

INTRODUCTION

Intersectional Epistemologies: The Ethics and Politics of Epistemic Practice

Special issue of *Hypatia*

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Musings on Intersectionality (Curated by an Epistemologist and an Ethicist)

This special issue of *Hypatia* focuses on intersectionality-informed analyses of the ethics and politics of epistemic practice. While there have been segments of issues devoted to topics in feminist epistemology in *Hypatia* in 2009 (on standpoint), 2011 (on epistemic justice), and 2020 (on gaslighting), there has not been a special issue of *Hypatia* devoted entirely to epistemology since the 2006 issue on epistemologies of ignorance. Since then, feminist work in epistemology has evolved considerably, including work on epistemic violence and oppression (e.g. Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Berenstain 2016; Davis 2018; Wieseler 2020; and Berenstain et al. 2021), non-propositional knowing (e.g., Shotwell 2011; Catala 2020; Medina and Henning 2021), epistemic resistance to oppression (e.g., Roshanravan 2014; Mason 2021; Medina 2012, 2023), new work on ignorance (e.g., Townley 2011; Bowman 2020; Bailey 2021), and a resurgence in interest in standpoint (e.g., Toole 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023; Kukla 2021; Tilton forthcoming). In addition, there are various robust conversations concerning the ethics and politics of epistemic practices currently taking place, both within and outside of feminist circles. For example, a great deal of work on epistemic injustice has been published not only in feminist philosophy journals but also in “mainstream” philosophy journals (e.g., *Ethics*, *Nous*, *Synthese*, and *Philosophical Studies*). In light of the attention this topic is receiving, we are explicitly showcasing *intersectionality-informed feminist* work in epistemology.

The term “intersectionality” itself is an outgrowth of Black feminist epistemology and political-epistemic practices of resistance to epistemic oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intervention in coining and using this term was precisely a way of resisting the ignoring or “unknowing” of Black women and Black women’s oppression maintained by single-axis approaches embedded within the US judicial system (1989) and taken by particular social justice movements (1991). Moreover, naming intersectionality was a way of identifying an approach to the world that was already being utilized by Black feminist knowers. Consequently, this identification both resisted the unknowing of Black women’s oppression *and* acknowledged Black women as active epistemic subjects. Within this context, single-axis approaches can be understood as a tool of epistemic oppression. Thus, it is our contention that, to be feminist, one must approach

epistemology from an intersectional standpoint. The essays in this issue attend to the simultaneity and complexity of overlapping, mutually reinforcing axes of oppression. Moreover, their authors rely upon and are in serious conversation with the work of knowers who are directly impacted by multi-axis oppressions.

How we arranged the issue

The curation—from the Latin for care—of this set of essays is informed by frames of reference rooted both in epistemology and in social ethics. What happens when a feminist epistemologist and a black feminist ethicist muse together about knowledge, ethics, and politics? The outcome reveals the necessity of just this sort of collaboration. The essays collected here illustrate the relations between epistemology, ethics, and politics that should guide inquiry in all three of these areas for the foreseeable future.

There are numerous ways in which we could have arranged this issue and we approached the task of doing so knowing that categories and orderings contribute to the mindsets with which essays are engaged. While we chose three categories—“Ain’t I a ...,” “Wrestling with Epistemic Violence,” and “A Know Better Toolkit”—within which to group the contributions, many other categories could have been chosen and some essays could easily have been placed in more than one category. In fact, some pieces were swapped in and out of all three categories. Thus we want to emphasize that the categories and ordering are an invitation to think together, not a demarcation of what these articles are or could be.

We placed musings at the beginning of each section to remind readers of the relationship between the kind of thinking that takes place when musing and that is represented in articles. Musing as a gerund calls attention to epistemic activity over reified products that are the result of epistemic activity. While musing might be considered an individual pursuit, feminist philosophical musing depends on interaction with others. We do not produce fully developed artifacts without musing with others and reflecting carefully on how our musings strike others (or at least we shouldn’t). And the best artifacts lead us to muse further, not to stop thinking (as if all thought were now done). We hope the pieces we have collected in this issue provoke further thought that attends to multiple axes of oppression simultaneously and that is informed by the ongoing knowledge work actively taking place among differently non-dominantly situated knowers. Muse on.

