

Resisting Epistemic Oppression

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ABSTRACT

In order to address questions about how to conceptualize epistemic oppression most effectively, this essay develops a critical engagement with Kristie Dotson's (2014) 'Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.' Relying on a conceptual clarification of what is meant by 'shared' epistemic resources, I argue against Dotson's distinction which finds some instances of epistemic oppression to be 'reducible' to the unequal distribution of social and political power, and some to be distinctively epistemic, and thus irreducible to these factors. Rather, I maintain the most effective conceptualization of epistemic oppression will find social/political power and epistemic power to be inextricable. This renders all forms of epistemic oppression 'irreducible' in Dotson's sense. I then briefly consider the import of such a modification by looking at Barack Obama's presidency.

1. The What and Why

Providing new ways of thinking is one thing philosophy does. One responsibility we might take upon ourselves as feminist philosophers then is to offer new ways of thinking about oppression and oppressive structures. This project begins with this assumption, and with the assumption that one way to measure the adequacy of conceptual resources generated by feminist discourse is to think about how they might help dismantle these oppressive structures. In other words, if and when taken up by social and political activists outside of the academy, do particular epistemic resources aid in anti-oppression work? Do they limit it?

In order to address questions about how to conceptualize epistemic oppression most effectively, this essay develops a critical engagement with Kristie Dotson's (2014) "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression." Relying on a conceptual clarification of what is meant by "shared epistemic resources", I

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argue against Dotson's distinction which finds some instances of epistemic oppression to be "reducible" to the unequal distribution of social and political power, and some to be distinctively epistemic, and thus "irreducible" to these factors. Rather, I maintain the most effective conceptualization of the phenomenon will find that all its forms have a distinctive epistemic dimension that must be contended with; they are thus irreducible in Dotson's sense. In other words, the critical interrogation of governing norms will be necessary for resistance in all three cases. I briefly consider the import of my view by looking at epistemic oppression amidst the presidency of Barack Obama.

2. The Irreducibility of Epistemic Oppression

In "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," Kristie Dotson (2014) gives an account of epistemic oppression, namely the "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production" (1). She posits three forms of epistemic oppression distinguished by the differing sources of difficulty for combatting each. First- and second-order oppressions are 'reducible' to an unequal distribution of social and political power and can "most often be addressed utilizing epistemic resources *within* the same epistemological system [my emphasis]" to help in re-distribution efforts. Testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (as developed by Fricker 2007¹) are their representative cases and will be explored in further detail in the following section.

The central case of third-order epistemic oppression on Dotson's view is "epistemological resilience," or the phenomenon whereby an epistemological system resists modification despite counter evidence or attempts to alter it. In contrast to the first- and second- order cases, epistemic oppression of the third-order variety "follows from a feature of epistemological systems themselves"

¹ Patricia Hill Collins (2017), cautions against claiming Fricker 'first theorized' or 'coined' these terms in an aim to avoid perpetuating epistemic injustice towards scholar-activists in the academy. For example, claiming Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) 'coined' 'intersectionality' seems to value intersectionality only when its recognized by the academy, but not before. Similarly, giving Fricker authorship over testimonial and hermeneutical harm erases the long history of Black feminist thought which has been theorizing these phenomena for decades. While Fricker helpfully packages these ideas for academic philosophy, she remains indebted to this history. See, for example, Truth (1851), King (1988), Combahee-River-Collective (1995), Hill Collins (2000, 2003), Harding (2004). For more on perpetuating epistemic oppression when theorizing about it, even in attempts to counter it, see Dotson (2012).

(116) and so, to combat it, one must “proceed from ‘*outside*’ a set of epistemic resources to throw large portions of one’s epistemological system into question...” (129; my emphasis). This marks the third-order case as distinctively ‘epistemic,’ and thus “irreducible” to problems arising from the unequal distribution of social and political power. The *inadequacy* of epistemic resources is its root cause; and so “one’s epistemic resources and the epistemological system within which those resources prevail may be wholly inadequate to the task” of addressing it (116). This makes the biggest obstacle for combatting third-order harm noticing it at all. For it will be very hard to notice or put into question the inadequacy of resources which are a condition of knowing in the first place.

