For abstracting away from the historical realities of domination and subordination obscures how such realities have shaped both the descriptive and normative dimensions of any social contract conceived or forged thus far. But this *perpetuates* injustice by promoting *ignorance* of it!,[11] undermining purported aims of the tradition. [12]

And so Mills gives us a modified contract, The Domination Contract,[13] which is the genus to more particular instances such as the Racial Contract, the Sexual Contract, the Racia-Sexual Contract, and others. In all forms, the Domination Contract describes the historical contract as one forged in and by conditions of domination and subordination, building into its very framework an acknowledgement of the way by which moral and political status has been denied for most people, and also the way by which such exclusion has created and justified

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[10] There are a few instances that Rawls does mention race, which Mills highlights. Even in these passages, however, race is merely *mentioned*, rather than engaged.

[11] On Mills' view, the Racial Contract prescribes an "epistemology of ignorance" (1997, 93). He spells out the details of this epistemology in "White Ignorance" (2007).

[12] For an articulation by Mills on this see Pateman and Mills (2007, 88).

[13] Here, Mills is following in the footsteps of both Rousseau and Pateman. In *Discourse on Inequality* (1984 [1754]) Rousseau already had in place the idea of a contract of domination, cashed out in terms of class, which theorized that corrupt society results in debased human nature, rather than the other way around (as versus variations of the latter from Kant, Locke, and Hobbes). Carole Pateman (1988), in *The Sexual Contract*, theorizes a similar contract of domination, but this time in relation to sex/gender. Drawing on both, Mills wanted to theorize a contract of domination in relation to race, i.e. *The Racial Contract* (1997). Mills theorizes The Domination Contract as the genus to the species of these different formulations.

today's global white supremacist (in the case of the Racial Contract) state. [14] The Domination

Contract is thus reparative to deceptive conceptualizations of the social world which include

'everyone' as willing political actors, resisting the (white) ignorance[15] which follows from such

'race neutral' understandings. Mills therefore moves contracts discourse from the ideal to the

non-ideal. In this way, his formulation functions as a consciousness-raising device, making

complete sense of the fact that we find ourselves in a social world where women and nonwhite

people are subordinated and ill protected by laws and policies never meant to serve them![16] By

illuminating the gap between historical and contemporary material realities and the social

contract as it has been conceived both descriptively and normatively,[17] the theory of the

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[14] As Mills puts it in *Blackness Visible*, because of this history, "personhood today cannot be taken for granted" (2015a, 9).

[15] See Mills 2007.

[16] "Racism and Sexism are not the exception, but the norm." And when "this historical and limited scope of 'person' is realized, the assumption in contract theory that the state arises from (in the Rawlsian formulation), "a cooperative venture for mutual advantage" consented to by all rational persons, is indeed consistent with the sexist and racist society within which we live."

[17] In Mills 2017a, Mills marks an important distinction between an 'ideal-as-descriptive-model' (or what I'll call 'descriptive ideals) and an 'ideal-as-idealized-model' (or what I'll call 'prescriptive ideals.') Descriptive ideals provide the *best or most accurate* model for describing or representing how things really are. Insofar as they cannot possibly represent anything and everything, they require abstraction, approximation, generalization, etc., and are 'ideals' as such. Prescriptive ideals, on the other hand, provide exemplar models of how things *should* be. Crucially, there will be a gap between our descriptive ideals and prescriptive ideals. The worse our social conditions are, the bigger the gap will be. When ideal theory denies this gap through the belief that the descriptive ideal is such a small deviation away from the prescriptive ideal that it's not worth investigating in its own right, or through the belief that the best way to achieve our prescriptive ideals is to assume they already exist, actual oppressive social conditions are obscured (in favor of what Mills recently calls, a "whiteopia" [forthcoming, Ch. 5]). And **"this failure at the descriptive level has repercussions for the success of the prescriptive project since we are then going to be normatively misoriented by the assumption of an intersubjectively recognized moral and political egalitarianism that does not actually obtain. (Mills, 2015b, 7). Another way of putting it, is that such a failure will often result in a "color-blind racism" (See Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In other word, ideal theory becomes ideological, as privileged (white) subjects' differential social advantage is maintained through a masking of the oppressive social conditions

Domination Contract provides the conceptual tools needed to seek *corrective* justice within the

already widely influential contracts framework. However, insofar as "the mainstream version of

the contract fails to acknowledge its racist [and more generally oppressive] foundations, it

sabotages the radical potential of the apparatus" (Mills 2007b, 89). For without such a

reckoning, we are thwarted in our ability to take responsibility for this history.

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that enable such inequality to thrive. Contrastingly, non-ideal theory is committed to the idea that the best way to achieve or move towards our prescriptive ideals is through a deep understanding of how social conditions currently work, or through good descriptive models. Only through this very understanding of the descriptive might we change harmful conditions towards our prescriptive aims. We thus need both kinds of ideals to make sense of any commitment to social and moral improvement (which is, after all, what non-ideal theory purports to be about in distinguishing itself from ideal theory). The problem with contract theory is not then its reliance on abstraction or ideals, but in its ideological *use* of ideals. But this, argues Mills, can be corrected for by holding these two kinds of ideals in their proper place, understanding them in relation to their limited, and distinct, social functions: descriptive ideals describe the world. Prescriptive ideals guide actions and policies for social and moral progress, allowing "us to critically interrogate or put into question ourselves because of the tensions/contradictions which arise in non-ideal conditions" (72). On Mills' picture, the Domination Contract through formulations like The Sexual Contract, or The Racial Contract, function as appropriate descriptive ideals because they provide the best model for understanding the social world we currently inhabit, recognizing the historical actuality that today's political system was created by and for white interests at the expense of non-whites. The appropriate ideal-as-idealized-model, on the other hand, is a political structure which honors the moral equality of all people (or universal moral egalitarianism).

   In this way, non-ideal theory starts from a position of failure (as opposed to the Rawlsian (2007 [1971]) starting place of the "well-ordered society") and is driven by corrective justice:

> "the relation between the descriptive and normative sides of the contract becomes radically different in this alternative contract theory since the real-life contract is being conceptualized as a domination contract. Thus our aim becomes to dismantle rather than endorse it. As a "contractor" in the original position, one is now making a prudential choice informed by the possibility of ending up female in a society structured by the sexual contract…gender domination…can become the object of normative critique since these 'facts' are not ignored in the mainstream contract…so if in the mainstream contract the circumstances of the creation of the sociopolitical sphere imply the oral endorsement of the institutions thereby created, in the radical use of the domination contract, this is inverted. The characterization of the descriptive contract here serves to alert us to the structures of systemic institutional oppression, which need to be dismantled" (92).

Others who either explicitly or implicitly hold these ideals distinct include Anderson (2006), Dewey (1981 [1939]), Code (1987), Kant (1992 [1781]), and others.

On Mills' version of the famous Rawlsian thought experiment then, one sits behind only a partial "veil of ignorance," because one has knowledge that includes the history of European expansionism in modernity, and the creation of white settler states (i.e. the workings of the Domination Contract). One then generates principles of rectificatory justice from this viewpoint. (However, the veil remains thick enough to bar knowledge of one's own identity characteristics, such as one's gender, race, class, etc, on Mills' view to prevent biasing one's own social group in the generation of corrective principles.[18]) Mills therefore identifies and corrects for the racist epistemology at the foundation of social contract theory.

> So it is not, at least for me… a matter of rejecting the contract figure as an illuminating way of encapsulating the truths of human equality and the human construction of the sociopolitical, but of *complicating it* so as to register the history of the exclusion of the majority of the population from the promise of liberal modernity. (2015b, 546, my emphasis)

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[18] One would also not have demographic racial ratios in the society (for example, am I in 1920s USA, where whites constitute 90% of the population, or in 1960s South Africa, where whites constitute 13% of the population), thereby ruling out the maximization of expected utility as a decision-making strategy.

His acknowledgement of these foundations, however, raise questions about his continued commitment to the tradition, and many of Mills' critics remain doubtful that his intervention goes far enough in securing a framework hospitable to gendered and racialized minorities.[19]

For example, Alison Bailey in 'Strategic Ignorance' critiques Mills' decision to theorize "within the language and logic of social contract theory" (2007, 78), arguing it undermines logics of resistance.[20] Bailey is sympathetic to Kristie Dotson's (2014) idea that resisting the harmful resilience of oppressive epistemological systems requires going "outside" of them.[21] Here, the "oppressive epistemological system," is contract theory itself.[22] While I agree with Bailey's specific claims, I'd like to consider the resistance potential of Mills' attempt to write from *within* social contract theory (as a Black man), despite the racist foundations that he himself identifies.[23]

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[19] See, for example, Pateman (2007b, 15). According to Mills' imagined critic in Black Rights/White Wrongs: "American Liberalism in Particular Has Been so Shaped in its Development by Race that Any Emancipatory Possibilities Have Been Foreclosed." His reply: "it is precisely such shaping that motivates the imperative of recognizing the multiplicity of liberalisms, not merely for cataloging purposes but in order to frame them as *theoretical* objects whose dynamic requires investigation."

I think its important to distinguish between the social contract as a tradition and the social contract as an idea. There is overlap here, given that the idea appears to stem from the tradition. However, whether one can hold onto the idea of a social contract without "staying in the tradition" is an open question, and critiques towards Mills, as well as his response to those critiques, seem often to conflate these two.

[20] For her argument see Bailey (2007, 88) as she discusses Frederick Douglass' (1855) autobiography.

[21] Epistemological resilience is defined, on Dotson's view, as the phenomenon whereby an epistemological system remains stable despite counterevidence or attempts to alter it (2014, 1). Or, as Lorde (2007 [1984]) I puts it, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." I have explored in other work (Rogers 2021a) about issues that arise in Dotson's account from her conceptualization that we must go 'outside' an epistemological system to counter its resilience.

[22] We note the resilience of such a system by the fact that its conceptual resources continue to enjoy such popular uptake, even by scholars like Mills and others who are committed of anti-racism.

[23] There's a way in which such a choice shares sympathy with Foucault's (1978) rejection of the 'Repressive Hypothesis.' For, he thinks that, in fact, resistance involves seeing how our own modes of daily living contribute to

For, drawing on María Lugones' work, Bailey agrees that "there are ways of using the dominator's tools that do not replicate dominance" (2007, 87)[24] and that one can "strategically act in ways that conform to white expectations" (88) as a clandestine way of resisting. What new insights emerge when we read Mills' Domination Contract in this Lugonesian spirit? On my view, we can notice how Mills is effective as a resistant actor in at least two ways. First, he multiplies mainstream conceptions of 'contract,' and second, he multiplies traditional and racist conceptions of 'personhood.' To understand the content and stakes of these claims, we need to first equip ourselves with Lugones' account of purity and curdled logics.

III. Purity and Curdled Logics

In "Purity, Impurity, and Separation" María Lugones writes about two different kinds of logics: 'purity logic' and 'curdled logic,' both of which can be described by different modes of *separation.* Lugones explains purity logic as separating through splitting, using the metaphor of split-separating yolk from egg white. "The intention is to separate, first cleanly and then, in case

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oppressive social conditions, rather than thinking of resistance as something that occurs against some 'other' which expresses power over us.

[24]Or, I would say, "don't *only* replicate dominance." but also resist it. As Bailey herself mentions, the strategic ignorance of oppressed groups also might inadvertently support problematic norms all the while they simultaneously resist them (2007)**.**

of failure, a bit messily, the white from the yolk, to split the egg in two parts as cleanly as one

can" (1994, 121). The intention of purity logic is thus to exert control over the messiness of

multiplicity through fragmenting things into "pure elements," apart from any relationship or

actual metaphysical inextricability from other parts.[25] To be fragmented means to be "in

fragments, pieces, parts that do not fit well together; parts taken for wholes…" Or, insofar as

'egg', for example, is conceptualized as a composite of these 'pure' parts, fragmentation can also

mean "composite, composed of parts of other beings, composed of imagined parts, composed of

parts produced by a splitting imagination" (127). Crucially, the underlying assumption for the

"lover of purity" is that *unity underlies multiplicity*. In this case, the fact of the impure multiple

messy egg composed of impure multiple messy parts is understood as Egg--composite of Egg

Yolk, Egg White (and maybe Egg Shell) -- an assumption which guides and justifies the process

of split-separation; the less 'white' the yolk is, the more perfectly 'Yolk' is, even if such

separation is entirely unnatural, and in the end, impossible to completely achieve (and thus

fictitious). [26]

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[25] We see such purity manifest in disciplinary norms which seek to control knowledge by different methods of ordering which might include classification, either/or dichotomizing logics, or assumptions of the underlying homogeneity or unity of something or someone. Things can be *knowable* through such logic because they are defined *essentially,* separated out from everything else, with necessary and sufficient conditions. Purity logic can be applied not only towards those things we already think of as 'separate' entities (Chair, Human, etc.), but also towards *parts* of more complex entities: Arm, Tree Trunk, Gender, Race, Reason.

[26] One can see how these ideas are taken up by intersectionality, where "additive approaches" to complex identities are critiqued. Women of color are not a composite of "Women" and "Black or brown" in ways that enable split-separation. Rather, these parts are entangled, enmeshed, mutually constitutive (for a rich discussion on the term

Within a social world in which purity logic dominates, not only things, but individuals and groups are split-separated into 'pure' elements or parts. This impacts what, who, and how we can know (the epistemic dimension of purity logic) often guided by what and who we assume exists at all (the ontological dimension of purity logic).[27] Although we are all messy multiple beings on Lugones' view, she centers her discussion on those whose multiplicitous identities are fore-fronted by dominant conceptual frames, as is the case with Mexican-Americans.[28] Lugones argues that the purity-dominant Anglo imagination conceptualizes Mexican-Americans as being constituted by two essential yet fully separable 'pure' parts: the authentic Mexican self, and the fully assimilated American self. Any special knowledge that might be afforded to those with the distinctive in-between or hybrid identity of 'Mexican/American' is thereby disregarded through this conceptual process which split-separates the Mexican half as inessential to the American half, and the American half as inessential to the 'authentic' 'traditional' and 'ornamental' Mexican half. "The ornamental nature of the Mexican self resolves the contradiction" because the Mexican self, crucially, is 'over there,' and so irrelevant, conveniently privileging the viewpoint of the illusory fully assimilated American self (1994, 135). This process of

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'intersectionality' in Black feminist theory, see Nash (2019a)). Mills has been critiqued for having an additive approach in his version of the Domination Contract which considers racial and gender oppression together in the Racia-Sexual Contract. See Sullivan (2017) and Gines (2017) for these critiques, see Mills (2017b) for his response, and Pateman & Mills (2007) for the relevant chapter.

[27] For, conception informs perception, and vice versa. See Mills (2007).

[28] Lugones uses slashes and hyphens intentionally, where hyphens refer to curdled/separation (as in either/or), and slashes refer to split-separations (as in hard-edged). See Lugones (1994, 122). I will follow her lead on these usages.

conceptualizing people harmfully limits what knowledge is available for uptake, guided by limited ontological assumptions about the kinds of beings that exist. In this case, purity logic protects the resilience of white supremacy by dismissing the distinctive knowledges multiple beings and hybrid experiences hold-- knowledges needed for obtaining a more accurate, less racist, understanding (and ontology) of the world.

In contrast, curdled logic resists this 'pure' way of categorizing and approaching the world, and is compared by Lugones to a different kind of separation, *curdled/separation*, this time using the metaphor of making mayonnaise:

> I place the yolk in a bowl, add a few drops of water, stir, and then add oil drop by drop, very slowly, as I continue stirring. If I add too much oil at once, the mixture se *separa*, it separates…In English, one might say that the mayonnaise curdled…When an emulsion curdles, the ingredients become separate from each other. But that is not altogether an accurate description: rather, they coalesce toward oil or toward water, most of the water becomes separate from most of the oil—it is instead, a matter of different degrees of coalescence. (1994, 122)

When mayonnaise separates, "you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk." Curdled logic thus embraces complexity, ambiguity, and tension--"If something or someone is neither/nor, but kind

of both, not quite either" (122) -- and in doing so resists the control of possibilities[29] that purity

logic's attempted hard-edged split-separations seek. There is no 'pure Mexican' or 'pure

American.' There are only ever multiplicitous persons and groups of persons whose parts are

overlapping and inseparable.[30] Curdled understanding resists ignorance when embraced and

practiced because it is simply an epistemically superior, or truer, perspective on reality, resulting

for those steeped in purity in what Barbara Smith calls a "fact trip" (1980, 48).[31] In other words,

purity is a fiction, falsified by diverse bodily experiences and material conditions themselves.[32]

This point will end up being especially important for the later part of my analysis. For, if bodily

experience is a primary falsifier of harmful purity logic, then epistemic norms which dismiss the

importance of bodily experience for knowledge production will be ill-equipped to counter

ignorance resulting from purity. [33]

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[29] Purity logic limits not only what we can know, but what we can *imagine*.

[30] For other qualities of curdled logic see Lugones (1994, 122).

[31] I am taking some liberty with Smith's words here, because I think the term applies well when we consider the racism which results from purity logic, as exemplified in the false dichotomy posed for Mexican-Americans, which obfuscates the *facts* of mixed-raced identities. Smith articulates the phenomenon like this:

> For those of you who are tired of hearing about racism, imagine how much more tired we are of constantly experiencing it, second by literal second, how much more exhausted we are to see it constantly in your eyes. The degree to which it is hard or uncomfortable for you to have the issue raised is the degree to which you know inside of yourself that you aren't dealing with the issue, the degree to which you are hiding from the oppression that undermines Third World women's lives. I want to say right here that this is not a "guilt trip." It's a "fact trip." (Smith 1980).

[32] I relate this idea to the classical Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, who argues against essential identities given the inter-dependence of all things. He distinguishes our "conceptual designations," or names for things from ultimate reality, which is not constituted by 'separate' individualized substances. See Garfield (1995). You might see this as the opposite of a view like that given in the Platonic view of Forms.

