The Problem of Privilege and Whiteness as Epistemic Vice

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read The Problem of Privilege and Whiteness as Epistemic Vice by Jacob Allen Wildermuth, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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This project seeks to describe a unique sort of epistemic obstacle that has not been adequately accounted for by contemporary work on epistemic injustice, which I call “the problem of privilege.” This obstacle problematizes the ability of people who exist in positions of privilege to develop epistemic virtues relevant to the domains of oppression in relation to which they are privileged. This project focuses on one particular example of this sort of epistemic vice, the problem of privilege as it exists between whiteness and racialized oppression, which I call “whiteness as epistemic vice.” I carry this project out by combining the framework of epistemic virtue/vice developed by José Medina with Patricia Hill Collins’ “Domains of Power” analysis of oppression, and using the resulting perspective to describe the problem.
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Introduction

The primary goal of this project is to describe what I call the “problem of privilege.” In broad strokes, I take the problem of privilege to be an epistemic problem that negatively impacts the ability of people who inhabit positions of privilege to develop epistemic virtues relevant to the domains of oppression in relation to which they are privileged. For example, the problem of privilege impedes the ability of men to develop epistemic virtues relevant to gendered oppression, and the ability of a member of the 1% to develop epistemic virtues relevant to economic oppression. I believe this problem is not adequately accounted for by contemporary work on epistemic injustice. However, I also believe it is well-known in everyday life, as well as in domains of knowledge other than philosophy. In fact, many of us live our everyday lives in a way that is already structured to account for this feature of reality. In our everyday process of combatting any given sort of oppression, we turn to the voices of those who are being oppressed in order to understand, resist, and rectify the problem. Additionally, domains of knowledge besides philosophy have long accounted for the existence of the problem of privilege, Black Feminism, for example. I believe an understanding of the problem of privilege was at work when Barbara Smith said “[Black Women] needed to have a place where we could define our political priorities and act upon them […] we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality.”1 The goal of this project is to take inspiration from these fields of

1 Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Demita Frazier, Alicia Garza, and Barbara Ransby, How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective, 31.
knowledge and from our real-world practices of resistance and use the tools from contemporary literature in the field of epistemic injustice in order to account for the problem of privilege.

Fortunately, the field of epistemic injustice has already begun describing a host of nearby problems. I believe the toolbox that has been constructed to understand epistemic injustice also possesses the potential to account for the problem of privilege. I have found a number of insights from this field to be extremely helpful in working towards describing this problem, in particular, the work of José Medina. In this project, I seek to expand Medina’s account of epistemic injustice to cover the problem of privilege.

I will be focusing on a particular example of the problem of privilege, the problem as it exists between whiteness and racialized oppression. I will focus on this example for two reasons. First, I believe this instantiation of the problem of privilege is a paradigmatic case of the problem. So, while I believe that the problem has other manifestations, I want to focus here on an example of the problem that I believe is particularly prevalent. Second, I chose to focus on the problem of privilege as it manifests between whiteness and racialized oppression because I have most poignantly experienced the problem of privilege in this form. This paper will consist of four sections: I. Exposition, II. Recontextualizing Medina, III. The Problem of Privilege and Whiteness as Epistemic Vice, and IV. Reflection.

I. Exposition

I will begin the first section by contextualizing Medina’s work within the tradition of scholarship regarding epistemic injustice. I then move to outlining some features of Medina’s account that are particularly important for my purposes. These include his virtue/vice account of epistemic injustice, his analysis of the connections between epistemic virtue/vice and social
position, and the positive project he believes ought to be advanced in combatting epistemic injustice. This section outlines the scope of Medina’s project so the following section can begin to describe the range beyond Medina’s account, where the problem of privilege exists.

II. Recontextualizing Medina

The problem of privilege exists beyond the range of problems Medina’s account is set up to solve. In order to understand the problem, the range beyond his account must first be outlined. This can be done by employing a new perspective regarding the purpose of Medina’s project. This section has two purposes: A. to develop a new understanding of the purpose of Medina’s project; and B. to use this perspective to locate the problem of privilege in relation to Medina’s project. I carry out the first of these purposes by broadening the scope of Medina’s project, following Kristie Dotson in locating epistemic injustice within Patricia Hill Collins’ “Domains of Power” analysis, which contextualizes the epistemic dimension of oppression among various other dimensions of oppression. The problem of privilege can then be located in relation to Medina’s project by understanding it as existing in the space opened by the convergence of Medina’s system and Dotson/Collins’ framework. Thus, this section establishes the kind of epistemic problem the problem of privilege is by locating it in relation to Medina’s work on epistemic injustice. The following section seeks to actually describe the problem of privilege.

III. The Problem of Privilege and Whiteness as Epistemic Vice

The problem of privilege is not as much a particular epistemic problem as it is a sort of epistemic problem that has many articulations. As such, in order to describe the general problem, I first outline one particular instantiation of the problem: the problem of privilege as it exists between whiteness and racialized oppression. I believe Medina’s project is well positioned to
account for this phenomenon by thinking of the problem of privilege as it shows up in whiteness as an epistemic vice that necessarily accompanies whiteness, or “whiteness as epistemic vice.”

IV. Reflection

The final section of my paper consists of a reflection upon the implications of my project, which I carry out in three sections. In section A., I consider two concerns I feel my project has to be wary of, but which I believe I have handled adequately. These concerns regard racial essentialism and problematizing political action. Section B. regards a number of objections specific to Medina’s work. Finally, section C. envisages the possibility for future work stemming from this project.
I. EXPOSITION

A. Preexisting Literature Regarding Epistemic Injustice

José Medina’s work flowers from a tradition of inquiry regarding epistemic injustice following from the work of Miranda Fricker. This field seeks to describe a particular sort of injustice that subjects people to harm in their “capacity as knowers,” an injustice of a distinctively epistemic sort. Two of the most prominent ways in which these sorts of harms occur are testimonial injustices and hermeneutical injustices. Testimonial injustice describes the ways in which discursive practices create and maintain unfair power dynamics between interlocutors by not properly valuing certain people in their status as epistemic knowers. Testimonial injustice names a sort of injustice that impacts the ability of those in marginalized social positions to speak and be heard. Hermeneutical injustice concerns the way relations of power can impact the collective set of epistemological resources we all use to interpret reality. This is most frequently manifested as a “hermeneutical lacuna,” a gap in the collective hermeneutical resources that results in obscured or problematized interpretations of some realm of social reality. Hermeneutical injustice names a sort of injustice that results in the experiences of those in marginalized social positions being missed or misunderstood. The paradigmatic example used to describe these sorts of epistemic injustices comes from Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, in particular, the trial of Tom Robinson. The trial of Tom Robinson takes place in

Alabama in 1935. Tom Robinson, a Black man, is accused of raping and beating a poor white woman, Mayella Ewell. Robinson is defended in court by Atticus Finch, a white lawyer. Finch presents convincing evidence of Robinson’s innocence—for example, the bruising indicated that Ewell’s assailant led with their left hand, and Robinson’s left arm is disabled—but the jury eventually sides against Robinson. Fricker says Robinson was the victim of a sort of “systematic testimonial injustice” in the form of wrongful non-attributions of credibility following from prejudice. This sort of testimonial injustice results in one’s testimony not being believed due to some prejudice in the hearer. However, some analyses of this example go further, and say that this is not only an instance of testimonial injustice, it is also an instance of hermeneutical injustice. This position holds there is a “lacuna” in the hermeneutical resources that results in various dimensions of Robinson’s experience falling outside the condoned bounds of the white-influenced social imaginary: a Black person feeling sorry for a white person, a white Woman making sexual advances on a Black man, and a father physically abusing his own daughter. These possibilities stretch or conflict with the sanctioned range of imaginative possibilities, so accepting Robinson’s testimony would require the acceptance of uncomfortable or inconceivable truths. On the other hand, this same social imaginary promotes pathways by which the truth of Robinson’s testimony can be discounted. Anti-Black stereotypes construct an alternative conception of what really happened that falls comfortably into the worldview promoted by the

white-influenced social imaginary. These are two of the most prominent sorts of distinctly epistemic harms the field of epistemic injustice seeks to describe.

