

## **Two Varieties of White Ignorance**

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**Abstract:** The concept of white ignorance refers to phenomena of not-knowing that are produced by and reinforce systems of white supremacist domination and exploitation. I distinguish two varieties of white ignorance, belief-based white ignorance and practice-based white ignorance. Belief-based white ignorance consists in an information deficit about systems of racist oppression. Practice-based white ignorance consists in unresponsiveness to the political agency of persons and groups subject to racist oppression. Drawing on the antebellum political thought of Black abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, I contend that an anti-racist politics that conceives of its epistemic task in terms of combating practice-based white ignorance offers a more promising frame for liberatory struggle. A focus on practice-based white ignorance calls for a distinctive form of humility that involves recognition of the limits of one's own political agency in relation to others, which is integral to democratic relations between free, equal, yet mutually dependent persons.

**Keywords:** White Ignorance, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Humility, Democratic Theory

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In a 2019 *New York Review of Books* essay, Zadie Smith asserts that part of “[w]hat all liberation movements want, surely, is comprehension and compassion.” This demand is a point both about the means and ends of liberation. Liberation movements mobilize and organize the public to dismantle systems of oppression in part by instilling understanding about who and how these systems dominate and exploit, and the motivations and capacities of those who are struggling for their freedom. But, in addition to this important instrumental point, the erosion of oppression also partly consists in the cultivation of mutual understanding and shared commitment among people estranged from and pitted against one another. To the extent that struggle for liberation is a struggle to live together in ways conducive to the flourishing of all, coming to know and be known by one another is itself an integral element of that struggle.<sup>1</sup>

The estrangement that liberation movements seek to overcome is not arbitrary, but reflects structures of domination and exploitation in a polity. The concept of white ignorance captures the estrangement produced by patterns of white supremacist domination and exploitation. Charles Mills coined and characterized the concept as a species of “not-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race— white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications— plays a crucial causal role” (Mills 2007). As Annette Martín argues, while white ignorance can manifest in willful refusal to understand or in faulty patterns of reasoning, these forms of ignorance are always

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that the goal of all emancipatory projects is to forge civic fellowship among all members of an oppressive polity. Frequently, emancipatory projects involve the marginalization or removal of at least some oppressors from the polity— colonial powers, exploitative oligarchs, incorrigible racists. But the task of dismantling oppression is often at the same time the task of forging bonds among fractured elements of the polity.

embedded in social structures of white racial domination that are themselves reinforced by these forms of ignorance (Martín 2021). For instance, de jure or de facto segregation, patterns of inquiry (e.g. medical research) that speak exclusively to the interests of racially privileged populations, and education policies that reinforce whitewashed national mythologies obscure the existence and effects of white racial domination— primarily, although by no means exclusively, from white members of a community— and thereby enable the persistence of racially unjust social structures (Alcoff 2007; Kinney & Bright 2021; Medina 2012; Outlaw 2007; Spelman 2007; Woomer 2019). Dismantling systems of racist oppression requires the dissolution of white ignorance, both because white ignorance impedes persons’ participation in anti-racist struggle and because it is impossible for persons to relate as civic fellows so long as some of them view others through a radically distorted lens.

In this paper, I show that we can distinguish two different sorts of epistemic failures that fall under the banner of white ignorance. On the one hand, white ignorance can refer to an information deficit in persons’ beliefs concerning systems of racist oppression and the experience of those exploited by these systems— that, for example, white Americans do not know what it is like to be Black in America. When cast in these terms, white ignorance is rectified by instilling true beliefs about systems of racist oppression and the experience of those exploited by these systems— by instilling, for example, an accurate sense of what it like to be Black in America. On the other hand, white ignorance can refer to a *practical* failure to comport oneself in ways that recognize and respond to the agency of those exploited by racist systems of oppression-- a failure, for example, to engage with Black Americans as full fellow participants in the social and political life of the polity. When cast in these terms, white ignorance is addressed through a reorientation of civic habits to reflect both the agency and vulnerability of those exploited by racist systems of oppression— through, for example, patterns in social and political life that reflect Black Americans’ standing as active

participants in the polity.

My argument in this paper is not that one of these conceptions of white ignorance is more faithful to the phenomenon. Both pick out aspects of the epistemic estrangement produced by white supremacy that anti-racist liberation struggles must combat. Moreover, to distinguish between belief-based white ignorance and practice-based white ignorance is not to imply that beliefs and practices do not influence one another. The distinction between belief-based and practice-based white ignorance points to the different forms of intervention that are most salient when political actors engaged in anti-racist politics prioritize addressing information deficits about systems of racist oppression or civic habits unresponsive to the agency of people subject to racist oppression. Indeed, as we will see in examples below, efforts to rectify information deficits about systems of racist domination do reshape the practices of whitely ignorant persons. But, as I will argue, interventions that primarily target information deficit are liable to reproduce, rather than eliminate, practices constitutive of racist hierarchies.<sup>2</sup>

My central contention is that the practice-based conception of white ignorance provides a more generative basis for anti-racist politics than the belief-based conception. An anti-racist politics guided by the belief-based conception is prone to recapitulating the very sorts of racist hierarchies that it aims to combat, because it casts the demand to overcome one's white ignorance as a demand to gain expertise over the experience of those from whom one is estranged by racist oppression.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the practice-based conception's demand to recognize and respond to the agency of those from whom one is estranged is not a demand for expertise; it is, rather, a demand to reshape one's civic habits to more fully embody ideals of democratic community (Allen 2009). On the practice-

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<sup>2</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying discussion on this point.

<sup>3</sup> I take this politics of expertise in anti-racist struggle to be closely related to the politics of deference that Olufemi O. Táíwò critiques in (Táíwò 2022): one defers to the standpoint-based knowledge of another until one gains epistemic mastery over the other's standpoint.

based conception, white ignorance is not a problem to be solved, such that we overcome and are done with it. Instead, recognition of one's white ignorance is itself, in politics indelibly shaped by white supremacist domination, partially constitutive of our relating to one another as democratic citizens.

As I will demonstrate below, these two conceptions of white ignorance are operative in narratives written and deployed by American abolitionists in the antebellum period. In particular, we can identify these conceptions of white ignorance in the contrasting ways in which abolitionist narratives mobilize humility in their white readers. Narratives including Frederick Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1999 [1845]), and Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), demand that their white readers recognize deficiencies in their knowledge of the slave system, which these narratives are designed to help rectify. In these narratives, humility is conceived as the recognition of a gap in what one knows that ought to be filled; humility is thus an appropriate attitude only so long as this gap in one's knowledge persists.

