CHAPTER 4

White Ignorance

White ignorance. . .
It's a big subject. How much time do you have?
It's not enough.

Ignorance is usually thought of as the passive obverse to knowledge, the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment.
But . . .
Imagine an ignorance that resists.
Imagine an ignorance that fights back.
Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge. . . .

Classically individualist, indeed sometimes—self-parodically—to the verge of solipsism, blithely indifferent to the possible cognitive consequences of class, racial, or gender situatedness (or, perhaps more accurately, taking a propertied white male standpoint as given), modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology was for hundreds of years from its Cartesian origins profoundly inimical terrain for the development of any concept of structural group-based miscognition. The paradigm exemplars of phenomena likely to foster mistaken belief—optical illusions, hallucinations, phantom limbs, dreams—were by their very banality universal to the human condition, and the epistemic remedies prescribed—for example, rejecting all but the indubitable—were correspondingly abstract and general. Nineteenth-century Marxism, with its theoretical insistence on locating the individual agent and the individual cognizer in group (basically class) structures of domination, and its concepts of ideology, fetishism, societal "appearance," and divergent group (basically class) perspectives on the social order, offered a potential corrective to this epistemological

individualism. But to the extent that there was a mainstream twentieth-century appropriation of these ideas, in the form of *Wissenssoziologie*, the sociology of knowledge, it drew its genealogy from Karl Mannheim rather than Karl Marx, was frequently (despite terminological hedges such as Mannheim's "relationism") relativistic, and was in any case confined to sociology.[1] So though some figures, such as Max Scheler and Mannheim himself, explicitly argued for the epistemological implications of their work, these claims were not engaged with by philosophers in the analytic tradition. A seemingly straightforward and clear-cut division of conceptual and disciplinary labor was presumed: descriptive issues of recording and explaining what and why people actually believed could be delegated to sociology, but evaluative issues of articulating cognitive norms would be reserved for (individualist) epistemology, which was philosophical territory.

But though mainstream philosophy and analytic epistemology continued to develop in splendid isolation for many decades, W. V. O. Quine's naturalizing of epistemology would initiate a sequence of events with unsuspectedly subversive long-term theoretical repercussions for the field.[2] If articulating the norms for *ideal* cognition required taking into account (in some way) the practices of *actual* cognition, if the prescriptive needed to pay attention (in some way) to the descriptive, then on what principled basis could cognitive realities of a *supra*-individual kind continue to be excluded from the ambit of epistemology? For it then meant that the cognitive agent needed to be located in her specificity—as a member of certain social groups, within a given social milieu, in a society at a particular time period. Whatever Quine's own sympathies (or lack thereof), his work had opened Pandora's box. A naturalized epistemology had, perforce, also to be a socialized epistemology; this was "a straightforward extension of the naturalistic approach."[3] What had originally been a specifically Marxist concept, "standpoint theory," was adopted and developed to its most sophisticated form in the work of feminist theorists,[4] and it became possible for books with titles like *Social Epistemology* and *Socializing Epistemology*, and journals called *Social Epistemology*, to be published and seen as a legitimate part of philosophy.[5] The Marxist challenge thrown down a century before could now finally be taken up.

Obviously, then, for those interested in pursuing such questions this is a far more welcoming environment than that of a few decades ago. Nonetheless, I think it is obvious that the *potential* of these developments for transforming mainstream epistemology is far from being fully realized. And at least one major reason for this failure is that the conceptions of society in the literature too often presuppose a degree of consent and inclusion that does not exist outside the imagination of mainstream scholars—in a

sense, a societal population essentially generated by simple iteration of that originally solitary Cartesian cognizer. As Linda Martín Alcoff has ironically observed, the "society" about which these philosophers are writing often seems to be composed exclusively of white males, so that one wonders how it reproduces itself.[6] The Marxist critique is seemingly discredited, the feminist critique is marginalized, and the racial critique does not even exist. The concepts of domination, hegemony, ideology, mystification, exploitation, and so on that are part of the lingua franca of radicals find little or no place here.[7] In particular, the analysis of the implications for social cognition of the legacy of white supremacy has barely been initiated. The sole reference to race that I could find in the Schmitt collection, for example, was a single cautious sentence by Philip Kitcher, which I here reproduce in full: "Membership of a particular ethnic group within a particular society may interfere with one's ability to acquire true beliefs about the distribution of characteristics that are believed to be important to human worth (witness the history of nineteenth-century craniometry)."[8]

What I want to do in this chapter is to sketch out some of the features and the dynamic of what I see as a particularly pervasive—though hardly theorized—form of ignorance, what could be called white ignorance, linked to white supremacy. (So the chapter is an elaboration of one of the key themes of my 1997 book, *The Racial Contract*.[9]) The idea of group-based cognitive handicap is not an alien one to the radical tradition, if not normally couched in terms of "ignorance." Indeed, it is, on the contrary, a straightforward corollary of standpoint theory: if one group is privileged, after all, it must be by comparison with another group that is handicapped. In addition, the term has for me the virtue of signaling my theoretical sympathies with what I know will seem to many a deplorably old-fashioned, "conservative" realist intellectual framework, one in which *truth, falsity, facts, reality*, and so forth are not enclosed with ironic scare-quotes. The phrase "white ignorance" implies the possibility of a contrasting "knowledge," a contrast that would be lost if all claims to truth were equally spurious, or just a matter of competing discourses. In the same way that *The Racial Contract* was not meant as a trashing of contractarianism as such but rather the critique of a contractarianism that ignored racial subordination, so similarly, mapping an epistemology of ignorance is for me a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge.

