Resisting Structural Epistemic Injustice

Michael Doan
Eastern Michigan University
mdoan@emich.edu

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Abstract

What form must a theory of epistemic injustice take in order to successfully illuminate the epistemic dimensions of struggles that are primarily *political*? How can such struggles be understood as involving collective struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination that seek to improve practices of knowledge production and make lives more liveable? In this paper, I argue that currently dominant, Fricker-inspired approaches to theorizing epistemic wrongs and remedies make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the epistemic dimensions of historic and ongoing political struggles. Recent work in the theory of recognition—particularly the work of critical, feminist, and decolonial theorists—can help to identify and correct the shortcomings of these approaches. I offer a critical appraisal of recent conversation concerning epistemic injustice, focusing on three characteristics of Frickerian frameworks that obscure the epistemic dimensions of political struggles. I propose that a theory of epistemic injustice can better illuminate the epistemic dimensions of such struggles by acknowledging and centering the agency of victims in abusive epistemic relations, by conceptualizing the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice relationally, and by explaining epistemic injustice as rooted in the oppressive and dysfunctional epistemic norms undergirding actual communities and institutions.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, oppression, water, human rights, recognition, self-determination

1. Introduction

What form must a theory of epistemic injustice take in order to successfully illuminate the epistemic dimensions of struggles that are primarily *political*? How can historical and contemporary political struggles be understood as involving collective struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination[1] that seek to

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[1] I understand *epistemic self-determination* in terms similar to Ian Werkheiser, who focuses on "the ability of community members to jointly determine and engage in the epistemic practices of their community, which can include methodologies for

improve practices of knowledge production for the sake of making lives more liveable?

Answering these questions involves attending to the particularities of distinct places, each with their own complex histories and social dynamics. Answering these questions well may lead in several directions all at once—in at least as many directions as there are distinctive harms and wrongs to be addressed. With this pluralistic orientation in mind, I begin by describing the collective struggle with which I have been involved for the past several years: a struggle in Michigan to restore and deepen local democratic control and to ensure clean, safe, affordable water as a basic right for all. I argue that currently dominant, Fricker-inspired approaches to theorizing epistemic wrongs and remedies make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the epistemic dimensions of a struggle of this sort. Recent work in the theory of recognition—particularly the work of critical, feminist, and decolonial theorists—can help to identify and correct the shortcomings of these approaches.[2]

I begin with a reflective overview of some of my own involvement in collective efforts to resist structural epistemic injustice. Next, I offer a critical appraisal of recent conversation concerning epistemic injustice, focusing on three characteristics of currently dominant, Frickerian frameworks that obscure the epistemic dimensions of political struggles and conflicts. Drawing on a shared analysis of how community groups in Detroit and Flint are advancing common struggles for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right (Howell, Doan, and Harbin 2017), I propose that one way a theory of epistemic injustice can better illuminate the epistemic dimensions of political struggles is by acknowledging and centering the agency of victims in abusive epistemic relations, by conceptualizing the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice relationally, and by explaining epistemic injustice as rooted in the oppressive and dysfunctional epistemic norms undergirding actual communities and institutions. I leave open the possibility that other theories of epistemic injustice, violence, and oppression emerging from distinct places and experiences may serve as differently illuminating lenses, with

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gaining knowledge as well as evaluative assumptions for accepting or rejecting knowledge" (Werkheiser 2017, 158).

[2] Thus, my project diverges from that of Paul Giladi, who argues that a particular strand of recognition theory, centered on the work of Axel Honneth, "provides a more complex but complementary diagnosis and social cure" for the two forms of epistemic injustice described by Fricker (Giladi 2018, 149). I shall instead emphasize how the work of critical, feminist, and decolonial theorists of recognition serves as a helpful corrective for Fricker-inspired discussions of epistemic injustice.

their own tactical advantages. My aim is to fashion one such lens, from where and with whom I currently stand.

2. Resisting Structural Epistemic Injustice

Since 2013, I have been working with grassroots coalitions in Detroit to challenge an authoritarian state intervention law known as the "Emergency Manager Law," or Public Act 436. This legislation allows the governor of Michigan to appoint an "emergency manager" in cities facing fiscal distress, suspending democracy at the municipal level and stripping residents of local citizenship rights with the declared purpose of balancing the books. Through my involvement in collective efforts to resist Emergency Management—particularly in response to the role of emergency managers in creating and sustaining water crises in Detroit and Flint—I have grown increasingly concerned with the patterns of group-based credibility discounting I have witnessed across the state of Michigan. These patterns overwhelmingly target working-class communities of color residing in deindustrialized, fiscally distressed cities. In **"Epistemic Injustice and Epistemic Redlining"** (Doan 2017), I argue that such cognitive undermining is rooted in Michigan's legal structure. In the course of so doing, I point out that philosophers have been unduly focused on "culprit-based" forms of epistemic injustice (Kwong 2015, 228) and tend to adopt approaches that preclude discussion of *structural* varieties.