By contrast, in Frederick Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1987 [1855]), and Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), white readers are confronted with the limits of their knowledge as a way of reorienting themselves towards enslaved and nominally free Black Americans as knowers, actors, and authors of their own stories. In these narratives, humility is conceived as a recognition of the limits of one's own ability to know, judge, and act that is at the same time an acknowledgment of the power of others to know, judge, and act. The practice-based conception of white ignorance casts humility not as an instrumental stage in our pursuit to know and be known, but as something partially constitutive of democratic political relations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> By putting antebellum abolitionists in conversation with contemporary political theory and philosophy, I do not mean to imply that today's theoretical apparatus of white ignorance sits ready-

Iris Marion Young advances a related thesis about the relationship between ignorance, humility, and understanding in political communities fractured by oppression in “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought” (1997).<sup>5</sup> Young challenges ‘symmetrical’ models of how members of a polity ought to relate reciprocally to one another (Benhabib 1991, Habermas 1984). On these symmetrical reciprocity models, the struggle to know and be known in political life is won when members of a polity are able to imaginatively inhabit, and thereby directly comprehend, the perspectives of their fellow members. Young articulates an alternative, asymmetrical version of the epistemic reciprocity requisite for a just polity. On Young’s asymmetrical reciprocity model, the struggle to know and be known in political life is won by “acknowledg[ing] and tak[ing] account of the other” without claiming epistemic mastery over the other’s perspective (1997, 343). In a relationship of asymmetric reciprocity, my understanding of you is always partial, revisable, and inextricably dependent upon what you communicate to me. For Young, recognition of this is embodied in attitudes of humility and wonder.

By turning to the political thought of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, we are able to elaborate upon and revise Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity in two key ways. First, Douglass and Jacobs show that humility focused on one’s lack of knowledge about systems of racist domination can all too easily embody an aspiration to mastery over the perspective of people subject

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made for us to find in these earlier thinkers. I also do not intend, however, to engage with Douglass and Jacobs as mere examples to illustrate a theoretical point independent of their own political thought. Rather, this paper is an occasion to think with Douglass and Jacobs about a set of questions concerning anti-racist politics in a context distant from, but by no means alien to, our own. My interpretation, if successful, is one that we could imagine Douglass and Jacobs by and large endorsing as resonant with their own views.

<sup>5</sup> (Bromell 2021, 67-68) interprets Douglass as employing a version of Young’s concept of asymmetrical reciprocity. I claim that Douglass, with Jacobs, offer an alternative mode of relation to Young’s asymmetrical reciprocity that is essentially embodied in action—in the ways in which members of a polity comport themselves with one another.

to such domination. A specific form of humility is needed in the struggle to know and be known that reflects the essential limits of one's own political agency in relation to others. Second, Douglass and Jacobs' emphasis on how white ignorance manifests directly in the practical relations between white and Black Americans points toward a do-first, rather than learn-first, anti-racist politics, on which people estranged by racist domination learn to relate to one another as civic fellows through changes in their civic habits, rather than undo systems of racist domination by rectifying gaps in their knowledge.

### **Belief-Based and Practice-Based White Ignorance**

In his original formulation of the concept, Mills characterizes white ignorance as not-knowing that is produced by, and itself helps to reproduce, systems of racial domination and exploitation. Many scholars have elaborated Mills' initial characterization of white ignorance in terms of doxastic states— that is, as concerning we (fail to) *believe*. Bayrún García characterizes white ignorance as “a lack of true belief or false belief that obtains because of whites' dominant-group status” (2019, 258). Martín similarly characterizes white ignorance in terms of “false belief” or a “lack of belief” about “matters pertaining to race and racial inequality” (2021, 867-68). Spelman catalogues a variety of propositional attitudes under the banner of white ignorance, such as “W does not believe that *g* is true and does not want to believe that *g* is true,” and “R does not believe that *c* is false but very much wants to believe that *c* is false,” where *g* and *c* are facts bearing on systems of racial domination (2007, 120, 130).

Yet some of the paradigm examples through which Charles Mills introduces the concept in “White Ignorance” are not well-captured in terms of beliefs about discrete claims or facts. Mills points to the character Captain Amasa Delano in Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*, who, in spite of the overwhelming evidence around him, is unable recognize that he has boarded a ship in the midst of a slave revolt; in particular, the actions of the revolt's leader, Babo, toward the ship's

deposed captain appear to Delano as devotion rather than lightly disguised detention (Melville 2017 [1856]; Mills 2007, 19). While part of Captain Delano's ignorance consists in a number of false beliefs he has about the state of the ship he has boarded (e.g. that the majority of the white crew died in a storm, that slaves on deck are wielding hatches in order to clean them for sale), these false beliefs are secondary to a more systematic defect in his perspective: he cannot cognize and interact with the Black people aboard the ship as agents who act in concert with one another on the basis of their own judgments.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for Mills, illustrates what it is like to be perceived as lacking such agency (Mills 2007, 19). It is, Ellison's protagonist asserts, to be rendered invisible: "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination— indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison 1995 [1952], 3). Thus, for instance, the sharpest moments of friction between Ellison's Invisible Man and the Brotherhood (typically taken as a stand-in for the American Communist Party) arise not over dispute of fact or policy, but over the Invisible Man's efforts to exercise his own judgment in ways independent of but accountable to the organization (462-78).

White ignorance, in these examples, is not a not-knowing of particular facts related to racial injustice, but a diffuse misorientation toward people subject to racial oppression. In these episodes, white characters fail to understand the Black characters with whom they interact as possessing the power to formulate visions of a shared living reflective of justice and conducive to flourishing and the capacity to advance these visions through both collaboration and contestation with others. The crux of this misorientation is not a false belief about the political agency of Black people— indeed, if we could ask them, members of the Brotherhood would surely affirm that the Invisible Man possessed the power to formulate and advance a vision of political community reflective of justice and conducive to flourishing. Rather, this misorientation is embodied in the practices of the white



characters; they comport themselves in ways that are unresponsive to the political agency of the Black characters with whom they interact. This practical unresponsiveness constitutes a form of *insensitivity* that effaces the political agency and personhood of Black people (Medina 2012 & 2016).

We can thus distinguish two varieties of white ignorance. One is belief-based; it concerns the beliefs that persons possess, or lack, about systems of racist oppression. The other is practical; it concerns how people respond to and interact with persons subject to racist oppression. My claim is not that one of these is the correct characterization of white ignorance. Both are forms of not-knowing that are produced by and reinforce systems of racial domination and exploitation. But I contend that these contrasting forms of white ignorance cast the epistemic aim of emancipatory politics— to disalienate ourselves from one another in the struggle to know and be known— in substantially different ways by prioritizing different points of epistemic intervention for anti-racist politics.

