

# Gaslighting, Misogyny, and Psychological Oppression

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## ABSTRACT

This paper develops a notion of manipulative gaslighting, which is designed to capture something not captured by epistemic gaslighting, namely the *intent* to undermine women by denying their testimony about harms done to them by men. Manipulative gaslighting, I propose, consists in getting someone to doubt her testimony by challenging its credibility using two tactics: “sidestepping” (dodging evidence that supports her testimony) and “displacing” (attributing to her cognitive or characterological defects). I explain how manipulative gaslighting is distinct from (mere) reasonable disagreement, with which it is sometimes confused. I also argue for three further claims: that manipulative gaslighting is a method of enacting misogyny, that it is often a collective phenomenon, and, as collective, qualifies as a mode of psychological oppression.

The term “gaslighting” has recently entered the philosophical lexicon. The literature on gaslighting has two strands. In one, gaslighting is characterized as a form of testimonial injustice. As such, it is a distinctively epistemic injustice that wrongs persons primarily as knowers.<sup>1</sup> Gaslighting occurs when someone denies, on the basis of another’s social identity, her testimony about a harm or wrong done to her.<sup>2</sup> In the other strand, gaslighting is described as a form of wrongful manipulation and, indeed, a form of emotional abuse. This use follows the use of “gaslighting” in therapeutic practice.<sup>3</sup> On this account, the aim of gaslighting is to get another to see her own plausible perceptions, beliefs, or memories as groundless.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I develop a notion of manipulative gaslighting, which I believe is necessary to capture a social phenomenon not accounted for by epistemic gaslighting. That phenomenon is the systematic denial of women’s testimony about harms done to them by men, which is *aimed at undermining those and other women*.<sup>5</sup> My objective is to discuss a feature of what we might call “the politics of testimony” that epistemic gaslighting is not designed to address. My argument is structured as follows. First, I outline some differences between epistemic and manipulative gaslighting. With these in view, I explain why epistemic gaslighting does not capture the phenomenon just described. Second, I provide an account of manipulative gaslighting that enables me to distinguish it from (mere) reasonable disagreement. Third, I

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explain a connection between manipulative gaslighting and misogyny. My thesis is that manipulative gaslighting is a common means by which misogyny is enacted. Fourth, I explain how manipulative gaslighting deployed in the service of misogyny qualifies as a collective phenomenon. Last, I argue that, as collective, misogynist gaslighting is a mode of psychological oppression.

### 1. EPISTEMIC AND MANIPULATIVE GASLIGHTING

We can explore the differences between epistemic and manipulative gaslighting by comparing these two cases:

*Epistemic:* James, a cisgender man, mispronouns Victoria, a trans\* woman colleague, repeatedly at a department function. Victoria relates this event to her colleague Susan. Susan, influenced by a stereotype of trans\* women as overly emotional, refuses to believe that James mispronounced Victoria, claiming that he would never do that and that Victoria misheard James because she is primed to detect mispronouncing at every turn.<sup>6</sup>

*Manipulative:* Norm, a close friend of Robin's, is always running late. Robin complains to Norm that this is disrespectful. Anxious to be "in the right,"<sup>7</sup> Norm reflexively and vehemently denies this and avers that Robin is "too sensitive." Over time this dynamic continues and leads to arguing. When Robin persists, Norm ups the ante, saying things like, "You really have a problem with time, don't you?" In the end, Robin begins to believe that Norm might be right. She begins to doubt her perceptions and her standing to complain, thinking, "What's the big deal if someone is late? Maybe I'm being too inflexible."<sup>8</sup>

Here are five differences between epistemic and manipulative gaslighting that emerge from these examples:

- a. *The wrong of gaslighting:* In the case of epistemic gaslighting, the primary wrong is being degraded as a knower. The wrong consists in an affront to one's epistemic competence or trustworthiness. However, on this view, gaslighting has a number of secondary wrongs. These include destroying the epistemic self-confidence of the knower, among others.<sup>9</sup> In the case of manipulative gaslighting, the primary wrong is *being manipulated* into losing confidence in oneself both as a knower and as a moral equal.<sup>10</sup> Degrading the agent as a knower, on this view, may be a secondary wrong.
- b. *Susceptibility to gaslighting:* In epistemic gaslighting, the hearer harbors prejudice against the speaker due to the speaker's social identity and so assigns to her less credibility than she would otherwise have. Manipulative gaslighting differs in two ways. First, the hearer need not assign to the speaker a credibility deficit; he simply wishes to show her as mistaken. Second, if a person is ascribed a credibility deficit, it may or may not be founded on her social identity. For instance, a gaslighting parent might see her adult male child as lacking credibility in many domains. But this is not due to his social identity.<sup>11</sup>
- c. *The subject matter of gaslighting:* Epistemic gaslighting is a response to one's testimony about a harm or wrong done to one. Manipulative gaslighting is

