Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance

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I distinguish between two senses in which feminists have argued that the knower is social: 1. situated or socially positioned and 2. interdependent. I argue that these two aspects of the knower work in cooperation with each other in a way that can produce willful hermeneutical ignorance, a type of epistemic injustice absent from Miranda Fricker's Epistemic Injustice. Analyzing the limitations of Fricker’s analysis of the trial of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird with attention to the way in which situatedness and interdependence work in tandem, I develop an understanding of willful hermeneutical ignorance, which occurs when dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally. Such refusals allow dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world.

Bringing feminist concerns to epistemology forces one to consider sociality in numerous senses. Among the many questions feminist epistemologists have investigated with regard to the social are: can a social movement (in particular, feminism) have a causal effect on the development of knowledge? Does one’s social position determine what one knows? Can a person know independently of any social group whatsoever? Is all knowing necessarily intertwined with social values? Do our current theories of knowledge obscure the epistemic labor of those in particular social positions? And do our current theories of knowledge re-inscribe certain social hierarchies? Clearly “social” is not meant and does not function in exactly the same way in all of these questions. Nonetheless, feminist epistemologies that examine different forms of sociality are sometimes placed next to one another as if they were competing for the same slot. This may be because one of the primary ways in which concerns about the social have

Hypatia vol. 27, no. 4 (Fall 2012) © by Hypatia, Inc.
appeared in feminist epistemology is in direct contrast to the distinctly nonsocial epistemic agent of classical epistemology. However, as Heidi Grasswick notes, the epistemic agent of classical epistemology is nonsocial in more than one way: he is at once an individual who is generic and self-sufficient (Grasswick 2004, 85). The need to attend to the social in more than one sense is borne out by the fact that epistemologies that focus on sociality in one sense can turn out seeming not social enough in other senses. Consequently, feminist epistemologists would do well to distinguish among different forms of sociality, to examine distinct forms simultaneously, and to consider how they might work in conjunction with one another.

I distinguish between two senses in which the sociality of the knower is epistemically significant: 1. her situatedness insofar as the knower's social position draws her attention to particular aspects of the world; and 2. her interdependence insofar as epistemic resources, needed to make sense of those parts of the world to which she attends, are by nature collective. I argue that there is a dialectical relationship between the knower's situatedness and her interdependence that can produce a tension, which, when worked out, may lead to an expansion of possible knowledge. However, the dialectical relationship between situatedness and interdependence, within the context of a socially stratified society, can also lead to a distinct form of epistemic injustice, willful hermeneutical ignorance. Analyzing an example in Miranda Fricker's book *Epistemic Injustice*, I develop this concept further and demonstrate the importance of adding it to Fricker's account. Unlike the two forms of epistemic injustice Fricker identifies (testimonial and hermeneutical injustice), willful hermeneutical ignorance does not describe a thwarted epistemic agent who is not believed or cannot make sense of her world. Instead, willful hermeneutical ignorance describes instances where marginally situated knowers actively resist epistemic domination through interaction with other resistant knowers, while dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world. Distinguishing between situatedness and interdependence is crucial for showing how such ignorance is possible while maintaining a vocabulary of accountability for what one does not know.

**THE SITUATED KNOWER**

Feminist attention to the knower's situatedness contrasts directly with the generic knower of classical epistemology. The importance of situatedness in knowing is neither as simple as the claim that different experiences lead to different knowledge, nor as strong as the claim that social position leads to automatic knowledge (Intemann 2010, 783–84). Instead, as Alcoff and Collins, among others, have noted, the situations resulting from one's social positioning create “common challenges” that constitute part of the knower's lived experience and
so contribute to the context from which she approaches the world (Alcoff 2000a; 2006; Collins 2008). Repeated over time, these challenges can lead to habits of expectation, attention, and concern, thereby contributing to what one is more or less likely to notice and pursue as an object of knowledge in the experienced world (Alcoff 2006, 91).

In addition, feminist standpoint theorists have analyzed how power operates within and around particular social positions in ways that are epistemically significant. For example, if a person’s social position makes her vulnerable to particular others, she must know what will be expected, noticed by, and of concern to those in relation to whom she is vulnerable, whereas the reverse is not true.

Finally, when one is marginally positioned, the epistemic resources used by most knowers in one’s society for knowing the world will be less suited to those situations in which marginally situated knowers find themselves on account of being marginal. Epistemic resources, about which I shall say more shortly, are developed in relation to and must be suitable for knowing the world. However, these resources do not help us to know all parts of the world equally or even all aspects of a given part of the world equally. Rather, specific resources help us to understand, investigate, and know about specific parts and particular aspects of the world. It follows that those who are not positioned well to influence epistemic resources will find that the dominant resources for knowing are less likely to be suited for knowing those parts of the world toward which their situatedness orients them. This claim will become significant as we begin to examine the interdependence of the knower.

In sum, the knower’s situatedness refers to the situations in which the knower finds herself repeatedly over time due to the social relations that position her in the world. This situatedness develops particular habits of attention that may attune the knower to others’ habits of attention or not, depending upon one’s social vulnerability. Moreover, this situatedness may be suited to the epistemic resources that prevail in a given society or may not, depending upon whether the experiences that arise from one’s situatedness influence the development of epistemic resources. In each case, social position has a bearing on what parts of the world are prominent to the knower and what parts of the world are not. Epistemically speaking, situatedness is fundamentally about how relations with others position the knower in relation to the world.