The meta-theoretical approach I find most congenial is that outlined by Alvin Goldman in his book *Knowledge in a Social World*.[10] Goldman describes his project as "an essay in social veritistic epistemology," oriented "toward truth determination," as against contemporary post-structuralist or Kuhn/Feyerabend/Bloor/Barnes-inspired approaches that relativize

truth.[11] So though the focus is social rather than individual, the traditional concerns and assumptions of mainstream epistemology have been retained:

> Traditional epistemology, especially in the Cartesian tradition, was highly individualistic, focusing on mental operations of cognitive agents in isolation or abstraction from other persons. . . . [This] individual epistemology needs a social counterpart: *social epistemology*. . . . In what respects is social epistemology social? First, it focuses on social paths or routes to knowledge. That is, considering believers taken one at a time, it looks at the many routes to belief that feature interactions with other agents, as contrasted with private or asocial routes to belief acquisition. . . . Second, social epistemology does not restrict itself to believers taken singly. It often focuses on some sort of group entity . . . and examines the spread of information or misinformation across that group's membership. Rather than concentrate on a single knower, as did Cartesian epistemology, it addresses the distribution of knowledge or error within the larger social cluster. . . . Veritistic epistemology (whether individual or social) is concerned with the production of knowledge, where knowledge is here understood in the "weak" sense of *true belief*. More precisely, it is concerned with both knowledge and its contraries: *error* (false belief) and *ignorance* (the absence of true belief). The main question for veritistic epistemology is: Which practices have a comparatively favorable impact on knowledge as contrasted with error and ignorance? Individual veritistic epistemology asks this question for nonsocial practices; social veritistic epistemology asks it for social practices.[12]

Unlike Goldman, I will use *ignorance* to cover both false belief and the absence of true belief. But with this minor terminological variation, this is basically the project I am trying to undertake: looking at the "spread of misinformation," the "distribution of error" (including the possibility of "massive error")[13] within the "larger social cluster," the "group entity," of whites, and the "social practices" (some "wholly pernicious")[14] that encourage it. Goldman makes glancing reference to some of the feminist and race literature (there is a grand total of a single index entry for *racism*), but in general, the implications of systemic social oppression for his project are not addressed. The picture of "society" he is working with is one that—with perhaps a few unfortunate exceptions—is inclusive and harmonious. Thus his account offers the equivalent in social epistemology of the mainstream theorizing in political science that frames American sexism and racism as "anomalies": US political culture is conceptualized as *essentially* egalitarian and inclusive, with the long actual history of systemic gender and racial subordination being relegated to the status of a minor "deviation" from the norm.[15] Obviously, such a starting point crucially handicaps any realistic social epistemology since in effect it turns things upside-down. Sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the *exception* but the

norm. So though his book is valuable in terms of conceptual clarification and some illuminating discussions of particular topics, the basic framework is flawed insofar as it marginalizes domination and its consequences. A less naïve understanding of how society actually works requires drawing on the radical tradition of social theory, in which various factors he does not consider play a crucial role in obstructing the mission of veritistic epistemology.

FOLK RACIAL STANDPOINT THEORY

Let me turn now to race. As I pointed out in an article more than a quarter-century ago,[16] and as has unfortunately hardly changed since then, there is no academic philosophical literature on racial epistemology that remotely compares in volume to that on gender epistemology. (Race and gender are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but usually in gender theory it is the perspective of white women that is explored.) However, one needs to distinguish academic from lay treatments. I would suggest that "white ignorance" has, whether centrally or secondarily, been a theme of many of the classic fictional and non-fictional works of the African American experience, and also that of other people of color.

In his introduction to a collection of black writers' perspectives on whiteness, David Roediger underlines the fundamental epistemic *asymmetry* between typical white views of blacks and typical black views of whites: these are not cognizers linked by a reciprocal ignorance but rather groups whose respective privilege and subordination tend to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation on the one hand and more veridical perceptions on the other.[17] Thus he cites the early twentieth-century black activist James Weldon Johnson's remark: "colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them."[18] Often for their very survival, blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists studying the strange culture, customs, and mindset of the "white tribe" that has such frightening power over them that in certain time periods whites can even determine their life or death on a whim. (In particular circumstances, then, white ignorance may need to be actively *encouraged*. Hence the black American folk poem: "Got one mind for white folks to see/Another for what I know is me." Or in James Baldwin's brutally candid assessment: "I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive."[19]) For what people of color quickly come to see—in a sense the primary epistemic principle of the racialized social epistemology of which they are the object—is that they are not seen at all. Correspondingly, the "central metaphor" of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is the image

of the "veil,"[20] and the black American cognitive equivalent of the shocking moment of Cartesian realization of the uncertainty of everything one had taken to be knowledge is the moment when for Du Bois, as a child in New England, "it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil."[21]

Similarly, Ralph Ellison's classic *Invisible Man*, generally regarded as the most important twentieth-century novel of the black experience, is arguably in key respects—while a multi-dimensional and multi-layered work of great depth and complexity, not to be reduced to a single theme—an *epistemological* novel.[22] For what it recounts is the protagonist's quest to determine what norms of belief are the right ones in a crazy looking-glass world where he is an invisible man "simply because [white] people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." And this systematic misperception is not, of course, due to biology, the intrinsic properties of his epidermis, or physical deficiencies in the white eye, but rather to "the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality."[23] The images of light and darkness, sight and blindness, that run through the novel, from the blindfolded black fighters in the grotesque battle royal at the start to the climactic discovery that the Brotherhood's (read: American Communist Party) leader has a glass eye, repeatedly raise, in context after context, the question of how one can demarcate what is genuine from only apparent insight, real from only apparent truth, even in the worldview of those whose historical materialist "science" supposedly gave them "super-vision."

