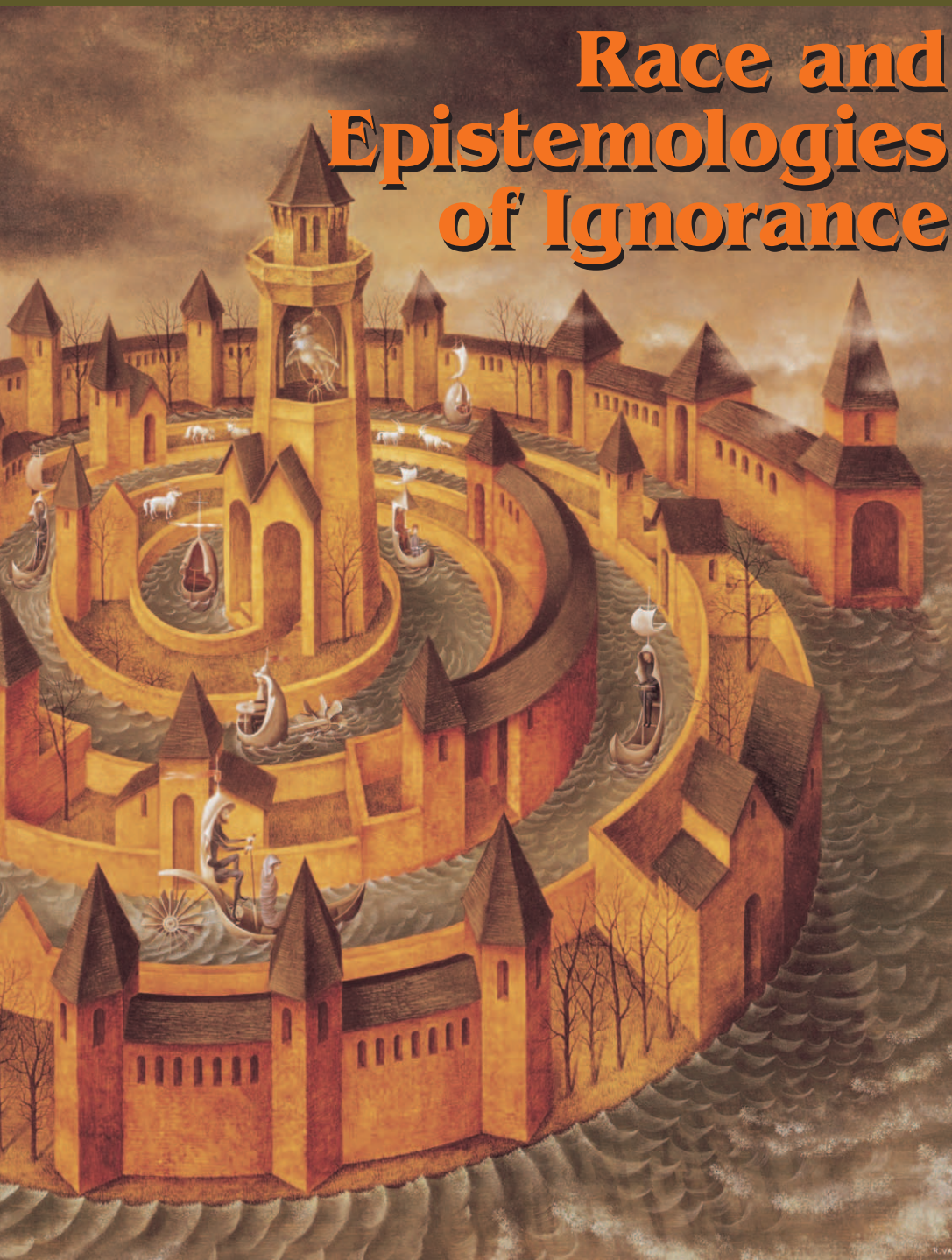


Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance



Edited by
Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana

Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance

SUNY series, Philosophy and Race

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EDITED BY

Shannon Sullivan
and
Nancy Tuana

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Introduction

Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana

Epistemology and ignorance—how could two such different things go together? Given that epistemology is the study of how one knows and ignorance is a condition of not knowing, epistemology would seem to have nothing to do with ignorance. At best, it might appear that the two concepts are related in that epistemology studies the operations of knowledge with the goal of eliminating ignorance. But in either case, epistemology and ignorance seem diametrically opposed. What, then, might be an epistemology of ignorance, and what possible connections might it have to issues of race?

The epistemology of ignorance is an examination of the complex phenomena of ignorance, which has as its aim identifying different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices. The authors in this volume examine the value of applying an epistemology of ignorance to issues of race, racism, and white privilege. Ignorance often is thought of as a gap in knowledge, as an epistemic oversight that easily could be remedied once it has been noticed. It can seem to be an accidental by-product of the limited time and resources that human beings have to investigate and understand their world. While this type of ignorance does exist, it is not the only kind. Sometimes what we do not know is not a mere gap in knowledge, the accidental result of an epistemological oversight. Especially in the case of racial oppression, a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known often is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation. At times this takes the form of those in the center refusing to allow the marginalized to know: witness the nineteenth-century prohibition against black slaves' literacy. Other times it can take the form of the center's own ignorance of injustice, cruelty, and suffering, such as contemporary white people's obliviousness to racism and white domination. Sometimes these "unknowledges" are consciously produced, while at other times they are unconsciously generated

and supported. In both cases, our authors examine instances where they work to support white privilege and supremacy.

