

Situating Cancel Culture: On Harm Reduction, Elite Capture, and Epistemic Hurdles

ABSTRACT

Many view *cancellation* as a method for holding influential personalities accountable for bad behavior, while others think *cancelling* amounts to censorship and bullying. I hold that neither of these accounts are worth pursuing, especially if the aim is social progress. In this paper, I offer a *situated* account of cancellation and cancel culture, locating the phenomenon in our exclusionary history while examining the social dynamics of belief. When we *situate* cancel culture, we can see how problematic instances of cancelling are embedded in ignorance. While combatting ignorance appears to call for a remedy rooted in feminist standpoint epistemology, there are risks in adopting naive practices of deference. Applying criticisms of epistemic injustice and adopting Táíwò's *elite capture* framework, I explain how well-intentioned *cancelling* can work against social movements. Since epistemic trust mechanisms discourage self-reflection and belief revision, the relevant tactics for enacting social change—coalition politics and education—seem out of reach. I conclude by sketching cancel culture as a diagnostic tool: cancellation can be used appropriately in marginalized communities, but when it comes to combatting ignorance among privileged folks, we should view cancel culture as a method for determining where our social institutions are failing us.

Cancel culture, and cancelling as a practice, is polarizing. Cancellation has become a popular strategy to organize efforts against problematic and harmful views. Broadly construed, cancellation is the phenomenon of publicly (often on social media) denouncing people for their problematic views or behaviour and subsequently encouraging others to boycott their work or lobbying organizations to remove them from an influential platform. While many insist cancellation is simply a way in which privileged people are finally being held accountable for their actions, others insist cancel culture effectively hinders open discussions of controversial issues, or worse, is a threat to free speech. In this paper, I offer a *situated* account of cancel culture in which cancellation is a political strategy that has the potential to reduce harm, but is at the same time an often misappropriated and problematic practice. More than this, though, I hope to point out that observing cancellation as a phenomenon can offer valuable information about how epistemic and political structures are serving (or hindering) projects of social justice. While there are circumstances in which cancellation can be useful, and circumstances in which cancellation is clearly problematic, I hold it is better to think of cancellation and cancel culture as a way of diagnosing how our social institutions are failing to adequately educate and contextualize projects aimed at social justice (and thus, preventing tangible social change).

If those in marginalized communities can use cancellation as a method to reduce harm, for example, this seems appropriate. However, when cancellation amounts to treating people as if they are incapable of improvement or resorting to outright harassment and threats on social media, there is no space for social progress.¹ On this front, I take it feminist standpoint

¹ Presumably, social progress will be closer if the problematic person (being cancelled) comes to a genuine change of beliefs or is removed from a position in which they perpetuate harm. Social progress is further away, then, if cancellation only amounts to online bullying—bullying doesn't get us the right kind of educational practices that allow for change, and moreover, bullying seems like a clearly (ethically) problematic practice to embrace.

epistemology can inform approaches distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate instances of cancellation. When those in marginalized communities refuse to engage with influential personalities who are causing them harm, it is important to trust their accounts. On the other hand, then, when cancelling is detached from marginalized communities' calls to action, this seems problematic.

Feminist standpoint theory cannot account for all the problematic issues at play, however. There is an underdiscussed, well-intentioned cancelling that can work against the social movements it intends to advance. Sometimes allies are keen to stand with those in marginalized communities, and this leads to more privileged persons embracing and participating in cancellation campaigns. This is informed by feminist standpoint theory as it is commonly adopted: deference to marginalized individuals is the responsible thing to do. While this is true in a sense, our social structures are set up such that privileged coopting of cancel culture (even with the best of intentions) can lead to detachment from the aims of the marginalized people most affected by the injustice that is the target of social justice efforts. This is because a *deferential* feminist standpoint epistemology in elite spaces ultimately ignores the larger social structures working to marginalize or privilege certain groups of people (Táíwò 2021; 2022). These structures, then, are the more appropriate focus of critical feminist epistemologies. Extending Táíwò's *constructive* reinterpretation of feminist standpoint theory, which provides a clearer picture of the social structures at play, I hope to highlight how epistemic trust and the social dynamics of belief cause further problems in preventing belief change and collaboration.

Feminist standpoint theorists helpfully point out that marginalized people are better situated to understand the social mechanisms perpetuating their oppression, but this is not the whole story (Harding 1993; see also Jaggar 1989; Harding 1991; Pohlhaus 2002). It is clear that

“those privileged by social divisions have little incentive for recognizing the relations that privilege them,” and moreover, “it is in their interest not to see these relations clearly as constructed and oppressive to some” (Pohlhaus 2002, 287). This is one of the points emphasized by epistemologies of ignorance (Hill Collins 2000; Tuana 2004; Mills 2007). If ignorance is not accounted for, then, naïve interpretations of standpoint theory risk missing the mark. An appropriately nuanced, standpoint-informed approach must be attentive to certain contextual features. In this way, I hope to point out (like Táíwò) that feminist standpoint epistemology as it is often adopted—that is, as a mandate “listen to the marginalized”—is not as simple as it sounds. More than this, I want to highlight that this is all the more complicated when we think about what we are to do with *cancellation* as a social practice.