Fricker’s account responds to this analysis of epistemic harms by advocating that we attempt to foster epistemic virtues that rectify these problems, the virtue of testimonial justice and the virtue of hermeneutical justice. What are these epistemic virtues? Fricker describes these virtues by use of an interpretation of Aristotelian virtue that is clearly influenced by John McDowell, who understands virtues as a perceptual capacity. Someone who possesses a virtue has the ability to accurately perceive the morally salient dimensions of a given situation so that they can respond accordingly in action. So, virtue is a specialized sensitivity to certain requirements that produces right conduct. What is it for an agent to possess a virtue? A virtuous agent is one who perceives, thinks, feels, and acts virtuously. They perceive well in that they see in “moral color.” This means they are attentive to the morally salient features of a given circumstance; they understand which features of a given circumstance are relevant to having virtuous comportment to that context. A virtuous agent thinks well in that they make proper use of these perceptions and have the capacity to use their reason to come to conclusions regarding the best course of action in the given circumstance. In other words, they possess practical wisdom. A virtuous agent will also feel properly due to their possessing proper dispositions. For example, if someone possesses the virtue of bravery, a description of their character is not sufficient if it merely accounts for their perceptive and rational relation to the circumstance, they

8 Medina, Epistemology, 79-80.
also possess the sorts of dispositions that elicit proper feelings of confidence and fear.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, a virtuous agent acts virtuously. It is not enough to perceive a situation well, feel the proper way in relation to the situation, and reason one’s way to knowing what the right thing to do is, but fail to carry out this action. The virtuous agent must actualize the course of action that their virtuous perception, thinking, and feeling tells them is right. Now that the general account of virtue that Fricker endorses is on the table, I can explain her account of epistemic virtue. Aristotle understands moral virtue as a socially trained moral sensibility that allows one to see the world in “moral color.” Similarly, Fricker conceives of the virtues of testimonial and hermeneutical justice as aspects of a socially trained perceptual capacity that allows one to see their interlocutors in “epistemic color.”\textsuperscript{10} Seeing in epistemic color in the context of a testimonial exchange manifests as a “reflexive critical awareness of the likely presence of prejudice” that allows for the possessor of this virtue to correctively “neutralize” the impact of prejudice on their potential or actual identity-prejudicial judgements.\textsuperscript{11} This is the virtue of testimonial justice. The virtue of hermeneutical justice allows one to see in epistemic color regarding our collective use of the social imagination. One who possesses the virtue of hermeneutical justice will be able to spot hermeneutical lacunae that obscure their own ability to interpret reality, as well as point towards hermeneutical lacunae that problematize other people’s ability to interpret reality. The positive project Fricker advocates as a response to her analysis of epistemic injustice is to foster these sorts of epistemic virtues in ourselves and in others.

\textsuperscript{9} (NE 1117a30)
\textsuperscript{10} Medina, \textit{Epistemology}, 80; McDowell, “Virtue,” 332–33.
\textsuperscript{11} Fricker, \textit{Epistemic}, 92–98.
B. Medina’s Contribution to the Literature

This is the context of epistemic injustice literature that preexists Medina’s work. I find Medina’s analysis to be particularly useful in part because he retains Fricker’s virtue/vice framework of accounting for epistemic injustice. I think this framework is well equipped to account for the problem of privilege. However, there are two other features of Medina’s account that go beyond the analysis of epistemic injustice he inherits from Fricker that are particularly important for my purposes: 1. the positive project he promotes to combat epistemic injustice, and 2. his analysis of the relationship between epistemic virtues/vices and social position.

1. Medina’s Positive Project

The ultimate goal of Medina’s positive project is to promote a “shared social sensibility—a set of cognitive-affective relational attitudes” that embody a “kaleidoscopic social imagination.”12 Generating this sort of a just kaleidoscopic social imaginary is, in part, a process of developing epistemic virtues in the individuals who make up society. Medina and Fricker offer similar accounts of the process of developing these sorts of virtues in an individual, by learning from those who already possess epistemic virtues and generating “epistemic friction” with differently situated others whereby each other’s understandings of the world are mutually meliorated by the other.13 Epistemic friction creates opportunities to be challenged in one’s ways of thinking and to challenge one’s interlocutor in return. This promotes the development of epistemic virtues in both parties involved. The next step in Medina’s picture is the development

12 Medina, Epistemology, 305-306.
of “radical solidarity” with those knowers with whom you are engaging.\footnote{Medina, \textit{Epistemology}, 251-252, 302.} This requires the development of “accountability and responsiveness” in a political, emotional, and epistemic sense. This relation is also one that should be cultivated with more and more people as one lives their life, and thus the mutual melioration that develops an adjusted epistemic standing for all parties involved becomes sensitive to an increasing number of others. Following this stage, we see the development of “resistant memories” and “resistant imaginations.”\footnote{Medina, \textit{Epistemology}, 255, 305.} This is the collective melioration of the past and future, the process of constructing truth according to the web of epistemic relations of radical solidarity and epistemic friction one has taken part in. Importantly, the goal of this construction of truth is not to arrive at a single, unified perspective. This project is organized around the affirmation of a series of truths that are attentive to a pluralistic “coordination of perspectives, so that standpoints become, not merged or fused together, but connected and attentive to each other.”\footnote{Medina, \textit{Epistemology}, 305.} The final phase of Medina’s project is a society that promotes this sort of relation between its various members, the development of a shared social sensibility dispersed throughout society, which establishes a social imaginary that is “kaleidoscopic” in its being able to account for multiple legitimate perspectives, a social imagination that possesses enough “fluidity, dynamicity, and interconnectivity” to acknowledge a multiplicity of perspectives, the possibility of further perspectives not yet considered, and the limitations of one’s own perspective.\footnote{Medina, \textit{Epistemology}, 201.} Thus, Medina’s work more adequately accounts for the
promotion of individual epistemic virtues in describing the communal process of engaging in epistemic friction.¹⁸ In this way, individual development of epistemic virtues contributes to a larger project. Upstream from the individual, the development of epistemic virtues results in healing the social imaginary.

As Medina’s emphasis shifts from developing the individual epistemic virtues towards this picture of developing a kaleidoscopic social imaginary, there are new aspects of epistemic injustice that are worthy of concern beyond just individual instances of testimonial injustice. Fricker’s description of hermeneutical injustice highlights the wrongs that occur in testimonial exchanges that owe to hermeneutical lacunae. Medina’s account is more focused on the role of hermeneutical injustice in shaping the collective social imaginary itself. Because of this, Medina can understand the harms of hermeneutical injustice as occurring in the process of shaping this collective epistemic resource itself, not just where failures of the social imagination result in unjust testimonial practices. For example, imagine a white person—let’s call her Karen—who attends a diversity and inclusion seminar at work. This seminar focuses on understanding racial microaggressions as instances of epistemic injustice. By highlighting a few examples and locating these particular examples within a framework that understands these examples as instances of epistemic injustice, the seminar attempts to help white people understand the ways some of their actions—which are seemingly innocuous, or even positive—can be offensive and harmful to the epistemic capacities of people of different races. Imagine now that Karen pays attention, understands all the concepts, and is receptive to the messages. She doesn’t want to be

one of those Karens, after all. She feels bad about the ways she has unwittingly caused discomfort to some of the people of color in her life. However, imagine that Karen does not adequately integrate the information into her life going forward. The lessons from the seminar are pushed to the back of her mind or forgotten. However much of the information is retained, Karen fails to use these tools to be more virtuous. Due to her socialized insensitivity and her failure to take this opportunity to learn to correct for these obstacles, we can imagine that Karen will go forward committing similar harms without recognizing them as such. The significance of Medina’s framework as opposed to Fricker’s is that the harms described in this example are not only those actions and insensitivities that impact Karen’s testimonial practices going forward; the lack of uptake itself is an instance of hermeneutical injustice. In this seminar, Karen was exposed to epistemic tools that have been calibrated from the perspective of marginalized social positions, but she failed to appreciate these tools as she should have. This means that the collective social imaginary—of which Karen is a part—lacks a set of resistant resources that it otherwise could have possessed. Medina’s positive picture concerns more than just correcting for instances of epistemic injustice through the development of epistemic virtues, it provides a positive account of a better future we can pursue, through developing communal epistemic virtues and fostering a kaleidoscopic social imaginary. This allows us to understand epistemic harms not only as instances of epistemic injustice in the sense of an unjust testimonial practice, but also failures to adequately pursue the positive project Medina advances, like Karen’s failure to provide the epistemic tools proper uptake.

2. Medina’s Connections Between Epistemic Virtue/Vice and Social Position
The second important feature of Medina’s project for my purposes is his analysis of the relationship between epistemic virtues/vices and social position. This observation plays a foundational role in the direction my project takes. The standard consideration of epistemic injustice—typified by Miranda Fricker—seeks to understand the ways in which people in marginalized social positions are adversely affected as knowers by injustices that occur in the epistemic realm. Fricker’s analysis seeks to describe the distinctly epistemic dimension of oppression broadly construed, giving us the tools to understand one particular way in which those who are oppressed can be wronged: they can be wronged specifically in their capacities as knowers. For most purposes, this is entirely appropriate. These are the primary harms of epistemic injustice, they are the problems that are most detrimental in the real world, and which this work ought to be chiefly organized around addressing.