But ignorance is not only a tool of oppression wielded by the powerful. It also can be a strategy for the survival of the victimized and oppressed, as in the case of black slaves' feigned ignorance of many details of their white masters' lives. This survival strategy also can take the form of the oppressed combating their oppression by unlearning the oppressor's knowledge, which has been both passively absorbed and actively forced upon them. Ignorance can be used against itself. It can be an important tool for the oppressed to wield against their oppressors, including their production of ignorance to dominate and exploit.

As this volume attests, tracing what is not known and the politics of such ignorance should be a key element of epistemological and social and political analyses, for it has the potential to reveal the role of power in the construction of what is known and provide a lens for the political values at work in our knowledge practices. Although racial oppression has been investigated as an unjust practice, few have fully examined the ways in which such practices of oppression are linked to our conceptions and productions of knowledge. Even less attention has been paid to the epistemically complex processes of the production and maintenance of ignorance. As the underside of knowledge, ignorance warrants careful examination, and nowhere is this truer than in the case of race and racism.

An exception to the neglect of racialized ignorance can be found in the work of Charles Mills who, in his book *The Racial Contract* (1997), argues that "[o]n matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (1997, 18). For Mills, the epistemology of ignorance is part of a white supremacist state in which the human race is racially divided into full persons and subpersons. Even though—or, more accurately, precisely because—they tend not to understand the racist world in which they live, white people are able to fully benefit from its racial hierarchies, ontologies, and economies.

Another exception to the neglect of racialized ignorance can be found in the work of Marilyn Frye. In *The Politics of Reality* (1983), Frye similarly explains that "ignorance is not something simple: it is not a simple lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state. Ignorance of this sort—the determined ignorance most white Americans have of American Indian tribes and clans, the ostrichlike ignorance most white Americans have of the histories of Asian peoples in this country, the impoverishing ignorance most white Americans have of Black language—

ignorance of these sorts is a complex result of many acts and many negligences" (1983, 118). Frye demonstrates how white ignorance often is an active force in the lives of those, such as feminists, who think of themselves as anti-racist. Far from accidental, the ignorance of the racially privileged often is deliberately cultivated by them, an act made easier by a vast array of institutional systems supporting white people's obliviousness of the worlds of people of color.

Although they do not focus on race, other exceptions to the neglect of manufactured ignorance can be found in the fields of history and science studies. Robert Proctor's (1996) examination of the "cancer wars" in the United States argued that political factors have negatively impacted cancer research, deliberately creating confusion and uncertainty about the carcinogenic risk of products such as tobacco, meat, and asbestos. Influenced by the work of Proctor, Mills, and Frye, Nancy Tuana (2004) examined the value of an epistemology of ignorance for a better understanding of the ways in which sexism informs the science of female sexuality. Invoking the idea of "agnotology," or the study of what is unknown, Londa Schiebinger (2004) examined the sexual politics behind the creation of ignorance of abortifacients in Europe. Given Proctor's, Tuana's, and Schiebinger's focus on ignorance as a culturally and politically induced product, their work on the role of ignorance in science complements the application of epistemologies of ignorance to racialized ignorance introduced by Frye and Mills and developed here.¹

Building on previous work on the epistemologies of ignorance and working out of continental, analytic, and pragmatist traditions, the thirteen authors in this volume critically examine practices of not knowing that are linked to and often support racism. Part I, "Theorizing Ignorance," explores some of the theoretical complexities of racialized ignorance. Charles W. Mills begins with "White Ignorance," in which he elaborates on one of the key themes of his book *The Racial Contract*. Linked with white supremacy, white ignorance includes both false belief and the absence of true belief about people of color, supporting a delusion of white racial superiority that can afflict white and nonwhite people alike. White ignorance operates with a particular kind of social cognition that distorts reality. For example, the lens with which white people (and others suffering from white ignorance) perceive the world is shaped by white supremacy, causing them to mis-see whites as civilized superiors and nonwhites as inferior "savages." White ignorance also impacts social and individual memory, erasing both the achievements of people of color and the atrocities of white people. A collective amnesia about the past is the result, which supports hostility toward the testimony and credibility of nonwhite people. By mapping white ignorance in these ways, Mills seeks both to minimize it and to make possible genuine knowledge about the world.

Mills's work in *The Racial Contract* plays an important role in Linda Martín Alcoff's chapter "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types," which develops a typology of recent arguments for an epistemology of ignorance. Beginning with the feminist philosophy of Lorraine Code, Alcoff explains that the first argument is that ignorance results from humans' situatedness as knowers. Because we are located, partial beings, we cannot know everything. Based on the standpoint theory of Sandra Harding, the second argument further develops the first by connecting ignorance to aspects of group identities. Situatedness is not merely a general feature of human existence. It is shaped by things such as race, which means that the ignorance that results from it also is racially inflected. The third argument is drawn from Mills's work and provides a structural analysis of how oppressive systems generate ignorance. Elaborating on that argument, Alcoff turns to Jürgen Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School, using their critique of rationality under capitalism to show how systemic ignorance is generated. With Horkheimer and Mills, Alcoff concludes that successful analyses of racial and other forms of systemic ignorance must be able to demonstrate alternatives to them and thus cannot afford postmodern refusals of concepts of truth, reason, and reality.

Harvey Cormier implicitly challenges Mills and Alcoff by arguing that an epistemology of ignorance will not help combat white privilege and racial injustice. In "Ever Not Quite: Unfinished Theories, Unfinished Societies, and Pragmatism," Cormier alleges that a dichotomy between appearance and reality lies at the heart of the epistemologies of ignorance. This dichotomy leads to the problem of ideology: if a structure of deceptively egalitarian appearances has been erected on top of a racist reality, then how can a person be sure that her vision of the world is untainted by the reigning ideology? Drawing on the pragmatist philosophies of Richard Rorty, Cornell West, and William James, Cormier urges that we jettison talk of appearance and reality and accept that all truths are a creation of human beings seeking to satisfy their desires and mold the world in particular ways. For Cormier, critical race theorists would be better off asking if certain beliefs help eliminate racism than if they match reality. The problem of white privilege and domination is not one of pervasive ignorance of reality but of the need for political struggle to build an antiracist society.

