

The Agent in Pain: Alienation and Discursive Abuse

For Theodor Adorno, the atrocity of the Holocaust, the brutality of two world wars, and the rapid expansion and encroachment of market capitalism into *all* spheres of life demonstrated that the project of modernity could only be viewed as a disaster. To use Max Weber's iconic terminology, every aspect of reality was now thoroughly *disenchanted*, boxed in an iron cage governed by calculating instrumental rationality. Humanity and the world had steered to barbarity, and were now in near-totalised 'mechanised petrification'.

Both the increasing volume of social evils, such as poverty, as well as the presence of 'radical evil' in the world, such as industrialised genocide, signified that the self-image of philosophical inquiry required redefining: rather than engage in traditional theoretical flights of speculative fancy ultimately divorced from and indifferent to embodied experiences, philosophers had to lend a voice to suffering with the aim of emancipation from the circumstances that produce and reproduce it. As Adorno wrote, '[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject'.¹ In other words, no philosopher worth their salt can, in all good conscience, conduct their intellectual investigations without being acutely aware of and being sensitively attuned to endemic suffering in the world.

One of the most powerful works in recent years to lend a voice to suffering for the purpose of radical social change has been Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. In her book, Scarry details the full, complex and harrowing phenomenology of physical pain caused by torture, an especially violent and cruel practice. She is concerned with the difficulty of expressing physical pain; with the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and with the nature of both bodily and verbal expressibility in general. Central to Scarry's position is her arresting claim that 'physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned'.² Though Scarry directs her attention to detailing the phenomenology of bodily pain, the notion of *the agent* in pain that I will try to sketch in this paper – and will develop fully in the monograph I am currently writing – is greatly indebted to her pioneering work.

¹ ND: 17-18.

² Scarry 1985: 4.

I

The different-but-related concepts of epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice emerge out of and have re-invigorated a rich line of work in critical social epistemology, particularly the groundbreaking work by intersectional feminists on epistemic exclusion, silencing, violence, and subordination.³ Critical social epistemologists, like traditional social epistemologists, have a default commitment to knowledge and our epistemic practices as *social mediated* – from innocuous instances of belief-formation to the complexities concerning credibility attribution.

What particularly motivates the inquiries of intersectional feminist epistemologists is the focus on (i) the power dynamics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability; (ii) the role these dynamics of power play in the social conditions of knowing; and (iii) the ways in which the structures of existing social institutions affect the actual practices of knowers. To borrow Wilfrid Sellars's expression, I would say that intersectional feminist epistemologists are particularly concerned with (i) how the normative space of reasons is organised; (ii) how one negotiates the normative space of reasons; and (iii) how one gets into normative space at all. To put this more simply, the overriding focus is critically uncovering the substantive link between various types of power relations and epistemic practices. Arguably, the central question is '*who gets to know things?*'.

An important advantage of the default commitment to knowledge and our epistemic practices as *social mediated* is how one can be alert to the ways in which race prejudices or gender biases or many other long-held socio-cultural views 'can embed themselves in our thinking, distorting even basic instances of empirical claim-making, memory, and belief-formation'.⁴ The most serious distortions (and *mutations*, I would add) involves acts of epistemic oppression and epistemic injustice.

For Kristie Dotson, epistemic oppression refers to 'a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilise persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinders one's contributions to knowledge production'.⁵ For Dotson, systemic practices of epistemic exclusion result in positions and communities that produce deficiencies in social knowledge. Related to, but conceptually and politically distinct from the concept of epistemic oppression, which is principally concerned with endemic, *structural* patterns of exploitation and

³ See Maitra (2004, 2009), Dotson (2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b), Medina (2004, 2006, 2012, 2013); Mills (2007); Alcoff (2007).

⁴ Congdon 2015: 78.

⁵ Dotson 2014b: 115.

domination of specific epistemic communities, is the concept of epistemic injustice. To quote Miranda Fricker, epistemic injustice arises when somebody or a social group is “wronged in their capacity as a knower”.⁶ Such wronging usually happens in at least two ways: through **testimonial injustice**, which *typically* occurs when a speaker’s assertions are given less credibility than they deserve because the hearer has prejudices about a social group of which the speaker is a member;⁷ through **hermeneutical injustice**, which occurs when there is a lacuna or gap in the collective interpretive resources of a given society that leaves a marginalised and socially powerless group unable to properly make sense of their social powerlessness.

