*Hypatia* (2020), **35**, 475–489
doi:10.1017/hyp.2020.25

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TRACING THE LINEAGES OF DECOLONIAL THINKING THROUGH LATINX FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

# Privileged Ignorance, "World"-Traveling, and Epistemic Tourism

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**Abstract**

In this article I am concerned with how relatively privileged people who wish to act in anti-oppressive ways respond to their own ignorance in ways that fall short of what is necessary for building coalitions against oppression. I consider María Lugones's sense of "world"-travel and José Medina's notion of epistemic friction-seeking as strategies for combating privileged ignorance, and assess how well they fare when put into practice by those suffering from privileged ignorance. Drawing on the resources of tourism studies, I critique the political and material context that can turn these attempts to "world"-travel or seek epistemic friction into a morally and epistemically problematic epistemic tourism. Centrally, I argue that trying to learn what it's like to experience oppression is not an effective method of counteracting privileged ignorance, since the epistemic vices and cognitive distortions that created the ignorance in the first place continue to influence knowledge-creation even after they are acknowledged. Rather than attempting to understand "what it's like" to experience oppression, privileged progressives should undertake to learn about the provenance and purpose of their ignorance and the structures of oppression that facilitate and are facilitated by that ignorance.

## I. Ignorance and Knowing What It's Like

Pernicious ignorance on the part of the privileged plays an important role in sustaining systems of oppression.[1] Thus, it makes sense that privileged people who wish to subvert oppression would first try to target their own ignorance. For privileged people interested in undermining oppressive systems, an obvious response to the recognition that ignorance is crucial to facilitating oppression is to try to learn the things that privilege typically prevents privileged subjects from learning, yet there are many ways in which this approach can fail. In particular, attempting to remediate ignorance of systems of oppression by acquiring knowledge about what it is like to be oppressed is often both a moral and an epistemic failure.

The impulse to learn what one has been ignorant of—whether that means acquiring mere facts or a sense of empathy—is good; many failures to live in community or to

work productively in coalition toward liberation arise in part from vast gaps in understanding among groups differentially affected by systems of white supremacy, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and more. However, the persistence of these systems is not due merely to the ignorance of their costs on the part of those who benefit from them. Although it is important for people in dominant positions to learn what they have been insulated from and to develop empathy for the people they dominate as one step toward no longer dominating, focusing exclusively or primarily on awareness as a tool to undermine oppression reflects a naive claim that if only privileged groups better understood the experiences of the oppressed, they would join fights against oppression. We are right to recognize that privileged ignorance is a symptom of and contributes to systems of oppression, but treating ignorance as the central cause of oppression erases the vast material and social benefits for the privileged that continue to provide an incentive to subjugate other people.

Nonetheless, there are people privileged by these systems who do want to dismantle them, and who recognize in themselves an ignorance that they sense ought to be corrected. This ignorance is often interpreted as ignorance of what life is like for those harmed by systems of oppression, so efforts to learn and teach more about these experiences are often important in movements against oppression. These tactics can have tremendously positive effects, but the principle behind them can beget problematic responses. When aspiring allies try to educate themselves about "what it's like" to experience oppression, they frequently go about this in objectionable ways. For example: there is a worldwide phenomenon of relatively wealthy people taking tours of slums, favelas, barrios, and shantytowns. These tours are often marketed as important, eye-opening rites of passage for privileged progressives wishing to become conscientious global citizens (Odede 2010). Then there is slum tourism's cousin, "voluntourism," in which people take a vacation to build a church in rural Mexico, or distribute shoes in Uganda, or a similar service-oriented adventure (cf. Illich 1968). One need not necessarily travel to engage in a well-intentioned but nonetheless annoying, offensive, and harmful information-gathering mission: many aspiring allies interrogate acquaintances about intensely personal aspects of their experiences, or extrapolate ridiculously from sensational media (consider the lamentations from white liberals about "the Black experience" when the movie *Precious* was released (*Precious* 2009); prior to that particular outbreak, the writer Percival Everett lampooned the behavior in his novel *Erasure* (Everett 2001).

These behaviors are morally problematic because they involve the objectification of the people with whom the aspiring ally hopes to be in solidarity, they push the burden of educating oneself about oppression onto people already burdened by that oppression, and they often seem to absolve responsibility for acting to undermine systems of oppression by replacing it with guilt or "awareness" as an endpoint for allyship. Knowledge of what it's like to be oppressed is not the only kind of knowledge about oppression about which people in positions of domination are systematically ignorant, but it is frequently the one that people try to address when they first begin to grasp their own ignorance, and focusing on learning what it's like can preclude more productive kinds of learning.

