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# Trans Epistemology and Methodological Radicalism: Un $\text{C}\text{e}\text{u}\text{f}$ , But Enough

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## Abstract

There have now been a few attempts in trans theory to give an account of trans epistemology (see Radi 2019; Meadow 2016; and Dickson 2021). I will suggest that despite an admirable goal—that of giving an epistemology that provides a methodologically radical and distinctively trans break from other contemporary epistemological theory—thus far no account has been successful. Instead, I suggest that, in the absence of a more satisfactory radical account of trans epistemology, we can think of trans epistemology as a methodologically moderate (though politically radical) extension of mainstream epistemology.

## Introduction

There have now been a few attempts in trans theory to give an account of *trans epistemology* (see Meadow 2016; Radi 2019; Dickson 2021). These have largely had an admirable goal—that of giving an epistemology that provides a methodologically radical and distinctively trans break from other contemporary epistemological theory—but thus far none has been successful. Whilst I do not want to suggest that such a project is inevitably doomed to failure, I will suggest that we can achieve a more moderate goal—that of modifying contemporary epistemology in light of the issues that trans people face. I will argue:

- (a) That there are debates over epistemology that are distinctive to trans issues and trans people's experiences;
- (b) That there are effects of epistemic injustices that are specific to trans people;
- (c) That the perspectives of trans people can make us rethink central concepts in social epistemology;
- (d) That the experiences of trans people give us a particular insight into how ideology is materialised and how the social world can be recognized as a product of ideology.

I will argue for these conclusions using four examples:

- (i) The debate over the nature of justification provided by self-identification;
- (ii) Testimonial injustice;
- (iii) Hermeneutical injustice;
- (iv) Gendered bathrooms.

I will suggest that these add to contemporary epistemology and provide a vision of trans epistemology as relatively methodologically conservative, though nonetheless politically radical, an extension of traditional epistemology that is well worth engaging in.

### What distinguishes trans epistemology? The field as it stands

Let's begin by looking at three attempts to define a trans epistemology in the extant literature, from Blas Radi, Tey Meadow, and Nathaniel Dickson. Each author attempts to give us what I would call a "radical" vision for trans epistemology, that is, an epistemology that is distinctively *trans*, and which represents a radical break from mainstream epistemology. By methodological radicalism here I broadly mean something like the following: the development of feminist epistemology led to a number of novel approaches to epistemology, novel approaches that did away with certain taken-for-granted assumptions of epistemology heretofore—think, for instance, of feminist epistemology's emphasis on standpoint theory and values in science. Such novelty is present in a number of historical developments in epistemology that come from marginalized subjects, not least the epistemological traditions that came out of queer theory and postcolonial theory. The hope that trans people might be the source of *another* novel approach to epistemology is the thought that drives the first half of the paper. By contrast, "mainstream" or "traditional" epistemology as I use it here just refers to those longstanding extant traditions in epistemology, including not just analytic epistemology, but more recent developments such as feminist, queer, and postcolonial epistemologies. I will suggest that each of the authors considered here fails to give us something that quite matches up to this promise.

### Radi's epistemology defined by its enemies

Radi's excellent article "On Trans\* Epistemology" (2019) ends with precisely this question of the specificity of trans epistemology: what distinguishes it from other forms of epistemology? Radi worries that, because the authors that he considers to be doing trans epistemology look like they are mostly borrowing "the conceptual tools of indigenous knowledge, feminist theory, transfeminism, postcolonial studies, epistemologies of the South, and critical race theory" (Radi 2019, 58), it appears as if there is nothing that distinguishes trans epistemologies from the epistemologies provided by these other traditions.

Radi considers and then rejects a couple of potential answers to this problem. First, he suggests that the specificity of trans epistemology stems from it being one which "studies and develops trans\* issues" (Radi 2019, 58). Second, he suggests that it may be defined in terms of its practitioners—that is, trans epistemology is just epistemology done by trans people (Radi 2019, 58). However, Radi suggests two reasons for rejecting both of these accounts. On the one hand, he argues, both of these accounts assume what and who is trans, as well as what their concerns are. On "the other hand, we would be

taking for granted the existence of a direct causal relationship between a particular gender identity and a certain way of constructing knowledge” (Radi 2019, 58).

I want to suggest that these reasons for rejecting the accounts are flawed. Take the first objection—even supposing the question of “which people are trans people?” is only completely answerable once we have an effective trans epistemology up and running, we can nonetheless say that we have some idea of who the group of trans people is going to include, and ask about their concerns, prior to starting the project. We can say for certain that (for example) trans women do fall under the trans umbrella for the purposes of circumscribing trans epistemology. After all, an answer to the question “which people are trans people?” which failed to include trans women would simply be missing the point. As such, prior to doing trans epistemology, we have a group of people who we know are trans, and as such we can simply use them, or their concerns, to initially circumscribe the limits of trans epistemology, expanding the sphere of trans epistemology should that field demand it as it develops. Radi’s second objection, that these accounts of trans epistemology presuppose an implausible direct causal relationship between gender identity and a particular way of constructing knowledge only works if one presupposes that trans epistemology is, or is going to be, a relatively uniform field. Rather, I suggest, we should expect that trans epistemology, if it is defined either in terms of the concerns of its subjects, or the identity of its practitioners, is going to be a form of inquiry that is rife with internal difference. As Radi himself recognizes, trans people exist in a variety of contexts, and live a variety of different lives, with varied interests and concerns. They will even have a variety of critical standpoints on those lives: “You lock up three trans people in a room and they’ll come out with five opinions among them” (Wilchins 2013, 15). Any epistemology defined in such terms will reflect that variety.

