"That's Above My Paygrade": Woke Excuses for Ignorance

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Abstract:
Standpoint theorists have long been clear that marginalization does not make better understanding a given. They have been less clear, though, that social dominance does not make *ignorance* a given. Indeed, many standpoint theorists have implicitly committed themselves to what I call the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis*. According to this thesis, there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know about oppression that they do not personally experience. I argue that this thesis is not just implausible but politically pernicious; it is an excuse for ignorance and silence that stifles our ability to address many injustices. Moreover, I argue that if we are to avoid lending support to the SEDT while working within a standpoint theory framework, we must hold that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints. So, we must hold that men can achieve feminist standpoints, that white women (and men) can achieve black feminist standpoints, and so on.

1. Standpoint Theory and the Strong Epistemic Disadvantage Thesis

Despite persistent misunderstandings to the contrary, standpoint theorists are not committed to an *automatic privilege thesis* (Wylie 2003, 27). According to an automatic privilege thesis, those who occupy marginalized social positions automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their social location. The issues with this thesis are obvious; it is implausible, it offers no explanation of the connection between marginalized social location and epistemic advantage, and it can't explain how it is that some marginalized individuals seem to (genuinely) buy into oppressive ideologies.

However, while the automatic privilege thesis is widely repudiated, there is support—in both the broader feminist discourse and the narrower standpoint literature—for a related thesis. I'll call this thesis the *strong epistemic disadvantage thesis* (SEDT). According to the SEDT, dominant social positions impose strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know about the oppression of others.[1] These limits are strong in the sense that the socially

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[1] The SEDT, for all its faults, does not entail the automatic privilege thesis. The automatic privilege thesis amounts to the claim that *all* marginalized people know better; the SEDT amounts to the claim that only marginalized people

dominant cannot break free of them; their ignorance is the inescapable result of their dominant social positions. The limitations are substantive in the sense that the socially dominant aren't just missing minor or trivial details; their social positions doom them to ignorance regarding matters of importance.

The SEDT and its consequences are exemplified by Kate Manne's 2017 book, <u>Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny</u> (Manne 2017). Manne aims to identify the enforcement mechanisms used to keep *all* women in their place. Despite this stated aim, she focuses on the oppression faced by cis straight white women. To justify this emphasis, Manne maintains that she is limited by her "own (highly privileged) social position and the associated standpoint or vantage point" (Manne 13). She says that these limitations restrict her to a "small corner of the overall canvas", but that this is as far as she can reach "without overextending [her]self and inevitably (as opposed to potentially) making a mess of it" (Manne 14).

Manne is plainly espousing the view that her privileged social position occludes her view of the oppression experienced by others. She writes as if her ignorance is both inescapable and substantive; she takes herself to be unable to write about intersectional forms of oppression, despite recognizing their political and philosophical significance—she says she would *inevitably* mess it up. Manne is not alone in thinking along these lines; her remarks reflect a sentiment that is growing in popularity.[2]

Despite Manne's invocation of 'standpoint' to justify her claim, standpoint theorists do not often directly advocate for the SEDT. Indeed, as we will see in Section 3, some standpoint theorists actively reject it. However, there is support in the standpoint literature for two theses that jointly entail the SEDT. The first is the claim that occupying a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint; the second is the claim that achieving a

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can know better. So, the SEDT is compatible with some marginalized people failing to achieve better knowledge, where the automatic privilege thesis is not.

[2] The view typically rears its head when people with progressive views are discussing politically-charged controversies. It is, for example, quite common in the debate about the moral and political permissibility of abortion; people say that men should "sit down" and listen to women. This claim is not necessarily justified on epistemic grounds, but it often is. People claim that men cannot fully grasp the issue because they do not have the requisite first-personal experience. Similar claims were recently made when "Bad and Boujee: Toward a Trap Feminist Theology" was recently pulled from shelves. Trap feminism is a kind of feminism that grows out of black women's experiences and trap music—but the book was written by a white woman. Many serious and legitimate criticisms of the book were made. However people also claimed that a white woman had "no business" doing work on issues that did not reflect her own experiences (Alter and Harris 2022).

standpoint enables epistemic advantage that is both robust[3] and uniquely accessible through a standpoint. Together, these two theses imply that there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know.

I argue that the SEDT is both theoretically implausible and politically pernicious. The SEDT is a primrose path for the socially dominant—it is an excuse for ignorance and silence that has only been granted legitimacy due to its guise of heightened political consciousness. Thus, my aim is to clarify and strengthen standpoint theory so that it is clearly separated from the SEDT. To do this, I argue that standpoint theorists must deny the necessary connection between a marginalized social position and the possibility of achieving a standpoint. So, I argue that men can achieve feminist standpoints, that white women (and men) can achieve black feminist standpoints, and so on. Central to my argument is the distinction between *perspectives* and *standpoints*. A 'perspective' reflects the social-situatedness of an epistemic agent, where a 'standpoint' reflects a critical consciousness that is actively achieved. I argue that marginalized social locations *do* provide epistemic advantages, and that dominant social locations provide disadvantages. However, the perspectival advantages afforded by a marginalized social location are neither constitutive of nor necessary for the achievement of a standpoint. If the socially dominant put in the work, they can overcome the disadvantages imposed by their social positions and achieve the critical standpoints that enable understanding and insight regarding forms of oppression that they do not experience.

2. Standpoint Theory Basics

If you want to know whether a particular philosophy department is sexist, you will likely get a more accurate assessment from a woman in that department. The same goes if you want to know whether the environment is hostile to people of color—while a white member of the department may happily report that their department is free of racial prejudices, a person of color may tell a different story. In cases like this, the socially marginalized tend to be more reliable reporters than the socially dominant. They are better informants because they are better positioned to know whether (and to what degree) such factors are at play.

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[3] The robustness of the advantage is what explains why those without standpoints will be at a noteworthy disadvantage. They are not simply missing out on what it is *like* to be marginalized, but they will fail to understand something of greater social importance.

This is the starting point of standpoint epistemology: your social location affects what you know. Standpoint theorists tend to make some combination of the following four claims, which both refine and extend this basic idea:

The Situated Knowledge Thesis: Epistemic agents are necessarily socially situated, and their knowledge reflects this--what people know is partial and shaped by their contingent histories, epistemic resources, values, etc. (Wylie 2003; Kukla 2006; Harding 1997; Táíwò 2020).

The Inversion Thesis: Those who are socially marginalized are epistemically advantaged in some critical respects. They may have access to better or more relevant evidence (Kukla 2021; Bright 2018; Wylie 2003; Collins 1986); they may be better incentivized to seek out relevant evidence (Bright and Kinney 2021); they may develop clarifying conceptual resources (Toole 2020; Wylie 2012); their experiences and values may prompt them to consider alternate hypotheses that are often overlooked (Wylie and Nelson 2007; Harding 1997); or they might produce accounts of the world that are better suited to envisioning more just social relations (Collins 2002; Collins 1997; Hartsock 1997; Pohlhaus 2002).