These practices are epistemically problematic because they often involve interpreting a small number of experiences as representative and because they are insufficiently attentive to the cognitive distortions that created and sustained the ignorance in the first place and continue to influence conclusions drawn from such experiences. For example, if I realize that growing up as a white person under conditions of white

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.25 Published online by Cambridge University Press

supremacy has led me to develop certain cognitive distortions about race and racism, why should I think that those distortions disappear just because I recognize that they exist, or because I decide to fight against racism? This latter epistemic failure in particular is a structural problem that makes it difficult to fix privileged ignorance of oppression by seeking to understand *what it's like* for the oppressed. Thus, the examples above aren't just poor executions of an essentially useful or productive strategy (though they are particularly bad cases). To the extent that these practices are intended to solve the epistemic problem that people in positions of privilege develop cognitive distortions that limit their understanding of that privilege, these knowledge-seeking practices fail because they continue to be influenced by the social and political structures that created the distortions in the first place.

In this article I am concerned with how relatively privileged people who wish to act in anti-oppressive ways respond to an awareness of the limits of their own understanding of oppression in ways that fall short of what is necessary for building coalitions against oppression. I begin by considering "world"-travel and epistemic friction-seeking as strategies for combating privileged ignorance, and assess how well they fare when put into practice by those suffering from privileged ignorance. I then draw on the resources of tourism studies to guide our attention toward the social, political, and material circumstances in which we experience ignorance and produce knowledge. Recognizing that the political structures of our world shape the way we produce knowledge suggests that the ignorant privileged should not rely on filling in their lacunae with facts about the experience of being oppressed in order to counteract their ignorance, since the epistemic vices and cognitive distortions that created the ignorance in the first place continue to influence knowledge-creation even after they are acknowledged. Instead, the privileged progressive should undertake to learn about the provenance and purpose of her ignorance and the structures of oppression that facilitate and are facilitated by that ignorance. This article is one attempt to pursue that latter project: by trying to understand how the structures of domination influence epistemic processes, I aim to demarcate domains of learning that may be more politically and epistemically productive.

## II. "World"-Traveling and Epistemic Friction

To demonstrate the claim that it is problematic to attempt to fix privileged ignorance by learning about what being oppressed is like, I want to discuss some philosophical responses to the problem of privileged ignorance: "world"-traveling as introduced by María Lugones in 1987 (Lugones 1987), and its more narrowly epistemic relative, epistemic friction, discussed by José Medina twenty-five years later (Medina 2013). Both of these concepts describe important features of cross-cultural communication and experience, both pay close attention to the role of power in shaping our relationships, and both face serious problems when deployed by people occupying dominant social positions, even when those people intend to undermine their own dominance.

Lugones's concept of "world"-traveling describes primarily the compulsory travel between world-views that people of marginalized cultures experience (for example, the ability of and need for a Latina woman in the US to read and navigate both her Latina world and the white/Anglo world that dominates). She discusses the value of this skill for self-preservation, communication, coalition-building, and resistance to domination. Lugones suggests that willfully engaging in "world"-travel may also be helpful for people who have been taught to ignore, exclude, and separate dominated

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others but who no longer want to do this to see what they have been insensitive to: "By traveling to other people's 'worlds,' we discover that there are 'worlds' in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable" (Lugones 2003, 97).

This "world"-traveling must be animated by a "playful attitude [which] involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the 'worlds' we inhabit playfully, and thus openness to risk the ground that constructs us as oppressors or as oppressed or as collaborating or colluding with oppression" (96). Lugones contrasts her conception of playfulness with an agonistic one that focuses on competition and on winning a game for which the rules are known and the uncertainty is about who will win. Attempts at "world" travel animated by this agonistic playfulness are bound to fail because they are not characterized by openness to surprise, to new conceptions of self and other, or to the possibility of different rules from those with which the participants are familiar, or a lack of rules altogether; "Their traveling is always a trying that is tied to conquest, domination, reduction of what they meet to their own sense of order, and erasure of the other 'world'" (95).

Medina's prescription for the ignorant privileged to seek epistemic friction parallels the epistemic elements of Lugones's recommendation. In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Medina discusses the epistemic imbalances that accompany, facilitate, and resist oppression. These include a special propensity among the materially privileged to develop certain epistemic vices like arrogance (which Medina describes as "enjoying too much cognitive esteem"), laziness, and closed-mindedness (Medina 2013, 32).

Epistemic vices (such as epistemic arrogance) are flaws that are not incidental and transitory, but *structural* and *systematic*: they involve attitudes deeply rooted in one's personality and cognitive functioning. Epistemic vices are composed of attitudinal structures that permeate one's entire cognitive life: they involve attitudes toward oneself and others in testimonial exchanges, attitudes toward the evidence available and one's assessment of it, and so on. These vices affect one's capacity to learn from others and from the facts; they inhibit the capacity of self-correction and of being open to corrections from others (which requires some amount of epistemic humility and open-mindedness) (31).

Letting our epistemic vices go unchecked has disastrous implications. "Continual epistemic neglect creates blinders that one allows to grow around one's epistemic perspective, constraining and slanting one's vantage point" (33). As these blinders take hold, an epistemically vicious person can develop and reinforce *meta-insensitivity*, which Medina also calls "meta-blindness," marking its relationship to the familiar pronouncements of "color-blindness" or "gender-blindness" (in myopic attempts at equal-opportunity hiring, for example)[2]: willful, even lauded, refusals to see; "the hermeneutically privileged have a pronounced *insensitivity to insensitivity*, a sort of *meta-blindness* (or meta-insensitivity), a special difficulty in realizing and appreciating the limitations of their horizon of understanding" (75).

