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## **What Lies Beneath: The Epistemic Roots of White Supremacy**

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**ABSTRACT:** Our ability to dismantle white supremacy is compromised by the fact that we don't fully appreciate what, precisely, white supremacy is. In this chapter, I suggest understanding white supremacy as an epistemological system – an epistemic frame that serves as the foundation for how we understand and interact with the world. The difficulty in dismantling an epistemological system lies in its *resilience* – a system's capacity to resist change to its underlying structure while, at the same time, offering the appearance of large-scale reform. Using white supremacy as a case study, here I explore what features enable this resilience. An analysis of white supremacy that presents it as more than a tool of social and political oppression, but as an epistemic system that makes this oppression possible, allows us to better understand, and eventually overthrow, such systems.

In response to nationwide protests, riots, and looting following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, businesses rushed to announce their support for Black Lives Matter and to denounce police brutality. Some had more than words to offer. The companies that own Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben vowed to change their branding, abandoning images long-linked to racist caricatures. Cities painted “Black Lives Matter” murals. Confederate monuments were toppled, streets and schools renamed.

These actions seem to herald a great change, to indicate a fundamental shift in how we think of systemic racism and a newfound willingness to confront the legacy of white supremacy. And yet, I believe these actions are little more than window dressing. The display has changed, but what is within remains largely untouched.

White supremacy is more than the sum of its parts. While white supremacy may be a social system with political and material consequences, it is also, as I will suggest in this chapter, an *epistemological* system. As I will argue here, what lies beneath the social system of white supremacy is an epistemological system, one that serves to justify or naturalize the political, material, and social oppression that white supremacy produces. And so, to truly dismantle white supremacy, we must ask, how do we change an *epistemological* system?

To answer this question, I'll draw on work from Kristie Dotson in which she introduces a framework for thinking about the relationship between certain systems (in her case, epistemological systems) and the forms of oppression those systems produce. Dotson is notable for her introduction into the philosophical lexicon of the concept of 'epistemic oppression' – oppression which harms an agent in his or her capacity as a knower. In her 2012 paper, Kristie Dotson introduces a distinction between epistemic oppression that is reducible to social and political oppression (first- and second-order epistemic exclusions), and epistemic oppression that is not so reducible (third-order epistemic exclusions). The latter, Dotson argues, follows from a feature of epistemological systems themselves. This feature is what she calls *epistemological resilience*.

A resilient epistemological system is one which resists change. The distinction between first- and second-order epistemic exclusions, on the one hand, and third-order epistemic exclusions, on the other, is significant because it indicates how that form of epistemic oppression is to be addressed. Reducible forms, Dotson suggests, can be addressed by utilizing and revising epistemic resources within an epistemological system. But epistemic oppression that follows from features

of epistemological systems requires that we recognize the limitations imposed upon us by those systems.

This chapter is a spiritual descendant of the project begun by Dotson. Where Dotson was concerned with investigating this distinction and how each form of oppression is to be addressed, I want to dive deeper into epistemological systems themselves. My first goal here is to examine in greater detail epistemological systems, how they resist change, and how they facilitate oppression. But the primary objective in doing so is to arrive at a better understanding of the conditions that allow for a system to persist over time and across generations. My hope is that such an analysis will allow us to better understand, and eventually topple, oppressive epistemological systems, systems like white supremacy.

To accomplish this task, I first attempt to precisify what a resilient epistemological system looks like and the ways in which such a system resists change. To do so I will take white supremacy as a paradigm case of the phenomenon in question and use it to draw out the conditions for counting as a resilient epistemological system. White supremacy presents an interesting, and fairly intuitive, case of a resilient epistemological system. We see that rather than ultimately rejecting the racial norms that allowed for anti-Black racism, there is instead a subtle shift in how these norms function from slavery, to Jim Crow, to the prison-industrial complex. Ultimately, we see that white supremacy is not abandoned so much as it is accommodated. I will suggest that it is this feature of white supremacy - its resiliency in perpetuating its ways of thinking - that ultimately produces much of the racialized social oppression we bear witness to today.

I begin here with a brief examination of epistemological systems (section 1). I next offer an analysis of white supremacy (section 2) with the aim of using this analysis to deconstruct what features constitute a resilient epistemological system (section 3). I then return to Dotson's analysis of the relationship between epistemological systems and epistemic oppression (section 4), before concluding with a brief look at how the resiliency of this epistemological system has created an enduring legacy of white supremacy (section 4).

## **Section 1: Diving into Epistemological Systems**

My primary aim here is develop an account of epistemological systems in order to better understand what it means to say that some such systems are *resilient*. I thus begin here by situating my project in relation to Dotson's, examining in detail her deployment of the concept, so that I may develop it in finer strokes.

### *1.1 Three Levels of Epistemic Oppression*

Kristie Dotson (2012) first introduced the notion of epistemological systems in order to distinguish between different levels of epistemic oppression. Epistemic oppression refers to the persistent and unwarranted infringement on one's ability to acquire and share knowledge. More broadly, I propose we think of epistemic oppression as the persistent and systematic exclusion of certain agents from the practices of knowledge production. As Dotson acknowledges, though it is often the case that many epistemic exclusions are the by-product of certain forms of social and

political oppression, there are some that are not so reducible. Such exclusions are distinctly epistemic, she argues, the result of some (flawed) feature of an epistemological system.