The Achievement Thesis: Standpoints are not a given, or automatic; the experience of marginalization does not entail a clearer, more nuanced, or more accurate understanding of the world. Standpoints are the result of work (Harding 1991; Pohlhaus 2002; Collins 2002; Wylie 2003).

The Methodological Imperative: (Some) inquiry should take the lives of the marginalized as its starting point, because those lives provide resources that enable more accurate investigation into the structure of our social world (Harding 1991; Táíwò 2020; Bright 2018).

Different theorists flesh out the details of these theses in different ways, and not every standpoint theorist endorses all four claims. But these theses convey the general thrust of standpoint theory—epistemologists must attend to the realities of our actual knowledge practices, and these realities suggest that knowers are not on equal epistemic ground. The socially marginalized have some key advantages, and, in some contexts, these advantages can lead to more accurate pictures of the way things are.

One more standpoint claim is relevant for my purposes. Standpoint theorists generally distinguish between social positions and standpoints (Wylie 2003; Wylie 2012; Intemann 2010,

785; Crasnow 2006, 5; Harding 1991). The difference is reflected in the achievement thesis. *Everyone* is socially located, and, if you buy into the situated knowledge thesis, these different social locations result in epistemic differences. However, these differences are typically not taken to be standpoint differences. Standpoint differences are those differences made by actively achieving a *critical consciousness*, or a (distinctly critical) awareness of the various mechanisms that sustain oppressive social orders. So, while everyone will have a *perspective*, not everyone—not even all marginalized people—will have a *standpoint*. Standpoint theorists are not always clear about which advantages correspond to having a marginalized social position, and which correspond to achieving a standpoint. One of the aims of this paper is to remedy this.

These basic commitments do not obviously imply the SEDT. However, the SEDT follows straightforwardly if we make two additional moves, each of which reflects the spirit of one or more of the central claims above.[4] The first involves drawing a tight connection—a connection of necessity—between a particular social position and the possibility of achieving the corresponding standpoint. The second involves identifying a robust epistemic advantage that is distinctive to achieving a standpoint. If we make both of these moves, then the SEDT follows:

P1. Only people who occupy a marginalized social position can achieve the corresponding standpoint.

P2. Those without standpoints face strong, substantive limits on what they can know.

C. Socially dominant people face strong, substantive limits on what they can know.

In the next section, I'll offer an overview of the support for P1 and P2 that can be found in the standpoint literature.

3. Arriving at the SEDT

In my conversations with people who have only passing familiarity with standpoint theory, they tend to have the impression that P1 is an *essential* part of standpoint theory. This impression sometimes leads them to think that my thesis—that standpoint theorists should deny P1 and hold that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints—is incoherent. Curiously, in (some of) my conversations with people who defend standpoint theory, there has

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[4] Compare these moves to Quill Kukla's characterization of two claims that "most standpoint theorists" have defended: "(1) that some contingent features of knowers can give them not only different but *better, more objective* knowledge than others have, and (2) that social positions of marginalization and structural disadvantage, such as those inhered by women, African Americans, or the working class…[give] them the potential to see truths that are inaccessible from the points of view of the dominant center" (Kukla 2006, 81-82).

been some reluctance to admit that there is *any* support for this thesis in the standpoint literature; instead, they suggest that the impression that standpoint theorists think marginalization is necessary for achieving a standpoint is the result of an uncharitable interpretation of standpoint theory. Given this, my aim is to demonstrate that the widespread idea that P1 is essential to standpoint theory is no accident—while not every standpoint theorist makes this claim, there *is* support for this thesis in the standpoint literature. Some of this support is explicit; some standpoint theorists actively affirm P1. Others provide support that is indirect; while the thinker may or may not *actually* think that marginalization is necessary for achieving a standpoint, they nonetheless express their views in ways that suggest that marginalization is necessary. Because P1 is considerably more fraught than P2, I'll give a more detailed overview of support for P1 than I'll give for P2.

Standpoint theorists sometimes explicitly affirm P1 as a way to distinguish their view from the implausible automatic privilege thesis discussed in the introduction. The automatic privilege thesis suggests that marginalization is *sufficient* for knowing better. In response, some standpoint theorists have said that marginalization is not sufficient but *necessary*.

Sharon Crasnow does this especially clearly. She makes the point three times, writing: "standpoint theorists claim that marginalization is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for their epistemic privilege" (Crasnow 4, 2006); "the social location is a necessary though not sufficient criterion for whatever epistemic privilege derives from standpoint" (5); and, lastly, "While epistemic privilege may require that one occupy a particular position in the social and political structure, it is not sufficient for achieving standpoint that one occupies that position" (5).

Phoebe Friesen and Jordan Goldstein also explicitly endorse the necessary connection between marginalization and standpoint. They write that the "basic claim of standpoint theory" is that "a standpoint is arrived at as a result of two necessary components, a marginalized social location and a process of critical reflection" (Friesen and Goldstein, 4). Like Crasnow, Friesen and Goldstein emphasize that marginalization isn't sufficient for achieving a standpoint; this is why they stress the importance of critical reflection. Not *all* socially marginalized people will achieve a standpoint, but only the marginalized *can*.

Friesen and Goldstein cite Sandra Harding, Alison Wylie, Kristin Intemann, and Nancy Hartsock as standpoint theorists who affirm the necessary connection between social position

and standpoint; Crasnow cites Wylie, Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins. Crasnow's attribution of the view to Collins is well-motivated. Collins understands a 'standpoint' as the collective knowledge that is shared by a group of people who are similarly located in hierarchical power relations. So, of the black feminist standpoint, Collins argues that black women have shared, group-based experiences that both reflect their shared social location and also give rise to "shared angles of vision" that lead black women to interpret their experiences in distinctive (but not identical) ways (Collins 1997, 335-337). She affirms this view in her 2002 book, where she writes, that, for black women, "the particular experiences that accrue to living as a Black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall" (Collins 2002, 27). She emphasizes that the "angle of vision", or standpoint, that arises out of black women's shared experiences is "unavailable to others" (39). Thus, Collins is clearly articulating the view that only black women can have a black feminist standpoint, because only they have the experiences that give rise to it.[5]

Friesen and Goldstein's attribution of the view to Hartsock is also reasonable. Hartsock writes that "material life…not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations", adding that "the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse" (1997, 218). Similarly, she claims that "the concept of a standpoint rests on the fact that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and the natural world are not visible" (Hartsock 1983, 117). Thus, Hartsock's work clearly suggests that the socially dominant cannot achieve the standpoint that reveals the "real relations" of the world.