[33] There might be a connection to Standpoint Theory here, whereby marginalization or material disadvantage sometimes gives persons an epistemic advantage, often arising from the friction of their personal embodied

Instead of Mexican/American then, one is *mestiza,* "ambiguous given the available classification of things" (122), thereby defying "control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts…she has no pure parts to be "had," controlled." Many other concepts emerging from various literatures also illustrate this idea of curdling, threatening by their "very ambiguity the orderliness of the system, of schematized reality" (122). Interventions like 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1989), 'queer,' 'quare' (Johnson 2001), 'assemblage' (Puar 2018) 'curdle' (Lugones 1994) 'mestiza' (Anzaldúa 2015 [1987]), 'matrix of domination' (Collins 1990), and many more are united in their desire to better track the complexity and diversity of bodily experience and the material world, grounding such concepts *within* the messiness or impurity of experience, rather than abstracting away from it. In doing so, they resist reductive and colonial imaginations which attempt to tame and control multiplicity, in turn "germinating a non-oppressive consciousness" which is non-oppressive insofar as opens further possibilities for coalition-building.

IV. Curdled Contracts

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experiences with a system set up by and for white persons (See Harding 2004). Standpoint Theory stems from Marx's Dialectal Materialism, and Mills ascribes to and draws from both in his own work. As such, I think there are more connections to draw out here. The important point, however, is that if bodily experience plays an important role in falsifying dominant epistemic frameworks (through, perhaps, creating the kind of "epistemic friction" theorized by Medina [2013]), then dismissing such experience as relevant for knowledge production will block important data points for corrective epistemologies. But as I discuss in the following sections, this is exactly what rationality as normative methodology in philosophy often does!

I believe aspects of Mills' account can be read through a curdled lens, or as effectively resistant, complementing and curdling the picture Bailey puts forward that his decision to remain within contracts discourse undermines logics of resistance.[34] For, Mills shows "against-the-grain creativity" in his conceptual re-naming of the contract as a Domination Contract,[35] and this intervention has the result of complicating and curdling both contract theory itself, and also the concept of 'personhood' embedded within the tradition. We must first note that purity logic itself cannot be 'pure,' or split-separated from curdled-logic as if these are two separate and essentialized ways of cognizing the world. The problem with purity logic is its purity, or its denial of multiplicity. As such, resisting its harmful dominance will require holding purity logic itself as 'impure,' or as coexisting inter-dependently, multiply, with other logics. And this is just the curdled, resistant nature of curdled logic (we might call this the *logical* dimension of curdled

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[34] This is not meant to be a critique of Bailey's account. I agree with her claim that Mills obfuscates nonwhite resistance by rooting his account of white ignorance (the epistemic dimension of the Domination Contract) within contract theory. My aim in the first part of this paper, however, is to use a lens of curdled logic to show that such a critique does not preclude Mills' work from also being effectively resistant.

[35] Lugones gives a list of different ways one can 'curdle,' which includes:

> "Bi- and multilingual experimentation, code-switching; categorial blurring and confusion; caricaturing the selves we are in the world of our oppressors, infusing them with ambiguity; practicing trickster and foolery; elaborate and explicitly marked gender transgression; withdrawing our services from the pure or their agents whenever possible and with panache; drag; announcing the impurity of the pure by ridiculing his inability at self-maintenance; playful reinvention of our names for things and people, multiple naming; caricaturing of the fragmented selves we are in our groups; revealing the chaotic in production; revealing the process of producing order if we cannot help producing it; undermining the orderliness of the social ordering; marking our cultural mixtures as we move; emphasizing mestizaje, crossing cultures; etc." (1994, 22)

logic) Resistance will require something more complex than a simple splitting away from purity logic then, however appealing the imagining of such separation, as if

> I could go away with my own people to our own land to engage in acts that were cleanly ours! But then I ask myself who my own people are…being in the middle of either/or…separation into clean, tidy things and beings is not possible for me because it would be the death of myself as multiplicitous and a death of community with my own. I understand my split or fragmented possibilities in horror. I understand then that whenever I desire separation, I risk survival by confusing split separation with separation from domination, that is, separation among [other] curdled beings who curdle away their fragmentation, their subordination. (Lugones 1994, 134)

In other words, for Lugones resistance is not simply a matter of split-separating from domination, either physically or conceptually. This would only reify harmful pure either/or thinking, thus making it impossible to form deep coalition with impure others, who inhabit themselves and the world somewhere in between this dualistic thinking and being. Solidarity rather requires "curdling away one's fragmentation." But what does this mean? She goes on:

> When seen from the logic of curdling, the alteration of the impure to unity is seen as fictitious and as an exercise in domination: the impure are rendered uncreative, ascetic, static, realizer of the contents of the modern subject's imagination [for example the Mexican-American]. Curdling, in contrast, realizes their against-the-grain creativity, articulates their within structure-inarticulate powers. (1994, 133)

The remarks above could apply to any reduction of a multiplicitous person or viewpoint. And one such reduction might be that someone or something (like Mills or contract theory) is either 'resistant' or 'oppressive,' when in fact, most people and things (including Mills and contract theory) contain elements of both. Equipped with this insight, what I would like to suggest is that Mills, by choosing to write within a tradition that has excluded Black people in the past, exemplifies a curdled activity within that tradition. He resists a split-separation which might look like denouncing contract theory wholesale due to its racism.[36] Rather, he commits to building coalition with (mostly white) social-political philosophers in the fight against racism (both within political philosophy and more broadly).[37] In doing so, he shakes-up, but does not pull out, the

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[36] I do not mean to suggest that leaving inhospitable spaces cannot also constitute an act of curdling. Lugones points out that "withdrawing our services from the pure or their agents whenever possible and with panache" is an act of curdling (1994, 122). So I am not suggesting that one always should remain within oppressive structures, only that sometimes remaining within them can be a resistant act, too. Mills seems to share the view that either response may well have benefits and costs:

> Subordinated social groups trying to develop an emancipatory politics routinely face the problem of how to relate to the frameworks, principles, and ideals officially promulgated by those who dominate the social order. Should they seek to adapt these frameworks, principles, and ideals to their own ends, or should they attempt to devise alternatives? The former strategy has the (seemingly) obvious virtue of self-positioning within the mainstream, taking up a conceptual and normative apparatus already familiar and socially hegemonic, albeit for unfamiliar and anti-hegemonic purposes. The possible downside is that this apparatus—shaped, after all, by long-established exclusionary practices—will turn out to be more refractory than hoped to any such appropriation. The latter strategy has the (seemingly) obvious virtue of jettisoning altogether the oppressor's creation, the master's tools, for one's own original liberatory vision. (Mills 2017c, 1)

[37] "I certainly hoped that whites would form a significant part of my audience, but I was definitely not aiming exclusively at them" (Pateman & Mills 2007, 245).

colonized ground beneath all of us engaged in contracts discourse. In fact, he explicitly

advocates for this middle ground approach to racist philosophical traditions more generally in

"Black Radical Kantianism," where he argues that ignoring the racism inherent in Kant's

enterprise on the one hand (by, for example, attributing it to irrelevant historical prejudices)[38]

and doing away with Kant altogether on the other, both give rise to problems. Rather, he

suggests that critiques on the base of racism should be applied to the apparatus itself. We can

then see what happens upon such critical engagement, moving forward with a "color-conscious

Kantianism" (Mills 2017c). Do we get new insights? Can we improve upon the original

framework armed with these critiques?[39] Do things that were once confusing become clearer?

Of course, this is precisely the approach Mills' takes to Rawls' theoretical framework,

leading to his formulation of the Domination Contract. And while there is continued resistance to

Mills' framework within mainstream social and political philosophy, it is also true that social

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[38] Despite being an influential ethicist, Kant was also a pioneering theorist of modern scientific/biological racism:

> As an orthodox Christian, Kant was of course committed to a monogenetic rather than polygenetic account of the origins of humanity. But the Keime (germs, seeds) he postulated as being present in the originary human race would—on being stimulated by the different physical environments across the planet to which human beings had migrated—so develop as to shape in a permanent way what became the different branches of humanity. White Europeans, yellow Asians, black Africans, and red Amerindians were created in what Kant claimed was a color-coded hierarchy of intellectual and characterological traits (see sources in Mikkelsen 2013). (Mills 2017c, 8)

[39] On Mills view, what were once contradictions in Kant's apparatus become resolved upon engaging the race critique: "there is no actual contradiction once we recognize that the egalitarian assumptions and pronouncements in the moral/political/teleological writings [i.e. the racist writings] are really referring to the (male subset of the) superior race (i.e., whites)" (2017c, 8). And as Frantz Fanon says, "There is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism. . . . On the other side of the ocean there was a race of less-than-humans" (Fanon 2007).

contract theory has not been the same since Mills' (and Pateman's) interventions. It is richer,

more complex, more accurate, and more hospitable because it considers issues of oppression.

The definition of 'contracting' is no longer naïve about autonomous subjects making decisions

with other autonomous subjects, and personhood cannot be taken for granted in the same way it

could within previous 'race-neutral' and 'gender-neutral' analyses. Mills has therefore

"complicated" our idea of contract, helping to transform the tradition's literature, methodology,

and framework towards aims of making better theories and building new coalitions in the fight

against oppression.

In addition to multiplying our understanding of 'contract' through these curdling moves,

Mills' contribution has also multiplied traditional notions of 'personhood,'[40] a concept which has

historically split-separated out white men from the rest of humanity, yet simultaneously taken

them to be the Whole of it. The gendered element is easiest to locate in the still often used

synecdoche 'man,' which purports to stand in for 'human.' The racist elements can be found

most explicitly in policies like the 3/5 compromise which considered Black men 3/5 of a person

for the sake of representation. Both gender and race elements can be found in the fact that

fundamental rights like voting, education, and good healthcare were historically denied to these

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[40] Not only in the way that more people will be considered 'persons' but also because personhood itself will be denied its 'purity' as a category. "The sum here, then—the sum of those seen as subpersons—will be quite different. From the beginning it will be relational, not monadic; dialogic, not monologic: one is a subperson precisely because others—persons—have categorized one as such and have the power to enforce their categorization…" (2015a, 9).

groups of people. Purity logic thus contributes to what Charles Mills calls, using a Jamaican Creole term, 'smadittizin,' or, "the struggle to have one's personhood recognized" that most persons have been engaged with for centuries.[41] For this reduction of what it means to be a person, exemplified and unified in the embodiment of white men, becomes a harmful way of ordering people's lives, including how they see and experience themselves, others, and the world. (Contract theorists themselves have been keen to point out that conception informs perception.) This is true both descriptively and prescriptively, as one comes to judge (and even more importantly comes to feel) who they and others *should be* based on harmful and often impossible standards of purity.[42] As the lesbian woman I irreducibly am, I will necessarily fail to live up to standards of recognition for the prototypical 'good person' within such fragmented pure conceptualizations. And this will trickle down to recognition for being a good citizen, a good philosopher, a good doctor, and so on and so forth for any role embedded with exclusionary conceptualizations/representations of personhood.[43] Mills' Domination Contract curdles these

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[41] On Mills' view, personhood is objective in the moral sense, but in the social/political sense, personhood comes about through social recognition, and so "personhood needs to be recognized as a technical term, a term of art, whose defining characteristics are generally so devised as to make whiteness a prerequisite for personhood. Nonwhites fall under an array of alternative categories—"savages," "barbarians," "natives"—whose common feature is generally their normative inequality" (Forthcoming, Ch. 5)**.**

[42] Reductive stereotypes often follow purity logic, with women being reduced to 'sex objects,' or Black and brown men reduced to 'criminals' in the "social imaginary" (Code, 1987). These stereotype, importantly, can have dehumanizing affective content, like fear, paranoia, or sexual attraction, which can reduce persons to sub-persons insofar as these affects determine judgments, beliefs, and actions without regard to the agency (goals, interests, opinions) of another (See Rogers 2021b).

[43] This is related somewhat to Irigaray's notion of 'implicit content,' which concerns the way by which language excludes women from subjectivity.

'pure' conceptualizations by describing the social contract as one of domination whereby some people are relegated to a sub-human status. For this modification *requires* rectification as one cannot describe or perceive violations of human-rights against non-whites if one does not acknowledge non-whites as humans in the first place. In this way, Mills' framework is immanently corrective, and a large uptake of his revised conceptual framing would provide needed tools for recognizing persons where historically there have been none according to harmful purity logics.

"To curdle away one's fragmentation" then means to engage from the perspective of multiplicity even, and perhaps especially, when the pull of purity is strong. To listen for and see the complexity and agency that inevitably lurks behind the illusory and reductive "modern subject's imagination." To hold firmly to the fact that there are multiple ways of perceiving and conceiving of things, multiple sides and parts of people and especially ourselves, multiple meanings and interpretations to be found in single, even seemingly fixed and pure expressions and representations, and multiple vantage points from which to write, read, and exist. Curdled logic is exemplified when we seek multiplication rather than fragmentation. Overlaps rather than split-separations. Complexity rather than reduction. And most importantly, solidarity rather than division. Curdling does not aim to shut down conversation or solve 'problems,' but leaves open doors, windows, cracks, so that new insights from previously and currently unknown or inarticulable 'others,' strangers even, might make themselves known in a process of coalition-building. In this way curdled logic is inherently non-oppressive. I am inspired by theorists like Lugones and Mills, who have worked within structures never meant to accommodate them to

change them for emancipatory ends, finding new alliances in the fight for justice along the way.[44]

V. Affective Numbness

But let's keep curdling.[45] What still can't be heard within a contract theory modified by Mills? Why? Where is there space to shift and move the conversation to open new possibilities for listening? In what follows I argue we can get an even deeper transformation of the contract tradition than Mills has so far provided by forging coalition with decolonial feminists who emphasize the importance of embodied experience as *part* of any justice agenda, theoretical or practical.

　　Let's consider Lugones' reminder that split-separating is not just something that happens 'out there' to objects or subjects of analysis or recognition, but something that is simultaneously

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[44] Despite still being a long way from the kind of mainstream uptake of race as an issue that Mills and I would like to see in the discipline, he notes that progress has been made:

> So there is a flurry of activity in multiple spheres, which—for those of us old enough to have been around in the 1980s and 1990s—is quite astonishing by comparison with those hard times. We are a long way from the period when Leonard Harris was unable to find any regular philosophy press for his pioneering book on Afro-American Philosophy, Philosophy Born of Struggle, and had to go with Kendall/Hunt, or when APA sessions on race and Africana philosophy were confined to the deadly late-night group program, with only a handful of diehards in attendance. (Mills 2017b, 31).

[45] For while Mills "reveals the [oppressive] process of producing order" within contracts discourse, he "cannot help [but re-] produce it" himself (145). For purity logic is all around us, including inside us and around us.

done to ourselves as inquirers or recognizers. She considers especially the purity logic inherent in the "objective, abstract, neutral philosophical standpoint":

> His own purification into someone who can step squarely onto the vantage point of unity requires that his remainder become of no consequence to his own sense of himself as someone who justifiably exercises control over multiplicity…And it is important to his own sense of things and of himself that he pay little attention to the satisfaction of the requirements of his sensuality, affectivity and embodiment. (1994, 130)[46]

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[46] Mills critiques Rawls' thought-experiment as idealizing both "the normative target and the socio-historical location from which we choose" (Forthcoming) and so seems aware of this problem, and therefore, I imagine would be sympathetic to Lugones' view here.

What follows from the epistemic domination aimed for by such a perspective, illuminated by these remarks, is that there is also an "affective domination" which occurs, insofar as occupying such a position requires the subordination of our affective lives. Lugones helpfully goes on:

> The ideal observer must himself be pure, unified, and simple so as to occupy the vantage point and perceive unity amid multiplicity. He must not himself be pulled in all or several perceptual directions; he must not perceive richly. Reason, including its normative aspect is the unified subject. It is what characterizes the subject as unity. A subject who in its multiplicity perceives, understands, grasps its worlds as multiple sensuously, passionately as well as rationally without the splitting separation between sense/emotion/reason lacks the unidimensionality and the simplicity required to occupy the privileged vantage point. Such a subject occupies the vantage point of reason in a pragmatic contradiction, standing in a place where all of the subject's abilities cannot be exercised and where the exercise of its abilities invalidates the standpoint. So a passionate, needy, sensuous, and rational subject must be conceived as internally separable, as discretely divided into what it makes it one—rationality—and into the confused, worthless remainder— passion, sensuality. Rationality is understood as the ability of a unified subject to abstract, categorize, train the multiple to the systematicity of norms, of rules that highlight, capture, and train its unity from the privileged standpoint. (1994, 129)

There is a deep relationship between embodiment and the "neutral philosophical standpoint" being characterized here. For, Lugones argues that the abstraction of such a standpoint requires a kind of affective numbness, or an abandonment of (often taken to be mastery of) direct bodily experience, which can be much messier and more contradictory in nature than our clean split-separated concepts would have us admit. But as I have argued (Rogers 2021b), connecting with the affect at the center of racialized and gendered oppression is vital for promoting the formation of responsible beliefs and judgment because lived bodily experience often reveals the inadequacy of current conceptual resources (think back to the example of Mexican/Americans put forward by Lugones).[47] This embodied experience might be emotional as one feels the painful dismissiveness of a more normatively legible peer, or the frustration/impatience of not being able to communicate some important insight one holds, or even the pride of sensing you know something another does not.[48] Similarly, someone else might feel discomfort, curiosity, or rage when trying to understand a perspective that pushes one outside of their epistemic comfort zone. All these experiences indicate the limits of current conceptual or categorical frames, and thereby promote curdling if noticed and given appropriate attention. However, if they get bulldozed by a normative method of impartial rational purity in

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[47] Even Kant might agree to a softer version of this given his famous worry about reasoning running away with itself: "concepts without intuitions [experiences in time and space] are empty."