As Dotson argues, recognizing the distinct underlying causes of epistemic oppression better allows us to consider the locus of change required to address each. To that end, she introduces three levels of epistemic oppression: first, second, and third-order epistemic exclusions. On the one hand we have first- and second-order epistemic exclusions. These levels of oppression, Dotson argues, are distinct in that they are 1) reducible to social or political oppression and 2) due to the inefficiency or insufficiency of shared epistemic resources. Thus, first- and second-order oppression can be addressed by fixing issues within an epistemological system.

First-order epistemic exclusions arise as a result of the inefficient or unjust application of some epistemic value or epistemic resource within an epistemological system. To illustrate, consider the epistemic value that we ought to give all epistemic agents a default level of credibility until we have some reason to modify this default assessment (Jones 2002). However, we tend to not to assign a default level of credibility to people of color or women (Fricker 2007). For instance, under our operative epistemological system,<sup>1</sup> we may regard women as too emotional, or people of color as too irrational, and as such degrade the level of credibility we assign their testimony.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Addressing this problem doesn't require a change to the epistemological system, but that we bring our behavior in line with this value. Thus, when engaging with women or people of color,

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<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that our current epistemological system is what bell hooks (2004) would call a 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. It is under such a system that women and people of color are viewed in the way described.

<sup>2</sup> When we assign a deflated level of credibility to an interlocutor for reasons related to their social identity, this is what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls a *testimonial injustice*.

<sup>3</sup> See Haslanger (2008) for more on schemas that classify women and people of color in these ways.

we should attempt to counteract this tendency instead of preemptively downgrading their credibility assessment.

Or, consider instead an instance of a second-order epistemic exclusion. This level of epistemic oppression occurs when epistemic resources are insufficient or inadequate such that an epistemic agent can't communicate her experience. Such levels of exclusion can be easily seen with the case of sexual harassment. Prior to the development of this term in the 1970s, women were unable to communicate their experiences of sex and gender-based discrimination in the workplace - the language for doing so simply did not exist (Fricker 2007).<sup>4</sup> The epistemic resources within our operative epistemological system were simply inadequate to attending to the unique experiences shared by women. Once again, this level of epistemic exclusion can be addressed from 'inside' the system by developing the concepts and names needed to pick out experiences shared by the socially marginalized.<sup>5</sup>

Both first- and second-order levels of epistemic oppression can be addressed by either revising existing epistemic resources, creating new resources, or ensuring that the available resources are applied more justly and efficiently. On the other hand, however, we have third-order epistemic exclusions. According to Dotson, third-order epistemic exclusions are 1) not reducible to either social or political oppression because they are 2) a direct effect of the epistemological system itself. Thus, third-order epistemic oppression can not be addressed from within the system, either

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<sup>4</sup> This is what Fricker has termed a *hermeneutical injustice* - when a person's own experience is made obscure, even to them, because the resources necessary for understanding that experience are unavailable.

<sup>5</sup> I would argue that patriarchy, like white supremacy is an epistemological system. In that sense, then, we can see that first- and second-order revisions of that system - like the inclusion of new concepts or the modification of our behavior to be in line with our commitments - mitigates the epistemically oppressive nature of that system, but does not fundamentally alter the system itself. We have seen similar revisions of white supremacy but, as I argue in this chapter, the essential function of this system remains largely unchanged.

by adding, revising or improving the application of existing epistemic resources. Instead, this level of epistemic oppression can only be addressed by revising our operative epistemological system(s). But, what, precisely is an epistemological system?

### *1.2 Epistemological Systems Deep Dive*

According to Dotson, an epistemological system is a holistic concept that refers to the epistemic norms, epistemic resources, habits of cognition, and other conditions that make possible the production of knowledge. As Dotson writes, an epistemological system includes “operative, instituted social imaginaries, habits of cognition, attitudes towards knowers and/or any relevant sensibilities that encourage or hinder the production of knowledge” (Dotson 2012, p. 121).

Peter Railton provides a useful way for thinking about epistemological systems, though he speaks in terms of *epistemic frames* rather than epistemological systems. Railton writes that we might think of an epistemic frame as functioning much like a camera frame. When taking a picture, one does not see the frame of the camera, but what is seen is seen *through it*. In this way, the frame provides a (artificially imposed) limit on the otherwise “undelimited and unbounded character of one’s experience” (Railton 2006, p. 15). These epistemic frames consist of ‘legions of tacit beliefs’, beliefs which frame our epistemic situations. As Railton writes, “Such framing is a matter of the expectations one brings to situations, the features of situations one tends to notice or ignore, the spontaneous interpretations of events one is primed to make, the possibilities for thought and action that come immediately to mind, and so on (ibid).

I find Railton's talk of epistemic frames to be a useful metaphor for drawing out what is meant by an epistemological system. In the same way that one may not see the frame of a camera when taking a picture, one may not be consciously aware of the epistemic frames one is employing; but what one sees, believes, and knows is seen, believed, and known, through this frame. Epistemological systems, I believe, provide this epistemic frame. Without such frames, we are overburdened with information for which we lack the categorical tools necessary for understanding that information. Consequently, this information ends up being meaningless without a filter through which to understand and interpret it.

