

**A “PURIST” FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY?**

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## Abstract

An intuitive conception of objectivity involves an ideal of neutrality—if we’re to engage in objective inquiry, we must try to sideline our prejudices, values, and politics, lest these factors taint inquiry and unduly influence our results. This intuition underlies various “purist” epistemological frameworks, which grant epistemic significance only to “epistemic factors” like evidence or the truth of a belief. Feminist epistemologists typically condemn purist frameworks as inimical to feminist aims. They argue that purist epistemology is divorced from the ineliminably social and value-laden nature of our epistemic practices, and, moreover, that it abstracts away precisely those features that are needed to explain how power shapes knowledge. As they see it, purist frameworks simply lack the conceptual space needed to ask the right kinds of questions. Thus, they go in for “impurist” frameworks, which grant epistemic significance to “non-epistemic” factors, and so shed the confining constraints of purism.

I turn the tables on the impurists—where they have connected purist norms with perniciously disengaged epistemology, I connect impurist norms with a creeping anxiety that is diminishing feminist epistemology’s political possibilities. First, I demonstrate that it’s increasingly common for impurist epistemologists to use moral considerations as a means to bypass the evidence, which betrays a lack of faith that the evidence will bear out feminist commitments. Second, I demonstrate that there is needless pessimism about our capacity to understand, as evidenced by the increasingly widespread idea that privileged social positions place robust limits on what people can know about oppression that they don’t personally experience. In both cases, moral and political considerations are invoked to give the illusion of being socially engaged, while in fact they allow people to give up on the difficult project of figuring things out. An extended case study on rape culture illustrates the stakes of doing inquiry that is only superficially socially engaged; I show that the two anxious traps I’ve identified have prevented contemporary feminist theorists from detecting and rooting out racist distortion in their accounts of rape culture because both traps interfere with a genuinely intersectional approach to feminist theorizing.

## Lay Summary

An intuitive conception of objective inquiry links objectivity with the pursuit of *neutrality*—we should rid the process of inquiry of our prejudices, values, and politics, lest these factors “taint” the process and unduly influence our results. Many feminist epistemologists think this is a mistake. They argue that values and politics can *never* be fully removed from the process of inquiry, and, consequently, that the “purist” ideal of neutrality only functions to *obscure* the presence of bias. I try to reconcile feminist epistemologists’ insights with the intuitive appeal of neutrality. I connect “impurist” epistemic norms with a creeping anxiety that is diminishing feminist epistemology’s political possibilities. By contrast, a purist feminist epistemology—which pairs purist ideals with feminist sensibilities—gives us a distinctly *optimistic* approach to feminist epistemology that serves as an antidote to anxiety and still does justice to the social dimensions of our epistemic practices.

## Preface

The work contained in this dissertation is original to me and was not produced with co-authors. I am responsible for the identification, design, and analysis of the research that appears here.

Chapter three, ““That’s Above My Paygrade”: Woke Excuses for Ignorance”, is a slightly modified version of a paper that has been accepted for publication at *Philosophers’ Imprint*, with the reference as follows: Tilton, ECR. (forthcoming). “That’s Above My Paygrade”: Woke Excuses for Ignorance. *Philosophers’ Imprint*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/phimp.2796>

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, for offering wisdom and guidance and supporting me even when I didn't take it.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Our knowledge production and distribution practices play an important role in the maintenance of oppression. Ideological ignorance makes it difficult to recognize that the social order is unjust and contingent, which demobilizes social change (Haslanger, 2002; R. Kukla, 2018, p. 18); our practices of testimonial exchange and conceptual resource production cater to the socially dominant, making it difficult for the marginalized to contribute to our epistemic projects (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2011); and prejudice and bias can shape the resistant possibilities that we can imagine in ways that are difficult to detect (Harding, 1992a; Mills, 2007; O. Táíwò, 2020). Since epistemology provides tools that can reveal the dynamics of our epistemic practices, epistemology can shed light on our epistemic practices' role in oppression and suggest routes for combatting that oppression. But this is a double-edged sword. Poorly formed epistemological tools or frameworks can be worse than just useless—they can serve an ideological function by obscuring the way injustice shapes what we know, and vice versa.

Feminist epistemologists have argued that “purist” epistemology serves precisely this function. This critique originates in early feminist work from the 80s and 90s, which was rooted in profound dissatisfaction with more “traditional” epistemological frameworks. The problem, as these early feminist epistemologists saw it, was that all “traditional” epistemologists valorised a “pure”, value-free, or neutral conception of knowledge and (consequently) endorsed epistemological norms that aimed at eradicating any trace of values (and politics) from our epistemic practices (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992b). Feminist epistemologists objected to these assumptions and idealizations on the grounds that the resulting epistemological frameworks were divorced from the ineliminably social and value-laden nature of our actual epistemic practices. Moreover, they argued that *because* purist epistemologists failed to reckon with the social, value-laden nature of knowledge production, purists abstracted away precisely those features that are useful for explaining how power shapes knowledge, thereby obscuring the injustices that characterize our actual knowledge practices. Purist epistemology, on their view, simply lacked the conceptual space needed to ask the right kinds of questions.

This critique prompted feminist epistemologists to develop “impurist” frameworks that explicitly built in space to analyze the roles of value, power, and politics in structuring knowledge. The feminist framework that I will focus on in this dissertation is standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology is distinguished by two central theses: the situated knowledge thesis and the epistemic advantage thesis. Different theorists interpret these theses differently, but, roughly, the situated

knowledge thesis holds that what you are in a position to know is sensitive to facts about your situatedness, and the epistemic advantage thesis holds that epistemic advantage can be drawn from positions of powerlessness or marginalization. Jointly, these two theses imply that *knowers are not on equal epistemic ground*. Thus, standpoint epistemology demands that epistemologists “situate” knowers in their social contexts and recognize that knowledge is subject to social forces.

For decades, feminist critiques of purism were largely disregarded by analytic philosophers, and “traditional” epistemologists and feminist epistemologists toiled away independently (Toole, 2021). Now, though, feminist epistemology has gained a significant foothold within analytic epistemology. In keeping with the feminist critique of purism, one explanation for feminist epistemology’s newfound status links its rise with the general decline of purism. This emerging narrative has it that it is no coincidence that the uptake of feminists’ insights has coincided with the rise of other impurist views like pragmatic encroachment and moral encroachment. Pragmatic and moral encroachment theorists are said to reject purism because they hold that our epistemic standards are sensitive to the practical and moral stakes of belief, and so allow practical and moral considerations to “encroach” on the epistemic realm. This supposedly requires that we “situate” knowers when making claims about their knowledge, as we must attend to the practical and moral stakes of their situation. Accordingly, Quill Kukla presents both standpoint epistemology and pragmatic and moral encroachment as calling for the recognition of the “situatedness” of knowledge (Q. R. Kukla, 2021). Briana Toole does the same; as she explains it, “where the standpoint epistemologist emphasizes social identity as the non-epistemic feature that makes a difference to what a person is in a position to know, pragmatic encroachment instead focuses on the practical costs associated with being wrong” (Toole 2022, 3). McKenna (forthcoming) makes a similar comparison.

The picture that emerges is that, despite the quite different origins of and motivations for feminist standpoint epistemology, on the one hand, and pragmatic and moral encroachment, on the other, both sets of views are part of a broader rising tide against purism that is clearing the way for socially engaged epistemology. Toole brings this out especially clearly; on her view, “what is central in this new and emerging body of work [at the intersection of epistemology and social issues] is the realization that epistemology has more to do than simply answer questions about what knowledge consists in; it must also acknowledge that our answers to these questions might be influenced by features we have previously failed to make space for” (Toole, 2021, p. 1). The thought seems to be that impurist frameworks uniquely enable the production of socially engaged epistemology because they grant epistemic significance to social and political factors that purists do not.

So, the apparent consensus is that feminist epistemology cannot be purist, because the purists' constraints prohibit the production of genuinely socially engaged epistemology. I will push back against this consensus. I think that feminist epistemologists have systematically underestimated the resources provided by purist frameworks and that overly hasty rejections of purism have led feminist epistemologists towards self-defeating epistemic and political norms. My ultimate goal is somewhat modest: I do not aim to fully vindicate purism, but only to reopen a question that I think has been closed prematurely. Along the way, though, I will identify several troubling tendencies among contemporary feminist epistemologists that we must reckon with. In short, I argue that the embrace of impurism has corresponded with the emergence of an overly timid approach to feminist inquiry that threatens to stagnate the production of feminist thought. Reconsidering the value of purist epistemology allows us to identify ways of avoiding the traps that are dulling contemporary feminist epistemology's political possibilities.

One of the first roadblocks to motivating a purist feminist epistemology is a persistent ambiguity about what it means for an epistemology to be purist. In this chapter, I'll demonstrate that an artificially inflated conception of purism is being used to link different varieties of feminist epistemology and pragmatic and moral encroachment. This bloated conception of purism obscures important differences between the various views that have been labeled 'impurist'. By more carefully articulating the contours of purism, I will bring these differences into view. A more precise conception of purism will also reveal key differences between different feminist views. While some feminist epistemology *does* deserve the 'impurist' label, other (especially more contemporary) feminist authors have dropped the radical underpinnings that characterized earlier feminist epistemology, and no longer defend views that violate purism properly construed. Clearing these confusions up will put us in a better position to think about the prospects of a purist feminist epistemology.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 1.1 demystifies purism by disambiguating between five distinct purist theses. As will become apparent, these theses do not necessarily stand or fall together, which complicates how different "impurist" objections hang together. Sections 1.2 and 1.3 offer detailed overviews of the literature on pragmatic and moral encroachment and feminist standpoint theory, with an eye to emphasizing the differences between these two camps. Section 1.4 brings out these differences explicitly. Finally, Section 1.5 sets the stage for the remaining chapters.

## 1.1 Demystifying Purism

It is difficult to pinpoint a precise definition of ‘purism’ because the label is applied to a fairly heterogeneous set of views. Consider some examples:

Jason Stanley argues that purism is assumed in the debate between internalists and externalists. For all their disagreements, both internalists and externalists agree that the factors that can make a difference between true belief and knowledge must be *truth-conducive* factors. What animates their debate is disagreement about *which* truth conducive features can be relevant to justification. Thus, both internalists and externalists assume purism. They both see the debate about justification as falling under the purview of theoretical rationality, which is “guided solely by the normative purpose of discovering the truth”, rather than the purview of practical rationality, which is sensitive to our interests and values (Stanley, 2005, pp. 1–2)

Lorraine Code argues that the assumption of purism can be seen when analytic epistemologists invoke generic knowers, which they do when they make claims or ask questions about whether “S knows that p” (Code, 1991). Code argues that the invocation of a generic knower reflects the desire to articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge that will hold universally, which itself reflects the conviction that “truth once discerned, knowledge once established, claim their status *as* truth and knowledge by virtue of a grounding in or coherence within a permanent, objective, ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral framework or set of standards” (p. 264). Thus, Code concludes that the invocation of the generic knower only makes sense if social, historical, and circumstantial features are deemed epistemically irrelevant.

Numerous feminist epistemologists have argued that the positivist treatment of evidence is objectionably purist. Positivists insisted that science could only permissibly make use of evidence that was in principle graspable by multiple individuals. Carl Hempel, for example, required that “all statements of empirical science be capable of test by reference to evidence which is public, i.e., evidence which can be secured by different observers and does not depend essentially on the observer” (1952, p. 22). Similar claims are made by Feigl, Popper, and Railton (Feigl, 1953; Popper, 1959; Railton, 1985, p. 764; see Kelly (2016) for discussion). Feminist epistemologists have argued that this treatment of evidence requires that people try to transcend themselves, since their individual “quirks” are necessarily distorting. Thus, they conclude that this treatment of evidence idolizes a

mythical “pure” disembodied, detached, a-located knower. See Harding (1992b), Kukla (2006), Hartsock (1997), and Collins (2002), among others.

This is a non-exhaustive overview of the kinds of views that are labeled ‘purist’, but it is enough to give a sense of the diversity of the views on the table. Briana Toole’s attempt to articulate the “unifying” feature that connects different purist views most clearly brings out the confusion that I want to clear up. As Toole describes it, what unifies different purist views is the assumption that “knowledge doesn’t depend on non-epistemic features” (Toole, 2020, p. 2). As we have already seen, this conception of purism prompts Toole to characterize both pragmatic encroachment and standpoint epistemology as claiming that knowledge depends on non-epistemic features; where the pragmatic encroachment theorist holds that practical stakes make an epistemic difference, the standpoint epistemologist holds that social identity makes an epistemic difference. Were this an appropriate characterization of purism, it would be obvious why feminist epistemologists should be impurist—social identity *demonstrably* makes a difference to what people know, and feminists must be able to acknowledge this. If acknowledging this amounts to a rejection of purism, then all feminist epistemologists should be impurist (indeed, if purism were this flat-footed, nobody should be purist!).

However, Toole’s description of impurism trades on an ambiguity. Her interpretation of standpoint epistemology grants a *causal* role to social identity; social identity is epistemically significant because it makes a difference to the evidence one has, or the possibilities one considers. But this is not at odds with purism—no one would deny that knowledge depends causally on non-epistemic features. Toole’s description of purism is too vague to capture the more specific disagreement between purists and pragmatic encroachment theorists. Moreover, her description also obscures that there are different dimensions along which a view might be purist. To bring out these details, we must drop the search for a “unifying” feature and distill several distinct purist theses. Doing so will allow us to think more carefully about the connections between different impurist views and the relationship between impurism and feminist epistemology.

### **1.1.1 Five Purist Theses**

As I see it, there are two intuitions that lie at the heart of purism: (i) as rational agents in a shared world, we are all, at least in principle, equally able to grasp the truth, or at least equally able to distinguish good reason to believe from bad reason to believe; and (ii) epistemic normativity is exclusively concerned with whether we are getting things *right*, where getting things right means

producing accurate descriptions of the world. We can distinguish between five purist theses that refine and expand on these intuitions:

**Individualism:** Individuals are epistemic agents in their own right. Louise Antony further distinguishes between two different interpretations of **Individualism** (Antony, 1995, p. 63).

- Self-Sufficiency: Epistemic agents can come to know things on their own; they do not *necessarily* need to interact with others to acquire knowledge (though in practice we often do)
- Methodological Individualism: Individuals are the primary epistemic subjects; the knowledge of groups is derivative of the knowledge of individuals.

**The Delineation Thesis:** We can sharply distinguish between theoretical rationality and practical rationality and, relatedly, between epistemic factors and non-epistemic factors. Theoretical rationality is guided solely by the search for the truth, and so is sensitive only to epistemic factors. Practical rationality concerns how agents ought to act, and so is sensitive to both epistemic factors and non-epistemic factors.

**Intellectualism:** Non-epistemic factors cannot make the difference between true belief and knowledge. If two agents are exactly alike with respect to their epistemic states (they have the same evidence for  $p$ , they both believe  $p$ , they are both equally confident that  $p$ , etc.), then they are also exactly alike with respect to which propositions they could know.

**Evidentialism:** Only evidence affects the propositional justification of a belief.

- Moderate Evidentialism: Beliefs should fit the available evidence (Bolinger, 2020, p. 16; Pace, 2010, p. 240). This kind of evidentialism is moderate because it doesn't rule out that non-epistemic features shape what it means for beliefs to "fit" the available evidence.
- Strong Evidentialism: The justification for belief *supervenes* on facts about the evidence for belief; there cannot be a change in the set of propositionally justified beliefs without a change in the available evidence (Kelly, 2016). This definition entails **Intellectualism**, while Moderate Evidentialism does not.



**Aperspectivalism:** Evidence has an intrinsically public character; it is, at least in principle, graspable by “anyone who is exposed to the relevant causal inputs and is able and willing to properly exercise her rationality” (Kukla, 2006, p. 1).

If we put these together, we get the view that *anyone* can (rationally) appreciate the weight of epistemic reasons, regardless of the agent’s practical stakes, moral stakes, location in social hierarchy, or facts about the agent’s social context more broadly, except insofar as those factors make a difference to the evidence the agent has or their ability to reason in light of it. Many of the theorists who are called “purists” do not endorse this view in its entirety. Carl Hempel is a clear example: while he defends **Aperspectivalism**, he rejects **Intellectualism**, since he defends the philosophy of science analogue to pragmatic encroachment: inductive risk (Douglas, 2000; Hempel, 1965). Thus, it is clear that an epistemological framework might be more or less purist: it is purist to the extent that it endorses this cluster of theses, and it is impurist to the extent that it rejects these theses. Consequently, various “impurist” views might have little in common—they might reject different purist theses.

It is also clear that there is more room for a purist epistemology to be socially engaged than the bloated conception of purism made it seem. The purist can only take social, moral, and political factors to be epistemically irrelevant insofar as those factors make no difference to the evidence that one has or one’s ability (or willingness) to reason in light of it. Unsurprisingly, though, these factors often make quite dramatic differences to the evidence one has or one’s willingness to reason in light of it. In many contexts, it will make no sense for the purist to disregard people’s social locations or the stakes of their circumstances (though the difference these factors make will have to be explained in terms of how it affects agents’ evidence or reasoning).

With this sorted, we can now more carefully distinguish between the different purist theses that impurists reject.

## 1.2 Encroachment

There are two types of encroachment views: pragmatic encroachment and moral encroachment. Encroachment views challenge **The Delineation Thesis** and **Intellectualism** (and, consequently, **Strong Evidentialism**), and some views challenge **Moderate Evidentialism**, too. Pragmatic encroachment theorists hold that epistemic norms are sensitive to the practical risks of (mis)belief.

Similarly—but not precisely analogously—moral encroachment theorists hold that epistemic norms are sensitive to the moral costs of (mis)belief. Thus, both pragmatic and moral encroachment theorists allow non-epistemic features to “encroach” on the domain of theoretical rationality, effectively blurring the distinction between theoretical rationality and practical rationality. Moreover, because non-epistemic features creep into what is theoretically rational, it is not the case that two agents with identical epistemic states can be said to know the same (or be justified in believing, etc.) precisely the same set of propositions—differences in the practical or moral stakes of the knowers’ situations can affect what is epistemically permissible for them, even if the epistemic features are held fixed. Thus, both forms of encroachment are incompatible with **Intellectualism**.

### 1.2.1 Pragmatic Encroachment

Pragmatic encroachment initially emerged as a non-contextualist way to avoid skepticism (Fantl & McGrath, 2002; Kim, 2017, p. 4; Stanley, 2005, pp. 12–13; 28–30). Contextualists dodge skepticism by arguing that the meaning of the word “knows” isn’t fixed—what it means to say that someone “knows” depends on the standards for knowledge attribution that are operative for the knowledge-attributor (J. J. Ichikawa, 2017; Lewis, 1996). So, in high-standards contexts, we can’t say that we *know* we have hands, but in lower-standards contexts, such claims can be true. The pragmatic encroachment argument is different; pragmatic encroachment theorists argue that epistemic norms are sensitive to an epistemic agent’s practical stakes. Thus, they typically hold that the *meaning* of the word “knows” is fixed, but that what it takes for an agent to stand in the knowing relation varies.

As Renée Bolinger helpfully explains, there is a standard “recipe” for defending pragmatic encroachment (2020, p. 5). First, pragmatic encroachment theorists posit a *knowledge-action* link. The knowledge-action link has it that if you know that *p*, then you are rationally permitted to rely on *p* in your practical reasoning (Fantl & McGrath, 2002; Hawthorne & Stanley, 2008, p. 578; Jeremy Fantl, 2007; see Roeber (2016) for useful discussion). Second, pragmatic encroachment theorists point to cases where whether you are rationally permitted to rely on some proposition varies with the practical stakes of your situation, even when the epistemic states are held fixed. Take this classic pair of cases, which were made famous by DeRose (DeRose, 1992, p. 913) but are widely discussed in the pragmatic encroachment literature (see, e.g., Stanley (2005)).

**Low Stakes:** Hannah is driving home on Friday afternoon. She plans to stop at the bank to deposit her paycheck, but there is a long line. It doesn’t matter when she deposits the check,

so she considers driving home and depositing the check Saturday morning. Sarah says, “Maybe the bank won’t be open tomorrow. Sometimes banks are closed on Saturdays.” Hannah replies, “No, I know it will be open tomorrow. I stop at the bank every Saturday; it’s open until noon”.

**High Stakes:** Hannah is driving home on Friday afternoon, as in **Low Stakes**. She notices the long lines and considers driving home and depositing the check Saturday morning. But in this case, Hannah will incur an enormous fine if she doesn’t deposit her check before noon on Saturday. Sarah mentions this fine to Hannah and says “Sometimes banks change their hours. Do you *know* that the bank is still open on Saturdays?”. Remaining just as confident as she was in **Low Stakes** that the bank will be open on Saturday, Hannah replies, “You’re right. I don’t know that the bank will be open tomorrow.”

In both cases, Hannah’s epistemic states are the same—her evidence for her belief and her confidence in her belief are (by stipulation) unchanged. Yet, it seems rational for Hannah to rely on the proposition that the bank will be open on Saturday in **Low Stakes**, but (supposedly) not in **High Stakes**. So, this pair of cases illustrates that what an agent may rationally act on is sensitive to the practical stakes of their situation. If you combine this with the knowledge-action principle, then you get the further conclusion that knowledge is sensitive to practical stakes.

There are several important choice points for pragmatic encroachment theorists (Bolinger, 2020, p. 7). Some focus on all-out states like belief and acceptance (Weatherson, 2005), while others argue that credences can also be encroached upon (Gao, 2019). There is also disagreement about which normative status is affected: does the belief fail to count as knowledge, while remaining justified (Hawthorne & Stanley, 2008), or does the belief fail to be justified (Ross & Schroeder, 2014; Weatherson, 2005)? But the most interesting choice point concerns the mechanisms that facilitate interaction between epistemic and non-epistemic features. Following Bolinger, we can map the possibilities here along two axes. The first axis concerns whether pragmatic factors are taken to make a direct or indirect contribution to the epistemic status of a person’s belief (credence, etc.). If pragmatic features are taken to make a direct difference, then the view is a *hard encroachment view*. If the difference is instead mediated by more familiar epistemic mechanisms, then the view is a *moderate encroachment view* (pp. 8-9).

Given the extremity of the view, hard pragmatic encroachment is not especially popular (though, as we will see, hard *moral* encroachment does enjoy some support). Moderate pragmatic encroachment is much more common. Moderate views hold that only epistemic features make a direct difference to the normative status of belief (e.g., whether it is justified, whether it amounts to knowledge), but that non-epistemic features make a difference to *how much* epistemic support a belief needs to be granted that status. So, in low stakes situations, you might need less evidence for your belief to count as justified, or for it to count as knowledge. In high stakes situations, though, you might need more (Bolinger, 2020, p. 8; Weatherson, 2017)

The second axis concerns whether pragmatic factors can make it *easier* to know, or whether they can only raise the bar for knowledge. Bolinger calls views that permit pragmatic considerations to have either effect *robust encroachment*, and views that only permit pragmatic considerations to raise the bar *cautious encroachment*. I am convinced by Ichikawa (2024) that the link between caution and disbelief is misguided; the cautious thing to do is not always to suspend belief. Given this, I prefer *symmetric encroachment* for views that let rising stakes raise *or* lower the bar for belief, and *asymmetric encroachment* for views that only allow rising stakes to raise the bar.

Pascal's wager provides a clear illustration of symmetric encroachment—the high stakes he points to count as reason *to* believe. Pace (2010) also endorses symmetric encroachment. However, as Ichikawa points out, most pragmatic encroachment theorists take the bar for knowledge to rise with the stakes (Ichikawa 2024, pp. 94-95). Mark Schroeder exemplifies this kind of view; he argues that only evidence is reason to believe, but that non-truth-conducive factors are reasons to withhold belief (Schroeder, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2.2 Moral Encroachment

Moral and pragmatic encroachment parallel each other in many respects. Indeed, insofar as moral considerations can raise the practical stakes, knowledge will depend on moral considerations in the same way, and for the same reason, that knowledge depends on practical stakes (Fritz, 2017). However, it is a mistake to view moral encroachment as *merely* an analogue to pragmatic

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<sup>1</sup> Schroeder presents his view as a kind of pragmatic intellectualism, because he thinks that rising stakes provide distinctly epistemic reasons to withhold belief. I set this disagreement aside; for my purposes, Schroeder's view is at odds with purism, and his view exemplifies the tendency to take the justificatory bar to rise with the stakes.

encroachment. Moral encroachment theorists allow moral considerations to encroach on what is epistemically permissible in more than one way.

As with pragmatic encroachment, there is a fairly standard recipe for moral encroachment. Start with a case that suggests that what is *epistemically* permissible conflicts with what is *morally* permissible:

**Cosmos Club:** It is 1995, and John Hope Franklin, a black man, is about to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The night before the award ceremony, Franklin hosts a party at the Cosmos Club, a private social club in D.C. There are very few other black members of the club. Consequently, on the night of the party, almost every other black person in the club is a club attendant, rather than a member (Franklin, 2005, p. 340; Gendler, 2011). As Franklin makes the rounds at the party, a white woman calls out to him, presents him with her coat check, and orders him to bring her coat. She has, evidently, assumed he is a club attendant because he is black. Franklin explains that he is a member of the club, and points her in the direction of the attendants (Franklin, p. 340).

Moral encroachment theorists argue that the belief that John Hope Franklin is an attendant has substantial evidential support. Thus, they think that on standard purist accounts, forming the belief that John Hope Franklin is an attendant is beyond epistemic reproach. I will contest this assessment of **Cosmos Club** in Chapter 2. For now, though, I will grant the point and explain the moral encroachment theorist's next steps. Contra the purist, the moral encroachment theorist thinks that the woman's belief in **Cosmos Club** is clearly wrong, or blameworthy (and it is specifically *having* the belief that is wrong, not only *acting* on it). Basu and Schroeder calls this kind of wrong *doxastic wronging* (Basu & Schroeder, 2019).

Doxastic wronging by itself doesn't secure moral encroachment, since you might conclude that our moral and epistemic duties can conflict. The next crucial step toward encroachment is positing something like a **No-Conflicts** principle:

**No-Conflicts:** If an epistemic attitude is epistemically impeccable, it must be morally permissible. (Bolinger, 2020, p. 6; Bolinger 2018)

According to **No-Conflicts**, what is morally permissible constrains what is epistemically permissible. Thus, the apparent tension between what is morally permissible and what is epistemically permissible in **Cosmos Club** is illusory—it is not rationally permitted to believe that John Hope Franklin is an attendant, given the moral costs of the belief. While this is true *despite* the evidence that you have for

the belief, it is nonetheless not the case that moral encroachment theorists force you to privilege your moral obligations *over* your epistemic obligations. The view is instead that moral obligations shape your epistemic obligations.