The attributions of the view to Kristin Intemann, Sandra Harding, and Alison Wylie are more complicated. When discussing what it takes for marginalization to result in a standpoint, Intemann writes that "the mere presence of an oppressed group will not be sufficient to achieve

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[5] In her earlier work, Collins argued that only black women could produce black feminist thought because black feminist thought was done from a black feminist standpoint. (Collins 1986, S16). Interestingly, she denies this implication in her later work—she says it would be "inherently separatist" to hold that only black women can produce black feminist thought (Collins 2002, 36). It is not clear, though, what licenses this change in her thought, as she affirms the various considerations that initially led her to that conclusion. She maintains that the black feminist standpoint is the collective knowledge or "shared angle of vision" that emerges from black women's shared experiences, and that they share these experiences because of their shared location in social hierarchy (32); she maintains that there is a "dialogical relationship" between the black feminist standpoint and black feminist thought (the black feminist standpoint informs black feminist thought, which in turn shapes the black feminist standpoint, and so on) (34); and she maintains that black feminist thought is characterized by a distinctive (black feminist) epistemology that holds that first personal experience to be a "criterion for credibility" (276).

the sort of conscious, critical reflection that is required for achieving a standpoint. In order for diversity to yield epistemic advantages, the community must engage in critical reflection" (Intemann 2010, 789). This resembles the lines taken by Crasnow, Friesen, and Goldstein—Intemann denies the sufficiency of marginalization for the achievement of a standpoint, citing the need for "critical reflection". While Intemann does not straightforwardly commit to the necessity claim, it seems to me implied (and apparently it seemed that way to Friesen and Goldstein, too).

Harding is interesting because she explicitly denies that occupying a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint. (1991, 277-284). Despite this, she frequently expresses her view using language that blurs the distinction between 'perspective' and 'standpoint'. She says, for instance, that the advantage of feminist standpoints stems from the fact that they begin inquiry "from the perspective of women's lives" (1991, 121-122; 126; 279;). Indeed, the chapter in which Harding discusses the connection between social position and standpoint is called "Reinventing Ourselves as Other" (1991, 268-295; discussed also in Pohlhaus 2002, 288-291). This way of characterizing the advantage that corresponds to achieving a standpoint is problematic because it suggests, first, that there *is* a way to "see" or "know" as a woman, and, worse, that achieving this perspective amounts to achieving a standpoint. But if *this* is what the advantage consists in, people may reasonably deny that anyone who isn't a woman could ever attain this advantage, since perspectives are meant to reflect a person's social-situatedness. I'll return to Harding's view in more detail in Section 6; for now, it is enough to note that even Harding speaks in ways that suggest that a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving a standpoint, despite her explicit disavowal of the claim.[6]

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[6] A similar ambiguity can be seen in the work of Briana Toole. Toole argues that standpoint epistemologists think that social position "makes a difference to what a person is in a position to know" (Toole 2020, 3, 7). She also says, perhaps more strongly, that "the standpoint epistemologist will argue that facts about the standpoint an epistemic agent occupies—where ones standpoint is determined by facts about one's social identity—will make a difference to what she is in a position to know" (7). This interpretation of standpoint theory prompts Toole to suggest that standpoint theory is incompatible with "intellectualism," because standpoint theorists hold that knowledge depends on "non-epistemic" features that are not accessible to everyone, like race or gender (6, 12). The dangers of this way of talking about standpoint theory are especially apparent when Toole discusses a hypothetical case in which a white woman—June—and a black woman—Moira—are watching a news report that covers the Daniel Holtzclaw case. In the case, Moira walks away knowing that Holtzclaw is guilty of raping the black women who accused him, while June walks away not knowing. Toole claims that "what allowed Moira to know…was a feature of her social identity—i.e., her race" (12). Moreover, Toole claims that June does *not* know "precisely because she lacks feature" (Toole 12). But if June's social position is what made the difference to what she was in a position to know, this strongly suggests that June *couldn't* know, because her social location prevents her from achieving the relevant standpoint.

Lastly, I would dispute the attribution of the view to Wylie. Wylie does not discuss whether the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints. Nonetheless, Wylie is quite careful about the relationship between occupying a marginalized social position and achieving a standpoint; her clear delineation of the advantages that correspond to social position and the advantages that correspond to an achieved standpoint has largely inspired the account I offer here. The closest Wylie gets to suggesting that a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving the corresponding standpoint is when she says that standpoint theorists are interested in people's "differential capacity to develop…a critical consciousness about the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically" (Wylie 2003, 31). This could be taken to imply that Wylie thinks only the socially marginalized can develop marginalized standpoints, though it certainly falls short of an obvious commitment to the view.

I take the preceding overview to establish that the standpoint literature does indeed provide support for the view that a marginalized social position is necessary for achieving a standpoint. While not every standpoint theorist embraces this connection, it is not a coincidence that so many people think this connection is central to standpoint theory. Positing the strong connection between social position and standpoint is a natural way to capture the idea that marginalization is distinctively advantageous—one of standpoint theory's main contentions—without committing to the implausible automatic privilege thesis.

Now consider P2. P2 amounts to the claim that standpoints are both *robustly* and *distinctively* epistemically advantageous. The robusnestness and distinctiveness of the advantage jointly capture the idea that marginalized standpoints are *definitively* advantageous, in the sense that those with standpoints will know better than those without standpoints in at least some important domains. Those without standpoints are not just missing minor or trivial details—hence, the robustness of the advantage—and the advantages in question can only be acquired via achieving a standpoint—hence, the distinctiveness of the advantages.

Take Elizabeth Anderson. She writes that, "*Classically*, standpoint theory claims that the standpoint of the subordinated is advantaged (1) in revealing *fundamental* social regularities; (2) in exposing social arrangements as *contingent* and susceptible to change through concerted action; and (3) in representing the social world in relation to universal human interests" (Anderson 2020). Thus, it is clear that Anderson is positing a robust advantage to those with standpoints. Wylie is also a clear advocate of this kind of view. Wylie argues that a standpoint

"throws into relief assumptions that underpin, and confound, a dominant worldview" (Wylie 38).
Likewise, Collins argues that the methodology and resources made available through a black
feminist standpoint enable thinkers to avoid the pitfalls of approaches that treat either race or
gender (or class) as primary, while treating other forms of oppression as mere complicating detail
(Collins 1986). Thus, for Anderson, Wylie, and Collins, the advantage conferred by a standpoint
is robust. Those *without* this advantage (or comparable advantage) will have a distorted
understanding of our social world. Similar views can be found in Hartsock (1983), Harding
(1991; 1997), Toole (2020), and Smith (1974).

By itself, the robustness of the advantage does not ensure that standpoints are *definitively*
advantageous, because comparable advantages could be acquired through other means. However,
standpoint theorists are (typically) clear that the advantage is distinctive, or unique. Harding
claims that "maximally critical assessments" are *only* possible from marginalized standpoints
(Harding 2004, 136). The Hartsock quote above also suggests this, as she says that however
"well-intentioned" someone may be, if they don't have the relevant standpoint, they will have
distorted understanding. The distinctiveness of the advantage afforded by a standpoint can also
be seen in Toole (2020), Collins (1986), and Intemann (2010).

