Constructing and Being Constructed:
Relational Trans Identity and Responsibility for Microaggressions

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Abstract

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This project centers on the question: Given the everyday and structural dynamics of gender oppression, how should we treat others' genders in our everyday interactions with them, particularly given that those everyday interactions are often subject to or structured by disputed meaning? To address this question, I focus on considering the practical possibility of trans liberation through the lens of empowerment, and offer an account of moral responsibility that's grounded in the need to build social conditions and responsibility practices that make empowerment opportunities for trans people more obvious, accessible, and abundant.

I start by characterizing empowerment as agency that aims to establish or enhance autonomy -- i.e., it is action through which an agent takes or increases control over some aspect(s) of her life. I propose a heterogenous framework for empowerment by considering five overlapping dimensions of empowerment: the site, relational dynamics, source of the constraint on agency, outcome sought, and timing. In particular, I focus on the dimensions that establish conditions of empowerment, or conditions that structurally balance power by making dissent both possible and meaningful.

I then concentrate on one particularly fraught site of meaning dispute for trans agents, that of identity. In particular, I focus on Hilde Lindemann's account of narrative relational identity, under which any given individual's identity is a system of meaning constituted by a web of first personal narratives she tells about herself, and by second and third personal narratives others tell about her, where all of those narratives are grounded and justified by master

narratives. Lindemann proposes that when first, second, and third personal narratives about a given identity conflict, we should work to identify the most accurate narrative. She further proposes using counterstories to combat toxic master narratives and amplify the credibility of marginalized peoples' narratives. By contrast, I argue that while counterstories can be important, increasing social credibility for trans agents is only possible to the extent that trans agents are sufficiently able to exert social power.

I propose, then, that we ought to focus not on accuracy but on developing identity practices that first create conditions of empowerment. In particular, I argue that in order to establish conditions of empowerment in our everyday identity practices, we should engage in identity practices that build and ensure a meaningful balance of power in our identity-constructing relationships and interactions. Building off of José Medina's account of epistemic responsibility, I argue that we have responsibilities to attain minimal knowledge about our social others and their relevance to us. I further argue that a given agent A has responsibilities both in she responds to others' first-personal narratives about themselves, and also in how she responds to others' second- and third-personal narratives about herself.

I conclude by applying this framework to a specific instantiation of everyday oppression, the microaggression. I demonstrate that my account advances the current discussion of microaggressions by giving us sharper tools for understanding the moral harms and obligations generated by microaggressions, namely by focusing on how microaggressions trade on and exacerbate vulnerability dynamics in our everyday relationships.

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Preface

July 25, 2020

As I write this, a litany of flashbangs boom in the background, sounding like they're likely coming from just down the street. I'm just now sitting down at my makeshift desk at my kitchen table, after having spent the past twenty minutes on the back stairs of my building, where I kept watch with crowds of my neighbors as a protestor detained by police on the driveway next door drifted in and out of consciousness. I wasn't there when her detainment started, so I don't know how it happened, but according to my neighbor who filled me in in the stairwell, police charged the street too fast for everyone to disperse safety and had been using batons and mace. A few minutes before my writing this, she was carried into a police van; I can now only hope that she ends up being okay.

In the two months that I've been scrambling to finish this project, these have become my standard working conditions: the constant drone of helicopters overhead, the unpredictable cacophony of flashbangs and fireworks, the screams of protestors fleeing down my street to escape tear gas. Three weeks ago, a non-binary person named Summer Taylor was run over by a car and killed while protesting less than a mile from my house. They were a vet at the clinic where I take my dog. Another non-binary person, Diaz Love, was also hit that night, and is still recovering from serious injuries. Protestors and journalists across the country have been brutally beaten by police, permanently injured by direct fires of rubber bullets and other crowd-control munitions, kidnapped by unidentified federal forces and detained for hours. And of course, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Manuel Ellis, Tony McDade, and so many other Black folks both before and since have had their lives stolen by both particular police and the ongoing legacy of white supremacist violence in this country.

In these last two months, it's often felt frankly pretty stupid to be focusing so much of my attention on a project about microaggressions. State-sanctioned terror is so vividly salient and is actively unleashing increasing violence on so many marginalized lives -- often as close as the

sidewalk less than 20 feet from where I sit every day. Nearly a million people have died from COVID-19, and millions more face severe economic hardship and daily health risks. In this unignorable context, my focus in this project on moral responsibility for microaggressions, everyday interpersonal slights, and poor identity holdings often feels pretty inconsequential. I keep reminding myself that this isn't true, and that all of this shit is ultimately part of the same insidious system of structural oppression. And at the end of the day, I do genuinely believe that the project to uproot oppression is at least partially -- though certainly not entirely -- built on developing better tools for holding ourselves and our social others responsible for the subtle and sneaky ways oppression filters into and structures our regular interactions with each other, and the myriad ways our everyday treatment of our social others can exacerbate their vulnerability. In that respect, I hope that what my work helps accomplish is a reinforcement of the importance of thoughtful relationships and communities that are built on solidarity and on the ongoing effort to rebalance power for marginalized people. Like really, deeply rebalance it, with a vision towards a future that's more just from the ground up -- not just in the big obvious moments but also in the minute daily possibilities for resistance that make up so much of our lives.

It's in this spirit that I write and complete this project -- that is, in the spirit of Mother Jones' famous call to "mourn for the dead and fight like hell for the living." This project accordingly is dedicated to all those who have been fighting this fight for so long before me, to those actively out on the streets as I type these words, and to all those who will continue fighting until a just future is realized.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 6, 2020, J.K. Rowling shared an article on Twitter titled "Opinion: Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate," with the comment "'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Womben? Wimpund? Woomud?" (Rowling 2020a). Half an hour later, she expounded, "If sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction. If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased" (Rowling 2020b). In response, a surge of trans people and allies condemned Rowling's comments, largely on the basis of their reliance on essentialist conceptions of gender that many trans- and non-trans feminist theorists have rejected for decades as harmful and conceptually flawed.[1] In the intervening weeks, Rowling's comments have continued to receive significant attention; however, the underlying principles she espouses are far from new. Indeed, many critics of Rowling's comments also situate them within the rise of anti-trans sentiment in British feminist discourse. Like its American and Australian counterparts, British trans-exclusive radical feminism (colloquially, "TERFism") characterizes trans women as men-pretending-to-be-women, allegedly to "invade" women-only spaces, assault women, or otherwise exercise misogyny; and characterizes trans men paternalistically as women who have deeply internalized patriarchy.[2]

It is likely no surprise that these characterizations contradict the self-characterizations most trans people have about ourselves and about gender. Unfortunately, whether coming from putative feminists, the far right, or anywhere in between, trans people have long experienced non-trivial social dispute about the meanings of our self-conceptions and the meaning-making practices we use to generate them. For instance, legislators in Idaho dispute that trans women

[1] Another key factor to this outcry was that while Rowling's comments would be objectionable at any time, she made them square in the middle of a historic global uprising for Black lives, a move that communicates extreme privilege and willful ignorance.
[2] E.g., refer to McKinnon 2018, Sumpter 2020, and Robertson 2020. Relatedly, for more on the upswing of TERF ideology in academic philosophy, refer to Weinberg 2019, Alcoff et al 2019, and Conkerton-Darby et al 2019.

are sufficiently "women" to be able to participate in women's sports (Minsberg 2020). Most states in the United States only offer "male" and "female" options on state-issued IDs, functionally disputing the legitimacy of non-binary sex or gender identifications (Gupta 2019). The prevailing psychiatric diagnostic guide in the U.S. still classifies identifying as trans as a medical disorder (DSM-5), in stark contrast to the self-conceptions of many trans people and even the World Health Organization (Haynes 2019). Trans people are routinely characterized as dangerous and deceptive (Bettcher 2007), and consequently many states even admit "trans panic" as a legal defense for committing violence against trans people (Holden 2019).

While trans people and allies regularly reject these toxic narratives for ourselves in subaltern trans spaces, because they are socially hegemonic, our rejection only goes so far in those broader social contexts. As legal theorist and activist Dean Spade writes, "To survive our day-to-day interactions with the various institutions of power that classify us differently and respond to us with simultaneous sexism and transphobia…we are often required to alternate between varying and contradictory narratives about our own experience and identity as needed" (2007, 251). Indeed, this contradictory situation -- one where trans meaning and meaning-making are forcefully disputed in dominant contexts but are nonetheless assertible -- is a clear example of the contradiction María Lugones identifies in anti-oppression theory as a whole. Namely, she argues that because structural oppression is socially inescapable, attempts at resisting it are, in some sense, paradoxical (2003).

To expand: In her *Pilgrimages / Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, Lugones identifies two "desiderata of oppression theory" (2003, 53-56). First, it is a desideratum that the theory lay bare the full force oppression -- i.e., that it is "inescapable," such that it permeates our everyday lives, regularly structures our interactions with others and with institutions/systems, and cannot be avoided purely through the individual's agency (2003, 55). In other words, the social forces of oppression make some identities – i.e., those that fit neatly within the boundaries of hegemonic meaning and meaning-making – easily accessible,

and others – i.e., those that break with hegemonic meaning and meaning-making – vilified, obscured, etc.[3] So, deeply recognizing the force dominant structures and others have on what a given identity is able to be (even when that is painful, and even when it is clearly unfair) is practically crucial if we want to fully understand how oppression is functioning in that context.

Second, it is a desideratum that the theory be liberatory (2003, 55). It is not enough for a theory of oppression to simply describe oppression, it is also important to locate paths of resistance and liberation. Lugones writes, "The ontological or metaphysical possibility of liberation remains to be argued, explained, uncovered. If oppression theory is not liberatory, it is useless from the point of view of the oppressed person. It is discouraging, demoralizing" (2003, 55). As Lugones points out, because portraying oppression in its full force means portraying it as inescapable, also attempting to describe any practical possibility of liberation can be incredibly difficult and even contradictory (2003, 55). In other words, if we take seriously that our everyday identity work takes place in a social world deeply permeated by oppressive dynamics that shape and constrain what kinds of meaning and meaning-making are possible, we also have to take seriously that any attempts at resistant meaning and meaning-making ultimately take place in that same oppressive context. This is the space of tension for any identity work that seeks to meet both criteria -- we want to identify modes of resistance from within an inescapable context that is built to preclude resistance.

In this project, I will take Lugones's criteria as a productive framework for exploring both (a) the oppressive social narratives trans agents are regularly subjected to and (b) the work we nevertheless engage in towards liberation. In the case of trans identity, Lugones's first criterion means reckoning with how trans meanings and meaning-making practices are variously enabled and constrained by hegemonic forces, including by confronting the causes, dynamics, and effects of those forces. In particular, this includes identifying the ways that

[3] For instance, Ásta writes, "to give a metaphysics of social properties is to give an account of the properties that *do matter* socially, not ones that *should matter*, but don't" (2018, 11).

dominant narratives and gender norms justify and promulgate violence towards and marginalization of trans people. Meanwhile, her second criterion insists that even in this context of disputed and oppressive meaning, trans liberation is practically possible -- i.e., it is practically possible to disrupt and ultimately dismantle those identified oppressive gender norms.[4] To that end, in this project, I'll focus on considering the practical possibility of trans liberation through the lens of empowerment. Through that lens, I offer an account of moral responsibility grounded in the need to build social conditions and responsibility practices that make empowerment opportunities for trans people more obvious, accessible, and abundant.

With these considerations in mind, my core focus in this project will be to explore the question: Given the everyday and structural dynamics of gender oppression, how should we treat each others' genders in our everyday interactions with them, particularly given that those everyday interactions are often subject to or structured by oppressive and disputed meaning? To focus this analysis, I'll concentrate on trans identity, and even more specifically, trans identity as a component of the intersubjective identity practices we engage in with our social others every day. In particular, the intersubjective identity practices I'll consider are relationally constructed such that no one agent -- not even the agent whose identity is in question -- has automatic authority over who she gets to be socially. Like the contexts of disputed meaning described above, trans identity is an important test case for this kind of conception of identity -- i.e., because such accounts of relational identity regularly result in conflicts between the stories an agent tells about herself and the stories others tell about her, some accounting will need to be made in order to describe how (or whether) trans liberation is still possible.

I am ultimately uninterested in a theory of identity that doesn't have affirming or liberatory avenues for trans people, so working through these concerns will be critical. Indeed, a

[4] Throughout this project, I will discuss "possibility" regularly. Unless otherwise noted, when I discuss possibility/impossibility, I'll be thinking about practical rather than conceptual possibility/impossibility.

core feature of my argument will be an interest in establishing opportunities for empowerment for trans people in our everyday identity practices. In that effort, the framework I'll establish will be grounded primarily in amplifying the agency and autonomy of trans people. However, as I'll argue, this does not mean that only trans people have a role to play in advancing trans empowerment. Quite to the contrary, I'll argue that because establishing conditions of empowerment is key to sustainable structural change that rebalances power for trans agents, everyone has a role to play. As a result, much of my ultimate focus will be on the responsibilities of non-trans people. As I'll show, in the context of disputed meaning, this requires engaging in practices that build a meaningful balance of power in our identity-constructing relationships and interactions.

1.1. Key frames and methodological commitments

To develop these ideas further, I'll rely on a few key frames and concepts throughout the project. For instance, as already described, Lugones' two desiderata for anti-oppression theory will be foundational throughout my inquiry. Indeed, rather than taking the apparent contradiction between the first and second desiderata to be self-defeating, I take it to be a rich foundation upon which to situate conversations about empowerment. Throughout this project, questions of dispute and contradiction will be of central interest, in large part because of their practical and conceptual pervasiveness for trans identity. For instance, even beyond dominant narratives that come in contradiction to many trans subaltern narratives, it's also the case that trans subaltern spaces are themselves sites of regularly contested meaning. As Spade reflects, "I have worked in dozens of trans activist spaces and campaigns where people who understood their identity through a postmodern gender deconstructive frame worked closely with others who experienced being trans as a mental-health impairment as well as others who understood their trans identity to be a genetic trait" (2007, 252). Indeed, as trans author Julia Serano argues, we should be wary of any gender theory that "makes the assumption that there is any one 'right' or 'natural'

way to be gendered," or "attempts to oversimplify gender" (2007, 111-112). Thus, much of my attention in this project will focus on analyzing disputed meaning -- whether it arises in dominant or subcultural contexts -- and how it can produce both challenges to and opportunities for empowerment.

Relatedly, a few notes about my focus on trans identity bear noting. First, a few remarks on language: I use 'trans' and 'transgender' interchangeably as umbrella terms covering a range of non-normative gender identities, including people who are trans women, trans men, non-binary trans people, gender fluid trans people, agender trans people, etc.[5] This includes people who have a range of different relationships to medical transition procedures (e.g., hormone therapy, various gender-affirming surgeries), including people who do not plan to undergo any medical transition procedures at all. I use the terms 'cis' and 'cisgender' to refer to non-trans people whose genders "match" the sex they were assigned at birth.

As the above considerations already begin to illustrate, trans identity covers a wide range of possible genders and perspectives and is in no way a monolithic or static identity. So, throughout this project, it should be understood that while my analysis may hold true for some or many individual trans people, because trans experience is not universally homogenous, that may not be the case for *all* trans people. Similarly, it bears noting that trans identities are not neatly isolatable from the many other identity categories any one individual holds. Indeed, a commitment to deeply intersectional analysis insists on the opposite – any given individual's gender identity is fundamentally shaped in context and relation to their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, class, sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation, etc, where the influence of these identities is not additive but reconstitutive. Acknowledging all of this, throughout this project I actively seek to integrate work from a range of trans theorists and activists, as well as work by authors from a range of marginalized identities. I do so not from a

[5] This is not a comprehensive list, and not everyone who identifies with one of these terms also identifies as trans.

place of thin or uncritical identity politics, but rather, in acknowledgement of the limits of my own perspective and the reality that my intuitions are both subtly and overtly informed by my own particular social positionality.

Finally, a note on the level of my focus. Throughout, I will prioritize non-ideal, ground-up analysis heavily informed by specific examples of everyday interactions that either have actually happened or plausibly could. Relatedly, I approach this analysis as someone with background and expertise in both academic philosophy and on-the-ground union organizing; consequently, much of my philosophical understanding of these issues is permeated with concrete experiences in organizing towards structural change for vulnerable people. In prioritizing this kind of "ground-up" analysis, it is likely that I'll have to forgo some broader, more abstract conversations about, e.g., the large-scale functioning of systemic and institutional oppressions, the society-wide machinations of master identity narratives, etc. However, I do not take those broader conversations to be unimportant, and I don't want my attention to interpersonal interactions to suggest that any (even robust) alteration to individuals' behavior will be successful at dismantling systems of oppression on its own. I also want to be clear that I don't take communicative or interpretive discrimination to be the only form of discrimination trans people currently face. Quite the opposite -- trans people, particularly low-income trans women of color, continue to face abhorrent levels of interpersonal and institutional overt violence every day, often justified by dominant meaning, but far exceeding the harms of disputed meaning on its own. Thus, any claims I make here should be taken with the background assumption that much still needs to be done for trans people to have meaningful access to -- as Janet Mock puts it -- the "not-so-extraordinary" basic advantages of safe, healthy lives (Mock 2014, xvii). In focusing on a situated account of everyday interactions, my goal is to provide sharper tools for those of us who are invested in trans liberation to build more regular, potent opportunities for trans empowerment. This should be taken to *supplement* and ideally *ground* -- not replace or supersede -- ongoing fights to combat overt discrimination and

violence.

However, I ultimately don't take a conversation focused on everyday interactions to necessarily preclude structural considerations. Quite the contrary, I take the level of the everyday to be a critical site for analyzing individuals and structures simultaneously. In particular, throughout this project, I adopt the decolonial frameworks of theorists like Lugones, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, which resist discrete theoretical divisions between the level of the individual and the level of the structural, and instead insist on the fundamental interconnectedness between the two. For instance, Alcoff argues, "We have to move in two directions at once: (1) localizing our analyses of gender formation in order to understand the specificity of its form and its effects…(2) relating the local, cultural, religious, or ethnic practices to transnational, colonial history" (2020, 26). Similarly, Lugones advocates a resistant epistemology that doesn't "[fall] into monological understandings of either individual or collective agency. Such [a resistant] epistemology dissociates itself from individualistic perspectivalism in favor of a more dispersed, more complex, multiple, interactive, uncertain, and necessarily engaged understanding of the social" (2003, 208). Margaret Ledwith likewise argues that we should "locate the individual as one who both creates and is created by society, to the extent that it is impossible to understand one without the other" (2012, 30).

In particular, I focus on what Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Alcoff describe as *lo cotidiano*, or the level of the quotidian. As Alcoff puts it, adopting the frame of *lo cotidiano* means "starting theory from the difficult material reality of the daily life of the impoverished and oppressed" (2020, 19). Isasi-Díaz elaborates that "Lo cotidiano…refers to the space -- time and place -- which we face daily, but it also refers to how we face it and to our way of dealing with it" (2011, 49). Working from the level of *lo cotidiano* means interpreting and theorizing individual agents' lived experiences as they are situated within, informed *by*, and inform*ing* social contexts and oppressive conditions. As Isasi-Díaz explains, "Lo cotidiano does not relate only to what is specific, but it also enters into contact with and is part of social systems. Lo cotidiano impacts

structures and its mechanisms and is, in turn, affected by them" (2011, 49). In brief, then, *lo cotidiano* is a framework for building our theorizing up from the everyday experiences of marginalized people, particularly as they are influenced by and influencing their social others, communities, and structural forces.

Throughout this project, I rely on this framework of *lo cotidiano*, and in particular find it instructive for filling out our understanding of any potential for empowerment as *situated*. Namely, our account of empowerment has to be able to make sense at the "street level" (Lugones 2003, 209). That is, it has to be built on what human actors can functionally do, whether as individuals or as individuals together. It also can't ignore that challenges to empowerment for marginalized people are also entrenched and reproduced at the level of the structural, the oppressive, the systemic. But even more strongly, empowerment is itself only possible because the street level -- including the ongoing relationships and interactions that structure our everyday lives -- grounds its possibility. In short, without social support, empowerment can't obtain.

1.2. Project overview

In this project, I most basically aim to show that in the context of oppressive and disputed meaning, liberation for trans people is not only practically possible, but made *more* practically possible when we establish conditions of empowerment in our everyday identity practices. Namely, when our identity practices are structured to solicit and integrate the dissenting meaning of trans agents, they help rebalance power such that opportunities for trans empowerment are more frequent, obvious, and potent. Over the course of this project, I hope to show that in order to achieve this power balance in her identity-constructing relationships with her social others, a given agent has responsibilities both in how she holds their identities, and in how she allows them to hold her identity back.

To make this argument, I start in Chapter 2 by clarifying how, precisely, I'm conceptualizing *empowerment*. I begin the chapter by exploring the connections between empowerment, autonomy, and agency. Following Susan Sherwin, I describe agency as reasonable action an agent takes given prevailing conditions, and autonomy as action an agent takes that reflects her deep interests. I most basically propose empowerment as the link between agency and autonomy for marginalized people: Empowerment is agency that aims to establish or enhance autonomy. That is, empowerment is action through which an agent takes or increases meaningful control over some aspect(s) of her life that matters to her. To make this case, I spend some time clarifying both how I conceive of the limits of "control" and how oppressed agents can work aspirationally to expand the range of available options to them in pursuit of autonomy.

Given the many contexts in which empowerment may be needed or sought, I then propose a heterogenous framework for empowerment that admits of many different formulations that vary by context. To that end, I classify a series of dimensions that can shape the form and aim of empowerment: its site, relational dynamics, source of constraint on agency, outcome sought, and timing. From there, I show how certain dimensions of empowerment -- namely, dimensions whereby (1) we are relationally empowered by our social context, (2) the outcome of our empowerment action is structural, and (3) the timing of our empowerment action is proactive -- can come together to establish what I call *conditions of empowerment* for vulnerable agents. I maintain that such conditions make empowerment's realization more obvious, accessible, and abundant by structurally balancing power to make dissent against hegemonic meaning and action both possible and potent. As I argue, while more reactive or particular forms of empowerment are often practically necessary, focusing our empowerment efforts on establishing conditions of empowerment stands to produce long-lasting and meaningful life control for marginalized agents.

Then in Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the particular site of dispute I focus on for the remainder of the project, that of intersubjective identity construction. In particular, I focus on Hilde Lindemann's account of narrative relational identity, under which any given individual's identity is a system of meaning constituted by a web of first-personal narratives she tells about herself, and by second- and third-personal narratives others tell about her. Because this framework disperses identity-constructing power across multiple potential authors, a key question to consider is how to handle disagreements between first, second, and third-personal narratives about a given individual. For Lindemann, when first, second, and third-personal narratives about a given identity conflict, we should work to identify the most accurate narrative through an assessment of credibility. She recognizes that given the significant constraints trans people face in receiving the uptake of their social others, trans identity is likely to be "impossible" until such a time that toxic narratives about them are replaced by more affirming stories. In that effort, she proposes deploying counterstories that amplify counterevidence that more credibly depicts the actual behavior of trans people.

While I take much of Lindemann's account to be compelling, I describe three key concerns for her account's success at advancing meaningful avenues for the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents. First, I argue that her account insufficiently recognizes the ways in which the dissenting meaning of trans people currently obtains and has effect (i.e., trans identity is not currently "impossible" full stop). Second, I argue that her framework's focus on issues of accuracy and credibility render it ill-equipped to accommodate trans practices for meaning-making and uptake that specifically don't rely on accuracy measures. Third, I argue that mere counterevidence is unlikely to advance the practical possibility for trans agents to dissent against dominant meaning and meaning-making; rather, that practical possibility demands a careful power analysis. I propose, then, that we ought to focus more primally on developing identity practices that create conditions of empowerment rather than merely assessing whether a given narrative itself is accurate.

In Chapter 4, I develop such a framework. I argue that in order to establish conditions of empowerment in our everyday identity practices, we should engage in practices that build and ensure a meaningful balance of power in our identity-constructing relationships and interactions. Namely, we should engage in practices that solicit and integrate marginalized meaning and meaning-making into our first-, second-, and third-personal narratives. I start by considering how dynamics of vulnerability and power are built into our intersubjective identity practices, focused on *uptake* as the key practice through which identities are socially conferred, where uptake involves both recognition and response. In particular, I show how trans agents (and other marginalized agents) are both structurally and practically subject to vulnerability in our narrative-sharing relationships, and consequently often receive distorted or diminished uptake from dominant social others.

From there, I describe how we can establish *recognition* practices that are structured to offer meaningful avenues for marginalized meaning to surface, even in dominant contexts. Drawing from José Medina's account of epistemic responsibility, I argue in favor of adopting interpretive practices that are specifically built to accommodate and resist the ways marginalized meaning and meaning-making are regularly undermined and dismissed in dominant contexts. Building off of this understanding of recognition, I describe how we are called upon to *respond* in our narrative-sharing relationships. Namely, I argue that in order to establish conditions of empowerment in our intersubjective identity practice, we have two key responsibilities in response: First, we have responsibility in how we respond to others' first-personal narratives about themselves, and second, we also have responsibility in how we respond to others' second- and third-personal narratives about ourselves. As I show, both responsibilities hinge on a consideration of vulnerability.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I conclude by applying my framework to a specific instantiation of everyday oppression, the microaggression. Namely, I show how my account advances the current discussion of microaggressions in philosophy by giving us sharper tools for

understanding the moral obligations microaggressions generate. To make this case, I start by more precisely characterizing 'microaggression,' a historically amorphous phenomenon. In particular, I explore various attempts to clarify whether microaggressions are unintentional, and argue that rather than focusing on intentionality *per se*, a key feature of microaggressions is *motivational clouding* -- i.e., some epistemic obfuscation or equivocation of the link between a perpetrator's motivations and their actions.

From there, I survey three existing approaches to the question of moral responsibility for microaggressions: the attributive, structural, and cumulative harm approaches. I describe how my empowerment approach advances these existing conversations by clarifying the structural approach's attention to the relationship between the individual and the structural. Namely, the two are intertwined through vulnerability and power in interpersonal interactions. I argue that microaggressions generate moral responsibility specifically because they are failures in our responsibilities in recognition and response. Put another way, microaggressions represent failures to treat with care the identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability of one's social others. On my account, then, we can hold microaggressors individually morally responsible for their specific microaggressions.

Chapter 2: Conditions of Empowerment

2.0. Introduction

On June 12, 2020, the Trump Administration finalized a rule to permit discrimination against trans people in health care settings in the United States. This rule overturns previous protections for LGBTQ people in health care by redefining the scope of "sex discrimination," limiting it to discrimination based on being male or female, at the specific exclusion of gender identity or sexual orientation. As a result, health care providers and insurers are now legally able to discriminate against trans patients -- including by refusing care -- purely because they are trans (Simmons-Duffin 2020). That this ruling came in the middle of a global pandemic was lost on few critics, particularly those worried about exacerbated impacts for Black trans people given already-disproportionate death rates from COVID-19 among Black Americans (Simmons-Duffin 2020).

Fast-forward a few days to June 15, 2020, when the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision to the opposite effect in employment contexts. Considering two cases, one where a gay man was fired for being gay, and one where a trans woman was fired for being trans, they ruled that the Civil Rights Act's protection against discrimination in employment "because of sex" *does* include discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Based on this interpretation of "sex discrimination" (contra the Trump Administration's), the Supreme Court ruled that employers could not discriminate on employees for being trans or queer (Liptak 2020).

Separated by just three days, these contrasting examples illustrate that disputed meaning about trans identity is both substantial and socially salient. But more than that, they also illustrate that the outcomes of those disputes are non-trivial, and directly impact the material conditions of trans people's lives. In some cases, such as the landmark Supreme Court ruling, those impacts have the potential to markedly improve trans people's lives and sense of

control. In others, such as the Trump administration's ruling, those impacts move us in the direction of increased precarity and marginalization of trans people.

It's within this context that I want to take up the question of *empowerment*.[6] In particular, I take this context to be instructive for situating us concretely in the contradictions of anti-oppression methodology described in Chapter 1. Namely, recall Lugones' position that because portraying oppression in its full force may require portraying it as inescapable, attempting to describe any practical possibility of liberation can be incredibly difficult and even contradictory (2003, 55). However, rather than taking the contradiction between the first and second to be demoralizing, I take it to be motivating. In particular, I follow Alisa Bierria in starting from a place where "instead of asking 'if' or 'whether' people can be agents within the contradiction of ongoing oppression and resistance, we might ask 'how?'" (Bierria 2014, 141). Namely, how can marginalized agents seek empowerment, engage in empowerment practices, and enact empowerment, particularly from within the context of social disputes about the meaning of their identities? How can those who aren't marginalized in a given context work to help create conditions of empowerment for those who are? How can we imagine and build towards a future where those disputes are resolved, prevented, or toothless?

