

**On Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice:
Editor's Introduction¹**

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Social justice demands that we attend carefully to the epistemic terrains we inhabit, as well as, to the epistemic resources we summon to make our lived experiences tangible to one another. Not all epistemic terrains are hospitable— colonial projects landscape a good portion of our epistemic terrain long before present generations move across it. There is no shared epistemic *terra firma*, no level epistemic common ground where knowers share credibility, and where a diversity of hermeneutical resources play together happily. Knowers engage one another on a politically saturated *uneven knowing field* where members of dominant groups work to forcibly maintain their/our epistemic home-terrain advantage. I use the metaphor of the uneven knowing field to capture these oppressive epistemic structures. The uneven knowing field is a hungry place where all knowledge that fails to nurture and sustain dominant ways knowing, risks being dragged onto the dominator's epistemic home turf to be mined, coopted, consumed, or destroyed. Knowledge and willful ignorance circulate with equal vigor in this hungry world. From the standpoint of oppressed/resisting peoples, the uneven knowing field is a minefield, an epistemic twilight zone, which must be traversed with considerable care and endless attention. The harms epistemic injustice produces are not disembodied harms. Repeated acts of injustice (epistemic or otherwise) weather our bodies, dull our minds, weaken our hearts, and traumatize the spirit of our communities. They create public health precarities and invite mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual illness into our being. Epistemic oppression is a cruel thief. It is disorienting, exhausting, and deadly. It triggers anger, anxiety, depression, and resistance. It steals our time, energy, and attention away from more beautiful things.

Epistemic survival demands the formation of strong resistant epistemic communities. The essays in this cluster focus on the structural dimensions of epistemic gaslighting and oppression, as well as strategies for resisting these harms. Structural gaslighting occurs when a knower's lived experience with general patterns of discrimination, violence, and oppression are conceptually severed from the structures of power that gave rise to these patterns the first place. It happens when knowers attribute epistemic harm to imagined individual character flaws and poor choices, in an effort to conceal how the mechanisms of power function to asymmetrically distribute harms in ways that fortify the social structures and practices that allow the violence to continue. Complex systems of domination require structural gaslighting, among other things, to keep their infrastructures in good working order. Omission, confusion, destruction, and orchestrated forgetting have subordinating functions. It takes a great deal of time, energy, and attention to ensure that knowers will, generation after generation, continue to misunderstand or misinterpret the worlds in which they live. Power is maintained by closing off and eradicating alternative hermeneutical frameworks and forcing disenfranchised knowers to compete on the dominator's

epistemic home terrain, a world where it takes a great deal of epistemic labor and physical energy to endure.

Our cluster opens with Elena Ruíz's powerfully nuanced account of "Cultural Gaslighting," a term she develops to capture the many ways structural gaslighting functions to support interpersonal and institutional forms of mental abuse in settler colonial societies. On her view, cultural gaslighting is not reducible human psychological vulnerability or one-on-one abusive relationships. Cultural gaslighting is an epistemic expression of structural gaslighting. It's a curating strategy designed to epistemically derail resistance to colonial domination, so that acts of cultural genocide and dispossession will continue without interruption. She describes it as, "a settler conceptual ruse that diverts critical attention away from structural epistemic oppressions that continue to underwrite the colonial project" (2020, #).

Her discussion begins with medical gaslighting, which occurs when medical professionals downplay or silence marginalized patient's self-reported experiences with illness. Consider how racialized accounts about whose motherhood is valued structurally skew access to infertility treatments toward white women. Or, how women of color's reproductive autonomy is repeatedly compromised by the documented increased risks of maternal mortality, increased infertility rates, non-elective hysterectomies, and forced sterilizations. Or, how enduring pseudo-scientific myths about Black people's tolerance for pain translate directly into racially-biased pain management procedures. Structural approaches to medical gaslighting are informative because they re-direct our attention away from bad providers and toward the tightly-connected constellation of health care policies, practices, training manuals, and disciplinary procedures that fail to hear and attend to women of color's reproductive health needs. This structured inattention to role that intersectional oppression plays in manufacturing health disparities counts as cultural gaslighting: it hides the entrenched oppressive structures that make women and girls of color's health more vulnerable.