On the belief-based conception, the primary problem is that a person afflicted with white ignorance does not grasp facts about the nature of white supremacist domination: there is a gap between what this person believes and what is in fact the case. The goal in combating belief-based white ignorance, then, is to fill in this gap— to bring such a person to know the social facts concerning white supremacist domination. On the practice-based conception, the primary problem is that a person afflicted with white ignorance fails to see and respond to racially oppressed persons as possessing the power to formulate and advance visions of a just and flourishing political community: she moves through the world insensitive to the political agency of those subject to white supremacist domination. The goal in combating practice-based white ignorance, then, is to render such a person responsive to the political agency of those subject to white supremacist domination.

The emancipatory struggle to know and be known takes a very different shape in response to

each of these forms of white ignorance: what is involved in rectifying someone's information deficit concerning systems of racist oppression is different than what is involved in changing her civic habits in relation to fellow members of her polity. One tractable point of comparison is the role of humility in combating each form of white ignorance. Broadly speaking, humility is a recognition of and responsiveness to one's limits and one's dependence on others. Mark Button argues that humility is an integral aspect of how we relate to others as free and equal members of a polity, especially in our efforts to rectify injustice and forge democratic forms of political community (2005). Humility is salient in the context of white ignorance and anti-racist politics: as an entrenched form of not-knowing that one cannot address or rectify in isolation, recognition of one's white ignorance involves humble recognition of one's limits and dependence upon others.

In the following two sections, I turn to anti-slavery narratives crafted by antebellum abolitionists that illustrate the contrasting roles of humility as a response to belief-based and practice-based white ignorance. When antebellum abolitionists targeted information deficits in the white public's understanding of slavery and white supremacy, they confronted their white readers with the profound gaps in their knowledge of the conditions of slavery and the experience of the enslaved in order to render these readers responsive to the information about slavery and the enslaved transmitted by these narratives. In contrast, when antebellum abolitionists targeted the white public's insensitivity to the political agency of enslaved and nominally free Black Americans, they confronted their white readers with the limits of their own power to judge and act in order to render white readers responsive to the political agency of enslaved and nominally free Black Americans. I argue that, whereas the belief-based use of humility subscribes to an epistemic ideal of expertise that is prone to reproduce oppressive hierarchies, the practice-based use of humility is an integral element of democratic citizens' relations to one another as free and equal yet mutually dependent.

### **Humility and Belief-Based White Ignorance**

In his introduction to Frederick Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1999 [1845]), abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison identifies ignorance as the source of white Americans' "contempt of the colored race." In particular, Garrison laments:

So profoundly ignorant of the nature of slavery are many persons, that they are stubbornly incredulous whenever they read or listen to any recital of the cruelties which are daily inflicted on its victims. They do not deny that the slaves are held as property; but that terrible fact seems to convey to their minds no idea of injustice, exposure to outrage, or savage barbarity. Tell them of cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant at such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters! (x)

White Americans generally, Garrison observes, fail to understand the nature and brutality of chattel slavery: they do not know and refuse to accept evidence of violence and harm that the system inflicts upon Black people. What Garrison describes here is belief-based white ignorance. Garrison frames Douglass's story of his life as a slave as means to rectify the gap between white Americans' misapprehension of chattel slavery and its vicious, unjust reality.

In the preface to her 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe similarly characterizes Black people as "a race hitherto ignored by the associations of polite and refined society... [with] a character so essentially unlike the hard and dominate Anglo-Saxon race, as for many years to have won from it only misunderstanding and contempt" (45). While Stowe grounds this misunderstanding and contempt in an essentializing difference in 'racial characters,' she nevertheless maintains that this epistemic gap can be overcome through artistic representation of the enslaved's condition: "[t]he poet, the painter, and the artist, now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the

development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood" (45). Such representations have the power, Stowe maintains, to "awaken [in white readers] sympathy and feeling for the African race... [by] show[ing] their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it" (46). On Stowe's picture, racist contempt is dissolved through narrative's power to alleviate white readers' ignorance about the condition of enslaved.

These authors locate narrative's power to overcome belief-based white ignorance in what William Andrews calls *imaginative self-projection*. Andrews writes that in Douglass's *Narrative*, "imaginative self-projection of the reader into the text had to be the basic preparatory condition for the kind of understanding that Douglass wanted whites to derive from his story, the understanding of the individual emotional significance of the facts of a fugitive slave's life" (1986, 137). Readers of Douglass's *Narrative* are meant to take up and inhabit his perspective as a slave and fugitive through the narrative details that his autobiography supplies. Similarly, Stowe takes her fictional characters to provide white readers with detail-rich perspectives to inhabit, through which these readers will be brought to recognize the injustice of the slave system. The general picture that Garrison, Douglass (in the early stages of his abolitionist career), and Stowe offer is one on which (fictional or non-fictional) narratives supply details about the conditions of enslaved Black people which enable readers to first-personally grasp what it like to be enslaved. The empathetic understanding yielded from imaginative self-projection provides readers with accurate beliefs about the condition, interests, and capacities of enslaved people. Humility, understood as the recognition that one does not know, is cast as the requisite for imaginative self-projection: by being brought to recognize that they lack understanding of the position and experience of the enslaved, readers are put into a position to do the work to inhabit the position of the enslaved.

What the humble reader, who recognized her belief-based white ignorance, sought was an *authentic*

understanding of what it was like to be enslaved. Humility was the recognition that one did not know ‘what it was *really* like’ to be in the position of (e.g.) an enslaved Black person. Stowe urges throughout the preface to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that the details of her narrative, in spite of its being a work of fiction, are ‘authentic,’ and she eventually defends this claim in a second book, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853). More generally, as Nolan Bennett observes, the traditional function of former slaves’ narratives was to “reorient white readers’ moral compasses” by providing “empirical proof” concerning the conditions of slavery (2019, 58). In other words, these narratives sought to persuade white audiences to judge that slavery was wrong and urgent action was needed by presenting them with the experiences of the enslaved: a narrative was understood to articulate a perspective on the world for the reader to inhabit. Because former slaves’ narratives were treated as ‘empirical proof,’ it was urgent—in the eyes of many white abolitionists—to authenticate them as accurate testimony. Robert Stepto observes that this demand crystallizes into a genre he labels “authenticating narrative,” in which white abolitionists would pen prefaces, like Garrison’s, to affirm the accuracy of the narrative, and in which the narrative itself would focus on providing verifiable details (Stepto 1991).