My basic aim in this chapter is thus to more precisely articulate a characterization of empowerment for marginalized agents in contexts of disputed and oppressive meaning. I'll start in Section 2 by exploring the connections between empowerment, autonomy, and agency. In

[6] A quick note on my focus: In common parlance, language of empowerment is sometimes used to describe dominantly situated people who are acting from some power or authority they've been vested with -- e.g., "As the trustee of Philomena's estate, Reginald was empowered to write checks for her." On this conception, "empowerment" is used roughly synonymously with policy-oriented "authorization." I'm far more interested in a richer conception of empowerment that's centered on how marginalized agents seek to secure better lives for themselves in their everyday contexts, so in this chapter, my development of *empowerment* will focus there and I won't be worried about accommodating the authorizations of dominant agents. (And in general, I'm inclined to think that descriptions of dominantly-situated agents as *empowered* by virtue of their dominantly-conferred power would be better described as *authorized*, *entitled*, *emboldened*, etc.)

contrast to liberal views of autonomy, I'll advocate a relational view that emphasizes the inherent dependence of agents and the social power relationships we exist within that regularly constrain the actions and lives of marginalized people. I'll follow Susan Sherwin in taking agency to be reasonable action an agent takes given prevailing conditions, and autonomy to be action an agent takes that reflects her deep interests. For marginalized agents, moving from mere agency to autonomy can be particularly difficult given the ways oppression constrains the range of options available to them. I'll most basically propose empowerment as the link between agency and autonomy; empowerment is agency that aims to establish or enhance autonomy. That is, empowerment is action through which an agent takes or increases meaningful control over some aspect(s) of her life that matters to her.

To make this case, in Section 3 I'll spend some time clarifying both how I conceive of the limits of "control" and how oppressed agents can work aspirationally to expand the range of available options to them in pursuit of autonomy. Given the many contexts in which empowerment may be needed or sought, I'll then propose a heterogenous framework for empowerment that admits of many different formulations that vary by context. To that end, I'll move in Section 4 to classify a series of dimensions that can shape the form and aim of empowerment: its site, relational dynamics, source of constraint on agency, outcome sought, and timing. From there, I'll show in Section 5 how certain dimensions of empowerment -- namely, dimensions whereby (1) we are relationally empowered by our social context, (2) the outcome of our empowerment action is structural, and (3) the timing of our empowerment action is proactive -- can come together to establish what I'll call *conditions of empowerment* for vulnerable agents. I'll maintain that such conditions make empowerment's realization more obvious, accessible, and abundant by structurally balancing power to make dissent against hegemonic meaning and action both possible and potent. As I'll argue, while more reactive or particular forms of empowerment are often practically necessary, focusing our empowerment efforts on establishing conditions of empowerment stands to produce long-lasting and

meaningful life control for marginalized agents.

2.1. Autonomy and agency

A. Problems for liberal conceptions of autonomy

To start, then, let's spend some time clarifying how I'm conceptualizing autonomy and agency, starting with autonomy. One common and influential conceptualization of autonomy is found in the liberal tradition. On liberal accounts, famously advanced by the likes of John Rawls, the "self" is conceived as a "free and rational chooser and actor whose desires are ranked in a coherent order" (Meyers 1997, 2). Autonomous agents, in short, are ideally rational and able to act independently. From here, "autonomy" is generally conceived as self-rule independent from others' coercion, manipulation, paternalism. As Susan Dodds notes, on these kinds of accounts, autonomy centers on self-rule through rational choice that is free from others' controlling influences (2000, 215-216). Similarly, Susan Sherwin writes that under a liberal framework, "the term 'autonomy' is often used to invoke an ideal of human independence and self-interested rationality -- an ideal that conjures up the metaphor of 'rugged individualism'" (2012, 14).

While such a liberal model of autonomy has been hugely influential in political philosophy, ethics, and public discourse, it has been subject to increasing critique from many feminist and non-ideal theorists, who question how applicable or desirable such a model is for marginalized agents living under conditions of oppression. These critiques are plentiful[7] and take many forms, but here I'll focus on two common and overarching concerns: one concerning the fundamental dependence of human beings, the second concerning power dynamics that constrain the range of options available to marginalized agents.

First, the liberal model of autonomy ignores or underappreciates relations of dependence and interconnection between human agents. As mentioned above, the liberal model of

[7] Among many others, refer to works in Mackenzie and Stoljar's edited volume, *Relational Autonomy Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self* (2000); Meyers 1989; Oshana 2006; Sherwin 2012.

autonomy characterizes agents as atomistic, ideally rational, and able to act independently. However, as Sherwin argues, "Equating autonomy with independence tends to obscure the many ways in which all humans depend on one another" (2012, 14). Dodds is similarly critical of liberal models of autonomy for "assum[ing] that, paradigmatically, individuals are equally rational and able to reflect on complicated choices once given adequate information" (2000, 216).[8] Operating off of these assumptions about independence and ideal rationality, the liberal model of autonomy misses that the decisions we make as individuals are often and inevitably colored and influenced by our social others -- our friends, families, coworkers, and even strangers with whom we interact -- often in ways that are subtle or not immediately recognizable. Further, in treating all external influence as interfering with individualistic rational decision-making, liberal autonomy neglects forms of influence that may actually *foster* an agent's ability to claim ownership over her life. Namely, it misses that there are plenty of caring, beautiful, and neutral ways to be influenced by our social others -- particularly those with whom we share intimate or important relationships -- and that these influences can actually enhance our capacities for self-rule. In short, I follow Sherwin in holding that "complete independence is impossible and undesirable" (2012, 14).

Second, the liberal model of autonomy cannot adequately account for significant power dynamics and oppressive social structures that regularly constrain the lives and actions of marginalized agents. For instance, Dodds argues that liberal conceptions of autonomy focus too heavily on mere voluntary choice at the expense of considering contextual factors that surround and potentially constrain a given choice. Namely, she argues that the liberal model of autonomy "ignores the social circumstances and power relations that affect choice contexts" (2000, 216). In other words, in focusing entirely on an idealized vision of rational agents and free choice,

[8] Dodds is primarily interesting in critiquing certain approaches to the practice of informed consent in health care settings. So while many of the arguments she makes more explicitly address informed consent than they do autonomy, the pieces I reference here are ultimately critiques of a liberal model of autonomy that those informed consent practices are based in.

liberal autonomy neglects that and how contextual power dynamics can variously constrain or enable the range of choices that are practically available to an agent. Indeed, as Sherwin notes, "Typically, people who lack social and economic power have a far smaller range of options regarding many aspects of their lives than their more advantaged compatriots" (2012, 14). Both Dodds and Sherwin argue in favor of attending to not just the basic choices of various agents, but also "the background conditions that structure those choices" (Sherwin 2012, 23).

For instance, consider the context of recovery from sexual harassment or sexual violence (SHSV). Whether a survivor is contemplating taking action through their workplace, university, or the legal system, very often the range of options technically available are far from practically available, or do little to actually generate a sense of regained control. This is particularly the case when a reporting process is so ineffectively structured that it drags on interminably, leads to re-traumatizing victim-blaming, leads to subtle or overt retaliation, etc. And even prior to an occurrently problematic reporting process, many survivors never access reporting processes in the first place -- not because they don't know that the processes exist, but because they have (often accurate) perceptions that the process will be re-traumatizing or ineffective.[9]

In my work as a union representative for junior academic workers at the University of Washington, I can recall too many examples of these dynamics in action. For instance, in 2017, a postdoctoral scholar at UW published an anonymous op-ed detailing her experience trying to secure support after being subjected to pregnancy discrimination in her lab. She'd worked in her lab for two years on a H-1B visa, and had been referred to by her boss as the best postdoc he'd ever had. However, after she became pregnant, her boss refused to move her off of experiments that exposed her to radiation. Then, when she was six months pregnant, he told her that her funding had run out and that he wanted her to take unpaid sick leave. The postdoc went to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action to find out what kinds of other options

[9] For instance, refer to National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018, 79-82.

might be available to her. They told her they would keep her case confidential, and would look into alternate funding options. Within 24 hours, her boss called her in for a meeting, irate that she'd gone to the Equal Opportunity Office, who had called him directly. The postdoc reports, "He said I did not have any rights, and if I did not accept the unpaid sick leave immediately he would cancel my H1B visa and I would be deported" (UW Postdocs United 2017). Eventually, given her increasingly constrained range of available options, the postdoc decided to leave the university entirely.

Unfortunately, this case is not that unique, as bad as it is. Because of deeply entrenched power dynamics and cultural narratives about sexual harassment and assault, targets who seek support are regularly presented with a set of options that either (a) don't advance autonomy in a meaningful way, (b) actively constrain autonomy even further, or (c) are functionally unavailable to begin with -- e.g., the option to report to offices that either seem ineffective or have been shown to be ineffective, to start investigations that come with a risk of retaliation or career harm, etc.[10] Following Sherwin and Dodds, I hold that these kinds of background conditions are critical to consider and incorporate into our conceptualization of autonomy. Further, for the purposes of moving towards a conceptualization of empowerment, I follow Patricia Hill Collins in advocating that in our attention to background conditions we pay specific attention to the operations of power that often structure the range of options practically available to marginalized agents. Collins writes, "Empowerment remains an illusive construct and developing a Black feminist politics of empowerment requires specifying the domains of power that constrain Black women" (2000 [2009], 23). Similarly, Margaret Ledwith writes, "it is by understanding the nature of power that we are able to transform it into empowerment" (2012, 31). In short, we can't understand empowerment without also understanding power

[10] In cases like this, in addition to the added harm brought on by increased constraint and precarity, research on institutional betrayal demonstrates that having a traumatic experience mishandled by an institution you previously trusted can cause post-traumatic outcomes of its own (e.g., refer to Smith and Freyd 2014).

(Collins 2000 [2009], 291-309).[11]

B. Relational autonomy and agency

Given these significant flaws of the liberal model of autonomy, how might we instead conceptualize it? Let's start with the same basic idea, i.e., that "autonomy is first and foremost a matter of self-determination" (Oshana 2015, 4). However, in contrast to the liberal conceptualization of the self as atomistic and independent, I follow many other feminist theorists in advocating a conceptualization of the self that is relationally situated with her various social others.[12] This in turn prompts an understanding of autonomy that is itself relational. For instance, Susan Brison argues that autonomy can be relational both *causally* and *constitutively*: Causally, autonomy "comes about (or fails to be brought about) as a result of relations with others in society" (2000, 283). Constitutively, autonomy "requires the right sorts of ongoing relations with others for it to be sustained" (2000, 283). In either case, our ability to pursue our deep interests and values -- i.e., to self-determine -- depends on our social others and social context.

The literature on relational autonomy is extensive, and much more could be said to elaborate the various ways in which autonomy is relational.[13] However, for the scope of this project, what's most important is that in contrast to liberal models of autonomy, relational accounts recognize both the fact of human dependency and that agents' abilities to pursue their deep interests can be constrained by social context and power dynamics. For instance, Sherwin summarizes relational autonomy as "the socially and politically situated positions in which persons live and from which they may exercise (or seek to exercise) control over aspects of their

[11] Note that while I take understanding power to be critical for grounding our conceptualization of autonomy and empowerment analytically, I don't take it to necessarily be a precondition of taking empowering action on the ground. That is, an agent does not necessarily have to have a fully formed or consciously articulated conceptualization of the power dynamics she is situated within in order to be autonomous or to take empowering action.
[12] For more on relational approaches to personal identity, refer to Chapter 3.
[13] Refer, e.g., to footnote 7 for a number of important works in this literature.

lives that are important to them" (2012, 13). Further, in recognition of the ways that everyday contexts of oppression may constrain the range of options available to an agent, Sherwin goes on to articulate a distinction between autonomy and agency. She characterizes agency as "the sort of circumstances where a person reasonably chooses an option that is the most attractive or reasonable for her under the prevailing conditions" (2012, 18), where that reasonable choosing may ultimately be inconsistent with the agent's deeper interests and needs. For Sherwin, agency that doesn't match an agent's deeper interests often arises because under conditions of oppression, "the options that are meaningfully available to [an oppressed agent] do not include a choice that is compatible with their deepest values and needs" (2012, 19). For instance, in the earlier example of response to SHSV, we saw that very often survivors do not have access to a full set of options that might reflect their deep interests. Meanwhile, Sherwin characterizes autonomy as "actions that are consistent with a person's broader interests, values and commitments, including the well-being of her group (based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and so on)" (2012, 19).[14]

Moving forward, I'll adopt Sherwin's distinction between agency and autonomy for helping to conceptualize empowerment. Most basically, I take empowerment to be agency that aims to establish or enhance autonomy -- i.e., it's action through which an agent takes or increases meaningful control over some aspect(s) of her life that matters to her. This basic characterization invites at least two immediate clarifications. First, how demanding is "meaningful control" in this case? What does it mean to take, increase, or have control over some aspect of one's life? Second, if we conceive of agency along Sherwin's definition, we may wonder whether marginalized agents can ever move from agency to autonomy. That is: If agency

[14] Note that I don't take Sherwin to be committed to something unrealistically demanding by "the well-being of her group." Minimally, I just take this to mean that oppressive norms about the agent's identity groups aren't a controlling force in her actions, and her actions don't actively perpetuate such oppressive norms (not, e.g., that autonomy requires an agent to proactively improve the welfare of her entire identity groups).

primarily takes place as choice within the boundaries of "prevailing conditions," and the range of available options is regularly insufficient for marginalized agents' autonomy, how can marginalized agents ever use their agency to move beyond the prevailing conditions to achieve (or seek to achieve) autonomy? In the next section, I'll explore each of these concerns in more depth: First I'll draw from work on disability and trauma to establish a more realistic scope for control. Second, I'll advocate treating the "range of available options" as a fluid set that's subject to expansion.

2.2. Control, choice, and empowerment

A. Control

In work supporting and advocating for survivors of SHSV, contemporary practitioners largely adopt a trauma-informed framework for care. Very generally, trauma-informed care is characterized as "a strengths based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment" (Hopper, Bassuk and Olivet 2010, 82). Similarly, in her work on recovery in the aftermath of violent trauma, Brison writes, "In order to recover, a trauma survivor needs to be able to control herself, control her environment (within reasonable limits, and be reconnected with humanity" (2002, 60). Indeed, throughout literature on trauma-informed practice, a clear emphasis is consistently placed on helping survivors regain a sense of control as a mechanism for empowerment and healing.

To better understand what control might mean in the context of autonomy and empowerment, consider Miranda Fricker's definition of social power: "a capacity we have as social agents to influence how things go in the social world (2007, 9), where "the point of any operation of social power is *to effect social control*" (2007, 13, emphasis in original). Here, control is the "point" of power -- we might also think of it as the effect or aim of a given exercise

of power, as a capacity that having power endows, or as a mode of influencing how things go in your life or others'. Similarly, in the context of autonomy specifically, Marina Oshana argues that a necessary condition of autonomy is control that gives you "power to determine how [you] will live" (2006, 83-84).

Others, meanwhile, caution against setting too much in store by "control." For instance, Diana Tietjen Meyers argues that Oshana's articulation of control is likely too strong to realistically obtain (2008, 204). Others characterize control -- whether bodily, psychological, or otherwise -- as something of a myth or illusion. For instance, in her work on physical disability, Susan Wendell argues: "A major obstacle to coming to terms with the full reality of bodily life is the widespread myth that the body can be controlled. Conversely, people embrace the myth of control in part because it promises escape from the rejected body. The essence of the myth of control is the belief that it is possible, by means of human actions, to have the bodies we want and to prevent illness, disability, and death" (1996, 93-94). For Wendell, this myth becomes particularly troublesome because it regularly characterizes those with "nonideal" bodies as failures, burdens, or at fault for their disability or illness (1996, 94). Similarly, in the context of trauma recovery, Brison writes that even when a victim's interlocutors acknowledge that violence has happened, they often cannot identify with the victim's loss of control. She writes that such interlocutors "cannot allow themselves to imagine the victim's shattered life, or else their illusions about their own safety and control over their own lives might begin to crumble. The most well-meaning individuals, caught up in the myth of their own immunity, can inadvertently add to the victim's suffering by suggesting that the attack was avoidable or somehow her fault" (2002, 9). Like the myth of control articulated by Wendell, this illusion can have non-trivial consequences: as Brison further writes, the prevalence of these social messages often ultimately results in victims of sexual assault internalizing self-blame as an "adaptive survival strategy" to regain a sense of control (2002, 74).

From this rich guidance a few points stand out: As is clear throughout work on autonomy

and trauma response, having a sense of control over one's life can be crucial for personal security and a basic sense of self. However, very rarely -- if ever -- are we able to be in complete control of ourselves -- whether our bodies, our minds, our external context, the course of our lives, etc. We are simply too vulnerable as a fundamental condition of our humanity to ever be "fully" in control in any of these domains. However, even against clear evidence that we aren't ever in full control of our lives, we often cling to the belief that we can or do have control. The persistence of this belief, unfortunately, often leads to stigma and further victimization of agents whose lives are most obviously "out of their control." Given all this, I don't take the meaningful control needed for empowerment to be necessarily be so demanding that it requires full control over one's body, psychological well-being, or environment. Rather, I take the empowerment to minimally aim at taking control of *some aspect(s)* of the agent's life that *particularly matter to her*.

B. Choice

Earlier, I described how in the context of oppression, marginalized agents are likely to face a constrained "range of available options" that often won't reflect their deeper interests. Given the constraints of available options, how can we conceive of marginalized agents using their agency to attain autonomy -- i.e., engaging in empowerment?

For her part, Sherwin proposes that we (broadly, socially) ought to expand the range of options available. She writes, "we must examine the types of options that are on offer and ask questions about how these have arisen and also inquire about potentially constructive options that are not available or accessible…[relational autonomy] encourages us to seek strategies that will make available alternatives that are more compatible with each agent's ultimate values and needs" (2012, 26). However, she also notes that simply adding more options may not be sufficient for autonomy; rather, "What is needed is access to *particular types* of choices -- those that are empowering and help to reduce oppression" (2012, 27, emphasis mine). Similarly, in

her work on women's empowerment in global development contexts, Serene Khader argues, "empowerment aims at improving people's opportunities for well-being or flourishing, not simply multiplying their choices" (2011, 190). Unfortunately, as Khader also notes, many theorists who work on issues of disempowerment and empowerment take too thin an approach to choice by describing disempowerment as "a lack of choice" and empowerment as "a type of choice enhancement" (2011, 179). As we saw in our analysis of liberal autonomy, however, conceiving of autonomy or empowerment as reducible to mere voluntary choice -- even with an expanded range of options -- is unlikely to produce meaningful autonomy for marginalized people.

I take these basic ideas to be convincing, but want to add some complexity to how we conceive of the range of options being expanded. For both Sherwin and Khader, this potential work is described somewhat abstractly, and at its most concrete seems to point at something broadly collective or society-wide -- as in Sherwin's articulation of public ethics (2012, 23-32) -- or something advocacy-based -- as in Khader's focus throughout *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* on the role of global development practitioners.[15] In either case, while we can conceive of the "range of available options" as fluid in a certain sense, its expansion is primarily suggested to take place through the agency of a widespread collective or of advocates, rather than specifically through the agency of oppressed people themselves. I don't take either Sherwin or Khader to be committed to these models of option-expansion exclusively, but without a specific accounting of the agency of oppressed people being aimed at this endeavor, I believe we miss something crucial about empowerment.

[15] To Khader's credit, she does articulate one activist's work as "an invitation to engage [women in rural Honduras] as thinkers and deliberators who could be persuaded to choose more flourishing lives for themselves…on their own terms" (2011, 6). However, ultimately this work is still described in terms of the *activist's* agency -- e.g., as "The interventions she initiated" (2011, 5). In large part this seems like an understandable result of the particular topic Khader is examining -- i.e., empowerment in the context of "interventions" in global development practice and activism.

Namely, the only way for us to conceive of the agency of oppressed people being used to establish or increase autonomy (i.e., the only way we can conceive of *empowerment*) is to allow that oppressed agents can themselves take action that exceeds the parameters of the existing range of options. Critical to this recognition is also a fine-tuning of how we articulate the "constraints" oppression yields on marginalized people's ranges of available options. Namely, following Bierria, I hold that while the fact of everyday oppression may (and often does) constrain the options available to marginalized agents, that doesn't mean our agency is diminished full stop -- to suppose so would "obscure[ ] agency that is practiced despite or through conditions of oppression" (2014, 129). Given all this, I hold that while it's helpful to recognize that the "range of available options" is changeable in a general sense (i.e., the range isn't a fundamental fact of the world), it's more critical to recognize that the "range of available options" can be changed through the agency of oppressed people specifically. That is, the range is subject to contestation, re-molding, and expansion, including through the agency of those who are constrained by it.

Further, when this expansion work is undertaken by the oppressed agents themselves (rather than, e.g., by advocates for the oppressed agents), it can yield empowerment in and of itself, far beyond the thin voluntary choice proposed by liberal models of autonomy. For instance, even when marginalized agents fail at fully achieving the expanded range of options we seek, the act of seeking can itself be empowering by showing that it's possible to struggle for change -- that things are not fixed or inevitable, but "can be otherwise" (Hall 2017, 161).[16] Further, when the work to expand available options is driven primarily by the agency of marginalized people themselves, success that obtains is far more likely to represent something meaningful to their autonomy than would abstract or advocacy-based expansions of thinly-

[16] Of course, it can also be demoralizing to fail. I only want to impress that sometimes "failure" to achieve a particular change or end is not *necessarily* demoralizing, and in some cases can function to enhance autonomy in and of itself.

conceived voluntary choice.

Ultimately, given the expansion work fundamental in the move from mere agency to autonomy, I hold that empowerment necessarily involves some element of aspiration. That is, empowerment rests on some minimal belief that things can or should be the way you want them to be. In most cases, this means believing things can be different from how they are already.[17] This kind of aspirationalism sees not just a problem at hand but, more importantly, envisions a future where the problem is resolved, prevented, or toothless. We find a similar aspirational or speculative attitude about *the possible* throughout philosophical work on liberation and resistance. For instance, Lugones writes, "My interest in the phenomenon of community, then, is an interest in the possibility of a more articulate, more tightly connected, less ephemeral, resistant collectivity" (2002, 59). Likewise, Ada María Isasi-Díaz writes of the importance of "imagin[ing] a different world, a different societal structure, a different way of relating to ourselves: to who we are and what we do" (2012, 49). Similarly, Collins writes, "The existence of Black feminist thought [given the force of Black women's oppression] suggests that there is always a choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be" (2000 [2009], 309).[18] In all this guidance, fundamental to the project of building empowerment for

[17] Here we might also think of work on *hope*. For instance, Katie Stockdale argues that "hope involves some kind of agential engagement aimed at the desired outcome, whether primarily in forms of thinking, feeling, imagining, planning, fantasizing, and so on" (2019, 30). While I don't have space here to fully explore the differences between hope and aspiration, my basic thought is that hope can sometimes be more general or passive than aspiration. E.g., consider the difference between "I hope I get into grad school" and "I aspire to get into grad school." The former suggests a bit more of an "it's out of my hands" attitude, while the latter suggests something of an underlying action plan. This example also indicates there may be something distinct between the timing of hope and aspiration, with the former potentially occurring *after* action aimed at the given end has already occurred, and the latter occurring *before* or *during* such an action or series of actions.

[18] These approaches share quite a bit too with literature on critical theory, where being critical is a mode of "extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary" (Shor 1992, 122) -- i.e., learning to problematize narratives we might otherwise take as given, in order to more creatively envision alternate possibilities (Ledwith 2012, 32-35). Refer also to Freire 1970. Further, in addition to theoretical work, we find similar threads in work on on-the-ground organizing. For instance, author and organizer Jane McAlevey writes, "organizing, at its core, is about raising expectations…about what [workers] themselves are capable of, about the power they could

vulnerable people is the foundational attitude that things can in fact be better than they are right now, and that whatever occurrent or dispositional problems we face are not inevitable but fixable.[19]

In summary then, I propose that we understand empowerment as *agency that aims to establish or enhance autonomy*. That is, empowerment is action through which an agent takes or increases control over some aspect(s) of her life that matters to her, where "control" should be meaningful (relevant to some deep interest) but not overly demanding, and where the individual's agency is directed at aspirationally expanding her options for achieving said control. While the foregoing discussion helps clarify a general formulation of empowerment, it is likely also becoming clear that specific instances of empowerment can take place in a wide variety of contexts and to a wide variety of degrees. Thus, it seems our work to clarify how the concept emerges and functions remains incomplete, particularly in the effort to better understand how marginalized people can take empowering action while under conditions of oppression.

To that end, I take Bierria's work to again be instructive. In her work on agency, she proposes, "Instead of a binary or scaled model of agency that gauges subjects as having more or less, abled or disabled, or successful or failed agency, I propose a heterogenous framework of agency -- *agencies*...A heterogenous model can help us propose language and frameworks to discern agency that is practiced within the constraints of violence and oppression" (Bierria 2014,

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exercise if they worked together, and what they might use that collective power to accomplish. Ultimately, expectations about where they will find meaning in their lives, and the kinds of relationships they can build with those around them" (McAlevey 2014, 12).

[19] It's worth noting that just as disputes arise about social meanings like those surrounding gender identity, so too are disputes likely to arise about *what we should aspire to*, both practically and theoretically. Indeed, even in organizing spaces generally orientated around agreement on a given problem, these kinds of disputes about aspiration are both likely and (anecdotally) common. While much more could be said about this, it's beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve it completely. For now, I'll just note that the fundamental point I'm making here is that moving from mere agency to autonomy demands some attitude of aspirationalism. So, while I take disputes about aspiration to be practically important, I don't think we need to have an exhaustive accounting of how to resolve them in order to generate the basic importance of aspirationalism for empowerment.

137).[20] I similarly propose a heterogenous framework for *empowerments*, where the specific form empowerment takes will vary dependent on the context and agents involved. For more on this, let's turn to the next section.

2.3. Dimensions of empowerment

In this section, I'll develop my heterogenous framework for empowerment by considering five overlapping dimensions of empowerment: the *site* of empowerment, the *relational dynamics* that structure empowerment, the *source* of the constraint on agency empowerment addresses, the *outcome* empowerment seeks to achieve, and the *timing* of the empowerment action. In this discussion, I'll follow José Medina's framework of classificatory pluralism (2017, 45) in that I have no expectation that these five dimensions are comprehensive or mutually exclusive. Rather, I hope for them to offer some initial routes for better understanding the phenomenon of empowerment, given its need and utility in a wide range of contexts.

A. Site of empowerment

The first dimension of empowerment I'll consider is its site. Empowerment can be located **internally**, such that it's primarily a matter of claiming an internal sense of control for oneself. For instance, Khader cites Richa Nagar and Saraswati Raju to describe empowerment as the "process of undoing internalized oppression" (Nagar and Raju 2003, 4, cited at Khader 2011, 175). More specifically, Khader argues in favor of a conception of empowerment as a process of overcoming "inappropriately adaptive preferences" (IAPs), or preferences that are "inconsistent with a person's basic flourishing that [are] causally related to conditions of deprivation" (2011, 175-176). In short, IAPs are preferences we have adopted because unjust social conditions constrain the practical accessibility of preferences that might better reflect our deep interests.

[20] Similarly, consider Collins's interest in avoiding "labeling one form of oppression as more important than others, or one expression of activism as more radical than another" (2000 [2009], 308).

For Khader, empowerment that overcomes such IAPs "enhance[s] some element of a person's concept of self-entitlement and increase[s] her capacity to pursue her own flourishing" (2011, 176). Very basically, such internal modes of empowerment might involve increasing one's self-confidence, self-esteem, etc., through some acknowledgement and rejection of previously constraining norms or beliefs. Empowerment can also be located **externally,** such that its primary attention is on achieving better control over one's relationships with others, social context, or other external matters. For instance, Aimee Stephens, the trans woman whose employment discrimination case was won before the Supreme Court in June 2020, sought external empowerment by seeking a change to the circumstances that allowed her employer to fire her for being trans.[21] Most of the cases I'll consider in this section will be primarily external, but it's worth noting that many cases of empowerment in action ultimately involve both internal and external forms of empowerment.