For those working in the continental tradition, this notion may call to mind the perhaps more familiar Foucauldian idea of an *episteme*. An *episteme*, Foucault writes, "defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge" (Foucault 1966, p. 68). Derek Anderson (ms) argues that an episteme, though it does not determine what claims are true or false, "determines which knowledge claims and which methods for arriving at knowledge claims count as scientific, rational, intuitive, or commonsensical". The question to consider here is *how* epistemological systems perform this function.

Extrapolating from the accounts above, I suggest that epistemological systems are like *governing bodies* for knowledge-acquisition. Consider, for instance, that a political system constructs rules for the passage and enforcement of policies, stipulates what bodies have authority, and determines the relationship between a government and its people. Epistemological systems, by comparison, construct rules for the formation and revision of beliefs, stipulate what method of forming beliefs we ought to employ or avoid, indicate how we ought to weigh evidence, specify

what standards a belief must meet to count as knowledge, and so on. Thus, where political systems govern policies and people, epistemological systems govern beliefs and knowledge. And just as there are multiple political systems – monarchies and oligarchies, democracies and autocracies – so too are there many different epistemological systems.<sup>6</sup> Such systems range from the prosaic and familiar, like arithmetical knowledge, to the mundane and arcane, like Bayesianism.

Epistemological systems serve as the necessary background and starting point from which we engage with the world, gather and interpret evidence, and generate new beliefs. Importantly, these systems shape our experiences, offer meaning, and direct future inquiry. I submit that epistemological systems shape and constrain what we know in at least three identifiable (but not exhaustive) ways: they are *normative*, *predictive*, and *attendant*.

As Railton alluded, epistemological systems are *normative* systems. Epistemological systems are normative in that they license certain beliefs and eliminate from consideration beliefs that are unsupported by or inconsistent with other beliefs in the system. Epistemological systems are also *predictive* in the sense that they prime us to form certain beliefs, making readily available some hypotheses rather than others to explain or interpret a body of evidence. Finally, these systems are *attendant*, by which I mean that they influence what features of the world we attend to and which we ignore.

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<sup>6</sup> An important distinction between political and epistemological systems to note is that there may be multiple epistemological systems in effect at a given time (that do not conflict), whereas competing political systems (e.g., autocracies and democracies) cannot coexist.

As a simple illustration of the ways in which these features shape and constrain knowledge, consider a toy case. First, let's start with the assumption that one commonplace epistemological system is the basic scientific commitment to the necessity of concrete, physical evidence in support of a belief. Such a commitment does not license a belief in miracles, for instance, anymore than it licenses a belief in magic. Second, imagine that my chapstick – an ever-present fixture for me - has just rolled off my coffee table on to the floor. There are a number of ways to explain this occurrence - perhaps my floor is uneven; there may have been a tiny earthquake; the air conditioner may have just cut on; my apartment may have a ghost; or perhaps my chubby cat's squishy tail disturbed the air in just the right way.

Given my scientific commitments, I am licensed to believe some of these explanations - e.g., that the floor is uneven - and not others - e.g., that a ghost has caused this disturbance. This commitment primes me to entertain certain hypotheses - my cat's tail as the culprit - more readily than others - given that I live in a no-quake area, I am not primed to entertain this explanation. Finally, it will make me attend to explanations compatible with this commitment - once the chapstick falls, I will not search the air for a ghost, but I may listen for the hum of the air conditioner or the mewing of my cat.

### *1.3 What We (Don't) Know*

Importantly for my purposes, these systems shape not just *what* we know, but what we are in a position to know.<sup>7</sup> It has been thoroughly discussed by those working at the intersection of social

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<sup>7</sup> Epistemological systems can be designed (or are such that) they make knowledge of certain states of affairs or facts impossible.

epistemology, feminism, and philosophy of race, the extent to which excluding certain parties from meaning-generating practices has also excluded certain bodies of knowledge. An epistemological system that, for instance, excludes women as sources of meaning and knowledge, (as was the case in legal theory until the early 90s) will also be one in which knowledge of certain injuries experienced exclusively by women will not be possible for epistemic agents situated in certain ways. Take, for instance, the now well-known example from Miranda Fricker (2007) on hermeneutical injustice and sexual harassment. Prior to the development of the conceptual resources needed to understand sexual harassment - and to the subsequent modification of the epistemological system of legal theory - we would not have been in a position to know that some act constituted sexual harassment (see also Toole 2019).

Of course, my intention here is not to argue that epistemological systems are intrinsically pernicious. Quite the opposite, these systems are useful, indeed necessary, for making meaning of and for engaging with the world. Rather, the problem lies in the *resiliency* of faulty or maladaptive epistemological systems.<sup>8</sup>

In their discussion of resilient social-ecological systems, Walker et. al define resilience as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Walker et. al 2004). Similarly, I suggest that an epistemological system is resilient to the extent that it can absorb disturbances without changing its underlying structure and maintaining its essential function, or

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that resiliency is not, in and of itself, a bad feature. Rather, the problem is that both good and bad epistemological systems can be resilient. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to draw a distinction between what counts as a good or bad epistemological system. However, broadly speaking, we might think that an epistemological system is faulty to the extent that it is flawed in the ways I note in the proceeding paragraphs. That is, if the system

to the extent that it can resist change. It is *this* feature of epistemological systems that particularly troubles me, as it is this feature which, I will argue, leads to a variety of forms of oppression – social, political, and epistemic.