For example, take a system of white supremacy patriarchy which has its central concepts and resources structured by the subjectivity of cis-white-men, such as the United States in 1776. Within such a system, “all men are created equal” quite literally meant “white property-owning men are created equal.”, Importantly, even though these exclusions continue to structure politics and social life, it might be particularly hard (especially for a white-cis-man) to notice the inadequacy of the phrase’s intended scope. This is harmful because it further enables inequitable policies to thrive by obfuscating political realities, fostering color-blind racism through a false assumption of equality amidst drastic inequality. To combat such epistemic resilience, one will need to do more than better distribute social resources among people of all races, genders, and classes. One will also need to put into question the basic assumptions of white supremacy and patriarchy which structure one’s knowing practices in the first place.² This kind of critical interrogation will be a distinctively epistemic task on Dotson’s view, making the third-order case “irreducible” to issues of social/political power.

In what follows, I show that first- and second- order harms also require this epistemic task, making them irreducible in the same way. Note that I shift from talking about “epistemological systems” to talking about “epistemological resources.” Although Dotson appears to use the terms interchangeably, I prefer talking about “resources” than “systems” to avoid the insides/outside language my view resists for reasons that will become clear. Like Dotson (2012, 29), I take on Pohlhaus’ broad use of ‘epistemic resources’ to include “resources of

² Because conception shapes perception (Mills 2007), these assumptions also structure one’s perceptual habits, hence the enabling of color-blind racism whereby one “doesn’t see color.”

the mind, such as language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world and standards to judge particular accounts of experience” (2011).³ I start with an examination of hermeneutical harm, followed by the testimonial case. These two phenomena have been widely taken up in US academic philosophy and as I mentioned previously, are utilized by Dotson (2012, 2014) as her quintessential examples of second- and first-order oppressions.

a. Hermeneutical Injustice

Hermeneutical injustice is the paradigmatic case of second-order epistemic oppression on Dotson’s view, and is caused by the “insufficiency” of epistemic resources according to her picture. To combat this harm then, Dotson says new resources or concepts need to be introduced into the system (while the system’s governing principles and rules remain largely intact). Let’s review the phenomenon to better understand the idea here. On Fricker’s view, hermeneutical injustice occurs when one has “*some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization*” (Fricker 2007, 158; original emphasis), or prejudicial exclusions in the production of shared epistemic resources. As Dotson (2012, 29) points out, women of color have frequently theorized about biased hermeneutical resources.⁴ Williams (1991) gives an especially vivid example of such prejudicial exclusion. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Williams shares a personal experience of being refused admittance into a department store by a white teenager who smugly mouths, “We’re closed.” It was a Saturday afternoon in 1986 and several white folks were inside shopping. There was an outdated buzzer on the door, and Williams suddenly understood the exclusionary practices for which these buzzers were first installed (45). However, when she, a lawyer and professor of commercial law, aimed to portray her experience through a symposium on Excluded Voices which was sponsored by a law review, the editorial board found her race to be “irrelevant.”

³ For an analysis on why we should expand our notion of epistemic resources to include resources of non-propositional knowledge, see Shotwell (2017), and in reference to Dotson’s account, see Bailey (2014).

⁴ It is an ironic furthering of hermeneutical injustice to women of color when these contributions are not mentioned in literature which aims towards knowledge production about such phenomenon.

While this might at first seem like a case of testimonial injustice, given the lack of credibility Williams' testimony seemed to garner, the fact that the board removed all references to race because "it was against 'editorial policy' to permit descriptions of physiognomy" (47) makes salient the hermeneutical harm.⁵ For, while Williams eventually convinced the board that she was not merely 'paranoid' (and that race was indeed central to event), the initial refusal to include mention of her race speaks to a practice in law and legal writing of aiming to appear race-neutral (48), thereby eclipsing the experiences of people of color, and perpetuating color-blind racism.⁶ Importantly, when such commitments to "race neutrality" are habitually enacted by those in positions of power to determine collective meaning, hermeneutical marginalization flourishes.⁷