Considering remedies for epistemic vices such as an arrogant overestimation of one's epistemic abilities, Medina champions experiences of epistemic friction, or circumstances that challenge an individual's world-view enough to cause a realization that there are other ways of experiencing and knowing the world than those to which the person in question has access. "As an antidote to this meta-blindness, we need to appeal

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to the *principles of epistemic friction*, actively searching for more alternatives than those noticed, acknowledging them (or their possibility), attempting to engage with them whenever possible, and seeking equilibrium among them" (78).

It is worth noting here a concern about epistemic friction as a remedy for meta-insensitivity, which has to do with a general conundrum about needing to employ particular virtues to fix related vices. This concern is not new; accusations of circularity against Aristotelian accounts of virtue abound,[3] though Aristotle's own view may be able to escape them (Peterson 1992). Likewise, the prescription to seek epistemic friction isn't strictly circular, but it is full of difficulties that result from a kind of circularity. The problem with suggesting epistemic friction as an antidote to meta-insensitivity is that a person must be sensitive enough to see alternative viewpoints when they are present, which is one of the skills the profoundly meta-insensitive person lacks. If a person does manage to get started on the project of correcting her meta-insensitivity (perhaps she becomes friends with someone who has a different viewpoint, and after a while, something about the friend's perspective "clicks"), the tension between epistemic bad habits and concerted efforts to mediate them manifests as a slow, frustrating dynamic of striving and failing. As with many attempts to teach ourselves new skills, the process is characterized by trial and error. This dynamic is compatible with improvement, but we should note that in this context each error runs the risk of reinforcing epistemic vices and harming other people. These risks should not dissuade us from trying since doing nothing is another way of perpetuating existing harms, but they give us another reason to make ourselves accountable to others so that we may learn when we have made harmful errors and seek help in correcting them; they emphasize the importance of outside perspectives and relationships that enable us to hear them.

Though Lugones's "world"-travel and Medina's epistemic friction do not map onto each other perfectly, there are many ways in which they speak of the same activity. This activity—opening oneself to a world that is not one's own—is essential to creating good epistemic agents in general, and more specific to my concerns here: allies in liberatory movements. I suspect that, implicitly, many people attempting to "world"-travel from positions of dominance are doing so with the intention of cultivating epistemic friction. One part of learning to see the subjugated other as a lively, resisting person—which is at least one of the goals of "world"-travel from relatively dominant positions—is learning to appreciate their view of the world, and to allow that view to challenge and influence one's own. That is, one of the goals of "world"-traveling is to encounter epistemic friction.

A third concept—curdling—developed by Lugones and taken up by Medina, helps "world"-traveling generate that epistemic friction. Lugones introduces curdling or curdle-separation in contrast to what she calls the "logic of purity" characterized by homogeneity, control, and fragmentation. Within a logic of curdling we recognize ourselves as multiplicitous and nonetheless connected, intermeshed, and whole (Lugones 2003). When we practice curdling behaviors, we can draw our own and other people's attention to the friction that already exists within our identification as members of certain groups. Lugones sees potential for coalition and empathy-building in curdling, since the ways one may be aware of not-quite-fitting within a social category can raise one's sensitivity to the fact that others experience power and social identities in contested, inflected ways. For Medina, some of the power of curdling-separation lies in its ability to generate epistemic friction on a social level: we can draw others' attention to the multiplicities alive within individuals and social groups by drawing attention to the ways in which we do not quite fit. I will return throughout this article to the ways

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a logic of curdling guides and supplements "world"-travel and epistemic friction, and how this plays out for hopeful "world"-travelers from dominant locations, but first I want to discuss some of the challenges for successful "world"-travel and epistemic friction-seeking in this context, and concerns about the larger consequences of people in positions of social domination pursuing these aims.

Shannon Sullivan has argued that "world"-traveling can actually contribute to white privilege because of a tendency for white people to develop what she calls "ontological expansiveness," or a sense of belonging and comfort in a variety of worlds—linguistic, geographical, cultural, and so on—even when those worlds are not "for" them (Sullivan 2004). Lugones has two reasons to object to characterizing the activity Sullivan describes as "world"-travel: ontological expansiveness is a version of the colonialist travel Lugones explicitly rejects, and one of the distinctive experiences that enables one to identify different "worlds" is feeling differentially "at ease within" them. If many white people are already at ease within the vast majority of spaces, even when these spaces were not designed for them to feel at ease within, their presence within those "worlds" does not seem to count as travel at all; one must be sufficiently open and affected by the space to sense that it is not one's own "world" in order to travel to it. Setting aside whether such an ontologically expansive person actually "world"-travels, the critique brings up some risks of attempting to "world"-travel from a dominant position: ontological expansiveness can turn the attempt to travel into an expansion of privilege by claiming more space that belongs, in some sense, to others. This kind of ontological expansiveness means that "world"-traveling can end up with white people laying claim to "worlds" that were previously zones of comfort, escape from, resistance to white dominance in other spheres.