But first, a caveat. My claim is not that any epistemological system that can survive or persist despite change is somehow a flawed system. Rather, epistemological systems must be able to appropriately absorb change. Or, as Walker et. al note, systems must be transformable, capable of creating ‘untried beginnings from which to evolve a new way of living when existing...structures become untenable’ (ibid). We might think of this as the flexibility of a system to update and evolve when presented with new information or background conditions. As Gaile Pohlhaus (2011) argues in her examination of the relationship between social identity and epistemic resources, epistemic resources are tools which enable us to understand and communicate our experiences. To the extent that existing resources fail to adequately do this, they must be open to addition and revision. To return to the example offered by Fricker, the available epistemic resources did not capture the phenomenon of gender-based workplace harassment, but we were able to add to the body of existing resources the concept of sexual harassment to remedy this inadequacy.

The same is true of epistemological systems. If an epistemological system no longer reliably produces knowledge or systematically excludes or obscures the knowledge and experiences of certain groups, we must revise that system. Problematically, as Dotson notes, the worry often lies

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is designed or functions so as to exclude certain epistemic agents or knowledge contributions, if it rationalizes false beliefs (and renders true beliefs irrational), and so on.

not merely in the inadequacy or inefficiency of parts of the epistemological system, but with the system in its entirety.

As I will soon show, *resilient* epistemological systems are epistemological systems that offer the appearance of having either been radically revised or altogether abandoned. However, they are resilient precisely because their underlying governing structure remains intact. This resilience is problematic because, as Dotson argues, it can contribute to epistemic oppression, as is the case when an epistemic agent is unable to share knowledge that seems impossible given the operative epistemological system (Dotson 2012, p. 131)

An example may help us further draw out what it means both to say that an epistemological system is resilient and that such a system can oppress. Let us turn then to white supremacy.

## **Section 2: White Supremacy as an Epistemological System**

In her pivotal work *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander interrogates the racist ideology that developed under slavery and gave rise to Jim Crow laws. This ideology, she notes, remains largely unchanged. My aim here is to argue that the racist ideology under investigation by Alexander, that of white supremacy, is a paradigm case of a resilient epistemological system.

Alexander tracks the evolution of white supremacy from chattel slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration. I will retrace her steps here so as to better understand how white supremacy has

adapted to survive changing legal, political, and social contexts. Doing so is the key to understanding how white supremacy functions as a resilient epistemological system.

### *2.1 A history of white supremacy*

The ‘essential function’ of white supremacy is to uphold racial hierarchies that position whites as the dominant and superior race. I argue that white supremacy is only able to achieve this function to the extent that it is an epistemological system. White supremacy allows for those who enact, uphold, and maintain its policies to believe in the superiority of the white race by constructing a world in which this appears to be true.

White supremacy is a multifaceted system of domination that encompasses a number of dimensions, ranging from the political and economic to the cultural and cognitive. On the cognitive component, Charles Mills writes that white supremacy is a system that will “have a negative effect on the consciousness of both whites and nonwhites, shaping both their descriptive and evaluative conceptualizations of the world”, with one of those negative effects being that “whites will tend to develop theories that justify their position, both morally and in terms of alleged facts about reality” (Mills 2003, pp. 276-277).<sup>9</sup>

We can most clearly see this in the evolution of white supremacy following the Civil War. As Alexander notes, the abolition of slavery was followed by the apparent loss of racial order. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of slaves, previously confined to plantations, were free to roam.

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<sup>9</sup> There are a number of important connections to be drawn here between this project and work in the epistemology of ignorance that focuses on the role of white ignorance in the maintenance of racial hierarchies. See Mills 2007.

It is here we see the emergence of vagrancy acts and ‘Black codes’, which would serve as a bridge between slavery and the eventual development of Jim Crow.

Vagrancy acts and Black codes were enacted to compel Blacks to gain lawful employment, as, according to whites, they “lacked the proper motivation to work” (Alexander 2010, p. 28). These laws not only made it a criminal offense to be without work, but also permitted the hiring-out of convicts to plantations. Consequently, with few to no job prospects readily available for freed blacks, these vagrancy laws functioned more or less as another form of forced free labor.

Of course, as Alexander notes, these laws were eventually overturned. But, on their heels was Jim Crow, which essentially functioned as a state-sanctioned form of terror that allowed for the legal enforcement of the separation of races. In many states, Jim Crow enshrined in law practices that previously had been covert, like the hiring-out of convicts, as well as the targeting and aggressive enforcement of criminal offenses of Blacks.

However, following the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 60s and the collapse of Jim Crow, white supremacy shifted instead to a focus on crime. The seeds of this new system had been planted early under the guise of ‘law and order’ initiatives, which merely served to “generate and mobilize white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement” (bid., p. 40). It is through the call for ‘law and order’ that we see the birth of mass incarceration. Through ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric that criminalized problems in Black communities – from the ‘welfare queen’ to the War on Drugs’ – a new system of racialized control emerged that effectively maintained segregation.

In part, the transition from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration was motivated by a cultivated fear among whites that Blacks were too unruly, aggressive, and dangerous to move among them unconstrained. In each case, what ‘justifies’ the move from one form of racialized control to another is a white supremacist epistemological system that ultimately views Blacks as so morally and intellectually inferior that they require supervision and regulation.