However, Medina notices that this analysis is not entirely sufficient. While of course being subject to epistemic marginalization is not a good thing, Medina thinks there are some epistemic advantages to this location. Medina thinks that people in marginalized social positions tend to develop epistemic virtues, for example, “humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness.” He says epistemically marginalized people tend to develop “a more acute attentiveness to hermeneutical gaps,” experiences of the collective social imaginary not working for one’s lived experience creates the opportunity to go beyond the dominant state of the collective epistemic resources. These virtues coincide in the state of “subversive lucidity” or “meta-lucidity,” the embodiment of epistemic virtue. The corollary phenomenon for people who

19 Medina, Epistemology, 69.
exist in positions of privilege is that they tend to develop epistemic vices, like “arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness.” Medina observes that even though people who exist in positions of privilege tend to have better access to epistemic resources, they tend to develop forms of “privileged ignorance” that shield them from the most difficult confrontations that follow from the power relations that facilitate their privilege. People in privileged social positions tend to be “actively ignorant subjects,” embodying epistemic vices. The importance of this insight cannot be understated for my purposes, it is the reason I have chosen to focus on Medina’s work instead of some other thinker in the realm of contemporary epistemic injustice. Medina’s analysis opens up a space where I (as a white person) can focus on the secondary epistemic problems that are part of the reason why addressing these primary harms is so difficult, like the impact of epistemic vices on people in positions of privilege. So, Medina’s analysis provides a starting point for my project with the observation that there are epistemic advantages to existing in marginalized social positions, and conversely, epistemic disadvantages to existing in positions of privilege.
II. RECONTEXTUALIZING MEDINA

Since an analysis of Medina’s purpose has been laid out, I am in a position to offer a method of recontextualizing Medina’s project and organizing it towards pursuing a new purpose, which opens up the space to understand the problem of privilege. This section has two purposes: A. to develop a new understanding of the purpose of Medina’s project; and B. to use this perspective to illuminate the location of the problem of privilege in relation to Medina’s project.

A. A New Understanding of the Purpose of Medina’s Project

1. Medina’s Purpose vs. My Purpose

So, both Medina’s analysis of the wrongs of epistemic injustice and the positive project he thinks we can advance in order to combat these problems has been laid out. My ultimate goal is to expand Medina’s analysis to bear on the problem of privilege, but this first requires employing a new perspective on the purpose of Medina’s project. I believe Medina’s work has a broader range of usefulness than the fairly limited set of goals he applies them to, and constraining his project in such a way means that there are some important epistemic problems that are not covered by his account. My claim is not that Medina’s analysis is mistaken, but that it can be useful to employ his framework with a different purpose. The purpose of Medina’s account is to address epistemic injustice as it exists across a variety of sorts of oppression. This is a useful way to look at epistemic injustice, as it allows Medina to design tools for describing the problems and solutions to address them that are applicable to a wide range of circumstances. However, I believe it can also be useful to take a different approach to epistemic injustice. Instead of centering the aspects of epistemic injustice that appear broadly across many contexts, I
focus on the way in which epistemic injustice functions as one tool of a given system of oppression and exists in connection to a variety of other mechanisms this system of oppression employs. For example, the epistemic injustices in the trial of Tom Robinson make up one aspect of the whole system of racialized oppression. I argue that the problems we ought to be concerned with in this example are not exhausted by the epistemic issues, there are a range of social and political problems that are also important. Instead of focusing on one sort of mechanism of oppression as it appears in a variety of systems of oppression, I believe it is also important to take the insights of work on epistemic injustice and use them to understand how epistemic injustice exists in connection to more broadly social and political concerns regarding a particular sort of oppression. Thus, instead of aiming towards understanding epistemic injustice as it might appear in any sort of oppression, the purpose of my project is to understand epistemic injustice as it appears as an aspect of one particular sort of oppressive system. The primary benefit of pursuing this goal as opposed to Medina’s is that it allows us to understand a sort of epistemic problem that Medina’s account fails to cover, an example of which is the problem of privilege. Because I believe the problem of privilege as it exists between whiteness and racialized oppression is a paradigmatic case of the problem of privilege, I am going to focus on US racialized oppression.

2. **Recontextualizing Medina’s System Within Collins’ System**

But what does it mean to understand epistemic injustice in connection to racialized oppression in particular? In order to describe the connections between epistemic mechanisms of oppression and other mechanisms of oppression, I follow Kristie Dotson in contextualizing epistemic injustice within Patricia Hill Collins’ “domains of power” analysis of US racialized oppression.
oppression. The purpose of this section is to show how Medina’s virtue epistemic/ethical perspective on epistemic injustice can make use of the insightful perspective employed by Doston and Collins in understanding the epistemic as one of many domains of oppression. Collins conceives of epistemic injustices as a “layer of oppression,” one feature of a greater system of oppression. Her work is constructed from the social position of a U.S. Black Woman; thus, her system is constructed from an analysis of oppression built from an analysis of the “US matrix of domination,” organized around “gender, class, race, sexuality, and nation.”

Collins’s domains of power analysis operates, in abstract, as follows:

Whether viewed through the lens of a single system of power, or through that of intersecting oppressions, any particular matrix of domination is organized via four interrelated domains of power, namely, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains. Each domain serves a particular purpose. The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues.

References:


21 Collins, Black, 270.


23 Collins, Black, 276.
So Collins understands the oppression faced by US Black Women as manifesting in these four distinct—but interrelated—ways. The structural domain points to oppression as it exists in formal institutions like the legal system, banks, etc. The disciplinary domain highlights the particular strategies by which power is exercised in an oppressive manner within these institutions. Her analysis here is clearly influenced by Foucault, and we can think of these strategies like those he describes as “surveillance,” “normalization,” and “examination,” of course among others. The interpersonal domain of oppression stresses the myriad ways in which people’s understandings of the world are developed in relation to power, and in turn how everyday, mundane interactions between individuals are informed by the operations of power. Finally, I have arrived at the hegemonic domain of power, which is the most significant aspect of Collins’s domains of power for my purposes. The hegemonic domain of oppression houses the epistemic dimension of the framework, and establishes the ways in which epistemic features affect the entirety of the system. The primary function of the hegemonic domain of power is justifying the oppressive arrangements of all the other domains of power and facilitating contacts between the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of power. The specific technologies of epistemic injustice discussed previously can also be used to fill out this picture. Testimonial injustices like microaggressions and hate speech are plentiful in the disciplinary and interpersonal domains of oppression. In fact, the paradigmatic case of interpersonal racism, the utterance of a racist slur, is a testimonial injustice. Workplace microaggressions make up a core

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aspect of the disciplinary mechanisms that systematically prevent employment and opportunities for promotion, which are again often testimonial injustices. Hermeneutical lacunae cover up many of the most oppressive structural mechanisms of the prison industrial complex so completely that from privileged perspectives they often appear not only benign, but even positive. Collins establishes two aspects of empowerment within the hegemonic domain of power: 1. “Gaining the critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies,” and 2. “constructing new knowledge.”26 This liberatory practice consists of deconstructing the established epistemic structures and replacing them with workable concepts tuned to the experiences of those who are marginalized by the US matrix of domination. I believe Fricker’s and Medina’s conception of epistemic virtue—as much as Dotson’s work on epistemic injustice—ought to be understood as part of this process of pursuing critical consciousness and constructing new knowledge. This is what I mean when I say that I believe the work on epistemic injustice done by Fricker and Medina ought to be reconceived according to my Collinsian account of Medina that understands epistemic injustice as one aspect of the US Matrix of Domination.

B. Using the Collinsian Account of Medina to Locate the Problem of Privilege

So where is the problem of privilege, and how does the Collinsian account of Medina help us locate it? I have said that the problem of privilege is an example that lies on the range of epistemic problems that is opened up by pursuing the alternative purpose I advance in this project and contextualizing Medina’s project within Collins’.

26 Collins, Black, 286.
1. How a White Person Can Contribute to Medina’s Positive Project

As a starting point, I consider Medina’s analysis of how a white person ought to engage in his positive project in order to attempt to combat epistemic injustice. This will give us an idea of the range of problems Medina’s account is set up to solve, setting the stage for imagining a range of problems beyond. As has been established, Medina’s end goal is to foster a kaleidoscopic social imaginary that is maintained by “a shared social sensibility—a set of cognitive-affective relational attitudes” which in turn foster individual epistemic virtues. A white person is able to engage in this project by offering their perspective as an epistemic counterpoint against which other perspectives can be weighed, generating epistemic friction and mutual melioration. Let’s think about a particular example. Imagine another white person who attended the same diversity and inclusion seminar Karen did, let’s call them Robin. Similarly to Karen, Robin is open-minded enough to pay attention, they grasp the ideas, and are welcoming to the overall vibe of the messages. The day after the seminar, Robin bumps into the person who led the seminar at the coffee shop, let’s call him John. They strike up a conversation, which eventually turns to a more in-depth discussion of how the material from the day before applies to various day-to-day aspects of racialized oppression. Applying the perspective they gained at the seminar, Robin pays special attention to acknowledging the way in which their voice—as a white person—is systemically given more weight due to testimonial practices and chooses to listen rather than speak. They are also attentive to the way in which their relation to the hermeneutical

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27 Medina, Epistemology, 305-6.
resources that exist in the collective social imaginary differs from John’s, and where they struggle to understand, they take this as likely owing to a hermeneutical lacuna obscuring their perception, not John’s being mistaken. This helps to foster circumstances in which their perspective might be challenged by John’s, because the testimonial and hermeneutical roadblocks that usually derail meaningful interaction and learning are being accounted for. The interaction created thus allows for the perspective of Robin to be changed, and their disposition to embody epistemic virtue is improved. In addition, positive change in Robin’s disposition to embody epistemic virtues, as an individual white person, has ramifications that echo upstream. Robin does not exist in a vacuum, and their dispositions are one aspect of the creation, maintenance, critique, and adjustment of the collective social imaginary, as well as their engagement in social practices that make up the shared social sensibility they are a part of. In this way, the collective social imaginary and the shared social sensibility are better off than they were before, and as other people pull from these collective resources in the future, epistemic virtues are cultivated in others. So, we understand how it is that a white person can participate in Medina’s positive project in relation to racialized oppression. They ought to pay attention to the way testimonial injustices can often undermine the sorts of exchanges that produce beneficial epistemic friction and adjust accordingly, and they ought to be mindful of hermeneutical injustices by understanding that their social position may make some truths more difficult for them to perceive, and again, adjust accordingly. Behaving in this way has positive effects that carry upstream and thus move us all closer to the creation of a kaleidoscopic social imaginary.