The epistemic analog to this ontological expansiveness involves unconsciously employing the epistemic vices one wishes to thwart in a way that assimilates new information into one's existing world-view. When a privileged person recognizes that he is subject to cognitive distortions that produce ignorance, those distortions do not simply go away, leaving the gaps in knowledge to be filled unproblematically. The epistemic vices that accompany privilege can prevent one from even recognizing experiences as occasions of epistemic conflict. This tendency may assert itself in interpreting new, difficult information in ways that fail to acknowledge the serious challenge to one's world-view.

A benign example: an acquaintance from my fiction book club and I were arguing about the relative values of sameness and difference in building just communities. He is a kind, peace-and-love sort of person, and argued that fundamentally we all want and need the same things, and that this should be the basis of our coming together to create a world where we could all get along. I argued that people of different backgrounds and identities often have very different, sometimes conflicting needs, and that the project of building just communities needs to take differences of social identity seriously and provide means for sustaining identities that are historically, socially, and personally meaningful, rather than trying to root out this difference in the interest of harmony. Infuriatingly, my friend's single-minded focus on sameness and agreement extended to the point that he refused even to admit that we disagreed at all, and I left the conversation feeling like I had been talking to a wall. Likewise, if I cannot recognize testimony, narrative, or experiences as conveying new information that challenges what I already know, I fail to experience or be changed by epistemic friction, though I may think I have done what is necessary to court it.

Mariana Ortega has described a version of this phenomenon prevalent among white feminist academics as "loving, knowing ignorance," a kind of "arrogant perception that

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involves self-deception and the quest for more knowledge about the object of perception—the perceiver believes himself or herself to be perceiving lovingly even though this is not the case, and the perceiver wishes to make knowledge claims about the object of perception, even though such claims are not checked or questioned" (Ortega 2006, 63). The knowingly, lovingly ignorant fail to make substantive use of remedies to the instrumentalization and erasure of women of color offered by Audre Lorde, Elizabeth Spelman, and María Lugones, and instead settle for superficial attempts at learning about (for this is rarely conceived of as learning *from*) the people whose struggle they want to support.

There is also the risk that "world"-traveling will turn into a kind of politically correct tourism, which Ortega describes as "fleeting moments of experimenting with being political while not really being committed to effecting change" (Ortega 2016, 141). This kind of dalliance in politics can take on a self-aggrandizing aesthetic, characterized by the desire to earn credibility from having "world"-traveled, incorporating a sense of worldliness (hipness, "wokeness") into one's image without a sustained commitment to effecting change. The concern with projecting a politically engaged image can range from social media photos of smiling white teenagers surrounded by poor third-world children, to "Water is Sacred" tee-shirts, and often involves some amount of turning the Other into an object of aesthetic contemplation or adornment. Does sustained commitment to struggle take the sting out of the aestheticization of that struggle? I am not sure; the kind of social credit accumulated by performances of radicalism or commitment to social justice can have stultifying effects even within communities that are deeply dedicated to their cause. It is easier to say that at least *mere* aesthetic engagement with a political movement does not achieve the goals Lugones and Medina have in mind, and certainly not without the additional costs of commodifying social and political movements. Yet we need to balance these concerns with recognition that symbols, representation, and visibility are important for justice movements.

A confusion about "world"-traveling persists in interpretations of Lugones's theory and in actual attempts to "world"-travel: a failure to distinguish "identifying with" from "identifying as." Although Lugones first articulates "world"-travel in the context of her own need to identify with her mother (instead of perceiving her arrogantly), this shouldn't be mistaken for Lugones's need to identify *as* her mother (Lugones 2003, 86). As Sonia Kruks points out, attempting to "world"-travel on the basis of identifying *as* the people to whose "world" one travels demands an untenable metaphysics (Kruks 2001). But this is not merely an interpretive misunderstanding; the conflation persists in practical attempts at solidarity as well, from trivial statements of identification ("Je suis Paris"), to emphases on sameness as a basis for political action ("gay people are just the same as straight people; we just want to have the same rights to be married"), to the somewhat absurd, but not uncommon adoption/appropriation of a culture one visits (I have in mind a phenomenon especially common with privileged young liberals, who, to take a recent example, dressed themselves up in the rituals and norms of Indigenous Dakota Access Pipeline resisters after a stay at the Standing Rock Reservation resistance camp). Identification *as* the people whose "world" one visits is deeply problematic since it erases the real, significant differences that characterize the relationship of domination/privilege that create the need for "world"-travel in the first place. When we erase these differences, we fail to understand the material conditions of our relationships and we lose access to "a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde 1984, 111). This kind of

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identification also often includes cultural and epistemic appropriation, with their attendant material and immaterial effects.