So, both P2 and P1 are well-motivated—both moves are ways to capture something that
is genuinely *central* to standpoint theory. The necessity of (relevant) marginalization for
achieving a standpoint captures the inversion thesis in a way that clearly distinguishes it from an
automatic privilege thesis. Positing a robust and distinctive advantage captures the idea that lies
at the heart of both the methodological imperative and the achievement thesis. We should do
(some) inquiry from a marginalized standpoint because that standpoint enables the clearest
understanding; it enables this clear understanding because it is the result of active effort to
understand how dominant ideology shapes the world we inhabit. Yet, the SEDT follows if we
make both moves. The next section will demonstrate the theoretical and political issues with the
SEDT.

4. Problems with the Strong Epistemic Disadvantage Thesis

The SEDT suggests that we live in "a world of unbridgeable epistemic solitudes" (Wylie
2012, 48) and dooms the socially dominant to ignorance. If the insights of marginalized people
are uniquely theirs, in the sense that the socially dominant cannot understand or make use of

those insights, then not only do the socially dominant *not* know—they *can't* know. Thus, the SEDT is at odds with work that argues that the ignorance of the socially dominant—like white ignorance (Mills 2007) and willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012)— is actively *cultivated* rather than a mere passive occurrence. Mills and Pohlhaus emphasize that the socially dominant have a significant interest in protecting their ignorance of societal injustice (Mills 2007, 35; Pohlhaus 2012, 721). Mills puts the point especially clearly. He writes, "white ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for "racial" reasons have *needed not to know*" (Mills 2007, 35 (emphasis added)). The "white epistemology of ignorance" he identifies is complex and actively maintained—it is not at all the inescapable result of simply *being* white. Indeed, Mills goes out of his way to note that white ignorance is not "indefeasible"—he explicitly clarifies that "some people who are white will, because of their particular histories...overcome [white ignorance] and have true beliefs on what their fellow whites get wrong" (23).

This aspect of the SEDT has several unsavory implications. Work on active ignorance is both prolific and persuasive (in addition to Mills (2007) and Pohlhaus (2012), see also: Medina (2013, especially chapter 1), Bright and Kinney (2021), and (Woomer 2019), among others). If you are compelled by this work, then you should be suspicious that the SEDT characterizes the ignorance of the socially dominant as passive and inevitable. Moreover, the work on active ignorance allows us to hold the socially dominant responsible for their ignorance. By contrast, the SEDT suggests that the socially dominant are *blameless*. Their social positions are not up to them and aren't something they can change. On standard accounts of blameworthiness, then, it will not make sense to hold them accountable for their ignorance, or for their failure to take steps towards better understanding.

Note too that, if the SEDT is true, the prospects for truly intersectional academic work are grim. Such work could only be done by people who are multiply-marginalized and, for familiar reasons, unlikely to end up in academia (and especially unlikely to end up in academic philosophy). Worse still, the multiply-marginalized people who *do* ascend to the academy often acquire social status and material advantage. This prompts parallel intersectional concerns—even the academic work done by the multiply marginalized would inevitably reflect the limitations

placed on them by their relative social privilege.[7] As a result, the burden of doing intersectional work would continue to—must continue to—fall on the shoulders of those who are most marginalized. So, not only does the SEDT suggest that the prospects for intersectional academic work are grim, it also suggests that epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016) is inevitable.

Fortunately, the thesis is straightforwardly implausible; the socially dominant can indeed escape their ignorance. To see this, consider two notably different white women feminists working in the 1970s: Susan Brownmiller and Gerda Lerner.

Susan Brownmiller did groundbreaking work on rape. She argued that rape was a politically significant mechanism of social control, rather than random violence (Brownmiller 1975, 15). This was important. But her account was also seriously defective, as Angela Davis has pointed out. Davis draws attention to Brownmiller's tendency to invoke the "myth of the black rapist," suggesting that black men are more likely to rape than white men. The myth of the black rapist plays on narratives that involve the hypersexualization of black people. According to the myth, black men have animalistic, uncontrollable sex drives. These uncontrollable sex drives drive them to rape. Since the myth of the black rapist draws on myths about black sexuality *broadly*, the invocation of the myth has serious implications for black women: "the fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality" (Davis 179). So, by endorsing these myths, Brownmiller contributes to a cultural narrative that both makes black women's sexual assault allegations implausible and also vilifies black men.

Standpoint theorists are well-equipped to explain both the virtues and deficiencies of Brownmiller's understanding of the mechanisms of oppression. As a woman in a patriarchal context, her experience makes particular realities salient to her. She can reflect on these realities and achieve a standpoint. Thus, she is able to see (some of) the political significance of rape. However, she is a *white* woman in a patriarchal (racist, capitalist) context. Her experience does not make salient the intricacies of racialized oppression. Her ignorance of the mechanisms of racial oppression impedes her ability to analyze the material relations of her context. Davis, on the other hand, is able to see the deficiencies of Brownmiller's account of rape because her acheived standpoint makes the racial aspects of our material relations more salient.

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[7] For a more thorough discussion of this point, see Táíwò (2018; 2022) on standpoint theory and elite capture.

I emphasize that this explanation makes it obvious that race plays a key role in both Brownmiller's impoverished understanding of rape culture and in Davis's more nuanced understanding. It is no accident that Brownmiller failed to see or understand how gender-based oppression intersects with race-based oppression. However, we should not insist that Brownmiller's race *determined* her ignorance (or, relatedly, that Davis's race determined her understanding). Such a claim is simply not plausible. <u>Against Our Will</u> was published in 1975. But in 1972, Gerda Lerner—also a white woman—was already aware of and critiquing the racist myth of the black rapist and its implications for black women. Lerner writes: "The myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women. Black women perceived this connection very clearly and were early in the forefront of the fight against lynching" (Lerner 1972, 193). This quotation makes it clear that whiteness does not determine ignorance about race-based dimensions of oppression. Brownmiller's ignorance was no coincidence, but neither was it inevitable.

Lerner is far from the only person to overcome the disadvantages imposed by her relative social privilege. John Stuart Mill is another straightforward example, as are all feminist men. The point is that while dominant social positions confer epistemic disadvantages, they do not *determine* ignorance. Thus, the passivity and blamelessness implied by the SEDT not only make the thesis false, but also politically pernicious. The ignorance of the socially dominant has real social consequences—their ignorance often interferes with or prevents efforts to alleviate injustice (Kinney and Bright 2021, 2). But the SEDT offers a way for the socially dominant to feel complacent in their ignorance, as it suggests that it is not their fault, and that there's nothing they can do about it. Moreover, by acknowledging the supposed limitations imposed by their dominant social positions, the socially dominant reap the benefits that (in some contexts) come along with publicly signalling a raised social consciousness. The SEDT is, then, a "no risk, all reward" strategy for the socially dominant. The costs of the strategy are instead borne by the marginalized.