Nor is it only black writers who have explored the theme of white ignorance. One of the consequences of the development of critical white studies has been a renewed appreciation of the pioneering work of Herman Melville, with *Moby-Dick* now being read by some critics as an early, nineteenth-century indictment of the national obsession with whiteness, Ahab's pathological determination to pursue the white whale regardless of its imperilment of his multi-racial crew.[24] But it is in the 1856 short novel *Benito Cereno*—used as the source of one of the two epigraphs to *Invisible Man* by Ellison—that one finds the most focused investigation of the unnerving possibilities of white blindness.[25] Boarding a slave ship—the *San Dominick*, a reference to the Haitian (Saint Domingue) Revolution—which, unknown to the protagonist, Amasa Delano, has been taken over by its human cargo, with the white crew being held hostage, Delano has all around him the evidence for black insurrection, from the terror in the eyes of the nominal white captain, the eponymous Benito Cereno, as his black barber Babo puts the razor to his throat, to the Africans clashing

their hatchets ominously in the background. But so unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished such a thing that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behavior of the imprisoned whites, no matter how far-fetched. In Eric Sundquist's summary,

> Melville's account of the "enchantment" of Delano, then, is also a means to examine the mystifications by which slavery was maintained. . . . Minstrelsy—in effect, the complete show of the tale's action staged for Delano—is a product, as it were, of his mind, of his willingness to accept Babo's Sambo-like performance. . . . Paradoxically, Delano watches Babo's performance without ever seeing it. . . . Delano participates in a continued act of suppressed revolt against belief in the appearances presented to him. . . . [a] self-regulation by racist assumptions and blind "innocence."[26]

The white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation. Correspondingly, on the positive epistemic side, the route to black knowledge is the self-conscious recognition of white ignorance (including its blackfaced manifestation in black consciousness itself). Du Bois prescribes a critical cognitive distancing from "a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world," a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[27] The attainment of "second sight" requires an understanding of what it is about whites and the white situation that motivates them to view blacks erroneously. One learns in part to see through identifying white blindness and avoiding the pitfalls of putting on these spectacles for one's own vision.[28]

So this subject is by no means unexplored in white and black texts. But as noted, because of the whiteness of philosophy, very little has been done here.[29] (One exception is Lewis Gordon's work on bad faith, which is obviously relevant to this subject, though not itself set in a formal epistemological framework.)[30] In this chapter, accordingly, I want to gesture toward some useful directions for the mapping of white ignorance and developing, accordingly, epistemic criteria for minimizing it.

DEMARCATING "WHITE IGNORANCE"

What I want to pin down, then, is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race—white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications—plays a crucial causal role. So let me begin by trying to clarify and demarcate more precisely the phenomenon I am addressing, as well as answering some possible objections.

To begin with, *white ignorance* as a cognitive phenomenon has to be clearly historicized. I am taking for granted the truth of some variant of social constructivism, which denies that race is biological. So the causality in the mechanisms for generating and sustaining white ignorance on the macro-level is social-structural rather than physico-biological, though it will of course operate through the physico-biological. Assuming the growing consensus in critical race theory to be correct—that race in general, and whiteness in particular, is a product of the modern period[31]—then you could not have had white ignorance in this technical, term-of-art sense in, say, the ancient world because whites did not exist then. Certainly people existed who by today's standards would be counted as white, but they would not have been so categorized at the time, either by themselves or others, so there would have been no whiteness to play a causal role in their knowing or non-knowing.[32] Moreover, even in the modern period, whiteness would not have been universally, instantly, and homogeneously instantiated; there would have been (to borrow an image from another field of study) "uneven development" in the processes of racialization in different countries at different times. Indeed, even in the United States, in a sense the paradigm white supremacist state, Matthew Frye Jacobson argues for a periodization of whiteness into different epochs, with some European ethnic groups only becoming fully white at a comparatively late stage.[33]

Second, one would obviously need to distinguish what I am calling white ignorance from general patterns of ignorance prevalent among people who are white but in whose doxastic states race has played no determining role. For example, at all times (such as right now) there will be many facts about the natural and social worlds on which people, including white people, have no opinion, or a mistaken opinion, but race is not directly or indirectly responsible. For instance, the exact temperature in the earth's crust twenty miles down right now, the precise income distribution in the United States, and so forth. But we would not want to call this white ignorance, even when it is shared by whites, because race has not been responsible for these non-knowings; other factors have.

Third (complicating the foregoing), it needs to be realized that once indirect causation and diminishing degrees of influence are admitted, it will sometimes be very difficult to adjudicate when specific kinds of non-knowings are appropriately categorizable as white ignorance or not. Recourse to counterfactuals of greater or lesser distance from the actual situation may be necessary ("what they should and would have known if . . ."), whose evaluation may be too complex to be resolvable. Suppose, for example, that a particular true scientific generalization about human beings, *P*, would be easily discoverable in a society were it not for widespread white racism, and that with additional research in the appropriate

areas, *P* could be shown to have further implications, *Q*, and beyond that, *R*. Or suppose that the practical application of *P* in medicine would have had as a spin-off empirical findings p_1, p_2, p_3. Should these related principles and these factual findings all be included as examples of white ignorance as well? How far onward up the chain? And so forth. So it will be easy to think up all kinds of tricky cases where it will be hard to make the determination. But the existence of such problematic cases at the borders does not undermine the import of more central cases.

Fourth, the racialized causality I am invoking needs to be expansive enough to include both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation, which may be operative even if the cognizer in question is not racist. It is necessary to distinguish the two not merely as a logical point, because they are analytically separable, but because in empirical reality they may often be found independently of each other. You can have white racism in particular white cognizers, in the sense of the existence of prejudicial beliefs about people of color, without (at that time and place) white domination of those people of color having been established; and you can also have white domination of people of color at a particular time and place without all white cognizers at that time and place being racist. But in both cases, racialized causality can give rise to what I am calling white ignorance, straightforwardly for a racist cognizer but also indirectly for a non-racist cognizer who may form mistaken beliefs (e.g., that after the abolition of slavery in the United States, blacks generally had opportunities equal to whites) because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge, though without prejudice himself. So white ignorance need not always be based on bad faith. Obviously from the point of view of a social epistemology, especially after the transition from de jure to de facto white supremacy, it is precisely this kind of white ignorance that is most important.

