

Chapter 1: Structural Gaslighting By Nora Berenstain

1.1 Introduction

“Because keeping oppressed peoples in the dark about the social formation of psychological toolkits for understanding violence is a cultural, counterrevolutionary strategy designed to manipulate social understanding of colonial violence and its structural prevalence, the greatest success of the gaslighting paradigm is that it provides cover for the structural dimensions of gaslighting.” – Elena Ruíz, *Cultural Gaslighting* (2020, 688)

Gaslighting is an epistemic form of abuse that aims to facilitate further abuse by interrupting its targets' ability to name and resist abuse. It involves calculated distortions of reality and production of doubt, and it relies on and solicits complicity from those who have the power to interrupt the abuse. This is true of gaslighting at both the interpersonal scale and at the broader structural scale. Interpersonal gaslighting and structural gaslighting are isomorphic forms of abuse. Beyond sharing a name, they share the same goals, functions, mechanisms, and success conditions. They also share the same purpose of undermining resistance to the abuse while simultaneously creating plausible deniability about the abuse.

While gaslighting is often understood solely at the scale of interpersonal relationship dynamics, structurally produced gaslighting that produces population-level harms has recently been receiving greater focus. This is a much-needed attentional shift. As I noted in Berenstain (2020) when first introducing the concept, structural gaslighting is significantly

more pervasive than interpersonal gaslighting and produces harm well beyond the scale of the individual. Population-level harms produced by the violence of structural oppression are vast, and those scholars who are working to reveal the operations of their structural gaslighting projects are invested in their disruption. Tremain (2021, 13), for example, reveals how narratives that naturalize and medicalize disability by portraying disabled people as “defective, unreliable, and suboptimal” contribute to the structural gaslighting that frames nursing homes as sites of “care” and “love” rather than as the carceral facilities of institutionally enabled abuse and maltreatment they actually are. Hatch (2020, 2) invokes structural gaslighting to describe how data collection on racial disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic “keeps scientists in an endless search for more and more refined measurements of racism’s harms, while the political and economic systems that comprise the fundamental causes of those harms are given a pass until all the data are counted.” Davis and Ernst (2019) outline an innovative notion of racial gaslighting, which perpetuates and normalizes white supremacy by pathologizing resistance to it. Abu Laban and Bakan (2022) extend the notion of racial gaslighting to Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestine, including through the denial of the 1948 Nakba, the obscuring of the violence Palestinians face under apartheid rule, and the distortion and erasure of Palestinian history. Ruíz’s (2020) notion of cultural gaslighting further analyzes the epistemic violence and attempted destruction of Indigenous epistemologies that is foundational to the settler colonial project and ongoing within settler colonial societies. These examples reflect the incredibly high stakes of the violence that structural gaslighting enables and provides cover for. The violence that structural gaslighting projects protect and makes possible includes political

and economic violence, racialized terror, rape and sexual abuse, land theft, forced displacement, and genocide. As each of the examples discussed here make clear, the victims of structural violence are not the only ones at whom structural gaslighting takes aim. The complicity of bystanders is equally important (and sometimes moreso) to the success conditions of structural gaslighting.[1] I explore this dimension of structural gaslighting in section 2 on what I term *narrative complicity*.

Interrupting structural violence requires a shift of attention to gaslighting at the scale of the structural and a focus on its inherent connections to systems of oppression and the population-level harms they reliably produce.[2] As Ruíz notes in her (2020) account of cultural gaslighting, a conception of gaslighting that frames the phenomenon as *primarily* an interpersonal phenomenon to which we are all equally susceptible actually works to cover over the structured epistemic violence linked to death-by-design for certain populations in settler colonial societies. Revealing the function and operation of structural gaslighting aids in understanding large-scale justifications for structural oppression and the narrative myths that obscure the violence they produce. In societies that are fundamentally structured by oppression, structural gaslighting is not the exception but the rule.

Structures of oppression in settler colonial societies rely on epistemological foundations to orient themselves toward their goals of containment, white supremacy, population control, racial capitalism, gendered domination, and land dispossession. Structural gaslighting

encompasses the justifying stories and mythologies produced in these societies to normalize, obscure, and uphold structures of oppression, as well as the sleight of hand used to conceal the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression and the population-level harms they produce. Among other conjurings, these epistemic practices include “systems of justification that locate the causes of pervasive inequalities in flaws of the oppressed groups themselves while obscuring the social systems and mechanisms of power that uphold them” (Berenstain 2020, 734). Such epistemic legwork often works by naturalizing socially produced inequalities through positing biological or cultural deficiencies in targeted populations. Structural gaslighting can be found in numerous narratives and is produced by many different entities and actors—people, institutions, academic disciplines.[3] It is built into a range of conceptual practices, theoretical systems, methodologies, and epistemologies.[4] This paper further develops my concept of structural gaslighting (Berenstain 2020) and explores its relationship to scientific and philosophical knowledge production. I investigate the mechanisms of structural gaslighting at play within “racecraft” (Fields and Fields, 2022) and scientific racism, the naturalization of disability, philosophical justifications for ableist violence, and the use of disablement as a tool of settler colonialism. I draw heavily from the work of Dorothy Roberts (2011, 2011b) and Shelley Tremain (2017) to illustrate how structural gaslighting in the sciences often works by characterizing an oppressed group as inherently biologically flawed in a way that detaches from and obscures the production of marginalization via social structure. I analyze paradigmatic instances of structural gaslighting with a focus on the epistemic and material

functions they perform for the systems they uphold and with the hope of providing tools for intervening into the pervasive and death-producing forms of material violence they license.

1.2 What is Structural Gaslighting?

Structural gaslighting refers to “any conceptual work that functions to obscure the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression and the patterns of harm that they produce and license” (Berenstain 2020). As such, it is found in an enormous range of western academic and scientific narratives. The stories that structural gaslighting comprises often have a scientific component or dimension. Sometimes, they are theoretical without purporting to be scientific. Science provides a font of examples of structural gaslighting because it is often presumed to possess dispassionate authority despite its embeddedness within social structures and cultural value systems. Scientific racism is one such form of structural gaslighting. The naturalization of disability is another. Both are effective strategies of structural gaslighting that justify and uphold structurally and institutionally violent forms of settler colonial white supremacy and ableism—along with patriarchy, cisheterosexism, and capitalism—while simultaneously obscuring the nature of that violence. Ruíz’s (2024) work on “structural trauma” offers an insightful look into the mechanics of structural gaslighting through an investigation of the origins and effects of the western concept of *trauma*. At its core, this concept produces structural gaslighting by framing *intentionally designed structural harms as tragic and unforeseeable acts of fate*.

Ruíz argues that the failure to understand trauma as a phenomenon that is *unevenly distributed by design in settler colonial societies* is itself a functional tool of settler colonialism, which compounds the effects of trauma on the populations it targets. Trauma and harm are reliably and predictably produced for Indigenous women and women of color in settler societies. Consider how industries such as fossil fuels, mining, and fracking bring transient male workers to rural and often Indigenous locations, where they set up temporary ‘man camps’ for out-of-state workers (Finn et al 2017). The influx of male workers for extractivist colonial projects like building pipelines reliably leads to soaring rates of violence against Native women (First Peoples Worldwide 2020). This violence includes kidnapping, assault, rape, sex trafficking, and homicide (Morin 2020). Yet the non-accidental links between settler colonialism and the production of violence against Native women is obscured by the western notion of trauma, which frames the phenomenon not as something systemically produced for certain populations *by design* but as rooted in the Greek conception of tragedy as the "unavoidable casualty of individual fate." The western construction of trauma as depoliticized, unavoidable, and impossible to predict produces structural gaslighting by disconnecting the intentional and systematic production of trauma for Indigenous women as a strategy of settler colonialism.

Ruíz shows that the depoliticized construction of trauma functions to deflect attention and knowability away from the reality that populations of color and Indigenous peoples are reliably subjected to violence and trauma, by design, at a structural scale. A primary function of the structural gaslighting this conception of trauma aims at is “exonerating white

settler culpability through cultural apparatuses like law, policy, law enforcement, governance, and the concepts that uphold them.” As such, it secures the underlying “blamelessness” of those who benefit from domination—a key function of structural gaslighting. This underlying blamelessness depends on the idea that tragedy itself is “built into the very fabric of being in a gambled trade-off for living self-determined lives” and is therefore merely the result of inevitable “bad luck.” This etiology disconnects *trauma* from “organized coordinated efforts structured to bring harm and injury to some people but not others.” In this case, structural gaslighting is achieved through the illusion that the instances of systemically produced trauma are i) purely individualized, ii) impossible to predict and, iii) unevenly distributed accidentally and without any culpability from the populations who constructed the oppressive structures and whose descendants continue to benefit from them—while also actively maintaining them. It is also achieved by disrupting the ability to name and identify the structurally produced violence and death. Ruíz writes, “For Indigenous women and women of color living in settler colonial societies like the United States, Canada, and The United Mexican States (Estados Unidos Mexicanos), these founding myths have had a lasting and damaging impact for the role they play in maintaining conceptions of trauma that preclude the identification of ongoing structural oppressions and systemic femicidal violence in our communities.” Structural gaslighting, here, is a counterrevolutionary strategy that aims to disrupt the ability to name and resist this abuse by those for whom settler colonialism produces trauma by design.