**No-Conflicts** makes space for more kinds of encroachment than are seen in the pragmatic encroachment literature. While the stakes of error are one way that a belief might be wrong, it is not the only way. Renée Bolinger (2020) sorts the moral factors that generate moral duties into three rough categories, reproduced below:

- *Production Process*—upstream factors to do with *how the belief came about*. This includes things like the agent’s patterns of attention, the type of evidence relied on, the inferential habits instantiated, and the attitude/stance taken toward the subject of belief.
- *Epistemic State*—factors based in *being in the belief state*, independent of how it came about. This is a narrow category, limited to the propositional content of *p*; the doxastic conviction or feeling of full confidence in *p*; or the mental state of accepting *p* as a fixed point in practical deliberation.
- *Rational Ecology*—factors based in *how beliefs orient actions* of the believer. This is a broad category, including considerations about how belief-that-*p* integrates into her overall epistemic state; stakes of relevant decisions; costs of having the latitude that *p*; risks of *p*-based error; as well as upshots for the agent’s moral appraisals of the object of belief (p. 10).

*Rational Ecology* costs are analogous to the factors considered by pragmatic encroachment theorists. An example offered by Ross and Schroeder is illustrative: it is easier to know that a sandwich does not contain peanut butter when the costs are just that the person dislikes peanut butter, than it is to know that the sandwich is free of peanut butter when the person is allergic to peanut butter (Ross & Schroeder, 2014, p. 261). In this case, the risks of erroneous belief are distinctly moral, and so the moral stakes have the same effect on the normative status of the belief that practical stakes generally do. Moral encroachment views that restrict their considerations to *Rational Ecology* factors are, then, directly parallel to pragmatic encroachment views (see, e.g., Fritz, 2017).

Examples of *Production Process* costs can be found in work by Basu, Moss, Bolinger, and McKenna. Both Basu and Moss defend the idea that we owe it to individuals to consider that they are exceptions to the statistics (Basu, 2019; Moss, 2018). Basu emphasizes that this means we must reason about *people* differently than we reason about *objects*, because objects do not have a sense of self-worth that

is affected by how we perceive them. Similarly, Bolinger argues that when you form beliefs about people on the basis of statistics, you impinge on their rights against certain kinds of risk imposition (Bolinger, 2018). McKenna focuses not on the harm of believing on the basis of statistics *broadly*, but instead on the more specific harm of believing on the basis of *stereotypes* (McKenna, 2020).

Last, examples of *Epistemic State* costs can be found in the work of Basu, Schroeder, McKenna, and Keller, among others. *Epistemic State* costs often come hand in hand with *Production Process* costs, but they need not. Basu and Schroeder argue that the contents of your belief can wrong others when those contents are demeaning (Basu and Schroeder, 2018). Basu says this is so even if the belief is true. Schroeder more modestly suggests that the belief is only wrongful if it is erroneous (2018). McKenna offers an example in which the content of your belief confirms stereotypes, and is wrongful on that basis (McKenna, 2020, p. 14). And Keller is one of many who argues that we can wrong our friends by believing poorly of them (even if the low belief is supported by the evidence!) (Keller, 2018)).

We now reach the point where moral encroachment theorists face the same choice points as pragmatic encroachment theorists: how directly do moral considerations affect the normative status of various epistemic states, and are their effects symmetric or asymmetric? As noted above, hard *moral* encroachment enjoys more support than hard pragmatic encroachment does. Much of what Basu says in particular is suggestive of the view (especially in (2019)). On her view, it is not (always) that moral considerations raise the amount of evidence needed to justify belief—her view is instead that, in some contexts, we have *duties* not to believe certain things about people. These moral duties are themselves reasons against belief, and so they directly affect what is rationally permissible. Keller, too, suggests that moral duties toward our friends are *themselves* reason to believe positively about them (2018).

Moderate encroachment is also popular. While some of what Basu says is suggestive of hard moral encroachment, she (along with Schroeder) also maintains that, in some cases, moral considerations require more or stronger evidential support (Basu and Schroeder, 2018). Moderate encroachment is also defended by Fritz (2017), Bolinger (2018), and Moss (2018).

Finally, both symmetric and asymmetric moral encroachment views are defended. Almost all asymmetric pragmatic encroachment theorists should endorse asymmetric moral encroachment, too (since, recall, that the practical stakes might be raised for moral reasons). Bolinger (2018) and Schroeder (2018) also defend asymmetric moral encroachment.

Basu defends symmetric encroachment, citing contexts of sexual violence as contexts where we might have a positive duty to believe the testimony of victims (Basu, 2020, p. 205). Alexandra Lloyd (2022) does as well; I discuss her view in detail in Chapter 2. Crewe and Ichikawa (2021) are sometimes cited as defending a similar view (Bolinger 2020, p. 14), but caution is required here. Ichikawa and Crewe advocate not for encroachment, but for a normative kind of *contextualism*. Their argument is *not* that we wrong victims by failing to believe them, and so we need less justification to rationally believe (or know, etc.) on the basis of victims' testimony. Their argument is instead that we ought to opt for lower conversational standards for the true attribution of knowledge. The difference is subtle, but it is relevant since Ichikawa actually disavows encroachment (Ichikawa, 2024, chapter 4; J. J. Ichikawa et al., 2012). However, Ichikawa does argue that *if* you are moved by moral (and pragmatic) encroachment arguments *against* belief, you ought also to be moved by encroachment arguments *for* belief (2024, chapter 4).

### 1.3 Standpoint Epistemology

Standpoint views are more difficult to chart than encroachment views. Speaking generally, we can say that standpoint theorists are committed to the following four theses:

**The Situated Knowledge Thesis:** Epistemic agents are necessarily socially situated, and their knowledge reflects this—what people know is partial and shaped by their contingent histories, epistemic resources, values, etc. (Harding, 1992b; R. Kukla, 2006; O. Táíwò, 2020; Wylie, 2003).

**The Epistemic Advantage Thesis:** Those who are socially marginalized may be epistemically advantaged in some critical respects. They may have access to better or more relevant evidence (Collins, 1986; Q. R. Kukla, 2021; Liam Bright, 2018; Wylie, 2003); they may develop clarifying conceptual resources (Toole, 2022; Wylie, 2012); their experiences and values may prompt them to consider alternate hypotheses that are often overlooked (Harding, 1991; Wylie & Nelson, 2007); they might be better incentivized to seek out and reason about evidence (Kinney & Bright, 2021); or they might produce accounts of the world that are better suited to envisioning more just social relations (Collins, 1997, 2002; Hartsock, 1997; Pohlhaus, 2002).



**The Achievement Thesis:** Standpoints are not a given, or automatic; the experience of marginalization does not entail a clearer, more nuanced, or more accurate understanding of the world. Standpoints are the result of struggle (Harding, 1991; Pohlhaus, 2002; Collins, 2002; Wylie, 2003).

**The Methodological Imperative:** (Some) inquiry should take the lives of the marginalized as its starting point, because those lives provide resources that enable more accurate investigation into the structure of our social world (Harding, 1991; Taiwo, 2020).

Different theorists flesh out the details of these theses in different ways, and not every standpoint theorist endorses all four claims. But these theses convey the general thrust of standpoint theory—epistemologists must attend to the realities of our actual knowledge practices, and these realities suggest that knowers are not on equal epistemic ground. The socially marginalized have some key advantages, and, in some contexts, these advantages can lead to more accurate pictures of the way things are.

Standpoint epistemologists come in two stripes. There are those who endorse what I'll call *radical social construction about knowledge*—they hold that knowledge just *is* whatever a particular community has credentialed as knowledge. These thinkers give up on a factive conception of knowledge. Knowledge is, instead, an honorific that may or *may not* be granted on the (traditionally construed) epistemic merits of the claim. On the other side, there are standpoint theorists who preserve more familiar conceptions of epistemic adequacy, and privilege the knowledge of the marginalized on those grounds. These standpoint theorists are attuned to the way that social forces shape the way we seek out evidence and the standards we use to assess claims, but they don't conclude that knowledge is *merely* a socially-granted credential. This divide tracks roughly but imperfectly with whether knowledge, and, relatedly, standpoints, are taken to be collective achievements or individual achievements. Collective accounts of standpoint theory were especially popular in earlier work, when there was a drive to clearly distinguish standpoint theory from various forms of empiricism. As this drive diminished (Intemann, 2010), individualist accounts of standpoint epistemology became more common.

### 1.3.1 Collective Accounts of Standpoint Theory

Many standpoint theorists working in the 1980s through the early 2000s rejected what they took to be an “empiricist” conception of knowledge, which they considered to be objectionably purist, and so objectionably individualist and passive (Harding, 1992; Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 284; Collins, 2002). They

therefore sought to replace the empiricist paradigm of knowledge-by-observation with a more social alternative. These theorists deny not just the individualist Self-Sufficiency Thesis, but, more radically, Methodological Individualism—they take the *community* to be the primary epistemic subject.

Harding is especially clear on this point. She writes: “what I believe that I thought through all by myself...only gets transformed from my personal belief to knowledge when it is socially legitimated” (1992, p. 454). Thus, Harding argues that individualist accounts of knowledge fail to take seriously the fact that our knowledge production practices are thoroughly social. Collins makes a similar point, arguing that individualist accounts of knowledge fail to make room for the importance of dialogue; only views that treat communities as the knowing subject can capture this importance (2002, pp. 269-290).

The shared understanding of knowledge as a social achievement influences these theorists’ articulation of a ‘standpoint’. Nancy Hartsock’s initial formulation of her view took the Marxian argument that a person’s role in production shapes what they know and modified it to bear more directly on the situation of women; she aimed to explain how the sexual division of labour affects what, and how, women know about the world (Hartsock, 1983, p. 565). Thus, she argued that women as *a class* were epistemically advantaged because they could make knowledge claims that best served women’s interests.<sup>2</sup>

Collins focuses specifically on the advantages that accrue to black women. On Collins’ view, black women share a standpoint that consists of their collective knowledge regarding the distinctive intersectional forms of oppression that black women are subject to. Black women’s shared experiences are central to the development of this standpoint, and they share these experiences by virtue of their shared location in social hierarchy (Collins, 1997, p. 377). Because black women do not share identical experiences, or identical reactions to their experiences, Collins holds that black women’s collective standpoint is “characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (Collins, 2002, pp. 30-32).

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<sup>2</sup> As Hartsock herself admits, her initial formulation of her view was insufficiently careful (Hartsock, 1997, p. 369): she replaces the binary of working-class/capitalist-class—which feminists object to because it obscures the unique difficulties women face—with a binary of man/woman. This binary obscures important differences between women by treating ‘woman’ as a homogenous class. To combat this, in later work she shifts to talk of a *feminist* standpoint, rather than a *women’s* standpoint. This shift allows her to avoid the implication that women serve identical social roles and so have identical epistemic advantages. Instead, a feminist standpoint is jointly crafted by differently situated women, and so has the resources to represent all women’s (non-identical) interests.

Harding and Pohlhaus also defend collective accounts of standpoint theory, though they both place special emphasis on the fact that standpoints are *forged*. Standpoints, on their views, are crafted by differently situated women. This joint effort is what enables a feminist standpoint to reflect the interests of *all* women (Harding, 1991, pp. 249-267; Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 1).

Up to this point, the four theorists I have focused on have largely been in agreement. However, there is a noticeable divide regarding the way these theorists develop the epistemic advantage thesis. In accordance with their impurist and social constructionist understanding of knowledge, both Collins and Hartsock ultimately flesh out the epistemic advantage thesis in terms of the *political* advantages provided by marginalized standpoints, and they back away from the claim that knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints is somehow more accurate, or closer to the truth. Harding and Pohlhaus take a different tack—while they too endorse radical social construction about knowledge, they nonetheless try preserve an interpretation of the epistemic advantage thesis that suggests that the knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints is more accurate.

Both Hartsock and Collins' earlier work seemed to privilege the knowledge produced by the socially marginalized on recognizably epistemic grounds. Collins argued that black women were more likely than white women to (accurately) recognize that they were oppressed, since white women's proximity to power distorted their perception of their own status (Collins, 1986). Hartsock also argued that women's social position gave them insight to the *real* workings of things that men lacked, going so far as to say that the very *concept* of a standpoint "rests on the fact that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (Hartsock, 1983, p. 117). However, both back away from the claim that the knowledge claims produced from marginalized standpoints are better on (traditionally-construed) epistemic grounds.

They roll this claim back in response to a now (in)famous paper by Susan Hekman, who argues that standpoint theory is fundamentally flawed. Hekman argues that standpoint theorists insist that knowledge is necessarily socially situated, and, thus, that "masculine" knowledge is partial and distorted; however, they also insist that the standpoints of the marginalized offer insight to the way the world *really* is. This, she thinks, reflects a fundamental inconsistency within standpoint theory. If we take the view that knowledge is socially situated to its logical conclusion, she argues, then there are infinite standpoints and no way to determine which standpoints are "better". Thus, Hekman

concludes that standpoint theorists make a mistake in trying to hold both that knowledge is socially situated and that those who are marginalized have an epistemic advantage (Hekman, 1997)

In response, Collins says that Hekman's critique "...certainly reveals the limitations of using epistemological criteria in defense of privileged standpoints" (Collins, 1997, p. 380). However, she thinks it is undeniable that, within hierarchical power relations, the viewpoints of some groups are privileged over the viewpoints of others. Moreover, she claims that "the amount of privilege granted to a particular standpoint lies less in its internal criteria in being truthful...and more in the power of a group in making its standpoint prevail over other equally plausible perspectives" (p. 380). She concludes that where the interests of the socially dominant are best served by epistemological frameworks that "obscure the privilege they gain from group membership", the marginalized are best served by epistemological frameworks that center their "collective responses to their common location and subjugation" (p. 380). Thus, the marginalized should choose epistemic frameworks that serve their interests, and should reject the purist frameworks defended by the socially dominant.

In this response, Collins turns away from the claim that the knowledge produced by the socially marginalized is *more accurate* than the knowledge produced by the socially dominant. Instead, she says that we ought to privilege the viewpoint of the marginalized because it is politically fruitful to do so—knowledge produced from the standpoint of the marginalized is *more empowering*, and *this* is the reason to accept or privilege it. She affirms this view in her 2002 book (pp. 35-36).

Hartsock makes a similar move, in response to the same article by Hekman:

Fundamentally, I argue that the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political rather than purely "epistemological". The quotation marks here are to indicate that I see ethical and political concepts such as power as involving epistemological claims on the one hand and ideas of what is to count as knowledge involving profoundly important political and ethical stakes on the other...I want to privilege some knowledges over others because they seem to me to offer possibilities for envisioning more just social relations (1997, pp. 372-373).

Thus, for both Hartsock and Collins, the knowledge produced by the marginalized is better not because it is more accurate, but because it is more politically efficacious.

This articulation of the epistemic advantage thesis fits well with the conception of knowledge that they are working with. Knowledge is an honorific that *we* grant, on the basis of our own reasons and according to our own standards. The epistemic frameworks defended by the socially dominant have

been used to protect the interests of the socially dominant at the expense of the socially marginalized, so Hartsock and Collins replace those frameworks with ones that instead serve the interests of the socially marginalized. This move is no more illegitimate than the move made by the socially dominant, since in both cases the frameworks are selected not on the basis of their “objective” empirical adequacy, but according to their ability to serve a community’s interests.

Harding takes a different line (which Pohlhaus echoes). Harding’s response to Hekman’s article is notably less concessive than Hartsock’s and Collins’:

Standpoint theories argue that the social world in effect provides a kind of laboratory for “experiments” that can enable one to observe and explain patterns in the relations between social power and the production of knowledge claims. Recollect that ancient lesson from elementary school science classes: “Is that stick in the pond that appears to be bent really bent? Walk around to a different location and see that now it appears straight—as it really is”...In an analogous way, standpoint theorists use the “naturally occurring” relations of class, gender, race, or imperialism in the world around us to observe how different “locations” in such relations tend to generate distinctive accounts of nature and social relations (2007, p. 384).

Harding also emphasizes that we can still judge some claims to be “less false” than others (p. 383). Her response reflects her commitment to what she calls *strong objectivity*. Unlike some other standpoint theorists who disapprove of “empiricism” because it is *too* objectifying (see, e.g., Collins, 2002, pp. 269-290), Harding argues that “empiricism” *isn’t objective enough* (Harding, 1992, p. 446). She argues that philosophical frameworks that idealize “neutral” knowers lack the resources to identify biases that are shared by a whole community. They lack these resources, she argues, because by (allegedly) working with a generic and therefore disembodied epistemic agent, they put the knower on a different plane than they put the objects of knowledge. This is apparently incompatible with the kind of reflexivity that is necessary to root out the biases that are shared by an entire community, because it treats the subject as *external* to the domain of objects that scientists (and epistemic agents generally) scrutinize. Thus, “purist” epistemological frameworks lack the resources needed to root out distorting bias, and so the knowledge claims put forward from within these frameworks will inevitably be distorted; the situatedness of knowers will always be an obstacle for those operating with this framework because they systematically ignore their situatedness rather than addressing it. By contrast, Harding argues that standpoint epistemology is a tool that can turn the situatedness of knowers into a resource, because it demands the reflexivity that is necessary for rooting out widely shared biases.

The description above may make it seem like Harding thinks there *are* universal epistemic standards, and that her critique of “traditional” epistemology is that it goes about trying to satisfy these standards in the wrong way. But Harding disputes this reading. Knowledge, she says, is necessarily *of an era*. In this vein, she sometimes makes claims that resemble the ones made by both Collins and Hartsock—she suggests, for example, that even *striving* to produce universally acceptable knowledge claims is a manifestation of the kind of a hubris that only a member of the dominant social group could cultivate, because it assumes that we could successfully identify standards that will be “found preferable by all rational creatures, past, present, and future” (pp. 449). However, at other points her view seems substantially weaker than this. Rather than objecting to the *goal* of producing universally acceptable claims, she instead objects to the idea that we have *actually produced them*. She says, for example, that her own thought is shaped by Eurocentric, androcentric, heterosexist, etc. biases that “Others” will one day point out to us, and which make her thought “characteristic” of the age in which she works (p. 454; p. 463). But this doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t *strive* to make universally acceptable claims. Indeed, talk about “Others” pointing out our own flawed assumptions to us suggests that there are precisely the kind of shared standards for assessment that she elsewhere purports to deny.

So, Harding strives to defend an interpretation of the epistemic advantage claim that confers *genuinely* epistemic advantage to the knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints, but her view is marked by tensions arising from her commitment to social construction about knowledge. I’ll explore this tension in more detail in Chapter 2.

### **1.3.2 Individualist Accounts of Standpoint Theory**

More contemporary standpoint theorists are not as tempted by radical social construction about knowledge, and they typically grant that individuals can achieve standpoints (though Intemann (2010) is a notable exception). Take the views defended by Alison Wylie and Quill Kukla. Kukla is explicit that they take individuals to be epistemic agents in their own right: “I believe that epistemic agents *are* individuals, regardless of the extent to which their epistemic agency is marked by their group memberships, decentered, achieved in collaboration with others, and so forth” (2006, p. 82). Wylie is less explicit, and even frames the question that she takes to animate standpoint epistemology to be a question about “what systematic limitations are imposed by the social location of different *classes* or *collectivities* of knowers” (2003, p. 31). Despite this, she frequently presents individuals as epistemic agents in their own right, and as capable of achieving standpoints (pp. 37-40).

Wylie and Kukla develop the epistemic advantage thesis in similar ways. They both distinguish between different uses of the term “objective”. As Wylie explains, there are three distinct uses or senses of “objective”. First, “objective” can pick out a property of knowledge claims—we say that some claims are more “objective” than others; second, “objective” can refer to “conventionally desirable properties of epistemic agents: that they are neutral and dispassionate with regard to a particular subject of inquiry”; and, finally, “objective” sometimes refers to the objects of knowledge—objective reality is what is “really real”, and is understood in contrast to what is more ephemeral or subjective (pp. 32-33). Wylie then argues that standpoint epistemology challenges the assumption that neutral or disinterested knowers are the best or only producers of objective knowledge claims—the explicitly interested feminist standpoint can produce knowledge claims that are more objective.

Kukla makes a similar argument. They add to Wylie’s classification of ‘objectivity’ the idea that evidence and the epistemic warrant it provides is “objective” insofar as it is *publicly accessible*. They then argue that standpoint epistemologies challenges the assumption that the “democratic accessibility” of warrant or justification is a necessary condition for producing more objective knowledge claims. They motivate this claim by offering an account of perception according to which our perceptive abilities both provide warrant and are *malleable*. It follows that our perceptual abilities will differ, and so will provide different, sometimes *better*, epistemic warrant. As they put it, we are “able to perceive different reasons and access different warrants when being rational in response to the same causal inputs” (p. 85). However, Kukla does maintain the democratic accessibility of warrant as a *regulative* ideal; it is something we ought to strive for, even though it’s not necessary for making objective claims.

Briana Toole also defends an individualist account of standpoint theory. Toole articulates three distinct ways a marginalized person might be advantaged relative to people who lack a critical standpoint: (i) the experience of marginalization allows for the development of richer conceptual resources; (ii) people with different social identities may entertain different hypotheses to explain the available evidence; and (iii), marginalized individuals are better able to embed another’s *de se* mode of presentation as their own (Toole, 2022).

As a final example, Liam Kofi Bright and David Kinney argue that members of socially dominant groups are often epistemically worse off because they are incentivized to remain ignorant of freely available evidence. While this applies to individuals *as members of groups*, they nonetheless treat

individuals as capable of being knowers in their own right. Interestingly, they hold that the ignorance of the socially dominant can actually be *rational*, at least on Buchak's (2010; 2013) model of rational but risk-averse reasoning (Kinney and Bright, 2021).

So, how do these views challenge purism? Kukla restricts their scrutiny to **aperspectivalism**, though whether they succeed in disputing it raises thorny questions. Kukla concedes that "if everyone had the perspective of the ideally educated, optimistically plastic inquirer, then all warrant would in fact be democratically accessible," but responds by holding that we inevitably fall short of this in practice (p. 92). However, now it is not so clear that Kukla is actually challenging aperspectivalism—aperspectivalism holds that it is *in principle* possible for everyone to access epistemic warrant, not that it is *practically* feasible. But just what does it mean to say that evidence is *in principle* democratically accessible? This is a difficult question to answer.

It's also not clear to what extent Wylie's view is at odds with purist commitments. While she says that her account of standpoint theory will not satisfy someone who is hankering for a "new foundationalism, now rendered in social terms" (p. 30), her view nonetheless doesn't seem to be at odds with a view that posits universal standards. The challenge posed by Bright and Kinney's view is also somewhat difficult to pin down. On the one hand, by appealing to how the socially dominant manage what evidence is available to them, they explain socially dominant people's ignorance in a way that poses no challenge to purist theses. On the other hand, by deeming the ignorance of the socially dominant potentially *rational*, they might be invoking a conception of rationality that is at odds with a more purist conception.

Finally, Briana Toole argues that her version of standpoint epistemology is at odds with aperspectivalism and intellectualism. Her view, she says, is at odds with these theses for precisely the same reason that she takes pragmatic encroachment to be: where pragmatic encroachment says that knowledge is sensitive to *stakes*, she says that knowledge is sensitive to an agent's *social location* (Toole, 2022, p. 6). This is at odds with intellectualism because, as she understands it, intellectualism is just the view that knowledge *isn't* sensitive to non-epistemic features. As I've discussed in Section 1, I don't think this is a good definition of intellectualism; it is too broad to be plausible. She concludes that her version of standpoint theory is incompatible with aperspectivalism because it has the result that some evidence is only appreciable by those who have achieved a standpoint (p. 7). However, this raises the same questions that Kukla's view discussed above raises.



## 1.4 Standpoint Epistemology vs. Encroachment

It's clear why people have been tempted to lump encroachment and standpoint epistemologies together. Both deny that there are fixed epistemic standards, and they do so by drawing deep connections between knowledge and action, and knowledge and value. Yet, it is also apparent that the views defended by standpoint theorists and encroachment theorists are quite different. This section draws out some of these differences.

I'll start by contrasting encroachment with the collective accounts of standpoint theory. The central difference here is the understanding of the knowing subject—collective accounts of standpoint theory deny that individuals are knowers in their own right, while encroachment theorists assume this. Recall that the impetus for denying methodological individualism was to secure a more active and social conception of knowledge. Given this, it is not surprising that encroachment theorists end up with a more passive conception of shifting standards—where collective standpoint theorists argue that we can *choose* different epistemological standards in accordance with our values and aims, for encroachment theorists we are *at the whim* of shifting practical stakes and objective moral demands. The significance of this difference reveals itself in different ways for pragmatic encroachment and moral encroachment.

Standpoint theorists aim to carve out epistemic frameworks that empower the socially marginalized, as is especially clear in the accounts defended by Hartsock and Collins (discussed above). However, because pragmatic encroachment puts subjects at the whim of shifting pragmatic stakes, pragmatic encroachment does not necessarily empower the socially marginalized. This is made obvious by pragmatic encroachment theorists' attempts to put their frameworks to work analyzing the effects of power on knowledge. Take, for example, this pair of cases (initially offered by Stanley (2015); presented as summarized by McKenna (2020, p. 2)):

**Case 1:** Pam is a manual worker who has good reason to believe that her co-workers are being exploited, though she lacks conclusive proof. She is wondering whether to act on her belief by creating a union. Let's suppose that, if the bosses are taking advantage of the workers, she will be successful in convincing them to join the union, and, if the bosses are not taking advantage of the workers, she will be unsuccessful. Let's also suppose that, because of her position in the company and her gender, Pam faces serious barriers to creating a union: she fears that she won't be taken seriously, either by her bosses or her co-workers; she worries that this will get her a reputation as a trouble-maker; etc.

**Case 2:** Jim also has good reason to believe that the workers are being exploited, and is wondering whether to act on his belief. But, because he is male and a manager in the company, he faces fewer barriers to creating a union; he knows he will be taken seriously; he is confident that this will not get him a reputation as a trouble-maker; etc.