In her contribution titled "Strategic Ignorance," Alison Bailey shares Cormier's concern that dichotomous thinking limits Mills's epistemology of ignorance. If the Racial Contract operates with an inverted epistemology that uses ignorance to present a falsehood as a truth, then the solution would seem to be a kind of cognitive therapy that allows the truth about white and nonwhite people to be recognized. Bailey argues that while this sort of therapy has a limited role to play in antiracist

struggle, it utilizes the same logic of purity that plagues the problem it attempts to solve. A more radical and long-lasting solution to racism and white supremacy can be developed, according to Bailey, with the curdled logic found in the work of María Lugones. Curdled logic draws on the resistance of people of color to highlight agency under oppression. Rather than simply oppose ignorance to knowledge, curdled logic demonstrates how a strategic use of ignorance is made possible through ambiguity, multiplicity, and dissembling. Reading Mills's work through a curdled lens, Bailey proposes an epistemology of ignorance in which oppressed people are not merely victims but also what she refers to as "oppressed<->resisting subjects."

Sarah Lucia Hoagland also draws on Lugones to argue that relationality is crucial to antiracist and feminist struggle. In "Denying Relationality: Epistemology and Ethics and Ignorance," she examines the denial of relationality that is at the heart of practitioners of dominant culture who are ignorant about those whom they oppress. Epistemologies that presuppose autonomy render invisible the relationality that structures subjectivities at both the individual and cultural levels. Recognizing relationality means acknowledging ontological interdependence, which transforms how we think of communicating across and through differences. Rather than exist as distinct categories—woman, man, lesbian, white, Latina, and so on—across which common ground needs to be found, those struggling against oppression are located in concrete geographies that support different worlds of meaning. Engaging in dialogue with Lugones and others having different geographies from her own, Hoagland enacts the complex communication that relationality demands.

Part I concludes with Elizabeth V. Spelman's analysis of some of the strategies deployed in the management of white ignorance. In "Managing Ignorance," Spelman draws on the work of James Baldwin to show how white America avoided inquiry into and knowledge of the horrors of white racism in the decades following the Civil War. White people tend to have a complicated relationship to the reality of black grievances, simultaneously believing that they are false and wanting to believe that they are false (which implies a recognition that they are true), a messy cognitive state that often is avoided by ignoring black grievances altogether. The management of this ignorance can be seen in the reunions of white Confederate and Union soldiers that were meant to repair relationships damaged by the war. The reconciliation of North and South carefully avoided any mention of slavery or race, as if the war were a squabble between two brothers that had nothing to do with the status of black people in the United States. Spelman demonstrates how the cultivated ignorance of the plight of black people and the neglect of racial justice were requirements for white healing to occur.

Part II, "Situating Ignorance," explores some of the geographical, historical, and disciplinary sites in which racial ignorance has operated and often continues to operate. In "Race Problems, Unknown Publics, Paralysis, and Faith," Paul C. Taylor draws on John Dewey and W. E. B. Du Bois to examine the social production of ignorance about race. Taylor describes racial groups as Deweyan publics: populations that collectively experience similar social situations and need to become self-aware to abolish ignorance of their common plight. Applying this radical constructionist view of race to the case of the 2004 coup in Haiti, Taylor confronts both the widespread ignorance about the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean and his own crisis in faith in public moral deliberation. Personally invested in the welfare of Haiti and thus shaken by the U.S. government's obscurantism about its foreign policy, Taylor challenges the utopian optimism that, he discovers, lies behind his radical constructionism. Urging that belief in the complete elimination of racial and colonialist injustice be replaced by permanent struggle against it, Taylor confronts the existential obstacles that millenarian faith can lay across the path of liberatory activity.

Shannon Sullivan also examines the role that ignorance plays in the relationship between the United States and the Caribbean. In "White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression: Or, Why I Know So Little about Puerto Rico," she explores her relationship as a white person with Puerto Rico. Providing a historical overview of the United States' acquisition of Puerto Rico as a colony and then focusing on the educational system subsequently installed, Sullivan charts how knowledge and ignorance intertwined to transform Puerto Ricans into "Porto Ricans" in the eyes of non-Puerto Rican U.S. citizens. Unlike the allegedly dark and savage Filipinos, "Porto Ricans" were seen as docile colonial subjects capable of Americanization. While the image of "Porto Ricans" thus contributes to the oppression of Puerto Ricans, it also can be a site for resistance when Puerto Ricans strategically use colonialist ignorance/knowledge to redistribute wealth from the mainland to the island. Challenging white ignorance of Puerto Rico, Sullivan demonstrates how the solution cannot be a simple increase in knowledge, because certain forms of knowledge can support rather than undermine racism and (neo)colonialism.

In "John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke: A Case Study in White Ignorance and Intellectual Segregation," Frank Margonis continues the discussion begun by Taylor and Cormier about the possible contributions of pragmatism to epistemologies of ignorance. Margonis examines Dewey's neglect of issues of race, which created an absence in his published work that is more than an insignificant gap. Erasing racial violence from the story of the United States' development, Dewey prepared the way for "color-blind" understandings of the nation's international affairs as

exercises in democracy. Du Bois and Locke, in contrast, confronted the racial violence of U.S. history and as a result saw World War I as an imperialist war in which white nations were fighting over access to the riches of predominantly nonwhite nations. As Margonis argues, Dewey's erasure of race offers a negative lesson to contemporary pragmatists and other antiracist theorists. Like Dewey, white philosophers today cannot afford to intellectually segregate themselves from philosophers of color. Speaking across and through racial divisions is the most potent weapon against epistemologies of ignorance that support white domination.

Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.) also voices his concern about the current state of American philosophy in "Social Ordering and the Systematic Production of Ignorance." Focusing on practices of education, Outlaw explains how schools have been a primary site for the production and distribution of white ignorance of other races. From the nineteenth century onward, schools have been institutions of "Americanization," a process of teaching a hierarchical racial ontology in which white people dominate all others. According to Outlaw, the academic field of philosophy participates in this process just as much as other fields and levels of schooling. Philosophers in the United States can be—and often are—completely ignorant of figures and issues that fall outside of a white, male canon. This is particularly problematic given that today's Ph.D. candidates in philosophy will be teaching an increasing number of nonwhite undergraduate students. In response, Outlaw calls for a transformation of knowledge production in academic philosophy that will eliminate its present (mis)education into ignorance.

Lorraine Code further explores the relationship between ignorance and racialized colonialism in "The Power of Ignorance." Juxtaposing George Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda* and James Mill's 1817 *The History of British India*, Code diagnoses some of the modes of ignorance that shaped the English-speaking white Western world in the nineteenth century. Although one work is fiction and the other history, together they expose patterns of privilege and ignorance at both the personal and global level. The female protagonist of the novel, Gwendolen Harlech, is ignorant of her ignorance of the lives of the poor and lower classes, while Mill celebrates his ignorance of colonized India. Both texts show how ignorance helps reify sexual, racial, and colonial hierarchies. The class and colonial-racial forms of ignorance in these works are coconstitutive with gender-based ignorance: Harlech's cosseted privilege is in part a result of the patriarchal world in which she lives, and the country of India is feminized by Mill as a compliant subject to a paternalistic colonizer. Connecting these modalities of ignorance to Michele Le Doueff's work on the maintenance of epistemic hierarchies in European history, Code develops an ecology of ignorance that focuses on the human subjects that embody and live not-knowing.

In “On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew: The Epistemology of Ignorance in Fanon’s Critique of Sartre,” Robert Bernasconi explores the significance of Franz Fanon’s claim that “the European knows and does not know” in the context of Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay on negritude, “Black Orpheus.” When Sartre depicts negritude as a temporary moment in the dialectical movement to a raceless society, he undermines Fanon’s attempts to affirm his blackness. From Fanon’s perspective, Sartre’s criticism of negritude is not necessarily wrong, but it is a piece of knowledge of which Fanon needed to remain ignorant in his fight against white supremacy. By claiming to know more than black people about their own situation of racial struggle, Sartre failed to acknowledge both his own racial location and the ignorance that accompanied it. As Bernasconi argues, Sartre’s efforts to support antiracist work were undermined by his blind spots. Although well intentioned, they serve as a warning to white people who think their knowledge is sufficient to eliminate racism.

Stephanie Malia Fullerton closes the volume by challenging the belief commonly held by philosophers that science has disproved the existence of distinct races and that ignorance of this fact is what impedes the fight against racism. In “On the Absence of Biology in Philosophical Considerations of Race,” Fullerton explains that while physical anthropology and population genetics have shown that no fixed, innate biological differences separate people into different races, they also have demonstrated that genetic differences correlate with geography and map onto racial categories. Focusing on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s eliminativist philosophy, Fullerton explains how biology wrongly has been written out of many philosophical accounts of race, creating a problematic ignorance of both race’s biological dimensions and the current state of the biological sciences. Cautioning that biology should not be left at the door of critical race theory, Fullerton encourages philosophers to acknowledge the complex bio-social relation between genetic inheritance and phenotype, culture, and history that gives rise to racial identity and meaning.

Many more topics and issues are related to racialized ignorance that deserve investigation, and we hope these thirteen chapters will inspire further work on them. Some of the discipline-based topics include problems of ignorance in Western philosophy as found in the work of Nietzsche (truth as necessary error), Heidegger (truth as simultaneous disclosure and concealment), Plato (epistemology as anamnesis), Descartes (ignorance and the evil deceiver), Rawls (the veil of ignorance), and many others; and the epistemology of ignorance vis-à-vis the long-standing philosophical tradition of skepticism. The operation of racialized ignorance in recent geopolitical events warrants exploration, especially in the case of genocide in the Sudan, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the slaughter in

Rwanda and Burundi, and the September 11, 2001, attacks. The role that race- and class-based ignorance has played in recent natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, also deserves attention. Finally, some of the broad questions that might guide future work on race and epistemology of ignorance include the following: To what extent are we obliged to know all that there is to know, or is allegedly knowable? Are there degrees of culpability for incurred ignorance? Are all epistemic subjects under the same obligations to know the same things? Are there term limits on certain forms of ignorance, and are some forms of ignorance more grievous than others, and if so, what are the criteria for differentiation? While these topics and questions are not comprehensive, we present them as a “wish list” for additional research in the blossoming field of the epistemology of ignorance.²