B. Relational dynamics

Empowerment can be structurally and practically relational in a few ways. First and perhaps most obviously, we can be **empowered against** some threat to our agency, whether that force is a specific perpetrator of violence, an institution or structure that has no regard for our well-being, internalized oppression, etc. In the example of the pregnant postdoc, empowerment is initially directed specifically against her boss. However, we could also imagine that at a certain point, empowerment might also be directed against the Equal Opportunity Office, the postdoc's department, or the university as a whole. We might even further imagine that it might be directed against the academic norms that produce hyper-reliance on a single advisor, the systems that give a single manager so much power over one's visa status, social gender norms that dismiss the needs of pregnant people, etc. A more detailed consideration of the range of

[21] Unfortunately, she died about a month before the ruling was made, so she did not live to see the success of her case (Ortiz 2020).

constraints on agency we may experience will be covered in the next section.

On the flip side, we can also be **empowered by** our social context, communities, and relationships. Dispositionally, having confidence that others in your life have your back can open a wider range of options for taking action to reclaim power that feel practically available. When we have the underlying security that, should something go wrong, we wouldn't have to endure it alone, we have much richer access to options that might feel practically inaccessible if we were in a position more saliently colored by isolated precarity or risk.[22] I can tell off a homophobic relative at a family event because I know my partner would support me if needed. I can refuse to wash my boss's car because I know my union rep would support me if needed. This kind of confidence can be important not just in contexts of potential risk, but also in contexts of active threats to agency or security. For example, when the need to gain meaningful life control is in the face of a problem that will take a difficult or risky fight in order to (re)claim control, having supportive relationships or a supportive community can provide the minimal foundation an agent may need to decide to take the fight on.

Further, we can be empowered by our social context occurrently, through specific conversations or interactions with our social others. For instance, consider organizer and writer Jane McAlevey's description of a typical one-to-one organizing interaction. In her example, an organizer is talking with Sally, a worker who's initially resistant to join her union (2016, 36-37). The organizer has an in-person, individual conversation with Sally about signing up for membership, and learns that she's struggling with how much her employer deducts from her

[22] Being empowered by our social others may arise from contexts that are particularly affirming. For instance, consider Tim Johnston's work on affirmative feedback loops, which are "established when either my environment, or people in my environment, affirm and reflect an aspect of myself back to me" (2015, 408). For Johnston, such feedback loops can "develop and preserve our identities" (2015, 408). While I won't take a hard position here on whether such affirmative feedback loops are strictly-speaking necessary for empowerment, it's hard to imagine that contexts where we are empowered by our social others aren't also contexts where we are affirmed by our social others (or where our trust in our social others isn't grounded in their participation in our affirmation).

paycheck to cover her family health insurance plan. Through the conversation, the organizer asks open-ended questions that get Sally talking through what a different situation would look like, and what it will take to move the structures supporting her current situation. McAlevey notes of this kind of one-to-one organizing that while it is certainly a form of influencing someone -- the organizer is moving Sally to take a particular action -- it doesn't involve lying, manipulation, false promises, or other such threats to agency (2016, 37). Rather, the organizer's influence *builds* Sally's agency by helping her recognize that the structural challenges she's facing have a solution -- in this case (and in most that confront structural challenges), a solution that hinges on whether and how Sally can exert her agency together with other workers (2016, 39). It's undeniably a mode of *influence* -- the organizer is transparent about moving a particular agenda.[23] But the key for this interaction's empowering potential is that it builds up from Sally's own concerns and analysis to enable her to clarify for herself a path towards addressing a problem that previously felt un-addressable. In a variety of ways, then, being empowered *by* our social context can often serve to make aspirationalism itself practically possible.[24]

In many cases, empowerment is structured *against* and *by* simultaneously. In any case, empowerment is fundamentally relational. We can't be empowered alone or atomistically, and

[23] Khader makes a similar point, positioning her approach as one that "focuses on noncoercive intervention and on deliberative interventions that actively expand people's capacities for agency" (2011, 33). However, here I am less interested than she is in "intervention" in the way it is used in literature on global development and political philosophy (refer, e.g., to Khader 2011, 32-33 for more on this topic).

[24] Another way "empowered by" is sometimes used follows something like an advocacy model I briefly addressed earlier, where an empowerer seeks to enhance the life of an empoweree by making some intervention on the empoweree's circumstances. E.g., take Khader's example of the UN's campaign to empower poor women in Sri Lanka: a putative empowerer (the UN) sought to enhance the life of empowerees (poor women in Sri Lanka) by making an intervention (a microcredit program to provide women with small loans) (2011, 171). Khader uses this example to address the way the conceptual vagueness around "empowerment" makes it susceptible to neoliberal cooptation (2011, 172, 174). However, similar to my earlier concerns, I think a more fundamental problem with this orientation to empowerment by is that the agent driving the empowerment action is a third-party advocate and not the oppressed person herself.

to the extent that we think we are, our independence is merely an illusion that hides or ignores our social situatedness. As Lugones writes, "Successful agency is a mirage of individual autonomous intentional action. What is illusory becomes comprehensible as the reality of power in institutionalized sense reveals the collectivity backing up the individual" (2003, 211).

C. Source of constraint on agency

Another dimension that can shape how empowerment is realized is the source of the constraint on the individual's or group's agency (i.e., the constraining boundaries of the range of available options).[25] In particular, let's consider how different overlapping levels of power can produce constraints on agency, both dispositionally and occurrently. **Interpersonal power** dynamics characterized by extreme power imbalance can easily result in constraints on agency like harassment, coercion, and subtle forms of manipulation. For instance, academics with "superstar" status often feel emboldened to harass their advisees because they know their advisees rely on them for make-or-break career opportunities like publications or letters of recommendation (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018, 52-55). Power dynamics produced or supported by **social norms** can also produce constraints on agency by restricting how an individual can socially express themself or otherwise act, by restricting the scope of meaning intelligible within hegemonic systems, by justifying violence or exclusion against certain groups,[26] etc. For instance, we can see this kind of normal power at work in the backlash trans and gender-non-conforming people often face when using public restrooms. When a cisgender woman calls security on a trans woman for using a women's restroom, the cis woman's action is bolstered and made possible because she's ultimately policing a widely-enforced social norm under which gender presentation and genital status

[25] Though as mentioned above, while I want to take constraints seriously, I also don't want to suggest that constrained agents experience fully diminished agency.
[26] Refer to Bettcher 2007 for more how violence against trans people is justified by appeal to "deception" narratives.

ought to "match."[27] **Institutional power** can result in constraints on agency in many ways: through policies that deny equitable access to basic needs and services, bureaucratic processes that fail to provide adequate support for certain groups, structural exclusion of certain groups from entering or participating in an institution, decision-making processes that are opaque or inaccessible to those who are impacted by their outcomes, etc. For instance, health insurance policies that do not cover trans-affirming services, or that require lengthy and confusing appeals in order to secure coverage, are an instantiation of institutional power.

These three sources are far from mutually exclusive; they are often operationalized together, and often build upon and support each other's continuation. For example, institutional power and interpersonal power are often wielded in ways that reify normal power. Further, interpersonal power can be intensified when also backed by institutional power. We can see some of the complex ways the three work together in the example of the pregnant postdoc: Her boss had interpersonal power over her by virtue of his role as her boss, but also because he could affect her visa status, could deny her professional advancement opportunities, etc. That he had these capacities was a result of various institutional practices and structures which placed those particular outcomes solely in his hands. That he had these capacities was also the result of social norms that undermine the testimony of women and that disregard the needs of pregnant people, as well as academic normalization of bullying by faculty, exclusion of women in STEM, etc. That he had these capacities was also supported by norms surrounding ineffectual university compliant processes -- i.e., as they are subject to a shared perception of ineffectualness, built from years of similar processes making little impact, and of tenured faculty across the country regularly acting badly with impunity. Further, not only did her boss's power threaten her agency, so did that of the Equal Opportunity Office, primarily institutionally through proceduralism, negligence, and (at best) naiveté.

[27] Refer to Bettcher 2009, 105-107 on the normal link between gender presentation and genital status.

D. Outcome sought

A third dimension that can shape empowerment is the outcome empowerment action aims for -- i.e., the aspiration it seeks to achieve.[28] Outcomes sought can be **particular**, such that they are specific to resolving a particular or discrete constraint on agency. For instance, in 2015, the UW anthropology department was moved to a building on the outskirts of campus that despite having multiple restrooms on every floor, did not have a single all-gender restroom, with the nearest all-gender restroom several blocks away. As a result, trans and gender non-conforming people working in the building had to walk five minutes outside any time they wanted to use an affirming bathroom. As a part of my union's Trans Equity Working Group (TEWG), we filed a grievance alleging that the university administration was not providing reasonable access to all-gender restrooms as provided by our contract. When administration denied the grievance, we organized a collective action with union members from across campus, and changed the signage of a bathroom in the building ourselves to designate it as all-gender. It hasn't been changed since.

Outcomes can also be **systematic**, and address a whole pattern or range of constraints on agency. Also in 2015, Seattle City Council passed a law stating that all gender-segregated single-use restrooms in public places should be converted to all-gender. University administration denied that this law needed to be implemented with respect to single-use restrooms on the Seattle campus, on the grounds that UW was a state institution, not a city institution. So, at the same time we were organizing for the particular restroom in the anthropology building, our TEWG took action to address this campus-wide issue. As a result of

[28] In this section, I generate an initial outline of outcomes empowerment might point at using examples where those sought outcomes successfully obtain. However, note that this dimension ultimately focuses on the type of outcome sought, not the whether or how an outcome obtains. Whether and how outcomes obtain is likely another fruitful dimension of empowerment to explore, though I don't have space to sufficiently do so here.

our organizing, the administration ultimately converted over 200 single-use restrooms on Seattle's campus to all-gender.

Outcomes can also be **structural**, whether by addressing or correcting an existing underlying constraint on agency, or by creating structures that prevent the realization of constraints on agency. Let's return to the example of the pregnant postdoc. At the time of her story, experiences like hers were unfortunately all too common for postdocs across UW. So, postdocs came together to organize a union, and after a multi-year campaign, won their first contract in 2019. Among many other wins, that contract included enforceable anti-discrimination protections and a just cause standard for dismissal, together ensuring that no postdoc could be fired for discriminatory reasons without the recourse of neutral third-party arbitration. Whereas the outcomes in two bathrooms cases were solutions to live constraints on agency, here we find a solution that addresses constraints on agency at their root -- the underlying causes or dynamics that make the constraint possible in the first place. In this case, that involved altering the structural power balance that previously existed between postdocs and the institution -- one where the institution and its agents could act arbitrarily and unilaterally, in ways that impacted the material lives of postdocs, and postdocs had little real say in their working conditions, and few enforceable recourse mechanisms. Beyond correcting a particular constraint or even pattern of constraints on agency, then, structural outcomes address the underlying causes or dynamics of constrained agency.

E. Timing

A fourth dimension of empowerment is the timing of the empowerment action or intervention. Empowerment action can be **reactive**, i.e., responsive to an attempted or active constraint on agency. For instance, the TEWG's work in around the anthropology building bathroom was reactive to an occurrent constraint, as was the pregnant postdoc's attempt to find recourse through the Equal Opportunity Office. Similarly, between 2015 and 2017, the United States and

Canada saw a wave of anti-trans bathroom bills introduced in state and provincial legislatures. These threats to trans agency spurred a wave of organizing by trans justice advocates against them. In Washington State, for instance, the right-wing group Just Want Privacy introduced I-1515, a bathroom initiative they tried to secure on the 2016 ballot. As a result, the trans community and allies engaged in substantial activism through the "No" campaign's main organization, Washington Won't Discriminate. Both in 2015, and again in 2017, we were able to defeat Just Want Privacy's initiatives and prevent them from acquiring the necessary signatures to make it onto the statewide ballot.[29]

Empowerment action can also be **proactive**, such that it anticipates potential constraints on agency and establishes protections to avert or weaken them. For instance, we can understand the postdocs' first union contract as a proactive empowerment action. In the previous section, we saw that postdocs won structural protections against harassment and at-will dismissal. But those specific protections weren't sought arbitrarily or a-contextually. Rather, they were specifically built from the collective recognition by postdocs of the particular power dynamic their positionality in the academic hierarchy yielded. Namely, postdocs identified that their positional vulnerability could and had been exacerbated by dynamics of identity, visa status, dependence on a single supervisor, and other key institutional and normal factors. From this recognition, seeing how it had made their positions more precarious and could continue to, they took action to establish stronger protection from those dynamics in the future. Looking forward, while these protections aren't guaranteed to completely prevent future instances of harassment, they can serve as a deterrent and can provide much stronger support for those who experience harassment.

[29] After failing in 2016, Just Want Privacy introduced a nearly identical initiative, I-1552, in 2017. Thus the website for Washington Won't Discriminate now frontlines 1552 rather than 1515. The webpage for Just Want Privacy no longer appears to be live.

2.4. Conditions of empowerment

As is likely already evident, the dimensions of empowerment explored above are not neatly discrete from one another, and often operate synchronously, support one another, or blur into each other. So far, I've explored how various dimensions of empowerment can shape the way empowerment is realized or the specific form it takes in a given context. However, in the right combination, these dimensions can go beyond just describing the character of empowerment, and can themselves establish a foundation that makes empowerment more likely to obtain in the first place. In other words, they can establish what I'll call *conditions of empowerment*. In particular, I'm thinking of a particular mode of empowerment where (1) we are relationally **empowered by** our social context, communities, and relationships, (2) the outcome of our empowerment action is **structural**, and (3) the timing of our empowerment action is **proactive**. Not only does this combination describe the form a specific instance of empowerment may take, but this particular mode of empowerment can also create circumstances that make future empowerment more likely.

For instance, let's return to the example of the postdocs' first contract. In the previous section, I discussed how the establishment of new protections served to proactively address constraints on agency. However, winning structural changes like a just cause disciplinary standard and anti-discrimination protections did more to address constraints on agency than merely enshrining a set of *de jure* protections. More significantly, in establishing these protections as enforceable outside of the university's unilateral control -- i.e., through neutral third-party arbitration -- the first contract established standards that shifted how both postdocs as a community and those with power over them understood their relationship. To expand: not only did postdocs win new and important protections by taking action together, but those protections also came with meaningful enforcement outside of administration's or supervisors' unilateral control, *and everyone knew it*. This last point is critical, because through that shared

understanding came a rebalancing of normal power. That is, it helped shift previously-accurate shared perceptions that those in positions of power could act badly with impunity -- a dynamic that had regularly dampened reporting and emboldened harassing behavior. With the contract clarifying that real recourse was available, those shared perceptions begin to shift, at once emboldening postdocs to seek support and discouraging bad behavior from supervisors.

Importantly, not only is this a specific instantiation of empowerment, it also sows the seeds for future empowerment, by doing a few key things. For one, it establishes clearer and more effective routes for recourse -- options that can more readily reaffirm meaningful control for agents who are actively targeted in the future. Further, as this example helps demonstrate, part of what is so significant about conditions of empowerment is how they reconfigure power relations, both in the immediate term and going forward. In the case of the postdocs' first contract, they did so by creating a structural and enforceable balance of power between postdocs and the university administration, far beyond merely a-contextual appeals to *de jure* recourse. Of particular importance is that this structure rebalanced power through its enhancing the practical possibility of dissent. Namely, the success of the contract campaign rebalanced power largely by establishing accessible and meaningful routes for those with less power (in this case, postdocs) to dissent against the actions or positions of those with more power (in this case, individual supervisors, university administration, the institution as a whole, academic norms, etc). In short, this mode of empowerment democratized postdocs' work context in substantive ways. Further, the experience of winning this rebalance as a community of postdocs, and the structural positioning of postdocs collectively as equals with the institution helped to solidify that these changes were more than just changes on paper -- they reified the community of postdocs as itself a critical source of power. As a result, the success of the first contract campaign not only won postdocs new rights, but also served to shift the entire terrain of their work in a far more empowering direction -- making empowerment opportunities in the future both more possible and more potent.

Now, as I've framed this discussion, conditions of empowerment specifically arise from dimensions of empowerment where (1) we are relationally empowered by our social context, communities, and relationships, (2) the outcome of our empowerment action is structural, and (3) the timing of our empowerment action is proactive. However, this is not to say that other dimensions of empowerment are trivial or inconsequential. As demonstrated by examples described in the previous section, modes of empowerment that are reactive, particular, or otherwise shaped can have important material impact on the lives of marginalized people. And indeed, given the current shape of the status quo and the everyday oppression vulnerable people regularly face, some degree of reactive and particular empowerment action will inevitably be necessary.

However, while reactive or particular forms of empowerment are often practically necessary, working to establish conditions of empowerment is critical if we want to move in the direction of ultimately preventing threats to agency for marginalized people. As Collins argues, "Historically, U.S. Black women's activism demonstrates that becoming empowered requires more than changing the consciousness of individual Black women via Black community development strategies. Empowerment also requires transforming unjust social institutions that African Americans encounter from one generation to the next" (2000 [2009], 291). The rough analogy with symptoms of an underlying disease is apt here -- we can wear ourselves out treating symptoms of oppression, but without treating the underlying disease causing those symptoms -- the basic conditions of oppression that enable it to thrive and reproduce -- we'll be stuck forever in a loop of harm. As a result, focusing our empowerment efforts on establishing conditions of empowerment -- conditions that make empowerment opportunities more obvious, accessible, and abundant -- is our best route for producing long-lasting and meaningful control for marginalized agents. In short, turning our attention to conditions of empowerment can enable us to proactively reshape the entire terrain upon which empowerment action occurs in the first place.

Chapter 3: Relational Trans Identity

> *"Stories form bridges that other people might cross, to feel their way into another experience."*
>
> - Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations*[30]

3.0. Introduction

In the introduction to her memoir *Redefining Realness*, trans woman Janet Mock reflects that her writing process was "gradual and challenging, one where I had to excavate answers within myself for some tough questions: Who am I, really? How does that answer contribute to the world? How do I tell my story authentically without discounting all the facets and identities that make me?" (2014, xvii-xviii). This set of questions provides a helpful structure of self-reflection for anyone, but they're particularly urgent and fraught for trans people. For trans people, the question "Who am I, really?" is often colored or undermined by the failures of our social others, who may ignore, misunderstand, and reject transness. Consequently, given our situation in contexts of oppressive and disputed meaning, the range of answers to "Who am I, really?" that are even possible for trans people can be severely restricted.

I am uninterested in any theory of identity that cannot robustly describe, accommodate, and amplify trans identity, and as articulated in previous chapters, am particularly interested in identifying and building paths for trans empowerment. In the rest of this project, I'll focus on one particularly fraught site of meaning dispute for trans agents, that of identity. I'll work through a way of conceiving identity that is both narrative and relational. Focusing particularly on Hilde Lindemann's work, I'll consider a framework that takes personal identity to be a system of meaning constituted by a web of first-personal narratives an agent tells about herself, as well as by second- and third-personal narratives others tell about her. Given the ways that trans identities and agents are particularly susceptible to social dispute, precarity, and harm --

[30] Million 2013, 76.

e.g., in regularly being personally obscured, untellable, unintelligible, and rejected -- I take trans identity to be a key test case for assessing the viability of this relational framework. Namely, I hold that in order for such a relational framework to be acceptable from a trans empowerment perspective, it should afford meaningful avenues for advancing the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents.

I'll proceed in this chapter as follows: In Section 2, I'll more specifically outline Lindemann's account of relational narrative identity, focusing especially on her claim that under a relational framework, my first-personal narratives about myself don't automatically trump others' narratives about me. Thus, a key question for trans agents under contexts of disputed and oppressive meaning is how we can handle inevitable and common disputes between trans first-personal narratives and contradicting second- and third-personal narratives about her. In Section 3 I'll describe how for Lindemann, when first, second, and third-personal narratives about a given identity conflict, we should work to identify the most accurate narrative through an assessment of credibility. She recognizes that given the significant constraints trans people face in receiving the uptake of their social others, trans identity is likely to be "impossible" until such a time that toxic narratives about them are replaced by more affirming stories. In that effort, she proposes deploying counterstories that amplify counterevidence that more credibly depicts the actual behavior of trans people.

While I take much of Lindemann's account to be compelling, in Section 4 I'll describe three key concerns for her account's success at advancing meaningful avenues for the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents. First, I'll argue that her account insufficiently recognizes the ways in which the dissenting meaning of trans people currently obtains and has effect (i.e., trans identity is not currently "impossible" full stop). Second, I'll argue that her framework's focus on issues of accuracy and credibility render it ill-equipped to accommodate trans practices for meaning-making and uptake that specifically don't rely on accuracy measures. Third, I'll argue that mere counterevidence is unlikely to advance the practical

possibility for trans agents to dissent against dominant meaning and meaning-making; rather, that practical possibility demands a careful power analysis.

3.1. "No trump" relational identity

To start, then, let's look more closely at the relational identity framework. When we say identity is relational, we can mean a great many different things -- that an individual's self-articulation is always already impacted by social forces,[31] that there is no account of the self without the demand for it from an interlocutor,[32] that no individual's identity is solely authorized by or transparent to her.[33] For the purposes of this chapter, I'll focus on one particular formulation, one where identity is relational primarily because it is an interactive intersubjective practice.[34] In particular, I'll focus on Hilde Lindemann's account of identity, under which personal identity is narrative in form and relationally constituted.[35] Very basically, on her account, a given individual's identity is constructed and continually reconstructed through the overlapping interplay of the stories the individual tells about herself (her first-personal narratives) and the stories others tell about her (second- and third-personal narratives) (2001, 87).

To better understand how this works, let's begin by unpacking the narrativity of identity her account builds up from. An extensive literature on this issue focuses on thinking about personal identity through the lens of story and storytelling. For instance, Marya Schechtman writes, "constituting an identity requires that an individual conceive of his life as having the form and logic of a story -- more specifically, the story of a person's life -- where 'story' is

[31] E.g., Butler 2005, 7; Drabinski 2014, 307.
[32] E.g., Butler 2005, 11; Cavarero 2000, 20.
[33] E.g., Hall 2017, 161; Code 1995, xvi, 95; Lugones 2002, 63.
[34] Though it can and often does overlap with these other formulations.
[35] Other accounts that centralize consideration of interactive intersubjective practice include Françoise Baylis. She writes, "my identity is neither in my body (viz., the somatic or biological account of personal identity) nor in my brain (viz., the psychological account of personal identity) but, rather, in the negotiated spaces between my biology and psychology and that of others" (Baylis 2012, 110. Also referenced at 2013, 517). In this chapter, I'll focus primarily on Lindemann because she explicitly addresses a number of items that are germane to my account: trans identity; storytelling and narrativity; and disputes between narratives.

understood as a conventional, linear narrative" (2007, 96). Lorraine Code similarly writes that a person's story is fundamentally made up of a sequence of actions and experiences that have sufficient coherence to "[hold] them together as stories rather than as mere assemblages of statements" (1995, 159). Narrativity also has a long history of importance for marginalized identity specifically. For instance, consider Kate Drabinski's account of the role self-narrative plays in forming trans subjectivity (2014), Dian Million's account of First Nations women using first-personal and experiential narrative to resist colonial epistemologies (2013), and Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez's collection describing oral history as a key method for building queer identity and community (2012).

In all of this rich theory, the practice of building and telling narratives is integral to understanding who both individuals and social groups are able to be in a given context.[36] However, these accounts do not all agree on the precise form identity narrative takes, with accounts ranging between narrativity as (a) a single chain of causes and effects and (b) loose assemblages of story fragments. For her part, Lindemann breaks from Schechtman's and Code's articulation of a linear story, arguing that personal identities are constituted "through the loosely connected stories we weave around the things about us that matter most" (2001, 71), where "what matters most" may be described first-, second- or third-personally. She holds that because "a great many stories and fragments of stories are apt to constitute an individual identity," it is misleading to suppose that a given individual only has *one* identity-constituting narrative, or that the many narratives that could make up an individual's identity are structured necessarily linearly (2001, 76).[37] Rather, she writes, "Because identities change over time, the

[36] Note that I'll regularly use the language of "who you are able to be in a given context" and that on my relational account, I take this to mean something fairly strong -- i.e., I take "who you are able to be" in a context to at least partially constitute who you *are* in that context.
[37] Likewise, in commentary on his interview with lesbian dancer Terry Sendgraff, Jeff Friedman writes, "In Terry's oral history, temporal and spatial disjunctions are, in fact, part of a larger narrative whole. This narrative is not so much destabilized as self-mobilizing, allowing fragmentation so that another kind of coherence can emerge" (2012, 82). Similarly, Gayle Salamon argues in favor of understanding social perception as a "network of relations" rather

stories that constitute them often appear to be a hodgepodge of narrative fragments" (2001, 76), where some fragments are authored first-personally and others second- or third-personally. Relatedly, recalling Susan Brison's work on trauma from Chapter 2, taking narrativity to be distinctive from mere chronology is important for recognizing the ways that traumatic memory is functionally internalized -- i.e., often as "disconnected fragments" that are neither re-experienced (e.g., via flashbacks) nor easily retold in chronological order (Shay 1994, 172, cited at Brison 2001, 44).[38]

For Lindemann, these narratives and narrative fragments we share intersubjectively are further compounded by *master narratives*. Most basically, master narratives are stories that are socially well-known and function as schema we use to interpret the identities of both individuals and social groups (2001, 83-84). For instance, well-known fairy tales, historic court cases, influential books or films, etc, can all serve as master narratives (2001, 7). Lindemann further describes master narratives as "stock plots" or "repositories of norms" that contain readily recognizable stories and roles, which we often use to both make sense of our experiences and to justify ourselves (2001, 6). Because they describe and help justify the continuation of norms, master narratives also often serve to set the boundaries of what kinds of behaviors or ways of being are socially acceptable in dominant contexts (2001, 6) and to govern our recognition of others (2001, 85). As Lindemann writes, "the norms of the master narratives tell us how we are supposed to understand the people (including ourselves) to whom we apply them" (2001, 85). Like the norms they help justify and police, master narratives often tell incomplete or pernicious stories about members of marginalized groups, particularly when those master narratives are written and circulated by dominant groups.

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than as "confirming the material 'truth' of any single element in that network or system" (2010, 60).

[38] Similarly, Lindemann distinguishes stories/narratives from chronicles. She takes stories to be depictive, selective, interpretive, and connective, while chronicles are mere descriptions of a sequence of events (2001, 11-12).

With all this groundwork in place, Lindemann goes on to describe personal identity as "system of meaning" -- i.e., one constituted plurally and non-linearly by an interplay between the many narratives and narrative fragments that an individual tells about herself and that her social others tell about her, where many of those narratives are built or justified by broader master narratives. However, merely expressing a particular narrative doesn't necessarily mean it will be integrated into a given identity's system of meaning, or that it will be socially meaningful. As Lindemann argues, "my acts fully express who I am only if that expression receives appropriate *uptake*" (2001, 70, emphasis mine). For Lindemann, uptake is a practice of "recognition and response" (2014, 15), and is critical for establishing socially meaningful narratives about an identity because "what matters socially about being female…is not what you are, but what you *seem* to be" (2014, 79, emphasis in original).[39] On this account, gaining second- and third-personal uptake from others is the key practice by which agents achieve social access to a given identity.[40] Going forward, I'll refer to the myriad relationships where 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-personal narratives about a given identity are exchanged or weighed for uptake as *narrative-sharing relationships*.[41]

Related to the critical role of uptake for setting the limits of who a person can be in a given social context, Lindemann argues that an agent's own first-personal narratives about her identity may not necessarily be authoritative -- i.e., second- and third-personal narratives about

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[39] Lindemann draws this setup from Ásta's *conferral* framework for identity (Ásta [Sveinsdóttir] 2012, Ásta 2018).

[40] Similarly, while she doesn't use the language of "uptake," Brison argues that second-personal affirmation is critical for trauma survivors' identities and recovery. She writes, "In order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we minted them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured" (2001, 51).

