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RETHINKING EPISTEMIC APPROPRIATION

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Abstract

Emmalon Davis (2018) has offered an insightful analysis of an under-theorized form of epistemic oppression called *epistemic appropriation*. This occurs when an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness gains inter-communal uptake, but the author of the epistemic resource is unacknowledged. In this paper, I argue that Davis's definition of epistemic appropriation is not exhaustive. In particular, she misses out on explaining cases of epistemic appropriation in which an intra-communal epistemic resource is *obscured* through inter-communal uptake. Being attentive to this form of epistemic appropriation allows us to identify unique forms of epistemic oppression that emerge as a result of socially maintained active ignorance.

I. Introduction

Emmalon Davis (2018) has offered an insightful analysis of a pervasive, morally disturbing, and undertheorized phenomenon called *epistemic appropriation*. It is an invaluable contribution to the rich literature on epistemic injustice. For Davis, epistemic appropriation is, by definition, *wrongful*. There are no neutral cases, let alone positive ones. There aren't situations in which an epistemic resource is appropriated without something unjust or unfair occurring. In other words, for Davis, epistemic appropriation is constituted by *two* primary harms: *epistemic detachment* and *epistemic misdirection* (2018: 705).

In this paper, I will argue that Davis has only identified one form of epistemic appropriation. She misses out on explaining particular cases of epistemic appropriation that seem to be a common feature of the general phenomenon of appropriation. For what it's worth, I believe that it should be left open as to whether there are cases of epistemic appropriation, defined differently from Davis, that are neutral or even positive. This creates a distinction between *wrongful* and *non-wrongful* epistemic appropriation. I won't say any more about the latter. What I will discuss are the *wrongful* cases that Davis fails to account for. That is, I will argue that there are cases of *wrongful* epistemic appropriation that do not

¹ There are a number of people to whom I owe a great deal of thanks for helping me in the development of this paper: Karen Jones, Laura Schroeter, and the philosophy postgraduate cohort at the University of Melbourne. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer whose insightful suggestions significantly improved the ideas and arguments of this paper, while also keeping the paper true to real-world phenomena.

require *the preservation of an epistemic resource* – a condition for epistemic detachment and epistemic misdirection.

Here's a toy example of the kinds of cases that I will set out to explain:

The Blues are a marginalized social group enslaved by the Greens. Members of the Blues share the epistemic resource 'greenie.' This resource is used to represent members of the Greens as dominant in a pejorative way; say as vicious oppressors. Importantly, 'greenie' is used by the Blues as a means of group solidarity, to make a firm distinction between them and their oppressors. Hearing the use of 'greenie' by members of the Blues, members of the Greens start referring to each other as 'greenies' in jest, representing each other as oppressors in a more positive light, and taking delight when hearing members of the Blues use the concept.

In this case, an epistemic resource has been appropriated. However, it stands in contrast to the process of epistemic appropriation offered by Davis. As the case shows, the epistemic resource, which was developed within marginalized situatedness, is obscured when it moves from intra-communal use to inter-communal uptake through appropriation. If we accept that this counts as a form of epistemic appropriation, then we can distinguish between two types: *resource-preserving* and *resource-obscuring* epistemic appropriation. As it stands, Davis has only offered an explanation of the former. I argue that we should expand our understanding of epistemic appropriation to include both – and possibly even more. Without appreciation of this latter kind of epistemic appropriation, we miss out on making sense of particular forms of epistemic oppression that afflict marginalized communities; forms of oppression that emerge as a result of socially maintained active ignorance.

II. What is an Epistemic Resource?

Epistemic appropriation involves the 'taking' of an *epistemic resource*, as it were. What is an epistemic resource? This is contested. For the purposes of this paper, an epistemic resource is a mental instrument, the purpose of which is 'for making sense of and evaluating our experiences' (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012: 718). This includes tools for thought and talk such as concepts, language, and the criteria or standards by which we assess interpretive dispositions (2012: 718).

I will not be interested in the *meaning* of an epistemic resource, such as a term or concept, or whether the disposition to use an epistemic resource must deliver *knowledge*.² This avoids having to compare the relative merits of alternative metasemantic frameworks; and sidesteps questions about the conditions under which one knows some proposition. Instead, my interest is in *socially stabilized psychological associations* with a particular term, which governs or underwrites practices of applying that term to aspects of the world. In this sense, psychological associations aid in the interpretation of experience and help facilitate the communication of such experience across social space. For instance, owing to socialization, we have internalized particular cognitive and affective associations with particular brand name terms,³ which helps us to pick out certain aspects of the world, and governs application

² This contrasts with Davis whose focus seems to be specifically on whether an epistemic resource is still able to deliver *knowledge* post-appropriation.

³ For an interesting discussion on the lexical effects of brand names, as well as the lexical effects of the names of children, see Cappelen (2020: 143).

dispositions with such terms. ‘Kleenex’ is a brand name, but it is often used as a generic term for tissues. That is, the psychological associations between the term ‘Kleenex’ and tissues are now so deeply entrenched within our social and representational milieu that the term is permissibly applied to any kind of tissue – at least within certain contexts (e.g., the U.S.)

In some of the psychology literature, associations of this kind would fall under the banner ‘concept.’ However, philosophers have claimed this term for their own purposes – to capture the systematic and compositional nature of basic constituents of thought. Thus, I will call such associations *conceptions*.⁴ And while conceptions are idiosyncratic in the sense that they are a feature of individual psychology, there are social mechanisms responsible for coordinating associative thought within an epistemic community in order to regulate or stabilize mutual understanding of a topic. This includes education systems, pressure to conform, news outlets, the testimony of experts or authorities, monuments, etc. Conceptions, then, are often massively overlapping between members of an epistemic community. ‘Kleenex’ is one clear example. The permissible application of this term to tissues in general is, at least in part, a function of widespread brand advertisement and conformity to dominant usage.

Some conceptions are unwarranted. These include pernicious associations with terms owing to racism, sexism, and the like (e.g., ‘gay’). However, conceptions are often an important means for understanding the world – even if such understanding fails to meet the standard required to constitute knowledge. Importantly, a conception is significant when it is developed within marginalized situatedness and used as a means of making sense of the experience of those who occupy positions of subordination in social hierarchy. And it is such conceptions that I believe are causally affected in some cases of (wrongful) epistemic appropriation.

One final thing to note. Conceptions play a substantive role in undergirding *behavioral* dispositions. Psychological associations with a term involve certain beliefs or opinions about how to identify the things to which the term applies. For instance, our conception of ‘Kleenex’ is such that we believe that it can be applied to basically any tissue. This application practice provides some of the groundwork for how we behave in response to the world, such as using tissues for blowing our noses.

With the notion of epistemic resource on the table, I will spend time explaining the details of Davis’s version of epistemic appropriation.

III. Davis and Epistemic Appropriation

Davis begins her discussion explaining that epistemic resources can be shared in two ways.

First, epistemic resources can be *intra-communally* shared. This is the set of epistemic resources shared *within* particular groups or communities. The groups that interest Davis are those that sit in a dialectical power relationship: marginalized groups, such as People of Color and women; and dominant groups, such as White people and men.