- frequently a response to such testimony, but is not necessarily. For instance, a man might routinely accuse his female partner of flirting when she is merely being friendly, and then dismiss her denial of this, calling her naive and emotionally immature, in an effort to make her doubt her own motives.<sup>12</sup>
- d. *The role of power in gaslighting*: Both epistemic and manipulative gaslighting require a power differential between the gaslighter and his target.<sup>13</sup> In the epistemic case, this difference is in social power. Indeed, it is part of what epistemic gaslighting is that it is done to people with less social power by those with more social power. In the manipulative case, the power differential can be understood in terms of leverage. A gaslighter, qua manipulator, cannot undermine one's confidence in one's judgments unless one is in some way invested in what the manipulator believes. This leverage, however, might be, and perhaps often is, *caused* by a difference in social power, as when a woman is invested in male approval.<sup>14</sup>
- e. *The role of intention in gaslighting*: Epistemic gaslighting is, by definition, unintentional because it is a form of testimonial injustice, which is, by definition unintentional.<sup>15</sup> Manipulative gaslighting is, by definition, intentional because *manipulation* is, by definition, intentional in the following sense: the manipulator always has an aim. He is attempting to get someone to do or to feel something. Nevertheless, he may be unaware that he is doing so.<sup>16</sup>

We can now see why the notion of epistemic gaslighting cannot treat the denial of women's testimony as aimed at undermining women: epistemic gaslighting, as such, lacks an aim. It occurs when the socially privileged unknowingly assign a credibility deficit to the socially disadvantaged and so tend to disbelieve their testimony; the actions of the privileged, however, are not aimed at undermining the persons giving the testimony. To be sure, those actions might cause some, e.g., to withhold testimony or doubt their perceptions, but that is not their purpose.<sup>17</sup>

Yet it seems that in the case of women's testimony about male harm, the refusal to believe, as widespread and systematic, is aimed at inhibiting women from giving such testimony.<sup>18</sup> Women's reluctance and self-doubt do not seem to be a merely contingent result of testimonial injustice. Indeed, routine denial would surely be in the interest of men because discrediting women's testimony about men harming them tends to license those harms, and, in turn, to cement the power men gain by committing them. If this observation about the aim of the denial is correct, then we need a notion of manipulative gaslighting to capture it.

## 2. GASLIGHTING AND REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

Below is my account of manipulative gaslighting (henceforth "gaslighting"). It is stipulative: my objective is to provide a characterization that allows me to distinguish gaslighting from (mere) reasonable disagreement. This is important because people are tempted to see gaslighting as mere disagreement; they attribute a false symmetry to the two interlocutors: Norm thinks he has been on time and Robin thinks he has not, or Norm thinks his lateness is not a problem and Robin thinks it is. If the conflict between Robin and Norm is simply a disagreement, then there is little room for

Robin to condemn Norm's actions. Indeed, if she were to do so, she might appear to be intolerant of people who disagree with her.

*Gaslighting* occurs when a person (the "gaslighter") manipulates another (the "target") in order to make her suppress or doubt her justifiable judgments about facts or values. He does this by denying the credibility of those judgments using these two methods: First, the gaslighter *sidesteps* evidence that would expose his judgment as unjustified. Second, he claims that the target's judgment lacks credibility because it is caused by a defect in her.<sup>19</sup>

I call this second tactic "displacement" because the gaslighter *displaces* the issue of the credibility of the target's judgment from the evidence (which supports her judgment) to some imputed or real defect in her that allegedly invalidates her judgment. Below, I explain this account in more detail by reference to the example of Robin and Norm. The relevant judgments in this case are that Norm is routinely late, that his being so is inconsiderate, and that Robin therefore has grounds for complaint. Norm's gaslighting, as we will see, aims to undermine all three of these judgments, though not necessarily simultaneously.

- a. *The target's judgments are justifiable.* Robin's judgment that Norm has been late and that his lateness is disrespectful can be justified, the first by appeal to the facts and the second by appeal, e.g., to widely held moral principles or social conventions. This justifiability criterion does three jobs. I will explain two of them here, and the third below when I consider possible problems with my account. First, the justifiability requirement makes room for cases where one can deny the credibility of another's judgments without gaslighting that person. Second, it allows for cases where someone can gaslight another even if that person's judgment is not fully justified. To see why we need to make room for these types of cases, consider the following examples:

1. Robin complains that Norm disrespects her by wearing loafers to their meetings.
2. Robin complains that Norm's lateness is disrespectful on the ground that she is descended from royalty.

Robin's judgment that Norm's wearing loafers disrespects her cannot be justified and it seems that Norm, on this ground, is not gaslighting Robin if he denies that he is disrespecting her by wearing loafers. Robin's belief that her ancestry renders Norm's lateness disrespectful is unjustified; nevertheless, the claim that Norm's lateness is disrespectful can be justified. It seems, then, that Norm's insistence that his lateness is not disrespectful to Robin can still constitute gaslighting.