It is here that we can see the three elements of an epistemological system emerge. A white supremacist epistemological system *licenses* the belief that poverty in Black communities is due to natural inferiority rather than systemic structures that have denied Blacks access to education and employment, health care and housing, and other opportunities. Moreover, such a system *primes* epistemic agents to see, and in turn believe, that Blacks are holding guns even when they possess only innocuous objects, like a wallet or a cell phone (Payne 2001, 2006). Lastly, this system ensures that we are more likely to *attend* to Black wrongdoing, even when whites commit crimes in equal or greater degree (Alexander 2010, pp. 98-100, 106).<sup>10</sup>

White supremacy, as a racial ideology, is a method of social control that succeeds, I argue, by being so well disguised that it is nearly invisible. As such, white supremacy can be difficult to fully identify or describe. This is, in effect, the source of its resilience. As such, let me turn now to the task of drawing out the features of a resilient epistemological system.

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, consider the research on teacher gaze – the phenomenon in which teachers gaze longer at Black students. See section 3.2 for more on this.

### 3. White Supremacy as a *Resilient* Epistemological System

I suggested above that white supremacy is an epistemological system. But, my goal here is to argue that not only is white supremacy an epistemological system, but that it is a *resilient* epistemological system. As Alexander herself notes regarding the resilience of white supremacy and the systems of control it enacts, it has “become perfected, arguably more resilient to challenge, and thus capable of enduring for generations to come” (Alexander 2010, p. 22).

Grounding my analysis in the account of white supremacy offered above, I identify five features of a resilient epistemological system. A resilient epistemological system

1. consists of a core set of foundational governing beliefs, values, epistemic norms and resources that
2. play a central role in structuring our understanding of and engagement with the world;
3. is self-masking;
4. is self-replicating;
5. and silences contrary or dissenting views.

I will argue below that white supremacy satisfies these conditions, and as such, I take it be a clear illustration of a resilient epistemological system.

### *3.1 Core Beliefs and Values*

First, white supremacy consists of a core set of beliefs that remain largely unchanged in content and character despite numerous changes in the social and political context. These core beliefs are such that they naturalize racial injustice by appealing to beliefs about the inherent inferiority/superiority of certain races.

What are the core beliefs that govern white supremacy? Chief among the beliefs in a white supremacist epistemological system is the belief in the inherent superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the Black race.

Additionally, as noted above, is the belief that Blacks are by their nature lazy, dangerous, menacing, and predisposed to criminality. Still further, a white supremacist epistemological system tends to cast Black men as violent and overly aggressive, and Black women as hypersexual (Crenshaw 1994). These latter beliefs (that Blacks are violent and promiscuous) mostly function so as to provide justification for and to naturalize the claim that whites are inherently superior.

Such systems also influence the available epistemic resources and norms. These resources and norms will in turn influence what beliefs we go on to adopt or reject and what social distinctions we notice or ignore. The very concept of ‘race’ is itself an epistemic resource devised to justify the practice of slavery (Alexander 2010, p. 23; see also Fredrickson 2002). The emergence of

this resource has produced the consequent belief that race is biological and that there are biological differences between the races with respect to intellect, culture, and morals.

These core beliefs make a difference to what epistemic agents embedded in this system are in a position to know about the social world.

### *3.2 Structuring Understanding*

The core beliefs of a resilient epistemological system will, in large part, determine which beliefs are rationally permissible. In the case of white supremacy, the epistemic norms and resources developed under this system function so as to direct our attention such that the knowledge we gather serves to reinforce these core beliefs. For instance, we may develop heightened attention to the wrongdoing of Blacks, which in turn serves to reinforce the belief in the criminality and aggression of Blacks. Take as an example Reagan's "war on drugs". As Alexander writes

...There is no truth to the notion that the War on Drugs was launched in response to crack cocaine. President Ronald Reagan officially announced the current drug war in 1982, *before* crack became an issue in the media or a crisis in poor Black neighborhoods...Almost overnight, the media was saturated with images of Black 'crack whores,' 'crack dealers,' and 'crack babies' - *images that seemed to confirm* the worse negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents. (Alexander 2010, p. 5, italics mine)

Yet, despite the over-attentiveness of the media to crack in the Black community, it remains the case that whites are more likely than Blacks to engage in drug crime (bid., pp. 7, 98-100). Thus, given the ubiquity of negative attention and portrayals of Blacks in the media, one might (almost) be forgiven for believing that Blacks are inherently criminalistic.

There is also evidence that primary school teachers are subject to a phenomenon known as ‘teacher gaze’, in which they gaze longer at Black students in expectation that they will be more disruptive (Gilliam et. al 2016). Teachers are thus more likely to catch Black students engaged in wrong-doing, even while white students are engaging in the same or similar behaviors. To some extent, one must wonder the extent to which this phenomenon contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. In turn, one could argue that just as vagrancy laws bridged chattel slavery and Jim Crow, the school-to-prison pipelines serves a similar link between Jim Crow and the prison-industrial complex.

