Needing Not to Know:
Ignorance, Innocence, Denials, and Discourse

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> The recognition of the fact of widespread complicity, and of one's role in it, is crucial for self-understanding and then also for providing an impetus for change in those societies.
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> — Larry May, *Genocide*

Recently, there has been a concerted effort to study the epistemic side of social injustice and, more specifically, epistemologies of ignorance.[1] Following this trend, José Medina expands Charles Mills's concept of white ignorance in an attempt to investigate how bodies of ignorance are produced by and also perpetuate systems of oppression.[2] Medina introduces the term "meta-ignorance" (*ER*, 149) to name a tenacious form of active ignorance that operates at a meta-level and involves an ignorance of one's ignorance. In order to counter meta-ignorance, Medina advances the development of "kaleidoscopic" consciousness involving multiple perspectives that are in epistemic friction and that Medina maintains compels the knower to grapple with alternative views (*ER*, 200). Working this friction into a continual process of epistemic equilibrium through the formation of networks of solidarity across social differences, Medina argues, is the remedy to counter meta-ignorance.

I cannot do justice here to all the rich insights that Medina's book offers to help us better understand the connections between ignorance and social injustice. In this essay, I focus on his articulation of meta-ignorance and his call for epistemic friction and kaleidoscopic consciousness to combat such ignorance. My central concerns are: How does one steeped in meta-ignorance acquire the type of openness that Medina advocates? Can the recalcitrance of second-order meta-ignorance be penetrated by epistemic friction alone? How can meta-ignorance be remedied when it is not perceived as a problem and, more particularly, when there are countless ways that epistemic friction can be avoided via socially sanctioned discursive practices? Which specific pedagogical practices can social justice educators introduce to rupture the defensive mechanisms of meta-ignorance?

In what follows, I first describe Medina's concept of meta-ignorance, his analysis of colorblindness as an illustration of such ignorance, and his remedy for such ignorance. Then I examine the relationship between ignorance, innocence, and denials of complicity in order to demonstrate that, while epistemic friction plays an integral role in social justice education, exposure to epistemic counterpoints alone cannot lead one to become self-critical. To recognize cognitive limitations when exposure to others is itself distorted by meta-ignorance and when meta-insensitivities are socially sanctioned and normalized requires, I argue, an understanding of what discourse means. Finally, I suggest that exposing students to the meaning of discourse and what discursive practices do is indispensable to breaching the walls of meta-ignorance and to encouraging systemically privileged students to stay with, rather than evade, the discomfort required for learning about their complicity in oppression.

<center>Meta-ignorance</center>

One of Medina's vital insights is his articulation of a specific form of insensitivity that arises from epistemic vices such as epistemic arrogance, laziness, and close-mindedness. These vices are systemic, not individual nor incidental or transitory, and they "inhibit the capacity of self-correction and of being open to correction from others" (*ER*, 31). While such vices are generated by having the privilege of not knowing and not needing to know, Medina insists that these vices are not exclusively the attributes of the systemically privileged. When found among the oppressed, however, such vices have different manifestations and different effects. Medina focuses, however, on the form of ignorance that structures the epistemology of the systemically privileged because of its pervasiveness and persistence.

To understand the ignorance of the privileged, Medina underscores not only the role of *not knowing* and *not needing to know* but, more significantly, *needing not to know*. The latter, according to Medina, is of distinctive significance because it not only fuels an active yet often unconscious epistemic obliviousness that persists "no matter what the evidence may be" (*ER*, 35), but it also functions to protect privilege through systemically supported mechanisms of defense. Jennifer Logue, building on Friedrich Nietzsche, refers to a "will to ignorance" that functions to shield the individual from having to acknowledge one's complicity in racism and social injustice.[3]

To describe this type of ignorance, Medina introduces the concept of meta-ignorance, which is distinct from first-order ignorance in that, while the latter involves mistaken beliefs or lack of beliefs about the social world and one's place in it, the former entails attitudes that limit the ability to identify and correct such first-order ignorance by occluding the subject's epistemic limits. Moreover, meta-ignorance is systemically supported. One way that Medina shows this is by connecting meta-ignorance to a concept he imports from Miranda Fricker, hermeneutical injustice.[4] Hermeneutical injustice is caused by gaps in our collective conceptual resources that result when certain marginalized groups are not allowed to participate fully in the practices through which social meaning is produced. In other words, there is a lack of conceptual tools available that would help the systemically privileged to know the social world such that privilege is then concealed and thus difficult to name, let alone challenge. In terms of whiteness, Medina explains, meta-ignorance is connected to the type of hermeneutical difficulty of privileged whites to recognize and make sense of their own racialized identities, experiences and social positionality. When meta-ignorance arises through and is supported by hermeneutical injustice, we not only don't know, but we don't know that we don't know and think we know. Such ignorance becomes a form of collective denial of certain social facts and uncomfortable truths by those who benefit from such ignorance. Thus, the intractability of meta-ignorance offers an additional epistemic barrier for social justice educators.