⁴ This is similar to other notions across different literatures, such as Elisabeth Camp’s (2015) notion of *characterization* in her discussion on the philosophy of concepts; Sally Haslanger’s (2012) notion of *schema* in her discussion on the construction of social reality; and Herman Cappelen’s (2018, 2020) notion of a *lexical effect* in his discussion on conceptual engineering.

Second, epistemic resources can be *inter-communally* shared. This is the set of resources shared across social groups, say, between members of a given society. Such resources are utilized by marginalized *and* dominant group members.

What Davis sets out to achieve is an explanation of a particular, problematic and wrongful, process by which an intra-communally shared epistemic resource used by members of a marginalized group receives dominant inter-communal uptake. She calls this *epistemic appropriation*. That is, epistemic appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource of a marginalized group receives popular uptake by dominant group members. For Davis, epistemic appropriation, as she defines it, is always wrongful. It is constituted by two distinctive harms: *epistemic detachment* and *epistemic misdirection* (2018: 705).

Epistemic detachment occurs when “the intercommunal pool is expanded to incorporate new epistemic resources... but the participatory role of marginalized contributors in the process of knowledge production is obscured” (2018: 705). That is, marginalized knowers are undermined insofar as they are not appreciated as knowledge-makers after inter-communal uptake of an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness. It’s important to note that epistemic detachment does not involve a marginalized person being prevented from contributing knowledge to the inter-communal set of resources. It requires only that such contributions go unrecognized.

Epistemic misdirection compounds the harm of epistemic detachment. It occurs when “epistemic resources developed within, but detached from, the margins are utilized in dominant discourses in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful” (2018: 705). Here, the concern is that marginalized knowers make significant and meaningful contributions to the set of epistemic resources shared across social groups, but such contributions only benefit, or work to the advantage of, those already with power *in virtue of* epistemic detachment.

On Davis’s account, epistemic appropriation occurs when the genealogy of an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness is erased, *but the resource is preserved* when taken up by dominant knowers. I will argue that this only captures one unique form of epistemic appropriation. Davis’s definition is not exhaustive. Importantly, it misses out on many different primary harms of epistemic appropriation, broadly construed, in which marginalized epistemic agents are undermined in virtue of the resources developed within the margins become obscured during inter-communal uptake. This obscuring of a marginalized epistemic resource within a dominant community means that marginalized people, those who developed the resource, are not able to convey understanding across social space – especially to those whom such understanding needed. Thus, on this version of epistemic appropriation it is an *epistemic resource* that is obscured, not its *recognition*.

To introduce this form of epistemic appropriation, I will make use of a broad distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation – this is a general distinction between types of appropriation. I will argue that for (some) non-epistemic cases of appropriation, we can distinguish between *function-preserving* and *function-obscuring* appropriation. Both can be wrongful. Taking lesson from this distinction, we can introduce a further distinction between kinds of epistemic appropriation: *resource-preserving* and *resource-obscuring* appropriation. I claim that Davis has given us an account of the former, yet we should accept that cases of epistemic appropriation involve the latter. A comprehensive

understanding of epistemic appropriation will include both, and plausibly other kinds. Before I get to these distinctions, I will first explore the difference between *individual level* and *group level* appropriation.

IV. Appropriation Across Ontological Levels

When does epistemic appropriation occur? Let me narrow the scope of this question. I am not (just) interested in what makes appropriation harmful or wrongful. Instead, I am concerned with the time at which appropriation has taken place.

Davis seems to be focused on epistemic appropriation that occurs at the *individual level*, while also being attentive to the ways that social structure shapes interpersonal dynamics:

“When epistemic detachment occurs, an *agent* is unjustly estranged from her own epistemic contributions, while those contributions are nonetheless taken up and circulated among dominant circles” (2018: 723).

Thus, to the question of when epistemic appropriation occurs, it seems that Davis’s answer is this: It occurs when the epistemic contribution of an individual knower is not recognized by an epistemic community.

Perhaps this is an unfair characterization of Davis’s position. She does make use of other examples that show how appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource is developed within a marginalized group, but the epistemic resource is not attributable to just one member. Davis restates a historical event where John Stuart Mill refers to a convention attended by many prominent men, but fails to mention the intellectually esteemed women who were present. This counts as epistemic appropriation on Davis’s definition insofar as the un-naming of the women means that their role in the production of an epistemic resource is erased. We can see that epistemic appropriation can occur at the group level, albeit a very small group.

I take it that epistemic appropriation can occur at any socio-ontological level. It can, as Davis has pointed out, occur as a matter of an individual not being given due recognition. But, it can also occur when a marginalized community’s epistemic resource is co-opted by a dominant group. This seems to follow more traditional ways of thinking about the general phenomenon of appropriation. Consider cultural appropriation.

Individuals can perpetrate cultural appropriation. For instance, think of a White person who decides to get dreadlocks, yet disregards the socio-historical context and culture in which the hairstyle is embedded. However, groups are also guilty of cultural appropriation. Think of logo of the Washington Redskins, an NFL team. It contains the image of the profile of a Native American man wearing a traditional headdress. Here, it is the (wrongful) appropriation of the symbolic resources of a group of people (i.e., Native Americans) by another group of people (i.e., the Washington Redskins).⁵ This is characteristic of sporting teams around the world: they use images of Indigenous groups as a matter of getting the (problematic) message across to other teams that they are ‘warriors’ to be reckoned with.

⁵ At the time of writing this paper, the team change their name and logo due to (rightful) accusations from the public that the franchise was appropriating the symbolism of Native American culture.

Unlike Davis, I am going to focus solely on cases of epistemic appropriation that occur between groups. To get clear on the phenomenon I have in mind, think back to the example mentioned in the introduction. An epistemic resource, developed by the Blues, was appropriated. It was co-opted by members of a dominant group who used the resource in a way that deviated from its original purpose. The resource picked up new psychological associations, within the dominant group, and subsequently lost its critical affect as a means of expressing certain negative attitudes to the dominantly situated people. I will say more about cases like this later on. For now, I will introduce the distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation.

V. Preserving and Obscuring Appropriation

Appropriation, as a general phenomenon, occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use. As discussed above, one example of this is cultural appropriation. Often, in the philosophical literature, cultural appropriation is presented in a neutral light. It is suggested that the appropriation of a culture involves a kind of one-way transaction without any social, moral, or political overtones; it is just “the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another” (Young 2005: 136). Some theorists are even skeptical that there is a serious harm that occurs in cases of cultural appropriation. James O. Young suggests that with respect to the appropriation of art, he is doubtful that “artists will do much harm to the cultures from which they borrow” (2008: 113). Though appropriation may be offensive, it’s not clear that it involves a significant wrongdoing. This controverts a more typical, value-laden understanding of cultural appropriation. Erich Hatala Matthes claims “there is general agreement that, if cultural appropriation is morally objectionable, it is only objectionable when a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates from a member of a marginalized group” (2016: 347). Matthes puts this claim in the context of Western colonialism. History has taught us that dominant groups tend to flex their muscle in order to force cultural assimilation, or else to degrade or destroy cultures altogether. Thus, it is important not to downplay the moral significance of cultural appropriation so that we can recognize the way that dominant cultures unjustly exercise power.