While structural gaslighting is primarily about disappearing and obscuring the *actual* causes, mechanisms, and harms of oppression, it frequently does this by manufacturing alternative explanations for the harm that are rooted in oppressive ideologies, and which are often created simultaneously with the production of said harm. As such, structural gaslighting is an essential component of the gearwork of structural oppression. As Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable” (2000, 5). Structures of oppression depend on authoritative justifications for their continued maintenance, because “Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence.” Citing Hazel Carby, Collins emphasizes that the purpose of controlling images produced within a society structured by white supremacist capitalist cisheteropatriarchy is “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations.” The function of disguising or mystifying objective social relations is the ultimate aim of structural gaslighting. Controlling images serve to make “racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins 2000, 77). Controlling images are thus one tool in the structural gaslighting toolbox, which work to hide and conceptually sever the effects of structural oppressions from the systems that produce them.

Covering stories for violent systems of oppression often locate the causes of pervasive inequalities in the purported ‘flaws’ of the oppressed groups themselves while

simultaneously obscuring the social systems and mechanisms of power that uphold them. Consider Collins's incisive explanation of the 'Matriarch' controlling image and its service to U.S. capitalism—an example of the extensive and powerful structural gaslighting accomplished by controlling images. The racist misogynistic 'Matriarch' image portrays Black women as unfeminine, aggressive, and masculine. The 'Matriarch' is a bad mother because she works outside the home and is thus unavailable to nurture and tutor her children, thus raising offspring who have no work ethic or educational support outside of school. She is responsible for destroying Black families because she drives away Black men by emasculating them.[5] In the following quote, Collins uncovers the conceptual work that the image does to hide the objective social relations that structurally produce harmful educational outcomes for Black children.

While at first glance the matriarch may appear far removed from issues in U.S. capitalist development, this image is actually important in explaining the persistence of Black social class outcomes. Assuming that Black poverty in the United States is passed on intergenerationally via the values that parents teach their children, dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on White, middle-class children. This alleged cultural deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from political and economic inequalities that increasingly characterize global capitalism. It also suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Inferior housing, underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and consumer racism all but disappear from Black women's lives. In this sanitized view of American society, those African-Americans who remain poor cause their own victimization. In this context, portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows White men and women to blame Black women for their children's failures in school and with the law, as well as Black children's subsequent poverty. Using images of bad Black mothers to explain Black economic disadvantage links gender ideology to explanations for extreme distributions of wealth that characterize American capitalism. (84)

The 'Matriarch' controlling image provides a scapegoat for U.S. social problems in order to deflect from the structural inequalities produced by white supremacy and U.S. capitalism. Instead of identifying any of the real causes of poor educational outcomes of Black schoolchildren, such as the racist-by-design practice of funding public education through property taxes, the practice of majority-white municipalities extracting assets and resources from majority-Black ones (Seamster 2016), the destruction of Black families by the child-welfare system (Roberts 2002), the increasing criminalization-as-punishment in predominantly Black schools and the ever-expanding school-to-prison pipeline (Morris 2016), whites can attribute them to the presumed moral failings of Black mothers and their purportedly inadequate parenting tactics. The 'Matriarch' image covers over the ongoing choices we make as a white supremacist society to deny equal education to Black children by instead assigning the blame to Black mothers.[6]

In this case of structural gaslighting, the *targets* of racism and misogynoir are scapegoated as the *cause* of their own oppression (as well as the oppression of their children) via the intergenerational transmission of professional, educational, and moral failure. Meanwhile, those who are actually responsible fall out of the picture completely. White preservation of white supremacist institutions and their corresponding accumulation of wealth are protected by the structural gaslighting that these controlling images accomplish. This deflection of attention away from the architects and beneficiaries of racial capitalism and

onto its exploited targets is an example of what Karen and Barbara Fields refer to as *racecraft*, which they characterize in part as a “conjurer’s trick of transforming racism into race” (2014, 26). The next section explores how this insightful notion can offer another informative look into the mechanics of structural gaslighting.

1.2.1 ‘Racecraft’

“. . . Racecraft daily performed its conjurer’s trick of transforming racism into race, leaving black persons in view while removing white persons from the stage. To spectators deceived by the trick, segregation appeared to be a property of black people, not something white people imposed on them” – Karen Fields and Barbara Fields (2014, 26).

The trick of disappearing white people, the architects and beneficiaries of white supremacy, from view while making racist segregation appear “to be a property of black people” is emblematic of the structural gaslighting that racecraft accomplishes. For Karen Fields and Barbara Fields, racecraft is a significant force, akin to witchcraft, that permeates the American social and political landscape. It is distinct from both race and racism. Fields and Fields explain that part of racecraft involves transforming the *doings* of racism into the objectual features of *race*. This happens, for instance, when “race” or racialized physical features are identified as the primary cause of racist actions, policies, institutions, or mechanisms of white supremacy.[7] “The shorthand transforms racism, something an aggressor does, into race, something the target is, in a sleight of hand that is easy to miss” (Fields and Fields 2014, 17). This sleight of hand, switching out the oppressor for the oppressed as the cause of their own oppression, is one of the central mechanisms

of structural gaslighting. Notice how it operates in the following example of a mundane yet hardly innocuous expression:

Consider the statement “black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color”—a perfectly natural sentence to the ears of most Americans, who tend to overlook its weird causality. But in that sentence, segregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then, in a puff of smoke—puff—reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole (Fields and Fields 2014, 17).

The sleight of hand present in ascribing acts of racism to “skin color” is an act of structural gaslighting. In magic, sleight of hand is a practice of attention manipulation that works to hide human action from view in order to produce a sense of mystical causation. Racecraft too involves deflecting attention from agents’ actions, background structures of oppression, and the causal roles of both in the production of consequences—the definition of structural gaslighting. The magician hides from view what allows the ball to be suspended in mid-air, so that it appears to be floating on its own. Similarly, racecraft removes the perpetrators of racism—both individual and systemic—from view so that the targets of racism appear to have *themselves* caused the harmful social conditions they inhabit. To say that racism occurs because of ‘skin color’ is to imply that racism follows naturally from the features of those targeted by it. This naturalization of racism is the work of structural gaslighting. There are many additional steps in the causal chain between having a certain “skin color” and being targeted by racism, but these steps fall out of view when the consequences of racism are causally attributed to the color of one’s skin. It is no coincidence that the steps that are obscured by such a locution are those that involve the *perpetrators* of racism—the creators,

facilitators, and beneficiaries of white supremacy[8] —as well as the structures of white supremacy itself.

This subtle blaming of the target of violence present in this form of causal reasoning finds consonance with the kind of gaslighting used to cover abuse at the interpersonal scale. In both cases, there is a causal inversion at play—the perpetrator finds reasons to justify the abuse, and these reasons are repeated by the larger community, sometimes even *in the context of condemning the abuse* (as is often the case when switching out a perpetrator’s racial animus for a target’s skin color in a causal locution). This functions to remove attention and culpability from the perpetrator of abuse and either place it on the target of the abuse or simply diffuse it so that both the perpetrator and their target are portrayed as mere victims of circumstance. The next section explores the notion of *narrative complicity* and its relationship to this community-enabling aspect of structural gaslighting.

1.2.2 Narrative Complicity

Exploring the relationship between community dynamics and abuse at the interpersonal scale can help provide insight into the role of community collusion in abusive dynamics at the scale of structural oppression. This section looks at the phenomenon I refer to as *narrative complicity*—community participation in the deployment and uptake of public narratives about abuse that control the construction of blame and culpability so as to minimize or diminish the responsibility of the perpetrator. This dynamic is not only integral

to the social phenomenon of domestic violence and interpersonal abuse, it is also a key component in the dynamics of structural gaslighting.