With regard to testimonial injustice, I think it would be helpful to illustrate this with a powerful example, an upsetting true story told by Patricia Williams, the James L. Dohr Professor of Law Emerita:

I was shopping in Soho [in Benetton’s] and saw a sweater that I wanted to buy for my mother. I pressed my round brown face to the window and my finger to the buzzer, seeking admittance. A narrow-eyed, white teenager wearing running shoes and feasting on bubble gum glared out, evaluating me for signs that would pit me against the limits of his social understanding. After about five seconds, he mouthed “We’re closed”, and blew pink rubber at me. It was two Saturdays before Christmas, at one o’clock in the afternoon; there were several white people in the store who appeared to be shopping for things for *their* mothers. I was enraged. At that moment I literally wanted to break all the windows of the store and *take* lots of sweaters for my mother. In the flicker of his judgemental grey eyes, that sales-child had transformed my brightly sentimental, joy-to-the-world, pre-Christmas spree to a shambles ... I am still struck by the structure of power that drove me into such a blizzard of rage ... No words, no gestures, no prejudices of my own would make a bit of difference to him; his refusal to let me into the store ... was an outward manifestation of his never having let someone like me into the realm of his reality ...⁸ A rumour got started that the Benetton’s story wasn’t true, that I had made it up, that it was a fantasy, a lie that was probably the product of a diseased mind trying to make all white people feel guilty. At this point I realised it almost didn’t make any difference whether I was telling the truth or not – that the greater issue I had to face was the overwhelming weight of a disbelief that goes beyond mere disinclination to believe and becomes active suppression of anything I might have to say. The greater problem is a powerfully oppressive mechanism for denial of self-knowledge and expression. And this denial cannot be separated from the simultaneously pathological willingness to believe certain things about blacks – not believe them, but things *about* them.⁹

In addition to being harmed by the shop clerk’s racism – she was not allowed to buy Christmas presents for her mother – Williams suffered a distinct, further wrong by having her *reporting of the event* dismissed and not accorded serious doxastic status.¹⁰ Rather than automatically receive the default level of epistemic respect and appreciation provided by Tyler Burge’s

⁶ Fricker 2007: 20.

⁷ See Davis (2016) and Giladi (forthcoming 2021) for how credibility excess is an act of epistemic injustice.

⁸ Williams 1991: 44-45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁰ Cf. McConkey 2004: 202-203.

Acceptance Principle,¹¹ Williams is not only treated with epistemic scorn, she is also stripped of any normative authority, and is deemed as someone who violates norms of assertion.¹²

With regard to hermeneutical injustice, it would be helpful to illustrate this with an example used by Fricker from the memoir of Susan Brownmiller:

Carmita Wood, age forty-four, born and raised in the apple orchard region of Lake Cayuga, and the sole support of two of her children, had worked for eight years in Cornell's department of nuclear physics, advancing from lab assistant to a desk job handling administrative chores. Wood did not know why she had been singled out, or indeed if she had been singled out, but a distinguished professor seemed unable to keep his hands off her. As Wood told the story, the eminent man would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he'd deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers. One night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on her mouth. After the Christmas party incident, Carmita Wood went out of her way to use the stairs in the lab building in order to avoid a repeat encounter, but the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance while maintaining cordial relations with his wife, whom she liked, brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding – the blank on the form needed to be filled in – she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment was denied.

'Lin's students had been talking in her seminar about the unwanted sexual advances they'd encountered on their summer jobs,' Sauvigne relates. 'And then Carmita Wood comes in and tells Lin *her* story. We realised that to a person, every one of us – the women on staff, Carmita, the students – had had an experience like this at some point, you know? And none of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those *click, aha!* moments, a profound revelation. The women had their issue. Meyer located two feminist lawyers in Syracuse, Susan Horn and Maurie Heins, to take on Carmita Wood's unemployment insurance appeal. 'And then ...,' Sauvigne reports, 'we decided that we also had to hold a speak-out in order to break the silence about this.' The 'this' they were going to break the silence about had no name. 'Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs,' Sauvigne remembers, 'brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for our speak-out. We were referring to it as "sexual intimidation," "sexual coercion," "sexual exploitation on the job." None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviours. Somebody came up with "harassment." *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That's what it was.'¹³

The epistemic injustice suffered by Wood, a black woman, is hermeneutical, because it concerns the specific ways in which cognitive resources for interpreting one's experiences are maldistributed in accordance with the background unequal power relations governing gender, racial, class, sexual, and disabled identities. In 1960s, U. S. women – especially working-class women of colour – were still *socially* powerless, in no small part due to the way unequal power relations had structured negative social attitudes and legal precedents and provisions. For

¹¹ See Burge 1993: 467.

¹² See Grice 1975: 26-30.

¹³ Brownmiller 1990: 280-281.

Fricker, women were often ‘hermeneutically marginalised’¹⁴ as a direct result of being and remaining socially powerless. In other words, they were prevented from having access to the resources required to make sufficiently salient sense of their social powerlessness. Consequently, the hermeneutical marginalisation created and sustained a form of linguistic paralysis, what Fricker calls ‘cognitive disablement’,¹⁵ where, for example, victims of sexual harassment are unable to articulate features of their specific experience for *their own full* understanding. According to Fricker, then, ‘[Wood’s] hermeneutical disadvantage renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it’.¹⁶

Crucially, though, two critical points need to be made here: (i) Dotson rightly argues that marginalised people often have no difficulty articulating their experiences. What Dotson has labelled ‘contributory injustice’, i.e. the systematic epistemic harm produced by a privileged inquirer’s willfully ignorant use of the prejudicial features of interpretive capital in a way that violates the epistemic agency of a non-privileged person (or group), includes instances where there are interpretive resources readily available for marginalised groups to sufficiently make sense of their marginalisation. But, crucially, those particular interpretive resources have not been recognised as part of the *overall* shared hermeneutic resources of a given society. This is due to dominant groups’ negative attitudes towards the authors and producers of those particular interpretive resources. In other words, it is not the case that marginalised groups lack the hermeneutical resources to make sense of their own experiences – but rather that dominant groups, for a plurality of reasons, are not inclined to deem those resources as epistemically and politically significant. As Nora Berenstain puts it, ‘[i]t is a failure of circulation rather than a failure of creation, and it is due to the refusal of dominant groups to acknowledge epistemic resources that resist assimilation into dominant epistemic schemes’.¹⁷