THE INTERDEPENDENT KNOWER

In addition to analyzing how social relations affect what we are likely to know, feminist epistemologists have also argued that relations with others are necessary for providing and maintaining epistemic resources with which we know. Knowers are situated insofar as they are confronted by a world from particular positions
within it. In contrast, knowers are *interdependent* insofar as the epistemic resources or tools *with which* we know operate collectively, not individually. This aspect of the knower contrasts directly with the self-sufficient knower of classical epistemology. *What* one knows because of situatedness is not the same as *whether* and *how* one is able to know through the use of epistemic resources. With regard to these latter questions, feminist epistemologists have shown that the knower is fundamentally interdependent with other knowers.

Knowing requires resources of the mind, such as language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experiences. As Lynn Nelson argues, “there are no ‘immediate’ experiences” (Nelson 1990, 138). Instead, within any given situation our experience “is shaped and made possible by communal ways of organizing things, and systems of connected theories, methodologies, and practices” (139; italics in original). In some cases the resources with which we know are formalized, as in academic disciplines; in other cases they are less formal, as in everyday knowing. In either case we need epistemic resources for making sense of and evaluating our experiences, and epistemic resources such as language, concepts, and criteria are normative: they are resources that are maintained by the force they exert in coordinating agents who recognize and use them. For this reason, language, concepts, and criteria exist in use *among* agents. As Wittgenstein argued, a language that in principle could be understood by only one person would not be a language at all. Likewise, a concept that in principle can be followed by only one person is not really a concept. Epistemic resources such as language, concepts, and criteria are the kinds of things that stand outside or beyond any one individual.

At the same time, not all epistemic resources are equally equipped for making sense of experience. So although epistemic resources such as language, concepts, and criteria stand outside of any one individual and even stand outside of any group of individuals that happen to use them, these resources *do not* stand independently of experience. Indeed, our epistemic resources must *answer to* our experiences even while we must answer to them. Good epistemic resources put us in particular relation to our experiences (for example, noticing more or certain kinds of details about the experience or anticipating what will follow from the experience). If our language, concepts, or standards don’t do that, then we need to develop new resources that do. This in fact is what we do when faced with such situations, but it is not something that we do in isolation.

In a socially stratified society, some persons are situated in positions that allow their experiences to count more in the development and circulation of epistemic resources. Here we begin to see the significance of the knower’s situatedness in relation to her interdependence. The right standards for knowing the world well will be determined by what is salient in the experienced world itself, and what is salient in the experienced world itself will depend upon *situatedness*: what do I/we need to know (or care to know) and why?
We are now in a position to note a dialectical relationship between these two aspects of knowing. On the one hand, in order to know the world in which she is situated the knower needs to make sense of her experiences via interdependently held epistemic resources; she cannot just hold true beliefs about the world without being able to demonstrate that they are true, let alone without being able to formulate the beliefs themselves. On the other hand, the standards and concepts that knowers hold interdependently are not de facto the right standards or adequate concepts for making sense of the experienced world; the right standards and adequate concepts must fit to and make sense of the experienced world. Using epistemic resources to make good sense of the experienced world and using the experienced world to develop better epistemic resources are both things we do in order to know well. When there is no tension between our epistemic resources and the experienced world, we simply use the language, concepts, and methods of evaluation that we have in the past. However, when there is a tension between the world of experience and the resources that we use to make sense of our experiences, for example when the proper language for describing an experience appears to be missing, or when our current concepts fail to track recurring patterns, we recalibrate our epistemic resources and/or create new ones until the tension between our resources and the experienced world is alleviated. This process can result in new possibilities for knowing, providing new tools for organizing and making sense of experience.

Given the dialectical relationship between situatedness and interdependence, a marginally situated knower is more likely than not to find gaps in the predominately held epistemic resources for making sense of what is noticeable to her in view of her situatedness. This will be the case for at least two reasons. First, part of being vulnerable to others, as argued above, means the marginalized knower must be aware of the concerns of those in relation to whom she is vulnerable, but those dominantly situated need not know anything of her concerns. Consequently, it is to the marginally situated knower's advantage to acquire and use epistemic resources that make sense of experiences that follow from dominant situatedness. However, it is of no immediate use to those in dominant positions to acquire and use epistemic resources that make sense of experiences that are salient to those marginally situated. Second, social positioning itself allows some to develop and disseminate epistemic resources more easily than others. Interdependence in such cases is asymmetrical due to relations of power. For these reasons, predominantly recognized epistemic resources are most likely to make better sense of that which arises from the experienced world of the dominantly situated than that which arises from the experienced world of the marginally situated.

For these reasons, being marginally situated could appear to be epistemically disadvantageous. However, those who are situated in positions for which
epistemic resources are underdeveloped are well situated to know this: that there are whole parts of the world for which dominantly held resources are not very suitable. Because our interdependent relations are imbued with power, the dialectical relation between interdependence and situatedness can be held in suspension for those who are socially vulnerable by those in relation to whom they are vulnerable. This can result in a prolonged tension between what one faces day to day via situatedness and the dominant resources maintained via interdependence that ultimately can lead to a critical standpoint. It is important to note that only by distinguishing between relations that produce situatedness and relations of interdependence that maintain epistemic resources that we can speak of a tension “between the two.” It is this tension and the urgency it produces when epistemic resources are at odds with one’s experienced world that signals a need to recalibrate and/or create new epistemic resources for knowing the world more adequately.