On the other hand, identification *with* a community seems less problematic. Recognizing the liveliness, humanity, creativity, vulnerability, and capacity to trick and deceive that are common to all of us is an important part of building solidarity and challenging the systems that would have us believe otherwise. Erroneously identifying *as* a particular social or political group actually creates barriers to the more productive attitude of identifying *with*. In Lugones's curdling terms, transparent identification as a group member erases the multiplicity within the group and reinforces the logic of purity; it may also simply be incorrect.

Lugones is emphatic that play is an important part of "world"-travel. By this she means that the kind of attitude that leaves one flexible and open to change in the rules or one's understanding of the rules, a willingness to explore, to give ground, and so on is central to "world"-travel. But Sue Campbell and Mariana Ortega both point out the problems that arise when this element of play on the part of the dominant is at work in "world"-travel. For one thing, the sense of having expectations unsettled and of giving ground will rarely *feel* like play to the privileged. Instead it is likely to be unsettling at the most benign, and more often quite frightening (Campbell 1999). Ortega points out that play can suggest that there is little at stake (Ortega 2016). From the dominant, encouragement to have a playful attitude while "world"-traveling can morph into a familiar kind of colonialist diversion in an exotic locale, or "dressing up" in another culture, as with many misguided attempts to identify as the community one visits. In spite of Lugones's own description of playfulness, which draws a distinction between this kind of colonialist diversion and the openness she's calling for, playfulness might be a misleading attitude to encourage in aspiring "world"-travelers from dominant positions. The attributes of playfulness that Lugones values are important for "world"-travel that hopes to avoid becoming dominating itself, but they are a tall order when the feelings that usually attend risking one's position, even if this is what one values, are defensiveness, fear, and anxiety. With care and effort, we can slowly cultivate more comfort with these feelings, but it is not a simple choice not to feel them.

## III. Epistemic Tourism

Many of the critiques of "world"-traveling parallel concerns about travel and tourism in the ordinary sense; it may be useful to think of them as worries that "world"-travel, when performed from a position of dominance, can turn into a kind of *epistemic tourism*. This connection is useful because the work done in tourism studies can draw our attention to the political, economic, and symbolic power structures that shape tourism as an activity. These attributes of tourism put most people off recommending ordinary tourism as an unproblematic remedy for insularity—though *travel* frequently is recommended, there is a common perception that people from the US don't typically value international travel, a claim often lamented and offered as one explanation for US exceptionalism, ignorance, and arrogance about the rest of the world.

Lugones has argued that arrogant perception (leading to agonistic travel) is one distinguishing feature between "world"-travel and what I call epistemic tourism. Are there material and social structures—in addition to psychological ones— that facilitate arrogant or agonistic attitudes when relatively privileged people attempt to "world"-travel? Taking a closer look at the structures that distinguish ordinary tourism from ordinary travel can help us identify structures that influence the epistemic forms of these

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activities and create a tendency for attempts at "world"-travel from the privileged to take on the arrogant and dominating character of epistemic tourism.

At a basic level, tourism is a type of travel, one special aspect of which is that it is voluntary, whereas travel as a broad category can encompass movement of varying levels of compulsion. For a sense of the breadth, consider the wanderings of refugees, emigration from hostile environments, immigration to promising ones, travel for work, vacations, research, family, escape. One chooses to be a tourist, and a tourist typically chooses where she visits and for how long; a tourist can return home.

Tourism is characteristically about consuming an environment, experience, or culture. As sociologists Elisabeth Cunin and Christian Rinaudo observe, "tourism functions well on a rationale that allows the passing visitor to consume the objects of an exotic yet domesticated world" (Cunin and Rinaudo 2008, 282). Though tourists (and those advertising to tourists) often describe tourism as a tool for self-actualization and the development of autonomy, the pretense that this activity is accessible to everyone and operates outside of the realm of consumption "ignores the basic determinants of social differentiation and material inequalities that determine peoples' [*sic*] ability to consume," and glosses over the way "the 'freedom' to consume [tourist products, destinations, and so on] often comes at the expense of someone else's welfare, whether through the appropriation/privatization of public lands for tourism development, the displacement of peasant populations, resource degradation, and the intensified commodification of labour power and/or exploitative working practices" (Bianchi 2009, 495).

Tourism is not just for the politically unaware, either; enlightenment is not what differentiates tourism from travel, and the narcissistic aetheticization of political awareness is highly visible in contemporary tourism. Raoul Bianchi, drawing on the anthropologist John Hutnyk, describes this as "revolutionary tourism," that is, "the seeking out of places and souvenirs associated with political struggle as part of one's travel experiences—in which the inherent irony of seeking hope in foreign struggles whilst failing to advance a revolutionary politics at home, is all too apparent" (496).