5. Avoiding the SEDT

There are three ways to object to the argument that entails the SEDT. First, you could deny P1 and accept P2. According to this view, the failure to achieve a marginalized standpoint

is definitively epistemically disadvantageous—the failure will result in distorted understanding of at least some key issues. This view avoids the SEDT by holding that the socially dominant can achieve marginalized standpoints, and so can reap the corresponding benefits. Second, you could accept P1 and modify P2 so that the advantage of a standpoint is distinctive without being robust. This view affirms the intuitive connection between social position and standpoint without dooming the socially dominant to ignorance regarding matters of social and political importance, as the advantages that correspond to achieving a standpoint aren't that substantive. Finally, you could accept P1 and modify P2 so that the advantage is robust, but not distinctive. This view also affirms the intuitive connection between social position and standpoint, but maintains that the clear understanding enabled by a standpoint can be achieved by other means. Thus, standpoints can be robustly advantageous and uniquely available to the marginalized, without the result that the socially dominant are doomed to ignorance.

Each of these views faces a difficulty. Those who modify P2 must capture the epistemic significance of achieving a standpoint—if the advantage is either trivial or replicable, why should we care about standpoints? Those who deny P1 must instead capture the significance of a marginalized social location—if marginalization is neither necessary nor sufficient for achieving a standpoint, why think that it is epistemically significant, as standpoint theorists have long contended?

My cards are on the table. I think we should reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint. To make my case, I'll first problematize both ways one could modify P2. Neither option, I argue, is compatible with recognizing the significance of a standpoint. I'll then demonstrate that versions of standpoint theory that reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint can nonetheless capture the epistemic significance of marginalization, and are overall better suited to capturing the insights of standpoint theorists.

Let's start with the view that denies the robustness of the advantage that corresponds to achieving a standpoint. Quill Kukla's recent work on standpoint theory helpfully illustrates this kind of view. Kukla offers the following three examples as examples of standpoint advantages: (i) disabled people have better evidence regarding the limitations of certain kinds of building design as a result of their embodied experience as disabled people; (ii) women, people of color, and trans people are more likely to see sexism, racism, and transphobia because they are its

targets, and bigotry is more likely to be concealed when people who are *not* its targets are around; and (iii) city dwellers are more comfortable darting around in crowds or on public transit because of their day-to-day experience (Kukla 2021, 7-8). These advantages are, they note, only available to people with the relevant social position, because they can only be attained by having a particular embodied experience; they aren't the kind of thing you can come to know just by being told by somebody else (9). Thus, these are epistemic advantages that simply aren't available to people who lack the relevant social position. Despite this, the socially dominant aren't robustly disadvantaged; these limits do not suggest that they will struggle to understand the world they live in.

Kukla's view is compelling in many respsects. The advantages they identify reflect real differences in knowledge that correspond to differing social locations. Despite this, the identified advantages are not well-suited to being the advantages that are distinctive of a *standpoint*. Standpoint theorists are often emphatic that a standpoint is not merely the perspective you have by virtue of occupying a particular social position. The difference, as discussed previously, is that a standpoint is meant to be *achieved*. A standpoint requires studying up; it is the result of prolonged and often coordinated effort to understand the systemic ways that groups of people are oppressed. This is why standpoint theorists frequently point to consciousness-raising groups—such groups do precisely the kind of critical investigation that involves both *work* and *revelation*.

By contrast, the advantages listed above require almost no work. While it is possible that a marginalized person could fail to acquire the proposed kinds of epistemic advantages, this failure would be the result of inattention or a lack of reflection. Consider the way Kukla describes their own examples of "standpoint" advantage. They say that their examples are "just examples of how being a certain kind of person with certain experiences goes along with knowing some things, and not knowing others" (Kukla 2021, 47). This makes it clear that these advantages are not achieved in any interesting sense. Thus, these advantages are better characterized as *perspectival advantages*—they are advantages that follow from occupying a particular social location. Positing these perspectival advantages as *standpoint* advantages erodes the distinction between perspective and standpoint, and so reduces standpoint theory to the situated knowledge thesis.

Further, the intuitive benefit of accepting P1 and modifying P2 was that by going this route, we could easily capture standpoint theorists' claim that marginalization is distinctively epistemically advantageous. Yet, on this articulation of the advantage that corresponds to having a standpoint, marginalization doesn't play a special role *at all*. The experience of marginalization makes the same kind of epistemic difference that experience *generally* makes. Just as the car mechanic knows more about cars, or a French person knows more about French culture, a marginalized person knows more about marginalization. This isn't because there's anything special about marginalization, but because there's something special about *experience*. The Kukla quote above makes this especially clear. When we diminish the advantage conferred by a standpoint in the way proposed, the advantages we identify are "just examples of how being a certain kind of person with certain experiences goes along with knowing some things, and not knowing others". This does not afford a distinctive epistemic value to marginalization.

Now consider the second way we might modify P2—rather than denying the robustness of the advantage, we might instead deny the distinctiveness of the advantage. On this view, anyone can achieve the critical consciousness that can reveal the assumptions that underpin dominant ideology, but this critical consciousness only counts as a standpoint if it is achieved by someone who is *appropriately socially located.* So understood, standpoints are robustly advantageous and achievable only by the marginalized, but the advantages are not distinctive.

The issue with this option stems from the apparent arbitrariness of specifying 'standpoint' in the way proposed. No meaningful epistemic difference is invoked to justify calling some achieved critical understandings 'standpoints', but not others (this *must* be true, or else standpoint advantages would indeed be distinctive). Anyone can achieve a critical understanding and reap the benefits that follow, but we only call it a 'standpoint' when the right person achieves it. 'Standpoint' so characterized fails to pick out the epistemically significant achievement. What *matters*—that is, what makes the epistemic difference we're interested in—is the achieved critical understanding. Because standpoint so characterized fails to pick out the epistemically significant achievement, it risks losing its philosophical and political significance. So, if we think that there's good reason to preserve 'standpoint' as a philosophically and politically significant term, then we have good reason to resist arbitrarily insisting that achieved critical understanding only constitutes a standpoint when it is achieved by someone (relevantly) marginalized.

The preceding arguments concern how we ought to use the word 'standpoint'. Despite this, the issue at hand is not merely a terminological one. This is partially because terminological points are often weightier than people recognize. Words and labels are significant cultural artifacts, and our choices about how to use them aren't—or shouldn't be—arbitrary. The significance of the way we define our words or use our labels is especially clear in this case. Failing to use 'standpoint' in a way that clearly distinguishes it from 'perspective' fails to capture some of standpoint theorists' poignant insights about the importance of *working* to achieve a standpoint—better understanding of the world is not a given, and is not easy. Arbitrarily insisting on the necessary connection between social position and standpoint threatens to sacrifice the philosophical and political significance of the term (and, frankly, reeks of essentialism). So, more centrally, my argument concerns how we ought to organize the various insights of standpoint theorists so that we can make the most of their invaluable insights while avoiding the SEDT. My point is that the proposed recharacterizations of 'standpoint' cannot do the theoretical work we want from them.