But by orienting the reader toward her belief-based white ignorance as a gap in her knowledge to be filled by acquiring the ‘authentic’ perspectives of enslaved people, this form of humility was prone to reproduce the very sorts of racist hierarchies that these narratives aimed to combat, in ways that Black abolitionists identified. First, by demanding humility of readers in light their lack of knowledge about the slave system, these narratives cast humility as a contingent attitude that needed to persist only so long as readers continued to be ignorant. These narratives implicitly promised white readers that they could do away with their humility by internalizing the narratives’ details and doing the work of imaginative self-projection to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Stowe indeed presented herself as an epistemic ideal for her white readers to aspire to emulate in this way. Through artistic projects like hers, Stowe writes in the preface to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “[T]he heart of the dominant race, who have

been her conquerors, her hard masters, has at length been turned toward [the African race] in mercy; and it has been seen how far nobler it is in nations to protect the feeble than to oppress them" (1852, 46). Stowe takes this turn of heart to be exemplified by commitments like her own to white-led colonizationist projects and her plan for an industrial college for Black Americans headed exclusively by white instructors.

Yet these are precisely the projects Black abolitionist Martin Delany targets in a May 1853 public letter criticizing Stowe's involvement in the anti-slavery movement. Delany maintains that such colonization projects aim to ensure that Black people who emigrate remain "subservient to... white men's power," and that a white-led educational institution for Black people "creates the impression that colored persons are incapable of teaching, and only suited to *subordinate* positions" (emphasis his). Ultimately, Delany maintains, Stowe's judgment in these matters fails to abide by the principle that "no enterprise, institution, or anything else, should be commenced *for us*, or our general benefit, without *first consulting us*" (emphasis his). By failing to abide by this principle, Delany declares that Stowe "is treating us as slaves, and presupposing us all to be ignorant."

Delany's critique of Stowe takes the following shape. Stowe takes herself to have gained expertise in the condition of enslaved Black Americans, as evidenced by *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her ability as an author to craft (what she takes to be) an 'authentic' narrative. By engaging with these texts, Stowe's readers are meant to gain comparable understanding of the slave system. But by conceptualizing white ignorance as something that can be overcome in these terms, Stowe invites her white readers to take themselves as empowered to exercise political judgment on behalf of Black Americans once humility is no longer warranted. Having overcome their belief-based white ignorance, Stowe and her readers take themselves to be in a position to exercise such judgment; and indeed, in light of various other forms of epistemic and political privilege they possess in a white supremacist society, they take themselves to be in a superior position to exercise judgment about what is in Black

Americans' best interest. But what this really amounts to, Delany cautions, is the effacement of Black Americans' political agency. Stowe's call for humility as something contingent upon forms of not-knowing that can be decisively overcome amounts to an aspiration to exercise political judgment on a frictionless plane: to call the shots because one has gained expertise (i.e., mastery over) a domain of knowledge.

Second, the humble recognition that one does not know what it is like to be subject to a specific form of oppression is prone to objectify persons subject to such oppression into bodies of knowledge. Douglass develops this point in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1987 [1855]), where he criticizes practices of Garrison and his fellow abolitionists on the anti-slavery lecture circuit.

Through much of the 1840s, Douglass worked with Garrison to give lectures across the U.S. that sought to persuade the public to endorse the anti-slavery cause. Douglass, at these events, was meant to provide a narrative of his experiences as a slave as part of the Garrisonians' anti-slavery argument. But, Douglass recounts in *Bondage*, his role among the Garrisonians was severely circumscribed. Douglass was "generally introduced as a '*chattel*'— a '*thing*'— a piece of southern '*property*'— the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak" (220, emphasis his). This objectification, Douglass argues, was driven by the apparent need to persuade his audiences that before them stood an authentic escaped slave telling his story. To this end, Douglass is instructed by one of the Garrisonians to "Give us the facts... we will take care of the philosophy" (220). The Garrisonians fear that Douglass's philosophical acumen— his ability to exercise judgment in response to injustice of slavery— would undermine the audience's belief that he was in fact a formerly escaped slave telling his own story. The division of political labor the Garrisonians demarcated between Black and white abolitionists— between supplying the narrative and making the argument— reduced Douglass to a mere body of testimony, a perspective for white audiences to inhabit and make political judgments on the basis of. This division of labor marked by the Garrisonians' distinction between narrators and philosophers was

persistent and pernicious. Douglass observes that the same attitude spurred trenchant resistance to his efforts to found a Black-owned and -edited anti-slavery newspaper, the *North Star*: “My American friends looked at me with astonishment! ‘A wood-sawyer’ offering himself to the public as an editor! A slave, brought up in the very depths of ignorance, assuming to instruct the highly civilized people of the north in the principles of liberty, justice, and humanity! The thing looked absurd” (241).

Douglass’s account suggests that the pressure to render him a mere body of testimony derived from the form of humility that his audience was meant to adopt toward their own white ignorance. In recognizing that they failed to grasp what it was like to be subject to chattel slavery in the American South, Douglass’s humbled audiences (at least as conceptualized by the Garrisonians) sought out authentic perspectives on the basis of which they could gain understanding through imaginative self-projection. The humble audience expected proof that the perspective they were offered was, in fact, authentic. But this demand for proof of authenticity ultimately functioned, Douglass shows, as a disciplining constraint on Black speakers: Douglass was instructed to calibrate how he presented himself to his audiences in order to ensure that they took his perspective as authentic. The white supremacist ideology that infused his audience’s orientation towards him— even as they strove to surmount their white ignorance— pressured Douglass to efface his own political agency (as would be manifest in his arguments against slavery) so long as he responded to his audience’s humility on its own terms. Douglass’s critique of the Garrisonians is not simply that they were mistaken in how they deployed him on the anti-slavery lecture-circuit; Douglass’s critique is that the circumscription of his political agency— his reduction to a mere body of testimony— was inevitable in light of the Garrisonians’ understanding of humility as an attitude in pursuit of authenticity.

The upshot of Delany and (in his later abolitionist career) Douglass’s challenges to humble recognition of one’s belief-based white ignorance is not that lack of knowledge about systems of racist oppression are unproblematic, or that such ignorance would persist in a racially just world. Rather,



their challenges show us that when we cast belief-based white ignorance as the fundamental form of epistemic estrangement that the liberatory struggle to know and be known targets, our movements are prone to reproduce the very sorts of oppressive hierarchies they aim to combat. This is reflected in the conceptualization of humility as an attitude contingent on one's not knowing, which we can aspire to overcome. When privileged political actors become humble in this way, they orient themselves towards the marginalized not as fellow political actors, but as bodies of knowledge to be managed. Organizing across racialized difference in pursuit of knowing and being known ought not be reduced to practices through which we learn facts about one another and gain expertise in (i.e., epistemic mastery over) each other's positions in an unjust world.