That said, even if for the wrong reasons, I think that Radi is right to reject the second account he proposes, which defines trans epistemology in terms of its practitioners. Why should we think that, for instance, Veronica Ivy’s work on the norms of assertion and aesthetic testimony (e.g., Ivy 2015, 2016), or my own work on dismissive incomprehension and assertion (e.g., Cull 2019a, 2019b), count as trans epistemology, just because it is written by trans people? Neither I nor Ivy bring up trans identities or interests as particularly salient features of our work on these topics, but under the second definition of trans epistemology, our work on these topics would count. Even if such a definition cuts the social world up fairly neatly, which I concede, this seems to be an uninteresting category. Surely, we want something more substantive from a concept of trans epistemology than just “epistemology done by trans people.”

What about the first account—defining trans epistemology by its object, trans issues? Well, it turns on how we define “trans issues”. If, by “trans issues,” we mean issues faced by trans people, it seems overly inclusive. Certain trans people face the issue of whether they should adopt a knowledge-first epistemology, but it would be strange were we to count Timothy Williamson’s *Knowledge and its limits* (2000) as a work of trans epistemology.<sup>1</sup> I think, however, that we can define “trans issues” slightly more tightly, as those issues that are salient to trans people in virtue of their trans status. That is, trans epistemology deals with those issues that are pertinent to trans people *because* they are trans people. I think this allows us to delimit an interesting class of epistemological inquiry, and later in this paper, I will argue how we can see trans epistemology (when thought of in this way) as an extension of contemporary epistemology.

Radi, however, goes on to suggest a couple of different ways of defining trans epistemology that he is more sympathetic to. He suggests that we might see trans

epistemology as distinguished by its unique method or approach. Indeed, I think that this would, if there were such a method, be an excellent way of circumscribing trans epistemology, potentially offering a radical break from other forms of contemporary epistemology. However, as Radi admits, as it stands, there is no such method, and he can only speculate as to what it might look like. Even then, we do not really get given any sense of the particular route that trans epistemology might take (Radi 2019, 58).

What might be read as Radi's final attempt to circumscribe trans epistemology is in terms of its unique relationship to its enemies, when compared with other liberatory epistemologies.<sup>2</sup> That is:

Intellectual opponents of feminist epistemology, epistemologies from the South and epistemologies of ignorance can be clearly identified as such, even as epistemic and political rivals or "enemies." Androcentrism, colonialism, and racism do not share on the projects of these critical epistemologies, and this is evident even in the most basic approaches to the field. Meanwhile, such differentiation is not that simple in trans\* epistemology. (Radi 2019, 59)

Why is this differentiation not so simple in trans epistemology? Well, Radi argues, a number of the people who have found themselves opposed by work in trans epistemology are themselves supposedly opposed to methodological and political conservatism in epistemology:

By examining the discussions held by the authors mentioned in this paper, we will find that their arguments are not exclusively targeted at representatives of epistemic conservatism. Many of the main controversies place them in opposition to Butler, Halberstam, Raymond, Preciado, among others, and to the local reappropriations of these authors. In other words, we discover that trans\* academics—and activists—engage in debates with exemplars of queer theory, gay-lesbian studies, and some feminist groups (affiliations that often overlap). Consequently, I suggest that one of the specific challenges of trans\* epistemologies is defined by the tensions with these epistemic communities. While self-subscribed to emancipatory and radical epistemological projects, some of our more contentious interlocutors act out the practices listed in the inventory of epistemic violences described above. Trans\* epistemologies, then, must find ways to struggle not only with their obvious enemies, but also with those who present themselves as natural allies. (Radi 2019, 59)

This is a very interesting way of delineating trans epistemology, but I think, ultimately, one that fails. For one, note that it is hardly uncommon for there to be conflicts between groups which seek liberation—think of the conflict between US feminist and Black activists over voting rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example. Or, in the epistemological domain, think of Black and postcolonial critiques of white feminist epistemology (see Amos and Parmar 2005; Jaggar 2005). As such, we can hardly say that trans epistemology is unique in conflicting with other putatively progressive epistemologists<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, this definition might suggest that various politically conservative positions count as trans epistemology. After all, if positioning one's epistemology as one that is opposed to Butler and other queer theorists is enough for an epistemology to count as trans epistemology, we might worry that anyone from Martha Nussbaum to Jair Bolsonaro can count as trans epistemologists. Perhaps even

more pressing is the worry that, if offered, such a definition of trans epistemology seems incredibly limiting. Trans epistemology ought to be more than simply a reaction to putatively progressive cis epistemology. Such a definition does a disservice to trans epistemology by limiting it to a critique of cis theory. More is needed from a definition of trans epistemology.