6. Standpoints without Marginalization

I'll now argue that we ought to reject the necessary connection between social position and standpoint. Sandra Harding and Gaile Pohlhaus have been explicit in thinking that marginalized social location cannot be necessary for achieving better understanding; I give additional arguments to show that we should follow them.

Harding disavows this necessary connection in light of the worry that talk of a standpoint grounded in women's experience is incompatible with recognizing the diversity of women's experiences. In response to this worry, Harding emphasizes the distinction between 'standpoint' and 'perspective'. She argues that *being a woman* does not supply a ready-made critical lens through which to view the world; instead, women's experiences provide the questions from which we should begin our inquiry (e.g., "Is the double day of work "really" a matter of nature's, not culture's, design?" (Harding 1997, 386)). So, what matters is *how* we conduct inquiry, not *who* conducts inquiry. This way of conceiving of standpoint is straightforwardly compatible with recognizing the diversity of women's experiences. Rather than posing a *problem* for standpoint theory, the diversity of women's experiences provides additional epistemic resources. However, this way of accommodating differences between women means that men, too, can achieve a

feminist standpoint. As Gaile Pohlhaus puts the point (while discussing Harding's work), "that men can forge a feminist standpoint follows directly from the assertion that a feminist standpoint can grow out of the diverse experiences of women, for if the social positions of women do not prevent them from theorizing about the oppressions facing women as a diverse social group, the social positions of men ought not to prevent them from theorizing about the oppressions of women" (Pohlhaus 2002, 88). Once we recognize difference *within* social positions, difference *between* social positions no longer seems problematic.

So, both Harding and Pohlhaus deny the necessity of marginalization for achieving a standpoint. Recall that the motivation for taking this route—denying P1, rather than P2—is the recognition that (many of) the advantages that interest standpoint theorists are the result of *work*, and that the work involved is work that the socially dominant can do. The challenge involved with taking this route is capturing the thought that marginalization is distinctively epistemically advantageous, a central tenet of standpoint theory. This is a task that both Harding and Pohlhaus struggle with. As Pohlhaus points out, Harding's position seems contradictory at times; when discussing the epistemic differences between feminist men and feminist women, Harding wants to maintain both "it matters who says what" and also "the validity of our claims must be largely independent of who says them" (Harding 1991, 283, discussed in Pohlhaus 2002, 288).[8]

I suggest that Harding makes these contradictory claims because she is struggling to square the severed connection between social position and standpoint with the epistemic significance of marginalization. Her claim that the "validity" of claims must be independent of who makes them reflects her commitment to rejecting the necessary connection between social position and standpoint, while her claim that it matters who says what reflects her desire to capture the idea that social positions make an important epistemic difference. This tension is further reflected in her tendency to use language that blurs the distinction between perspective and standpoint. As discussed previously, Harding expresses the advantage of achieving a standpoint in perspectival terms—she says that feminist standpoints are advantageous because they start from women's *perspective* (Harding 1991, 124). Pohlhaus demonstrates that this is a recurring slip in Harding's work (Pohlhaus 288-291).

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[8] These two claims don't *have* to be contradictory. You could, for instance, hold that the validity of claims must be (largely) independent of who says them and also hold that it "matters who says what" on *moral* or *political* grounds; however, Harding makes both claims while explicitly considering *epistemic* differences made by being either a feminist man or a feminist woman. Thus, there seems to be real tension here. I'll discuss moral and political considerations in more detail in the conclusion.

These difficulties prompt Pohlhaus to abandon the notion of a standpoint altogether. She argues that the spatial and visual aspects of the metaphor of a 'standpoint' will *inevitably* suggest that the advantage is the result of seeing the world from a particular social location (289-290). Thus, Pohlhaus concludes that the concept is not well suited to illuminating the epistemic significance of marginalization while avoiding the implication that you must occupy a particular social location to understand the world.

I am sensitive to the worries that motivate Pohlhaus. Nonetheless, I don't think we need to abandon talk about 'standpoints'. The issue with Harding's discussion of standpoint advantages is *not* that she suggests that people with feminist standpoints share a distinctive way of understanding the world—it's that she suggests that people with feminist standpoints know *like women*. Harding describes standpoint advantages in these terms, I submit, because she hasn't articulated a new way of conceiving of the significance of marginalization to a standpoint, if marginalization is not *necessary*. Clarifying the relationship between marginalization and the corresponding standpoint will help us to resist the temptation to discuss standpoint advantages in perspectival terms, and so will better equip us to use the term 'standpoint' in ways that do not suggest that you must be marginalized to achieve them.

I argue that the experience of marginalization provides evidence, friction, and incentive that are absent in the day-to-day lives of those who are not similarly marginalized. These advantages are both crucial for the initial generation of a standpoint, and also make it easier for those have these advantages to achieve a standpoint. Thus, marginalization is significantly epistemically advantageous, but it does not provide advantages that are necessary for achieving a standpoint. Standpoints can be shared with, contributed to, and achieved by the socially dominant, despite their significant epistemic disadvantages.

My view is most similar to Alison Wylie's. Wylie argues that the experience of marginalization puts marginalized people in a position to access unique evidence, and that this evidence enables (but does not determine) the achievement of a standpoint (Wylie 2003, especially 35-36).[9] Wylie is somewhat vague about what, precisely, this unique evidence *is*. Drawing on Narayan, she claims that the socially marginalized are able to "grasp subtle manifestations of power dynamics" and that they are intimately aware of the ways that

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[9] Despite this, Wylie does not explicitly consider whether the socially dominant can achieve a marginalized standpoint.

oppression shapes their lives (Wylie 37), though she does not get into specifics. Given that our task is to clarify the relationship between social position and standpoint, I'll try to offer more concrete considerations.

First, marginalization yields evidence that the social order is socially constructed and contingent, rather than natural. Marginalized people are subject to the enforcement mechanisms that mold them to fit their assigned roles. Because their experience reveals these enforcement mechanisms, their experience yields evidence that their social roles are cultural, rather than natural. Now, the socially dominant are *also* molded to fit their roles (e.g., as women are forced into femininity, men are forced into masculinity). A plausible difference, though, is that while both the socially dominant and socially marginalized are forced into their roles, the roles that marginalized people are forced into are, by nature, *demeaning* and *subordinating*. Thus, they seem less likely to be roles that people will fit into easily. Being molded in ways that do not suit you will make it more apparent that you are being molded in the first place.