[41] In general, I take the narrative-sharing relationships we have in our personal relationships to carry more practical force over our what our identities end up being than do narrative-sharing relationships with loose acquaintances or strangers. However, it's worth noting that this is not universally the case; e.g., a particularly intense narrative exchange with a stranger may end up having a proportionately intense impact on your identity.

her may ultimately carry more weight. She writes, "my own self-constituting stories don't automatically trump other people's stories about me…on epistemic, practical, and conceptual grounds […] I cannot be the sole arbiter of the stories that constitute me" (2001, 99). Lindemann calls this a "no-trump" view -- i.e., my own first-personal narratives about myself don't automatically trump others' narratives about me (2001, 99).

While it may initially seem troubling not to grant the individual whose identity is in question ultimate authority over it, there are good reasons for embracing a no-trump view. For instance, as many who do relational work point out, we often have imperfect self-understandings. Consider Schectman's example of a person, let's call him Greg, who believes himself to be Napoleon and insists to his social others that he led troops into battle at Waterloo (1996, 121). For Schectman, this example illustrates the importance of subjecting our narrative self-constitution to basic reality constraints. However, I follow Lindemann in taking this example to more importantly impress the broader point that "identities are more than merely subjective self-understandings" (2001, 92) and may legitimately be contested by our social others. For instance, consider the slightly less outlandish example of an agent who has overly harsh first-personal narratives, whether in a particular moment of crisis or because of a chronic condition like persistent depression. Take, e.g., a scene from the 2018 film *Eighth Grade*, where fourteen-year-old Kayla (Elsie Fisher) experiences a moment of frank insecurity and asks her dad (Josh Hamilton), if he's sad that he has to be her dad. He profusely rejects that narrative and second-personally insists to Kayla how easy it is to love her and be proud of her (Burnham 2018).

Further, and most relevant to this project, a no trump view is compelling because it forces recognition of the very real power that dominant forces *just do play* in governing which identities we have easy social access to, and which are subject to scrutiny or rejection. It recognizes, in Gayle Salamon's words, that "our bodies are always shaped by the social world in which we are inescapably situated" (2010, 76). For instance, as Naomi Scheman writes,

"Narrativity *per se* may be humanely important, but we have no access to narrativity *per se*. What we have are culturally specific narratives, which facilitate the smooth telling of some lives and straight jacket, distort, or fracture others" (1997, 113). Similarly, James Baldwin writes, "I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way. And yet, of course, at the same time, I *was* being spat on and defined and described and limited" (1993, 23-24). Now, recognizing the role that master narratives play in identity formation descriptively doesn't mean we have to be satisfied with them normatively. The key point here is just that while we can and should reject the legitimacy of such toxic narratives, they still do have significant effect on who marginalized agents can be, particularly in dominant contexts.

Moreover, while it may seem self-defeating to incorporate the often destructive force of narratives beyond one's control, it need not be. For instance, Kim Q. Hall writes in favor of "understanding that one's authority and certainty as a knowing subject are perpetually at risk of being undone," specifically because such a stance "is empowering precisely because it reveals that current social, political, and economic hierarchies are not inevitable consequences of an immutable nature; things can be otherwise" (2017, 161, referencing Ladelle McWhorter 1999 and 2009). Indeed, following Lugones's first desiderata of anti-oppression theory (2003, 55), in fully recognizing the oppression marginalized people face, we are far better able to recognize *where* resistance is needed and *that* it is possible.

Nevertheless, as described throughout this project, such meaning dispute is non-trivial for trans agents, and while these challenges aren't fundamentally demoralizing, they are often practically harmful and dangerous. For more on how we might manage conflicting meaning about trans stories and identities, let's turn to the next section.

3.2. Adjudicating disputes in narrative-sharing

Given the above articulation of a no-trump view for relational identity, where does this leave us for identities that are socially subject to persistent disputed and oppressive meaning? In other words, if neither self- nor the other-narratives have complete overriding authority, and those narratives don't match one another, how do we arbitrate which one carries constitutive weight – which one actually describes the identity? In this section, I'll explore this set of questions specifically through the lens of trans identity. As mentioned earlier, I take trans identity to be an important test case for the viability of the relational framework given the ways that trans identities and agents are particularly susceptible to challenged uptake. In particular, the key question here will be whether the relational framework affords meaningful avenues for advancing the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents.

Lindemann argues that when two narratives about an agent contradict, we need some standard for assessing which ought to be kept in the system of meaning, and which ought to be discarded. In part, this need stems from an interest in being able to describe agents as accurately as possible, where for Lindemann this is primarily an ethical rather than metaphysical interest. Namely, she is concerned with the import of personal identity practices for moral agency: Given the ways that marginalized agents regularly have their identities undermined by toxic master narratives, she wants to develop a way for adjudicating disputes that enables us to assert why marginalized narratives deserve uptake. With that general motivating interest in the background, she argues that when two narratives about an agent "flatly contradict one another, they can't both contribute to the narrative construction of my identity…The task then is to decide which of the two contending narratives to choose" (2001, 94).

For Lindemann, this process of adjudicating disputes between contradicting self- and other-narratives about an identity in ordinary contexts is mediated by a *credibility constraint*.[42] She proposes three criteria to help make a determination of credibility: **(1) Strong explanatory force**: Explanations of why a person is the way they are should meet "the standard epistemic criteria for evaluation -- being consistent with the data, being coherent, and being sufficiently broad in scope" (2001, 93).[43] **(2) Correlation to action**: There should be a clear correspondence between the narrative about a person and that person's actions (95). **(3) Heft**: Stories about a person should account for the features that they (or others) care about most (96). With these criteria guiding the assessment of credibility, Lindemann concludes, "A story credibly contributes to a person's identity, then, if it offers the *best* available explanation of some aspect of who she is" (2001, 95, emphasis in original).

Unfortunately, when we turn to the case of trans identity, we find numerous cases in dominant contexts where the credibility criteria are unlikely to land dispute adjudication in the favor of a trans person's first-personal narratives. For instance, in dominant contexts, disputes between a trans person's first-personal narratives about herself and others' second- and third-personal narratives about her are both common and profound. Consider, e.g., at least four immediate challenges for second- and third-personal uptake of trans identity, which in turn call into question the practical possibility of trans identity in many contexts. First, trans identity may be **personally obscured**. Given the breadth and depth of toxic master narratives about gender, it can be very common for people to go through years of feeling confused, uncomfortable, or even actively transphobic because they don't yet have the epistemic tools to

[42] Lindemann offers the credibility constraint as an alternative to reality constraints like Schechtman's on the grounds that credibility better enables us to "circumvent the difficulties that arise from insisting on only one story per identity, on the ability to articulate any story that is fully identity-constituting, on 'objectivity' or 'reality'" (2001, 93).
[43] Referencing Longino 1993, 112.

describe their trans identity to themselves.[44] Second, trans identity may not be **tellable**.[45] There are many factors related to safety, basic needs, economic security, and institutional barriers that may limit a trans person's ability or desire to make their first-personal narratives public. They could be worried about being disowned by their family or kicked out of their family's home,[46] getting fired from their job,[47] or being denied housing.[48] Third, trans identity may not be **intelligible**. Even when someone is able to make their identity publicly available in a way that's consistent with their first-personal narratives, if their gender identity is sufficiently at odds with hegemonic ways of describing gender -- with respect to a rigid binary, in heavily essentialist or biologically determined ways -- it can become literally incoherent to others operating from that hegemonic standpoint.[49] Fourth, trans identity may be **rejected**. Even when someone is able to make their identity publicly available, and even when others can recognize how that person wants to be held, trans identity is often *refused* by the social others with whom we interact. In contrast with failures in intelligibility, those who reject trans identity don't hold a trans person incorrectly because they don't recognize how he wants to be held. Rather, they do so precisely

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[44] We can think of this as a likely form of hermeneutical injustice (refer, e.g., to Fricker 2007, Medina 2017). Similarly, refer to Khader's work on inappropriately adaptive preference and internalized oppression (2011), as covered in Chapter 2.

[45] Note that I mean "tell" to go beyond literally announcing it, and to also include the myriad other verbal and non-verbal ways we make parts of ourselves public or available for others' potential uptake.

[46] LGBTQ youth experience homelessness 120% more than non-LGBTQ youth (Morton et al 2017, 12).

[47] Up until the June 2020 United States Supreme Court ruling in Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, 30 states did not have legal workplace protections for gender identity ("2017 Workplace Equality Fact Sheet" 2017). While employment-based discrimination against trans people is now illegal nation-wide, we can reasonably assume that it still regularly occurs.

[48] Currently in the US, 33 states do not have legal housing protections for gender identity ("Housing for LGBTQ People" 2018).

[49] As Naomi Scheman puts it, "It is not only in our own memories but in the memories of others that our selves take shape, and the institutionalization of transsexuality functions as a theft of selfhood, in making a transsexual life not only closeted but literally untellable, incoherent" (1997, 138). For more on intelligibility, refer to Fricker 2007; Medina 2013, 2017, 2018; Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014.

because they *do* recognize how he wants to be held but refuse to accept that he has legitimate claims to be so held.[50]

Given that receiving second- and third-personal uptake is critical for an identity to be conferred socially, these challenges can and often do result in trans people not having access to their identities, especially in dominant contexts. That is, under the no-trump articulations of relational identity we've covered so far, in disputes between first-, second-, or third-personal narratives about an agent, in order to count as identity constituting, a story should best meet the credibility criteria. But as we've just seen, that's often specifically difficult for trans people. For instance, if a trans person is facing obstacles of tellability or intelligibility, their first-personal narratives are unlikely to meet criteria like correlation to action or strong explanatory force. And if a trans person is facing rejection, they fundamentally will not receive their interlocutor's uptake. These challenges are no coincidence, either; rather, they are a predictable consequence of the ways master narratives regularly force trans people into a choice between authenticity and necessity (Levitt and Ippolito 2014, 1743).

This lands us in the troubling place: if first-personal narratives require the second- and third-personal uptake of others to count as identity-constituting, and many trans people's first-personal gender identities are systematically not granted such uptake because master narratives are structured to render them insufficiently credible, then many trans people's first-personal gender identities would not appear to "count as genuine" (Lindemann 2014, 136). In other words, if a trans woman's first-personal claim to the identity of woman is not given uptake by others and can't meet credibility, she wouldn't have the identity "authority" to socially access the

[50] Rejection of this sort often interacts with issues of intelligibility -- for instance, if part of the reason for the rejection is that the second- or third-person harbors an unacknowledged failure of intelligibility. However, I take them to be different in rejection's reliance on *some* recognition of how the person would *like* to be held that is actively declined. Similar to the distinction I draw here between intelligibility and rejection is Lindemann's distinction between, respectively, "misfiring recognition" and "misshapen responses." She writes of the latter, "Note that the problem isn't that [the individual in question isn't] properly recognized…the problem is that the *response* [is] very badly out of keeping with who these people are" (2014, 115-116).

identity *woman* (2014, 105). Indeed, Lindemann explicitly recognizes trans identity as a fraught case for the relational framework. She writes that because of the persistence of toxic master narratives about trans people, trans identities are likely to be "impossible" until a time that gender presentation comes to represent how a person wants to be treated rather than assumptions about genital status (2014, 143). Given all this, how might the relational framework afford meaningful avenues for advancing the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents?

Let's start by considering how Lindemann handles this question. She proposes responding to the problems posed by oppressive master narratives by using *counterstories*. She defines a counterstory as "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect" (2001, 6. Refer also to Lindemann 1995). For Lindemann, counterstories are the "necessary means of resist[ing]" oppressive master narratives" (2001, 150). She distinguishes three levels of resistance an agent's counterstory can activate: her counterstory can include a denial that a particular master narrative applies to her, it can include opposition to select others' use of a particular master narrative for her, or it can include public and systematic opposition of a particular master narrative (2001, 169-172). Lindemann further argues that the best counterstory will free the moral agency of not just individuals, but "the entire group whose identity is damaged by an oppressive master narrative" (2001, 183).

Like ordinary identity holding, Lindemann argues that good counterstories will meet the credibility criteria because "they offer the best available explanation of who the group members are, they correlate strongly with the group members' actions, and they weight the various characteristics of the group accurately" (2001, 183-184). To illustrate, she uses the example of activists in the 1970s gay liberation movement opposing the oppressive master narrative that gay men were sexual predators. The counterstories they activated were aimed at rejecting that master narrative and replacing it with more accurate depictions of gay men's lives through personal story-telling, consciousness-raising, marches, etc (2001, 184). Lindemann argues that

this counterstory work "gets its purchase in the gap between the master narrative's depiction of homosexuals and gay men's *actual behavior*" (2001, 185, emphasis mine). Similarly, in her later analysis of trans identity, she writes that what is needed to combat harmful master narratives that trans people are maliciously deceiving others[51] are "counterstories that resist the evil deceiver narrative by offering concrete representations of the range of sexed and gendered possibilities" (2014, 142).

In sum, then, Lindemann holds that when trans people have challenges for ordinary identity holding, we ought to deploy counterstories that convey counterevidence to toxic master narratives, ultimately demonstrating those master narratives to less credibly depict the actual behavior of trans people. Indeed, Lindemann's interest in assessing credibility in general is an interest in arriving at the most *accurate* depiction of an agent's identity (or some aspect of their identity). She writes, "What we are after, in the narratives that constitute selves, is not art but accuracy. For that reason…if a narrative is to be credible as a part of a person's identity, it must depict the proportions faithfully. To the fullest extent possible, we want to understand the person as she actually is, not tip the scales either for or against her" (2001, 98-99). For Lindemann, then, the "scales" are currently being tipped against trans people's first-personal narratives by oppressive master narratives to such an extent that the inaccuracy with which they're portrayed renders them currently "impossible." On her account, we best address this problem, and best raise trans dissent, through the vehicle of counterstories that amplify more accurate counterevidence.

While I find elements of Lindemann's account compelling, there are some key areas of concern about how her relational framework ultimately fares for trans empowerment. In the next sections, I'll detail three main concerns. First, while Lindemann explicitly addresses narrative multiplicity, I take her appreciation of it to ultimately be too shallow to recognize the

[51] Referencing Bettcher 2007.

ways in which the dissenting meaning of trans people currently obtains and has effect. Second, her framework's focus on issues of accuracy and credibility render it ill-equipped to accommodate certain trans practices for meaning-making and uptake. Third, I hold that mere counterevidence is unlikely to advance the practical possibility for trans agents to dissent against dominant meaning and meaning-making; rather, that practical possibility demands a careful power analysis.

3.3. Challenges for Lindemann's Account

A. Multiplicity and the "impossibility" of trans identity

In the previous section, we saw that for Lindemann, an individual's identity is not a single, linear story but a system of meaning made up of myriad stories and story fragments, generated first-, second-, and third-personally. She further acknowledges that an agent's identity may change over time as different features go in and out of importance, and that some stories may function to bind fragments together, others may not be connected to others at all, others may be iterative, etc. (2001, 76). She even goes as far to say that when an agent is caught between two different cultures (as, e.g., an immigrant may be), she may have parts of her identity that are at odds with each other (2001, 76). Her account, then, is explicitly one of narrative plurality or multiplicity. I strongly agree with Lindemann's interest in narrative multiplicity; however, I take her interest in adjudicating between contesting narratives to ultimately undermine that interest's fruition.

To see why, let's start by considering more precisely how trans identity is multiply constituted. Similar to the example Lindemann offers of an immigrant who belongs to two cultures and moves between them (2001, 76), trans people regularly move between at least two

"worlds of sense,"[52] dominant contexts and trans subcultural contexts.[53] [54] On Lugones's account, dominant and subcultural[55] contexts hold radically different possibilities, such that agents who regularly experience themselves in both end up "acting, enacting, animating their bodies, having thoughts, feeling the emotions, in ways that are different in one reality than in the other" (2003, 57). She proposes occupying both realities at once in the "between" space she calls "the limen" -- a space where the agents "remembers" her many selves "'between and betwixt' universes of sense that construe social life and persons differently" (2003, 59). For Lugones, occupying this liminality is a critical liberatory task through its creation of "a clear sense of standing in a dual reality, one in which we use double perception and double praxis. One eye sees the oppressed reality, the other sees the resistant one" (2006, 78). Further, on Lugones's account, the limen doesn't settle contradictions in meaning that occur between realities, but rather looks to sites of "cantankerous" dynamics between worlds of sense in order to identify potential for resistance (2002, 60).

Bettcher similarly advances an account of trans identity that is explicitly plural. Echoing Lugones, Bettcher devotes specific attention to differences between dominant and subcultural spaces. She writes of her multiple meanings account:

> "I recognize that sometimes 'woman' can be used in ways that are expressly non-inclusive or marginalizing of trans women (typically in mainstream society) and that it can also be used in trans-friendly cultures in ways that centralize trans women as paradigms of womanhood. That is, I argue, terms such as 'woman' have multiple meanings that are under political contestation" (2017, 5).

In other words, given most trans peoples' existence in both dominant and subaltern contexts, Bettcher holds that a trans person can "count" as conflicting things depending on which world of

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[52] Lugones 2003, Chapter 4.
[53] Though it's helpful for the purposes of analysis to describe these contexts as discrete and internally unified, that's ultimately too simplified a picture. Dominant and subcultural contexts rarely separate neatly from one another, and neither is internally homogenous.
[54] We find related arguments in literature on double consciousness. E.g., refer to Du Bois 1903, Collins 1990 [2009], Medina 2013, among many others.
[55] Note Lugones tends to use the term "subordinate" rather than "subcultural" or "subaltern;" I use the latter two purely for reasons of consistency with Bettcher's work.

sense they're occupying. For instance, a trans woman can count as *both* "really a man" (in dominant contexts) *and* paradigmatically a woman (in trans subcultures) (2012, 240). In addition, Bettcher notes that not only are there meaning conflicts between dominant and trans subcultural contexts, but also *within* trans subcultural contexts. She writes that trans subculture itself is "generally replete with multiple and sometimes conflicting accounts of gender" (2012, 246).[56] Like Lugones, Bettcher holds that it is through recognizing these multiple, sometimes inconsistent, worlds of sense that we are best able to identify sites of resistance. Namely, she argues in favor of rejecting the assumption that gender has a single meaning. By instead fully investing in meaning multiplicity, we find that there currently *are* trans-friendly meanings in effect in subcultural contexts.

Thus, when we take a deep approach to multiplicity that recognizes the synchronous existences of multiple worlds of sense, we can recognize that marginalized agents are likely to "count" as different things in different contexts -- and those differences may even be in direct contradiction. However, it's through recognizing this sometimes contradictory multiplicity that we are also able to identify sites of resistance and to account for the fact that trans identity isn't "impossible" full stop. That is, while trans identity may be "impossible" in many dominant contexts, we don't have to wait for an upheaval of gender norms in order to count trans identity as "possible." Rather, trans identity is *currently* possible and in effect in many subcultural contexts. Unfortunately, while Lindemann does explicitly commit to multiplicity in her account, her focus on adjudicating between conflicting stories ends up undermining her ability to account for both (a) the descriptive dynamics of synchronous multiple worlds of sense as they impact differences in who someone counts as in various contexts and (b) the resistant and currently

[56] Recall the similar point from Dean Spade in Chapter 1: "I have worked in dozens of trans activist spaces and campaigns where people who understood their identity through a postmodern gender deconstructive frame worked closely with others who experienced being trans as a mental-health impairment as well as others who understood their trans identity to be a genetic trait" (2007, 252).

effective existence of non-dominant meaning in subcultural contexts. As such, her account inevitably also has limited success in identifying and paving roads for advancing that resistant dissenting meaning into dominant contexts as well.

B. Credibility, accuracy, and trans meaning-making

The second major concern I have with Lindemann's account is that its reliance on credibility assessment and accuracy leaves it ill-equipped to accommodate (let alone enhance) trans practices for meaning-making and uptake that specifically do away with reliance on accuracy. Recall that for Lindemann, the challenges trans people face in receiving (dominant) others' uptake is a function of pernicious master narratives, and to best ensure the social conferral of trans identity, we ought to deploy counterstories that increase the credibility of trans agents through amplifying evidence of their "actual behavior." On Lindemann's account, in meeting the credibility criteria of strong explanatory force, correlation to action, and heft, we are able to arrive at the most accurate stories about a given agent. Unfortunately, however, these very criteria are often inconsistent with or directly counter to criteria trans subcultures regularly use in determining whether a first-personal narrative appropriately "fits."

For instance, dominant norms for granting gendered uptake often rely heavily on gender performance that is sufficiently convincing in its attachment to archetypes of "male" or "female" performance. Unfortunately, Lindemann's credibility criteria can function to replicate these dominant practices, particularly in her assertion that "a story is identity constituting *only if* there is a strong correlation between it and the person's actions. Without such a correlation, the story must be ruled out" (2001, 95, emphasis mine). However, for many trans people, such correlation is unlikely to obtain. For instance, in dominant contexts, I'm often taken to be a cis woman because of the correlations dominant other draw between my observable appearance (my body, my mostly women's clothes, etc) and uncontested femininity. To some degree or another, these facts of my appearance are actions, many of them intentional -- e.g., I pick my

clothes, hair, and makeup, etc. While I can only control my body to a certain extent, I have great health insurance and if I wanted, I could undertake various medical transition services to look less like a typical woman. Thus, it appears that, strictly-speaking, my actions don't correlate to my not identifying as a woman. Now, Lindemann might argue that my relevant actions in this case go beyond just my gender expression -- she would likely allow that I should include actions like the way I answer when others ask, "What pronouns should I use for you?", the fact that my pronouns are in my email signature, etc. However, these actions are only possible for me in contexts where I'm supported and generally feel free to be open about how I'd like to be held. As addressed above, however, for so many trans people -- particularly trans women and youth of color -- gender is a constant negotiation between authenticity and necessity, and thus regularly isn't tellable in the first place, or is only tellable in certain contexts.

Given that trans people's identities are regularly not "observable" for a variety of reasons, most trans subcultures don't use criterion like correlation to action and strong explanatory force to manage uptake practices. For instance, as just mentioned, in many trans subcultures, it's widely understood that our genders may be untellable. Further, many trans subcultures also recognize more expansive understanding of gender than binary-based correlations between femininity-womanhood, masculinity-manhood, etc. Indeed, as Bettcher argues, in trans subcultural spaces, first-personal claims about gender function more expansively than in dominant contexts, such that application of gender categories may be based in personal and political reasons rather than objective criteria.[57] She writes:

> "Claims about self-identity in (some) trans subcultures have the form of first-person, present-tense avowals of mental attitudes (e.g., 'I am angry at you')...It is no longer a question whether the category is truthfully predicated of the object in

[57] Similarly, in her work on disability, Elizabeth Barnes argues that "There is no objective feature(s) of disabled bodies such that all and only bodies with that feature(s) count as disabled" (2016, 9). Rather, she argues in favor of understanding disability as *solidarity* -- i.e., disability as a category is constructed by "a group of people with a variety of physical conditions [who] got together and observed that their experiences of their bodies had something in common" (2016, 44). In short, for Barnes, "disability *just is* whatever the disability rights movement is promoting justice for" (2016, 43).

> question…gender categories do not merely apply (or fail to apply) on the basis of objective criteria but are adopted for personal and political reasons" (2012, 246-247).

Very often trans uptake and meaning-making practices for gender have very little to do with the observation of actual behavior. For instance, it's common practice in many trans subcultures to not make any inferences about a person's gender purely based on one's own observations. Rather, when meeting a new person we regularly ask what pronouns they'd like to have used for them, we regularly use gender-neutral pronouns for others when this proactive move hasn't or can't occur, etc.

All told, Lindemann's reliance on credibility criteria like correlation to action renders her account ill-equipped to accommodate trans subcultural meaning-making and uptake practices that specifically don't rely on accuracy assessments. Given that these same practices are themselves critical to the advancement of the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents, this is ultimately a significant challenge for her account's ability to advance trans empowerment.

C. Counterstories and power

The third concern I'll explore has to do with the efficacy of counterstories as a tool for resistance. In particular, I hold that mere counterevidence provided by counterstories is unlikely to advance the practical possibility for trans agents to dissent against dominant meaning and meaning-making. Namely, the toxic master narratives counterstories seek to combat are specifically structured to be resistant to counterevidence or mere amplification of "actual behavior." In this section, I'll briefly consider three ways this dynamic can be realized: first, master narratives incentivize flawed interpretations of trans meaning and meaning-making; second, they establish double binds for trans first-personal narratives; third, they are structurally resistant to counterevidence. This set of concerns ultimately indicates that the practical possibility of trans dissent demands careful attention to power and vulnerability.

First, master narratives incentivize dominant agents to interpret the first-personal projections of trans agents poorly. To expand: As we've already seen, trans identity often receives particularly poor outcomes through use of the credibility criteria -- and this is no accident. Indeed, many hegemonic norms for assessing credibility are *specifically structured* to misunderstand and ignore trans meaning and meaning-making and the circumstances that color what kinds of meaning and meaning-making are practically accessible. For instance, as we saw in Section 3 with the issue of intelligibility, very often trans people don't receive uptake from dominant interlocutors precisely because the attempts we make to project our identities to them are rendered incoherent under dominant norms -- to such an extent that our attempts may not even make it past a point of basic understanding in order to be assessed for credibility. Indeed, when trans people's actual behavior is inconsistent with dominant interpretive norms, it's unlikely to ever count as credible in dominant contexts. As Bettcher argues, uptake is a "matter of complex interpretation. So caution is required" (2009, 112). She continues:

> "A person unfamiliar with trans-friendlier contexts approaches avowals of identity in extreme ignorance…she lacks the cultural resources to identify evidence for or against an interpretation. Suppose an MTF has facial hair (stubble) which she hasn't bothered to shave in several days. Somebody unfamiliar with MTF realities may construe this as sloppiness or a lack of care. By contrast, somebody acquainted with the realities of some MTFs will understand she may have had to let her hair grow out for electrolysis" (2009, 112).

Given these challenges to interpretation of trans people's actual behavior, merely amplifying that behavior through counterstories will only be successful to the extent that the counterstories include attention to interpretive deficits. Now, this is not necessarily an un-overcomeable challenge to Lindemann's overall conceptual framework. However, the practical challenge is non-trivial and not to be overlooked. That is, to the extent that counterstories rely on interpretation of trans people's actual behavior, they must attend to challenges in interpretation.[58]

[58] I'll address such challenges in interpretation in much more detail in Chapter 4.

Second, and more conceptually demanding, master narratives regularly structure double binds for trans first-personal narratives. In particular, narratives surrounding *appearance* often produce a mine field for trans people. As Bettcher argues in her identification of the appearance/reality double bind, trans people are regularly placed in a position of either "passing as nontrans (and hence running the risk of exposure as a deceiver) or else being openly trans (and consequently being relegated to mere pretender)" (2014, 392). In either case, appearance is used against the trans person: On the one hand, "convincing" appearance can result not in amplified credibility or accuracy, but exacerbated oppression, as when trans "deception" is used to justify extreme violence against trans people.[59] On the other hand, open identification as trans can result in exacerbated disbelief that the person is the gender they say they are. Thus, rather than being used to clarify credibility, appearance is regularly used to justify either end of a double bind. Put another way, far from actual behavior being used to increase social recognition of the accuracy of trans identities, it is often used as a method of pernicious "reality enforcement" (Bettcher 2014, 392). Given that counterstories rely on amplification of actual behavior, the appearance/reality double bind presents serious challenges for the practical possibility of uptake of trans meaning and meaning-making.

Now, Lindemann would likely respond that the problem isn't with counterstories themselves, it's the master narratives that make the double-bind possible in the first place. However, this just takes us to my third concern: Because they are mechanisms of prejudice, toxic master narratives about trans people are *structurally resistant to counterevidence*. Take, for instance, Rachel McKinnon's account of anti-trans ideology as propaganda. She provides the example of trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) characterizing trans women as predators who want to gain access to women's spaces in order to sexually assault cis women. McKinnon writes, "This is an unfounded fear, based only on a deeply flawed ideology…there's

[59] For instance, recall from Chapter 1 that many states still admit "trans panic" as a legal defense for committing violence against trans people (Holden 2019).

never been a verified reported instance of a trans women sexually assaulting a cis woman in such spaces" (2018, 485). Bettcher similarly writes of this example, "Such a claim is easily empirically falsifiable. As a matter of fact, trans women don't use the restroom to spy on other women or to threaten them with rape; they use it to pee in a safe environment" (2017, 6). Unfortunately, despite the clear evidence to the contrary, these narratives persist and have social effect. As McKinnon writes, "systematic ignorance…seems to persist in the face of overwhelming counterevidence." (2018, 488). Indeed, others go even farther to characterize resistance to counterevidence as a fundamental feature of prejudice. For instance, as Fricker argues, prejudice is fundamentally resistant to counterevidence, often as a result of the prejudiced person acting from motivated irrationality (2007, 34-35). Similarly, Elizabeth Barnes argues that reframing normatively laden disagreements "isn't merely a matter of presenting counterexamples. The gap in our understanding…tends to render counterexamples invisible" (2016, 181).