(ii) From the perspective of those confronting the ideology motivating, producing, and reproducing epistemic *oppression*, it would be both conceptually and politically reckless to either ignore or downplay Wood’s race in the discourse here. Either failing to see Wood’s race as directly relevant to *her* experience or avoiding mentioning Wood’s race on the grounds that one can see her experience as an instance of something that is relevant to women *in general* is

¹⁴ Fricker, 2007: 153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Berenstain 2016: 585.

guilty of the errors present in ‘post-racial’ judgements. While many women face sexual harassment in the workplace, African American women’s experiences of workplace sexual harassment is *unique*. For Fanon, the ‘post-racial’ judgement ‘I don’t see colour; I see people’ – a judgement favoured by liberals – aims to negate *difference* and it does so from a predominantly *white* perspective.¹⁸ The liberal claim may well be *genuinely* well intentioned – since it is sensitive to the oppressive features of racial bias –¹⁹ but it is nonetheless *still* an instance of symbolic violence with material effects.

The idea of seeing a person of colour independently of any racial category amounts to a form of invisibilisation, insofar as a person of colour is likely to reply ‘If you don’t see *colour*, you don’t see *me*’. The liberal-Enlightenment disposition to do one’s utmost to look through or past putatively contingent or inessential properties in the attempt to establish a *common humanity*²⁰ ossifies the potential for moments of *genuine* intersubjectivity. Rather than serve as a means to foster communicative action by privileging difference over monochromatic universality, ‘I don’t see colour; I see people’ is either, at best, an instance of a ham-fisted conceptualisation of empathy, or, at worst, an instance of a subtle and insidious racist schema.²¹ Active disregard of racial categories – whether such disregard is motivated by *ignorance* or not –²² is invariably bound up with complex patterns of race-specific denigration.²³ In this respect, the *pragmatics* of the claim ‘I don’t see colour; I see people’ are ‘I see you in spite of your race’.

To see a person despite their race always implies that racial colour categories are, by default, problematic – specifically, racial colour categories are phenomena that need to be eliminated on account of how they *negatively brand* a person’s subjectivity and experiences. However, for so many people of colour, their racial situatedness and racially embodied subjectivity is, on the contrary, a profound source of *pride*,²⁴ so much so that these play an ineliminable role in imbuing their lives with positive meaning and their achievements with especially heightened value. For example, the development of Black Feminist thought is precisely predicated on the idea that embodied and embedded blackness is a source of profound *power*, as something to be actively deployed in the work of constructing and maintaining intersectionally liberating narratives. Black women’s activism has been enriched by how race

¹⁸ Viz. BSWM: 196-197.

¹⁹ Viz. Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers 2012: 205.

²⁰ Viz. Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers 2012: 206.

²¹ For further on this, see Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Eddo-Lodge (2017).

²² For further on ignorance, see Mills (2007) and Eddo-Lodge (2017).

²³ Cf. Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers 2012: 206.

²⁴ Cf. Korsgaard 2009: 20; 21; 22.

plays a *sine qua non* role in the articulation of black women's hermeneutic integrity, where they resist any double bind and are in positions to *self*-define and interpret their *own* experiences and subjectivities *independently* of white-centric or white-steered patterns of (un)marked ideological recognition. As Patricia Hill Collins writes:

For African-American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women's critical social theory ... Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. In all, Black women's participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively Black and womencentred worldviews.²⁵

Having sketched the central themes of epistemic oppression, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, I would now like to turn to the central themes of recognition theory.

II

One of the key developments in interdisciplinary social theory over recent decades has been the rise of 'diagnostic social philosophy'. In the words of its leading contemporary exponent, Axel Honneth, such a tradition '... is primarily concerned with determining and discussing processes of social development that can be viewed as misdevelopments, disorders or "social pathologies" ... Its primary task is the diagnosis of processes of social development that must be understood as preventing the members of society from living a "good life"'.²⁶

For Honneth, the hallmark concept for articulating the formal complexities of social structures, attitudes, and pathologies is *intersubjective recognition*, the practice of acknowledging and being acknowledged by others, specifically 'affective approval or encouragement'.²⁷ In his first major work, *The Struggle for Recognition* (a combination of Hegel's early Jena writings, G. H. Mead's social psychology, and Donald Winnicott's object relations psychoanalysis), Honneth's underlying claim is that the process of gaining recognition intersubjectively is identical to the journey of self-realisation *qua* social and rational agent, as 'practical identity-formation presupposes intersubjective recognition'.²⁸ The

²⁵ Collins 1999: 8-9.

²⁶ Honneth 2007: 4.

