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Cultural Gaslighting

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This essay frames systemic patterns of mental abuse against women of color and Indigenous women on Turtle Island (North America) in terms of larger design-of-distribution strategies in settler colonial societies, as these societies use various forms of social power to distribute, reproduce, and automate social inequalities (including public health precarities and mortality disadvantages) that skew socioeconomic gain continuously toward white settler populations and their descendants. It departs from traditional studies in gender-based violence research that frame mental abuses such as gaslighting—commonly understood as mental manipulation through lying or deceit—stochastically, as chance-driven, interpersonal phenomena. Building on structural analyses of knowledge in political epistemology (Dotson 2012a; Berenstain 2016), political theory (Davis and Ernst 2017), and Indigenous social theory (Tuck and Yang 2012), I develop the notion of cultural gaslighting to refer to the social and historical infrastructural support mechanisms that disproportionately produce abusive mental ambients in settler colonial cultures in order to further the ends of cultural genocide and dispossession. I conclude by proposing a social epidemiological account of gaslighting that a) highlights the public health harms of abusive ambients for minority populations, b) illuminates the hidden rules of social structure in settler colonial societies, and c) amplifies the corresponding need for structural reparations.

To be an Indigenous woman in this country is to intimately understand both interpersonal and systemic gaslighting
—Emily Riddle (nehiyaw iskwew)

The term *gaslighting* comes from the title of a 1944 film adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play, which portrays the manipulative attempts of a jewel thief to take possession of his wife's riches through a wide range of acts designed to pathologize her as insane, including lies, isolation, double-talk, and duplicitously restaging household objects. It gained popularity in Anglo-American psychology throughout the 1980s and 90s as a popular-culture heuristic for addressing emotional abuse sustained in intimate partnerships (see, for example, Kutcher 1982; Cawthra, O'Brien, and Hassanyeh 1987). This framing bracketed the film's original references to the physical violence (the murder of his wife's aunt) required for the gaslighter to gain access to his wife's home and the specific power relation to her psychic life as her husband. Isolated from its structural connection to other forms of violence, gaslighting came to be known as an interpersonal abuse mechanism or pressure tactic that enables abusers to get inside the heads of their intended victims for the purposes of asserting power and/or establishing control.<2> The term continues to have this distinctly mentalistic and interpersonal meaning in modern colloquial usage and in

psychology, where it is defined as "the effort of one person to undermine another person's confidence and stability by causing the victim to doubt [their] own sense and beliefs" (Kline 2006, quoted in Davis and Ernst 2017, 2).

I argue that gaslighting is a structural phenomenon that upholds interpersonal and institutional modes of mental abuse in settler colonial societies; it is not merely a generalized human trait of psychological susceptibility. Rather, it is a technique of violence that produces asymmetric harms for different populations depending on one's processive relation to/within settler social structures. To show this, I take a social epidemiological approach that focuses on population-wide health inequities alongside Indigenous perspectives on health, self-determination, and colonial violence (Acuña Delgado 2006; Tuck and Yang 2012; Jones et al. 2013; Ngāti Awa et al. 2013; Cameron et al. 2019). I employ anticolonial perspectives on population health inequity that shift the momentum away from probabilistic accounts of life chances (as socially structured for all humans) to more coordinated views of social inequity based on nonaccidental maldistribution of harm.<3> On this view, at its broadest level, gaslighting is a way of curating modalities of resistance to settler colonial cultures for the purposes of consolidating the colonial project of Indigenous land dispossession and cultural genocide of non-Euro-Atlantic peoples. At its narrowest, it is a pointed aim at the inner life of experiences of settler violence. On both accounts, it enacts violence, not moral evaluative accounts *of* violence as an epistemic phenomenon.

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. This idea will be examined through the notion of settler innocence narratives (Mawhinney 1998; Tuck and Yang 2012) and the political demands that decoding these projects make on people living in what is commonly referred to, following the 1848 secession of over half a million miles on the southwestern border, as "US territory." Focusing on the structural *functionalization* of settler moves to innocence, I argue that there is nothing accidental about the popularization of the narrowed psychological understanding of gaslighting as interpersonal, emotional abuse. For example, in a 2017 *Psychology Today* article, the following list was provided as a diagnostic for gaslighting:

> 1) They tell blatant lies; 2) they deny they ever said something, even though you have proof; 3) they use what is near and dear to you as ammunition; 4) they wear you down over time; 5) their actions do not match their words; 6) they throw in positive reinforcement to confuse you; 7) they know confusion weakens people; 8) they project; 9) they try to align people against you; 10) they tell you or others that you are crazy; 11) they tell you everyone else is a liar. (Sarkis 2017)

Settler colonial culture does, in fact, tell blatant lies, deny in the face of proof, use the near and dear against you, wear you down over time . . . at face value, the notion of gaslighting can all too easily be used as a diagnostic tool to refer to the effort of one *culture* to undermine another *culture*'s confidence and stability by causing the victim*ized collective* to doubt [its] own sense and beliefs. By decoupling intersecting structural violences from their original portrayal and containing the source of violence within the isolated consciousness of individuals, the notion of gaslighting as interpersonal, emotive harm works to foreclose awareness of ongoing cultural processes through

organized failures of understanding. These failures are functionalized through vast networks of settler institutions, social policies, and publicly licensed resources of interpretation.

This is a common move in settler epistemologies. Weak concepts are presented as robust frameworks for analysis that are then laid before oppressed peoples as offerings, keys to insights about what is happening to one, but that 1) reinforce the cultural assumptions behind settler epistemologies and 2) often have to be rebuilt wholesale to even begin to approximate the complexity of harm and violence experienced in settler states such as the US, Canada, and Mexico. This epistemic labor is done frequently and at great cost. Meanwhile, robust accounts of multistable structural violences (such as those produced by women of color and Indigenous philosophers on Turtle Island) are devalued, testimonially suppressed, and "quieted" in settler cultures, as Kristie Dotson's work on epistemic oppression has powerfully shown (see, for example, Dotson 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2017). Gaslighting, on this account, is a settler conceptual ruse that diverts critical attention away from structural epistemic oppressions that continue to underwrite the colonial project.<4> One example of this is reductive accounts of medical gaslighting.

MEDICAL GASLIGHTING

Medical gaslighting is commonly understood as the interpersonal phenomenon of having one's experience of illness marginalized (including having one's self-reported or presenting symptoms downplayed, silenced, or psychologically manipulated) by a clinical provider or healthcare professional.<5> This view developed from the use of gaslighting to denote coercive control in interpersonal violence research (Stark 2007; Roberts and Andrews 2013; Johnson et al. 2017; Harris and Woodlock 2019, 530–32) and jettisoned structural accounts available in health equity research on racism (see, for example, Washington 2007; Hoffman et al. 2016; Bailey et al. 2017; Browne 2017; Goodman et al. 2017).<6> The latter identify a wide range of micro-, meso-, and more important, macro-level phenomena that work to promote structural oppressions, including cases of legal gaslighting (Epstein and Goodman 2019) that functionalize coercive social power to continuously downplay women's experiences of intersectional oppressions as we navigate public institutions. These structural literatures emphasize that psychological stressors have real-life harms that certainly include individual tolls, yet also pose significant intergenerational, intragenerational, and historical group consequences that not all social groups face. What gets lost in the reductive interpersonal accounts of medical gaslighting as individualized epistemic injustices is the way these harms are consistently and unevenly distributed across specific populations, not by accident, but by design.<7> In the next section, we'll take a look at how this maldistribution persists through social transformations in health-care access through US Black women's reproductive health history. A similar point can easily be made for Indo-Mestizx, Afro-Latinx, First Nations, Aboriginal, Pacific Islander, Pueblos Originarios, American Indian, and Indigenous women given the structural maldistribution of intersectional violences surrounding femicide, forced disappearance, rape, and sex- and labor-trafficking in the global economy.<8>

To begin, the systemic clinical silencing of reported symptoms that marginalize US Black women's reproductive health needs does not happen in a vacuum. Decreases in health care access and care quality for Black women are not isolated from gains and increases for other populations. This is especially evident in the rise of assisted reproductive technologies (ART), which by design amplify the reproductive health concerns of white women. As Camisha Russell explains, these

technologies are often mobilized to maintain racialized systems of global inequality, especially through racial constructions of infertility and catering services to white women and couples with scientifically debunked yet culturally pervasive rhetorics of genetic race (Russell 2018).<9> In 1992, congress set up the National ART Surveillance Program (H.R. 2733) to collect data on ART patient demographics, obstetric and medical history, procedures and birth outcomes, but not race or ethnicity. This led to a bevy of studies attempting to identify the impact of race and ethnicity on ART use (not access to); adjusting for the impact of insurance mandates for IVF treatment, one recent study looked at a one-year distribution of ART cycles in the US varied by race/ethnicity and found "the highest proportion of use occurring among older, college-educated white non-Hispanic women with incomes >300% above the poverty level," or "85.5% of cycles, followed by Hispanic (5.5%), black non-Hispanic (4.6%), and A/PI non-Hispanic (4.5%) women" (Dieke et al. 2017). This approach to racial inequality in ART is reminiscent of the old line, "when someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding" (Nietzsche 2009, 257). Social and biomedical technologies in settler colonial societies are deeply embedded in power differentials that functionalize colonial relations. Indigenous women's and women of color's life chances through reproduction have been carefully regulated by social policies aligned with economic gains for white settler populations since slavery. In fact, racialized labor is so important in a settler-colonial market economy that it must be seen as unimportant, mystified through pathologizing rhetorics of risk-inducing population behaviors or personal choice. As the above study conjectures:

> Racial/ethnic disparities in infertility prevalence have been documented and may be due to disparities in conditions known to cause infertility such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For instance, some racial/ethnic minorities report higher rates of STIs (including STIs leading to pelvic inflammatory disease) compared with non-Hispanic whites. Additionally, delays in accessing infertility care have been described for some racial/ethnic groups. For example, Asian/Pacific Islander (A/PI) and black non-Hispanic women reported longer durations of infertility and accessed ART at a later age compared with white non-Hispanic women. (Dieke et al. 2017, 605)

There are many ways to responsibly account for the incidence of infertility in marginalized populations, including histories of forced sterilization, asymmetrical environmental exposure risks to heavy metals, organophosphates, BPAs, PCBs, and other contaminants that induce endocrine dysfunction and reduce fetal viability—not just in our lifetime, but in our mothers' and grandmothers' lifetimes. STIs are not an acceptable conjecture in this context.<10> For example, uterine fibroids, the leading indication for hysterectomy in the US, are experienced at much higher rates and with greater severity by Black women than white women (Stewart et al. 2013, 807). This includes an earlier age of onset, such that the very impact of these disparities is borne differently (Myles 2013, 2–10). Yet very few medical studies of this exist compared with those for STIs, for which national datasets on racial and ethnic minorities are kept (CDC 2015). In her 2018 APA talk, "Stem Cell Clinics, Medical Gaslighting, and Epistemic Marginalization," Nora Berenstain emphasizes the role that medical gaslighting plays in producing intersectionally structured harms that disproportionately fall on Black women and diminish their reproductive autonomy. She notes, "Black women are less likely to have their pain from uterine fibroids taken seriously, and, when it is taken seriously, they are more likely to receive recommendations for extreme procedures that require long recovery periods and result in sterilization" (Berenstain 2018). Black women receive

hysterectomies to treat uterine fibroids at twice the rate that white women with a fibroid diagnosis do.<11> This is unsurprising in light of the long colonial history of strategic maldistribution of public health precarities and the corresponding gatekeeping of health resources.

In *Medical Apartheid* (2007), Harriet Washington details the exploitative history of medical experimentation on Black Americans that bedrocked the rise of clinical medicine as a functionally white-serving institution and established social baselines for mistrust in doctor–patient interactions in the US (Washington 2007). Washington details, for example, the targeted abuse of Black slave women by surgeon James Marion Sims (1813–1883), a former president of the American Medical Association and founder of the first women's hospital in the US. Long considered a figurehead in medical advancements in gynecological medicine and surgery, Sims systematically mutilated and abused his patients of color, seventeen of whom he acquired as slaves for these purposes. Among his many known procedures, he once removed the bladder stones from a nine-year-old slave girl in order to create, not close, a vesicovaginal fistula he could study. He routinely anesthetized women so their husbands could rape them while "flatly refusing to administer anesthesia to slave women and girls," repeatedly discounting their pain as real or sufficient to warrant intervention on account of alleged racial differences in pain tolerance (Washington 2007, 65). In a recent study of racial bias in pain management, half of white medical students interviewed in the US study believed at least one of the following to be a biological fact: the nerve endings of Black people are less sensitive than those of whites, Black people's skin is thicker than those of whites, Black people's blood coagulates at faster rates than those of whites, among other myths (Hoffman et al. 2016). The education-to-provider pipeline in US medicine has remained deeply imbedded in the colonial project. This includes associated research produced by medical scientists. From an anticolonial standpoint, it is unsurprising that the scientific literature on racial discrimination in US medicine has been severely restricted in analyses of "structural or systematic racism" (.04% of the established literature) when compared to the skyrocketing number of studies (nearly 48,000 in 2016) that list race neutrally as an objective social factor (Bailey et al. 2017).<12> A shift in thinking is needed from conducting "informative studies" on race to analyzing the limits of studies that are based on the racist observational economy of Native informancy, the preferred research method in settler-credibility economies.

The impacts of these structured voids in medical knowledge for women of color are not only compounded and multiplicative, but also operate across various scales and registers of life. As nonaccidental gaps in knowledge, they help justify intersectionally evasive and race-neutral explanations for our experiences of structured racism and sexist racism in everyday life. This includes the common view that oppressed peoples see oppression everywhere or "read too much into" adverse experiences, even at the doctor's office, where race-neutral explanations almost always produce variants of patient culpability, such as a patient's alleged failures to report clinically significant symptoms or communicate effectively. Noteworthy is that increased presence of empirical studies on clinical racism or sexism (as very few studies on systemic sexist racism exist) has not closed these gaps, but has often produced the need for follow-up studies to empirically demonstrate the inverse—that antiracism and nondiscrimination is statistically significant enough to recommend interventions in current conditions. This problem is compounded with the common belief that producing compelling scientific research on social inequality will be met with corrective action, since empirical evidence is thought to yield the potential to inform policy decisions in ways disproportionate to other argumentative strategies in the public sphere. If that empirical proof is imperial, yes, easily, because it can be recognized in the design of social structure that determines the organization of knowledges in the public sphere: bad science gets

used *all the time* in marshaling corrective measures against people of color, and called out when it harms white populations.<13> "Cherry picked racist research," as Rep. Katherine Clark notes, has been used successfully by the Trump administration to rescind civil rights policy aimed at dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline for children of color (Brinlee 2019).<14> A systems view is essential here because, even if a new administration rescinds the rollback, this pattern continues in the prison-to-death pipeline for people of color.<15> One way or another, structured precarity remains for some populations but not others.

This is where new structuralist views of oppression as the coordinated maldistribution of social harm come in. Asymmetries in the distribution of lifetime chances to be in need of systems that systematize racism is not an accidental phenomenon in settler colonial societies. Settler systems need to be needed so they can do their work of structuring power over social structure, whether at the level of regulation, enforcement, encoding, respecification, distribution, or surveillance: social pathways, punitive or rewarding, are established for this purpose. On this view, the structural legacy of medical apartheid continues today despite social transformations aimed at more evenly distributing the social goods of civil rights and other settler configurations of judicable goods by those in power since the landing of the Mayflower.

Reductive accounts of medical gaslighting do not capture this reality. Consider that today, women of color walking by the South Carolina statehouse, whether en route to receive gynecological care or as plaintiffs seeking redress for medical malpractice, must do so under the venerated gaze of marble statues dedicated to Sims and his legacy (Washington 2007). Countless similar examples exist. What this signals to us a choice by the *preservers*, not the creators, to willfully continue mentally slapping and berating marginalized populations long after empirical studies have demonstrated (by publicly legible, settler scientific standards) the adverse health consequences and psychophysiological impacts of inhabiting environments that induce stress or increase exposure risks, from low birthweights to inflammatory markers linked to cardiac disease and likelihood of death from stroke. Settler geoscaping of the environment is thus one form of structural gaslighting as mental manipulation and deceit that distributes harms unevenly across populations. It offers structural protectives to some individuals by curating public worlds and visual languages that venerate white supremacy, normalize sexist racism, and reinforce beliefs of color-blind societies, so that when a white person is accused of racism, the allostatic load is often less than when a person of color experiences racism.<16> This is a serious social disadvantage. In settler colonial societies, public worlds are also epistemic safety nets that extend various layers of protection to some people but not others by design. This is not where one arrives in social science research. It is where one starts.