2. The Role of a White Person in Medina’s Account is Negative
However, there is a key aspect of this picture that I would like to highlight, namely, that the role a white person is expected to play when addressing racialized oppression is entirely negative. By “negative” I mean that the best they can do is fix their faulty understanding, they cannot engage in the actual positive creation of the sorts of epistemic resources that combat epistemic injustice in relation to racialized oppression, the most they can do is provide these resources the proper uptake.

Why would Medina prescribe a negative role for white people regarding racialized oppression? Those who exist in positions of privilege straightforwardly benefit epistemically from not being subjected to wrongful attributions of credibility deficits, their ideas are given more uptake in shaping the collective social imaginary, and they are simply more likely to materially have the resources and leisure to exercise their epistemic capacities. This would seem to put white people in an advantageous epistemic position and make them well suited to making the sorts of positive contributions in question. However, as has already been noted, Medina thinks that existing in positions of privilege tends to promote epistemic vices. People in positions of privilege lack experiences like the collective epistemic resources not working to interpret their lived experience, and these are the sorts of experiences that foster epistemic virtues. So there are epistemic advantages to existing in marginalized social positions, as well as disadvantages to existing in privileged social positions, and this puts white people in a bad position to make positive contributions to resisting racialized oppression. Let us return to the case of Robin and John in order to highlight the way in which Medina’s prescribed avenue of resistance against racialized oppression is negative. Robin can recognize that they are likely to have faulty perceptions owing to hermeneutical lacunae in relation to racialized oppression and take a
negative stance, trying to learn from John’s perspective. So Robin, as an epistemically virtuous white person, recognizes that in relation to racial injustice, they are not in a position of epistemic authority, and ought to take more of the role of the learner rather than the teacher. Even where they may be offering pushback, the goal of this argumentation is to clarify their faulty understanding. If they struggle to grasp something, they consider the possibility that they may be suffering from a hermeneutical lacuna.

So it has been established that the role Medina believes white people ought to play in relation to combating racialized oppression is negative. But why is it a problem to offer an account that prescribes a negative role to white people? If one considers this example from Medina’s perspective, this is a perfectly acceptable picture of the role a white person ought to have regarding racialized oppression. Medina’s project is concerned with addressing epistemic injustice as it appears across a variety of sorts of oppression, so while a white person may not be able to offer positive contributions regarding racialized oppression, they can surely make positive contributions to the project elsewhere. However, if this analysis is considered from the Collinsian account of Medina, this negative route becomes problematic. Because my account seeks to address harms of racialized oppression including structural mechanisms like the prison industrial complex, disciplinary mechanisms like workplace discrimination or interpersonal mechanisms like hate speech, it is not possible to advocate that white people to take a purely negative role, because not acting in relation to these domains of racialized oppression is itself a political action. However, the epistemic problems that give Medina reason to advocate a negative role for white people in relation to racialized oppression have not been addressed, and in fact, they further problematize the ability of white people to contribute to political projects in these
non-epistemic domains. Because I am concerned not only with the instance of epistemic injustice itself, but also its connections to racialized oppression broadly construed, it is clear that an inability to embody epistemic virtues disrupts an epistemic agent’s ability to navigate in relation to the whole range of mechanisms of oppression I am concerned with. Because white people tend to develop active ignorance and other epistemic vices that impede their ability to navigate these epistemic obstacles, they are not only in a nonideal position to make positive contributions to the hegemonic domain of racialized oppression, but all of the other domains as well. We thus arrive at a dilemma where white people are forced to act positively, yet are epistemically unfit to do so.

Further, this is not an isolated dilemma that can simply be brushed under the rug. In her project “The Problem of Speaking for Others” Linda Martín Alcoff holds that the appeal to such a prescription for people in privileged social positions is not merely politically irresponsible, but it “presumes an ontological configuration of the discursive context that simply does not obtain.”29 The idea that one can successfully retreat to only positively contributing to domains relevant to their own experiences of oppression is not possible, because we exist in an interconnected web in which all of our movements interact with the experiences of others. This dilemma is thus not simply an isolated or unique circumstance, it is a structural feature of the world that emerges when one starts to pay attention to positionality. Even if this were not the case, and we could confine white people to negative roles in these moments, would we want to? Political movements of this sort typically call for solidarity across difference, the appreciation

and acknowledgement of difference that empowers communal action.\textsuperscript{30} We ought to advance a political project that requires white people to participate, otherwise we unjustly place the burden of solving political problems solely on those who are negatively impacted by the systems we are seeking to change.

\textbf{C. A New Range of Epistemic Problems}

So, if I am trying to address racialized oppression broadly construed, I need to have an account that offers a positive role for white people regarding not only the hegemonic domain of oppression, but also the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains. White people must engage in a range of political projects that are not only epistemic, and participation in these projects requires doing more than just taking a purely negative stance. However, the role Medina believes a white person ought to fill in relation to racialized oppression is negative. This is not a problem from Medina’s perspective, but it is a problem from the Collinsian account of Medina. The Collinsian account of Medina thus allows us to point towards epistemological problems that arise when white people are required to take a positive role in relation to racialized oppression, or more broadly, when people who exist in privileged social positions have to make positive contributions to political projects regarding the dimension of oppression in relation to which they are privileged. Medina’s account is concerned with problems that are primarily epistemic, and these problems often have political ramifications. My account instead focuses on epistemic problems that arise only out of concern with the political. By placing Medina’s project within this frame, a range of problems Medina’s account has not been set up to solve opens up, those

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{30} Lorde, Audre, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, 26-27.}\\
\end{footnote}
which exist at the dilemma where positive political contribution is necessary, but epistemically
problematic. Although Medina’s project has not yet been applied towards these particular
ends, I believe the tools he has created are particularly useful for describing this range of
problems. In the following section, my project uses Medina’s account to describe the epistemic
problem I have been pointing towards. When Medina’s framework is brought to bear on this
issue, I believe the problem is best understood as an *epistemic vice that necessarily exists as a
feature of whiteness*. I will refer to this example of the problem of privilege as it manifests
between white people and racialized oppression as “whiteness as epistemic vice.”
III. THE PROBLEM OF PRIVILEGE AND WHITENESS AS EPISTEMIC VICE

The space opened up by putting Medina’s work in conversation with Dotson and Collins gives us an idea of where the problem of privilege is located. In this section, I describe one example of the sorts of epistemic problems that exist at the dilemma where white people are forced to act positively, yet are epistemically unfit to do so. These sorts of epistemic problems have not yet been covered by contemporary work on epistemic injustice. My goal in this section is to use Medina’s virtue ethical/epistemological account of epistemic injustice in order to describe one example of these sorts of epistemic problems, whiteness as epistemic vice. It is important to note that the goal of this section is only to diagnose the problem I am concerned with, not to advance a solution or a positive project that should be carried out in response. These are important questions that I hope this account opens the door to solving, but questions I leave for another day. In order to describe the problem in question, I will focus on a real-world example of whiteness as epistemic vice that appeared during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2020. In section A., I argue that the BLM example should be seen as existing along the new range of epistemic problems made accessible by section II., by showing that it makes sense to understand this example as lying at the dilemma previously considered. Once it has been established that the protests serve as an example of the novel sort of epistemic problem the Collinsian account of Medina allows us to understand, I move in subsection B. to expand Medina’s analysis to account for this example in terms of epistemic virtue/vice. The goal of this subsection is to understand this particular example not only as existing on the dilemma, but to describe a specific manifestation of a particular sort of problem that lies at the dilemma. I hold
that the BLM example is an instantiation of the problem of privilege as it appears between whiteness and racialized oppression, which I call whiteness as epistemic vice.

A. The BLM Example as Lying at the Dilemma

In describing whiteness as epistemic vice, I am concerned with an agent’s ability to perceive, think, feel, and act in relation to the ways their experience is epistemically colored in relation to their existing as a white person in a world organized by racialized oppression and being expected to make positive contributions to the relevant sorts of political projects. Consider, for example, the BLM protests of 2020. The BLM protests of 2020 were sparked by the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who was murdered by the police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This instance of police brutality served as a figurehead for the sorts of oppression meted out on the Black people and people of color in the US at the hands of law enforcement. I believe that during this time, white people tended to make mistakes in their attempts to aid the movement in resisting racialized oppression, and that whiteness as epistemic vice can explain some of these failures. In this subsection, I show that it makes sense to understand these failures as existing at the dilemma described in section II. Because the range of epistemic problems my project is concerned with is defined by their existence at this dilemma, proving that the example of white people’s failures in the BLM protests exists at this dilemma shows that this is an epistemic problem of the relevant sort.