To more accurately describe the kind of epistemic injustice inflicted on the people of Flint, Detroit, and other fiscally distressed, majority-black cities, I develop an account of a phenomenon that I call "epistemic redlining," which is a structural form of epistemic injustice not readily countenanced by existing, Frickerian models. Whereas *redlining* refers to the practice of denying financial services (e.g., mortgages, home-repair loans) to residents of specific neighborhoods, generally because they are people of color and/or poor, I understand *epistemic redlining* as the practice of denying conferrals of credibility to residents of specific municipalities, generally because those municipalities are deemed to be in a state of "financial emergency" (Doan 2017, 7). Contrary to the general thrust of recent Fricker-inspired work on the topic, I argue that epistemic redlining ought to be understood as a form of epistemic injustice in spite of the fact that it cannot be traced straightforwardly to prejudice and cannot be remedied through the cultivation of individual virtue. Since the practices of epistemic redlining and Emergency Management are inseparably intertwined, I suggest that the act of signing Public Act 436 into law can be understood as "an operation of discursive power whereby the state—and capitalist interests that deploy state violence to secure their positions—sanctioned and legitimized the *mis*recognition of certain geographically defined populations," further institutionalizing the epistemic and

political subordination of groups already relegated to surplus or disposable statuses (Doan 2017, 7).[3]

Having developed an alternative account of epistemic injustice that can accommodate structural varieties, several pressing questions remained unanswered: How can structural epistemic injustice be effectively confronted and remedied, if not (solely) through the cultivation of individual virtue? What do collective efforts to resist structural epistemic injustice actually look like, particularly in the Michigan context? In "Detroit to Flint and Back Again: Solidarity Forever" (Howell, Doan, and Harbin 2017), my coauthors and I address these questions while recounting how community groups in Detroit and Flint advanced common struggles for clean, safe, affordable water as a human right, particularly during the period of 2014 to 2016. Drawing from activist archives of meeting notes, publications, broadcasts, films, and other recordings, together with our own participant perspectives on organizing efforts as we experienced them, we explore how Detroit and Flint activists managed to center the experiences, voices, and analyses of people whose knowledge of water contamination and shutoff practices has not mattered to emergency managers, the Department of Treasury, the Department of Environmental Quality, or the governor of Michigan.

Against the background of denigrating portrayals of city residents as ignorant, incompetent, and incapable of self-governance—portrayals which, as Jamie Peck astutely observes, conform to a neoliberal logic that seeks to "endogenize and localize" both the supposedly underlying causes of municipal fiscal distress and "the scope for politically acceptable remedies" (Peck 2014)—sharing personal stories about water became a central part of efforts to draw attention to the crises unfolding in Flint and Detroit. Stories of ordinary peoples' struggles for survival were gradually woven into broader counternarratives that came to inform the framings of grassroots journalists and filmmakers, the inquiries pursued by community-based researchers, and the focal points of citizen-led policy initiatives, as well as various forms of direct action—including the act of civil disobedience in

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[3] Reflecting on the "age of disposability," Kali Akuno argues that the "correlation between capital accumulation (earning a profit) and the value of Black life to the overall system have remained consistent throughout the history of the U.S. settler-colonial project, despite shifts in production regimes" (Akuno 2017, 62). In the context of deindustrialized cities such as Detroit and Flint, in which remaining manufacturing industries have mostly replaced human labor through automation, the "lack of jobs for Black people translates into a lack of need for Black people, which equates into the wholesale devaluation of Black life. And anything without value in the capitalist system is disposable" (65).

which a group of Detroiters known as the "Homrich 9" blocked private contractors from executing water shutoffs.

We argue that the practice of sharing stories about water in public spaces has been "central to efforts to build and expand networks of solidarity, identify and process shared trauma, forge a sense of collective identity, and work collaboratively toward political transformation" (Howell, Doan, and Harbin 2017, 5). In addition to mobilizing those most directly affected by water crises, this practice has helped counter the dehumanizing logic of neoliberal governance, "which casts non-experts as lacking the credibility to speak truthfully about the quality of the water flowing from their taps, let alone about the state of their own health and well-being" (7). As ordinary channels of democratic representation were suspended indefinitely under Emergency Management, grassroots organizations and communities found ways to intervene directly, opening new channels for their voices and analyses, building enabling structures to support the sharing of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to collectively meet each other's needs, and establishing the infrastructure required to meet those needs autonomously and sustainably over time, without relying on the state. As Rev. Bill Wiley-Kellermann of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Detroit put it, "in a situation where the unjust law is an Emergency Manager law, which takes over the entire structure of governance, the act of civil disobedience needs to be *to become ungovernable*" (quoted in Howell, Doan, and Harbin 2017, 12).

Led by black women and other women activists of color who played significant roles in building multiracial, intergenerational coalitions within and between cities across Michigan, the United States, and globally, the struggle for clean, safe, affordable water can be understood as involving an ensemble of struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination. For example, as government officials refused to acknowledge Flint residents as knowers, disregarding thousands of complaints about diseases and rashes linked to the foul, discolored water flowing from their taps, local activists and organizers conducted their own water-testing campaigns and offered community-wide trainings. They also collaborated selectively with credentialed experts working in academic institutions, whose findings would more readily be recognized as legitimate—not to mention legally obliging—by those employed by state agencies. In adopting these diverse approaches to producing and sharing knowledge, Flint residents demonstrated a keen critical awareness of the epistemic values and norms undergirding academic and state institutions. Sometimes conforming to specific norms to secure epistemic recognition for particular purposes (e.g., working through established channels of expertise to force the state to publicly acknowledge the existence of lead and other forms of contamination), activists also challenged norms bound up with the reproduction of their collective subordination while developing alternative ways of

relating to one another as thinkers, inquirers, and collaborators, insisting that the knowledge and ways of knowing of ordinary people matter.

3. Theorizing the Epistemic Dimensions of Political Struggles
3.1. Can there even *be* a struggle?

What form must a theory of epistemic injustice take in order to illuminate the epistemic dimensions of such a political and structurally oriented struggle? To begin with, in order to conceptualize the statewide struggle for clean, safe, affordable water as, in part, a struggle for epistemic recognition and self-determination, a theory of epistemic injustice needs to at least *acknowledge* the agency of victims in abusive epistemic relations, such as relations between government officials and city residents. After all, there can be no struggle for recognition in situations where the unjustly ignored, silenced, and excluded are either unwilling or unable to participate in reshaping the epistemic relations at issue, whether by initiating and directing a process of change or by steering processes already underway. It is striking, then, that recent work on epistemic injustice leaves us sorely ill-equipped for so much as noticing ongoing struggles for epistemic recognition, let alone understanding and evaluating them. Why might this be the case?