### **Humility and Practice-Based White Ignorance**

In spite of these criticisms, Black American abolitionists did not generally seek to expunge humility from anti-slavery organizing in the antebellum period. Instead, Black abolitionists in the 1850s including Douglass and Harriet Jacobs recast the struggle to know and be known in the face of racist oppression *practically*, as a failure of white Americans to comport themselves in ways that reflected the political agency of Black Americans. Corresponding to this practice-based conception of white ignorance was a practical form of humility: acknowledging the political agency of Black Americans required that white Americans recognize the limits of their own political agency—for instance, in recognition that one's own judgment about what the polity should do or value is always refracted through the judgments and actions of others, that one can never simply impose her will upon the polity. Cultivating humility, and thereby acknowledging others' agency, is a matter of reorienting oneself to one's own limits through confrontation with others' political agency.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Cavell, in "The Avoidance of Love," observes that acknowledgment of another is, at the same time, acknowledgement of one's own particular and limited position in the world. Acknowledgement "requires self-revelation" which confirms one's "separateness... from others" (1969, 338).

Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1987 [1855]), and Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), it appears on first face that the authors seek to instill appropriate patterns of deference in white readers— humility about what these readers do not know. But in fact, I argue, their aim is to induce active forms of response to the author's own judgment in articulating his or her narrative. What is at issue, for Douglass and Jacobs, is not whose judgment is singularly authoritative in a given context, but how each of us should exercise judgment in relation to one another.

In a pivotal episode in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass recounts his fight with the 'slavebreaker' Edward Covey, whom Douglass overpowers in a protracted struggle.<sup>7</sup> The episode provides a rich picture of Douglass's experience throughout the fight, inviting the reader to take up his perspective as a slave standing up in his own defense. Yet in his concluding remarks to the episode, Douglass confronts his typical reader with the limits of her understanding: "He only can understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant" (1987 [1855], 151). While his vivid depiction of the fight invites the reader to take up his perspective, Douglass asserts, at the moment the reader would have taken herself to have achieved this empathetic connection, that the typical reader is not in a position to do so. In order to understand the effect of the fight on Douglass, he maintains that one must know what it is like to hazard one's life and no longer be "afraid to die" (152). This amounts to a much starker and more robust epistemic limit than that which Douglass draws when describing this episode in his first autobiography: "He can only understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody

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<sup>7</sup> For two classic analyses of the scene, which both focus on the *Narrative's* version, see (Davis 2018 [1970], esp. 127-132) and (Boxill 2018 [1997]).

arm of slavery” (1999 [1845], 68). In the *Narrative*, Douglass claims that a reader who has not herself resisted in the way that he has cannot share in his experience of satisfaction; in *Bondage*, Douglass makes the stronger claim that such a reader cannot grasp the wider orientation toward the world involved in risking one’s life in the face of oppression. The former is ignorance about a particular fact (i.e., a feeling of satisfaction), whereas the latter is ignorance of an entire practical orientation.

Whereas, in the Covey episode, Douglass cautions his readers about what they cannot know, he asserts that there are things his reader ought not know in the chapter recounting— or, rather, refusing to recount— his escape from slavery. Douglass asserts that he will not recount the episode in detail so as not to give away means that other slaves can use to escape themselves: “By stringing together a train of events and circumstances, even if I were not very explicit, the means of escape might be ascertained, and, possibly, those means be rendered, thereafter, no longer available to the liberty-seeking children of bondage I have left behind me. No anti-slavery man can wish me to do anything favoring such results” (1987 [1855], 195). He goes on to condemn the practice, common among abolitionists, of publishing detailed accounts of successful efforts of Black Americans to escape from slavery:

In publishing such accounts, the anti-slavery man addresses the slaveholder, *not the slave*; he stimulates the former to greater watchfulness, and adds to his facilities for capturing his slave. We owe something to the slaves, south of Mason and Dixon’s line, as well as to those north of it; and, in discharging the duty of aiding the latter, on their way to freedom, we should be careful to do nothing which would be likely to hinder the former, in making their escape from slavery. (196-97)

Douglass confronts his audience with a limit of their understanding: they do not know, and will not

learn, the details of how Douglass himself escaped.<sup>8</sup>

Nick Bromell observes that in both *Bondage* and many of his speeches in the 1850s, Douglass addresses his audiences with a “simultaneous evocation of both human brotherhood and human estrangement” (2021, 94).<sup>9</sup> In addressing white audiences, Douglass both appeals to points of commonality— shared humanity, citizenship, or a commitment to justice— and confronts them with the alterity of whiteness and Blackness in America. For instance, in an 1861 speech at the A.M.E. Zion Church in Rochester, Douglass in quick succession both states that “I cannot claim to speak on this great [anti-slavery] movement of the great North, as one of the privileged class of the American people” and that “[w]hile... I may speak as a man, and view the great subject which now comes before us, as one of the oppressed, I can also speak as an American” (*FDP* 1.2:425). Bromell compellingly argues that Douglass leverages this rhetorical tension between brotherhood and estrangement to “elicit whites’ involuntary identification with a Black orator” while at the same time “underscoring the difference that lay between them” (2021, 79). For Bromell, the tension in Douglass’s rhetoric reflects the dual commonality and difference of white and Black Americans, and aims to attune his audience to both of these elements of their relations to one another.

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8 Douglass does offer a similar criticism in the *Narrative*, writing that “those open declarations are a positive evil to the slaves remaining, who are seeking to escape. They do nothing towards enlightening the slave, whilst they do much towards enlightening the master. They stimulate him to greater watchfulness, and enhance his power to capture his slave. We owe something to the slaves south of the line as well as to those north of it; and in aiding the latter on their way to freedom, we should be careful to do nothing which would be likely to hinder the former from escaping from slavery” (1999 [1845], 89). We should take this passage, I think, as evidence that Douglass began to develop a critique of anti-slavery politics that targets belief-based white ignorance even as he crafts a narrative for this purpose under Garrison’s direction. This critique is, in turn, articulated in its fullest form in *Bondage*.

9 Illustrative examples of Douglass’s speeches include “Persecution on Account of Faith, Persecution on Account of Color” (1851, *Frederick Douglass Papers* 1.2:291-310), “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852, *FDP* 1.2:359-388), “A Nation in the Midst of a Nation” (1853; *FDP* 1.2:423-440), “An Inside View of Slavery” (1855, *FDP* 1.3:5-13), “The Dred Scott Decision” (1857; *FDP* 1.3:163-183), and “Citizenship and the Spirit of Caste” (1858, *FDP* 1.3:208-212).