- b. *The gaslighter's judgments are unjustified.* Norm's claim that he has not been late or that he has but his behavior is not disrespectful (or that it is disrespectful but its being so is "no big deal") are unjustified because the evidence shows that he has been late and that his being so is disrespectful and

the being disrespectful gives Robin grounds for complaint. This requirement that the gaslighter's judgment is unjustified allows for instances where a person can question the credibility of another's *justifiable* judgment without gaslighting that person. To see why we need this requirement, consider these two cases:

1. Norm is in fact on time and is aware of this. Nevertheless, Robin accuses him of being late. Let us imagine that there is a bug in Robin's iCal application and it records her meetings with Norm earlier than the time they have agreed upon.
2. Norm is in fact late, but he is not aware of this—he thinks he has been on time. Robin accuses him of being late. Let us imagine that Norm has a bug in his iCal application that records his meetings with Robin later than the time they have agreed upon.

In the first of these cases, Norm's judgment is justified and Robin's is justifiable. If Norm denies being chronically late, in this scenario, it seems that he is not gaslighting Robin and this is precisely because he is justified in his claim that he has not been late. In the second of these cases, Norm's judgment is justifiable and Robin's is justified (and so justifiable). If Norm persists in maintaining that he has been on time, it seems he is not gaslighting Robin because he has evidence for his claim. So, if Norm's judgment is either justified or justifiable, he is not, on my account, gaslighting Robin when he denies being late—when he maintains, that is, that her judgment that he has been late is mistaken.

- c. *The gaslighter sidesteps challenges to his judgment that would expose it as unjustified.* When Robin brings up Norm's lateness, he rushes immediately to his own defense without considering that Robin might have a point. He fails to engage by, say, explaining why his lateness might be excusable or by trying to get to the bottom of their disagreement about the facts. There are other ways to sidestep not revealed by my example. They all involve refusing to give the target a hearing, because such a hearing would reveal that the gaslighter's judgment is without merit. Other sidestepping tactics include ridiculing or belittling accuser for making the accusation,<sup>20</sup> implying that she is a hypocrite,<sup>21</sup> turning the table,<sup>22</sup> verbally attacking her, or plain old changing the subject. (Indeed, one way of changing the subject is to immediately displace.)
- d. *The gaslighter displaces, that is, he attributes a flaw to the target to "explain" her judgment and thereby prove it not credible.* Norm says or implies that Robin has both cognitive and characterological defects: she has a deficient memory and is oversensitive, inflexible, and prone to lying. Norm claims that these defects, rather than his conduct, cause Robin to make her complaint.

### 3. OBJECTIONS

Let me now discuss two worries about my account, one having to do with displacement and the other with the demand that the gaslighter's judgment be unjustified. Displacement is a tactic designed to distract the target (and others) from attending to the evidence, which supports the target's judgment. It focuses attention upon the character or capacities of the target. A worry about including this criterion is that this type of refocusing is not always nefarious. Sometimes the explanation for a person's judgment is indeed a something about her. And so, a person might be correct to refocus and when he does he is not manipulating, but rather making a correct diagnosis.

Suppose, then, that Robin has an unusually low tolerance for lateness and is very affronted when people are late. Let's say that this tendency is so extreme that it constitutes a character flaw. Suppose further, that these features of her character are exclusively what explain her reaction to Norm and that it is not accidental that Norm brings up this flaw—he knows that Robin has this trait. On my account, the justifiability requirement allows that Norm may still be gaslighting Robin given that her complaint is otherwise justifiable—that is, given that she would have grounds for complaint even if she did not happen to have this particular personality flaw. Though Norm is correct in his attribution of this flaw, he is nonetheless, in this context, using it as an excuse for conduct that is in fact objectionable. So, his focus on this defect can still qualify as manipulative.

Now consider an objection to including the requirement that the gaslighter's judgment be unjustified.<sup>23</sup> Let us suppose that Norm's belief that he has not been late is either justified or justifiable: either Robin has a glitch in her calendar application or he does. Suppose, in addition, that he tells Robin that according to his calendar he has been on time. When she is skeptical, he then engages in displacement. He tells her that she is accusing him of lateness because she is neurotic and has pent-up anger toward men. It might seem that Norm is indeed gaslighting Robin, even though he has reasonable grounds for denying his lateness. I have three responses to this worry.<sup>24</sup>

The first is that Norm may be *epistemically* gaslighting Robin in this case. If Norm refuses to believe her testimony on the ground that, as a woman, she is epistemically lesser, then what he is doing may be epistemically unjust. Whether or not it is depends on whether *epistemic* gaslighting requires that the person denying another's testimony must be unjustified in his denial. Consider an embellishment of the case of Susan and Victoria. Imagine that Susan denies Victoria's testimony because earlier James had told her that Victoria wrongly believes that he mispronounced her and suppose that James is generally credible. So, Susan's denial is justifiable. But, as per the example, she still sees Victoria as having a credibility deficit as a trans\* woman<sup>25</sup> and she believes James's testimony over Victoria's. My hunch is that Susan's reaction still counts as epistemic gaslighting, but I leave it to theorists of epistemic gaslighting to determine its criteria.