Both Stanley and McKenna conclude that it is “easier for Jim to know that his workers are being exploited than it is for Pam. The thought is that Pam’s social identity creates barriers to her knowing that don’t exist for Jim. Because of her precarious position in the company and her gender, she just needs more evidence than Jim does” (McKenna, p. 2). Stanley and McKenna both spin this result as speaking in favor of pragmatic encroachment. Stanley uses this set of cases to argue that pragmatic encroachment can offer an explanation for epistemic oppression: “Those who are in high-stakes situations when vying for the goods of society will have to meet higher standards for full belief. This is an epistemic harm. Since it is reasonable to hold...that negatively privileged groups will have more at stake in disputes over society’s goods, they will be epistemically disadvantaged” (pp. 339-340). Similarly, McKenna argues that pragmatic encroachment tells us “something important about why many societies are highly resistant to social change. Social change often requires people to act irrationally, that is, to act on evidence that is insufficient given the situation they find themselves in” (p. 5). Amia Srinivasan points out that this analysis is in tension with standpoint theorists’ conclusions (Srinivasan, 2016). Moreover, Srinivasan rightly emphasizes that the stakes-sensitivity view strips knowledge from the marginalized when it seems to matter most—“suppose a woman knows she has been sexually harassed by her boss. She is encouraged by a lawyer-friend to take legal action. Suddenly the stakes are up. It really matters to this woman that she’s right: not just for the legal outcome, but for her sense of self, the righteousness of her protest. According to the interest-relative account...this woman no longer knows that she has been sexually harassed once the stakes are sufficiently high” (pp. 377-378). Thus, the shifting standards that feature in pragmatic encroachment are not of the right kind to systematically empower the socially marginalized.

Now take moral encroachment. Recall that, for collective standpoint theorists, our role in selecting the epistemic standards is part of what explains the need to place the epistemic agent “on the same plane” as the objects of knowledge—we must be *reflexive* about how our social situatedness affects the thought that we produce. Because moral encroachment theorists take epistemic adequacy to be shaped not by *our* moral values but by *the* moral values, the emphasis on the need for reflexivity is lost. Indeed, Rima Basu, a leading moral encroachment theorist, actively *opposes* placing epistemic

subjects on the same plane as the objects of investigation. Basu argues that when we regard people as objects to be studied, we fail to relate to them as human beings. People, she argues, are fundamentally unlike tables and chairs, and we wrong them when we form our beliefs about them the same way that we would form our beliefs about non-human objects (2019). Thus, Basu embraces almost precisely the divide between epistemic agents and the objects of knowledge that early standpoint theorists were vehemently against.

Since both of these issues stem from encroachment theorists' assumption that individuals are knowers in their own right, it might seem like there's a better case to be made for comparing encroachment to individualist accounts of standpoint epistemology. One thing to note is that Basu's argument that it is morally wrong to form beliefs about people the way we form beliefs about objects seems to be in tension even with Wylie's more reserved characterization of standpoint epistemology. Wylie describes standpoint epistemology as a "nuanced, well-grounded (naturalized) account of how reliable particular kinds of knowledge are likely to be, given the social conditions of their production; it consists of an empirically grounded assessment of the limitations of particular kinds of knowers, of how likely they are to be partial, and how likely it is that the knowledge they produce will fail to maximize salient epistemic virtues" (2003, p. 24). More generally, though, a salient difference between encroachment and standpoint epistemologies is that encroachment epistemologies are vindicated by cases that demonstrate that non-epistemic features make a difference to knowledge *when the epistemic features are held fixed*. By contrast, individualist standpoint theorists are generally trying to demonstrate that non-epistemic features like gender or race *make a difference to the epistemic features*. That is, when you vary a person's race or gender, you will *also* end up with variant epistemic features. People who are marginalized will often have different evidence, incentive, and reasoning strategies relative to the socially dominant. Thus, they aren't interested in identifying hypothetical scenarios in which all the epistemic features are held fixed, but the practical, moral, or other non-epistemic features change make a difference to knowledge.

## 1.5 Looking Ahead

The preceding discussion has, I hope, made it clear that there are different ways that epistemologies might incorporate or attend to social (and other non-epistemic) features, and that not all of these ways are incompatible with purism. However, concerns about the adequacy of purist feminist frameworks persist, even if those frameworks aren't dead on arrival.

My strategy for motivating purist feminist epistemology is to try to turn the tables on the impurists—where they have connected purist norms with the repeated failure of more “traditional” epistemologists to produce socially engaged epistemology, I connect impurist norms to the spread of an overly apprehensive approach to feminist epistemology that is diminishing feminist epistemology’s political possibilities. The upshot of this is twofold. First, the political utility of impurist frameworks has been exaggerated. The impurist approach gives rise to a *superficial* form of socially engaged epistemology—while impurist frameworks “make space” for social and political factors, they do so in a way that allows impurists to bypass the difficulties of producing feminist thought that is rooted in the realities of oppression. Second, the political advantages of purism have been underestimated. By combining purist epistemic norms with feminist political sensibilities, we get a purist approach to feminist epistemology that serves feminist aims better than competing impurist alternatives.

The remaining chapters are organized as follows:

In Chapter 2, I demonstrate that, among impurist feminist epistemologists, it is increasingly common to defend politically significant conclusions on (primarily) moral grounds, despite the availability of traditional evidential support. This is a longstanding tendency, though it is made more salient by the recent popularization of moral encroachment. I argue that the tendency to invoke non-evidential reasons to believe in accordance with feminist values betrays a lack of faith that the facts will bear out feminist commitments. This lack of faith results in the production of what I call *anxious epistemology*. Anxious epistemology is a distinctive type of dogmatic inquiry, distinguished by an unusual paradox of faith: the anxious inquirer lacks faith that the evidence will bear out their commitments, but they do not lack faith in the *truth* of their convictions. The resulting anxiety prompts the anxious inquirer to take up an adversarial stance towards the evidence; they see the evidence as an obstacle that must be overcome, rather than a resource. I argue that taking up this stance towards the evidence when defending feminist commitments not only does a disservice to the tradition of feminist inquiry, but also results in an inflexible feminism. This chapter undermines one important source of motivation for endorsing impurism, and, at the same time, shows that purism has been unduly underestimated.

Chapter 3 takes issue with impurist varieties of standpoint theory that entail the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis* (SED<sub>T</sub>). The SED<sub>T</sub> holds that privileged social positions place strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can understand about forms of oppression that they

don't personally experience. The SEDT is tempting because it allows standpoint theorists to explain what is epistemically advantageous about marginalization without committing themselves to the untenable *automatic privilege thesis*. However, the SEDT is little more than an excuse for ignorance and silence on behalf of the socially dominant, and interpretations of standpoint theory that lend support to the SEDT are stifling the production of genuinely intersectional feminist thought. I argue that to avoid lending support to the SEDT, standpoint epistemologists must deny that marginalization is necessary for achieving a marginalized standpoint. The resulting interpretation of standpoint epistemology is more plausible and better suited to feminist aims—and it is purist.

The two traps that I identify in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are direct consequences of rejecting purism, and they can, accordingly, be resolved by embracing purism. The solution to the problem outlined in Chapter 2 is for feminists to put more faith in, and cleave more closely to, the evidence. The solution to the problem outlined in Chapter 3 is for feminists to take the epistemic differences made by social location seriously, without thereby giving up on the project of using our capacity for rational discernment to overcome the limitations that social privilege can confer. These solutions align neatly with the pair of intuitions at the heart of purism: (i) rational agents are all, at least in principle, equally able to grasp the truth, and (ii) the only check on our epistemic practices is whether we are getting things right. Pairing these intuitions with feminist sensibilities gives us a distinctly *optimistic* approach to doing feminist epistemology, which serves as an antidote to the rampant unease that is predominant at present.

Chapter 4 is an extended case study on rape culture. I problematize conceptions of rape culture that exclusively emphasize “minimizing” rape myths and the social tendency to unjustly disbelieve women’s claims, and so overlook the importance of “catastrophizing” rape myths and those cases in which people are all too willing to believe allegations. I argue that these considerations must be accounted for if we’re to understand how the tendency to dismiss women’s allegations is shaped by the racist underpinnings of rape culture. While this account of rape culture is important in its own right, it also serves to illustrate the stakes of the traps identified in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Both traps have prevented (some) contemporary feminist theorists from detecting and rooting out racist distortion in their accounts of rape culture, because both traps interfere with a genuinely intersectional approach to feminist theorizing. This chapter also serves as a concrete illustration of what it looks like for purist feminist epistemology to be socially engaged.

Finally, in Chapter 5 (the conclusion), I wrap things up and identify avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Anxious Epistemology

This chapter identifies and diagnoses a troubling trend within feminist epistemology. As I will demonstrate, it is increasingly common for impurist feminist epistemologists to defend feminist conclusions on moral grounds, despite the availability of evidential support. Indeed, (some) impurist feminist epistemologists invoke moral considerations *at the expense of* evidential considerations. This is a longstanding tendency within feminist epistemology, though it is made more salient by the recent popularization of moral encroachment.

To diagnose this accelerating retreat from the evidence, I introduce the notion of *anxious epistemology*. Anxious epistemology is a distinctive type of dogmatic inquiry, distinguished by an unusual paradox of faith: the anxious inquirer lacks faith that the evidence will bear out their convictions, but they do not lack faith in the *truth* of their convictions. This spurs the anxious inquirer to take up an adversarial stance towards the evidence. Rather than seeing evidence as a resource that could guide inquiry, they see evidence as an obstacle that inquiry must overcome. While such an explicit lack of regard for the evidence is typically reserved for bad-faith inquirers, the anxious epistemologist sincerely believes that bypassing the evidence is the surest way to the truth. So, the growing feminist tendency to invoke moral considerations instead of evidential ones betrays a lack of faith that the facts will bear out feminist commitments.

Feminist epistemology has long been plagued by allegations that it promotes pseudo-inquiry, and *the vast majority of these allegations have been wildly unfair* (see, e.g., Haack (1993)). Given this, my thesis teeters on the edge of dangerous territory—I neither want to bolster critics’ uncharitable dismissals of feminist epistemology, nor do I want my critique to be hastily brushed aside by other feminist epistemologists who have grown tired of the expectation that they engage seriously with critics who do not take *them* seriously. So, before I lose any skeptical readers, let me quickly illustrate the kind of thing I have in mind.

### 2.1 Please Pause for a Brief Illustration

Recall **Cosmos Club**, discussed in Chapter 1:

**Cosmos Club:** It is 1995, and John Hope Franklin, a black man, is about to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The night before the award ceremony, Franklin hosts a party

at the Cosmos Club, a private social club in D.C. There are very few other black members of the club. Consequently, on the night of the party, almost every other black person in the club is a club attendant, rather than a member (Gendler, 2011; Franklin, 2005, p. 340). As Franklin makes the rounds at the party, a white woman calls out to him, presents him with her coat check, and orders him to bring her coat. She has, evidently, assumed he is a club attendant because he is black. Franklin explains that he is a member of the club, and points her in the direction of the attendants (Franklin, 2005, p. 340).

Tamar Gendler uses Franklin's account of this incident as an illustration of her "sad conclusion" that rationality sometimes demands that we form racist beliefs (2011). On Gendler's view, the woman believes an "empirically well-supported hypothesis", but the fact that the belief is well-supported doesn't make the belief any less racist (p. 35). Moral encroachment theorists want to resist Gendler's sad conclusion. They want to show that, far from *requiring* the formation of racist beliefs, rationality actually guards against the formation of such beliefs. As discussed in Chapter 1, their strategy is to hold that the normative status of a belief is sensitive to the moral costs or stakes of that belief. Since it is morally impermissible to hold racist beliefs, and the woman's belief that Franklin is an attendant is racist, the woman needs stronger evidence to be justified in believing. Thus, moral encroachment theorists preserve the idea that rationality guards against the formation of racist beliefs.

Moral encroachment theorists adopt this strategy because they judge that the evidence alone will not allow us to condemn the woman's racist belief as irrational. Mark Schroeder makes this especially explicit; he writes, "I hold out hope that epistemic rationality does not require racism. If it does not, then the costs of [the woman's] belief must play a role in explaining why the evidential standards are higher" (Schroeder, 2018, p. 309). However, this judgment is the result of a striking oversight.<sup>3</sup> As Georgi Gardiner has pointed out, in Franklin's original recounting of the incident, he specifies that "all of the club attendants were in uniform" (Franklin, 2005, p. 340; Gardiner, 2018, p. 5). Franklin, as a member of the club, was obviously not in uniform. Once we notice this, it is simply not plausible that we need moral encroachment to explain why the woman's belief was irrational—the woman's belief was formed in the face of obvious countervailing evidence (Gardiner, pp. 15-16). Worse still, because moral encroachment theorists have overlooked relevant evidence, they mischaracterize what

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<sup>3</sup> Part of what makes this oversight so striking is that the overlooked fact is also relayed by Gendler. After claiming that the woman endorsed a well-supported hypothesis, she remarks, "The likelihood that a black man present in the Cosmos Club was a member of the staff rather than a member of the club was very high—high enough, perhaps, to make it rational to assume that even though he was wearing a suit rather than a uniform, he was nonetheless an employee rather than a host" (p. 35).

goes wrong in **Cosmos Club**. **Cosmos Club** doesn't depict a "cooly rational" woman being misled by her evidence (a victim to the statistics!)—it depicts a woman whose prejudice prevents her from taking relevant information into account.

### 2.1.1 The Introduction Will Now Resume

The moral encroachment theorist's treatment of **Cosmos Club** is anxious epistemology. On the one hand, they are sure that if we went by the facts alone, rationality would require that we form (some) racist beliefs. But, at the same time, they are also sure that it is *not* rational to form racist beliefs. This conflict gives rise to anxiety, which is then neutralized by invoking moral considerations to bypass the evidence. However, this willingness to bypass the evidence disrupts inquiry and seeds misunderstanding.

In what follows, I will demonstrate that the moral encroachment theorist's treatment of **Cosmos Club** is not an isolated incident; it is indicative of a broader problem in feminist epistemology. To prove that this is indeed patterned, I will give two more examples of anxious epistemology from the literature on moral encroachment, and three examples from standpoint theorists who endorse radical social construction about knowledge. Despite significant differences between these two sets of views, the affinity for impurism leads theorists in both camps to give in to anxiety and adopt a method of inquiry that is divorced from the evidence. I argue that this anxious approach to inquiry does the tradition of feminist inquiry a disservice, and also divorces feminist thought from the conditions of oppression in which it is meant to be rooted.

## 2.2 The Feminist Case Against Purism

Feminist epistemologists are committed to producing socially engaged epistemology. This commitment is rooted in the recognition that "our society systematically generates and distributes the ignorance it needs to preserve itself" (Bright, manuscript, p. 2), and, therefore, that the right epistemological frameworks can help us better understand the oppressive forces that structure our society.

Purist feminist epistemologists see injustices in the epistemic sphere as *violations* of purist epistemic norms. They will emphasize, for example, how oppressive ideologies systematically obscure the real workings of the social world (Haslanger, 2001; Kukla, 2018), how prejudice can cause us to unjustly



dismiss marginalized people's testimony (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2011), or how the assumptions that govern thought may reflect the experiences of the socially dominant (Fricker, 2007). Impurist feminist epistemologists disagree—they think that purist norms are partially to *blame* for the role our epistemic practices play in maintaining oppression.

Sandra Harding's argument in "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity?"" is a representative (and influential) example of this kind of view (1992). Harding argues that the ideal of epistemic purity demands that inquirers try to remove themselves (their values, interests, idiosyncratic preferences, etc.) from the process of inquiry because, for the purist, belief only rises to the status of knowledge if it has transcended "its ties to local, historical interests, values, and agendas" (p. 438). The purist endorses this standard for knowledge because they want to endorse only those claims that ought to be *universally* assented to by all rational inquirers. Thus, they see any ties to "particularity" or "subjectivity" as necessarily distorting; only inquiry that is unconditioned by the contingencies of individual inquirers (or communities of inquirers) could hope to meet this standard. Harding argues that this ideal is unachievable. Indeed, she says that it is a *delusion* "to think that human thought could completely erase the fingerprints that reveal its production process" (p. 445). Instead, we must accept that thought is always "*of an age*" and will bear the mark of shared assumptions that, in the future, will allow people to pick out the thought as distinctive to that age (p. 454).

Crucially, Harding's claim isn't meant to be the less controversial claim that people are fallible and unlikely to transcend whatever biases predominate in an "age". When Harding says that knowledge is "socially-situated", she is urging us to see knowledge as *ineliminably* social. On Harding's view, there is no "universal" standard that could be identified outside of the practices of individuals and their communities. Knowledge is necessarily produced and judged *within* our social practices, and nothing but hubris could make someone think that their particular standards would be assented to by all rational creatures. Thus, our epistemic practices necessarily have the interests and values of a particular community baked in—and this is true when inquiry is going well, too.

So, the purist tries to disentangle the epistemic and the social in a way that Harding thinks is impossible. What is worse, according to Harding, is that the methodology prescribed by the purist abstracts away precisely those features that are useful for interrogating how social forces have influenced inquiry. The methods and norms "are too weak to permit researchers to systematically identify and eliminate from the results of research those social values, interests, and agendas that are

shared by the entire scientific community” (p. 438). They cannot detect the assumptions that are “the dominant beliefs of an age” because these assumptions can only be interrogated if we accept that knowledge is inextricably social, and so will always bear the mark of the community that produced it (p. 440) This is why scientists regularly produce research that affirms (and exhibits) the sexist, racist, and otherwise prejudicial biases that prevail in their time—they can entertain disagreements *between* different scientists, but they cannot even begin to identify the assumptions that are shared by all scientists (let alone eliminate them). By contrast, impurist feminists “not only acknowledge the social situatedness that is the inescapable lot of all knowledge-seeking projects but also, more importantly, transform it into a systematically available scientific resource” (p. 446).

As we’ve seen, the moral encroachment theorist’s picture is quite different. While they “make space” for social and moral considerations, they do not endorse radical social construction about knowledge. Despite this, feminist moral encroachment theorists also argue that a purist conception of epistemic normativity ultimately serves oppressive ideologies. The feminist moral encroachment theorist’s concern is rooted in the observation that “unjust social structures of our world gerrymander the regularities and the evidence an individual is exposed to in ways that reinforce racist and sexist beliefs” (Basu, 2020, p. 192). Given this, if we have epistemic standards that take the racist or sexist (or otherwise prejudicial) charge of a belief to be epistemically irrelevant, then our epistemic standards will tend to affirm those beliefs that align with oppressive ideologies.

The upshot of all this is that, for both feminist moral encroachment theorists and feminist social constructionists, the allure of impurism is that it (allegedly) provides the resources that we need to see through the fog of ideology. Moreover, the *reason* that impurism (allegedly) produces less distorted inquiry is that it is socially engaged in a way that purism is not. However, in the examples that follow, we will see that the embrace of impurist norms is giving rise to a method of inquiry that is only *superficially* socially engaged. Moral and political considerations are used to bypass the evidence, which results in inquiry that is strangely divorced from the relevant facts.

### **2.3 Anxious Feminist Epistemology**

This section offers examples of anxious feminist epistemology as they arise in two distinct impurist camps: moral encroachment and (some versions of) standpoint epistemology. In each example, the theorist is considering a challenge to a feminist commitment, and they judge the evidence alone to be inadequate for dealing with the challenge. The inadequacy of the evidence is taken to count not

against the feminist commitment but against the purist's conception of epistemic normativity—it lacks the resources needed to serve feminist aims and/or maintain coherence with feminist analysis, and so ought to be rejected. Impurism, by contrast, is vindicated precisely because it enables the theorist to bypass the (perceived) evidential deficit and vindicate the feminist commitment.

### 2.3.1 Anxious Moral Encroachment

**Cosmos Club**, discussed above, was our first example of anxious moral encroachment. Our second example comes from a paper titled “Moral encroachment and the epistemic impermissibility of (some) microaggressions” by Javiera Perez Gomez (2021). As the title suggests, Perez Gomez aims to defend the conclusion that the beliefs expressed by racist microaggressions are (often) irrational. Her examples of microaggressions include complimenting a black person for being articulate and asking Asian Americans where they're “really” from. Perez Gomez claims that the former implicates that black people are not usually articulate, and the latter implicates that Asian Americans are not really American (p. 9237). I'll focus on her treatment of the belief ‘black people are usually inarticulate’ in what follows, but a similar case could be made for each example that she discusses.

Perez Gomez's argument that it is (often) irrational to believe ‘black people are usually inarticulate’ goes like this. First, she points out that microaggressions are part of a broader pattern of injustice, which means that the harm of microaggressions must be assessed in relation to their context. This reveals that microaggressions—which may not seem that harmful when assessed as one-off instances—can cause significant harm (p. 9241). Perez Gomez then invokes moral encroachment, which allows her to claim that the harm of a microaggression “raises the level of evidential support required for a potential microaggressor to rationally rely on his belief, such that in some cases, the stakes of relying on her false belief may be so high that they provide a reason to withhold belief” (p. 9250). Thus, she concludes that it will usually be irrational to believe that black people tend to be inarticulate, because the harm of that belief raises the amount of evidence required for it to be rational.

The justification that Perez Gomez gives for using the moral encroachment framework is especially relevant for my purposes here. Perez Gomez is *explicitly* worried that, if we adopted a purist framework, we may not be able to conclude that it's (often) irrational to believe that black people are usually inarticulate. As she explains, if we limited ourselves to a purist framework, “one could hold that microaggression is sometimes impermissible for practical or moral reasons yet hold that it need

not also be *epistemically* impermissible...one might argue that, given the right kind of evidence, it could be rationally permissible for an agent to believe that ‘Blacks are not articulate’” (p. 9238). Perez Gomez then presents moral encroachment as a “fortunate” alternative to purism because it allows us to grant that moral features affect the epistemic status of belief, which gives us the resources we need to conclude that it is usually irrational to have such a racist belief (p. 9238).

So, the commitment that Perez Gomez starts out with is the idea that it is irrational to have racist beliefs. She then worries about the possibility that, if we went by the evidence alone, it may sometimes be rational to have the racist belief that black people are inarticulate. To counter this challenge, she uses moral encroachment to secure the belief that aligns with her feminist sensibilities, despite the potential incongruence with the evidence; she uses the moral costs of the belief as a tool to jimmy up the justificatory standard for belief, thereby vindicating her feminist intuition. This is textbook anxious epistemology, and it comes with real costs.

There is a wealth of evidence that demonstrates that the stereotype that black people are inarticulate is rooted in prejudicial assessments of the capabilities of speakers themselves and the complexity and dynamism of AAVE (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Smitherman, 1986; Pullum, 1999). Because Perez Gomez’s argument is designed to circumvent the evidence, she misses the opportunity to critique racist interpretations of black people’s communicative capacities. Indeed, it is worse than this—taking seriously the possibility that it may be rational to believe that black people are usually inarticulate (and to the extent that her entire argument is oriented around this possibility!) is actively insulting and grants undue legitimacy to racist stereotypes.

While Perez Gomez’s argument is striking in its ability to bring the underlying anxiety to the fore, it is in many respects a standard moral encroachment argument. Indeed, the problematic dynamic in this case directly parallels the dynamic in **Cosmos Club**. Recall that Basu and Schroeder argue that it was irrational for the white woman to believe that John Hope Franklin was a club attendant because the moral costs of that belief raise the justificatory bar. Like Perez Gomez, Basu and Schroeder are explicit that they cannot accept that a racist belief like hers could be rational, which is why they go in for moral encroachment (Schroeder, 2019, p. 3019). While Basu and Schroeder are at least *right* to grant that black people in the Cosmos Club were usually attendants, they nonetheless overlook the evidence that John Hope Franklin was the exception to this rule, since he wasn’t wearing a uniform.

Our third (and final) example of anxious moral encroachment comes from Alexandra Lloyd's paper titled "#MeToo and the Role of Outright Belief" (2022). Lloyd argues that we ought to believe women's sexual assault allegations, even "when the evidence does not definitely establish that the assault did occur" (p. 190). So, Lloyd's argument is explicitly designed to justify believing women in contexts where it couldn't be justified by the evidence alone.

Because Lloyd is seeking cases in which the available evidence is inconclusive, she sets aside cases that involve "complications" like corroborating eye-witness testimony. She focuses instead on he-said-she-said cases, which only involve the accusation of the victim and the denial of the accused (p. 190). She offers **#MeToo** as an example of this kind of case:

**#MeToo:** Ben, a man in Caelynn's vicinity, is considering whether to believe the proposition "Jay sexually assaulted Caelynn" on the basis of the following facts, which he read in a newspaper article: at a college fraternity party, Caelynn had a couple of drinks. The next morning, she woke up naked in Jay's bed at the fraternity. She doesn't remember much from the night before, but her vagina is sore, her underwear is missing, and she has fuzzy memories of protesting as Jay had sex with her. Jay did have nonconsensual sex with Caelynn, although he denies it. Ben also has access to evidence that women lie about being sexually assaulted less than 10% of the time (p. 190).

Lloyd argues that if Ben doesn't form an outright belief (as opposed to high credence) in the truth of Caelynn's allegation, he seriously wrongs her because "he doesn't respond to her as a victim of sexual assault in a way that supports and validates her" (p. 184). Her argument for this is as follows:

1. Caelynn, as a victim of sexual assault, is owed certain kinds of treatment from Ben (including, especially, "empathetic engagement" (p. 183).
2. Outright belief (as opposed to high credence) is a "precondition" for responding to victims of sexual assault in the way they are owed (p. 185).<sup>4</sup>
3. So, Ben wrongs Caelynn if he doesn't believe her allegation, even if the evidence is inconclusive.

Lloyd also argues that given the infrequency of false reports, Ben *doesn't* similarly wrong Jay by disbelieving his denial. As she explains, "the level of risk to which Jay is exposed when Ben believes Caelynn is so low that it does not make sense to say that Jay is wronged" (p. 193). She compares it to going to a concert: at concerts, we are subject to low risk of a crowdsurge, but we do not think that

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<sup>4</sup> I don't think this is true, but I grant it for the sake of argument.

this exposure to risk amounts to a wrong (p. 193). So, Lloyd thinks that the moral features compel us to believe, even though the evidence is inconclusive.