In what follows, I offer a commentary on epistemic circumstances related to the state of contemporary cancel culture. I argue that social structures and the social dynamics of belief often actively work against a coalitional politic, even when well-intentioned allies adopt what they take to be a feminist-informed approach aimed to work in favour of progressive social movements. This can make the important work of combatting ignorance through education and cross-community relationships feel out of reach. Understanding how ignorance replicates and examining the epistemic distance that can prevent collective cooperation, then, is essential for informing our coalitional projects. In what follows, I do not wish to develop a novel and clearly defended view of what cancel culture *is*, but instead, I hope to examine some of the ways in which cancelling, viewed as a way of approaching political problems and problematic political actors, can serve and/or frustrate the goals of those who have been marginalized and oppressed.²

² Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for offering this language to describe my project.

In *Section I*, after briefly explaining some key terms and concepts, I offer a *situated* account of cancel culture, in which I argue cancellation *can* be used as a legitimate harm-reductive strategy, informed by feminist standpoint theory and epistemologies of ignorance. In *Section II*, I account for problematic instances of cancellation, including the well-intentioned cancelling performed by allies, in which feminist standpoint theory cannot helpfully instruct us. Further, I offer speculation on how the social dynamics of belief can compound the issues highlighted by Táíwò’s structural critique of naïve standpoint epistemologies. To conclude, I offer a reinterpretation of cancellation as a tool activists and allies can use to our (perhaps minimal) benefit. While this account helps to inform our aims for coalition and social justice, the pragmatics will require a more careful treatment. I am convinced, however, that *properly construed* feminist epistemologies are central to understanding avenues forward aimed at social progress.

Section I. Situating Cancel Culture

It is important to point out that “cancelling” is a “socially mediated phenomena with origins in queer communities of color” (Clark 2020, 89). As Meredith D. Clark explains, “Black Twitter,” that is, the “meta-network of culturally connected communities on the microblogging site,” turned the “language of being ‘cancelled’ into an internet meme” (2020, 89; Clark 2015; Shifman 2013). Of course, cancellation and cancel culture have since become the subject of polarized political and moral debate. Clark (2020) convincingly argues that the term ‘cancel,’ as it is wielded in popular discourse, has effectively been weaponized by elites to silence those in marginalized communities. She claims the term “cancelling” has “devolved into journalistic shorthand” utilized to silence marginalized people “who have adapted earlier resistance

strategies for effectiveness in the digital space” (2020, 89). I will return to this conception in my discussion of elite capture in *Section II*, taking up precisely this issue. It seems to me that the weaponization of cancel culture is the result of social and political structures that are extremely difficult to overcome.

In this paper, I do not wish to defend a particular conception of cancellation or cancel culture. Instead, I am convinced by Erich Halata Matthes’ (2021) reasoning: “Commentators often act as if cancel culture is simply good or bad, something to be criticized or supported, something that exists or doesn’t—but cancel culture is too amorphous for that” (78). If I convince my reader of nothing else, I hope to highlight that discussions of cancel culture require a great deal of nuance. For now, I will use the term ‘cancelling’ to describe the practice of withdrawing one’s attention, often publicly declaring this disengagement on social media, from “someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money” (Clark 2020, 88). Cancel *culture*, relatedly, will refer to the social acceptability of participating in cancellation. This is similar to Matthes’ (2021) description of cancel culture as a *disposition* to call for the ostracization or boycotting of a person or their work (78). Presumably, right-wing moral panic about cancel culture’s effect on free speech is related to concerns about a *culture* in which people preemptively censor themselves to avoid offending the masses, ending up *cancelled*. This is part of why I think the distinction is important.

In this section, my goal is to *situate* cancellation and cancel culture according to the social, historical, political (and ultimately, epistemic) contexts. In the same way that feminist and social epistemologies aim at *situating* knowledge according to the intersections of social and historical identities (see Alcoff 2000; Collins 2008; Harding 1991; Pohlhaus 2012), I hope to

situate cancel culture. In these traditions, when it comes to knowledge, “the knower’s situatedness refers to the situations in which the knower finds herself repeatedly over time due to the social relations that position her in the world” (Pohlhaus 2012, 716-717). Likewise, I think there is something to be learned by excavating the social, historical, and political circumstances that give rise to cancel culture as a polarizing topic of discourse. I think there is one especially clear takeaway: identity politics will matter when it comes to cancellation’s viability as a political strategy. Through examination of exclusionary histories that effectively erase marginalized people from contributing to public discourse, I insist cancellation could be an important harm reductive tool for those in marginalized communities. At the very least, this re-frame of cancel culture should communicate to privileged people that cancellation is not inherently unreasonable or the result of unwarranted sensitivity. Some of the (many) complications that arise in this proposal are taken up in the next section.

The irony, of course, should not be lost that right wing movements in the United States are increasingly concerned about free speech and cancel culture, while at the same time, Republican politicians are passing bills to criminalize the teaching of Critical Race Theory (read: American history) in schools (Schuessler 2021), prohibiting discussions of sexual orientation and gender identities in classrooms (Phillips 2022), and preventing trans individuals from accessing gender affirming healthcare (Sharrow and Sederbaum 2020) (this all seems pretty *cancel-y* to me). This, of course, isn’t the sense of cancellation with which I am primarily concerned here. However, this is a reactionary cancel-adjacent phenomenon with which philosophers might especially concern themselves. I take it philosophers are committed to reserving spaces where we can discuss (and hopefully dismantle) problematic and controversial ideas. While this mentality might push us to think we ought to eliminate cancellation and cancel culture in all its forms,

situating cancellation can help us make sense of its strange—seemingly asymmetrical—use. In some instances, cancellation might be a useful epistemic strategy for marginalized communities.