[48] I would argue this access to these kinds of affective experiences is part of what gives nondominantly positioned people the possibility for possessing the kinds of epistemic advantages theorized by in Standpoint theory (See Harding 2004).

which their epistemic salience is dismissed, our understandings of ourselves and others will be epistemically (and morally) weaker.

Narrow conceptions of 'person' within the contract tradition and more broadly are in part responsible for this kind of normative methodology which excludes the epistemic significance of affect.[49] In contractualism (the form of contract theory subscribed to by Mills), moral requirements are determined by responsiveness to people as *rational agents*, where the distinctive value of persons concerns their capacity to assess reasons and justifications. Therefore, in addition to the problematic purity logic Mills resists regarding the reduction of personhood to 'white man,' we see a different (and perhaps more foundational) reduction in the tradition whereby reason is considered essential for what it means to have moral status, or to be 'human,' and is thereby split-separated from emotional and physical dimensions of human experience which are considered inessential or even antithetical to the distinctive nature of personhood.[50] And within the reduction of personhood to rational nature, "his embodiment is

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[49] In his version of materialist constructivism, Mills (Forthcoming) argues that an inter-subjective recognition or failure of recognition of one's personhood, cashed out often in unconscious habits of perception, provides the material basis for race and racism, while reproductive capacities are the material basis for gender and sexism, I think it is more likely that the distinction between personhood/sub-personhood provides a material basis for both race and gender (even if gender has additional material bases). We can see this gender component emerge more clearly with the analysis I'm giving. Reason was not attributed to either women or people of color, so if personhood was therefore distinguished from sub-personhood by the attribution of whether someone was rational (cashed out in contemporary times through unconscious habits of perception as Mills correctly theorizes), then we can see how the distinction between person and sub-person provides a material basis for both race and gender, rather than being unique to race as Mills theorizes.

[50] As Bailey puts it, "Reason *essentially* defines human nature while sex and race count as *accidental* properties" (2007 83).

irrelevant to his unity" (130). But we know that emotion and reason are not in fact 'pure' in the way of actually being able to be pulled apart from each other; conceiving of them as such therefore creates impossible standards which deny lived human reality; occupying the kind of philosophical standpoint characterized by Lugones is as much infeasible as it is illusory. There is no purely emotional or purely rational subject. There are only ever multiple beings with impure parts. A curdled logic yields a more realistic picture: personhood is both (and inextricably) emotional and rational (and spiritual, and physical, etc.), just as it is both masculine and feminine (or both/not either/in between) black and white (or both/not either/in between), etc., even when these (impure) parts are in tension with one another. Furthermore, knowledge is neither purely rational or purely embodied, it is both rational and embodied, or it is somewhere between these fictitious 'pure' parts. Oily yolk, yolky oil.

While Mills is known for theorizing the Domination Contract as prescribing an epistemology of ignorance then,[51] it seems to me that there is still a general underemphasis for how such ignorance concerns not only *what* is recognized as knowledge or not, but also which *ways of knowing* are recognized as legitimate under conditions of domination.[52][53] The first

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[51] which functions as ideology that maintain white, male, and other kinds of privilege (See Mills 2007).
[52] This might also be a different kind of epistemic diversity than has so far been theorized in the literature, where diversity does not only apply to diversifying *who* is producing mainstream knowledge, but *how* mainstream knowledge is produced.
[53] This is partially because Mills remains committed to an understanding of knowledge as "true belief" (Mills 2007, 16) or to "veritistic epistemology." But more embodied ways of knowing the world might not be subject to the same

(perhaps more familiar) aspect of racialized (and sexualized) ignorance concerns what kinds of things are knowable. We might cash this out in terms of the more paradigmatic case of Fricker's (2007) hermeneutical injustice, in which gaps in collective[54] knowledge concern *objects* of knowledge. For example, the subordination of non-white men has meant that objects of concern or salience for the majority of persons receive little mainstream attention or study about these things. Take the example of 'sexual harassment': it was ill understood until (white) women held more power in the social world to determine collective meaning. Before that, such treatment of women in the workplace was (mis)-understood as "flirting." Similarly, the historical narrative of whites dominating people of color received little attention in mainstream high school textbooks (or in social contract theory) prior to people of color gaining more social power. In its place was a white-washed history of white heroes and 'savages,' which furthered (white) ignorance about the actual foundations of the U.S.. What was considered 'known' at the level of dominant society was false, and Mills' attempt to forefront the history of white domination within contract theory is therefore reparative for this aspect of ignorance.[55]

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kind of truth conditions mainstream epistemology employs. Understanding one's own and others' experiences might require different kinds of skills than assessing evidence or reasons.

[54] Where collective means 'shared' not aggregate (See Rogers 2021a). I thus align myself with others who argue that many of the resources needed for epistemic resistance *already* exist within communities (Mason 2012, Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012, Medina 2012, Dotson 2014). And this makes sense, insofar as it is *active* exclusion of some communities in contemporary society (rather than, say, isolation) which often constitutes the inadequacy of governing epistemic resources.

[55] When theorizing about hermeneutical injustice, Fricker and Mills both focus on the "absence of illuminating *concepts* [my emphasis] or, as Mills points out, "the presence of actively obscurantist and mystificatory *concepts* [my emphasis]." This emphasis on concepts might be one reason why hermeneutical injustice remains focused on

But there is another aspect of (white) ignorance guided by a purity logic which reduces the *way* we can know things to a process of reasoning which aims to control multiplicity and embodied experience, both of self and others. Let's call this, perhaps, 'procedural hermeneutical injustice,' in which gaps of knowledge are caused by excluding alternative, curdled, *ways* of knowing, and the insights those alternatives afford. Insofar as embodied ways of experiencing and knowing the world have been associated with the essence or nature of 'woman' in the history of the tradition, delegitimizing these ways of knowing the world is sexism in full-swing.[56] Yet it's important to see that championing what "the white fathers told us" counts as legitimate for knowledge production (Lorde 2997b, 38) results in harm which impacts not only women (who are contrasted with their 'rational' male counterparts), but also every other person who in aiming to gain credibility or recognition denies or ignores their own embodied experience and needs in ways which subvert emotional and psychological health.[57]

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objects of knowledge and seems ill-equipped, as far as I can see, to capture those kinds of unknowings or ignorance which result from collective gaps in different *ways* of knowing.

[56] For more about the sexist history of the tradition see Okin (2013).

[57] Or, we might say it results in a "systematic gaslighting." And this might be especially relevant to those who have been socialized as (cis) 'men' within patriarchal epistemologies of ignorance, and who thereby experience even more pressure to approximate the ideals they are supposed to constitute. It is not a coincidence, for example, that our institutions and structures are badly equipped, under white supremacy capitalist patriarchy, to accommodate loss and grief within a predominant logic that renders the emotional and embodied aspects of human living as insignificant to the policies and principles we adopt. Affective numbness towards the suffering of ourselves and others is the result, and is common within, and endorsed by, our current social world. Just think of the impartial 'juror' who must cast her or his personal feelings aside in the rendering of justice. We are normatively told not to contaminate our judgment and lives with our own pain, so why acknowledge it in others? What happens when a person socialized as such experiences tragedy? On the one hand, affirming the (completely normal) emotional response of grief might risk his own intelligibility to others and self as the rational 'man' he is supposed to be, and so he might repress or

Fortunately, as groups historically marginalized gain more social and political power, there is greater potential for a more multiplicitous understanding of knowledge to gain a foothold in our social world. As Lorde puts it,

> …as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experience and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power form where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (Lorde 2007b, 37)

In other words, Lorde understands the reparative potential for feelings and embodied experience to resist the reductive demands on knowledge issued by the purity logic of the Domination Contract. And given Mills' newfound commitment to theorizing the body, I think he would be sympathetic with this claim. Yet I am not yet sure how he can incorporate it into the revised Rawlsian thought-experiment.

In *Contract & Domination*, Mills argues that contractors know the history of racial domination and subordination behind the veil, thereby avoiding idealized abstraction and its

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pull apart those parts of self which have been discarded as inessential to his being in order to resemble the 'ideal' of himself. On the other hand, if he does affirm his grief, there may still be a sense of fragmentation as he attempts to fit together various parts of himself that under the social norms of purity logic are "not supposed to go together." Ironically then, in the attempt to control and unify subjects through reducing their multiplicity, purity logic often undermines the possibility of experiencing a unified (or integrated) self (and society) at all. And this is *especially* true for men whose multiplicity might be denied more vehemently than any other by current norms.

ensuing ignorance *about the world*, but they remain ignorant of their own identity characteristics,

including race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, and so on. For Mills argues that an

ignorance of one's own identity will secure the kind of perspective needed for generating

principles of (corrective) justice because, again, one would reason according to the possibility

that they/she/he could just as likely be a member of some subordinate group as they could a

dominant group (ratios of groups are precluded from the considered data). As such, they/she/he

would have a (long term) self-interest[58] in securing the most advantageous principles for all

groups, considered together, thereby promoting the best possible outcome for whatever group

one finds oneself in when the veil is lifted:

> What would you choose behind the veil on prudential grounds (worried that you might
>
> turn out to be, say, black) if you knew your options were limited to non-ideal societies
>
> shaped by the legacy or white supremacy, and regulated respectively by corrective public
>
> policy measures ranging from non-existent to very strong? (Pateman & Mills 2007, 22)[59]

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[58] See footnote 6 for a distinction between short-term and long-term prudential reasoning. Here Mills is referring to the latter.

[59] Given Mills commitment to Marxist materialism as well as to something like Derek Bell's (1980) view of "convergent interests" where moral suasion will always be insufficient for moving whites or other dominant groups to act outside of their personal interests for aims of anti-racism, this mandated ignorance of one's own social positioning makes some sense: "materialism rules out moral motivation as a prime social mover, so it would have to be *perceived* [my emphasis] group interest" (2017a, 9). In the revised thought-experiment, one's perceived group-interest is any possible group's interest given one's self-ignorance about group membership.

But can such a normative standpoint for generating principles of corrective justice accommodate the transformative potential of feelings (and embodied experience more broadly) that Lorde speaks of?

Maybe. Mills could reply that affective and experiential knowledge could still be considered by contractors behind the veil. This would not be first-hand phenomenological data, since one does not know one's own identity, but rather achieved through testimony and art which depicts the experience of some dominant or subordinate group. This information can then be engaged alongside historical information about racialized domination and subordination. And these things together would be reasoned through (or even emotionally experienced) as one aims to generate principles of corrective justice. On this line of argument, understanding the subjective experience of various groups of people is an important facet of what occurs behind the veil. Mills says something along these lines in his response to a similar objection raised by Chris Lebron:[60]

> That knowledge, deriving from R2 testimony [or the testimony of those who have been
>
> racially subordinated), is indeed going to be crucial to the *prudential* [my emphasis]
>
> decision making of the R1s [or those who are part of the racially dominant group, but

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[60] Lebron's critique concerns whites not having the subjective experience of racial domination behind the veil, which would be necessary for carrying out the thought-experiment properly. Without such information, whites will be handicapped in their ability to imagine themselves as Black, and so will not be able to make judgments according to such a possibility. See Lebron (2015).

who do not know what group they are part of behind the veil] as they weigh the possibility of turning out to be R2s once the veil is lifted. But it is allowed entry, not precluded, by my revisionist reframing of Rawls's set-up as a way of deriving principles of justice for a nonideal, ill-ordered racist society, which will require an informed picture of what such a society is actually like. (2019, 17)[61]

In other words, Mills seems to agree that understanding *what it is like* to live in a society of domination and subordination, not just in statistical descriptive way, but in a richly perceived, way, plays a necessary role for arriving at the best principles of corrective justice we can using the modified Rawlsian thought experiment. Ignorance about one's identity is only supposed to preclude self-serving biases, not critical awareness of racial inequality itself, says Mills.

However, I am skeptical this approach works. How can we correct for self-serving biases if we remain unaware of them? And without awareness of them, how can we prevent their determining judgment unknowingly? And, how can we engage the body in the contracting process without knowing what our (politicized) bodily characteristics are? In other words, it is precisely our identity characteristics which dictate much of our personal and embodied experience in an oppressive social world, allowing us to use those experiences for aims of

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[61] In other places, Mills states "what is needed is a synthesis of these alternative epistemologies, which recognizes both the multiplicity and the unity, *the experiential subjectivity and the causal objectivity*, of hierarchical class-, gender-, and race-divided society" (Mills 2019, 39).

justice. Mills emphasizes this point himself in *White Leviathan* when he theorizes the negative

feedback loop which occurs between embodied experience (especially through unconscious

bodily patterns of perception) and the construction (and reification) of racial identity. But if this

is right, then the idea that one can generate principles for a just society without having worked

out one's own relationship to oneself and one's body as it has been socialized within an unjust

world, is implausible. Lugones says, "You make the inner changes first, and then you make the

outer changes. I've always believed that" (Zaytoun 2019, 55). While the story of transformation

might, contra this statement, actually be more reciprocal between individual and social changes

(as Mills highlights), it is still true on both accounts that without having access to one's own

identity characteristics, contractors are precluded from doing the kind of necessary inner work

needed for corrective justice, or for correcting the very kinds of self-serving biases which worry

Mills in the first place. Furthermore, not knowing the identity characteristics of others also

contributes to this lack of self-awareness. For as Laura Pérez (2020) points out, "Some of your

own actual and seeming differences may also perhaps be part of my own potential subjectivity

that present power relations that have been rendered other or mute within me" (Perez, 56). And if

this is right, then by curdling our perception of others,[62]

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[62] This is consistent with Mills' claims that the "autonomous epistemic agent needs to be replaced by a 'community of knowers'" (2015a, 33).

the possibilities of me knowing some other part of me is opened, such that is I were male,

is the cultural understanding of "female" and "feminine" as difference (to the "male" or

"masculine") would open up the so-called femaleness in me, just as so-called maleness

opens me up to a part of my "female" self, to some degree, and just as queer politics

opens up the queerness within heterosexuality as well as different and earlier

constructions of a femme or butch lesbian or male gay identity (Pérez 2020, 56)[63]

Without allowing for identity differences to make themselves known behind the veil, we

therefore do not have access to others in the kinds of way that would help us recognize new,

more just, possibilities within ourselves.[64] I don't think Mills would object to these insights, but I

don't see how he can avoid that within his modified apparatus contractors are ideally

"homogeneous in their ability to comprehend and communicate;" or to put it in Lugones' words,

are "postcultural," (1994, 130) occupying precisely the kind of fictitious 'neutral' philosophical

standpoint which she is worried about; difference appears flattened by not only an abstracted, but

an *idealized* vantage point, which abstracts away from the pertinent realities of one's own bodily

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[63] This is partially what Audre Lorde is also getting at when she pleads that we "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of difference that lives there" (2007c, 113c).
[64] In this way, we see something I have called 'the self-reflexivity of emotional numbness' (Rogers 2021b) in formation.

life.[65] We therefore need to further modify the apparatus if we are to give a realistic picture of how embodied experience, whether oppressive or resistant, crucially factors into the process of justice. I believe this is the direction Mills wants to go in his most recent work,[66] even if he has not yet fit together his newly theorized material constructivism with the revised Rawlsian starting point.

In other words, we need our complex, embodied, messy, oppressive, resistant, multiple selves to properly orient us towards justice. We need to pay attention to and acknowledge, rather than control, the fullness of our beings, so that we can pay attention to and acknowledge, rather than control, the fullness of others' beings in turn. That is a starting place for justice I'd fight for.

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[65] This distinction between abstraction and idealized abstraction is an important one that Mills brings our attention to again and again. However, in this case, I think he is subject to his own view of harmful abstraction, as identity characteristics are 'pertinent realities' which should not be abstracted away from, and which one *must* abstract away from if self-ignorance about one's social position is to remain behind the veil on Mills' modified thought experiment.

[66] Interesting, however, is that Mills focuses primarily on *unconscious* bodily experience, drawing on Shannon Sullivan's (2007) work.

> White privilege is not just "in the head." It also is "in" the nose that smells, the back, neck, and other muscles that imperceptibly tighten with anxiety, and the eyes that see some but not all physical differences as significant. A person's psychological disposition toward the world can be found throughout her body, in her physical comportment, sensations, reactions, pleasures, and pains. . . . And all of this, including the "properly" bodily aspects of white privilege, can function unconsciously. The body, in fact, often serves as a prime site of nonreflective resistance to the transformation of habits of white privilege. It can actively thwart conscious attempts to dismantle a psychosomatic sense of white superiority. (Forthcoming quoting Sullivan, 37).

However, he doesn't much consider more overt bodily experiences like intense emotions, which also seem relevant to the material base of race and racism, and which, insofar as they are more overt, make it less likely that we will fail to notice the failure of purity logic's hard-edged separations.

VI. Repair

Many feminists and especially decolonial feminists have been successful in resisting the harmful and sexist abstracted vantage point which glorifies reason at the expense of affect; the inclusion of visual art, poetry, storytelling, and other stylistic choices make space for including embodied experience in ways that are productive rather than irrelevant to social, political, and philosophical aspirations.[67] Just as one cannot give uptake to Mills' Domination Contract without correcting one's perception of personhood, one cannot fully understand Lugones' piece without curdling pure conceptions of knowing, and the epistemic domination such purity aims for.[68] For as she reminds us, "the resistance and rejection of the culturally split self requires…that the language and conceptual framework of the public [or dominant spaces] become hybrid" (136). In other words, to be inclusive of marginalized perspectives and voices requires one be willing to be moved or transformed by them, such that curdled, common ground

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[67] For example, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, María Lugones, Cherríe Moraga, Emma Pérez, Adrien Piper, Mariana Ortega, Patricia Williams, Jennifer Nash, and many others. See especially Moraga & Anzaldua (2015), Pitts, Ortega, and Medina (2020), and del Alba Acevedo (2001) which center the importance of art and storytelling for theory building.