Still further, as Lauren Woomer has observed, despite the abundant evidence of police brutality in Black communities, whites are overwhelmingly unlikely to believe that police brutality is a severe issue. Rather than seeing police brutality as the result of systemic racism in the criminal justice system, whites are more likely to claim that instances of police brutality are either ‘isolated incidents’, were justified, or could have been avoided if the Black actors involved had complied (Woomer 2017).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Consider as well that these core beliefs structure our understanding such that we are not easily able to admit of counterexamples. Consider, for instance, that talented Black intellectuals tend to be viewed as an exception to the norm of Black inferiority, rather than evidence that requires a revision of that norm.

Moreover, as Gaile Pohlhaus (2011) and Miranda Fricker (1999) have each noted, epistemic resources – the conceptual tools and language used for understanding and communicating our experiences – are largely shaped by the socially dominant. Consequently, the epistemic resources that are readily available are better-suited to understanding a ‘white world’, but largely fail at capturing those experiences shared by those at the social margins. As such, our conceptual repertoire is altogether inadequate to attending to the oppression produced by white supremacy because those resources were not designed to be able to serve this function.<sup>12</sup>

Returning to the example above, the concept of race, along with the belief that race is biological, is so pervasive that even our medical doctors are prey to treating Black and white patients differently on the basis of race alone. In a study published in the *Proceedings in the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers found that doctors believed 1) that Blacks have thicker skin than whites, 2) that Blacks are biologically more resistant to pain and, 3) consequently, doctors under-prescribed medication to Black patients even when they reported the same levels of pain as white patients (Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt, & Oliver 2016, p. 4296).

One might naturally wonder how such a system persists, even and perhaps especially among people who might not endorse (or disavow altogether) racist attitudes. Part of this is owed to the fact, I believe, that resilient epistemological systems are self-masking.

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<sup>12</sup> One need only look at the treatment of concepts designed for expressing the experiences of the socially marginalized to see this. Consider, as one illustration, the ill-treatment of the concept of ‘microaggressions’.

### 3.3 Self-Masking

Self-masking is a feature of a resilient epistemological system that allows for such a system to offer the appearance of reform when it has been merely redesigned. The capacity to self-mask is, I suggest, one of the defining features of a resilient epistemological system. It is precisely this features that allows for an epistemological system to be resilient. Self-masking allows for an epistemological system to survive in a world that is continually calling for its demise.

As we have seen, white supremacy adapts to meet accepted standards of the period without actually changing the underlying principal beliefs that govern it. As such, the core set of beliefs remain largely undisturbed. For instance, the transition from Jim Crow to mass incarceration via the school-to-prison pipeline mirrors the move from chattel slavery to Jim Crow by way of vagrancy laws. In both the case of vagrancy laws and the school-to-prison pipeline, we have what looks to be social progress – the abolition of slavery and later, the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* to desegregate schools, effectively signaling the end of the Jim Crow era. However, each gave way to yet another form of race-based social control.

One way by which white supremacy masks itself is through the advocacy of ‘color-blindness’.<sup>13</sup> As Jose Medina observes, “the disavowal of racialized...perception involves distancing oneself from the social reality of racism...and failing to properly acknowledge [its] influence on social cognition” (Medina 2013, p. 27). In this way, color-blindness has an

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<sup>13</sup> I suggest that resilient epistemological systems employ a number of methods to insulate themselves from criticism. With regard to white supremacy, self-masking occurs via linguistic hijacking (Anderson ms), epistemic misdirection and appropriation (Davis 2018), and by actively maintaining structures of ignorance (Alcoff 2007; Mills 2007; Woomer 2017).

important role to play in the maintenance of white supremacy. As Charles Mills writes, the strategy of colorblindness allows “the white delusion of racial superiority [to insulate] itself against refutation” (Mills 2007, p. 19). Michelle Alexander echoes this sentiment, writing that “in the era of color-blindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly as a justification for discrimination” (Alexander 2010, p. 2). And so, we use the language of criminality instead. In hiding behind the linguistic turn from ‘race’ to ‘criminality’ we remain able to enact white supremacy by couching it in the socially acceptable language of ‘law and order’.

In fact, the core belief of white supremacy – the notion that there is such a thing as ‘race’, at all - is itself a self-masking one. As Charles Mills writes in discussing constructivists accounts of race, racial categories “do not pre-exist white supremacy as natural kinds, but are categories and realities themselves brought into existence by the institutionalization of the system” (Mills 2003, p. 371). That this is a category that was devised for the sole purpose of procuring a ready supply of cheap labor is masked by the more recent belief that white supremacy emerged as a natural result of the moral, cultural and intellectual superiority of the white ‘race’ (Fredrickson 2002, p. 29; Cornell and Hartmann 2007, p. 23). Thus, the notion that race is biological is designed to mask the more economic origins of the concept and to justify its continued usage. To elaborate on this point, let me turn now to the fourth feature of a resilient epistemological system: its capacity for self-replication.

### *3.4 Self-replication*

The self-masking feature of a resilient epistemological system is aided and abetted by a system's capacity for self-replication. Self-replication refers to the recursive, self-sustaining dynamic of an epistemological system to ensure its own reproduction. Self-replication, in sum, ensures the replication of an epistemological system's frameworks and ways of thinking.