This is not accidental. Ruíz draws on Angelique Davis and Rose Ernst's research on racial gaslighting to illustrate how white supremacy generates racialized narratives, which pathologize women of color's resistance, as a way of keeping white supremacist patriarchal structures in good working order. Attention to racialized gaslighting, however, doesn't fully explain the why the abusive mental ambients that target women and girls of color, continue to circulate in settler colonial cultures. The violence required to maintain white supremacy is part of a long-term strategy of settler dispossession developed by white Anglo-European settlers to permanently take control of Native Amerindian from homelands. Cultural gaslighting, she argues, has an epistemic world-building function: "to produce totalizing and abusive ambients—languages, stories, buildings, practices, rituals, forms and documents—that work to destroy resistance to settler cultural authority as natural claims to Indigenous land" (2020, #). These ambients include "settler moves to innocence," which allow settlers and their descendants to keep stolen lands and accumulated wealth without feeling guilty or responsible (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Settler moves to innocence are regularly accompanied by Anglo-European colonizers requests that colonized peoples explain and educate them about the conditions of their oppression. Ruíz uses Nora Berenstain's (2016) account of epistemic exploitation to highlight how settler colonial forms of cultural gaslighting infect academic and scientific knowledge projects. Consider how philosophy has historically aligned itself with colonial and settler colonial agendas. John Locke's

“The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina” (1669) and his view of property, for example, provided ontological and legal justification for removing Native peoples from their ancestral homelands. Or, think about how the culture of contemporary academic philosophy weaponizes rigor, reason, tightly-argued prose, and a culture of justification to gatekeep what counts as ‘real’ philosophy. Ruíz extends these historical insights to explain how the colonial epistemic practices of legitimating narratives and gaslighting structure gender-based asylum cases.

The colonizing scripts present in medical and racial gaslighting are artifacts of the deeper *pre-structural colonial violence* that cultural gaslighting obscures. Cultural gaslighting relies on the active concealment and erasure of the prestructural hermeneutic violences in order to set the stage for the long-term development of settler societies. Colonization demand not only the violent seizure of land, labor, and resources, it also requires the violent seizure of indigenous frameworks of interpretation and meaning making. This expression of hermeneutical violence is *not* reducible to Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice. The epistemic harm (violence) here is not a simple matter of someone’s experiences being misunderstood because there is an interpretive gap between their lived experiences and the concepts used to make sense of that experience. Colonizers actively seize indigenous the means of meaning production, in order to prepare the stolen knowing field to support emergent hermeneutical structures that will be compatible with *their* colonial projects. These prestructural forms of hermeneutical violence actively target and destroy indigenous systems of naming, meaning and signification (i.e. cosmologies, calendars, kinship systems, alphabets, languages, symbols, and ecosystems). When you deny Native knowers access to the ancestral hermeneutical frameworks that have given their lives and worlds meaning for millennia, you force them onto the colonizers knowing field. This is traumatizing, but that’s the point. Hermeneutical violence is part of the machinery that allows colonizers to continue to secure and plunder Native lands, knowledges, and resources. These acts of violence fortify settler interpretive resources by enabling settler epistemologies (grounded in structural innocence) to circulate with impunity and to repeatedly foreclose resistant possibilities.

Ruíz’s conclusion puts forward a social epidemiological account of gaslighting that: (1) calls attention to the public health harms of abusive ambients for marginalized populations, (2) makes clear the hidden rules of social structure in settler colonial societies, and (3) emphasizes the importance of structural reparations.

Colonial violence is woven tightly into hermeneutical frameworks we inherit. Nora Berenstain’s “White Feminist Gaslighting,” uses Miranda Fricker’s discussion of hermeneutical injustice as a paradigmatic example of how structural epistemic gaslighting is reproduced by white feminist methodology and epistemology. White feminist gaslighting happens when knowers enlist dominant epistemologies and ideologies in the service of actively obscuring, distorting, and erasing the mechanisms used to create and maintain white supremacy and it’s intersections with other oppressive structures. Using Ruíz’s (2012) insights into the colonial roots of Anglo-analytic epistemic injustices scholarship as a springboard, Berenstain sets out to explain how Fricker’s whitewashed treatment sexual harassment and violence qualifies as structural epistemic gaslighting. Her critique of Fricker re-centers women of color’s collective political activism and epistemic labor on these issues. It offers a clear illustration of how the colonial habits of forgetting and erasure not only fail to treat women and girls of color as knowers, but also work to remove their life stories and histories from dominant epistemic economies in the first place.