1. The First Condition of the Dilemma Holds in the BLM Example

The first condition of the dilemma holds in the BLM example if it can be shown that the circumstance is one that necessitates political action. If one looks at this example from the Collinsian analysis of Medina, this condition is straightforwardly met. This movement mobilized
primarily in the form of protest, which is a political action. However, as was established in
section II., I do not consider those who engaged in protest to be the only ones taking a positive
political stance. The decision not to engage in protest at these historical moments is itself a
political action. Whether or not one engaged in protests, one made a positive political action.
These protests are thus an example that clearly meets the first condition of the dilemma.

2. The Second Condition of the Dilemma Holds in the BLM Example

The second condition of the dilemma can be shown to hold if it can also be shown that in
relation to these political projects white people are in an epistemically unfit position to make
these sorts of positive political contributions. I here establish that in the BLM protests this
second condition also holds. As an example of one way white people might be considered
epistemically unfit to make the sorts of contributions necessitated in this example, consider one
sort of question that was being asked during the BLM protests, the question of the proper use of
violence. During the BLM protests of 2020, there were Black people and people of color both
advocating for violent protest and discouraging it, and there is still no consensus answer to this
ongoing question. Beyond simply pro-violence and anti-violence, there are also a range of
intermediate positions along a number of axes. For example, there are a range of positions
regarding the appropriate sorts of violence, and who the proper targets ought to be.

Table 1. Sorts of Violence & Targets of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sorts of Violence</th>
<th>Violent Protest</th>
<th>Self-Defense in Protest</th>
<th>Peaceful Protest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Targets of Violence</td>
<td>The Proper People (No Firm Designator)</td>
<td>Police Officers</td>
<td>The Proper Property (No Firm Designator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate or Government Property</td>
<td>No Proper Targets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Determining the answer to the question of the proper use of violence is no small task. Indeed, there is likely no firm answer to this sort of problem. We may eventually arrive at a general agreement that certain positions are generally right or always wrong, but the real solution is to foster virtues that allow one to be sensitive to the morally and epistemically salient features of a given circumstance, such that the particular context can be met with proper perception, feeling, reasoning, and action. This is because in the real world there is no codifiable set of rules that would provide hard and fast answers to these sorts of questions. There are cases where violent protest is justified, as well as cases where peaceful protest is justified. Similarly, there are circumstances where there are not proper targets of violence in the project of resisting racialized oppression, but there are also times where any person may be a justifiable target of violence in pursuit of this project, and thus there is no hard and fast designator by which we can determine who these targets ought to be. My argument is that white people consistently and problematically fail to possess the sort of virtue that would enable them to correctly answer the question of the proper use of violence regarding resistance to racialized oppression. Let us consider some examples of the ways these sorts of failures have occurred. As a caveat, these examples are not meant to be all-encompassing representations of the failures of whiteness, and they are not meant to describe failures that only white people are capable of. It is impossible to create examples that describe the entire range of ways these sorts of failures occur, these examples are meant to provide touchpoints by which we can imagine the whole myriad ways in which these sorts of failures might occur. My argument is that these examples should be seen as instances of a broader tendency among white people to make similar sorts of mistakes. Once the examples have
been established, I offer evidence for this conclusion by showing that this explanation is consistent with Medina’s system and some of the foundational tenets of Black Feminist Theory.

As most people who were politically engaged during the protests of 2020 have certainly encountered, an overriding position consistently advanced by middle aged to older white people was that of unconditional nonviolence, a position defined by the options furthest option on the right of each row above. This sort of a position is primarily motivated by a comfortable position within the US political system, and in particular, in relation to law enforcement. The comfortable relation to law enforcement enjoyed by white people in the US creates a hermeneutical lacuna that disguises the racism inherent in the structure of US law enforcement. Recall the case of Tom Robinson, in which it was much easier for the jurors to filter Robinson’s testimony through racist tropes rather than accept his testimony and imagine possibilities that fall outside of or conflict with the dominant social imaginary. This articulation of the position of unconditional nonviolence is remarkably similar to the example of Tom Robinson’s trial. The dominant social imaginary provides easy escape valves by which the failures of US law enforcement can be understood without stretching or shattering the sanctioned realm of imagination, like a “bad apple” conception of police brutality. Instead of understanding police brutality as a result of the structure of law enforcement, individual agents corrupt an otherwise healthy system. In the example from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, instead of a white woman being attracted to a Black man and a Black man feeling sorry for a white woman, Robinson’s guilt is “an easily imaginable,
A lack of recognition of the degree to which racialized oppression is a structural feature of the US political structure is an avenue carved out by the US dominant social imaginary, a position that reinforces faith in the US political system to monitor and correct itself, through nonviolent institutions like the democratic process.

On the other side, younger white people often took a problematic position on the farthest left of the “Sorts of Violence” row (Violent Protest), coupled with a center position on the “Targets of Violence” row (The Proper Property (No Firm Designator)). This position is ripe for mistakes to be made because according to this posture, determinations regarding the proper property that ought to be subject to violent protest has no firm designator. This places the onus of making virtuous determinations on the capacities of the agents themselves. One example of the mistakes that can be made concerns the vandalism of former NBA player JR Smith’s car by a white person near a protest in Los Angeles in May 2020.

One of these [expletive] white boys didn’t know where he was going and broke my [expletive] window in my truck (...) Thinking you’re doing something for the people, the one black person who was able to get out of the situation and move into a nice neighborhood and do all of those things that we aspire to do, you broke that person’s window without even knowing. So it’s like, people are consistently doing stuff, when you

don’t even know what you’re doing it for or why you’re doing it.\textsuperscript{32}

I chose this example because I take it to be a case of use of violence on property that is uncontroversially wrong. There are a number of variables that I could cite as reasons for this: the property belonged to a private individual, the individual did not do anything destructive to Black people or people of color, and the individual was Black. However, the importance of this example is not why we consider this particular example to have been a case of improper use of violence, but simply that it was an example of improper use of violence. There are a number of ways I could posit this mistake as resulting from lacking epistemic virtues, but I would like to highlight Smith’s analysis of the cause of this mistake, that “people are consistently doing stuff, when you don’t even know what you’re doing it for or why you’re doing it.” Smith’s description of the circumstances leading up to this mistake align with my analysis of these problems arising at the dilemma. The sorts of epistemic problems I am concerned with occur when white people have to make positive political contributions, yet are epistemically unfit to do so. I believe it seems reasonable to understand this example as existing at the dilemma.

To this point, I have provided two examples of the ways white people were prone to making mistakes while trying to contribute to political projects during the BLM protests. The significance of these examples is not to provide a systematic account of how one might go about making these sorts of determinations. The goal is to understand how complex making these sorts of judgements is, and to understand the many ways one can go wrong. By understanding a few

ways in which white people have made the sorts of mistakes that might result from them lacking
the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues I hope to argue that the second condition of the dilemma
holds in these circumstances, that white people are in an epistemically unfit position to make
these sorts of positive political contributions. However, the most these examples can prove
definitively is that white people have made these sorts of mistakes, but proving that white people
are more inclined to making these sorts of mistakes than Black people and people of color is a
stronger claim. This is significant because proving that the second condition holds requires that
this stronger claim holds. This is a problem because there is no way to offer an argument that
conclusively proves that white people have a particularly problematized capacity to embody
these sorts of epistemic virtues. My argument thus turns on the intuitions of my reader, and
whether or not one finds it reasonable to see my examples as symptoms of a greater tendency
among white people to make these sorts of mistakes. In order to incline my reader towards
drawing this stronger conclusion, I suggest that drawing this conclusion is consistent with both
observations from Medina and some of the foundational premises of Black Feminist Theory.