Understanding resistance to cancel culture must involve some consideration of the harsh discourse surrounding its use. As I recently pointed out in a brief op-ed, privileged voices sometimes complain “you can’t say anything anymore”³ or insist *it doesn’t make sense* to cancel influential personalities for their problematic behaviour (2022). In its most abstract form, of course, cancel culture is harsh! If cancellation is the immediate action when individuals misunderstand important aspects of the social world, this is surely too extreme. Cancellation, however, “is not just an *abstract* strategy, it is a tangible way for marginalized communities to reduce harm” (Millman 2022). While many might (understandably) think this attitude is rooted in over-sensitivity, consideration of the relevant history and oppression offers insight into *why* some progressive movements seem eager to *cancel*. This is the reinterpretation I am offering here: situating cancel culture helps us see that the state of the polarizing practice is not mysterious or mere sensitivity-driven irrationality. There are instances in which it is simply a method for harm reduction.

One of the most salient features of collective knowledge is that “it is largely produced by the ultra-privileged” (Millman 2022). As an example, consider colonial histories of racist exclusion: Black and Indigenous people in Canada and the United States have been *actively* kept out of knowledge production. These groups were kept out of higher education, denied political participation, lived in segregated communities, and were thus, physically removed from accessible amenities (see Heath Canada 2009; Maynard 2017; Henry 2021; Shaw and Smith

³ As a friend of mine recently pointed out to me, a nice response here might be “Really, what was it you wanted to say?”

2021). These factors all work together to effectively prohibit these people from shaping social discourse (Millman 2022; see also Mills 2007; Skitolsky 2020).

This is the reality of North America's colonial and genocidal history. On top of this, there has been continual dismissal of marginalized voices and movements advocating for basic social and political improvements. In 1951, a group of Black Americans petitioned the United Nations to recognize the ongoing genocide of Black people at the hands of the US government—in 2022, police brutality and environmental racism are still lethal (Patterson 1951). Too many Indigenous people living in what is now Canada lack access to safe living conditions (including drinking water). While calls to action are consistently articulated by those most affected by these histories, and while there have been some improvements in the material conditions of people in these communities, this traumatic history is not particularly salient to privileged people. At the same time, this history is essential to understanding why it is so important public education includes CRT-informed curricula, and *additionally* why there might be a need for epistemic strategies like *no-platforming* and (as I'm arguing) *cancellation* as harm reduction techniques.

Epistemologies of ignorance make this clear. Since people of color in colonial Western contexts, for example, have historically been excluded from political and social discourse, mainstream theories largely erase their experiences. This erasure reifies the perception of our social structures as homogenous and harmonious, leading to privileged people identifying instances of injustice as *anomalies*, when this is not the case (Mills 2007, 17). Racism (and colonialism, and misogyny, and queerphobia, etc.) have always been the *norm* in settler North America. Accounting for the epistemic shortcomings of the 'privileged gaze' in order to correct misunderstandings must involve prioritizing the voices in marginalized communities. This is where a feminist standpoint epistemology can help us understand the social dynamics of belief:

marginalized people are better situated to accurately see how contemporary social systems are problematic (Harding 1993).

Sandra Harding and other standpoint theorists highlight how those in marginalized positions are often better situated to acquire a more objective picture of the world (Harding 1991; 1993; Pohlhaus 2002). Harding (1993) holds that a feminist standpoint epistemology will point out that in societies stratified by race, class, gender, sexuality, and politics shaping social structure, “the activities of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them” (54). This means standpoint theories will argue for starting off from the lives of marginalized peoples *in order to produce less partial accounts* of those lives, privileged lives, and the whole social order—this is how Harding argues a feminist standpoint epistemology provides a stronger objectivity than other empiricist theories (1993, 56-57). From this, it becomes clear that Western histories of racism, colonialism, and the consistent, problematic treatment of marginalized communities are *knowledge issues* (as well as ethical issues). Moreover, this points to the solution in rectifying our epistemic shortcomings: listening to those in marginalized communities.

This context, I think, makes it clear that cancellation and cancel culture interpreted (by privileged folks) as *unwarranted* sensitivity is often a gross misrepresentation. Privileged people who insist *it doesn't make sense to cancel someone* betray their ignorance. Since privileged folks so easily fail to recognize the history of violence from which they are removed, dismissal of marginalized voices entrenches their perceived entitlement and pushes the responsibility of social justice onto the shoulders of the most marginalized. It is the right of those in marginalized groups to refuse to engage with persons and content that cause them harm. Furthermore, it is not

hard to see that “there is a point at which the continual onus of educating privileged (and ignorant) groups of people becomes too heavy a burden to bear” (Millman 2022, see also Real Talk: WOC & Allies 2017). It is unreasonable to expect those in marginalized communities to continually inflict and re-inflict trauma associated with the legacies of racism (or homophobia, or transphobia, or misogyny, etc.). Thus, when the emotional and educational labour is falling disproportionately on those already oppressed by current systems, cancellation can become an effective epistemic strategy by which marginalized people can reduce the harms (perpetuated by privileged ignorance) associated with a problematic history—namely, by silencing (or attempting to silence) those who are causing harm. What’s insulting about much of the current discourse, is that we sometimes treat issues as if it is *up for debate* whether marginalized individuals should be heaping trauma on their lives already fraught with racist treatment, for example, for our (white) benefit! That is not our call to make.

