

# When the Joke Is on You: A Feminist Perspective on How Positionality Influences Satire

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Humor is a powerful tool that achieves many social functions. Beyond improving group bonds, humor also routinely performs sociopolitical functions, including both upholding dominant power structures and subverting them. Following recent scholarship on epistemic injustices/oppression and the social functions of humor, this article will argue that these effects depend upon the would-be humorists' positionality. By showing when parody/satire/irony generates Medina's concept of epistemic friction and when it cannot (Medina 2013), the two functions of humor are clarified: as a tool of subversion that fosters social-justice aims when coming from marginalized groups and a tool of superiority/disparagement—a shadow text (Bailey 2017)—when used by privileged ones against social-justice aims. Consequently, I make recommendations for those engaged in social-justice pedagogy to take humor seriously regarding its dual functions and impacts within the classroom, in popular culture, and even within the academic canon.*

## EPISTEMIC OPPRESSION AND HUMOR

Epistemic oppression, Kristie Dotson tells us, “refers to a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinder one’s contributions to knowledge production” (Dotson 2014, 116). Dotson identifies three “orders” of epistemic oppression—to oversimplify: testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice, and (irreducible) epistemic exclusion—that result when dominant epistemologies fail to include the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups. In the third order, the epistemic system itself, rather than any tangible institutional or social injustice, is exclusionary. For Dotson, the perspectives of women, people of color, sexual, religious, or ethnic minorities are excluded from the prevailing *organizational schemata*.

Organizational schemata . . . are a shared epistemic resource like language that enables goals and pursuits to be shared collectively. What is important about the concept of an organizational schema is the fact that it is, often, intentionally collective and can be altered. As such, they are a kind of shared epistemic resource. (Dotson 2014, 117)

When perspectives of marginalized groups are excluded from this shared epistemic resource and the resource itself is set up in such a way as to render attempts at input incomprehensible or incredible from positions of dominance and privilege, the individual can be silenced (Dotson 2011) and change becomes almost impossible.

It is imperative that those perpetrating third order epistemic oppression take a step back and become aware of their overall epistemological systems that are preserving and legitimating inadequate epistemic resources. This kind of recognition, which can be seen as akin to a broad recognition of one's "cultural traditions systems," is extraordinarily difficult. (Dotson 2014, 132)

In related work on epistemology, José Medina draws upon the work of critics in race theory and feminist theory to argue that *this* epistemic oppression can paradoxically result in privileged elites having epistemic disadvantages while the oppressed acquire epistemic advantages (Medina 2013, 29). Due to the constant validation of epistemic systems that favor privileged groups, privileged individuals become unable to spot bias or error and develop three vices—epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and closed-mindedness—that Medina summarizes with the term *active ignorance* (30–35). The oppressed, because they are forced to operate within the epistemology of privileged groups, are prone to developing three epistemic virtues—humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness (40–44)—and exhibit what he calls "lucidity" and a "kaleidoscopic consciousness" (44) because they have access to numerous epistemologies. Consequently, Medina addresses a critical component for effecting third-order change: to find a way to break into dominant organizational schemata, which are upheld by the active ignorance of privileged groups perpetuating dominant epistemologies that maintain oppressive power structures. For this, it is essential to bring about a recognition of the existence of alternative epistemologies, experiences, and perceptions, but this is extraordinarily difficult from within that epistemic system.

This article will argue that humor, in particular irony and satire, when used in the service of criticizing oppressive power structures and especially by members of marginalized groups, is a potentially powerful tool for increasing receptivity and recognition of other ways of knowing and experiencing society. The comic mode is politically effective because it operates within a realm of openness to that which does not operate in accordance with the hyper-rational, Western, philosophical logical tradition. Thus, it bears the potential for ironic, double-voiced, satirical humor to break through the intransigence of exclusionary epistemic systems, spark recognition of the existence of alternative epistemologies, undermine active ignorance (Medina 2013), and, ultimately, effect third-order change (Dotson 2014).

However, when these same ironic, satirical, double-voiced tools of humor are used by members of dominant groups to disparage, mock, or discredit marginalized groups or social-justice scholarship that seeks to make oppression visible, they serve no such purpose but rather perpetuate dominant epistemologies and power structures. It is therefore essential to recognize the importance of positionality in relation to the social function of satirical humor and its impact on social-justice aims.

## THE SOCIAL POWER OF HUMOR

In *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Nancy Walker recognizes that humor is a way of recognizing and dealing with disparity (Walker 1988). Using Langston Hughes's definition of humor, "Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it. You're really laughing at the other guy's lacks, not your own. . . . Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first" (cited in Walker 1988, 101), she characterizes humor as requiring "consciousness of . . . the distance between the official promise of equality and the actual experience of subordination to the dominant culture" (102). In this sense, although this definition is far too narrow for a deep philosophical treatment of the

topic, humor is a powerful social tool and one in which the positionality of the humorist matters.

Because it is a powerful social tool, humor is more than “your own unconscious therapy” (Hughes, cited in Walker 1988, 101). It can also reinforce group bonds (Martin 2007) and shared perceptions of the world. In this capacity, humor has frequently been used for upholding dominant epistemologies, power structures, and hierarchies; belittling and intimidating marginalized groups in society; and asserting the superiority of dominant ones (Dresner 1988; Mulkay 1988; Gilbert 2004; Neuendorf, Skalski, and Powers 2014; Abrams 2017). Against this, humor has been a medium for solidarity among members of marginalized groups that also offers a relatively safe means for social critique that defamiliarizes, satirizes, and deconstructs dominant norms, assumptions, and epistemologies (Showalter 1985; Witkin 1999; Willett 2008; Day 2011; Rossing 2014; Leng 2016; Abrams 2017). Those engaged in social-justice pedagogy would do well to take humor seriously and recognize its dual functions and social impacts.

Humor plays many specific roles in disrupting or reinforcing hegemonic discourses and epistemologies, and those outcomes depend significantly upon the positionality of the humorist, especially when using irony and satire. Particularly elucidating in this regard are Medina’s conceptions of active ignorance and epistemic friction together with Bailey’s privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, willful ignorance, and shadow texts (Medina 2013; Bailey 2017). Through them, the positionally dual functions of ironic or satirical humor are clarified. This article argues that when such humor is used by marginalized individuals to critique power structures, it provides the epistemic friction necessary to expand knowledge and address injustice. When used by individuals in privileged positions to mock marginalized groups (or scholarship and activism that seeks to make oppression visible), however, it generates no such epistemic friction, upholds oppressive power structures, and preserves privilege.