[68] We can see then how a nuanced understanding of Lugones' position yields the possibility for 'impure' employments of categories absent a commitment to the heavy ontology which follows from assuming such categories are 'pure.' One can still talk about 'emotions' and 'reason,' or 'women' and 'people of color,' through a curdled lens, as long as these concepts aren't taken to have an accompanying and exclusionary metaphysics of essences. According to Nāgārjuna, the famous Classical Indian Buddhist philosopher, they are simply "conventional designations" which are necessary for navigating a shared social world, rather than referents of essentially discrete metaphysical entities. See footnote 33.

and languages can be forged. Lugones' piece is quite remarkable in the way it resists harmful philosophical norms, embodying its own theoretical commitments to curdled logic by using artwork, shifting between languages, personal narrative, metaphors, artwork, interruption of argumentative flow, and other stylistic choices to 'curdle' the essay itself.[69] Which is not to say there is not rigorous purity logic also at play. In Lugones we find a hybrid language, a "mestiza consciousness" (here again drawing from Anzaldúa). She calls this way of writing "theoretico/practical." Other classic texts which take this approach like *This Bridge I call my Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa 2015), *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa 2015), and others have received little uptake in social/political philosophy, including in Mills' own work.[70] So, how might Mills radicalized formulation of contract theory integrate such insights to further resist harmful and reductive purity logic, and build deeper coalition with these scholars? Or, what would it mean for Mills himself to curdle away the split-separation of social/political philosophy from other bodies of literature committed to anti-racism, perspectives he himself claims are relevant and necessary for dismantling oppression?

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[69] "sometimes the logic of purity dominates the test, sometimes the logic of curdling does. But at other points, both worlds become vivid as coexisting and the logic of what I say depends on the coexistence" (1994).

[70] These very modes of knowing are considered extremely important to the theoretical aspirations of many women of color, a group often considered to have the most epistemic advantage within the kind of standpoint theory Mills endorses. It is surprising, therefore, that Mills has not engaged these scholars more in his own work, especially considering sentiments he often expresses along the lines of, "Until the number of scholars interested in these issues [of intersectionality] increases, progress in articulating a sophisticated theorization of social oppression and generating a hoped-for stimulus to an emancipatory politics will be limited and slow" (555).

The answer is both theoretical and practical (or neither, or somewhere in-between). Theoretically, Mills is making headway in his forthcoming book in which he stresses the role of unconscious habits of perception in dictating whether someone is recognized as a person or citizen, giving an account of material constructivism which acknowledges the materiality that lies at the basis of any oppressive society, and specifically at the basis of the global white supremacist state. (Interestingly enough, he does not have much to say about more superficial embodied experiences, like intense emotions.) He does a brilliant job illuminating embodied experience as a politicized process using the contract tradition, showing how it is both shaped by, and also re-inscribes, structures of power hierarchies. However, he has little to say about how embodied experience serves as a site for repair or resistance, and while he gestures towards a future account of such (cashed out in terms of how we might generate corrective justice using the theoretical framework of materialist constructivism), his intervention thus far appears to sustain a commitment to rational abstraction[71] as normative methodology for generating such principles, as well as for generating philosophical insight on these issues. In other words, he remains theoretically and methodologically rooted in the kind of "abstract, neutral, philosophical standpoint" problematized by Lugones. This is so despite his own recognition,

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[71] Again, though Mills often makes a helpful distinction between abstraction and idealized abstraction, critiquing the latter while embracing the former, my point is that the standpoint of the kind of inquirer Mills himself seems to advocate for, both in theory and practice, still appears to require the kind of idealized abstraction Mills himself finds problematic.

critiquing Rawls here, that "Whiteness as racelessness as abstractness as philosophical representativeness" (forthcoming, Ch. 5). So where is the body, or the materiality, in Mills' materialist constructivism, or in his revised contract apparatus more generally?

To be fair, in the new book, we see little return to the Rawlsian thought-experiment, modified or not, and a greater emphasis on Hobbes' materialism, taken up and corrected for using modified insights from Rousseau about social transformation. Given that Mills certainly does not advocate for the thought experiment as the only way one might go about generating corrective justice, maybe he would agree that we can do away with this approach to rectification which split-separates contractors from the actual social world in order to generate principles of justice. We should stay exactly where we are. And then we need to stir.[72]

I would agree then, with Mills' movement towards a theorizing of contract as an *imminent* rather than abstracted process in the creation of the racialized state, made and remade daily in our embodied interactions and relationships with each other.[73] However, his emphasis on unconscious perceptions and reactions when theorizing the role of the body leaves, so far, little theoretical space for resistance forged by deep listening to ourselves and others across multiplicity and difference (and a commitment to curdling when needed to accommodate insights

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[72] This is also more consistent with the materialist starting point for social transformation advocated for by Marx and taken up by Mills.

[73] He draws here from Gail Weiss who remarks that, in the white supremacist state, we are "intercorporeally linked with one another in a continuous "contractual" exchange of whiteness that both affirms full citizenship and constantly recreates the polity as a white entity" (Forthcoming, quoting Wiess).

that emerge from that listening).[74] While he is right to point out that much of our embodied

experience is tacit and under the threshold of awareness, there is also much embodied experience

that we do have access to (like intense emotions), and that we can communicate quite well if

open ears (or more importantly, open hearts) await on the other side. In fact, it is through such

communication, and the collective response to insights which emerge from that communication,

that we might best be able to capture both our responsibility for the human-made nature of

society, and the normative commitment to approximating universal moral egalitarianism, the two

aspects of social contract theory that Mills finds most important.[75]

If to obtain reality, purity logic "must order people's lives and psyches" (127) and "the

modern subject must be dressed, costumed, masked so as to appear able to exercise this

reduction of heterogeneity to homogeneity, or multiplicity to unity" (Lugones 1994, 130), then

curdled logic, too, in order to obtain reality, must change us. And this change will benefit all of

us, as we unlearn how we hide ourselves, remembering how to undress, take off our costumes,

and unmask-- to be relieved of the burden of pretending we can exercise control over our bodies

and emotions, over our own multiplicity, or even our theories, so as to admit that we would

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[74] Lugones' (2006) notion of 'complex communication,' is relevant here, as well as Medina's (2020) theorization about the role of emotions in complex communication.

[75] The question for me becomes meta-philosophical at this juncture, namely, given these harmful and reparative ways of thinking about the world that we have been investigating, what follows methodologically about how philosophy should conduct itself. The answer to this question might differ depending on whether "the goal is a revisioning of the tradition that we both want the white male majority of practitioners in the field to accept and to incorporate into their own work" (Pateman & Mills, 79), or whether the goal is to increase epistemic diversity in the discipline. Mills is committed to both. I am more concerned with the latter..

rather *live.* By doing so, we might let others live, too. And together, we might start to implement the kind of justice (epistemic and otherwise) about and towards which we theorize and aspire.

CHAPTER THREE
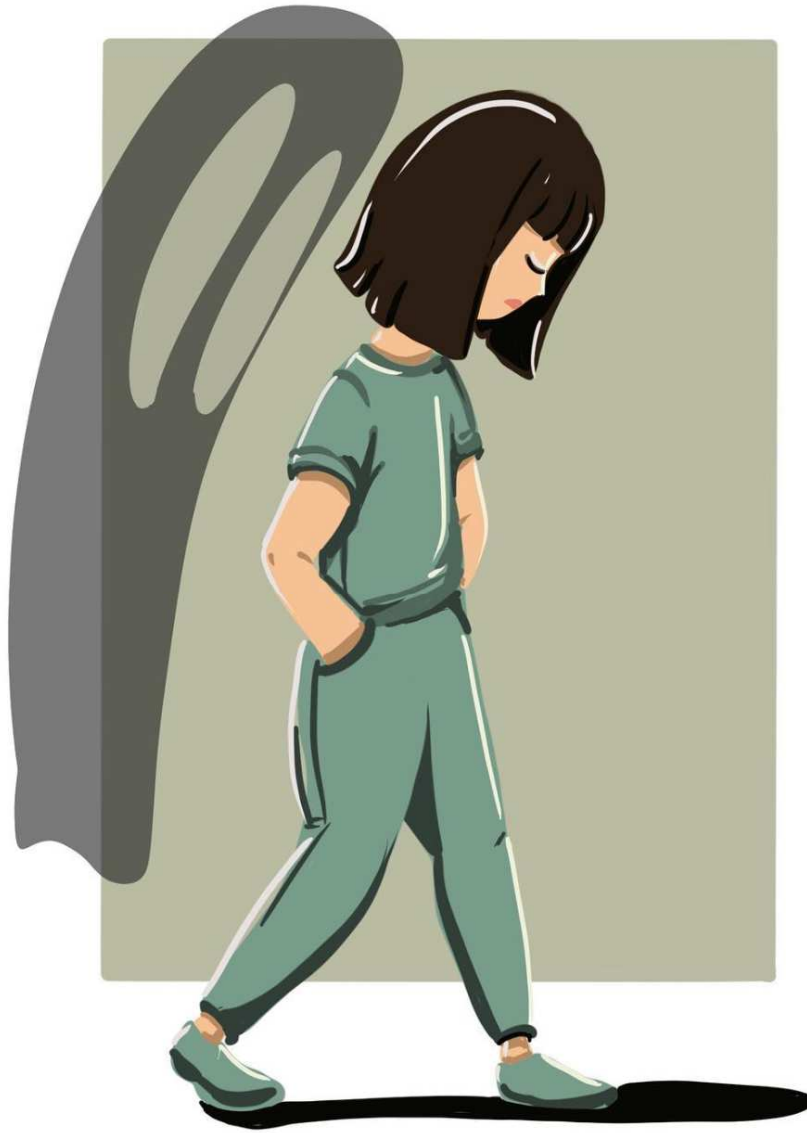
Figure 4: 'Ghost' by Monica Padilla

We can't stop living. Which means we have to live, which means we are alive, which means we

are humans and we are human: some of us are unkind and some of us are confused and some of

us sleep with the wrong people and some of us make bad decisions and some of us are

murderers. And it sounds terrible but it is, in fact, freeing: the idea that queer [or any identity]

does not equal good or pure or right. It is simply a state of being—one subject to politics, to its

own social forces, to larger narratives, to moral complexities of every kind. So bring on the queer

villains, the queer heroes, the queer sidekicks and secondary characters and protagonists and

extras. They can be a complete cast unto themselves. Let them have agency, and then let them

go.

— Carmen María Machado

Grieving Ghosts

Abstract:

This paper examines how harmful affective numbness travels through everyday epistemic practices, and how expanding our capacity for grieving using infectious storytelling can be reparative. I am primarily concerned with the sixth characteristic I lay out in my account of affective numbness (Rogers 2021b), namely, its 'dominant interpretive affect' in which the failure to affectively engage with persons *as persons* often means one *is* affectively engaged with persons as *subpersons*, or as objects of fear, paranoia, frustration, judgment, envy, etc. In Section I, I draw on Shannon Sullivan's account of racial privilege which stresses its resilient habitual transactional dimension.[1] I think about numbness as an unconscious (and/or willful) habitual denial of complex personhood. In Section II, I consider how social hauntings resist habits of privileged numbness through affectively manifesting histories of group-based trauma, and their disavowed ontologies of personhood. I argue attending to these hauntings through grief work can support the transformation of habits of numbness into practices of what Emma Vélez calls (drawing on María Lugones) "faithful witnessing." Finally, in section III, I think about how

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[1] Alexis Shotwell (2011) has a related account of racialized commonsense as "implicit understanding."

storytelling, employed often in decolonial feminist methodology, can offer a helpful context for doing this kind of reparative grief work.

Keywords:

Hauntology; epistemologies of ignorance; affective numbness; affective epistemology; decolonial feminism; faithful witnessing; Shannon Sullivan; grief; epistemic oppression; epistemic injustice; social epistemology; collective trauma; trauma studies; affect theory; Judith Butler

I. Racialized Habits and Affective Numbness

Consider the following: a white man, Stan, is likely not be followed or considered a threat when shopping in most northside Chicago stores. As such, his thoughts can focus on the task at hand, and his body can casually move aisle to aisle as he goes about his business. And it is through exposure to this kind of psychic and bodily freedom that his mind and body have learned they are 'safe' in these contexts, exemplifying both cognitive and physical dimensions of white and gender privilege. We can see here then the way self and world interact to produce these cognitive and bodily habits of ease or unease, and why someone might be personally invested in maintaining structures which uphold their easeful living. We can also see how someone's group-based privilege might go unnoticed by them. For, if one has never experienced the kind of vulnerability that non-white and/or gender non-normative folks have experienced when shopping, they may not realize that a pleasant shopping experience arises more from the safety of social identity than the safety of environment. Ignorant judgments based in white-masculine subjectivity but thought to be universal might follow, such as, for example, "shopping is a safe activity."

In *Revealing Whiteness,* Shannon Sullivan draws upon pragmatism and psychoanalysis to give an account of racial privilege as habit formation. However, while traditional views like those of Freud and Laplanche have primarily focused on the way by which parents unconsciously implant enigmatic messages to their children, Sullivan argues our unconscious lives are shaped beyond this primary relationship, in our daily interactions with others and the

world.[2] As she puts it: "unconscious habits are always effecting and being effected by those of other people and impersonal institutions" through tones of voices, bodily gestures, and an "entire array of the social, political, economic, aesthetic, material, [epistemic], and psychological world." On her view of "the multiplicity of transactional habit," we continue making and re-making ourselves through our transactions with others and our environments, beyond the formative years of childhood. These transactions are chock full of meaning and messages, both conscious and unconscious, which can work to either reiterate or transform learned habits. And many of these habits are racialized and gendered. If Stan were to move to another place where his race and/or gender was marginalized or fetishized, his cognitive and bodily habits might also change in response. Perhaps he would become more tense and fearful when shopping, finding "shopping is sometimes risky" to be a more apt judgment. On the other hand, if he stays put, it is likely that each store visit will reiterate his belief that "shopping is safe," alongside his bodily and cognitive habits of privilege.

Safety while shopping is therefore not only a personal affair. The looks people give me or don't give me, the way I am spoken to, including the words people use or don't use, the shared cultural norms of dress or accent which are present, etc., all work together to form the racialized

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[2] Brennan (2015), Cheng (1996), and Spillers (1989), also consider the insufficiency of the oedipal drama of the nuclear family for addressing gender and racial formation. As Sullivan puts it, "Not just parents, but other caregivers, loved ones, teachers, and friends send enigmatic messages about race and white domination that help make up one's unconscious life. An entire world of transgenerational others contributes to the undigested remnants of white privilege that are psychosomatically sedimented in one's self." (Sullivan 2006, 94).

bodily and psychological habit of "safety" I experience. My own ease, sense of hurry, tension, etc. also become unconscious messages sent to others which a/effect their sense of safety/unsafety. If I am paranoid of being harassed by a man the next aisle over, my demeanor of coldness or haste might impact his own sense of ease/unease, which will a/effect others, and so on. Sullivan gives several examples from her own life and literature in which racialized habits form unconsciously through our transactions with others in this way, and especially with those who we are in intimate and long-term relationship with (like our family members or more immediate communities). According to the account, messages experienced frequently, (in this case of safety or unsafety while shopping), will result in the solidification of responsive (often unconscious) habits which embed themselves into our sense of self and others, and in ways which perpetuate racialized and gendered advantage and disadvantage. For privileged folks, or those with the most social power to change unequal structures, will often remain ignorant of how their habits of being are privileged and racialized; and even if awareness is achieved, they will have little incentive to combat structures which advantage them through these resulting habits of more easeful living.[3] As such, structural change will be effective "only if the roots they have planted in people's psychosomatic habits have been dug up" (2006, 4).

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[3] White privilege as unconscious habit would therefore seem to play an important role in harmful epistemic resilience, or the phenomenon whereby an epistemological system resists modification (Dotson 2014). On Sullivan's view, "White privilege goes to great lengths not to be heard" (2006, 5). How this relates to Toni Morrison's claim that "it requires hard work *not* to see" the racial problem, would yield an interesting analysis.

Sullivan puts forward five advantages to understanding white privilege in this way, as unconscious habit, all of which can be seen from the example above. First, understanding white privilege in this way can account for the complexity of racism as both mental and physical, as habits are both somatic and psychical; thinking of privilege as habit can therefore illuminate the different ways white privilege constitutes racist "bodying" as much as racist thinking. Second, habits are historically produced through repetition of learned behavior, rather than eternally fixed. This is important because it explains why white privilege is so resilient, but also leaves space for the possibility of its transformation (especially, on Sullivan's view, through a change in environment). Third, since habits compose the self, but are formed through engagement with others and the world, understanding white privilege as unconscious habit accounts for the personal and collective dimensions of the phenomenon, as well as their interaction. Fourth, given its rootedness in one's sense of self, accounting for white privilege as unconscious habit explains the personal investment many have in maintaining racist structures. Finally, habits are often hidden from conscious reflection, and so understanding white privilege in this way explains why and how it often functions unnoticed.