A structural approach to medical gaslighting is helpful here because it illustrates that the gaslighting in question is not simply from the presiding clinical provider: a tightly woven net of policies, training manuals, advisory boards, disciplinary and institutional procedures—even medical equipment—upholds the *structured inattention* to the reproductive health needs of (to follow the previous example) Black women, who continue to have the highest maternal mortality rates of any group for which metrics are kept.<17> Black newborns consistently die at twice the rate of white newborns, and Black mothers consistently die at three to four times that of whites (see Flanders-Stepans 2000; Howell et al. 2013). The math is not hard, the finding already well-known among women of color. From an anticolonial perspective, it is predictive that positivist studies on Black maternal and neonatal mortality rates consistently look to patient culpability or group stereotypes of health risks to explain causes of cases, yet draw blanks regarding hypotheses for extended etiologic periods of health risks among Black women—why patterns of precarity ebb

and flow in measurement metrics, yet, on the long view, continue to persist. The structured inattention to the role that racism, white supremacy, and misogynoir (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 762) play in producing what are often simply couched as "health disparities" is a form of gaslighting that aims at covering over the entrenched relations of patriarchal power and white supremacist domination over racialized, gendered populations in a settler context. Colonialism is a long game, one where death and mortality are not measured by cases, but by incidences of cases borne unevenly across populations. Social epidemiological framings of structural violence can be useful because they extend the etiologic period beyond affected cases to historical and structural determinants of health, yet they must be methodologically oriented toward nonwhitewashed configurations of those histories and structures. Critical epidemiology can be a helpful starting point in this regard (see, for example, Braveman 2001; Prussing 2018). In the next section, I turn to more structurally nuanced accounts of gaslighting in racial justice literatures that better capture the nonaccidental nature of structural violence in settler colonial societies.

RACIAL GASLIGHTING

In "Racial Gaslighting," Angelique Davis and Rose Ernst argue that gaslighting should be understood as a structural phenomenon that targets those who resist white supremacy (Davis and Ernst 2017). Disambiguating their use of the term from the interpersonal form of psychological abuse represented in *Gaslight*, Davis and Ernst argue *racial gaslighting* is a better way to think about the "macro-level racial spectacles" and other socio-institutional processes that do the behind-the-scenes work in culture to produce the effects subsequently recognized as psychological gaslighting. The whole supports the part, and vice versa, but what drops out of this picture of gaslighting is a blameless representation of the operations of power and violence in society. The maintenance, upkeep, and regeneration of white supremacy is the true function of gaslighting; it is an "enduring process" that kicks in when individuals or groups *resist* white supremacist structures in any form.

This suggests that racial gaslighting, which Davis and Ernst define as "the political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist" (Davis and Ernst 2017, 3), will be especially abusive for women of color. Since the functionalization of violence against racialized women is a structural feature of colonial violence and settler white supremacy, the normalization of pathologizing narratives targeting women of color will be multiplicative and asymmetrical with respect to white women. "Just as racial formation rests on the creation of racial projects, racial gaslighting, as a process, relies on the production of particular narratives. These narratives are called racial spectacles. Racial spectacles are narratives that *obfuscate* the existence of a white supremacist state power structure" (3). Thus, racial spectacles pathologizing women of color will become ubiquitous in culture, so much so that the need for intersectional understanding of domination will be routinely questioned by progressive movements focused on single-axis social justice projects like white feminism and gender-neutral racial justice. The kinds of techniques, tropes, narratives, and *consequences* assailed against women of color who resist will thus differ, as will their visibility and public reach. This shows up in prevalent questioning of white women's mental states as problematic while retaining a weak narrative version of ontological respect for them *as* women (as in Dr. Ford's testimony before the House Judiciary Committee), yet characterizing racialized women's *whole being* as problematic when their mental states are questioned. The questioning

comes from individuals, though also from institutional forms, policies, and procedures. When a brown Indo-Mestizx woman is given only the option to check "white" in racial classification checkboxes over the course of a lifetime, the cultural objective is clear. When racialized and Indigenous women are elected into settler public office with noncompliant, anticolonial agendas, the response is predictively swift and all too often fatal.

Gaslighting, on the view offered here, is not a generalized possibility in interpersonal dynamics (based on a universal trait of human psychological susceptibility) actualized by the particular intentional states of an individual. Following Davis and Ernst, it is a *nonaccidental iterative process* that functions to co-opt resistance to white supremacy by pathologizing noncompliance. But pathologization is not meted out evenly across all social actors. A white, cisgender, upper-middle-class man who allies himself with progressive racial justice movements, or a similarly situated couple who buys a redlined house for a family of color are going to be marked differently by racial gaslighting than will the family of color, as will each family member. Davis and Ernst outline five of these differences in terms of "portrayal, exposure (or risk), pathologization, audience and outcome" (Davis and Ernst 2017, 5). To illustrate this, they cite two legal case studies about racial power: *Korematsu v. United States* (1944) and *Commonwealth of Kentucky v. Braden* (1955).

Korematsu is the landmark case that unsuccessfully challenged Executive Order 9066 authorizing the internment of individuals based on Japanese ancestry during World War II. The *Braden* case revolved around Carl and Anne Braden, a white couple charged with sedition following the firebombing of a redlined home they purchased for Andrew Wade, a Black man, and his family. Analyzing doctrinal decisions in both cases, Davis and Ernst focus on the absurd race-neutral legal narrative crafted in response to Korematsu's and Braden's defenses. They cite the following prosecutorial comments from the *Braden* case transcript*:*

> There is no question of white and colored in this case. There has been no colored man indicted. I don't know why [the defense attorney] . . . wanted to harp on white supremacy and all that sort of thing . . . [we] should let this be a milestone in the historic fight of America today to stop this evil pitting race against race, white against black, Catholic against Protestant, Jew against the Gentile, rich against the poor. (8)

The Braden case used the political narrative of communism, syndicalism, and sedition as a vehicle for racial gaslighting. While the Bradens were harmed for their actions through trumped-up charges and individualized sentencing to hard labor in a Kentucky prison, the violence done to the Wades drops out of the doctrinal history of *Braden*.<19> Davis and Ernst argue the differential portrayal of social actors, the level of exposure in scope (limited to mortal consequences) and range (individuals, families, communities), who is meant to be the spectator, and the outcome of the violence depends on racial profiles determined by white supremacist structures.

In the Korematsu case, the Supreme Court majority decision denied Fred Korematsu's claims of civil liberty violations under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments by arguing racial prejudice was not the issue: "what we are dealing specifically with is nothing but an exclusion order" to "relocation centers" warranted by national security risks in the midst of an official war (*Korematsu,* 224, quoted in Davis and Ernst 2017, 4). The *Korematsu* decision is peculiar for its ability to withstand structural challenges while being repudiated by legal scholars. It has never been overturned as a matter of law, making possible the legal basis for indefinite detainment and internment of anyone characterized as "enemy aliens" by the US (including the current carceral

detainment of migrants and asylum-seekers at the US–Mexico border). From this, Davis and Ernst identify the legal doctrine of *stare decisis* as a supporting mechanism to racial gaslighting.<20>

Davis and Ernst develop three features of gaslighting as significant for understanding the structural dimensions of psychological oppression under white supremacy that are helpful for this project. First, racial gaslighting "offers a way to understand how white supremacy is *sustained over time,*" broadening the etiologic period of colonial harm (3, emphasis added). Second, it is about *structural iterative power*, since there is a direct and bivalent relationship between "the promulgation of these [racial] narratives and the creation of law" (4). Third, it is about function, not intent; awareness is "not determinative of whether the process of racial gaslighting is taking place" (8). While intent is not necessary under their framing of gaslighting, a closer look at the history of settler colonialism with respect to Indigenous peoples enables us to bring intent back without the Cartesian trappings of mental egoism that underpin notions of liability in the settler legal distinctions between *actus reus* and *mens rea*, or act and intent. Describing *cultural intent* will also help situate gaslighting as a settler epistemic tool that structurally quiets (Dotson 2012a) critical analyses of settler structural violence in order to mitigate *cultural liability* for settler colonial violence and its continuing project of dispossession.<21> The orienting goal of settler colonial violence, it must be repeated, is not cultural or racial domination for domination's sake, but to maintain control over production, accumulation, and transmission channels that secure intergenerational wealth for white settler populations and their descendants.

SETTLER MOVES TO INNOCENCE

The notion of *racial gaslighting* is critically important but ultimately insufficient for addressing the social and historical infrastructural support mechanisms that disproportionately produce abusive mental ambients for people of color and Indigenous peoples in settler colonial cultures. This is because, although it correctly identifies the persistence of white supremacy, the facilitating violences—those that have made white supremacy a viable historical project that functions in particular ways and for specific ends—remain unaccounted for. These violences are the techniques of settler colonial dispossession. "Techniques" here refers to the various encoding functions of a social practice (like sexist racism) that determine ordering, permutation, and synchronicity with other social practices, not its metaphysical existence as a particular entity. "Dispossession" refers to long-term strategic processes (including various projects of racialization) developed by white Anglo-European settlers to *irrevocably* take possession of Native Amerindian lands. Dispossession is a cultural project of epistemic consolidation that requires foresight into counterrevolutionary strategy and cooptation of resistant cultural narratives, such as Native claims to settler possession of stolen lands and political formations of identity that challenge settler colonial authority. The land cannot simply be seen as being owned *by* settlers; it must be seen as the natural and ontological property of whiteness on territory whose history also naturally begins with settlement and a founding story of fathers birthing a nation. The world-building epistemological function of gaslighting is, by default, to produce totalizing and abusive ambients—languages, stories, buildings, practices, rituals, forms and documents—that work to destroy resistance to settler cultural authority as natural claims to Indigenous land. For these reasons, racial gaslighting analyses of "relocation centers" in the US, such as those derived from the *Korematsu* decision, that do not attend to the forced relocations and violent internment of Native Amerindians on government reservations and residential schools (in the US, Canada, but

also Mexico and other settler nations (Gott 2007; Speed 2017) can easily perpetuate colonial narratives about settlers as first peoples (Deloria and Lytle 1998).