Bernstain identifies three epistemic tactics in Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice as evidence of white feminist gaslighting. First, Fricker's discussion of gender-based oppression fails to adequately recognize the role structural oppression plays in producing interpretive harms. Consider the examples Fricker uses in her discussion of *epistemic bad luck*. As an example, Fricker suggests that a police officer's failure to take the testimony of a male survivor of sexual violence seriously, is best explained as an incidental epistemic failure (a misunderstanding), rather than the product of a patriarchal rape culture that actively produces interpretive frameworks in which sexual violence against men and boys are rendered unintelligible. Hermeneutical marginalization is not epistemic bad luck. It's a structurally produced form of silencing. Reducing interpretive harms to incidental misfortunes then, counts as structural epistemic gaslighting.

Next, Fricker's discussion of hermeneutical injustice not only underemphasizes the role structural oppression plays in interpreting lived experiences with sexual violence, it also fails to acknowledge oppression's intersectional dimensions. Intersectional understandings of sexual violence recognize how overlapping systems of domination share interpretive resources. When we rely exclusively on single-axis frameworks to interpret intersectionally-generated harms we engage in what Bernstain calls *interpretive flatlining*: a tactic that narrows our focus to the point where Black, Indigenous, and people of color's histories of epistemic resistance are difficult to notice. Single-axis ("gender-first") hermeneutical frameworks work to obscure the racialized and colonial roots of women of color's experiences of sexual violence. Fricker's decision to foreground Carmita Wood's experience as a paradigmatic case of workplace sexual harassment while analyzing it solely in terms of gender-based oppression locks her into a single-axis framework that produces white women's lived experiences as the universal template. This renders invisible the ways that colonialism, racism, classism, or ableism make Indigenous, Black, Brown, working-class, undocumented, or disabled women and girls exponentially more vulnerable to sexual violence. Consider the sexual harassment routinely experienced by farmworkers, hotel maids, or factory workers (who can't afford to lose their jobs) differs from the experiences of privileged women (who may be at liberty to find another job). Bernstain recounts historical examples of the resistant knowledge produced by U.S. Black women in order to make tangible the collective historical knowledge that Fricker's examples obscure. She concludes that the single-axis hermeneutical frameworks create structurally prejudiced interpretive resources, which are best characterized as instances of structural epistemic gaslighting.

Finally, the interpretive flatlining that concerns Bernstain not only obscures histories of epistemic resistance, this omission also fails to treat women and girls of color as knowers. Fricker's failure to acknowledge both the historical legacy of women of color's epistemic resistance to sexual violence in the workplace, and the interpretive resources women of color continue to create in response to oppressive work conditions, counts as an instance of strategic forgetting. Fricker's tendency rely on hermeneutical frameworks that side-step the lived experiences of women and girls of color reveals how her discussion of hermeneutical injustice shares the epistemic habits and mechanisms that characterize colonialism and white supremacy.

Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.'s "Gaslighting and Echoing; or Why Collective Epistemic Resistance is Not a 'Witch Hunt,'" considers the complications that arise when collective epistemic resistance to oppression is mischaracterized as unthinking or unreasonable. The unlevel knowing field offers

no profitable way for nondominant knowers to invest our epistemic labor. Within the confines of unlevel knowing field, individual and collective epistemic resistance can appear incompatible with reasonable discussion. Resistant knowers behave unreasonably. We overreact and lack credibility. The repeated erasure of our epistemic labor (and even of our selves) prompts many of us to storm off the unlevel knowing field, refusing where possible to have conversations within the confines of oppressive epistemic frameworks. Our decision to disengage makes us epistemic spoilsports: We have childishly shut down a perfectly interesting conversation. Our collective disengagement is nothing more than a witch hunt.