Consider Miranda Fricker's treatment of testimonial injustice in her widely influential 2007 book, *Epistemic Injustice*. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unduly discounted, and their testimony is not believed, owing to a negative, identity-based prejudice in their audience. Fricker offers the example of Tom Robinson from Harper Lee's classic novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Robinson, a black man, has been charged with raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman, and must testify before an all-white jury. While it is obvious that Robinson is innocent of the crime and speaks truthfully in court, the jury fails to believe his testimony, for their credibility judgments are systematically distorted by antiblack prejudice. Robinson is not taken seriously in his capacity as a knower and is thereby damaged in his standing as a human being. Meanwhile, having written off their only reliable informant, the jury issues an under- and misinformed verdict, imprisoning Robinson for a crime he did not commit. To prevent such multilayered injustices from occurring and to promote more successful testimonial exchanges, Fricker recommends cultivating the virtue of *testimonial justice*, through which the virtuous hearer effectively "*neutralizes the impact of prejudice in her credibility judgements*," rendering her perceptions of her fellow speakers "*un*prejudiced" (2007, 92, 93; original emphasis).

Since the publication of *Epistemic Injustice*, a number of philosophers working on the topic have joined Fricker in accepting the following two tenets: first, credibility discounting must ultimately be traced to prejudice in order to qualify as

unjust; and second, there must be an individual remedy, in the form of a specific corrective virtue, for each and every variety of unjust discrediting (e.g., Hookway 2010; Kwong 2015; Marsh 2011; May 2012; Pohlhaus 2012; Riggs 2012). Recall that, on Fricker's view, the withholding of credibility is not necessarily unjust in and of itself, and only becomes so when a speaker's credibility is unduly discounted because of an identity-based prejudice in their audience. The guiding thought here is that the "ethical poison of testimonial injustice must derive from some ethical poison in the judgement of the hearer," and that identity prejudice, with its "ethically bad affective investment" and stubborn resistance to counterevidence, is an appropriately poisonous source (Fricker 2007, 22, 36). Prejudice is more than a *cause* of epistemic injustice, for Fricker—it is a *criterion* that qualifies an instance of credibility discounting as an injustice (May 2012, 8). If this first tenet is accepted, then the second is likely to seem plausible as well; for if prejudice is an individual problem, it can probably be addressed by way of an individual remedy.

In addition to focusing on individual remedies, Fricker-inspired theories go a step further by placing both the *responsibility* and the *initiative* for undoing testimonial injustice in the hands of individual perpetrators. Given that prejudiced hearers are the source of the problem, and they, not their victims, are the ones whose testimonial sensibilities need to change, it is reasonable to suppose that they bear responsibility for bringing about the requisite psychic changes. More specifically, on Fricker's view it is the responsibility of hearers to exercise critical awareness regarding the prejudices that are likely influencing their credibility judgments so that their testimonial sensibilities can be checked through a self-reflective, self-corrective process, guided by the ideal of neutralizing "any negative impact" (92). It is up to individual hearers to enact this responsibility by somehow coming to suspect the influence of prejudice, "shift[ing] intellectual gear out of spontaneous, unreflective mode," and adjusting their credibility assessments upwards to compensate for any undue deficits (91). Fricker suggests that there are two mechanisms that might prompt hearers to engage in such self-correction: we might either sense some dissonance between our own reasoned beliefs and perceptual judgments, or simply begin a process of critical self-reflection on that "great passive inheritance that conditions the credibility judgements we make" (41, 91, 83). Either way, the impetus to self-correction comes *from within*, and it is up to each of us, as individuals, to take up the charge of molding ourselves into more virtuous hearers.[4]

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[4] In *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker does admit that "eradicating these injustices would ultimately take not just more virtuous hearers, but collective social political change" (Fricker 2007, 7–8). However, since nowhere in her account does she explain the relationship between structures of unequal power and systemic prejudices, let alone

Fricker's narrow focus on the initiative and responsibilities of perpetrators is surely well-meaning. Insofar as she self-consciously avoids placing the responsibility of correcting for testimonial injustice on those who have already been harmed in their capacity as knowers, her approach underscores the importance of not further burdening the victims, let alone subjecting them to what Nora Berenstain calls "epistemic exploitation" (Berenstain 2016).[5] Notice, however, that *Fricker's analysis of testimonial injustice focuses one-sidedly on the agency and prejudice of perpetrators, occluding the agency and resistance of victims*. Not only are the unjustly discredited, silenced, and excluded, given no role in initiating or guiding the work of correcting for testimonial injustice, but the question is left conspicuously unasked whether they might also take responsibility for demanding the recognition of their oppressors or find themselves moved to press for broader changes in their social and material conditions (rather than, say, going around trying to fix all the vicious hearers). In an odd twist, Fricker presents the perpetrators of testimonial injustice as the chief protagonists of change, driven to mend a damaged web of epistemic relations by their own desire to become more virtuous—or, at least, so we are invited to hope.[6] Meanwhile, their victims are cast as the passive recipients of a form of epistemic recognition still to come and seemingly have nothing to do but wait patiently for their abusers to come around.[7]

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address the role of political change in working to reduce such prejudices, it is difficult to grasp the meaning of her admission.

[5] My thanks to Ami Harbin for drawing my attention to this feature of Fricker's approach.

[6] If hearers begin in vice, in the grips of "active ignorance" (see Mills 2007; Medina 2013), how exactly would they begin to move into virtue, all on their own? How, for example, would they know how far to shift their credibility judgments upwards to correct for undue deficits? My thanks to Chris Cohoon for drawing my attention to these questions.