My second response is this: given that Norm's judgment about his lateness is at least justifiable, if not justified, it is hard to maintain that he is *manipulating* Robin into doubting her judgment about his lateness: manipulation typically involves trying

to change another's beliefs by giving her *faulty* reasons disguised as good reasons where the manipulator knows the reasons to be *faulty*.<sup>26</sup> But Norm is giving Robin good reasons that he either knows or justifiably believes to be good, and so he is not sidestepping. I would say that even if he eventually displaces in an effort to dissuade Robin, he is not gaslighting her. What he is doing is objectionable. But—and this is my third response—there are many vicious ways to react to a credible accusation leveled at one. Displacement can be morally objectionable aside from its role in gaslighting.

My characterization of gaslighting, as promised, distinguishes it from reasonable disagreement: whereas those engaged in reasonable disagreement are responsive to evidence, gaslighters intentionally and methodically (though not necessarily consciously) circumvent both the evidence that their view is unjustified and the evidence that their target's view is, or is very likely to be, correct.

#### 4. MISOGYNY AND GASLIGHTING

In what follows, I explain how gaslighting is used in the service of misogyny. I employ Kate Manne's account of misogyny as a structural phenomenon. On her view, misogyny is a property of social systems wherein noncompliant women are subjected to various kinds of hostility, the purpose of which is to enforce certain patriarchal norms, in particular the demand that women, graciously and amenably, serve men.<sup>27</sup> Misogyny is enacted, I show, primarily through the displacement component of gaslighting: men who are credibly accused of abuse by women (or the allies of those men) punish women for those accusations by ascribing defects to them to "explain" their accusations. These defects can relate to their capabilities or their characters and the nature of the ascribed defect depends upon how challenging it is for the accused to deny the accusation: the stronger the evidence of abuse, and hence the more difficult it is to displace the accusation, the more sinister is the attribution of the defect.

I consider below five ways in which a woman's accusation against a man might be displaced. First, the accused (or someone who is loyal to the accused, in the case where a woman's testimony is either public or else given to a third party)<sup>28</sup> denies that the harmful event in fact occurred and attributes the accusation to the woman's being confused, having a faulty memory, or misinterpreting the event. An example of this is President Donald Trump's imitation of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony before the Judiciary Committee that nominee Brett Kavanaugh, now a Supreme Court Justice, had sexually assaulted her when they were in high school. Trump said,

How did you get home? I don't remember. How'd you get there? I don't remember. Where is the place? I don't remember. How many years ago was it? I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. What neighborhood was it in? I don't know. Where's the house? I don't know. Upstairs, downstairs—where was it? I don't know—but I had one beer. That's the only thing I remember.<sup>29</sup>

A second type of displacement is suggested in Manne's discussion of "misogynoir." She describes the case of Daniel Holtzclaw, a half-white, half-Japanese police officer who preyed upon black women. He would approach them on suspicion of a crime

and then sexually assault them—forcing them, for example, to perform oral sex on him. He was convicted of these crimes on the basis of incontrovertible physical evidence. However, in the wake of his conviction, conservative journalists sought to exonerate him. Holtzclaw himself maintains his innocence, claiming that his victims were lying, motivated by the prospect of profiting from their accusations.<sup>30</sup> Where in the Trump case the accuser was alleged to be confused, in the Holtzclaw case, the accusers were alleged to be outright lying and the defect attributed to the victims was opportunism.

A third type of displacement occurs when it is implausible for the accused to deny that he in fact committed the harm. (Perhaps there were multiple reliable witnesses.) In this type of case, he concedes that he engaged in the conduct he was accused of, but downplays the harm. Cases of this sort are common and familiar: The accused says, e.g., “I was only joking; where is your sense of humor?” or “Why are you so uptight?” or “Wow, you sound like a man-hater.” Here the displacement consists in attributing a character flaw to the accuser—she is uptight, humorless, hateful.<sup>31</sup>

Sometimes it is plausible neither to deny that an incident occurred nor that it was harmful. In this situation, one has the option of using a fourth type of displacement: victim-blaming. The accused concedes that he did something harmful to the accuser, but maintains that the victim brought the incident upon herself. This type of case, too, is familiar: “Why were you at a fraternity house?” “Why were you drinking?” “Why were you wearing a short skirt?” etc. As in the previous example, the defect attributed to the victim is a character flaw: she had it coming because she is, e.g., promiscuous or reckless.