### *Meadow's trans epistemology as queer epistemology*

Tey Meadow, by contrast, suggests that trans epistemology is a particular methodology employed by researchers taking a queer perspective on transgender topics:

A queer perspective on transgender topics makes two primary intellectual moves: first, such studies take a humanistic approach, conferring the “dignity of belief” upon the “felt sense of gender” that research subjects describe (Salamon 2014, 116). Second, such studies deploy what I’ll call a “trans\* epistemology.” The truncation symbol, or “\*” at the end of “trans\*,” symbolizes the openness to a variety of endings, meanings, and interpretations, a multiplicity of as-yet undefined articulations. The “subject” of research, previously considered a static, knowable, coherent, and self-knowledgeable entity, bound by the imagination of the researcher, is redrawn as an open question about how the forces of culture, discourse, self-understanding, and social group membership interact to produce frameworks of meaning into which subjects position themselves. Such an epistemological orientation allows for multiple, unstable, contingent meanings, while still recognizing that individuals “bring a high degree of intelligible order to their circumstances” (Blommaert and Rampton 2016, 36), even when such circumstances seem dauntingly complex. (Meadow 2016, 319–20)

What is puzzling about this definition of “trans\* epistemology” is that it seems largely indistinguishable from queer theory understandings of the “subject” of research. Is there really anything distinctive about claiming that the subject is “redrawn as an open question about how the forces of culture, discourse, self-understanding, and social group membership interact to produce frameworks of meaning into which subjects position themselves”?<sup>4</sup> Surely such claims are standard practice in queer theory. Moreover, there is no reason to think that the above claims should especially be linked to trans people. Now, one might respond to this by asking, “Isn’t there something inherently resistant about trans identities, which demonstrates the contingency of identity?” Perhaps, but we should demand an argument to convince us as much. Indeed, as trans theorists such as Vivian Namaste (2000) and Jay Prosser (1998) have been at pains to argue, an unthinking association of trans identities with queer ideas about the destabilization of identities is not only tenuous but indeed is actively transphobic.<sup>5</sup> What is odd is that, where we do get a departure from queer theory, it is characterized by Meadow not as trans epistemology, but as a “humanistic approach.” As such, we cannot claim, as Meadow does, that this is a distinctive methodology.

We might suggest a modification to the above definition, that trans epistemology might best be characterized as *both* an endorsement of the humanistic approach of conferring the dignity of belief on a felt sense of gender, and an endorsement of a queer approach to the subject that no longer treats it as a static, coherent, and “self-knowledgeable” entity. Yet even before we consider what such a research program might look like, we face a problem: the two commitments of this version of trans epistemology are in conflict. The trans epistemologist of this stripe at once claims that the

subject fails to have self-knowledge regarding their identity, and, thanks to their humanism, wants to “confer the dignity” of belief regarding trans people’s identifications. At best this position is patronizing. At worst it is incoherent. If someone following Meadow’s trans epistemology buys the claim that their research subjects cannot truly know the nature of their own identity, then any “conferral of the dignity of belief” with respect to their research subjects is insincere, a patronizing “you might think you’re a woman, but really, you are an unstable open question of forces, only some of which you understand.” On the other hand, if the researcher sincerely believes one of their research subjects when that subject says, “I am a trans man,” then they appear to have given up on the second commitment to the impossibility of self-knowledge on the part of the subject with regards to identity. As such, this view of trans epistemology seems untenable.

### *Dickson’s trans epistemology as integrated epistemology*

A more recent attempt to distinguish trans epistemology comes from Nathaniel Dickson, who argues that trans epistemology should be *integrated*: that is, any gulf between the daily lives of trans people and academic research should be removed, whether that involves removing impediments to accessing the production of research or removing impediments to accessing the products of research. He suggests that failing to integrate the production of knowledge “prevents solidarity and collaborative understanding and activity. Reintegrating learning and activity is essential to nurturing our capacity for collective learning, thinking, and political action” (Dickson 2021, 211).

How should we interpret the notion of integrated epistemology? Well, we might say that research that uses an integrated epistemology is one in which (1) everyday activity on the part of the researcher is incorporated into the research, perhaps using researcher diaries or other means of incorporating the researcher into their research. We might also think that (2) it is research *done by trans people* on their own lives and the lives of other trans people in ways that are shaped by the complex and varied narratives of trans communities—that is, reflexive autoethnographic and ethnographic research into trans lives. Alternatively, we might suggest that integrated epistemology is one that makes the products of research, whether conceptual, medical, social, or otherwise, freely available to the public. As Dickson puts it,

Our dispossession ... is everywhere visible, in the death of diabetics who cannot obtain insulin, the black market in hormones for gender transition, the use of fish antibiotics for the treatment of human infections, the price of state sanctioned medications, the racist devaluation of language systems, the gap in preventative and diagnostic care access by race, income, and gender. (Dickson 2021, 211)

On this view, trans epistemology, when used to guide academic research generally, involves (3) a broad commitment to (minimally) the pulling down of online research paywalls and the institution of a welfare state, if not full communism, where the products of research are used for the benefit of all. Assuming that the revolution has not yet arrived, we might think that the individual research project, when guided by trans epistemology, involves (4) a sharing of the results of that research with the subjects who were researched.