The concept of meta-ignorance helps us to better understand how well-intended white students who consider themselves antiracist or nonracist can be so resistant to learning about their complicity in social injustice. When ignorance masquerades as socially sanctioned "knowledge" that determines what is plausible or intelligible such ignorance becomes difficult to dislodge. Moreover, when the ability to deracialize

is socially sanctioned, one does not have to understand the racialized experience of the marginalized nor does one have to contend with how whiteness affects one's life. Medina offers the example of colorblindness, the ideology of insisting that racial difference be ignored, as an illustration of meta-ignorance. Individuals who claim to not see race are not only ignorant of the racialized experience of people of color and ignorant of their own privilege, they are also unaware that they exhibit racial insensitivity at all and, in fact, they believe that they are standing on moral ground.

As an antidote to meta-ignorance, Medina promotes the development of ka-leidoscopic consciousness that involves the continuous exposure to and serious engagement with multiple and conflicting viewpoints. Such exposure, according to Medina, produces beneficial epistemic friction that compels one "to be self-critical, to compare and contrasts one's beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps, and so on" (*ER*, 50). Medina's emphasis on epistemic friction parallels the call for emotional trauma and discomfort in antioppressive pedagogies.[5] Against the view of the safe and comfortable classroom, Megan Boler proposes a pedagogy of discomfort that serves as a basis for collective and individual social transformation.[6] Boler refers to *emotional* discomfort rather than *epistemic* friction, but both Boler and Medina see tension as key to teaching and learning about "difficult" knowledge such as racism. Boler makes a compelling argument for the relationship between emotions, knowledge, and education, and she contends that political emotions such as anger expressed by the marginalized as a result of their experiences with racism can be a form of challenging injustice. The aim of the emotional discomfort she ad-vances is to get students to examine habits, practices, and beliefs that have become rigid and immune to flexibility. As Boler explains, "The first sign of the success of a pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn't want to know, and how one has developed emotional investments to protect oneself from that knowing."[7] The emotional trauma and discomfort that can be provoked by epistemic friction is understood to be a crucial step in combatting the arrogance of meta-ignorance.

Medina recognizes that epistemic habits are socially produced and deeply en-trenched and, thus, he stresses not only the need for epistemic friction but also the importance of collective effort and structural change in the social imaginary. He also acknowledges that barriers to epistemic injustice are not exclusively cognitive but also affective. The connection that he makes to the affective dimension, however, is restricted to the claim that prejudiced beliefs influence the inability to develop emo-tions such as empathy, compassion, and sympathy (*ER*, 210), and he calls not only for epistemic transformations at the collective level but affective restructuring as well.

Indeed, meta-ignorance requires collective transformation. At the level of social justice education, however, Medina's argument leaves a number of questions un-answered. If exposure to others is already distorted by meta-insensitivities that are socially supported, how can exposure to alternative views be a remedy for meta-igno-rance? Medina's model relies heavily on collective action generated by networks of resistance. But under conditions of meta-ignorance, how do we become collectively sensitive? Finally, if meta-ignorance protects one from acknowledging complicity in

social injustice and is socially sanctioned, what type of discomfort and friction can dislodge such ignorance? In the next section, I examine more closely what makes meta-ignorance so intractable and the discursive strategies that white people have at their disposal to evade rather than to stay with discomfort and tension. Then I suggest that understanding how discourse operates can be a tool to raise awareness of the practices and habits that not only shield the systemically privileged from considering their role in the perpetuation of systemic injustice but are themselves expressions of one's complicity in injustice.

IGNORANCE, INNOCENCE, AND DENIALS OF COMPLICITY
The problem of Whiteness is not a problem of evil, but a problem of good!

— Cleveland Hayes and Brenda Juarez, "You Showed Your Whiteness: You Don't Get a 'Good' White People's Medal"

The recalcitrance of meta-ignorance can be the product of ignorance that poses as "knowledge" through processes of normalization. When forced to encounter marginalized views that have been silenced by dominance, meta-ignorance functions to protect one's epistemic mastery and authority from challenge. The tenacity of meta-ignorance, however, can also come from another source.

Well-intended white people often believe that they are innocent of racism as long as they do not engage in "extreme" racist acts of overt hate and discrimination. From this perspective, the continuing presence of racism is attributed to "those bad whites" whose bigotry is outdated while "good whites" can remain ignorant of their own complicity. Moreover, it is not only that most white people are ignorant of their complicity in racism but also that white people have a positive interest in remaining ignorant; they possess a *passion for ignorance*[8] because "our very identities as good people rests on our not seeing our racism."[9] Medina hints at a relationship between ignorance and innocence when he inquires, "Can our ignorance stand in the way of our being (or becoming) good people and good citizens" (*ER*, 121)?