The example just given speaks to a different variety of hermeneutical injustice than that put forward by Fricker. Fricker uses Carmita Wood and 'sexual harassment' as her paradigm case. Wood, in Brownmiller's memoir, describes her experience of being sexually harassed in the workplace. In the end, she leaves her job and applies for unemployment insurance. When asked why she had chosen to leave her job, Wood was unable to describe what had occurred because of there being a gap in collective epistemic resources to make sense of what she had experienced. As a result, she was denied compensation. Later, as she gathered with other women, shared experiences of these unwanted sexual advances surfaced, and through collective processing of experiences only intelligible with different epistemic resources than those of dominant discourse regarding men's treatment of women in the workplace (commonly understood as 'flirting' [153]), the term 'sexual harassment' emerged.

As Mason (2011) and Pohlhaus (2011) point out, by emphasizing the way non-dominant knowers fail to understand their own experience, Fricker fails to consider the different ways of knowing that are found in those same

⁵ Such a response to Williams' testimony demonstrates what Dotson calls 'accurate intelligibility' (2011). For a more nuanced discussion of different kinds of epistemic silencing, see 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing' (Dotson 2011).

⁶ The pernicious effects of such practices in anti-discrimination law towards Black women are outlined by Crenshaw (1989). For more on epistemic injustice and the law specifically see Sullivan (2017).

⁷ Mills (1997) recalls a similar thesis about the marginalization of people of color in the construction of dominant philosophical discourse which follows a 'racial contract' that presumes an illusion of race-neutrality

communities.⁸ Williams' story provides a contrast case to Wood's, as her experience exemplifies an instance of hermeneutical injustice in which there is not an absence of self-understanding. Williams understands her racialized experience quite well, even if she remains hermeneutically harmed because of an inability or unwillingness on the part of dominant knowers to take up the conceptual resources she is offering. Importantly, this might perpetuate a lacuna in *shared* resources insofar as dominant knowers have greater social power to shape collective meaning. It does not, however, indicate a gap *en toto*. Despite the inadequacy of Fricker's account, it is still highly useful for thinking about hermeneutical harm and one way it might be countered. We've seen how radically dominant conceptual resources have been altered as the result of 'sexual harassment' being introduced during the 'consciousness raising' speak outs of the eighties. Lives and careers have been saved, appropriate treatment of (some) women by men has radically shifted. We might then say that this specific countering of hermeneutical injustice was successful, and that it was successful because it was able to de-stabilize the dominant resources for understanding men's treatment of (some) women in the workplace. In other words, the insertion of 'sexual harassment' was able to modify dominant epistemological resources, making them less resilient.

Important to note is that the central obstacle to rendering Wood's experience intelligible⁹ was the inability to communicate what had happened to her because dominant epistemic tools were unable to accommodate her experience. A central reason the needed concepts were lacking was the absence of women's hermeneutical participation in society. This persisted because of unequal relations of power that prevented women from partaking in areas such as politics, law, academia, or other spheres in which collective social meanings are generated. In the Williams' case, we can see how preventing people of color from sharing their racialized experiences similarly functions to exclude some groups in the construction of shared resources.

But, in neither of these cases was countering the harm reducible to an unequal distribution of employment opportunities. Generating the new concept 'sexual harassment' required that women counter the limits of their available

⁸ One can see how such an incomplete view of hermeneutical injustice could further perpetuate the lacuna in shared academic philosophical resources by leading one to fail to consult non-dominant voices in the production of knowledge about epistemic injustice. See Dotson (2012).

⁹ Medina (2017) points out that it is usually a matter of someone being rendered more or less intelligible, rather than fully or not at all.

epistemic resources, putting them into question to recognize a shared experience so far inarticulable. And convincing the editorial board to include mentions of race in their law review required editors to put into question their own dominant epistemic resources by which race was found to be irrelevant. The epistemic dimension of sexism and racism revealed by these harms was therefore a central challenge to be faced in overcoming both.