Do any of (1)–(4) really present us with a distinctively trans epistemology? Well, taken individually, certainly not. Reflexive research of the sort described by (1) is, whilst not the methodology of the majority in the social sciences, certainly a style of

methodology taught in most social research methods courses. As such it does not represent a major break from standard methodology. Similarly, autoethnography, whilst not uncontroversial, is standard practice in many departments. Thus, even if we can say that (because it is *trans* autoethnography and ethnography) (2) represents a trans epistemology, (2) does not give us the radical break from standard epistemology that we were hoping for. We might think that, when the subjects and recipients of research are trans people, the same holds for (4)—if anything, (4) just describes an aspect of community-based participatory research.<sup>6</sup> (3) is interestingly different—whilst this is definitely a radical break from standard practice in most university contexts, it's hard to see what makes this a distinctively *trans* break. If anything, this looks like an *anti-capitalist* break from bourgeois exploitation of research. Of course, trans and anti-capitalist demands are not always opposed—indeed in most cases I would submit that they are aligned—but it seems hard to see why the best description of (3) is “trans epistemology” and not “socialising research.”

Indeed, we might draw a parallel between (3) and the work of the logical positivist Otto Neurath. Neurath was a socialist who participated in both of the Bavarian revolutionary governments of 1919, attempting to institute full socialization of the economy as president of the central planning office. After his exile to Vienna, he participated in a number of further socialization projects, focusing on housing and education. Education, and adult education about the results of social-scientific inquiry in particular, were a central concern for Neurath, establishing the Social and Economic Museum of Vienna, and developing ISOTYPE, a pictorial methodology for the dissemination of statistical research to all. We can thus think of both Neurath and (3) as calling for a left-wing positivist commitment to the dissemination of research and sharing the fruits of research (see Neurath 1973a, 1973b, along with Carnap 1963, 81–84).

What if (1)–(4) are taken together, as Dickson suggests? Well, we are left with trans people doing reflexive autoethnography that is both shared with and used for the good of trans people. As far as it goes, we might be happy labelling this practice *trans epistemology*. However, one might worry that this is a little narrow in scope. Compare this notion of trans epistemology with the notion of feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology is incredibly broad in scope, allowing for critiques of all aspects of life. By comparison, the vision of trans epistemology we get from Dickson is (while certainly worthwhile) a very narrow methodology. Whilst Dickson's version of trans epistemology might provide an excellent methodology for the study of, say, online trans messageboards, or the everyday practice of taking hormones, it seems hard to see how we could have (say) a trans epistemology of mathematics or physics in the way that we have feminist epistemology of mathematics and physics. Perhaps this is okay—maybe we should prefer a limited scope but maintain claims to novelty in method. In what follows however, I will offer a picture of trans epistemology that gives up on claims to methodological novelty or radicalism in favour of a broad scope.

### A less radical vision for trans epistemology

I don't want to suggest that we will never have a trans epistemology that represents a radical and distinctively trans break from mainstream epistemology. However, for the moment, I suggest that we just don't have such an epistemology. Instead, I want to suggest that there is room right now for a vision of trans epistemology that sees itself as a methodologically more conservative extension of epistemology to trans issues, and a revision of epistemological concepts in the light of trans insights. In particular, in the following four



sections, I will, via four examples, argue for each of the following in turn: (i) there are debates over epistemology that are distinctive to trans experiences, (ii) that there are effects of epistemic injustices that are specific to trans people, (iii) that the perspectives of trans people can make us rethink central concepts in social epistemology, and (iv) that the experience of trans people gives us a particular insight into how ideology is materialized and how the social world can be recognized as a product of ideology.

### *Self-identification: moral or epistemic?*

One question that has arisen in recent analytic trans philosophy is of the nature of the justification provided by self-identifications. Normally, when someone avows something about their inner life, we take it that we are justified in taking that avowal at face value. So, when someone says, “I love chocolate,” *normally* we take ourselves as justified in believing that yes, this person does love chocolate and that we should treat them appropriately (perhaps buying them chocolate for their birthday). Meanwhile, when someone, apparently sincerely, says “I am a woman,” we take ourselves to be justified in believing that they are a woman, and treating them as such. However: what is the nature of this justification? Is it epistemic, or moral? One way of putting this question is, are our actions and beliefs that we base on this person’s claim justified because the person in question is an authority on the truth of the matter at hand, or are our actions justified because we would be doing a harm or morally failing if we did not perform them? Of course, one’s answer might also be that the justification is both epistemic and moral, or that it is neither. Perhaps the justification is pragmatic, or there is no justification whatsoever! As I will suggest later, I do not take myself to be solving this debate here—rather, I wish to underwrite the significance of this debate for our conception of trans epistemology.

Talia Bettcher says that the justification in question is *ethical*, deriving not from the status of the subject as an expert, but from the status of the subject as a moral agent. For Bettcher, drawing on the work of J. L. Austin, when one says, “I’m hungry” or “I’m a woman,” one is not merely acknowledging a fact about oneself—one is also staking a claim and certifying a particular public understanding of oneself which was private before. Bettcher gives a couple of examples of why we might think that this is of ethical significance:

Or consider a case in which a second person simply *tells* the first person with certitude what her attitudes are. For example, even if it is clear one wants to go home (one looks at the clock, taps one’s foot), it is odd for one’s date to announce, unprompted “You want to go home now.” To be sure, he might ask, “Do you want to go home? Because it seems like you do.” He might even say, “It seems to me you want to go home.” What seems problematic is the attempt to avow somebody else’s mental attitudes on their own behalf, and there is a sense that if “You want to go home now” is not meant humorously, it is an attempt to control. Again, there is something that feels “ungrammatical.” More important, there is an infringement on the first person’s autonomy, the second person is inappropriately treating his own interpretive assessment as authoritative. (Bettcher 2009, 102)

An interesting upside of this thought is that one of the central wrongs of misgendering is an infringement on autonomy. When a trans man says, “I am a man,” and someone



replies “You’re just a confused girl,” one of the wrongs that is occurring is that the transphobe is attempting to control the mental states of the trans man. We will return to some other harms in a moment when we look at testimonial injustice.