For example, as feminist epistemologists have long pointed out, the dominantly recognized concept of the “generic knower” is not only an epistemic resource that focuses attention on particular aspects of the world experienced from a dominant position, but it is also a concept that hides that fact. From a marginalized social position, the gap between the concept of the “generic knower” and significant aspects of knowing will be more prominent since the concept of the “generic knower” fails to account for precisely those aspects of knowing that are experienced more saliently from marginalized social positions. At the same time, a knower who finds this particular epistemic resource to be ill suited to her experienced world can develop and maintain epistemic resources that do make better sense of her experience with others who work cooperatively rather than coercively in relation to her. We can view various epistemic resources developed by feminist epistemologists, such as the concept of the “situated knower,” as precisely the result of this kind of work: an epistemic resource developed in light of the experienced world from marginalized situatedness with knowers who now recognize and use this resource.

It is important to emphasize here that being marginally situated leads not to “different” knowledge, but, as Harding has argued, to more objective knowledge (Harding 1991, 138–63). This is the case for at least two reasons. First, “it is from marginalized situatedness that the inadequacy of our epistemic resources for making sense of parts of the experienced world is noticed. Although it is true that those dominantly situated may come upon parts of the world for which current epistemic resources are inadequate, being dominantly situated means precisely that one is in a position to affect those resources. Thus, the movement to calibrate epistemic resources in relation to the experienced world from dominant situations is not “blocked” by the flow of power along the circuitry of interdependence. Marginally situated knowers are therefore in a position to notice inadequacies in our epistemic resources that are more entrenched. Second, because being
situately vulnerably means that one will need to attend to what others are likely to notice, the resources required for knowing from vulnerable situations must answer to more experiences. Therefore, the epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness will be suited to more of the experienced world in general. Stated differently, the interdependent resources developed from marginalized situatedness are “experience rich.”

And yet, marginally situated knowers who develop epistemic resources more adequate for making sense of more parts of the experienced world may have particular trouble convincing those not so situated of the usefulness and importance of these resources. First, as noted above, there is nothing about the dominant knower’s situation that requires her to investigate parts of the world in light of others’ concerns. Further, it is not in the immediate interest of the dominantly situated to acquire and maintain epistemic resources calibrated to the marginally experienced world, since doing so moves epistemic power away from dominant situatedness and can make clearer the injustices that maintain dominant privilege. Despite the obstacles, however, it is not in principle impossible for those dominantly situated to recognize and learn to use epistemic resources calibrated from marginalized positions.

Distinguishing between situatedness and interdependence thus allows us to maintain that marginalized situatedness is epistemically advantageous while also holding those dominantly situated responsible for not knowing the experienced world of those marginally situated. The dominantly situated knower cannot step outside of her situatedness in order to experience the world as others do; however, she can learn to use epistemic resources developed from the experiences of marginalized knowers. Learning to do so, however, is not a disembodied, apolitical exercise. Although epistemic resources are resources of the mind, they are resources of the embodied mind that coordinate one’s attention with other knowers in lived situations. Becoming attuned to when and how to use epistemic resources requires engagement with practitioners skilled in their use, placing oneself in encounters where it makes sense to use them, making mistakes and being corrected. There are myriad reasons why this endeavor would be difficult for the dominantly situated knower. For one, it is disorienting. For another, it opens one’s eyes to aspects of one’s situatedness with which it is not easy to contend (for example, one’s unearned privilege that cannot simply be disowned). Moreover, using epistemic resources is an interdependent endeavor, and there are reasons why those who worked hard from marginalized positions to develop and maintain the use of epistemic resources for making better sense of the world would not welcome dominantly situated knowers to their use. First, it might not be worthwhile to expend energy with some dominantly situated knowers. In addition, entering into a truly cooperative relation of interdependence requires a great deal of trust; years of having to engage with dominantly situated knowers in coercive relations may have eroded that trust. Nonetheless, it is important to
note that entering less coercive and more symmetrical interdependent relations is not in principle impossible, just difficult.

One particular difficulty is that even in the case where a dominantly situated knower appears open to the claims of those in marginalized positions, she can preemptively dismiss the resources required to judge those claims due to the dialectical relationship between interdependence and situatedness. Good epistemic resources, as stated earlier, make sense of the experienced world, and if one’s situatedness does not make salient those aspects of the world for which particular resources are useful, the dominantly situated knower can use that fact to dismiss those resources before learning to use them. It is not the case that dominantly situated knowers are in principle incapable of apprehending what these epistemic resources are meant to call one’s attention to, but rather from a dominantly situated position those aspects of the world are not experienced as obvious. For this reason the attention of such persons needs some training.

We can see this kind of preemptive dismissal, for example, in the reception that ideas like the “situated knower” have received in mainstream epistemology. We also see this happen when those situated dominantly dismiss the viability of such arduously honed concepts like “white privilege,” “date rape,” or “heteronormativity.” These epistemic resources, which could (and sometimes do) help dominantly situated knowers to know the world in light of marginalized situatedness, can be preemptively dismissed, because, attuned to what is not immediately present within the experienced world of the dominantly situated knower, such resources can appear to the dominantly situated knower to attend to nothing at all, or to make something out of nothing. Of course, epistemic resources, when learned and used properly, can call one’s attention to whole parts of the world that were previously not obvious at all. However, this point is often forgotten in cases when dominantly situated knowers confront epistemic resources honed from the experienced world of marginally situated knowers.