Fifth, the "white" in "white ignorance" does not mean that it has to be confined *to* white people. Indeed, as the earlier Du Bois discussion emphasized, it will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved. (This is a familiar point from the Marxist and feminist traditions—working-class conservatives, "male-identified" women, endorsing right-wing and sexist ideologies against their interests.) Providing the causal route is appropriate, blacks can manifest white ignorance also.

Sixth, and somewhat different, *white* racial ignorance can produce a doxastic environment in which particular varieties of *black* racial ignorance flourish—so that racial causality is involved, but one would hesitate to subsume them under the category of white ignorance itself, at least without significant qualification. Think, for example, of "oppositional" African

American varieties of biological and theological determinism: whites as melanin-deficient and therefore inherently physiologically and psychologically flawed, or whites as "blue-eyed devils" created by the evil black scientist Yacub (as in early Black Muslim theology).[34] Insofar as these theories invert claims of white racial superiority, though still accepting racial hierarchy, they would seem to be deserving of a separate category, though obviously they have been shaped by key assumptions of "scientific" and theological white racism.

Seventh, though the examples I have given so far have all been factual ones, I want a concept of white ignorance broad enough to include moral ignorance—not merely ignorance of facts *with* moral implications but also moral non-knowings, incorrect judgments about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves. For me, the epistemic desideratum is that the naturalizing and socializing of epistemology should have, as a component, the naturalizing and socializing of *moral* epistemology also and the study of pervasive social patterns of mistaken *moral* cognition.[35] Thus the idea is that improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression.

Eighth, it presumably does not need to be emphasized that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged-group-based ignorance. Male ignorance could be analyzed similarly, and clearly it has a far more ancient history and arguably a more deep-rooted ancestry in human inter-relations, insofar as it goes back thousands of years.[36] I am focusing on white ignorance because, as mentioned, it has been relatively undertheorized in the white academy compared to the work of feminist theorists on gender.

Ninth, speaking generally about white ignorance does not commit one to the claim that it is uniform across the white population. Whites are not a monolith, and if the analysis of white ignorance is to be part of a social epistemology, then the obvious needs to be remembered—that people have other identities beside racial ones, so that whites will be divisible by class, gender, nationality, religion, and so forth, and these factors will modify, by differential socialization and experience, the bodies of belief and the cognitive patterns of the sub-populations concerned. But this is, of course, true for all sociological generalizations, which has never been a reason for abandoning them, but one for employing them cautiously. White ignorance is not indefeasible (even if it sometimes seems that way!), and some people who are white will, because of their particular histories (and/or the intersection of whiteness with other identities), overcome it and have true beliefs on what their fellow-whites get wrong. So white ignorance is best thought of as a cognitive tendency—an inclination, a doxastic disposition—which

is not insuperable. If there is a sociology of knowledge, then there should also be a sociology of ignorance.[37]

Tenth, and finally, the point of trying to understand white ignorance is, of course, *normative* and not merely sociological (hence the emphasis on the continuity with classic epistemology). The goal is to improve our cognitive practices by trying to reduce or eliminate white ignorance. In classic individualist epistemology, one seeks not merely to eliminate false belief but to develop an understanding, wariness, and avoidance of the cognitive processes that typically produce false belief. For a social epistemology, where the focus is on supra-individual processes and the individual's interaction with them, the aim is to understand how certain social structures tend to promote these crucially flawed processes, how to personally extricate oneself from them (insofar as that is possible), and how best to do one's part in undermining them in the broader cognitive sphere. So the idea is that there are typical ways of going wrong that need to be adverted to in the light of social structure and specific group characteristics, and one has a better chance of getting things right through a self-conscious recognition of their existence and corresponding self-distancing from them.

WHITENESS AND SOCIAL COGNITION

Let us turn now to the processes of cognition, individual and social, and the examination of the ways in which racial "whiteness" may affect some of their crucial components. As examples, I will look at perception, conception, memory, testimony, and motivational group interest (in a longer treatment, differential group experience should also be included). Separating out these various components is difficult because they are all constantly in interaction with one another. For example, when the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid. Inference from perception involves the overt or tacit appeal to memory, which will be not merely individual but also social. As such, it will be founded on testimony and ultimately on the perceptions and conceptions of others. The background knowledge that will guide inference and judgment, eliminating (putatively) absurd alternatives and narrowing down a set of plausible contenders, will also be shaped by testimony, or the lack thereof, and will itself be embedded in various conceptual frameworks and require perception and memory to access. Testimony will have been recorded, requiring again perception, conception, and memory; it will have been integrated into a particular framework and narrative; and from the start it will have involved the selection of certain voices as against

others, selection in and selection out (if these others have been allowed to speak in the first place). At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted. Thus at any given stage, it is obvious that an interaction of great complexity is involved, in which multiple factors will be affecting one another in intricate feedback loops of various kinds. So an analytic separating-out of elements for purposes of conceptual isolation and clarification will necessarily be artificial, and in a sense each element so extracted leaves a ghostly trail of all the others in its wake.

Start with perception. A central theme of the epistemology of the past few decades has been the discrediting of the idea of a raw perceptual "given," completely unmediated by concepts. Perceptions are in general simultaneously conceptions, if only at a very low level of abstraction. Moreover, the social dimension of epistemology is obviously most salient here, since individuals do not in general make up these categories themselves but inherit them from their cultural milieu. As Kornblith says: "The influence of social factors begins at birth, for language is not reinvented by each individual in social isolation, nor could it be. Because language acquisition is socially mediated, the concepts we acquire are themselves socially mediated from the very beginning."[38] But this means that the conceptual array with which the cognizer approaches the world needs itself to be scrutinized for its adequacy to the world, for how well it maps the reality it claims to be describing. In addition, it is not a matter of monadic predicates, reciprocally isolated from one another, but concepts linked by interlocking assumptions and background belief-sets into certain complexes of ideation that by their very nature tend to put a certain interpretation on the world. So in most cases the concepts will not be neutral but oriented toward a certain understanding, embedded in sub-theories and larger theories about how things work.