Equipped with Sullivan's analysis then, we can see that judgments or beliefs like, "shopping is safe," or, "J-walking down the street won't get you in trouble with the cops," or, "philosophy is a hospitable discipline," or "Vermont is super friendly," or "Renting in Chicago is easy," etc. could signify that one is experiencing what Mills (2006) calls "white ignorance," or what we might think of as the default epistemic orientation of white racial privilege, namely, one of "white solipsism," whereby "in many people's day-to-day lives, it can seem as if only white people exist" (Sullivan 2006, 17). For, just because one "knows and feels" the world to be a

certain way does not mean that this is the experience of everyone, or even most people. Rather,

such beliefs and judgments take for granted white-masculine subjectivity within a sphere of

influence that dehumanizes non-dominantly raced and gendered persons, in part, by failing to

account for nondominant experiences as relevant to "collective"[4] understandings of the social

world.[5] A more accurate belief or judgment would be: "shopping in some particular contexts is

safe for some (groups of) people."[6]

And the affective dimension to these judgments is important. For if one is equipped with

the more ignorant belief that shopping is safe (full stop), then one is likely to have less sensitivity

to experiences which pose dissonance with that belief.[7] Or, one is more likely to be affectively

numb to those experiences, driven by an ill-fitted framework of meaning (and its dominant

interpretive affects) which conceal another's personhood from the realm of feeling. And so, a

timid, fearful midnight shopper in one's vicinity might read as "slow, annoying, and in the way,"

resulting in gestures and affective dispositions which fail to acknowledge or engage with

alternative readings of her behavior. One's sighs of impatience, or lack of social distancing,

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[4] For a discussion on the difference between "shared" and "collective" understandings, see Rogers (2021a).
[5] This is relevant to Fricker's (2017) notion of 'hermeneutical injustice' (2007), and Dotson's (2014) work on 'epistemic oppression.' Also see Spivak (2003) and De Schryver (2021).
[6] From such an analysis, the insights of Standpoint Theory regarding the epistemic advantage some non-dominant persons can achieve due to material disadvantage are highlighted (as in contrast to the group-based ignorance of many materially privileged folks). See Harding (2004).
[7] Causing what Medina (2013) calls "productive epistemic friction."

might only further her feelings of alienation and fear, as she is registered as a mere *obstacle* to one's own pleasant shopping experience, rather than as a complex *person* with her own goals, experiences, and practical orientations in need of acknowledgment. If one is aware that different people experience different levels of safety within such a context, one might approach this shopper less intrusively, with a patience or openness that works to allay the fear and anxiety she is experiencing, or at the very least, not perpetuate it. In some cases, these patterns of numbness which result in misinterpretations of others can be deadly, such as when a cop reacts fatally because he sees a gun where there is a phone, prompted by a lens of white suspicion (or criminalized Blackness) which blocks accurate perception that the man is in fact a nervous ten-year old boy who can't find his mother.

I rely on Avery Gordon's (2008) notion of "complex personhood" here, which at the very least is "about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (5).[8] On my view, attributions of complex personhood also understand that people are both powerful and vulnerable. No one is fully self-sufficient nor fully determined, even within systems of domination and subordination that unequally distribute power and vulnerability. We are all more complex than such a binary makes legible, even if differentially so, impacting others through our

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[8] One can see how stereotyping or reducing a person to just one thing (whether the stereotype is apt in some situation or not), is quite straightforwardly a denial of complex personhood. In this way, stereotypes are always in part constituted by affective numbness.

actions and behaviors, and being impacted by others' actions and behaviors in turn.[9] One way

white privilege as unconscious numbness denies personhood then, is by failing to account for

this complexity. In the case of Stan, he denies both others' vulnerability, or the way they are

(historically and presently) impacted by his own (group-based) behavior, and also his own

power, or the way such behavior (historically and presently) impacts others' (group-based)

experiences. In some sense then, the dehumanization of others which occurs at the heart of

numbness and white ignorance can also be a dehumanization of the self, insofar as that self is

reduced to a myth of individualism which denies our complex relational nature. Appreciating

another *on their own terms* includes an appreciation for the ways in which those terms are in part

defined by an (often traumatic) history and present of others, including oneself. In this way,

attributing complex personhood to others is in itself a relational act, resisting toxic and colonial

atomistic conceptions of others and self (as well as the subjectivity of both).[10]

The dehumanization, or denial of complex personhood, which travels through

unconscious habits of numbness and affective ignorance towards nondominant communities

contributes to "insidious trauma." Insidious trauma was a term first used by Maria Root (1992) to

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[9] On Butler's (2006) view, this means we are all mutually vulnerable (or exposed) to each other, although this vulnerability is differently distributed across various social groups.

[10] I need to think more about this, but insofar as exposure to others, and therefore the potential for loss, is built into the concept of complex personhood I'm using, I'm not sure it is subject to the regular critiques of humanism employed by Afro-pessimists. Blackness as "ontological death" would not be constitutively true of the 'human' or 'person' on this view, which would include ontological death as part of its very concept. Of course, this does not discount the empirical facts of how Blackness has been taken up through various colonial humanisms. See especially Wilderson (2020) as he takes up Hartman (1997).

"focus attention of the disavowed traumas experienced by marginalized people" (Westengard 2019, 15). Laura Brown (1991) used the term to resist more traditional ways of thinking about trauma as an event "outside the range of human experience," arguing that the concept of human experience is actually a norm which privileges dominantly identified persons.[11] Rather, "insidious trauma, she claims, is a common experience among marginalized subjects who feel constantly threatened by the prospect of violence" (2019, 15).[12]

In the context of our midnight shoppers, to understand the possibility of my fear as a femme while shopping late at night is to acknowledges the *collective* history of gender violence which makes such possible fear rational, and allows for all of the possible complex experiences I might be having.[13] If you see coyness where there is fear, driven by your own interpretive lens of fetishizing women (the same lens responsible for sexualized violence against women), or if you disregard my affective state completely (perhaps due to your own hurry to make it home to your children), you might, as already noted, perpetuate my fear, and my lack of shopping privilege.

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[11] This is a result of what Foucault (2007) calls "disciplinary power," in which people evaluate and compare themselves and their own experiences according to norms and standards which are considered "objective" in some society. This is related to Mills' (2015) thesis in *Blackness Visible* (2007) in which whiteness is an "objective" norm of personhood against which people of color must fight for (dominant) recognition within white supremacist worlds. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) shows the legal stakes of such practices, in which women of color are rendered illegible within anti-discrimination doctrine that takes for granted "objective" norms of experience which keep analytically separate experiences of racism and sexism. In the context of our discussion, Stan's experience is not a 'normal human experience' then, it is the experience of a privileged, dominantly situated person whose experience aligns with the "objective" norms of our racist and sexist society. In fact, the *majority* of people lack the kind of privilege that renders Stan's experience "normal."

[12] See also Cvetkovich (2003) for a discussion of everyday trauma as it relates to queer trauma.

[13] Perhaps, expanding upon Foucault (2013), we could call this a "*group-based* historical *a priori.*"

But another way of putting it is that you will be a further perpetrator of my insidious trauma, further habituating my own trauma-response through your lack of acknowledgement of my complex personhood outside of your own (affective) understanding, on its own terms, with its own history and ensuing practical logic.

On my view then, one way we exclude complex persons from perceptual, interpretive, and practical considerations on their own terms, is when we are affectively numb; being numb is therefore one way we fail to acknowledge collective trauma and historical violence in our everyday lives. If, as many accounts of trauma posit, trauma responses persists when the trauma remains unacknowledged,[14] then it makes sense that an abundance of racialized habits which fail to acknowledge such histories would co-exist with a flourishing of insidious trauma, or the "small, persistent acts of microaggression combined with *unacknowledged* institutional and systemic violence" (Westengaard 2019, 15-16).[15] Whether this lack of acknowledgement (at both the individual and collective levels) is unconscious or willful (on my view, it's usually some combination of both), it continues the negative feedback loop between group-based habits of

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[14] And this seems to be true individually and collectively. As Brennan (2015) notes: There is a "clinical belief that relief and energetic release comes with the words to say it. Language releases us from the affects…via words that express something occluded and thereby release the energy deployed in this occlusion" (140). At the social level more broadly, consider here the way by which introducing new concepts like 'sexual harassment' (where before "flirting" was the way women understood their mistreatment by men in the workplace) offer pathways for stopping the perpetuation of trauma induced by gaps in appropriate understanding. See Fricker (2007) on 'hermeneutical injustice.'

[15] Westengard (2019) focuses her analysis on queer communities specifically. However, the initial discussion of insidious trauma can be extended to other historically marginalized groups.

*ignor*ance (illuminated for example in Stan's judgment about shopping safety), and group-based habits of trauma-responsiveness.[16]

And so, if we want to distribute the racialized and gendered privilege of bodily and cognitive safety when shopping more equally, attending to affective orientations and habits of numbness will play an essential role. Stan's interactions with others in real time hold potential to further calcify or disrupt current racialized and gendered unconscious habits. Does he move, speak, and gesture in ways which confirm or disarm the trauma-response?[17] How does an understanding of differential shopping privilege impact Stan's ability to acknowledge the complex personhood of other shoppers? How does white ignorance, in contrast, prevent him from acknowledging it (through encouraging dehumanizing numbness, perhaps)? I do not aim to suggest that recognition from dominantly situated persons is the answer to curing racism or other forms of oppression; I will have more to say on this later, but suffice to say that such a view would perpetuate colonial logics of hierarchy which de-center the resistant subjectivities of nondominant groups.[18] However, insofar as unconscious habits of *privilege* are concerned, persons who carry such privilege have affective work to do when it comes to their interactions in

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[16] Failing to acknowledge violence often reduces to a failure to acknowledge aberrations from privileged experiences considered 'normal' despite their exceptional status.
[17] Al-Saji (2015) on 'the phenomenology of hesitation' is of relevance here.
[18] See Vélez (2020).

a diverse social world, a world which makes white-solipsistic habits not only wrong (insofar as the epistemology does not track the ontology), but also grossly harmful.

II. Grieving the Ghosts of Dehumanization

Just because the collective and individual traumas which inform and shape complex personhood as well as our current social orientations towards one another go unacknowledged (by individual, group, or national habits[19]), does not mean they go away. Rather, they live on unseen (or intentionally hidden from the view of dominance), haunting us like the unfinished business of ghosts, hungry for acknowledgement and attention. "Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in every day life" (xvi). In recent years, several theorists have reinvigorated Derridean hauntology,[20] focusing their attention on 'hauntings,' phantoms,' or 'the spectral,' and 'ghostly' nature of how collective trauma shows up in the present. While different scholars focus on the idea in different ways, often homing in on specific forms of marginalization and historical events of subjugation, there are a number of

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[19] Much of the work on hauntings refer to the "nation" as an important unit of analysis. Collective amnesia as a form of social haunting, for example, is often cashed out in terms of how various nations habitually mis-remember their histories. In our increasingly globalized world, "global hauntings" and "global habits" (Sullivan, 94) are of relevance, too (an analysis of how they converge and diverge with the various national habits and hauntings would be especially interesting).

[20] See especially Derrida (2012).

shared characteristics which unify these multiplicitous accounts of social hauntings,

characteristics which include things like "unacknowledged" or "unrecognized," traumas,

"undigested" or "unmetabolized" grief, "intangible" or "ephemeral" affective presences,

"unfinished" or "unresolved" business, "hungry" or "empty" ghosts and phantoms,

"generational" or "ancestral" wounds, and more.[21]

    "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will…into the structure of

feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative

recognition" (Gordon, 8). When we are haunted by something then, there is an (affective)

dissonance with accepted reality. In the case of collective trauma, we have an affective

dissonance with white supremacist, patriarchal, and other realities which historically denied (or

ignored) and continue to deny (or ignore) the complex personhood of others, if not self-

professedly, then through group-based habits of numbness. If we think of numbness as a kind of

"affective ignorance" whereby one remains affectively oblivious to another's complex

personhood, then hauntings offer us a kind of counterevidence by making affectively manifest

realities which disrupt such ignorance; or, the ghosts of trauma make *felt* alternative

epistemologies which demand "transformative recognition" of the humanity of those who have

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[21] See, for ex, Davis (2005), Etkind (2009), Kosmina (2020), Ortega (2019), Gatehouse (2020), Jordan-Zachary (2017), Powell (2004, 2016), Sullivan (2006), Mookherjee (2015), Westengard (2019), Gordon (2008), Prechtel (2015), Cheng (2001), and Horkheimer and Adorno (1987) who believed "we needed some kind of theory of ghosts, or at least a way of both mourning modernity's "wound in civilization" (Gordon (2008) quoting Horkheimer and Adorno (1987), 216).

been systematically dehumanized. In this way, hauntings resist attempts to cover up, disavow, or

leave unacknowledged such violent dehumanization. Crucially, to recognize dehumanization is

also to recognize complex personhood; one can't be de-humanized if one is not human in the

first place.[22] Social hauntings thereby provide an opportunity for reparative acknowledgement, or

the kind of acknowledgement that might disrupt racialized habits of numbness.[23]

Such acknowledgement must move us beyond struggles for (individual) recognition,

which, as Kelly Oliver has persuasively argued (drawing on Fanon (2008)), "are caught up in the

logic of colonialism and oppression that made them necessary in the first place" (Vélez quoting

Oliver, 13).[24] Oliver suggests "witnessing" might offer a viable replacement for recognition that

moves us beyond colonial logics and hierarchies, arguing that those who have undergone

traumatic events desire more than recognition, but desire a witnessing to "horrors beyond

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[22] Modus tollens. This is also related to Oliver's point that "bringing future possibilities to fruition requires locating "seeds of future justice in the past" (Velez quoting Oliver, 26). For, the possibility of recognizing complex personhood now depends on recognizing such personhood was alive and well then, too, or that complex personhood has existed all along.

[23] Gordon thinks about this need for acknowledgement that Haunting points us to as distinctive of its "something-to-be-done" nature (Gordon 2008, xvi). In this way, they demand "responsiveness."

[24] The three lines of critique of both Hegelian and "neo-Hegelian" theories of recognition (in relation to subjectivity) that Oliver develops include: "1) The desire and demand for recognition is a pathology of colonial and oppressive cultures; (2) accounts of subjectivity based in recognition often normalize violence and subjugation as foundational to the process of subject formation; and (3) the processes of recognition work to assimilate rather than sustain difference" (Vélez 2020, 12).

recognition" (Vélez quoting Oliver, 13).[25] In other words, because experiences of trauma exceed

the facts of what happened,[26] acknowledgement of complex personhood

informed by trauma[27] requires an attention to this excess, to affective experience.[28] Emma Vélez

takes up and modifies this idea of witnessing.[29] Drawing on Lugones, "faithful witnessing," says

Vélez, is an active and collaborative activity engaged in the "ghostly matters, or the *heridas*

abiertas (open wounds), of colonialism, one which engages "against common sense" (Lugones

2003, 219). Faithful witnessing requires cultivating and instantiating interpretive skills of sensing

and meaning making "against the grain of power," (sometimes against one's own power) within

a multiplicity of nondominant differences and experiences informed by the enterprise of

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[25] There is also a tradition of witnessing in Black Feminist Thought. Nash (2019, 114), for example, argues that "black feminism's long practice of love-politics centers on two ideas: vulnerability and witnessing." Nash goes onto call this practice one of "empathetic looking" (127), which is related but distinct from Lugonesian faithful witnessing.

[26] See also López (2019) on this point.

[27] On Oliver's view, a real acknowledgement is constituted by 'response-ability,' or the ability to respond to these experiences (Vélez 2020, 22). Witnessing can be healing because, having been degraded by acts of domination which are unresponsive to one's personhood, being witnessed and responded to as a complex person, can be reparative. The view is complicated, however, by the fact that experiences of domination, insofar as they work to destroy one's subjective sense of self, also impact one's ability to bear witness to one's own trauma, creating a paradox of self-witnessing. As such, in aiming to share those experiences, "speaking in tongues" (Hendson 2014, 59) becomes necessary. As someone aiming to witness and 'respond' to these kinds of complex experiences of violence, there will always be a lack of transparency or knowability, another reason why politics of recognition (which can be, on Oliver's view, assimilationist) are not sufficient in this context.

[28] One way the view of witnessing Oliver puts forward is articulated is that it is both a witnessing of "what you can see" (which relies on juridical concepts of witnessing), and also "what you believe by blind faith" (the religious sense of witnessing). See Velez (2020, 19).

[29] Vélez works to overcome the paradox of self-witnessing in Oliver's view, explained above, through her Lugonesian account of "faithful witnessing" (Lugones 2004) which accommodates the "multiplicitous self" (2020, 29).

colonialism in its myriad of forms.[30] In other words, faithful witnessing is open to others'

complex personhood. In thinking about overcoming racialized habits of numbness and privilege

then, faithfully witnessing has the advantage of providing a theoretical framework for

interpreting others (and ourselves) through *collective* (group-based) histories and traumas which

shape (but do not determine), complex individual subjective experiences. Conceptualizing

acknowledgement of complex personhood as a practice of faithful witnessing, rather than an

event of recognition, might also resonate more with the habitual nature of numbness, (insofar as

habits must be re-trained over time).[31] In what follows, I would like to suggest that one way to

support the transformation from habits of numbness towards practices of faithful witnessing is

through grieving the (group-based) traumas which haunt us.

But how does trauma haunt us? By their nature hauntings disorient our *usual* sense of

things which is precisely why they provide fertile ground for learning how to faithfully witness

"against commonsense." Because hauntings have a way of demanding our attending, no matter

our interests or plans, we can't help but have some awareness of their presence, even when

habituated in numbness. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng assures us that "if we are

willing to listen, the history of disarticulated grief is still speaking through the living" (2001,

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[30] Vélez argues we can develop our ability to faithfully witness through at least three practices: critical world-traveling, testimonio, and the decolonial imaginary (Vélez, 31).

[31] The burden of recognition cashed out in terms of faithful witnessing places less of the burden on those who have been marginalized, and more on those who are privileged.

29).[32] For at least one of the ways we are haunted is through trauma's open wounds ("heridas

abiertas"[33]), wounds which perpetuate further trauma. Sometimes these wounds are intangible

(Cheng 2001), or spectral (Mookherjee 2015),[34] but sometimes they are more obvious, making

material that which the metaphor ephemeralizes and illuminating how we are often haunted in

plain sight.[35] Martín Prechtel, in *The Smell of Rain on Dust*, puts forward the thesis that

alcoholism, drug addiction, mental and even physical illnesses can be effects of (insidious)

trauma which haunt society, lurking within nations, communities, and families, whether social

appearances and performances betray these dark realities or not. Prechtel argues that when

acknowledgement of dignity and personhood is lacking, it is human nature to attend to the

ensuing social wound with replacement "remedies" more easily attained.[36] Of course, such

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[32] Cheng (2001) draws on the psychoanalytic distinction between grief and melancholy, whereby the former is constitutive of a healthy response to loss, and the latter an unhealthy response, to argue that racial identity is a melancholic formation, inherently tied to an inability to appropriately grieve the violence and loss of racialization, thereby sustaining it. Contra Freud, Cheng doesn't think there actually is some grief ideal alternative to the melancholic response of racial formation, as that would require an elimination of racial difference that would be as harmful as it would be impractical. However, she does advocate for the possibility of healthier grief responses than current racial politics and social life exemplify, one which better attends to the humanity of all involved. See also Failler (2009) and Muñoz (1999).