I call this kind of dismissal and the knower’s continued engagement in the world while refusing to learn to use epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness willful hermeneutical ignorance. Willful hermeneutical ignorance falls within what Charles Mills has called, “an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions … producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997, 18). Although a number of theorists have described instances and variants of willful ignorance (see Mills 1997; 1998; Sullivan and Tuana 2006; 2007), attention to the relationship between situatedness and interdependence contributes to this literature an account of how such systematic ignorances can be actively maintained.

Willful hermeneutical ignorance seems a clear candidate for what Fricker has termed “epistemic injustice,” but because she does not attend to different types of epistemic relations working in conjunction with one another, this type of
epistemic injustice is not obvious in her account. However, when considering how situatedness and interdependence work in conjunction with each other, this lacuna in her work becomes more prominent. In what follows, I clarify what Fricker means by epistemic injustice and the two kinds of epistemic injustice she identifies: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Analyzing a key example from Fricker’s book, I use the relation between situatedness and interdependence to develop further the idea of willful hermeneutical ignorance while demonstrating some limitations of Fricker’s account.

**Situatedness, Interdependence, and Epistemic Injustice**

In *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker notes that there are some injustices that are done to a knower in her role as knower; these kinds of injustices she calls epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007, 1). Furthermore, she details two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice is the injustice of “giving a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” for no other reason than identity prejudice (1), whereas hermeneutical injustice is, “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization” (158). This latter type of epistemic injustice is one site where interdependence and situatedness cooperate epistemically. It is in relation to this type of injustice that I contrast the notion of willful hermeneutical ignorance.

In Fricker’s account, hermeneutical injustice results from “hermeneutical marginalization,” an unequal participation in meaning-generating practices pertaining to some areas of the social world that is the result of subordination in or exclusion from those practices (Fricker 2007, 153–54). Fricker’s main example of hermeneutical injustice is the situation of women experiencing sexual harassment prior to the development of the concept of and language concerning sexual harassment. For Fricker, the absence of women in meaning-generating practices such as legal scholarship and the general marginalization of women’s voices in the political sphere results in an absence of epistemic resources for describing and ascertaining facts about that area of the world experienced by women in particular. This situation leads to cognitive disablement for all parties (151). However, the disadvantage is shouldered by the harasssee, who “is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment” (151). According to Fricker, once adequate epistemic resources are developed to fill a lacuna left by hermeneutical marginalization, an instance of hermeneutical injustice ceases. In Fricker’s words, the “moment of truth” in which an epistemic resource lifts the “hermeneutical darkness” from the mind of the person wronged “seems to be not simply a hermeneutical breakthrough … but also a moment in which some kind of epistemic injustice is overcome”
(149). Although I agree that having an epistemic resource like the concept of “date rape” alleviates an epistemic injustice, anyone who has discussed this issue on a college campus knows that there is still a good deal of epistemic injustice thwarting the use of this concept for knowing the world well.

The concept of “hermeneutical injustice,” itself an epistemic resource, helps us to understand and identify a certain kind of experience more clearly—the experience of being unable to make sense of some aspect of one’s world due to exclusion from or marginalization in the development of epistemic resources. But because the concept of hermeneutical injustice is developed from one aspect of one distinct kind of hermeneutical marginalization, the notion “hermeneutical injustice,” as Fricker has constructed it, may itself contain a hermeneutical injustice. Fricker’s main examples are consciousness-raising done by women in the 1960s and 70s, and Edmund White’s autobiographical development of knowledge of himself as simultaneously gay and fully human. Although marginally situated knowers can work to hone epistemic resources to make better sense of aspects of the experienced world, Fricker does not treat the reception of those resources within the larger social world (for example, the use of the term “gay” when first introduced to the heterosexual community to describe same-sex coupling). Moreover, none of the experiences Fricker considers when developing the concept of hermeneutical injustice are from persons in groups marginalized in ways that keep members together, as happens when racialized minorities are sequestered in particular neighborhoods or when certain classes work together in particular jobs. Considering these kinds of cases might be said to go beyond the project of Fricker’s book. However, neglecting to do so skews her notion of epistemic justice and epistemic virtue. We can see this specifically by examining one example Fricker takes as a case of testimonial injustice, but which is also a strong example of willful hermeneutical ignorance.

**Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance and Epistemic Injustice**

The case Fricker treats concerns the trial of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Robinson is a black man who has been wrongfully accused and is convicted of raping a poor white woman, Mayella Ewell. Lee’s novel, set in Alabama in 1934, is told from the point of view of Scout, an inquisitive and tomboyish young white girl, whose father, Atticus Finch, is a lawyer who defends Tom Robinson. Ewell’s father witnessed his daughter attempting to kiss Robinson, for which he beat her and then reported Robinson as her assailant. Fricker’s interpretation of the trial in which Robinson is convicted of the rape and beating of Mayella Ewell is that the all-white jury commits testimonial injustice against Robinson, the injustice of failing to believe an epistemic agent for no other reason than identity prejudice. Atticus Finch has presented an airtight
defense: Ewell was beaten by someone who used his left fist, and Robinson is incapable of using his left fist due to a childhood injury. Despite more than sufficient evidence to support Robinson's claims and to distrust the claims of the Ewells (who forward a concocted story of rape), the jury members do not believe Robinson's account of what happened. Thus, Fricker concludes, the jury members commit testimonial injustice by according to Robinson a deflated amount of credibility because he is black. Robinson's testimony is one the jury would have believed if Robinson had been white and ought to have believed regardless of his racialized status.