In the latter case, this would-be didactic form of satire assumes its own superior capacity to produce knowledge and seeks to “correct” alternatives to the Western philosophical tradition. It therefore belongs not to the mode of satire that seeks subversive deflation of power and privilege, but to the mode of *superiority/disparagement humor*, which has long been used to belittle marginalized groups, recenter masculinist, Western, and White epistemologies, and uphold oppressive power structures (Martineau 1972; Neuendorf et al. 2014; Ford 2015; Abrams 2017). Such discourses—which can be found in classrooms, mainstream popular culture, and academic writing—employ an uncritical assumption that dominant epistemologies are sufficiently obvious and universally correct that substantive engagement with alternatives (including social-justice or the perspectives of marginalized groups) is unnecessary. Instead of engaging alternatives, one can merely present them as “self-evidently” ridiculous and trust that humor (among those in on the ostensible joke) will continue legitimizing dominant epistemologies (Dotson 2014). By recognizing that this approach to humor generates shadow texts borne in active ignorance, we can avoid mistaking it for critical engagement, track it, and develop strategies to prevent it from derailing social-justice work and inflicting psychological and epistemic harm upon members of marginalized groups.

#### SUPERIORITY/DISPARAGEMENT HUMOR

According to Thomas Ford, “disparagement humor refers to communication that is intended to elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target. It can uniquely denigrate its target without challenge or criticism by communicating its message

is to be taken as ‘just a joke’” (Ford 2015, 163). Because of the ways in which disparagement humor is used not just to openly belittle its targets but also to undermine social-justice-oriented endeavors, it is an important site of research for justice-oriented philosophical inquiry.

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, in her book-length exploration of female American humorists, argues that disparagement humor has been dominant historically and is traditionally masculine. In fact, due to theories of humor having overwhelmingly focused on the masculine, until quite recently women’s humor has gone largely undiscussed and even unrecognized (Abrams 2017, 2). This is perhaps why Kirsten Leng, who recognizes the current strength of feminist comedy, has also argued for a need to “recover a history of humour in feminism” (Leng 2016, 1) in a political context, and Kathleen Rowe draws attention to ways in which “unruly women” in film and television have increasingly presented challenges to patriarchal authority (Rowe 2011). Despite increasing scholarly attention to these alternative traditions, women’s humor often gets less attention and is taken less seriously than “male” humor and is denigrated as “shrill” (West 2016). This comedic glass ceiling for women’s humor likely follows from some combination of sexism and the “humane humor rule” that Emily Toth identifies as common within women’s writing. Under this “rule,” women tend to avoid mocking that which cannot be changed (Toth 1987, 783). Abrams contrasts this situation with male superiority/disparagement humor (Abrams 2017, 3), which she describes as “a much more aggressive attack on those of perceived inferiority due to innate differences such as race, gender, physical appearance and so on” (8). Disparagement humor therefore often targets both women’s humor and concepts central to social justice.

Indeed, the most comprehensive investigation into the links between superiority/disparagement humor and opposition to social justice was conducted by Kimberly Neuendorf and her colleagues (Neuendorf et al. 2014). Previously, Neuendorf found that a predilection to disparagement humor related to greater endorsement of the value of social power and lower endorsement of the values of equality and helpfulness (Neuendorf, Skalski, and Powers 2004). Drawing on this work and that of Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson and of Caroline Thomas and Victoria Esses, which found racist and sexist humor to commonly use this mode (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Thomas and Esses 2004), Neuendorf and her colleagues tested, among others, the hypothesis that “affinity for disparagement humor will be related to opinions less favorable toward marginalized groups” (Neuendorf et al. 2014, 5). They found that “appreciation for disparagement humor . . . presag[ed] lesser support for affirmative action and greater satisfaction with the current treatment of women, minorities, and immigrants” (9). Disparagement humor, then, is frequently a tool used by dominant groups in society to maintain power structures that work to their advantage.

#### IRONY AND SATIRE AS TYPES OF HUMOR

Humor has, however, been particularly useful as a method for marginalized groups to critique social injustices. In agreement with Walker, Zita Dresner argued that feminist humor has long “reinforced the validity of women’s perceptions about their oppression and subordinate status, undermined the bases of male chauvinism, and supported the legitimacy of women’s demands for political, social and economic equality” (Dresner 1988, 149; Walker 1988). It thus gives strength and validity to women’s knowledge and provides access to a shared epistemic resource (cf. Dotson 2014). Widening this argument, Abrams takes an intersectional approach in examining the use of irony, satire, parody, and wit in a diverse selection of American female humorists. For Abrams, the “notion of humor as a masked form

of social criticism or even rebellion by those in subordinate positions against injustices perpetuated by existing power structures is at the root of much of women's humor" (Abrams 2017, 6). She sees this form of humor operating in response to traditionally male humor, which "tend(s) towards jokes and put-downs targeted at those of perceived lower social standing as an expression of hostility and a demonstration of one's own cleverness and an affirmation of one's social superiority" (6). It thus successfully disrupts oppressive power structures and dominant epistemologies rather than reinforcing them.

Expanding this theme, in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Joanne Gilbert looks at ways women and other marginalized groups have used humor. She finds that "one aspect of shared humor among marginalized groups is its tendency to unmask the unabashed hypocrisy of the dominant culture" (Gilbert 2004, 30). Indeed, subversive irony of this kind is common in the folk humor, satire, defamiliarization, and doubling of meaning that characterized African-American humor during enslavement and reconstruction (Foxy and Miller 1977; Zolten 1993; Watkins 1994). As the pioneering constructionist social worker Stanley Witkin observes, this follows from a recognition that critique delivered within a humorous mode shields the vulnerable from punitive consequences likely to result from direct and serious criticism. Specifically, "throughout history, humor has provided a safe way for marginalized people to criticize oppressive social orders" (Witkin 1999, 102).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar similarly find elements of irony, satire, "double [voice]," or "palimpsestic discourse" in the writing of women and marginalized groups (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 79). (The image of the palimpsest—a piece of written material from which an earlier text has been erased and written over but that is still partially visible—indicates the existence of layers and depth of meaning and knowledge beneath the surface.) This concurs with Elaine Showalter's analysis of feminist art: "The feminist content in feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic, and subversive. One has to read it between the lines in the missed possibilities of the text" (Showalter 1985, 270). Walker essentially agrees and sees this as a reason even women often remain unaware of the contribution of their humorous traditions, as it is the subtext that "carries the message of oppression" (Walker 1988, 120). She indicates that "readers not prepared to understand the subversive methodologies of women's literature might well [carry] away from it an impression that directly counters the subtextual content" (120). In general, then, satire, irony, parody, and dual meaning—a text that is innocuous on the surface but contains a hidden deconstructive social critique—tends to characterize the humor of marginalized groups and critics of oppressive structures, while direct and disparaging humor is associated more with dominant groups, men, and defenders of oppressive structures.