These observations, in my view, clearly establish cancellation as a potentially useful epistemic strategy for those in marginalized communities. When identity-oppressed individuals are harmed by those in influential positions, cancel campaigns are a potential avenue for holding these influential persons accountable—especially when those in identity-oppressed groups are systematically disadvantaged *before* the cancellable offenses perpetuate that harm. When social movements gain traction and there is a clear (feminist) epistemic advantage *on the part of those doing the cancelling*, cancellation seems like a natural fit for empowering those most affected by ongoing oppressive actions being taken against them.

When movements are orchestrated by and available to the most marginalized in a community, we should accept cancellation as a legitimate epistemic strategy. I think the #MeToo movement often fits here. For example, feminist scholars provide compelling accounts of the

epistemic authority we should grant victims of sexual assault (see Manne 2018; 2020; Burke 2021). As we continue, however, it is important to notice that many instances of cancellation do not adhere to this framework. Where allies in progressive social movements virtually ‘jump’ to the defense of the marginalized, there is a good chance they risk perpetuating harm in some significant sense: this is my primary interest in the following section.

Section II. Problematic Cancelling and Feminist Epistemologies

While the last section was primarily concerned with why cancellation might be a useful political tool for those in marginalized communities, this section will ultimately examine some of the challenges associated with cancellation’s use and further, argue that social and institutional structures are to blame. To start, though, I will examine some of the issues raised by scholars interested in the ethical implications of cancellation and cancel culture. These will highlight some important aspects of cancellation and cancel culture as they are commonly adopted, thus orienting my discussion of what observations we should take to be relevant for my ultimate project of understanding cancellation and cancel culture as useful for diagnosing social ills.

Of course, there is good reason to think cancellation cannot always be the answer. Some scholars have pointed out that cancellation leads to problematic ethical implications for the individuals involved in cancellation campaigns. Others have pointed out that the real issue with cancellation and cancel culture occurs at the structural level. Mary Beth Willard (2021) voices the first type of concern. One of the important discussions in her recent book highlights how social media problematically “shapes” the ways cancellations happen (Willard 2021, 122). It is obviously true that cancellation and cancel culture are made possible largely due to social media platforms like Twitter. Although I think social media has become an important part of

community building and awareness raising, Willard (2021) makes a compelling point about the risks of social media's incentives. As she sees it, social media's incentivization of speediness and sensational content does not allow individuals the time or motivation to reflect on the ethically relevant factors (2021, 128-129). As a result, she is concerned that "cancellation in many cases is just a narrowly focused kind of moral grandstanding" (2021, 122).

Moral grandstanding on Willard's (2021) view—an adoption of Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke's (2016) characterization—is the declaration of a moral stance aiming to convince others of one's moral respectability, rather than offering a meaningful addition to public moral discourse. For Willard, this is ethically problematic because it pushes individuals to posture, rather than "contributing much of substance" (2021, 122). This differs from virtue signalling because the nature of social media makes it easy to signal disingenuously, and moreover, there are no shared controls to stop cancellations from "spiralling out of control" (Willard 2021, 127).

More than this, Willard (2021) points to a few ways that cancellation tends to miss nuance. On her view, cancellation is insensitive to the severity of the crime: as she says, "cancellation seemingly erases the difference between a crude tweet and serial sexual assault" (116). Additionally, since cancellation is tied up in the attention economy, it is applied arbitrarily. That is, effective cancellation "depends mostly on the whims of the Internet's attention" (Willard 2021, 114). Moreover, there is no shared understanding of what it means to make amends to come back from cancellation. These three things together, on Willard's (2021) view, should lead us to think cancellation is a flawed method for bringing wrongdoers to justice.

These are all helpful things to point out, not only about the ethical implications for those engaging in cancellation, but also for the ways cancellation often plays out on the ground. In my view, these problems with cancel culture are not problems arising from individual engagement in

cancellation, but rather indicative of a much larger problem. On this note, I want to highlight Erich Halata Matthes' (2021) characterization of how individual instances of cancellation gone astray are often tied up in the failure of institutions. Like Willard (2021), Matthes (2021) is interested in the ethical implications for those participating in cancellation. His approach relies on contextual analysis, allowing for nuanced evaluations of cancellations, depending on the circumstances. One thing that is particularly salient in his analysis, though, is the problematic way in which individualism obscures the way we think about what cancellation and cancel culture *is*. He explains:

When cancel culture directs our attention to the sacrificial destruction of particular individuals, it's easy enough for those in positions of power [...] to acquiesce to the canceling of some representative artists without making any significant alterations to who wields power in their organizations or how decisions are made (99).

This points to Willard's (2021) concern about *empty* moral posturing. It seems, in reality, cancel culture often does not lead to change, and instead individuals are offered up as sacrifices only to maintain the status quo. This is the phenomenon I want to excavate in terms of the social and feminist epistemic structures in place. Therefore, this is the aim of the remainder of this section. I hope to point out, with Matthes, that cancellation as a political tool is not (in itself) the problem. Rather, the problem lies in the elite capture of cancel culture (Matthes 2021; Táiwò 2022).