With this in mind, I want to introduce a distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation. Here are some rough definitions:

Preserving appropriation occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the appropriated object is preserved.

Obscuring appropriation occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the appropriated object is obscured.

As it stands, these definitions don’t tell us much. Both simply restate the broad definition of appropriation mentioned above, and add in ‘preserved’ or ‘obscured.’ Thus, we might ask: *What* is preserved or obscured in cases of appropriation? The answer to this varies depending on the kind of appropriation one is interested in. To see how this distinction is useful for our discussion of *epistemic* appropriation, first compare two cases of wrongful *cultural* appropriation.

Here's the first. In 2017, the movie *Ghost in the Shell* was released. It is based on the hugely popular Japanese seinen manga of the same title, authored by Masamune Shirow. In the movie, Scarlett Johansson, a White American, plays the main character, who is Japanese. This caused outrage in different Asian communities, as it was seen as an instance of cultural appropriation – in particular, 'whitewashing.' It was argued that Hollywood, a predominately White community, took from Japanese culture, with disregard, and benefitted from this. This follows a more general trend of Hollywood whitewashing Asian media. I will refer to this as Case (i).

Here's the second. In a scene in the Netflix show *After Life*, Ricky Gervais can be seen seated in front of what appears to be a piece of Indigenous Australian art. When a journalist from NITV⁶ saw this, he went to the web to see if he could find the artist. It turned out that the artist was a White British woman named Timna Woollard. Again, this caused (rightful) outrage. The concern was that Woollard's attempt to mimic Indigenous Australian art fails to recognize how such images are connected to Indigenous Australian culture; it makes the mistake that Indigenous artwork is simply a matter of 'style.' Call this Case (ii).

Both Case (i) and (ii) are instances of cultural appropriation. However, there is a sense in which they are distinctly different. Case (i) is an instance of *preserving* appropriation; Case (ii) is an instance of *obscuring* appropriation. Specifically, the former is *function-preserving*; the latter *function-obscuring*. To be clear, we can understand 'function' as the *goal* or *purpose* behind an object.⁷ For instance, the function a hammer is to hit the heads of nails.⁸ How does this apply to appropriation? Define function-preserving appropriation as follows:

Function-preserving appropriation occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the *function* of the appropriated object is preserved.

In Case (i), we can see that the function, the goal or purpose, of *Ghost in a Shell* is preserved. Despite the main character being played by Scarlett Johansson, a White American, the storyline remains the same. It still tells the futuristic story of a cyborg supersoldier who tries to get to the bottom of her unknown past. That is, the appropriation involved in the re-make of *Ghost in a Shell* does not obscure its revered narrative – after all, the goal or purpose of the movie is to tell a particular story.⁹

In contrast to function-preserving appropriation, we can define function-obscuring appropriation as follows:

Function-obscuring appropriation occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, but the *function* of the appropriated object is obscured.

⁶ This is a television channel in Australia that broadcasts shows primarily produced by Indigenous Australians.

⁷ This isn't meant to imply something as strong as an *etiological* or *proper* function (Millikan 1984). Objects can have goals or purposes that aren't selected-for.

⁸ Of course, if members of a community found that hammers were useful for other things, it might be that the hammer develops a new, socially recognized, function.

⁹ Though, even this is suspect. One might think that because bodies are imbued with social meaning, something about the story isn't conveyed when a White person is cast to play a character that was originally a person of color.

We can see this kind of appropriation in Case (ii). In Indigenous Australian communities, artworks are more than just paintings. They are connected to stories, culture, and land; they are imbued with a social significance that reflects ceremonies important to the communities who create the artwork. The symbols used in each artwork tell complex narratives through the combination of an alphabet of cultural icons. Thus, when a White person, totally unconnected¹⁰ from this culture, paints something that attempts to mimic Indigenous art, under the guise of ‘appreciation,’ they are not preserving the original function of the artwork.¹¹ They do not have the necessary ‘inside’ knowledge to decipher the significance of the work that they are copying. The goal or purpose of Indigenous art is not simply to create something that looks nice, but to bring into existence a symbolic piece that holistically connects up with broader ways of living.

V.I. Resource-Preserving Appropriation

We can apply the general distinction between preserving and obscuring appropriation to the epistemic domain. That is, preserving and obscuring appropriation extends beyond the appropriation of culture and functions. We can distinguish between *resource-preserving* and *resource-obscuring* appropriation. Define resource-preserving appropriation as follows:

Resource-preserving appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource is taken from an individual or group, and the epistemic resource is preserved as a source of understanding and communication.

This appears to be the kind of appropriation that interests Davis. Consider the first case that she offers. John Stuart Mill puts himself as the sole author of a document entitled “The Enfranchisement of Women,” of which Harriet Taylor was a collaborator. Though Mill has the consent of Taylor, Davis claims that this still counts as epistemic appropriation since there is an epistemic resource given to the broader community, but the resource is not recognized as coming from its creator (i.e., Harriet Taylor) (2018: 707 – 708). We can see that the appropriated epistemic resource is maintained as a source of understanding (or knowledge, as Davis argues). The wrong is *specifically* epistemic detachment and misdirection.

There’s no doubt that Davis has located a unique and important form of epistemic appropriation. However, her account is not exhaustive. It is one kind of epistemic appropriation out of (at least) two. And her failure to countenance other kinds means that she misses out on explaining distinctive forms of epistemic oppression. Thus, while Davis has located the primary harms of resource-preserving appropriation, she has not explained the primary harms of other forms of epistemic appropriation. In particular, one form that she hasn’t discussed is resource-obscuring appropriation.

VI. Resource-Obscuring Appropriation

Define resource-obscuring appropriation as follows:

¹⁰ Unconnected insofar as she doesn’t belong to or understand that culture. She is ‘connected’ insofar as she is part of a culture that is historically responsible for the murder and on-going oppression of Indigenous Australian people through colonization.

¹¹ I conjecture that a lot of cultural appropriation is function-obscuring, not function-preserving.

Resource-obscuring appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource is taken from an individual or group, and the epistemic resource is obscured as a source of understanding and communication.

In other words, resource-obscuring appropriation involves the appropriation of an epistemic resource which has the effect of undermining the resource as a means of gaining understanding of the world, and as a means of communicating understanding across social space.

An immediate question one might have is: For whom is the epistemic resource *obscured*? There are, at least, two options. The first is that, through appropriation, an epistemic resource is obscured for both the group that created the resource and the group that appropriated it. That is, the epistemic resource, with its original cognitive and affective significance, can no longer be used as a means of understanding and communication within and across communities after resource-obscuring appropriation – even for the group that developed the resource. We might call this *maximal appropriation*. Think back to the toy example outlined in the introduction. Understood as an instance of maximal appropriation, we might say that not only did the Blues lose a means of conveying information about their oppression to the Greens through the obscuration of an epistemic resource, but the Blues *also* lost a means of making sense of their experience of oppression, and subsequently lost a means of communicating this experience to each other.