Tourism is characteristically practiced by people in privileged social and economic positions, whether they are politically conscious or not. And even when practiced by the politically aware, tourism partakes of structures of capitalism and colonialism that enable visitors who can afford it to purchase experiences and souvenirs of exotic (ized) worlds, often sanitized or curated to fulfill the expectations of the tourist. Tourism, even when self-consciously practiced to increase one's exposure to the world outside one's experience, requires a location that is able to accommodate visitors, infrastructure for reasonably comfortable travel, and at least nominally hospitable hosts. That is, the immaterial experiences of tourism—at best: awe, expanded understanding of the world, a new perspective on one's own norms—require a material world that allows for these experiences. They also often, but not always, include fetishizing the locals—objectifying them, or imbuing them with a kind of naive wisdom, and generally failing to engage them the way one would an equal.[4]

Because of the parallel I have drawn between tourism and epistemic tourism on the one hand and travel and "world"-travel on the other, it would seem that I think a distinguishing feature of tourism in contrast to travel is that tourism involves some particular kind of moral failure, but I do not think this is true. Tourism does not always commit harm over and above that which attends the colonialist and capitalist social relations that support tourism. Although objectification of the people, culture, and place toured is a frequent attribute of tourism, it is not a necessary feature. In my own experience, these features more frequently accompany tourism when there is a

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very large gap between the power of the tourist and that of the toured (contrast the stereotypical attitudes of an American tourist in Paris and an American tourist in Nairobi).

What I wish to draw attention to is the way in which tourism not only relies on but tends to function in harmony with structures of colonialism and capitalism, whereas travel may transgress them. Lugones's logic of curdling gives us another way to articulate the tension: we can cultivate curdling's resistant potential by refusing to play roles that are complicit in the logic of purity, but tourism limits the extent to which this refusal is possible because it partakes of norms and material structures built around the logic of purity.

Both travel and tourism are embedded in social, political, and material relations that influence who practices them and how they are practiced. Drawing a connection between ordinary travel/tourism and the epistemic versions of these activities should urge us to consider capitalist and colonialist social relations as important features that shape and distinguish "world"-travel and epistemic tourism. Just as those engaged in the agonistic play with which Lugones contrasts her own open, creative playfulness are linked to conquest and domination, epistemic tourism operates within a system where the tourist has power over the toured, consumes knowledge and culture, interprets information within her existing system of understanding, and takes herself to have contributed to her own personal and larger social development. Processes of epistemic tourism reinscribe the systems of colonialism and capitalism that, at least superficially, the epistemic tourist aims to subvert through her tourism. Epistemic tourism is suffused with the capitalist, colonialist, and otherwise dominating norms of ordinary tourism, and so we should not assume that what is learned as a result is free from the distortions that accompany these modes of domination just because the intention on the part of the epistemic tourist is to correct the ignorance that has resulted from those distortions in the past.

Other elements of the analogy also help illuminate what transforms "world"-travel practiced from dominant positions into epistemic tourism. The voluntariness of attempts at "world"-travel from dominant positions parallels tourism more than it does the compulsory travel demanded of oppressed subjects. Because this has been frequently misunderstood, it bears repeating: the travel to dominant "worlds" that marginalized subjects experience is very often compulsory. There need be no recommendation that marginalized women seek out these experiences because they often cannot help but have them (cf. Bartky 1998). This is part of what it means for there to be a dominant "world" or "worlds": they demand participation by claiming and dominating social and physical space. This is the enormous privilege that distinguishes even successful "world"-traveling *from* dominant positions from "world"-traveling *to* dominating worlds; for the dominant person, traveling to another "world" is a choice.

But of course, privilege and marginalization do not touch us all uniformly or entirely. Although tourism is tied to some privileges (for example, having enough money, a means of getting around, a passport if leaving one's own country), there are plenty of people who have these privileges yet are marginalized in other ways, and these variations influence the experience of tourism for both the tourist and the locals. Likewise, one may, for example, travel as a refugee rather than as a tourist and nonetheless experience racial privilege in the place of refuge. (I have in mind my spouse's family: refugees from the Spanish Civil War who eventually settled in Mexico.) In these situations, cultivating the art of curdling—"the distance of meta comment, auto-reflection, looking at oneself in someone else's mirror and back in one's own, of self-aware experimentation"— may help us hold these multiple experiences

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in mind, and build a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between travel and tourism (Lugones 2003, 145). Mariana Ortega emphasizes this theme of Lugones's work when she notes the importance of *critical* world-travel, which requires "an ongoing process of evaluation and interpretation of not only what is learned through traveling but also of the very practices of traveling across worlds" (Ortega 2016, 131). For marginalized, multiplicitous selves, this critical stance "might lead them to understand themselves as capable of being not just oppressed but also of being oppressors and as also being capable of resistance" (132). For people "world"-traveling from positions of domination, a critical stance on one's own social location, baggage, and means of travel is crucial (though not sufficient) for encountering epistemic friction because "the unconscious motivations they have, if any, will jeopardize their practices of world-traveling but will not necessarily stop them" (137–39).