²⁷ TSR: 95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

dynamical process of intersubjective recognition, where intersubjective recognition itself presupposes that social identities are inherently vulnerable through-and-through, is mediated by a dialogically structured normative space of reasons – the ‘network of discursive holdings’,²⁹ where, for example, looping-effect³⁰ normative discourse takes place.

Taking inspiration from Hegel’s three forms of intersubjectivity – love, legal relations, and solidarity – Honneth draws distinctions between three forms of practical self-understanding, namely self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem: *self-confidence* refers to the basic sense of the stability and continuity of one’s self as a determinate individual with particular needs and emotions that require intersubjective recognition to be meaningfully constituted. *Self-respect* comes from being recognised as part of an equal legal community, where being part of a legal community as an equal member under the protection of law provides social respect. And *self-esteem* comes from having one’s traits and accomplishments positively recognised either by fellow members of one’s individual community or by other communities of value.

Social conflict, then, is understood to arise from how certain groups within a given society experience either *misrecognition* or *nonrecognition*: in cases of misrecognition, the recognition order of a society acknowledges a group or minority, but, incorrectly, does not accord that particular group or minority the *same* level of respect and value as that of the majority. In cases of nonrecognition, the recognition order of a society incorrectly fails to acknowledge the subjectivity of a group or minority, incorrectly according that group or minority *no* positive normative status at all.

Both misrecognition and nonrecognition are severely detrimental to psychological and moral development, since they are not forms of *intersubjective recognition*: ‘[t]hrough intersubjective recognition, [one] is engaged in the process of self-realisation with respect to [one’s] practical relation-to-self’,³¹ to the extent that the self-realisation of any individual can only be achieved in a progressive social environment. Since human beings are intersubjectively vulnerable, ‘[t]o miss out ... is to be deprived of one of the basic ways of being a self and hence to suffer an impoverishment of one’s life’,³² to quote Frederick Neuhouser. The following from Robert Sinnerbrink also captures this developmental point particularly well: ‘[t]he effects of social misrecognition involve not only distorted forms of communication but the real corporeal

²⁹ Kukla and Lance 2009: 192.

³⁰ Viz. Hacking (1999).

³¹ Zurn 2015: 25.

³² Neuhouser 2008: 223.

experience of suffering; this remains a fundamental experience essential to any account of misrecognition as a moral injury to the integrity, and hence freedom and dignity, of the autonomous subject'.³³

By explicating the recognition order of a society through uncovering the moral grammar of that society, one can *reveal the moral and social commitments* governing how members interact with one another. This aims to practically aid emancipation by realising the immanent emancipatory potential found in contemporary social structures and social attitudes, in order to transcend the current intersubjective framework to realise full human freedom.

III

Recognition theory on the one hand, and contemporary work by intersectional feminist epistemologists on the other, have largely developed separately from one another, notwithstanding significant points of overlap.³⁴ Yet these fields of discussion have considerable bearing on one another. From a recognition theory perspective, I think epistemic oppression and testimonial injustice are particularly harrowing, because such practices rob a group or individual of their status as *rational inquirers*, thereby creating an asymmetrical cognitive environment in which they are not deemed one's conversational peer. To see how this works, it would be particularly helpful to articulate an analogy between (i) Honneth's own Scarry-influenced account of how torture and rape constitute denials of self-confidence, and (ii) a recognition account of epistemic oppression and testimonial injustice.

According to Honneth, the trauma inflicted by torture and rape often involves an irreparable breach of one's foundational self-confidence in one's body. As he writes:

The forms of practical maltreatment in which a person is forcibly deprived of any opportunity freely to dispose over his or her own body represent the most fundamental sort of personal degradation. This is because every attempt to gain control of a person's body against his or her will – irrespective of the intention behind it – causes a degree of humiliation that impacts more destructively than other forms of respect on a person's practical relation-to-self. For what is specific to these kinds of physical injury, as exemplified by torture and rape, is not the purely physical pain but rather the combination of this pain with the feeling of being defencelessly at the mercy of another subject, to the point of feeling that one has been deprived of reality. Physical abuse represents a type of disrespect that does lasting damage to one's basic confidence (learned through love) that one can autonomously coordinate one's own body ... Thus, the kind of recognition that this type of disrespect deprives one of is the taken-for-granted respect for the autonomous control of one's own body, which itself could only be acquired at all through experience emotional support as part of the socialisation process.³⁵

³³ Sinnerbrink 2011: 204.

³⁴ E.g. Young (1990).

³⁵ TSR: 132-133.

Since the violation of bodily integrity represents the violation of one's most basic and self-evident way of interacting with one's external environment, torture and rape prevent one from trusting others and oneself – 'the suffering of torture or rape is always accompanied by a dramatic breakdown in one's trust in the reliability of the social world and hence by a collapse in one's own basic self-confidence'.³⁶

To develop the analogy between Honneth's account of how torture and rape constitute denials of self-confidence and a recognition theoretic account of testimonial injustice, I would like now to return to the example used to articulate testimonial injustice: I claimed that rather than be accorded the default level of epistemic respect and doxastic appreciation provided by Burge's Acceptance Principle, Patricia Williams is not only treated with epistemic scorn, she is also stripped of *any* normative authority, nonrecognised, and is deemed as someone who violates norms of assertion.