This is one way well-intentioned cancelling movements in which allies of marginalized folks engage (inadvertently) perpetuate harm they are trying to avoid. This is a phenomenon that is well-documented in other areas. For example, Andrea Pitts (2017) has outlined how Anglophone epistemic injustice literature actually *performs* epistemic injustice. While Pitts focuses on how analytic Anglophone epistemology ignores the accounts of Latin American,

Latina U.S., and Caribbean philosophers’ work “whose existences require a perpetual struggle against neoliberal economic expansion and epistemic hegemony,” we can see how this applies to other accounts (2017, 150). When scholars frame discussions about epistemic injustice without meaningfully engaging with those who experience epistemic injustice most harshly, “they exclude the testimony of racialized others from the dominant discourse about how and why we exclude certain individuals from our community of possible knowers, in order to reassure themselves of their own moral and epistemic integrity” (Skitolsky 2020, 49).

Here, we again see an explanation reminiscent of Charles Mills’ (2007) account of ignorance, explaining why we see such widespread misunderstanding and perpetuation of injustice—even among allies of marginalized communities. As Lissa Skitolsky further explains, we must recognize the systemic nature of racist epistemic injustice:

If we heed the wisdom of hip-hop and the work of critical race theorists who emphasize that white sensibility is characterized by a profound lack of empathy for [B]lack communities, then it becomes clear that instead of a call to better “know” or “perceive” the racialized “other,” we should recommend a greater effort to accept the limits of white sensibility and examine how the sheer acknowledgement of these limits acts to counter the willful refusal to grant the testimony of racialized others any epistemic value (2020, 50).

In this way, we can see that the reasonable insistence on centering marginalized voices, like feminist standpoint theory seems to prescribe, without accounting for the ignorance of the privileged in the room, we are destined to replicate the epistemic injustice we intend to avoid. This is why Skitolsky’s assessment is so powerful. The replication of systemic (epistemic) racism comes from privileged folks refusing to acknowledge the limits of what they can know.

Furthermore, and relatedly, we can better understand this picture with Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's development of the concept *elite capture*. The problem, as Táíwò sees it, is not *that* standpoint epistemology encourages epistemic deference, but *how* (2021). Of course, the deference encouraged by standpoint theory is aimed to empower the marginalized through rightfully identifying them as sources of knowledge, and therefore targets of deference. However, “deferring in this way as a rule or default political orientation can actually work counter to marginalized groups’ interests, especially in elite spaces” (Táíwò 2021). Clearly, elite spaces are the ones which carry social capital. People in elite spaces govern our society, produce academic research, train academics, and report on contemporary social issues. Elite spaces make up the positions in which one can affect “institutions and broader social dynamics” (Táíwò 2021).

Being in an elite space is a kind of social advantage—and being a person in an elite space usually comes with some other social privilege. This means the identity oppressed individuals who find themselves in elite spaces are likely removed from the most marginalized they are supposed to represent (Táíwò 2021). In elite spaces, then, you will see well-intentioned epistemic deference to a member of an identity oppressed group, but these forms of deference are “ultimately self-undermining and only reliably serve ‘elite capture’: the control over political agendas and resources by a group’s most advantaged people” (Táíwò 2021). Feminist standpoint deference, in this sense, is often enacted far too narrowly. We exist in larger social structures that functionally operate to exclude marginalized people from the spaces where social movement has the potential to make tangible strides. Those who are most affected by injustice are *not even in the room* to inform discussions about how to best mitigate the injustice they experience. Where we are concerned about social justice, then, “the mechanisms of the social system that determine

who gets into which room often just *are* the parts of society we aim to address” (Táíwò 2021). Thinking more systemically must involve consideration of these broader systems: thinking about who is excluded from elite spaces and why, gets us closer to the feminist standpoint aims with which we started.

Clearly, the deference model is rooted in good intentions. However, individualizing a systemic problem results in outcomes which obscure our intended point of study. Deference offloads accountability, and often paints a history of individual “heroes” who have done the work that is actually “ours to do now in the present” (Táíwò 2021). Moreover, the deference tactics “that insulate us from criticism also insulate us from connection and transformation. They prevent us from engaging empathetically and authentically with the struggles of other people,” which is anti-political (Táíwò 2021). The necessary conditions to make tangible strides for the most marginalized—that is, the necessary conditions to accomplish the aims of standpoint theory—requires a constructive, rather than a deferential approach. A constructive approach will inevitably be demanding: it requires us “to be accountable and responsive to people who aren’t yet in the room, to build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together, rather than merely judiciously navigating the rooms history has built for us” (Táíwò 2021).

More than this, privileged perspectives can reduce identity-oppressed people to their traumatic experiences. As Táíwò points out, it is harmful to endorse a deferential feminist epistemology since this “asks the traumatized to shoulder burdens alone that we ought to share collectively” (2021). Defining people only according to their traumatic burdens is dehumanizing for privileged benefit (see Táíwò 2021; Estes 2020). We are connected through shared humanity, and coalitional politics become next to impossible when we refuse to engage with the larger

structures maintaining the oppressive status quo. In Táíwò's words, “‘coalitional politics’ (understood as struggle across difference) is, simply, politics” (2021).