I agree that practicing curdling and a critical stance are important components of an epistemic friction-seeking practice of "world"-traveling, but they may not be sufficient to overcome the forces that turn "world"-travel into epistemic tourism. Bianchi has critiqued the "critical turn" in tourism studies for focusing single-mindedly on the symbolic exchanges and interactions in tourism while ignoring the material power relations that simultaneously shape tourism. It is worth keeping this critique in mind when we translate to "world"-traveling and epistemic tourism in order to acknowledge that our ways of acquiring knowledge are tied up with acquiring status, spending money, and a number of other less obviously epistemic activities. Adhering to the notion that knowledge-acquisition is importantly distinct from these other activities (though perhaps concurrent with them) conceals the ways in which activities of knowledge-acquisition can cause material harm. It also obscures the way knowledge-acquisition works differently for people depending on their situation within differentially distributed social, political, and material power— a central theme of feminist epistemology, but which can sometimes be forgotten, especially in analysis that centers white women.

## IV. Alternatives to Epistemic Tourism

So, knowledge-acquisition is not exempt from the power structures that shape our social, political, and material world. But the inclination on the part of aspiring allies to learn what they can to ameliorate suffering, to educate themselves to help or be in solidarity with others' struggles is understandable and even laudable, even if in both principle and practice it is neither as epistemically effective nor as politically helpful as needed. Recommendations to "world"-travel or to seek epistemic friction, when deployed from positions of domination, are distorted by the very systems they are intended to diminish and transform into attempts to understand the experiences of subjects of domination through epistemic tourism. What recommendation can help us avoid this distortion?

Aspiring allies might be better off trying to learn about the provenance of their own ignorance of oppression than trying to understand what it's like to live subject to that oppression. We ought to resist the claim that mere ignorance is the cause of oppression (so if only people knew better, oppression would not exist), but recognize the role manufactured ignorance plays as a symptom and tool of oppression. Privileged people wishing to be helpful allies must interrogate whether we are as ignorant of systems of oppression as we claim to be, since false claims of ignorance enable us to disavow responsibility for oppression, all the while idly wishing it would stop. Lenape and

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Potawotomi education scholar Susan Dion describes this behavior as casting oneself as "the perfect stranger" in the context of nonnative people's frequent claims that they know nothing about Indigenous peoples. This tactic is an often-reflexive way of refusing to acknowledge any existing relationship between oneself and Indigenous people; if you don't know anything about the history of settler colonialism then you can't be blamed for having done nothing to fix it (Dion 2009; 2016).

Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang's description of "settler moves to innocence" recounts a similar process of claiming ignorance as a sort of defensive stance to avoid taking responsibility for colonialist harms (Tuck and Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang describe four moves toward innocence: settler nativism (referred to by Vine Deloria, Jr. as the "Indian-grandmother complex" [Deloria 1988]), adoption fantasies and appropriating Indigenous cultures, equivocating on colonialism by characterizing all struggles against imperialism as anti- or decolonial without addressing specific context, and focusing on "decolonizing consciousness" to the exclusion of material decolonization. "Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positioning that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. In fact, settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 10).

The critiques from Dion, Tuck, and Yang emphasize the importance of recognizing that one central role that ignorance plays in systems of oppression is that of excusing the oppressor. These critiques encourage us to move beyond the mere fact of our ignorance and toward understanding its purpose. So, one positive recommendation for a person at the point of recognizing genuine ignorance or declaring ignorance (and these may feel much the same to the person doing the recognizing) is to learn about the ignorance itself rather than attempting to fill in that ignorance with facts obtained through epistemic tourism. We can ask ourselves: Why was I ignorant for so long? What purpose does/did this ignorance serve? What narratives does it enable to persist? What forces enabled or encouraged or enforced its perpetuation?

Shannon Sullivan's article "White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression: Or, Why I Know So Little about Puerto Rico" is an example of responding to ignorance by asking these sort of questions. Sullivan notes that she is "less interested here in ignorance as a simple lack of knowledge than [she is] in ignorance as an active production of particular kinds of knowledges for various social and political purposes" (Sullivan 2007, 154). The distinction can be subtle, since Sullivan's approach to understanding her ignorance does involve learning a large number of facts about the colonial history of the US in Puerto Rico, but crucially, it also involves recognizing the relationship among knowledge, ignorance, and power, as well as learning about the "knowledge"[5] produced and distributed among white people from the US in order to justify continuing colonial projects in Puerto Rico.