In the orthodox left tradition, this set of issues is handled through the category of "ideology"; in more recent radical theory, through Foucault's "discourses." But whatever one's larger meta-theoretical sympathies, whatever approach one thinks best for investigating these ideational matters, such concerns obviously need to be part of a social epistemology. For if the society is one structured by relations of domination and subordination (as of course all societies in human history past the hunting-and-gathering stage have been), then in certain areas this conceptual apparatus is likely going to be negatively shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s). So crucial concepts may well be misleading in their inner makeup and their external relation to a larger doxastic architecture. Moreover, what cognitive psychology has revealed is that rather than continually challenging conceptual adequacy by the test of disconfirming empirical data, we

tend to do the opposite—to interpret the data through the grid of the concepts in such a way that seemingly disconfirming, or at least problematic, perceptions are filtered out or marginalized. In other words, one will tend to find the confirmation in the world whether it is there or not.

Now apply this to race: consider the epistemic principle of what has come to be called "white normativity," the centering of the Euro- and later Euro-American reference group as constitutive norm. Ethnocentrism is, of course, a negative cognitive tendency common to all peoples, not just Europeans. But with Europe's gradual rise to global domination, the European variant becomes entrenched as an overarching, virtually unassailable framework, a conviction of exceptionalism and superiority that seems vindicated by the facts, and thenceforth, circularly, shaping perception of the facts. We rule the world because we are superior; we are superior because we rule the world. In the first essay of a posthumous book collection of his pioneering 1940s–1960s essays against Eurocentrism, world historian Marshall G. S. Hodgson invokes the "New Yorker's map of the United States," which—like Saul Steinberg's later and more famous March 29, 1976, *New Yorker* cover cartoon depiction of the "View of the World from 9th Avenue"—offers us the bizarrely foreshortened perspective on the country afforded from its self-nominated cultural center.[39] Hodgson argues that the standard geographical representations of Europe by Europeans, as in the Mercator projection world map, are not really that radically different:

> It would be a significant story in itself to trace how modern Westerners have managed to preserve some of the most characteristic features of their ethnocentric medieval image of the world. Recast in modern scientific and scholarly language, the image is still with us. . . . The point of any ethnocentric world image is to divide the world into moieties, ourselves and the others, ourselves forming the more important of the two. . . . We divide the world into what we call "continents.". . . Why is Europe one of the continents but not India?. . . . Europe is still ranked as one of the "continents" because our cultural ancestors lived there. By making it a "continent," we give it a rank disproportionate to its natural size, as a subordinate part of no larger unit, but in itself one of the major component parts of the world. . . . (I call such a world map the "Jim Crow projection" because it shows Europe as larger than Africa.). . . . [Mercator] confirms our predispositions.[40]

And this geographical misrepresentation and regional inflation have gone in tandem with a corresponding historical misrepresentation and inflation. Criticizing the standard historical categories of Western historians, Hodgson suggests that "the very terms we allow ourselves to use foster distortion." The "convenient result" is that Europe, an originally peripheral region of what Hodgson calls the "Afro-Eurasian historical complex," is lifted out of its context and elevated into a self-creating entity unto itself,

"an independent division of the whole world, with a history that need not be integrated with that of the rest of mankind save on the terms posed by European history itself."[41]

From this fatally skewed optic, of course, stem all those theories of innate European superiority to the rest of the world that are still with us today but in modified and subtler versions. Whiteness is originally coextensive with full humanity so that the nonwhite Other is grasped through a historic array of concepts whose common denominator is their subjects' location on a lower ontological and moral rung.

Consider, for example, the category of the "savage" and its conceptual role in the justification of imperialism. As Francis Jennings points out, the word was "created for the purposes of conquest rather than the purposes of knowledge." "Savagery" and "civilization" were "reciprocals," "both independent of any necessary correlation with empirical reality." The conceptual outcome was a "conjoined myth" that "greatly distorted [white] Americans' perceptions of reality," necessarily involving "the suppression of facts."[42] In effect,

> the Englishman devised the savage's form to fit his function. The word *savage* thus underwent considerable alteration of meaning as different colonists pursued their varied ends. One aspect of the term remained constant, however: the savage was always inferior to civilized men. . . . The constant of Indian inferiority implied the rejection of his humanity and determined the limits permitted for his participation in the mixing of cultures. The savage was prey, cattle, pet, or vermin—he was never citizen. Upholders of the myth denied that either savage tyranny or savage anarchy could rightfully be called government, and therefore there could be no justification for Indian resistance to European invasion.[43]

When Thomas Jefferson excoriates the "merciless Indian Savages" in the Declaration of Independence, then, neither he nor his readers will experience any cognitive dissonance with the earlier claims about the equality of all "men," since savages are not "men" in the full sense of the word. Locked in a different temporality, incapable of self-regulation by morality and law, they are humanoid but not human. To speak of the "equality" of the savage would then be oxymoronic, since one's very location in these categories is an indication of one's inequality. Even a cognizer with no personal antipathy or prejudice toward Native Americans will be cognitively disabled in trying to establish truths about them insofar as such a category and its associated presuppositions will tend to force his conclusions in a certain direction, will limit what he can objectively see. One will experience a strain, a cognitive tension between possible egalitarian findings and overarching category, insofar as "savage" already has embedded in it a narrative, a set of

assumptions about innate inferiority, which will preclude certain possibilities. "Savages" tend to do certain things and to be unable to do others; these go with the conceptual territory.