Just as gaslighting and abuse can occur at psychological, interpersonal, and sociological scales, narrative complicity plays an enabling role for abuse at multiple scales. An in-depth look at Alisa Bierria's insightful work on community accountability reveals some of the forms narrative complicity can take. In her (2012) discussion of the public discourse surrounding Rihanna's experience of domestic violence by then-boyfriend Chris Brown, Bierria offers a powerful inquiry into survivor subjectivity and narratives surrounding survivor accountability. Her piece investigates what happened when a purportedly 'private' act of abuse became public after LAPD officers sold their photographs of Rihanna's facial injuries to the gossip blog *TMZ*. Through an analysis of the online discussions that surrounded both the initial incident and Rihanna's later choice to temporarily return to her relationship with Brown, Bierria finds a range of responses. These include overt misogynoir aimed specifically at Afro-Caribbean women (e.g. "Caribbean women are crazy, she probably cut him"), extensions of sympathy toward Rihanna that are contingent upon her leaving the relationship and retracted upon her returning (e.g. "I'm sorry but I no longer feel sorry for her, because she's going right back to the person who put her in that situation"), and more subtle forms of condemnation projecting a lack of self-love onto Rihanna or holding her responsible for enabling men's violence against women and girls. All of these responses demonstrate narrative complicity with Brown's abuse by offering rhetorical justification,

minimization, and exculpation of the perpetrator's actions through positioning Rihanna as sharing in the culpability for the abuse.

Among the most vicious and overtly misogynoiristic responses was the frequently expressed assumption that Rihanna must have enacted physical violence against Brown first and that he was merely responding to her attack. While many liberal white feminist analyses rejected these responses as episodes of victim-blaming, Bierra notes the inadequacy of this framework when it comes to the public narratives that are often constructed around Black women victims of violence. She writes, "Characterizing this dynamic as 'victim-blaming,' which salvages a notion of a 'victim' but contends that the victim enabled the violence, misses a key point. Black women who are victims of violence are not simply accused of bringing it upon themselves, they are dis-positioned as its *perpetrator*" (106). Responses that painted Rihanna as the aggressor rather than the victim of violence are in line with a similar pattern that Black women and girls (both cis and trans) face when are treated as the instigator of violence when they are defending themselves from violence.[9]

To different degrees and in different ways, each of the themes Bierra uncovers engages in narrative complicity surrounding Rihanna's experience of violence, and they all enable the broader structural gaslighting of Black women victims of violence. The responses range from inverting the perpetrator and target of abuse, justifying the abuse, and holding the target of abuse accountable for other instances of men's violence toward women. These responses

engage in narrative complicity with a culture that enables abuse by removing accountability from the perpetrator and placing it elsewhere. The sources of narrative complicity are myriad and diverse. They include white feminism, toxic self-help culture, Black respectability politics, and misogynoir about Afro-Caribbean women that is rooted in the eroticization of Blackness foundational to the white-dominated industry of colonial tourism (Bierria 2012, 105). Bierria's careful analysis of these instances of narrative complicity reveals the many ways that abuse is enabled by community. Indeed, this is the opening point Bierria makes while identifying the role of public imaginaries in the narrative construction of domestic abuse. She writes:

Domestic violence, despite its brand, is usually not constrained to a domestic sphere or a zone of privacy. It spills over the tenuous boundaries of an abusive relationship, implicating a public who share a knowing, witness the shadows, or sustain the consequences from the violence. Bound to a situation they cannot control, others often attempt to manage the disquiet of domestic violence by crafting overly confident explanations about the relationship and investing in the comfort of a coherent narrative about something that defiantly resists coherence. People who share community with individuals within an abusive relationship tend to provide the most primary and impactful response. Yet their own biases, premises, and needs frequently drive their evaluations and choices, which puts demands on how the principal target of violence and the person responsible for a pattern of violence are defined and narrated (Bierria 2012, 101).

Even at the interpersonal scale, gaslighting and other forms of abuse have always relied on collusion from the target and perpetrator's communities. At the structural scale, the dynamics are much the same. Ideological justifications for oppression offer "overly confident explanations" that help people feel okay about systems designed to produce violence at the level of populations. Narrative complicity at the structural scale involves

removing responsibility for the population-level harms (including individual instances of them) from the structures of oppression that produce them and their beneficiaries who uphold them. The conjured idea that the targets of violence and oppression are actually their perpetrators forms a core part of the webs of narrative complicity in structural gaslighting. We see this particular narrative practice across a wide range of domains, both interpersonal and structural.[10] The notion of structural gaslighting is therefore not simply metaphorical. It is a wide-scale application of the exact tactics that abusers rely on and that bystanders and community members enable through narrative complicity.

Structural gaslighting reflects the power of collusion that structures of oppression offer to perpetrators of abuse—both individual and systemic—to narrativize the abuse in ways that enables it to continue without community intervention. Sources of narrative complicity are wide-ranging and not confined to a specific domain or set of rhetorical practices. In the next section, a powerful source of narrative complicity—scientific theorizing—takes center stage.

1.2.3 Science and Structural Gaslighting

Scientific theorizing and its role in naturalizing and entrenching socially determined inequalities is one of the most prolific producers of structural gaslighting. Structures of oppression depend on authoritative justifications for their continued maintenance, and science often provides such authority. Science's ability to stealthily produce justifying

stories that make unjust social structures seem natural, normal, and inevitable is central to understanding its role in upholding oppression through structural gaslighting. As I noted in (Berenstain 2020), structural gaslighting “both draws its power from and simultaneously reinforces structural oppression in an unending positive feedback loop.” The mythologies and theoretical justification of structural oppression are established as ‘common sense’ or ‘common knowledge.’ In turn, they provide the background framework that reinforces the plausibility and credibility of structural gaslighting. Science and structural oppression are thus enmeshed in their shared production of ‘common knowledge.’

Why is science particularly well-positioned to produce structural gaslighting? Science is a collection of social institutions and processes that are embedded within larger sociocultural contexts, conceptual frameworks, and value systems. Some of the ways that social values affect science are widely recognized, such as how research funding distribution is influenced by what questions are seen as culturally and commercially valuable, or how institutional goals determine the way scientific results are applied in practical contexts. But beyond these widely known examples of influence, however, in the social sciences especially, social values permeate each stage of the scientific method—and this is especially true when the area of science addresses socially contentious issues. Gathering of data, observation reporting, interpretation of data, definitions of variables, operationalization of concepts, and inference drawing all involve numerous decisions that rely on a variety of background assumptions.

Many popular and academic understandings of science are limited in the extent to which they acknowledge or understand it as a socially embedded and constructed process. One consequence of this is that both public and academic imaginaries construe scientific framings of socially contentious issues as more objective and well-founded than they actually are. The authority that is rightly earned by certain sectors of science can be illegitimately transferred to other areas, subsectors, or research programs. For instance, the theoretical framework of evolutionary biology is quite well-supported, but the additional background assumptions that inform many of the hypotheses of research on the evolutionary psychology of gender differences are relatively less so (Meynell 2021).[11]

For certain socially embedded concepts, there is no way to define them that does not involve value-based choices and decisions. Value-based assumptions can't be separated out from methodological choices about how to operationalize, define, and measure concepts such as *race*, *sex*, or *disability*. But few people are versed in the way that social values influence the *internal* process of science, through operationalization of key concepts and evaluation of background assumptions, for instance. When combined with science's presumed authority and objectivity, these factors make science especially well-positioned to be a primary producer of the justifying stories and explanations that exemplify structural gaslighting. Ideologically grounded assumptions often provide the background theoretical frameworks against which data are interpreted and scientific hypotheses are confirmed.

This creates a feedback loop of scientific studies confirming ideological frameworks that in turn create more scientific studies that rely on the same ideological frameworks.[12]

Science frequently investigates presumed inherent differences between dominant and subordinated groups (Longino 1990). This is one of the central ways that science engages in narrative complicity by justifying structures of oppression. As Shelley Tremain's characterization of Dorothy Roberts's work on "the old bioscience" alludes to, the naturalization playbook is a well-developed method of structural gaslighting that obscures the social production of inequalities by ascribing their causes to the presumed biologically defective features of the bodies of those subordinated:

"First, the old biosocial science approach separates nature from nurture in order to locate the origins of social inequalities in inherent traits rather than imposed societal structures; second the old biosocial science postulates that social inequalities are reproduced in the bodies, especially the wombs, of socially disadvantaged people rather than reinvented through unjust ideologies and institutions; third, the old bioscience identifies problems that stem from social inequality as derived from the threats that oppressed people's biology itself poses to society rather than from structural barriers and state violence imposed upon oppressed people; and fourth, the old bioscience endeavors to intervene and fix perceived biological deficits in the bodies of oppressed people rather than end the structural violence that dehumanizes them and maintains an unjust social order." – Shelley Tremain on Dorothy Roberts, Foucault and the Feminist Philosophy of Disability (2017, 4)

This theoretical strategy has adherents across many areas of the biosciences, as such tactics pervade research into sex differences (e.g. in hormones, sexual behavior, intelligence) and the relationship between gender and sexuality (especially that which

frames transgender identities and experiences in terms of psychiatric disorder). These tactics are foundational both to racial science and to disability bioethics, two interlinked areas that aim to target and often eliminate the presumed intrinsic deficits that are projected onto racialized and disabled populations. I turn next to one of the formidable giants of the ‘old bioscience,’ namely, scientific racism.