Dotson could reply that by re-distributing social power, women and people of color would thereby be able to participate fully in the creation of new and needed concepts, and so this variety of epistemic harm really is reducible to unequal social power. However, my point is that even if a re-distribution of social power permitted a more equal contribution to social meaning, insofar as dominant epistemic resources are constituted by inadequate and absent concepts needed for women and people of color's legibility, a modification of those resources will still be in order, and such modification will require the distinctive epistemic skills of critical interrogation.

b. Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice is the paradigmatic case of first-order harm and is caused by the "inefficiency" of epistemic resources on Dotson's picture. To address the harm then, Dotson says that one just needs to better, or more efficiently, use the epistemic resource that one already has available, namely, credibility. Importantly, testimonial injustice often occurs when a listener makes a judgment of a speaker's credibility that is deflated.¹⁰ These deflated judgements arise due to unreliable stereotypes, manifested in the form of 'social images,' which work into the listener's perception of her interlocutor. The central case of testimonial injustice is defined by Fricker as an attribution of "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit", whereby "the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer...[is due] to identity prejudice on the hearer's part, as...[when] the police don't believe someone because he is Black" (Fricker 2007, 4). In these central cases, the prejudice that tracks the speaker holds a negative valence regarding some feature of the speaker's social identity, such as their race.

¹⁰ This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Otherwise, anyone whose credibility was seen as "deflated" would be the victim of epistemic injustice, including the used car salesman, etc. Recent work by Davis (2016) and Lackey (forthcoming) has developed an account of epistemic injustice which includes the attribution of credibility *excess* or credibility *surplus*.

Important to note is that stereotypes and prejudices play a large role, perhaps even a causal role, in this form of epistemic oppression. This is because stereotypes in the form of negative-identity prejudices constitute some of the available epistemic resources from which to draw upon from within an epistemological toolbox. And this also suggests a deep interdependency between hermeneutical and testimonial injustices. For, it is the concepts and schematas *within* the operative epistemic resources which provide the prejudices needed for testimonial injustice to occur. If the habitual use of stereotypes prevents the proper uptake of testimony of those who experience identity-prejudices, gaps in collective understanding will occur where successful communication is consistently thwarted.

José Medina (2012a) brings out this point nicely, suggesting “hermeneutical and testimonial injustices are often interrelated so intimately that we cannot understand one without the other...” (206). He goes on: “In other words, these [hermeneutical] gaps emerge from and are supported by *testimonial insensitivities*. And, on the other hand, testimonial injustices take place when the persistence of hermeneutical gaps renders certain voices less intelligible (and hence less credible) than others...” (206). We see this interrelatedness in the Williams example. On the one hand, the deficit in credibility assigned to Williams regarding the relevance of race to her experience of discrimination is attributable to prejudices about Black people being “paranoid” when it comes to experiences of racism.¹¹ But these prejudices are already within dominant epistemic resources, indicating *hermeneutical* marginalizations as their basis. On the other hand, the *testimonial* injustice easily positions the editorial board to perpetuate *further* hermeneutical exclusions by their omitting of crucial aspects of Williams’ testimony which would take race seriously, namely, those very aspects which might counter inadequate race-neutral legal practices to make them less resilient.

But, if I’m right these prejudices are resources often drawn upon from within operative epistemic resources, we might think Dotson is incorrect in assuming that in the first-order case (i.e. testimonial injustice), “alterations made need not extend beyond the...shared epistemic resources in question” or that correcting for testimonial injustice primarily involves “leav[ing] intact

¹¹ Hill-Collins (2000, 72-81) gives an account of how stereotypes in the form of four specific “controlling images” impact the assessment of Black women in the U.S. as competent sources of knowledge.

already present operative schemata” (Dotson 2014, 118). Rather, we will again be faced with putting into question our resources, or with epistemic obstacles, for combatting first-order oppressions. For, an altering of the epistemological resources (including an alteration of credibility attribution) by eradicating these prejudices, or by providing new concepts which more accurately capture group-identities, will be crucial in fighting against testimonial harms, and this will require critical interrogation. In other words, effectively addressing testimonial harm is also ‘irreducible’ in Dotson’s sense.