* * *

This book grew out of the 2004 Penn State Rock Ethics Institute Conference, “Ethics and Epistemologies of Ignorance.” This conference was cosponsored by the Penn State Africana Research Center, the Department of Philosophy, and the Women’s Studies Program. The conference, in turn, had its roots in a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Seminar on Feminist Epistemologies that we codirected in 2003. Fifteen gifted scholars, Rita Alfonso, Lisa Diedrich, Carla Fehr, Mary Margaret Fonow, Heidi Grasswick, Catherine Hundleby, Debra Jackson, Marianne Janack, Nancy McHugh, Patricia Moore, L. Ryan Musgrave, Mariana Ortega, Mary Solberg, Alice Sowaal, and Penny Weiss, participated in the intense five-week seminar, exploring connections between ethics, politics, and epistemology and culminating in a focus on ignorance. Their work, and our work as directors of the seminar, was augmented by four visiting scholars: Linda Martín Alcoff, Lorraine Code, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, and Charlene Haddock Seigfried. The NEH scholars and visiting scholars contributed to the enormous success of the multidisciplinary conference, which explored the ethical, political, and epistemological implications of the conscious and unconscious production of ignorance as it impacts practices of domination, exploitation, and oppression. Many scholars who participated in the first NEH Summer Seminar on Feminist Epistemologies directed by Nancy Tuana in 1996 came to the conference, as well as over sixty participants. The topic sparked a great deal of interest, dialogue, and exciting new work, more of which can be found in a guest-edited issue of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* on Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance (Tuana and Sullivan, 2006). The second NEH Summer Seminar and the “Ethics and Epistemologies of Ignorance” conference gave birth to a new scholarly organization called FEMMSS—Feminist Epistemologies, Metaphysics, Methodologies, and Science Studies—which had its inaugural meeting at the University of Washington in 2004. We would like to

thank all of the feminist and race theory scholars who supported the conference and the development of FEMMSS, including Linda Martín Alcoff, Susan Babbitt, Robert Bernasconi, Peg Brand, Tina Chanter, Lorraine Code, Harvey Cormier, Penelope Deutscher, Carla Fehr, Mary Margaret Fonow, Marilyn Frye, Heidi Grasswick, Sandra Harding, Lisa Heldke, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Catherine Hundleby, Debra Jackson, Marianne Janack, María Lugones, Nancy McHugh, Charles Mills, Patricia Moore, L. Ryan Musgrave, Lynn Hankinson Nelson, Mariana Ortega, Lucius T. Outlaw Jr., Naomi Scheman, Alice Sowaal, Elizabeth V. Spelman, Gail Weiss, and Penny Weiss. We also would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities; Penn State University's Rock Ethics Institute, the Africana Research Center, the Philosophy Department, and the Women's Studies Program, as well as the NEH Summer Seminar participants and the conference speakers and attendees for their support of and excited involvement in the blossoming field of epistemologies of ignorance. Finally, we cannot thank enough Kathy Rumbaugh and Barb Edwards for all of the hard work they both put into the conference and the preparation of this anthology. Without the support of all of these people and institutions, this volume would not have been possible.

Notes

1. For additional work related to the epistemologies of ignorance, especially in connection to race, see Sullivan (2006).
2. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for help with these lists of topics and questions.

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PART I

Theorizing Ignorance

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CHAPTER 1

White Ignorance

Charles W. Mills

White ignorance . . .

It's a big subject. How much time do you have?

It's not enough.

*Ignorance is usually thought of as the passive obverse to knowledge,
the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment.*

But . . .

Imagine an ignorance that resists.

Imagine an ignorance that fights back.

*Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated,
an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—
not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated
at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly
as knowledge.*

I

Classically individualist, indeed sometimes—self-parodically—to the verge of solipsism, blithely indifferent to the possible cognitive consequences of class, racial, or gender situatedness (or, perhaps more accurately, taking a propertied white male standpoint as given), modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology was for hundreds of years from its Cartesian origins profoundly inimical terrain for the development of any concept of structural group-based miscognition. The paradigm exemplars of phenomena likely to foster mistaken belief—optical illusions, hallucinations, phantom limbs, dreams—were by their very banality universal to the human condition and the epistemic remedies prescribed—for example, rejecting all but the indubitable—correspondingly abstract and general.

Nineteenth-century Marxism, with its theoretical insistence on locating the individual agent and the individual cognizer in group (basically class) structures of domination, and its concepts of ideology, fetishism, societal “appearance,” and divergent group (basically class) perspectives on the social order, offered a potential corrective to this epistemological individualism. But to the extent that there was a mainstream twentieth-century appropriation of these ideas, in the form of *Wissenssoziologie*, the sociology of knowledge, it drew its genealogy from Karl Mannheim rather than Karl Marx, was frequently (despite terminological hedges such as Mannheim’s “relationism”) relativistic, and was in any case confined to sociology (Curtis and Petras 1970). So though some figures, such as Max Scheler and Mannheim himself, explicitly argued for the epistemological implications of their work, these claims were not engaged with by philosophers in the analytic tradition. A seemingly straightforward and clear-cut division of conceptual and disciplinary labor was presumed: descriptive issues of recording and explaining what and why people actually believed could be delegated to sociology, but evaluative issues of articulating cognitive norms would be reserved for (individualist) epistemology, which was philosophical territory.

But though mainstream philosophy and analytic epistemology continued to develop in splendid isolation for many decades, W. V. Quine’s naturalizing of epistemology would initiate a sequence of events with unsuspectedly subversive long-term theoretical repercussions for the field (Quine 1969b; Kornblith 1994b). If articulating the norms for *ideal* cognition required taking into account (in some way) the practices of *actual* cognition, if the prescriptive needed to pay attention (in some way) to the descriptive, then on what principled basis could cognitive realities of a *supra*-individual kind continue to be excluded from the ambit of epistemology? For it then meant that the cognitive agent needed to be located in her specificity—as a member of certain social groups, within a given social milieu, in a society at a particular time period. Whatever Quine’s own sympathies (or lack thereof), his work had opened Pandora’s box. A naturalized epistemology had, perforce, also to be a socialized epistemology; this was “a straightforward extension of the naturalistic approach” (Kornblith 1994a, 93). What had originally been a specifically Marxist concept, “standpoint theory,” was adopted and developed to its most sophisticated form in the work of feminist theorists (Harding 2004), and it became possible for books with titles such as *Social Epistemology* (Fuller 2002) and *Socializing Epistemology* (Schmitt 1994) and journals called *Social Epistemology* to be published and seen (at least by some) as a legitimate part of philosophy. The Marxist challenge thrown down a century before could now finally be taken up.