Crucially, Lloyd clarifies that her argument is not just that *morally* speaking, it would be best if Ben believed Caelynn. Her argument is that “there are some contexts in which an agent does *epistemically* best only if they have an outright belief in the relevant proposition” and that “sexual assault against women is one such context” (p. 187, emphasis mine). While Lloyd doesn’t explicitly invoke moral encroachment, it is nonetheless clear that the moral encroachment thesis is what bridges the gap between her argument that morally we should believe women and her conclusion that this is what’s epistemically best, too.

Lloyd’s lack of faith in the facts is unnecessary in her own hypothetical example, as I will explain shortly. First, though, it’s worth pausing to see that she not only underestimates the strength of the evidential resources but also *overestimates* the utility of moral considerations. Lloyd stipulates that Ben must form his belief “under conditions of uncertainty” (p. 193). However, her assessment of the relative costs of belief in fact turns on the assumption that the allegation is true. If Ben sides with Jay and disbelieves Caelynn, Caelynn would suffer greatly because she *is in fact a victim*, and so is owed empathetic engagement. If Ben instead sides with Caelynn and disbelieves Jay, Jay wouldn’t be harmed at all because he is only subject to a slight risk of suffering consequences that are undeserved—a risk that doesn’t materialize, since the accusation is true.

This strategy works well for hypothetical examples in philosophy papers, where we can stipulate what is true and what is not. However, it will not get us far out in the real world. Out there, if we’re confronted with a sexual assault allegation and we’re not sure what to believe, the assumption that the allegation is true would obviously not fly—we would be assuming precisely the thing we are questioning. Without the stipulation that the accusation is true, assessing the possible costs of belief and disbelief is much less straightforward. We must, of course, still consider the possibility that the allegation is true, in which case disbelief could seriously wrong the victim in the way that Lloyd describes. But we wouldn’t *know* whether disbelief would harm her to this degree because we wouldn’t know whether she is in fact a victim. Moreover, we would also have to consider the possibility that the allegation is false, in which case we could seriously wrong the accused (the mere fact that this harm is *unlikely* doesn’t mean that the harm is minor when it actually occurs). Uncertainty about the truth of the allegation, then, would leave us feeling uncertain about whether belief or disbelief would be more morally costly. Lloyd’s appeal to moral considerations only seems

to help her get around the (supposed) evidential deficit because she exercises her authorial power to stipulate that the allegation is true.

This issue is somewhat orthogonal to the issue of anxious epistemology, but not entirely. Lloyd uses statistics about how likely a report is to be false to make comparative claims about the costs of disbelieving Caelynn versus disbelieving Jay, which she does because she is trying to lower the justificatory standard for belief to vindicate belief in Caelynn's claim. Alternatively, we could treat those statistics as relevant evidence—women usually aren't lying! This doesn't by itself tell us whether we should believe or disbelieve a particular case, but a natural next step is to figure out whether there's any reason to think that Caelynn may be the exception to the general rule. Once we ask this question, we see that Lloyd has dramatically undersold the strength of the available evidential resources.

Per Lloyd's description, Ben learned about Caelynn's allegation through the newspaper. The article reported that Caelynn had been drinking and doesn't remember much about the night before, and that she woke up naked, with her underwear missing, a sore vagina, and only fuzzy memories of trying to resist Jay's advances (p. 190). One thing is immediately clear—Caelynn has already come forward with *extremely* intimate details about her assault. These are not the kind of details that people share lightly because they make someone a possible target for (undue) public shaming and ridicule. Moreover, by including that she was drinking at a fraternity party and has only a hazy memory, Caelynn has included precisely the kind of detail that gets many victims' claims thrown out prematurely. These details make her an "imperfect" victim, and the perfect target for rape myths that prompt people to unjustly minimize and dismiss rape allegations (Jenkins, 2017; Tilton, forthcoming). These details also make it unlikely that she is lying—the costs of coming forward are high, and the chances that she will be believed are low. By contrast, it is obviously in Jay's interest to deny the allegations, whether they are true or not.

In a real case, there would be even more to go by (including people's testimonial histories and their more specific incentive structures, etc.). My point is that Lloyd underestimates the available evidential resources, even in her own hypothetical case. Indeed, the very framing of the problem—that we must figure out how to justify believing women in "he-said-she-said" cases where the evidence is inadequate—is a needlessly skeptical framing that feeds rape culture (Ichikawa, 2024, pp. 180-183). I agree with Jonathan Ichikawa, who, in response to Lloyd, emphasizes that "we do not

need to compromise scrupulous adherence to evidential norms to respond appropriately. In many cases, we should believe allegations *because the evidence establishes their truth*” (2024, p. 181).

The recurring problem in these examples is that a lack of faith in the facts causes the anxious inquirer to miss that the evidence is on their side and, consequently, to misdiagnose the problem at hand. So far, these misdiagnoses have resulted in needlessly weakened or costly arguments for the right conclusions. However, a lack of faith in the facts can quickly devolve into a lack of *regard* for the facts. When inquiry is divorced from the evidence, you don’t only run the risk of overlooking evidence that proves you right—you risk overlooking evidence that proves you wrong, too. Lloyd’s anxious defense of the importance of believing women illustrates this darker side of anxious epistemology.

While the evidence is on the side of the accuser in Lloyd’s example, this won’t always be the case. In cases where the evidence isn’t on the accuser’s side, there will *not* be a better, evidence-based argument that could secure Lloyd’s conclusion. But this is how it should be—we don’t *want* an argument that can bypass real evidential deficiencies. Lloyd’s willingness to believe despite the evidence reflects a distorted conception of rape culture, and her strategy for justifying belief would, in practice, fuel racist patterns of allegation acceptance.

I’ll discuss the racist underpinnings of rape culture in more detail in Chapter 4. The short version, though, is that while there *is* a real tendency to dismiss women’s allegations out of hand, this tendency is not monolithic. Undue skepticism keeps many perpetrators from facing consequences, but deeply held racist prejudices can make people all too willing to believe some allegations—especially if a white woman is accusing a black man (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1269–1272; Davis, 2011; Yap, 2017; Ichikawa, 2024, p. 192). In Chapter 4, I’ll argue that these racist stereotypes play a central role in contemporary rape culture—vigorously condemning a small subset of rapes makes one feel morally righteous *and* makes it easier to dismiss the vast majority of rape allegations. As we will see, it is no accident that those rapes that are vigorously condemned are those that align with racist stereotypes. For now, though, it is enough to see that contemporary rape culture is not characterized by a *total* unwillingness to believe allegations. People accept and reject allegations in ways that reflect and entrench multiple axes of oppression; they will overlook evidence when believing doesn’t suit them, and they will believe despite the evidence when believing *does* suit them. Once we recognize this, we cannot in good conscience abide by an argumentative strategy that permits (even *strives*) to bypass



the evidence. This strategy both misconstrues the reason that people respond skeptically to many allegations and also overlooks that undue skepticism is not the only problem.

### 2.3.2 Anxious Standpoint Epistemology

Social constructionist interpretations of standpoint epistemology face a distinctive problem. Recall that a central standpoint thesis is the epistemic advantage thesis, which holds that marginalization can be epistemically advantageous. The traditional interpretation of this thesis is that knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints is *better* than knowledge produced from socially dominant standpoints (Collins, 2002; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983). However, this seems to be in conflict with radical social construction about knowledge. When one endorses radical social construction about knowledge, one denies that there is a “universal” or “external” epistemic standard. But in making comparative claims about the epistemic strength of different standpoints, one seems to be implicitly invoking precisely the kind of “universal” standard that social constructionists reject.

Susan Hekman is one of several standpoint critics to point out this tension (Hekman, 1997). Others include Louise Antony (1993). Hekman took one of standpoint theorists’ goals to be vindicating the feminist claim that women are oppressed (p. 342). In pursuit of this goal, Hekman claims that standpoint theorists invoke the ineliminably social conception of knowledge to dismiss “masculine” knowledge claims—which *deny* that women are oppressed—as impartial and distorted, only to turn around and insist that a marginalized standpoint offers insight into the way the world really is (p. 343). She argues that this is incoherent because if we take the ineliminably social conception of knowledge to its logical conclusion, we must grant that there are infinitely many standpoints, and no way to determine which standpoints are “better”.

Four of the leading standpoint theorists at the time—Patricia Hill Collins, Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, and Sandra Harding—responded to Hekman’s argument as part of a *Signs* symposium (1997). Two of these four—Patricia Hill Collins and Nancy Hartsock—straightforwardly resort to anxious epistemology.

I’ll focus on Patricia Hill Collins’ response, also mentioned in the Introduction, for the sake of brevity. In response to Hekman’s article, Collins grants to Hekman that “multiple realities yield multiple perspectives on reality” (Collins, 1997, p. 380), but takes issue with Hekman’s claim that

standpoint theorists think that marginalized standpoints yield *more accurate* understanding than dominant standpoints. She writes:

Bracketing the question of power and restricting argument solely to the question of truth certainly reveals the limitations of using epistemological criteria in defense of privileged standpoints. But within the reality of hierarchical power relations, the standpoints of some groups are most certainly privileged over others. The amount of privilege granted to a particular standpoint lies less in its internal criteria in being truthful...and more in the power of a group in making its standpoint prevail over other equally plausible perspectives. Within hierarchical power relations, it seems reasonable that some groups disadvantaged by systems of power might see their strength in solidarity and collective responses to their common location and subjugation. In contrast it seems equally plausible that those privileged by these types of group placements might want to do away with notions of the group altogether, in effect obscuring the privilege they gain from group membership (p. 380).

Collins seems to be making two separate points. The first is a descriptive claim about how our epistemic practices actually work: the ideas that win out often don't do so on merit—they do so because they are endorsed by the powerful, and the powerful have the means to ensure that their ideas are accepted. The second point is that the socially dominant benefit from frameworks that obscure the role of social groups (because doing so obscures their unearned and unjust privileges) while the socially marginalized benefit from frameworks that emphasize groups (because it highlights the importance of solidarity and coalition building). So, since epistemic battles are won by might and not on merit, and marginalized groups are empowered by frameworks that emphasize the importance of groups, marginalized standpoints (which yield the insights encoded by standpoint theorists) ought to be privileged because of their empowering possibilities.

Collins' agreement that "epistemological criteria" cannot vindicate the claim that marginalized standpoints are better than dominant standpoints is striking. She doesn't simply cede that there is no neutral standard that could settle disagreements between people with marginalized standpoints and people with dominant standpoints—she says that each group has an *equally plausible perspective*. Given this (supposed) lack of distinctly *epistemic* advantage, Collins instead offers up political reasons to privilege marginalized standpoints. She affirms this justification for the inversion thesis in her 2002 book (pp. 35-36). Hartsock makes a similar move; she writes, "Fundamentally, I argue that the criteria for privileging some knowledges over others are ethical and political rather than purely epistemological...I want to privilege some knowledges over others because they seem to me to offer possibilities for envisioning more just social relations (1997, pp. 372-373).

So, Collins and Hartsock both distance themselves from the claim that the knowledge produced from marginalized standpoints is more accurate, or more true, than the accounts produced by the socially dominant. They do so in response to Hekman's charge that they lack the epistemic resources they need to defend such a claim, and opt instead to privilege marginalized standpoints (and the knowledge produced from those standpoints) on political grounds.

This is a substantial concession, and it marks a significant departure from these theorists' earlier works. For example, Hartsock's earlier work fleshed out the epistemic advantage thesis in more distinctly epistemic terms. She argued that a marginalized standpoint "exposes the real relations among human beings" and required "both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which we are all forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations" (1983, p. 285). Collins' earlier work also identified more traditionally epistemic reasons to think that marginalization can be epistemically advantageous. The "insider-outsider" advantages she lists include having more evidence and "seeing patterns" that are more difficult for "insiders" to see (p. S15).<sup>5</sup> More concretely, Collins argues persuasively that white women's proximity to power enables systematic and predictable ignorance about the workings of the social world, and that the marginalized may be able to offer more accurate accounts by virtue of their marginalization.

So, walking back a distinctly epistemic interpretation of the epistemic advantage thesis strips standpoint epistemology of some of its most politically powerful insights. There are also obvious strategic limitations to privileging standpoints for moral, rather than epistemic, reasons. Collins rightly notes that, often, whether an idea is taken to be "known" or "established" has little to do with the merit of the idea; sometimes, ideas are accepted just because they are parroted by the powerful. However, rather than objecting to this as bad epistemic practice, she accepts these dynamics as the rules of the game. In doing so, she not only takes an objectionably cynical approach toward social epistemology, but she endorses norms that do not benefit the marginalized. If the ideas that win out do so simply because their proponents have the power to insist on them, then our epistemic practices are going *badly*. These are not dynamics that we should simply accept, and this goes doubly for the marginalized—since they, by definition, *lack* the power required to receive uptake by force alone, it is

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<sup>5</sup> A recent paper by Jingyi Wu bolsters this kind of standpoint claim. Wu uses network models to simulate social learning and finds that groups who are "unidirectionally" ignored reliably end up epistemically advantaged relative to the group that ignored them (2023).

in their interest to push for norms that reward ideas for their merits and to demonstrate that marginalized standpoints are more accurate.

Moreover, shunning the importance of accuracy in favor of self-empowerment is self-undermining. To change the world, we must understand it. Accurate understanding of the world *enables* resistance and empowerment—we cannot simply switch out accuracy *for* empowerment.

Accepting these rules is neither strategic nor necessary, even if you accept radical social construction about knowledge. The absence of a single, “external” standard that could settle all disputes between different communities doesn’t preclude the possibility of any inter-community conversation and adjudication. So long as there is *some* overlap in norms or ideals endorsed by different communities, it may be possible to settle disagreements. And indeed, it is simply not plausible that the norms that govern marginalized standpoints are *so* different from the norms that govern dominant standpoints that inter-community conversation is impossible. While the socially dominant are predictably ignorant about the nature of oppression, so long as the dominant standpoint strives for *some* degree of accuracy (and it seems absurd to suggest that it does not), this ignorance is a failure by its own lights. It may well be difficult to convince those under the sway of dominant ideology that they are misguided, but the judgment that it is impossible is overly pessimistic, even for radical social constructionists about knowledge. The presence of *shared* ideals of accuracy can do the work that these theorists thought impossible.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.4 A Road to Nowhere

The previous section demonstrated that anxious epistemology can disrupt feminist inquiry by causing theorists to overlook relevant evidence. The details of these disruptions were tied to specifics about each case, and the evidence that each theorist overlooked. In this section, I’ll discuss the costs of anxious epistemology considered more abstractly. I argue that anxious feminist epistemologists’ ambivalence toward feminist commitments causes the insights of past feminists to slip through their fingers, and leaves them without the resources they need to actively shape the feminist project.

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<sup>6</sup> This is potentially how Harding counters Hekman’s argument. Harding writes: “recollect that ancient lesson from elementary school science classes: “Is that stick in the pond that appears to be bent really bent? Walk around to a different location and see that now it appears straight—as it really is...in an analogous way, standpoint theorists use the “naturally occurring” relations of class, gender, race, or imperialism in the world around us to observe how different “locations” in such relations tend to generate distinctive accounts of nature and social relations...Like the stick-bent-in-water example, although all knowledge claims are determinately situated, not all such situations are equally good ones from which to be able to see how the social order works” (Harding, 1997, p. 384).

As illustrated by the examples discussed above, the anxious feminist epistemologist resolves apparent disconnects between the evidence and feminist commitments by appealing to moral or political considerations. This impulse doesn't just betray a lack of faith in the evidence—it betrays a lack of faith in the tradition of feminist inquiry, too. This lack of faith does the tradition of feminist inquiry a profound disservice. Feminist commitments haven't been established arbitrarily; they have evolved over decades of feminist activism and scholarship, marked by rigorous critical engagement with the realities of marginalized people's experiences of oppression and the societal forces that perpetuate that oppression. Indeed, as we have seen, there is good reason to think that feminists have often needed to be *more* meticulous, or *more* rigorous than their opponents because rooting out widely held and deeply entrenched biases requires an especially discerning eye. Much of the feminist tradition has been animated by a critical spirit, which ought to inspire more confidence that feminist commitments are indeed borne out by the evidence.

When feminists give into anxiety and try to bypass the evidence, they not only disregard previous feminists' efforts but also the *fruits* of those efforts—they turn their backs on the evidence and argumentation that provided the original basis for feminist commitments that are now widely shared. This has serious consequences for the preservation of past feminist insights. To see the problem, we must first notice that, because feminist commitments are now widely shared, many feminists endorse them despite having only minimal (direct) familiarity with their evidential basis. Instead, feminist commitments are “passed down” and believed on the basis of testimony. This state of affairs is to be expected; our epistemic practices are made up of chains of reliance on the investigations performed by others, and these chains dramatically expand what we are able to know (Hardwig, 1985; Nguyen, 2022). However, the key to the success of these chains of reliance is that they *terminate with someone familiar with the evidence* (Hardwig, p. 337). If the new cohort of feminist thinkers turns their backs on the work produced by previous generations of feminists, we risk losing the insights that provide the basis for many feminist commitments.

This is why the impurist justifications for feminist commitments described above seem oddly *detached*, or even *backward*. Their strategy for determining whether it's rational to hold certain beliefs (e.g., that black people are inarticulate) is to appeal to their feminist moral judgments (e.g., that it's wrong to believe that black people are inarticulate). However, these feminist moral judgments were originally reached via careful scrutiny of the evidence. Take Lloyd's argument that we should “believe women” because only full belief validates victims. Feminists have been calling attention to

the unjust tendency to baselessly dismiss women's allegations for decades. A repeated point of emphasis is that this tendency is out of line with the statistics about false reports and facilitates the pervasiveness of sexual violence—women are routinely subject to sexual violence, their allegations are often dismissed out of hand on the basis of prejudice, and this makes them less likely to come forward. Accordingly, part of why it is so important to believe women is that the tendency to *disbelieve* reflects the very prejudice that makes women so vulnerable to sexual violence in the first place. By contrast, Lloyd *starts* with the feminist intuition, and tries to bend the evidence to fit it.

So, the anxious feminist epistemologist does a disservice to the tradition of feminist inquiry, and this is tied to their lack of faith that the facts will bear out feminist commitments. At the same time, though, anxious feminist epistemologists also treat feminist commitments as if they are *beyond scrutiny*. Their conviction that feminist commitments are true prompts them justify them with arguments that stand independently of the evidence, which ultimately functions to shield their commitments from evidence-based challenges. This strategy results in an untenably rigid feminist project that treats feminist commitments as if they are *fixed*, settled, (or, more ironically, as if they are *immutable truths*).

A rigid approach to feminist inquiry is untenable for two reasons. First, treating feminist commitments as if they are settled is incompatible with the self-scrutiny that feminist epistemology requires. Feminist theorists know all too well that *intending* to reveal and counteract oppressive ideology doesn't guarantee success; there is a long track record of feminist work that unintentionally reinscribes or bolsters the prejudicial distortions they sought to uproot. For years, much of feminist thought operated on the assumption that white, privileged women's experience of oppression could stand in for women's experience broadly (Lugones & Spelman, 1983); groundbreaking work on rape in 70s and 80s routinely invoked the racist myth of the black rapist (Davis, 1981); and early work in analytic social ontology fell prey to similar problems of exclusion. Sally Haslanger, for example, offered a definition of 'woman' (Haslanger, 2000) that has since been rejected as trans-exclusionary (Jenkins, 2016; Haslanger, 2016). This history makes it clear that feminists must be open to the possibility that feminist commitments—even cherished ones!—may bear the mark of ideological influence. Thus, feminists must be open to challenges to their commitments, and meet those challenges head-on. Anxious epistemology is at odds with this because the anxious feminist epistemologist gives into anxiety and seeks to *bypass* any apparent evidential deficiencies.

So, open-mindedness is crucial if feminists are to root out past errors. Open-mindedness can also help feminists be more responsive to the dangers posed by *elite capture*. Elite capture, a term introduced by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, occurs when a group's most advantaged people control the political agendas and resources (2020; 2022). Táíwò, offers the following example of elite capture: contemporary analytic feminism's emphasis on increasingly specific varieties of epistemic injustice (see, as an example, Chapter 4). He writes, "One might think questions of justice ought to be primarily concerned with fixing disparities around health care, working conditions, and basic material and interpersonal security. Yet conversations about justice have come to be shaped by people who have ever more specific practical advice about fixing the distribution of attention and conversational power" (Táíwò, 2020). Táíwò is careful not to suggest that the notion of epistemic injustice is *useless*, or that the experiences the concept addresses are unimportant; however, they are concerns that are central to the experience of oppression only in the experience of people who are relatively well-off in other respects. That these injustices figure so prominently in contemporary analytic feminism is a consequence of the privilege of the feminists who have the power to set the agenda.

If we allow the elite to articulate feminist commitments and then enshrine those commitments as indubitable doctrine, this will obviously result in a movement that serves the interests of those with the most social power. But the threat of elite capture looms larger still. The feminist movement may serve the interests of the elite not only when the elite are the ones setting the agenda, but also when the elite co-opt or distort the concepts and strategies articulated by less advantaged members. When this kind of co-opting happens, resources and strategies that initially served the interests of more marginalized members of a group can be stripped of their initial power, and the liberator's tools end up building the master's house. Since the tools of resistance can be transformed into the service of oppression, it is crucial that we not unthinkingly take these tools for granted.

To illustrate, consider non-white feminists' calls for white feminists to attend more seriously to the epistemic disadvantages caused by their social privilege. These calls accompanied the rise of the "lovingly, knowingly" ignorant feminist. As Mariana Ortega explains, the "great wanting of this feminist is to be respected in a field that claims to care about women of color and their thought" (2006, p. 62). However, this feminist underestimates how difficult it is to achieve the relevant understanding, often taking the quotation of the same famous lines, from the same famous non-white women, to be sufficient (p. 69). In effect, the lovingly, knowingly ignorant feminist treats inclusion as a hollow credentialing practice, and so underestimates her understanding of the oppression that non-white women face.

In a context dominated by loving, knowing ignorance, calls for reflexivity and humility directly target the feature of the epistemic landscape that protected white women's ignorance: their arrogant assessment of their own understanding. However, as calls for reflexivity and humility became the norm—repeated by precisely the same feminists the calls initially targeted—the epistemic landscape was transformed. Loving, knowing ignorance was replaced with *helpless* ignorance. The socially dominant took the calls for reflexivity and humility, which were initially meant to secure more careful, in-depth engagement with the work of non-white women, and transformed them into justifications for silence. The socially dominant began to practice “reflexivity” by proclaiming that their social identity presented *insurmountable* obstacles to understanding. So, what started as an inability to *see* difference became an inability to *see past* difference. In a context dominated by helpless ignorance, the strategy designed to combat loving, knowing ignorance isn't just ineffective—continued use of this old strategy can actually exacerbate the problem.

The anxious epistemologist's defense of their commitments is disconnected from the conditions that gave rise to them, and their argumentative strategy is too detached from the evidence to be sensitive to subtle shifts. If we took the anxious approach to defending feminist commitments, we wouldn't be able to adapt to subtle shifts such as this one. Our defense of the calls would be grounded in assessments about the moral worth of the practice (e.g., deference is owed to the marginalized because it is a condition for respecting them and explicitly tailored to persist even in the face of evidence that challenged the legitimacy of the commitment. We would lack the openmindedness required to revise our commitments, and would continue to engage in a strategy that is no longer effective.

The upshot of this is that the conditions that foster ignorance and injustice are subject to change. Elite capture is an especially insidious force of change, because it can render once potent strategies for resistance inert. For resistance to succeed, it is crucial that liberatory/feminist theory be attuned to these changes and be able to accommodate them, which requires that beliefs be defended on evidential grounds and given up when the evidence demonstrated to be inadequate. Taking an adversarial stance toward the evidence is incompatible with this, and so it risks leaving feminism unable to adapt.



## 2.5 Error Theory

So far, I have demonstrated that an anxious form of dogmatism has infected impurist feminist epistemology. This dogmatism is objectionable from any perspective, but it is especially problematic by feminists' own lights. Our question at this point is: why is anxious epistemology so prevalent among feminist epistemologists, when the ideals of feminist epistemology seem to so obviously forbid it? I'll argue that anxious epistemology is not only a violation of the critical spirit that animates (much of) feminist epistemology, but also partially *caused* by it. This reflects a surprising feature of anxious epistemology: it is a close companion of skepticism.

Anxious epistemology tends to come hand in hand with skepticism because taking an adversarial stance towards the evidence—a stance typically reserved for pseudo-inquiry—can be reasonable when you're in a *hostile epistemic environment* (Battaly, 2018). To see this, consider Moore's infamous proof of an external world. His proof is simple: he holds out his hands and proclaims "here is one hand, and here is another". It follows from this that there are two external objects, and, so, that there is an external world (1939, p. 24). Moore thinks this proof is perfectly rigorous and conclusive, but he recognizes that many people will disagree. Such people, Moore explains, don't just want a proof of the conclusion that there is an external world; they *also* want a proof of the premise "here is one hand" (p. 25). This, Moore says, he cannot provide. Such a proof would require ruling out that he is not dreaming, which he cannot do. But this does not bother Moore—he thinks that even though he cannot *prove* that he has a hand, he nonetheless *knows* that he has a hand.

Moore's reaction to this skeptical challenge is instructive. Not for a second does Moore worry that perhaps he doesn't have a hand (indeed, he thinks it would be absurd if anyone truly worried about this). So, the skeptical challenge doesn't threaten the *content* of his beliefs. Instead, it threatens his ability to *prove* them. While challenges to one's ability to prove one's beliefs often diminish one's confidence in those beliefs, these can come apart when the thrust of the concern is that the belief couldn't be proven *even if it were true*.

Feminist epistemologists don't typically address the general kind of skepticism that Moore addresses. Instead, they're engaged with a more targeted, more social kind of skepticism. This social skepticism is rooted in the observation that we are *unreliable agents*, living in an *unreliable world*. The world is unreliable due to the hand that oppressive ideologies have had in shaping the world—this ideological influence can make our observations unreliable, even when they are accurate. *We* are

unreliable because prejudice and bias can influence how we gather the evidence (e.g., by influencing which questions we ask, which possibilities we take seriously, which domains we think worthy of inquiry, etc.) and how we assess that evidence (e.g., implicit bias). Collectively, these strands of thought emphasize that *the world may not be as it seems*. This, of course, is the basis of feminist epistemology's "critical spirit".