In circumstances where it is unreasonable to contend that the woman brought the harm upon herself, there is fifth form of displacement available. It is described by Manne, as an illustration of what she calls “himpathy,” which is when people have excessive sympathy toward male assailants and relatively little toward the assailants’ female victims.<sup>32</sup> Her example is Brock Turner, a white student athlete at Stanford who was convicted of sexually assaulting a young white woman behind a dumpster when she was unconscious. Turner was discovered in the act by two white men. So, there was no disputing the fact that he committed a serious harm against his victim and it was hard to argue that she had it coming given that she was unconscious.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite the obviousness and gravity of the harm, Turner’s father lamented that the conviction had ruined his son’s appetite and deprived him of his happy-go-lucky demeanor. Moreover, the (white male) judge gave Turner an extremely light sentence, presumably due to Turner’s golden-boy status. The trauma and devastation experienced by Turner’s victim, known as Emily Doe, was largely ignored in public discourse about the case.

What goes on in this type of displacement is that the accuser portrays himself as victimized in virtue of being accused *despite the fact that he is clearly guilty and knows himself to be guilty of the harm*. The cause of the accusation, we are told, is not the assailant’s wrong-doing, but rather the desire of the victim to level the accusation. The “defect” attributed to the victim is simply her insistence upon bringing the injustice to light. Even though the perpetrator committed a grave harm, *she* is in the wrong for complaining. This is the ultimate form of displacement: If women can be

condemned for protesting when they are unequivocally justified in doing so, then men, or at least elite men, are completely insulated—they simply cannot be in the wrong for harming women.

My discussion above of displacement and misogyny suggests that gaslighting can be part of the structure of misogyny: It punishes women who refuse to abide men's harmful behavior; women, that is, whose actions challenge a legitimizing ideology that portrays such conduct as rare or benign. One might make the following objection to this approach. As per my characterization of manipulative gaslighting, gaslighters' claims about their targets' flaws are typically groundless: gaslighters accuse women of fabricating harms when those women have *no* motive to do so and when in fact they have a strong motive not to do so. (Why would Holzclaw's victims deliberately entangle themselves in a criminal justice system that is racially biased unless they had actually been victimized?)

In other instances, gaslighters express a wholly unfounded certitude about counterfactuals, such as when they reflexively say, "He would never do that." In yet other cases, they infer the presence of the character flaw, which allegedly justifies the person's victimization, from the mere fact that she was victimized: If she was raped at a fraternity party, she *must be* reckless. And in yet further cases, gaslighters adopt the plainly immoral assumption that a female victim of a grievous harm has no right to complain if the perpetrator is a high-status male. Surely, the objection goes, gaslighting cannot be a means of enacting misogyny because these "explanations" make sense only where a misogynist ideology has taken hold.

This is not a problem for my view, I think, because it is plausible that misogyny, like other social phenomena such as epistemic injustice or the social construction of race, can have a looping effect.<sup>34</sup> Misogynist practices encourage misogynist attitudes (however subtle), which then enable and legitimize misogynist practices.

## 5. COLLECTIVE GASLIGHTING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION

In therapeutic discourse, (manipulative) gaslighting is typically treated as a relational, as opposed to a political, phenomenon: gaslighting is seen as a property of individual relationships and not of social systems. The therapist's aim is to help those trapped in gaslighting relationships to escape and recover. What they need to recover from are psychological harms, namely the disorientation and depression associated with the abiding self-doubt that persistent gaslighting within a relationship induces. The political implications of gaslighting tend to be downplayed<sup>35</sup> in that discourse, though it is acknowledged that, in male-female relationships, men are typically the perpetrators and women the targets of gaslighting.<sup>36</sup>

Below I draw upon this therapeutic discourse in order to argue for two points. The first is that those same psychological injuries can be experienced by women who are not personally in gaslighting relationships, but who live in a culture in which the gaslighting of women is widely practiced. This is because misogynist gaslighting is, I argue, a collective phenomenon. My second point is that the psychological injuries produced by collective gaslighting are constitutive of the psychological oppression of women.

Recall that misogyny, as I am understanding it, is primarily a structural phenomenon that functions to enforce patriarchal norms. Thus, misogynist hostility is delivered by people when they do such things as adhere to culturally condoned scripts, conform their actions to the reigning ideology, participate in rituals, traditions, and long-standing practices, etc. Hence, people may enact it unwittingly—they may not harbor overtly misogynist attitudes and may not be aiming to enforce patriarchal norms. And though misogyny targets only certain (i.e., noncompliant women),<sup>37</sup> its capacity to enforce resides in its serving as a threat to all women. Misogyny is a collective phenomenon then, insofar as, first, it is delivered through a collection of ordinary actions. Second, its collective aim, as it were, may be distinct from the aims of the individuals engaging in those actions, but is nonetheless achieved through those individual actions. Third, it affects women as a collectivity—as a group.

Misogynist gaslighting is similarly a collective phenomenon. As a sometimes component of misogyny it serves to enforce the norms of patriarchy by discouraging women from bringing accusations against men who injure them.<sup>38</sup> This, in turn, allows men to get away with such injuries, which emboldens them to commit them and their committing them helps consolidate their power over women. As a form of manipulation, misogynist gaslighting induces women to suppress or doubt their judgments in the domain of gender relations. Just as the people doing the gaslighting may not see themselves as enforcing patriarchal norms, they also may not see themselves as participating in the mass manipulation of women.