One might object that it doesn’t at all seem obvious that our current epistemological system can’t contain both the prejudices in question and also the resources needed to address those prejudices.¹² In fact, I think they can, as I will explain below in my distinguishing between ‘shared’ and ‘extant’ epistemic resources. This distinction aims to put into question Dotson’s ‘inside/outside’ characterization which differentiates the location of resistance for addressing first/second order and third-order harms respectively.

3. The Resources We Share

Medina points out a confusion regarding the idea of shared or collective epistemic resources in his analysis of Fricker: “Fricker’s expression ‘the collective hermeneutical resource’ strongly suggests that we can pool all the hermeneutical resources available to all groups and create some kind of exhaustive inventory” He goes on, “So, we need to ask: what about the hermeneutical resources that are not widely shared, especially those that are buried in the interstices and obscure corners of the social fabric?” (2012a, 211). As pointed out already, Mason (2011) and Pohlhaus (2011) similarly posit a distinction between those epistemic resources which are dominant, and those which are located within non-dominant social spheres, arguing Fricker’s failure to account for the latter results in an inadequate account of hermeneutical injustice. Dotson herself argues “there is always more than one set of hermeneutical resources available,” emphasizing the fact that “we do not all depend on the same hermeneutical resources” (Dotson 2012, 31).

For current purposes, I suggest the following distinction: ‘extant epistemic resources’ refers to the aggregate or collection of all possible epistemic resources that exist, both among marginalized and privileged knowers.

¹² Thank you to Sanford Goldberg for raising this objection.

I heed Medina's worry and do not mean to suggest that we can 'make an exhaustive inventory' or that we *know* what all of these resources are. They therefore account for those resources that might be "buried in the...obscure corners of the social fabric," or even those that don't exist yet. Given that 'extant resources' include all possible epistemic resources from which to draw,¹³ we might say they make up 'the epistemological system.'¹⁴ On the other hand, 'shared epistemic resources' refer only to those resources currently *useable* by everyone, meaning they are resources which will easily generate uptake in mainstream, or dominant society. Importantly, 'shared epistemic resources' will therefore be co-extensive with 'dominant epistemic resources.' For, it is privileged knowers who are in the position of social power to determine what gets to count, or what doesn't get to count, as knowledge.¹⁵ In other words, dominant knowers define our 'shared' epistemological toolbox by determining which epistemic resources are meaningful and therefore useable by the majority in the generation of knowledge and social meaning.¹⁶

So while Dotson is correct in assuming we do not all depend on the same resources, there is another way in which we *do* all depend on them. Dominant resources are available to (or are forced upon) non-dominant knowers in a way that makes them 'collective', or 'shared'. Whether or not, as a subordinated member of society, I *want* to learn or know about the experiences of white straight men in literature and film doesn't matter; I will navigate the social world at least partially using these 'shared' and pervasive cultural references if I am to participate in mainstream society. If I am Black and want to purchase a skin-colored bra, I will learn quickly that 'nude' really means 'white' in order to correctly navigate my desired wardrobe. These irrelevant or ill-fitted concepts *will be* part of my conceptual toolbox. While this is a more benign example than many, sometimes one's very ability to survive and communicate at all will depend upon such knowledge. As Weldon Jonson points out: "Often for their very survival, Blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists,

¹³ For more on the idea that knowledge production always appeals to the *possible*, not just the actual, see Alcoff on Horkheimer (2007, 50-57).

¹⁴ A reminder that 'epistemological system' refers to "all the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession" (Dotson 2014, 121).

¹⁵ And it is precisely because of this fact that Dotson believes we can address first- and second-order epistemic injustices through re-distributing social power. I do not doubt that this is an important part of combatting these types of oppression, but I do take issue with conceptualizing such oppressions as 'reducible' to such factors.