[7] Fricker arguably has more to say about the agency of victims in her discussion of hermeneutical injustice—see, for example, her remarks on "hermeneutical rebellion," which she casts as "part of the mechanism of consciousness raising" (Fricker 2007, 167). Whether her thinking might be able to move further in the structurally oriented direction, I am suggesting, remains to be seen, though. One question is whether such meaning-making activity ought to be considered the foremost art of resistance, especially given the way Fricker renders its success dependent on the uptake of perpetrators and on the incorporation of new terms into the "collective" hermeneutical resource (cf. Mason 2011). Another is how to understand the relationship between what Fricker now calls "*discriminatory* epistemic injustice," on the one hand, and "systemic riggings of the epistemic

Compelling though it has turned out to be for many philosophers, this picture of how epistemic injustice can and ought to be remedied should give us pause. I suspect that its plausibility ultimately rests on the idea that prejudiced hearers are the source of the problem, and since only the hearers themselves can come to believe and perceive otherwise, they not only can but *must* perform the requisite epistemic labor on their own, out of their own good will. But even if that argument were convincing, there would still be plenty of reason to resist Fricker's conclusion that vicious hearers must be the sole initiators and protagonists of change. For one thing, Linda Martín Alcoff and Rae Langton have independently interrogated Fricker's (largely unsupported) presumption that perpetrators could reliably serve in that role, emphasizing the need for structural remedies to complement and pave the way for the cultivation of individual virtue (Alcoff 2010, 132–134; Langton 2010, 462–463; see also Anderson 2012, 167–169; Medina 2013; Emerick 2016, 178–181). As Kristie Dotson points out, we also need to be mindful of various sources of "epistemic inertia" within and among perpetrators of epistemic oppression, ranging from "the social, political, and historical landscapes of epistemic power" to "features of epistemological systems themselves" (Dotson 2014, 134). The character of resistance to change is likely to vary across historical and cultural circumstances. It may include everything from an inability or reluctance to so much as recognize the need to alter one's own epistemic sensibilities, to a lack of impetus to pursue changes one accepts as obligatory (Dotson 2014, 132–133, 129).

In summary, there is good reason to suspect that Fricker's account puts an inordinate amount of faith in the perpetrators of epistemic injustice. By accepting her depiction of epistemic injustice as rooted in the prejudices of individuals, philosophers following Fricker's lead run the risk of uncritically inheriting her faith in the self-redemptive initiative of perpetrators and, in so doing, occluding and treating as irrelevant the agency of victims. As a consequence, Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice prevents us from so much as noticing historic and ongoing struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination, such as those currently being waged in Detroit, Flint, and other cities subjected to authoritarian rule. Yet it is precisely in those situations where perpetrators of epistemic injustice demonstrate an unwillingness or inability to change their ways that the need to demand and press for change becomes most urgent—not to mention in those situations where it is the perceived legitimacy of specific conventions, laws, and institutions, and not just the stubbornness of those who happen to be charged with implementing them, that is the principal source of epistemic inertia. Not only does Fricker's account ignore

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economy," on the other, which she characterizes as a distinct species of epistemic wrongs but does not discuss any further (Fricker 2017, 53; original emphasis).

situations where it becomes necessary to engage in struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination in the face of persistent harms—it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize the possibility of struggles already underway.

By allowing the victims in abusive epistemic relations to recede into the background, philosophers following Fricker's lead also fail to consider the extent to which the power to inflict injury through the withholding of credibility depends on a prior history of recognitive relations and acts. Thus, important questions are left unasked about how we go about investing authority in one another in and through our ongoing relationships, and how relations of power and vulnerability come to be intertwined with assessments of credibility, among other evaluative qualities. Why have such questions been left unaddressed? Much as recent work in the theory of recognition has been shaped by what Cillian McBride calls a "recognition deficit model" (McBride 2013, 6, 37–38), Fricker-inspired theories of epistemic injustice generally take for granted what might be called a "credibility deficit model." The basic picture here is that of a relationship between a subject whose credibility is denied, waiting for—or, perhaps, *demanding*—epistemic recognition from another who has the power to remedy this deficit by conferring the credibility that is warranted by the available evidence. Since the focus is on the harms done through the withholding of credibility, the solution is thought to be the granting of due or appropriate credibility by way of ameliorating the distorting influence of prejudice. The guiding ideal is that of a society of hearers who are generally *un*prejudiced and who skillfully hew to operative epistemic norms, managing to minimize, if not entirely eliminate, instances of unjust credibility discounting.

Yet as McBride, Kelly Oliver, Amy Allen, and Glen Coulthard each point out, pictures of this sort divert our attention away from questions about "the way our desires for recognition from particular groups, individuals, and institutions are formed in the first place," and whether such desires might themselves be a product of social domination, as we accommodate ourselves to structurally asymmetrical modes of recognition (McBride 2013, 6; see also Oliver 2001, 9, 26; Allen 2010, 26–31; Coulthard 2014, 23–25). "Sometimes we would be better off if we did not desire the recognition of some people in the first place," adds McBride, "because it is this desire itself which helps to render us subordinate to them" (104). Suppose my self-confidence is seriously shaken by your judgment of my epistemic competence, and you thereby harm me in my capacity as a knower. If, in light of my having been harmed in this way, I am demanding the credibility I am due, then it must be that I already recognize your authority over me, at least insofar as I have come to see you as a credible judge of my cognitive abilities (see Markell 2003, 31–32; McBride 2013, 151). I could be right in my assessment of you. But, then again, my judgment of you may well be just as vulnerable to the influence of misleading stereotypes as is yours of me, conditioned as our assessments of credibility are by the "great passive

inheritance" of our generation (Fricker 2007, 83). I might, for example, see you as far *more* competent than you actually are, taken as I am by your finely tailored suit and Ivy League credentials, having yet to reflect critically on this corner of the prevailing social imaginary. Or, as Estelle Ferrarese points out, suppose I recognize your authority not because I acknowledge you as a competent judge, but only insofar as your assessment of me plays a mediating role in my gaining access to certain resources (Ferrarese 2009, 611), such as gainful employment or safe drinking water. Unless you acknowledge my status as a knower and are prepared to believe at least some of what I say, I will not be able to acquire whatever it is that I want or need, for you control the resources in question. You may even hold a monopoly, rendering me wholly dependent on your largesse.