One of the ways in which misogynist gaslighting achieves its collective aims—enforcing patriarchal norms and fostering self-doubt in women—is by being done publicly. It can be done publicly by being done by a public figure, or by an agent in whom the public has placed its trust, or by ordinary people operating in the public domain. The example of Trump above illustrates gaslighting by a public figure. Below is an example of each of the other two modes of publicity. The first concerns the case of Ma'lik Richmond and Trent Mays, two football players from Steubenville High School who raped an unconscious 16-year-old girl at a party, documenting their acts with photographs. Below is a female CNN reporter's coverage of the announcement of the verdict in that case. It suggests that the rapists were unjustly treated merely by being held accountable for their crimes.

Incredibly difficult, even for an outsider like me, to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their lives fell apart . . . when that sentence came down, [Ma'lik] collapsed in the arms of his attorney . . . He said to him, "My life is over. No one is going to want me now." Very serious crime here, both found guilty of raping the 16-year-old girl at a series of parties back in August.<sup>39</sup>

The second example involves Bill Cosby. 31,000 fans liked his Facebook post of Dec. 21, 2015 (before both of his trials) in which he thanked his supporters. Below is a fan's comment, which both downplays the harm and blames the victim:

The issue is determining what constitutes ‘rape’ . . . I don’t think that making a series of questionable decisions leading to you having [an] intoxicated relation with someone and later regretting it or feeling like you were assaulted constitutes as rape. I think a lot of people—both men and women—would be able to lock partners up if this was a valid basis to charge someone with sexual assault.<sup>40</sup>

This type of public gaslighting is especially effective in manipulating women into second-guessing their views about things that men do to women, for it targets at once all the women who witness it. If it happens regularly, it is capable of inducing in women a particular state of mind where they cannot quite fully embrace their own perception that the man’s action was wrong or harmful.<sup>41</sup> They struggle with the disquiet of believing “deep down” that the woman in question was unjustly treated but also believing that she is perhaps making a big deal out of nothing or that the boys should be allowed to make one mistake. They are tempted to laugh or express outrage along with others when women make allegations of mistreatment, yet they also feel a nagging discomfort in doing so. In short, they are afflicted with doubt about their own moral judgments in matters of gender relations.

My contention is that this state of mind is a mark of psychological oppression. According to Sandra Bartky, “to be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind.”<sup>42</sup> The psychologically oppressed have internalized subtle messages of inferiority sent to them through entrenched social practices reserved specifically for the subordinated. Their sense of inferiority makes them, in a certain respect, their own oppressors, which, in turn, makes “the work of domination easier.”<sup>43</sup>

Bartky discusses three practices directed at women that instill in them a sense of inferiority: stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification. Each of these modes of psychological oppression, she claims, engenders feelings of inferiority while simultaneously obscuring itself as the cause of those feelings. For example, via sexual objectification women are urged to identify strongly with their bodies—to see their appearance and adornment as of great import. At the same time, they are mocked for having such inferior concerns, which they are led to believe arise from their nature as women, rather than from their exposure to sexual objectification.<sup>44</sup>

Gaslighting, I claim, fits this picture and so qualifies as fourth mode of psychological oppression. It causes women to see themselves as inferior both in their ability to make sound judgments but also in their moral status. This is because what they are inspired to doubt are judgments about their moral status. In distrusting their belief that an action done to them is in fact morally objectionable, they are doubting not only their ability to discern harm but their standing as one who is owed better treatment. Suppose a woman is manipulated into believing that sexual harassment is merely flirting and that her dislike of it is a sign of immaturity.<sup>45</sup> As a consequence she puts up with it, ignoring her discomfort, and even sometimes criticizes other women who complain about it. In doing these things, she calls into doubt her and other women’s standing to resist this treatment. She implies that she and other women are the kinds of beings for whom such treatment is fitting. Furthermore, because gaslighting tells women directly that their complaints are not credible *because*

they arise from a defect in them, women are bound to believe that they are indeed defective—that their negative feelings are caused by a personal flaw rather than the conduct of men.

## 6. SUMMARY

I have described a kind of gaslighting—manipulative gaslighting—that captures the idea that discrediting women who accuse men of abuse is a strategy for undermining women. I then explained how manipulative gaslighting can be distinguished from a mere difference of opinion. Next, I argued that manipulative gaslighting can be part of the structure of misogyny, for it enforces certain patriarchal norms of proper feminine behavior toward men. I maintained, further, that the gaslighting of women who accuse men of harm serves to undermine women's confidence in both their justifiable beliefs about men's bad behavior and about their moral status. This experience of diminished confidence, I argued, is a mark of psychological oppression.<sup>46</sup>