While the contemporary field of epistemic injustice does not have an account of white
people being particularly prone to making these sorts of mistakes in contributing to political
projects, Medina does acknowledge a nearby phenomenon. Recall that Medina is motivated to
prescribe white people a negative role in relation to epistemic issues regarding racialized
oppression because he believes that white people tend to develop epistemic vices and active
ignorance. While this insight pertains only to the epistemic domain for Medina, I believe it is
reasonable to expect that these sorts of epistemic failures often lead to political failures. As has
already been discussed, testimonial injustices like microaggressions and hate speech are harms in
the disciplinary and interpersonal domain as well as the epistemic, and similar connections exist among all sorts of epistemic injustices and the greater system of oppression they occur within. I thus find it reasonable to believe that the consistent failures of white people Medina notices in the epistemic domain correspond to consistent failures of white people that problematize their relation to a broader range of political mechanisms. Additionally, while epistemic injustice literature has not accounted for these sorts of persistent failures of white people in the political domain, there are other fields of knowledge that have developed frameworks that I believe are structured around an understanding of this tendency of white people. Black Feminist Theory has historically recognized the importance of the perspective of those who are oppressed in order to have a workable political theory. For example, some of the field’s most important foundational work done by the Combahee River Collective expresses this tenet of liberatory theory in “Identity Politics.” The Collective’s *How We Get Free*, Barbara Smith emphasizes the importance of being able to “make a political place for people like ourselves [...] We needed to have a place where we could define our political priorities and act upon them.”33 This acknowledgement of the importance of the perspectives of those who are marginalized by a given system of oppression continues to be appreciated in the work of contemporary Black Feminists. For example, Brittany Cooper’s “people-centered politics” and adrienne marie brown’s “Pleasure Politics” both pay homage to the idea that there is something unique about these sorts of standpoints, arguing that special attention ought to be paid not only to the oppressive circumstances of those who are most oppressed by a given system, but also that we

need to “prioritize the pleasure of those most oppressed.” This centering of the perspective of those who are actually impacted by the system of oppression in question offers a sort of negative justification for the position I offer, that white people are simply not epistemically well-suited to make the sorts of determinations necessary for these sorts of political projects. The reason Black Feminist Theory chooses to ground itself in the experiences of those who are targeted by the US matrix of domination is because these are the people who are most well equipped to understand the problems the movement is attempting to address, and to imagine solutions. If it is the case that those who are targeted by a system of oppression are more well-suited to guide resistance against this system, this insight is accompanied by the corollary consequence that those who are not targeted by this system of oppression are less equipped to determine proper methods of opposing the relevant system of oppression.

I believe that these examples from the BLM protests of 2020 ought to be conceived as existing at the dilemma described in the previous section. I have argued that this is the case by showing that both of the conditions that define the dilemma hold in these examples. The conclusion that I hope to draw from showing this to be the case is that these are examples of the novel sort of epistemic problems the Collinsian account of Medina opens up. In the following section, I seek to account for these problems by using Medina’s virtue epistemic/ethical account of epistemic injustice.

B. The BLM Example as an Example of Whiteness as Epistemic Vice

I have shown how the BLM example can be located along the range of epistemic problems which has been opened up. In this section, I lay out the ways Medina’s account of epistemic injustice can help us describe whiteness as epistemic vice in particular, beyond just
showing that it exists at the dilemma. In section 1., I describe how Medina’s account can be cleanly applied to whiteness as epistemic vice. In section 2., I outline the difficulties Medina’s account has in accounting for whiteness as epistemic vice. Namely, I believe whiteness as epistemic vice necessarily accompanies whiteness, while Medina does not recognize any necessary connections between social position and epistemic virtue/vice. In section 3., I offer a description of the emergence of whiteness as epistemic vice that lends evidence to the conclusion that whiteness as epistemic vice necessarily accompanies whiteness. Finally, in section 4., I offer an adjusted account of epistemic virtue/vice that is compatible with whiteness as epistemic vice.

1. The Overlap Between My Account and Medina’s

We have already seen examples of how lacking epistemic virtue can problematize one’s ability to make positive contributions to political movements. I have suggested that there are a number of problematic stances taken regarding the question of the proper use of violence that result from a lack of epistemic virtue. Possessing a privileged relation to law enforcement often results in a lack of development of the virtue of hermeneutical justice, which can result in failure to correct for hermeneutical lacunae that obscure structural racism, resulting in a problematically forgiving position towards addressing racism in law enforcement. Additionally, white people who take more nuanced stances towards resisting racialized oppression often lack the epistemic virtues that enable them to properly make determinations regarding the proper targets of violence where there are no firm designators that mark proper targets, and this results in mistakes in political actions like the JR Smith example. Medina’s account of epistemic injustice is useful for describing the sorts of epistemic problems that occur in these instances. Whiteness as epistemic vice uses Medina’s terminology to point towards a persistent inability of white people to embody
epistemic virtues regarding political projects concerning racialized oppression. Medina’s virtue/vice account of epistemic injustice provides a useful framework for understanding these failures because it allows us to point towards a capacity (or lack thereof) in the agent themselves. This allows for a diagnosis of these sorts of failures without attempting in vain to create a systematic account of all the epistemic obstacles that might be taken to be relevant to a set of circumstances. The focus is on the capacity of the agent to properly identify the epistemically salient features of any given circumstance. While my analysis stretches Medina’s account by applying it to a range of problems that his account does not originally intend it to (those which emerge only by paying attention to these extra-epistemic domains of racialized oppression) these examples do not break the structure of his system.

2. The Distinctions Between My Account and Medina’s

However, the fit between Medina’s account of epistemic virtue/vice and my project is not always so clean. In particular, my account of whiteness as epistemic vice does not describe a vice that merely tends to be developed in white people, as epistemic vices appear in Medina’s system. Instead, I hold that whiteness as epistemic vice is a necessary feature of whiteness. Because I understand the sorts of epistemic problems I am concerned with as existing at the dilemma where white people are forced to make positive contributions to political projects yet not epistemically qualified to do so, it must be the case that in all instances of these problems, white people are not epistemically suited to make these sorts of contributions. I believe that whiteness causes a significant epistemic problem in relation to the pursuit of political projects that concern the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of racialized oppression. What is this
epistemic problem? The problem I am concerned with is contained within this observation, which I take to be undeniably true and extremely important:

White people are not impacted by racialized oppression the way people of color are. People of color are systematically oppressed by this system, white people are systematically privileged by this same system. Because of this, a white person can never perceive racialized oppression the way that a person of color perceives it.

I believe the insight contained within this statement points towards the existence of an epistemic vice that is necessarily entailed due to being white. This vice is an epistemic obstacle that impedes white people’s ability to perceive, reason, feel, and act in relation to political action regarding racialized oppression. Medina himself also considers a similar observation:

According to Du Bois, people of color, the target of racist oppression, are capable of seeing what the others do not see: their own degradation and the mechanisms of oppression and social distortions that produce them; they feel “the dead-weight of social degradation” masked as “the Negro problem,” they feel the weight of the ignorance of the white world. And this is what crucially distinguishes them at the meta-level from racially privileged subjects: they are aware of a social illusion and what this social illusion hides; they are aware of a whole body of ignorance, a set of blind spots, to which others remain insensitive.34

34 Medina, Epistemology, 196.
Both of these observations outline an epistemic problem that particularly impacts the ability of white people to embody certain sorts of epistemic virtue. However, Medina and I do not arrive at the same conclusion about what insights these observations contain. In particular, our difference of opinion turns on how strong the connections between epistemic vice and social position are. Medina believes that people in positions of privilege tend to develop epistemic vices, and that people in marginalized social positions tend to develop the virtue of hermeneutical justice. So, Medina believes social location does have some impact on how likely one is to develop either epistemic virtues or vices, but he does not think membership in a particular social group is necessary or sufficient for the possession of epistemic virtues or vices. This is what Medina calls his rejection of “the thesis of automatic epistemic privilege.” While Medina finds a connection of probability between social position and epistemic virtue/vice, I find a stronger connection between privileged social positions and epistemic vice (but importantly, not between marginalized social positions and epistemic virtue). My project challenges Medina’s assessment of the connection between social position and epistemic vice, arguing for a stronger connection than Medina’s account puts forward. I now turn to offering a picture of the emergence of whiteness as epistemic vice that I believe offers support for the idea that the connection between whiteness and epistemic vice is one of necessity.

3. The Emergence of Whiteness as Epistemic Vice as Evidence of its Necessity

To suggest how I conceive of this sort of epistemic vice as necessary, I begin exploring how it is that this vice emerges in white people in the real world. These arguments are not meant to arrive at the conclusion that whiteness as epistemic vice is the only explanation for the phenomena considered, or that the only way to conceive of whiteness as epistemic vice is to
consider it to be necessary. As was outlined in section II, it is not possible to make these sorts of arguments in a manner that conclusively proves either of these points. My account of the emergence of whiteness as epistemic vice offers a suggestion that is consistent with both my position and lived experience, and that I believe provides evidence for the position that we should think of whiteness as epistemic vice as necessarily accompanying whiteness. I believe whiteness as epistemic vice emerges from two key aspects of the relation between white people and racialized oppression: lack of relevant experiences of racialized oppression and being privileged by racialized oppression.

One reason I believe we should think of whiteness as epistemic vice as necessarily accompanying whiteness follows from the idea that even if a white person learned to perceive the oppressive impositions of racialized oppression, they still had to learn. My argument is that this dimension of the world is made available to Black people and people of color without the melioration of one’s perspective by differently situated others, whereas white people require this sort of ongoing epistemic friction in order to develop the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues. People of color don’t have to learn to see this way, they weren’t taught to see this way, because of their having the actual experience of being oppressed by racialized oppression, they just do. The sorts of experiences Medina points to as being particularly ripe locations for the development of epistemic virtues are precisely the sorts of experiences of racialized oppression that white people cannot experience. Because white people lack this relevant sort of experience of racialized oppression, they never fully experience racialized oppression without the melioration of their perspective. So, whiteness as epistemic vice necessarily emerges in white
people in part because they necessarily lack the sorts of experiences that foster the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues.