1.3.1 Scientific Racism

“They are forced to labor, and yet commonly are not even adequately nourished. It is said that they tolerate hunger easily, that they can live for three days on a portion of a European meal; that however little they eat or sleep, they are always equally tough, equally strong, and equally fit for labor. How can men in whom there rests any feeling of humanity adopt such views? How do they presume to attempt to legitimize by such reasoning those oppressions that spring solely from their thirst for gold?” [13]

– *Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, Histoire Naturelle, 1749*

The tradition of scientific racism has long been essential to the U.S. project of racecraft. Scientific racism is a complex and multifaceted set of practices, many of which exemplify structural gaslighting. Much scientific racism consists in naturalizing socially produced inequalities between racialized groups by postulating their origins in biological differences between ‘races’. These ‘scientific’ explanations argue that contingent social hierarchies are in fact necessary and inevitable results of the natural order. They cover over the causes and effects of white supremacy and disappear the work of structural racism in producing inequities like racial health disparities. As I noted in (Berenstain 2020), “Conceptually severing individual instances and broader patterns of discrimination, violence, and

oppression from the larger structures that produce them is a linchpin of structural gaslighting.” Negative health outcomes for victims of racism become something that results follows from their inherent state of being, an inevitable consequence of the natural order of things.

Consider the claims of so-called ‘slave medicine’ and the work its practitioners and ideological proponents did to buttress the institution of slavery. Nineteenth century enslaver and physician Josiah Nott contended that slavery was morally permissible because craniometry empirically established that forced labor and bondage benefitted African and African-descended peoples. He wrote that "the negro attains his greatest perfection, physical and moral, and also greatest longevity, in a state of slavery” (Nott 1847, 281). Dr. Samuel Cartwright also created scientific justifications for racial oppression by purporting to develop empirical methods showing that African-descended peoples achieved optimal health in bondage. After finding differences in lung capacity between white people and enslaved Africans and African-descended people, Cartwright (1851) claimed the differences were innate and referenced them in his arguments against the abolition of slavery. Specifically, he suggested that without being subjected to forced manual labor, inadequate oxygen would reach the brains of enslaved African and African-descended peoples due to their innately lower lung capacity. Nott’s and Cartwright’s work demonstrate the historically tight connection between scientific racism and structural gaslighting. The function of scientific racism has always been to justify socially maintained structures of racist oppression by suggesting they are borne of a natural biological hierarchy.

Purportedly scientific explanations for racial differences rooted in the supposed inferiority of Black bodies have long been a hallmark of scientific racism, and they continue to be found in a variety of its contemporary manifestations.[14] While some of today’s proponents of scientific racism are as explicitly white supremacist as Nott and Cartwright, individual researchers need not consciously endorse racism and white supremacy for their work to uphold scientific racism. Their work can still serve to promote and maintain structural racism regardless of their individual beliefs or commitments. Indeed, plenty of ‘well-intentioned’ research aimed at closing racial health gaps traffics in scientific racism and produces structural gaslighting. In the next section, a case study of the FDA’s approval of BiDil as a race-based drug illustrates how interventions into racial health inequities aimed at promoting Black health can do the nefarious work of structural gaslighting.

1.3.1.1. Naturalizing Racist Health Inequities: The Case of BiDil

“At work here is an appropriation of race as reified in the BiDil story to serve larger political agendas aimed at transmuting health disparities, rooted in social and economic inequality, into mere health differences, rooted in biology and genetics” – Jonathan Kahn (2005)

In her (2011b) article “What’s Wrong with Race-Based Medicine?” Dorothy Roberts shows how the FDA’s unprecedented approval of BiDil as a race-based drug formed a new chapter in the long legacy of scientific racism. A multitude of factors reflect the scientific racism at the heart of the BiDil case. The drug company NitroMed’s campaign and the FDA’s resulting decision 1) presumed a biological/genetic reality of racial differences without evidence, 2)

relied on inadequate science, 3) suggested biology was the cause of social inequality, 4) was motivated by the capitalist pursuit of profit, 5) indicated that results from drug trials done on Black patients could not be universalized to all people, and 6) located the causes of health problems in Black communities within Black bodies rather than within the environment structured by white supremacy. Roberts's analysis of the scientific racism in this decision process reveals the role that structural gaslighting played in both NitroMed's campaign for FDA approval and the FDA's justification for its decision. It also illustrates the positive feedback loop between structural gaslighting and the structures of oppression it relies on and works to reinforce.

Before 2005, the FDA had never approved a drug for a race-specific use. When BiDil was approved, it was approved not as a *generalized* treatment for congestive heart failure but as a treatment specifically for *African American congestive heart failure*—despite the fact that BiDil had not been *designed* as a race-specific drug. In fact, BiDil was not a newly developed drug at all but merely a combination of two well-known generic drugs that were already widely in use as treatment for heart failure, isosorbide dinitrate and hydralazine hydrochloride. Neither was BiDil a pharmacogenomic drug—a pharmaceutical specifically designed to work with an individual's particular genetic makeup, which could theoretically target a genotype that people with recent African ancestry are statistically more likely to have than those without. One might reasonably presume that a drug approved specifically for African American congestive heart failure would, at the very least, have been shown to be *more effective* in African American populations than in other populations. However, this

was also not the case; such a hypothesis was never tested. The trial that tested BiDil's efficacy, known as the African American Heart Failure Trial (A-HeFT), included only 1,050 self-identified African American patients. The drug was found to be extremely effective, increasing survival by 43% and reducing hospitalizations by 39%. But since the efficacy of BiDil was not tested on any non-Black patients, no comparisons could be made about its rate of effectiveness across populations.

Despite the total lack of empirical evidence for different rates of efficacy between racial groups, NitroMed relied on presumptions of biological race differences as its speculative explanation for the drug's efficacy in self-identified Black patients. NitroMed's press release for BiDil stated, "Observed racial disparities in mortality and therapeutic response rates in black patients may be due in part to ethnic differences in the underlying pathophysiology of heart failure" (Roberts 2011b, 4). The company made a statement, unsupported by empirical evidence, that the difference in death rates between Black and non-Black patients with heart failure might be due to differences *in the mechanisms of heart failure itself* between differently racialized groups. In other words, maybe Black people experiencing heart failure die at higher rates than white people experiencing heart failure do because *Black people's hearts work differently than white people's hearts do*.

NitroMed's tactic engaged in structural gaslighting by i) obscuring the structural connection between white supremacy and African American heart failure and ii) positing an unfounded

‘biological’ cause for a health disparity that is actually produced by numerous dimensions of anti-Black racism. The company’s structural gaslighting further played into the long legacy of scientific racism in a number of ways. For one, NitroMed stood to make an extraordinary profit off of marketing BiDil specifically as a drug for Black populations. NitroMed’s patent for the race-neutral version of the drug was set to expire in less than ten years, and an FDA approval for BiDil’s race-specific purpose would afford NitroMed an additional 13 years of patent-protected profits.[15] Relying on inadequate or nonexistent empirical data to confirm presumptions about racial differences produced within a white supremacist society has a long history in the U.S.—especially to uphold profitable forms of racial oppression such as slavery, the school-to-prison pipeline, and other forms of racial capitalism.[16] The kind of racialized medicine that NitroMed was promoting was simply a repackaged variant of racial capitalism, which would allow white-owned companies to profit economically from a Black underclass, in this case one characterized by their alleged physical inferiority.

The presumed inferiority of Black bodies that NitroMed exploited to win FDA approval for marketing BiDil as a race-based drug reflects the structural gaslighting at the heart of this process. NitroMed argued that since BiDil had been tested only on Black patients, the data licensed its approval only for Black patients. But, as Roberts emphasizes, “This kind of logic had never resulted in a racial indication before. In the past, the FDA has had no problem generalizing clinical trials involving white people to approve drugs for everyone. That is because it believes that white bodies function like human bodies.” This is an excellent

illustration of the methodological component of structural gaslighting. By affirming the idea that data from trials run only on white patients could be universalized while trials run only on Black patients could not, the FDA licensed different *inferential relations* between data derived from Black bodies and data collected from white ones. Roberts writes, “By approving BiDil only for use in black patients, the FDA emphasized the supposed distinctive, and substandard, quality of black bodies. It sent the message that black people cannot represent all of humanity as well as white people can” (2011b, 3). This two-track inferential system and its bifurcated methodological mandate—a form of what Ruíz (2020, 705) terms *epistemic apartheid*—tacitly promotes a metaphysics of biological deviancy for Black bodies. This metaphysics provides the methodological barrier blocking inferences from data about how a drug works in Black bodies to conclusions about how it works in human bodies generally.