In situations of either sort, my vulnerability to you—that is, to the very possibility that you might deny me the credibility I am due—could very well be shaped by factors that have little to do with your actual competence and authority, some of which are entirely outside my control. Insofar as I am able to alter my attitude towards you (perhaps by denying the legitimacy of your judgment in light of good reasons) without suffering serious consequences, it may turn out that your authority over me, and your power to harm me in my capacity as a knower, is rendered precarious or nonexistent in turn. So, in addition to occluding the agency of victims by focusing exclusively on the responsibilities of perpetrators, Fricker-inspired theories also sidestep some crucial questions of power and authority, and thereby fail to do justice to the complexities of epistemic relations—complexities that only come fully into view when considered from below. Once we start raising questions about the processes through which authority and power are invested and maintained in ongoing relationships, there begin to emerge new possibilities for resisting epistemic injustice at both the interpersonal and structural levels. We can also begin to understand what struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination might ultimately be about and what tends to move people into engagement in struggles of these sorts.

3.2. Is struggle really *necessary*?

In the previous section, I noted that Fricker's view ignores situations where it becomes necessary to engage in struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination, particularly in the face of persistent—in some cases, institutionally embedded—epistemic inertia. I will now argue that the necessity of struggle is further obscured by the way Fricker characterizes the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice. To anticipate: by conceiving of epistemic injustice in *individualistic* terms, Fricker-inspired theories draw attention away from social relations and institutions that subordinate people and groups on epistemic grounds, precluding consideration of efforts to redress what are arguably more fundamental

wrongs. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's recent work in the theory of recognition, in what follows, I sketch out an alternative approach to characterizing the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice that helps explain why engaging in a struggle for epistemic recognition may sometimes be necessary to redress relevant injuries.

On Fricker's view, the primary ethical harm in all cases of epistemic injustice is that "the subject is wronged in her capacity as a knower" (Fricker 2007, 44). Fricker discusses two main types of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. On the one hand, testimonial injustice wrongs a subject in her capacity as a *giver* of knowledge. It also tends to cause any of a number of secondary practical harms, such as making someone appear unqualified for a job; as well as secondary epistemic harms, such as shaking someone's confidence in her own beliefs. As Fricker puts it, "testimonial injustice, and the attack it makes on intellectual confidence, can change an intellectual trajectory in one fell blow, whether as a single event or, more likely, as the final straw in an ongoing experience of persistent petty intellectual underminings" (51). On the other hand, hermeneutical injustice wrongs a subject by excluding her from participating in the pooling of knowledge, insofar as it renders her unable "to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible" (162). The secondary epistemic harms of hermeneutical injustice include the erosion of a subject's faith in "her own ability to make sense of the world, or at least the relevant region of the world" (163), the practical side-effects of which are both serious and wide ranging.

In summary, Fricker conceives of the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice in terms of *the damage inflicted on an individual's cognitive capacities*. When somebody suffers an injustice of this kind, the wrong inflicted on her "bears a social *meaning*" to the effect that she is "less than fully human," for the degradation of her capacities *qua* knower symbolically degrades her *qua* human being (44; original emphasis). But she also suffers concretely, both as result of this symbolic degradation and from psychic injuries inflicted more directly.[8] By attacking her intellectual confidence and potentially throwing her off of her intellectual trajectory, epistemic injustice threatens an individual's capacity for autonomous thought and action. As Fricker puts it, epistemic injustice is "capable of running both deep and wide in a person's psychology and practical life," constraining "who the person can be" (58). On Fricker's view, then, epistemic injustice is an impediment to the ethical

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[8] It is worth noting that Fricker's discussion of "epistemic objectification" leaves open the possibility that one might be wronged by testimonial injustice without also suffering any concrete damages (Fricker 2007, 132–136). My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.

self-realization of individuals and, hence, "presents a face of oppression" (58). Since the focus is on harms done by the withholding of credibility and exclusion from hermeneutic participation, the solution is thought to be the granting of epistemic recognition and inclusion in existing practices of meaning-making.

I agree that individual knowers often suffer psychic damage as a result of epistemic injustice and that the extent of the damage can be so serious as to limit their prospects for full-fledged self-direction and self-realization. My concern, though, is that by focusing on the psyches of individual victims (which mirrors how Fricker locates the source of the problem, in the psyches of individual perpetrators), Fricker-inspired views draw attention away from other injurious features of abusive epistemic relations that not only tend to move people into struggles for epistemic recognition, but also help them come to grips with the inadequacy of being granted credibility or included in practices of meaning-making in the absence of significant struggle or conflict.

In order to illuminate the epistemic dimensions of ongoing political struggles, I think we would do better to conceptualize the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice *relationally*. Born of her celebrated exchange with Axel Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003), Nancy Fraser's "status model of recognition" is particularly helpful for envisioning the type of approach needed here. The status model encourages us to reconceptualize various forms of epistemic nonrecognition and misrecognition (such as the withholding of credibility or the denial of another's status as a knower) as institutionalized relations of *status subordination*—violations of justice in their own right—rather than merely as vehicles of psychic injury or impediments to self-realization.[9] From the perspective of an extended status model, epistemic injustice occurs whenever "institutions structure interactions according to cultural norms that impede parity of participation" (Fraser 2003, 29), preventing people from testifying and being heard, asking relevant questions, contesting claims and standards of evidence, and otherwise participating in everyday epistemic practices as peers.