We have seen that this critical spirit is behind many important feminist insights and corrections to "dominant" ways of thinking. But skepticism is an unsparing force, and it comes for feminists' own conclusions as surely as it comes for those of their opponents. If ideology works by deluding vast swaths of the population, why should feminists think that *we* have escaped the obfuscating fog of ideology? (Haslanger, 2017, p. 14).

Feminists wielded social skepticism to challenge the content of their opponents' beliefs. However, when skeptical challenges target feminist convictions, feminist epistemologists find themselves in a situation quite like Moore's—they doubt their ability to *prove* their beliefs, but they do not lose confidence *in* those beliefs. The strands of thought that make up feminists' social skepticism furnish all the resources they need to see the failure to prove their commitments as reason to doubt the adequacy of the evidence without doubting the truth of their convictions.

Moreover, they're not just sure that their beliefs are true, but that their beliefs have political import. Failure to justify their beliefs won't just rob us of the truth, it will make the world *less just* (racist beliefs may go unchecked, sexual assault allegations will continue to be disbelieved, etc.). It would, then, feel imperative to find some means to bypass the evidence and remain confident in one's belief, despite the hostility of the epistemic environment—bypassing the evidence is the only way to safeguard true beliefs and pursue justice.

Impurism is implicated in this story because impurist frameworks make the invocation of extra-evidential considerations *an option on the table*. Rigging justificatory standards via appeal to moral or political considerations isn't possible for the purist, which makes engaging in anxious epistemology more difficult. I take this to be a (small) mark in favor of purism. Moreover, as varieties of impurism like moral encroachment gain popularity, it becomes easier—and more tempting—to take the anxious way out. The argumentative "blueprint" is readymade and already taken seriously within analytic epistemology, and thus appears to be a simple way to craft arguments that serve feminist aims.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This paper identified two central issues with anxious feminist epistemology. First, a lack of faith that the facts will bear out feminist commitments is often misguided—feminist commitments should take heart, and treat the evidence as a resource, rather than an obstacle. There is good reason to suspect that the evidence will be on their side. The second issue is that when the evidence *isn't* on their side, feminist commitments cannot be used to bypass evidential deficits. This is because feminist commitments are formed in response to oppressive realities, and because feminist commitments aren't stable enough to provide the basis for a Moorean kind of certainty.

An impurist feminist epistemologist could grant that feminists ought not use feminist judgments to bypass the evidence, and could agree that the particular arguments I've pointed to above are bad arguments. However, noticing the tendency I've described does put pressure on the judgment that impurism is a more natural fit for pursuing feminist aims. Noticing this tendency puts us in a position to see that impurists often underestimate what purist conceptions of justification can do for feminists, because the quality of the evidence is underestimated. Since the judgment that impurism is superior to purism is so often rooted in a faulty assessment of the evidence, an important source of motivation for impurist feminist epistemology is lost. Indeed, it is worse than this—many feminist epistemologists seem to have endorsed impurism *because* it allowed them to bypass the evidence, and I have argued that a willingness to bypass the evidence undermines feminist aims. This is not to say that there are no other reasons to endorse impurism. But even still, these impurist feminists will have to explain why, exactly, the arguments described above are bad, when each involves the invocation of considerations that are taken to be genuinely epistemically relevant on the impurists framework. They will also have to articulate norms that would prevent the production of anxious epistemology.

### Chapter 3: “That’s Above My Paygrade”: Woke Excuses for Ignorance

Despite persistent misunderstandings to the contrary, standpoint theorists are not committed to an *automatic privilege thesis* (Wylie, 2003, p. 28). According to an automatic privilege thesis, those who occupy marginalized social positions automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their social location. The issues with this thesis are obvious; it is implausible, it offers no explanation of the connection between marginalized social location and epistemic advantage, and it can’t explain how it is that some marginalized individuals seem to (genuinely) buy into oppressive ideologies.

However, while the automatic privilege thesis is widely repudiated, there is support—in both the broader feminist discourse and the narrower standpoint literature—for a related thesis. I’ll call this thesis the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis* (SEDT). According to the SEDT, dominant social positions impose strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know about the oppression of others.<sup>7</sup> These limits are strong in the sense that the socially dominant cannot break free of them; their ignorance is the inescapable result of their dominant social positions. The limitations are substantive in the sense that the socially dominant aren’t just missing minor or trivial details; their social positions doom them to ignorance regarding matters of importance.

The SEDT and its consequences are exemplified by Kate Manne’s book, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017). Manne aims to identify the enforcement mechanisms used to keep *all* women in their place. Despite this stated aim, she focuses on the oppression faced by cis straight white women. To justify this emphasis, Manne maintains that she is limited by her “own (highly privileged) social position and the associated standpoint or vantage point” (p. 13). She says that these limitations restrict her to a “small corner of the overall canvas”, but that this is as far as she can reach “without overextending [her]self and inevitably (as opposed to potentially) making a mess of it” (p. 14).

Manne is plainly espousing the view that her privileged social position occludes her view of the oppression experienced by others. She writes as if her ignorance is both inescapable and substantive; she takes herself to be unable to write about intersectional forms of oppression, despite recognizing

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<sup>7</sup> The SEDT, for all its faults, does not entail the automatic privilege thesis. The automatic privilege thesis amounts to the claim that *all* marginalized people know better; the SEDT amounts to the claim that only marginalized people *can* know better. So, the SEDT is compatible with some marginalized people failing to achieve better knowledge, where the automatic privilege thesis is not.

their political and philosophical significance—she says she would *inevitably* mess it up. Manne is not alone in thinking along these lines; her remarks reflect a sentiment that is growing in popularity.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Manne’s invocation of ‘standpoint’ to justify her claim, standpoint theorists do not often directly advocate for the SEDT. Indeed, as we will see in Section 3, some standpoint theorists actively reject it. However, there is support in the standpoint literature for two theses that jointly entail the SEDT. The first is the claim that occupying a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint; the second is the claim that achieving a standpoint enables epistemic advantage that is both robust<sup>9</sup> and uniquely accessible through a standpoint. Together, these two theses imply that there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know.

I argue that the SEDT is both theoretically implausible and politically pernicious. The SEDT is a primrose path for the socially dominant—it is an excuse for ignorance and silence that has only been granted legitimacy due to its guise of heightened political consciousness. Thus, my aim is to clarify and strengthen standpoint theory so that it is clearly separated from the SEDT. To do this, I argue that standpoint theorists must deny the necessary connection between a marginalized social position and the possibility of achieving a standpoint. So, I argue that men can achieve feminist standpoints, that white women (and men) can achieve black feminist standpoints, and so on. Central to my argument is the distinction between *perspectives* and *standpoints*. A ‘perspective’ reflects the social-situatedness of an epistemic agent, where a ‘standpoint’ reflects a critical consciousness that is actively achieved. I argue that marginalized social locations *do* provide epistemic advantages, and that dominant social locations provide disadvantages. However, the perspectival advantages afforded by a marginalized social location are neither constitutive of nor necessary for the achievement of a standpoint. If the socially dominant put in the work, they can overcome the disadvantages imposed by their social positions and achieve the critical standpoints that enable understanding and insight regarding forms of oppression that they do not experience.

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<sup>8</sup> The view typically rears its head when people with progressive views are discussing politically charged controversies. It is, for example, quite common in the debate about the moral and political permissibility of abortion; people say that men should “sit down” and listen to women. This claim is not necessarily justified on epistemic grounds, but it often is. People claim that men cannot fully grasp the issue because they do not have the requisite first-personal experience.

<sup>9</sup> The robustness of the advantage is what explains why those without standpoints will be at a noteworthy disadvantage. They are not simply missing out on what it is *like* to be marginalized, but they will fail to understand something of greater social importance.

### 3.1 Standpoint Theory Basics

If you want to know whether a particular philosophy department is sexist, you will likely get a more accurate assessment from a woman in that department. The same goes if you want to know whether the environment is hostile to people of color—while a white member of the department may happily report that their department is free of racial prejudices, a person of color may tell a different story. In cases like this, the socially marginalized tend to be more reliable reporters than the socially dominant. They are better informants because they are better positioned to know whether (and to what degree) such factors are at play.

This is the starting point of standpoint epistemology: your social location affects what you know. Standpoint theorists refine and extend this basic idea with the following four claims, which were also introduced in the Introduction:

**The Situated Knowledge Thesis:** Epistemic agents are necessarily socially situated, and their knowledge reflects this--what people know is partial and shaped by their contingent histories, epistemic resources, values, etc. (Wylie, 2003; Kukla, 2006; Harding, 1997; Táíwò, 2020).

**The Inversion Thesis:** Those who are socially marginalized are epistemically advantaged in some critical respects. They may have access to better or more relevant evidence (Kukla, 2021; Bright, 2018; Wylie, 2003; Collins, 1986); they may be better incentivized to seek out relevant evidence (Kinney & Bright, 2021); they may develop clarifying conceptual resources (Toole, 2022; Wylie, 2012); their experiences and values may prompt them to consider alternate hypotheses that are often overlooked (Harding, 1997; Wylie & Nelson, 2007); or they might produce accounts of the world that are better suited to envisioning more just social relations (Hartsock, 1997; Collins, 1997; Pohlhaus, 2002; Collins, 2002)

**The Achievement Thesis:** Standpoints are not a given, or automatic; the experience of marginalization does not entail a clearer, more nuanced, or more accurate understanding of the world. Standpoints are the result of work (Pohlhaus, 2002; Collins, 2002; Wylie, 2003; Harding, 1991).

**The Methodological Imperative:** (Some) inquiry should take the lives of the marginalized as its starting point, because those lives provide resources that enable more accurate investigation into the structure of our social world (Harding, 1991; Táíwò, 2020; Bright, 2018).

Different theorists flesh out the details of these theses in different ways, and not every standpoint theorist endorses all four claims. But these theses convey the general thrust of standpoint theory—epistemologists must attend to the realities of our actual knowledge practices, and these realities suggest that knowers are not on equal epistemic ground. The socially marginalized have some key advantages, and, in some contexts, these advantages can lead to more accurate pictures of the way things are.

One more standpoint claim is relevant for my purposes. Standpoint theorists generally distinguish between social positions and standpoints (Crasnow, 2008; Harding, 1991; Intemann, 2010, p. 785; Wylie, 2003, 2012). The difference is reflected in the achievement thesis. *Everyone* is socially located, and, if you buy into the situated knowledge thesis, these different social locations result in epistemic differences. However, these differences are typically not taken to be standpoint differences. Standpoint differences are those differences made by actively achieving a *critical consciousness*, or a (distinctly critical) awareness of the various mechanisms that sustain oppressive social orders. So, while everyone will have a *perspective*, not everyone—not even all marginalized people—will have a *standpoint*. Standpoint theorists are not always clear about which advantages correspond to having a marginalized social position, and which correspond to achieving a standpoint. One of the aims of this paper is to remedy this.

These basic commitments do not obviously imply the SEDT. However, the SEDT follows straightforwardly if we make two additional moves, each of which reflects the spirit of one or more of the central claims above.<sup>10</sup> The first involves drawing a tight connection—a connection of necessity—between a particular social position and the possibility of achieving the corresponding standpoint. The second involves identifying a robust epistemic advantage that is distinctive to achieving a standpoint. If we make both of these moves, then the SEDT follows:

P1. Only people who occupy a marginalized social position can achieve the corresponding standpoint.

P2. Those without standpoints face strong, substantive limits on what they can know.

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<sup>10</sup> Compare these moves to Quill Kukla's characterization of two claims that "most standpoint theorists" have defended: "(1) that some contingent features of knowers can give them not only different but *better, more objective* knowledge than others have, and (2) that social positions of marginalization and structural disadvantage, such as those inherited by women, African Americans, or the working class...[give] them the potential to see truths that are inaccessible from the points of view of the dominant center" (R. Kukla, 2006, pp. 81–82).

C. Socially dominant people face strong, substantive limits on what they can know.

In the next section, I'll offer an overview of the support for P1 and P2 that can be found in the standpoint literature.

### 3.2 Arriving at the Strong Epistemic Disadvantage Thesis

In my conversations with people who have only passing familiarity with standpoint theory, they tend to have the impression that P1 is an *essential* part of standpoint theory. This impression sometimes leads them to think that my thesis—that standpoint theorists should deny P1 and hold that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints—is incoherent. Curiously, in (some of) my conversations with people who defend standpoint theory, there has been some reluctance to admit that there is *any* support for this thesis in the standpoint literature; instead, they suggest that the impression that standpoint theorists think marginalization is necessary for achieving a standpoint is the result of an uncharitable interpretation of standpoint theory. Given this, my aim is to demonstrate that the widespread idea that P1 is essential to standpoint theory is no accident—while not every standpoint theorist makes this claim, there *is* support for this thesis in the standpoint literature. Some of this support is explicit; some standpoint theorists actively affirm P1. Others provide support that is indirect; while the thinker may or may not *actually* think that marginalization is necessary for achieving a standpoint, they nonetheless express their views in ways that suggest that marginalization is necessary. Because P1 is considerably more fraught than P2, I'll give a more detailed overview of support for P1 than I'll give for P2.

Standpoint theorists sometimes explicitly affirm P1 as a way to distinguish their view from the implausible automatic privilege thesis discussed in the introduction. The automatic privilege thesis suggests that marginalization is *sufficient* for knowing better. In response, some standpoint theorists have said that marginalization is not sufficient but *necessary*.

Sharon Crasnow does this especially clearly. She makes the point three times, writing: “standpoint theorists claim that marginalization is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their epistemic privilege” (Crasnow, 2008, p. 4); “the social location is a necessary though not sufficient criterion for whatever epistemic privilege derives from standpoint” (p. 5); and, lastly, “While epistemic privilege may require that one occupy a particular position in the social and political structure, it is not sufficient for achieving standpoint that one occupies that position” (p. 5).



Phoebe Friesen and Jordan Goldstein also explicitly endorse the necessary connection between marginalization and standpoint. They write that the “basic claim of standpoint theory” is that “a standpoint is arrived at as a result of two necessary components, a marginalized social location and a process of critical reflection” (Friesen & Goldstein, 2022, p. 661). Like Crasnow, Friesen and Goldstein emphasize that marginalization isn’t sufficient for achieving a standpoint; this is why they stress the importance of critical reflection (p. 662). Not *all* socially marginalized people will achieve a standpoint, but only the marginalized *can*.

Friesen and Goldstein cite Sandra Harding, Alison Wylie, Kristin Intemann, and Nancy Hartsock as standpoint theorists who affirm the necessary connection between social position and standpoint; Crasnow cites Wylie, Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins. Crasnow’s attribution of the view to Collins is well-motivated. Collins understands a ‘standpoint’ as the collective knowledge that is shared by a group of people who are similarly located in hierarchical power relations. So, of the black feminist standpoint, Collins argues that black women have shared, group-based experiences that both reflect their shared social location and also give rise to “shared angles of vision” that lead black women to interpret their experiences in distinctive (but not identical) ways (Collins, 1997, pp. 335–337). She affirms this view in her 2002 book, where she writes, that, for black women, “the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall” (Collins 2002, p. 27). She emphasizes that the “angle of vision”, or standpoint, that arises out of black women’s shared experiences is “unavailable to others” (p. 39). Thus, Collins is clearly articulating the view that only black women can have a black feminist standpoint, because only they have the experiences that give rise to it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In her earlier work, Collins argued that only black women could produce black feminist thought because black feminist thought was done from a black feminist standpoint. (Collins, 1986, p. S16). Interestingly, she denies this implication in her later work—she says it would be “inherently separatist” to hold that only black women can produce black feminist thought (Collins, 2002, p. 36). It is not clear, though, what licenses this change in her thought, as she affirms the various considerations that initially led her to that conclusion. She maintains that the black feminist standpoint is the collective knowledge or “shared angle of vision” that emerges from black women’s shared experiences, and that they share these experiences because of their shared location in social hierarchy (p. 32); she maintains that there is a “dialogical relationship” between the black feminist standpoint and black feminist thought (the black feminist standpoint informs black feminist thought, which in turn shapes the black feminist standpoint, and so on) (p. 34); and she maintains that black feminist thought is characterized by a distinctive (black feminist) epistemology that holds that first personal experience to be a “criterion for credibility” (p. 276).

Friesen and Goldstein's attribution of the view to Hartsock is also reasonable. Hartsock writes that "material life...not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations", adding that "the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse" (Hartsock, 1983, p. 285). Similarly, she claims that "the concept of a standpoint rests on the fact that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and the natural world are not visible" (p. 285). Thus, Hartsock's work clearly suggests that the socially dominant cannot achieve the standpoint that reveals the "real relations" of the world.

The attributions of the view to Kristin Intemann, Sandra Harding, and Alison Wylie are more complicated. When discussing what it takes for marginalization to result in a standpoint, Intemann writes that "the mere presence of an oppressed group will not be sufficient to achieve the sort of conscious, critical reflection that is required for achieving a standpoint. In order for diversity to yield epistemic advantages, the community must engage in critical reflection" (Intemann, 2010, p. 789). This resembles the lines taken by Crasnow, Friesen, and Goldstein—Intemann denies the sufficiency of marginalization for the achievement of a standpoint, citing the need for "critical reflection". While Intemann does not straightforwardly commit to the necessity claim, it seems to me implied (and apparently it seemed that way to Friesen and Goldstein, too).

Harding is interesting because she explicitly denies that occupying a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint. (Harding, 1991, pp. 277-284). Despite this, she frequently expresses her view using language that blurs the distinction between 'perspective' and 'standpoint'. She says, for instance, that the advantage of feminist standpoints stems from the fact that they begin inquiry "from the perspective of women's lives" (pp. 121-122; p. 126; p. 279;). Indeed, the chapter in which Harding discusses the connection between social position and standpoint is called "Reinventing Ourselves as Other" (pp. 268-295; discussed also in Pohlhaus, 2002, pp. 288-291). This way of characterizing the advantage that corresponds to achieving a standpoint is problematic because it suggests, first, that there *is* a way to "see" or "know" as a woman, and, worse, that achieving this perspective amounts to achieving a standpoint. But if *this* is what the advantage consists in, people may reasonably deny that anyone who isn't a woman could ever attain this advantage, since perspectives are meant to reflect a person's social-situatedness. I'll return to Harding's view in more detail in Section 6; for now, it is enough to note that even Harding speaks in ways that suggest that a

marginalized social position is necessary for achieving a standpoint, despite her explicit disavowal of the claim.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, I would dispute the attribution of the view to Wylie. Wylie does not discuss whether the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints. Nonetheless, Wylie is quite careful about the relationship between occupying a marginalized social position and achieving a standpoint; her clear delineation of the advantages that correspond to social position and the advantages that correspond to an achieved standpoint has largely inspired the account I offer here. The closest Wylie gets to suggesting that a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint is when she says that standpoint theorists are interested in people's "differential capacity to develop...a critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically" (Wylie, 2003, p. 31). This could be taken to imply that Wylie thinks only the socially marginalized can develop marginalized standpoints, though it certainly falls short of an obvious commitment to the view.

I take the preceding overview to establish that the standpoint literature does indeed provide support for the view that a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving a standpoint. While not every standpoint theorist embraces this connection, it is not a coincidence that so many people think this connection is central to standpoint theory. Positing the strong connection between social position and standpoint is a natural way to capture the idea that marginalization is distinctively advantageous—one of standpoint theory's main contentions—without committing to the implausible automatic privilege thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> A similar ambiguity can be seen in the work of Briana Toole. Toole argues that standpoint epistemologists think that social position "makes a difference to what a person is in a position to know" (Toole, 2022, p. 3, p. 7). She also says, perhaps more strongly, that "the standpoint epistemologist will argue that facts about the standpoint an epistemic agent occupies—where one's standpoint is determined by facts about one's social identity—will make a difference to what she is in a position to know" (p. 7). This interpretation of standpoint theory prompts Toole to suggest that standpoint theory is incompatible with "intellectualism," because standpoint theorists hold that knowledge depends on "non-epistemic" features that are not accessible to everyone, like race or gender (p. 6, p. 12). The dangers of this way of talking about standpoint theory are especially apparent when Toole discusses a hypothetical case in which a white woman—June—and a black woman—Moira—are watching a news report that covers the Daniel Holtzclaw case. In the case, Moira walks away knowing that Holtzclaw is guilty of raping the black women who accused him, while June walks away not knowing. Toole claims that "what allowed Moira to know...was a feature of her social identity—i.e., her race" (p. 12). Moreover, Toole claims that June does *not* know "precisely because she lacks feature" (p. 12). But if June's social position is what made the difference to what she was in a position to know, this strongly suggests that June *couldn't* know, because her social location prevents her from achieving the relevant standpoint.

Now consider P2. P2 amounts to the claim that standpoints are both *robustly* and *distinctively* epistemically advantageous. The robustness and distinctiveness of the advantage jointly capture the idea that marginalized standpoints are *definitively* advantageous, in the sense that those with standpoints will know better than those without standpoints in at least some important domains. Those without standpoints are not just missing minor or trivial details—hence, the robustness of the advantage—and the advantages in question can only be acquired via achieving a standpoint—hence, the distinctiveness of the advantages.

Take Elizabeth Anderson. She writes that, “*Classically*, standpoint theory claims that the standpoint of the subordinated is advantaged (1) in revealing *fundamental* social regularities; (2) in exposing social arrangements as *contingent* and susceptible to change through concerted action; and (3) in representing the social world in relation to universal human interests” (Anderson, 2020). Thus, it is clear that Anderson is positing a robust advantage to those with standpoints. Wylie is also a clear advocate of this kind of view. Wylie argues that a standpoint “throws into relief assumptions that underpin, and confound, a dominant worldview” (Wylie, 2003, p. 38). Likewise, Collins argues that the methodology and resources made available through a black feminist standpoint enable thinkers to avoid the pitfalls of approaches that treat either race or gender (or class) as primary, while treating other forms of oppression as mere complicating detail (Collins, 1986). Thus, for Anderson, Wylie, and Collins, the advantage conferred by a standpoint is robust. Those *without* this advantage (or comparable advantage) will have a distorted understanding of our social world. Similar views can be found in Hartsock (1983), Harding (1991; 1997), Toole (2022), and Smith (1974).

By itself, the robustness of the advantage does not ensure that standpoints are *definitively* advantageous, because comparable advantages could be acquired through other means. However, standpoint theorists are (typically) clear that the advantage is distinctive, or unique. Harding claims that “maximally critical assessments” are *only* possible from marginalized standpoints (Harding, 1992). The Hartsock quote above also suggests this, as she says that however “well-intentioned” someone may be, if they don’t have the relevant standpoint, they will have distorted understanding. The distinctiveness of the advantage afforded by a standpoint can also be seen in Toole (2020), Collins (1986), and Intemann (2010).

So, both P2 and P1 are well-motivated—both moves are ways to capture something that is genuinely *central* to standpoint theory. The necessity of (relevant) marginalization for achieving a standpoint captures the inversion thesis in a way that clearly distinguishes it from an automatic privilege thesis.

Positing a robust and distinctive advantage captures the idea that lies at the heart of both the methodological imperative and the achievement thesis. We should do (some) inquiry from a marginalized standpoint because that standpoint enables the clearest understanding; it enables this clear understanding because it is the result of active effort to understand how dominant ideology shapes the world we inhabit. Yet, the SEDT follows if we make both moves. The next section will demonstrate the theoretical and political issues with the SEDT.

### 3.3 Problems with the Strong Epistemic Disadvantage Thesis

The SEDT suggests that we live in “a world of unbridgeable epistemic solitudes” (Wylie, 2012, p. 48) and dooms the socially dominant to ignorance. If the insights of marginalized people are uniquely theirs, in the sense that the socially dominant cannot understand or make use of those insights, then not only do the socially dominant *not* know—they *can’t* know. Thus, the SEDT is at odds with work that argues that the ignorance of the socially dominant—like white ignorance (Mills, 2007) and willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus, 2012)—is actively *cultivated* rather than a mere passive occurrence. Mills and Pohlhaus both emphasize that the socially dominant have a significant interest in protecting their ignorance of societal injustice. Mills puts the point especially clearly. He writes, “white ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for “racial” reasons have *needed not to know*” (Mills, 2007, p. 35 (emphasis added)). The “white epistemology of ignorance” he identifies is complex and actively maintained—it is not at all the inescapable result of simply *being* white. Indeed, Mills goes out of his way to note that white ignorance is not “indefeasible”—he explicitly clarifies that “some people who are white will, because of their particular histories...overcome [white ignorance] and have true beliefs on what their fellow whites get wrong” (p. 23).

This aspect of the SEDT has several unsavory implications. Work on active ignorance is both prolific and persuasive (in addition to Mills (2007) and Pohlhaus (2012), see also: Kinney & Bright (2021), Medina (2013, especially chapter 1), and Woomer (2019), among others). If you are compelled by this work, then you should be suspicious that the SEDT characterizes the ignorance of the socially dominant as passive and inevitable. Moreover, the work on active ignorance allows us to hold the socially dominant responsible for their ignorance. By contrast, the SEDT suggests that the socially dominant are *blameless*. Their social positions are not up to them and aren’t something they can

change. On standard accounts of blameworthiness, then, it will not make sense to hold them accountable for their ignorance, or for their failure to take steps towards better understanding.

Note too that, if the SEDT is true, the prospects for truly intersectional academic work are grim. Such work could only be done by people who are multiply-marginalized and, for familiar reasons, unlikely to end up in academia (and especially unlikely to end up in academic philosophy). Worse still, the multiply-marginalized people who *do* ascend to the academy often acquire social status and material advantage. This prompts parallel intersectional concerns—even the academic work done by the multiply marginalized would inevitably reflect the limitations placed on them by their relative social privilege.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the burden of doing intersectional work would continue to—must continue to—fall on the shoulders of those who are most marginalized. So, not only does the SEDT suggest that the prospects for intersectional academic work are grim, it also suggests that epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016) is inevitable.

Fortunately, the thesis is straightforwardly implausible; the socially dominant can indeed escape their ignorance. To see this, consider two notably different white women feminists working in the 1970s: Susan Brownmiller and Gerda Lerner.