I believe that maximal resource-obscuring appropriation is possible, at least in principle. However, it is, perhaps, rare. Few epistemic resources will be completely, or even mostly, unavailable to members of a marginalized group after the process of dominant uptake. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that, through appropriation, an epistemic resource can collect psychological associations as a function pervasive and influential social mechanisms (e.g., the education system, advertising, popular websites, etc.) that will propagate far and wide in society, ultimately ending with the complete overhaul of the original significance of the epistemic resource as it was developed within marginalized situatedness.

Despite its possibility, my interest won't be in maximal appropriation. Instead, I will focus on what we might call *asymmetric appropriation*. This occurs when an epistemic resource is obscured through appropriation, but only insofar as the resource picks up new and deviant associations *within a dominant group*. Importantly, the resource, even after appropriation, is maintained as a source of understanding and communication within the marginalized group that created it – at least for the most part.¹² In other words, the resource is obscured *only* for the group responsible for appropriating the resource.

As mentioned in §II, I am interested in the appropriation of *conceptions*. Such are the widespread cognitive and affective associations with a term that undergird or support practices of applying the term to particular aspects of the world. Moreover, such associations are stabilized or regulated by social mechanisms that enable thinkers and speakers to coordinate thought within a community. Thus, I will

¹² In this sense, asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation could be construed as a type of asymmetric resource-preserving appropriation. This is because the resource of a marginalized group is preserved *for the marginalized group*. This appears to break down the distinction that I have introduced. Nevertheless, I think the distinction has a methodological importance insofar as it allows one to *emphasize* the fact that something is either preserved or obscured after the process of appropriation. My interest is in how an epistemic resource is obscured, whereas Davis's interest is in how an epistemic resource is preserved.

focus on cases of asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation in which dominant group members imbue different psychological significance to a term than the members of the group that brought the resource into existence. Of course, *not all* members of the dominant group responsible for appropriating an epistemic resource will fail to understand its original significance. All that is required for resource-obscuring appropriation to occur is that the new and deviant psychological associations prevail within a dominant community, and the original associations are less salient or, worse, mostly non-existent.

To give a more situated analysis, I will now explore a real-world case.

VI.I. *The Appropriation of 'Woke'*

There are many cases of asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation that we might pick from. The appropriation of epistemic resources used in Black communities in the U.S., such as associations with the terms 'bae,' 'on fleek,' 'trap'; the appropriation of religious or spiritual epistemic resources, such as associations with the terms 'Zen' or 'karma'; the appropriation of Australian Indigenous epistemic resources, such as associations with the term 'yakka'; and the appropriation of Native American epistemic resources, such as associations with the term 'spirit animal.' In what follows, I will discuss the appropriation of the epistemic resource 'woke.'

In recent time, the term 'woke' has become a part of ordinary linguistic practice. First used in the 1940s, its roots are found in Black American communities.¹³ Historically, it is a term that symbolizes understanding and awareness of social justice issues, in particular the oppression and liberation of Black Americans. In more recent time, 2008, the term was used in Erykah Badu's song "Master Teacher." However, 'woke' became hugely popular when it was picked up by the Black Lives Matters movement, and used over and over again in relation to the racially motivated shootings of Black Americans at the hands of the police (over 30 millions time on Twitter). Users of the term aimed to express something along the lines of being conscious of White supremacy and the surreptitious ways in which it materializes. Given the state of socio-political affairs at the time of this usage, 'woke' invoked a careful skepticism of supposedly protective institutions. The cognitive and affective associations of the term allowed an individual to be conscious of the ways flawed ideology can take a grip on one's understanding of the social world. Fast-forward to the present.

Things changed when certain online communities got hold of the term. It was used in a way that strayed from linguistic practice in Black Communities, and subsequently developed new psychological associations. Within dominant communities, mostly made up of Whites, 'woke' is still used to express a conscious understanding of something implicit in the world – being aware of what's really going on. However, it is also used in ways that takes attention from the unjust treatment of Black Americans. Take a look online and you will see that 'woke' is now associated with sentiments unrelated to Black lives: anti-feminist warnings, celebrity gossip, the dangers of soft drink and razors, and contempt for progressives.

¹³ It was used in a 1942 first volume of a digest magazine written by J. Saunders Redding; as well as 1962 New York Times article, 'If You're Woke You Dig It.' The reference of 'remaining awake' was also mention by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965 (Mirzael 2020).

What is responsible for this change? Of course, there are many factors. One significant reason is that ‘woke’ is regularly used on popular online platforms in the format of memes, the purpose of which is to tell jokes or to make light of certain people, situations, or events (e.g., about celebrities, or feminists, or soft drinks, etc.). And the nature of memes is such that they are meant to be copied or reproduced. Thus, the new and deviant associations with ‘woke’ is partly, if not mostly, a product of social mechanisms that stabilize or regulate similarity of thought and talk within the dominant epistemic community. Such mechanisms include conformity to see and engage with the world in the same way, and preference or pressure to speak the same language; perhaps to guarantee effective coordination and communication, or simply to participate in shared ‘rituals’ that signal in-group membership. Put differently, the social mechanisms responsible for stabilizing new psychological associations with the term ‘woke’ within a dominant community involves participation in certain practices of joking around with other people in online space. The issue is, when associations of jokiness or triviality with ‘woke’ are consistently reproduced within a dominant community, the epistemic resource turns into something that is a far cry from its origins in Black communities.

Let’s sum up. At one point in history, the term ‘woke’ circulated primarily, perhaps even solely, within Black communities. And, within such communities the term was imbued with a distinctive social and political significance. It was used to make sense of particular experiences of marginalization and oppression, to express solidarity with in-group members, and to inform others of the ways that injustice can take shape.¹⁴ Now, after inter-communal uptake, the term has picked up new and deviant associations within the dominant community. Owing, at least in part, to mechanisms of psychological enforcement, ‘woke’ carries cognitive and affective associations unrelated to its origin, context, and justice-oriented purposes. It has been obscured by, and for, the dominant group – namely, White people. This, I contend, constitutes a case of asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation. Why?

First, ‘woke’ cannot be used within dominant contexts, by and large, to make sense of certain forms of injustice with the same social and political significance as those who use the resource within Black communities. This is because, within the dominant community, the cognitive and affective associations with the term are not restricted to, or even mostly about, structural racism. Instead, the salient or central associations are comical, humorous, trivial, and even contemptuous.¹⁵

The claim is *not* that members of a dominant community, or those situated within a dominant context, aren’t able to, at least in principle, make sense of unjust police violence against Black Americans. Rather, the claim is that dominantly situated people cannot make sense of such violence with the use of ‘woke’ in the way that members of Black communities are able to when thinking and speaking within non-dominant situatedness. The associations with the term, stabilized by social mechanisms which enables coordinated understanding of a topic (e.g., pressure to conform, language of internet, etc.) fails to structure the overall thinking of dominantly situated people in a way that captures the unique and oppressive experiences of Black Americans in relation to ‘protective’ institutions.