Obviously, then, for those interested in pursuing such questions this is a far more welcoming environment than that of a few decades ago. Nonetheless, I think it is obvious that the *potential* of these developments for transforming mainstream epistemology is far from being fully realized. And at least one major reason for this failure is that the conceptions of society in the literature too often presuppose a degree of consent and inclusion that does not exist outside the imagination of mainstream scholars—in a sense, a societal population essentially generated by simple iteration of that originally solitary Cartesian cognizer. As Linda Martín Alcoff has ironically observed, the “society” about which these philosophers are writing often seems to be composed exclusively of white males (Alcoff 1996, 2, n. 1), so that one wonders how it reproduces itself. The Marxist critique is seemingly discredited, the feminist critique is marginalized, and the racial critique does not even exist. The concepts of domination, hegemony, ideology, mystification, exploitation, and so on that are part of the lingua franca of radicals find little or no place here. In particular, the analysis of the implications for social cognition of the legacy of white supremacy has barely been initiated. The sole reference to race that I could find in the Schmitt (1994) collection, for example, was a single cautious sentence by Philip Kitcher (1994, 125), which I here reproduce in full: “Membership of a particular ethnic group within a particular society may interfere with one’s ability to acquire true beliefs about the distribution of characteristics that are believed to be important to human worth (witness the history of nineteenth-century craniometry).”

I sketch out in this chapter some of the features and the dynamic of what I see as a particularly pervasive—though hardly theorized—form of ignorance, what could be called white ignorance, linked to white supremacy. (This chapter is thus an elaboration of one of the key themes of my 1997 book, *The Racial Contract* [Mills 1997].) The idea of group-based cognitive handicap is not an alien one to the radical tradition, if not normally couched in terms of “ignorance.” Indeed, it is, on the contrary, a straightforward corollary of standpoint theory: if one group is privileged, after all, it must be by comparison with another group that is handicapped. In addition, the term has for me the virtue of signaling my theoretical sympathies with what I know will seem to many a deplorably old-fashioned, “conservative,” realist, intellectual framework, one in which *truth*, *falsity*, *facts*, *reality*, and so forth are not enclosed with ironic scare quotes. The phrase “white ignorance” implies the possibility of a contrasting “knowledge,” a contrast that would be lost if all claims to truth were equally spurious, or just a matter of competing discourses. In the same way *The Racial Contract* was not meant as a trashing of contractarianism, as such, but rather the demystification of a contractarianism

that ignored racial subordination, so similarly, mapping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge.

The metatheoretical approach I find most congenial is that recently outlined by Alvin Goldman in his book *Knowledge in a Social World* (Goldman 1999; see also Kornblith 1994a; Kitcher 1994). Goldman describes his project as “an essay in social veritistic epistemology,” oriented “toward truth determination,” as against contemporary poststructuralist or Kuhn-Feyerabend-Bloor-Barnes-inspired approaches that relativize truth (5). So though the focus is social rather than individual, the traditional concerns and assumptions of mainstream epistemology have been retained:

Traditional epistemology, especially in the Cartesian tradition, was highly individualistic, focusing on mental operations of cognitive agents in isolation or abstraction from other persons. . . . [This] individual epistemology needs a social counterpart: *social epistemology*. . . . In what respects is social epistemology social? First, it focuses on social paths or routes to knowledge. That is, considering believers taken one at a time, it looks at the many routes to belief that feature interactions with other agents, as contrasted with private or asocial routes to belief acquisition. . . . Second, social epistemology does not restrict itself to believers taken singly. It often focuses on some sort of group entity . . . and examines the spread of information or misinformation across that group’s membership. Rather than concentrate on a single knower, as did Cartesian epistemology, it addresses the distribution of knowledge or error within the larger social cluster. . . . Veritistic epistemology (whether individual or social) is concerned with the production of knowledge, where knowledge is here understood in the “weak” sense of *true belief*. More precisely, it is concerned with both knowledge and its contraries: *error* (false belief) and *ignorance* (the absence of true belief). The main question for veritistic epistemology is: Which practices have a comparatively favorable impact on knowledge as contrasted with error and ignorance? Individual veritistic epistemology asks this question for nonsocial practices; social veritistic epistemology asks it for social practices. (Goldman 1999, 4–5, emphasis in original)

Unlike Goldman, I will use *ignorance* to cover both false belief and the absence of true belief. But with this minor terminological variation, this is basically the project I am trying to undertake: looking at the “spread of misinformation,” the “distribution of error” (including the possibility of “massive error” [Kornblith 1994a, 97]), within the “larger social cluster,” the “group entity,” of whites, and the “social practices” (some “wholly pernicious” [Kornblith 1994a, 97]) that encourage it. Goldman makes glancing reference to some of the feminist and race literature (there is a grand total of a single index entry for *racism*), but in

general the implications of systemic social oppression for his project are not addressed. The picture of “society” he is working with is one that—with perhaps a few unfortunate exceptions—is inclusive and harmonious. Thus his account offers the equivalent in social epistemology of the mainstream theorizing in political science that frames American sexism and racism as “anomalies”: U.S. political culture is conceptualized as *essentially* egalitarian and inclusive, with the long actual history of systemic gender and racial subordination being relegated to the status of a minor “deviation” from the norm (Smith 1997). Obviously such a starting point crucially handicaps any realistic social epistemology, since in effect it turns things upside down. Sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the *exception* but the *norm*. So though his book is valuable in terms of conceptual clarification, and some illuminating discussions of particular topics, the basic framework is flawed insofar as it marginalizes domination and its consequences. A less naïve understanding of how society actually works requires drawing on the radical tradition of social theory, in which various factors he does not consider play a crucial role in obstructing the mission of veritistic epistemology.