As it applies to our case study, the capacity to reproduce itself through seemingly innocuous means and under numerous guises has created an enduring legacy of white supremacist mindsets in our schools, policies, and legal structures. As has been argued by noted literary scholar Donnarae MacCan,

Cultural and social historians have a useful tool in the record created by children's books. The simple, transparent images contrived for the young are often an unselfconscious distillation of a national consensus or a national debate. They reveal, for example, the degree to which postbellum society retained features of the slavery era; they illustrate how the white supremacy myth infected the mainstream collective consciousness in both [antebellum and postbellum] epochs. (MacCan 2002, p. xiii).

Still further, as MacCan writes, "the myth of white superiority was introduced into each successive generation's social conditioning, and the very act of passing down white supremacist attitudes to children tells us much about the importance of this myth to the child-raisers" (ibid., p. 233).

The passing down of the white supremacist myth from generation to generation serves two functions. First, it represents white superiority as factive, universal, and natural. This representation of white superiority as reflecting natural racial hierarchies allows for the white experience to be so thoroughly embedded as normative “that its normativity is not even identified as such” (Mills 1998, p. 10). Second, the white supremacist myth serves to naturalize white supremacy, ultimately rendering white supremacy both essential and fundamental, and thus not susceptible to challenge. This consequently thwarts understanding white supremacy and white normativity as reflective of a particular historical context and as a contingent, rather than necessary, state of affairs.

White supremacy is able to reproduce itself in this way largely because it is also able to silence dissenting views. This leads me to the final feature of resilient epistemology systems.

### *3.5 Silences Dissenters*

A resilient epistemological system cannot survive merely by self-masking and self-replicating - it must also ‘put down’ any potential threats. I suggest that it achieves this function through *silencing*. Silencing, as it pertains to the maintenance of epistemological systems, is a two-fold process. It both involves rendering oppositional views illegible and alienating participating members from those oppositional perspectives.

Kristie Dotson defines silencing as a form of epistemic violence in which a “given group’s ability to speak and be heard” is damaged (Dotson 2011, p. 236). As Dotson argues, this occurs when we privilege existing epistemic practices and ‘disappear’ alternative ways of understanding. Thus, for instance, if as I have argued, our existing epistemic practices are largely shaped by white supremacy, then any epistemic practice that conflicts with this operative system may be misunderstood. As an illustration, consider that some hear the claim “Black Lives Matter” as “*Only* Black Lives Matter” and thus respond with the assertion that “All Lives Matter” (Anderson 2017). Or consider instead that those who try to draw attention to racism are accused themselves of being racist for talking about race at all. In both cases, the ability to speak and be understood by one’s audience is undermined because the operative epistemological system – i.e. white supremacy – makes such talk incomprehensible.

The unintelligibility of oppositional views then provides a basis for adherents to dismiss the credibility or reliability of those espousing contrary views. In this respect, resilient epistemological systems function much like echo chambers. C. Thi Nguyen (2018) defines an echo chamber as “a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited” (Nguyen 2018, p. 2). As Nguyen writes, echo chambers systematically isolate members from outside epistemic resources, such that the chamber cannot simply be ‘popped’ by exposure to outside information. Echo chambers achieve this by undermining the trustworthiness of those who espouse contrary views, as well as providing counter-explanations of these contrary views such that the core beliefs of the system are reinforced.

To illustrate, consider that a core belief of white supremacy is that Blacks are inherently dishonest or unreliable. As a consequence, any social critique made by Blacks is taken merely as further evidence of their unreliability.<sup>14</sup> Thus, one need neither take seriously the testimony of Blacks regarding the systemic structures of racialized oppression they experience, nor critically evaluate whether one is living in such a system. By preemptively assigning credibility deficits to those who are most likely to challenge the white supremacist status quo, white supremacy can insulate itself from challenge, criticism, and condemnation.

What is especially interesting about the role of silencing in the maintenance of a resilient epistemological system is its “looping” effect. Essentially, we see the use of a first-order epistemic exclusion (that we distrust the testimony of Blacks) that enables and is enabled by some feature of the operative epistemological system (the credibility deficit preemptively assigned to Blacks under white supremacy). As I hope is becoming clear, the three orders of epistemic exclusion that Dotson delineates, and the five features of resilient epistemological systems that I have identified here, operate cyclically. First- and second-order epistemic exclusions support third-order ones, which in turn support those first- and second-order exclusions. In much the same way, the core beliefs of a resilient epistemological system seem to support the justifiable exclusion of dissenting points of views, which in turn reinforces the core beliefs of that system.

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<sup>14</sup> Or, consider that white pro-Black activists are dismissed as self-hating race traitors. Thus, their actions are understood not as being motivated by the fact that Blacks are discriminated against, but by their internalized white

#### 4. Circling Back: Resilient Epistemological Systems and Third-Order Epistemic Exclusions

I prefaced this chapter with a question: what it would take to change an epistemological system? To some extent, my goal has not been to offer an answer so much as it has been to show that, in order to provide one, we must first fully understand what it is that we are endeavoring to change. As I noted, epistemological systems can be modified through first-order revisions – by making one’s behavior reflect one’s values – or second-order changes – by identifying and addressing gaps in one’s operative resources. However, a resilient epistemological system may preserve and legitimize inadequate resources such that the underlying conditions of the epistemological system – those features that I identify in section 3 above – remain largely intact. Such a system then yields third-order exclusions – a form of epistemic oppression in which an individual’s knowledge “may seem impossible given the state of the operative epistemological system” (Dotson 2014, p. 131).