¹⁴ Of course, other epistemic resources were available to perform this role. The point is simply that the psychological associations with ‘woke’ constituted an epistemic resource(s).

¹⁵ Moreover, and again within dominant contexts, the term cannot be wholly understood as a means by which members of Black communities express solidarity with one another.

One might wonder: Given the pervasiveness and influence of the social mechanisms that stabilize associations with a term, is it possible that ‘woke’ also picked up new associations within Black communities? Put differently: Could the dominant inter-communal uptake of ‘woke’ constitute an instance of *maximal* appropriation. This is plausible. After all, the Internet is an all-encompassing part of our lives. So, it stands to reason that the term might have also collected cognitive and affective associations even within Black communities. And this could be a serious problem. In virtue of having its time in the inter-communal sun, ‘woke’ might have new and unintended conceptions that can’t be shaken off, including associations such as the term being tired, whitewashed, uncool, useless, played-out, silly, fun, trivial, etc. Despite this, even if ‘woke’ has new and deviant associations within non-dominant communities, it seems likely that it would maintain or preserve its original associations. And, given this, such associations can be deliberately made salient in the relevant context – if one is speaking within non-dominant situatedness, one simply has to stress or emphasise that they are using the term in a way prior to its appropriation.¹⁶

Second, and importantly, when asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation occurs, members of the group that created and developed the resource are not able to use the resource as a means of conveying certain experiences to the appropriating group. This is because the resource has different, perhaps completely dissimilar, associations within each epistemic community. In the case of ‘woke,’ the term, within Black communities, is imbued with a significance relating to the racially motivated violence and murder of Black Americans at the hands of the police; and within the dominant community, the term is associated with fun, triviality, and contempt.

Given this, it seems that if someone from non-dominant situatedness tried to communicate experiences of marginalization and oppression with ‘woke’ to a dominantly situated person, the attempt at communication would fail insofar as the dominantly situated person could not enter into the right interpretive frame required to fully understand what is being expressed. After all, the dominantly situated person is subject to social mechanisms responsible for stabilizing new and deviant associations with the term. Thus, when ‘woke’ is heard the dominantly situated person will, more or less, automatically activate the psychological associations that have been established within their community.¹⁷ And, such associations do not match, and even diverge to a significant extent with, the associations that have been developed within marginalized situatedness.

Being unable to use an epistemic resource, after appropriation, as a means of communicating experience to dominantly situated people is particularly problematic in cases where the resource, in its original context, is able to make sense of certain forms of injustice that the marginalized group faces – injustices that the dominant group might be partly or wholly responsible for bringing about. It is problematic not just because there is one less channel of communication available, especially a channel that could be used to transmit information about injustice. But because the dominant group had the opportunity to acquire an epistemic resource, developed within the margins, that would have enabled them to understand, at least to an important extent, certain experiences of marginalization and oppression.¹⁸ This, I believe, constitutes distinctive forms of epistemic oppression.

¹⁶ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁷ A similar point has been defended by Elisabeth Camp (2018: 49).

¹⁸ This does not mean that other resources cannot be used to communication such experience across social space. Rather, it simply means that the appropriated resource cannot be used.

VII. The Harms of Resource-Obscuring Appropriation

Like Davis, I think wrongful epistemic appropriation is a form of epistemic oppression: “Epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to [epistemic] production” (Dotson 2015: 115). And, epistemic appropriation is oppressive insofar as it undermines epistemic agency, where such agency is intimately tied up with basic human capacities. When our epistemic capacities are undermined, we are undermined as human beings. And, importantly, “the well functioning of those [epistemic] capacities involves not only the ability to *obtain* epistemic goods... but also the ability to *contribute* epistemic goods (i.e., to propose new ideas, conceptual resources, hypotheses, innovative frameworks, etc.)” (Davis 2018: 724, my emphasis).¹⁹

As said spelled out in §II, Davis argues that the primary harm of epistemic appropriation is epistemic detachment and misdirection. An agent must be unjustly estranged from her own epistemic contributions, and importantly, “those contributions are nonetheless taken up and circulated among dominant audiences” (2018: 723). As we can see, asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation does not involve this harm. It is not about erasing understanding of the author of an epistemic resource. After all, the epistemic resource that the dominant group comes to acquire, through appropriation, is substantively different from the resource that circulates within non-dominant situatedness. This is the watermark of asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation. Thus, we can ask: What are the harms of resource-obscuring appropriation?²⁰

A first thing to note is that, on my account, not all cases of resource-obscuring appropriation will constitute epistemic oppression. Think of the *re*-appropriation or reclamation of term ‘queer.’ In this case, a marginalized group has obscured the negative associations with the term that have been developed within dominant situatedness. And, overall, this is a positive outcome. Thus, taking lesson from Matthes claim at the start of §V, we might say that if resource-obscuring appropriation is wrongful, it is only wrongful when a dominant group appropriates from a marginalized group. *Wrongful* resource-obscuring appropriation occurs only when a dominant group takes up an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness, and, owing to this, the epistemic resource is obscured. With this in mind, what further conditions must be met for wrongful resource-obscuring appropriation to occur?

VII.I. Hermeneutical Injustice

As Davis carefully lays out, Miranda Fricker’s (2007) notion of hermeneutical injustice, a species of epistemic injustice or oppression, must meet two conditions:

Conceptual Deficit: hermeneutical injustice must be explained in terms of a conceptual deficit in the intercommunally shared pool of resources.

¹⁹ This is also defended by Miranda Fricker (2007).

²⁰ I avoid using the word ‘primary’ only because I believe that there are many different harms involved in asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation, some of which have been discussed in the existing literature, others that have not been.

Nonculpability: hermeneutical injustice involves no epistemic culpability on the part of any individual agent; it is a structural phenomenon (2018: 719).

It's important to note that concepts, understood as basic representational elements of thought with semantic properties, are not the only kind of epistemic resource. Thus, I expand my understanding of 'conceptual deficit' to accommodate any deficiency of epistemic resources, including conceptions.

On Davis's account of epistemic appropriation, neither condition for hermeneutical injustice is met. After all, the essence of Davis's account is that an epistemic resource is created within marginalized situatedness, which is then preserved as a means of understanding and communication after appropriation. There is no conceptual deficit. Moreover, for Davis, epistemic appropriation is not *just* a structural phenomenon. Rather, it involves perpetrators at the individual level. Marginalized knowers are rendered powerless by members of dominant groups who fail to recognize them as a source of epistemic production.

Does resource-obscuring appropriation constitute hermeneutical injustice? According to Davis's definition, it does in some sense but not in the way that hermeneutical injustice is typically understood to play out. When resource-obscuring appropriation occurs, *there is a deficiency in the inter-communal pool of epistemic resources that is maintained.*²¹ The dominant group fails to acquire an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness that will be available *across* social groups. However, this deficiency is not simply a product of a *mere* lacuna; a gap in the shared resources that has yet to be filled. Rather, it is a product of, in some sense, *an attempt to fill in a lacuna that has gone awry*. Dominant group members, in their attempt to acquire an epistemic resource, seem to be able to recognize that the resource, the object of appropriation, has been developed within marginalized situatedness. The issue is, the dominant group members fail to appreciate exactly what the resource is, and to what extent it is meaningful. As a result, the dominant group members do not acquire the resource, but rather obscure it through appropriation. Thus, the gap in the inter-communal pool of resources that is maintained does not owe simply to oversight. It is active, involving the participation of dominant group members that attempt to acquire a marginalized epistemic resource, but fail to grasp its significance for non-dominant communities.