In addition to (or as part of the process of) understanding the contextualized role of ignorance, aspiring allies should focus on learning about the structures that ignorance supports: the relations of power that facilitate well-being for some groups at the cost of the suffering (exploitation, dehumanization, poverty, shame, cultural and material dispossession, and so on) of others. This is in contrast to learning what it's like for those who suffer the costs of these structures, though they are easy to confuse, since we have good reason to think that it is easiest to see the structures of privilege and oppression from the perspective of the oppressed. In curdling terms, learning about our ignorance can help us move from seeing ourselves transparently as members of dominant groups

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to understanding the thick ways in which we actually do not quite fit the ideal of the logic of purity—the impartial observer. Although the impartial observer cannot "world"-travel because he is from no-place, recognizing the ways in which each of us is a multiplicitous being can help root us in place and generate some of the resistance necessary for epistemic friction.[6]

The complex relationship between the visibility of these structures and their power over one's life can easily lead to the belief that in order for a privileged person to understand the structures underlying their privilege they need to learn what it's like to be oppressed. One concern about the practice of epistemic tourism that sticks with me is that it is evidence of a refusal to accept testimony of oppressed subjects about their own experiences; instead, an aspiring ally tries to go out and experience oppression himself with his own eyes. In addition to being epistemically unjust, this urge reflects a misunderstanding of how privileged ignorance works; why should I trust my own interpretation given what I know to be my cognitive limitations in these particular areas? If I grasp the way my ignorance of systems of oppression works to support that oppression, at the very least I do not have any reason to think my interpretation or experience of what it might be like to suffer under systems of domination is more reliable or valuable than those of people whose perspectives have not been blinkered by a lifetime of ignorance.

Luckily, the relationship between experiences of oppression and insight into oppressive structures is not so tight that one must have those experiences in order to understand at all. Charles Mills, José Medina, Linda Martín Alcoff, Paula Moya, Satya Mohanty, and many more have emphasized this looseness while discussing the sort of insight into oppressive structures that experiences of being oppressed can facilitate (Mills 1997; Mohanty 1997; Moya 2002; Alcoff 2007; Mills 2007; Medina 2013). Suffering oppression is neither necessary nor sufficient for developing these kinds of insights, but nonetheless there is an important connection among identity, experience, and knowledge. As Medina puts it, the vices and virtues that tend to accompany privilege and oppression are not exclusive to those groups, are not universal within those groups, and are not automatic features of membership in those groups (Medina 2013, 43). Rather, as Moya interprets the conflict expressed by Cherríe Moraga of feeling strongly that her experiences of the world shape what she sees and how she sees it, without wanting to be reduced to her social and political identities: "The 'physical realities of our lives' will profoundly *inform* the contours and the context of both our theories and our knowledge" (Moya 2002, 37).

Finding ways to understand the structures of oppression without needing to have the experiences of being oppressed will be an important part of educating the privileged while minimizing harm to the oppressed. In the meantime, and as we continue developing the skills of learning to work in coalition, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which seeking knowledge is embedded in a material and social world, and that our knowledge-seeking is not morally or politically neutral. We ought to recognize that we often know more than we think we know, and that we are taught ignorance in order to serve particular political purposes. And when we recognize that the reproduction of this ignorance is built into the structure of various forms of domination, let us also recognize that pursing knowledge within those same structures is unlikely to rectify either the ignorance or the domination.

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to many people for offering feedback, assistance, and encouragement for this article. Thanks especially to Naomi Scheman, the participants in the Moral, Political, Legal, and

Social (MPLS) Theory group at the University of Minnesota, Ian Stoner, Kate Derickson, and María Rebolleda Gómez for discussions about many iterations of this article. I am grateful to the attendees of the Hypatia-APA/CSW conference in May 2015, an anonymous reviewer, and the editors for their helpful feedback. Many thanks to the editors of this special issue and the entire editorial team at Hypatia for all their hard work and support.

## Notes

1 In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills argues that "the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills 1997, 18). See also *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* for a collection of responses to and developments of Mills's work on white ignorance, power, and domination (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

2 Like Medina, I do not intend the use of "blindness" here to associate moral or epistemic ineptitude with vision impairment. Medina retains the term in order to invoke problematic but common metaphorical uses like "color-blindness"; I use the term when he does, but prefer "insensitivity" otherwise.

3 Here I have in mind accounts that question how a person who has been habituated into vice, for example, may learn to develop virtue, given that the only account we get of the development of virtue and vice is one of habituation from a young age. (See, for example, Hurka 2012. Peterson 1992 includes a detailed catalogue of accusations of circularity.)

4 Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* is an acute explanation of the overlapping infrastructures of colonialism and tourism in Antigua. The entire small book is filled with perspicacious barbs; one, often quoted: "An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you . . ." (Kincaid 1988, 17).

5 "Knowledge" is in quotation marks here so I can avoid committing to whether what Sullivan (along with most of us in the US) was taught ought to be described as knowledge. Certainly, many of the things we are taught about Puerto Rico are not *true*, but they are treated as knowledge.

6 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the connection here and throughout the article to Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (DiAngelo 2018). I agree with DiAngelo that openness to critique is an essential, ongoing feature of white allyship with antiracist projects. Doing our best, on our own and with others, to challenge the fiction of the impartial observer with whom we are taught to identify is a vital step in undermining the domination characteristic of liberal modernity. Though it is insufficient, it may be all that hopeful allies are capable of.

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**Cite this article:** Bowman M (2020). Privileged Ignorance, "World"-Traveling, and Epistemic Tourism. *Hypatia* **35**, 475–489. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.25