These analyses of subversive humor as it is used by marginalized people to critique dominant narratives repeatedly refer to uses of "irony," and "satire," which are variable in terms of both form and function but define essential features of a far broader classification of the "comedic." Irony is particularly versatile and has been productive of many analyses and arguments for its many functions. These reach back quite far in the scholarly literature (Frye 1957; Booth 1974; Wilde 1982) and recognize subtypes including Socratic irony, dramatic irony, irony of fate, and verbal irony (Kreuz and Roberts 1993). However, the kind of irony used in humor to disrupt dominant narratives is closely akin to a postmodern, deconstructive irony that questions oppressive power structures by challenging long-established epistemologies (for example, Butler 1993; cf. Shugart 2001).

This deconstructive potential of (especially ironic) humor was clearly pointed out by Mike Mulkay, who saw that in the serious mode, we assume "there is one, real, unitary world that can be described without paradox and inconsistency" (Mulkay 1988, 220), whereas the comic mode reveals multiple realities, paradoxes, and inconsistencies. As such, seriousness, particularly within politics and science, imposes a dominant narrative whereas comedy allows

for breaking epistemic rules and embracing diversity and multiple/contradictory experience (220–21).

The value of postmodern irony for troubling dominant epistemologies that perpetuate oppression received a great deal of scholarly attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Mulkay 1988; Bennett 1992; Bernard 1992; Blair 1992; Hutcheon 1991; 1992; Waring 1992; Mukherjee 1992). Among these, Linda Hutcheon argues in favor of its productivity in expanding epistemic systems when she identifies both a deconstructive and constructive use of postmodern irony (Hutcheon 1992, 30–31). Particularly, she sees deconstructive postmodern irony as “a kind of critical ironic stance that serves to distance, undermine, unmask, relativise, destabilise” in which “marginality becomes the model for internal subversion of that which presumes to be central” (30). Constructive (postmodern) irony, on the other hand, “works to assert difference as positive” and puts its “focus on liminality” (30). For Hutcheon, it is there that irony “can open up new spaces, literally between opposing meanings, where new things can happen” (31).

Seen in this way, postmodern irony can be argued to serve a political function, but it remains inherently politically ambiguous. A purely deconstructive, postmodern irony, though useful for showing flaws in grand narratives, has also been criticized for failing to provide a framework for positive action on behalf of social-justice aims (Poovey 1988; hooks 1996; Ryu 2001; hooks 2004). Thus, Helene Shugart notes that postmodern irony “invites multiple readings on multiple levels, thereby creating multiple potential audiences” and adds that “[s]ignificantly, although the subversive function of irony in this instance may be apparent to a postmodern audience, the text may be just as likely to function hegemonically for other audiences” (Shugart 2009, 433). This mirrors Walker’s concern about the danger of missing the ironic subversion unless already prepared to look for it (Walker 1988, 120). Therefore, postmodern irony (or that double-voiced, palimpsest mode of subversion) is vulnerable to being read literally and upholding the very structures of power it wishes to disrupt, complicate, or expand to include other voices.

This is much less of a risk with satire. Northrop Frye, in his tremendously influential *Anatomy of Criticism*, describes satire as “militant irony” (Frye 1957, 223). Irony, therefore, when hardened into satire, becomes a *weapon* to be employed against a target. This is consistent with his earliest definition in which he identified two essential qualities of satire: wit or humor and an object of attack (Frye 1944, 76). Furthermore, Frye tells us that satire is founded on a sense of the grotesque or absurd (Frye 1957, 224). It is clear, therefore, that it can be used against the marginalized, dehumanized other or against the knowledges, beliefs, and experiences of those who fall outside dominant epistemologies. In this way, satire can be more akin to superiority/disparagement humor when it comes from a place of cultural hegemony and seeks to enforce oppression. Nevertheless, when used to critique dominant narratives, particularly by members of marginalized groups, satire can be a highly effective form of political engagement.

#### POSITIONALITY AND HUMOR

Humor, then, in addition to its other functions, is capable of opening minds to other perspectives and other knowledges. Ultimately, ironic, satirical, and double-voiced humor is powerful in its ability to defamiliarize established power structures and disrupt and destabilize hegemonic certainties. Indeed, it “reveals the ‘dirt’ behind reputable institutions, roles, groups, and individuals: the government, the bureaucracy, the professions, the rich, the powerful, the celebrated” (Davis 1993, 157). This is the argument of Cynthia Willett who, in *Irony in the Age of Empire*, looks at the power of satire as a form of social critique. Willett

argues that “The truth-telling of the satirist is not the same as that of the public moralist or political debater” (Willett 2008, 2) but can, in certain circumstances, be more effective. Examining the satire of Stephen Colbert (on *The Colbert Report*) and, in particular, his satire of the Bush administration and its “truthiness,” Willett remarks, “The satire does not counter moral claim with moral claim or political argument with political argument, and for good reason. Direct challenges to the radical agenda of the neoconservatives have not been effective because the debate has already been framed by their rhetoric” (3). Similarly, Amber Day’s *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* draws upon the works of Jon Stewart and Michael Moore to argue that parody, satire, and irony are gaining political prominence and bypassing the standard discourses that dominate political debate (Day 2011).

We therefore see the complicated significance of positionality. If dominant groups have constructed the standard epistemology and dictated acceptable political discourses, direct challenges to it within those discourses are likely to be ineffective and may not even be understood (Medina 2013; Dotson 2014). Of course, Colbert, Stewart, and Moore, as wealthy white men, hold privileged positions in society and are both more likely to be given credibility and limited in the extent to which they can represent the experiences of marginalized groups, which often shows. They can, nevertheless, use that position effectively to critique dominant narratives. Similarly, women and members of racial or sexual minorities can uphold the very structures that oppress them. Therefore, positionality, where it comes to utilizing humor for social critique, is to be understood not only in terms of the position individuals’ identity gives them within society but also the position they take in relation to social justice.

On this, Willett argues that “ridicule has advantages that serious speech lacks for a democratic political ethics. It can offer a democratic equalizing of the discursive terrain” (Willett 2008, 3) and points out that society is not formed merely by institutions of law and education. Addressing social injustice purely in legal and intellectual terms necessarily comes up against the masculinist, imperialist frameworks in which they were formed, and which are still given wide-scale credibility. Willett therefore writes that if social justice, which she refers to as “a free life,” “has not been well served by abstract intellectual prose, perhaps it is because it does not easily lend itself to such an analysis. Yet the social dynamics of communities, the virtues and vices of character, and political arrogance and moral blindness are all central topics of U.S comedy” (4). Thus ironic and satirical humor can be used to engage with dominant narratives and be received within culturally familiar frameworks, though the positionality of the humorist matters, both in terms of identity and with regard to stance on social justice.