In "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang issue a timely warning about uncritically collapsing progressive struggles for racial justice with Indigenous projects of decolonization: "In our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land, and not just symbolically" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 7). Collapsing these struggles is one way, according to them, that "the settler, disturbed by her own settler status, tries to escape or contain the unbearable searchlight of complicity" (9). They refer to such attempts to elude psychological liability as "settler moves to innocence" (9).<22> More specifically, "settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, or without having to change much at all" (10). There is thus a distinct material function tied to the psychological motivations behind moves to innocence: keeping various forms of settler-accumulated wealth, including power and privilege. This is important because it links individual moves to innocence to a larger social group or historical collective, as in those for whom giving up inherited wealth in the form of land, power, or privilege proves difficult. This is not a psychological trait—the hesitancy to give up this power, whether by individuals or collectives, does not happen in a vacuum. Underlying supporting mechanisms of settler social structures enable it.<23>

We can extend the notion of settler moves to innocence from individual persons to social groups that promote cultural moves to innocence through monopolizing the structural resources of institutional patterning and distribution design, where the "strategies" or "positionings" of settler cultures that Tuck and Yang allude to are refracted in the very institutional enforcement of social structure. In other words, it's far more than personal bias or racial spectacle at play here. It's the structuring of conditions for *ongoing* racial spectacles from one generation to another, or to pre-structured cycles of *mobilization without emancipation* that are functionalized in various ways through settler social structures.<24> On this view, culturally structured epistemic mobilization is always *coordinated to obstruct* emancipation in any meaningful, life-changing way for marginalized peoples at the level of populations. Things do get better, for some, for a time.<25> But the long game of colonialism does not have freedom as a basic condition of our lives. It won't simply be given. That doesn't mean it won't be had.

One of the take-aways from the rich literature on dispossession is the notion of indomitable resistance to oppression, including histories of resurgence, reclamation, and refusal (Simpson 2007; 2014). Another is that people make settler moves to innocence because they can, but that this can-do-ness is *always structured in advance*. It is enabled and reinforced by the physical lands and environments around us, and what's been done to them. Psychological violences are not psychological all the way down. Feeling guilty about past and current wrongs feels good when your everyday proximate relations to places, practices, and peoples have been actively curated to confirm your innocence narrative—when you sense you don't have to give anything tangible up to say you feel this way, especially in triangulation with whiteness, stolen accumulated wealth, or settler futurity. In fact, you can potentially profit from moves to innocence by being recognized as the one to name the episteme surrounding power and injustice (as Gayatri Spivak's criticism of Foucault holds [Spivak's 1988]), so long as actual colonial injustices go untracked in the episteme.<26> So there's really not much you have to give up to both recognize this very wrong and profit from it, yet in the process also help maintain the inequitable distribution of access to

resources tied to social power. It's settler gold. It simultaneously functionalizes and normalizes the social visibility of mobilization without structural emancipation in the domain of knowledge—what could possibly be better for a settler-credibility economy? It makes it look like folks are really trying to help us, and we're just overly demanding or unreasonable in our resistance to white supremacy and its white feminist allies in philosophy. In the next section I'll illustrate this point by looking to the proliferation of hermeneutic injustice discourses in white feminisms in philosophy. To do this, I draw on the notion of epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016) and Dotson's notion of metaphilosophical apostasy (Dotson 2019).

EPISTEMIC EXPLOITATION

Tuck and Yang's use of settler innocence builds on Janet Mawhinney's and Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack's examination of white activists' "strategies to remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination" in their role with antiracist organizations (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9; see Fellows and Razack 1998; Mawhinney 1998). Fellows and Razack refer to settler innocence as a temporal race to get to the finish line first, so to speak, in the self-identification with oppression—a "race to innocence" that provides an allegory for "the process through which a woman comes to believe her own claim of subordination is the most urgent, and that she is unimplicated in the subordination of other women" (9). On this view, by claiming to have an "absence of experience," one can place themselves in the position to ask others to perform labor they are creating a new need for. This idea is elaborated at length by Berenstain. Her article, *Epistemic Exploitation*, theorizes epistemic exploitation as a tool of epistemic oppression in which dominant populations structurally elicit redundant epistemic and emotional labor from marginalized groups by constantly calling on them to explain and educate them about the nature of their oppression (Berenstain 2016). The "absence of experience" on which the race to innocence hinges is a rhetorical mechanism used to produce epistemic exploitation, manifested as a constantly recreated need for an ever-expanding amount of labor from Indigenous peoples and people of color to white settler populations. The production of epistemic exploitation via settler moves to innocence constitutes part of the practice of epistemic consolidation through the disappearing of violences, a form of cultural gaslighting that is necessary for the survival of the ongoing settler project.<27>

Epistemic exploitation functions as a settler form of cultural gaslighting across many fields of knowledge, from cultural anthropology to Anglo-European academic philosophy.<28> Here I consider the latter, which, following Dotson's rich notion of metaphilosophical apostasy in Anglo-American analytic philosophy (Dotson 2019), might also possibly be called *philopséma,* as in the love of structured untruths as a way of journeying toward a particular cultural form of truth. It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the knowledge projects of the discipline of academic philosophy have always been deeply aligned with colonial and settler colonial epistemic agendas. Locke's account of property, for instance, was explicitly oriented toward providing ontological justification for the removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands using culturally arbitrary conceptions of labor and ownership. While ruling out Indigenous knowledges *as* knowledge, academic philosophy also forecloses on possibilities for the expansion of what is recognized as knowledge. One way that academic philosophy doubles down on the European colonial subject's self-declared monopoly on knowledge production is through its structured use of epistemic exploitation. Dotson, for example, identifies academic philosophy's *culture of*

justification as a way for narrow conceptions of philosophical "rigor" to function as gatekeepers to disciplinary legitimacy. Dotson reflects on how philosophy's culture of justification creates a hostile and unsustainable environment for diverse practitioners who may work on issues that acknowledge the relevance and reality of social location and embodied experience:

> The burden of shifting justifying norms within a professional environment that manifests symptoms of a culture of justification involves sacrificing one's labor and energies towards providing a catalyst for change via numerous legitimating narratives aimed at gaining positive status for oneself as a philosopher and one's projects as philosophical. Let me make the strong statement that shouldering this burden and the set of experiences one exposes oneself to is not a livable option for many would-be diverse practitioners of philosophy and the small numbers of under-represented populations within professional philosophy attest to this observation. (Dotson 2012b, 15)

Annika Mann describes similar experiences in which she must respond to others' incredulity and doubt that her work *really* counts as philosophy:

> My struggle has been trying to figure out ways to bring my blackness and my femaleness together with philosophy and to find acceptance of such philosophical work within the academy. I think that most departments, to be honest, give lip service to this kind of acceptance. "Yes, we'd love to have someone come here to do African American philosophy. We'd love someone to come and do feminist philosophy and try to bridge these gaps." But when you actually come and say, "OK, this is what I'm going to do," then you get, "What philosophy do you really do?" Or, "What classes can you really teach?" The implication becomes, "What within the mainstream western canon can you really do?" And that is very frustrating to me. And I think it serves to further marginalize the work that I am trying to do. (Allen et al. 2008)

Making diverse philosophical practitioners first prove that what they do should count as philosophy is an effective management strategy for quelling 1) the development of insurrectionist knowledges and 2) the intergenerational preservation of ancestral know-how and Indigenous philosophies that contributes to the collective continuance of a people (Whyte 2018). Marginalized knowledge-creators must devote their time and cognitive resources to proving the legitimacy of our ideas by demonstrating that they are at the very least adjacent to and comprehensible within recognizable settler epistemic frameworks. This epistemic "pay to play" requirement for certain populations ensures that our resources and labor are depleted, extracted, and expended on meaningless pretheoretical busywork before we are able to pursue our own counterrevolutionary epistemic strategies, such as trust-busting the epistemic consolidation project of the self-declared settler monopoly on knowledge production.