Here, making use of Matthes, Pitts, Skitolsky, and Táíwò, we can extend similar reasoning to the practice of cancellation. Unsurprisingly, and closely aligned to the feminist standpoint account in the previous section, we can reasonably infer that cancellation that comes from allies is probably not as well informed as it should be. This is partially due to the nature of lived experience, but it is also related to elite capture, and the limits of privileged sensibility. When cancellation is adopted by ‘the elites,’ it will inevitably be detached from the aims of the most marginalized. This is how well-intentioned allies of social movements can inadvertently hinder the projects they aim to advance. Moreover, this explains how cancel culture can inadvertently lend support to social environments in which “the veneer of progressivism remains valued far higher than the action of it” (Matthes 2021, 107; Flood 2020).

Without actual consultation, community building, and the resulting coalitional relationship, elites cannot do the marginalized justice—this goes for cancel campaigns and further projects of social justice alike. Similarly, coming to terms with the problematic implications of well-intentioned cancel culture (rooted in deferential standpoint theory), must involve a recognition that privileged sensibility places limits on knowledge. This more nuanced understanding of feminist standpoint theory as *constructive* allows us to better conduct ourselves in a politically polarized environment, where cancel culture (and its implications) have a tangible impact on our behavior.

Deference to the most marginalized in elite spaces amounts to tokenization. Taking feminist standpoint aims seriously, then, must involve a clearer picture of the structural mechanisms which gatekeep elite spaces. This is the form of detachment from social movements

of which we must be especially aware, as feminist scholars. We preach the message “listen to the most marginalized” while failing to remain in touch with the most marginalized. We tokenize our identity-oppressed colleagues and pat ourselves on the back for being one of the socially enlightened, while systemic inequality thrives outside (and inside) our universities. This is white feminism. Appreciating the severity of this problem must involve taking tangible steps toward a constructive feminist epistemology.

The problem here, of course, is implementing a truly coalitional politic. Cancel culture, paired with the internet’s virtual hold on our lives, problematically encourages *slacktivism*—an expression of support for a social cause through social media sharing or online petition signing, requiring little real-life commitment or effort (Oxford Languages). If privileged people can offer retweets rather than more involved efforts for the same sense of deluded progressivism, then they will opt for laziness. This is not necessarily because they see it as laziness, though. Elite, naive adoption of cancellation offers privileged folks a sense of satisfaction with their moral stances, even when it is nowhere near enough. This is due to the ignorance structures in place, plus the elite capture at work in these spaces.

At the same time, the internet *can* (and does) act as a useful tool for community organizing. Gaining literacy in cancel culture and its practices must involve constructive approaches to these social issues. Examining potential methods for coalition is a tricky enough enterprise on its own. However, our social structures often further prevent the authentic and empathetic engagement required to form these relationships—and this is reflected in our online social spaces as well. The problem in building these cross-community bridges is, in part, physical proximity. This is unsurprising. A tenured faculty member at an academic institution and a young, imprisoned, financially disadvantaged, Black woman will obviously be physically

distant. More than this, though, there are epistemic mechanisms that work to keep social communities ideologically separate. This sort of belief divide becomes embedded in our social structures and is extremely difficult to overcome. This compounds the issue of elite capture. Elite spaces keep us detached from the most marginalized, and the social dynamics of belief keep us isolated via epistemic filters, and self-replicating belief systems.

We will inevitably place epistemic filters on ourselves through our social circles, our political affiliations, and our professional endeavours. In this way, *epistemic bubbles* develop, preventing individuals from interacting with other views (Nguyen 2018, 1-2).⁴ Often, though, especially in online environments, *echo chambers* develop, in which individuals not only encounter consistent affirmation of their views, but also acquire readily available explanations to protect their beliefs from refutation (Nguyen 2018, 2). Echo chambers deliver a series of strategies *actively* keeping individuals confident in their existing beliefs, and thus meeting outside views with hostility. While echo chambers are largely thought to be an epistemic feature of *online* communities, cognitive mechanisms of belief persistence nudge us toward echo chamber practices in all of our communities.

This is implied through contemporary psychology and cognitive science suggesting humans are adept at retaining existing beliefs and prioritizing comfort over evidence, making significant belief change rare (Smith 2016). Clearly, my political affiliation and those in my close ideological proximity will affect my ability to receive certain ideas as live options. Moreover, if humans are cognitively prepared to defer to members of their own group and protect existing belief structures, it does seem like the sort of education the feminist is advancing

⁴ Nguyen builds on Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Frank Cappella's work on echo chambers (see Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

won't be effective.⁵ While this psychological problem obviously compounds the problem of elite capture, there are additional epistemic problems.

Preferential treatment of partisan testimony aligns with epistemic principles of justification we take to be important. As Regina Rini (2017) points out, we are often justified in trusting members in our close ideological proximity, since our political commitments embody our value commitments. When I share partisan affiliation with another person, I know she and I coincide on (at least some) normative claims. In this case, as Rini puts it, from where I'm standing, "she *tends to get normative questions right*" (2017, 52). From my first-person perspective, then, this reasonably elevates the epistemic position of my partisans. Therefore, we are often *reasonably* being differentially receptive "to normative testimony from others, depending on their partisan affiliation" (Rini 2017, 50). What's perhaps more problematic in our current context, preserving mechanisms that elevate partisan testimony and undermine the accounts of non-partisans *can* be in our epistemic best interest. If we know non-partisans are mistaken, and at the same time we want reliable information, why should we consider a non-partisan's conflicting beliefs in the first place, let alone take them seriously?