To use a Sellarsian *tourneure de phrase*, testimonial injustice deprives Williams, a rational agent, of her rightful place as someone moving in the space of reasons, and thereby leaves individuals like her who are systemically prejudiced against in a state of self-alienation and double-consciousness: because Williams is *not* recognised³⁷ – *as opposed to recognised but treated with less credibility than other epistemic participants* – she is forcibly alienated from her own rationality, where her rationality enables her to be a member of a community of inquirers.³⁸ As part of her self-conscious identification with fellow African Americans in an African American community, Williams communicatively self-interprets and finds such communicative action empowering. However, African Americans (and, of course, other people of colour), as part of a racist world, are met with external and hostile web of meanings that radically distort such uplifting *local* self-conceptions. The power structure of racial oppression is pervasive such that the experiential relation Williams has to herself becomes distorted by how she views *her* agency from the perspective of traditional white prejudicial attitudes.

Crucially, the asymmetrical nature of the cognitive environment causes Williams to *feel* that the space of reasons, the locus of normative discourse where epistemic practices derive their sense of meaning and purpose, is not welcoming to her. As Iris Marion Young writes:

In societies stamped with cultural imperialism, groups suffering from this form of oppression stand in a paradoxical position. They are understood in terms of crude stereotypes that do not accurately portray individual group members but also assume a mask of invisibility; they are both badly misrepresented and robbed of the means by which to express their perspective. Groups who live

³⁶ Ibid., p. 133.

³⁷ Cf. Fricker 2007: 134-135.

³⁸ Cf. Fricker 2007: 133.

with cultural imperialism find themselves defined externally, positioned by a web of meanings that arise elsewhere. These meanings and definitions have been imposed on them by people who cannot identify with them and with whom they cannot identify.³⁹

Given that epistemic oppression and testimonial injustice cause one to be alienated from both their own rationality and from the practices which necessarily constitute discourse between peers, I think one has compelling reason to think that nonrecognition and exclusion from the space of reasons amounts to, what I have called, ‘*discursive abuse*’. The *experience* of discursive abuse ‘carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse’,⁴⁰ where the identity under threat here is a person’s self-interpretation as *Geistig*.⁴¹ To use Andrea Lobb’s expression, the kind of ‘epistemic injury’⁴² endured here can be made sense of in relation to what Richard Rorty calls ‘mute despair’ and ‘intense mental pain’. For Rorty, this notion of *agential pain* – the type of pain unique to *agents* (i.e. beings with interests and self-conceptions) – ‘reminds us that human beings who have been socialised ... can all be given a special kind of pain: they can all be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialised (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves)’.⁴³

The failure to properly recognise and accord somebody the epistemic acknowledgement they *merit* is an act of abuse in the sense of forcibly depriving individuals of a progressive social environment in which the epistemic recognition accorded to them plays a significant role in enabling and fostering their self-confidence as a *knowing agent*. Conceived in this way, one can see the analogous parallel with Honneth’s analysis of the harmful effects of torture or rape on self-confidence:

| Torture or Rape | Discursive abuse |
|---|--|
| External and forcible control over one’s own bodily integrity | External and forcible control over one’s own epistemic integrity |

³⁹ Young 1990: 59.

⁴⁰ TSR: 130-131.

⁴¹ Cf. Fricker 2007: 55.

⁴² Lobb 2018: 1.

⁴³ CIS: 177.

| | |
|---|--|
| Violation of bodily integrity prevents one from trusting others and oneself to the distressing extent that victims internalise culpability | Violation of epistemic integrity prevents one from trusting others and one's own rational capacities to the distressing extent that victims internalise culpability |
| "Physical abuse represents a type of disrespect that does lasting damage to one's basic confidence ... that one can autonomously coordinate one's own body" ⁴⁴ | Discursive abuse represents a type of disrespect that does lasting damage to one's basic confidence that one can autonomously coordinate one's own claims and participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons |

A further harm of the denial of epistemic recognition as a fellow member of an epistemic community is that the collapse of self-confidence as a rational inquirer stultifies a person's ability to actively participate in practices designed to bring about *social change*: the asymmetrical nature of the cognitive environment means that those who are accorded little or no testimonial credibility are further rendered powerless by having their knowledge claims, which challenge various social attitudes, summarily dismissed. As Jane McConkey writes:

It is questionable whether an individual or group could ever really be regarded as an effective challenger to the dominant interpretations in society if they were not understood as credible knowers. In order to defy their invisibility in the self-understandings of society, putative knowers have to have their new claims to knowledge accepted as at least possibly true. They must be considered as people who can reliably tell us how things are, but this will only be achieved when they are afforded credibility.⁴⁵

In addition, there is a significant danger that testimonial nonrecognition and the lasting effects of discursive abuse can be so systemic, as in gaslighting, that the victim can end up thinking *they* are at fault or that *they* deserve such treatment. As agents, we do not view ourselves as normatively self-supporting. However, this does not mean that we thereby relinquish our status as *independent* thinkers. Rather, this means that we continuously check our individual commitments and judgements against the commitments and judgements of our fellow agents. Such a subject is active in that they are not passive 'in the use of [their] reason',⁴⁶ where the

⁴⁴ TSR: 132.