In the context of trans identity, we can see resistance to counterevidence in all too many live examples. In addition to the insidious trope that trans women are sexual predators, TERFs and the far right both regularly dabble in many claims that are expressly refuted by empirical evidence: claims that trans identity is a delusion or illness and thus, surgical transition procedures and hormone therapy should be withheld, especially for young trans people (McKinnon 2018, 486); claims that sex is a biological fact, and there are just the two (Fausto-Sterling 1993); etc. Like the sexual-predator trope, these claims are all clearly and explicitly refuted by well-established empirical facts, and yet they still regularly have effect -- often effect that disproportionately impacts trans women of color. For instance, in July 2020, the Department of Housing and Urban Development proposed a rule that would allow federally-funded homeless shelters to deny trans people access to affirming gender-segregated shelters. The proposed rule specifies that shelter staff can use empirically unreliable features to make an assessment of sex: "height, the presence (but not the absence) of facial hair, the presence of an

Adam's apple, and other physical characteristics which, when considered together, are indicative of a person's biological sex" (Department of Housing and Urban Development 2020). As many have since pointed out, this rule is likely to not only lead to an exacerbated homelessness crisis for trans people, but also for cis women who have "masculine" features, particularly Black cis women -- all during a global pandemic and economic crisis.[60] Again, despite this entire rule being obviously empirically absurd, that empirical reality alone doesn't ultimately do much of anything to undermine its effect.

All told, the epistemic functions of ignorance and prejudice make it clear that counterevidence alone isn't enough to effectively resist prejudice or toxic master narratives. Because the primary function of counterstories is to amplify counterevidence to toxic master narratives, they are highly susceptible to this set of challenges in efficacy. Thus I'm skeptical that we'll ever be able to effectively replace master narratives about trans identity simply through increased personal story-telling and consciousness-raising.[61] That is, I'm skeptical that a mere expansion of counterstories about trans identity will be sufficient on its own to increase the credibility of trans people, let alone advance empowerment by creating meaningful avenues for advancing dissenting meaning. In particular, it seems this problem for counterstories stems from the fact that they don't necessarily have teeth. In other words, mere counterevidence doesn't advance the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents because it doesn't have a necessary relationship to power; without such a relationships it also can't help rebalance power for trans agents.

Indeed, the key to the relational framework's ability to advance meaningful avenues for the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of trans agents lies not in mere accuracy but in *power*. For instance, as Bettcher argues, "this conflict over meaning is deeply bound up with the

[60] E.g., Burns 2020.
[61] I'm also skeptical that personal story-telling and consciousness-raising are the whole story even in Lindemann's paradigmatic example of counterstories -- i.e., of gay men using counterstories in the 1970s to resist their own version of the sexual predator master narrative.

distribution of power and the capacity to enforce a way of life" (2012, 242). Indeed, we cannot understand disputes about trans identity without understanding power -- every attempt trans people make or don't make to receive uptake in dominant contexts is mediated by the power our dominantly-situated social others have to overlook, disregard, or attack us. Further, the hegemonic norms that enable dominantly-situated agents to successfully overlook, disregard, and attack us are *specifically designed* to undermine our attempts at surfacing alternate meaning and meaning-making. Thus, attempting to advance trans empowerment through mere provision of counterevidence is unlikely to succeed. Rather, as I'll demonstrate in the next chapter, the practical possibility of trans empowerment demands a careful power analysis.

3.4. Conclusion

With the analysis of the previous section in mind, I want to conclude this chapter by calling a key question that's underlying my concerns with Lindemann's framework: Namely, what, exactly, are we trying to get out of precise and decisive dispute adjudication for the relational identity framework? As mentioned at the outset of Section 3, for Lindemann, I take this to be a concern rooted in how we address issues of undermined moral agency in social identity work. That is, given the ways that marginalized agents regularly have their identities undermined by toxic master narratives, adjudication based in credibility is an attempt to assert why those marginalized narratives deserve uptake. In short, she wants to develop tools to describe why we can be morally responsible for holding each other in certain identities.[62]

But unfortunately, decisive adjudication ends up leading to the opposite by undermining deep narrative multiplicity across multiple worlds of sense and thus disregarding rich information that's critical for identifying sites of precarity and resistance. To expand: when faced with a disagreement between first- and second- or third-personal narratives about an agent Beatrice, decisive adjudication seeks to make a ruling about whose narrative most

[62] This concern is a predominant focus in her 2014 work, *Holding and Letting Go*.

accurately describes her. But really, all of those first-, second-, and third-personal narratives *and the dispute itself* are valuable pieces of information for understanding who Beatrice is able to be in that context. For instance, if Beatrice thinks she's a great driver and Andrew thinks Beatrice is a terrible driver, doing a credibility assessment to determine whose story fits best would erase the key social information that part of who she *is* is someone whose status as a driver is in dispute, tension, and social precarity. Further, part of what makes Beatrice's positionality distinguishable from Dominic, who thinks he is a good driver and who Andrew *also* thinks is a good driver, is that Beatrice's status is precarious and Dominic's is not. These issues with decisive adjudication are largely rooted in its focus on *accuracy*. Namely, in its ultimate interest in identifying the most "accurate" stories about a given individual, decisive adjudication gets the basic problems facing relational identity slightly wrong. That is, the disruptions and injustices marginalized agents face in identity work are not just a matter accuracy deficit, but, more fundamentally, a matter of power deficit.

For instance, to illustrate this set of issues, consider an example of the dynamics of interactive story-building in practice. While much of our accounting so far has been limited to the analytic unit of a single narrative-sharing relationship between two agents, in reality we each exist in a complex web of narrative-sharing relationships that are often difficult to precisely pull apart. Rather, these relationships are regularly synchronic and interactive and compounding, even when they may be incompatible. Indeed, there are not wholly distinct nor intrinsically competing separations between, e.g., how I first-personally talk about myself, how my friend second-personally talks to me, and how my family third-personally talks about me. For example, when I'm with a group of friends at a karaoke bar:

- the narratives my casual friend Myles has about me interact with
- the narratives my partner of three years has about me, interact with
- the narratives the stranger at the next table who hates that I sang a Britney Spears song has about me, interact with

- the narratives I have about myself, interact with
- the narratives the cis woman in the bathroom who momentarily gave me a suspicious look has about me.

The relationships I have with not just each of those people as individuals, but also a cluster of those people as my friend group, and all of those people plus some as the group of everyone at the bar, plus all of those people without me when I get up to get a drink, operate synchronously and compoundingly -- in complex real time, they build on one another, color one another, and dispute one another to yield a picture of who I am in that context.

It may be that the context is a dominant one, and is not particularly friendly to trans meaning or meaning-making. Imagine in such a context that the cis woman in the bathroom goes beyond a momentary suspicious look and calls security on me. In the dominant context, the bouncer's narratives about me align with the woman's -- i.e., that I don't belong in the women's restroom, or I somehow pose a threat to the woman. Despite these narratives directly contradicting those that I have about myself and that my friends have about me, and despite our narratives about me being far more accurate than theirs, our stronger relationship to accuracy doesn't end up mattering as much as the fact that the woman and bouncer have sufficient *power* in that context to kick me out. In that case, because my narrative-sharing relationship with the cis woman is colored by her having significantly more social power -- bolstered by master narratives and the mutual compliance of the security guard -- the dispute she raises about my identity is itself a shaping force for who I am able to be socially.

By contrast, imagine the bar is a trans-friendly context -- the owners and staff are explicitly committed to trans rights, I have more than a few friendly people around me, etc. Imagine the cis woman still goes to security to try to get me kicked out, but she's immediately shut down -- by the bouncer, by many others in the bar, etc. In that case, her narratives about me don't make much of a difference for who I am in that moment, because they're far less socially weighty in the subaltern context -- she has less power over me, and I have less

vulnerability to her. This vulnerability/power balance is more fundamentally important to our understanding of the stakes of the meaning dispute and potential paths for resistance than is any assessment of credibility or accuracy.

Given this central importance of power and vulnerability dynamics, while counterstories can be important and may even be necessary for trans empowerment, they aren't sufficient. Increasing social credibility for trans agents -- whether through counterstories or other means -- is only possible to the extent that trans agents are sufficiently able to exert social power. As a result, rather than focusing our resistance efforts on counterstories alone, we first ought to focus on developing identity practices that establish conditions of empowerment for trans agents. In other words, we ought to develop identity practices that are structured to ensure a meaningful balance of power in our identity-constructing relationships and interactions. For more on this, let's move on to the next chapter, where I'll develop an account that grounds our responsibilities for how we hold our social others in dynamics of vulnerability.

Chapter 4: Empowering Uptake Practices

> *"Mrs. Lehntman needed Anna just as much as Anna needed Mrs. Lehntman, but Mrs. Lehntman was more ready to risk Anna's loss, and so the good Anna grew always weaker in her power to control."*
>
> - Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives*[63]

> *"One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself -- this is to say, risking oneself."*
>
> - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*[64]

4.0. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we considered a narrative relational framework for personal identity under which any given individual's identity is a system of meaning constituted by a web of first-personal narratives she tells about herself, and by second- and third-personal narratives others tell about her. In particular, we saw that our social others are likely to treat us "according to who we seem to be" (Lindemann 2014, 84), where for marginalized people, "what we seem to be" is regularly informed by oppressive meaning. Because relational identity disperses identity authority among a range of agents, and my own narratives about my identity don't necessarily trump others' about me, the stakes here are non-trivial. That is, when toxic narratives about the identity of a group of people circulate in dominant discourse, and that dominant discourse is taken to be authoritative, it could result in that identity being practically impossible to access. For Lindemann, we best address this issue by deploying more accurate counterstories -- narratives that deploy counterevidence to more credibly depict the actual behavior of the group in question. As I argued, however, the disputes and injustices marginalized people face in identity work are less a matter of deficits in accuracy and more a matter of deficits in power. I proposed, then, that we ought to focus our identity work not on considerations of accuracy or credibility, but rather, on developing identity practices that establish conditions of

[63] Stein 1909[1994], 28.
[64] Baldwin 1962[1993], 86.

empowerment. Thus, in this chapter I will argue that we should ground responsibility for how we hold our social others not in assessments of credibility or accuracy, but in assessments of power and vulnerability. I'll argue that in order to establish conditions of empowerment in our everyday identity practices, we should engage in practices that build and ensure a meaningful balance of power in our identity-constructing relationships and interactions. That is, we should engage in practices that solicit and integrate marginalized meaning and meaning-making into our first-, second-, and third-personal narratives.

To make this argument, I'll start in Section 2 by considering how dynamics of vulnerability and power are built into our intersubjective identity practices, focused on *uptake* as the key practice through which identities are socially conferred, where uptake involves both recognition and response. In particular, I'll show how trans agents (and other marginalized agents) are both structurally and practically subject to vulnerability in our narrative-sharing relationships, and consequently often receive distorted or diminished uptake from dominant social others. From there, in Section 3 I'll describe how we can establish *recognition* practices that are structured to offer meaningful avenues for marginalized meaning to surface, even in dominant contexts. Drawing from José Medina's account of epistemic responsibility, I'll argue in favor of adopting interpretive practices that are specifically built to accommodate and resist the ways marginalized meaning and meaning-making are regularly undermined and dismissed in dominant contexts. Building off of this understanding of recognition, in Section 4, I'll describe how we are called upon to *respond* in our narrative-sharing relationships. Namely, I'll argue that in order to establish conditions of empowerment in our intersubjective identity practice, we have two key responsibilities in response: First, we have responsibility in how we respond to others' first-personal narratives about themselves, and second, we also have responsibility in how we respond to others' second- and third-personal narratives about ourselves. As I'll show, both responsibilities will hinge on a consideration of vulnerability.

4.1. Vulnerability and power in narrative-sharing relationships

As described in Chapter 2, to understand how we can build conditions of empowerment, we first have to carefully understand power. So, in order to begin digging into how we can establish conditions of empowerment in our everyday identity practices, we should first have a clearer understanding of how vulnerability and power are likely to enter into them.

To start, let's briefly elaborate the role and mechanics of *uptake* in narrative-sharing relationships. In the last chapter, I followed Lindemann in characterizing uptake as involving both recognition and response. Beyond identity work specifically, the practice of uptake has also been developed in the context of social epistemology more broadly. For instance, in her account of epistemic injustice in scientific citation practices, Darcy McCusker writes, "Uptake requires that members of the community hear the criticisms made by others and respond appropriately; not every criticism will need a response, but the community members must *show that they are willing to modify their background beliefs in light of criticism*" (McCusker 2019, 1047, emphasis mine, referencing Longino 2002, 129-131). Here, uptake is characterized as a practice of dynamic, interactive responsiveness to others' contributions. Notably, practicing uptake does not mean offering automatically or uncritically positive responses. Rather, what's important is that the members of the community consider each contribution carefully and are demonstrably open to having others' contributions change their own positions should they withstand scrutiny. Note that "openness" involves continually evaluating and re-evaluating hypotheses using shared standards and given new evidence, such that (at least) over time, we can see some indication that views have changed accordingly (Longino 2002, 129-130).

Like uptake in scientific practice, practicing uptake well in identity work doesn't have to mean automatically or uncritically accepting others' narratives. Instead, we can think of uptake as a process of being demonstrably open to others' narratives (about themselves, about ourselves, about others), considering those narratives in some meaningful way, and reacting accordingly. And as discussed in Chapter 3, uptake is core to the relational framework -- it is the

key mechanism by which shared first-, second-, and third-personal narratives are licensed and socially activated. Put another way, our identities are fundamentally shaped by how others do or don't give uptake to our first-personal narratives, by how others do or don't give uptake to other second- and third-personal narratives about us, by which aspects of our first-personal narratives are or aren't available for others' uptake, etc.

Given this structure, it's unsurprising that Lindemann characterizes relational identity work as fundamentally relying on *trust*. She writes, "We performers need to be able to rely on each other to play the roles we seem to be playing in the improvisations that constitute our interpersonal exchanges" (2014, 144). She calls on Annette Baier's work to flesh out this idea and writes that trust is equivalent to "reliance on another's good will," where trusting someone means "depend[ing] on her good will towards me" (2014, 144, citing Baier 1986, 235). For Lindemann, in so depending on another, "I necessarily lay myself open to the possibility that my trust is unmerited and the other might harm me" (2014, 145). Given how the relational framework is structured -- with a network of agents each acting as potential authors of a given identity, where, e.g., I rely on others to construct me well and they rely on me to construct them well -- I take this to be a convincing position. Put another way, the relational framework fundamentally places us in positions of varying dependence and power with respect to our interlocutors. So, because who we are is partly determined by who our social others allow us to be, who we are is in turn a matter of vulnerability and dependence on those social others.[65]

Indeed, this articulation of potential harm as a result of our existence within dependency relations aligns considerably with substantial literature on vulnerability. Most basically, vulnerability is characterized as a state of being *susceptible to harm*. For some, this

[65] I expect this vulnerability and dependency to generally be stronger in narrative-sharing relationships that are also personal or intimate relationships -- e.g., a narrative-sharing relationship between spouses is likely to carry more vulnerability than one between strangers, precisely because spouses know so much about each other and depend on one another for many reasons beyond identity construction alone.

susceptibility exists because the capacity to suffer is inherent to human embodiment as "an ontological condition of our humanity" (Mackenzie et al 2014, 4).[66] For others, this susceptibility more saliently arises because "inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others" (2014, 5).[67] In either case, most authors will agree these susceptibilities suggest that the structure of vulnerability is inherently relational. For instance, Robert Goodin writes, "Vulnerability implies that there is some agent (actual or metaphorical) capable of exercising some effective choice (actual or…metaphorical) over whether to cause or avert the threatened harm," which in turn "implies that 'vulnerability' is essentially a relational notion" (1985, 112). Goodin summarizes this idea succinctly: "Vulnerability amounts to one person having the capacity to produce consequences that matter to another" (1985, 114).[68]

So, in the context of relational identity work, we can fairly straightforwardly understand Lindemann's argument that identity work relies on trust as an argument about vulnerability. Namely, because a relational identity framework fundamentally involves dependence on another's good will and because it fundamentally disperses identity authority amongst agents, the identity work I do with another agent is fundamentally structured such that I have some amount of vulnerability to how they hold me, and they have some amount of vulnerability to

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[66] E.g., refer to Dodds 2014, Fineman 2008, Butler 2004, Butler 2009, MacIntyre 1999, Nussbaum 2006, Ricoeur 2007, Schildrick 2002, Turner 2006.
[67] E.g., refer to Goodin 1985, Macklin 2003, Levine et al 2004, Hurst 2008, Luna 2009, Schroeder & Gefenas 2009.
[68] While dependence and vulnerability are often discussed interchangeably, Susan Dodds argues the dependence is actually a specific form of vulnerability (2014, 182). She writes that vulnerability is a disposition that we occupy by virtue of our embodied relationality, where our needs are met through "complex interpersonal and social interactions over time," likely with many other agents, institutions, etc (2014, 182). Meanwhile, dependence is a form of vulnerability that "requires the support of a specific person (or people)" (2014, 182-183). So, vulnerability is the general disposition of having needs that must be met relationally (a disposition we all share as embodied relational beings), and dependency is a vulnerability where our needs rely on a specific person. However, because most of the work I'll reference does not carefully use Dodds' distinction, for the sake of consistency with that work, I will use of 'vulnerability' to include both a general disposition of reliance and specific reliance on particular individuals.

how I hold them. Applying this to narrative-sharing relationships specifically, I argue that we can very basically understand narrative-sharing relationships as relationships where agents are variously *vulnerable* towards one another (their identities can potentially be impacted by each other), and, by fiat, *powerful* towards one another (they can potentially impact each other's identities). Given all this, we can basically understand the vulnerability that's conceptually embedded in the relational framework as:

> *Identity-constructing vulnerability*: Susceptibility to another person's (or group's, or institution's) capacity to impact who you can be in a given context, which arises from our status as relationally-situated beings.

Now, the conceptual framework of relational identity isn't the only way vulnerability can arise in our narrative-sharing relationships. Beyond the way vulnerability is inherently structured in the multi-authored framework, we also know that different agents are variously vulnerable socially and by virtue of their occupying (or seeming to occupy) marginalized identities. As we saw in Chapter 3, dominant modes of meaning-making regularly render marginalized agents non-credible or unintelligible to their dominantly-situated others, and this can have significant material impacts for marginalized agents. For instance, trans people whose identities are untellable to, unintelligible to, or rejected by dominant others often consequently face negative impacts to their economic security, their mental and physical health, their safety, their self-esteem, their access to social spaces, etc.

Further, when we consider how this manifests socially, when a marginalized identity is systematically mischaracterized by toxic master narratives and systematically misheld by dominant others, the harms extend beyond the individual to constrain full identity groups. Consider, for instance, Talia Mae Bettcher's incisive analysis of how the "trans deceiver" narrative justifies and promulgates violence against trans people: trans people are systematically characterized as "deceptive," and with widespread uptake of this master narrative comes widespread violence against trans people, particularly trans women (Bettcher 2007). So even at a cursory glance, how we do or don't hold our social others -- particularly our marginalized

social others -- can have significant impact. Indeed, while no one narrative-sharing relationship on its own is fully identity-constituting (as discussed in Chapter 3), any relationship where such poor holding is happening is minimally a site of potential harm -- whether harm in the form of physical violence (as in Bettcher's example) or in the form of epistemic and social harms (e.g., impaired self-knowledge, unequal status as a maker and sharer of social meaning, etc).[69]

While these toxic narratives arise within and have the real potential to shape narrative-sharing relationships, the vulnerability they produce is not necessarily a specific result of the relational framework itself. Rather, it's a practical result of the ways that master narratives function to position non-conforming identities as marginal and susceptible to harm. However, while the source of this vulnerability isn't the relational framework per se, this kind of vulnerability still likely has extreme significance in the narrative-sharing relationship and can function to diminish or enhance one of the agent's positions of relative power in the relationship. So, to distinguish these two (often interwoven but distinctive) forms of vulnerability, let's add:

> *Identity-based vulnerability:* Susceptibility to another person's (or group's, or institution's) capacity to effect social control over you because of your (perceived or actual) marginalized identities, which arises from the relative salience of master narratives in that context.[70]

Adding identity-based vulnerability to our analysis is helpful for narrowing our attention even more closely on particular forms of vulnerability in identity practice that are instantiations of

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[69] E.g., refer to literature on testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory injustice (Fricker 2007, Dotson 2011, Medina 2017) as well as related literature on epistemic harms of microaggressions (e.g., Fatima 2017, Fatima 2020, Friedlaender and Ivy 2020). The latter will be covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

[70] As discussed in Chapter 2, Miranda Fricker uses the notion of "effect[ing] social control" to describe social power (2007, 13). She further writes that identity power is at work "Whenever there is an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon…shared imaginative conceptions of social identity" (2007, 13). For the purposes of this chapter, I understand *shared imaginative conceptions of privileged social identity* very basically to be *master narratives*. So, in the case of practical identity vulnerability as I've defined it, a person who occupies marginalized identity categories is likely to be vulnerable towards an interlocutor whose identity categories are relatively more privileged.

structural oppression, and not just any generic or felt form of vulnerability. To illustrate the difference: In 2014, Janet Mock was doing publicity for her memoir and went on Piers Morgan's talk show to discuss it. During the interview, Morgan deadnamed her and referred to her childhood self as a boy, among other problems. After the interview aired, Mock called Morgan out for these problems on Twitter, and subsequently many others tweeted their agreement with her and called Morgan out themselves. The next day, Morgan had Mock back on his show, and in his (excruciatingly long) opening statement, he said that he'd spent "12 hours being viciously abused", and that he wanted Mock to explain "why he's had to go through this" (CNN 2014). Now, I don't doubt that this experience felt bad to Morgan and likely made him feel vulnerable in ways he wasn't used to (itself a marker of his privilege). However, this form of vulnerability is categorically different from vulnerability produced by systems of oppression. Among other likely differences, it is not particular to his membership in a marginalized group, but to his actions, and is not ongoing or systemic, but one-off. Meanwhile, the vulnerability Mock has in these exchanges is particular to her marginalized identity -- in the first interview especially, she is subjected to being incorrectly named and gendered by someone who has significant power in the context. So, including identity-based vulnerability in our analysis here allows us to focus on vulnerability like Mock's and not Morgan's.

To now consider the distinction between the identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability in the context of narrative-sharing relationships, imagine a trans person Ana is misheld in some way by a cis interlocutor Darren. The narrative-sharing relationship between Ana and Darren is one that's fundamentally structured by *identity-constructing vulnerability* -- i.e., vulnerability that arises by virtue of its being a narrative-sharing relationship, where both agents' identities are vulnerable to how the other holds it and both agents have some power in the relationship. However, in this case, *identity-based vulnerability* is also clearly at play -- i.e., Ana faces exacerbated vulnerability that's specific to her trans identity and the ways master

narratives are weighted against her because of it. Among other potential reasons,[71] this disparity impacts the narrative-sharing relationship by tipping the scales of power -- Ana is more vulnerable in the relationship than is Darren, and Darren is more powerful in the relationship than is Ana.[72]

Consequently, the uptake practices engaged in through the narrative-sharing relationship will be skewed towards Darren's having unilateral control over both Ana's identity and his own. That is, because Ana's narratives aren't authoritative either structurally (as a result of the identity framework) or practically (as a result of oppressive master narratives), Darren's narratives about her are likely to carry far more social weight. In many cases, because Darren has so much more power in the relationship, he can effectively hold Ana however he'd like without facing significant social consequences, and without even needing to consider how she'd like to be held. Further, because Darren has so much more power in the relationship, he can also likely socially effect his own first-personal narratives about himself without having to consider Ana's input. Altogether, because Ana does not have access to meaningful ways for potentially exerting dissenting, non-dominant meaning in this narrative-sharing relationship, the narrative-sharing relationship and the uptake practices within it are not structured to build or even encourage conditions of empowerment. Our task, then, is to consider how we might better structure our uptake practices. In particular, we need uptake practices that not only admit the dissenting meaning of marginalized agents, but that also actively solicit and integrate such dissenting meaning into practice.

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[71] For instance, we can imagine any number of reasons the scales of vulnerability/power might be tipped in a narrative-sharing relationship -- one agent being somehow incapacitated, one agent being an infant, one agent being in a position of structural authority (employer, political leader, coach, etc), and so on.

[72] Note that in practice, the assessments of identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability are unlikely to be so clearly delineated, and assessments of both our identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability should be understood to be highly-context dependent.

To begin determining how we might establish more empowering uptake, let's consider how Lindemann characterizes doing uptake well. She does not say much explicitly, but does offer some helpful starting points. She writes:

> "The rules that govern the expression and uptake of an identity are not just social but also moral…in ordinary social interchanges the participants are expected to help each other preserve the definition of the scene they have collaborated in establishing. They do this by responding appropriately to the personae being projected, and in that way they hold the others in their identities." (2014, 102).

Recalling that uptake is a practice of both recognition and response, we can understand Lindemann's call here to "respond appropriately" as hinging on also *recognizing* appropriately. As I've begun to show, and as a growing literature in epistemic injustice persuasively argues, recognition is often and easily impaired for marginalized agents, particularly in cases where giving uptake is predicated on using dominant norms to interpret the first-personal projections of marginalized agents. Often in such cases, dominant meaning and meaning-making are ill-equipped to describe or understand marginal epistemic norms, and instead render marginalized agents non-credible or unintelligible to dominantly-situated agents.[73]

As a result, without a robust account of resistant interpretive norms and practices, the first-personal narratives of marginalized people are destined to be overpowered by dominant understandings. Consequently, those with marginal identities are unlikely to receive affirming, empowering, or even basically acceptable uptake from dominant others. Given this, I argue that to understand what "responding appropriately" to others' projected personae ought to look like, we need to start by considering how we recognize them, where recognition involves taking in information and interpreting it. Namely, we can and should insist on deploying interpretive practices that are specifically built to accommodate and resist the ways marginalized meaning

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[73] In some cases, this can be overtly or intentionally malicious (e.g., use of slurs, physical violence, etc), but much more frequently this is more covert, ambiguous, subtle, or not explicitly intentional (e.g., forms that require gender identification but only have options for "male" or "female"). This latter category includes the phenomenon of microaggressions, which I'll cover in explicit detail in Chapter 5.

and meaning-making are regularly undermined and dismissed in dominant contexts. In particular, we should be engaged in recognition practices that are structured to rebalance power by affording meaningful avenues for marginalized meaning and meaning-making to surface and be taken seriously. For more on this, let's move to the next section.

4.2. Resistant recognition & interpretive practice

As I've described, in order to shape recognition practices that are empowering for marginalized agents, it will be important to ensure that marginalized meaning and meaning-making aren't being consistently undermined. For instance, in his *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013), José Medina specifically focuses on how racist and sexist interpretive failures arise in our interpersonal communicative interactions with one another to generate epistemic responsibilities, and from there, he describes strategies for epistemic resistance. Let's consider his account in more detail.

Most basically, Medina argues that to be epistemically responsible with respect to our interlocutors, we should have some minimal knowledge of those others, ourselves, and the contexts within which we are mutually situated. He summarizes this position in his thesis of cognitive minimums, where he writes that acting responsibly as an epistemic agent "requires that one be minimally knowledgeable about one's mind and one's life, about the social world and the particular others with whom one interacts, and about the empirical realities one encounters" (2013, 126). Medina builds this position up from the idea that as epistemic agents, we carry some minimal expectations of recognizing that the epistemic standards and interpretive norms we rely on in day-to-day life are likely to be imperfect or incomplete. This expectation in turn prompts a linked expectation that under such recognition, we carry some minimal responsibility for questioning and reconsidering those norms. He writes, "In order to become hermeneutically responsible interlocutors, in our communicative interactions, we are obligated to interrogate the limits of our interpretive horizons and to expose ourselves to interpretive challenges that may

require extending or transforming the interpretive resources available to us" (2013, 110). Further, Medina argues that minimal knowledge is basically necessary for responsible action in general, writing, "Responsibility and epistemic competence are bound up with each other: there is no responsibility unless there is minimal knowledge about self, others, and the world" (2013, 127).