As Roberts argues, in response to NitroMed’s empirically baseless campaign of scientific racism, the FDA could have made one of two non-racist decisions: Either they could have rejected NitroMed’s request for BiDil’s approval altogether, or they could have approved its use as a treatment for congestive heart failure in all populations. This latter option would have made the drug available to the vulnerable populations who were most in need of it without reinforcing the baseless and harmful public perception that racial health disparities are caused by biological racial differences between groups. Instead of taking this route, the FDA chose to legitimize the empirically ungrounded speculation that the higher rates of death from heart failure among Black patients was reflective of an underlying uniqueness in

the biology and mechanics of Black heart failure, a move that structurally gaslights Black populations by suggesting that the deleterious health effects they experience as a result of white supremacy and anti-Black racism are actually caused by their own physiological inferiority.

The FDA's endorsement of NitroMed's speculation is emblematic of structural gaslighting. A number of social factors produced by white supremacy contribute to the higher rates of congestive heart failure that Black patients experience. Hypertension is one of the primary predictors of heart failure, and stress is a major contributor to hypertension (Dimsdale 2008). Due to white supremacy, Black populations experience a range of stressors that are more severe than those experienced by white populations. These include, among many others, the stress of racial discrimination (Williams 2018), greater exposure to pollutants due to environmental racism (Cheeseman et al 2022, Taylor 2014), higher rates of eviction and housing precarity (Bluthenthal 2023), greater vulnerability to sexual violence and a lower chance of legal redress (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, and Johnson 2018; Ritchie 2012), a widening racial wealth gap (Aladangady and Forde 2021), and the ongoing trauma of publicly consumed spectacles of Black death (Wright 2018, Mowatt 2018). Black Americans also have more restricted access to quality health care than do white Americans (Dickamn et al 2022, Rooks et al 2008). Yet NitroMed's knee-jerk presumption that differential rates of death due to heart failure among Black and white populations must be due to underlying pathophysiological differences in heart function, and the FDA's decision to approve BiDiI as a race-specific drug on the basis of this assumption, obscures and deflects from this reality.

It suggests that the solution to negative health outcomes brought on or exacerbated by white supremacy need not involve changing white supremacy itself; its effects can simply be treated with individual pharmaceutical prescriptions. As Roberts points out, it also attributes the cause of a socially produced racial health disparity to intrinsic failures of Black bodies. Suggesting that Black people are *preternaturally* more vulnerable to heart failure than non-Black people are is just the sort of sleight of hand that deflects attention from the real causes of racial health disparities—namely, racism—in an impressive feat of racecraft.

That “structural gaslighting is not identified in terms of any specific intention or goal of the perpetrator but by the function of its operation” (Berenstain 2020, 735) is illustrated by the example of Esteban Burchard’s work on why Puerto Rican children are especially susceptible to developing asthma. We know that a range of environmental factors related to the presence of allergens and irritants contributes to the likelihood of developing asthma. Exposure to pests, air pollution, and insect droppings are contributing factors. We also know that Black and Puerto Rican children have especially high rates of asthma—13% and 19%, respectively, compared to only 8% of white children. An NYU study that tracked exposure to air pollution using monitors attached to the backpacks of asthmatic schoolchildren living in the South Bronx found that the children “who were twice as likely to attend a school near a highway as children in other parts of the city, were exposed to fine-particle pollution from diesel exhaust (a known asthma trigger) that exceeded EPA standards” (Roberts 2011, 109). Factors such as environmental racism play a clear role in determining the level of air pollution and environmental toxicity that differently racialized groups are exposed to. A

recent study found that race was a much stronger predictor than income for levels of exposure to environmental pollution (Paoletta et al 2018). Another found that, while people of color are exposed to greater levels of fine particulate matter than white people, white people were *responsible* for creating more air pollution than people of color (Tessum et al 2019).[17] The study found that “white people enjoy a so-called pollution advantage. They bear the burden of 17 percent less air pollution than is generated by their own consumption. Blacks and Hispanics, on the other hand, experience a ‘pollution burden.’ They face 56 percent and 63 percent more exposure, respectively, than is caused by their consumption” (Stanley-Becker 2019). The physical landscape sculpted by white supremacy plays an obvious and central role in structurally producing racial disparities in autoimmune conditions such as asthma. Nonetheless, Burchard engages in structural gaslighting by attributing racial differences in such conditions to genetic differences, which he postulates account for different rates of asthma among differently racialized groups. Specifically, he conjectures that there must be a “distinctive genetic variant” that Puerto Ricans have, which predisposes them to asthma. He conjectures that this imagined genetic variant derives from their recent African ancestry and thus also explains high asthma rates among African Americans.

To be clear, Burchard does recognize that environmental factors play some role in producing these discrepancies, and he intends for his work to address and remedy these problematic disparities. But regardless of Burchard’s intention in pursuing genetic explanations of racial disparities that we know to be caused, at least in part, by environmental racism, his work

serves to deflect from the socially produced landscape that benefits white children while harming Black and Puerto Rican children and normalizes the state of affairs in which Black and Puerto Rican children have heightened rates of asthma. The hypothesis of genetic predisposition to asthma based on recent African ancestry makes higher rates of asthma in such communities appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable. And it averts attention from the role structural oppression plays in creating these disparities. This shows that merely giving lip service to the fact that structural oppression plays *some* role in producing a relevant pattern is not enough to preclude one's proffered explanation of said pattern from enacting structural gaslighting.[18]

As this investigation into the relationship between scientific racism and structural gaslighting demonstrates, the practice of naturalizing socially created disparities that trace back to structural oppression is a key tactic of structural gaslighting. Naturalization is an especially central structural gaslighting tactic of ableism, a structure whose roots are deeply intertwined with those of scientific racism (Metzl 2009). I turn now to an investigation of the naturalization and medicalization of disability as a form of structural gaslighting.

1.4 Ableism and the Medicalization of Disability

Shelley Tremain's important and insightful conceptualization of *disability as an apparatus of power* reveals how ableist ideologies, including the individualization, naturalization, and medicalization of disability, are forms of structural gaslighting. Tremain rejects the

presumption that there are “natural” or prediscursive ontological components to disability, arguing that disability is a “contingent social phenomenon” that is metaphysically inextricable from cultural and historical context and that it is an apparatus of power in which all people are implicated. Her view is thus deeply at odds with those who take disability to be either a biological trait possessed by individuals or a feature of constructed environments that gives social significance to ‘impairments,’ which are themselves construed as natural biological traits that exist transculturally and transhistorically. Just as racecraft transforms collective acts and upholding of *racism* into intrinsic features of racialized persons, the apparatus of disability transforms the collective action of *disablement* into the intrinsic biological features of disabled persons.

Tremain contends that the apparatus of disability differentially subjects peoples “to relatively recent forms of power on the basis of constructed perceptions and interpretations of (inter alia) bodily structure, appearance, style and pace of motility, mode of communication, emotional expression, mode of food intake, and cognitive character” (23). All such forms of human diversity are shaped by myriad social factors and cultural understandings of their significance. She writes:

“To understand disability as an apparatus is to conceive of it as a far-reaching and systemic matrix of power that contributes to, is inseparable from, and reinforces other apparatuses of historical force relations. On this understanding, disability is not a metaphysical substrate, a natural, biological category, or a characteristic that only certain individuals embody and possess, but rather is a historically contingent network of force relations in which everyone is implicated and entangled and in relation to which everyone occupies a position.” (2017, 22)

Tremain's account is particularly well-suited to capturing the intersectional nature of ableist systems of oppression and their corresponding reliance on structural gaslighting, as it recognizes that the historical force relations that the apparatus of disability comprises are inseparable from the network of force relations that make up settler colonial white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy. The apparatus of disability construes disabled people as naturally inferior and defective in numerous ways, most of which have racialized, gendered, and sexualized conceptual components.

An important feature of structural gaslighting is that it is defined by the function it performs within systems of oppression. Another key feature of structural gaslighting is that the mythologies and storytelling that produce it ultimately uphold and justify pervasive and ubiquitous forms of structural violence while simultaneously disappearing said violence from view. Tremain's conceptualization of disability is a radical anti-gaslighting tool in the fight against ableism. Like Fields and Fields's conception of racecraft, Tremain's picture reveals how ableism's sleight of hand transforms the systems created and the actions perpetrated into features of disabled persons themselves, disappearing from view both the apparatus of disability and the non-disabled persons who benefit from it, a paradigmatic act of structural gaslighting.