Susan Brownmiller did groundbreaking work on rape. She argued that rape was a politically significant mechanism of social control, rather than random violence (Brownmiller, 1975). This was important. But her account was also seriously defective, as Angela Davis has pointed out. Davis draws attention to Brownmiller’s tendency to invoke the “myth of the black rapist,” suggesting that black men are more likely to rape than white men. The myth of the black rapist plays on narratives that involve the hypersexualization of black people. According to the myth, black men have animalistic, uncontrollable sex drives. These uncontrollable sex drives drive them to rape. Since the myth of the black rapist draws on myths about black sexuality *broadly*, the invocation of the myth has serious implications for black women: “the fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality” (Davis, 1981, p. 182). So, by endorsing these myths, Brownmiller contributes to a cultural narrative that both makes black women’s sexual assault allegations implausible and also vilifies black men.

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<sup>13</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this point, see Táíwò (2020; 2022) on standpoint theory and elite capture.

Standpoint theorists are well-equipped to explain both the virtues and deficiencies of Brownmiller's understanding of the mechanisms of oppression. As a woman in a patriarchal context, her experience makes particular realities salient to her. She can reflect on these realities and achieve a standpoint. Thus, she is able to see (some of) the political significance of rape. However, she is a *white* woman in a patriarchal (racist, capitalist) context. Her experience does not make salient the intricacies of racialized oppression. Her ignorance of the mechanisms of racial oppression impedes her ability to analyze the material relations of her context. Davis, on the other hand, is able to see the deficiencies of Brownmiller's account of rape because her achieved standpoint makes the racial aspects of our material relations more salient.

I emphasize that this explanation makes it obvious that race plays a key role in both Brownmiller's impoverished understanding of rape culture and in Davis's more nuanced understanding. It is no accident that Brownmiller failed to see or understand how gender-based oppression intersects with race-based oppression. However, we should not insist that Brownmiller's race *determined* her ignorance (or, relatedly, that Davis's race determined her understanding). Such a claim is simply not plausible. Against Our Will was published in 1975. But in 1972, Gerda Lerner—also a white woman—was already aware of and critiquing the racist myth of the black rapist and its implications for black women. Lerner writes: “The myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women. Black women perceived this connection very clearly and were early in the forefront of the fight against lynching” (Lerner, 1972, p. 193). This quotation makes it clear that whiteness does not determine ignorance about race-based dimensions of oppression. Brownmiller's ignorance was no coincidence, but neither was it inevitable.

Lerner is far from the only person to overcome the disadvantages imposed by her relative social privilege. John Stuart Mill is another straightforward example, as are all feminist men. The point is that while dominant social positions confer epistemic disadvantages, they do not *determine* ignorance. Thus, the passivity and blamelessness implied by the SEDT not only make the thesis false, but also politically pernicious. The ignorance of the socially dominant has real social consequences—their ignorance often interferes with or prevents efforts to alleviate injustice (Kinney and Bright, 2021, p. 2). But the SEDT offers a way for the socially dominant to feel complacent in their ignorance, as it suggests that it is not their fault, and that there's nothing they can do about it. Moreover, by acknowledging the supposed limitations imposed by their dominant social positions, the socially

dominant reap the benefits that (in some contexts) come along with publicly signalling a raised social consciousness. The SEDT is, then, a “no risk, all reward” strategy for the socially dominant. The costs of the strategy are instead borne by the marginalized.

### **3.4 Avoiding the Strong Epistemic Disadvantage Thesis**

There are three ways to object to the argument that entails the SEDT. First, you could deny P1 and accept P2. According to this view, the failure to achieve a marginalized standpoint is definitively epistemically disadvantageous—the failure will result in distorted understanding of at least some key issues. This view avoids the SEDT by holding that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints, and so can reap the corresponding benefits. Second, you could accept P1 and modify P2 so that the advantage of a standpoint is distinctive without being robust. This view affirms the intuitive connection between social position and standpoint without dooming the socially dominant to ignorance regarding matters of social and political importance, as the advantages that correspond to achieving a standpoint aren’t that substantive. Finally, you could accept P1 and modify P2 so that the advantage is robust, but not distinctive. This view also affirms the intuitive connection between social position and standpoint, but maintains that the clear understanding enabled by a standpoint can be achieved by other means. Thus, standpoints can be robustly advantageous and uniquely available to the marginalized, without the result that the socially dominant are doomed to ignorance.

Each of these views faces a difficulty. Those who modify P2 must capture the epistemic significance of achieving a standpoint—if the advantage is either trivial or replicable, why should we care about standpoints? Those who deny P1 must instead capture the significance of a marginalized social location—if marginalization is neither necessary nor sufficient for achieving a standpoint, why think that it is epistemically significant, as standpoint theorists have long contended?

My cards are on the table. I think we should reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint. To make my case, I’ll first problematize both ways one could modify P2. Neither option, I argue, is compatible with recognizing the significance of a standpoint. I’ll then demonstrate that versions of standpoint theory that reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint can nonetheless capture the epistemic significance of marginalization, and are overall better suited to capturing the insights of standpoint theorists.



Let's start with the view that denies the robustness of the advantage that corresponds to achieving a standpoint. Quill Kukla's recent work on standpoint theory helpfully illustrates this kind of view. Kukla offers the following three examples as examples of standpoint advantages: (i) disabled people have better evidence regarding the limitations of certain kinds of building design as a result of their embodied experience as disabled people; (ii) women, people of color, and trans people are more likely to see sexism, racism, and transphobia because they are its targets, and bigotry is more likely to be concealed when people who are *not* its targets are around; and (iii) city dwellers are more comfortable darting around in crowds or on public transit because of their day-to-day experience (Q. R. Kukla, 2021, pp. 45–46). These advantages are, they note, only available to people with the relevant social position, because they can only be attained by having a particular embodied experience; they aren't the kind of thing you can come to know just by being told by somebody else (p. 47). Thus, these are epistemic advantages that simply aren't available to people who lack the relevant social position. Despite this, the socially dominant aren't robustly disadvantaged; these limits do not suggest that they will struggle to understand the world they live in.

Kukla's view is compelling in many respects. The advantages they identify reflect real differences in knowledge that correspond to differing social locations. Despite this, the identified advantages are not well-suited to being the advantages that are distinctive of a *standpoint*. Standpoint theorists are often emphatic that a standpoint is not merely the perspective you have by virtue of occupying a particular social position. The difference, as discussed previously, is that a standpoint is meant to be *achieved*. A standpoint requires studying up; it is the result of prolonged and often coordinated effort to understand the systemic ways that groups of people are oppressed. This is why standpoint theorists frequently point to consciousness-raising groups—such groups do precisely the kind of critical investigation that involves both *work* and *revelation*.

By contrast, the advantages listed above require almost no work. While it is possible that a marginalized person could fail to acquire the proposed kinds of epistemic advantages, this failure would be the result of inattention or a lack of reflection. Consider the way Kukla describes their own examples of “standpoint” advantage. They say that their examples are “just examples of how being a certain kind of person with certain experiences goes along with knowing some things, and not knowing others” (p. 47). This makes it clear that these advantages are not achieved in any interesting sense. Thus, these advantages are better characterized as *perspectival advantages*—they are advantages that follow from occupying a particular social location. Positing these perspectival

advantages as *standpoint* advantages erodes the distinction between perspective and standpoint, and so reduces standpoint theory to the situated knowledge thesis.

Further, the intuitive benefit of accepting P1 and modifying P2 was that by going this route, we could easily capture standpoint theorists' claim that marginalization is distinctively epistemically advantageous. Yet, on this articulation of the advantage that corresponds to having a standpoint, marginalization doesn't play a special role *at all*. The experience of marginalization makes the same kind of epistemic difference that experience *generally* makes. Just as the car mechanic knows more about cars, or a French person knows more about French culture, a marginalized person knows more about marginalization. This isn't because there's anything special about marginalization, but because there's something special about *experience*. The Kukla quote above makes this especially clear. When we diminish the advantage conferred by a standpoint in the way proposed, the advantages we identify are "just examples of how being a certain kind of person with certain experiences goes along with knowing some things, and not knowing others". This does not afford a distinctive epistemic value to marginalization.

Now consider the second way we might modify P2—rather than denying the robustness of the advantage, we might instead deny the distinctiveness of the advantage. On this view, anyone can achieve the critical consciousness that can reveal the assumptions that underpin dominant ideology, but this critical consciousness only counts as a standpoint if it is achieved by someone who is *appropriately socially located*. So understood, standpoints are robustly advantageous and achievable only by the marginalized, but the advantages are not distinctive.

The issue with this option stems from the apparent arbitrariness of specifying 'standpoint' in the way proposed. No meaningful epistemic difference is invoked to justify calling some achieved critical understandings 'standpoints', but not others (this *must* be true, or else standpoint advantages would indeed be distinctive). Anyone can achieve a critical understanding and reap the benefits that follow, but we only call it a 'standpoint' when the right person achieves it. 'Standpoint' so characterized fails to pick out the epistemically significant achievement. What *matters*—that is, what makes the epistemic difference we're interested in—is the achieved critical understanding. Because standpoint so characterized fails to pick out the epistemically significant achievement, it risks losing its philosophical and political significance. So, if we think that there's good reason to preserve 'standpoint' as a philosophically and politically significant term, then we have good reason to resist

arbitrarily insisting that achieved critical understanding only constitutes a standpoint when it is achieved by someone (relevantly) marginalized.

The preceding arguments concern how we ought to use the word ‘standpoint’. Despite this, the issue at hand is not merely a terminological one. This is partially because terminological points are often weightier than people recognize. Words and labels are significant cultural artifacts, and our choices about how to use them aren’t—or shouldn’t be—arbitrary. The significance of the way we define our words or use our labels is especially clear in this case. Failing to use ‘standpoint’ in a way that clearly distinguishes it from ‘perspective’ fails to capture some of standpoint theorists’ poignant insights about the importance of *working* to achieve a standpoint—better understanding of the world is not a given, and is not easy. Arbitrarily insisting on the necessary connection between social position and standpoint threatens to sacrifice the philosophical and political significance of the term (and, frankly, reeks of essentialism). So, more centrally, my argument concerns how we ought to organize the various insights of standpoint theorists so that we can make the most of their invaluable insights while avoiding the SEDT. My point is that the proposed recharacterizations of ‘standpoint’ cannot do the theoretical work we want from them.

### **3.5 Standpoints without Marginalization**

I’ll now argue that we ought to reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint. Sandra Harding and Gaile Pohlhaus have been explicit in thinking that marginalized social location cannot be necessary for achieving better understanding; I give additional arguments to show that we should follow them.

Harding disavows this necessary connection in light of the worry that talk of a standpoint grounded in women’s experience is incompatible with recognizing the diversity of women’s experiences. In response to this worry, Harding emphasizes the distinction between ‘standpoint’ and ‘perspective’. She argues that *being a woman* does not supply a ready-made critical lens through which to view the world; instead, women’s experiences provide the questions from which we should begin our inquiry (e.g., “Is the double day of work “really” a matter of nature’s, not culture’s, design?” (Harding, 1997 p. 386)). So, what matters is *how* we conduct inquiry, not *who* conducts inquiry. This way of conceiving of standpoint is straightforwardly compatible with recognizing the diversity of women’s experiences. Rather than posing a *problem* for standpoint theory, the diversity of women’s experiences provides additional epistemic resources. However, this way of accommodating

differences between women means that men, too, can achieve a feminist standpoint. As Gaile Pohlhaus puts the point (while discussing Harding’s work), “that men can forge a feminist standpoint follows directly from the assertion that a feminist standpoint can grow out of the diverse experiences of women, for if the social positions of women do not prevent them from theorizing about the oppressions facing women as a diverse social group, the social positions of men ought not to prevent them from theorizing about the oppressions of women” (Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 88). Once we recognize difference *within* social positions, difference *between* social positions no longer seems problematic. So, both Harding and Pohlhaus deny the necessity of marginalization for achieving a standpoint. Recall that the motivation for taking this route—denying P1, rather than P2—is the recognition that (many of) the advantages that interest standpoint theorists are the result of *work*, and that the work involved is work that the socially dominant can do. The challenge involved with taking this route is capturing the thought that marginalization is distinctively epistemically advantageous, a central tenet of standpoint theory. This is a task that both Harding and Pohlhaus struggle with. As Pohlhaus points out, Harding’s position seems contradictory at times; when discussing the epistemic differences between feminist men and feminist women, Harding wants to maintain both “it matters who says what” and also “the validity of our claims must be largely independent of who says them” (Harding, 1991, p. 283, discussed in Pohlhaus, 2002, p. 288).<sup>14</sup>

I suggest that Harding makes these contradictory claims because she is struggling to square the severed connection between social position and standpoint with the epistemic significance of marginalization. Her claim that the “validity” of claims must be independent of who makes them reflects her commitment to rejecting the necessary connection between social position and standpoint, while her claim that it matters who says what reflects her desire to capture the idea that social positions make an important epistemic difference. This tension is further reflected in her tendency to use language that blurs the distinction between perspective and standpoint. As discussed previously, Harding expresses the advantage of achieving a standpoint in perspectival terms—she says that feminist standpoints are advantageous because they start from women’s *perspective* (Harding, 1991, p. 124). Pohlhaus demonstrates that this is a recurring slip in Harding’s work (Pohlhaus, 2002, pp. 288-291).

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<sup>14</sup> These two claims don’t *have* to be contradictory. You could, for instance, hold that the validity of claims must be (largely) independent of who says them and also hold that it “matters who says what” on *moral* or *political* grounds; however, Harding makes both claims while explicitly considering *epistemic* differences made by being either a feminist man or a feminist woman. Thus, there seems to be real tension here. I’ll discuss moral and political considerations in more detail in the conclusion.

These difficulties prompt Pohlhaus to abandon the notion of a standpoint altogether. She argues that the spatial and visual aspects of the metaphor of a ‘standpoint’ will *inevitably* suggest that the advantage is the result of seeing the world from a particular social location (pp. 289-290). Thus, Pohlhaus concludes that the concept is not well suited to illuminating the epistemic significance of marginalization while avoiding the implication that you must occupy a particular social location to understand the world.

I am sensitive to the worries that motivate Pohlhaus. Nonetheless, I don’t think we need to abandon talk about ‘standpoints’. The issue with Harding’s discussion of standpoint advantages is *not* that she suggests that people with feminist standpoints share a distinctive way of understanding the world—it’s that she suggests that people with feminist standpoints know *like women*. Harding describes standpoint advantages in these terms, I submit, because she hasn’t articulated a new way of conceiving of the significance of marginalization to a standpoint, if marginalization is not *necessary*. Clarifying the relationship between marginalization and the corresponding standpoint will help us to resist the temptation to discuss standpoint advantages in perspectival terms, and so will better equip us to use the term ‘standpoint’ in ways that do not suggest that you must be marginalized to achieve them.

I argue that the experience of marginalization provides evidence, friction, and incentive that are absent in the day-to-day lives of those who are not similarly marginalized. These advantages are both crucial for the initial generation of a standpoint, and also make it easier for those have these advantages to achieve a standpoint. Thus, marginalization is significantly epistemically advantageous, but it does not provide advantages that are necessary for achieving a standpoint. Standpoints can be shared with, contributed to, and achieved by the socially dominant, despite their significant epistemic disadvantages.

My view is most similar to Alison Wylie’s. Wylie argues that the experience of marginalization puts marginalized people in a position to access unique evidence, and that this evidence enables (but does not determine) the achievement of a standpoint (Wylie, 2003, especially pp. 35-36).<sup>15</sup> Wylie is somewhat vague about what, precisely, this unique evidence *is*. Drawing on Narayan, she claims that the socially marginalized are able to “grasp subtle manifestations of power dynamics” and that they are intimately aware of the ways that oppression shapes their lives (p. 37), though she does not get

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<sup>15</sup> Despite this, Wylie does not explicitly consider whether the socially dominant can achieve a marginalized standpoint.

into specifics. Given that our task is to clarify the relationship between social position and standpoint, I'll try to offer more concrete considerations.

First, marginalization yields evidence that the social order is socially constructed and contingent, rather than natural. Marginalized people are subject to the enforcement mechanisms that mold them to fit their assigned roles. Because their experience reveals these enforcement mechanisms, their experience yields evidence that their social roles are cultural, rather than natural. Now, the socially dominant are *also* molded to fit their roles (e.g., as women are forced into femininity, men are forced into masculinity). A plausible difference, though, is that while both the socially dominant and socially marginalized are forced into their roles, the roles that marginalized people are forced into are, by nature, *demeaning* and *subordinating*. Thus, they seem less likely to be roles that people will fit into easily. Being molded in ways that do not suit you will make it more apparent that you are being molded in the first place.

There is also crucial *friction* between the experiences of the socially marginalized and the narratives that reflect and sustain oppressive social orders. Patricia Hill Collins talks at length about “controlling images” and their role in maintaining oppression. She focuses on the controlling images of black women, which includes representations of black women as “stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas” (Collins, 2002, p. 76). These stereotypical images manipulate the cultural meaning of black femininity in ways that are meant to justify their subordination (p. 77). Crucially, these stereotypes do not represent or reflect reality; they *distort* it. These images misrepresent the capacities and qualities of the socially marginalized. Because these images are distorted, there will be friction between these controlling images and the experiences of the socially marginalized. Images of the socially marginalized that denigrate the abilities and capacities of the marginalized will, at least often, simply not cohere with marginalized people’s impressions of themselves and their fellow group members. This friction is both evidence that dominant social narratives are false and incentive to develop alternative accounts.

A more obvious incentive is that the socially marginalized are directly disadvantaged by the social order. Because they are not at the top of the social hierarchy, it is in their interest to unearth the illusions, distortions, and falsehoods that uphold and entrench the social order (Bright, 2018; Kinney and Bright, 2021). This makes it significantly more likely that they will put in the time and effort that is required to develop the understanding that is necessary for developing a standpoint.

I emphasize—as does Wylie (2003, p. 37)—that these are advantages that simply come along with being socially marginalized. Thus, these are *not* standpoint advantages; they are perspectival advantages. But it is obvious that these advantages are epistemically significant—they are critical for the *generation* of a standpoint. By drawing on the evidence provided by their experience—which their social location incentivizes them to do—the socially marginalized can come to recognize and articulate patterns of injustice that sustain the social order. So, the perspectival advantages associated with marginalization enable the development of the critical awareness that is constitutive of a standpoint.

The day-to-day lived experience of the socially dominant will not yield the same evidence, friction, or incentive. The socially dominant benefit from the social order. It is not in their interest to put in the effort to identify and understand the mechanisms that uphold the social order—doing so would threaten the privileges their place in society affords them. And even if they *do* put in the effort to identify and understand the mechanisms of the oppression of others, reflection on their own experiences will not be of much use. This is partially because the experience of the socially dominant is well-trodden ground; dominant experience has shaped the concepts and understandings that are already available. Further reflection on these experiences is less likely to lead to innovation or revelation—this will come more easily from reflection on experience that has been (unjustly) underexplored.

Moreover, it is often in the interest of the socially marginalized to conform—at least temporarily—to the narratives set out by controlling images. Charles Mills cites a black American folk poem that expresses this idea—“Got one mind for white folks to see/Another for what I know is me” (Mills, 2007, p. 18). Patricia Hill Collins discusses this phenomenon too; it can benefit black people to *act* in ways that confirm stereotypical portrayals of them because it enables them to fade into the background (Collins, 1986, p. S14). Because the socially marginalized may intentionally act in ways that conform to stereotypes, reflection on the experience of the socially dominant may fail to yield the same friction that reflection on the experience of the socially marginalized yields.

So, reflection on the experience of the socially dominant does not have the same revelatory potential as does reflection on the experience of the marginalized. This, I take it, captures an essential insight of standpoint theorists—the methodological imperative. We should anticipate that inquiry that is done from a standpoint that is grounded in the experiences of the marginalized will yield *better*, more *accurate* understanding (in at least some contexts). The socially marginalized are also better placed to

perform this inquiry, because marginalization provides more direct access to the relevant evidence and incentivizes them to put that evidence to use. Thus, the inversion thesis has been captured as well; it is obvious that marginalization is epistemically advantageous, while social dominance is epistemically disadvantageous. But while the socially dominant are significantly epistemically disadvantaged, the disadvantages are not insurmountable obstacles; the socially dominant are not doomed to ignorance. Socially dominant people's day-to-day experiences cannot ground a marginalized standpoint, but they can nonetheless come to achieve one. To do so, they must take the experiences of the socially marginalized as their starting point. Only by engaging in critical reflection that centers experiences that are not their own can the socially dominant achieve a marginalized standpoint.

Note too that this account of the epistemic significance of marginalization affords a more distinctive role to marginalization than do views like Quill Kukla's. The experience of marginalization isn't epistemically advantageous because of features about experience *generally*, but because of special features about marginalization in particular.

### **3.6 Knowing Across Difference**

It is one thing to say *that* dominantly-situated knowers can come to understand the mechanisms of oppression that they do not personally experience, and so can achieve a marginalized standpoint. It is another thing to explain how this could happen in practice. Space and scope concerns keep me from offering anything like a full account here. However, two worries loom, and they can only be addressed by saying something more practical about how to achieve a standpoint.

The first worry concerns a type of ignorance that Mariana Ortega calls *loving, knowing* ignorance. Loving, knowing ignorance plagues contemporary white feminist thought. It is characterized by ignorance about the work and experience of women of color, where this ignorance is accompanied by professed love for and knowledge about women of color (Ortega, 2006, p. 57). Feminists who are lovingly, knowingly ignorant often have good intentions; they may take genuine interest in the plight of women of color, read and cite (some of) their work, and generally *want* to understand women of color (p. 62). Despite these good intentions, these feminists nonetheless have defective or distorted understandings of women of color; their knowledge falls short of what they think it is. The work they produce, then, both contributes to the production of ignorance and misinformation about the marginalized, while simultaneously securing their position as respectable Third Wave feminists (pp.



60-63). So, work that is knowingly, lovingly ignorant doesn't just fail to shed light on intersectional forms of oppression—it can also obscure the need for work that does. Given the dangers of this kind of ignorance, it is crucial that this paper not leave readers with the impression that it is easy for the socially dominant to achieve marginalized standpoints. This impression would lead to the production of more loving, knowing ignorance.

The second worry pulls us in the opposite direction—if it is *too difficult* for the socially dominant to achieve a standpoint, then it won't actually be feasible for most dominantly-situated knowers to achieve one. If this is the case, then while we don't live in a world of truly *unbridgeable* epistemic solitudes, our prospects are not much better. Moreover, if achieving a standpoint is not feasible for most, then it will be difficult to hold the socially dominant accountable for their ignorance.<sup>16</sup>

Ortega's proposal for avoiding loving, knowing ignorance plays into the hands of this second worry. She emphasizes that things like merely theorizing about women of color, including token women of color in conferences, and reading the work of women of color, are not enough to break free of the "controlling images" that distort the socially dominant's perception of the socially marginalized. Instead, Ortega offers *world-traveling* as a way for the socially dominant to escape ignorance.

The notion of 'world-traveling' comes out of Maria Lugones' work. World-traveling, according to Lugones, is an intensive undertaking whereby one comes to understand the "world" of another, where a "world" is composed of things like customs, language, and social meanings. According to Lugones, world-traveling enables us to "understand *what it is to be [another] and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" (Lugones, 1987, p. 17 (emphasis in original)). Ortega thus sees world-traveling as opening up the possibility for white women to understand the oppression experienced by women of color (p. 69). However, as Ortega emphasizes, world-traveling is extremely demanding:

"Rather than a nice addition to one's manuscript, rather than being the seal that must be stamped in Third Wave feminist work, "world"-traveling has to do with actual experience; it requires tremendous commitment to practice: to actually engage in activities where one will experience what others experience; to deal with flesh and blood people, not just their theoretical constructions; to learn people's language in order to understand them, not to use it against them; to really listen to people's interpretations, however different they are from one's own; and to see people as worthy of respect, rather than helpless beings (p. 69).

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to consider this worry.

She stresses the difficulty of world-traveling because loving, knowing ignorance tends to hide itself; it is easy to think you've escaped it when in fact you are still caught in its grip. However, if the socially dominant must successfully world-travel in order to escape ideological ignorance and achieve a standpoint, then the chances for the socially dominant to achieve better understanding are not especially good. Few people will have the time and resources required to successfully engage in world-traveling.

I take Ortega's cautions seriously; treating token actions as sufficient for escaping ignorance can have dangerous consequences. However, I want to refrain from concluding that world-traveling is the only way that the socially dominant could achieve a marginalized standpoint. Two considerations tell against this conclusion. The first is that Lugones proposes world-traveling as a means to understand what it is like to *be* another person—she puts it forward as a way to see the world *through someone else's eyes*. But the crux of my argument is that achieving a marginalized standpoint is not helpfully understood as achieving a marginalized perspective. You don't have to see *like* a marginalized person in order to have achieved a marginalized standpoint (indeed, there is no one way to see *like* a marginalized person at all). This is the point of the distinction between a 'perspective' and a 'standpoint' that I have emphasized throughout this paper.

The second consideration is that standpoints come in degrees. You can do more or less of the work required to escape ideological ignorance, and, so, you can make more or less headway toward achieving a standpoint. This work includes (but is not limited to): engaging with work on oppression that is written by marginalized people; questioning preconceived or stereotypical notions of marginalized people; talking with marginalized people; and reflecting on the ways that dominant ideology shapes thought. Those who do more of this work will tend to have better understanding of oppression that they don't experience than those who do less of this work, but even those who do less of this work will tend to be better off than people who do *none* of this work.

Both Ortega and Uma Narayan emphasize the special importance of engaging with real, "flesh and blood" members of marginalized groups, rather than just theoretical representations of them (Frye, 1983, p. 75; Narayan, 1988, p. 37; Ortega, 2006, p. 69). Doing so provides an opportunity for the socially dominant to check and question their evolving conceptions of marginalized people and the oppression they face—a kind of opportunity that isn't possible through reading alone. However, it is worth noting that this kind of engagement is not without costs. As is clear from the very notion of "loving, knowing ignorance", good intentions are not enough to prevent harm. Goodwill alone cannot

undo “assumptions and attitudes born of centuries of power and privilege”—there is a real risk that the socially dominant will harm marginalized people through their insensitivity (Narayan, p. 35)<sup>17</sup>. Despite this, it is work that is worth doing. Learning to understand and work with difference is precisely the kind of work that makes coalitionary politics possible (Narayan, p. 34). Moreover, it is clearly the kind of work that many socially dominant people *do* have the time and resources to engage in.