If this is the argument for moral or ethical first-person authority, why might one think that we have *epistemic* first-person authority? Well, it looks like, in a lot of cases, we are the best placed to judge the truth as to our internal states. If one wishes to know how I’m feeling, or what I want for dinner, *generally* the best person to ask is me. Of course, we can be wrong about our attitudinal states occasionally (I think I want chocolate, but really I’m just sad). But nonetheless, it looks like we are as well placed as anyone to judge, and probably better placed than anyone else.

Bettcher has denied that first-person authority of this sort is epistemic in character. Why? She notes that being wrong about our own attitudinal states happens *a lot*. We might not always be wrong, but the existence of denial, self-deception, wishful thinking, and unconscious attitudes means that we cannot be experts, or epistemic authorities on our inner lives. If this is right, then it looks like any special justification that we have in drawing on the first-person avowals of others cannot be epistemic in nature. Certainly, the justification will not have the overwhelming force we normally take it to have.

However, I think that Bettcher sets the bar too high here. Suppose you and I disagree over whether England or Australia will win the Ashes later this year, but neither of us is an expert on cricket. Absent further evidence, it looks like we are peers, and at something of an impasse. However, suppose you remember that a few weeks ago you met the Australian team and they looked especially strong and capable of batting in comparison to the English team. It seems like I should, given this additional evidence, increase my credence in the thought that Australia will win. I don’t need to recognize you as an expert on cricket, only that you are better placed than me to know the truth-value of the claim “Australia will win the Ashes.”

In the case of first-person authority, the evidence provided might, in certain cases, be undermined by self-deception, denial, and so on. But *prima facie* it looks like the evidence provided via first person access is good, and simply places one in a better position than others to know about one’s attitudinal states. We need reasons to think that the evidence has been undermined—perhaps that the person in question is in denial about some issue, or that the person is prone to self-deception. However, absent such reasons, we should take at face value any sincere avowal of attitudinal states, simply on the epistemic grounds that the avower is best placed to know if the avowal is true. As such, in most cases it will be enough to justify belief in an avowal: expertise is not necessary, just better evidence. So, we might think, self-identifications provide epistemic justification in just the same way that avowals of attitudinal states like “I want a cup of tea” do.

What’s the upshot of this? Well, maybe self-identifications provide epistemic, as well as moral justification. Maybe someone can provide a counter-argument to myself, or Bettcher, and suggest that the justification is merely epistemic or ethical. Perhaps the debate concludes that the justification is political, pragmatic, or of some other nature.<sup>7</sup> However the debate develops we should note that this debate is precisely an epistemic debate that is distinctive to trans issues. Of course, this debate does not float free of more standard debates in epistemology about testimony, self-knowledge, and even classical questions about personal identity. As such, I want to suggest that trans epistemology, as epitomized here, is best characterized as an extension of traditional epistemology to trans issues.

### Testimonial injustice

I want to suggest that another methodologically (more) conservative extension of traditional epistemology as trans epistemology comes in thinking about the specific ways in which epistemic injustices affect trans people. By way of example, let's think about testimonial injustice, as defined by Miranda Fricker (2007). Put basically, this is the injustice done when a speaker is given less credibility than they deserve due to an audience's prejudice about the identity of the speaker. Think of, for instance, the ways in which misogynist audiences will be more likely to believe the testimony of men than women, or racist audiences are less likely to believe the testimony of black people than white people. Fricker defines the idea thus: "The speaker sustains such a testimonial injustice if and only if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer" (Fricker 2007, 28).

It seems fairly obvious that trans people face testimonial injustice insofar as their testimony with regard to their gender is dismissed. If what I said in the last section was correct—that we should give someone a reasonably high degree of credence with respect to their avowals of attitudinal states—then it looks like that, given the systematic assertion that trans people are not the gender they claim to be, trans people are suffering testimonial injustice. A particular transphobic prejudice on the part of hearers is deflating the credence that those hearers have (or should have) in the avowals of trans people about their genders. Even if one rejects the epistemic nature of the justification provided by self-identifications, as discussed above, it looks like a relatively high level of credence should be given to trans people when they self-identify, and because of prejudice that high level is not given in most cases.

However, the testimonial injustice faced by trans people is not limited to cases of self-identification. Take the medical context—even when a trans person has access to a medical professional who respects their gender identification, those professionals often fail to attribute appropriate credence to the testimony of trans people. Rather than appropriately listening to the patient's narrative about what has recently changed in their life that might be a cause of the symptoms on display, doctors are often quick to attribute any symptoms to the patient's trans status, resulting in misdiagnosis. In its extreme form, this leads to what has been called "trans broken arm syndrome" (Payton 2015; Dietz and Halem 2016, 1074).