Further, as an analysis of hermeneutical injustice has shown us, people of color have these experiences in spite of the collective hermeneutical resources being skewed by systematic marginalization. Even though the interpretive resources that structure the dominant understanding of social reality are tuned to understand the experiences of white people, people of color have no choice but to experience the material impact of the oppressive features of racialized oppression. I believe that white people’s being structurally privileged in relation to racialized oppression disguises the harms of racialized oppression such that they are more difficult to perceive. It is not enough to simply notice that white people lack concrete experiences of being oppressed by racialized oppression. Because oppressive systems tend to make themselves less visible to those who are privileged by the system, being privileged itself shapes the process of coming to learn about racialized oppression for white people. This is a second sense in which I say white people never fully understand racialized oppression. When white people learn to perceive racialized oppression in this way, they are using a different mechanism than people of color. White people need to use epistemic tools developed from a social position other than their own in order to change their perception of reality and perceive more adequately, whereas these dimensions of the world are forcefully impressed upon people of color such that they cannot help but perceive racialized oppression.

35 Medina, Epistemology, 105.
However, this is not to say that people of color necessarily develop the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues. Medina’s position has shown that just existing in a social position that typically fosters these virtues does not guarantee that these virtues will develop. This is consistent with both my lived experience and my account, for this is not the dimension of Medina’s position I wish to challenge. This is also not to say that racialized oppression does not have a negative impact on white people. For example, white people who are in community with people of color may feel distressed when those around them are subjected to discrimination, or they may suffer psychologically from the realization that they profit from and participate in practices that systematically oppress people of color. However, even when racialized oppression negatively impacts white people in particular circumstances, the structure of that particular facet of racialized oppression is a part of a structure that systematically privileges white people. This structural relation white people have to racialized oppression means that they come to learn about certain aspects of racialized oppression in an entirely different manner than people of color. The insight I draw from noticing the differences between the structural relations white people and people of color have regarding racialized oppression does not mean that people of color necessarily develop epistemic virtues or that white people necessarily cannot develop these sorts of virtues. I wish to highlight the fact that being privileged in relation to racialized oppression necessarily informs the way in which white people develop the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues. In the following section, I describe white people’s distinct process of learning about racialized oppression as creating an upper limit to the extent to which white people can

develop the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues. I argue that this upper limit constitutes the structural form of whiteness as epistemic vice.

4. Accounting for Whiteness as Epistemic Vice

So what does “whiteness as epistemic vice” mean? As with any question of virtue/vice, it is concerned with the ability of the agent to properly perceive, think, feel, and act. This label suggests improperly calibrated dispositions that complicate white people’s ability to virtuously navigate a world structured by racialized oppression. Virtues and vices are dispositions possessed by agents themselves, which are then applied to one’s movement through a life of irreducibility of unique experiences. Conceiving of an obstacle as a vice allows it to be understood as problematizing a variety of dimensions that mediate one’s relation to the world—perceiving, thinking, feel, acting, etc.—without describing every manifestation systematically.

We can understand some rules about the ways in which virtues and vices are typically manifested, but the crucial point is understanding that these are dispositions that show up in many different ways given the particular circumstances. So, what does it mean to understand whiteness as epistemic vice as constituting an upper limit to the extent to which white people can develop the relevant sort of epistemic virtues? I have established that white people can never fully understand racialized oppression because they are incapable of having the relevant sort of experiences, and because they are structurally privileged in relation to racialized oppression. In developing epistemic virtues that allow them to perceive racialized oppression, white people are learning to see a system that is systematically obscured from them.37 I want to suggest that

privilege necessarily creates an upper limit to the extent to which one can embody epistemic virtues relative to the domain in which they are privileged, and that this obstacle is best described as a sort of epistemic vice. Not only are white people less likely to develop epistemic virtues, they are never going to be able to reach the level of epistemic virtue that an epistemically virtuous person of color might. This limitation explains why white people consistently fail when attempting to make positive contributions to racialized oppression. White people make these sorts of mistakes not only because they tend to develop the relevant sorts of epistemic vices, but also because the relevant epistemic virtues they develop can only do so much. The roundabout way white people have to develop the relevant epistemic virtues is not suited to making positive contributions to political projects like those considered in the BLM examples because engaging in these projects requires one to take a stance for oneself, often without taking the time to meliorative one’s perspective by engaging with differently situated others. White people can develop epistemic virtues, but these virtues have to then be applied to the irreducibly unique set of circumstances which make up the real world. The contours of this world cannot be defined in advance, so there are always going to be novel or difficult circumstances which they have to respond to, and they will not always have the opportunity to take this roundabout path to determine proper responses before taking positive action. Whiteness as epistemic vice describes the way white people’s lacking unmediated responsiveness to certain epistemically salient features of racialized oppression creates an upper limit to the extent to which they can embody the relevant sorts of epistemic virtues, and this results in consistent failures in their attempts to contribute to the relevant sorts of political projects.
Why is this analysis unique? What new epistemic problems does it describe? The example of Robin outlines how whiteness as epistemic vice describes problems beyond the scope of Medina’s analysis. In the example, Robin is particularly motivated to take advantage of the seminar, valuing it as an opportunity to learn about epistemic resources developed from marginalized social positions. They also carried this knowledge forward, properly engaging in Medina’s positive project by giving these tools proper uptake and thus fostering a more just shared social sensibility and imagination. This was again displayed in the way Robin engaged in further conversation with John at the coffee shop. Their negative stance regarding the conversation’s turning toward racialized oppression evinces an awareness of the way in which their social position ought to affect their participation in testimonial practices and their (possibly problematized) ability to make use of hermeneutical tools in interpreting racialized oppression. The vice I am pointing to however, still pervades this example. The vice I am trying to articulate is that which requires Robin to turn to John to learn about racialized oppression in the first place, it explains the fact that they cannot fully embody a virtuous relation to racialized oppression. It is that feature that accounts for Du Bois’s observation that “people of color, the target of racist oppression, are capable of seeing what the others do not see” as well as my belief that “a white person can never perceive racialized oppression the way that a person of color perceives it.” Whiteness as epistemic vice is capable of explaining all of the examples of white people’s shortcomings I have thus far considered, although in certain cases, there are more straightforward epistemic vices at play. Examples of this sort of more straightforward epistemic vice are already covered by Medina’s framework, the case of the jurors at Tom Robinson’s trial and the case of Karen. These are instances of testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, and
epistemic harm resulting from failure to adequately promote a kaleidoscopic social imaginary. There surely may be harms following from whiteness as epistemic vice, but in these occurrences there are bigger fish to fry. The examples my account covers that Medina’s does not are the examples of the question of the proper use of violence and the example of Robin. The responses to the question of the proper use of violence are particular to my analysis because my analysis is more adequately structured to make sense of these cases than Medina’s. While it may be true that Medina’s account has the tools to understand the types of epistemic injustices in play in both of these examples, his focus on the epistemic domain of oppression means that his account is primarily concerned with the epistemic problems going on in these instances of failure, and not with understanding these epistemic harms in the context of a political project particularly aimed at addressing racialized oppression. This means that while Medina can diagnose the epistemic issues, his investigation does not properly locate these problems as occurring at the dilemma my perspective makes possible. That is, my analysis understands that these are domains in which white people have to make positive contributions, they have no choice. Medina’s proposed solution to these problems is to rectify the epistemic mistakes, and then move forward with making positive contributions in other domains. My analysis understands that this is not a tenable solution, people exist in a web of political connections and are always positively acting in the political realm. Thus, the examples pertaining to the question of the proper use of violence are better off being accounted for in my framework than Medina’s. Finally, the epistemic problem in the example of Robin can only be recognized on my account because according to Medina, there is no epistemic problem occurring in this example. Robin follows all the rules laid out by preexisting work regarding epistemic injustice, they pay attention to testimonial practices
and hermeneutical lacunae, and their actions contribute to the promotion of a kaleidoscopic social imaginary. But whiteness as epistemic vice pervades this example because Robin is white, and as such they do not have the relevant sort of interactions with racialized oppression, and their structurally privileged relation to racialized oppression actively obscures their understanding of racialized oppression. As such, there is a limit to the extent to which they can come to embody the relevant sort of epistemic virtues, and this upper limit pervades the example of Robin’s interaction, even though they behaved adequately.
IV. REFLECTION

My paper concludes with a reflection upon the implications of my project, which I carry out in three sections. In section A., I consider two concerns I feel my project has to be wary of, but which I believe I have handled adequately. These concerns regard racial essentialism and problematizing political action. Section B. regards a number of objections particular to Medina’s work. Finally, section C. envisages the possibility for future work stemming from this project.

A. My Concerns

The first concern I would like to consider is the opinion that my perspective—in particular, my instance upon whiteness as epistemic vice being necessarily connected to whiteness—promotes an essentialist understanding of race. If whiteness is necessarily accompanied by epistemic vice, it seems that I am arguing that this vice is an essential aspect of whiteness. This is potentially problematic because racial essentialism creates the sorts of divisions between people that have historically been mobilized for oppressive means. However, I do not believe this worry is particularly problematic for my account for two reasons. First, I am describing a feature of the world that owes to social reality, my analysis is contingent upon that given state of social reality. Again, I am not naming a metaphysical feature of whiteness, and if the state of the social reality were to change such that racialized oppression no longer existed or no longer existed in its current state, my analysis loses relevance. Second, my project has been methodologically structured as an ameliorative account. That is, my project is seeking to look at the state of social reality and create a tool that is useful for particular purposes. In describing whiteness as epistemic vice, I am not describing a metaphysical feature of whiteness. I am trying
to name a problem that pervades social reality and describe it so that it can be addressed in the pursuit of racial justice. Where this tool is no longer useful for these purposes, for instance if it were used to racist ends, it would lose its motivational drive and become useless.