There is also crucial *friction* between the experiences of the socially marginalized and the narratives that reflect and sustain oppressive social orders. Patricia Hill Collins talks at length about "controlling images" and their role in maintaining oppression. She focuses on the controlling images of black women, which includes representations of black women as "stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mommas" (Collins 2002, 76). These stereotypical images manipulate the cultural meaning of black femininity in ways that are meant to justify their subordination (77). Crucially, these stereotypes do not represent or reflect reality; they *distort* it. These images misrepresent the capacities and qualities of the socially marginalized. Because these images are distorted, there will be friction between these controlling images and the experiences of the socially marginalized. Images of the socially marginalized that denigrate the abilities and capacities of the marginalized will, at least often, simply not cohere with marginalized people's impressions of themselves and their fellow group members. This friction is both evidence that dominant social narratives are false and incentive to develop alternative accounts.

A more obvious incentive is that the socially marginalized are directly disadvantaged by the social order. Because they are not at the top of the social hierarchy, it is in their interest to unearth the illusions, distortions, and falsehoods that uphold and entrench the social order (Bright 2018; Kinney and Bright 2021). This makes it significantly more likely that they will put

in the time and effort that is required to develop the understanding that is necessary for developing a standpoint.

I emphasize—as does Wylie (2003, 37)—that these are advantages that simply come along with being socially marginalized. Thus, these are *not* standpoint advantages; they are perspectival advantages. But it is obvious that these advantages are epistemically significant—they are critical for the *generation* of a standpoint. By drawing on the evidence provided by their experience—which their social location incentivizes them to do—the socially marginalized can come to recognize and articulate patterns of injustice that sustain the social order. So, the perspectival advantages associated with marginalization enable the development of the critical awareness that is constitutive of a standpoint.

The day-to-day lived experience of the socially dominant will not yield the same evidence, friction, or incentive. The socially dominant benefit from the social order. It is not in their interest to put in the effort to identify and understand the mechanisms that uphold the social order—doing so would threaten the privileges their place in society affords them. And even if they *do* put in the effort to identify and understand the mechanisms of the oppression of others, reflection on their own experiences will not be of much use. This is partially because the experience of the socially dominant is well-trodden ground; dominant experience has shaped the concepts and understandings that are already available. Further reflection on these experiences is less likely to lead to innovation or revelation—this will come more easily from reflection on experience that has been (unjustly) underexplored.

Moreover, it is often in the interest of the socially marginalized to conform—at least temporarily—to the narratives set out by controlling images. Charles Mills cites a black American folk poem that expresses this idea—"Got one mind for white folks to see/Another for what I know is me" (Mills 18). Patricia Hill Collins discusses this phenomenon too; it can benefit black people to *act* in ways that confirm stereotypical portrayals of them because it enables them to fade into the background (Collins 1986, S14). Because the socially marginalized may intentionally act in ways that conform to stereotypes, reflection on the experience of the socially dominant may fail to yield the same friction that reflection on the experience of the socially marginalized yields.

So, reflection on the experience of the socially dominant does not have the same revelatory potential as does reflection on the experience of the marginalized. This, I take it,

captures an essential insight of standpoint theorists—the methodological imperative. We should anticipate that inquiry that is done from a standpoint that is grounded in the experiences of the marginalized will yield *better*, more *accurate* understanding (in at least some contexts). The socially marginalized are also better placed to perform this inquiry, because marginalization provides more direct access to the relevant evidence and incentivizes them to put that evidence to use. Thus, the inversion thesis has been captured as well; it is obvious that marginalization is epistemically advantageous, while social dominance is epistemically disadvantageous. But while the socially dominant are significantly epistemically disadvantaged, the disadvantages are not insurmountable obstacles; the socially dominant are not doomed to ignorance. Socially dominant people's day-to-day experiences cannot ground a marginalized standpoint, but they can nonetheless come to achieve one. To do so, they must take the experiences of the socially marginalized as their starting point. Only by engaging in critical reflection that centers experiences that are not their own can the socially dominant achieve a marginalized standpoint.

Note too that this account of the epistemic significance of marginalization affords a more distinctive role to marginalization than do views like Quill Kukla's. The experience of marginalization isn't epistemically advantageous because of features about experience *generally*, but because of special features about marginalization in particular.

7. Knowing Across Difference

It is one thing to say *that* dominantly-situated knowers can come to understand the mechanisms of oppression that they do not personally experience, and so can achieve a marginalized standpoint. It is another thing to explain how this could happen in practice. Space and scope concerns keep me from offering anything like a full account here. However, two worries loom, and they can only be addressed by saying something more practical about how to achieve a standpoint.

The first worry concerns a type of ignorance that Mariana Ortega calls *loving, knowing* ignorance. Loving, knowing ignorance plagues contemporary white feminist thought. It is characterized by ignorance about the work and experience of women of color, where this ignorance is accompanied by professed love for and knowledge about women of color (Ortega 2006, 57). Feminists who are lovingly, knowingly ignorant often have good intentions; they may take genuine interest in the plight of women of color, read and cite (some of) their work, and

generally *want* to understand women of color (62). Despite these good intentions, these feminists nonetheless have defective or distorted understandings of women of color; their knowledge falls short of what they think it is. The work they produce, then, both contributes to the production of ignorance and misinformation about the marginalized, while simultaneously securing their position as respectable Third Wave feminists (60-63). So, work that is knowingly, lovingly ignorant doesn't just fail to shed light on intersectional forms of oppression—it can also obscure the need for work that does. Given the dangers of this kind of ignorance, it is crucial that this paper not leave readers with the impression that it is easy for the socially dominant to achieve marginalized standpoints. This impression would lead to the production of more loving, knowing ignorance.

The second worry pulls us in the opposite direction—if it is *too difficult* for the socially dominant to achieve a standpoint, then it won't actually be feasible for most dominantly-situated knowers to achieve one. If this is the case, then while we don't live in a world of truly *unbridgeable* epistemic solitudes, our prospects are not much better. Moreover, if achieving a standpoint is not feasible for most, then it will be difficult to hold the socially dominant accountable for their ignorance.[10]

Ortega's proposal for avoiding loving, knowing ignorance plays into the hands of this second worry. She emphasizes that things like merely theorizing about women of color, including token women of color in conferences, and reading the work of women of color, are not enough to break free of the "controlling images" that distort the socially dominant's perception of the socially marginalized. Instead, Ortega offers *world-traveling* as a way for the socially dominant to escape ignorance.

The notion of 'world-traveling' comes out of Maria Lugones' work. World-traveling, according to Lugones, is an intensive undertaking whereby one comes to understand the "world" of another, where a "world" is composed of things like customs, language, and social meanings. According to Lugones, world-traveling enables us to "understand *what it is to be [another] and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" (17, emphasis in original). Ortega thus sees world-traveling as opening up the possibility for white women to understand the oppression experienced by women of color (69). However, as Ortega emphasizes, world-traveling is extremely demanding:

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[10] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to consider this worry.

"Rather than a nice addition to one's manuscript, rather than being the seal that must be stamped in Third Wave feminist work, "world"-traveling has to do with actual experience; it requires tremendous commitment to practice: to actually engage in activities where one will experience what others experience; to deal with flesh and blood people, not just their theoretical constructions; to learn people's language in order to understand them, not to use it against them; to really listen to people's interpretations, however different they are from one's own; and to see people as worthy of respect, rather than helpless beings (69).