II

Let me turn now to race. As I pointed out in an article more than fifteen years ago (Mills 1998), and as has unfortunately hardly changed since then, there is no academic philosophical literature on racial epistemology that remotely compares in volume to that on gender epistemology. (Race and gender are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but usually in gender theory it is the perspective of white women that is explored.) However, one needs to distinguish academic from lay treatments. I would suggest that “white ignorance” has, whether centrally or secondarily, been a theme of many of the classic fictional and nonfictional works of the African American experience, and also that of other people of color. In his introduction to a collection of black writers’ perspectives on whiteness, David Roediger (1998) underlines the fundamental epistemic *asymmetry* between typical white views of blacks and typical black views of whites: these are not cognizers linked by a reciprocal ignorance but rather groups whose respective privilege and subordination tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation, on the one hand, and more veridical perceptions, on the other hand. Thus he cites James Weldon Johnson’s remark “colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them” (5). Often for their very survival, blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists, studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the “white tribe” that has such frightening power over them,

that in certain time periods can even determine their life or death on a whim. (In particular circumstances, then, white ignorance may need to be actively *encouraged*, thus the black American folk poem, “Got one mind for white folks to see/ Another for what I know is me,” or, in James Baldwin’s brutally candid assessment, “I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive” [Baldwin 1993, 217].) What people of color quickly come to see—in a sense, the primary epistemic principle of the racialized social epistemology of which they are the object—is that they are not seen at all. Thus the “central metaphor” of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* is the image of the “veil” (Gibson 1989, xi), and the black American cognitive equivalent of the shocking moment of Cartesian realization of the uncertainty of everything one had taken to be knowledge is the moment when, for Du Bois, as a child in New England, “It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil” (Du Bois 1989, 4).

Similarly, Ralph Ellison’s classic *Invisible Man* (1995), generally regarded as the most important twentieth-century novel of the black experience, is arguably, in key respects—while a multidimensional and multi-layered work of great depth and complexity, not to be reduced to a single theme—an *epistemological* novel. For what it recounts is the protagonist’s quest to determine what norms of belief are the right ones in a crazy looking-glass world where he is an invisible man “simply because [white] people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.” And this systematic misperception is not, of course, due to biology, the intrinsic properties of his epidermis or physical deficiencies in the white eye but rather to “the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (3). The images of light and darkness, sight and blindness, that run through the novel, from the blindfolded black fighters in the grotesque battle royal at the start to the climactic discovery that the Brotherhood’s (read: American Communist Party) leader has a glass eye, repeatedly raise, in context after context, the question of how one can demarcate what is genuine from only apparent insight, real from only apparent truth, even in the worldview of those whose historical materialist “science” supposedly gave them “super vision.”

Nor is it only black writers who have explored the theme of white ignorance. One of the consequences of the development of critical white studies has been a renewed appreciation of the pioneering work of Herman Melville, with *Moby Dick* (2000) now being read by some critics as an early nineteenth-century indictment of the national obsession with white-

ness, Ahab's pathological determination to pursue the white whale regardless of its imperilment of his multiracial crew. But it is in the 1856 short novel *Benito Cereno* (1986)—used as the source of one of the two epigraphs to *Invisible Man* by Ellison—that one finds the most focused investigation of the unnerving possibilities of white blindness. Boarding a slave ship—the *San Dominick*, a reference to the Haitian Revolution—which, unknown to the protagonist, Amasa Delano, has been taken over by its human cargo, with the white crew being held hostage, Delano has all around him the evidence for black insurrection, from the terror in the eyes of the nominal white captain, the eponymous Benito Cereno, as his black barber Babo puts the razor to his throat, to the Africans clashing their hatchets ominously in the background. But so unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished such a thing that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behavior of the imprisoned whites, no matter how far-fetched. In Eric Sundquist's summary (1993):

Melville's account of the "enchantment" of Delano, then, is also a means to examine the mystifications by which slavery was maintained. . . . Minstrelsy—in effect, the complete show of the tale's action staged for Delano—is a product, as it were, of his mind, of his willingness to accept Babo's Sambo-like performance. . . . Paradoxically, Delano watches Babo's performance without ever seeing it. . . . Delano participates in a continued act of suppressed revolt against belief in the appearances presented to him . . . [a] self-regulation by racist assumptions and blind "innocence." (151–55, 171)

The white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation. Correspondingly, on the positive epistemic side, the route to black knowledge is the self-conscious recognition of white ignorance (including its black-faced manifestation in black consciousness itself). Du Bois's (1989) famous and oft-cited figure of "double consciousness" has been variously interpreted, but certainly one plausible way of reading it is as a prescription for a critical cognitive distancing from "a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world," a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (5). The attainment of "second sight" requires an understanding of what it is about whites and the white situation that motivates them to view blacks erroneously. One learns to see through identifying white blindness and avoiding the pitfalls of putting on these spectacles for one's own vision.

This subject is by no means unexplored in white and black texts, but as noted, because of the whiteness of philosophy, very little has been done here. (One exception is Lewis Gordon's [1995] work on bad faith,

which is obviously relevant to this subject, though not itself set in a formal epistemological framework.) In this chapter, accordingly, I gesture toward some useful directions for mapping white ignorance and developing, accordingly, epistemic criteria for minimizing it.