The second concern I want to highlight is the worry that my account makes political action more difficult for white people, which is not a desirable outcome. My goal in describing whiteness as epistemic vice is not to immobilize white people in relation to these sorts of important political projects, or to say that they cannot participate in working towards solutions to particularly hard problems like the question of the proper use of violence. Indeed, advocating such a response would fly in the face of both my critique of Medina’s account and the same foundational insights of Black Feminist Theory I appeal to for justification. The problem I seek to address with Medina’s system is that it lacks an account of a positive role for white people in relation to racialized oppression, so I am clearly opposed to advocating a negative role for white people. Further, these insights from Black Feminist Theory that I hope to structure my account in concert with explicitly reject the notion that only those who experience a given sort of oppression have a role in resisting it. Acknowledging the importance of the perspectives of those in marginalized social positions seeks to recognize difference such that healthy solidarity can be pursued with appreciation of these differences. My account seeks to provide the necessary balance to appreciating the “principle of ‘We must all be in this together’ ” by describing not only why the perspectives of those who are marginalized are important in pursuing movements that resist racialized oppression, but also pointing towards the corresponding limitations that
accompany positions of privilege. My hope is that by creating an account of these limitations, this dimension of difference can be more adequately recognized so that we can move forward towards finding solutions.

**B. Objections From Medina**

The second section of my reflection regards a number of objections that are particular to Medina’s work. The most obvious place to begin outlining the tension between my account and Medina’s is the question what sorts of connections exist between social position and epistemic virtue/vice. My position is plainly incompatible with Medina’s belief that there are no necessary connections between social position and epistemic virtue/vice. However, I believe I believe this incompatibility is not as stark as it seems, because my position is actually compatible with the reasons why he believes there are no necessary connections between epistemic virtue/vice and social position. I am going to focus on two of his arguments in particular—as I take these to be the strongest arguments he provides for his position—and show his reasoning to be compatible with my account of epistemic vice as a necessary limitation that accompanies whiteness. Medina is clear that while he does believe social position has some connection to epistemic virtue/vice, it is neither “necessary” nor “sufficient.” Medina’s first point in support of this position is making sure he does not “romanticize the predicament of the oppressed,” he cannot advance a picture of reality that leads us to believe that people in marginalized social positions will all develop epistemic virtues. This point is entirely compatible with my position. Medina’s

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concern here is an argument against supposing a necessary connection between people in marginalized social positions and epistemic virtues, while the connection I argue for exists between people in privileged social positions and epistemic vices. My account is fully consistent with the understanding that people in marginalized social positions can possess epistemic vices. Additionally, Medina does not want to hold a position analogous to Louise Antony’s suggestion that people operate with the “working hypothesis” that if there are misunderstandings or conflicts of opinion, one should assume that it is the person in the marginalized social position who is right. He also describes this concern as trying to avoid “the demonizing of their oppressors at the epistemic level.” My position does not argue that white people cannot be epistemically virtuous. My position claims only that an epistemic vice that necessarily accompanies whiteness limits the capacity of white people to have a fully virtuous relation to racialized oppression. Since the vice I describe only caps the degree to which white people can become fully virtuous regarding their movement in a world with racialized oppression, white people are not doomed to a position of vicious incompetence. White people can engage in the promotion of their own critical consciousness, and become positive contributors to the production of new knowledge. If this is the case, Antony’s position is just as illegitimate on my account as it is on Medina’s. So white people are not demonized, and since my analysis offers no new perspective on the connection between marginally situated knowers and epistemic virtues, my account is consistent with Medina’s in that people of color are not automatically epistemically privileged by their

41 Medina, Epistemology, 112.
42 Medina, Epistemology, 30.
marginalization. So my account avoids all of Medina’s concerns about positing a necessary connection between social positions and epistemic virtue/vice, while earning the benefit of making sense of a variety of circumstances Medina’s does not.

A nearby objection that might follow from Medina’s perspective would take issue with the way in which my project describes a privileged social position and a marginalized social position. Borrowing from contemporary intersectionality standpoint theorists, Medina argues that “the absolute distinction between privileged and oppressed individuals” is somewhat problematic. Medina believes this dichotomy is not reflective of the real world, that a subject who is privileged in every dimension of their identity is more fiction than reality, and that “most individuals are oppressed in some respects and privileged in other respects.” The first relevant point I believe must be considered is that epistemic virtues are likely to emerge in most, if not all subjects. When a subject has developed these sorts of virtues, they have developed a sensitivity to epistemic injustices which is a capacity of the agent they are capable of applying to domains of their experiences beyond just those that immediately fostered the virtue. This is the second point I find important, the “domain specificity of meta-lucidity,” the degree to which epistemic virtues developed in relation to one domain of experience can be applied to other domains. So, how easily can epistemic virtues be applied from one domain to another? Medina holds that these virtues cannot be seen as automatically transferring. It is not the case that coming to understand the ways in which one’s social position is impacted by epistemic injustices affords an

agent an understanding of all epistemic injustices or epistemic injustices in general. I believe this is a justified stance. On the other hand, Medina does not take this difficulty to be fatally problematic for the possibility of expansion of epistemic virtue from one domain to another. For example, Medina considers the possibility of a gay man coming to develop epistemic virtues in relation to gendered oppression. While Medina does not think that experiences of sexual stigmatization in relation to sexuality affords a gay man an understanding of the ways in which sexual oppression exists in relation to gender, he does think that “he can draw on that experience, and his special sensitivity and critical openness with respect to some sexual matters can be used as the starting-point of a cognitive-affective learning process.”45 Regarding the question of the degree of domain specificity of epistemic virtues, he believes that the obstacles that prevent the expansion of epistemic virtue from one domain to another are “constraining but not rendering impossible” this possibility. This perspective is undoubtedly true and important, in the real world people are multidimensional human beings. But I also believe this perspective needs to be weighed against an analysis that focuses on particular instances of privilege and marginalization, rather than taking such a broad perspective that the problematic dilemmas that exist along a particular domain of oppression are avoided. Medina’s perspective is that everyone is marginalized in some respects and privileged in others, and thus the virtues one develops in one domain can be expanded to another. While this is true, if we lose sight of individual instances of privilege and marginalization, we are simply dodging tough questions and not providing valuable insight into the real problems that emerge in lived experience. In fact, if we lose sight of these

45 Medina, Epistemology, 204.
sorts of particular ways in which particular people are privileged or marginalized, we lose one of the most important insights of standpoint theory, that social position matters. My account was inspired by the fact that Medina’s analysis does not do enough to outline these sorts of tough real world problems. So, while we need to understand that the fictional person of absolute privilege is a fantasy, we also need to understand that in the real world and in relation to particular domains of oppression, people are privileged and people are marginalized.

C. Envisaging Future Work

I conclude my project by gesturing towards the ways in which my strategy opens the possibility to pursue similar projects and the existence of other instantiations of the problem of privilege. I believe the process of locating contemporary work on epistemic injustice within a more broadly political framework concerning a particular sort of oppression can be applied to domains other than US racialized oppression. Thus, similar sorts of projects that operate from a political framework and seek to discover epistemic obstacles that follow from the relevant mechanisms of oppression are possible in any number of forms. These sorts of projects would be characterized by being able to locate epistemic problems that arise only in the context of particular political frameworks. One particular sort of problem that I believe may exist across these various spaces are different instantiations of the problem of privilege. In describing whiteness as epistemic vice, I highlight the way in which in relation to US racialized oppression, people in privileged social positions possess epistemic vices in relation to the domain in which they are privileged. Similar problems following from privilege may surely exist in other domains. However, I chose to focus on the problem as it exists between whiteness and racialized oppression because I felt that this instantiation of the problem was particularly strong. There are
a number of reasons that other occurrences of the problem may not be as strong. One such reason follows from the fact that according to the way race exists as a feature of social reality (at least at this point in time) individual races are not usually considered to be fluid. The particular determinations for racial categorization are surely up for debate, but the general consensus does not admit of individual people changing races. This is not the case for other paradigmatic domains of oppression, like gender or class. Because of this, I believe considerations about the strength of the sorts of connections between privileged social positions and epistemic vices are likely to be much weaker. Positing a necessary connection between privileged genders or classes and epistemic vices seems impossible if one’s gender or class can change. However, I think there is a possibility of describing epistemic vices that are not necessary, but instead exist in degrees, perhaps contingent upon an individual’s current or past relation to these forms of oppression. The particular ways in which these analyses ought to be carried out would require a similar sort of project as the one I have embarked on here, examining the particular domains of oppression in question and determining the sorts of epistemic obstacles that particularly problematize the capacities of those who exist in the relevant sort of privileged social positions.

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