## NOTES

1. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For phenomena closely related to epistemic injustice see Nora Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo* 3 (2016), 569–90; Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Epistemic Silencing," *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 236–57; and Saba Fatima, "On the Edge of Knowing: Microaggression and Epistemic Uncertainty as a Woman of Color," in Kirsti Cole and Holly Hassel, eds., *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Feminist Strategies for Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 147–57.
2. Rachel McKinnon, "Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting As Epistemic Injustice," *The Routledge Companion to Epistemic Injustice*, Gail Polhaus, Jr., Ian James Kidd and José Medina, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 167–74.
3. Robin Stern, *The Gaslight Effect: How to Spot and Survive the Hidden Manipulation Others Use to Control Your Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). Victor Calef and Edward M. Weinschel, "Some Clinical Consequences of Introjection: Gaslighting," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 50 (1981), 44–66. Damien W. Riggs and Clare Bartholomaeus, "Gaslighting in the Context of Clinical Interactions with Parents of Transgender Children," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/14681994.2018.1444274.
4. Kate Abramson, "Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting," *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014), 1–30. See also Miranda Fricker, "Evolving Concepts of Epistemic Injustice," in Polhaus, Jr., et. al. (2017), 53–60, 54. This notion of gaslighting is assumed in humorous accounts. See, for instance, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/yes-your-toddler-is-gaslighting-you> and <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/i-cut-down-my-grocery-bill-by-eating-my-roommates-food-and-gaslighting-her>.
5. Jessica Valenti describes the current "large-scale dismissal of women's reality." <https://medium.com/s/jessica-valenti/the-gaslighting-of-american-women-456821bbb09d>.
6. McKinnon, "Allies Behaving Badly," 168. As McKinnon describes the case, Susan uses tactics, in defending James, that I describe below as constitutive of manipulative gaslighting. (Susan engages in what I call "displacement.") I am not sure whether these tactics are seen by McKinnon as constitutive of epistemic gaslighting or rather as contingent features of her example.
7. According to Stern, "gaslighters need to be right in order to preserve their own sense of self and their sense of having power in the world" (*The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 189).
8. Stern gives this example in an interview: [https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/mar/16/gaslighting-manipulation-reality-coping-mechanisms-trump?CMP=fb\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/mar/16/gaslighting-manipulation-reality-coping-mechanisms-trump?CMP=fb_gu). It is essential that we imagine in examples involving men and women that the individuals involved occupy the same social position with respect to other types of social hierarchy (i.e., race, sexual orientation, class, etc.). Otherwise we cannot clearly isolate the relevant power dynamic. The case might be different if Norm was black and Robin white or if Norm was gay and Robin straight, for this might diminish Norm's leverage over Robin and

hence his willingness or ability to dismiss her accusations or it might embolden Robin to make the accusations. The case might also be different if Norm was white and Robin black, or Norm was straight and Robin gay, for this might enhance Norm's leverage and inhibit Robin from making accusations.

9. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 44. See also McKinnon, "Allies Behaving Badly," 171, and McKinnon, "Gaslighting as Epistemic Violence: 'Allies,' Fucking Quit It," unpublished paper delivered at the 2017 Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice Conference.
10. It follows that the wrong-making feature of manipulative gaslighting is whatever the wrong-making feature of wrongful manipulation is. There is disagreement about this, but I need not take a stand. See, for example, Marcia Baron, "Manipulativeness," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 77 (2003), 37–54; Moti Gorin, "Towards a Theory of Interpersonal Manipulation," in Christian Coons and Michael Weber, eds., *Manipulation: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73–97; Claudia Mills, "Politics and Manipulation," *Social Theory and Practice* 21 (1995), 97–112; and Robert Noggle, "Manipulative Actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1996), 43–55. Stern vacillates between treating gaslighting as the successful effect of the manipulation and as the manipulation itself. She says, for instance, that if a person ignores the actions of the person engaging in behavior typical of gaslighting and decides she is willing to live with his disapproval then "there would be no gaslighting" (*The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 210). She also says, "Gaslighting works only when you believe what the gaslighter says and need him to think well of you" (*The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 217). I identify gaslighting with the manipulative behavior, regardless of whether it is successful.
11. Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 189.
12. *Ibid.* Kindle location 159.
13. Thanks to Bill Wringe for pressing me to clarify this idea.
14. According to Stern, people are vulnerable to gaslighting when they idealize the gaslighter and seek his approval (*The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 189).
15. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 54. Fricker states,

In testimonial injustice, the absence of deliberate, conscious manipulation is definitive. . . . In this kind of epistemic injustice, the hearer makes a special kind of misjudgment of the speaker's credibility—one actually clouded by prejudice. . . . Testimonial injustice . . . happens by way of a discriminatory but ingenuous misjudgment. . . .

Fricker makes this statement under the heading of "theorizing the unintended." She runs together, I believe, the notions of doing something intentionally and doing it consciously. Hence, she overlooks a kind of injustice that consists in intentional but unconscious manipulation.