¹⁶ See Mills (1997) for more on how this idea has played out in the social contract tradition.

studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the “white tribe” that has such frightening power over them, that in certain time periods can even determine their life or death on a whim” (Mills 2007, 17-18, quoting Johnson).¹⁷

This, of course, is not so for dominant knowers in their accommodation of epistemic resources generated from non-dominant knowers. First, these conceptual frameworks or tools are not always easily made available given unequal distributions of social power. As Medina points out, they may be in “the interstices.” Furthermore, dominant knowers do not depend on these resources for their survival, and in fact, are often incentivized to willfully refuse or remain ignorant of alternative understandings in order to maintain their own privilege. This can result in what Pohlhaus (2011) calls ‘willful hermeneutical ignorance,’¹⁸ leading to Dotson’s (2012) ‘contributory injustice.’ Contributory injustice occurs when “an epistemic agent’s willful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower’s ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency” (Dotson 2012, 32).¹⁹ Actively seeking out alternative resources, engaging in what Medina (2012b) calls ‘epistemic friction,’ is one way dominant knowers might resist contributory injustice. The view I’m proposing suggests that this seeking out of alternative resources, in order to put into question inadequate dominant resources to make them less resilient, is necessary for countering first- and second-order epistemic oppression, too.

One benefit of this distinction between extant and shared epistemic resources is that it helps make clear the important fact that the inadequacy which characterizes third-order oppression on Dotson’s picture is constitutive of *governing* epistemic norms insofar as those governing norms are those that are usable because dominant. My view thus supports Mills’ claim that “Sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the *exception* but the *norm*” of our shared epistemic practices (Mills 2007, 17). It is probably important to flag that Mills and I are using ‘epistemic norms’ to describe the de

¹⁷This point is articulated in Du Bois’ (1995) theory of double-consciousness. The insights of feminist standpoint theorists who claim oppressed knowers are in privileged positions of knowing is also of relevance. See Harding (2004).

¹⁸For more on the epistemology of ignorance see Sullivan and Tuana (2007), and especially Mills (2007) and Alcoff (2007).

¹⁹This might be one way for thinking about what was going on in Williams’ case.

facto practices of a community (including racist and sexist practices), rather than the more common usage of ‘epistemic norm’ whereby one means those norms that are correct for epistemic purposes.

For current purposes, what’s important to see is that conceptual resources or alternative epistemic resources which are generated by non-dominant knowers are not part of the shared epistemic reservoir insofar as these resources will not easily generate uptake or meaning within dominant society.²⁰ And so, these resources, even though part of our ‘extant epistemic resources’, cannot constitute the ‘shared epistemic resources’ from which first- and second-order resistances draw, according to Dotson’s account. And this is key. For, insofar as epistemic resources generated by non-dominant knowers do not come from the shared epistemic resources, if these concepts are then used to put into question or modify those resources (such as in the Williams case), the harm is being addressed in a way that is characteristically third-order, and Dotson’s distinction between the ‘reducible’ and ‘irreducible’ cases will not hold.²¹ But resisting shared epistemic resources by generating or using alternative resources is just how non-dominant knowers resist hermeneutical injustice according to Fricker’s account. And if in the first-order case, to alter credibility assessments, resistance is partially constituted by dominant knowers actively searching “for more alternatives than those noticed [or than those negative prejudices that are made readily available within the set of useable epistemic resources], and to engage those alternatives,” then we also see these epistemic skills as being highly relevant for countering testimonial harm.

The inadequacy of our shared or useable epistemic resources arises from just this analysis, namely, that there are many experiences that are not being captured or made intelligible by shared epistemic resources, resulting in all kinds of epistemic oppressions. Resisting any epistemic oppression which arises because of this inadequacy, including first- and second-order injustices, must therefore involve the ability to alter the inadequate resources, often through combatting contributory injustices perpetrated by dominant knowers and actively seeking out alternative epistemic resources. The epistemic dimension

²⁰ Of relevance here is Lorraine Code’s distinction between the ‘instituted social imaginary’ and the ‘instituting social imaginary.’ See Code (2017).

²¹ It’s important to remind ourselves again that the distinction between the two cases is marked by how different types of oppression should be *addressed*, or their sources of their resistance (not by, for example, how the harms are detected or even how they are experienced).

will thus be a central and pervasive concern for resisting epistemic oppression of all kinds (or at least of those forms that have been under current consideration).