Testimonial injustices are not only faced by trans people—even in specific cases in the medical context there are obvious parallels to types of testimonial injustice faced by fat people and people with mental illnesses in such contexts.<sup>8</sup> That said, specific prejudices against trans people lead to particular forms of testimonial injustice—as recognized by Fricker herself and explored in her later work with Katharine Jenkins (see Fricker and Jenkins 2017). Thinking through these sorts of cases, and other particular forms of epistemic injustice faced by trans people, whilst not a radical break from traditional epistemology, to my mind certainly counts as trans epistemology.

### Hermeneutical injustice

Slightly more radically, we might think that taking trans perspectives seriously may ask us to rethink central concepts in traditional epistemology. Here I'll take the example of hermeneutical injustice as given by Miranda Fricker, whose definition has come to loom large over the field of epistemology. Hermeneutical injustices are injustices that result from the lack of a way to understand an important part of one's life: "Hermeneutical injustice is: *the injustice of having some significant area of one's social*

*experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.*" (Fricker 2007, 155). The "collective hermeneutical resource" is the collection of those concepts, frameworks, and ideas that are shared in common for all to use to make sense of the world (see also Fricker 2016, 167).<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, to say that there is a structural identity prejudice in that resource is just to say that the resource has largely been formed by and for certain groups, biased by those who have power. The idea is that because our concepts and frameworks for understanding the world were produced by and for (say) white men, and that others who suggest different concepts have had their concepts either co-opted or dismissed, there are going to be biases in our resources for understanding the world. One way this expresses itself is through lacunae or gaps—places where it would be really useful to have some concept, but we simply do not have one because of the biases in our collective hermeneutic resource.

Fricker's primary example is the concept of sexual harassment:

As Wood told the story, the eminent man would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he'd deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers. One night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on her mouth. After the Christmas party incident, Carmita Wood went out of her way to use the stairs in the lab building in order to avoid a repeat encounter, but the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance while maintaining cordial relations with his wife, whom she liked, brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding—the blank on the form needed to be filled in—she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied.

The "this" they were going to break the silence about had no name. "Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs," Sauvigne remembers, "brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for our speak-out. We were referring to it as 'sexual intimidation,' 'sexual coercion,' 'sexual exploitation on the job.' None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors. Somebody came up with 'harassment.' Sexual harassment! Instantly we agreed. That's what it was. (Brownmiller, quoted in Fricker 2007, 149–50)

For Fricker, having the concept of sexual harassment allows for better organization around fighting it, legislative efforts to regulate or control it, and so on, where before there wasn't even a way of making sense of sexual harassment as a systematic problem. As such, a situation in which the concept is absent is one where an injustice is occurring, and where the development of new concepts becomes an issue of justice.

How might we think of trans concepts within this model? As Fricker thought of things, there is a *single* hermeneutical resource that is relevant for talk of hermeneutical injustice—a single set of concepts and frameworks for understanding the world, from

which concepts such as sexual harassment and nonbinary are omitted as lacunae. However, whilst concepts like trans, nonbinary, etc., have existed in trans communities for a long time, such concepts were not a part of the *collective* hermeneutical resource until recently. Their influence might have been limited, and their ways of understanding the world marginalized, but trans people did in fact have the concepts in question, even when the rest of society did not. The notion of *genderqueer*, for instance, has a history going back to at least 1995 (see Wilchins 1995, 4), but one would be pushed to claim that it forms a part of the collective hermeneutical resource even now. After all, whilst “genderqueer” might have made its way into a few dictionaries post-2016, it hasn’t found its way into ordinary discourse in more conservative areas. If one is a person who wishes to talk to one’s conservative relatives about one’s genderqueer identity, one is going to have a real issue, despite one having access to the relevant concept. So we have a kind of injustice to do with access to conceptual resources, but not one that is adequately captured by Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice. Meanwhile, take the concept *agender*. Trystan Goetze raises the case of Tyler Ford talking about themselves and the concept:

People don’t know what to make of me when they see me, because they feel my features contradict one another. They see no room for the curve of my hips to coexist with my facial hair; they desperately want me to be someone they can easily categorise ... Strangers are often desperate to figure out what genitalia I have, in the hope that my body holds the key to some great secret and unavoidable truth about myself and my gender. It doesn’t. My words hold my truth. My body is simply the vehicle that gives me the opportunity to express myself. (Ford 2015)

Here it looks like there’s a kind of injustice that is going on, and one to do with concepts and interpretation at that. But this isn’t a case of lack of self-understanding or failure to adequately understand one’s own experience. Rather, it is that *others* lack the understanding, or fail to adequately understand and engage with Ford.