⁴⁵ McConkey 2004: 204.

⁴⁶ Deligiorgi 2002: 150.

sense of passivity here is one which is formally similar to that of the logical egoist, namely someone who considers themselves ‘to be cognitively self-sufficient’.⁴⁷

Since human beings are intersubjectively vulnerable and pay attention to how they are regarded by one another, critical comments are often understood as offering opportunities for self-improvement.⁴⁸ For example, receiving a reviewer’s report on a paper submitted to a professional academic journal which recommends rejection or revision and resubmission can often alert an author to weaknesses or errors on the author’s part. However, regressive recognition orders *deliberately exploit* intersubjective vulnerability and *pervert* communicative dynamics of critique by making those excluded from the social space of reasons *think and feel* as though their rejection is entirely the result of their failings. Systemic testimonial nonrecognition permeates individuals’ or a social group’s psychology to the extent that individuals or a social group are made to blame themselves for not being deemed worthy enough to be afforded credibility.

In response to the analogy between discursive abuse and the violation of bodily integrity, Lobb has critiqued it:

... physical abuse might be not just *analogous* to epistemic abuse, but that physical abuse itself can have direct and severe negative epistemic consequences for the victim. Insofar as these then subsequently harm her capacities to function well as a knower, they also qualify as *epistemic harms*. Of course, a rapist’s violation of his victim’s integrity and agency is not directed explicitly at his victim’s capacity as a knower *per se* – except insofar as his intention manifests utter indifference to what she knows about her own desires: namely that she does not *want this to be happening to her*. But such violation can, I suggest, bring resultant epistemic harms that, as Honneth suggests, can undo the foundational sense of an embodied self-confidence and not only shatter the epistemic trust and openness to the world and other people, but also undermine the subject’s epistemic trust in the *signals of the body itself*. The harms that may be done to the physically violated subject specifically *as a knower* might not be accessible at all if we take the figure of the *knower* to be synonymous with a *rational enquirer*. To accept such a claim requires countenancing modes in which embodied ways of knowing exceed or precede propositional, conceptual, and discursive knowledge, and indeed accepting that there may be modes of direct phenomenological apprehension of the world that do not involve rational enquiry at all. This is not in any way to underestimate the gravity of not being able to function fully as a rational enquirer, of course; rather, it is to suggest that to address *only* this kind of epistemic impact may be to underestimate the extent and depth of the loss of knowing function that is incurred by the violated body (as the subject of knowledge). This embodied form of epistemic harm, in other words, may shatter the capacity to function as a knower at levels of a different order than those which operate when she stands in the “space of reasons” as a rational enquirer, or functions as a giver of testimony, or accesses her culture’s semantic and hermeneutical resources. It is for this reason that I think that we need another phrase to describe it.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁸ See APPV: 128-129 and LL: §57, 563; §740.

⁴⁹ Lobb 2018: 17-18.

I sympathise with Lobb's critique. However, for the purpose of this paper at least, I would like to very briefly claim that her legitimate concern, namely that there is insensitivity to the harms of 'pre-discursive injury', can be addressed by carefully bringing into the conversation the additional mode of recognition first articulated by Honneth in his 2001 essay on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and then elaborated in *Reification*.

This additional mode of recognition, usually labelled as 'antecedent recognition' or 'sympathetic engagement', is developmentally and conceptually prior to self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Crucially, antecedent recognition necessarily involves the ability to take up the second-person perspective, meaning that the Other is, by default, seen as a human rather than as a *mere thing*. Such a skill is indispensable for the later development of language and additional cognitive and psychological abilities. However, importantly for Honneth, antecedent recognition is *not* achieved in a cognitive manner. It is not a matter of someone 'rationally processing the second-person standpoint',⁵⁰ to quote Christopher Zurn. Rather, it comprises a kind of purely affective, pre-cognitive, sympathetic engagement with the Other, where the Other is directly encountered as an emotional and intentional creature with their own desires, goals, and projects.

In this respect, then, invisibilisation, namely acts of 'looking past or through', involves withholding from a person both the subtle and unsubtle expressive gestures that typically mark the original, sympathetic affirmation of the Other and the readiness to communicate with the Other, to whom we are answerable. Epistemic and social invisibilisation are particularly vicious forms of humiliation and violence; they are a 'deformation of the normal human capacity for the evaluative perception of others'.⁵¹ This numbing of the appropriate reactive attitude harms one's ability to maintain the Levinasian-Weilian summons-obligations one has when regarding the pain of others, and this in turn, entrenches and reproduces anomie. To paraphrase Susan Sontag, writing on Woolf's *Three Guineas*:

Not to be pained ... not to recoil ... not to strive to abolish what causes this havoc ... would be the reactions of a moral monster. And, she is saying, we are not monsters, we members of the educated class. Our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind.⁵²

So far, I have offered some reasons for thinking there is a substantive role for recognition theory to play in *articulating* the harmful effects of silencing, ignorance, and violating a