[33] See Anzaldúa (1995).

[34] Patricia Williams' (1991, 73) notion of 'spirit murder' and its "numbing pathology" is also of relevance here. This distinction between talking about 'wounds' versus 'spirit' is important for Nash (2018), who seeks redress more through a (juridical) view of how we might protect and "give rights" to spirits (as an act of love), rather than starting from a place of woundedness. This is related to her view about afropessimism's impact in the academy of associating Blackness, and therefore intersectionality and black feminism, with death and loss, rather than life and love (whereby loss is intimately connected with beauty). See footnote 48.

[35] Collective trauma is sometimes only 'ghostly' then to the extent we *willfully* ignore these more obvious social wounds, to the margins of daily living, just barely within sight.

[36] Laura Berlant's (2007) notion of "slow death" is of relevance here.

behaviors only further dehumanizing attitudes, creating a negative feedback loop whereby trauma and its failed recognition only breeds more trauma and failed recognition. It therefore makes perfect sense that we see disproportionate amounts of poverty, homelessness, mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc., among marginalized individuals and groups. What doesn't make sense is that the dominant social explanation and attitude continues to refer to and ontologize sub-personhood, the very source of this trauma. Such an explanation (willfully) ignores one's own complex personhood, or one's (group based) power to aid in harm and healing.

It might seem somewhat obvious that attending to everyone's (complex) personhood is the key to social healing. If all persons were treated as persons worthy of dignity, care, and respect, the world we live in would be much different. What I hope to suggest, however, is less obvious, namely, that *grieving* the dehumanization which has occurred towards ourselves and others, evidenced through hauntings (or "sites of unresolved griefs"[37]), is one way by which we might collectively move towards affective acknowledgment of complex personhood in our daily interactions where before dominant habits have operated to perceive, or more importantly *feel*, sub-persons; or, grief can support a transformation from habits of numbness to practices of

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[37] Vélez specifically examines, drawing from Anzaldúa, the ghostly social figure of *La Llorona,* which is a "symbol of unresolved grief, an ever-present specter in the psyches of Chicanos and Mexicanos" (Vélez 2020 quoting Anzaldúa, 48). I, too, am thinking of social hauntings as sites of unresolved grief.

faithful witnessing.[38] The avoidance of such "grief work," on my view, is in part *constituted* by these patterns of numbness which become, what Prechtel calls, "national habits." These racialized habits of numbness, like trauma-responsive habits, operate *defensively*, but not against the possibility of further physical violence; rather, privileged habits of numbness defend (at least in part) against the unbearable *grief* which would follow from facing the horrific realities of systemic oppression.[39]

By its very nature grief resists numbness, for grief affectively acknowledges that whatever atrocity has occurred did not occur because groups of people were 'inherently subhuman,' and therefore deserving of such treatment, but rather because they were, heartbreakingly, abused and exploited by other groups of people.[40] Judith Butler account of 'ungrievability' is of obvious relevance here, or the idea that some lives, within current regimes of power, are disposable, in part demonstrated by the lack of grief (by some)[41] which follows from their loss. We can see this, for example, in the naming of every American soldier who was

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[38] This reminds me of Frankowski (2015) characterization of sorrow as an "interruption of forgetting." Or Malidoma Somé's words "Grief is the enemy of denial."

[39] It is also a defensiveness, I would presume, against the giving up of privilege made resilient through numbness.

[40] Such a realization can illuminate the reciprocal nature of witnessing. On such a view, when a full realization of another's dehumanization takes place, it is accompanied by a realization of the way by which dominant groups have violated their *own* humanity, too. "We will have to learn to talk to and listen to ghosts, rather than banish them, as the precondition for establishing…*humanistic* knowledge" (Derrida 2012, 23).

[41] The loved ones of those who passed inevitably grieved, so when we say "ungrievability," we must be explicit that whiteness is being centered, so as to not assume whiteness by default in a way that would perpetuate the very hierarchy within dominant systems of meaning the concept is meant to disrupt.

killed in Iraq coupled with the namelessness of the "thousands" of Iraqi children murdered.[42] But

if loss of life can ensue without consequence or real meaning within some political system, why

would that system work to maintain those lives at all? Such questions take on an even graver

tone when thinking about the global COVID-19 pandemic. How many and whose deaths are

rendered disposable when weighing decisions about re-opening the economy? Or, who must die

so the economy can live? Just as everyday habits of numbness work to perpetuate insidious

trauma on the level of individual interaction, these habits of numbness at the level of media and

political responsiveness work to perpetuate more physical or blatant forms of violence and

trauma, which will, in turn, give rise to more insidious trauma if left ungrieved.[43]

For example, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* Butler considers

the national response to the 9/11/2001 attack on the World Trade Center, a response that bears

resemblance to countless other examples of war origin stories, whereby some violence exposes

an "unbearable vulnerability…that we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are

subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief" (XI-XII). Upon

reflecting on the injury, we might be able to understand more fully, through our grief, the

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[42] I'm reminded here of the "hypervisibility" of affective numbness whereby too much exposure to death desensitizes one to it (Rogers 2021b). A contemporary example of resistance to such "ungrievability" is occurring via efforts to recover the names of the hundreds of native children being discovered in Canadian school burial grounds.
[43] See Vélez (2020, 12) for more on her take on Oliver regarding the relationship between faithful witnessing and response-ability.

experience of other vulnerable nations, and use that understanding as a basis for generating a more global political community.[44] In this way, "vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability."[45] But often, driven by habits of numbness, grief is bypassed, and violence is used to justify further violence, generating more trauma, more hauntings, more sites of unresolved grief. With such little political patience, so quick to de(hu)monize the attacker, grief has little chance of taking hold in a way that might support reparative practices of witnessing which acknowledge each other's complex personhood. I can still remember how quickly we habituated ourselves in newly racialized ways of navigating airport security post 9/11. And I remember, two years after the attack, my sixteen-year-old Muslim-American friend being searched by airport security as we made our way home from an orchestra trip. I remember them looking through the photos on his phone, some of them private, of his family, his girlfriend. They were laughing, (willfully?) oblivious to Shann's experience. I'll never forget his face of worry, and even more vividly, his face of shame. It haunted me for years to come.

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[44] Butler (2004), like Cheng (2001), brings the idea of haunting into subjectivity itself, arguing that insofar as we constitutively exclude others from our ideas of self, others "haunt" us by revealing our vulnerability through our exposure to them. On her view "violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies outside ourselves and for one another" (27). Just as on Prechtel's view, Butler argues that restructuring our grief sensibilities might allow us to counter this dehumanization, cashed out on her view in terms of an affective recognition of our mutual and natural vulnerability to one another. There is a connection to be here, too, with Buddhist frameworks that take the capacity to suffer as inherently connective, and as the basis for Buddhist ethics.

[45] Nash (2018, 117) takes up this point in putting forward a "love-politics" that is based on the recognition of mutual vulnerability. In Nash (2019), we see how such vulnerability might be taken up within academic writing. In the piece, loss, when armed with a recognition of shared vulnerability, becomes a source for "writing black beauty."

On my view, grief allows us to "metabolize," in our *bodies*, the unbearable *facts* of others' dehumanization, and therefore, of others' personhood.[46] Having "digested" this more accurate, albeit more devastating, reality, we can better take responsibility for that reality, perhaps by developing skills of faithful witnessing. Crucially, such responsibility does not mean that, by necessity, violence will never be an appropriate response. But, it does mean that if and when chosen as a course of action, it will be chosen from a place of *knowledge* regarding the complex personhood of others, rather than as a reactive habitual response to an (affective) ignorance about such personhood. This is important. For armed (affectively) with the sober truth about how violence dehumanizes, choices towards violence are of a different nature. While I may have to choose a violent course of action to defend my own or others' humanity against the dangerous dehumanizing threats of others, I will not be smug about it. My affective knowledge of others' complex personhood will mean I grieve the predicament I'm in and will work to minimize any violent actions I must take. Choosing violence as a means for dehumanization itself is therefore not an option when we are affectively attuned to a shared humanity through practices of faithful witnessing, achieved in part through grief.[47] But it is precisely this kind of

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[46] Drawing on something like Derrida's "eating well," the worry might arise that such a view of "digestion" looks like "swallowing the other." Incorporating the other, however, can just be another way of bypassing acknowledgement of difference. I need to think more about this, but my sense is there is a distinction to be made here between digesting the *facts* of group-based trauma and digesting or incorporating the Other. Surely others are not reducible to their experiences of trauma. I thank Carmen De Schryver for raising this concern.

[47] On this point, I am reminded of Fanon's (2004) view about the rehabilitative role of violence against white colonialism. I am also reminded of the view on violence put forward in the *Bhagavad Gita*, namely, that sometimes

motive which often drives wars and violence within resilient systems of domination and subordination, as violence becomes necessary for upholding systems of power which privilege some lives over others, numbness being these system's greatest weapon.

But if this is right, then it becomes clear why patriarchal norms of toxic masculinity, whereby grief is considered 'un-masculine' and as something to be overcome, work to perpetuate systems of oppression which need affective acknowledgement to be resisted and transformed into systems of greater equality and reciprocity where faithful witnessing can thrive (systems which are, as it happens, also *epistemically* superior). Hauntings provide sites for reparative acknowledgement, or for the development of faithful witnessing, through offering opportunities to grieve. Rather than turning away from trauma, only to react to it unconsciously through habits of group-based numbness, grieving the trauma hauntings reveal might allow for an integration of the horror of group-based violence into our understandings of self and others as complex persons, which then might transform our everyday (affective) *habits* into *practices* of faithful witnessing which honor such personhood.

I want to be clear that I can imagine other pathways than grief towards gaining affective knowledge of complex personhood,[48] and would, importantly, never want to reduce the humanity

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violence is inevitable, but there is a distinction to be made between violence for the sake of God or humanity (holy wars), and violence used against God and humanity. See Mascaró (2003).

[48] Irigaray (1993), for example, theorizes wonder as an affect that can, as opposed to loss, ground our ethical relationship with different others.

of those who have been dehumanized to their experiences of loss.[49] However, while loss may not

be constitutive of black subjectivity (in the way some afro-pessimists claim),[50] it might be that

loss *is* constitutive of colonialism, and that in faithfully witnessing others, we are appreciating

that fact, having metabolized the various horrors of the colonial project through grieving. And

so, witnessing moves us beyond recognition of individuals to a witnessing of shared histories,

and while its generalizable insofar as we can all be witnesses to the horrors of a system we are all

a part of, faithful witnessing as a social practice is keenly sensitive to the differences in

vulnerability, power, and histories, within that larger shared history.

> When it comes to the future of the race question, to borrow Faulker's words, the past is
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> not dead; it is not even past. Rather than prescribing how we as a nation might go about
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> "getting over" that history, it is useful to ask what it means for social, politics, and
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> subjective beings to *grieve*. (Cheng)

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[49] Nash (2019) notes "If Afropessimism is a tradition that has centered the impossibility of the black human, it is necessarily in tension with a longer black feminist tradition that has centered survival, wellness, care, friendship, and intimacy as strategies of safeguarding black women's bodies and fundamental humanity" (2019, 105). On her view, which I share, loss can be inherently connected with beauty (as opposed to only death).

[50] See Wilderson (2020) as he takes up Hartman's (1997) concept of "ontological death" as being constitutive of black subjectivity.

III. Reparative Storytelling

Sullivan, in her account of how we can resist unconscious habits of racial privileges, argues that *indirect* approaches work best, given the way unconscious habits of privilege attempt to thwart their conscious recognition and transformation. Though she focuses primarily on how to resist through a change in environment, she agrees that "Literature, art, and film…can be particularly useful to critical race theory because their images, tones, and textures often perform subtle emotional work that richly engages the nonreflective aspects of white privilege" (2006, 1). Another way of putting it is that art has the capacity to work on our "racialized commonsense" (Shotwell).[51] I examine here specifically the way storytelling, broadly understood, can do so through grief work. For one powerful way trauma haunts us is through its (ghost) stories. And storytelling is perhaps one of the most powerful ways complex personhood asserts itself against conditions of dehumanization. It makes sense then, that most theorists working on social hauntings do so through an examination of storytelling within literature, film, and other works of art.[52] As we've noted, the horror of violence is often "unspeakable" or even "unthinkable,"

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[51] See Al-Saji's (2014) 'phenomenology of hesitation' for a Fanonian inspired account of how we might interrupt racialized commonsense through art as a space for critical hesitation and the regeneration of racialized habits.
[52] There is an abundance of attention in almost all of the literature to Toni Morrison's (1989) *Beloved*, and Ralph Ellison's 2016) *Invisible Man,* among an array of other novels. Cheng (2001) also focuses on the representation of Asians-Americans in cinema, Westengard (2019) on the representation of queerness in gothic art, and Gordon (2008) and Ortega (2019a) on the role of the photograph, which, as Sontag (2001) notes, can "haunt" us by establishing evidence of atrocities (atrocities which are willfully ignored).

exceeding our ability to conceptualize it fully without affective engagement, an engagement storytelling can offer us.[53] In resisting privileged habits of numbness by grieving collective trauma then,[54] engaging with storytelling might be a good place to start.

This is a related but distinct point from claims made by Vélez' (2020) and Nash (2018). Vélez claim that *testimonio* cultivates skills of faithful witnessing, as testimonio concerns the practice of writing first-hand accounts of trauma for revelatory purposes, while Nash writes about the resistant power of forms like "memoir, narrative, autobiography, and "alchemical" (drawing from Willliams 1991) writing that makes visible (and palpable) black women's embodied experiences" (119). I am taking storytelling to encompass all of these forms of writing and more, as something that can include non-literary and even fictitious elements. Furthermore, I am concerned in this section with the reparative potential of storytelling from the perspective of a listener or reader more than from the perspective of the writer or teller. However, I am fully on board with the related but distinct claims that Vélez and Nash make, too.

On my view, storytelling can provide contexts for reparative *grief* towards developing social practices of faithful witnesses in at least two ways. First, storytelling can be a means by which affects are intentionally, rather than unconsciously, transmitted. Second, such stories can be a practical context to engage collective trauma *indirectly*, so as to 1. decrease the possibility

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[53] For more on the significance of this point, see Cvetkovich (2003)'s work on the "archive of feelings."
[54] This includes experiences of insidious trauma.

of activating defensive habits which arise when our political and social interests are engaged in real-time (and which block humanizing affective content from one's experience as a result), and 2. foster grief work within more appropriate contexts than our daily interactions afford. These claims are related, but let's explore each in turn.

First, in "What is Art?," Tolstoy gives an account of art whereby its purpose, as a human activity, is for the artist "consciously, by means of certain external signs, to hand on to others feelings he has lived through."[55] On the view, art should primarily be seen as a form of communication, with the aim being to transmit "the emotions which originally inspired the artist to create his or her work..." What makes a work of art 'art,' according to Tolstoy, is its ability to fulfill this aim, determined by its degree of 'infectiousness.'[56] There is a connection to be made, therefore, between the kind of affective transactions we experience in our daily social

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[55] Though I am partial to expressionist theories of art like Tolsoy's in thinking about what art I find most powerful or socially productive for our current purposes, I align myself with Weitz' (1956) thesis overall, who argues that art cannot be defined, given that what makes art 'art,' is its infinitely open status, which by necessity exceeds definition.

[56] This degree of infectiousness is established by three criteria, namely, the individuality of the feeling transmitted, the clarity with which it is conveyed, and the sincerity of the artist. The most important of these criteria, however, is the sincerity of the artist, or his or her "inner need for expression," determined by how deeply he or she feels the emotion him or herself. For, the more sincere the artist, the more he or she will be "impel(ed)… to find clear expression for the feeling which he (or she) wishes to transmit." Of course, there is no sure way to make sure the affect being transmitted is replicated between artist and audience due to the variety of mental content that goes into evaluating our affective experiences (Brennan 2015, 7). However (and this will come up again in the next section), the point here is that affective contagion is more likely to be successful in contexts like storytelling (as versus daily interactions) where 1. The transmission is intentional on the part of one person (the artist), rather than messy and unconscious and 2. The receptive capacities of the listener/reader are more open (the viewer), than defensive.

interactions, and infectious art. While the former are often characterized as unconscious and messy, the latter can provide a context whereby more intentional affective transmissions occur.

Many folks who have experienced trauma and want to communicate the horror of those experiences rely on the infectiousness of art. In the context of the academy, it should not be surprising then that those working on issues of oppression from non-dominant social positionings often rely on storytelling as means for their knowledge production.[57] As Jennifer Nash (2019) beautifully puts it, "the form of theory matters and…certain forms might be necessary to get us closer to the objects we wish to explore and understand" (104). To communicate what I know about homophobia, sexism, and classism, for example, requires a turn to my affective experience of these systems, and I can communicate that affective experience intentionally, through using storytelling alongside my scholarship. It should also not be surprising then that institutions and disciplines which unconsciously and willfully aim to uphold racial and other forms of group-based privilege may minimize the importance of storytelling, considering it "less credible" than other forms of "more rigorous" methodologies, or "subversive," or, in extreme cases, "dangerous."[58] For insofar as art more generally, and storytelling specifically, has the capacity to

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[57] Gloria Anzaldúa developed the relevant concept of "autohistoria-teoría," or a form of self-writing that connects self-knowledge with structural ignorance, based in the idea that writing about one's own experiences can, as Andrea Pitts (2016) puts it, "hail others to critically interrogate their own identities" (2016). It is a form of self-writing that combines autobiography with feminist theory. Many decolonial feminists working in Black and Latina feminisms employ autohistoria-teoria in their work. See Anzaldúa & Moraga (1981), Lorde (2012), Williams (1991), Nash (2019), Pitts, Ortega, and Medina (2020), del Alba Acevedo (2001), and many others, for example.
[58] Brittney Cooper calls this a "culture of justification."

affectively attune us to the horror and grief of racist and gendered social structures (through intentional affective infection) it has the capacity to undue the systems of meaning which uphold those structures. Choosing to engage with the storytelling and artistic components of scholars working on oppression is therefore not a neutral decision, morally or epistemically. Combatting group-based privilege and its ensuing ignorance requires affective engagement with the horror and grief of dehumanization that our current social structures continue to foster. Storytelling offers one pathway for the communication of such affective knowledge to occur.