The ontological project of settler colonialism involves reifying the settler presence on stolen lands as original and timeless, which provides an illusory justification for governance through the "policing" of who belongs there. This logic is similarly played out via the settler policing of who belongs in the proper place of the colonial discipline of academic philosophy. The culture of justification positions dominant colonial epistemologies as the truest, most original, and default forms of knowledge and positions their foot soldiers as the gatekeepers of legitimacy within the ivory tower. As Dotson identifies, the use of "legitimating narratives" that are differentially

deployed against racialized populations functions as a "boundary policing" mechanism, essentially creating a porous border to the discipline that is reified and enforced through diffuse cultural practices. These material differences are made possible by a structured accumulation of epistemic power (Dotson 2018b) that helps generate cultures of salience oriented toward epistemic apostleship, not the deep critical thought often claimed by the discipline (Dotson 2019).

Another example of colonial epistemic practices of legitimating narratives can be found in how colonial nations structure the institution of gender-based asylum. Ezgi Sertler demonstrates how these institutions are structured to foreclose on applicants' knowledge while reifying the power of state actors. She writes, "this structural limit becomes visible when we realize how the institution of asylum is *formed* to provide *legitimacy* to the *institutional comfort* the respective migration courts and boards enjoy." Sertler introduces the important notion of "institutional comfort" to describe "the ways in which state actors in migration courts and boards are systemically afforded the ability to arbitrarily and ambiguously misinterpret asylum applicants' experiences, cultures, and countries" (Sertler 2018, 5). Epistemic assumptions and norms are structurally tipped in favor of the credibility of state actors at the expense of applicant credibility. This manifests in migration boards' freedom and ability to dismiss credible reports of violence, danger, and threat by asylum-seekers and structurally reframe them as noncredible. If applicants' reports about their experiences in their home countries do not fit with the dominant narratives and representations of their countries under the colonial gaze, this provides a reason for their reports to be dismissed as suspicious and unfounded.

For instance, Sertler considers the case of Sara, a Kurdish woman in Iraq whose family had arranged for her to be married against her will. After she began a secret relationship with a colleague, her brother caught them and retaliated violently. When Sara went to the police, the officer "told her he would have killed her himself had she been his sister, and that the police could not do anything since it was an honour-related crime'" (9). The Migration Board dismissed Sara's application based on a failure to find her credible. Specifically, the Board suggested that "it is odd and not very likely that she would initiate a sexual relation with another man when she knows she is going to marry her cousin. . . . That she would be so blinded by love and disregard the consequences is not a reasonable explanation with the culture that is prevalent in northern Iraq and with her family traditions in mind" (9). Because Sara's experience did not fit the Board's *strategically uninformed* and *actively ignorant* conception of Kurdish women's lives and "the culture" in northern Iraq, her claims about her own experience were dismissed as unreliable. On this view, Sara did not simply run up against some bad epistemic luck with the Board, or fall on the mortal end of an unvirtued interpersonal judgment based on a structural identity prejudice about Kurdish women, migrants, and asylum seekers that, as darn historical luck would have it, belonged to western culture at the time she sought relief.

On one view, the Migration Board's treatment of Sara is an example of the gaslighting that occurs "where a listener doesn't believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker's testimony. In this epistemic form of gaslighting, the hearer of testimony raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately" (McKinnon 2017, 168). Seen in the broader context of colonial relations, this practice also exemplifies the very condition of Native informancy that forms part of the conditions of cultural gaslighting in colonial contexts, where the standards for believability of oppressed peoples shift, change, multiply, and are always asymmetrically held in the hermeneutical contexts of settler colonial culture (which is *always tacitly positioned as Hearer*). Intake forms, institutional policies, operational practices, social reward mechanisms, and official incentives for survival are developed alongside the violences that produce the condition of

Native informancy to ensure that who "speaks" and who "hears" is subordinate to the cultural interpretive mechanisms that legitimate speech, meaning, and intelligibility—not what is said, but what is *sayable* through the licensed languages that precondition the possibility of being understood in settler colonial culture (Ruíz 2012).

The move to decouple structural and identity prejudices (even while retaining a formal conceptual relation between them) is linked to the functionalization of innocence narratives that enable blame to be placed on the precariously knowable intentional mental states of individual social actors who simply followed the *functionally legitimated* scripts of colonial violence and dispossession. Some philosophers have responded to this by proposing different forms of bias training, including cultivating virtued reflective attitudes that open the way for more just epistemic practices between us. But virtued liberal narratives and reflective practices have always been designed to functionally coexist with oppressive realities. To whom, exactly, is this news? And they have been designed this way since Aristotle theorized virtue alongside the justified enslavement of nonwhite peoples, and neo-Aristotelianism was functionalized in the colonial project as the baseline to justify the freedom of enslaved peoples as those possessing western self-reflective Reason, or have we not read these edicts and papal bulls? Only in a settler credibility economy that trades in the social recognition of mobilization without emancipation can one make sense of the fact that as of 2019, *Korematsu* is still good law while having been formally overruled: good law legally, not rhetorically; it is what is currently allowing the carceral internment of asylum-seekers and children as a matter of law. Jamal Greene argues that the Supreme Court's 5–4 majority decision in *Trump* v. *Hawaii*, which claimed to finally overrule *Korematsu,* is thus an "empty and grotesque" claim, empty because it is not binding on lower courts, and grotesque because "its emptiness means to conceal its disturbing affinity with that case" (Greene 2019, 629). This is what epistemic injustice literatures in white feminisms can feel like for people of color who have long had to consider the relation between social knowledge and the colonial project. In the next section, we'll see how hermeneutic injustice should thus be understood as a form of hermeneutic violence, not the other way around. This is because the possible epistemes for understanding knowledge, truth, credibility, and testimony are often the result of hermeneutical whitewashing and other forms of prestructural violence, including epistemicides, that yield accumulated forms of cultural interpretive power—the gearwork behind cultural gaslighting.

PRESTRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Hermeneutic violence is a unique kind of cultural violence that arose in conjunction with the colonial projects of western European powers. It is violence done to systems of meaning and significance for the purposes of weakening resistance to colonization and securing the dispossession of Native lands and resources (Ruíz 2013; 2019). It ensures that the bodies that continue to survive colonial genocide are displaced from a tacit network of referential systems that weave meaning together independently of settler colonial epistemologies. It is a prestructural violence that includes violence to calendrical systems, narrative textiles like amoxtli, the treaty-stealing and polluting of lands, rivers, and waterways, but also trauma done to traditional kinship structures and nonbinary understandings of sex and gender. On the long view, it can include epigenetic violences that disproportionately induce genetic risks in some populations but not others and force communities to reconfigure the emplaced role of our bodies and communal health under conditions of structured precarity and deficiency narratives.

For Native Amerindians, the forced, violent imposition of the western alphabet and subject-predicate grammar (as well as the assumptions of exclusionary logic, interiorization, and narrative linearity that support it) constituted a unique violence to the discursive practices of Indigenous communities that very often goes unacknowledged. By weakening the relationship between Native Amerindians and the interpretive resources required to effectively participate in cultural processes, one powerful consequence of hermeneutic violence has been the degree of difficulty contemporary Indigenous women face in having claims of violence heard and recognized in one's home language (Ruíz 2013; 2019). The prestructural machinations of these hermeneutic violences are essential conditions for the contemporary forms of cultural gaslighting that are a cornerstone of settler epistemic practices. Cultural gaslighting often turns on the active disappearing of the prestructural hermeneutic violences that formed the conditions of possibility for settler society. On the usual view, European colonizers "imposed" their worldview onto Native Amerindians as either an intentional act of domination or as an unintended consequence of encountering a radically different culture, which caused colonizers to revert to their default cultural understandings without insight into the limits of their epistemic frameworks. This cultural narrative of *presumed unintentionality* has enabled settler interpretive resources to accumulate epistemic power (Dotson 2018b), which further enables settler epistemologies to foreclose revolutionary and insurgent resistance. This is an epistemic spectacle we must refuse.