Although I agree that some aspects of this case fit Fricker's description of testimonial injustice, the sections of the novel to which Fricker turns when giving her account reveal that it is more complicated than just not believing someone when one ought due to identity prejudice. First, the jury refuses to believe not only Robinson's word, but also his white defense attorney's entire account of what happened. Second, when Robinson gives his testimony, not only does the jury take him as untrustworthy; they also consistently misinterpret his words. Here is a case of hermeneutical trouble where the marginalized person knows perfectly well what is happening to him: he is being set up because a white woman made a sexual advance toward him, and her white father witnessed it. However, the economy of hermeneutical resources preempts Robinson from transferring that knowledge to the jury. This difficulty in the transfer of knowledge is not just because the jury won’t believe him, but because the members of the jury are using epistemic resources that do not allow for the intelligibility of what Robinson has to say.

To support this claim, I examine the section of the novel that Fricker cites where jurors draw improper inferences from Robinson's words. The inferences that the jurors ought to draw are unavailable to them, not because they inherently lack a capacity, but because they use epistemic resources that are faulty and that distort a significant portion of the experienced world. The jurors are culpable since there is nothing forcing them to use faulty epistemic resources; rather, they lack such resources due to a prejudice against taking seriously the experienced world outside of white men and a refusal to enter into truly cooperative interdependence with knowers situated outside dominant social positions. The individual jurors’ past and continuing failure to enter into cooperative epistemic interdependence with marginally situated knowers results in a current structural problem with regard to the transfer of knowledge, thereby revealing willful hermeneutical ignorance to be simultaneously an agential and structural injustice. The relationship between interdependence and situatedness is critical for analyzing what is going on in this instance of epistemic injustice.

Fricker uses the prosecution's cross-examination of Robinson to support her claim that Robinson is a victim of testimonial injustice. In this instance the
prosecutor asks why Robinson stopped by the Ewell residence so often and helped Mayella Ewell with various chores for no pay, to which Robinson replies that he felt sorry for her since she had no one to help her (quoted in Fricker 2007, 24). Fricker takes the prosecutor's and jury's response to be one of disbelief at Robinson's answer. However, the response of the prosecutor and the jury is more complicated than mere disbelief:

“You felt sorry for her, you felt sorry for her?” Mr. Gilmer [the prosecutor] seemed ready to rise to the ceiling.

The witness realized his mistake and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. But the damage was done. Below us [in the courtroom from the balcony], nobody liked Tom Robinson’s answer. Mr. Gilmer paused a long time to let it sink in. (Quoted in Fricker 2007, 24; italics in original)

If the epistemic injustice to which Robinson is subjected in this scene is just that he is not taken as credible because he is black, what was the particular “mistake” he made such that he could realize he made it with these particular words? Would any response, which the jury would not have believed, have done the same damage? And if not, what was the distinct difference that these words made? In order to answer these questions, we need to say more than, “the jury gave Robinson a deflated amount of credibility.” We need to understand, first, that the jury—indeed almost every white person in the courtroom—individually and simultaneously misinterpreted Robinson’s words in the very same way without consulting one another; second, that Robinson and those who did not misunderstand his words knew that this was the case; and third, that there was no immediate way for the latter to correct the former.

The jury commits an epistemic injustice in this scene because it has not, does not, and will not enter into a relation of true epistemic interdependence with Robinson. If the jury recognized and used epistemic resources developed from the reality of Robinson’s experienced world, it could not ignore so aptly and misinterpret so deftly the sense of Robinson’s words. Instead, it uses only epistemic resources developed from the experienced world of one situated as a white supremacist patriarch. Coming from a classist patriarchal framework, there is no unusual hardship in the life of someone like Mayella Ewell, a poor unwed woman caring for her younger siblings and an alcoholic, widowed father. Coming from a racist framework, there is no possibility of genuine human connection between a white woman and a black man. Moreover, in this case it is not simply that the true meaning of Robinson’s words is unintelligible to the jury, but also that those words are received by the jury in a way that means something entirely different from Robinson’s actual accurate account. Fricker notes,
In the context of a racist ideology structured around dogmas of white superiority, the fundamental ethical sentiment of plain human sympathy becomes disfigured in the eyes of whites so that it appears as little more than an indicator of self-perceived advantage on the part of the black subject. A black man is not allowed to have feelings that imply a position of any sort of advantage relative to any white person, no matter how difficult and lonely her life might be. (Fricker 2007, 24–25)

Although this passage indicates that a problem in understanding has taken place, Fricker oddly does not treat the injustice in this case as one of a hermeneutical sort. We, however, can, for it is clear in this example that Robinson’s feelings and his reasoning have no proper expression readily available using epistemic resources calibrated solely to the experienced world of those who live in positions of privilege under patriarchal white supremacy. The intricacies of intersectional oppressions and the possibility of human connection between persons who are both subordinately (yet differently) situated (Ewell due to sex and class, Robinson due to race and class via race) are simply not salient within this world. Consequently, in the experienced world of patriarchal white supremacist men there is no need for acquiring resources to make sense of such things; they simply do not appear as objects of experience. Thus, for those who use epistemic resources developed only from the experienced world of white men who have no interest in undermining their own privilege, Robinson’s words can only mean something like an implied superiority to Ewell.