I contend that the connection between brotherhood and estrangement runs even deeper in Douglass's political thought in the 1850s. The tension Douglass draws between brotherhood and estrangement embodies a claim about what it means to relate to one another as political fellows through difference produced by systems of racist oppression. For Douglass, we relate to one another as shared members of a political community that has been fractured by oppression precisely through humble recognition of and responsiveness to our estrangement from one another. When Douglass confronts his white audiences with the limits of their understanding— of what they cannot know or will not be told about his experience as a slave, for instance— he is not ascribing a necessary limit to their potential to be in fellowship with Douglass and Black Americans. Rather, humble acknowledgment of this limit is itself constitutive of fellowship. Humility here functions not as a constraint upon but as part of the fabric of political community.

The idea that acknowledgment of one's limits is a key constitutive element of how persons related to one another as political fellows is a more general commitment of Douglass's political philosophy in this period. It is illustrated in Douglass's description in *Bondage* of his relationship to a group of fellow slaves in the lead-up to an escape attempt in 1836. In a series of covert meetings, Douglass states that he “did my very *best* to imbue the minds of my dear friends with my own views and feelings” (1987 [1855], 168, emphasis his). Douglass does not merely hope that the judgments of others will happen to align with his— he *organizes* to align their judgment. But his efforts are not to impose his own will on his fellows; Douglass's aim is to, as he puts it, ‘instigate,’ his fellows' own judgment to pursue freedom.<sup>10</sup> At their covert meetings, the group “talked the matter over; told our hopes and fears, and the difficulties discovered or imagined; and, like men of sense, we counted the

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10 Douglass describes himself as “instigator of the high crime” p. 171. Douglass's relationship to his fellows, in terms of instigating judgment, is characterized by Gooding-Williams as “politics without rule” (2009, 184-87).

cost of the enterprise to which we were committing ourselves” (1987 [1855], 171). Through these conversations, each member of the group comes to commit himself to the endeavor.

Douglass does not give us a picture of a highly sanitized deliberative sphere in which persons weigh reasons in isolation from one another. Through his conversations with his band of brothers, Douglass forged social bonds of trust and loyalty that shaped their judgment (1987 [1855], 165). Reasons and bonds together shape, rather than determine, the judgment of each member of the plot. Douglass writes that “we were committing ourselves” to the plot because each member judged to commit himself. Recognition of this fact, in Douglass’s view, is integral to understanding one another as possessing political agency. While I may appeal to reason, emotion, social connection, or aspiration to get you to judge and act in a particular way, your act of judgment, grounded in your power to formulate and advance visions of how we will live together, is itself nevertheless is opaque to me.

This is the point that Douglass means for his reader to recognize when he declares that she cannot fully grasp what it was like for Douglass to hazard his life for the sake of freedom in his fight with Covey, or that he will not divulge the details of his successful escape plot— he means for his reader to recognize that his will is not, and cannot, be hers. To recognize this fact is to respond to the judgments of the enslaved as manifestations of their inherently opaque political agency. As Andrews observes, throughout his antebellum narrative writings Douglass sought to overcome white readers’ disinterested perspective, on which their judgment about slavery was informed by a set of un-perspectival facts: “Douglass did not want to indulge his reader in a servile way; he wanted his reader to learn something about his or her responsibility to the text,” and, through this, to learn something about the nature of his or her responsibility to enslaved and nominally free Black Americans as free and equal, but mutually dependent, political actors (1986, 137). For Douglass, what is necessary to forge bonds of understanding between political fellows estranged by racist

oppression is a shift in what Nicholas Buccola terms the ‘moral ecology’ in which members of the polity are situated: the concrete, and often quotidian, patterns of interaction between persons, in which our understanding of each other’s agency is reflected into our own practical judgment and action (2012, 101-127).

Writing in the 1850s from beyond the demands for authenticity built into the Garrisonians’ framework, Douglass casts the task of knowing and being known as a member of a political community in terms of acknowledgment of, or practical responsiveness to, one another’s agency. The paradigmatic form of white ignorance that impedes such understanding is itself practical. The epistemic failure of whites that Douglass points to is not that they do not know what it like to risk their life for freedom or how to escape from slavery, but that they comport themselves as if they do— effacing the judgment and agency of Black Americans who possess and act on such knowledge. For Douglass, the sense of humility integral to addressing white ignorance is an acknowledgment of the distinctness and opacity of others’ political judgment and agency through a recognition of the limits of one’s own. While we can strive to instigate others to adopt our judgments and normative visions, such humility is necessary to avoid comporting ourselves in ways that mistake our judgment for theirs. This is a picture of politics as *organizing* free yet mutually dependent equals, rather than *managing* subordinate others.

The mechanics of this reorientation towards others as distinct and opaque sources of political judgment that addresses practice-based white ignorance through humility is most fully theorized in the antebellum period by Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).<sup>11</sup> The narrative’s epigraph, attributed to “a woman of North Carolina,” identifies epistemic estrangement as one barrier to whites’ involvement in the anti-slavery movement: "Northerners

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<sup>11</sup> Jacobs refers to herself, as well as all other main characters in the narrative, pseudonymously.

know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that world, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown." Jacobs frames the aim of her narrative as to combat this estrangement, especially by attuning white women to the condition of enslaved Black women:

I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two million of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations (1861, 6)

Jacobs intends for her narrative to cultivate understanding and compassion in her readers, which will spark concrete support for the anti-slavery cause. But as the final line itself signals, there is an intrinsic challenge to this project: the estrangement that Jacobs intends to address is itself a product of white Northern women's lack of experience of slavery's conditions. Jacobs' narrative, is crafted to address white women's lack of experience of these conditions and thereby spur them to anti-slavery action (Yellen 1991, 275-76).

If Jacobs were thinking of this problem along the lines of Garrison and Stowe, she would have conceived of her narrative as a *substitute* for experience. Indeed, Jacobs invites this reading by casting her narrative as testimony through which white readers gain greater understanding and affective appreciation for the condition of enslaved Black women.<sup>12</sup> In her reading of *Incidents in Scenes of Subjection*, for instance, Saidiya Hartman maintains that the narrative's aim is to "transform the

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12 For a detailed analysis of Jacobs' account of the distinctive forms of sexualized violence to which enslaved Black women were subjected, see (Threadcraft 2016, 42-55).



reader's incredulity and resistance into identification and empathy" (1997, 107). Jacobs' story appears to present a perspective for readers to inhabit through imaginative projection, and thereby stands in for an experience of the conditions of slavery.