Here I am highlighting how our social structures contribute to the epistemic distance preventing coalition building, at which elite capture only hints. With elite capture, we could infer that there is potential for epistemic distance between elites and marginalized folks, but here we can see that the social nature of belief adds another layer of complication. Elites and marginalized folks belong to different social communities, which means there are significant epistemic hurdles to overcome—related to the psychology, epistemic trust, and relationship

⁵ One concrete example is found in biases surrounding belief: there is ample evidence suggesting beliefs act to bias the perception and interpretation of information so that it is consistent with an already existing belief set (Connors & Halligan, 2015; see examples in Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Jones & Russell, 1980; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985; Gilovich, 2008).

building—in pursuing a constructive feminist standpoint intervention. While elites are physically distant from those most oppressed by the structures we hope to dismantle, elites may also be on the other side of a belief-divide. Think about how classism becomes embedded in the beliefs of upper middle-class folks through capitalistic myths and a belief in the sanctity of meritocracy, for example. In this way, elite capture becomes a more dire issue. Epistemic trust comes naturally among partisans, but to cultivate relationships across diverse groups, we are adding psychological and social challenges.

While this might sound a little hopeless, there is still some comfort to be found in this analysis. As Táíwò emphasizes, these constructive feminist projects are demanding for the fact that they require authentic relationship building. The important thing to notice here, is that when it comes to belief change, relationships are some of the only avenues we have for pursuing belief change anyway. Where humans are not necessarily responsive to evidence, we are responsive to our relevant social counterparts. Here, then, I am going to *double down* on cultivating meaningful social connection.

Section III. Moving Forward

Situating cancel culture can offer insight into why marginalized groups do not owe their emotional and educational labour to problematic (and ignorant) ideas. While cancelling might allow marginalized people a reprieve, it offers no obvious method for combatting the ignorance which allows bigoted views to thrive. Here, I want to suggest we, in fact, *can* use cancel culture to our advantage. Cancel culture *shows us* how social discourse is failing us. In this way, we can use discussions about cancel culture as a diagnostic tool, rather than a polarizing conversation that fails to address any of the actual social issues plaguing us.

Cancellation and cancel culture, as they are discussed and used to stir up moral panic, point to a clear list of topics where our social institutions are actively obscuring nuanced issues. This is how we can see cancel culture as helpful for diagnosis. The most ‘cancellable,’ controversial views in the discourse point us directly to the social issues which require our immediate attention. To be fair, I think this is a natural way to think about controversy in feminist philosophy more generally. However, making this step explicit helps us to see that cancellation and cancel culture, while often presented as warranting widespread moral panic, in reality, these simply emerge from (i) a failure of our institutions to adequately educate us about how privilege and oppression obscure social discourse and (ii) a failure of our institutions to allow for coalitional politics in favour of radical social change. Of course, this is more or less *by design* in a capitalist, white supremacist, colonial, misogynistic, heteronormative, etc. patriarchy. Discourse surrounding cancel culture can obscure social issues, and a constructive feminist epistemology is needed to guide us through.

There are no easy answers here. We must prioritize marginalized voices to more accurately understand the world in which we live, while receiving this information appropriately to (socially and politically) improve the conditions of those in marginalized communities. We must hold influential persons accountable for their problematic behaviour, and minimize the potential harm incurred by oppressed individuals as we attempt to educate responsibly. Where elite capture is the direct result of the oppressive social systems in which we (especially academics) operate, and the ignorance preventing progress is so tenacious thanks to the social structures of belief, we must do the work to build coalitional bridges. What’s complicated is that the nature of our social structures means privileged people are in a poor epistemic position when

it comes to seeing the avenues for progress. Connection to the most marginalized is required for feminist-informed action to stand.

References

- Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2000. "On Judging Epistemic Credibility: Is Social Identity Relevant?" In *Women of Color and Philosophy*, edited by Naomi Zack. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Burke, Tarana. 2021. *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*. New York: Flatiron Books.
- Clark, Meredith D. 2015. "Black Twitter: Building Connection Through Cultural Conversation." In *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, edited by Nathan Rambukkana, 205-217. Peter Lang Press.
- Clark, Meredith D. 2020. "DRAG THEM: A Brief Etymology of So-Called 'Cancel Culture.'" *Communication and the Public* 5, no. 3-4: 88-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562>
- Connors, Michael and Peter Halligan. 2015. "A Cognitive Account of Belief: A Tentative Road Map." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5: 1588. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01588>
- Estes, Nick (@nickwestes). 2020. "The cunning of trauma politics is that it turns actual people and struggles..." Twitter. September 4, 2020. <https://twitter.com/nickwestes/status/1301998637740851201?lang=en>
- Flood, Alison. 2020. "US Publishing Remains 'As White Today as it was Four Years Ago.'" *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/30/us-publishing-american-dirt-survey-diversity-cultural-appropriation>
- Gilovich, Thomas. 2008. *How We Know What Isn't So*: Simon and Schuster.
- Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* New York: Cornell University Press.
- Harding, Sandra. 1993. "Rethinking standpoint epistemology: 'What is strong objectivity?'" In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter, 49-82. Routledge.
- Hastorf, Albert and Hadley Cantril. 1954. "They Saw a Game: A Case Study." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49, no.1: 129-134.