Thus the term itself encourages if not quite logically determines particular conclusions. Concepts orient us toward the world, and it is a rare individual who can resist this inherited orientation. Once established in the social mindset, their influence is difficult to escape since it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things *through* the concept itself. In the classic period of European expansionism, it then becomes possible to speak with no sense of absurdity of "empty" lands that are actually teeming with millions of people, of "discovering" countries whose inhabitants already exist, because the nonwhite Other is so located in the guiding conceptual array that different rules apply. Even seemingly straightforward empirical perception will be affected—the myth of a nation of hunters in contradiction to widespread Native American agriculture that saved the English colonists' lives, the myth of stateless savages in contradiction to forms of government from which the white Founders arguably learned, the myth of a pristine wilderness in contradiction to a humanized landscape transformed by thousands of years of labor.[44] In all these cases, *the concept is driving the perception, with whites aprioristically intent on denying what is before them*. So if Kant famously said that perceptions without concepts are blind, then here it is the blindness of the concept itself that is blocking vision.

Originally, then, foundational concepts of racialized difference, and their ramifications in all socio-political spheres, preclude a veridical perception of nonwhites and serve as a categorical barrier against their equitable moral treatment. The transition away from old-fashioned racism of this kind has not, however, put an end to white normativity but subtly transformed its character. If previously whites were color-demarcated as biologically and/or culturally unequal and superior, now through a strategic "color-blindness" they are assimilated as putative equals to the status and situation of nonwhites on terms that negate the need for measures to repair the inequities of the past. So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today and all its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures. If originally whiteness was race, then now it is racelessness, an equal status and a common history in which all have shared, with white privilege being conceptually erased. Woody Doane suggests that

> "color-blind" ideology plays an important role in the maintenance of white hegemony. . . . Because whites tend not to see themselves in racial terms and not to recognize

> the existence of the advantages that whites enjoy in American society, this promotes a worldview that emphasizes *individualistic* explanations for social and economic achievement, as if the individualism of white privilege was a universal attribute. Whites also exhibit a general inability to perceive the persistence of discrimination and the effects of more subtle forms of institutional discrimination. In the context of color-blind racial ideology, whites are more likely to see the opportunity structure as open and institutions as impartial or objective in their functioning. . . . this combination supports an interpretative framework in which whites' explanations for inequality focus upon the cultural characteristics (e.g., motivation, values) of subordinate groups. . . . Politically, this blaming of subordinate groups for their lower economic position serves to neutralize demands for antidiscrimination initiatives or for a redistribution of resources.[45]

Indeed, the real racists are the *blacks* who continue to insist on the importance of race. In both cases, white normativity underpins white privilege, in the first case by justifying differential treatment by race and in the second case by justifying formally equal treatment by race that—in its denial of the cumulative effects of past differential treatment—is tantamount to continuing it.

What makes such denial possible, of course, is the management of memory. (Thus, as earlier emphasized, it is important to appreciate the *interconnectedness* of all these components of knowing or non-knowing: this concept is viable in the white mind because of the denial of crucial facts.) Memory is not a subject one usually finds in epistemology texts, but for social epistemology it is obviously pivotal. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs was one of the pioneers of the concept of a collective, social memory, which provided the framework for individual memories.[46] But if we need to understand collective memory, we also need to understand collective amnesia. Indeed, they go together insofar as memory is necessarily selective—out of the infinite sequence of events, some trivial, some momentous, we extract what we see as the crucial ones and organize them into an overall narrative. Social memory is then inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, monuments. John Locke famously suggested memory as the crucial criterion for personal identity, and social memory plays a parallel role in social identity. Historian John Gillis argues that "the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa. . . . [But] memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality. . . . '[M]emory work' is . . . embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end. If memory has its politics, so too does identity."[47] As the individual represses unhappy or embarrassing memories that may also reveal a great deal about his identity, about who he is, so in all societies,

especially those structured by domination, the socially recollecting "we" will be divided, and the selection will be guided by different identities, with one group suppressing precisely what another wishes to commemorate.

Thus there will be both official and counter-memory, with conflicting judgments about what is important in the past and what is unimportant, what happened and does matter, what happened and does not matter, and what did not happen at all. So applying this to race, we will find an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia, especially about nonwhite victims.

Hitler is supposed to have reassured his generals, apprehensive about the launching of World War II, by asking them: "Who now remembers the Armenians?" Because the Third Reich lost, the genocide of the Jews (though far less the Romani) is remembered. But who now remembers the Hereros, the Nama, the Beothuks, the Tasmanians, the Pequots? (For that matter, who does remember the Armenians, except the Armenians themselves?) Who remembers the Congolese? In Adam Hochschild's chilling book on King Leopold II's regime of rubber and extermination, which resulted in the deaths of ten million people in the Belgian Congo, the final chapter is titled "The Great Forgetting."[48] Through the systematic destruction of state archives in Brussels—"the furnaces burned for eight days"—and the deliberate non-commemoration of the African victims—"in none of the [Brussels Royal Museum of Central Africa]'s twenty large exhibition galleries is there the slightest hint that millions of Congolese met unnatural deaths"—a "deliberate forgetting" as an "active deed" was achieved, a purging of official memory so thorough and efficient that a Belgian ambassador to West Africa in the 1970s was astonished by the "slander" on his country in a Liberian newspaper's passing reference to the genocide: "I learned that there had been this huge campaign, in the international press, from 1900 to 1910; millions of people had died, but we Belgians knew absolutely nothing about it."[49]

Similarly, and closer to home, James Loewen's critical study of the silences and misrepresentations of standard American history textbooks points out that "the Indian-white wars that dominated our history from 1622 to 1815 and were of considerable importance until 1890 have disappeared from our national memory," encouraging a "feel-good history for whites": "By downplaying Indian wars, textbooks help us forget that we wrested the continent from Native Americans."[50] In the case of blacks, the "forgetting" takes the form of whitewashing the atrocities of slavery—the "magnolia myth" of paternalistic white aristocrats and happy, singing darkies that dominated American textbooks as late as the 1950s—and minimizing the extent to which "the peculiar institution" was not a sectional problem but shaped the national economy, polity, and psychology.[51] Du Bois refers to "the

deliberately educated ignorance of white schools"[52] and devotes the climactic chapter of his massive revisionist 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America* to the documentation of the sanitization by white southern historians of the history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.[53]