But at pivotal moments in *Incidents*, Jacobs despairs at the possibility of forging an anti-slavery movement through empathetic understanding. While describing the role of sexual violence in the tyranny and oppression to which slaves are subjected, Jacobs laments that:

The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe. Surely, if you credited one half the truths that are told you concerning the helpless millions suffering in this cruel bondage, you at the north would not help to tighten the yoke. You surely would refuse to do for the master, on your own soil, the mean and cruel work which trained bloodhounds and the lowest class of whites do for him at the south. (45)

While Jacobs begins by noting the limits of her capacities in capturing the wrongs and horrors of slavery, she quickly observes that even if she were able to adequately articulate these wrongs and horrors, white Northerners would not take Jacobs at her word, for the details of slavery are 'greater than [they] would willingly believe.' Jacobs runs up against testimonial injustice—her readers will not come to inhabit her experience because they do not believe her narrative (Fricker 2007).

Jacobs develops this problem further in describing the funeral of her Aunt Nancy:

Northern travellers, passing though the place, might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the 'patriarchal institution;' a touching proof of the attachment between slaveholders and their servants; and tender-hearted Mrs. Flint would have confirmed this impression, with handkerchief at her eyes. *We* could have told them a different story. We could have given them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings, that would have touched their hearts, if they *had* any hearts to feel for the colored people. We could have told them how

the poor old slave-mother had toiled, year after year, to earn eight hundred dollars to buy her son Phillip's right to his own earnings; and how that same Phillip paid the expenses of the funeral, which they regarded as doing so much credit to the master. We could also have told them of a poor, blighted young creature, shut up in a living grave for years, to avoid the tortures that would be inflicted on her, if she ventured to come out and look on the face of her departed friend. (222-23, emphasis hers)

Jacobs imagines white northerners misapprehending the character and context of Aunt Nancy's funeral because they would fail to consult, or consider the perspective of, enslaved people in the community. Instead, they would allow the outward grandeur of the funeral to simply confirm their understanding of slavery as a 'patriarchal institution' which is ultimately to the benefit of the enslaved. While any enslaved person in the community could readily dispel such misconceptions, Jacobs observes that they simply would not be consulted by northern travelers— they would be subjected to 'testimonial quieting' (Dotson 2011).

In light of these patterns of epistemic injustice, Jacobs despairs at the possibility of moving white northerners to action against slavery. This despair is illustrated in the narrative, for instance, in Jacobs' account of her parting interaction with a ship captain who assisted in her escape from slavery:

He saw that I was suspicious, and he said he was sorry, now that he had brought us to the end of our voyage, to find I had so little confidence in him. Ah, if he had ever been a slave he would have known how difficult it was to trust a white man. (240)

Because enslaved Black people are not taken as sources of testimony by whites, and because even when the opportunity to supply testimony arises their testimony is not afforded adequate credence, Jacobs appears to conclude that, as she puts it in the preface, "only experience" can capture the

wrongs and horror of slavery. Neither narrative nor any other indirect conduit of experience is a sufficient substitute to address the estrangement produced by racist oppression.

But if this were Jacobs' position, the existence of *Incidents* itself would be puzzling. The fact that Jacobs crafted this narrative and addressed it to white readers implies that she thought that there is some role for narrative in addressing the estrangement of white and Black people in the anti-slavery movement. The interpretive key, I think, is to note that Jacobs directs this despair at the possibility of white northerners inhabiting the perspective of enslaved Black women *to* her white readers. Her expressions of despair are a way in which Jacobs refuses to engage with her audience exclusively on the terrain of evidence and empathy.

Jacobs, I claim, understands such refusal as an active mode of engagement with practice-based white ignorance. Jacobs' refusals capture what Lindsey Stewart characterizes as a generative alternative to a politics of recognition (Stewart 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).<sup>13</sup> A politics of recognition must proceed on terms at least potentially legible to the party from whom one seeks recognition. For Stewart, drawing on the work of Zora Neale Hurston, the pursuit of recognition from white audiences compelled (antebellum and neo-) Black abolitionists to efface the agency embodied in Black joy in order to engage such audiences on the terrain of Black suffering and abjection. A politics of refusal instead forges space for Black self-determination through rich manifestations of political agency precisely because it rejects the constraints of white legibility. While Jacobs is herself perhaps a plausible target of Stewart's critique of the effacement of Black joy in abolitionist thought, her ultimate refusal to justify her actions to her white readers on their terms forges a domain of Black self-determination. Indeed, I contend, Jacobs deploys a politics of refusal not only

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13 On refusal as an alternative to resistance and recognition in Black feminist philosophy see (Dotson 2018; Hartman 2021; and Perry 2018). For related critiques of recognition, see (Markell 2003; Simpson 2014).

to reject a politics of white recognition, but to imagine alternative forms of anti-racist coalition consistent with Black self-determination grounded in rich manifestations of political agency by Black people. In so doing, Jacobs also articulates an essential point about the role of humility in democratic political relations generally.

In her narrative, Jacobs deploys refusal as a manifestation of her authorial (and ultimately political) agency designed to induce humility in white readers. For instance, in recounting a sexual relationship she initiated with the attorney Mr. Sands in order to deflect the advances of her slaveholder Dr. Flint, Jacobs states:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant, you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within the hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others. (86)

At first pass, in this passage Jacobs seems to beseech herself in a subservient manner to her reader. She asks for pity and pardon, expresses recognition that she acted wrongly, and suggests that her actions might be judged by a different standard than in other circumstances.

But there is another important strand in this passage. Jacobs subverts her audience's paternalistic disposition to render judgment through her assertion that "[n]o one can feel it more sensibly than I do." This is not, ultimately, an expression of deference to the moralistic expectations of her readers. Set against the backdrop of a number of episodes in the narrative in which the gap in understanding between enslaved Black and white Northern women appears insurmountable, Jacobs is able to

present a struggle internal to her own judgment. For Jacobs, the point of presenting this struggle is to confront readers with herself as someone who made a reasonable judgment in impossible circumstances— that Jacobs was, in fact, an agent in the episode who her readers should now relate to as such— thereby, as Hartman puts it, “deposing the reader as judge” (1997, 107).

Hartman sees this refusal to recount the details of sexual violence in the slave system ultimately not as an expression of Jacobs’ independence from the judgment of white readers, but as an internalization of it. Identifying in Jacobs’ refusals a strand of shame that mirrors the “sensibility and delicacy” of white readers, Hartman suggests that this aspect of *Incidents* “inadvertently reinforces the idea that, if determined enough, one can escape violation, thereby implicitly suggesting that submission is to some degree an act of compliance and that utmost resistance establishes the meaning of nonconsent” (110-111). Jacobs’ refusals to recount the horrific sexual violence of the slave system are recast as shame at having been subjected to such violence; the white reader’s judgment, purportedly deposed, appears to reinsert itself in traces of the misogynistic logic that non-resistance is consent.