#### HUMOR AS IT EFFECTS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Although the humor of marginalized people tends toward the ironic, satirical, and double-voiced, it would be a mistake to think it lacks seriousness (Walker 1988). The relater of a disparaging sexist or racist joke may hide behind “I was only joking,” but the marginalized creator of satirical/ironic humorous social observations does not—indeed, cannot—step away from her own experience and thus disclaim her observations of a society that oppresses her (cf. hooks 1996; 2004). Understandably, then, scholars have focused on the inherent seriousness and power of humor, irony, and satire in a social-justice context, particularly as it focuses on feminism and critical race theory (Witkin 1999; Willett 2008; Day 2011; Neuendorf et al. 2014; Rossing 2014; Leng 2016; Abrams 2017). Jonathan Rossing looks specifically at the value of critical race humor as a form of *parrhesia* in the Foucauldian

sense (Rossing 2014; cf. Foucault 2001): difficult experiential truth-telling in which the speaker addresses the more powerful from a subordinate position. Rossing writes,

Major revisions to dominant knowledge require insights from those outside of dominant political culture whose experiential truths disrupt the status quo and challenge dominant knowledge and conventions. Critical race humor provides a pathway to parrhesia for speakers who are underpowered in relation to their audience. Such humor empowers marginalized critics to problematize shared and sacred truths, and it provides opportunities to undermine oppressive forces that stifle justice. (Rossing 2014, 23)

We see this undermining of “sacred truths” about gender roles through irony and satire in the work of early feminists like Alice Duer Miller, particularly in her “Why We Oppose Votes for Men” (1915):

1. Because a man’s place is in the army.
2. Because no really manly man wants to settle any question otherwise than by fighting about it.
3. Because if men should adopt peaceable methods women will no longer look up to them.
4. Because men will lose their charm if they step out of their natural sphere . . .
5. Because men are too emotional to vote. Their conduct at baseball games and political conventions shows this . . . (*New York Times* 1974)

Contemporary feminists like Leigh Hofheimer draw on the same satirical yet utterly serious humor in her “10 Rape Prevention Tips,” which include:

3. If you pull over to help a woman whose car has broken down, remember not to rape her. . . .
8. Use the buddy system! If it is inconvenient for you to stop yourself from raping women, ask a trusted friend to accompany you at all times.
9. Carry a rape whistle. If you find you are about to rape someone, blow the whistle until someone comes to stop you. (Hofheimer 2011)

In both of these cases, the female feminist-as-humorist satirizes dominant discourses that oppress women—anti-female-suffrage and victim-blaming rape-prevention discourses—to considerable subversive/disruptive effect. By using the dominant discourse while applying its reasoning to the dominant rather than subordinate group, the latter’s “dirt,” as Murray Davis might have it, is revealed (Davis 1993).

Alice Childress, an African-American playwright, actor, and author, similarly used double-voiced irony and reversal of discourses to reveal the racist double standards in her 1956 story, “Like One of the Family.” Witkin describes Childress’s depiction of an exchange between Mildred, a black housekeeper, and her new, wealthy white employers:

Mildred’s female employer hesitantly and with awkwardness asks her if she has a “health card,” quickly adding, “I don’t mean any offense, but one must be careful, mustn’t one?” . . . [Mildred] heartily endorses her employer’s query responding, “Indeed, one must, and I am glad you are so understandin’, ‘cause I was just worryin’ and studyin’ on how I was goin’ to ask you for yours, and of course you’ll let me see one from your husband and one for each of the three children.” This



remark causes the employer to turn “green” and hurriedly confer with her husband. She returns shortly saying, “Mildred, you don’t have to bring a health card. I am sure it will be all right.” To which Mildred responds, “On second thought, you folks look real clean, too.” (cited in Faulkner 1987, 144)

Similarly, the African-American director Justin Simien used satire in his 2014 film, *Dear White People*, to defamiliarize the casual racism he frequently encountered in college (Simien and Gross 2014). Discussing the “Unleash Your Inner Negro” party scene in the film, in which students mimicked stereotypes of African Americans and wore “blackface,” Simien said, “[F]or me, it was a way to kind of give a visceral sense of what it feels like as a person of color to see myself kind of through a lens perhaps of white culture, white media that actually has no real contact with me and my culture—to kind of give any audience the visceral horror of seeing something like that” (Simien and Gross 2014). Ultimately, Simien conveys an experiential truth and addresses the kind of epistemic oppression experienced by marginalized groups when a dominant epistemic system excludes their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives (cf. Dotson 2014): “This is the sort of thing that kind of happens with sort of closed cultural loops of people” (Simien and Gross 2014).

In all of these cases, the satirical humor in use is aimed at a wide audience. As Willett and Day have argued, political satire used within a wider cultural sphere than the standard forums for political debate has the power to reach people (Willett 2008; Day 2017). But *how* does it reach them? For Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, the startling aspect of satire is essential (Haroutunian-Gordon 2004). In this way, people working within established epistemologies and experiencing the “calm of comprehending” are suddenly startled into discomfort by the impact of the satire, which she refers to as the “disquiet of puzzlement.” That is, it generates epistemic friction. In these cases, something has disturbed the expected narrative and introduced an alien form of knowledge that requires thought to process, and people laugh to express and manage this discomfort (hooks 2004, 29). In the case of *Dear White People*, for example, scenes that had been viewed from a dominant epistemology suddenly appear very different, and an avenue for social change is opened. For Cris Mayo, in fact, this discomfort is a way to open new opportunities for understanding:

The disruptions to habitual ways of thinking in humor remind them of possibilities of thinking that were only just out of sight, already embedded within concepts already familiar to them, concepts that perhaps just needed a subtle nudge from someone who sees them at a different angle. (Mayo 2014, 176)

In this way, potentialities for expanding one’s own epistemology to incorporate previously excluded perceptions can be recognized through the comic mode in a way not always accessible in the serious, and yet again, positionality matters. This is the thesis of Mayo’s essay, “Humorous Relations: Attentiveness, Pleasure, and Risk,” in which she looks at the relationships between humorist and listener. For Mayo, listeners need to practice “attentiveness to complexity” and be aware that there could be layers they are not familiar with. This requires “curiosity and openness to being startled, themselves qualities similar to vulnerability and willingness to take risks” (Mayo 2014, 176). Speakers cannot assume that their audience will possess such qualities or be able to access them (which can depend entirely on the positionality of the humorist with relationship to the audience), but the mode of humor nevertheless inherently tends to generate greater openness and willingness to be surprised. This affords the speaker an opportunity to startle, defamiliarize dominant epistemologies, generate epistemic friction, and expand the listeners’ understanding to other perspectives (cf. Dotson 2014).