These sorts of cases are going to require us to rework our notion of hermeneutical injustice in order to be able to account for it—allowing that there are multiple hermeneutical resources, and that access to and the marginalization of various resources is a political issue, both for the understanding of oneself and of others. Indeed, Trystan Goetze suggests that we can develop *six* different species of hermeneutical injustice by carefully analysing the notion of a collective hermeneutical resource and different relationships to those resources (Goetze 2018, 81). We might even suggest that a lacuna-based analysis of hermeneutical injustice is wrongheaded, following Arianna Falbo in arguing that “filling in hermeneutical gaps is not enough to ensure hermeneutical justice; it is just one part of a much broader, comprehensive, and socially embedded process” (Falbo 2022, 358). Once we have this improved conception of hermeneutical injustice, we can begin to analyze the case of Ford more adequately. As such, we have a case of trans people, and the particular issues that we face, making us rethink a central concept in epistemology.<sup>10</sup>

I suspect that we need to further modify our notion of hermeneutical injustice if we consider the case of Section 28. Section 28 was passed by the Thatcher government in 1988 and stated that a local government “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” nor may it “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as

a pretended family relationship” (UK Government 2020).<sup>11</sup> This largely affected schools, where teachers believed that they could face prosecution for teaching about queer identities and lives, and many lesbian, gay, and bisexual school clubs were closed. Here we have an explicit attempt by a government to prevent children from learning about concepts such as gay or non-heterosexual families. As Jill Knight, a Conservative MP and driving force behind the bill put it, “The major point of it was to protect children in schools from having homosexuality thrust upon them” (quoted in Durham 1991, 118). In Fricker’s terms, we would say that the concept of gay is a part of the collective hermeneutical resource, but a government is attempting to stop certain individuals from accessing that concept. Yet this does not count as hermeneutical injustice according to Fricker’s initial definition! But this seems wrong—by withholding the concept from children, the UK Government prevented gay children (in particular) from understanding significant aspects of their lives. In the light of this conclusion, we might think, we are going to have to expand or rethink our notion of hermeneutical injustice.

Might trans perspectives make us rethink our conception of testimonial injustice too? Perhaps—think about the case of a transphobic person who sincerely believes that trans women are just delusional men and gives extremely low credence to any statement made by a trans woman. One might think that it’s going to be difficult to square the kind of prejudice driving down the transphobic person’s credences with the notion of identity prejudice which is so central to Fricker’s account of testimonial injustice. After all, identity prejudice is “prejudice for or against people owing to some feature of their social identity” (Fricker 2007, 28) but it looks as if, from the transphobe’s point of view, trans women aren’t trans women—so it’s not that aspect of their social identities that is driving down the transphobe’s credences. We might suggest that we need to tinker with the notion of testimonial injustice to capture what is going on in this case, or at least tell a careful story about how identity prejudice functions here.

### *Epistemology of the water closet: ideology materialized*

Finally, I want to suggest that another avenue for trans epistemology as methodologically more conservative extension of traditional epistemology is *trans epistemology as ideology critique*, and I want to explore this via the case of bathrooms. Contemporary epistemologists have largely moved past the notion of ideology as mere “false consciousness,” that is, that we can conceive of ideology merely in terms of false or misleading beliefs that serve to justify or perpetuate an existing social order.<sup>12</sup> Instead, philosophers such as Sally Haslanger have argued for a *materialist* conception of ideology, drawing on the likes of Catharine MacKinnon (see especially MacKinnon 1989) and Stuart Hall (see especially Hall 1996/2005). Haslanger suggests that we should understand ideology as a set of behavioral scripts, symbols, and meanings that uphold or create unjust social relations, and obscure that which is valuable.<sup>13</sup> On this account, ideology produces and maintains ideological formations, that is, unjust social practices and institutions, stabilizing them and making them resistant to change. The task of ideology critique becomes “to challenge, disrupt and replace those aspects of the cultural techné that mask or occlude what’s valuable and prevent us from organizing ourselves in ways that are more just.” (Haslanger 2017, 160).

What does any of this have to do with bathrooms? Well, one way of reading gendered bathrooms is as a material aspect of binarist ideology—the binarist assumptions of society have been built into the very architecture of almost all public buildings, and

the social practices of violence and exclusion that accompany those architectural choices. Cissexist and binarist ideology also maintains the material (in the Marxist sense) social relations that govern informal policing of bathroom use.<sup>14</sup> In short, gendered bathrooms are ideological formations. In this sense, to claim that gendered bathrooms are ideological formations is not to claim that gendered bathrooms are somehow “false” or “not real,” as per an analysis of ideology as illusion or false consciousness. Rather, to borrow Hall’s phrase, they are “all too real” (Hall 1996/2005, 36), unjust aspects of an ideology that distorts what we should value (asking us to value a fixed binary gender system) and produces an unjust set of social relations (such as gender nonconforming people being beaten up for using the “wrong” bathroom) (cf. Marx 1976, 163–77).

The experience of using a public toilet whilst trans is, at this point, well-documented, with elevated risks of violence and sexual assault for those trans people using any public toilet, alongside suicide amongst those forced to use traditional gendered bathrooms (see, for instance, Ivy 2014; Seelman 2016; Murchison et al. 2019). I want to suggest that it is precisely these ideological formations—the architecture, social practices, and beliefs—that produce the violence faced by transgender people around bathrooms.