However, for those with some facility in using epistemic resources developed from other sets of experiences, one can see that “feeling sorry for” Ewell attends not to her whiteness, but to those aspects of her situation structured by class and gender. Moreover, Robinson’s words suggest that he has something like an “outsider within” (Collins 2008) relation to her; in other words he has knowledge of her daily struggles even though he is separate from and subordinate to her in the social hierarchy. Since white men in the United States during the 1930s were not in a position to experience with any degree of intimacy others to whom they might be subordinated, they simply do not readily have the resources to make sense of such experiences. Here is not just a case of deflated credibility, but also of willful ignorance. The jury misunderstands Robinson because it has not begun to use epistemic resources that would allow it to know what Robinson knows: those things that appear saliently in the experienced world of a black man in 1930s Alabama. These resources were not impossible for a white man to acquire; clearly they existed, otherwise Robinson would have no expression even to himself for what happened on the day in question. However, acquiring the proper epistemic resources for understanding Robinson would require breaking the racist code of white supremacist conduct and acknowledging black men as full epistemic agents.
Robinson, of course, knows that the jury will not draw proper inferences from what he has said, as is indicated by the fact that he “realized his mistake.” Robinson’s world of experience includes not only his concern for another human being in the form of non-subordinating pity, but also awareness that people with power systematically misunderstand such gestures in particular ways. Said succinctly, Robinson has what DuBois called “double-consciousness” (DuBois, 1989, 3). He knows what actually took place because he has the epistemic resources (for example, a non-subordinating notion of pity) to do so. At the same time, he also knows what is happening in the courtroom, for he has the epistemic resources to know something else: how his words and actions will be perceived by those without the epistemic resources required to know him and his world of experience. Without those resources, the jury cannot know what Robinson knows.

How is this predicament possible? First, Robinson must have a community within which he has acquired epistemic resources that are adequate to his experienced world. However, he is also confronted by a community that does not use those resources and that has the material power to actively resist acquiring them. As argued previously, given the relationship between interdependence and situatedness, such a refusal on the part of those with material power is not difficult. In the case where a marginally situated knower notices that dominantly held epistemic resources are not suitable for knowing her experienced world, dominantly situated people can dismiss both the possibility that there is anything to be known here and any epistemic resources that might have been developed to make sense of the experienced world of those marginally situated. On the one hand, marginally situated people cannot demonstrate to dominantly situated people that there is a part of the experienced world for which dominant epistemic resources are inadequate because that part of the world is one to which dominantly situated knowers do not attend. On the other hand, the marginally situated cannot call the attention of dominantly situated knowers to those parts of the experienced world, because the epistemic resources to do so are unavailable or preemptively dismissed. Because epistemic resources are supposed to fit or answer to the world in some way, when such resources are not yet established, new epistemic resources can be preemptively prevented from calling attention to that for which they are suited, on the grounds that they do not fit anything in the experienced world—more precisely, because they do not fit the experienced world from which prior epistemic resources were developed.

When a group with material power is vested in ignoring certain parts of the world, they can, therefore, maintain their ignorance by refusing to recognize and by actively undermining any newly generated epistemic resource that attends to those parts of the world that they are vested in ignoring. The resources that would call their attention to those aspects of the world to which they do not attend are the very ones under contestation; hence the dominant group may simply
refuse them on the grounds that those resources do not fit the parts of the world to which the group already attends. In cases where such a refusal is enacted, dominant epistemic agents are calling for a guarantor for the need for new epistemic resources, but they disqualify marginalized knowers, the very persons whose experienced world reveals the inadequacy of current epistemic resources. An en masse refusal to recognize alternate epistemic resources, when enacted by those with material power, is hard to overcome. It is important to note, however, that such a refusal is not an inherent inability, but rather a willful act. Attending to the distinction between situatedness and interdependence shows us that this is the case. Situatedness cannot be transcended, but with habitual practice epistemic resources can make more evident to the knower that which is not immediately obvious from her position in the world. Good epistemic resources that do exactly that must be calibrated dialectically in relation to the experienced world of those otherwise situated. The use of power along the circuitry of interdependence either to undermine or to refuse to acknowledge epistemic resources calibrated in relation to marginalized situatedness is not a necessary act; it is a willful refusal to acknowledge and to acquire the necessary tools for knowing whole parts of the world.

BECOMING VIRTUOUS KNOWERS IN LIGHT OF SITUATEDNESS AND INTERDEPENDENCE

In the case of Tom Robinson's trial, it would appear that Robinson's white lawyer, Atticus Finch, and Finch's daughter, Scout, know what the white jurors do not or, at the very least, know to some extent what Robinson knows and attempts to convey through his testimony. For Finch's part, he not only believes Robinson, not only pleads with the jury to believe Robinson, but also realizes that the jury will not do so, indicating his recognition of two different ways to attend (even if one is accurate and the other not) to Robinson's testimony. In Scout's case, if her narration is to be believable, we, the readers, must acknowledge that Scout knows something the jury does not.

If we take the problem with the jury to be only that they, due to prejudice, fail to believe testimony that they ought to believe, as Fricker claims, we are limited to asking, “How is it that Finch and Scout are able to believe what the jury does not and so come to know what the jury does not?” The answer to this question in Finch's case, using Fricker's framework, would be that Finch must possess the virtue of testimonial justice of a corrective sort; he has learned to correct for prejudices of the day by making “irrelevant” or “forgetting” skin color (Fricker 2007, 96). In the case of Scout, Fricker provides an answer: “[Scout] displays the virtue of testimonial justice more or less naïvely ... she is still at a stage of imitation, active reflection, and experimentation with respect to the virtue [of testimonial justice]” (94). In other words, either the prejudices of the
day have not yet taken hold of Scout’s credibility judgments, or she is imitating what Fricker interprets as Finch’s practice of “forgetting” Robinson’s race, or both (94–95).