Treating standpoints as a graded construct raises one final question: how do we judge who has done enough work to have achieved a standpoint, and who is in a position to make this judgment? This is a difficult question to answer, but note that it is not a difficulty that is specific to judging whether a socially dominant person has achieved a standpoint. It is difficult to judge whether *anyone*—including the marginalized—has achieved a standpoint. Moreover, this isn’t the kind of difficulty that tells against striving to achieve a standpoint. Whether we can *judge* who achieved a standpoint is irrelevant to the claim that people can (or even should) strive for them. Thus, while developing criteria for judging who has achieved a standpoint seems like a fruitful task, it is a task that I leave aside for now.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.7 Conclusion

Standpoint theorists have long been clear that marginalization does not make better understanding a given. They have been less clear that social dominance does not make *ignorance* a given. As a result, many accounts of standpoint theory—either intentionally or unintentionally—bolster the SEDT. I’ve attempted to offer a way of understanding standpoint theory that does not entail that there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know. By (1) insisting on a sharp distinction between perspective and standpoint and (2) holding that the perspectival disadvantages that correspond to social privilege do not prevent the socially dominant from achieving a marginalized standpoint, we can make sense of standpoint theorists’ poignant insights without dooming the socially dominant to ignorance. The socially dominant who engage in a struggle to develop a critical consciousness can overcome their perspectival disadvantages and achieve a marginalized standpoint.

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<sup>17</sup> Narayan gives practical advice for how to navigate and mitigate such harms..

<sup>18</sup> It’s worth noting that information about whether someone has done the work that is conducive to achieving a standpoint is fairly easy to assess, and would provide some basis for thinking that someone has (or has not) achieved a standpoint. Moreover, this information is, at least plausibly, assessable by people who have not themselves achieved standpoints. This suggests that you don’t need to have achieved a standpoint to make correct judgments about who *does* have a standpoint (though surely having a standpoint would make these assessments more reliable).

My argument primarily concerns whether the socially dominant can achieve the understanding that is necessary for doing insightful work on forms of oppression that they do not personally experience. It does not follow, though, that the socially dominant *should* do this. There are two further justifications that could be invoked to justify silence on the part of the socially dominant: a methodological justification, and a moral justification.

The lynchpin of the methodological justification is the idea that you can omit discussions of intersectional forms of oppression without impairing the resulting theory. That is, those omissions do not *distort* the theory, even though they render the theory incomplete. Along these lines, Kate Manne suggests that we view her work as “the bare outlines, which invites filling in by theorists with the relevant epistemic and moral authority to do, should they so choose” (Manne, 2017, p. 13). If this methodological claim is right, it could provide good reason to avoid going into “complicating” intersectional issues. Understanding the oppression experienced by others requires considerable effort—if you could do good, intersectional work without expending this effort, it may be reasonable for you to do so.

Moral justifications hold that even if the relatively privileged *could* speak insightfully about oppression that is not their own, they *ought not* (see, e.g., Alcoff (1991) and Manne (2017, p. 25)). Various considerations are relevant here: given that multiply-marginalized people are largely locked out of the academy, there’s something *insidious* about relatively privileged scholars launching their careers by doing work on the very oppressive forces that prevent multiply-marginalized people from having the opportunity to do that academic work themselves; when the socially dominant do work *about* the socially marginalized, they may contribute to—rather than challenge—cultural narratives that position marginalized people as passive subjects; and, in general, the socially dominant too often take up space that they shouldn’t.

I leave discussion of the methodological and moral justifications for future work (though I note that the moral justifications seem considerably stronger than the methodological justification). It’s plausible that, at least sometimes, people who make claims about the authority to speak to oppression on epistemic grounds *actually* have moral or political considerations in mind. However, my arguments here demonstrate the need for more care when thinking about authority. Rather than prompting the socially dominant to take responsibility for their social location and its effects, the SEDT offers them an easy way out. Moreover, invocations of the SEDT oversimplify a complicated

issue. Moral considerations do not weigh decisively one way or the other; some considerations support silence, others—some of which have been gestured at throughout this paper—do not. Thus, figuring out when, how, or whether the socially dominant should contribute their voices is a complex issue. Invoking the SEDT cuts this conversation unduly short.

## Chapter 4: Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility

Rape allegations create high stakes epistemic situations. A true rape allegation warrants various kinds of sanction for the perpetrator, and failing to enact these sanctions seriously wrongs the victim: it can put her (and others) in a vulnerable position, can communicate that we do not take the wrongdoing seriously, and generally gives a sense that justice has not been done. However, if we believe an allegation when we *shouldn't*, and act accordingly, we seriously wrong the accused by enacting sanctions that are not deserved. So, it is crucial that we get things right.

But forming the right beliefs in these cases can be quite difficult. This is an area rife with prejudice that occludes our view of the truth. On the one hand, there is an undeniable cultural tendency to unjustly dismiss women's allegations and proceed with business as usual. However, this tendency to dismiss women's allegations is not monolithic. Issues of race, gender, and class influence the reception of allegations in significant ways. While women are, on the whole, unlikely to be taken seriously, white women are much more likely to be taken seriously than black women are, and white women are especially likely to be taken seriously when accusing black men (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1269-1272). Indeed, when there are allegations that a black man has raped a white woman, the allegations are often taken *deadly* seriously: the rape of white women by black men was offered as the justification for the brutal lynching of black men (and some women) at the end of the Reconstruction Era, despite the distorted nature of the allegations (Davis, 1981, p. 186). More recently, during the 2015 Charleston church shooting, Dylann Roof is reported to have said, "You rape our women, and you're taking our country, and you have to go" as he shot and killed nine black men and women at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Bouie, 2015).

Rape myths pull us in both directions. There are *minimizing* rape myths that encourage dismissive responses to rape. Such myths suggest that women routinely lie about rape, or that rape victims somehow deserved what happened to them, or that they were asking for it anyway. In the other direction, there are *catastrophizing* rape myths. These myths suggest that rape occurs late at night in dark alleys, and is committed primarily by inhuman *monsters*, especially black or seriously mentally ill men (Yap, 2017, p. 8-9). Such myths prompt severe responses to allegations, especially when the allegation concerns the rape of a white woman by a black man.

The minimizing myths and the catastrophizing myths may seem to be at odds with each other, or to construct contradictory narratives about rape. My first aim in this paper is to show that there is no

tension here—I argue that these two sets of rape myths work *together* to distort the epistemic resources we use to evaluate rape allegations. Together, the minimizing myths and catastrophizing myths skew our conception of what “real” rape is and position women who come forward as likely to be lying. By skewing our conception of “real” rape and positioning women who come forward as likely to be lying, rape myths launch a dual attack on the trustworthiness of victims who come forward and the plausibility of their claims.

My second aim in this chapter is to argue that rape myths’ dual attack on trustworthiness and plausibility enables a novel kind of epistemic injustice. The literature on epistemic injustice has largely focused on testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.<sup>19</sup> Testimonial injustice concerns the unjust impact prejudice can have on our assessments of trustworthiness. Hermeneutical injustice concerns the role prejudice can have in determining the conceptual resources that are developed to make sense of our experiences. Hermeneutical injustice affects which kinds of ideas we consider plausible or intelligible: if we lack the conceptual resources necessary to make sense of a particular experience, reports of that experience will be more difficult to understand, and so more difficult to believe. So, the literature has lots to say about the way prejudice can negatively affect our assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility *separately*.

But little has been said about the ways our assessments of plausibility and trustworthiness *interact*. As I will demonstrate, if someone tells you something that is wildly implausible, this reasonably bears on your assessment of that person’s trustworthiness. This influence can be legitimate—though there are limits. The type of injustice I identify concerns illegitimate interaction between assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility. Using Jian Ghomeshi’s trial as a case study, I show how this injustice can result in *runaway credibility deflations*, leaving many victims who come forward with a nearly insurmountable credibility deficit. Moreover, as I’ll show, this kind of interaction also helps to explain why some people believe too hastily in cases that involve a white woman accusing a black man of sexual assault.

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<sup>19</sup> Testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice are the two kinds of epistemic injustice initially identified by Miranda Fricker (2007). Fricker’s framework has been incredibly influential, and has been taken up by people working on epistemic injustice (see, e.g., Medina, 2011 or Jenkins, 2017). Other thinkers identified epistemic injustices that go beyond hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice (see, e.g., Dotson, 2011 or Berenstain, 2016). Even these thinkers who go beyond the two kinds of injustice identified by Fricker, though, do not draw attention to the dynamic I hope to draw attention to in this paper.

## 4.1 Rape Myths

Rape myths can be understood as “*attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny, justify, and tolerate male sexual aggression against women*” (Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). In this section, I defend the view that rape myths function to deny, justify, and tolerate sexual violence against women. However, I take issue with versions of this view that ignore the deadly seriousness with which some accusations are met.

### 4.1.1 “Tolerant Attitude” Interpretations of Rape Myths

Consider the following account of rape myths offered by Hall *et al.* (1986). They attempt to capture the functioning of rape myths by providing three categories that rape myths can be sorted into: (i) myths that deny the existence of rape or the scope of the problem, (ii) myths that excuse the behavior of the rapist, and (iii) myths that deny that rape is a serious crime. Here are some common rape myths, sorted into the three categories provided by Hall *et al.* (1986):

1. Myths that Deny the Existence of Rape
  - a. Women routinely lie about rape.
  - b. Women claim they’ve been raped when they regret the sexual interaction.
  - c. Women could resist rape if they really wanted to.
  - d. Consent cannot be withdrawn after it has been given.
  - e. Consent is automatically present if a sexual act has occurred between the same parties before.
  - f. “Attractive” men don’t rape women, and “unattractive” women are never raped.
2. Myths that Justify the Rapist’s Behavior
  - a. Women who were raped were “asking for it”, either by dressing promiscuously or drinking excessively.
  - b. Rape is a crime of passion.
  - c. If he was drunk, he couldn’t help it.
3. Myths that Deny the Seriousness of Rape
  - a. Only promiscuous women are raped.
  - b. Most women secretly want to be raped.



c. Most rapists only rape once.<sup>20</sup>

This framing of rape myths emphasizes *minimizing* myths. It suggests that rape myths function to deny, justify, and tolerate sexual violence against women by perpetuating the idea that rape is “not that bad”. On this account, the myths that cast rape as a rare occurrence both obscure the danger women face and trivialize their fear; the myths that deny the seriousness of rape encourage minimal, if any, punishment; and the myths that justify the rapist’s behavior shift the blame to the victim and so minimize the violation. This way of fleshing out how rape myths deny, justify, and tolerate sexual violence against women remains popular (see, for example, Roxane Gay’s Not That Bad (2018)). However, this analysis is seriously flawed.

First, it seems to ignore the contemporary (and historical) seriousness with which allegations that black men have raped white women have been met. Not only are these reports often deemed credible, they are deemed credible reports of *serious wrongdoing*. To return to the example from the introduction, when it was (falsely) claimed that black men were raping white women at horrifying rates after the Reconstruction Era, it was said that this crime “caused civilized men to “revert to the original savage type whose impulses under such circumstances have always been to ‘kill, kill, kill’” (Davis, 1981, p. 187). This was offered up as justification for the brutal lynchings—white men were, supposedly, driven to the extreme violence by their moral outrage.<sup>21</sup> The mythical black rapist is not—and was not—real. But the success of the narrative suggests that rapes were not taken to be “not that bad”; on the contrary, the success of the narrative seems to have depended on rape being considered a *seriously* morally reprehensible crime. Alex Lloyd’s view (2021), discussed at length in Chapter 2, has similar defects. Kate Manne’s near exclusive emphasis on “himpathy”—the excessive empathy that people have for men accused of sexual assault—is also similarly deficient (Manne 2017).

More generally, it is hard to square the view that rape culture persists because people think rape is “not that bad” with the widespread disavowal of rape. Rape features prominently in TV crime shows, and viewers are expected to root for the perpetrator to be brought to justice; graphic rapes of young college women by student-athletes are featured on the news, to nationwide outrage; while frat boys at

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<sup>20</sup> As an anonymous reviewer noted, this myth denies the seriousness of rape a bit differently than the other two in this category. Where the other two minimize the severity of the violation, this one denies the importance of addressing each rape allegation.

<sup>21</sup> Only 16.7% of the people who were lynched were even accused of rape, and yet the supposed threat black men posed to white women was invoked as the justification for all lynchings (Davis, p. 189).

Yale may hold up signs reading, “no means yes and yes means anal” (Orbey, 2018), they are met with broad condemnation. In general, people believe that rape is bad.

However, while there may be widespread disavowal of rape, it is still apparent that sexual violence against women is largely carried out with impunity. One in six women is the victim of rape or attempted rape (and the statistics are worse for trans women and women of color, especially Indigenous women) (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics”, RAINN); only five out of every 1,000 rapes result in a conviction (“The Criminal Justice System: Statistics”, RAINN); Donald Trump was elected despite his claims to “grab [women] by the pussy”; Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court in the face of credible allegations that he sexually assaulted Christine Blasey Ford while they were in high school. It is hard to ask for clearer evidence that sexual violence against women is widely tolerated. So, there is clearly a sense in which people are failing to take sexual violence seriously. How do we make sense of this failure, given the public disavowal of rape?

To solve this puzzle, we need to attend to the category of rape myths that is overlooked by Howard, Hall, and Boezio: catastrophizing myths.

#### 4. Myths that Catastrophize Rape

- a. Rape always involves overwhelming physical force.
- b. Rape occurs in dark alleys late at night.
- c. Rape is committed by strangers, not by people close to you.
- d. Rape is committed by people incapable of respecting or caring for women.

These myths, unlike the previously discussed myths, condemn rape as a monstrous act—but they still are not based in reality. Women are significantly more likely to be raped by someone close to them than they are to be raped by a stranger; rape does not always involve any—let alone overwhelming—physical force; and many people who commit rape are perfectly capable of forming respectful, even loving, relationships with other women (Yap, 2017, pp. 4-5).

There seems to be tension between minimizing rape myths and catastrophizing rape myths. One possible interpretation of the seemingly contradictory set of rape myths is that people simply hold contradictory beliefs about rape. They believe simultaneously that rape always involves overwhelming physical force, and that women could fight off rape if they really wanted to; they believe simultaneously that rape is a vicious attack in a dark alley late at night, and that rape is really

not that bad. On this interpretation, some rape myths work to trivialize, justify, or deny sexual violence against women, while others do not—people simply have mixed-up and incoherent beliefs about rape. Thus, people might sincerely condemn rape while still rooting for Trump or Kavanaugh—their beliefs simply don't cohere.

Alternatively, we might suggest that there's no incoherence in people's beliefs at all—people simply condemn *some* rapes, while tolerating others. People might, for instance, think that rape is morally intolerable when the victim is a white woman and the perpetrator is a black man, but think rape is tolerable if the races are reversed—that is, if the victim is a black woman, and the perpetrator is a white man. So, rather than positing that people have *incoherent* beliefs, this explanation suggests that people have grossly immoral beliefs.

Neither of these routes is the one that I will take. Both of these explanations suggest that, in some way, tolerant *attitudes* toward rape are somehow playing an important role in sustaining rape culture. I maintain that rape myths primarily function to deny, justify, and tolerate sexual violence against women, but I deny that this is done by cultivating tolerant attitudes towards rape.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4.1.2 The “Recognition Failure” Interpretation of Rape Myths and Catastrophizing Myths**

I suggest that what is endemic to contemporary rape culture is a systematic failure to recognize many instances of rape. Too often, people incorrectly dismiss a situation as *not really rape*. This dismissal doesn't depend on having a tolerant attitude towards rape. Indeed, as I hope to show, people's catastrophized conception of rape can be the driving force behind their unjust dismissal of rape allegations.

Rape myths enable people to dismiss various rape allegations by denying that there was *really rape* in two ways. First, catastrophizing rape myths distort our assessment of what “real” rape looks like. “Real” rapes are characterized by the catastrophizing rape myths—“real” rapes are violent and terrifying; they happen to innocent women who are alone at night, and who could not possibly fight off their attacker. “Real” rapes, like those portrayed in TV crime shows or on the news, are obviously heinous and must be condemned. In contrast, the myths that minimize rape do so by characterizing such violence as not *really* rape. If she was wearing a short skirt, she must have wanted it—not real

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<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to deny that people *ever* have contradictory beliefs about rape, or that people *ever* have tolerant attitudes toward rape. Instead, I deny that these things *are the norm*, even in a rape culture.

rape. If it didn't require overwhelming physical force, she could have fought him off—not real rape. If she has said yes to him before, she probably said yes to him this time—not real rape. Since these instances don't fit the stereotype of “real” rape, one can dismiss them while remaining consistent with their sincerely held “anti-rape” beliefs and values.

A catastrophized conception of rape sets demanding standards. For something to count as “real” rape, we need to be able to conceptualize what happened as being a moral catastrophe, to see the victim as vulnerable to serious violation, and to see the accused as capable of doing something monstrous. Audrey Yap makes a version of this point when she argues that a narrative that casts rapists as necessarily monstrous gives rise to a problematic *modus tollens* inference that exonerates many people we see as non-monstrous:

- a) If someone commits a sexual assault, then that person is a monster.
- b) Person X is not a monster.
- c) Therefore, Person X did not commit sexual assault (Yap, 2017, p. 16).<sup>23</sup>

We can generalize this point: a catastrophized conception of rape gives rise to an exonerating *modus tollens* inference any time we fail to see the violation at hand as a catastrophic violation. This could happen for all kinds of reasons. It might be because we are incapable of seeing the accused as doing something monstrous, but it might also be because we're incapable of empathizing with the victim and recognizing the severity of the violation she has endured, or because we think that what she's reporting just doesn't seem that bad.

The upshot of this is that, somewhat surprisingly, a catastrophized conception of rape can result in the unjust dismissal of credible rape allegations, rather than a commitment to taking such allegations seriously. Thus, the catastrophized myths are an important part of contemporary rape culture.

Skewing our conception of “real” rape is just one of the ways rape myths distort the epistemic resources that we bring to bear on rape allegations. The second distortion involves positioning women who come forward as likely to be lying. This is the work of myths that, in the terms of Hall *et al.*, “deny” sexual violence against women—these myths deny such violence by suggesting that women often lie about rape. When the victim is judged to be untrustworthy, it might be agreed that what is

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<sup>23</sup> See Kate Manne (2017) and Amia Srinivasan (2022) for similar discussions.

*reported* to have happened rises to the level of “real” rape—but what *really* happened does not. What “really” happened might be that the woman was broken up with, or had sex that she now regrets, or even nothing at all. In these cases, allegations are written off on the grounds that the reported rape is fabricated, and so not “real”. This, again, allows people to insist that they condemn rape, while justifying and tolerating individual rapes—they fail to see those rapes as *really* rape.

So, on my view, contemporary rape culture tolerates sexual violence against women not by cultivating tolerant attitudes towards rape, but by distorting our conceptual resources in ways that allow us to (wrongly) dismiss most rapes as not *really* rape. This explanation of how rape myths distort our epistemic resources explains how there is widespread, public disavowal of rape *and* that the vast majority of rapes are carried out with impunity: people fail to recognize that the vast majority of rapes *are* rapes. Crucially, though, there *is* a small subset of rapes that people vigorously condemn. This explains the deadly seriousness with which some allegations are met. “Real” rape is considered to be a serious—even unthinkable—moral infraction. And while this moral infraction is *so* serious that many perpetrators will be deemed incapable of the infraction, not everyone who is accused is held in such high regard—there are some people who we do think are capable of monstrous moral infraction. This, of course, is how we end up with such a racialized response to rape allegations—it is (unjustly) easier for us to imagine a black man committing such a heinous crime.<sup>24</sup>

The upshot of this is not that we need to stop thinking that rapes are bad. Of course rapes are bad. The mistake is, instead, with thinking that rape is necessarily *monstrous* or *terrifying* or somehow *inhuman*, and that it is because of these features that rape is bad. The reality is this: people we know and like rape; this rape is bad. Rape occurs without physical violence; this rape is bad. Rape occurs and the victim never leaves the perpetrator; this rape is bad. By catastrophizing rape, we make it more difficult to see most rapes for what they are, and to recognize what it is that makes these violations so harmful.

## 4.2 Rape Myths and Epistemic Injustice

The dual distortions of the epistemic resources we bring to bear on rape allegations fit neatly into the classic types of epistemic injustice identified by Miranda Fricker: hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice. These types of epistemic injustice are not my focus; I aim to draw attention to

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<sup>24</sup> I discuss these racist myths in more detail in the section titled “Hasty Acceptance”.

another phenomenon at play here. However, it will help to get these types of injustice on the table. Doing so will help me to distinguish the kind of injustice I will identify, and also to highlight an important terminological difference between Fricker's account and my account.

Hermeneutical injustice concerns the role prejudice can have in determining the conceptual resources that are developed to make sense of our experiences. Fricker defines it as “the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization” (Fricker, 2007, p. 158). When hermeneutical injustice occurs, certain social experiences are *incomprehensible* because people lack the interpretive tools necessary for making sense of those experiences, and they lack these tools as a result of the exclusion of marginalized people from dominant meaning-making practices. The distorted, overly narrow conception of rape that rape myths impart is a clear instance of this kind of injustice—the vast majority of rapes are seriously misunderstood because people lack the interpretive tools to make sense of these rapes *as rape* (See Katharine Jenkins (2017), for a detailed discussion of this point).

Rape myths' maligning of victims' trustworthiness is a clear instance of *testimonial injustice*. Testimonial injustice occurs when “prejudice on the hearer's part causes him to give the speaker less credibility than he would otherwise have given” (Fricker, 2007, p. 4). Not taking an account seriously because it was given by a woman; not taking an account seriously because it was given by someone with an accent; not taking an account seriously because it was given by a black person; these are all examples of testimonial injustice. Rape myths—which are plainly prejudicial—can result in the unjust dismissal of rape victims' testimony. Thus, this seems like a relatively clear instance of testimonial injustice.

This brings me to the important terminological distinction. Fricker characterizes testimonial injustice as an unjust *credibility* deflation. However, I use the term ‘credibility’ slightly differently than Fricker does. I follow Karen Jones, who follows Locke, in understanding ‘credibility’ more generally.

#### **4.2.1 The Two Grounds of Credibility**

Jones identifies two grounds of credibility: the trustworthiness of the testifier, and the plausibility of what is testified to in light of our background knowledge. The trustworthiness of the testifier is determined by considering two factors: “competence with respect to the truth of *p* and veracity with respect to [the] exchange” (Jones, 2002, p. 156)). A testifier's competence with respect to the truth of

$p$  is determined by examining their “counterfactual tendencies”; competent testifiers will tend to believe some claim  $p$  only if  $p$  is true, and they will not tend to believe  $p$  if  $p$  is not true.

A testifier’s veracity with respect to the exchange is determined by looking at her “local trustworthiness”. A testifier is locally trustworthy if, in exchanges relevantly similar to the one occurring, she would be honest (p. 156). If we have reason to *doubt* that she would be honest in relevantly similar exchanges (if, for example, the testifier would obviously benefit from lying), then she is *not* locally trustworthy and so not a trustworthy testifier. Trustworthy testifiers are, then, those people who are both locally trustworthy and competent with respect to their claim.

The second ground of credibility—plausibility in light of background knowledge—concerns how plausible a claim is. The more “astonishing” a case is, meaning the less it coheres with our background knowledge, the less plausible it is, and so the less credible it is (p. 157).

On this understanding of ‘credibility’, both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice result in unjust credibility deflations. This is straightforward with testimonial injustice: testimonial injustice involves an unjust trustworthiness assessment, which results in a lower overall credibility assessment. It is slightly less straightforward with hermeneutical injustice—hermeneutical injustice is not *primarily* an unjust plausibility deflation. Instead, hermeneutical injustice has downstream effects on what we think is plausible: if we lack the conceptual resources necessary to make sense of a particular experience, reports of that experience will be more difficult to understand, and so will seem less plausible. Suppose, for example, that someone thinks a conventionally attractive man would never sexually assault a conventionally unattractive woman. When confronted with an allegation that alleges just this, we should anticipate that he will feel *surprised*; this is not how sexual assault works, according to the conceptual resources available to him. This will likely have a negative effect on his assessment of the plausibility of the allegation. Thus, hermeneutical injustice can also result in an unjustly deflated overall credibility assessment.

Given my more general use of ‘credibility’, I refrain from characterizing testimonial injustice as an unjust *credibility* deficit. Instead, I understand testimonial injustice as an unjustly deflated *trustworthiness* assessment. This is, I emphasize, merely a terminological divergence from Fricker’s account—substantively, I understand testimonial injustice in the same way that Fricker does.

The two types of injustice identified by Fricker concern how prejudice can affect our assessments of the two grounds of credibility *separately*. What is important, for my purposes, is that our assessments of plausibility and trustworthiness can *interact*—we do not always make separate assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility.

Suppose, for instance, that I approach you and tell you that I am a sewer rat in disguise. The radical implausibility of this claim casts doubt on my trustworthiness with respect to it—I might be confused, pulling a strange prank, etc. In any case, it seems that the implausibility of my claim casts legitimate doubt on my trustworthiness. More realistically, consider the claim that anthropogenic climate change is a myth, a story conjured up by left-leaning scientists in order to motivate their desired policies. The implausibility of the climate denier's claim, again, seems to cast doubt on her trustworthiness with respect to it—she may be deliberately spreading misinformation, or simply enjoys provoking others, or has genuinely bought into this right-wing conspiracy theory, etc.

I take these two cases to illustrate that our assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility can interact, and that this interaction can be legitimate. The philosopher who has paid the most attention to this feature of our epistemic practices is Karen Jones. Jones recognizes that, if our assessments of the two grounds of credibility interact, unjust assessments of either ground can be *amplified*—an unjustly low assessment of trustworthiness or plausibility, if allowed to influence the assessment of the other ground, can result in *further* unjust credibility deflation.

I pursue this idea in what follows. While Jones raises an important issue, I disagree with her conclusion. Jones argues that we must make *independent* assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility, so that we can avoid further disadvantaging those who are unjustly deemed untrustworthy or whose reports are unjustly deemed implausible. I take a more moderate route: I maintain that assessments of plausibility and trustworthiness *can* legitimately interact, although this legitimate interaction has limits. I then explore how—and when—the violation of these limits amounts to an epistemic injustice, and use a case study to show how this epistemic injustice can help to flesh out our picture of the epistemic obstacles faced by victims who come forward about their rapes.