To be fair, Dotson acknowledges that the distinction she draws between first-, second-, and third-order epistemic oppressions might not be so neatly mapped outside of theory. She concedes: “Though I introduce the kinds of changes each form of epistemic injustice minimally demands, those changes cannot be genuinely separated except in theory” (Dotson 2012, 36). She even explicitly considers my objection that “all of the forms of epistemic oppression outlined here [might be] made difficult due to epistemological resilience [i.e. are irreducible].” To this she replies, “I am not sure this is an objection as much as a shifting of terms” (2014, 133). She goes on to suggest the distinction she draws between reducible and irreducible harms is still important for offering clues into how we might differently address these harms (2012, 36). My view, however, suggests that the way the distinction is drawn might at times might *obfuscate* how we should address these harms. I consider an illumination on this point in what follows.

4. The Stakes

In order to motivate my view that conceptualizing epistemic oppression is better done when we forfeit the reducible/irreducible, inside/outside distinctions, I briefly reflect on some The Presidency of Barack Obama.²²

In his 1965 debate with William Buckley, James Baldwin refuses to be hopeful about Kennedy’s prediction that the US might see a Black president in 40 years. He suggests that if Kennedy’s prediction is true (note Obama’s presidency was 44 years later), the indication of real racial progress would be an illusion. Rather, such an “achievement” would only show that the United States’ white political establishment is able to include a Black subject on its own terms and in its own time. Bell’s (1980) “interest convergence” theory echoes

²² I agree with Dotson that it is important to keep in mind the fact there are different skills required for addressing the distinct harms she has laid out. For example, different skills might be required for the altering of credibility assessments than, say, are required for generating new concepts (Dotson 2012, 36). However, I remain unconvinced that any of these skills can be effectively cultivated without addressing epistemological resilience through critical interrogation (often by the consideration of alternative resources) as a primary source of resistance.

Baldwin's point, asserting whites will only promote racial equality to the extent it "converges" with their own interests.

In *Racism without Racists* (2014), Bonilla-Silva's analysis of Barack Obama's presidency aligns with such sentiments. He claims the election of non-dominant politicians in recent decades, and especially the election of Barack Obama to presidency, has contributed to the illusion that the United States is now post-racial. "Whites saw the confirmation of their belief that [the United States] is indeed a color-blind nation" (257). But, Bonilla-Silva notes that the rise of a few carefully-chosen [non-dominantly positioned politicians] is hardly indicative of more equitable race relations. "This fairy tale is the most popular way to explain [the United States'] racial politics, despite the depressing statistics telling a different story about what it means to be [non-dominantly positioned in the United States] in 2011" (256).

Despite the continuing significance of racism in [non-dominant folk's] lives, whites' racial policy attitudes in 2008 had not changed significantly since the 1980s. Instead, most contemporary researchers believe that since the 1970s, whites have developed new ways of justifying the racial status quo distinct from the "in your face" prejudice of the past. Analysis have labeled whites' post civil rights racial attitudes as "modern racism," "subtle racism," "aversive racism," "social dominance," "competitive racism," or the term I prefer, "color-blind racism." ...the new version is as good as the old one, if not better, in safeguarding the racial order. (259)

We can see here the how re-distributing of political power to Black individuals is not sufficient for racial progress and may even be a tactic to justify the safeguarding of a racial order which privileges whites by giving the illusory impression (especially to whites, to whom such an impression most obviously privileges, but sometimes more generally, too) that the United States is no longer racist. This promotes the false belief that we need not pay mind to matters of racial disparity because the problem is "fixed."²³

Important here then is that some ways of redistributing political power, namely, those which fail to also contend with the epistemic challenges to racial progress, can reinforce rather than resist epistemic oppression. In the case of Obama's presidency, higher usage of concepts such as 'post-racialism' emerged

²³ For a more thorough philosophical account of the significance of Barack Obama's presidency and its relationship with post-historicism and post-racialism, see Taylor (2016).