The slippage from epistemic resistance to being characterized as unthinking or unreasonable is, on Pohlhaus's view, best addressed by highlighting the epistemic labor required to navigate and resist epistemic oppression. Epistemic gaslighting happens when listeners respond to a victim's testimony by saying things like: "I know Jason, he would never do something like that." Or, "are you sure? I think you might be overreacting." They make knowers doubt their own lived experience. As Pohlhaus powerfully notes, epistemic gaslighting is "oriented not toward psychological breakdown, but rather toward a sort of epistemic breakdown: to put out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world, one that centers the experience of the one who is gaslit" (2020, #). Acts of epistemic gaslighting offer a solid starting point for her argument. They highlight both the immense amount of epistemic labor the resistant knowers expend in these contexts, and insight into why soliciting *re-engagement* (i.e., inviting resistant knowers to return to the unlevel knowing field) can be harmful. The first half of her paper uses these insights to develop a *structural* account of epistemic gaslighting that makes intelligible the contexts within which epistemic resistance to oppression happens. The second half considers how practices of *epistemic echoing* provide useful resistant responses to structural gaslighting. Resistant knowers need a tangible amount of echoing to sustain our beliefs. They also need resistant communities of knowers to affirm and stabilize those beliefs. Not all claims echo across the unlevel knowing field with equal force. She introduces the term *survival echoing* to capture, the sort of good echoing that helps individual nondominant knowers to collectively trust and maintain their beliefs in the face of epistemic pressure to doubt them. In contrast to survival echoing, Pohlhaus uses the term *resistance echoing*—where networks of resistant knowers work to reverberate meanings in spaces structured by epistemic gaslighting with the goal of making them reverberate loud enough to shake the practices that allow epistemic gaslighting to continue. Both forms of echoing are necessary for resisting structural epistemic gaslighting. As she puts it, "one form works 'under the radar' (helping us survive) while the other form works to jam the radar itself (helping us to resist)."²

Like colonialism, white supremacy and patriarchy, ableism informs how societies are designed. Ableism generates social practices that regulate whose movement is enabled, and whose movement is disabled on the unlevel knowing field. Christine Wieseler's "Disability, Bioethics, Ableism and Epistemic Oppression," offers a much needed critique of bioethics at the epistemic level. Wieseler's contribution draws our attention to the ways that bioethicists' so-called 'objective claims,' are informed by ableist hermeneutic resources, which repeatedly construct disability as a lack. When this happens disabled peoples' knowledge about their lived experiences is habitually treated as unintelligible.

Wieseler begins with a helpful summary of the resistant epistemic resources (e.g. willful hermeneutical ignorance, epistemic oppression, epistemic exploitation, and epistemic

imperialism) that feminists philosophers have developed to move conversations on epistemic injustice forward. She combines the insights from these conversations to make tangible the many ways disabled peoples' epistemic agency is restrained by the ever-present ableist hermeneutical frameworks informing bioethics scholarship. Ableist hermeneutics promote a number of annoying epistemic habits, including nondisabled peoples' skepticism about disabled peoples' accounts of their lived experiences, and the unshakeable false moral assumption that disabled knowers have a lower quality of life. The injustice here is that nondisabled knowers willfully refused to adopt the hermeneutical resources that disabled knowers repeatedly offer as correctives.

Biomedical ethicists take *the standard view of disability*—the belief that disabilities negatively impact disabled people's quality of life—as a value-free assumption. The force of this assumption generates a skepticism in nondisabled knowers that obscures the epistemic harms that disabled people continue to counter. “How can it be possible,” nondisabled knowers may say to ourselves, “for disabled persons to lead fulfilling lives? Disabled people must be wrong about their experiences. They must have made a psychological compromise. They must have reduced their expectations, in order to convince themselves that they do not suffer.” To explain why this skepticism is ill-founded, Wieseler examines a series of conversations between Peter Singer and disabled attorney and disability rights activist Harriet McBryde Johnson. Her treatment of their exchange illustrates how Singer's skepticism is more accurately described as epistemic oppression. Wieseler is also concerned with the slippage between having a low quality of life and having a life that has less value.

Unfortunately, reliance on ableist hermeneutical frameworks is not confined to the quirky habits of a few ableist philosophers. These frameworks set the parameters for discussion in most of the literature on biomedical ethics, making it difficult for disabled people to call into question the default assumption that their lives are less valuable than the lives of nondisabled people. She uses the testimony of Elizabeth Barnes, a disabled philosopher, to highlight the epistemic harms involved in constantly being called upon to prove to that your life has value, and the epistemic labor required to attend to nondisabled knowers strategic refusals to take up resistant hermeneutical frameworks created by disabled knowers. Being constantly called upon to prove to that your life has value is deeply epistemically harmful. Wieseler's concludes with a discussion of some of the resistant responses these cruel requests. She emphasizes the importance of collaborative epistemic practices used to produce knowledge about disability. These include discussions of 'cripistemology,' global epistemic incapacity, disability competence, and attention to 'crip skills,' and 'crip science'.

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² Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., in conversation, 30 July 2020.