Similarly, in the cases of the feminist or (critical) race satires, discourses of subordination and responsibility that have been or are being applied to women or marginalized racial groups are suddenly applied to whites and/or men, which causes a startling effect and need to re-evaluate their biases. Regarding this effect, Mayo indicates, “Humor can help us all to see the prejudices that are part of how we structure our understanding of relations with others, and forms of anger about those prejudices that we know are already there, even if we do not personally experience them” (Mayo 2014, 183). By defamiliarizing those discourses that have been acceptably applied to women and people of color and instead applying them to white men, white and male listeners have the opportunity to see the structural imbalance and understand the anger of women and people of color.

In fact, the very nature of humor encourages an epistemic openness and a realization that other perspectives, knowledges, and experiences exist, which can be difficult to access among members of privileged groups in the serious mode. Mayo, referring to uses of humor within the classroom, demonstrates this when she observes,

That some respond with laughter and others with mild amusement and still others with wonder at why other people are laughing gives classes a clear moment on which to reflect on their differences. Humor can show us that we do not have the full sense of what something can mean and do this in an environment of amusement or wonder at amusement. (Mayo 2014, 179)

That humor can provide access to awareness that people do not already have makes it an extremely valuable social tool, and this becomes especially clear in the contexts of feminist epistemology and epistemic oppression.

#### HUMOR AS PRIVILEGE-PRESERVING EPISTEMIC PUSHBACK

Given this function of ironic, double-voiced, and satirical humor and its potential to disrupt oppressive power structures, it is a matter of grave concern when attempts are made to use the comedic mode to attack, belittle, and discredit social justice-oriented efforts. Because irony and satire are commonly used to critique power structures with comparative safety and those affected by social injustice are necessarily the least powerful, abuses of this mode of humor by members of privileged groups who attack social-justice scholarship and activism are best understood as forms of superiority/disparagement humor. They are, in fact, tactics within privilege-preserving epistemic pushback.

Privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, Bailey tells us, represents a kind of willful ignorance (cf. Tuana and Sullivan 2007).

[It] is a form of worldview protection: a willful resistance to knowing that occurs predictably in discussions that threaten a social group’s epistemic home terrain . . . . In practice, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is a family of cognitive, affective, nonverbal, and discursive tactics that are used habitually to avoid engaging ideas that threaten us. (Bailey 2017, 879)

It follows that supposedly ironic/satirical humor used by the privileged against the marginalized (or against social-justice scholarship that seeks to make that marginalization visible) is among these tactics, and it operates on many levels of concern to social-justice pedagogy. Of particular interest, it manifests within the classroom when students resort to parodic mockery of concepts used within social-justice scholarship, on a cultural level when

mainstream television and large social media accounts do so (Margolis 1999; Hughey and Muradi 2009), and within academe in the form of academic hoaxes (Fleming and O’Carroll 2010; Fredal 2014).

## CLASSROOMS

Within classrooms, irony and double-voiced humor are frequently seen when women and sexual, ethnic, racial, or religious minorities become frustrated trying to explain their experience to members of dominant groups, who in turn often intentionally avoid engagement through willful (cf. Bailey 2017; Tuana and Sullivan 2007), pernicious (Dotson 2014), or active ignorance (Medina 2013). Imagine, for example, a female student responding to a male classmate who refuses to credit her account of continuous sexual harassment with, “Yes, sir. Of course, you are right. Would you like me to make you a sandwich now?” Think of the person of color who, upon having her experiences of racism rejected and being told to calm down, raises her voice to reply, “How can I? I’m an ‘Angry Black Woman.’ It’s what we do.” Imagine the Muslim student who is consistently regarded with suspicion by his classmates and finally says, “Do you want to check my backpack? Make sure there’s no bomb?” These kinds of utterly serious jokes carry the potential to “reveal the dirt” behind the dominant discourses they parody.

Compare those ripostes with jokes made by members of dominant groups to target social-justice concepts ironically/satirically. Think of the male student who responds to a female student commenting upon the physical attractiveness of a man with, “Can you not objectify men, please?” and receives a laugh from his friends. Imagine the sunburned white student who asks a person of color to check her “Black privilege,” expecting her to laugh along. Think of the self-identifying cisgendered man who responds to having his male privilege pointed out with, “Did you just assume my gender?” Compared with “dirt-revealing” humor from marginalized groups, there is a profound difference in the impact of these seemingly casual jokes at the expense of concepts used to make injustice visible. And this difference is contingent upon the two-factored positionality of the humorist in a way that can multiply its effects; both the humorists’ position on social justice and social position bear relevance. By making light of these concepts, by disparaging them, by assuming them worthy of mockery, “satire” positioned against social justice and from a perspective of cultural dominance is revealed as superiority/disparagement humor used as privilege-preserving epistemic pushback.

## TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Satirical mockery of social-justice concepts also commonly appears within wider culture, where it feeds into dominant cultural discourses in an organized and systemic way via mainstream television shows and social media. *The Simpsons*, season 28, episode 19, mocked collegiate social-justice activists in a scene that likened them to robots (*The Simpsons* 2017). The franchise was also criticized for the racial stereotyping of the character Apu (*The Simpsons* 2016; Kondabolu 2017). Similarly, the animated sitcom *South Park* is a serial offender of superiority/disparagement humor—having used the n-word forty-two times in its season 11 premiere (*South Park* 2007), having been accused of promoting “acceptable racism” for its anti-Semitic content (Margolis 1999), and having been described as an “economy of hyper-irony and manic-satire” even while being criticized by Matthew Hughey and Sahara Muradi for its depiction of Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian people

(Hughey and Muradi 2009). It also frequently mocks social-justice scholarship and activism and what it calls “PC culture” (for “politically correct”). The creators of *South Park* call themselves “equal opportunity offenders” (Raphael 1998), revealing an assumption of a level cultural playing field that does not exist. (Bailey’s development of the concept of an “unlevel knowing field” [Bailey 2014] in her engagement with Dotson’s third-order epistemic oppression [Dotson 2014] addresses this form of ignorance most explicitly.)

This approach to humor, which purports to be satirical and yet is aimed *at* social-justice work, is what Bailey identifies as a “shadow text”: a narrative that “follows” social-justice concepts but does not engage them, seeking instead to derail and disparage (Bailey 2017). Bailey defines shadow texts in classroom contexts as a form of “discursive resistance” that offers no epistemic friction but only serves as an obstacle (Bailey 2017). She derives the term “epistemic friction” from Medina, who uses it, in a positive sense, in reference to resistance to dominant epistemologies and “mutual contestation of perspectives” (Medina 2013, 11) that are necessary to producing knowledges. *Beneficial epistemic friction*, to Medina, forces an individual “to be self-critical, to compare and contrast one’s beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, [and] to recognize cognitive gaps” (51). The epistemically privileged, who are accustomed to having their own beliefs and knowledges validated, become prone to *meta-blindness*, which Medina defines as “the inability to recognize one’s own limitations and inabilities” (76). Medina therefore argues that, “As an antidote to this meta-blindness, we need to appeal 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, Medina’s emphasis).