One might remark that we have left the realm of the epistemic here—and certainly we have left the realm of epistemology as sometimes narrowly conceived in analytic philosophy. However, I take myself (in this section at least) to be operating within a long tradition of thinkers in the Marxist tradition who see epistemic issues as not merely dealing with questions of justification and knowledge, but also with questions of what material conditions afford or make possible certain practices and ideas.<sup>15</sup> Trans epistemology, then, may be thought of as partly an investigation into and critique of the nature of binarist and cissexist ideology, where this ideology critique is concerned with more than mere binarist or cissexist belief, but with social practices, architecture, economic relations, and so on. This type of trans epistemology might be thought of as a species of critical theory. If this is right, then we are left with another vision of trans epistemology as methodologically conservative extension to more traditional epistemology—this time, rather than analytic epistemology, trans epistemology is an extension of critical theory. I note that, whilst this vision for trans epistemology is not particularly radical with respect to methodology—we’ve had critical theory for nearly a hundred years at this point—nonetheless it is *politically* radical. Following Haslanger’s vision for ideology critique, trans epistemology in this mode would involve political action, to tear down the ideological formations of cissexist and binarist ideology, replacing them with institutions and social practices that make trans lives less fraught with danger and marginalization.

## Conclusion

I began this paper with an extended discussion of purportedly radical visions for trans epistemology and found that none really offered a methodologically radical and distinctively trans break from epistemology at large in a way that was particularly satisfying. That is not to say that the projects described therein were without merit: far from it. However, we should be clear where we stand at this point in philosophical history—methodologically, trans epistemology has only offered conservative extensions to mainstream epistemology. Whilst I have necessarily only been able to offer sketches of the various aspects of these more methodologically conservative versions of trans epistemology here, I suggest that these conservative extensions are worthwhile projects;



they demand that we take trans lives and experiences seriously and improve our broader epistemological framework.

Despite this methodological conservatism, we need not also endorse a *political* conservatism in our work. Not only is this compatible with the methodology I've suggested here, I also suggest it is desirable. All of the examples I have considered are, if not explicitly political, certainly in the realm of applied epistemology with clear contemporary political stakes. This is, I think, partly a reflection of my own commitments to political radicalism, and the hope that epistemology can be of use in political praxis (however indirectly). However, I also suspect that this emphasis on the political has been foisted upon me by the politicization of trans people in contemporary politics, such that even questions surrounding our self-identifications have become topics of political debate. It's perhaps unsurprising that a vision of trans epistemology by a trans person in 2023 is so invested in the political—nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to produce work that is aimed at achieving liberation, the end of economic exploitation, and the defeat of oppression.

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## Notes

1 Whilst it seems quite clear that Williamson was not thinking about this in much of his work, Emma Bolton and I have, in correspondence, developed an interesting question in trans philosophy that arises from his work on vagueness: is Williamson's epistemicism compatible with demigender identities? Exploring potential responses to and worries about this question goes beyond the scope of this paper, however.

2 An anonymous reviewer at *Hypatia* points out that there is another plausible reading of Radi here: that in moving to questions of affinities, alliance, and enemies, Radi is discarding the task of circumscribing trans epistemology in favor of thinking about the practice of trans epistemology, offering a warning to those who would join the conversation that those who might be thought to be natural accomplices are not so easily brought into alliance.

3 As an anonymous reviewer at *Hypatia* pointed out, the intersectional identities of trans people make this sort of oppositional position even more difficult to argue for.

4 It's worth noting here that "the subject" here is ambiguous between the object of study ("we're studying the subject") and the subject doing the study ("I'm the subject undertaking this research"). This ambiguity is shared in common with queer theory. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Hypatia* for pointing this out.

5 See Cull ([forthcoming b](#)) for a more thorough analysis of the shared nonideal theory project of Prosser and Namaste.

6 For more on CBPR, see Jull et al. 2017.

7 See Díaz-León 2016; Cull 2020. R. A. Rowland has recently suggested a fittingness account of gender identity that involves treating the reasons involved as those of appropriateness—such that the nature of the justification provided is *that it is fitting to treat such a person in such-and-such a way* (see Rowland [forthcoming](#)). Elsewhere I have developed a deflationary position on the nature of gender identity that suggests that gender identity *just is* the belief that one is a member of a given gender. This "shallowness" undermines many worries about self-deception, denial, and so on, since any belief that one has regarding one's gender identity is true by definition. This lends itself nicely to an account that suggests that reports of self-identifications provide epistemic justification, but of course does not rule out that such reports *also* provide moral and political justification. For more discussion of this account, and the potential issues it faces, see Cull [forthcoming a](#).



- 8 And of course, in many cases, there are going to be intersections of these oppressions leading to qualitatively distinctive injustices.
- 9 There's a real question as to whether *any* concept fits the bill of being available to all, but investigating that question takes us well beyond the scope of this paper (cf. Kant 1781).
- 10 Fricker herself has been developing the concept of hermeneutical injustice in light of these and other concerns—see Fricker 2016; Fricker and Jenkins 2017.
- 11 Note that this is a conclusion that can be drawn from thinking about any of the LGBTQ+ identities that Section 28 sought to suppress.
- 12 Though see Shelby (2014) for a contemporary defence of this conception of ideology.
- 13 Haslanger differs from Hall on this point in using a pejorative understanding of ideology. For a neutral term covering those scripts, meanings, and symbols that uphold social practices and institutions (whether those practices and institutions are just, unjust, or neutral) Haslanger uses the term “cultural techné.”
- 14 On cissexist ideology see Serano 2016. On binarist ideology see Dembroff 2020.
- 15 For more on this Marxist approach, see Cull forthcoming a.

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