16. See Marcia Baron, "The *Mens Rea* and Moral Status of Manipulation," in Coons and Weber, eds. *Manipulation*, 98–120, 100–106; and Kate Manne, "Non-Machiavellian Manipulation," in Coons and Weber, eds. *Manipulation*, 221–46.
17. See Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 242: "Epistemic violence is the refusal of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges, owing to pernicious ignorance. . . . Intentions and culpability to not determine epistemic violence in testimony." Epistemic violence, as a form of testimonial wrong-doing, then, may or may not involve the attempt to undermine someone, though it nevertheless is harmful in any case.
18. One might say, then, that manipulative gaslighting, like rape, is, as Claudia Card maintains, a practice or an institution. It is a "form of social activity structured by rules that define roles and positions, powers and opportunities, thereby distributing responsibility for consequences." See Claudia Card, "Rape as a Terrorist Institution," in R.G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris, eds., *Violence, Terrorism and Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 296–319, 297–98.
19. By "justifiable" I mean "capable of being supported by the evidence" and by "unjustified" I mean "not supported by the evidence."
20. In this case Norm might say in a sarcastic tone "Oh aren't *you* so great for finding fault in *me*."
21. "Oh, right, like *you're* never late."
22. An example of this is when, during his confirmation hearing, Judge Kavanaugh responded to Senator Klobuchar's question "Have you ever drank to the point of blacking out?" by asking "Have you?"
23. I am grateful to Kate Schmidt and Suzanne Obdrzalek for pressing me on this issue.

24. These responses hold *mutatis mutandis* for the objection that even if Robin's judgment is unjustifiable, Norm might still be gaslighting her if he engages in displacement. Suppose in response to her claim that his wearing loafers is disrespectful, Norm ridicules Robin and accuses her of being neurotic. He is still not gaslighting her though he is being disrespectful.
25. She also, McKinnon says, sees James as having a credibility excess as an ally of trans\* people.
26. Mills "Politics and Manipulation," 100.
27. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47.
28. This refinement applies in all the types of displacement I outline. For ease of exposition, I omit it in discussing the next three types.
29. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/02/politics/trump-mocks-christine-blasey-ford-kavanaugh-supreme-court/index.html>.
30. Manne, *Down Girl*, 209–18.
31. The ubiquity of this attitude toward men's predatory behavior in the late 20th century is documented here: <https://medium.com/s/story/gen-x-remember-when-men-preferred-hanes-and-you-were-an-up-tight-bitch-6ba6db0feb80>.
32. Manne, *Down Girl*, 196–205.
33. I suppose someone could say the victim had it coming to her because she drank to the point of unconsciousness. Usually, though, when people say that a woman had it coming to her, they are referring to some action of hers that suggests that she's "asking for it." But an unconscious person cannot be acting in a such a way because they are not capable of acting in any way at all.
34. See Ian Hacking, "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds," in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Anne James Premack, eds., *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 351–83; Hacking, "Making Up People," in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, eds., *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36; Sally Haslanger, "Objectivity, Epistemic Objectification, and Oppression," in Polhaus, Jr., et al., eds. *The Routledge Companion to Epistemic Injustice*, 279–90, 283; Haslanger, "Social Construction: Who? What? Where? How? in *Theorizing Feminisms*, E. Hackett and S. Haslanger, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16–23; and Ron Mallon, *The Construction of Human Kinds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
35. Stern maintains that gaslighting in personal relationships is an "epidemic" and in explaining this gestures toward the politics of gaslighting. She offers three reasons for this epidemic. The first is the profound change in women's roles and the backlash against that change. The second is "rampant individualism." This produces social isolation rather than a sense of being a part of a community which, in turn, causes people to be more invested in personal relationships such as marriages. The third is "gaslight culture" wherein "experts," politicians, advertisers, etc. state falsehoods regularly and with impunity (See *The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 554–90).
36. Stern, *The Gaslight Effect*, Kindle location 196.
37. Manne, *Down Girl*, 47. She states, "To put the problem bluntly: when it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires, what's to hate, exactly?"
38. See Dotson's discussion of "testimonial smothering" in Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 44–51.
39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvUdyNko8LQ>.
40. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xdw3b4/talking-to-the-people-who-still-defend-bill-cosby-on-the-internet](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xdw3b4/talking-to-the-people-who-still-defend-bill-cosby-on-the-internet). The author of this article thinks that the author of this comment is saying that Cosby made some questionable decisions. I don't read the post that way; I think he is saying that the women involved made some questionable decisions that led then into having an "intoxicated relation" with Cosby which they later regretted.
41. Likewise, exposure to nonpublic gaslighting on a regular basis can also contribute to self-doubt, as when family members or friends react to one's testimony in ways similar to the Facebook commenter.
42. Sandra Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in her *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–32, 22.
43. *Ibid.*, 23.
44. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
45. As suggested by Daphne Merkin in an opinion piece in the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html>.

46. Thanks to members of the audience at the 2017 UNC Chapel Hill Workshop on Respect and Appreciation in Relationships, the 2017 Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice Conference, and the 2018 Social Ontology Conference for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Erin Kelly for her valuable comments.