The status model of epistemic recognition helps us to see the withholding (and in some cases, the granting) of credibility as one of many distinctive means of subordination that, once institutionalized, serve to reproduce social hierarchies over time. For example, we might think of the subordination of factory workers to their professionalized managers and owning-class employers as partly a function of those "institutionalized patterns of cultural value" (50) that elevate largely propositional, theoretical, and technical forms of knowledge over various forms of implicit

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[9] Although Fraser's focus is not on *epistemic* recognition, I am proposing that her view be extended in this direction so that it can speak to relations of epistemic subordination as well.

knowing, including non- or potentially propositional, skill-based, and affective modes of understanding (see Shotwell 2011, 2017). In the context of present-day Michigan, we might also consider to what extent certain hierarchical valuations of ways of knowing have been codified into law, such that working-class black and brown communities end up systematically subordinated to the dictates of unelected technocrats. When the "fiscal responsibility" of local governments comes to be regarded as a proxy for the credibility of entire populations, what types of knowledge and ways of knowing are simultaneously elevated and degraded by the state legislature? According to what patterns of cultural value can the ability to self-govern be reduced to the ability to meet one's financial obligations to major banks? What norm of credibility is being reinforced or established through legislative means?

The status model of epistemic recognition locates the fundamental wrong of epistemic injustice in social relations and institutions, rather than in individual or interpersonal psychology, without thereby denying the importance of healing and redressing the psychological suffering and incapacitation produced through various forms of social hierarchy and domination. It also suggests that epistemic injustice is rooted in deeply embedded patterns of cultural value on the basis of which institutional norms are constructed and enacted, and not only in identity-based prejudices, which are but one of many modes through which we invest value in one another. Finally, since the existence of impediments to parity of epistemic participation can be demonstrated regardless of whether the victims suffer any significant psychic injuries or distorted self-relationships, Fraser's model also makes epistemic injustice more readily identifiable, owing to its public verifiability.

Of course, this is not to suggest that the status model makes the work of remedying epistemic injustice any easier. For one thing, given that the fundamental wrong of epistemic injustice lies in the character of social relations and in how these relations are structured by institutions of various kinds, Fricker's proposed solution is clearly inadequate, focused as it is on individual remedies and the self-redemptive initiative of perpetrators. As Glen Coulthard points out, the granting of recognition by the dominant partner in a relationship may well modify the structure of domination in certain important respects, but the subject position of the subordinated party remains unchanged (Coulthard 2014, 39). This is especially the case in real-world contexts of domination, such as those of ongoing settler-colonial projects in the United States and Canada, where the values and terms underwriting recognitive relations "end up being determined by and in the interests of the hegemonic partner" (23).

In such contexts, Coulthard argues convincingly that engaging in struggle serves as a necessary "mediating force," holding out the promise of "fundamental self-transformation" (39). By initiating a struggle for epistemic recognition, the

subordinated parties at least stand a chance of shedding their current identities, altering their subject positions in and through the process of actively reshaping the terms and character of their interactions with others. "Without conflict and struggle," writes Coulthard, "the terms of recognition tend to remain in the possession of those in power to bestow on their inferiors in ways they deem appropriate" (39; see also Oliver 2001, 24; Markell 2003, 30; Laden 2007, 278–279). To reestablish themselves as "truly self-determining," Coulthard suggests that the subordinated will need to demand epistemic recognition in terms *other than* those prescribed by and exclusively serving the interests of those in positions of greater power, taking it upon themselves to become "creators of the terms, values, and conditions by which they are to be recognized" (39). As Anthony Laden emphasizes, unlike a simple demand for the credibility they are due according to current standards, the subordinated would then be demanding "that the powerful give something up: in particular, the ability to impose identities on others." Hence, "it is much less clear that the mere articulation of the demand will motivate the powerful to accede," reinforcing the need to struggle for equal status as epistemic and political agents (Laden 2007, 278–279).

3.3. Over what are we struggling?

In the previous section I argued that Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice obscures the necessity of engaging in struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination in contexts of domination. I will now argue that her account prevents us from understanding an important aspect of what such struggles are ultimately about—that is, what the victims of abusive epistemic relations are often best positioned to collectively recognize and struggle *against*, and what sorts of goals, epistemic and otherwise, they are generally inclined to struggle *for*. I contend that, in order to more fully illuminate the epistemic dimensions of historic and ongoing political struggles, epistemic injustice ought to be understood as rooted in the oppressive and dysfunctional epistemic norms undergirding actual communities and institutions. By adopting this alternative explanatory approach, I believe we put ourselves in a much better position to understand how political struggles often come to be motivated, in part, by a desire to improve practices of knowledge production for the sake of making lives more liveable.

Recall that Fricker conceptualizes epistemic injustice in terms of the misuse of the norm of credibility due to the distorting influence of prejudice. For example, in the case of Tom Robinson, it is not that the jury is simply *unaware* of the usual "markers" of credibility that community members rely on when assessing one another (Fricker 2007, 71) and simply fail, out of sheer ignorance, to notice that Robinson possesses these markers. Rather, the jury's perception of Robinson is systematically distorted by their shared antiblack imaginings, such that the markers

of credibility they *would* have noticed in Robinson, but for his perceived blackness, are not recognized as such.