In political theory, and particularly in revolutionary theory, special focus falls on the stage of political change coincident with the *consolidation* of power, as opposed to the acquisition of power or tactical overthrow of existing power structures. It is at this stage that revolutions often go awry or fail to make the lasting changes necessary to secure the perpetuity of the new power structures, social group interests, or political ideologies. Revolts, uprisings, coups, riots, and insurgencies rarely succeed in fomenting the basic, rapid transformations to existing social structures that survive counterinsurgencies; most revolutions thus acquire the historical character of social mobilizations without the aimed-for emancipation from oppression. In many cases, this is because the revolutionary action has failed to achieve the epistemological break necessary for genuine transformation of stable colonial structures. Colonialism, if it is to survive five centuries of anticolonial strategies (as it has through its structural iterations in imperialism and neoliberalism) requires an element of unarticulated suppression at the deepest interpretive levels that prefigures the emergence of the systematic operationalization of the particular oppressions under colonialism. Hermeneutic violence performs this counterinsurgent role by preparing the way for cultural processes of domination that cannot just overturn, but *consolidate* European power structures over Amerindian and non-European ones. Consolidatory domination at the level of culture thus rests on the ability to do more than regulate social acts and practices through laws, prohibitions, and normative valuations that discourage individual actions. It rests on establishing hermeneutic power over discursive domains and the subsequent regulatory authority to license only those logics *and counterlogics* produced recursively, through self-same systems of interpretation. Cultural recursion can then be seen as a process whereby seizing the structures of meaning and interpretive stability—as part of securing consolidatory domination—is succeeded by a program of establishing social structures that also operate recursively, that is, by translating elements of a system into elements recognized through logics external to the system. Cultural recursion is important to consolidate colonial domination because, by influencing all parts of the social web of interactions, it is able to create the *appearance* of an objective, value-free world that contradicts the lived experience of oppressed peoples, a world behind which a multiplicity of western cultural valuations palpitate, actively shaping the kinds of social acts and practices acknowledgeable as

"real" in settler colonial culture. It is a cruel reality to inhabit, but it is not our only reality. At its most finely tuned stages of development, it creates social contexts where violence can only be recognized to the degree that it corresponds with western conceptions of the extra-legal use of force, so that, for example, environmental harms to Amerindian waterways are seen as less violent than interpersonal harms to a white person or their property. There's more than one way to kill a people, and this fact features prominently in the colonial project.<29>

"Hermeneutic violence" is an interpretive retooling strategy designed to do something very specific in the world and for specific populations. It is limited by design. The point is not to set up new epistemic puzzles and citational economies around buzzwords that keep us occupied with the master's myths, but to continue to refocus attention on the systemic violences that are continuously marshaled against Indigenous women and women of color, strategically, predictively, and from one generation to the next. It is an anti-gaslighting tool to help lift others up, pass the baton, and say, 'I get what's happening here, and my name will not be counted on your ledger of those captured'. When we're culturally gaslighted away from making moves for substantive structural change by the overwhelming citational presence of feminist philosophies that claim to have our interests in mind, hermeneutic violence helps us see that Anglophone accounts of hermeneutic injustice lack interpretive acumen when it comes to colonial contexts. This is not accidental, as settler epistemologies actively promote narratives of terminal Indigeneity and linguistic death alongside justice frameworks (Million 2013).<30> From an anticolonial perspective, there's simply no such thing as a "serious hermeneutical disadvantage" that does not inflict epistemic injustice, unless, of course, you come from a tradition that a) thinks you can "opt in" or "out" of hermeneutical practices as a matter of choice, b) deploys "*extant*" (undestroyed) hermeneutical resources as the baseline for interpretive understanding, and c) feels free to deploy an arbitrary understanding of "hermeneutic" that ignores Indigenous theorist's prestructural hermeneutical commitment to history—something that might come in handy for thinking about how history structures the present conditions of knowledge production.<31> But the work of cultural gaslighting cannot be done alone, by individual agents as gaslighters; it is produced from the bottom up and sustained through the abusive mental *ambients* that allow people to carry out their institutional tasks (of operationalized settler colonial violence) not just with impunity but with reward and philosophical acclaim.

The operationalization of gaslighting as a psychologically reductive interpersonal abuse mechanism in contemporary philosophical discourse trades on a pure innocence narrative. It provides shield and cover for epistemic complicity that enables other forms of mental and physical abuse, not just to individuals, but to communities. It is an act of colonial violence because it delinks the necessary association between the land one inhabits and the ambient world one dwells in, enabling infrastructural development in culture that operationalizes settler histories as real and obfuscates nonsettler realities. Gaslighting, on this view, is a form of epistemic territorial expansion that empowers members of dominant communities to claim epistemic space as their own, and only their own. Cultural gaslighting shows that epistemological frameworks that claim to derive from universal sets of metaphysical assumptions about the nature of knowledge are monocultural perspectives supported by structural power relations (see Dotson 2018b). Cultural gaslighting thus provides cover for institutions, but also for individuals to Mayflower their way through public spaces (and major publications) as a tacit mode of being. Mayflowering, as I use it here, is a spatial concept of emplaced social power based on prestructural and structural violences. It describes when a member of an interpretive community privileged under settler colonialism unproblematically bodies forth and takes up social space through an innocence narrative based on

epistemic purity that is structurally enabled. Like the "pilgrims" on the Mayflower, they presume a right to foreign spaces by reconceptualizing them as blank territories, both physically and epistemically. They're walking lettered cities (Rama 1996). Their ability to genuinely think they are doing good—and to double down on this—is thus predicated on the creation of social *infrastructures* (like law, disciplines, and argumentative systems such as philosophy) that confirm that reality and that operate by the structured dispossession of other forms of life.<32>

Epistemic practices, including those that claim to be liberatory, often recapitulate colonial violences, both structural and prestructural. Unlike, for instance, the nuanced structural account of epistemic gaslighting by Gaile Pohlhaus (Pohlhaus 2017), mainstream white feminist discourses on epistemic injustice and gaslighting illustrate this pattern.<33> What we are being sold as philosophical resources to fight oppression are concepts that claim to fix the very thing they are culturally responsible for. Recognizing this must lead to an open discussion about the possibilities, requirements, and conditions for structural epistemic reparations and cultural revitalization projects, which cannot be severed from Indigenous land rematriation and structural reparations for the coordinated maldistribution of precarities in women of color's lives. Epistemic reparations need to be thought about in structural terms because liberation does not come about by swapping out bad thoughts for good ones or making room for historically marginalized voices while retaining the power to make room culturally. As Dotson and Sertler point out, freeing your mind isn't enough when conditions that structure ongoing precarity in the material world remain (Dotson and Sertler forthcoming). Because I am interested in what enables these conditions to remain—a kind of epistemic *impunity* that is functionalized across social systems—in the next and final section I outline an account of structural innocence that prevails in contemporary accounts of social structure. This account keeps us on the hamster wheel of recognition while lasting structural transformations that flip the script at the macro level elude us. It should be seen as only one aspect of larger forces at play in the intergenerational maintenance of colonial violence.

EPISTEMIC IMPUNITY AND THE HIDDEN RULES OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Contemporary accounts of social structure belie the operational existence of a multi-track model of social structure that is based on the respecification and enforcement of settler colonial relations (*Siedlerproduktionsverhältnisse*, for the nomenclatural purist) and is co-functional with abstract models of universal social structure derived from the German sociological tradition. This tradition has cultivated a monocultural view of social structure that works to exonerate the targeted maldistribution of harms in settler societies. As a system of self-exoneration, it works to foreclose the legitimacy of claims for wealth redistribution or reparation in material, social, and structural epistemic terms. For instance, the sociological concept of latent function (and dysfunction) prevents structuralist approaches in the social sciences from identifying and tracking the role of settler colonial complicity in structuring the maldistribution of social protectives and precarities, as latency on both accounts—harm or profit—is always seen as unconscious and unintentional. That's the functional purpose of the definition—that nonspecified consequences of institutional or social phenomena, good or bad, are always seen as unintended *and having no identifiable aggressor*. Because this notion predicates definitions of *structural violence*, it too is seen as having no identifiable aggressor. Whom, exactly, does this benefit? This goes beyond the scope of methodological racism (Ruíz 2017) in structuring inequality. It is better understood in terms of techniques of keeping and asserting social power that structure inequality prestructurally, by

suppressing and denying as a matter of *automation*. This doesn't take away cultural intent, as one of the basic features of impunity is that automation does not foreclose complicity but maintains it.

Epistemic impunity is as common in philosophy as it is in sociology, cultural anthropology, ethnography, history, and other official instruments of knowledge production and gatekeeping in settler societies, including policy and governance. *Structural innocence* has become the very bedrock of sociologies of knowledge and economies of observation that work both manifestly and tacitly to maintain control over social power in settler colonial societies. This idea of structural intent is premised on the core notion of elementary functions (or "design") built into settler social structure, where "elementary" denotes processes of self-automation that work to reinforce particular structural relations throughout system transformations. The cultural particularity of relations selected for reinforcement (and respecification in the transformed structure) is important, as these relations rely on metaphysical and epistemological provenances of dominant social histories that are maintained through social power and its (political, legal, material, institutional) instruments. Not all cultures colonize when given a chance. Stop lying. But there is profit to be had by denying this and asking colonized peoples to first disprove settler assumptions about cultural universals before acquiescing to the salience of the question of reparations for structured and ongoing harms to our communities, for maintaining the conditions under which femicide and sexual violence against us *can* thrive.