⁵⁰ Zurn 2015: 44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵² Sontag 2004: 8.

person's integrity as a knowing agent. However, I would now like to turn to a discussion of whether there is any scope for recognition theory *treating* the social pathology of testimonial injustice at least. For Fricker, the best means of combatting testimonial injustice involves the Aristotelian notion of moral training, specifically the idea of training *testimonial sensibility*: listeners need to be trained well to develop *as far as possible* non-prejudicial attitudes about both their interlocutors (and themselves).⁵³ As she writes:

[P]erhaps we should think of the ideal hearer as someone for whom correcting for familiar prejudices has become second nature, while the requisite alertness to the influence of less familiar prejudices remains a matter of ongoing active critical reflection. This seems about right. What matters is that somehow or other one succeeds, reliably enough (through time and across a suitable span of prejudices), in correcting for prejudice in one's credibility judgements. If one succeeds in that, then one has got the virtue of testimonial justice.⁵⁴

A key feature of Fricker's project of training testimonial sensibility involves the hearer developing greater empathetic competency. Empathy plays a crucial role here just not because this particular kind of intentional emotional state is a *formal* condition for trust,⁵⁵ but also because empathy is required to make the *right* kind of credibility attribution judgement: minimal levels of empathetic engagement invariably prevent a hearer from being salient to or correct for prejudice, since the failure to put oneself in one's interlocutor's shoes – whether due to emotional immaturity or due to personal vindictiveness – results in *epistemic misperception*. As Fricker writes, '[i]f, for instance, her lack of empathetic skill renders her unable to pick up on the fact that her interlocutor is afraid of her (perhaps he is a school pupil and she the head teacher), then she may well misperceive his manner, taking him, for instance, to be insincere when he is not'.⁵⁶

While there are virtues to Fricker's account of empathy, epistemic exclusion, and silencing, I think empathy is too individualistic, and we need to theorise mis/nonrecognition as *social* phenomena. For the recognition theorist, testimonial injustice is classed as a particular variety of *social* pathology. Since testimonial injustice is analysed here under a clinical framework, we shall find, in what follows, that recognition theory provides a more complex but complementary diagnosis and social cure of discursive abuse.

⁵³ In response to Fricker, Alcott (2010) argues that since prejudice and bias are often unconscious intentional states, it is practically impossible to consciously correct those attitudes.

⁵⁴ Fricker 2007: 98.

⁵⁵ See Jones (1996).

⁵⁶ Fricker 2007: 79.

For testimonial injustice to be categorised as a *social* pathology, this described phenomenon needs to be established as something that is *pervasively experienced throughout society*. What this means is that one can legitimately regard a pathological property or symptom to have *social* reach only if there is compelling reason to think that the pathogens do not occur *only* in isolated and individual instances. Once we understand the *social scope* of the experiences of testimonial disrespect and alienation, we then develop an epidemiology of discursive abuse that goes *beyond* the proto-typical social scientific statistical practices of questionnaires and reports, since, as Zurn correctly writes, ‘maladies ... are not often acknowledged as such by those who suffer from or are subject to them’.⁵⁷ Moreover, the recognition theorist’s sensitivity to the limitation of proto-typical social scientific statistical practices as an appropriate epidemiological methodology for treating social pathologies also points towards a sophisticated form of critical social aetiology and therapy: relations of misrecognition and nonrecognition and processes of epistemic exclusion and silencing are *mutually supporting*: what sustains an asymmetrical social structure is an asymmetrical cognitive environment wherein some speakers are illegitimately deprived of participating in epistemic practices; what sustains an asymmetrical cognitive environment is an asymmetrical social structure wherein some members are rendered invisible.

Since recognition theory offers a diagnosis of a social malady in terms of uncovering the moral grammar underlying an asymmetrical recognition order, the kind of therapeutic programme is one rooted in developing the conditions required to bring about intersubjective testimonial recognition. The practice of overcoming epistemic unsociability and realising our epistemic sociability seems to share much in common with the process of transitioning from asymmetrical recognition orders to genuinely symmetrical recognition orders, since true sociality does not merely consist in interacting with others simpliciter, but rather in interacting with others in such a way that enables self-realisation. I think there are important advantages to this approach.

Firstly, articulating the relationship between structures of regressive recognition and regressive epistemic practices in terms of *mutual sustainment* rather than a linear top-down or linear bottom-up relation aids the understanding of the social sphere as a dynamic domain. Following Foucault, there is no vertical relationship between discursive practices and recognition structures, to the extent that regressive recognition structures enable regressive

⁵⁷ Zurn 2015: 114.

epistemic practices, and the regressive epistemic practices enable regressive recognition structures: ‘they condition each other and cannot be understood independently of each other’.⁵⁸

Secondly, realising our epistemic sociability in terms of transitioning from asymmetrical recognition orders to genuinely symmetrical recognition orders necessarily requires significant empathetic engagement: attentiveness to the particularity of the Other, in light of *difference*, is precisely what is required for *genuine* recognition. Whilst mutual recognition is *partly* designed to follow respect, since we should not treat others as means to an end, mutual recognition goes further, for not only should we treat others as ends in themselves, but we have realised that recognition of others as equals is a necessary condition for the possibility of us achieving a healthy practical relation-to-our-own-selves. Human beings’ unsociable sociability – to use Kant’s expression – forces us to engage in all sorts of reprehensible practices, whose consequences are so awful that they affectively and rationally compel us to overcome those structures and social attitudes that are symptomatic of the unsociable aspects of human nature, so that we can fully develop genuine empathetic engagement.