The function of naturalizing stories of disability, such as those offered by the medical model and the British Social Model (BSM), is to construct disability as an undesirable defect and to license interventions aimed at eliminating both disability and disabled people.[19] Tremain critiques both the medical model of disability and the British Social Model (BSM) for naturalizing as “static” the conceptual objects that emerge from them: disability in the former case, and impairment in the latter (86). By naturalizing as static the conceptual objects that emerge from them, while also construing them as inherently defective and undesirable, these models of disability construe disabled people “as a problem to be rectified or eliminated” (Tremain 2020).

The social and political interventions that the ableist structural gaslighting tactic of naturalization licenses are eugenicist and, in many cases, exterminationist forms of structural violence. These include forced institutionalization and incarceration (Appleman 2018), forced sterilization, invasive medically unnecessary surgeries (Smith 2012), physical and sexual abuse (Singer and McMahan 2017), denial of adequate health care and quality of life, work with pay below minimum wage (U.S. Dept of Labor 2021), the use of solitary confinement as punishment in public schools (Richards, Cohen, and Chavis 2019), discrimination in education, employment (Robert 2003), and housing, exclusion from community and public life, and state-sponsored and medically promoted death (Parliament of Canada, Bill C-7).

Consider the relationship between the structural gaslighting of ableist ideologies of naturalization and Illinois public schools' use of a carceral punishment system involving placing children who act out in solitary confinement. Though the isolation rooms are purportedly used only as a last resort for physical aggression, a ProPublica report found that they were frequently used for minor non-threatening disciplinary infractions like disobedience and insubordination. Most of the students isolated in solitary confinement are disabled. While some school districts ban this form of punishment, they often funnel disabled students to schools that do not. The report explains, "A few school districts in Illinois prohibit seclusion, including Chicago Public Schools, which banned it 11 years ago. But these districts often send students with disabilities to schools that do use it, such as those operated by most of Illinois' special-education districts" (Richards, Cohen, and Chavis 2019).

The use of isolation and imprisonment as punishment for disabled students is exactly the sort of abusive practice that we ought to expect within an ableist society that uses structural gaslighting to construe disabled people as biologically inferior and thus less than human. Scott Danforth, a professor at Chapman University who studies the education of disabled children, ascribes the lack of concern about the abusive practice of isolation as a result of the fact that it is primarily disabled children who are the targets of its abuse. "Danforth said seclusion goes unexamined because it largely affects students with disabilities. To put children in timeout rooms, "you really have to believe that you're dealing with people who are deeply defective. And that's what the staff members tell each other. ... You can do it

because of who you're doing it to.” (Richards, Cohen, and Chavis 2019). In this case, ableist structural gaslighting portrays disabled students as both incapable of responding to and unworthy of compassionate and humane treatment because of being inherently defective, The work of structural gaslighting is apparent when abusive and exploitative treatment is justified by reference to “who you're doing it to.” This tactic is evident across patterns of justification of ableist abuse from Goodwill's practice of paying disabled workers pennies an hour to hang clothing at their stores to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) practitioners justifying the use of electric shocks on autistic children as a form of “treatment” and “therapy.”

Ableism's structural gaslighting is what facilitates the use of harmful treatments, interventions, and even so-called ‘cures’ for their autistic children—another manifestation of ableism's eliminationist logic. ABA specifically involves aiming to replace autistic behaviors with socially acceptable ones regardless of whether the autistic behaviors cause harm to the child or others. Many interventions aimed at making autistic children easier to manage are harmful and abusive. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is often one of the only autistic “therapies” covered by medical insurance. Some forms of ABA aim at punishing children with the use of “aversives” for displaying autistic modes of behavior and cognition and rewarding them for suppressing their natural forms of self-expression and emotional regulation, including self-stimulating or ‘stimming’ behaviors such as rocking or hand-flapping. These practices are rooted in structural gaslighting narratives that i) obscure the fact that these are merely behaviors that fall outside the contingent and arbitrary realm of

what is deemed socially acceptable in this particular moment, and ii) disconnect the social harms of engaging in autistic behaviors from the ableism that stigmatizes, degrades, and devalues them.

ABA is rooted in a theoretical framework of radical behaviorism, framing behaviors as produced solely by external stimuli and eliding thoughts and emotions (Sandoval-Norton, Shkedy, & Shkedy 2021). It ignores and even denies the existence of specifically autistic subjectivities. Ivar Lovaas, one of the founders of ABA, was known for his belief that autistic people are not really people.[20] In a 1974 interview with *Psychology Today*, Lovaas said, “You have a person in the physical sense—they have hair, a nose and a mouth—but they are not people in the psychological sense.” (Chance 1974) The founder of ABA sees autistic people not as human beings but as physical shells inside of which the ABA therapists must do the work of constructing a person where there otherwise is none. This construction often takes place through abuse. ABA interventions have involved forced eye contact, forced compliance and obedience, and forced exposure therapy to stimuli and situations that cause experiences of anxiety and even terror. “Aversives” include the use of slapping, pinching, electric shock, noxious odors and physical restraints (Dawson 2004). Sessions can last up to eight hours and often involve denying breaks to the autistic child even when they are experiencing sensory or emotional overload.

The practices of and justifications for abusive ABA interventions reveal how the process of structural gaslighting plays out from the ableist degradations of autistic ways of being to the abuses that ableism's violently dehumanizing ideology necessitates. ABA sets autistic children up to accept abuse (Lynch 2019). This is because it teaches compliance and obedience above all, including when experiencing unwanted physical touch and other boundary violations, and it encourages children to ignore and suppress their feelings of discomfort, overstimulation, and pain. As one autistic adult reported about their experience of childhood ABA, "The focus on compliance made it harder for me to say no to people who hurt me later" (McGill and Robinson 2020). This is an example of how ableist structural gaslighting, which is itself abusive, enables further abuse by mitigating targets' ability to identify and resist abuse. Others described how ABA "created internalised ableism, self-loathing" and produced long-term PTSD. The parallels between ableism's large-scale structural gaslighting and the kind of gaslighting used to cover abuse at the interpersonal scale are apparent. In each case, the perpetrator explains why the abuse is not only justified but is actually *for the victim's own good*. As emphasized in the discussion on narrative complicity, these reasons are endorsed by the broader public, And, just as in gaslighting at the interpersonal scale, ableist structural gaslighting and the abuses can encourage its targets' compliance with further abuse.

1.4.1 Philosophy and Ableist Gaslighting

Revealing policies of structural violence as socially imposed and therefore reversible, rather than as natural consequences of biology, is a necessary step in the fight to end ableist structural gaslighting and the widespread harms it causes. As Tremain (2017, 2020) has demonstrated, professional philosophy is deeply complicit in the promotion of ableist ideologies that produce, justify, and disappear from view pervasive violence in the lives of disabled people. This complicity traverses across diverse topics and areas, including political theory, development ethics, and white feminist philosophy. The capability approach to justice and human dignity (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2003, 2007), for instance, has been critiqued for relying on and promoting various forms of ableism (Kittay 1999, Montgomery 2001). The approach conceives of human welfare in terms of certain objectively construed capabilities that a person must have access to in order to live a life of flourishing. Since many of these capabilities are ones that are held solely by non-disabled people, the result can be a theory that denies disabled people the possibility of flourishing and produces structural gaslighting by obscuring the role that the apparatus of disability plays in both producing disability and obstructing the flourishing of those it disables.

The literature on disability and adaptive preferences, to which the capabilities approach gives rise, is an example of professional philosophy's structural gaslighting of disabled people. A foundational assumption of that literature is that the testimony of disabled people about the quality of their lives should be treated as an 'adaptive preference' and thus discounted from bearing on the question of whether, all else being equal, disability makes one's life less worth living' (Barnes 2009). The suggestion is that disabled people can't be

trusted about how disability affects their quality of life, because they can be expected to develop subjective views and preferences that make their undesirable bodies and lives more bearable.

Interestingly, we do not see parallel alternate views considered, such as the idea that disabled people who testify that their lives are worse off and that they wish they had not been disabled might feel that way because of pervasive ableist structural gaslighting, or that expressing a preference for a non-disabled life is an 'adaptive preference' in response to living in a deeply ableist society that labels one irrational for preferring or feeling neutral about a disabled body. Nor do we see the possibility considered that *non-disabled* people's testimony about their quality of life being better than disabled people's might itself be an adaptive preference within an ableist society. The 'adaptive preferences' justification for explaining away the testimony of disabled people who reject the idea that their bodies make them inherently worse off than non-disabled people structurally gaslights disabled people by obscuring the relationship between ableism and disabled people's experiences of their lives and bodies. This literature paints disabled ways of being as inherently worse off than non-disabled ways in order to locate the cause of disabled people's suffering within their own bodies and minds, rather than within the structures of ableism that actually produce it. It then goes a step further by telling them that their evaluative judgments of their own lives and experiences simply can't be trusted—gaslighting at its finest.