Ain’t I a ...

An intersectional approach to epistemology highlights complex questions about who knows and how. While earlier white feminists tended to focus on women without attention to multiple axes of oppression when addressing these questions, an intersectional approach investigates how differently marginalized knowers are multiply positioned in relation to one another. Explicitly the essays in the “Ain’t I a ...” section analyze marginalizing practices within the construction and framing of epistemic subjects (who knowers are) and epistemic objects (what knowers know), even by feminists. Each of these four essays expresses a frustration with the way that attributions such as woman, knower, autistic, pioneer are withheld and/or wielded—against women of color, against neurodivergent women, against transwomen. They richly explore who is empowered to control these framings—white women, medical practitioners, the state. These essays also map the ways that knowers at the intersections resist the power structures attempting to define them, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less.

While elite feminists are more aware of the problems of speaking for all women, approaches that simply acknowledge differences among women can nonetheless maintain pernicious hierarchies among us. For example, in her musing on “Cis Feminist Moves to Innocence,” Nora Berenstain calls attention to the harms that ensue when otherwise dominantly situated women take a “retreat” approach (Alcoff 1991) with respect to speaking on the oppression of women who are differently non-dominantly situated. While this sort of retreat may be said to be motivated by intersectional concerns, utilizing Mawhinney (1998) and Tuck and Yang (2012), Berenstain identifies how it is not intersectional but rather part of a harmful set of “moves to innocence.” In particular she notes that the move to retreat from speaking about such things as transmisogyny conflates “lack of experience as a *target* of transmisogyny with a lack of *location* within the power structure of cis-supremacy” (Berenstain 2016, 4). In conflating these two lacks, those who take a retreat approach claim solidarity, while failing to take on the work required to be in solidarity with other women (see also Tilton *forthcoming*). Importantly, “speaking for” versus not speaking at all is a false binary. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Linda Martín Alcoff (1991) have both argued, a person can speak *with* and *to* other women. Moreover, as María Lugones has pointed out, “the disclaimer [of not speaking on others’ experiences] just serves as an announcement that the author will not accept responsibility for the effects of her own particular ‘social and sexual history’ on others” (2003, 69). This sort of approach positions cis-het-white women as prototypical women (Frye 2000) and all other women as facsimiles, thereby contributing to transmisogyny, misogynoir, etc. If feminists wish to counter sexism and patriarchy, their actions and theories must engage deeply with the analyses of differently non-dominantly situated women analyzing multiple axes of oppression.

In “The Epistemological Asymmetry of Framing ‘Woman’ via US Women’s Rights Pioneers,” Lauren Bickell examines the asymmetrical framing of women, specifically, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony compared to Sojourner Truth. The character of this asymmetry and more importantly Bickell’s theorized explanation for it provide important insight into the framing of US women’s rights pioneers and by extension the framing of the social movement for women’s rights in the US. Conceding to public criticism, the Women’s Rights Pioneers Monument was redesigned to add Sojourner Truth to its original coupling of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, thus making physically manifest an unresolved conflict. Stanton and Anthony’s presence frame women’s grievement in the suffrage movement vertically, while Truth’s presence elicits a horizontal framing—highlighting potential and missed coalitions over grievement. Bickell carefully situates Truth in the history of Black feminist thought—explicitly working with Black feminists considered “less palatable” at the time and exhibiting “intersectionality-like thought” and multi-axis frameworks—in a way that gives the lie to the monument’s representation of Stanton, Anthony, and Truth as easy contemporaries battling together for the rights of a similarly framed “woman.” Bickell’s application of her conceptual toolkit—including critical historiography, social epistemology, and social movement analysis—is potent for interrogating these types of frictions throughout the construction of the US feminist movement.