III

What I want to pin down, then, is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race—white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications—plays a crucial causal role. Let me begin by trying to clarify and demarcate more precisely the phenomenon I am addressing, as well as answering some possible objections. To begin with, *white ignorance* as a cognitive phenomenon has to be clearly historicized. I am taking for granted the truth of some variant of social constructivism, which denies that race is biological. So the causality in the mechanisms for generating and sustaining white ignorance on the macro level is social-structural rather than physico-biological, though it will of course operate through the physico-biological. Assuming that the growing consensus in critical race theory is correct—that race in general, and whiteness in particular, is a product of the modern period (Fredrickson 2002)—then you could not have had white ignorance in this technical, term-of-art sense in, say, the ancient world, because whites did not exist then. Certainly people existed who by today's standards would be counted as white, but they would not have been so categorized at the time, either by themselves or others, so there would have been no whiteness to play a causal role in their knowing or non-knowing. Moreover, even in the modern period, whiteness would not have been universally, instantly, and homogeneously instantiated; there would have been (to borrow an image from another field of study) “uneven development” in the processes of racialization in different countries at different times. Indeed, even in the United States, in a sense the paradigm white supremacist state, Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) argues for a periodization of whiteness into different epochs, with some European ethnic groups only becoming fully white at a comparatively late stage.

Second, one would obviously need to distinguish what I am calling white ignorance from general patterns of ignorance prevalent among people who are white but in whose doxastic states race has played no determining role. For example, at all times (such as right now) there will be many facts about the natural and social worlds on which people, including white people, have no opinion, or a mistaken opinion, but race is not directly or indirectly responsible, for instance, the number of planets 200 years ago, the exact temperature in the earth's crust twenty miles down right now, the precise income distribution in the United States, and so

forth. But we would not want to call this white ignorance, even when it is shared by whites, because race has not been responsible for these non-knowings, but other factors.

Third (complicating the foregoing), it needs to be realized that once indirect causation and diminishing degrees of influence are admitted, it will sometimes be very difficult to adjudicate when specific kinds of non-knowing are appropriately categorizable as white ignorance or not. Recourse to counterfactuals of greater or lesser distance from the actual situation may be necessary ("what they should and would have known if . . ."), whose evaluation may be too complex to be resolvable. Suppose, for example, that a particular true scientific generalization about human beings, *P*, would be easily discoverable in a society were it not for widespread white racism, and that with additional research in the appropriate areas, *P* could be shown to have further implications, *Q*, and beyond that, *R*. Or, suppose that the practical application of *P* in medicine would have had as a spin-off empirical findings *p*₁, *p*₂, *p*₃. Should these related principles and factual findings all be included as examples of white ignorance as well? How far onward up the chain? And so forth. So it will be easy to think up all kinds of tricky cases where it will be hard to make the determination. But the existence of such problematic cases at the borders does not undermine the import of more central cases.

Fourth, the racialized causality I am invoking needs to be expansive enough to include both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation, which may be operative even if the cognizer in question is not racist. It is necessary to distinguish the two not merely as a logical point, because they are analytically separable, but because in empirical reality they may often be found independently of each other. You can have white racism, in particular white cognizers, in the sense of the existence of prejudicial beliefs about people of color without (at that time and place) white domination of those people of color having been established; and you can also have white domination of people of color at a particular time and place without all white cognizers at that time and place being racist. But in both cases, racialized causality can give rise to what I am calling white ignorance, straightforwardly for a racist cognizer, but also indirectly for a nonracist cognizer who may form mistaken beliefs (e.g., that after the abolition of slavery in the United States, blacks generally had opportunities equal to whites) because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge, though without prejudice himself. So white ignorance need not always be based on bad faith. Obviously from the point of view of a social epistemology, especially after the transition from *de jure* to *de facto* white supremacy, it is precisely this kind of white ignorance that is most important.

Fifth, the “white” in “white ignorance” does not mean that it has to be confined *to* white people. Indeed, as the earlier Du Bois discussion emphasized, it will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved. (This is a familiar point from the Marxist and feminist traditions—working-class conservatives, “male-identified” women, endorsing right-wing and sexist ideologies against their interests.) Providing that the causal route is appropriate, blacks can manifest white ignorance also.

Sixth, and somewhat different, *white* racial ignorance can produce a doxastic environment in which particular varieties of *black* racial ignorance flourish—so that racial causality is involved—but which one would hesitate to subsume under the category “white ignorance” itself, at least without significant qualification. Think, for example, of “oppositional” African American varieties of biological and theological determinism: whites as melanin deficient and therefore inherently physiologically and psychologically flawed, or whites as “blue-eyed devils” created by the evil scientist Yacub (as in early Black Muslim theology). Insofar as these theories invert claims of white racial superiority, though still accepting racial hierarchy, they would seem to be deserving of a separate category, though obviously they have been shaped by key assumptions of “scientific” and theological white racism.

Seventh, though the examples I have given so far have all been factual ones, I want a concept of white ignorance broad enough to include moral ignorance—not merely ignorance of facts *with* moral implications but moral non-knowings, incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves. For me, the epistemic desideratum is that the naturalizing and socializing of epistemology should have, as a component, the naturalizing and socializing of *moral* epistemology also (Campbell and Hunter 2000) and the study of pervasive social patterns of mistaken *moral* cognition. Thus the idea is that improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression.

Eighth, it presumably does not need to be emphasized that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged, group-based ignorance. Male ignorance could be analyzed similarly and clearly has a far more ancient history and arguably a more deep-rooted ancestry in human interrelations, insofar as it goes back thousands of years. I am focusing on white ignorance because, as mentioned, it has been relatively undertheorized in the white academy compared to the work of feminist theorists.

Ninth, speaking generally about white ignorance does not commit one to the claim that it is uniform across the white population. Whites