Shadow texts, Bailey argues, produce no such friction. They make no attempt to seek out or understand alternative perceptions held by marginalized people, and, rather than engaging with social-justice concepts intended to make oppression visible, they shadow them “in the same way a detective shadows a suspicious person . . . . The word ‘shadow’ calls to mind the image of something walking closely alongside another thing without engaging it” (Bailey 2017, 886). Thus attempts at satirical humor from anti-justice or relatively privileged perspectives are best understood as a form of shadow text that fails to generate epistemic friction. This indicates the subtle mechanisms by which positionality determines whether satire and irony become either effective social critique or a form of disparagement humor.

Ostensibly “satirical” shadow texts are rife on social media. For example, a Twitter account called “SJW Nonsense” has nearly 40,000 followers (@SJW\_Nonsense). (“SJW” abbreviates “Social Justice Warrior,” a derogatory term for social-justice activists that implies they are too militant.) The account describes itself as “documenting SJW craziness,” and, as the name implies, it selectively posts examples of social-justice activism/commentary without added commentary, although its followers respond derisively. This phenomenon is not isolated. Numerous similar accounts proliferate on Twitter and Reddit, including those that request examples of social-justice activism/commentary to be posted for ridicule (the most popular account has over 50,000 members [r/sjwhate/]). It is typical for these accounts to describe themselves as “satirical” despite their lack of engagement, indicating a certainty in one’s own epistemology so profound that alternatives are deemed “objectively” ridiculous, leaving no need to engage them seriously (Dotson 2014).

The same methodology typifies the Twitter account “New Real Peer Review,” which has over 50,000 followers and claims to “provide a lighthearted, *satirical* view of most questionable specimens of modern academic peer-review process” (@RealPeerReview, emphasis added). Targeting the humanities and social sciences primarily, New Real Peer Review posts abstracts and excerpts from peer-reviewed scholarship it wishes to disparage (with sections highlighted for added effect). Despite presenting excerpts of scholarly literature, New Real Peer Review makes no attempts to engage with that scholarship on

good-faith terms. Instead, it is understood that the account's followers will find (superiority/disparagement) humor by reading it through the dominant Western epistemology of hyper-rationalism and evidence-based knowledge production. In this way, New Real Peer Review produces a running stream of shadow texts based upon academic scholarship that is often concerned with topics relevant to social-justice research.

Of note, this kind of disengaged mockery cannot be considered a form of critique because it refuses engagement. Barbara Applebaum usefully distinguishes disagreement from a refusal to engage, writing, "One can disagree and remain engaged in the material, for example, by asking questions and searching for clarification and understanding. Denials, however, function as a way to distance oneself from the material and to dismiss without engagement" (Applebaum 2010, 43). She also points out that "the mere fact that they can question the existence of systemic oppression is a function of their privilege to choose to ignore discussions of systemic oppression or not" (45). Neither can this kind of irony or satire be considered in terms of deconstruction, defamiliarization, or disruption because social-justice scholarship does not—arguably *cannot*, due to its orientation against (socially unjust) systems of domination—constitute a dominant epistemology. On the contrary, it represents an expanding body of thought that seeks to challenge the status quo by being inclusive of a greater range of epistemologies and for furthering social justice. That is, positionality matters. Ultimately, then, this style of mocking humor, levied from the privileged perch of the epistemically dominant, cannot be considered in the same light as the ironic, double-voiced satire that members of marginalized groups use to critique oppressive power structures. Its intention and impact are precisely the opposite: to maintain and reinforce those oppressive structures. It must, therefore, be considered superiority/disparagement humor. As noted, the best way to understand such humor is as cultural *shadow texts*.

#### THE ACADEMIC HOAX AS THE ULTIMATE SHADOW TEXT

The epitome of the shadow text is the academic hoax perpetrated against fields of scholarship that seek to disrupt power structures, challenge dominant epistemologies, and make oppression visible to those who are actively ignorant of it. With his mimicry of the objectives and methods of social justice, the hoaxer walks closely alongside legitimate scholarship without substantive engagement. Thus, the hoax constitutes the most literal "shadow text" of all and offers no epistemic friction because engagement is merely feigned. This renders academic hoaxes, when positioned against social-justice-oriented scholarship, a sophisticated but empty form of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback that seeks to resolve epistemic discomfort by mimicking certain ideas convincingly so as to offer them up for ridicule to others who are similarly epistemically protectionist. In this way, the hoax presents itself as satirical humor that, due to the positionality of the hoaxer against social-justice-oriented scholarship, is better understood as a shadow text (and breach of academic ethics).

For context in terms of positionality, James Fredal points out that the hoax itself can be understood as a Western construction, specifically one that is enabled by "contest cultures: cultures that encourage public forms of competition and self-assertion" (Fredal 2014, 76). Hoaxes attempt to assert one view of intellectual rigor, philosophical validity, or epistemology over another, claiming ostensible satire as their methodology, which is especially problematic when attempting to support the prevailing masculinist, Western philosophical tradition. Fredal further identifies the individuals who engage in hoaxes as frequently belonging to dominant groups who seek to defend the status quo and protect structures of power that benefit them. He argues,

It is often the traditionalist, the positivist, the Platonist, the true poetic sensibility that feels resentment over the success of the “new,” “modern” (or, worse, “postmodern”) voice. Thus, though often seeming iconoclastic and antiauthoritarian, hoaxes typically arise out of deeply conservative or reactionary sentiments that mock the superficial pretensions of the hoaxed genre to point to more substantial verities in more authentic forms. (79)

This attitude requires the hoaxer to be committed to the belief that his own, older, “established” epistemology is the only valid one, which allows him to perceive himself as the corrector of some alleged obvious error. In this sense, the academic hoax fits Frye’s broad definition of satire: there is a militancy (Frye 1957) about it, an object of attack (Frye 1944, 76), and it is rooted in the belief that the target is absurd or grotesque (Frye 1957, 224). Indeed, as Chris Fleming and John O’Carroll point out, “[T]here is a tendency to narcissism and self-flattery in the hoax. It commences with the premise that it has superior knowledge of some kind, and that the hoax will reveal something critical (and usually negatively so) about the state of things in a given field” (Fleming and O’Carroll 2010, 57). As argued above, when coming from dominant or anti-justice positions, this kind of satire has much more in common with disparagement humor than does the satire of marginalized people, which points out the absurdity and injustice of oppressive power structures.