Thirdly, an especially illuminating feature of the recognition approach is the way it articulates the complexities of the collective phenomenology of agential suffering and the motivation to express *collective* outrage to such suffering. As Honneth writes:

Feelings of having been disrespected ... form the core of moral experiences that are part of the structure of social interaction because human subjects encounter one another with expectations for recognition, expectations on which their psychological integrity turns. Feelings of having been unjustly treated can lead to collective actions to the extent to which they come to be experienced by an entire circle of subjects as typical for their social situation ... [T]he models of conflict that start from the collective feelings of having been unjustly treated are those that trace the emergence and course of social struggles back to moral experiences of social groups who face having ... recognition withheld from them ... [In this case] we are dealing with the analysis of a struggle over the intersubjective conditions for personal integrity.⁵⁹

The importance of emphasising collective experiences of pre-discursive and discursive abuse lies in a descriptively rich, anti-abstract account of current societal failings, and in an emancipatory narrative concerning how social critique points towards, what Honneth calls, the ‘untapped normative surplus’ in society: collective experiences often lead to Consciousness-Raising initiatives, which in turn can help bring about solidarity movements, to form practical ways of bringing about social change. For example, with regard to epistemic oppression and injustice, the epidemiology of these abuses is endemic enough to unite those who experience

⁵⁸ Oksala 2005: 97.

⁵⁹ TSR: 163.

epistemic oppression and injustice in different ways and those who express solidarity with them. #MeToo and #TimesUp illustrate that precisely because a concerted effort to end this genus of oppression is ever-growing that one has good reason to think experiences of abuse coalesce into *social movements* which have the real capability of radically reforming the current recognition structure.⁶⁰

From an intersectional perspective, mutual recognition could only be fully generalised and receive institutionalised support in a society that was no longer capitalist, racist, sexist, classist, cisnormative, heteronormative, transphobic, and ableist. But, that does not mean (and cannot mean) that mutual recognition is *impossible* under the neoliberal market sphere. It means, rather, that mutual recognition will be difficult to achieve under existing conditions. Recognition theory shares much in common with a robust democratic call for substantive progressive correction, where the goal of social critique is to shift unequal power relations that are directly responsible for suffering and the kind of alienation that is produced by marginalisation and that further entrenches oppressive ideology: current social institutions fail to be *relational institutions*, since they fail to promote practices of symmetrical recognition.

I take what I have proposed here to hopefully go to some length in bringing recognition theory and intersectional feminist epistemology into conversation, and that this conjunction could help those theorists determined to lend a voice to suffering address social challenges. *The failure of mutual recognition helpfully explains how epistemic oppression and injustice are possible.* That modern Western societies, quite simply, have disgraceful and appalling habits of epistemic misrecognition and nonrecognition reveals the normalised virulent contempt for non-privileged groups. To put this point more polemically, modern social institutions have substantive internal structural weaknesses; modern social institutions often fail to encourage the quest for self-realisation and thereby leave people who are epistemically oppressed and marginalised in a constant state of alienation; modern social institutions, therefore, require radical change, rather than liberal tweaks.

For example, *distress* at institutional racism and police brutality is dismissed, to the extent that the vocabulary of protest against injustice are viciously misrecognised to the point of erasure. As Robert Gooding-Williams writes, the conservative and reactionary view is ‘a failure to regard the speech or actions of black people as manifesting thoughtful judgements about issues that concern all members of the political community’.⁶¹ As part of the effort to

⁶⁰ See Jackson (2018).

⁶¹ Gooding-Williams 2006: 14.

explicitly challenge the reactionary socio-epistemic paradigms which construe antiracist protestors as public threats, Black Lives Matter demonstrations typically involve the chants ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot!’, where marchers raise their hands above their heads while chanting. To quote José Medina here, ‘[t]his slogan performatively challenges the misplaced presumption that demonstrators pose a threat to public order, interrogating the underlying narratives that depict them as such a threat, while invoking alternative images of peaceful expressions of group agency’.⁶² Furthermore, the chants ‘Whose streets? Our streets!’ and ‘No Justice, No Peace!’ are *deliberately* misinterpreted and misrecognised by reactionary groups to imply that the basic progressive claim “Black Lives Matter” is equivalent to “Black Lives Matter More than White Lives.” Crucially, this forms a significant part of the explanation for why #AllLivesMatter is in fact reactionary, since #AllLivesMatter reveals itself as either wilfully or non-wilfully ignorant of structural racism and systemic misrecognition.

I would contend that what motivates the desire to transform the social-epistemic practices of existing modern institutions is self-critically facing up to agential alienation, ‘to produce new forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability’,⁶³ as Judith Butler beautifully puts it.

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⁶² Medina 2018: 12.

⁶³ Butler 2004: 208.

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