There is something very troubling about this understanding of Finch and Scout as virtuous knowers. How can failing to notice something as significant as Robinson’s racialized status within the context of a white racist society be seen as a virtuous way of learning what Robinson knows in this situation through the testimonial transfer of knowledge? I agree that Robinson’s racialized status should not count against him in judging his credibility. However, it seems that race ought to figure somehow here and not just in the sense that Finch, recognizing his whiteness in relation to Robinson, might self-reflectively try to correct for prejudice (Fricker 2007, 91). Indeed, if Finch were to disregard race, how is it that he understands very clearly that the jury will not believe Robinson? And if Scout, in imitating Finch’s practice of “listening without watching” really is able to believe Robinson because she has forgotten his race, why does Scout conclude that Robinson must be telling the truth because, “a respectable Negro would never go up into somebody’s yard of his own volition”? (quoted in Fricker 2007, 94).

In contrast, if we read the injustice of the jury as not just a failure to believe due to an unfair deflation of Robinson’s credibility, but also as a failure to use the proper epistemic resources to understand Robinson’s words and the active use of faulty epistemic resources to systematically misunderstand Robinson, we can make better sense of Finch’s and Scout’s knowledge. Finch not only believes Robinson, he attends to the actual meaning of Robinson’s words and recognizes the jury’s failure to do so. Finch could only realize what is happening by way of epistemic resources suited to Robinson’s experienced world. Given Finch’s character as developed in Lee’s novel, such an understanding of Finch seems plausible. Scout’s “closing her eyes” to listen to Robinson’s words may not be about forgetting who is saying them, since, presumably, she is hearing a voice that is racialized in her society. Instead, the practice may be one of concentrating on the sense of Robinson’s words as he means them, and of actively blocking out the predominant epistemic practices of the white jurors and white audience below as she listens to Robinson. Although Scout may not be adept enough to understand the concern that led Robinson to risk his life by helping Mayella Ewell, Scout can understand that it is dangerous for a black man to enter a white person’s yard except as an employee, that Robinson is aware of that danger, and that he would not do such a thing without good reason. If she continues to listen to racialized others in this way, Scout stands a chance not just of believing persons she ought to believe, but of learning to use epistemic resources that attend to the experienced world beyond dominant interests.

This possibility reveals that willful hermeneutical ignorance is the converse to Harding’s important distinction between standpoint and social position with
regard to critical knowledge. Critical standpoints and willful ignorances rely on
the interest one takes in others and their experiences, not one’s social position, to
determine what can be known. As Harding has argued, if those in a dominant
position take an active interest in how the world is revealed from marginalized
experiences, they can participate in a critical standpoint (Harding 1991, 272–95).
Conversely, ignorance is not something to which one is doomed because of social
position, but rather something one chooses to maintain.

The relationship between situatedness and interdependence shows how this is
possible. When one genuinely cares to know something about the world as expe-
rienced from social positions other than one’s own, one must use epistemic
resources suited to (and so developed from) those situations. Prerequisites for
acquiring such resources are, first, to allow the resources to be well developed by
persons situated in them; second, to trust those persons to have developed them
well; and third, to take an interest in learning to use those resources. Of course,
where one stands in relation to others may influence whether one does or does
not decide to take such an interest, a decision that reveals one’s moral and
epistemic character. Because we need others in order to maintain and use episte-
mic resources, such a refusal can have grave consequences. In cases where a
marginally situated knower has no community with which to develop adequate
epistemic resources for making sense of her experiences, we see the type of her-
meneutical injustice Fricker discusses in Epistemic Injustice. In cases where a
marginally situated knower does have others with whom she has developed epi-
stemic resources for attending to her experienced world, but dominantly situated
knowers refuse to learn to use them, we see the kind of willful ignorance I have
detailed here.

CULPABLE IGNORANCE AND EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE

The example of Tom Robinson’s testimony shows that willful hermeneutical igno-
rance can be more than an act of “not seeing” parts of the world; it can mani-
fest in a systematic and coordinated misinterpretation of the world. It is a
particularly insidious type of ignorance. First, in moral and political discourse it
blocks the transmission of knowledge that ought to make a normative claim on
those for whom the knowledge is intended, presenting instead a distorted pic-
ture resulting from faulty epistemic resources. Second, it allows for a coordinated
experiencing of the world that is determined by knowers themselves without
their realizing it, because epistemic resources can become second nature once
one has developed a facility in using them, and because epistemic resources
work to coordinate knowers in relation to the world and one another. Conse-
quently, in cases of willful hermeneutical ignorance we are confronted with know-
ers who are simultaneously and without consultation captivated by a distorted
picture of the world. Taking account of the dialectical relation between situatedness and interdependence is crucial for seeing why such ignorances are not necessary but require an act of will. Although one cannot step outside one’s social position, one can acquire epistemic resources that reveal what is not already obvious from where one is situated. Refusing to acquire those resources affords one the privilege of coordinated ignorance with others who have similar investments in willful ignorance.