Fleming and O’Carroll address the nature of hoaxes by writing, “they rely upon knowledge of the textual system in question” and thus constitute “an order of double writing” (57). In this way, the hoax presents itself as a form of postmodern irony that works on many levels at once (Shugart 2009), using the double-voiced, palimpsest mode of presenting a seemingly straightforward text with a hidden meaning (Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Showalter 1985). However, Fleming and O’Carroll stress that this doubling appears because the hoax “shares formal features with the system upon which it is *parasitic*” (Fleming and O’Carroll 2010, 57, emphasis added), and in this way positionality matters. Parasitic shadowing of epistemic concepts and ideas is not true engagement with them but a simple bad-faith, often exaggerated copy produced from a position that deems itself obviously superior to what it attempts to satirize. In these conditions, where the alleged satire flows with the direction of power instead of against it, there is no subversion of dominant narratives, no epistemic friction to encourage critical self-reflection, and no attempt to understand different perspectives or to seek equilibrium between them (Medina 2013, 51–78). There is instead an under-engaged presentation of elements of fields focused on social justice, sometimes exaggerated, that the hoaxer sees as a problem and about which he is confident that all “right-thinking” people will share his perception. Precisely because he operates from within a dominant epistemology, he often receives the superiority-affirming feedback he desires.

These motivations and effect clearly differ from the “double-voiced” or “palimpsest” irony and satire by which women and members of marginalized groups seek to expose oppressive power structures. Recall Medina’s analysis of the epistemic virtues and advantages that members of oppressed groups are prone to because they are compelled to work within the epistemology of privileged groups (Medina 2013, 40–44). From this position, marginalized people know not only their own perceptions, experiences, and knowledge of the world but also those of dominant groups, which results in Medina’s “kaleidoscopic consciousness” in which multiple epistemologies are simultaneously understood. This enables members of marginalized groups to understand and push back upon dominant epistemologies while introducing their own, which produces a genuinely subversive, satirical challenge to the reigning epistemology that truly engages with the target it addresses. In contrast, members of dominant groups are prone to the epistemic disadvantages that accrue from never having to engage with any other epistemology and constantly having their own validated and affirmed.

This leads to the inability to see outside one's own epistemology, acknowledge others, and attempt engagement with them. Individuals from dominant groups who produce a purported satire at the expense of marginalized groups or social-justice scholarship are therefore not subverting a dominant epistemology from a position of genuine understanding and engagement. They are shadowing marginalized ones in order to perpetuate already dominant epistemic systems and discrediting alternative epistemologies that seek to challenge them and introduce other ways of knowing.

In this way, the positionality of the satirist becomes integral, both in terms of the position bestowed upon the individual by his or her identity and the status it is given in society and in terms of the position the individual takes in relation to other groups within society, oppressive power structures, and scholarship and activism for social justice. Because the academic hoax nearly always comes from a position of dominance, then, Fleming and O'Carroll conclude: "Its humour is inherently mean-spirited and unethical" (Fleming and O'Carroll 2010, 58). This may well be the case, and when an academic hoax takes the form of bad-faith pseudo-engagement, mimicry, and mockery of marginalized groups and scholarship that seek to make their oppression visible, committed by relatively privileged actors seeking to defend dominant epistemologies, it is much more akin to superiority/disparagement humor than to subversive satire.

To date, not least because of the rigor attendant on peer-reviewed academic scholarship in general and technical skill required to produce them, few academic hoaxes have been perpetrated, especially against social-justice-oriented scholarship. Among these, two stand out.

#### THE SOKAL AFFAIR

Alan Sokal's "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutic of Quantum Gravity," targeted the esteemed Duke University Press literary criticism journal *Social Text* (Sokal 1996). Sokal intended to demonstrate that postmodern scholarship often relies upon obscurantist jargon and bogus epistemic justifications for its "ideologically fashionable" conclusions, often while misusing scientific terminology in playful, if silly, linguistic ways (Sokal and Bricmont 1997). The article was entirely meaningless. Fleming and O'Carroll, among others, argued that Sokal's hoax was a form of deconstruction and an ironic play on postmodern relativism that was itself postmodern (Fleming and O'Carroll 2010), but Fredal's argument that hoaxes like this have a much longer history in masculinist, Western, philosophical history is supported by the rationale given by Sokal himself, which depends upon his positionality as a physicist (dominant scientific epistemology) criticizing potentially disrupting postmodern social commentary (alternative marginalized epistemology). This positionality was immediately recognized at the time, despite any validity possessed in his critiques of postmodern relativism and its failures to acknowledge objective bases for knowledge. Specifically, upon Sokal's revelation that his article was an academic hoax, the editor of *Social Text*, Stanley Aronowitz, criticized Sokal's epistemic narrowness,

He believes that reason, logic, and truth are entirely unproblematic. He has an abiding faith that through the rigorous application of scientific method, nature will yield its unmediated truth. . . . So Sokal never interrogates the nature of evidence or facts, and simply accepts them if they have been adduced within certain algorithms that bear the stamp of "science." (Aronowitz 1997, 107)

In short, Aronowitz accused Sokal of epistemological arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness—Medina’s three markers of active ignorance—which are likely indicators of criticizing from a position of epistemic privilege. Far from engaging with postmodern concepts of knowledge as culturally constructed and critiquing them ironically (or otherwise) from a position of understanding, Sokal’s initial premise in “Transgressing the Boundaries” was that it was all merely meaningless jargon, which was a conclusion derived from his own dominant, objectivist, scientific perspective. Indeed, his intention seems to have been to expose, embarrass, and *humiliate* postmodern epistemologies and social commentary to deny them respect within academe.