In “Solidarity with Chrystul Kizer: On Disparate Failures of Knowledge Attribution and Survivors of Sexual Assault,” Ayanna Spencer analyzes how child survivor Chrystul Kizer’s knowledge of her own experiences is and isn’t attributed to Kizer in the Wisconsin Supreme Court case concerning whether laws shielding sex trafficking victims from prosecution applied to her. Importantly, in this case, all parties ostensibly agreed that Kizer was a child victim of sex trafficking. Questions about whether the

law ought to apply in her case were instead raised by shifting perspectives on the stakes involved in attributing knowledge to Kizer. Spencer argues that matters not relevant to Kizer's experience such as "how might attributing knowledge to Kizer impact future court cases," were allowed to encroach upon whether Kizer was deemed to know the most basic claims about her first-hand experience such as, "My trafficker is a danger to me." Spencer's analysis demonstrates the importance of shifting from a knowledge possession account (what counts as knowing) to a knowledge attribution account (who is attributed with the authority to know), particularly when those with epistemic and political power are constructing stakes that determine whether multiply marginalized knowers count or do not count as knowers with respect to their own experiences.

In "Celebrating Neurodivergence Amidst Social Injustice," Megan Krazinski uses faithful witnessing and world-traveling (Lugones 2003) to make legible the constructed oppressions and the liberatory possibilities that linger at the intersections of race, gender, and neurodivergence. This analysis reveals autism diagnosis as both a blessing and a curse whose distribution capriciously favors white males. Krazinski documents the intergenerational trauma caused by living without the clarification provided by autism diagnosis (Krazinski's grandmother and mother) and growing up with it (Krazinski herself). The particularity of Krazinski's faithful witnessing—capturing her grandmother's insistent self-definition around, past, and through the rigid gender roles others attempted to impose upon her and her mother's hypervigilant focus on masking and medical intervention—anchors Krazinski's articulation of neuroqueerness, "the intertwining of autisticness and non-normative gender and sexuality." Her analysis allows the reader to world-travel with her through a critique of center-stream autism discourse and practice. A practice that fails to acknowledge the particularities at the intersection of gender and neurodivergence—e.g., the late diagnosis of autistic women, the disproportionate pressure for and success at masking in autistic women, as well as the aforementioned neuroqueerness. The queering that Krazinski's world-traveling reveals includes perhaps unresolvable tensions at some intersectional joints: how autism diagnoses withheld from people of color can be an injustice without making access to diagnosis worthy of celebration and that the disruption of normative gender identification can be a significant challenge while also being a route to a powerful reclamation of self. By facilitating the world-traveling of the reader, Krazinski also models a vital intervention for the understanding of intersectional oppression.

Wrestling with epistemic violence

The essays in "Wrestling with Epistemic Violence" contend with knowing violence and violent "knowing." These essays articulate how violence in the world is ignored and how epistemic violence is used to establish and reinforce exclusion, othering, and isolation. While Fatima and Dougherty address physical and psychological violence explicitly, Monteleone, Rekis, and Sibbald examine epistemic practices of othering in which physical violence is often just out of frame. Refusing to include people with intellectual disabilities (ID) in our conversations about ID makes them more vulnerable to violence generally (Monteleone). Public discourse about religion (both as identity and worldview) often frames some religions as violent and others as not (Rekis). And conceptions of violence can be used metaphorically to distort our attention away from the perspectives of those objectified within them: for example, the way the "illness as war" metaphor structures interactions between patient and doctor as justifiably hierarchical, given among other things its temporality of urgency.

Rebecca Monteleone wrestles with increasing philosophical attention to intellectual disability (ID) as an object of knowledge, while the standards for philosophical engagement commit epistemic violence by systematically excluding those labeled with ID as subjects in these conversations. This exclusion is especially troubling given that conversations in philosophy often concern the full personhood of people labeled with ID and their ability to contribute to knowledge production. Monteleone's musing "Complexity as Epistemic Oppression" considers the possibility of "a philosophy that does not just theorize *about* intellectual disability, but *with* people with intellectual disabilities." Imagining philosophy otherwise, Monteleone argues, not only dismantles harmful gate-keeping, but also highlights important aspects of knowing, such as embodied communication and prosthetic thinking. Practicing relational accountability, Monteleone's musing includes a plain-language abstract, an easy-read summary, and discussion questions. Importantly, Monteleone situates these aspects of the musing *not* as accommodation, but rather as central to the argument and an invitation to all knowers to imagine otherwise together.