Further, resource-obscuring appropriation is not an individual-level wrong. There is no individual-level culpability. On my version of appropriation, it is a relationship between groups. Given this, we might think that there is a sense in which *groups* are the appropriate target of blame: a dominant group has acted wrongfully toward a marginalized group. This is tempting, however it fails to acknowledge the structural processes responsible for resource-obscuring appropriation. It involves many people, within a dominant community, copying or reproducing an obscured epistemic resource. And this is a function of social mechanisms that undergird coordinated similarity of thought and talk; mechanisms that shape avenues to understanding, while closing off others. So it seems that the problem is not simply with the

²¹ Of course, the resource will still be available to marginalized group members. So, this doesn't constitute a *maximal* case of hermeneutical injustice insofar as there is an epistemic resource available for marginalized group members to make sense of their experience and to communicate with. If this doesn't constitute hermeneutical injustice, then that's fine by me. It still constitutes a distinctive epistemic wrong similar enough to hermeneutical injustice that is worth highlighting. *Maintaining* an epistemic lacuna in the inter-communal pool of resources appears to be just as bad as there merely *being* a lacuna in the inter-communal pool of resources.

people, or the group, who copy or reproduce an obscured epistemic resource. Rather, it is the social mechanisms that enable this to occur. Our moral or political evaluation of resource-obscuring appropriation is better directed at the level of socio-epistemic structure, not the people or groups that participate in this structure. Overcoming appropriation will take systemic change.²²

One final thing to note about hermeneutical injustice. Miranda Fricker (2016) argues that hermeneutical injustice comes in multiple forms. Importantly, she claims that there can be *midway cases*. In such cases, a marginalized person has access to an epistemic resource but the resource is “not shared with at least one out-group with whom communication is needed” (2016: 9). Put differently, “[m]embers of such hermeneutically self-reliant groups are vulnerable to hermeneutical injustices whose form does not involve any confused experiences whatsoever, but only frustratingly failed attempts to communicate them to members of an out-group” (2016: 9).

It is clear that *asymmetric* resource-obscuring appropriation involves, or at least can involve, this form of hermeneutical injustice. This is because the appropriated resource is preserved as a means of understanding and communication *for* the marginalized group. However, the resource is obscured once it reaches dominant audiences. Consequently, attempts by a marginalized epistemic subject to convey experience or understanding to a dominantly situated person *with the use* of the appropriated resource will fail, or at least fail to a significant degree. There will only be frustratingly failed attempts at communication.

Again, this does not fit the usual mould of midway cases of hermeneutical injustice. The standard story simply involves a situation in which a resource is operative in one community but not another. Of course, this is true in cases of asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation. However, like above, there is something a little more active that explains why a resource is only operative in one community. The dominant group has not simply overlooked the epistemic resource, but has misunderstood its importance or significance.

This pattern of misunderstanding points to something deeper about the wrong or harm of resource-obscuring appropriation. It is not merely an accidental gap in knowledge or a lack of understanding. Rather, it is the result of *active* ignorance that is maintained by social practices; in particular, systems of marginalization and oppression. Put differently, resource-obscuring appropriation involves vicious epistemic behavior that prevents dominantly situated people from properly acquiring an epistemic resource that has been developed within marginalized communities. But what is active ignorance? And how does it relate to structures of marginalization and oppression?

VII.II. *Active and Structural Ignorance*

According to Marilyn Frye, there is something especially worrying about the nature of ignorance:

Ignorance is not something simple: it is not a simply lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state. Ignorance of this sort... is a complex result of many acts and many negligences.... Our

²² In saying this, however, it is entirely possible that through a coordinated effort, a dominant group can be morally responsible for the appropriation of a marginalized epistemic resource – perhaps this is true in the toy case outlined at the beginning of the paper.

ignorance is perpetuated for us in many ways and we have many ways of perpetuating it for ourselves (1983: 118).

This quote is illuminating. It reveals that ignorance, or some forms of ignorance, is a matter of vicious epistemic behavior that prevent subjects from knowing or epistemically accessing certain aspects of the world; aspects of which such subjects should understand, such as marginalized experience. Specifically, the vices that constitute active ignorance, according to José Medina (2013), include epistemic arrogance, laziness, and close-mindedness. A person in the grips of epistemic arrogance ‘presumes to know all there is from his own... perspective’ (2013: 39), which results in failing to learn from mistakes and overcome biases, as well as developing a sense of cognitive superiority (2013: 31). An epistemically lazy person lacks a motivation or willingness to ‘find out more’ about the world, and to see how different life experiences shapes one’s standpoint (2013: 39). And, someone who is close-minded lacks an openness to the relevance and importance of alternative perspectives or points of view in the formation of beliefs or other attitudes (2013: 39).

Despite active ignorance being framed as a failure on the part of an individual epistemic agent, it is (often) a causal product of epistemic agents being embedded in unjust hierarchical *socio-epistemic structures* (Santos 2020: 4). In this sense, active ignorance is a social achievement. Specifically, it involves patterns of social practices infected by forms of prejudice which results in epistemic agents being far more likely to come into contact with dominant perspectives, experiences, and understandings rather than the perspectives, experiences, and understandings that are unique to marginalized situatedness. And this inequality contributes to sustaining and bolstering systems of marginalization and oppression. So while active ignorance is enacted by individuals through cognition, it systematically arises as a part of structural processes (Woomer 2019: 77; Martín 2019: 12).²³ Put differently, unknowing is a consequence of effort; a product of social systems set up in a way that allow for ignorance to reproduce unjust social relations.

A clear example of this kind of ignorance is offered by Charles Mills. He tells us that,

“[o]n matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially function), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world that they have made” (Mills 1997: 18).

What Mills is describing here is a particular system of active ignorance, one concerning race. He calls this *White Ignorance* (2007: 22). Whites have created an epistemic structure, causally related to their Whiteness, in which the relevant resources that are collectively available to render intelligible experience are those that fail to make sense of what the world is truly like – in particular, facts about

²³ Annette Martín (2019) distinguishes between different ways of thinking about structural ignorance, or White ignorance specifically. She argues that it is common to think about such ignorance in terms of willful ignorance (i.e., vicious epistemic behavior) or the distribution of faulty cognitive resources (2019: 6 – 11). However, Martín argues that neither view is sufficient to capture all of the ways that structural ignorance takes shapes. She offers a general version of structural ignorance, or what she calls *The Structuralist view*, that states two conditions: such ignorance (1) results as part of systematic social processes (that give rise to injustice), and (2) that ignorance is an ‘active player’ in such processes (2019: 12). In this sense, *The Structuralist View* accommodates the former versions of ignorance, while being general enough to account for others.

the marginalization and oppression of People of Color. A clear example of White Ignorance is the education system (Outlaw 2007). For example, in Australia children are taught throughout their schooling life that Captain Cook discovered the continent 250 years ago; it was an empty land, or, at least, a land empty of *people*. This ignores the history of Indigenous Australians who have occupied the land(s) for 60,000 years. Through this ignorance, certain aspects of history are actively forgotten or non-accidentally overlooked in order to maintain a particular Australian narrative that is central to the self-conception of White settlers; a narrative that leaves one in denial about a man greatly responsible for a brutal genocide of Indigenous people and culture. Systems of ignorance, such as this, translate into benefits for the dominant group. By unknowing injustice, hierarchies that privilege some but subordinate others can be maintained. After all, in the absence of a perceived problem, there is no need to change.