So, Medina argues that, as epistemic agents who interact with other differently situated epistemic agents, we have some minimal obligation to regularly question and revise our interpretive resources, even if and especially when we may otherwise take them as given. However, he is careful to recognize how difficult this project can be, particularly in cases where the interpretive resources an agent relies on are structured to promote active ignorance -- a state of "being hermeneutically numbed to certain meanings and voices," where one's ignorance actively protects itself from being challenged (2013, 107). In particular, Medina focuses on active ignorance as an instantiation of racialized or gendered ignorance, where hearers in privileged positions (e.g., white people, men) may not give uptake to a marginalized speaker's testimony because the hearer's hermeneutical resources actively create "blind spots" (106) that inhibit them from understanding the potential hermeneutical positions of marginalized knowers.

Difficult as it may be to undo such self-protecting active ignorance, Medina argues that even if we might not expect an agent to instantly develop full understanding of a communicative act or interpretive practice that they've been actively trained not to understand, they still can be blamed for "not even trying in the least to interrogate their interpretive habits" (2013, 112).[74] Put simply, they can be blamed for not making any effort at all to understand an interlocutor from her perspective (2013, 112). For Medina, working to achieve this kind of understanding is a

[74] Michele Moody-Adams makes a similar point, arguing against treating cultural limitations in our knowledge of others as non-culpable ignorance, writing, "Affected ignorance is essentially a matter of choosing not to be informed of what we can and should know" (1994, 301). We can also recognize similarities with Longino's position on being demonstrably open to critique discussed above -- i.e., at its most basic, this just means re-evaluating evidence in light of critique and new information.

particular responsibility for those in privileged social (and thus, dominant hermeneutical) positions. Namely, because privilege is the position that protects itself from other perspectives, while the epistemic *harm* of active ignorance is born by the epistemic agent in question (as their epistemic resources are impaired by the ignorance), the epistemic *wrong* is born by the marginalized people with whom the agent interacts (as their lives are impacted by the ignorance) (2013, 107). So, particularly in cases where some racial or gendered stigma is expressed socially, a privileged subject's ignorance to that stigma or its harms is an epistemic failure "if and when agents in that position can be expected to have the requisite knowledge of social contextuality and therefore, to be aware of and sensitive to such stigmatizing expressive possibilities" (2013, 142).

Medina goes on to parse two key failures of epistemic responsibility agents may make in cases of active ignorance:

1. **First-order or object-level ignorance**: This is ignorance of the kinds of "specific things we should know about the people we interact with" (2013, 149). He gives the example of knowing that Jewish people exist at one's university, and knowing the prominent aspects of their religion, culture, history, etc (2013, 149).
2. **Second-order or meta-level ignorance**: This is a more general attitude of ignorance about others -- ignorance of the specificity of others, or ignorance about the relevance of others to one's life. As Medina writes, this can manifest as "the assumption that others are utterly irrelevant to our life -- *blindness to social relationality*" (2013, 149, emphasis in original). Medina is particularly interested in second-order ignorance because it is "the kind of active ignorance that protects itself and becomes a durable obstacle for responsibility…and requires a whole battery of critical interventions and structural transformations to be uprooted" (2013, 150). Here Medina gives the example of Franz Fanon's (1967) identification of two types of blindness to difference common in white ignorance:

> One is blindness to the basic humanity of Black people, instead recognizing them as subhuman. This type of blindness is, unsurprisingly, most often expressed by those who are explicitly prejudiced against Blackness (2013, 150). The second, however, comes from those who are publicly and explicitly supportive of racial justice; it is a blindness to the humanity of Blackness "*in its difference*, in its specificity" such that Black experiences are universalized with each other, and ultimately, with all human experience (2013, 151).[75]

For Medina, both first-order and second-order ignorance are failures in our "epistemic obligations to know others" (2013, 148) because they are failures in knowing a minimal amount about others and about relevant social context. In addition to being failures in other- and context-knowledge, Medina also argues that they are failures in *self*-knowledge. He writes, "social ignorance also involves self-ignorance; ignorance about [one's] own positionality and relationality with respect to those ignored others" (2013, 143). In other words, when we are ignorant to the realities and perspectives of our social others and the social context we inhabit together, we are also ignorant to our own social positionality and that our positionality is shaped relationally with others (2013, 143. Refer also to 2013, 37 and 105-106).

From these characterizations of how we can fail in our epistemic responsibilities, Medina calls for epistemic responsibility built on "lucidity with respect to one's blindness or insensitivity" (2013, 224). For my purposes, I propose that we focus our analysis on such lucidity by flipping Medina's framework for knowledge rather than ignorance. That is, to be epistemically responsible, an agent should achieve two-part knowledge about her social others:

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[75] In addition to Fanon, there's a wide body of work on "color-blindness" as itself a form of racism. As that literature demonstrates, despite putatively establishing racial equality by explicitly not referencing any differences between various racial groups, color-blind approaches actually exacerbate racial inequities, e.g., by ignoring power differences that underlie racial injustices. For variations on this topic, refer, e.g., to Du Bois 1903, Dovidio and Gaertner 2004, Mills 1997, Bonilla-Silva 2014, as well as fictional work including Ellison 1952 and Saramago 1999.

(a) **first-order knowledge**, or minimal understanding of specific things about her interlocutors that are likely to matter to them, and (b) **second-order knowledge**, or minimal understanding of others' relevance to her own life, minimal understanding of her and others' relationality with respect to each other, etc. Now, I don't take this responsibility to demand that we each work to achieve encyclopedic knowledge of facts about every kind of identity and culture that exists. Recall, e.g., Medina's earlier point that while we don't have to expect that an agent instantly develops full knowledge of others' meanings and meaning-making practices, we can be blamed for not making any effort at all to understand our interlocutors from their perspectives (2013, 112). In most cases, then, more fundamentally important than the content of the knowledge itself are practices of being open to new information and seeking alternate views. Medina calls this a *kaleidoscopic consciousness* -- that is, an epistemic standpoint that is forever considering and reconsidering alternate views, "a subjectivity that is always open to acknowledge and engage new perspectives" (2013, 224).

Further, while such kaleidoscopic consciousness likely demands some proactivity -- e.g., actively soliciting information about alternate views (for instance by seeking out books, movies, articles, etc, written by and featuring people who are different from you) -- it doesn't hinge entirely on your doing extensive independent research. Indeed, I again want to take Medina's caution against universalizing others' experiences seriously. Here that caution means that while working to expand our understanding of other kinds of people *in general* is important, the "specific things" that are likely to matter to your interlocutors will also, to at least some extent, be specific *to them*. That information is likely best learned through your interactions with them. This need not look like anything as intensive as a formal interview (and I would suspect, *shouldn't* look like a formal interview), but can instead be a matter of low-intensity preference checks, particularly in ongoing relationships.[76]

[76] E.g., "I noticed your name in your email signature is different from your name on your office door. What would you like me to call you?" or "I'm going to bring in cookies tomorrow -- do you

To illustrate what meeting these responsibilities might look like, let's return to the example of Greg who thinks he's Napoleon. In Chapter 3, I borrowed this example from Schechtman to motivate the no-trump view by demonstrating that our first-personal narratives about ourselves are fallible and might not warrant uptake by others. Now, though, let's spend a minute to consider what meeting your cognitive minimums with respect to Greg might look like. Because this is an example of someone projecting first-personal narratives substantially divergent from dominant hermeneutical practices, meeting cognitive minimums is likely to be somewhat more demanding than it might be with someone whose self-conception is more easily intelligible. This work might include developing understanding of some range of factors, e.g.:

- When did Greg start thinking this? How long has this been going on?
- How does this self-conception differ from his previous self-conception? Does it contradict core values he previously held deeply?
- What are potential causes for his beginning to think this?
- How are other people in his life (friends, family, coworkers, strangers) reacting to this? Are they treating him with kindness? With ridicule?
- Is he experiencing economic, safety, or health issues because of this?
- What's at stake in granting him or not granting him uptake? That is, what are the costs and benefits of just playing along? What are the costs and benefits of refusing to give him uptake?
- Is your own identity more or less vulnerable because of this? Is Greg able to hold your identity in the way he'd like to? In the way you'd like him to? If not, why not?

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have any dietary restrictions?" Similarly, take the pedagogical practice of having students at the beginning of a term fill out a short private questionnaire to let you know if they have any particular learning needs, accommodations, etc.

- What kinds of interpretive tools might Greg be using to understand himself? Are those the same or different from the interpretive tools you generally rely on? Are they the same of different from the interpretive tools generally used by others in Greg's life?
- Is there something you might be missing by thinking about this only from your perspective? What might this look like from Greg's perspective?

While achieving understanding of these factors is likely more demanding than achieving first- and second-order knowledge of less contested identities, note that it still need not be that demanding in practice. I take it that all of these questions could be resolved primarily through thoughtful attention in your interactions, and in most cases they don't need to demand, e.g., intensive research or interviewing.

Turning back specifically to my interest in recognition, I hold that achieving this minimal first- and second-order knowledge is critical for developing affirming recognition practices for vulnerable marginalized agents. As we've seen throughout this chapter, the first-personal narratives of marginalized agents are regularly interpreted through the lens of dominant norms, and as Medina persuasively demonstrates, such interpretation is bound to be faulty because it is built on self-insulating and self-perpetuating active ignorance. In other words, dominant meaning and meaning-making are ill-equipped to describe or understand marginal epistemic norms, and even actively incentivize misunderstanding or ignoring those norms. Without the responsibility for the minimal knowledge that grounds more nuanced interpretation of others' narratives, marginal identities will continue to be misrecognized as non-credible or unintelligible. By contrast, by meeting our responsibilities to recognize both first-and second-order knowledge, we engage in an epistemic practice that insists on engaging in kaleidoscopic consciousness. Note, too, that simply attaining first- and second-order knowledge is not sufficient for recognition -- we must also be able to activate that knowledge and apply it to

various circumstances.[77] Continually striving for first- and second-order knowledge not only admits marginalized meaning and meaning-making practices into our interpretive habits, but *demands* that we actively and regularly seek them out, effectively producing dispersed control over recognition in a given interaction. As such, recognition practices that are built on first- and second-order knowledge help rebalance power for marginalized and vulnerable people.

To demonstrate why, let's return again to Greg. Let's imagine Greg is a regular at the coffee shop where you're a barista, and as a result you've had consistent interactions with him over the course of a few years. Through your interactions in that time, you've established understanding of some set of the questions listed above, primarily through small talk and attention to context clues. From that work, one of two sets of facts emerge. In the first, Greg1 is a wealthy software engineer who retired at forty because he was financially able to. He has now decided to pursue a career as an actor and recently saw a call for a role as Napoleon in a well-funded film that has already signed a number of big names. Despite having no background in theater and no extensive historical knowledge of Napoleon, a lifetime of extreme privilege has given him the confidence to believe that he has what it takes to get the role. In the weeks leading up to his audition, he decides to take on what he understands to be the personality of Napoleon in every aspect of his life -- he turns every moment he can into a heated competition, falls into a rage after losing a card game with his wife, and insists on long retellings of his military successes. Now when he comes into the coffee shop, anytime you write "Greg" on his cup instead of "Napoleon," he berates you publicly, screams that he won't pay for the drink, and demands to speak to your manager.

In the second, Greg2 is a high school history teacher who is in a horrible car accident that gives him a serious head injury and puts him into a coma for several months. One day, to

[77] Note that our failure to activate knowledge in appropriate circumstances can be the result of many different factors, and no one is likely to do this perfectly all the time. For instance, we may be tired, inattentive, or careless; may underappreciate the significance of the knowledge; etc.

the great relief of his loved ones, he awakens from his coma. However, they are soon dismayed to realize that his head injury has caused him to become convinced he is Napoleon. While Greg2's underlying personality has not changed much -- he still has the same sweet, calm demeanor he always has -- his perception of reality has shifted dramatically: he often goes to leave the house talking of buying a warm coat for his upcoming invasion of Russia, asks where his wife Josephine is, insists on wearing Napoleonic attire, etc. Strangers regularly ridicule him, often in ways that end up being very confusing and emotionally upsetting to him. The high medical costs of his extended hospital stay and his inability to return to work put a significant financial strain on his partner Steve, who is unable to afford long-term care at a mental health facility, but does his best to care for Greg2 in their home. Now when he comes into the coffee shop, anytime you write "Greg" on his cup instead of "Napoleon," he gets confused and sometimes becomes very distressed.

With these two contrasting examples, we can begin to see the importance of meeting cognitive minimums for helping build a meaningful balance of power in our recognition practices. Most basically, these examples demonstrate the utility of starting recognition from a basic appreciation that you might not immediately or automatically have all the information you need to interpret Greg's first-personal narratives. More specifically, these examples demonstrate that by seeking both first-order and second-order knowledge, we find that the first-personal narratives of Greg1 and Greg2 merit much different second- and third-personal recognition, despite their containing the same basic content -- i.e., the story "I am Napoleon." In particular, second-order knowledge is especially productive in these cases as it forces both meditation on and incorporation of contextual vulnerability dynamics into your interpretations of Greg1's and Greg2's first-personal narratives. By actively subjecting our interpretations of these first-personal narratives to alternative perspectives and information, we find that the vulnerability Greg2 has in your narrative-sharing relationship is non-trivial, and thus your recognition of him demands careful treatment. By contrast, Greg1's position exposes him to very little vulnerability,

whether in your narrative-sharing relationship or elsewhere; indeed, his interactions with you primarily serve to exacerbate your own vulnerability.[78]

So, meeting our epistemic minimums in our recognition practices enables us to go beyond just the content of the narrative at hand and instead ensures a deeper consideration of contextual vulnerability and power dynamics. While meeting your epistemic minimums is unlikely to be highly demanding in *every* interaction you have with *any* person, in contexts where the relationship is close, or you have ongoing interactions, or you have a particularly powerful position, the demandingness accordingly increases. This is specifically a result of the increased vulnerability that defines such relationships, and concomitantly, the greater knowledge you have of each other. And ultimately, this setup serves to structure recognition practices in our narrative-sharing relationships as dynamic and democratic without abandoning a critical stance or the no-trump view. To expand: pushing ourselves to meet both first- and second-order knowledge to ground our interpretations of others' first-personal narratives doesn't just acknowledge that we likely have gaps in our knowledge and perspective (though this is undeniably important). More significantly, it also insists that acknowledging our epistemic lacunae is a key practice for ensuring that our narrative-sharing relationships aren't built on our unilateral interpretive power. In other words, we are proactively seeking vulnerable perspectives, information about how they are rendered vulnerable in the first place, information about how they are dynamically vulnerable or powerful, etc. However, this practice does not

[78] At the same time, however, this fact of your vulnerability likely makes it practically more difficult to refuse to give him uptake (e.g., you may be worried about him retaliating or trying to get you fired).

insist that we always or automatically give up our interpretive power; it just means that we make our interpretive choices as a function of our social others' vulnerability to us and others.[79] [80]

Meanwhile, recognition practices that focus more squarely on constraints of reality (as does Schechtman) or credibility (as does Lindemann) are ill-equipped to produce the same results. In particular, they focus assessments of appropriate recognition on the content of a narrative and some assessment of its accuracy, whereas I focus assessments of appropriate recognition primarily on how agents within the narrative-sharing relationship are rendered more or less vulnerable. While Lindemann's approach is far more successful at incorporating contextual information than is Schechtman's, it still falls short of deeply integrating the kinds of vulnerability considerations I have described. Indeed, under either Lindemann's or Schechtman's epistemic standards, we have few tools for recognizing Greg2 as Napoleon. Further, in more deliberately focusing on vulnerability and our responsibilities to consider marginalized meaning and meaning-making, my account also does more to help advance a balance of power in our recognition practices.

However, in our work to establish uptake practices that help build conditions of empowerment for vulnerable agents, restructuring our recognition practices alone is not enough. Rather, we must also attend to our *response* practices, where response is the primary

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[79] Of course, in practice this is all much easier said than done. Particularly given the depth and self-perpetuating ignorance of dominant positionality, we should be slow to assume that even a dominant agent who is actively seeking out alternate perspectives will always get things right. And even in our narrative-sharing relationships with others who are situated similarly to us, it's unlikely we'll get recognition right 100% of the time. As Lindemann points out, "No one is capable of uniform excellence -- there are too many people in our lives and too many other calls on our time and attention" (2014, 122). So, rather than supposing uniform excellence is possible, my account simply insists that we do our best and accept responsibility when we inevitably mess up.

[80] This practice also does not insist that we seek to know *everything* about our social others, even those with whom we have the closest relationships. For instance, it may even be healthy for partners in an intimate relationship to not seek full knowledge of every detail of each other's lives (e.g., refer to Baier 1986). While I'm sure much more could be said on this topic, my general inclination is that the question of exactly how much knowledge we should strive for does not admit of precise boundaries in every case, but rather, admits of degrees dependent on context and does not demand either extreme of *all knowledge* or *no knowledge at all*.

action through which we *do uptake* -- whether by granting uptake to the first-personal narratives of others, rejecting uptake of those narratives, giving uptake to some other set of narratives about them, etc. With this in mind, in the next section, I will describe how our responsibilities in recognition ground linked responsibilities in response.

4.3. Responsibilities in response

In the last section, we saw that to help balance power in our recognition practices, we should actively seek alternate perspectives and interpretive practices, particularly when we are in socially dominant positions. Turning now to an interest in balancing power in our response practices, then, one immediate route we can take is to ensure that the complex recognition built in the previous section is operationalized to inform how we treat others in our narrative-sharing relationships. But treating our social others well -- i.e., doing uptake in ways that build conditions of empowerment -- has to go beyond just how we treat the basic content of who our social others are. That is, because we are interested in building practices that structurally balance power for agents whose meanings and meaning-making practices are disputed, *how we treat* our social others means more than just treatment we do *at* or *towards* them, and also includes treatment we admit *from* them.[81] In other words, if we want to take power rebalancing seriously in our uptake practices, we must consider both (a) how an agent responds to the first-personal narratives of her social others, and (b) how she responds to their second- and third-personal narratives about her. In short, we must consider both how she constructs and how she is constructed.

To begin digging into this set of topics, let's consider how the recognition practices in the previous section might handle trans identity. Meeting one's first order obligations with respect to trans people demands identifying a range of considerations: For instance, it may call for

[81] Here is another place we can find close similarities with literature on color-blindness or post-racialism. Like that literature, my account is invested in surfacing and understanding -- not ignoring or assimilating -- difference.

recognition that trans people exist in one's social spaces, that others' genders might not be immediately "obvious," that others' gender presentations may shift from context to context, that it's generally considered rude to ask people about their genitals or medical history, etc. Relatedly, meeting one's second order obligations can prompt a number of key recognitions: It can mean recognizing that how you hold other people's genders is non-trivial and can impact their access to basic material needs. It can mean recognizing that having easy social access to one's gender is not something others necessarily experience. It can mean recognizing that your own relationship to gender is not neutral or given, but that rather, your gender is itself shaped by your social others and structural forces.

As we have seen throughout this project, how trans identity is or isn't socially recognized is regularly a matter of dispute. Particularly given the contested nature of this recognition, expanding our second-order knowledge to specifically consider identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability is critical. Under such an approach, recognition goes beyond merely understanding the content of various narratives to also understanding how they may be subject to precarity or distortion because of the agent's social context. For one, this could involve recognizing that your trans interlocutor's first-personal narratives are socially precarious, and that without your uptake, won't be socially conferred, and that without conferral, they could experience exacerbated vulnerability. For instance, consider the example of a cis woman policing a trans woman's use of the women's restroom. In this case, the cis woman's failure to grant uptake to the trans woman's first-personal narratives directly generates vulnerability for the trans woman. Similarly, failing to call a trans person by the right name or pronouns could risk making their trans identity public to people for whom that isn't safe -- e.g., a discriminatory manager or landlord, people they interact with everyday who may now harass them, etc.

A. Constructing

With these considerations in mind, then, we can begin to see how our first- and second-order recognition informs our responses to the first-personal narratives of our trans social others. Some responses may be particular to specific interactions with a trans interlocutor. For instance, if someone you've known for a while asks that you start using a different name for them, recognizing a general set of respect and safety concerns should prompt you to respond by starting to call them by the new name, and correcting yourself when you make a mistake. Responses may also involve negative action -- e.g., abstaining from asking invasive questions about whether a trans person has had "the surgery." The recognitions identified above may also prompt general or proactive responses. For instance, recognizing that gender is not always "readable," one could adopt a practice of starting meetings with new people by having everyone share their pronouns.[82] Likewise, recognizing that sex does not always "match" gender for many people, one could work to use inclusive language when talking about topics like reproductive justice or women's rights -- e.g., using "people who menstruate" rather than "women" when discussing issues relevant to menstruation.

Most basically, our responsibilities in how we respond to the first-personal narratives of others are a function of the vulnerability dynamics that structure our narrative-sharing relationships with them. To expand: In all of the above instances, the response given is based on recognition of both specific things that are likely to matter to trans people, and a basic understanding of how relational dynamics make some identities socially licensed and others socially precarious. These recognitions clarify that in your narrative-sharing relationships with trans people, your response has impact. That is, you very likely have the capacity to "produce

[82] While some have offered thoughtful critiques of pronoun "go-round" practices, I follow Spade 2018 in still generally finding them productive, namely because of the norm they establish for *everyone* to offer their pronouns. Without them, it's often the case that only the trans folks who feel the most comfortable doing so will provide their pronouns, further marking transness as an aberration and cisness as a given.

consequences that matter to [them]" (Goodin 1985, 114), where how their identity is socially conferred -- and the material conditions that may hinge on this conferral -- depends heavily on your response. This dependence relation grounds responsibility; namely, a responsibility to treat one's position of power with care. In particular, I argue that we have responsibility in constructing others proportionate with the capacity we have to produce consequences that matter to their identities:

> *Responsibility in constructing:* we are responsible for granting (at least minimal) uptake to the first-personal narratives of our social others in proportion with the capacity we have to impact what their identity can be socially.

Put another way: Suppose you're in a narrative-sharing relationship with an interlocutor who is projecting a particular first-personal narrative, and you've recognized it consistent with the practices detailed in the previous section. Your obligation to treat them according to that first-personal narrative ought to hinge on a weighting of the vulnerability at stake, given considerations like: Would refusing to treat your interlocutor according to that first-personal narrative result in them being subjected to exacerbated vulnerability? Are they already subjected to vulnerability that would be continued if you refused to so treat them? Would treating them in one way or another increase your or another agent's vulnerability? If, e.g., granting a vulnerable person uptake comes at no threat to your own vulnerability and also minimizes theirs, then you have an obligation to treat them according to their first-personal narratives.[83]

Given that this process is mediated proportionally based on the capacity you have to impact who they can be, it's also worth noting that we're almost never so deeply powerless that we're completely off the hook for doing some basic work to try to treat our social others well. For instance, even in cases where we have relatively little identity-based power, we may have some

[83] Note that while this process may be undertaken consciously or deliberatively, it doesn't necessarily need to be. E.g., particularly after a lot of practice engaging in this kind of epistemic practice, it may become more a matter of habit than conscious effort. In any case, it will require some appreciation (whether deliberative/conscious or not) of second-order knowledge that others are can be different from you in important ways, and that your identities are mutually dependent on each other.

identity-constructing power and vice-versa; given the complexity of our actual interactions and identities with our social others, these variables have myriad permutations. In any case, because my framework insists on attention to both identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability of both you and your social others, it is almost never the case that you don't have any responsibility towards an interlocutor whatsoever, although the relative amount of responsibility can be tipped significantly based on how those vulnerabilities balance. Indeed, while my framework is not meant to be particularly demanding to enact, it is meant to be fairly demanding in terms of who bears (at least some) responsibility when.

To illustrate, let's return to the example of the two Gregs. There we saw that the vulnerability Greg2 has in your narrative-sharing relationship is significant, while treating him as Napoleon would come at little cost to you. On the reverse, the vulnerability experienced by Greg1 in your narrative-sharing relationship is quite low, whereas his interactions with you primarily serve to exacerbate your vulnerability. As a result, while you would be warranted in refusing to treat Greg1 as Napoleon, you ought to treat Greg2 as Napoleon. Similarly, if a friend tells you they're trans and would like you to start calling them a different name, the cost of doing so is very small to you, particularly compared with the harm and increased vulnerability that refusing to do so could cause to them, so you ought to call them the new name.[84]

Notably, in focusing primarily on these vulnerability dynamics for guiding your responses to the first-personal narratives of others -- rather than, e.g., whether you find those narratives accurate or credible -- you ultimately help balance power in the narrative-sharing relationship. That is, in prioritizing your social others' vulnerability more than your own

[84] TERFs will probably argue that treating trans women as women would come at a cost to their (the TERFs') vulnerability; after all, their entire ideology is based off of the fear that trans women are just men masquerading as women in order to gain access to women-only spaces and harass or assault them. However, this kind of argument is refuted by basic empirical evidence (e.g., McKinnon 2018, Bettcher 2017), and ultimately functions as little more than a dog whistle to stoke prejudice and trans panic. Refer to Weinberg 2019 for a helpful analysis of TERF uses of dog whistles.

epistemic evaluation (or even full understanding) of their first-personal projections, you engage in response practices that take marginalized meaning and meaning-making seriously.

B. Being Constructed

However, if we want to take power rebalancing seriously in our uptake practices, we can't just consider how we respond to others' first-personal narratives about themselves, and also must consider how we respond to their second- and third-personal narratives about us. Here, too, we'll find similar value in focusing on vulnerability. To ground our analysis of this facet of response, let's start with an example.

In a 2017 comedy special for Netflix, Dave Chappelle performs a bit about a party he attended, saying:

> "I went to a gallery party, all right?...And there was a few eccentric types, one of which was a very wealthy man that happened to be wearing a dress...Whatever he was, he was definitely a man...He looked sick, and all his friends were standing around him, concerned, trying to revive him...All I said, 'Excuse me, gentlemen. Is he okay?' Then they looked at me like I was evil. 'She is fine.' I said, 'Word? Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know this is what we were doing.' Here's my thing. I support anybody's right to be whoever they feel like they are inside. I'm your ally in that. However, my question is to what degree do I have to participate in your self-image? Is it fair that I have to change my whole pronoun game up for this motherfucker? That doesn't make sense" (Lathan 2017).

Now, in this example, Chappelle clearly fails in his response to the first-personal projections of the sick woman. For instance, consider what minimal work it would have taken to meet his obligations toward her first-personal projections: Some light first- or second-order epistemic work would likely prompt recognizing that this is a person who might not want to be treated as a man, and that treating them with care would come at very little personal risk to Chappelle's own identity or vulnerability. From there, he could have used gender-neutral pronouns or asked her friends how he should refer to her. Instead, he made assumptions from his perspective, took no account of his power or her vulnerability in the situation, and acted accordingly. Particularly telling here is his question "to what degree do I have to participate in your self-image?" This question clearly marks a failure to recognize second-order knowledge that's key for treating the

identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability of our social others well -- i.e., the knowledge that the social conferral of his social others' identities does rely (at least in part) on him participating in their first-personal narratives.

However, this failure in his responsibilities toward the sick woman's first-personal projections is not the only failure at play here; he also fails to respond appropriately to others' second-personal narratives about him. Namely, he fails to recognize that not only does how he treats others impact who they can be socially, but also that *how others treat him* impacts who *he* can be socially. In particular, he rejects wholesale even the basic notion that others could ask him to make minor changes to his behavior, in this case, his "whole pronoun game." Importantly, the fundamental problem isn't even that he doesn't want to change his behavior in a particular way (though given the vulnerability dynamics in play, this particular rejection is indeed problematic). Rather, the more fundamental issue is that he rejects as out of order even the basic idea of others making second-personal demands upon him that could be worth his uptake.

Similarly, consider the following question submitted to the *Slate* advice column "Dear Prudie":

> "Q. LGBTQ…BGHMNHGRESDFE?:..after this week's column I had to Google the term cis-man (maybe I don't get out enough), and when I read the definition, I thought, Seriously?! Isn't there enough nomenclature out there that cis-people can be identified simply as a man or a woman?...Frankly, I don't care how anyone identifies—your sexual preferences have nothing to do with whether I like you or not! In fact, I'd be just as happy not knowing, because I just don't care. Am I wrong that it seems we are bending too far in the opposite direction to make up for persecution in the past, to the point where the majority of us will have to refer to ourselves as non-LGBTQ?" (Lavery 2017).