#### 4.2.2 Jones and the Independence Rule

Jones argues that we must make *independent* assessments of the trustworthiness of a testifier and the plausibility of their claim (p. 157). Her argument centers around the following case study:

Fauziya Kassindja fled her native Togo in October 1994, escaping a forced polygamous marriage and female genital mutilation. Her father was opposed to FGM and, while alive, protected her and her sisters from it. But when he died, Kassindja's aunt became her guardian and forced her mother to leave the family home. When Kassindja's mother learned of the aunt's plans for Kassindja, she sent Kassindja's sister to help her, giving her \$3,000 to leave the country. Kassindja's sister drove her to the airport in Ghana, where Kassindja boarded the first flight leaving that evening. The flight took her to Germany. Knowing no one in Germany and not speaking German, Kassindja wandered around the airport until she struck up a conversation with a German stranger named Rudina Gergs. Gergs believed Kassindja's story and offered her a place to stay. Kassindja remained with Gergs until another chance encounter took place, this time with a Nigerian man, Charlie, whom she met on a train. Charlie sold her his sister's passport, which she then used to travel to the United States. Rather than try to enter illegally, Kassindja gave herself up to the INS, claiming asylum as a refugee from FGM. Her case was heard by Judge Donald Ferlise of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, who, on August 25, 1995, denied Kassindja's application for asylum. Though told the same story Gergs believed, Ferlise found it incredible: "I have taken into account the lack of rationality, the lack of consistency and the lack of inherent persuasiveness in her testimony and have determined that this alien is not credible (p. 158).

While Jones diagnoses several problems with Ferlise's reasoning, of particular importance for my purposes is her claim that one of the judge's failures was not keeping his assessments of the trustworthiness of the testifier and the plausibility of her claim separate.

Jones argues that an initial assessment that a testifier is untrustworthy can result in viewing her testimony through a "lens of distrust" (p. 159). This way of approaching testimony, Jones argues, can be self-fulfilling—it can lead us "to seek out evidence of inconsistencies, to magnify those we suppose ourselves to have found, ...to focus on them in our assessment of the story as a whole", and to overlook possible explanations for discovered inconsistencies (p. 159). So, when we allow our trustworthiness assessment to influence our plausibility assessment, that influence can cause us to give a lower plausibility assessment than is actually warranted. Worse still, Jones maintains that allowing assessments of one ground of credibility to influence the other can result in "runaway" reductions to overall credibility—"our low initial trustworthiness rating leads to a reduction in the plausibility rating we would have given to the content of the story, and this in turn confirms our initial assessment of untrustworthiness, which in turn makes us only the more confident in our low

plausibility ratings” (p. 160). When a testifier is subjected to runaway credibility deflations, there is not much she can do to get her interlocutor to believe her.

Jones argues that this dynamic can be seen in Ferlise’s reasoning. Ferlise based his assessment that Kassindja was “incredible” on the following factors: she didn’t know the current whereabouts of her mother; Ferlise doubted female genital mutilation was that much of a threat if she had been able to avoid it up to this point; and Ferlise found it surprising that she was able to survive in Germany with the help of two strangers (p. 160). As Jones notes, only the second consideration actually has any bearing on her asylum request. But more importantly, Jones thinks that these three factors could only lead someone to reject Kassindja’s trustworthiness as a testifier, as Ferlise did, if these factors were viewed through a lens of distrust. Without the distortion caused by distrust, these three factors would not cause someone to deem Kassindja untrustworthy. Given Ferlise’s history of lacking sympathy for female asylum seekers, it is plausible that he approached Kassindja’s testimony with such an initial low trustworthiness assessment. This low trustworthiness assessment likely influenced his plausibility assessment, which then affirmed his initial trustworthiness assessment (p. 161).

So, Jones concludes that Ferlise’s dismissal of Kassindja’s testimony was the result of allowing his assessments of the two grounds of credibility to feed off of each other. This leads her to what she calls the *Independence Rule*: make independent assessments of the trustworthiness of the testifier, and the plausibility of their claim (p. 159). Specifically, what this rule forbids is: i) allowing the implausibility of the *present* claim to influence the assessment of the testifier’s trustworthiness with respect to it, and ii) allowing the assessment that the testifier is locally untrustworthy to influence the assessment of the claim’s plausibility. This means that a *history* of making implausible claims may be used as evidence that the testifier is not competent or locally trustworthy, although Jones does advise caution in making this inference (p. 158).

Jones specifies that a history of making implausible claims can still be used as evidence that a testifier is untrustworthy because she recognizes that, often, it seems like the plausibility of a claim does have some bearing on the testifier’s trustworthiness. Even with this restriction, though, Jones’ claim seems too strong. Recall my hypothetical claim that I am a sewer rat in disguise, or the claim that climate change is a myth—the implausibility of these claims, I suggested, legitimately casts doubt on the trustworthiness of the testifiers. Jones’ Independence Rule would bar us from making these inferences, and so seems too strong.

That said, I do think Jones has picked up on an important flaw in Ferlise’s reasoning—Ferlise unjustly allows his plausibility and trustworthiness assessments to feed off of one another, and this leaves Kassindja with a nearly insurmountable credibility deficit. This suggests that we need something to explain the difference between Ferlise’s reasoning in Kassindja’s case, and our reasoning about the climate change denier—why is one inference legitimate, but the other not?

My aim in the following section is to capture what’s going wrong with the runaway credibility deflations that Jones is concerned with, without positing a rule as strong as the Independence Rule. I begin by briefly canvassing possible restraints on legitimate interaction between assessments of trustworthiness and assessments of plausibility. I then focus on the constraint I call the *degree constraint* and explain how the violation of this constraint captures what is going wrong with Ferlise’s reasoning.

#### **4.2.3 Legitimacy Constraints**

Let’s focus on the climate denier. This example is meant to show that trustworthiness and plausibility assessments may legitimately interact—by saying something so implausible, the climate change denier casts doubt on her own trustworthiness with respect to her claim. Moreover, the implausibility of her claim seems to legitimately deflate our assessment of her trustworthiness with respect to other related claims. We might, for instance, also think she is not trustworthy when she praises the coal industry.

But there are limits to how far we can extend this deflated trustworthiness assessment. For example, the implausibility of her denial of anthropogenic climate change does *not* warrant a deflated trustworthiness assessment when it comes to claims about her children’s whereabouts, or what she had for lunch—we do not have reason to think she is incompetent with respect to, or likely to be lying about, claims like this. I call this the *Scope Constraint*. The Scope Constraint reflects the domain-specificity of trustworthiness: I may be trustworthy in some areas, and not in others. Rarely are people *universally* untrustworthy.

In addition to the Scope Constraint, we might posit something like a Reasonableness Constraint: only initially reasonable assessments of trustworthiness or plausibility may legitimately influence your assessment of the other ground. The exact contours of this constraint will depend on your preferred

account of reasonableness. I wish to remain neutral on these details; I suggest only that some version of a Reasonableness Constraint is plausible.

Finally, I want to posit a *Degree Constraint*. Even a reasonable plausibility or trustworthiness assessment only warrants some degree of influence on your assessment of the other ground. *Some* independent investigation into the trustworthiness and plausibility of the claim must be done. When the assessment of one ground of credibility *determines* the other ground, or otherwise exerts too much influence, the Degree Constraint is flouted. The violation of this constraint can capture what is going wrong in the runaway credibility deficits that Jones is concerned with—your initial low trustworthiness assessment causes you to give a lower plausibility assessment than you otherwise would have, which confirms your initial low trustworthiness assessment, and so on. By using the low trustworthiness assessment as (conclusive) evidence that the claim is implausible, no independent investigation into the plausibility of the claim is carried out. The same goes when the implausibility of a claim is used to conclude that a testifier is untrustworthy; the implausibility of the claim is taken to settle the matter all on its own. This is epistemic laziness that is not permitted by the Degree Constraint.

This list of constraints isn't meant to be exhaustive, but to give a sense for the limits on legitimate interaction between assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility; there are, presumably, further constraints that could be provided, and the details could be more fully worked out. This rough sketch is enough for my purposes; what matters is that when we flout restraints like this, we make an epistemic mistake. This mistake consists in making it *too difficult for a testifier to convey knowledge to us*.<sup>25</sup>

A low trustworthiness assessment typically requires that the testifier provide more evidence than a more trustworthy testifier would need to provide. Suppose, for example, that someone had recently lied to you about whether it was raining outside or not. If they now come to you and assert that it's raining, you might reasonably require more evidence than just their word that it's raining (you might require corroborating testimony, or that they show you their wet hat, etc.). In contrast, if someone

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<sup>25</sup> This may seem like a *moral* mistake, rather than an epistemic mistake. In calling this an epistemic mistake, all I mean to do is call attention to the fact that a speaker has been harmed in their capacity as a knower. So, where epistemic injustice is a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower, an epistemic mistake *harms* someone in their capacity as a knower. The next section considers when this harm amounts to a *wrong*, and so can be considered an epistemic injustice rather than a mere epistemic mistake.

who had *not* recently deceived you about the weather came and told you that it was raining, you might believe them on their word alone.

A low plausibility assessment works similarly: when someone testifies to something implausible, their testimony is *harder to believe*—they will, at least usually, need to have more or stronger evidence than someone testifying to something more plausible. Thus, lower credibility assessments make it more difficult for testifiers to transmit knowledge. When we violate the constraints on legitimate influence between assessments of credibility, we wrongly deflate our overall credibility assessment. This, then, makes it more difficult for the testifier to transmit knowledge to us than it ought to be. This is our epistemic mistake.

#### **4.2.4 From Epistemic Mistake to Epistemic Injustice**

Of course, not all epistemic mistakes are epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007, pp. 21-22). We regularly assign less trustworthiness to speakers than they deserve; this is always an epistemic mistake, but it is not always an epistemic injustice. These trustworthiness deflations rise to the level of injustice when the *reason* for the trustworthiness deflation is prejudice (Fricker, p. 22). Similarly, there are many experiences for which we lack the conceptual tools necessary to understand those experiences. Insofar as we are unable to make sense of these experiences, we are worse off, epistemically, than we would be if we had those conceptual tools. But the absence of these tools only rises to the level of an injustice when the *reason* we lack these tools is systemic prejudice (Fricker, p. 152).

So, does the illegitimate influence of an assessment of one ground of credibility on the assessment of the other ground ever rise to the level of an epistemic *injustice* and not merely a noteworthy epistemic mistake? I argue that it does.

We might think that this kind of illegitimate influence rises to the level of an epistemic injustice whenever the initial implausibility assessment or untrustworthiness assessment is the result of prejudice. In cases like this, unjustly low assessments of trustworthiness or plausibility do even *more* damage than they would have had they been reigned in. Suppose, for instance, that a racist's cops unjustly low trustworthiness assessment of a Black male testifier is allowed to influence his assessment of the plausibility of that testifier's claim. This influence allows the cop's racism to doubly disadvantage the testifier—it not only unjustly affects the cop's assessment of his

trustworthiness, but does further damage insofar as it affects his plausibility assessment. We might think this further damage constitutes an additional epistemic injustice.

Alternatively, we might think that this is a case that features one epistemic injustice (testimonial injustice) and another mere epistemic mistake. This mistake may compound the harms of testimonial injustice, but it does not count as an additional injustice.

I remain neutral here. I think either interpretation is plausible, so long as we acknowledge that, if it's not an additional epistemic injustice in cases like this, there's still an epistemic dynamic here worth taking note of. But I also think that, even if this is a case of this kind of epistemic injustice, it is not a central case, or an exemplar (though, I emphasize, this does not mean it is an unimportant epistemic misstep). Here's what I propose we consider to be the "central cases": cases in which the available epistemic resources are structured so as to *encourage* the illegitimate influence of the assessment of one ground of credibility on the assessment of the other, and the epistemic resources are structured this way as a result of systemic prejudice. In these cases, the illegitimate influence can be said to be somehow *caused* by prejudice, and so rises from a mere epistemic mistake to a full-fledged epistemic injustice. In the next section, I argue that rape myths function in this way.

### 4.3 Case Study: **R v. Ghomeshi**

Consider the following case:

**R v. Ghomeshi:** Jian Ghomeshi was a Canadian celebrity and the host of a popular radio show on CBC. In November of 2014, Ghomeshi was fired from his position at CBC after his bosses were presented with graphic evidence that he had physically assaulted his girlfriend. After Ghomeshi was fired from his job, more than ten women alleged that he had sexually assaulted them in the past decade (Kingston 2016). Three of these complainants took their allegations to court in 2016, where Ghomeshi was charged with four counts of sexual assault and one count of choking. (2016 ONCJ 155). Ghomeshi was cleared of all charges.

The judge, William Horkins, cleared Ghomeshi because he believed the defense had cast adequate doubt on the victims' credibility.

The three complainants were made to try their cases separately. This was significant; typically, the cases would have been tried together, and the similarities between the three women's allegations would have counted as evidence against Ghomeshi. Tried separately, this evidence was unavailable.

The complainants were made to try their cases separately because the defense introduced text messages and Facebook messages exchanged between the three women as evidence of possible collusion (Kingston, 2016). In the messages, the women discussed the impact Ghomeshi had on their lives and, in one, vowed to “sink the prick” because he sexually assaulted them (Kingston, 2016).

These messages could only be interpreted as evidence of collusion if seen through a lens of distrust. Without the distortion of distrust, these messages might actually be considered evidence in the women’s favor. This suggests that Horkins began the case with a low initial trustworthiness assessment.

Once the defense had the three cases tried separately, their strategy was to undermine the victims’ credibility. For the sake of space, I will focus on only one of the three women, Lucy DeCoutere, but all three women had their credibility attacked in similar ways.

One way the defense discredited DeCoutere was by focusing on the narrative structure of her claim. In his verdict, Horkins claimed that when DeCoutere recounted the assault, the details often shifted: sometimes she said Ghomeshi slapped her first, sometimes she said he choked her first. This, he said, made it hard to trust her account of the events.<sup>26</sup>

Another way the defense discredited DeCoutere was by criticizing her for omitting information in her initial report to the police. DeCoutere did not initially reveal to the police that she had kissed Ghomeshi before he began to assault her, that she had kissed him goodbye on the night that he assaulted her, or that she later sent him flowers to thank him for taking her out—this information was all given later. DeCoutere claimed that she didn’t think it was relevant; when she first talked to the police, she focused on the details of her assault, not on what had happened before or after (2016 ONCJ 155). But Horkins claimed that he could not believe that “someone who was choked as a part of a sexual assault, would consider kissing sessions with the assailant both before and after the assault not worth mentioning when reporting the matter to the police” (2016 ONCJ 155).<sup>27</sup> Further, he

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<sup>26</sup> For interesting discussions about why rape victims’ credibility shouldn’t be determined by the consistency of their stories, see “Consistency Shouldn’t Be the Test of Truth in Sexual Assault Cases” (2019) by Linda Alcoff in *Aeon*, or *Aftermath* (2002) by Susan Brison.

<sup>27</sup> To be clear, what Horkins purports to find “unbelievable” is that DeCoutere, when reporting the assault to the police, didn’t disclose that she had kissed Ghomeshi both before and after the assault, or that she sent him flowers afterward. He claims that a “real” rape victim would have seen these factors as obviously relevant to the police’s investigation. In my analysis of his reasoning, I proceed as if it is DeCoutere’s omission of these details that Horkins finds implausible. It seems worth noting, though, that it seems extremely likely that what Horkins

speculated that perhaps what motivated DeCoutere’s “questionable conduct” was her role as an advocate for sexual assault victims. He admitted that he didn’t have conclusive evidence for this, but maintained that it was still a “live question” (2016 ONCJ 155).

Horkins’ assessment that DeCoutere’s “shifting narrative” made her difficult to trust seems to be an instance of distrust being self-fulfilling. This minimal shift in details does not reasonably undermine DeCoutere’s trustworthiness. This degree of variation seems to be well within the bounds of what is, in normal circumstances, understandable, and DeCoutere was testifying to an event that happened *a decade ago*—it would hardly be surprising if she couldn’t remember whether Ghomeshi slapped her or choked her first, but *did* remember that he did both. However, if you approach her narrative through a lens of distrust—and so are prone to seeking out and fixating on inconsistencies, and overlooking explanations of those inconsistencies, as Jones claims—then the shifting details may be taken to undermine her trustworthiness.

Horkins’ lens of distrust, besides exacerbating his assessment of DeCoutere’s untrustworthiness, also seems to color his assessment of the plausibility of her claim. He is explicit that he thinks it “unbelievable” that a victim of sexual assault would omit that she kissed her assailant before and after the assault, or that she sent him flowers afterward. His comment suggests that he thinks her behavior is out of line with what a “real” sexual assault victim would do. Importantly, his assessment came *after* DeCoutere explained that she didn’t discuss kissing Ghomeshi before or after the assault or sending him flowers afterward when reporting the assault to the police because she (correctly) thought it was appropriate to focus only on the details of the assault, not on what occurred before or after. In failing to take this explanation seriously, Horkins seems to be allowing his distrust to color his assessment of the plausibility of her claim.

This is already evidence that Horkins allowed his plausibility and trustworthiness assessments to feed off of each other. However, most incriminating for Horkins is his speculation that perhaps what explains DeCoutere’s “questionable conduct” is her role as a sexual assault advocate. Here, his assessment that her story is implausible is explicitly being allowed to influence his assessment of her trustworthiness—rather than investigating, on independent grounds, the plausibility of her claims, he simply believes that DeCoutere is lying instead.

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*actually* finds implausible is that a “real” rape victim would kiss her assailant before and after the assault, or send him flowers afterward. However, since all he explicitly claims to find unbelievable is her failure to disclose these facts, this is all I discuss. Either way, my analysis applies, and rape myths are unjustly impacting his assessment of the case.



This influence is illegitimate. First, Horkins' initial assessment that her claim is implausible is unreasonable. DeCoutere has explained why she omitted those details when reporting to the police—she was reporting only those details relevant to the assault. Her omission of those details is not “astonishing”.

Further, and more importantly, Horkins' reasoning seems to exhibit the pattern of runaway credibility deflation identified by Jones. He approached the case with distrust, as evidenced by his dismissal of potentially corroborating evidence. This distrust, plausibly, colored his assessments of the plausibility of DeCoutere's claims. Then, his assessments that her claims were implausible *confirmed* his initial assessment that DeCoutere was untrustworthy. This is exactly the pattern of runaway credibility deflation identified by Jones, and it makes it too difficult for DeCoutere to receive uptake.

This illegitimate reasoning is a central case of the kind of injustice that I have identified. Rape myth acceptance leaves people with an unjustly narrow conception of rape, which makes them likely to deem most rape allegations implausible because they fail to conform with their expectations of “real” rape. Rape myths also contend that women often *lie* about rape. Since this is a common belief, it coheres well with our background knowledge. Thus, when we hear an “astonishing” sexual assault case, and are searching for a way to make sense of it, it will be easier to accept that the victim is simply lying than it will be to accept that most rapes defy our distorted expectations. This means that rape myths encourage hearers to, upon hearing an astonishing case, suspect the veracity of the victim rather than seriously consider, on independent grounds, whether or not her claim is plausible. This kind of injustice goes beyond the wrongs done by hermeneutical and testimonial injustice—this injustice leaves some victims who come forward with a nearly insurmountable credibility deficit caused by the unjust interaction between assessments of trustworthiness and plausibility.

#### **4.4 Hasty Acceptance**

In the case just discussed, the victims' credibility was unjustly deflated because their assaults failed to align with the judge's expectations and he approached the testifiers with distrust. I now want to suggest that violations of the constraints identified can result in unjust credibility *inflation*, and so can explain what goes wrong in those cases where we believe an allegation on too little evidence.

A catastrophized conception of rape only works to make those cases we deem *non-catastrophic* difficult to conceptualize as rape. There are, however, cases that we readily recognize as catastrophic; these cases will not be rendered implausible by a catastrophized conception of rape. Whether a case is plausible will depend in large part on whether we are capable of seeing the accused as *monstrous* (recall: if the accused isn't monstrous, we may be led to an exonerating *modus tollens* inference). Many factors influence who we are capable of conceptualizing as a monster. Here I will restrict my consideration to the role race plays in structuring who we can picture as capable of rape.

The myth of the black rapist ascribes to black men *irrepressible, animalistic* sexual urges, thus making it seem like black men are more likely (or even very likely) to rape. This myth arose in the late 1870s as justification for ongoing lynchings (Davis, 1981, p. 186), and it has been difficult to shake. Many feminist scholars writing in the 1970s and 1980s, like Susan Brownmiller and Jean MacKellar, invoke the myth in their work on rape, suggesting that Black men are more likely to rape than white men (Davis, p. 178). As I have discussed, Dylann Roof invoked the myth as he shot 9 black men and women at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Bouie, 2015). In February 2019, Liam Neeson discussed his reaction to discovering a close friend of his had been raped—upon hearing that she had been raped by a black man, he roamed the streets with a club, looking for *any* black man so that he could kill him. This reaction—the thought that any black man will do—only makes sense if all Black men are seen as rapists, and so are all are seen as equally guilty. In other words, Neeson saw this rape as having been committed by Black men *generically*; he was attributing to Black men, as a class, the essence of being a rapist.

The myth of the black rapist works to unjustly position black men as plausible rapists (and, so, plausibly monstrous). Because they are positioned as plausible rapists, allegations that they have raped someone can seem unjustly plausible. Moreover, black men are vulnerable to testimonial injustice—if, as Medina has argued, trustworthiness is comparative and contrastive, a trustworthiness deficit suffered by a black man can result in a relative credibility *excess* for women (Medina, 2011, 2013). So, white, cis, able-bodied women's allegations, in addition to seeming (potentially) unjustly plausible, may also seem more trustworthy than Black men's denials. Since the white woman who accuses a black man has both an unjust testimonial advantage *and* benefits from an unjustly inflated plausibility assessment, I suggest that we may see the reverse of what was seen in the Horkins case—rather than having runaway credibility *deflations*, we have may have runaway credibility *inflations*: the plausibility of the accusation may confirm the initial assessment that the white woman is a trustworthy testifier (relative to the black man, anyway), which may in turn reconfirm the plausibility

of the allegation. This dynamic, then, might explain why we are so quick to believe some rape allegations—rather than investigating, on independent grounds, whether what is alleged is true, we allow our trustworthiness assessments and plausibility assessments to feed off of each other, resulting in unjust certainty that the allegation is true.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to provide an account of the functioning of rape myths that takes seriously the unjust cultural tendency to dismiss women’s allegations out of hand, while also recognizing that this tendency is not monolithic—allegations that black men have raped white women are often met with deadly seriousness. My account of rape myths makes room for both of these issues by emphasizing the role catastrophizing myths play in contemporary rape culture. These myths, I argue, work *with* the minimizing myths to leave us with a distorted, overly narrow conception of “real” rape. While we vigorously condemn this small minority of rapes, the vast majority we tolerate by falsely deeming them not really rape.

My account of the epistemic injustice rape myths enable also makes room for both of these issues. The injustice I’ve identified concerns the ways in which our distorted trustworthiness and plausibility assessments can illegitimately feed off of each other in ways that foreclose genuine investigation into the allegations at hand. Whether runaway credibility deficit benefits the accused or the victim depends on the details of the sexual assault, and how they fit with our catastrophized conception of rape and relative trustworthiness assessments.

The account of rape myths I’ve provided makes it clear that we can take seriously *both* that there are serious obstacles to women being believed, and that there are serious issues with believing accusations too quickly. Indeed, my account suggests that these two issues are *related*. What we are willing to believe, and what we cannot bring ourselves to believe, are both informed by rape myths. Both directions of this injustice need to be addressed if we are to decrease the obstacles women face when they come forward, without increasing the obstacles faced by black men.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

My goal in this dissertation has been to reconsider the prospects of a purist feminist epistemology. I focused specifically on feminist arguments that rejected purism for *political* reasons.

In Chapter 1, I cleared up ambiguity about the purist's commitments that made purist feminist epistemology's prospects seem undeservedly dire.

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that impurist feminist epistemologists often turn to impurism after wrongly judging that the evidence won't bear out their feminist commitments. This oversight undercuts some of the motivation for turning to impurism in the first place. Moreover, I showed that the impurist arguments they defended worked by bypassing the evidence, which severed feminist inquiry from the oppressive realities feminist inquiry is meant to explain. As a result, impurists were left without the resources they needed to root out past error and to respond to the changing nature of oppression.

In Chapter 3, I targeted a different kind of anxiety. I showed how impurist interpretations of standpoint theory that entail the SEDT are being used as an excuse for ignorance and silence by privileged feminist theorists. By endorsing the SEDT, privileged feminists can offer the *illusion* that they're doing justice to intersectionality while simultaneously excusing themselves from doing the work that's required to produce intersectional thought. I defended a purist interpretation of standpoint theory that avoids lending support to the SEDT and puts more pressure on privileged feminist theorists to strive to understand oppression that they don't personally experience.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I demonstrated the stakes of using impurism to give into either of the anxious traps outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. Both traps have prevented contemporary feminist theorists from successfully challenging the white feminist tendency to overlook the racist underpinnings of contemporary rape culture. This chapter also served as a concrete illustration of a socially engaged purist epistemology.

The arguments that I've given in this dissertation do not vindicate purism. Indeed, I've said little about the theoretical viability of different purist commitments, or how plausible it is that impurists could articulate norms that would guard against the anxieties that threaten to stagnate the production of feminist thought. Pursuing these questions is one obvious direction for future research. I don't yet

have answers to these questions, but I do have a suspicion. My suspicion is that, as we pursue these questions further, we will find that nothing of political significance *really* turns on the theoretical disagreements between purists and impurists. What matters is whether the theoretical commitments of each framework are compatible with the norms that govern good inquiry, including inquiry into issues of feminist concern—and I suspect that sophisticated versions of both purism and impurism can be compatible with the norms of good inquiry. If this is right, then neither epistemological framework will be inherently more radical or more conservative than the other.

In saying this, I do not mean to make the preceding chapters seem disingenuous. I do genuinely have purist epistemological intuitions, and I think that feminist epistemologists' affinity for impurism is partially to blame for the proliferation of anxious strategies that impede good inquiry. I also hope that my arguments prompt other feminist epistemologists to reconsider their distaste for purism. But ultimately, if impurists also condemn the anxious tendencies I've emphasized and formulate impurist norms that better defend against them, this is the change that matters.

I could also be wrong that sophisticated versions of purism and impurism are equally compatible with the norms of good inquiry! For now I am unsure, and eager to think more about these issues in future work.

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