An objection arises: couldn't one be intentionally manipulative in the transmission of affect, causing folks like Plato to wonder whether art should be permitted in the ideal society at all?[59] For one could just as easily, and often does, perpetuate *dehumanizing* affective and conceptual content via storytelling. I'll admit that this is a fair warning given the kind of propaganda and subliminal affective messaging that pervades our media landscape in service of racism, sexism, etc.[60] However, I offer two responses: First, such an objection does not discount the alternative possibility that one could intentionally transmit humanizing affects, concepts, and words within the context of storytelling, and so the objection concedes that such a context is powerful for impacting and re-structuring our affective sensibilities (the primary point I want to make in putting it forward as a context for combatting unconscious habits of racial privilege and

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[59] See Book X of Plato's *The Republic* (Annas 1981).
[60] See Du Bois (1926) view, for example, on art as propaganda.

numbness). In other words, my claim appears to be true even if the intentions of the artist may come under further scrutiny to determine contexts in which affective transmission is reparative rather than manipulative.[61]

My second line of reply to the concern addresses this further worry about manipulation. I do think grief carries with it uniquely healing properties. It seems to me that as such, it is a harder affect to mobilize for nefarious ends through storytelling in the way, say, hate, pleasure, or joy might be (just think here of how often contagious hate or joy is used manipulatively through stories told by cults or religious groups). Furthermore, I'm not sure that cases which might at first appear to be harmful instances of grief transmission through storytelling, are, in fact, harmful.

Let's consider the grief of losing one's gun rights, or a way of life, or one's sense of belongingness within a diversifying community. While I don't think transmission of such grief would have a positive impact full stop, I do think it could be helpful for disrupting habits of *privilege*. Let's return to Stan to think about this more closely. Stan has enjoyed a certain amount of racial and gender privilege and comfort which he has been ignorant of. Let's say he does a bunch of anti-oppression work and begins to overcome some of his group-based ignorance. This importantly might mean that to make others' shopping experience more comfortable, his

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[61] Contra Tolstoy, Guy Sircello (1995) argues that the artist's actual feelings are irrelevant to the work's expressive qualities, making the manipulation worry come into greater focus.

shopping experience may need to become less so. This is not because he is less safe physically

speaking, but rather because attending to the possible experiences of others requires less

obliviousness, and in general, more patience than many folks like Stan have had to cultivate.[62]

Compared to the "bliss" of ignorance, these behavioral changes may lead Stan to feel exhausted

after returning from the store, and very upset about the state of the world. In other words, there

may be a real sense of loss for Stan in terms of easeful living as he cultivates practices of faithful

witnessing. While at first it might be easy to dismiss the idea affective knowledge of *privileged*

loss is relevant to the collective project of social healing, I am not sure this is the case. It seems

to me that Stan's mourning of such a loss could serve to deepen his understanding of the

experiences of others who have lost the ability to feel comfortable and at ease due to institutional

racism, sexism, etc. Losing one's psychic shopping privilege or gun rights is of course not the

same as failing to have *physical* shopping privilege or lacking *civil* rights, but these losses are not

entirely disconnected either. It might be that processing and conveying his grief (intentionally

transmitting his affective experience of loss through storytelling, perhaps) allows space for

"other Stan's" to process and understand their own grief and complex personhood, something

they usually defend against through habits of privileged numbness. Opening to such feelings of

grief, no matter how trivial they might be, might be a first step towards opening to the grief

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[62] This is, of course, not true for people of color or other nondominant groups who have had to cater to white comfort for survival.

needed for faithfully witnessing others, as well as towards disrupting unconscious habits of

privilege that defend against such feelings.[63]

I do not mean to suggest that there are no examples of transmitting grief through

storytelling which can be harmful to the project of social justice, but it seems to me such

examples are less obvious than is the case for other affects.[64] As such, it might be that

storytelling as a form of contagious art, insofar as it concerns grief and loss, is a safer context for

combatting racial privilege than other forms of affective transmission through storytelling.

Putting all these remarks about Stan's loss aside, remember also that I am concerned primarily

with using storytelling to address *social hauntings*. Insofar as losses of privilege are not, in fact,

social hauntings, these examples need not touch on my central claim at all.

Next, the *indirect* approach storytelling offers us for gaining affective knowledge through

grief is practical for at least two reasons.[65] First, as Sullivan points out, racialized habits thwart

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[63] This also raises Spillers (1984) point regarding the affective transformations that art can produce in changing people' sensibilities as they engage intimately and personally within their own communities. It might be that in this case, Stan's storytelling is best utilized for transformative ends in the intimacy of his own community.

[64] See Gould (2009) and Brown (2018) for discussions about how we might mobilize pleasure for political aims. Similarly see Cooper (2018) and Lorde (1981) for discussions about mobilizing anger for political purposes. While these books offer powerful and convincing analyses, it is easy to imagine those same affects being mobilized for harmful political purposes, too. 'Grief activism' seems less obviously co-optable in the same way. Other who have written on grief activism loosely construed include Ortega (2019b), Frankowski (2015), Muñoz (1999) and Cheng (2000). However, while many of these texts focus on affects experienced by persons resisting conditions of oppression, my own view considers the affective dispositions of those who are dominantly positioned. Many of us are a combination of both.

[65] Sullivan notes that "given unconscious habit's resistance to its detection, its transformation must be approached indirectly" (2006, 92). Although she focuses on a change in environment, such a move can be impractical for many.

attempts at modification. And this will especially be true when survival is on the line (psychic as well as physical). Stories therefore seem to be a less threatening context than daily social living for the possibility of suspending habits. I loosely draw on Kantian disinterestedness here, as it is taken up by George Dickie's (1964) re-visiting of the theme in aesthetics literature. According to the view, dis-interestedness is really about *attention*, or about the ability to attend to an aesthetic object outside of distractions which often derive from one's own interests.[66] If the Kantian language is distracting, the term 'open' can also do, the point being just that one should and often does approach art with a kind of openness that makes self-interest of less relevance; or, one approaches aesthetic experiences *for their own sake*. This is a useful way of thinking for our purposes since it is precisely self-interested (dominant interpretive) affects which get in the way of humanizing perceptions of others, or perceptions of complex others *on their own terms*.[67]

So while a dominantly positioned person may be less inclined to listen to me rant about feminism, his numbness in full swing as he suggests that my obsession with PC language is "obnoxious and over the top," he may be more inclined to emotionally engage with the horror of sexual assault which informs such language if it is presented indirectly, through stories in literature or on screen. Less socially guarded, these aesthetic contexts can offer ways to engage

Given her own commitment to pragmatism, she may be amenable to engaging storytelling as an alternative pathway for repair.
[66] Bullough (1912) and Bell (1969) for an evolution of the discussion which leads to Dickie's view.
[67] See Lovibond (2010) for a discussion of disinterestedness towards others as it relates to sexual interest.

with resistant ideas in a more affectively open way then, and it is only within such openness that

a re-training of affective sensibilities through grief is made possible (as one's perception is less

likely to be bulldozed by ways of thinking and feeling which constitute habits of numbness).[68]

But learning how to grieve through art is practical in another way, too. Feeling my heart

break when I see a person lacking shelter and food due to horrific social conditions might be

unrealistic on two counts; first, given the demands of my own day, such an intense emotional

experience might be less threatening and impractical in the context of engaging with stories. Just

as artists can be more intentional with their affective contagion in the context of art and

storytelling, it seems too that those who engage with stories can be more intentional with their

affective receptivity (than in social interactions). Second, giving someone who is starving money

is certainly better than giving them tears, which could be a further denial of their complex

personhood even if tears served to motivate the giving.[69] And so while integrating the trauma of

homelessness into my evaluative framework of the world through grief can inform reparative

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[68] Many people who are looking to heal from their trauma find the creation of art and storytelling, in addition to engagement with the art and storytelling of others, to be helpful practices for processing and expressing trauma. Practices of testimonio, autohistoria-teoria, and critical memoir embrace such an idea. For remember that numbness can be self-reflexive, where the pain of some event is so overwhelming that one develops habits of numbness to avoid feelings that might be impractical and debilitating to one's daily life. Of course, these habits of numbness are impractical in their own way, and eventually the confrontation of loss and pain that trauma caused is necessary for developing habits that are intentional rather than reactionary. The problem with inhabiting a world of insidious trauma, however, is that trauma-responsive habits remained incentivized. See also Talwar (2019) for an examination of the role art therapy can play for social justice.

[69] See Hoagland (2007).

action, it might be better to do such "grief work" in the confines of experiences outside of direct social interaction, such as through storytelling. And this is related to the idea that grieving the experiences of individuals in real time seems to do different work than grieving group-based collective trauma through engagement with stories. For, the practice of faithful witnessing attributes complex personhood to different others, holding interpretive space for vulnerability and power to coexist, as well as interpretive space for an understanding that people's subjectivities are informed by a variety of historical and group-based traumas that exceed conceptualization. In other words, there is an appreciation for an inherent lack of transparency and humility in faithful witnessing. While storytelling can certainly leave room for interpretive mystery, insofar as grief is intentionally transmitted within such stories so that we can gain affective knowledge, these aesthetic experiences might be further determined than our daily interactions of faithful witnessing should be. Transforming habits of numbness towards practices of faithful witnessing is more about what we do with affective knowledge of loss intentionally transmitted through art after the fact of grieving, rather than about gaining such knowledge through grief within social interactions themselves.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope to have offered some insight into the habitual affective dimension of group-based advantage and oppression, especially insofar as numbness is concerned. I hope to also have provided some food for thought regarding why grieving the horror of group-based histories of trauma might help transform habitual numbness into practices of faithful witnessing. For, infectious art which transmits group-based experiences of grief and loss through storytelling can

affectively attune us to the complex personhood revealed by social hauntings. Such an affective experience might then result in the discovery of the complexity and richness of our own personhood, too.

> We need a culture of passionately gradual people who can hear, give, and truly feel the deep weeping grief inside the absurd platform of hate caused by the writhing of human pain. Instead of compulsively defusing the situation, these people would know to find and digest the grief through the whole bigger "story" of life, knowing it is hard in our frustration not to always want to fight against "something" to make it all right. How relaxing it would be if there really just was a bunch of bad guys who you had only to depose to make the world all fixed up. But that's too simple and the source of even more loss, because in the instance of trying to cure it all by force you plant the next round of the sickness of revenge. So what do you do?
> Get courageous. Become a person. Make beauty out of grief. Become real people… make your hate into an art of love beyond your wants, and stop sending undigested grief in the form of sorrow frozen into hate into the arms of the future. Hand over the world with some modicum of the possibility for peace. (Prechtel 2015, 85)

CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 5: Commissioned artwork, 'NOA,' by Rebecca Baruc

to release my unconscious understanding of an emotional legacy so deeply silent and encoded in

symbol, I need to call upon metaphor and meter

-Lillian Moats (Legacy of Shadows)

NOA

I. Introduction

This dissertation has explored issues of affective numbness as it relates to epistemologies of ignorance. We have looked at the relationship between numbness and the dehumanization of others in the context of false confessions and the #metoo movement, how numbness continues to show up in philosophical traditions like contract theory, and how it is habituated in our daily interactions with others. We have also touched on the value of storytelling, as a primary methodological insight and strategy of decolonial feminists, for combatting such numbness and its ensuing ignorance (in part through "grief work"). My aim in this conclusion is to employ such methodological interventions more directly in my own scholarship, embodying the theoretical commitments of the previous chapters.

While I did not touch as much on the power of creating art as I did on the power of engaging art in previous chapters, NOA has given me an appreciation for the potential that collaborative art making holds for implementing key tools developed by decolonial feminists for the formation of decolonial subjectivities and consciousness. The film elaborates and expresses,

in both process and product, ideas such as Anzaldúa's "autohistoria,"[1] Butler's "relational knowing,"[2] Lugones' "complex communication" and "world-traveling,"[3] Lorde's "poetry as illumination,"[4] and more, some of which I will expand upon dialogically in section III.

One idea in particular, however, has been an unspoken thread throughout the entirety of the dissertation, and has also been a thread that brings together all of your brilliant work in a way that binds this committee/community in a shared pursuit. This idea concerns an interest in, what I'll call, "the principle of harmonizing complexity," or the idea that we should be striving to instantiate, in a myriad of ways, a kind of harmony amidst complexity, not through an assimilative "melting pot" of sorts, but through something more like yogic "bandhas," or those loci of power in the body generated through a delicate balance of tensions and frictions which pull in infinite directions. This kind of power generated from harmonizing complexity is something that I endeavor to cultivate in both my written and creative work, and the theme comes up in various ways that have been inspiring to me in all of your work, too. I'll highlight just a few.

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[1] Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza." (1987).

[2] Butler, Judith. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. verso, 2006.

[3] Lugones, María. *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

[4] Lorde, Audre. "The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power." *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (1993): 339-43.

Rachel takes up the idea through an interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* which explains 1. how we comprehend order among abundant diversity in empirical investigation and 2. How we *sense* such multiplicitous order within ourselves through the imaginative activity of aesthetic experience. The guiding principle for both is an undetermined yet purposeful future-directedness which guides and unifies human inquiry and experience.[5] Charles (also informed by Kant's regulative principles), takes up the idea in the political realm when he argues against white-washed "universalisms" which like to pretend racial differences don't exist, towards the idea of a "rainbow universalism," or a universalism which embraces racial and ethnic difference as a basis for the emergence of a new humanism. Such a humanism will only emerge by going "through race" (rather than "around race") which will require working through the kind of conflicts and "epistemic friction" that José's work draws our attention to.[6] José draws out the epistemic dimension of Charles social and political claims then, putting forward a view of the "kaleidoscopic social imagination," in which the resistance and friction between conflicting viewpoints are seen as generative rather than limiting for the creation of pluralistic communities.[7] Finally, Jen's work aims to harmonize complexity through our affective investments in each other. Her invitation towards black-feminist love politics imagines the

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[5] Zuckert, Rachel. *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the 'Critique of Judgment'.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[6] Mills, Charles W. *Blackness visible.* Cornell University Press, 2015: 92-93.

[7] Medina, José. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and the social imagination.* Oxford University Press, 2013.

possibility for an ethics of care (among a multiplicity of difference both within and outside of the identity category 'Black women') to replace proprietary relationships (often cashed out through a presumed identity politics) as a unifying principle of "intersectionality."[8]

I know these kinds of loose associations are not typically smiled upon within "rigorous, serious" scholarship, but they are connections which have inspired even the most "rigorous, serious" aspects of my own work, especially insofar as I try and have conversations across a diversity of subfields like social epistemology, decolonial feminisms, aesthetics, and affect theory. But perhaps even more so as I produced NOA, a highly collaborative artistic endeavor, one which aims to offer a pleasurable and un-determined aesthetic experience, generative friction towards political aims (both between collaborators, and between collaborators and viewers), multiple viewpoints to get a kaleidoscopic understanding of grief, and a community of artists and viewers grounded in loving vulnerability and the witnessing of difference. While the relationship between affective numbness and epistemic resilience has been the unifying them theoretically of the dissertation then, the harmonizing complexity principle has been the unifying theme practically speaking, or the dissertation's "meta-principle."

To work with the push and pull of tensions and differences as something which can be harmonizing, and even pleasurable, within a political moment where difference is manifesting

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[8] Nash, Jennifer C. *Black feminism reimagined*. Duke University Press, 2018.

itself so painfully, has been a refuge for me. This committee, in its friendly interdisciplinarity, has itself instantiated other possibilities for how difference might be treated, and I thank you each for the ways your scholarship and friendship has inspired my work; I hope you feel some of these resonances with each other, too.

II. The Music Film

Funded by a grant from Northwestern's Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts, 'NOA: a music film' functions as the primary content for the concluding chapter of this dissertation. It is a highly collaborative project which includes movement, poetry, music, and improvisation. The film weaves together nine original songs, forming a non-linear story that strives to understand how we can embrace our grief and losses for purposes of inner and outer transformation in a modern context. The film features seven on-screen independent Chicago-based artists, each of whom brings their own perspectives and unique knowledge to this multidisciplinary exploration of our emotional lives. With each musical turn, the film introduces the viewer to a new character, drawing on different modes of creative expression as a vessel for grief and a source of healing. This film brings viewers into an experience of deep feeling, infecting them with the same kind of emotional bravery exhibited in its storytelling.

Watch now:

https://noamusicfilm.com/watch/

closed captioning available

III. An Interview with Emmalon Davis

I have decided to articulate the ideas and the intellectual trajectory leading to NOA in the form of an interview, through a conversation with Emmalon Davis, instead of formulating it in a more traditional, univocal form (in the sense of "in a single voice"). I feel this multivocal, dialogical conversation better captures the collaborative essence at the core of NOA.