Moreover, the misrepresentations of national textbooks have their counterpart in monuments and statuary: social memory made marble and concrete, national mnemonics of the landscape itself. In his study of Civil War monuments, Kirk Savage argues, "Monuments served to anchor collective remembering," fostering "a shared and standardized program of memory," so that "local memory earned credibility by its assimilation to a visible national memory." The post-bellum decision to rehabilitate Robert E. Lee, commander in chief of the Confederate Army, thereby "eras[ing] his status as traitor," signified a national white reconciliation that required the repudiation of an alternative black memory:

> The commemoration of Lee rested on a suppression of black memory, black truth. . . . [US statesman Charles Francis] Adams could not justify a monument to Lee without denying the postwar reality of racial injustice and its congruence with the Confederate cause. "Sectional reconciliation" of this kind was founded on the nonconciliation of African-Americans, and on their exclusion from the legitimate arenas of cultural representation. Black Americans did not have their own monuments, despite the critical role they had played in swinging the balance of power—both moral and military—to the North. . . .The commemoration of the Civil War in physical memorials is ultimately a story of systematic cultural repression. . . . Public monuments . . . impose a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives. Inasmuch as the monuments make credible particular collectivities, they must erase others.[54]

At the level of symbolism and national self-representation, then, the denial of the extent of Native American and black victimization underwrites the whitewashed narrative of discovery, settlement, and building of a shining city on the hill. But the editing of white memory has more material and practical consequences also: as earlier emphasized it enables a self-representation in which differential white privilege and the need to correct for it does not exist. In other words, the mystification of the past underwrites a mystification of the present. The erasure of the history of Jim Crow makes it possible to represent the playing field as historically level so that current black poverty just proves blacks' unwillingness to work. As individual memory is assisted through a larger social memory, so individual amnesia is then ratified by a larger collective amnesia. In his research on the continuing, indeed deepening, gap between white and black Americans, Thomas Shapiro remarks on how often white interviewees seemed to "forget" what

they had just told him about the extensive parental assistance they received, claiming instead that they had worked for it:

> [X's] memory seems accurate as she catalogues all sorts of parental wealthfare with matching dollar figures. . . . However, as soon as the conversation turns to how she and her husband acquired assets like their home, cars, and savings account, her attitude changes dramatically. . . . The [Xs] describe themselves as self-made, conveniently forgetting that they inherited much of what they own.[55]

Thus the "taken-for-granted sense of [white] entitlement" erases the fact that "*transformative assets*," "inherited wealth lifting a family beyond their own achievements," have been crucial to their white success, and that blacks do not in general have such advantages because of the history of discrimination against them.[56] Thomas McCarthy points out the importance of a politics of memory for closing the "peculiar gap between academic historical scholarship and public historical consciousness that marks our own situation," and he emphasizes that the eventual achievement of racial justice can only be accomplished through a systematic national re-education on the historic extent of black racial subordination in the United States, and how it continues to shape our racial fates differentially today.[57]

But forgetting, whether individual or social, will not even be necessary if there is nothing to remember in the first place. C. A. J. Coady's now classic book on testimony has made it irrefutably clear how dependent we are on others for so much of what we know; testimony as a concept is thus crucial to the elaboration of a social epistemology.[58] Yet if one group, or specific groups, of potential witnesses are discredited in advance as being epistemically suspect, then testimony from them will tend to be dismissed or never solicited to begin with. Kant's infamous line about a "Negro carpenter"'s views has often been quoted, but never stales: "And it might be, that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was *quite black* from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid."[59] Nonwhite inferiority necessarily has cognitive ramifications, undermining nonwhite claims to knowledge that are not backed up by European epistemic authority. In an 1840 letter, Daniel Butrick, a missionary to the Cherokees, gives a long list of the reasons "how whites try and fail to find out what Indians know because they refuse to recognize the humanity or intelligence of Native peoples," the result being "that such persons may spend all their days among the Indians and yet die as ignorant of their true character almost as if they had never been born."[60] During slavery, blacks were generally denied the right to testify against whites because they were not seen as credible witnesses, so when the only (willing) witnesses to white crimes were black, these crimes would not be brought to

light. At one point in German South West Africa, white settlers demanded "that in court only the testimony of seven African witnesses could outweigh evidence presented by a single white person."[61] Similarly, slave narratives often had to have white authenticators—for example, white abolitionists—with the racially based epistemic authority to write a preface or appear on stage with the author so as to confirm that what this worthy Negro said was indeed true.

Moreover, in many cases, even if witnesses would have been given some kind of grudging hearing, they were terrorized into silence by the fear of white retaliation. A black woman recalls the world of Jim Crow and the dangers of describing it for what it was: "My problems started when I began to comment on what I saw. . . . I insisted on being accurate. But the world I was born into didn't want that. Indeed, its very survival depended on not knowing, not seeing—and certainly, not saying anything at all about what it was really like."[62] If black testimony could be aprioristically rejected because it was likely to be false, it could also be aprioristically rejected because it was likely to be true. Testimony about white atrocities—lynchings, police killings, race riots—would often have to be passed down through segregated informational channels, black to black, too explosive to be allowed exposure to white cognition. The memory of the 1921 Tulsa race riot, the worst American race riot of the twentieth century, with a possible death toll of 300 people, was kept alive for decades in the black community long after whites had erased it from the official record. Ed Wheeler, a white researcher trying in 1970 to locate documentation on the riot, found that the official Tulsa records had mysteriously vanished, and he was only able with great difficulty to persuade black survivors to come forward with their photographs of the event: "The blacks allowed Wheeler to take the pictures only if he promised not to reveal their names, and they all spoke only on the condition of anonymity. Though fifty years had passed, they still feared retribution if they spoke out."[63]