It is further important to recognize that the harms of philosophy's ableist structural gaslighting go beyond the epistemic to include, for instance, the promotion of physical and sexual violence against disabled people. In 2017, Peter Singer, one of the world's most famous philosophers, joined forces with Jeff McMahan to defend in the *New York Times* a white woman's repeated rape of a disabled Black man. Justifying grievous violence against disabled people wasn't new territory for Singer, who is well-known for arguing that killing disabled infants is morally permissible—as long as they count as “severely” disabled on his arbitrarily determined personal scale.[21] For this reason, Singer is considered by many disability justice activists to be a proponent of genocide against disabled people (McBryde Johnson 2003). In their pro-rape op-ed, Singer and McMahan (2017) argue for a view that permits sexual abuse of intellectually disabled people who cannot articulate the harms done to them through rape.

The essay engages with the conviction of Anna Stubblefield, former chair of the Rutgers-Newark Philosophy Department, for sexual assault. Stubblefield, a white woman, performed “facilitated communication” with a disabled, non-verbal Black man with cerebral palsy, who was the older brother of one of Stubblefield's students. Facilitated communication is a pseudoscientific practice by which a verbal person “determines” (i.e. either decides or unconsciously projects) what a non-verbal person is attempting to communicate by stabilizing the disabled person's wrist or hovering the disabled person's finger over a keyboard in order to infer which letters they are trying to point to (Lilienfeld et al 2014).[22] Even if facilitated communication were a scientifically grounded therapy, it

should be fairly obvious that such an enormous power disparity would not allow for the possibility of sexual consent between the disabled person and their facilitated communicator. This would follow from the fact that the facilitated communicator would be the *sole link* connecting between disabled person's inner thoughts and their ability to express themselves to the outside world, creating an unmitigated level of power over the disabled person that is not only ripe for abuse but that would also *attract* abusers to the 'profession.'^[23] Nonetheless, Stubblefield claimed that her client, through facilitated communication, expressed a desire for sexual intimacy with her and later said that he was in love with her. Stubblefield proceeded to repeatedly sexually assault him, including during a time in which she kept his family unaware of his whereabouts.^[24]

Singer and McMahan defend Stubblefield's 'innocence' and frame her repeated sexual assaults as genuine acts of love.^[25] They also deny the possibility that the person she victimized could have experienced harm from her assaults or that the assaults could have resulted in anything other than pleasure for him. They write, "On the assumption that he is profoundly cognitively impaired, therefore, it seems that if Stubblefield wronged or harmed him, it must have been in a way that he is incapable of understanding and that *affected his experience only pleasurably*" (emphasis added). The article indulges in numerous grotesque rape myths (e.g. he probably enjoyed it; he would have resisted if it were really rape since "he was capable of struggling to resist;" "he surely would have found a way to express his hostility to Stubblefield on that occasion or subsequently," etc.) that likely would not have passed muster with the editorial review board had they been applied to a case involving

anyone but a non-disabled white woman rapist and a disabled person of color as the target of sexual abuse.[26]

Interestingly, Singer and McMahan are so deeply committed to dehumanizing disabled people (of color) that they fail to notice that their view *also* commits them to the moral permissibility of sexually abusing infants and other young children who cannot readily articulate the harms of abuse and may even experience pleasure from it. It is striking (though not surprising) that when given the choice between i) *not* providing cover for child sexual abusers and ii) promoting sexual violence against disabled people, Singer and McMahan choose the latter. The article's title "Who Is the Victim in the Anna Stubblefield Case?" is supremely fitting for a work emblematic of gaslighting, as one of its most common tactics involves reversing the victim and the abuser in order to frame the abuser as the *real* victim. Singer and McMahan engage in structural gaslighting by arguing that certain groups of disabled people simply can't be sexually assaulted. Further, they place the locus of this impossibility in disabled people's purportedly inferior bodyminds, covering over the ableist structures and their beneficiaries that in fact place disabled people, particularly disabled people of color, among those who are the *most vulnerable* to sexual assault—especially by those who are trusted with their care, which is precisely the kind of case exemplified by Stubblefield. The narrative complicity of the *New York Times* is evident in the fact that it was more plausible to their editorial board that disabled people of color deserve dehumanization and abuse than that the newspaper should decline to publish such racist poorly reasoned rape apology.

While Singer and McMahan's rape apology treatise is an extreme example of the violent ableism and white supremacy that philosophers promote through structural gaslighting, less explicitly violent instances of structural gaslighting in ableist philosophy also promote structural violence against disabled people. Much academic philosophy suggests disabled people cannot truly have lives worth living and encourages the discounting of disabled voices from philosophical discussions. In an ableist society in which eugenicist policies continue to thrive, such rhetoric serves only to further entrench the justifications for disability discrimination and elimination that are already present within mainstream liberal and conservative political movements and the promotion of structural violence and eliminationist practices against disabled people.

1.4.2 Disableization and Dispossession

“To analyze disability as an event, that is, would involve determination of the process of (what we might call) “disableization,” whereby the apparatus of disability variously incorporates a growing number of people’s lives, through a multiplying number of means and techniques, in order to distinguish certain subjects from others, identify them, improve them, render them more productive, eliminate them, and govern them in a host of other ways.” – Shelley Tremain (2017, 96)

On Tremain's account subjects *are made* disabled and impaired by the apparatus of disability, which includes “an accelerating array of social policies, administrative decisions, medical and scientific classifications and examinations, techniques of surveillance and registration, cultural representations, aesthetic practices, and academic research” (2017,

96). Tremain's apparatus conception of disability involves analyzing the processes that produce subjects *as disabled* and *impaired* rather than construing disability and impairment as something subjects 'have.' Her concept of *disableization* helps illuminate the role that the production of disability plays in facilitating forms of structural violence such as mass incarceration and settler colonial land theft.[27] Structural gaslighting occurs through both the process of disableization itself as well as through the coverup of said process through the naturalization of disability and the ascription of disability to biological features of people's bodyminds.

Incarceration has long been a central strategy of managing disabled populations in settler colonial societies, as has disableizing racialized and Indigenous populations so as to manage them and remove them from their land. In 1898, Congress passed a bill licensing funding for the creation of the Canton Indian Insane Asylum in North Dakota. Also called the Hiawatha Insane Asylum, the institution forcibly committed and imprisoned over 350 Native Americans, at least 121 of whom died or were killed at the facility. Ella Callow, Director of the Office of Disability Access and Compliance at UC-Berkeley, incisively summarizes the relationship between the U.S. government's disableization of Native Americans and its foundational projects of settler capitalist land dispossession—a relationship obscured through structural gaslighting. She explains,

My family comes out of Indian country and, you know, for us, it's always kind of like, it's always a money grab. They're always trying to make money off of Indians. That's what it always is. It's take the land, take the water, get whatever you can get. And just one more thing that can be gotten is bodies — literal bodies that people make money

off of. You label them, you call them something, put them somewhere, and you can make money from them.

Every time Indigenous people get taken off their land, removed from their community and put away, there is a chance that that's one less person making it back, having a family who will have treaty rights they can enforce, who will have descendants who have treaty rights they can enforce, who can hold the government to its obligations to Native people. (Brice 2020)

Callow reveals the intentional and purposive nature of the settler administrative systems that trade in disability and mental illness narratives so as to eliminate Native peoples in order to eliminate their claims to land. In 1913, one Lakota man was sent to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, another federally funded psychiatric institution, after he was accused of stealing horses, which he denied, and diagnosed with "horse-stealing mania." He was later transferred to Hiawatha, which had a policy requiring the forced sterilization of those who were imprisoned there. The intertwining of settler colonialism and ableist structural gaslighting provides justification for eugenicist projects of eliminating "problem" populations, such as those who either require community care that the settler government does not want to provide or who have claims to land that the settler government does not wish to honor. The forced institutionalization of Native people also provided an economic lifeline to the white settler population in Canton, who sued to keep the institution open after it was finally closed in 1933 following extensive documentation of the facility's abusive and inhumane conditions.

The production of disability for Native populations to facilitate their violent displacement and dispossession through incarceration is also evident in the history of residential boarding

schools in the U.S. and Canada. These institutions were not places of learning and education so much as they were carceral spaces for abuse, punishment, and the promotion of cultural genocide through forced assimilation. The legacy of kidnapping and removal for the purposes of assimilation persists today in the contemporary practice of removing Native children from their homes due to a parent's 'mental illness' and placing them in non-Native homes. In South Dakota, for instance, a Native child is 11 times more likely to be placed within the foster system than is a white child. Despite the Indian Act's recognition that Native children in the foster system should be placed with Native families, Callow notes that when the child-welfare issue is framed in terms of a Native parent's disability or mental illness, that tends to be treated as superseding the rights of the child to be raised in a home that is in line with their tribal or cultural identity (Brice 2020). That Native children are often placed in non-Native (and especially white) homes when Native foster homes are available reflects that this practice is a continuation of the legacy of forced removal for the purposes of eliminating a people through the attempted elimination of their culture. The structural gaslighting here is multi-dimensional. It inheres both in the apparatus that disableizes Native parents and in the naturalizing narratives that obscure the non-accidental connection between settler colonialism and the production of disability for Native populations.