Even more than the Chappelle example, here we can see a clear refusal to accept the idea that how others treat you does, and ought, to impact who you are socially. Namely, this writer is so committed to the putative neutrality of their non-trans gender identification that they can't fathom the potential of more specific language applying to them. Like with Chappelle, the fundamental problem is not, by itself, that this person rejects a particular label for themself. In

this case, a vulnerability assessment will tell us that holding them as cisgender is completely appropriate, but that's not the core issue. Rather, the fundamental problem with this person's stance is that it reveals that they don't take others' second- or third-personal narratives about them to at least warrant consideration, let alone potential uptake.

In both the Chappelle and Dear Prudie examples, the failure to respond to the second- and third-personal narratives of others with even basic consideration betrays a deep lack of appreciation for the vulnerability and power dynamics that color their narrative-sharing relationships. To expand: in both examples, responses are built on an assumption that the agent's identity is shaped and actualized completely independently from the narrative efforts of their social others. To wit, their outrage at others' attempts to treat them in ways that are not immediately and wholly consistent with their first-personal narratives reveals a foundational epistemic position where their first-personal narratives are supposed to have automatic and uncontested authority. This dynamic is no coincidence but a constitutive feature of identities that rely on master narratives rooted in patriarchy, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression. That is, because those master narratives are presupposed on the liberal model of autonomy discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., "I am self-determining, independent, strong…"), the attitudes of privilege and dismissal Chappelle and the Dear Prudie writer demonstrate are co-constitutive with the content of the master narratives themselves.

This dynamic in turn blurs the oppressive foundation grounding idealized individualism, creating what Lugones describes as a "mirage" of self-determination that incentivizes ignorance of the myriad dominant epistemic groundings that make their first-personal narratives possible in the first place (2003, 211). Further, because their resulting first-personal identities are sufficiently consistent with dominant meaning and meaning-making, they likely have very little cause to even notice attempts at dissenting meaning, let alone interpret it well. While a non-trivial component of this failure is one of self-knowledge (as we saw from Medina), what is more troubling is how both examples reveal a disregard for the legitimacy of marginalized social

others as makers of meaning. Most fundamentally, they fail to treat their social others as equal participants in their narrative-sharing relationships, i.e., as authors whose second- and third-personal narratives merit at least minimal consideration.

Further, while these kinds of failures would amount to some abuse of identity-constructing power in any narrative-sharing relationship, in narrative-sharing relationships with those who experience identity-based vulnerability relative to you, that power abuse is all the more harmful. Indeed, like our responsibilities in our responses to others' first-personal narratives about themselves, our responsibilities in our responses to others' second- and third-personal narratives about us are a function of vulnerability. However, here our responsibilities have less to do with the capacity we have to produce consequences that socially matter to others, and more to do with the capacity we have to ignore others' attempts to produce consequences that socially matter to us, even when those attempts might warrant uptake. For instance, in the Dear Prudie example, the writer felt no call to entertain the ways others might want to hold them (e.g., as cisgender), and rejected those attempts unilaterally. In particular, that rejection did not come after first weighing how doing so might exacerbate or maintain others' relative identity-based or identity-constructing vulnerability.

As a result, in an agent's responses to others' second- and third-personal narratives about her, our analysis of power and vulnerability should focus not on the *vulnerability of her social others to her*, but rather, *her invulnerability to them*. Put another way, we ought to consider how easily an agent can ignore marginalized perspectives about who she is without consequence.[85] Indeed, when identity-based and identity-constructing power entitle an agent to

[85] Note here that I mean invulnerability to extend along at least the same axes as vulnerability -- i.e., an agent may have both identity-constructing invulnerability and identity-based invulnerability. There isn't a neat formula for determining how we might balance these various axes in any given narrative-sharing relationship between agents who will likely be vulnerable and invulnerable to each other in complex ways. Most basically, though, my insistence on including identity-based in/vulnerability in these assessments is specifically meant to help us avoid unfortunately common scenarios where context-neutral understandings of vulnerability are deployed by privileged and/or powerful people to try to claim vulnerability for themselves as

disregard the narrative attempts of her marginal social others, those narrative attempts ought to be treated with care. Most basically, an agent's responsibilities in being constructed call on her to be open to the second- and third-personal narratives of her marginal social others, even and especially when those narratives conflict with her first-personal narratives. More specifically, I argue that we have responsibilities in being constructed that hinge on our capacity to ignore marginalized others' attempts to hold us differently than we hold ourselves:

> *Responsibility in being constructed:* we are responsible for granting (at least minimal) uptake to others' second- and third-personal narratives about us proportionate with the capacity we have to dismiss those narratives unilaterally.

What this responsibility basically amounts to is a surrender of your unilateral control over who you get to be socially, in cases where your epistemic positionality is structured to ignore marginalized meaning and meaning-making. However, this doesn't mean uncritically accepting what any of your marginal social others say to or about you; as ever, I am committed to a no-trump view that runs all directions in a narrative-sharing relationship. What this does mean is that you should be actively going out of your way to find ways your identity may be invulnerable or oblivious to marginal meaning and meaning-making.[86] It means when a marginal social other holds you in a way that prima facie seems incorrect or contradicts your first-personal narratives, that rather than dismissing them offhand, you should spend meaningful reflection considering whether there's something you've missed by virtue of your epistemically dominant positionality.

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a defense against attempts to hold the accountable for bad behavior. For instance, in her work on perpetrator responses to sexual assault, Jennifer Freyd describes a common tactic where perpetrators will attempt to reverse the roles of "victim" and "offender," e.g., by claiming that they are the real victim, deflecting the conversation to all the ways they've been negatively impacted by virtue of being called out, etc (1997) (not unlike the Piers Morgan example).

[86] Note that while I take this to be an active practice in that it should be ongoing and proactive, it's not necessarily an onerous demand. For instance, it could be as simple as regularly reflecting on the ways that you have power with respect to others you interact with (whether by virtue of your identity categories or some other fact of your relationship with them), making a habit of checking in with others you have some power over about their preferences, making a habit of checking in with yourself what kinds of perspectives you may be missing or overlooking, etc. In cases where you have more significant power (e.g., you're in a supervisory position), it likely should be more intensive and could involve establishing structures that more easily enable people to raise concerns with you -- e.g., setting up an anonymous complaint form.

It means accepting that in your narrative-sharing relationships with those who have identity-based vulnerability you don't, accepting that your identity is not neutral compared with theirs, but that you are both relationally constructed by each other and each of your various social others. For instance, working to meet this responsibility could entail responses as simple as a cis woman including her pronouns in her email signature as a recognition that doing so helps disrupt the continual normalization of making gendered assumptions about people based on their name or appearance.[87]

This responsibility in our responses to others' second- and third-personal narratives about us is critical to the overall project of rebalancing power in our intersubjective identity work. While our efforts to integrate marginalized meanings into how we *construct* others are also crucial toward this end, without also engaging in efforts to allow marginalized meanings to impact how we *are constructed*, identity-constructing and identity-based power will continue to function largely unscathed. That is, without responding well to both directions of the narrative-sharing relationship, we won't rebalance power in a sufficiently structural way. On the other hand, when we meet our responsibilities both in our responses to others' first-personal narratives about themselves and to others' second- and third-personal narratives about us, we establish a framework that not only admits marginalized meaning, but actively solicits it and integrates it into our identity practice. In doing so on an ongoing basis, we establish and re-establish a foundation that creates greater power for marginalized meaning and meaning-making both in our specific narrative-sharing relationships with marginalized others and the broader context of intersubjective identity work. In short, when we meet both of these

[87] In many ways, I take this approach to be harmonious with Andrea Sullivan-Clarke's work on decolonizing allyship. She persuasively argues that to participate in allyship decolonially, putative allies should work on establishing ongoing relationships with indigenous people, where those relationships are premised on amplification of indigenous sovereignty and epistemic equality, such that the social hierarchies often built into performative allyship are disrupted (Sullivan-Clarke 2019).

responsibilities, we help establish conditions of empowerment for marginalized agents in identity practice.

Of course, in practical application, this is all much more complex and nuanced. Our actual narrative-sharing relationships with others don't admit of clear boundaries, whether internal to the that narrative-sharing relationship itself, or external to a network of narrative-sharing. Further, given the intersectionality of each of our personal identities, it will rarely (if ever) be the case that a narrative-sharing relationship will consist of one vulnerable person and one invulnerable person, and I don't take my framework to rely on or presume immutable borders. Rather, context is critically important. While we will likely have stronger responsibilities in narrative-sharing relationships that are close or ongoing, on my account, narrative-sharing relationships with strangers also matter, even if they aren't as demanding. Following Lindemann, I also don't mean this framework to suppose uniform excellence is possible (2014, 122); minimally, we should each try our best and take responsibility when we inevitably mess up. Given the many complex dynamics that are likely to shape the employment of my framework in practice, it will be useful to apply it more explicitly to some concrete examples. For more on this, let's turn to the final chapter for a more detailed consideration of one particular form of everyday oppression, the microaggression.

Chapter 5: Responsibility for Microaggressions

5.0. Introduction

Consider the following first-person accounts. First, from psychologist Derald Wing Sue:

> "I [...an Asian American] recently traveled with an African American colleague on a plane...As the plane was only sparsely populated, we were told by the flight attendant (White) that we could sit anywhere, so we sat at the front, across the aisle from one another...Just before take-off, the attendant...asked if we would mind moving to the back of the plane...
>
> "Both of us...had similar negative reactions...why were we being singled out?... Struggling to control myself, I said to her in a forced calm voice: 'Did you know that you asked two passengers of color to step to the rear of the 'bus'"? For a few seconds she said nothing but looked at me with a horrified expression. Then she said in a righteously indignant tone, 'Well, I have never been accused of that! How dare you? I don't see color! I only asked you to move to balance the plane. Anyway, I was only trying to give you more space and greater privacy'" (Sue et al. 2007, 275).

Second, from trans author and activist Janet Mock:

> "I have been able to navigate this world mostly unchecked, seen as my true self without being clocked or spooked, as the girls would say colloquially. When I was younger, I remember taking pride in people's well-meaning remarks: 'You're so lucky that no one would even know!' or 'You don't even look like a guy!' or 'Wow! You're prettier than most 'natural' women!' They were all backhanded compliments, acknowledging my beauty while also invalidating my identity as a woman. To this day, I'm told in subtle and obvious ways that I am not 'real,'

> meaning that I am not, nor will I ever be, a cis woman; therefore, I am fake (Mock 2014, 154-155).

Finally, from my own life:

> When my union was bargaining a new contract several years ago, I was coordinating some of our press outreach, and as a result, was interviewed for quotes a number of times. The first few times, when the reporter asked me my identifying information, I would just give my name and elected position, and I noticed that this often resulted in published pieces misgendering me. So, in an attempt to correct this pattern, I on two occasions tried to give my pronouns when introducing myself, saying something like, "Sam Sumpter, UAW 4121 Financial Secretary. I use they/them pronouns." On the first occasion, the reporter was so utterly baffled by what I was saying that it was as if I was speaking a different language. I tried to further explain what that meant but to no avail, and I eventually just stopped trying and moved on. On the second occasion, the reporter got visibly frustrated with me, waved her microphone around and said, "What? I don't need to know that. I just want a quote." I responded, "Don't you need to know how to refer to me?" and she said, "No, I just need a quote." In both cases, unsurprisingly, the reporters went on to misgender me in their pieces.

In this concluding chapter, I want to explore how my account can apply to on-the-ground experiences and instantiations of oppression, focusing on a case study of *microaggressions* -- a phenomenon illustrated in the three examples above. Namely, I'll show how my account advances the current discussion of microaggressions in philosophy by giving us sharper tools for understanding the moral obligations microaggressions generate. To make this case, I'll start in Section 2 by more precisely characterizing 'microaggression,' a historically amorphous phenomenon. In particular, I'll explore various attempts to clarify whether microaggressions are unintentional, and will argue that rather than focusing on intentionality *per se*, a key feature of

microaggressions is *motivational clouding* -- i.e., some epistemic obfuscation or equivocation of the link between a perpetrator's motivations and their actions. From there, in Section 3, I'll survey three existing approaches to the question of moral responsibility for microaggressions: the attributive, structural, and cumulative harm approaches. In Section 4, I'll describe how my empowerment approach advances these existing conversations. In particular, I'll describe how my account clarifies the structural approach's attention to the relationship between the individual and the structural: namely, the two are intertwined through vulnerability and power in interpersonal interactions. On my account, microaggressions generate moral responsibility specifically because they are failures in our responsibilities in recognition and response. Put another way, microaggressions represent failures to treat with care the identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability of one's social others.

5.1. Characterizing microaggressions

A. Basic characterization of microaggressions

To start, let's consider more closely what, exactly, microaggressions are. In the first two decades of the 21st century, most microaggressions research has been centered in psychology, led most prominently by Derald Wing Sue and his 2010 book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. Indeed, until quite recently, this book was largely considered the authoritative text on microaggressions. Philosophical treatment of microaggressions was all but non-existent until 2015, followed by a dramatic surge in philosophical publications dedicated to the topic starting around 2018. This burgeoning philosophical treatment of microaggressions has been particularly interested in clarifying what microaggressions are from a social ontological perspective. As this growing literature makes clear, microaggressions are something of an amorphous phenomenon, and pinning down what they are, exactly, is no straightforward task.[88]

[88] In this chapter, I won't have space to fully explore every detail of the rapidly-emerging literature that works to more precisely characterize microaggressions from a philosophical perspective. Further, it bears noting many new pieces have been published within just the past

To start digging into this, let's consider a few well-cited definitions.[89] The term 'microaggression' is attributed to Charles Pierce, who defines them as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs'" (Pierce et al 1978, 66). More recently, psychologist Sue describes them as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (Sue 2010, 24). For Sue, some varieties of microaggressions are unintentional and unconscious, while others function more like overt aggression and are conscious/intentional.[90] Philosophical literature has moved to even more explicitly insist that microaggressions are rooted in oppression and target marginalized identity specifically. For instance, consider two of the earliest philosophical definitions of microaggressions, which come from Emily McTernan (2018) and Christina Friedlaender (2018). McTernan writes, "Microaggressions are the everyday, minor, and apparently innocuous 'degradations and put-downs' experienced by members of oppressed, systematically disadvantaged or marginalized groups" (2018, 261). McTernan further describes them as "those minor or subtle details of interactions between people that fulfil a certain role: namely, functioning as a particular kind of degradation or putdown while appearing innocuous and plausibly unintentional" (2018, 266). Similarly, Friedlaender describes microaggressions as "subtle acts of bias that reflect a structural form of oppression toward a specific group of people, such as racism, transphobia, or sexism" (2018, 6). Friedlaender writes that microaggressions are

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few months: For instance, the first edited volume dedicated entirely to a philosophical treatment of microaggressions, *Microaggressions and Philosophy* (2020), was published merely a few months before my completing this project. Works in this volume appear to give a rich analysis of many key topics for microaggressions research, including its definition, harms, and function. In this chapter I will engage with a few pieces from this volume that I received as pre-published drafts; however, given time constraints, I have not been able to incorporate much of that important work.

[89] Some have explored various levels of microaggressions, including interpersonal, institutional, and environmental (Sue 2010, Chapter 2). Here I will focus exclusively on interpersonal microaggressions (as does the vast majority of both psychological and philosophical literature).

[90] Refer, e.g., to his distinction between microinsults and microinvalidations, on the one hand, and microassaults, on the other (Sue 2010, 28-37).

"the behavioral consequence of an agent's implicit bias against a structurally oppressed group. These subtle insults are predominantly unintentional" (2018, 6).

With these definitions as starting points, already a few key features begin to stand out. Namely, microaggressions are:

A. **Communicative actions**: In contrast with the related phenomenon of implicit biases (which are attitudinal states), microaggressions are behaviors, including speech acts, that send implicit messages to and about members of a marginalized group. For instance, the flight attendant's comments to Sue and his friend conveyed implicit "back of the bus" messages. They may also include implicit messages to members of a marginalized groups that they aren't welcome, expected, or integral to an environment -- e.g., neglecting to learn how to pronounce a colleague's non-English name, ignoring the contributions of women of color in a meeting, etc.

B. **Degrading towards marginalized people because of their marginalized status:** Microaggressions are specifically targeted at agents because of their perceived or actual membership in a marginalized group (e.g., McTernan 2018, 265).[91] This helps separate them from other small slights or insults to "pick out a particular kind of injustice" that is both undergirded by and helps reproduce structural oppression (McTernan 2018, 267). For instance, in the Sue example, the implicit message was degrading specifically because it was targeted at their being people of color.

C. **Everyday or quotidian**: They occur in everyday contexts (at work, at the grocery store, at parties, etc); perpetrators generally commit them nonchalantly;

[91] E.g., consider the differences between: "move, jerk!" (generic insult), "move, bitch!" (gendered insult, by virtue of membership in a marginalized group), and "move, dick!" (gendered insult, not by virtue of membership in a marginalized group).

and targets generally experience them as common features of social life (e.g., McTernan 2018, 268-269). For instance, all three examples at the beginning of the chapter occur in normal everyday conversations. In Mock's examples, e.g., the comments her microaggressors give are both casual and regular.

D. **Subtle or seemingly innocuous**: Particularly when taken individually, microaggressions may seem minor, and often communicate their degrading content subtly, ambiguously, or covertly (McTernan 2018, 264). This is particularly obvious in Mock's examples, where the microaggressions are so seemingly innocuous they are supposed to be compliments.

E. **Often committed unintentionally and/or unconsciously**: Perpetrators often commit microaggressions without being aware that they are doing so, and/or without intending to cause harm or activate degrading stereotypes. For instance, in both Sue's and my examples, the perpetrators' outrage clearly communicates that they didn't take themselves to be doing anything purposefully wrong.

In moral work on microaggressions, feature (E) is regularly a key site of interest. For more on this, let's turn to the next section.

B. Intentionality and consciousness

Similar to moral work on issues of aversive racism and implicit bias, many take up the framing question: given that microaggressions may be committed unconsciously, unintentionally, and often in direct contrast with our endorsed values, should we be held morally responsible for committing them? Instrumental to this question are often clarification questions about consciousness and intention: What does it mean for a microaggression to be unintentional? Does it just mean that the perpetrator wouldn't endorse the content of the stereotype? Does it mean that they wouldn't endorse the harm caused? Does it mean that however they acted, it

wasn't the result of a deliberate choice to activate a stereotype? Before beginning our moral analysis, then, it would be useful to more precisely explicate how microaggressions relate to issues of consciousness and intentionality.

Let's start with the question of *consciousness*, as it often implicitly or explicitly grounds how the literature handles *intentionality*. Genealogically, the claim that microaggressions are often committed unconsciously tends to be rooted in a prior claim that microaggressions are the behavioral result of implicit biases, as we saw Friedlaender argue above. Unfortunately, few are clear enough about how implicit biases themselves are unconscious, leading to even greater conceptual messiness for microaggressions.

Implicit attitudes or implicit biases[92] are generally characterized as attitudinal states wherein automatic associations are made between characteristics of a given concept, often in a way that drives behavior. In general, 'implicit attitude' is used to refer to an attitude that is "inferred from indirect, performance-based procedures…that avoid the direct influence of deliberative processing" (Hahn, et al 2014, 1369). Further, they typically are characterized as unavailable to the individual's mere introspective awareness.[93] However, simply stating that an implicit bias is outside of an individual's conscious awareness is not a precise enough picture. In their 2006 study, Bertram Gawronski and colleagues work to more precisely identify what aspects of implicit bias may be unconsciously known to the agent in question. They focus on three aspects of implicit attitudes that may or may not be available to individual awareness: the attitude's source (2006, 488), its content (2006, 489), and its impact on behavior (2006, 491).[94] Their research concludes that while there is evidence to support some unconscious features of

[92] I use the terms 'implicit attitude' and 'implicit bias' roughly interchangeably (although 'attitude' is normatively neutral and 'bias' is not), but it should be noted that I mean both to indicate an *attitude* or *internal state* and not any behavior that attitude may cause. Further, while in philosophy we might mean 'attitude' to indicate something fairly developed like a propositional belief, I'll use it more in keeping with the psychological literature, which has a much weaker notion such that attitudes need not be propositional.
[93] E.g., Gawronski et al 2006 provides a summary of a number of such accounts.
[94] For additional discussion of this point, see also Hahn et al 2014, 1370.

implicit bias, it does not extend to every feature. For each of the three features they identify, they respectively conclude:

- **Source**: There is evidence that individuals can be unaware of the sources of their implicit attitudes, but there is also evidence that individuals can be unaware of the sources of their *explicit* attitudes. So, it is not a feature unique to implicit attitudes (2006, 492).[95]
- **Content**: They write that if we were generally unaware of the content of our implicit biases, that would be evident in a low correlation between self-reports of explicit attitudes and indirect measures of implicit attitudes. However, there is increasing evidence that "self-reported attitudes are systematically related to indirectly assessed attitudes" (2006, 489), for a variety of reasons, including "motivational factors, the degree of deliberation during self-report, conceptual correspondence between measures, and measurement error" (2006, 490). For instance, the correlation between implicit and explicit attitudes has been shown to be stronger when the measure of the latter is based on affective reactions (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable near two men kissing each other") rather than opinions (e.g., "Gay men should not work with children or adolescents") (2006, 490, referencing Banse et al 2001). While this and the other research they draw from doesn't necessarily mean that we actively introspectively access our implicit attitudes, it does demonstrate that the content of implicit attitudes often closely matches the content of explicit attitudes.

[95] This is perhaps an unsurprising finding for social philosophers -- given the myriad messages we receive from multiple complex sources on a daily basis, it seems unlikely that we'd be able to reliably report the full set of sources behind a given explicit attitude. I take Gawronski et al here to be responding to a trend in the psychological research on implicit bias that attempts to mark a distinction between (a) being able to articulate reasons for holding a belief, as we can often do for explicit beliefs through direct self-report, and (b) not being able to articulate a reason for holding a belief (in line with the generally-accepted position that implicit biases are only measurable through indirect means and not direct self-report). For more on this, refer to Gawronski et al 2006, 488-489.

- **Impact on behavior**: There is evidence that implicit attitudes may influence behavior outside of the individual's conscious awareness: Implicit attitudes may prompt behaviors (e.g., responses to stimuli), "irrespective of participants' motivation and ability to control this influence" (Gawronski et al 2006, 493). That is, in contrast to behaviors that we can directly control or consciously decide to enact, implicit attitudes function automatically (i.e., outside of our direct control) in ways that in turn cause behavior.[96]

Given these conclusions, Gawronski et al recommend caution when labeling implicit attitudes "unconscious" without qualifying which particular aspects of the attitude one refers to (2006, 493). Namely, we ought to take implicit attitudes to be unconscious insofar as the agent is not consciously aware of how their implicit biases impact their psychological processes, where those psychological processes may in turn impact behavior. However, in much of the philosophical and public attention to implicit biases, their *unconsciousness* is assumed to refer specifically to their stereotypic content. As a result, this flawed understanding also permeates into treatment of microaggressions.

For instance, McTernan argues, "Implicit biases underpin some microaggressions, but so, too, could explicit biases, consciously adopted stereotypes, or ignorance of background context" (2018, 266). While McTernan's general point is not implausible -- there certainly may be more than one underlying cause of microaggressions -- this still reveals an imprecise analysis of implicit biases' relationship to consciousness. Namely, in positioning implicit bias and consciously adopted stereotypes as distinct from each other, she misses that some implicit biases may be the result of consciously adopted stereotypes.[97] The key question is just whether that stereotype is driving neural associations between characteristics of a given concept in a way

[96] Importantly, this finding has been shown to hold regardless of the individuals' motivation to control prejudiced reactions (2006, 491, referencing Gawronski et al 2003).
[97] Recall that an implicit bias is an attitudinal state wherein automatic associations are made between characteristics of a given concept. How those associations are made and strengthened can be the result of subtle or unconsciously received prejudiced messages, but can also be the result of consciously adopted beliefs.

the agent isn't deliberatively aware of, *not* whether the agent knows or endorses the stereotype itself. Now, I won't here make any claims about whether microaggressions are always caused by implicit biases specifically. While it seems plausible to maintain that at least some subset of microaggressions are the behavioral outcome of implicit biases, I'm happy to be empirically agnostic about whether that is always the case. However, the reason these kinds of imprecisions in unconsciousness about implicit bias matter is because they are often used to ground attention to intentionality.

For instance, consider Christina Friedlaender and Veronica Ivy's account, where they argue that taking implicit biases to ground microaggressions problematically precludes the possibility of intentional microaggressions. They write:

> "Following Sue (2010), much of the contemporary research and discussion about microaggressions frames agents as unintentionally and unconsciously committing these harmful acts despite consciously holding progressive and egalitarian values. Since implicit bias is taken as the primary precursor to microaggressions, descriptive and normative analyses focus on the absence of intent to harm" (2020, 185).

While I won't contest that this pattern may exist in some of the literature, it's not a necessary conclusion from any use of implicit bias. Indeed, whether an implicit bias grounds a microaggression (or any other behavior) is largely irrelevant to the question of assigning intentionality. Again, the important feature for determining whether an action was caused by an implicit bias is just whether a stimulus triggered a neural association between characteristics of a given concept in a way that is outside of the agent's deliberative awareness, and that association then prompted some behavior.

However, this point of clarification does not seem to contradict but rather advance Friedlaender and Ivy's overall point: ultimately, they are interested in demonstrating that how we treat intentionality with respect to microaggressions is not as zero-sum as previous literature suggests, and further, that the very fact of ambiguity between intention and action is a core feature of microaggressions (e.g., refer to 2020, 193. Refer also to Friedlaender forthcoming).

This feature of ambiguity -- whether experienced by the target, perpetrator, or both -- is an important one for filling out our understanding of microaggressions. For more, let's turn to the next section.

C. Motivational clouding

Whether from the perspective of targets, bystanders, or perpetrators, microaggressions involve what I call *motivational clouding* -- i.e., some epistemic obfuscation or equivocation of the link between a perpetrator's motivations and their actions. In this section, I'll work to establish an initial taxonomy of motivational clouding by considering it through the perspectives of (a) targets and bystanders and (b) perpetrators. We should note, however, that these are not discrete or stable categories; we will all inevitably be targets, bystanders, and perpetrators at various points in our lives.

With that in mind, let's start by considering how motivational clouding functions for targets and bystanders. For instance, let's look more closely at Friedlaender and Ivy's account of attributional ambiguity. They write, "Attributional ambiguity occurs when the causes or motivations of one person's behavior toward another are sufficiently unclear, such that the witnesses and the target(s) might second-guess whether the behavior was, in fact, a microaggression" (2020, 191). Consistent with my clarification of 'unconscious,' we find that it's regularly unclear whether an agent would endorse their implicit bias or microaggression -- rather, the causes and motivations of the microaggression are typically ambiguous.[98] Further, as Friedlaender and Ivy argue, the very fact of the ambiguities and ignorances described above provide perpetrators with myriad avenues for developing alternate rationalizations for their actions (2020, 194), as Sue's example of the flight attendant demonstrates. Fortunately, it's not necessary for us to precisely determine an agent's intention in order to arrive at a

[98] We might, however, be able to build a strong case over time that a microaggressor endorses their implicit biases and microaggressions -- e.g., if they regularly repeat a behavior despite multiple attempts at correction.

characterization of microaggressions that's conceptually rich. Quite the contrary, as a form of motivational clouding, I follow Friedlaender and Ivy (2020) and Friedlaender (forthcoming) in taking attributional ambiguity to be a key feature of microaggressions.

Now, as valuable as the framework of attributional ambiguity is, its focus is specifically on the interpretive capacities of targets and bystanders, and does not consider these issues for the perpetrator.[99] However, in the philosophical literature that more squarely focuses on the failures of perpetrators of microaggressions, we find a similar interest in problematizing a straightforward characterization of intent or motivation. For instance, some perpetrators may experience motivational clouding as a function of willful or active ignorance. Kristie Dotson, for instance, characterizes microaggressions as a type of epistemic violence that constitutes a "failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owning to pernicious ignorance" (2011, 242). She further defines pernicious ignorance as a harmful form of ignorance that predictably follows from an "epistemic gap in cognitive resources" (2011, 238). Here we find ready similarities with the characterization of active ignorance we saw from Medina in the previous chapter, and indeed he describes microaggressions specifically as a form of hermeneutical injustice that may be willful (2017, 46).

