

# 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 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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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

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## 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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