As a number of Fricker's critics have pointed out, this explanatory approach ignores the possibility that it is not always and only a *lack* of conformity to operative epistemic norms, but rather the *skillful* conformity to those norms that can result in unjust patterns of discrediting, silencing, and epistemic exclusion, regardless of whether prejudice is also in play (see Dotson 2014; Ayala and Vasilyeva 2015; Ayala 2016; Doan 2017). If the principal problem is that the operative norm of credibility is itself epistemically dysfunctional in ways that predictably give rise to "pernicious ignorance" (Dotson 2011, 238), contributing thereby to the epistemic marginalization of groups along lines of gender, race, class, and other dimensions of identity, then solutions focused solely on the psychological constitution of individuals will only scratch the surface of a far more complicated situation. By way of contrast, Saray Ayala's approach to accounting for and remedying discursive injustice calls for "high-level interventions on the norms and conventions governing discourse" (Ayala 2016, 884), whereas Dotson's approach to remedying epistemic oppression emphasizes the need for socially dominant groups to become "aware of their larger epistemological systems . . . so as to possibly change them or shift out of them entirely" (Dotson 2014, 131). My proposed approach to resisting structural epistemic injustice focuses on the importance of examining the epistemic assumptions undergirding legislation at the state level, while tracking how these assumptions are gradually legitimized and normalized through the practices allowed by specific laws, and by the political distinctions these laws enact (Doan 2017). Each of these alternatives relies on the insight that practices of epistemic recognition need to be *historicized*, directing our attention to the processes through which epistemic values and norms are *institutionalized*—whether at the level of social imaginaries, discursive conventions, or systems of laws and legislation. In other words, these approaches resonate with the words of Axel Honneth, who argues that, "the distinctively human dependence on intersubjective recognition is always shaped by the particular manner in which the mutual granting of recognition is institutionalized within a society" (Honneth 2003, 138).

By way of contrast, Fricker takes for granted the universal acceptability and applicability of a particular, largely unexamined norm of credibility, the justification for which is independent of the actual, historical practices of human communities.[10]

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[10] Interestingly, this has not always been the case. In a paper published nearly ten years prior to *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker entertained the view that a norm of credibility might itself be corrupted by social pressures, rather than just distorted in its use by prejudice. There she suggests that "there is likely (at least in societies recognizably like ours) to be some social pressure on the norm of credibility to

Here is it important to note that Fricker's disagreement with Honneth, Ayala, Dotson, and myself is methodological as well as substantive in nature. In *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker appeals to a fictional State of Nature scenario in order to argue that the virtues of accuracy and sincerity are both natural and universal, for they arise in response to epistemic needs that are "absolutely basic" in human communities (Fricker 2007, 112). So, too, with the virtue of epistemic justice: this virtue is exhibited by those who manage to correct their identity-based prejudices in order to more reliably track the accuracy and sincerity of possible informants, given that these are the two universal markers of credibility (114–120). Returning to the example of Tom Robinson: when the jurors fail to notice Robinson's accuracy and sincerity due to their antiblack prejudice, it would seem that they are failing to conform to a norm of credibility that, on Fricker's view, not only might but "*must* arise in human society," alongside the two corresponding virtues of truthfulness (112; original emphasis).

Whereas Fricker finds the State of Nature construction useful in building a case for a form of universalism regarding epistemic values and norms, others are more circumspect about the costs of adopting an ahistorical approach. Arguing against ahistorical accounts of recognition in particular, Honneth insists that subjective expectations of recognition cannot be derived from any historically transcendent source (Honneth 2003, 138). Instead, we need to examine the norms embedded in actual, historical practices of recognition, which are gradually sedimented into "relatively stable expectations that we can understand as the subjective expression of social integration" (174). Honneth's historically and institutionally oriented approach leads him to endorse what he calls a *moderate value realism*, according to which the evaluative qualities of a person or group "represent the certainties of our life-world, whose character can be subject to historical modifications" (Honneth 2007, 333). According to Honneth, then, "We should understand recognition as a reaction with which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities we have learned to perceive in human subjects to the degree that we have been integrated into the second nature of our life-world" (336), rather than as a reaction to qualities presumed to be both natural and universal.

One appealing feature of Honneth's approach is that it reveals prevailing epistemic values and norms as the products of past struggles for recognition, undertaken by inherently fallible and limited beings such as ourselves. Honneth's approach is also compatible with an important insight of many feminist epistemologists, that in historicizing practices of epistemic recognition we need not abandon claims to the effect that particular struggles have succeeded in improving

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imitate the structures of social power" (Fricker 1998, 170). It not entirely clear why Fricker later decided to abandon a structural analysis for a psychological one.

our practices of knowledge-seeking, nor need we abandon a commitment to finding new ways of improving current practices. As Heidi Grasswick argues, "Social practices of knowing are transformed in positive ways by members of communities critically reflecting on their communal commitments to current standards, theories, and methods, and determining that a shift in some of these commitments would better serve their needs, epistemic and otherwise" (Grasswick 2004, 106). In order to account for the possibility of such positive transformations, we need a theory of epistemic injustice that is capable of conceptualizing the "dynamic relationship between the epistemic agents—as active reflective inquirers—and the standards and existing practices of knowing that they have access to through their communities" (97). We also need a theory that can help us chart the connections between different sets of standards, the normative statuses and relations they play a role in legitimating, and the patterns of epistemic participation to which these statuses and relations give rise.