So, while microaggressions may not come with a deliberative intention to operationalize a particular stereotype or elicit a particular harm, they can often be a result of forms of ignorance that are active or willful. Such dynamics of willful ignorance aren't necessarily *ambiguous* in the same way as attributional ambiguity -- the cause is clearly identified as a function of self-perpetuating epistemic privilege -- but they are still epistemically nebulous in important ways. Namely, perpetrators can not only socially deny that they've done something

[99] While I'm generally sympathetic to calls to focus our attention on the experiences of targets of microaggressions (e.g., Freeman and Stewart 2018), in order to fully understand the phenomenon, we must also pay attention to how they function for perpetrators as well. Further, as with any operation of structural oppression, we must acknowledge that there will never be neat, static lines between 'perpetrator' and 'target'; rather, we each occupy perpetrator-target roles dynamically and sometimes even synchronously.

problematic, but they can also personally deny that they've done something problematic. That is, just as targets and bystanders may have difficulty confirming intentional responsibility socially because the perpetrator can readily rationalize their actions to others, dynamics of willful ignorance also enable perpetrators to rationalize their actions *to themselves*.

Perpetrators may also experience motivational clouding primarily through the function of implicit bias that places their impact on behavior outside of our conscious control. For instance, agents who are generally well-meaning and may even be actively working to address their active ignorances may still find themselves perpetrating microaggressions as a result of implicit biases. In these cases, while the agent might not deliberatively endorse that such biases influence their behavior, they also may not have direct introspective access to the fact of that influence. Whether as a function of implicit biases we don't endorse or active ignorance we haven't sufficiently resolved, motivational clouding describes how we are epistemically incentivized to overlook that our behaviors may be the result of oppressive or prejudiced influence.

Consequently, motivational clouding also results in significant practical challenges to successful responsibility-holding, as perpetrators can respond with dynamic evasiveness. McTernan describes one such evasive maneuver as plausible deniability -- i.e., the perpetrator can plausibly claim that they "did not intend [their action] to have the effect of degrading or putting down the other" (2018, 264). As Friedlaender points out, this practical evasiveness is not always a merely coincidental byproduct of motivational clouding, but rather, perpetrators may actively trade on motivational clouding in order to microaggress evasively (forthcoming).[100] [101]

[100] Friedlaender compellingly identifies microaggressions as an "insidiously adaptive" instantiation of structural oppression precisely because of this feature (forthcoming).
[101] Further, as an increasingly large literature in philosophy demonstrates, this feature of microaggressions generates non-trivial epistemic harms for targets: diminished self-knowledge (Fatima 2017, Fatima 2020), diminished self-confidence (Fatima 2017, Fatima 2020, Friedlaender and Ivy 2020), gaslighting (Friedlaender and Ivy 2020), secondary harms like poor medical treatment (Freeman and Stewart 2018), and hermeneutical injustice (Fatima 2020, Medina 2017), to name a few. For instance, Medina argues that microaggressions can produce

A related effect of motivational clouding is that because it blurs the boundaries of what counts or doesn't count as a microaggression, sometimes it is also a constitutive feature of behaviors that *aren't* microaggressions, but can be mistaken for them. For instance, imagine Selena and Bryce are faculty members who've never met before but are on the same panel at their discipline's national conference. During the panel discussion, Bryce regularly interrupts Selena and jumps in to comment on questions explicitly addressed to her. During the panel, Selena feels like something is off and that this might be a form of gendered dismissiveness, but she wonders if she's just imagining it. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Selena, Bryce has been interrupting people of many different identities all day, including a number of white cis men. He's a jerk, but an equal opportunity jerk. His interruption of Selena, then, might not have been a microaggression strictly-speaking, because it might not have been based on her marginalized status. But even if it's not a microaggression, because it is still structured by the ambiguity of whether it was a microaggression or not, it also involves motivational clouding.

Whether for targets, bystanders, or perpetrators, motivational clouding involves the epistemic obfuscation or equivocation of the link between a perpetrator's motivations and their actions, such that microaggressions become both harder to define, and harder to enforce accountability around. On the part of targets and bystanders, motivational clouding may take the form of attributional ambiguity, such that the perpetrator's motivations are sufficiently unclear that the target has difficulty pinning the problem down, and may experience exacerbated self-doubt. On the part of perpetrators, this may take the form of willful ignorance, active ignorance, or unconsciousness about when and how bias, whether implicit or explicit, drives action. In any of these cases, it is a constitutive feature of microaggressions. In summary, then, we can understand microaggressions as:

Microaggressions: everyday, seemingly innocuous actions that communicate

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hermeneutical injustices by "put[ting] unfair pressures on one's meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities" (2017, 46). Take, e.g., my experience with the first reporter, where a key obstacle to my receiving uptake from him was a hermeneutical gap on his part.

> degradation towards marginalized agents because of their marginalized status. Microaggressions are characterized by motivational clouding between perpetrators' motivations and the microaggressive act, such that perpetrators are able to take dynamic evasiveness to responsibility, and targets often experience exacerbated harms.

Taking motivational clouding to be a core feature of microaggressions helps accomplish a few key things. First, it enables us to integrate into our understanding of microaggressions questions about motivation or epistemic background while remaining agnostic about the specific content of a perpetrator's intentions. Second, it also helps clarify the challenge we face in attempting to deal with microaggressions from a moral perspective. Namely, similar to challenges raised in Chapter 4, it helps clarify that as we develop a framework for moral responsibility for microaggressions, our efficacy will be seriously limited if we focus too heavily on assessing accuracy -- what a perpetrator's motivations or influences are, whether a behavior counts as a microaggression, etc.

5.2. Existing approaches to responsibility for microaggressions

With the above understanding of the particular phenomenon I'm interested in, in this section, I'll map the landscape of some of the current moral approaches to microaggressions. While my interest is ultimately on moral responsibility for microaggressions, here I'll also draw on literature that considers moral responsibility for actions caused by implicit bias, for a few reasons. First, as I've described them, microaggressions are often taken to be a behavioral outcome of implicit bias. Second, as a practical limitation, very little work has been done to specifically examine moral responsibility for microaggressions.[102] I'll cover three approaches for assessing moral responsibility for microaggressions and/or implicit bias: the attribution approach, structural approach, and cumulative harm approach.

For those in the attribution approach, the core object of interest is the individual agent's

[102] Indeed, even among authors who consider morally-relevant *harms* of microaggressions, few also make explicit *responsibility* claims.

psychology. Authors in this camp are foundationally concerned with how factors of individual psychology bear on questions of individual responsibility for actions caused by implicit bias. In particular, theorists who take this approach focus on the importance of attribution – that is, whether implicit biases can be rightly said to "belong" to the individuals who have them. Further, they agree upon the condition that for an agent to be responsible for acting on an attitude, that attitude must be attributable to her. For some, certain limitations of human psychology give reason to believe that implicit bias should not be taken to generate individual moral responsibility. For example, Neil Levy argues that we are generally not individually responsible for our implicit bias-caused actions because for an agent to be morally responsible for an action, she must be *aware of her reasons for acting, where '*awareness' indicates that she is either introspectively aware of her reasons or "can easily become introspectively aware" of them (Levy 2013, 214). Jennifer Saul makes a similar point, arguing that "A person should not be blamed for an implicit bias of which they are completely unaware that results solely from the fact that they live in a sexist culture" (2013, 55).[103] Robin Zheng, meanwhile, holds that implicit bias-caused action can be attributed to an agent if (a) they would endorse the difference the implicit bias made on the action or (b) they haven't done a reasonable amount to avoid or respond to implicit biases (2016, 72). She argues that while agents should not be blamed from their implicit bias-caused actions, they can be held accountably responsible.[104] Finally, Angela Smith argues that for an action to be attributable to an agent, the action should be "indicative or expressive of her judgments, values, or normative commitments" (2008, 367), where these evaluative judgments are "not necessarily consciously held propositional beliefs, but rather

[103] Given my previous characterizations of willful ignorance, it is likely no surprise that I take these characterizations of attribution to leave something to be desired.
[104] While Zheng's characterization of attribution is significantly closer to mine, it still ultimately lands on some question of endorsement we might want to avoid. Also note that the way she uses "accountable" versus "attributable" is roughly a distinction between, respectively, (a) being held to expectations that arise by virtue of our existing in a social context that distributes duties and burdens based on the roles we play in our communities, versus (b) being praised or blamed for action that expresses our deeper agency.

tendencies to regard certain things as having evaluative significance (2005, 251). For Smith, then, there are a much greater range of actions we can be held responsible for by virtue of their "belonging" to us, likely including those stemming from active or willful ignorance.

By contrast, those working from a structural approach confront the problem of responsibility for implicit bias as a question of what methods are most effective for combating implicit bias as a phenomenon. They agree that addressing the problems posed by implicit bias from an exclusively individualized or psychological perspective is insufficient for such a project to be successful long-term. Instead, long-term, sustainable improvements must necessarily involve improvements to the institutions and systems of oppression that fundamentally underlie implicit attitudes to begin with. Most of these authors thus argue that either we should not focus on individual responsibility at all, or that we should only do so in terms of collective responsibility or indirect personal responsibility. For instance, Maureen Sie and Nicole van Voorst Vader-Bours argue that because the stereotypes and prejudices that foster implicit biases are developed and maintained collectively, they can only be discontinued collectively as well; as a result, we are *indirectly* personally responsible for them (2016, 108). Meanwhile, others such as Anne Jacobsen (2016) and Michael Brownstein (2016) argue that because institutions deeply affect individuals' attitudes and individuals' attitudes deeply affect institutions, we're responsible for addressing both simultaneously. Similarly, Sally Haslanger argues that individual attempts at correcting internalized components of that ideology (like implicit biases) are futile as long as the structural injustices themselves remain (2015, 8). For Haslanger, responsibility for injustices (and the many ways they are maintained) generates questions of not just what I should do, but what "we can and should do together" (2015, 12).

The final approach to the moral consideration of microaggressions I'll overview is increasingly the most common in philosophy. This cumulative harm approach grounds moral responsibility for microaggressions in the way the harms of microaggressions add up. Under the cumulative harm approach, microaggressions generate responsibility because they cause harms

that, while minor on their own, add up to cause either aggregate or compounded harm that's often commensurate with the harms of macroaggressions. In some cases, writers take this to suggest that responsibility ought to be taken up structurally or collectively; in others, writers focus on individual responsibility. For instance, Samantha Brennan takes this cumulative feature to prompt *institutional* responsibility. With a focus on the related phenomenon of micro-inequities, she argues that "we lose sight of morally important factors if we…push to see wrongness in its smallest possible units" (2016, 247), and that individually wrong acts stemming from micro-inequities are only part of a larger picture of injustice. As a result, she argues that instead of holding individuals responsible for the micro-inequities they commit, we ought to focus on institutional responsibility. Similarly, McTernan advocates taking a cumulative approach to the harms of microaggressions because it is from that collective perspective that we can most readily recognize how microaggressions perpetuate structural injustice by "distort[ing] relations of equal standing" (2018, 272).

By contrast, on Christina Friedlaender's account, the cumulative harm of microaggressions grounds *individual* responsibility, though not always individual blame. Friedlaender argues that because microaggressions aren't isolated, the cumulative harm of microaggressions is not disaggregate-able or strictly additive but compounding, such that the "harms affect one another in accumulation" (2018, 14). As a result, Friedlaender advances a forward-looking account where responsibility isn't disaggregated to attach blame to the specific individuals who commit specific acts, but rather, "we have an individual responsibility to not engage in that action again" (2018, 17). This forward-looking responsibility attaches very specifically to individuals, who "must understand, reflect, and renegotiate their thoughts and actions in a forward-looking manner" (2018, 18).[105]

While the attribution, structural, and cumulative harm approaches each have compelling

[105] While Friedlaender doesn't explicitly address institutional responsibility, I don't take their account to be necessarily mutually exclusive with institutional attention.

elements, I am largely dissatisfied with the attribution and cumulative harm approaches. For instance, the cumulative harm approach gets right that microaggressions can produce significant harm, and that they directly contribute to the reproduction of structural oppression. However, as Friedlaender points out in an upcoming piece, this focus on cumulation ultimately stems from a libertarian concept of harm, where microaggressions can only be legitimized as a site for moral harm because they can be demonstrated to be as harmful as macroaggressions (Friedlaender forthcoming). This precludes the possibility of allocating backwards-looking responsibility for a single, individually harmful microaggression. Relatedly, the cumulative harm approach has few tools to help us understand the concrete interpersonal interactions within which microaggressions regularly occur. While the attribution approach helps account for questions of individual responsibility, it is overly focused on the level of the individual perpetrator's motivations, a particularly fraught project given motivational clouding, and at the expense of sufficient attention to the structural sources of both microaggressions and individual motivations themselves. By contrast, I'm much more sympathetic to the structural approach. In particular, I find Haslanger's, Jacobsen's, and Brownstein's work compelling for their integration of both structural and individual dynamics. What I hope my account can add to these accounts is to more explicitly consider how the structural and individual are intertwined through a focus on vulnerability and power in interpersonal interactions, particularly in light of motivational clouding. For more on this, let's turn to the next section.

5.3. An empowerment approach

On my account, what makes microaggressions morally relevant is ultimately a question of the vulnerability and power dynamics that structure our intersubjective identity work.

To see why, let's start with a brief recap of my empowerment approach to intersubjective identity work. Most broadly, we are responsible for engaging in uptake practices that build a meaningful balance of power in our narrative-sharing relationships with others. We build this

power balance by meeting responsibilities in recognition and in response. Regarding recognition, we are responsible for attaining minimal knowledge about marginalized meaning and meaning-making, in particular through first- and second-order knowledge about our marginalized social others. Regarding response, we have responsibilities both in how we treat others' first-personal narratives about themselves, and in how we treat others' second- and third-personal narratives about us. That is, as a result of the vulnerability dynamics embedded in intersubjective identity work, we are responsible for granting uptake to the first-personal narratives of our social others proportionate with the capacity we have to impact what their identity is or can be socially. Relatedly, we are also responsible for granting uptake to the second- and third-personal narratives our social others have about us, proportionate with the capacity we have to dismiss those narratives unilaterally. Given the minimal knowledge called for by our recognition responsibilities, these obligations are both forward-looking and backward-looking: we're responsible to the interlocutors with whom we actively share narrative-sharing relationships, and to those we are likely to encounter in the future.

Let's now apply this framework to microaggressions specifically. On my account, microaggressions generate moral responsibility because they are failures to treat with care the identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability others have to you. That is, they are failures of responsible uptake: responsibilities in recognition (first- and second-order knowledge) and failures in our responsibilities in response (constructing and being constructed). Further, on my account what's concerning about motivational clouding is not just that it impairs our ability to accurately identify an agent's influences or motivations, but more fundamentally, that it trades on and exacerbates vulnerability dynamics. Further, because my account hinges on assigning responsibility proportionate with vulnerability, it also helps clarify that we likely have stronger demands in relationships that are ongoing, close, or deeply embedded with power.

To illustrate how these dynamics play out in practice, let's consider how each of the three examples provided at the beginning of the chapter illustrates failures in each of the above pieces of responsible uptake. For instance, in Sue's example, the flight attendant fails to recognize first-order knowledge of bus segregation in the United States and its import for people of color, particularly Black people. While she presumably *knows about* the history of bus segregation (otherwise she would not be so defensive), but she nevertheless failed to recognize that her actions would call it up. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it's not enough for recognition to merely rest on attaining first-order knowledge; we must also be able to activate that knowledge and apply it to various circumstances. She further fails to recognize that how she holds Sue and his friend might matter to them, and that how they hold her ought to matter to her.

Stemming from these recognition failures, in her responses to their first- and second-personal narratives she also fails to treat her position of power with care. Instead she uses her identity-constructing and identity-based power to insist that they move to the back of the plane, working from master narratives that are inconsistent with their first-personal narratives about themselves. Further, she uses her position of power to unilaterally reject their second-personal narratives about her, responding with outrage that they would even attempt to hold her differently from how she holds herself. She is too invested in the putative neutrality of race ("I don't see color!") that she fails to treat her own race as non-neutral and fails to admit that how Sue and his friend hold her might be worth uptake. It's also worth noting that she's able to exert these forms of power despite non-trivial forms of vulnerability she likely often experiences herself in other contexts: As a service worker, she likely often has vulnerability to passengers who feel entitled to make unreasonable demands of her. As a woman in an industry historically and currently rife with sexism, she likely has also been vulnerable to a range of subtle and overt forms of sexual harassment from passengers, coworkers, management, etc. My account doesn't discount that those are very real forms of vulnerability she likely experiences on a day-to-day basis, but rather, grounds responsibility in the contextual vulnerability that's specific to this

relationship, where she does in fact have power to impact who others can be and how they move about the world. Namely, it is precisely in focusing on (a) identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability in particular narrative-sharing relationships rather than (b) vulnerability in general, that we're able to arrive at this result. Further, on my account, her failures generate responsibility specifically because of these vulnerability dynamics rather than, e.g., any assessment of whose narratives were more or less accurate or whether/how intention is properly assigned.

Mock's example is rather different, but with ultimately similar results. Her interlocutors fail to recognize general first-order knowledge about how trans women interface with the category of 'woman' -- either the knowledge that trans women are "real" women, or at least the knowledge that trans women generally identify as real women.[106] They similarly fail to recognize the second-order knowledge that simply being well-meaning isn't sufficient for attending to the relevance you have to others' identities or they to yours; well-meaning but thoughtless comments can fail to recognize important aspects of another's identity. Note, too, that on my account it isn't incumbent upon Mock to remedy these recognition failures by educating her interlocutors (though she certainly could if she wanted to). Rather, her interlocutors have the responsibility to be doing that knowledge-building work proactively and as individual epistemic agents.

From these failures in recognition also come failures in response. Namely, in disregarding the identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability Mock has to them, they fail to treat her first-personal narratives well, instead carelessly treating her as a "fake" or "non-natural" woman. They also fail to make meaningful space for Mock to hold them second- or third-personally in ways that might be inconsistent with their own first-personal narratives. In

[106] Even if the interlocutor wouldn't count it as "knowledge" or endorse it as a belief that trans women are real women, at a minimum, they should have the general knowledge that trans women generally *identify* as being "real" women.

particular, her account demonstrates that when microaggressions take the form of apparent compliments, they leave the target without much recourse. That is, the pleasant intentions of her interlocutors produce additional layers of motivational clouding, in turn rendering more difficult any attempt to treat them anything other than pleasant. And again, on my account this feature of motivation clouding is not a problem because it impairs our ability to accurately assign intention *per se*, but more precisely, because it trades on and exacerbates vulnerability, which can in turn cause further harm (e.g., harms like gaslighting, unequal access to social practices of meaning-making and -sharing, physical violence that's justified by toxic narratives, etc).

Finally, the reporters in my example both fail to recognize basic first-order knowledge that not everyone uses binary pronouns, that gender isn't always immediately "readable," and that gender doesn't always track sex assigned at birth. They additionally fail to recognize that how they recognize me interpersonally and in print impacts who I get to be socially, and that I ought to have standing to make requests of them about how they recognize me second- and third-personally. As mentioned in the previous chapter, while we might not expect everyone to already have a full set of knowledge about any identity that is new to them, agents can be blamed for "not even trying in the least to interrogate their interpretive habits" (Medina 2013, 112). The failure to minimally interrogate interpretive habits is particularly evident with the second reporter's response: "What? I don't need to know that. I just want a quote." By contrast, we could imagine a more open and epistemically responsible response: "I'm not sure what you mean, but I don't want to mess up how I represent you. Could you tell me more?" And in this case, I think we can be even more demanding given the context: that is, a reporter for an established news service in a major American city in 2018 has no excuse for not knowing the very basic and well-circulated fact that there are people who exist who use they/them pronouns.

In addition to these recognition failures, both reporters also fail to treat my first-personal narratives with any care, instead disregarding them, either offhand or after a confused

interaction. They likewise fail to treat my second-personal narratives about them with care: both reporters treat my requests as out of order or incoherently applied to them or their future conduct. Indeed, both treat even the most basic holdings of them that go beyond the bare information they pre-determined a need for as irrelevant to them. Once again, the key problem here isn't that I'm being held "inaccurately" or that I can't accurately assign intentions to either of the reporters (though those are both problems) -- the fundamental issue is that they aren't treating my vulnerability to them with care. Both reporters have non-trivial power over who I get to be socially because they have unilateral control over what they write about me in print -- how I am represented publicly. With that kind of power, any confusion should prompt questions, and any direct requests should at least be considered. In particular, when they're requests about basic identifying information, they ought to be taken up, even without the reporter completely understanding why it might be important or what it might mean to me.

As a result of their respective failures, on my account, we can hold the microaggressors in all three examples individually morally responsible for their specific, individual microaggressions. To expand: On my account, because these responsibilities stem from a consideration of vulnerability in our identity work, they are in effect even for specific, individual microaggressions. Because I'm interested in proportional vulnerability, these responsibilities are likely to increase in demandingness when microaggressions occur in narrative-sharing relationships that are ongoing, close, or particularly powerful; however, it also applies even in interactions with strangers. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 4, even in our narrative-sharing relationships with strangers, it's unlikely that we're ever so deeply powerless (or that they're ever so deeply invulnerable) that we're completely off the hook for doing some basic work to try to treat our social others well. In general, we can minimally start with the assumption that we probably have some identity-constructing power with respect to our social others, and that they have some identity-constructing vulnerability with respect to us. This basic assumption should prompt us to do what we can to be basically respectful of others with whom we interact, with our

potential responsibilities towards them increasing in demandingness the more we interact or learn about them and our relationship. In addition, sometimes the roles we occupy provide some basic information that can structure our understanding of our likely power relationships with others: e.g., when a reporter is on the ground looking for a quote, regardless of who they're talking to, they have some non-trivial power over how the person is represented publicly.

These features of my account give it a particular advantage over the cumulative approach in cases where an individual microaggression is sufficiently abusive of vulnerability to cause non-trivial harm on its own. For example, while my interactions with the reporters would of course be exacerbated in cumulation, because of the degree to which they abused my identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability by publicly misholding my first-personal narratives, they're sufficiently problematic on their own to warrant responsibility-holding. My account accommodates these kinds of cases while the cumulative approach is ill-equipped to do so. Further, in contrast to the attributive approach, my account is much more attuned to the dynamics of structural oppression that undergird microaggressions in the first place. In particular, I take my account to help clarify the structural approach's attention to both the level of structure and individual -- especially how they are intertwined in our everyday interpersonal interactions through identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability and power. This framework additionally helps us make sense of the problem with motivational clouding in microaggressions -- it's not a problem just because it interferes with our ability to accurately assess intention or motivation, but more fundamentally, because it trades on and exacerbates vulnerability.

Note that while all three examples I've covered illustrate failures in every piece of uptake, this need not always be the case in order to generate responsibility for microaggressions. Rather, because response is the arm of uptake that "does" the social conferring, meeting our responsibilities in response is sufficient for avoiding microaggressing. However, because response regularly builds from recognition, it's generally unlikely that a well-executed response

will come without some achievement of minimal knowledge. Consequently, we can understand microaggressions to generate individual responsibility because they constitute failures in both constructing and being constructed, where those failures are grounded in an abuse of identity-constructing and identity-based vulnerability. In short, microaggressions generate moral responsibility because they constitute an abuse of vulnerability in our intersubjective identity practices.

Luckily, in addition to clarifying these moral failures, my account also clarifies that meeting our moral responsibilities doesn't have to be that onerous. In the case of microaggressions, this can involve both backward-looking and forward-looking responsibility, but need not be intensive or graceful to have effect. For instance, a few months ago, I moved to a new apartment building, and recently ran into my new upstairs neighbor, a woman in her 60s. We were chatting informally, and at one point in the conversation she very awkwardly asked me what pronouns I use. She was clearly not completely comfortable knowing how to ask that kind of question, or was worried she might be asking it wrong. But she asked! And in doing so, she demonstrated both first- and second-order knowledge, and that she was interested in treating my first-personal narratives well on a forward-looking basis.

Similarly, several years ago, as a union representative I was helping prepare for an arbitration hearing on a grievance. I was corresponding with the arbitrator over email for some time for scheduling purposes, and she would regularly refer to me as Mr. Sumpter. I never corrected her, and the first time we met in person was at the hearing itself. Upon seeing me, she recognized that I'm not a man, and apologized for her mistake. I told her that I use they/them pronouns, but I had no intention of pushing the matter or correcting her going forward -- after all, she had complete power over the outcome of the grievance, and I didn't want to risk our case by making her feel annoyed or defensive towards me. To my surprise, however, she took on her responsibility excellently -- she immediately switched her pronoun usage, and without prompting began using the prefix Mx. when referring to me. Here we see both backwards- and

forwards-looking responsibility in play: Backwards-looking, she took ownership for her mistake and apologized, and forward-looking, she began granting me affirming uptake from then on.

Both the example of my neighbor and the arbitrator illustrate that on my account, meeting both backward- and forward-looking responsibilities in intersubjective-identity practice doesn't have to be terribly difficult. Rather, it's most basically a matter of working to identify ways to treat our social others' vulnerability to us with care, and when we make a mistake, our social others are warranted in expecting backward-looking repair (in many cases, as simple as an apology) and forward-looking improvement. Indeed, meeting our moral responsibilities with respect to our intersubjective identity practices most generally comes down to adopting habits of basic consideration and epistemic humility.

5.4. Conclusion

As we saw in Chapter 1 with María Lugones's first desiderata of anti-oppression theory, structural oppression is socially inescapable, and our social identities are variously enabled and constrained by dominant forces. This includes dominant meaning and meaning-making practices that override, police, or ignore the meaning and meaning-making of marginalized agents. Given that microaggressions are everyday instantiations of oppression, it's thereby no surprise that they are fundamentally structured by an investment in the reproduction of dominant epistemic norms that are built to withstand dissent from marginalized agents.

However, in Chapters 1 and 2 we also saw that even from within this context where our everyday interactions are subject to and structured by disputed and oppressive meaning, a rich history of liberatory theory nevertheless insists on the practical possibility of liberation and empowerment for marginalized agents. In particular, I identified the need to and possibility of creating intersubjective identity practices built to actively solicit and take up the dissenting meaning and meaning-making of marginalized agents. My account of responsibility in our uptake practices builds from these interests to devote specific consideration to the ways our

vulnerability to one another in intersubjective identity work grounds responsibilities towards each other. And as I've shown in this chapter, because my account is built around attention to dynamics of vulnerability in disputed meaning and meaning-making, it's well-equipped to make moral sense of everyday instantiations of oppression like microaggressions, which are bound to be fraught with these same dynamics of dispute.

That is, when we understand microaggressions as failures in recognition and response in our everyday identity practices, we are better able to identify that and how they contribute to both identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability. From here, we are also better able to identify routes of moral repair -- namely, through restructuring our identity practices to rebalance power for the vulnerable others with whom we interact, we establish more plentiful and potent opportunities for dissenting meaning to have social effect. While these individual and interpersonal actions aren't enough on their own to completely dismantle oppression, they are critically important for establishing conditions of empowerment, which themselves ultimately form the foundation of realizable structural change.

And of course, microaggressions aren't the only way that oppression crops up in our everyday identity practices -- so too, do macroaggressions. I take my empowerment approach to responsibility to also apply to the ways our identity-based and identity-constructing vulnerability may be disrupted macroaggressively. However, because overt discrimination and other forms of obvious aggression are far more explicit about their discriminatory commitments, we tend to not need as detailed tools to understand why they generate moral responsibility. While I don't expect this framework to be convincing to those who are explicitly committed to oppressive meaning and meaning-making, I do hope that with sharper tools in hand, those of us who are interested in disrupting and ultimately dismantling structural oppression will be able to shift the terrain upon which these conversations happen in the first place. That is, by investing in practices that rebalance power in our interactive identity work, we help build conditions that make empowerment opportunities for marginalized people more

frequent, obvious, and potent. The more these practices get taken up, the more we also increase opportunities for rebalancing the structural power that undergirds oppression in the first place.

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