This one-sidedness was even more apparent when Sokal (with Bricmont) responded angrily to criticisms of their 1997 book *Intellectual Impostures* (also entitled *Fashionable Nonsense*), which detailed the motivations behind his hoax. There, despite valid criticisms of excesses of postmodern relativism, they made further attacks on scholarship that seeks to challenge the exclusivity of Western hyper-rational, scientific epistemologies (Sokal and Bricmont 1997). To suggestions that their own epistemology, work, values, identity, and politics could underlie their resentful dismissal of alternative ways of knowing, they therein replied, “Well! Let’s concede once and for all that we are arrogant, mediocre, sexually frustrated scientists, ignorant in philosophy and enslaved by a scientific ideology (neoconservative or hard-line Marxist, take your pick). But please tell us what this implies concerning the validity or invalidity of our arguments” (Sokal and Bricmont 1997, xviii). This assertion, that those asking them to consider their positionality, values, and epistemological shortcomings had not offered anything valid, is a perfect example of active ignorance (Medina 2013; cf. Wolf 2017). Tellingly, this “hard-line” rejoinder, which trumpets their beliefs about the superiority of their epistemological standing, appeared only in the original French version of the book and was removed from subsequent editions.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL PENIS AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

More recently, “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct,” by James Lindsay and Peter Boghossian (under the pseudonyms “Jamie Lindsay” and “Peter Boyle”), attempted to address social-justice concepts directly. In this sense, it can be afforded far less latitude in interpretation than the more thoughtful Sokal affair. Lindsay and Boghossian’s article characterized toxic masculinity in terms of a “conceptual penis” that seeks to aggressively exploit not only women’s bodies but also the natural world and can ultimately be understood as the root cause of global warming (Lindsay and Boyle 2017). This (attempted) hoax’s *explicit* purpose was to delegitimize gender studies (Boghossian and Lindsay 2017), and it received considerable support from the political right, including initiating overt political agendas against feminism, gender studies, postmodernism, the humanities, peer-reviewed scholarship, and even climate change (*The Australian* 2017; Killoran 2017). Of note, the joke seemingly was on the hoaxers in this case, as their attempted hoax was universally heralded as a failure (even by Alan Sokal) because of the journal’s low standards with respect to the peer-review process (Sokal 2017; Taylor 2017; Torres 2017).

Because it sought to delegitimize gender studies, it is important to examine the motivations behind this hoax, along with its epistemological assumptions. The positionality of its authors also matters. Its authors, two cisgendered, heterosexual, white men who affirm deep commitments to the prevailing Western philosophical tradition (Lindsay is a mathematician; Boghossian a “Socratic” philosopher) and antipathy to social-justice activism (Torres 2017), specifically targeted “the academic Left’s moral architecture in general, and . . . the moral orthodoxy in gender studies in particular” (Boghossian and Lindsay 2017)



due to their dislike of the conclusions, implications, and activism emanating from gender studies. Specifically, these hoaxers revealed themselves as morally and epistemologically motivated against (newer) established theoretical considerations of gender, race, and sexuality in favor of preserving and bolstering hegemonic scientific and meta-scientific narratives (Boghossian and Lindsay 2017). These attitudes, however, are the “deeply conservative and reactionary sentiments” described by Fredel (Fredel 2014).

Consistent with Fleming and O’Carroll’s general observations about hoaxes and hoaxers (Fleming and O’Carroll 2010), James McWilliams addressed the “Conceptual Penis” hoax in a piece for *The Week*. Titled “The Hoax that Backfired,” it draws particular attention to the authors’ positionality and tone. He observed, “This is the rhetoric of humiliation.” He continued by noting the power structures in play: “Boghossian and Lindsay are white men working in the most male-dominated academic fields (philosophy and math) attempting to humiliate through bullying one of the few academic fields dominated by women” (McWilliams 2017, n.p.). This attempted hoax—in which the joke was on the hoaxers—thus reveals itself as a form of superiority/disparagement humor, a tactic of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, and a shadow text.

#### HOW TO RESPOND, A CONCLUSION

Bailey urges a two-pronged response to shadow texts. She argues for the importance of teaching students to identify them as a way of tracking ignorance culturally, writing, “It’s essential for them to understand that tracking ignorance requires that our attention be focused not on a few problem individuals, but on learning to identify patterns of resistance and tying ignorance-producing habits to a strategic refusal to understand” (Bailey 2017, 887). However, she warns against engaging with them seriously: “Treating privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as a form of critical engagement validates it and allows it to circulate more freely; this . . . can do epistemic violence to oppressed groups” (881).

This presents a difficulty. Although it is essential to be able to identify shadow texts and demonstrate them to others, it is also vital not to encourage them or to focus on them to the point of recentering the needs of privileged groups. Even here, positionality matters. Applebaum addresses this problem, “Systemically marginalized students may be offended, hurt and feel unsafe (and feel that their humanity is denied) in classrooms where such systemically privileged students are allowed to recenter their privilege” (Applebaum 2010, 107). To clarify, she gives an example from her own classroom,

After showing students statistics about the gender/race wage gap, one white male student dismissed the data. . . . Allowing him to express his disagreement and spending time trying to challenge his beliefs often comes at a cost to marginalized students whose experiences are (even if indirectly) dismissed by his claims. . . .  
(107)

Ultimately, Applebaum draws on the guidelines of Lynn Weber’s classroom for insight into how to deal with this potential issue within academic settings: The guidelines state that students will “acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist” and “to agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups” (in Applebaum 2010, 103). Although Weber was challenged by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education for this requirement (FIRE 2002), Applebaum points out that she did “not demand agreement with

her views but rather an engagement with the course material and with the experiences of marginalized others” (Applebaum 2010, 112).

These guidelines form a reasonable expectation for anyone wishing to address social-justice scholarship/activism within academe. At a minimum, such work should engage with its targets’ foundational claims on their own terms. Rather than merely shadowing those texts as a form of resisting them, it should strive to understand the experiences and epistemologies of those whom social-justice scholarship seeks to support. Rather than falsely engaging through privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, scholarship that seeks to address concepts in social justice should set its own epistemic privilege aside and learn. Furthermore, the positionality of humorists, hoaxers, and satirists—both in terms of identity and stance regarding justice-oriented initiatives—must be considered in the evaluation of any work produced in this vein.

This requirement for engaging with social-justice scholarship and activism can be implemented in classrooms and throughout academia, and sanctions can be put in place for those who seek only to derail and disparage in order to maintain social, cultural, or institutional dominance. Individual professors and university administrators can introduce simple but formalized methods for adjudicating and then sanctioning members of culturally dominant groups who misuse irony, satire, hoaxes, and double-voiced humor to preserve hegemony over their own epistemic terrain and inhibit the ability of marginalized groups to contribute to knowledge production. As Bailey observes, “

I focus on these ground-holding responses because they are pervasive, tenacious, and bear a strong resemblance to critical-thinking practices, and because I believe that their uninterrupted circulation does psychological and epistemic harm to members of marginalized groups” (Bailey 2017, 877).

In a wider social context, effecting circumstances that expect members of dominant groups to engage earnestly with and through social-justice concepts and to incorporate the experiences and knowledges of members of marginalized groups will be less straightforward. Superiority/disparagement humor, alongside other forms of generating shadow texts to undermine social-justice scholarship, activism, and discourses, remains common. However, by combining activism with scholarship and by providing scholarship for activists in all fields and industries—including all forms of media—improvements may manifest over time. Should they, even through incremental progress, then acknowledgment of oppressive power structures should increase, humor can be resituated appropriately to a greater variety of social contexts, and the experiences of members of marginalized groups will increasingly be considered valid forms of knowledge.

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