As an illustration of such an exclusion, let’s return once more to our discussion of police brutality. That police brutality is a direct result of systemic racism – enabled by white supremacy as an epistemic framework – is dismissed in the ways noted in section 3.2 above – as an isolated incident that is the result of one ‘bad apple’ rather than a practice that has been shaped by anti-Black racism. Consequently, demands that policing be radically reconceived – either by abolishing or defunding the police – are met with skepticism. Many are inclined to argue, as Alex Vitale writes, “that racist and brutal cops can be purged from the profession and an unbiased system of law enforcement reestablished in the interest of the whole society” (Vitale 2017). But this ignores the historical origins of policing as rooted in white supremacy. As Vitale goes on to

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guilt.

argue, policing emerged as a form of modern social control in response to new economic developments – in the US, that economic development was slavery (Bayley 1998; Vitale 2017).

The view of police as “dispassionate enforcers of the law” cannot be reconciled with the understanding of police as agents who enforce unjust racial hierarchies.<sup>15</sup> Resistance to this conceptualization of the police does not stem from a distrust of testimony (a first-order exclusion), as we have seen more and more that people are willing to acknowledge the excessive force with which police officers treat Blacks. Nor is it the result of inadequate resources for understanding (a second-order-exclusion), as the epistemic interventions that would allow us to understand police brutality are in place. Such knowledge instead seems impossible because it conflicts with our understanding of police officers as basically good – an understanding itself provided by white supremacy.

This resistance is thus the product of the resilience of white supremacy as an epistemological system. Dotson argues that when an individual is “confronted with the epistemological resilience of a maladjusted system...[her] epistemic agency is compromised by being rendered incapable of contributing to the domains of inquiry relevant to her insight” (Dotson 2014, p. 130). Thus, we see that the knowledge contributions of Black activists – pathways for the abolition and defunding of the police – have struggled to be taken up – resulting in a third-order epistemic exclusion, one that I argue is owed to the resilient epistemological system that is white supremacy.

## 5. The ‘New’ New Jim Crow?

In the previous sections, I provided an analysis of white supremacy in order to deconstruct the features of a resilient epistemological system. I asserted that a resilient epistemological system consists in the following five features: 1) it has a core set of beliefs that 2) structure our understanding, and it is 3) self-masking, 4) self-replicating, and 5) it preemptively silences would-be dissenters. Though I remain neutral as to whether these features are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for constituting a resilient epistemological system, I strongly suspect that those operative epistemological systems that might strike us as resilient are likely to present all five features.<sup>16</sup> Consider, for instance, that this account will enable us to analyze other operative, and maladaptive, resilient epistemological systems like patriarchy or cults, systems which surely possess all the features described above.

I argued that white supremacy satisfies these conditions, and as such, I take it to be a clear illustration of a resilient epistemological system. Understanding white supremacy in this manner is essential if we seek to dismantle it. In treating white supremacy as the mere manifestation of social inequity we have acted as if it can be eradicated by eliminating certain unjust social systems (e.g. segregation). But if, at its core, white supremacy is something more, then addressing unjust social systems is little more than a symbolic change, one which leaves the underlying cause unchanged. In sum, in failing to understand the epistemic dimensions of white supremacy, we have treated the symptoms of a corrupt system without striking at the root cause.

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<sup>15</sup> Essentially, I am suggesting that police brutality against Blacks is a feature, not a bug, of policing.

What lies beneath the social, cultural, political, and economic forms of white supremacy that we are more familiar with is the epistemic form that makes those possible. Understanding that white supremacy is not merely a political system, but an *epistemological* one, positions us to see that it still pervades the American social, political, and legal landscape, and will continue to do so, so long as it pervades our epistemic systems. White supremacy, I have argued, is embedded in our thinking - it is the filter through which we see, the starting point from which we believe, the frame through which we understand, interpret, and interact with our world. In unpacking the epistemological roots of white supremacy, in exploring the evolution of white supremacy, my hope is that we can do three things.

First, the analysis offered here provides us with the necessary tools for identifying white supremacist attitudes in our thinking. As bell hooks (2004) and others have noted, naming the problem is the first step in addressing the problem. Knowing how white supremacy manifest in our thinking, how it reproduces itself in our legal and medical institutions, how it silences dissenting viewpoints, allows us to recognize what we could not before.

Second, if the diagnosis that I offer within these pages is correct, it provides a direction for how we can move forward. The resistance we have seen to discussions regarding issues ranging from police brutality to the prison-industrial complex, may not be owed to racist individuals, but to racist epistemological frameworks that distort our ability to understand these issues. What this tells us is that we must both draw attention to the inadequacy of this framework, and strive to

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<sup>16</sup> It is just as likely, however, that resilient epistemological systems function more like family, or ‘cluster-concept’, such that a system that is resilient might present any three or more of the features identified.

provide alternative epistemic frames for which to see and understand the world, ones not shaped by anti-Black racist sentiment.

Third, and most importantly, this analysis may very well allow us to contemplate how white supremacy might continue to evolve. Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow*, turned her gaze to the past - attending to the ways in which Jim Crow gave rise to the mass incarceration of Black Americans that we see today. Our task now is to look forward. With the account I've offered here, I hope we can work to anticipate what might replace mass incarceration as the 'new' new Jim Crow.

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