There is individual profit and communal wealth to be gained from maintaining abusive ambients that unevenly distribute social precarity across populations. Settler societies use various forms of social power to distribute, reproduce, and automate social inequalities (including public health precarities and mortality disadvantages) that skew socioeconomic gain continuously toward white settler populations and their descendants. While the idea of uneven distribution of harm can be found in the social epidemiology literature and public health research on racism, anticolonial perspectives are needed to outline the hidden rules of social structure in settler colonial societies. These are rules that lead, for example, to epistemic apartheid in legal systems, where the claims of some litigants are recognized (and given access to one procedural legal track that affords different life chances) whereas others are pathologized and streamlined into another legal track, often a dead-end street where the mitigation phase is ceremonial and the punishment predictive. In this regard, extending the etiologic period of European colonialism helps to reframe a past historical event or static structural determinant to *an ongoing and dynamic interpretive process*. Colonialism, at heart, is an ongoing interpretive process. While it may be strategically helpful to understand gaslighting as placing a special focus on the power relations that can affect a person's trust in their own judgments, what is at stake is not just the existential and ontological spectrum of emotional abuse sustained but the *asymmetrical death toll of some populations over others*, consistently, predictively, and from one generation to the next. Cultural gaslighting shows how rhetorical strategies that name a public grievance yet actively *abate relief or remedy of that grievance* are some of the most commonly taught and preserved interpretive resources in settler epistemic systems.<34>

Coming to terms with the coordinated depths of structured dispossession should not lead to impasses for action—it hasn't for many. The colonial mind game has always been to get us to disappear ourselves, to whiten our minds by preference, aspiration, fear, or the terrible calculus of bounded choice to survive a moment of terror we did not create, a moment that often spans lives and generations. We cannot fall into the trap that survival is acquiescence, as surrender only reifies the strength of the relations between specified elements in settler social structures. The work of structural respecification oriented towards basic transformations in settler colonial relations is

daunting, but we move toward this future with the assertion that proof of harm is no longer on the table. We've been continuously put in the subordinate position of having to redundantly answer to "tell me the story of how I conquered you"<35> in order to get relief for coordinated violences that make answerability to conquerors a basic feature of social structure (Rabasa 2011). Half a millennium of evidence is enough. Settler social structures guarantee that there will always be costs tallied to our resistance and resilience. Despite this, we must continue our work, for there is simply no (nonwhitewashed) reason to think the structured abuse, exploitation, and adaptive criminalization of our bodies—and the subsequent structural epistemic gaslighting of this condition—will stop under settler colonial regimes, nor that the ebb and flow of femicide and mortality rates will, unaided, bend toward justice.

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Notes

1. Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg – Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples.

2. It gained particular traction among antiviolence resource organizations as an educational outreach tool for intimate partner abuse cycles and, in more clinical settings, as a way to talk about somatic markers, neural pathways, and independent psychiatric variables that could help explain impairments in social decision-making among individuals facing psychological trauma and/or emotional abuse (Humeny 2014). See also Ahern 2018.

3. The probabilistic idea of "life chances" (*Lebenschancen*) comes from German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), yet has a longer conceptual history in German philosophy, melding together theories of human agency from the existentialist and *Lebensphilosophie* tradition (especially Nietzsche) with socially determinist trends in the critique of political economy (as in Marx's *Produktionsverhältnisse*). Weber's original notion of the social power behind the distribution of life chances in a market economy (the opportunities each person has to access a better material life) highlighted "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out *his own will despite resistance*, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber 1947, 53, emphasis added). The question of how the socially fated (by design) probabilistically defy the storm and stress of circumstance is not an appropriate starting point for thinking about responses to colonial violence and its aftermath. The descriptive tools of life chances were never meant to track the strategic maldistribution of life chances of Indigenous people and people of color, and need to be rethought as a framework, particularly in public health research.

4. The argument is not against the existence of the concept of systemic psychological abuse and its possible political uses. In fact, useful interpersonal accounts of gaslighting have long existed in women of color feminisms with little to no uptake in mainstream feminist discourses. Predictably, when the conditions of heuristic need arose in the domestic violence awareness campaigns of the early 1980s, which centered heavily on rescuing the future life chances of US white women, the term culled was not from our intellectual works and histories, but from the obscure works of a white male British playwright and its preservation in US settler cinema.

5. This includes experiences of embodiment that are wrongly medicalized as illness, particularly as mental pathology in psychiatry. More recently, medical gaslighting has been used to refer to a type of "identity-related abuse" observed *by* healthcare providers between patients and their healthcare proxies, or the parents of transgender children and adolescent patients (see Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2018).

6. This pattern continues in philosophy. For years, progressive movements for racial justice have taken up structural analyses of gaslighting to little attention in mainstream analyses of gaslighting as a form of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker 2007), with the exception of Pohlhaus 2017.

7. Design does not simply refer to the identification of patterns of distribution, *but intent of distribution effects*, as in a grand design or master plan. A shift in thinking is needed from individual health "stressors" and bias to active structural "antagonists" in this regard.

8. Not only are these women disproportionately subjected to heightened mortality risk factors, they are often targets of state-sponsored epistemic warfare that promote cultures of silence and violent retribution (Fregoso and Bejarano

2009). For instance, the increasingly common phenomenon in Latin America of charging women who experience miscarriages with aggravated homicide has only recently attracted legal attention.

9. Russell also introduces us to the helpful notion of *structural competency*: "physicians must learn what is called structural competency: the ability to discern how a host of issues defined clinically as symptoms, attitudes, or diseases . . . also represent the downstream implications of upstream decisions about such matters as health care and food delivery systems, zoning laws, urban and rural infrastructure, medicalization, or even about the very definitions of illness and health" (Metzl 2012, 216, cited in Russell 2016,52).

10. Particularly when no such comparative data is produced for white women and ARTs.

11. In her dissertation, "Unbearable Fruit: Black Women's Experiences with Uterine Fibroids," sociologist Ranell Myles finds that "their experiences negatively impact their quality of life by creating added stress, influencing their work lives, and in some cases affecting their ability to conceive and have safe pregnancies" (Myles 2013, 145). Although "psychological distress" has been clinically shown to be a risk factor for death from cerebrovascular disease (Hamer et al. 2012), medical responses to psychological distress are often pathologized for women racialized as nonwhite but remedied with infrastructurally supported, provision-of-care models for women racialized as white.

12. Research on race itself was severely limited well into the late twentieth century, as race was routinely seen by high-ranking scientific journals as an ideological construct unsuited for inclusion in rigorous scientific study design and empirical research. This was, of course, methodologically compatible with generations of sexist racist research produced in American medicine and particularly in psychiatry. Today, health-disparities research lags significantly behind other public interest fields in intersectional analyses, with psychologically driven racial bias dominating the literature.

13. It is incumbent on researchers to anticipate this and to design research with the social forces behind settler colonial market economies in mind, revolutionizing methodologies if need be.

14. Morgan Brinlee is citing a 2014 study by University of Cincinnati Professor John Paul Wright that allowed the Trump administration to argue for policies based on the racist assumption that "Black children are just more disruptive in the classroom."

15. Cf. cases involving the expert testimony of Walter Quijano, state forensic psychiatrist for the state of Texas. (see Millhiser 2016; Buck v. Davis)

16. This in no way minimizes the range of socially legible public outbursts, tears, and emotive somersaults put on social display by white people mentally distressed by accusations of racism. In fact, the higher the pay grade, the more epistemic resources are often made available to license this behavior. The original claim of differential allostatic load remains the same.

17. Indigenous women fare similarly: they have produced robust scholarship on this phenomenon, yet remain peripheralized in western medical measures. Indigenous peoples have developed sophisticated knowledge-practices that incorporate wariness of white people with clipboards asking questions since the fifteenth century. The underserving of Indigenous populations is thus not due to "small data sets" but structured inattentions to the historical conditions for producing medical knowledges about Indigenous populations. (see Deer 2015; Patrick 2016). Scientific mystification of violence against Native and Indigenous women changes, of course, with border imaginaries that contain populations neatly in settler epistemic terms (island imaginaries), as the rising health literature on Australian aboriginal women show.

19. Today, historical marker #2254 stands at the original site of the Wades' home. The State of Kentucky has rebranded the Wades as "open housing *pioneers*" who "benefited from the friendship and assistance of Carl and Anne Braden" (https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/298). This is an example of gaslighting produced by settler geoscaping.

20. *Stare decisis* refers to the procedural principle that decides which legal arguments have standing based on case precedent.

21. Heston Tobias and Ameil Joseph make a related point, arguing gaslighting is a "historical form" of abuse that predates its coinage in settler aesthetics. It has been a technique of *communal incapacitation* through targeting noncompliance in Black communities, such that "gaslighting is part of a systemic, historical process of racism that has been used by the police and government organizations to both illegally target people of color and *deny complicity* in racial profiling" (Tobias and Joseph 2018, 22, my emphasis).