<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0057880>

Heath Canada. 2009. "Drinking Water Advisories in First Nations Communities in Canada: A National Overview 1995-2007." Accessed May 1, 2022.
https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2009/sc-hc/H34-208-2009E.pdf

Henry, Natasha. 2021. "Racial Segregation of Black Students in Canadian Schools." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/racial-segregation-of-black-students-in-canadian-schools#:~:text=their%20own%20schools.-,Post%2DSecondary%20Education,in%20post%2Dsecondary%20school%20institutions.>

Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Rev. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Routledge.

Hobbes, Michael. 2022. "Is 'Cancel Culture' really a threat to America?" From <https://michaelhobbes.substack.com/p/is-cancel-culture-really-a-threat?s=r>.

Jaggar, Alison. 1989. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *Inquiry* 32, no. 2: 151-176

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall and Frank Cappella. 2008. *Echo chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*: Oxford University Press.

Jones, Warren H., and Dan Russell. 1980. "The Selective Processing of Belief Disconfirming Information." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 10, no. 3: 309-312.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1002/ejsp.2420100309>

Lord, Charles, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper. 1979. "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, no. 11: 2098-2109.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.37.11.2098>

Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press.

Manne, Kate. 2020. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. Crown.

Matthes, Erich Halata. 2021. *Drawing the Line: What to do With the Work of Immoral Artists From Museums to the Movies*. Oxford University Press.

Maynard, Robin. 2017. *Policing Black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present*. Halifax, Nova Scotia; Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.

Millman, Lara Roth. 2022. "Joe Rogan is at it Again: Cancel Culture can be Harsh, But it Can Also Help Reduce Harm." *The Conversation Canada*. <https://theconversation.com/joe-rogan-is-at-it-again-cancel-culture-can-be-harsh-but-it-can-also-help-reduce-harm-176776>

- Mills, Charles. 2007. "White ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11-38. Suny Press.
- Oxford Languages, s.v. "Slacktivism," accessed May 10,
<https://www.google.com/search?q=slacktivism&oq=slacktivism&aqs=chrome.69i59j0i512i9.2147j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#dobs=slacktivism>
- Patterson, William L., ed., 1951. *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Against the Negro People*. Civil Rights Congress, New York, N.Y.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile, Jr. 2002. "Knowing Communities: An Investigation of Harding's Standpoint Epistemology." *Social Epistemology* 16, no. 3: 283–293.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/0269172022000025633>
- Pohlhaus, Gaile, Jr. 2012. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance." *Hypatia*, 27, no. 4: 715-735.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01222.x>
- Phillips, Amber. 2022. "Florida's Law Limiting LGBTQ Discussion in Schools, Explained." *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2022.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/01/what-is-florida-dont-say-gay-bill/>
- Pitts, Andrea. 2017. "Decolonial Praxis and Epistemic Injustice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. Edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, 149-157. London: Routledge.
- Real Talk: WOC & Allies. 2017. "White People, Stop Asking Us to Educate You About Racism." From <https://medium.com/@realtalkwocandallies/white-people-stop-asking-us-to-educate-you-about-racism-69273d39d828>
- Rini, Regina. 2017. "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology." *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27, no. 2, E-43-E-64. <http://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2017.0025>
- Schuessler, Jennifer. 2021. "Bans on Critical Race Theory Threaten Free Speech, Advocacy Group Says." *New York Times*, November 8, 2021.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/08/arts/critical-race-theory-bans.html>
- Sharrow, Elizabeth and Isaac Sederbaum. 2022. "Texas isn't the Only State Denying Essential Medical Care to Trans Youths." *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2022.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/10/texas-trans-kids-abortion-lgbtq-gender-ideology/>
- Shifman, Limor. 2013. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling With a Conceptual

- Troublemaker.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18, no. 3: 362–377.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013>
- Skitolsky, Lissa. 2020. *Hip Hop as Philosophical Text and Testimony: Can I Get a Witness?* Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Smith, Aaron C. T. 2016. *Cognitive Mechanisms of Belief Change*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Táíwò, Olúfẹ̀mi O. 2021. “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference.” *The Philosopher*. November 20, 2021.
<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/being-in-the-room-privilege-elite-capture-and-epistemic-deference>
- Táíwò, Olúfẹ̀mi O. 2022. *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*. Haymarket Books.
- Tosi, Justin, and Brandon Warmke. 2016. “Moral grandstanding.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 3: 197-217. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12075>
- Tuana, Nancy. 2004. “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance.” *Hypatia* 19, no. 1: 194-232. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2004.tb01275.x
- Vallone, Robert, Lee Ross, and Mark Lepper. 1985. “The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Biased Perception and Perceptions of Media Bias in Coverage of the Beirut Massacre.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 49, no. 3, 577-585.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.49.3.577>
- Willard, Mary Beth. 2021. *Why It's Ok to Enjoy the Work of Immoral Artists*. Routledge.