which has worked to perpetuate and adapt inadequate racist ways of thinking to a contemporary social landscape where whites no longer feel comfortable admitting blatant racism, and so must find more subtle ways to reinforce a social order which privileges them. Of course, this is not to deny that that were positive consequences of Obama's presidency,²⁴ but even so, we also see the way in which, unaccompanied by a critical interrogation of our shared epistemic resources, the election of a Black man to presidency might have *further* enabled testimonial or first-order injustices to thrive. It is not at all hard to recall or imagine someone invoking post-racialism after Obama's election in an aim to discount the relevance of race in an experience of discrimination. Recalling a situation akin to Williams: "That can't be right. I mean, we have a Black president! Racism is no longer a thing, you are probably just being paranoid or over-sensitive." Moreover, if one takes seriously the idea that Donald Trump's election was due largely to a 'white-lash' (Blake 2016) against the election of the United States' first Black President, we can see why it might be problematic to think we can "reduce" resistance to a re-distribution of political/social power. In tandem with such a re-distribution, we must also change the way people *think* about race if we are to combat testimonial injustices and epistemic oppression more broadly. And this will require distinctively epistemic skills.²⁵

Someone might object: "In presenting Obama's presidency as an example of redistribution of socio-political power, the argument remains vulnerable to the objection that said presidency was not a *real* and significant redistribution of power, but only an apparent one. A real redistribution of power would entail much more than just the election of a Black president. What is required for resistance is not an epistemic task, but only a more substantive form

²⁴ For example, Bonilla Silva points out Obama's admirable policies such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the cessation of enhanced interrogation techniques (torture), public statements about wanting to extend a hand to leaders of "rival nations," the achievement of health care reform, support for workers' efforts to get unionized, new emission and mileage standards, and legislation to exert some control over the credit card industry (2014, 280-281). Unfortunately, he finds these policies don't live up to the hype, being weakened or undermined by Obama's race-neutral approach to governing: "An emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific programs," which he believes "isn't just good policy, it's also good politics." (quoting Obama, 277). Such a refusal provides evidence that dominant epistemic resources of race-neutrality were un-questioned, resulting in policies that "betrayed [a] center-right stand on most issues" (282).

²⁵ See Ahmed (2012) for a salient analysis regarding the way 'diversity' often functions in institutions of higher education. She investigates "whether the ease of its [diversity's] incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge" (1).

of redistributing power.”²⁶ To this I reply: apparent redistributions of social and political power seem substantial to many when the resilience of inadequate epistemic resources thrives. And so, even if this case is only an apparent redistribution, the effect of it is that many become complacent in the fight against racism because they view such cases as substantial. Unless we also combat the epistemic resilience which informs how people think about race and gender in ways which thwart deep modification of our governing resources, we are unlikely to ever get a real or substantial re-distribution of social and political power. For the latter, we will need to put into question the very conditions of our knowing what re- distribution looks like in the first place. In sum, redistributing social and political power might be necessary, but never sufficient, for resistance efforts.

5. Recap

Insofar as Dotson aims to distinguish different epistemic oppressions based on their primary sources of *resistance*, her conceptualization itself becomes an epistemic tool to be drawn upon for means of resistance.²⁷ As such, one way we might think about the effectiveness of the account is by looking at its conceptual adequacy for resistance. My argument is that the inside/outside theoretical framework which finds some (‘reducible’) epistemic oppressions to be most effectively addressed *within* and others *outside of* a particular epistemological *system* is importantly limited as a conceptual tool for resistance. Rather, I find Dotson’s reflections on third-order resistance to be helpful for thinking about countering epistemic oppression more broadly. Putting our epistemic resources into question through consulting alternative resources that are not already ‘shared’ because dominant should be a feature which unifies rather than differentiates any effectively resistant conceptualization of the phenomenon. Despite being framed against Dotson’s picture, I think there is more agreement than disagreement between us. In offering this analysis, my hope is to contribute to a shared project of resistance that is greatly indebted to Dotson for its conception and articulation.²⁸

²⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

²⁷ Recall title of Dotson’s (2014) paper upon which much of this discussion is based, namely, ‘*Conceptualizing* Epistemic Oppression’ [my emphasis].

²⁸ For more on the virtues of Dotson’s articulation of the third-order case, see Bailey (2014).

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