22. As Tuck and Yang note, these can be redeployed by people of color and forced migrants, such as—following their logic—displaced victims of human trafficking, war, and global capitalism, including (for illustrative purposes) Sonoran women asylum-seekers who may have "stories of colonization" rather than "stories of creation" as part of their identity in settler Mexico (as the Mexican state coordinated the reclassification of Indigenous peoples as *campesinxs* under strategic settler configurations of labor and land politics). For a helpful distinction between claims

to innocence and claims to pure innocence, which are untenable in late-stage, settler-colonial, capitalist societies given the historical functioning of the settler-slave-Native triad, see Dotson 2018a. I follow Dotson on this point.

23. This is not only because one has it, but because of inhabiting social structures that nonaccidentally recognize *these* forms of capital but not others as social protectives or wealth. Understanding the structural relations behind motivations for settler moves to innocence is critical for recognizing the violent precarities that are structured to shape the aspirational experiences of people of color and racialized immigrants resettling on stolen lands, and whose own lands have often been stolen and/or removed from possibility of return.

24. The idea of mobilization without emancipation comes from late twentieth-century feminist interpretations of Latin American revolutionary theory, particularly of the Nicaraguan and Cuban revolutions (cf. Randall 1983; AMNLAE 1984; Molyneux 1985; Ariza and de Oliveira 1999; Viterna 2005; Garzón et al. 2014). Indeed, a great deal of feminist anticolonial approaches to structural oppressions (including lengthy treatments of ideological forces and epistemic oppressions responsible for thwarting women's liberation) arose out of these literatures, to little uptake in the global North. Along with feminist Zapatismo, it is these literatures that form my basic conceptions of social transformations, the predictive nature of counterrevolutionary forces, permutations of cultural power, and processes of functionalization. Stability across transformations is one of the lasting legacies of Latin American revolutions (Winn 1989; Gleijeses 1992); feminist interpretations of these histories, however, have been critical in dismantling deterministic accounts of cultural structural dependency on the global North and envisioning paths for strategic responses to counterinsurgency (Viterna 2013; Kampwirth 2004).

25. Historically, one or two have always gone free—in fact some *must always go free* and in a statistically significant way for settler science to see, record, and study the paradox when it ebbs, thereby constructing the illusory puzzle of freedom to keep us busy as political theorists.

26. For example, citing Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* rather than Gertrude Mossell's *A Lofty Study* helps relieve pressure to enter the actual work and voices of women of color into the citational economy of the academy. A hundred women of color and Indigenous women can say it, but when a structurally privileged white woman says it, it becomes a potential cottage industry by design, irrespective of who the writer is. In fact, I fully expect terms like *cultural gaslighting* and *hermeneutic violence* to be unproblematically attributed to or associated with a white academic in the near future, or to be foreclosed by homologous terms that depoliticize or produce opposite effects (cf. the notion of academic mainstreaming of intersectionality in Ruíz 2017).

27. It enables journal referees to ask to have the term "settler colonial culture" explained to them, often with the presumption that no such thing exists. It is just another version of knowledge-production based on Native informancy. It takes the form: "Prove to us we're bad, because we're inherently good," and where proof of harm not *indication of harm* is the baseline for motivating corrective action. Today, a slew of cutting-edge and important work is being done across the natural and social sciences to prove people of color are disproportionately harmed by policy, practice, and bias, but with the legitimating framework of unproven harm as the baseline of study design. Study design does not yet foreground the inverse, proof that harm *isn't* being done to our communities and lives. This would constitute corrective action and better align with the realities of the subjects that methodological positivism claims to be tracking. The gains may be short-term, but they are necessary.

28. This power is wielded quite widely on a structural scale that has direct *economic* benefits and indirect benefits as social capital that are often economized for social mobility. It constitutes the nonaccidental accumulation of interpretive *wealth and capital* as a form of indirect intergenerational wealth transmissions between specific populations and their descendants. It is a form of wealth that performs as safety nets of social capital, yet (predictively) remain unaccounted for in studies of class wealth (Ruíz unpublished).

29. Consolidatory domination and cultural recursion help us see how interpretive familiarity under colonialism is achieved, not by growing into a specific sociohistorical context held together by social acts and practices, but by the simultaneous erasure and repression of an alternative reference point that preconditions the emergence of *western interpretive frameworks*, acts, and practices. This productive repression is performed by hermeneutic violence. It is not a reflective political maneuver; it is the expressive outcome of western conceptual orthodoxies (such as substance ontology, hierarchical binaries, exclusionary logics) that are particularly adept at producing a worldview that structures social processes through agonism and domination, where what perseveres unchanged through struggle and change has its existence recognized as *real*. That's not a universal feature of human existence; it is the metaphysical provenance of western culture since the Greek atomists, and essential to the development of Greco-Roman slave law.

30. As one professor (one of Gadamer's students) in graduate school once told me, "*real* Indigenous cultures are dead. All there is left are pastiches. Rain dances in high school gymnasiums." It didn't work. I saw how the whitewashing of hermeneutic resources (including historiography) for the purposes of wielding monocultural authority over the instruments of knowledge-production is one of the oldest tools of dispossession in the academy. Retaining monocultural control of institutional and infrastructural mechanisms such as law, history, and education

that trade on whitewashed hermeneutical resources is critical to the formation of interpretive power, which discloses only those domains of intelligibility that recognize colonial cultural formations as the prereflective baseline for meaning, language, and social communication. The goal was not to get me to *believe* or adjudicate the claim of Indigenous death, but to foreclose the possibility of epistemic disobedience based, for instance, on lived knowledge of Indigenous cultures, memories that outlive my lifespan, or simply the politics of refusal (see Simpson 2007; Dotson 2018a).

31. There's a deeper value inversion at play here, since monocultural epistemologies actually have the serious hermeneutical disadvantage when compared to the vast majority of the world's oppressed peoples who can track multiple cultural levels of salience. But this limitation is unsupported by the social infrastructures of settler culture.

32. Mayflowering is common in the discourses of ally culture, whether humanitarians, political liberals, white feminists, or structurally privileged peoples from colonized contexts who unproblematically resettle to Indigenous lives and lands, holding onto intergenerational wealth *or aspirations to restored settler status* through the social capital of assimilative recognition. (This is especially true of white and white-facing mestizx diasporic Latin Americans who expected to inherit privileged socioeconomic statuses in their countries of origin, and whose deflated social and economic standing as "Latinx" in the US was interiorized to enable Mayflowering, but also deep anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous, sexist racism and complicity with US white settlers and their institutions.) What is imperial in the interpretive asymmetry enacted through Mayflowering is more than an organized failure to recognize that their embodied can-do-ness takes place on stolen lands; it helps to organize the automation of structural violence. Mayflowerers are often some of the most virtued and principled humanists in the academy. Mayflowering is thus one reason to reject ethical views in social epistemology that tackle social injustices through the monocultural lenses of settler-imperial culture.

33. Social epistemology under white feminisms has become the new clipboard-carrying ethnographer making the rounds on Native lands, the imperial social anthropologist who records as a matter of data, taking notes, assuming answers *are theirs* to interpret as truth, lies, or false belief and report back as objective knowledge. With universalism as a methodology, conquest is always near. That is why some prefer to fictionalize our lives to talk about them indirectly, so that you don't have to talk about actual hermeneutical injustices to, say, the actual women who have given *testimonio* of injustices, sexual violence, and femicide, for centuries. The literature on the epistemology of testimony is long and varied in Latin America, but to the global North, it might as well never have been written.

34. Precarity is always a double-edged sword that requires structural countermoves to address. Since reproducing conditions of psychic exhaustion is part of the design of settler social structures, the trap set up is to respond by giving up on all empirical work and applied research, particularly on research that gives socially legitimate legal measure and cultural weight to communal impacts of trafficking, battery, femicide, rape, and associated gender-based violences. The fact remains that we need lawyers who won't advocate against our interests through cultural incompetence and doctors who won't get us killed while doing nothing legally recognized as negligent, doctors who have "structural competence" (Russell 2016). We need structural competence across the board: policies that address regulatory lacunae and public servants who call racist policies and practices to task, even under a settler governance structure that on the long view skews advantage toward white settler populations and their descendants. Strategically, we can marshal moves that force policies and laws to do what section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did, which was to shift the burden on states to first prove that proposed changes to voting procedures were *not* racist before being enacted. It had a nontrivial positive impact on the lives of many people of color in the US, which is why it was foreseeable that it would be dismantled. But we can also stay ahead of predictive epistemic precarity by shifting the debate altogether and directing our citational economies to Indigenous social science research that doesn't rely on the interpretive assumptions of settler credibility economies, yet can move tactically within them to address community needs brought by structured harm (Walter and Andersen 2016). When considering adverse racial climates in academia (Williams 2019), flip the script. Make them keep up for a change.

35. And with metaphysically impoverished settler languages woefully unequipped for little more than prespecifying subject–object distinctions primed for regulating commercial transitions in settler market economies. There are other ways of being, living, and relating that the grammatical arrangements of settler languages do not enliven.

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