In "What does it Mean to be an American? American Ignorance and the Social Imagination of Citizenship," Saba Fatima explores the complex intersection of race and nation as it shapes what she calls "American Ignorance," a distinct epistemic form central to the American identity. The epistemic resistance to the truth—that America is a nation built and persisting on racialized violence—revealed in the Senate record of torture by the CIA in the aftermath of 9/11 is used by Fatima to explore the unique knowledge/ignorance necessary to the American story. To be American, argues Fatima, is to stand in a relation of Charles Mills style ignorance (2007) to how the enacting of violence against a racialized Other (Beauvoir 2010)—through colonialism, white supremacy, the criminal justice system, and torture—is foundational to America. In the specific case of the Senate torture report, the denial, mitigation, and exculpation are manifested, justified, and sustained by a vigilantly maintained social imagination of our citizenship that "knows" the truth of American hearts and is ignorant of the recurrent history of violence that has made this America possible. Fatima argues that strategies like reparations and criminal prosecution open space for critical narratives that push back against American ignorance; furthermore, Americans have an epistemic responsibility to foster epistemic environments that will allow narratives that challenge American ignorance to flourish.

In "Religious Identity and Epistemic Injustice," Jaklyn Rekis argues that an account of how religious subjects can be harmed by epistemic violence requires an intersectional lens. Rekis' argument considers two perspectives on religious identity: religion as social identity and religion as worldview. Considering religion as a social identity, Rekis analyzes how overestimating the connections among religion, race, and gender can contribute to forms of epistemic violence such as testimonial smothering, preemptive testimonial injustice, and unequal distributions of credibility. For example, the convergence of dominant understandings of race, gender, and religious identity in the debate over the hijab in France systematically exclude from consideration the testimonies of Muslim women directly impacted by this debate. Considering religion as a worldview, Rekis argues that underestimating connections among religion, race, and gender can lead to impoverished understandings of the way in which religious worldviews inform resistance to racial and gender oppression. Here Rekis examines the testimony of Sojourner Truth arguing that excising Truth's religious worldview from her abolitionism and feminism undercuts the import and full meaning of Truth's work, constituting a hermeneutical form of violence.

Kaitlin Sibbald uses Blending theory to articulate how metaphors can be the source of culpable epistemic harm even while being a key resource to marginalized knowers in context. In “Are Metaphors Ethically Bad Epistemic Practice? Epistemic Injustice at the Intersections,” Sibbald explores how we can better appreciate the function and impact of metaphors when considered in light of their role in meaning making. Blending theory explains that metaphors integrate concepts in a three-step process that begins with the fusion of the domains of two “clashing” concepts; turns to the integration of selected background information of the fused concepts; and ends with drawing inferences along the lines of that fusion (Fauconnier and Turner 2003). Metaphors, Sibbald specifies, foster the understanding of one or two things in terms of a *partial* understanding of the other, and this, she argues, can lead to ethically bad knowledge practices. Metaphors can distort the concepts they’re meant to illuminate, sometimes to the point of making them unusable. Metaphors can exclude certain conceptualizations and dilute others to the point of producing hermeneutic and testimonial injustice, though in some instances, one epistemic injustice might serve to *rectify* another. Using a number of vivid examples including “illness as war,” Sibbald illuminates the role metaphors play in our conceptual frameworks, especially for those of us at the intersections. She even goes so far as to provide a series of questions for evaluating the epistemic ethics of any particular metaphor. While acknowledging that there are not easy answers to which metaphors should be excluded and when, Sibbald’s analysis hints at implications that Blending theory has for other games we play with language—humor, irony, etc.—opening new routes to interrogating their epistemic violence as well.

Drawing on her experience as an advocate for survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV), Emma Dougherty develops an understanding of hermeneutical injustice that can be agential and that does not require hermeneutical marginalization. Dougherty argues that myths about IPV can act as hermeneutical interference (Hänel 2020) making it difficult for victims to identify themselves as suffering abuse and that these myths disproportionately affect people who are multiply marginalized (Ijoma 2018; Mogul et al. 2011). In such cases, meaning-making resources are available, but those who need them have difficulty using them. In addition, Dougherty calls attention to the tendency of perpetrators of IPV to isolate their victims, arguing that this isolation keeps victims from accessing not only material resources, but also epistemic resources for resisting violence. When used by an individual perpetrator, isolation thus constitutes an agential form of hermeneutical injustice. Expanding beyond IPV, Dougherty considers how policies such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and institutions such as the prison system in the US can act as hermeneutical isolators, making multiply marginalized individuals more vulnerable to epistemic, emotional, and physical violence.