One pernicious mechanism of active ignorance is *willful hermeneutical ignorance* (Pohlhaus Jr. 2013). The starting point for understanding this notion is to recognize that different social groups have different experiences, which is a product of rubbing up against distinctive aspects of social reality, such as oppressive social relations. Because of this, such groups develop unique epistemic resources; ways of making sense of experience unique to their social position. Importantly, the resources that are developed within marginalized situatedness, and tailored to understand marginalized experience, are better suited for understanding certain aspects of the social world. This includes resources such as *emotional abuse, micro-aggressions, date-rape, heteronormativity, settler*, etc. The issue is, dominantly situated people often refuse to learn, or take seriously, the resources developed within marginalized situatedness. There is an active effort by members of dominant groups, through a system that supports and encourages many negligences and oversights, to stop alternative epistemic resources, those that can make better sense of the world, from propagating or taking root in dominant contexts.

How does this relate to resource-obscuring appropriation? When a dominant group fails to properly acquire an epistemic resource developed within the margins, and instead obscures it through appropriation, this constitutes a refusal to learn. Of course, this differs from Pohlhaus Jr.'s account of willful hermeneutical ignorance insofar as it is not a flat-out refusal to acquire an epistemic resource, but a refusal to acquire it *properly*.²⁴ Put differently: in cases of resource-obscuring appropriation, dominant group members make an effort to take up a resource developed within marginalized situatedness, but refuse to properly recognize and appreciate how that epistemic resource operates within non-dominant communities, which subsequently constitutes a failure to respect what makes the resource important, significant, or valuable (i.e., as a tool for understanding and disruption).

This refusal, I contend, is a product of vicious epistemic behavior, or active ignorance. In particular, dominant group members refuse to properly acquire an epistemic resource developed within

²⁴ There is a sense in which this might constitute what Lauren Woomer calls 'agential insensitivity' (2019). In particular, it is an uptake failure in which an epistemic subject fails to acquire the relevant epistemic resources needed to understand certain aspects of social experience. However, Woomer does not talk of the possibility of epistemic appropriation. She discusses cases in which an agent fails to take up an epistemic resource developed within marginalized situatedness, or fails to use an epistemic resource effectively. Perhaps epistemic appropriation falls into the latter category. Yet, it seems that epistemic appropriation is not about effective use of an existing resource, but a failed attempt by a dominant group to even acquire a resource in the first place. After all, the resource is obscured, so its 'effective' use will be inadequate to make sense of marginalized experience.

marginalized situatedness insofar as they epistemically arrogant, lazy, and close-minded (Medina 2013: 39).²⁵ Such members are arrogant to the extent that they presume to know all there is from their perspective, and as a result, they understand the significance of a marginalized epistemic resource in a way that only makes sense of dominant perspectives and experiences. Further, members of dominant groups are lazy to the extent that they are unmotivated, or lack a willingness, to find out exactly why it is that an epistemic resource is significant, important, or valuable for a particular marginalized community. And finally, dominant group members are close-minded to the extent they are not open to the relevance of alternative perspectives and experiences that would allow them to understand the significance, importance, or value of a marginalized epistemic resource. To see how such vices give rise to resource-obscuring appropriation, consider the example ‘woke’ once more.

To reiterate, ‘woke’ carries distinctive psychological associations within Black communities; associations that are socially and politically significant. And despite attempts by the White community to acquire this epistemic resource, or what they believed the resource to be, they instead obscured it through associating ‘woke’ with triviality, fun, jokiness, contempt, etc. This, I contend, owes to the fact that members of the White community understood ‘woke’ only as an epistemic resource that caters to their own perspectives and experiences (i.e. epistemic arrogance); perspectives and experiences that are detached or estranged from racial subjugation in the form of police violence and institutionalized murder. Moreover, members of the White community, when attempting to acquire ‘woke’ from non-dominant situatedness, were unmotivated or unwilling to find out why this epistemic resource is significant, important, or valuable for Black communities (i.e., epistemic laziness). Finally, White group members closed themselves off to the relevance of Black perspectives and experiences, which prevented them from understanding the significance, importance, or value of ‘woke’ as a means of bringing to light certain forms of racial marginalization and oppression, and the possibility for change (i.e., epistemic close-mindedness).

As said, such vices constitute a refusal to learn, a kind of willful hermeneutical ignorance. And it results in White people failing to properly take up an epistemic resource that would have offered them another means of making sense of injustice. In the end, all that the White community is left with is an epistemic resource that has been co-opted for their own purposes, devoid of any social and political significance that relates to Black lives.

To reiterate, active ignorance of this kind is not (often) a matter of conscious deliberation about whether to give uptake to a resource developed within marginalized situatedness. Instead, it typically manifests as an implicit defence mechanism rooted in, and maintained by, socio-epistemic structures that prevents one from accessing, or taking seriously, alternative perspectives, experiences, or understandings. In the case of the resource-obscuring appropriation of ‘woke,’ active ignorance owes, at least to a significant extent, to the *general* socio-epistemic structures that prevent White people from understanding the marginalization and oppression of Black Americans, or what Charles Mills calls White Ignorance. Put differently, given that White people do not see the marginalization and oppression of Black Americans, or fail to see it clearly, it should be no surprise to learn that White people failed to understand what ‘woke’ was originally meant to capture. After all, if there is no systematic police violence, then there is no need for an epistemic resource to make sense of such violence. Put in more abstract terms, the obscuring of associations with ‘woke,’ through appropriation,

²⁵ Perhaps among other epistemic vices.

is a product of broader socio-epistemic structures of White ignorance that maintains patterned miscognition within the White community. Active ignorance turns an attempted acquisition of a marginalized epistemic resource into an instance of resource-obscuring appropriation.²⁶

VII.III. Contributors to Epistemic Production

How does the socially maintained active ignorance that gives rise to resource-obscuring appropriation undermine epistemic agency or constitute epistemic oppression? It's important to remember that contributing to the production of epistemic resources constitutes an important aspect of our epistemic agency (Fricker 2007, 2016; Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Pohlhaus Jr. 2012; Davis 2018). And ignorance undermines one as *a contributor to epistemic production* (Davis 2018). So, we might ask: how does resource-obscuring appropriation in particular undermine one as a contributor to the production of epistemic resources?