And even when such fears are not a factor and blacks do feel free to speak, the epistemic presumption against their credibility remains in a way that it does not for white witnesses. Black counter-testimony against white mythology has always existed but would originally have been handicapped by the lack of material and cultural capital investment available for its production—oral testimony from illiterate slaves, ephemeral pamphlets with small print runs, self-published works like those by the autodidact J. A. Rogers laboriously documenting the achievements of men and women of color to contest the white lie of black inferiority.[64] But even when propagated in more respectable venues—for example, the Negro scholarly journals founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—they were epistemically ghettoized by the Jim Crow intellectual practices of the

white academy. As Stephen Steinberg points out, the United States and its white social sciences have generally "played ostrich" on the issues of race and racial division.[65] The result has been—as in Du Bois's famous image of blacks in a cave trying desperately to communicate to white passersby before gradually realizing that they are silenced behind the updated version of the veil, "some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass"[66]—that "[black critics] of whatever political stripe . . . were simply met with a deaf ear."[67] The testimony of Negro scholars saying the wrong thing (almost an analytic statement!) would not be registered. "The marginalization of black voices in academia was facilitated by an 'invisible but horribly tangible' color line that relegated all but a few black scholars to teach in black colleges far removed from the academic mainstream."[68] Consider, for example, an anthropology founded on the "obvious" truth of racial hierarchy. Or a sociology failing to confront the central social fact of structural white domination.[69] Or a history sanitizing the record of aboriginal conquest and black exploitation. Or a political science representing racism as an anomaly to a basically inclusive and egalitarian polity. Or, finally—in my own discipline—a political philosophy thriving for forty-plus years and supposedly dedicated to the elucidation of justice that makes next to no mention of the centrality of racial *injustice* to the "basic structure" of the United States and assumes instead that it will be more theoretically appropriate to start from the "ideal theory" assumption that society is the product of a mutually agreed upon, non-exploitative enterprise to divide benefits and burdens in an equitable way—and that this is somehow going to illuminate the distinctive problems of a society based on exploitative white settlement. In whatever discipline that is affected by race, the "testimony" of the black perspective and its distinctive conceptual and theoretical insights will tend to be whited out. Whites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions.

Finally, the dynamic role of *white group interests* needs to be recognized and acknowledged as a central causal factor in generating and sustaining white ignorance. Cognitive psychologists standardly distinguish between "cold" and "hot" mechanisms of cognitive distortion, those attributable to intrinsic processing difficulties and those involving motivational factors, and in analytic philosophy of mind and philosophical psychology there is a large and well-established body of work on self-deception and motivated irrationality, though located within an individualistic framework.[70] So claiming a link between interest and cognition is not at all unheard of in this field. But because of its framing individualism, and of course the aprioristic exclusion in any case of the realities of *white* group domination, the generalization to racial interests has not been carried out.

What needs to be done, I suggest, is to extrapolate some of this literature to a social context—one informed by the realities of race. Because of its marginalization of social oppression, the existing social epistemology literature tends to ignore or downplay such factors. By contrast, in the left tradition this was precisely the classic thesis: (class) domination and exploitation were the foundation of the social order, and as such they produced not merely material differentials of wealth in the economic sphere but deleterious cognitive consequences in the ideational sphere. Marxism's particular analysis of exploitation, resting as it does on the labor theory of value, has proven to be fatally vulnerable. But obviously this does not negate the value of the concept itself, suitably refurbished,[71] nor undercut the prima facie plausibility of the claim that if exploitative socio-economic relations are indeed foundational to the social order, then this is likely to have a fundamental shaping effect on social ideation. In other words, one can detach from a class framework a "materialist" claim about the interaction between exploitation, group interest, and social cognition and apply it with what should be far less controversy within a race framework. I argue in chapter 7 that *racial exploitation* (as determined by conventional liberal standards) has usually been quite clear and unequivocal (think of Native American expropriation, African slavery, Jim Crow), requiring—unlike exploitation in the technical Marxist sense—no elaborate theoretical apparatus to discern, and that it can easily be shown to have been central to US history. So vested white group interest in the racial status quo—"the income-bearing value of race prejudice,"[72] in the words of Du Bois—needs to be recognized as a major factor in encouraging white cognitive distortions of various kinds.[73]

Nor is such "motivated irrationality" confined to the period of overt racism and de jure segregation. Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders's attitudinal research on public policy matters linked to race reveals "a deep and perhaps widening racial divide [that] makes the discovery of commonality and agreement between the races a dim prospect," and central to the shaping of white opinion, it turns out, is their perception of their group interests: "the threats blacks appear to pose to whites' collective well-being, not their personal welfare."[74] Race is the primary social division in the United States, these two political scientists conclude, and whites generally see black interests as opposed to their own. Inevitably, then, this will affect white social cognition—the concepts favored (e.g., today's "color-blindness"), the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it so as to achieve racial justice. As emphasized at the start, then, these analytically distinguishable cognitive components are in reality all interlocked with and

reciprocally determining one another, jointly contributing to the blindness of the white eye.

In his wonderfully titled *States of Denial*, Stanley Cohen argues that "whole societies may slip into collective modes of denial":

> Besides collective denials of the past (such as brutalities against indigenous peoples), people may be encouraged to act as if they don't know about the present. Whole societies are based on forms of cruelty, discrimination, repression or exclusion which are "known" about but never openly acknowledged. . . . Indeed, distortions and self-delusions are most often synchronized. . . . Whole societies have mentioned and unmentionable rules about what should not be openly talked about. You are subject to a rule about obeying these rules, but bound also by a meta-rule which dictates that you deny your knowledge of the original rule.[75]

White ignorance has been able to flourish all these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for "racial" reasons have needed not to know. Only by starting to break these rules and meta-rules can we begin the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white darkness and the achievement of an enlightenment that is genuinely multiracial.