She stresses the difficulty of world-traveling because loving, knowing ignorance tends to hide itself; it is easy to think you've escaped it when in fact you are still caught in its grip. However, if the socially dominant must successfully world-travel in order to escape ideological ignorance and achieve a standpoint, then the chances for the socially dominant to achieve better understanding are not especially good. Few people will have the time and resources required to successfully engage in world-traveling.

I take Ortega's cautions seriously; treating token actions as sufficient for escaping ignorance can have dangerous consequences. However, I want to refrain from concluding that world-traveling is the only way that the socially dominant could achieve a marginalized standpoint. Two considerations tell against this conclusion. The first is that Lugones proposes world-traveling as a means to understand what it is like to *be* another person—she puts it forward as a way to see the world *through someone else's eyes*. But the crux of my argument is that achieving a marginalized standpoint is not helpfully understood as achieving a marginalized perspective. You don't have to see *like* a marginalized person in order to have achieved a marginalized standpoint (indeed, there is no one way to see *like* a marginalized person at all). This is the point of the distinction between a 'perspective' and a 'standpoint' that I have emphasized throughout this paper.

The second consideration is that standpoints come in degrees. You can do more or less of the work required to escape ideological ignorance, and, so, you can make more or less headway toward achieving a standpoint. This work includes (but is not limited to): engaging with work on oppression that is written by marginalized people; questioning preconceived or stereotypical notions of marginalized people; talking with marginalized people; and reflecting on the ways that dominant ideology shapes thought. Those who do more of this work will tend to have better understanding of oppression that they don't experience than those who do less of this work, but

even those who do less of this work will tend to be be better off than people who do *none* of this work.

Both Ortega and Uma Narayan emphasize the special importance of engaging with real, "flesh and blood" members of marginalized groups, rather than just theoretical representations of them (Ortega 69; Narayan 1988, 37; see also Frye 1983, 75). Doing so provides an opportunity for the socially dominant to check and question their evolving conceptions of marginalized people and the oppression they face—a kind of opportunity that isn't possible through reading alone. However, it is worth noting that this kind of engagement is not without costs. As is clear from the very notion of "loving, knowing ignorance", good intentions are not enough to prevent harm. Goodwill alone cannot undo "assumptions and attitudes born of centuries of power and privilege"—there is a real risk that the socially dominant will harm marginalized people through their insensitivity (Narayan 1983, 35)[11]. Despite this, it is work that is worth doing. Learning to understand and work with difference is precisely the kind of work that makes coalitionary politics possible (Narayan 34). Moreover, it is clearly the kind of work that many socially dominant people *do* have the time and resources to engage in.

Treating standpoints as a graded construct raises one final question: how do we judge who has done enough work to have achieved a standpoint, and who is in a position to make this judgment? This is a difficult question to answer, but note that it is not a difficulty that is specific to judging whether a socially dominant person has achieved a standpoint. It is difficult to judge whether *anyone*—including the marginalized—has achieved a standpoint. Moreover, this isn't the kind of difficulty that tells against striving to achieve a standpoint. Whether we can *judge* who achieved a standpoint is irrelevant to the claim that people can (or even should) strive for them. Thus, while developing criteria for judging who has achieved a standpoint seems like a fruitful task, it is a task that I leave aside for now.[12]

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[11] Narayan gives practical advice for how to navigate and mitigate such harms (1983).

[12] It's worth noting that information about whether someone has done the work that is conducive to achieving a standpoint is fairly easy to assess, and would provide some basis for thinking that someone has (or has not) achieved a standpoint. Moreover, this information is, at least plausibly, assessable by people who have not themselves achieved standpoints. This suggests that you don't need to have achieved a standpoint to make correct judgments about who *does* have a standpoint (though surely having a standpoint would make these assessments more reliable).

8. Conclusion

Standpoint theorists have long been clear that marginalization does not make better understanding a given. They have been less clear that social dominance does not make *ignorance* a given. As a result, many accounts of standpoint theory—either intentionally or unintentionally—bolster the SEDT. I've attempted to offer a way of understanding standpoint theory that does not entail that there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know. By (1) insisting on a sharp distinction between perspective and standpoint and (2) holding that the perspectival disadvantages that correspond to social privilege do not prevent the socially dominant from achieving a marginalized standpoint, we can make sense of standpoint theorists' poignant insights without dooming the socially dominant to ignorance. The socially dominant who engage in a struggle to develop a critical consciousness can overcome their perspectival disadvantages and achieve a marginalized standpoint.

My argument primarily concerns whether the socially dominant can achieve the understanding that is necessary for doing insightful work on forms of oppression that they do not personally experience. It does not follow, though, that the socially dominant *should* do this. There are two further justifications that could be invoked to justify silence on the part of the socially dominant: a methodological justification, and a moral justification.

The lynchpin of the methodological justification is the idea that you can omit discussions of intersectional forms of oppression without impairing the resulting theory. That is, those omissions do not *distort* the theory, even though they render the theory incomplete. Along these lines, Kate Manne suggests that we view her work as "the bare outlines, which invites filling in by theorists with the relevant epistemic and moral authority to do, should they so choose" (Manne 2017, 13). If this methodological claim is right, it could provide good reason to avoid going into "complicating" intersectional issues. Understanding the oppression experienced by others requires considerable effort—if you could do good, intersectional work without expending this effort, it may be reasonable for you to do so.

Moral justifications hold that even if the relatively privileged *could* speak insightfully about oppression that is not their own, they *ought not* (see, e.g., Alcoff 1991, and Manne 2017, 25). Various considerations are relevant here: given that multiply-marginalized people are largely locked out of the academy, there's something *insidious* about relatively privileged scholars launching their careers by doing work on the very oppressive forces that prevent

multiply-marginalized people from having the opportunity to do that academic work themselves; when the socially dominant do work *about* the socially marginalized, they may contribute to—rather than challenge—cultural narratives that position marginalized people as passive subjects; and, in general, the socially dominant too often take up space that they shouldn't.

I leave discussion of the methodological and moral justifications for future work (though I note that the moral justifications seem considerably stronger than the methodological justification). It's plausible that, at least sometimes, people who make claims about the authority to speak to oppression on epistemic grounds *actually* have moral or political considerations in mind. However, my arguments here demonstrate the need for more care when thinking about authority. Rather than prompting the socially dominant to take responsibility for their social location and its effects, the SEDT offers them an easy way out. Moreover, invocations of the SEDT oversimplify a complicated issue. Moral considerations do not weigh decisively one way or the other; some considerations support silence, others—some of which have been gestured at throughout this paper—do not. Thus, figuring out when, how, or whether the socially dominant should contribute their voices is a complex issue. Invoking the SEDT cuts this conversation unduly short.

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