This kind of epistemic injustice seems much more ubiquitous in a world where marginally situated knowers do in fact know a great deal about their experienced world and have more venues for transmitting that knowledge to others. For example, President Obama’s remarks that the Cambridge police acted stupidly concerning the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. make perfect sense given those parts of the world revealed by such epistemic resources as racial profiling or driving/walking/entering-my-own-house while black. But to those who dismiss such concepts and refuse to examine the world with them, President Obama’s words become distorted and misconstrued. Likewise, when Judge Sonia Sotomayor was quoted as saying that she would hope a wise Latina would make better judgments than a white male without her life experiences (Sotomayor 2001), many were quick to misinterpret this statement in an essentialist manner and even to accuse her of racism. Those who take seriously and use some version of the situated knower in epistemic judgments, on the other hand, ascertained that Sotomayor had “simply stated upfront what most of us know full well: identity affects experience, and experience makes a difference in our judgment” (Alcoff 2009). Finally, during the presidential election of 2008, the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright were quoted throughout the media as evidence that Barack Obama (as a member of Wright’s Trinity Church) was anti-American and racist. In his Philadelphia speech responding to these accusations, Obama made the keen observation that, “the fact that so many people are surprised to hear … anger in some of Reverend Wright’s sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning” (Obama 2008). In light of white America’s unfamiliarity with black churches, Obama cautioned that, “Trinity’s services … may seem jarring to the untrained ear” (Obama 2008). Yet, despite untrained ears, many continued to think they could draw proper inferences from their observations of Wright’s speeches and so continued, “to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality” (Obama 2008). In the end, Obama had to fully dissociate himself from both Wright and Trinity Church, perhaps similarly “realizing his mistake” in assuming that white America could understand at least this much: when judging situations in areas where one has little experience, one would do well to suspect that one’s perception may be distorted.

In all three cases, large numbers of epistemic agents drew the same distorted inferences from what was said by persons who were in some aspect of their social
position marginally situated. In each case, the problem was not that the marginally situated knower was taken to be unreliable or was lacking an epistemic resource for making sense of the world, and in each case, the solution is not to give something to the marginally situated knower such as credibility or epistemic resources. Instead, in each case marginally situated persons make use of good epistemic resources that resist a distorted sense of reality in order to know the world well. And in each case, the solution is for dominantly situated knowers to catch up and learn to use epistemic resources they lack by forging truly cooperative interdependent relations with marginally situated knowers.

This line of thinking and these types of questions arise if one examines the relationship between situatedness and interdependence. Both of these aspects of knowing have played a prominent role in feminist epistemology. However, when we fail to distinguish between the two and fail to detail how they might operate both distinctly and in relation with one another, it is harder to see such important questions.

Hermeneutical injustice as Fricker has defined it is possible because we need epistemic resources to make sense of our world. Because epistemic resources are maintained and developed interdependently, we need one another in order to have and use them. When epistemic agents refuse to allow the development of or refuse to acknowledge already developed epistemic resources for knowing the world from situations other than their own, they contribute to epistemic injustice and maintain their own ignorance about whole parts of the world. Although Fricker’s account does indicate that marginally situated epistemic agents can resist this confinement of their experiences to the unknown and unknowable, her faith in the evidence of the world as revealed by proper epistemic resources is too strong. The relation between situatedness and interdependence indicates how dominantly situated knowers can resist such evidence. Those who disregard epistemic resources developed from the marginally experienced world can easily dismiss such evidence, for it will remain, as in the case of Tom Robison, or Rev. Wright, or Judge Sotomayor, or President Obama, obscured and misconstrued.

Considering the ways in which different types of sociality can work epistemically in conjunction allows us to articulate the importance of taking into account where one is situated while maintaining a vocabulary of accountability for what one does and does not know. Such attention is crucial to developing an account of how epistemic resources are generated and how they may be generated more justly. Finally, understanding the complexities of sociality reveals the degree to which accuracy and epistemic justice are inherently linked. For the more unjust one is with regard to the development and maintenance of epistemic resources, the less accurate and robust will be one’s account of the world we inhabit together.
Notes

1. This article is distinct from Grasswick's article since my aim is not to develop a model of the epistemic subject, but rather to examine the relation between two ways in which an individual-in-community knower is in community.

2. For criticism along these lines, see Pohlhaus 2003; Grasswick 2004; and Sobstyl, 2004.

3. Kristie Dotson also argues that Fricker's account fails to acknowledge a distinct type of epistemic injustice that Dotson calls contributory injustice. The absence of contributory injustice from Fricker's account, Dotson argues, likewise results in deleterious effects (Dotson 2010). Willful hermeneutical ignorance may be a type of the broader category of contributory injustice insofar as the former is one way dominant knowers can refuse to acknowledge the significance of contributions of marginalized knowers to the general knowledge pool.

4. This may be what Harding means when she says that a critical standpoint “starts from” marginalized lives (Harding 1991). Her account lacks the degree of specificity I give precisely because she does not focus attention on the relationship between situatedness and interdependence.

5. Fricker does consider the interdependence of knowers when discussing testimonial injustice and also considers the situatedness of knowers when discussing hermeneutical injustice, but nowhere examines the possibility that situatedness and interdependence do significant epistemic work in tandem.

6. I take willful hermeneutical ignorance to be distinct from and not a subcategory of Fricker's hermeneutical injustice since the former is not purely structural, but also willful. Fricker is clear that hermeneutical injustice as she defines it is a purely structural injustice (Fricker 2007, 1; 159; 161; and 162).

7. Here might be an example of what Linda Martín Alcoff calls “white double consciousness” (Alcoff 2000b).

References