Given that the victims of abusive epistemic relations are often best positioned to collectively recognize and struggle *against* the persistence of epistemic norms that institutionalize relations of subordination, how might a theory of epistemic injustice go about conceptualizing the goals, epistemic and otherwise, that such agents are inclined to struggle *for*? Returning to the work of Nancy Fraser, I propose that her distinction between *affirmative* and *transformative* strategies for redressing injustice can help us distinguish among different approaches to understanding and remedying epistemic injustice. On Fraser's view, an *affirmative strategy* is one that aims to "correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them" (Fraser 2003, 74). Thus, a strategy is "affirmative" insofar as it affirms the reproduction of the social structures in question—and in cases of epistemic injustice, when it affirms the epistemic norms undergirding those structures. For example, Fricker's approach to remedying testimonial and hermeneutical injustice seems to qualify as an affirmative strategy: it aims to correct credibility judgments distorted by prejudice without calling into question the underlying norm of credibility guiding our assessments of one another or the broader communal practices and social institutions in which this norm is (allegedly) embedded. Insofar as Fricker's strategy aims to improve practices of knowledge production, it is by encouraging the granting of credibility to a wider range of people who truly merit it, working against the epistemic marginalization of individual members of socially disadvantaged groups by including such individuals in formerly exclusive practices of meaning-making. As Alcoff points out, Fricker's notion of justice and virtue is driven by an aim familiar to many corporate diversity campaigns: "the aim of neutrality, that is, the aim of becoming inured to either unearned privilege or undeserved demerit" (Alcoff 2010, 134). Since Fricker takes for granted the universal acceptability and

applicability of a particular norm of credibility, justified independently of exiting social reality, the only remaining challenge is to ensure conformity to this norm with a view to properly sorting out the deserving from the undeserving.

By way of contrast, a *transformative strategy* aims to "correct unjust outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework" (Fraser 2003, 74). Thus, a strategy is "transformative" insofar as it aims to resist the reproduction of the social structures in question while also contributing to a process of radical restructuring. In cases of epistemic injustice, a transformative strategy is one that seeks to create new terms, values, and conditions by which people are to recognize one another as thinkers, knowers, and collaborators, contributing thereby to broader processes of social, economic, and political restructuring. For example, efforts to resist Emergency Management in Michigan can be understood as transformative in orientation, insofar as they are rooted in a critique of systematic water, housing, and education deprivation, on the one hand, and a critique of the particular manner in which the epistemic non- and misrecognition of entire populations has been institutionalized by the state legislature, on the other. By highlighting lawmakers' roles in installing and legitimizing oppressive and dysfunctional epistemic norms, these efforts avoid the dangerous mistake of presuming that a norm justified independently of existing social reality must also be operative in real-world contexts of domination. Instead, Flint and Detroit activists have demonstrated a keen critical awareness of the epistemic norms embedded in actual, historical practices of recognition and of how those norms have gradually been sedimented into the relatively stable expectations of individuals and groups. Without *affirming* the norms undergirding academic and state institutions, they have sometimes *conformed* to specific norms as a way of securing recognition for particular purposes, conscious of the fact that access to tightly controlled resources, such as clean drinking water, is sometimes predicated on such performances (Ferrarese 2009, 611), and that "outward conformity does not signal any real acceptance of the authority of the norms themselves" (McBride 2013, 154). The practice of sharing personal stories about water contamination and shutoff practices in public spaces has helped to unsettle degrading expectations concerning the knowledge and ways of knowing of ordinary people, indirectly challenging the dehumanizing logic of neoliberal governance, undermining the legitimacy of state officials and their policies, and shifting public consciousness around the human right to water. By directly enacting epistemic norms that subvert the logic of authoritarian rule—and that go even further, challenging the adequacy of a return to previous structures of democratic representation—the statewide struggle for the human right to clean, safe, affordable water reveals itself as a struggle to begin anew, by listening anew.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that one way a theory of epistemic injustice can better illuminate the epistemic dimensions of political struggles is, first, by acknowledging and centering the agency of victims in abusive epistemic relations, rather than occluding them; second, by conceptualizing the harms and wrongs of epistemic injustice relationally, rather than individualistically; and third, by explaining epistemic injustice as rooted in the oppressive and dysfunctional epistemic norms undergirding actual communities and institutions, rather than focusing exclusively on the distorting influence of prejudice. While I have assumed throughout that a theory of epistemic injustice ought to be capable of illuminating the epistemic dimensions of struggles that are primarily political, I appreciate that this particular desideratum is not self-evidently desirable. In closing, then, I shall speak briefly to the advantages of the approach outlined above.

Attending to the epistemic dimensions of political struggles has at least two distinctive advantages. First, there is a longstanding tendency in philosophical discussions of epistemic injustice to propose remedies for specific problems without first considering how such proposals have tended to work out in practice. Although the first published reviews of *Epistemic Injustice* brought this issue to the fore (Alcoff 2010, Langton 2010), the reception of these critiques has been mixed. By drawing attention to the epistemic labor involved in today's transformative social movements, I hope both to invite more empirically oriented reflection on the merits and limits of proposals already on offer and to broaden the range of proposals deemed worthy of consideration. In other words, we should want to illuminate the epistemic dimensions of political struggles because we should be prepared to embrace more engaged, epistemically responsible philosophical research. Second, attending to real-world struggles for epistemic recognition and self-determination opens up possibilities for understanding and working to improve practices of knowledge-seeking not otherwise available to us. While checking our own prejudices is undoubtedly important, self-corrective practices need not be coupled with an uncritical affirmation of prevailing epistemic norms. Given that, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, "norms change along with forms" (Gilmore 2007, 43), it is difficult to understand how genuine improvements in practices of knowledge production are possible in the absence of protracted, dual-sided struggles to transform both ourselves and our institutions.

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MICHAEL D. DOAN is an assistant professor of philosophy at Eastern Michigan University. His research interests are primarily in social epistemology, social and political philosophy, and moral psychology. He is the author of "Collective Inaction and Collective Epistemic Agency," in the *Routledge Handbook of Collective Responsibility* (forthcoming), and "Responsibility for Collective Inaction and the Knowledge Condition," in *Social Epistemology* (2016).