A first guess is that an epistemic subject is not *seen* as a contributor to shared understanding. This is the kind of epistemic oppression that interests Davis. In her version of epistemic appropriation, a marginalized knower is able to develop an epistemic resource, but they are not recognized as the author of this resource by dominant audiences (Davis 2018: 723). In other words, this constitutes a *failure to be seen as an epistemic subject*.

In some cases of resource-obscuring appropriation, this kind of failure will be present. It is entirely possible that epistemic appropriation can occur without members of the appropriating group knowing who authored the relevant epistemic resource. Perhaps this is true for many resources developed within queer communities (e.g., the phrase 'throwing shade,' first documented in the movie *Paris is Burning*, was developed within drag and gender non-conforming contexts). This constitutes a form of epistemic oppression along the lines for which Davis has argued.

For many cases of resource-obscuring appropriation, however, members of the appropriating group will know, at least to some extent, which community has authored the relevant epistemic resource. That is, those within dominant situatedness will often recognize that a marginalized group is a source of epistemic production. For example, it is reasonable to suppose that White people understood that 'woke,' as an epistemic resource, originally developed within Black communities given its connection to the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as being regularly used by Black artists in popular media. Thus, in cases where the appropriating group recognizes the community that authored an epistemic resource, ignorance cannot undermine epistemic agency through a failure to be seen *as* an epistemic subject.

²⁶ My discussion of active ignorance does not speak to interpersonal situations, or linguistic exchanges. Nevertheless, such situations are an important location at which resource-obscuring appropriation will start to gain traction. For example, a dominantly situated speaker might reliably fail to meet certain dependencies of a marginalized speaker when the speaker is attempting to convey socially and politically important content with the use of a particular term, such as 'woke.' That is, there will be an active failure on the part of the dominantly situated person to do what they need to do in order to understanding what the marginalized speaker is saying. Kristie Dotson (2011) calls this a failure of communicative reciprocity, and constitutes a form of epistemic violence. Further, this violence might constitute a form of *testimonial quieting* insofar as the dominantly situated person fails to treat the marginalized person as a knower of oppression. However, I leave this possibility open.

Despite this, one can still be undermined as an epistemic subject, and suffer from epistemic oppression, with respect to their status as a contributor to epistemic production *even* while being recognized as a contributor to epistemic production. That is, one can be undermined as an epistemic agent in virtue of socially maintained active ignorance that prevents dominant audiences from *properly grasping* the epistemic resource that one has produced.

In ‘failure to grasp’ cases, epistemic oppression is not a product of a failure to be seen as a contributor to epistemic production. Rather, it is a result of one being seen as a producer, but one’s status as a producer is understood through a *particular socio-epistemic optic or lens*. Specifically, marginalized group members are unjustly seen as producers of epistemic resources that cater largely to the perspectives and experiences of dominantly situated people, not the perspectives and experiences of the marginalized community that developed the resource. Less abstractly, when, say, members of a Black community develop a resource that uniquely captures Black experiences, members of the White community, in their attempt to acquire this resource, understand the resource as befitting their perspectives – that the resource was designed for them. Importantly, this constitutes a denial of epistemic agency, and constitutes epistemic oppression, insofar as those within marginalized situatedness are constrained in how they are understood or recognized *as* contributors to the production of epistemic resources: marginalized group members are seen as epistemic subjects only to the extent that their role is to produce epistemic resources *for*, or mostly for, the perspectives and experiences of dominantly situated people.

To bring the discussion back to the previous section, this way of seeing marginalized epistemic subjects as epistemic producers relates to active ignorance. Systems of ignorance do not simply prevent a marginalized person from being seen as someone who is able to contribute to shared understanding. Instead, it also shapes mistaken beliefs or opinions about the epistemic resources a marginalized group has produced. The default assumption of dominantly situated people appears to be that marginalized epistemic resources are designed to cater for dominant perspectives and experiences. To reiterate, this constitutes epistemic oppression. Marginalized epistemic subjects are not respected as producers of epistemic resources insofar as systems of ignorance prevent dominantly situated people from understanding that the resources developed within marginalized situatedness are *for* marginalized people. To see this, consider ‘woke.’

The appropriation of ‘woke’ does not involve a situation in which people fail to recognize Black communities as a source of epistemic production. The status of Black communities as producers of epistemic resources is recognized. However, there is a non-accidental and systematic misunderstanding of the nature and significance of the epistemic resource that Black communities have in fact produced. This owes to dominantly situated people enacting vicious epistemic behavior, such as presuming that an epistemic resource is for them, while at the same time disregarding the perspectives and experiences of other groups. Subsequently, this prevents important marginalized epistemic resources from circulating within dominant communities.

In sum: ignorance gives rise to epistemic oppression insofar as, despite being seen as epistemic producers, marginalized people are subject to interpretive constraints concerning which resources they can, or be understood to, produce – and for whom such resources are being produced. Put differently, even if marginalized group members are able to develop an epistemic resource, dominantly situated people, in their attempt to acquire this resource, are afflicted by pernicious ignorance that prevents

them from fully grasping the significance of the resource. The consequence is (often) asymmetric resource-obscuring appropriation.

VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that while Emmalon Davis has identified a distinctive form of epistemic appropriation, her account is not exhaustive. Importantly, Davis only explains resource-*preserving* appropriation. I have shown that there is another kind of epistemic appropriation: resource-*obscuring* appropriation. And it occurs when an intra-communal epistemic resource is *obscured* through inter-communal uptake.

Importantly, this alternative form of epistemic appropriation allows us to understand unique forms of epistemic oppression. In the first place, I argued that resource-obscuring appropriation constitutes hermeneutical injustice. But I also showed how it is that resource-obscuring appropriation is connected to socially maintained active ignorance. That is, when attempting to acquire a marginalized epistemic resource, dominantly situated people enact vicious epistemic tendencies which prevent them from fully grasping the significance, importance, or value of the resource for marginalized communities. And this constitutes epistemic oppression insofar as marginalized group members are either *not* seen as contributors to epistemic production or they are seen as contributors to epistemic production *only* to the extent that what they produce caters for dominant perspectives and experiences.

The natural next question is: what can we do about resource-obscuring appropriation? Unfortunately, this question is far too big to explore in this paper. So I won't attempt to give any answer here. What I will say is that individual-level solutions, such as emphasising the cultivation of certain virtues, might not be the best antidote to structural problems. And, as we've explored, active ignorance, that which is responsible for and explains the wrongs or harms of resource-obscuring appropriation, is rooted in, and maintained by, social structure. In my mind, then, the best bet is an overhaul of the epistemic structures that close off avenues to perspectives that would enable dominantly situated people to see, and to correct, injustice. However, at the same time, I recognize that individual-level interventions that might help stop the bleeding, as it were. Such are the practical solutions that dominant group members can enact in order to minimize the likelihood of perpetrating resource-obscuring appropriation. Thus, I believe that time should be dedicated to exploring both options: we should theorize how we can correct the socio-epistemic structures that give rise resource-obscuring appropriation, while at the same time working out strategies for reducing the likelihood of resource-obscuring appropriation occurring.

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