I agree with Hartman that Jacobs’ expressions of shame are an important site of critical intervention in interpreting her narrative. But it is also important to emphasize that Jacobs consciously rehearses her struggle with the sexual mores of the dominant class for her readers. In so doing, Jacobs makes manifest through her narrative her own powers of judgment. What is at stake for Jacobs (as narrator) in this episode is not ultimately that her audience comes to the correct judgment about what she should have done, but that her audience comes to recognize that she possessed the agency to make this judgment for herself. Similarly, Jacobs’ refusals to recount the details of sexual violence, and her emphasis on the limits of white readers’ understanding of her experience, make manifest the domain and depth of her agency— that these are her experiences to know, interpret, and feel.

It is not, then, that the reader's judgment is entirely deposited in *Incidents*; rather, the reader's judgment is resituated in relation to that of Jacobs and other enslaved Black women. The boundary that Jacobs' seeks for her white readers to act in humble recognition of is not that between what they know and what they do not; it is the boundary between what is theirs to judge and what is not. Robin Warhol rightly characterizes these moments of refusal as utilizing a "rhetoric of otherness," but it is not, as she argues, a rhetoric that is primarily directed at highlighting a defect in the reader (1995). Rather, the boundary that Jacobs highlights is one constitutive of political agency: one's political agency consists in both the power to exercise one's own judgment and to recognize and respond to the judgments of others. Through the manifestations of her own judgment throughout *Incidents*, as both narrator and character, Jacobs orients her readers toward the limits of their own political agency. The estrangement that Jacobs' narrative combats through the cultivation of humility is the failure to recognize and respond to others as distinct sources of political judgment. The knowing and being known of emancipatory politics that Jacobs offers us is a practical responsiveness to one another's agency. Humility, as a response to practice-based white ignorance, functions not as a recognition of defects that we might aspire to overcome or despairingly accept, but instead as a constitutive element of how we relate to one another as political agents.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have distinguished two different forms of not-knowing that are produced by and reinforce systems of racist oppression: belief-based white ignorance and practice-based white ignorance. Belief-based white ignorance consists in false beliefs (or the lack of true beliefs) about matters related to race or racial injustice. Practice-based white ignorance consists in an insensitivity to the political agency of persons subject to racial oppression. While both forms of white ignorance are elements of racial injustice that ought to be expunged from our political communities, I've argued that a focus on one or the other form of white ignorance leads us to conceptualize the

epistemic dimension of liberation struggle— to know and be known to one another— in materially different ways, and that a focus on practice-based white ignorance offers a more generative framework for anti-racist organizing.

The lesson that this analysis offers is not that political actors should adopt one specific set of activities that target practice-based white ignorance, nor is it that we should avoid acquiring accurate beliefs about one another. Rather, the lesson concerns our orientation toward the various patterns of interaction that make up political life in general, and anti-racist emancipatory politics in particular. Douglass illustrates this point in *Bondage*, when describing his experience in New York having just escaped from slavery. He emphasizes that “loneliness,” “insecurity,” and “helplessness” characterized his experience of newly-gained yet precarious freedom (1987 [1855], 206-207). Although “[i]n the midst of thousands of my fellow-men,” Douglass describes himself as distrustful of and estranged from each, including a fugitive slave known to him in Baltimore who he meets in passing. As narrator, Douglass then transitions to an “apology... for the few slaves who have, after making good their escape, turned back to slavery, preferring the actual rule of their masters, to the life of loneliness, apprehension, hunger, and anxiety, which meets them on their first arrival in a free state” (1987 [1855], 207). Douglass goes on to describe in detail the process through which an enslaved person might come to this judgment, enabling his reader to at least partially inhabit this perspective.

Yet Douglass does not invite his reader to insert judgment about what a newly-escaped enslaved person should do in this position, nor to identify flaws in the reasoning that might lead one to return back into bondage. Instead, Douglass goes on to describe the actions of sailor named Stewart to whom Douglass reveals his fugitive status in a state of desperation. Stewart “listened to my story with a brother’s interest” and upon learning Douglass’s aim (“running for my freedom”) and current constraints (“knew not where to go— money almost gone— hungry”), “promptly put me in the way

of getting out of trouble,” locating for Douglass David Ruggles of the New York Vigilance Committee, who in turn assisted Douglass in reuniting with his wife Anna and set the couple on their way to New Bedford (207-208). Stewart, in this episode, of course does not ignore Douglass’s account of his situation, and acts on the basis of what Douglass communicates that he wants and needs. But the “brotherly interest” that Stewart takes in Douglass leads him not to supplant Douglass’s judgment with his own, but instead to judge how he can act in concert with Douglass in Douglass’s fight for freedom. While Douglass communicates facts about himself to Stewart, the effect of this communication is to orient Stewart toward Douglass as someone to conspire with, rather than as someone with a problem to solve or manage.

According to the argument that I have developed in this article, the orientation that someone in Stewart’s position would take toward Douglass— as a fellow conspirator or a problem to manage— depends on the type of humility that they adopt in the interaction. In most political interactions in polities fractured by oppression, persons will be estranged from one another in two ways: (1) they will lack knowledge of one another’s interests, desires, and capacities; (2) they will struggle to see one another as autonomous agents who are distinct sources of political judgment. The choice this paper poses is whether to judge and act from an attitude of humility in response to the first or second form of estrangement.

Humility as a response to belief-based white ignorance is a response to the first form of estrangement. It is an attitude contingent on a person’s lack of knowledge about systems of racial oppression and the position and experience of those dominated and exploited by these systems. Persons humble about their belief-based white ignorance recognize that the gaps in their knowledge and aspire to eliminate these gaps. But when the liberatory struggle to know and be known is figured in this way, political actors are liable to reproduce the very sorts of oppressive hierarchies that they aim to combat, because the struggle to overcome one’s ignorance becomes the struggle to gain



epistemic mastery over the social positions of other people.

Humility as a response to practice-based white ignorance, in contrast, is a response to the second form of estrangement. It is an attitude through which persons recognize and respond to those subject to racist oppression as free and equal yet mutually dependent agents with the power to judge and act in concert with others. In other words, I see and engage you as a person endowed with political agency in part by recognizing the limits of my own political agency. Learning about one another can be a mode through which we exercise this form of humility, but the work is done in how we relate to one another as the authors and interpreters of our own lives. This liberatory struggle to know and be known is a matter of learning how to relate to one another in ineliminable terms of distinctness and vulnerability. It is a form of humility that ultimately reflects our collective power to remake ourselves, and in so doing, our shared world.

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