Emmalon, currently an Assistant Professor of in the Philosophy Department at the University of Michigan, has been my colleague and good friend since our time in IU's graduate program. We took a feminist philosophy course together, and I think I can speak for both of us when I say that reading Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Ethics and the Power of Knowing,*[9] influenced our philosophical work for years to come. Emmalon has published on issues of "epistemic appropriation"[10] (which you will remember from Chapter One), "credibility excess,"[11] "content-based testimonial injustice"[12] and other themes in social epistemology as they intersect with critical race theory. Her newest project engages problems of "novelty" within

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[9] Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing.* Oxford University Press, 2007.
[10] Davis, Emmalon. "On epistemic appropriation." *Ethics* 128, no. 4 (2018): 702-727.
[11] Davis, Emmalon. "Typecasts, tokens, and spokespersons: A case for credibility excess as testimonial injustice." *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 485-501.
[12] Davis, Emmalon. "A Tale of Two Injustices." *Applied Epistemology* (2021): 215.

philosophical discourse. Both of us use our scholarship to think about how we might make the discipline of philosophy more hospitable to women, people of color, LGBTQIA folks, folks struggling with mental wellness, and other marginalized groups in the discipline. Our conversations with one another at conferences, on the phone, and through memes, inform this work, and have been a touchstone of my time in graduate school. I cannot think of a better way to finish this period of my career than a conversation with this brilliant scholar and friend about NOA, and I am grateful for her time and engagement, as always.

Emmalon: Thank you so much for sharing your film with me. I am appreciative to have experienced this piece of art, and am also appreciative for its bridge-building work with decolonial feminisms, especially as it relates to the issue of philosophical method. While there are many themes and motifs that came up for me as relevant when watching NOA, I want to first focus first on personal narrative. Can you say more about the role personal narratives are playing in this work, both your own and those of your collaborators?

Taylor: To me, telling your story means putting yourself in a position to be seen, and exposing yourself in such a way that you can feel connected to others because who you are is, hopefully, being witnessed with a kind of open attention. We know the process has the potential of being harmful, which is why it's risky. I used to think telling your story - and maybe it's because I'm a twin who was often competing with my "ahead of his age" (awesome) brother for attention- was about feeling special or being special. But what I've realized over the years, and especially in the midst of this project, is that the stories that are the most deeply gripping are the ones which connect to something true in us all, but which are only expressible through a full embodiment of unique and particular selves. It is about being special. But all of us are special.

Theoretically, I am playing around with something that Gloria Anzaldúa calls "autohistoria-teoría," which is a form of self-writing that connects self-knowledge with structural ignorance, or the idea that writing about one's own experiences can, as Andrea Pitts puts it, "hail others to critically interrogate their own identities."[13] As such, self-writing shows the relational nature of self-knowledge, and requires both affirmation of one's experience, but also resistance to the aspects of one's experiences that get in the way of such affirmation. While NOA is not a written work exactly, music has always been the way I tell my story. The lyrics were all written from my own experience of coming out as a lesbian after ending a long-term relationship with my best friend, and the empowerment and heartbreak that accompanied these initial years of owning my sexual and relationship preferences out loud, to a family and internal self which are both culturally steeped in a southern homophobic Catholic tradition.

The process of making this work was indeed a process of overcoming the kind of self-ignorance that had resulted from repressing so many important parts of myself. But it was also a process of acknowledging the interconnection of my own experience with others. Through letting others interpret my lyrics with their own stories, movements, visuals, and other creative expressions, I hoped to create a collaborative atmosphere that honored the relationship between

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[13] Pitts, Andrea J. "Gloria E. Anzaldúa's Autohistoria□teoría as an epistemology of self□ knowledge/ignorance." *Hypatia* 31, no. 2 (2016): 352-369.

knowing ourselves and knowing others. I learned so much more about my own process and self through witnessing and listening to the unique stories of my collaborators.

Emmalon: As a scholar deeply influenced by Anzaldúa's work, María Lugones puts forward similar ideas about the relationship between knowing ourselves and knowing others in her concept of "world-traveling." You used a Lugones quote at the beginning of the film: "only when we have traveled to each other's worlds, are we fully [persons] to one another." Can you say more about how the idea of "world-traveling" is showing up in the music film?

Taylor: You will notice that there are both doors and mirrors used throughout the film. Almost all the videos end with one of our characters walking through a door or seeing themselves in a mirror. What I hoped to capture with these metaphors is precisely this idea of the interdependence between knowing ourselves and knowing others. Another Lugones quote I love which gets at this idea is: "Without knowing the other's "world," one does not know the other, and without knowing the other one is really alone in the other's presence because the other is only dimly present to one." I find this to be such a beautiful way of articulating something like a politics of witnessing which provides a theoretical framework for thinking about the importance and relationality of seeing and being seen, amidst the impossibility of full transparency. In NOA,

both the mirrors and doorways are portals to new worlds inside or outside ourselves,[14] which are achieved through productive friction generated by attempting to honor and see ourselves and others against the "conditions of unseeing" our world often provides. What gets in the way of our mirrors and doorways if not the eyes of the world looking at us with shame and judgment? How does clearing our pathways towards each other also make our own reflections clearer, and vice versa?

NOA is very much a journey of world-traveling, both for the characters in the film, and for the audience, as they are led through different stories of love and loss which are meant to put forward a tactile kind of coalition-building. This is a coalition with others who may have very different experiences than ourselves, but also a coalition with the parts of ourselves we often obscure for fear of the world's gaze. These two kinds of coalitions are deeply connected, which the doorways and mirrors hope to convey.

Emmalon: I am moved both by the deeply collaborative nature of the project itself and its theoretical bedrock. Can you say more about the different collaborative elements present in the work, and also a bit about how you chose these specific collaborators?

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[14] As such, the project relies on the notion of a "multiplicitous self." See Ortega, Mariana. *In-between: Latina feminist phenomenology, multiplicity, and the self*. SUNY press, 2016.

Taylor: I see NOA's collaborative process almost like playing a non-traditional game of telephone. You put something out there, and there's the initial courageousness of that, given the possibility for, and danger of, misinterpretation. The hope is that you touch something in somebody else through this offering, which they then feel safe and vulnerable to share with others…this ripples outward and outward…and so the product takes on a life of its own, yet it is still deeply connected to, and forged by, its participants.

This project of bringing so many other collaborators and forms of creative expression into the mix was really a microcosm of that process. The choice to create a visual offering with the music gave an opportunity to share and filter the initial message through multiple new lenses. The performers interpret the lyrics and song themes through their own experiences using movement and other forms of performance, then those contributions are interpreted through the filmmaking and editing, and back through the scholarship, each successive layer bringing new qualities to the core message which enriches our understanding of what is being said.

I knew that deep trust would be necessary for the kind of vulnerability needed for this project, and so all of NOA's collaborators of are friends of mine who I've met through various artistic endeavors of my own. Furthermore, each of these artists has made me feel deeply at some point through their own creative expressions, indicating a resonance between us I felt would be powerful for the collaborative nature of the film.

Emmalon: Were there any major challenges posed by such a collaborative endeavor? What was it like to be at the creative center of so many different perspectives?

Taylor: Great question, and yes! There were a few notable challenges, which were also gifts in some ways. I think about Lugones again here, and her concept of 'complex communication.' I returned a lot to this idea as I navigated issues which arose. Complex communication does not presume that there can be or will be transparency between different persons. When employing complex communication, one expects there to be tensions among differently situated subjects but navigates such tension for the aim of coalition-building. Complex communication importantly involves more than just words, but tones and body language, emotions and affects more generally.

This perhaps most explicitly showed up during my work with Jason Raynard. Jason is deaf and I had never collaborated with someone who was deaf before. I learned many new skills, such as closed captioning, hiring ASL interpreters, some ASL myself, etc. it is a great example of how employing complex communication is generative and makes our world/worlds more inclusive. Overall, NOA is richer and more complex because Jason was involved, as he worked to make the piece more inclusive of the deaf community, contributing new layers of meaning and beauty for everyone in the process.

Complex communication was also needed when one of our more high-profile collaborators was accused of sexual assault. Responding to this event had as many possibilities as perspectives, and figuring out how to make everyone feel safe and heard in the accountability process was a project as large as the film itself. Perfection was not achieved, but through complex communication, we did succeed in finding a response that seemed to pull an equal amount of tension in all directions.

Emmalon: Where does the title NOA come from?

Taylor: There are two interrelated answers to the question. The first answer is that NOA comes from Noah's Ark, putting a femme twist on the name. As I interpret them, all of the great flood narratives from around the world…which, by the way, are some of our oldest origin stories (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* being the oldest)…have something to say about the relationship between uncertainty, grief, and trust. Noah is asked to build a boat from (in some interpretations) the wood of his home, destroying all he knows for the sake of a journey into the unknown. The only thing known about the journey is that it will be forged in the unknown, and turbulent. Yet Noah is asked to trust that on the other side of the process, there awaits new life.

I take this story to be, at least in part, a metaphor for a process of inner transformation, where what is being asked is that we dive into the deep and dark parts of ourselves with trust that it will yield fruit we cannot yet see. That we come undone, casting away that which we know for the sake of something we do not know, using stormy waters as our bridge.

And this relates to the second meaning of the title NOA, an acronym which stands for Navigating our Affectedness, or navigating the ways by which we are affected by others and the world. The self-sufficient colonial subject is a fiction which often carries with it a normative commitment to a kind of repression, whereby we ignore or push away the feelings and affects which betray our vulnerability to others and the world (thereby exposing the fiction). This leaves us stuck in what Prectel calls, our "frozen sorrows." NOA, on the other hand, embraces the affectedness which results from our deep interconnectedness, carrying with it a different normative commitment. That we grieve our losses and feel our feelings as an honoring of our

connection to each other, using those feelings as the stormy waters which takes us to new, yet-to-be-imagined, futures.

Emmalon: Say more about your focus on grief. Can you share some lyrics that touch on these ideas in the work itself?

Taylor: Much of what NOA examines is the relationship between loss and love, whereby grief is a testament to connecting with, to loving, that which one has lost. Like a flood, grief washes over us in waves, without a sure future in sight. But it is only by being with these hard feelings that we can heal, and break through, to something beyond the horizon of our current knowing. NOA aims to get at how this is true both personally and collectively. For when we ignore the open wounds of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and more, these wounds fester, stirring social turmoil, as we remain stuck in broken systems. It is only by facing these wounds, existing within that pain of loss, acknowledging it, that social healing can really begin. Pretending they don't exist, results in *ignor*ance which continues to perpetuate a festering. We must dive in, risky as it is.

I am inspired by much of the way grief is talked about in some indigenous literatures I've been engaging with like, for example, *The Smell of Rain on Dust* by Martin Prechtel, who speaks of grieving traumatic histories for the sake of new life as a process of coming undone, and then existing within that space fully for a time, for the sake of metamorphosis (which in my experience sometimes feels and looks more like a deepening than a soaring):

From noa, the song:

Loved until it broke

Then blew it up in smoke

Truth that spits me out

A puddle on the ground

Feathers on the wall

Cannot catch this nightfall

Two to one to none

I'm coming all undone

Love that runs away

Can't go back, she doesn't wait

Compass in the dark

Steering floods like Noah's Ark

Write another song,

Try and get the hurtin' gone,

Love until it breaks,

Then learn to live with heartache

Undone, I'm coming undone, I'm coming undone,

it breaks, its breaks

I break, I break…

Emmalon: How do you deal with difference in this film? While not explicitly thematized in the film itself, race, gender, and other systems of oppression are very important parts of the dissertation's conceptual work. How does it connect here?

Taylor: I heed Butler's call that we learn how to re-structure our senses, or re-sensitize ourselves to the humanity (or what I call, following Avery Gordon, "complex personhood"[15]) of others, as a form of resistance. She talks a lot about 'ungrievability,' or the inability to grieve the lives of those whose lives don't really seem to 'count' within oppressive systems of meaning (usually those nameless 'others' who have suffered that we read about in the newspaper). This shows connection with my account of affective numbness, too. NOA displays stories from all different kinds of social positionings, asking us to connect emotionally with ourselves *through* difference, whereby difference is generative for better self-understanding because we are, at our roots, deeply interdependent and relational. Traveling to others' worlds, to return to Lugones' idea of world traveling, brings us home to new parts of ourselves.

Perhaps Audre Lorde puts it best when she calls our feelings are "the hidden source of our power from which true knowledge, and therefore lasting action comes." It's been challenging to convey in my own words the relationship I'm trying to highlight between getting in touch with our own darkness and emotional worlds, and our interdependence with others, but the point is

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[15] Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. U of Minnesota Press, 2008.

actually quite simple: Our feelings, or the affects more broadly, indicate the way by which are vulnerable to each other and the world; and so by attending to them, we embrace and acknowledge such interdependence. When understanding fails us, we can quite literally feel our way to one another.

We learn how to *stop* feeling across difference as a way to uphold colonial subjectivity. What I find particularly powerful when thinking about repair, is the idea that grieving the loss of humanity many have experienced within systems of oppression, connects me with the loss of my own humanity insofar as I have contributed to those systems. We re-humanize ourselves when we re-humanize others. This is the power of combatting numbness. And therefore collective healing is, in fact, mutually beneficial for those who occupy dominant and nondominant positionalities alike.

Emmalon: And what do you think the limitations of feeling are? How does this come up, if at all, in the message and art of NOA, or in your own process of making it?

Taylor: Great question. Feelings without a critical understanding of our shared vulnerability can be limiting, and more importantly, can be utilized for manipulative and dangerous ends. Just think about Trump's rallying cries which stir up and then mobilize intense rage for xenophobic ends. This potential for manipulation of feeling is related to why Plato wanted to dismiss the arts from his conception of the ideal state. Feelings are obviously not, then, inherently transformative. I do think grief, when fully embraced, is a feeling which can be uniquely healing, such that when we feel it, we acknowledge vulnerability in a way that is different from, say, rage, which defends against such vulnerability. In some sense, and I think this is what Malidoma

Somé means when he says "grief is the enemy of denial,"[16] grief is truth-conducive, connecting us with the shared vulnerability which underlies our shared human existence, whereas defending against grief, often through rage or other emotions which "shore the self up," can be ignorance producing. This doesn't mean, of course, that we should repress rage or even hate. But it does mean that expressions of rage, hate, or other emotions uninformed by an understanding of, and respect for, mutual vulnerability, can be highly destructive.

Emmalon: I noticed the film is broken up into three major sections: chaos, insight, together. Can you say more about the logic underlying such a structure? And are there any other lyrics you might want to share?

Taylor: As an origin story, the Flood is a story of beginning from "chaos" or uncertainty. When we confront that chaos with a certain kind of trust, we achieve something like "insight," and can see each other and ourselves more clearly. This results in a more integrated self and collective ("Together"). I often think of it through this metaphor: There's a heavy person sitting on top of you while you sit on a bench (chaos). You scream and flail for a while until you move them/they move to the other side of the bench. Now you can see them more clearly (insight). It turns out they're not so scary, so you move closer and sit right beside each other (perhaps holding hands—Together).

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[16] Somé, Malidoma Patrice, and L. M. Some. *The healing wisdom of Africa*. London: Thorsons, 1999.

NOA is a story of renewal and re-renewal and re-re-renewal, or the cyclical nature of falling apart and coming back together again. You will notice that the end of NOA is very similar to the beginning, and if you look very carefully, you will see scene one in the portal of the final doorway. This is supposed to indicate the non-linear nature of transformation. It is an endless process that is completed through bravely confronting our individual and social histories and ills again and again, with the aim of achieving even just a bit of progress with each new round of breaking (and re-forming).

And sure, I feel these ideas can be gleaned from the lyrics of 8900, named after the address of my childhood home in NC:

Cobwebs of old

Kingdom's of gold

Precious the load

A delicate scaffold

Freedom's not King

The Kingdom's not free

But oh what we'll be

Castles from old debris

Futures from history

It feels like:

A Nightsky that holds

What stays and what goes

An infinite game

A rotating picture frame

We rise and we fall

We learn and recall

Circling back

To Time and its artifacts

Time and its open task

It feels like:

Time and its artifacts, Time and its open task,

Time, and It's open…

Emmalon: Thanks for taking the time to discuss NOA with me in greater detail. This conversation has enriched my understanding of your project, and has given me much to think about in terms of the themes and ideas you develop in the film. You have offered me new insight regarding identity, grief, loss, renewal, collective rebirth, and affective engagement. As always, I am grateful to be in dialogue with you and I look forward to our continued conversation and friendship.

IV. Complex Collaboration

I have prepared a private webpage for you to get to know each of the primary collaborators of

NOA a bit better. **Please click on their sketches to hear short interviews prepared as part of**

this dissertation.

https://noamusicfilm.com/collaborators/

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CODA

Figure 6: "Portrait of Taylor" by Rebecca Baruc

If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people.

-Virginia Woolf

Artifacts and Open Tasks

As I have written this dissertation, and made these arguments, I have continually asked myself: Can I heed decolonial feminist insights about the importance of embodied scholarship in more than theory, but in practice? Or, Can I shift between speaking from my heart and speaking from my head? Each of us has both, after all. Better yet, can I speak from both simultaneously? And can I do so without losing credibility as a serious scholar? Will I be understood? Or, more importantly, will I be able to get a job?

I have not been disciplined to write or research in this way and have only the examples of others who have paved the way, and my own guiding intuition. But it strikes me that such a risk is crucial to take, and the challenge of participating in the transformation of philosophical discourse (helping to make it more collaborative, multilayered, and interdisciplinary in the tradition of decolonial feminism), a good challenge to take up. Engaging in my own multiplicitous voice as a philosopher, activist, and artist, like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, María Lugones, Mariana Ortega, Patricia Williams, Audre Lorde, and others, has allowed me to utilize discourses outside of philosophy (or often at the margins of it), to generate my own philosophical voice. In doing so, I hope to honor these women in at least two ways. In a retrospective sense, I follow in their footsteps, helping to transform philosophy into a more publicly engaged discourse. In a prospective sense, I hope to challenge all of us to become more vulnerable and open to collaborative transformations in our research practices. Through such collaboration, the hope is to expose and resist our own affective numbness and forge new

affective connections, allowing for an exploration of self-ignorance towards new forms of

knowledge in collaboration with other voices, perspectives, and methodologies.

Or…..I hope to connect with you.

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