The apparatus of disability within settler colonial societies thus cannot be disentangled from the settler colonial project of Indigenous land dispossession which requires the elimination of Native peoples for its completion, and both of which require structural

gaslighting to accomplish. Settler logics underwrite the desire to extinguish a range of diverse lifeways and forms of disabled existence. Extinguishing non-neurotypical behaviors often takes the form of coercing, abusing, and incarcerating the people who engage in them. The effort to extinguish autistic lifeways, for instance, in order to make an autistic person become “indistinguishable” from a neurotypical person is rooted in much the same logic as General Richard Pratt’s call to “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” This admonition was the motto of the residential Carlisle School, where Native children were punished with abuse for speaking their language and were taught white Christian ways of being to replace their own, as they were forced to cut their hair and wear clothing styles consonant settler aesthetics. Residential schools formed a backbone of the cultural assimilationist tactics that underwrite settler colonial genocide. In a range of cases, forced compliance and incarceration underly the effort to replace ways of being that threaten settler colonial ableist white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy with those that do not.

1.5 Concluding Remarks

Structural gaslighting occupies a range of rhetorical styles, domains, narratives, practices, and strategies. It can be explicit and blatant or subtle and stealth. It can come from widely accessible popular discourse or from within the protected walls of the ivory tower. What should be clear from the range of cases considered here, however, is that structural gaslighting is not metaphorical, and neither are its harms. The epistemic rarely remains solely epistemic. It reaches into every aspect of our lives. It underlies the ideologies that

many of us are so steeped in that we don't even realize they are there. It constructs our systems of violence and it disappears them from view just as quickly as it builds them. Structural gaslighting facilitates and covers up real material abuse in people's lives, including sexual violence, incarceration, forced sterilization, land theft, and state-sponsored death. Those concerned with disrupting the material harms caused by structural oppression ought not ignore the essential role that stealth epistemic tactics like structural gaslighting play in upholding the systems that produce them.

Notes

1. The goal of the structural gaslighting surrounding Israel's current U.S.-backed genocide of the Palestinian people, for instance, does not lie in convincing Palestinians that they deserve unmitigated cruelty, dehumanization, torture, sexual violence, starvation, and mass execution. Rather, it lies in convincing *those who have the power to stop the genocide* that such heinous atrocities and crimes against humanity are not only justified and deserved but are necessary for the preservation of 'western civilization.'
2. For the account of structural violence on which I am relying, see Ruíz (2024).
3. "Individuals, institutions, political systems, and social groups engage in structural gaslighting, regardless of whether they intend to do so, when they invoke oppressive ideologies, disappear or obscure the actual causes and mechanisms of oppression, and conceptually sever acts of oppression from the structures that produce them" (Berenstain 2020).
4. For a further unpacking of this idea, see Dotson's piece 'Bad Magic' in (Berenstain, Dotson, Paredes, Ruíz, and Silva 2021).
5. For one of the most vivid origins of the 'Matriarch' image, see Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report by the Office of Planning and Policy, US Department of Labor – "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action." The report offers many examples of structural gaslighting via misogynoiristic controlling images.
6. Christina Cross's (2020) research on educational attainment among extended family households similarly analyzes the various rationales offered for racial disparities in educational and socio-economic status between white children and children of color. She shows how the figure that "57 per cent of Black and 35 per cent of Hispanic children ever live

in an extended family, compared with 20 per cent of White children,” is used to elide the structural disadvantages produced by intersecting oppressions for children of color.

7. Racecraft is a constructed “mental terrain” with “topographical features that Americans regularly navigate,” and which “we cannot readily stop traversing” (Fields and Fields 2014, 19). This landscape crafted by collective imaginings influences and structures a wide range of actions. Fields and Fields theorize racecraft as originating in the magical thinking necessary to force human populations into the organizational taxonomy of ‘race’ that categorizes humans on the basis of presumed inborn traits, distinguishes groups from one another, and structures them into a naturally hierarchical ranking of value. They write, “Fitting actual humans to any such grid immediately calls forth the busy repertoire of strange maneuvering that is part of what we call *racecraft*” (16). In these “strange maneuverings” of racecraft are exemplary illustrations of the mechanics of structural gaslighting.
8. See Ruíz (2024) for an incisive account of the construction and preservation of what she terms “white dynastic formations.”
9. Marissa Alexander, Cece McDonald, and Cyntoia Brown have all served time in prison for defending themselves from physical and sexual violence. McDonald, a trans woman, was forced to serve her time in a men’s prison.
10. Cis men who physically and sexually assault trans women, for instance, often portray their victims as having perpetrated a sexual violation against them (Bettcher 2007).
11. Lloyd (2001) is an excellent example of using the well-supported theoretical and methodological frameworks of evolutionary biology to debunk the purported empirical evidence for the evolutionary psychological hypothesis that rape behavior is a biological adaptation. Buss and Schmitt (2015) also serves as an extensive repertoire of under-supported evolutionary psychological hypotheses of sex differences.

12. See Fine's (2010) *Delusions of Gender* for compelling examples from neuroscience.
13. The motivation and function of theories of scientific racism was to protect white wealth by legitimizing the brutality of enslavement by way of 'empirically' confirming both the *sub-* and *super-*human-ness of African and African-descended peoples. It is notable that even a white European count in the Eighteenth Century could see these justifications for what they were.
14. However, it should also be noted that anti-Black racism is by no means the only form of racism for which science has produced theoretical justifications.
15. See Kahn (2004) for an extensive accounting of the commercial motivations for classifying BiDiI as a race-specific drug.
16. White settler capitalists were not interested in blocking the abolition of slavery *solely* because they wanted to maintain their racial power. They also wanted to protect the profits they accrued from the system of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983).
17. This latter comparison of racial differences in *responsibility* for pollution is one that is rarely studied. The lack of focus on disparities in culpability has the same sleight-of-hand effect that Fields and Fields identify by hiding the role that white people play in creating and maintaining racist systems.
18. For further illustration that mere lip service attention to structural factors is inadequate for preventing structural gaslighting, see the extended critique of Fricker's analysis of hermeneutical injustice and sexual harassment in Berenstein (2020).
19. The medical model of disability conceives of disability as an intrinsic biological deficiency or deficit of the individual and rejects the social construction of disability. The BSM acknowledges that the social environment plays a role in producing disability, for instance, by being constructed primarily for sighted people and people who do not use wheelchairs. However, it takes disability to be constructed from a substrate of *impairment*, which is

conceives of as a negatively valenced intrinsic biological property of the individual, much the same way that the medical model conceives disability, as Tremain (2017) points out.

20. Lovaas was also a pioneer of gay conversion therapy—now widely recognized as abuse, including by the American Psychological Association.
21. Singer, for instance, counts disabilities as diverse as spina bifida, Down Syndrome, and Haemophilia as “severe” enough to license the killing of infants who have them (1979).
22. Facilitated communication differs from Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), which use technology to unlock the voices of otherwise non-verbal persons.
23. The client of the facilitated communicator would, for instance, have no way of expressing to anyone else that they *did not consent* to a sexual relationship with the facilitated communicator.
24. It is also noteworthy that Stubblefield decided to *give him a new name* and call him only by that name, echoing the practice of white enslavers and slave mistresses renaming the Black people they enslaved as an expression of ownership and domination (Engber 2016)
25. The first of many signs of their extraordinary ignorance about the phenomenon of sexual violence is their assumption that acts of sexual assault are incompatible with the perpetrator feeling genuine love for their victim.
26. The gendered racist controlling image that portrays Black men as inherently sexually aggressive and predatory (especially toward white women) likely contributed to Singer and McMahan’s refusal to see a Black man as a victim of sexual violence, just as the presumed innocence and fragility of white femininity likely contributed to their refusal to see a white woman as a perpetrator of sexual violence.
27. While Tremain’s notion of disableization is valuable for interrupting the production of ableist force relations, it is also important to recognize that Indigenous conceptions of ableism and

their corresponding concerns cannot be subsumed under non-Indigenous ontologies of ableism. For a discussion of how Indigenous interventions into the ontologies of ableism found in disability studies might attend to the disablement of land wrought by settler colonialism, see Jaffee and John (2018).

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