A know better toolkit

The essays in this section, we contend, poise readers to embrace the difference and complexity articulated in black and indigenous feminist thought and to resist single-axis analyses. While Sertler and Meissner articulate distinctive methodologies equipped to approach multiple axes and differences with care, Meghani and Ward return readers to equally equipped concepts that have been worn of their potency through misuse and abridgement. There is an unapologetic emphasis in these essays on the frameworks of black and indigenous women as well as a refusal to “overcome” differences. While not exhaustive, the tools provided here are indispensable.

In “Notes from a Structural Epistemologist”, Ezgi Sertler maps methods and commitments she uses to interrogate the role that oppressive institutions and systems

play in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world. Sertler attributes two commitments to the structural epistemologist: (1) understanding the how and why of certain predicaments and vulnerabilities disproportionately imposed on specific bodies and the persistence of those impositions and (2) highlighting the “interlocking nature of systems of oppression” and the character of “organized domination.” The toolkit she develops includes attention to the “epistemic status set-up” (the assignment of high/low epistemic status to different folks) and the “intervention/resistance ratio” (the restriction of intervention by epistemic agents on the processes of knowledge production). She also articulates the “production strategy” of structural epistemology which examines how knowledge-production is affected by the organization of systems and institutions, including the prioritization of certain measures over others. Sertler is offering more than just a how-to: articulating the conceptual tools of the structural epistemologist project shows just how vital their contribution has been to understanding epistemic oppression and how crucial they will be to the future of epistemology, ethics, and politics.

Drawing on language reclamation work and Indigenous philosophies of language, Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner outlines a non-exhaustive list of ways in which Indigenous languages are untranslatable. Identifying and acknowledging this incommensurability allows for coalitions that respectfully hold space for different languages, knowledges, and lifeways. Her essay, “World-Traveling in Tule Canoes: Indigenous Philosophies of Language and an Ethic of Incommensurability,” is organized through a metaphor rooted in her communities’ traditional practice of canoe voyaging. Thus, the form of the essay itself honors the inseparability of knowledge, knower, knowledge communities, and land, while enacting the kind of knowledge practices Meissner recommends for navigating the difficult terrain of incommensurability. Over the course of her paper, Meissner calls attention to various aspects of the landscape with respect to translation, including active debate within communities on the possibilities of translation, the way values motivate quests concerning translatability, and guidance for responsible world-traveling that can be learned through following Indigenous philosophies of language.

The “mainstreaming” of intersectionality in social and political philosophy has been fraught with confusion, misuse, and abuse. In “Intersectionality, Intersectional Standpoints, and Identity Politics,” Zahra Meghani surveys the functional and historical distinctions between standpoint, intersectionality, intersectional standpoints, and identity politics in a way that amplifies their importance to normative philosophies as well as to epistemology. At the same time, Meghani defends intersectional standpoints from dismissive criticisms that rely on the erasure of or disingenuous engagement with the contributions of black feminist thought. Using the example of discourses critical of public assistance policies concerning undocumented folk, Meghani shows the classificatory import and political power of intersectional standpoint analysis by refuting claims that undocumented folk aren’t ethically entitled to benefits, aren’t “real” members of the relevant community deserving of benefits, or are undeserving as part of a criminal class. Meghani also clarifies the relationship between intersectional standpoint and identity politics to reveal the epistemic gaslighting leveraged in rejections of identity politics and to clarify the role played by intersectional standpoint in the liberation of those at the margins.

In the final essay of this issue, Caleb Ward develops an interpretation of Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic grounded in a close reading of “Uses of the Erotic.” Ward’s analysis connects the essay to commitments expressed by Lorde throughout the entirety of her work and situates the concept of the erotic within the context of

Black feminist resistance to oppression. The erotic as a source of political resistance, Ward argues, resides for Lorde in the connection among feeling, knowledge, power, and concerted action. “Audre Lorde’s Erotic as Epistemic and Political Practice” provides an understanding of all four connected elements. Just as Meissner emphasizes the importance of holding space for incommensurability in order to build coalition, Ward also argues that Lorde’s erotic helps build coalitional resistance through a recognition of genuine differences, where feeling, knowledge, empowerment, and action are inseparable.

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