In this question, Medina assumes that ignorance can be a *hindrance* to being good. In contrast, I want to explore how ignorance *benefits* white people and protects the status of white people as "good." I contend that desires for innocence fuel meta-ignorance. White moral innocence depends on a need not to know about one's complicity so that one's perception of oneself as an upstanding moral agent is not disturbed. The double meaning of the term innocence is instructive. The term is often employed to describe one as naïve, unaware, or uninitiated, but it is also used to define someone as not guilty of a crime or offense, not responsible or morally blameworthy. White people cannot develop vigilance about their complicity in racism without recognizing the complex relationship between ignorance and white innocence.

Feminists of color and some educational theorists have studied the relationship between ignorance and innocence. For instance, in their discussion of white feminists' "race to innocence," Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack employ the term "innocence" to bring attention to "a deeply felt belief that each of us, as women, is not implicated in the subordination of other women."[10] White feminists often claim that they cannot be racists because they themselves are victims (of patriarchy) and, therefore, cannot be involved in the oppression of others. According to Fellows and

Razack, investments in one's self-image as a "good person," even as anti-racist, can function to obstruct one's ability to see the harmful consequences of one's practices. One's self-image as innocent thus perpetuates the ignorance of complicity. Fellows and Razack suggest that white feminists begin the process of feeling *less innocent* if they want to contribute to social change.

Sarita Srivastava likewise exposes white feminists' desire for innocence and maintains such innocence obstructs the ability to consider how white practices are implicated in racism.[11] Srivastava describes how white feminists' moral self-image as helpers and saviors of women of color functions to silence these same women of color from raising the issue of white women's complicity in racism. Sara Ahmed shows how white commitments to diversity depend on ignorance as evidenced in how she is silenced in her attempts to expose the institutional racism at her university.[12]

Even white students' desire for dialogue across difference and to know the other, which might seem like a refusal of ignorance, can be a passion for ignorance that serves white interests. Alison Jones explains that white students not only do not have the "ears to hear" what marginalized students tell them, they need for students of color to absolve them from any taint of racism.[13] These "redemption fantasies"[14] safeguard microaggressions of dismissal and denial from being challenged. The ostensible desire to know the other becomes more about sustaining investments in whiteness than a genuine desire to understand marginalized experience and how white people are implicated in their injustice.

In addition, white students have an infinite number of discursive strategies that serve to "insulate White people from examining their/our individual and collective role(s) in the perpetuation of racism."[15] Kim Case and Annette Hemmings demonstrate how white female teacher candidates distanced themselves through discursive strategies when they felt they were being positioned as racist or implicated in institutional racism.[16] Kathy Hytten and John Warren additionally studied the rhetorical strategies that their students performed in courses that attempted to teach them about systemic privilege and oppression and their role in perpetuating such systems.[17] These rhetorical strategies of evasion are socially sanctioned and are endorsed as "common ways of thinking about diversity."[18] It is not only that white students employ these discursive moves to avoid confronting their implication in the maintenance of racism but Hytten and Warren underscore that these practices are "not original — that is, they are already available, already common forms of asserting dominance."[19]

Ignorance and innocence are clearly mutually reinforcing. To pierce this cycle, I suggest that social justice educators need more than just the epistemic friction that may result from exposing the systemically privileged to alternative viewpoints. That type of friction, I contend, may not be generated unless students understand the difference between language as representation and language as discourse.

Understanding How Discourse Operates

In some circles of philosophy of education, there is a growing appreciation of the role that discursive practices play in our social life. The educational research on

dialogue, according to Charles Bingham, has been framed within the presumption of language as representation or the view that language is a transparent mirror of reality that people use to share meaning but that does not have any effect on the people using it or the world words represent.[20] Such an approach assumes language is passive in that it is merely a vessel for the containment of ideas and that it adds nothing to our meaning of self or social reality.

The study of language as representation focuses on the *truth or accuracy of language* and what it represents. Power is not considered a relevant mediator of the truth for those who approach language as representation. Rather, language is considered a transparent instrument by which people transmit ideas that they want to communicate to others. In addition, this approach to language assumes that individuals are the source of the meaning of their speech and, thus, intentions often are important to understanding what language means.[21]

Michel Foucault has contributed to the way we can understand how power relations affect knowing and/or lack of knowing. Foucault explains how discourse is the tool by which power flows and by which our construction of meaning is constituted. Critically analyzing how we are constituted by the limits of our epistemic frameworks, according to Foucault, releases us to break past those limits and explore new possibilities.[22]

Discourse, by which Foucault refers not only to the written or spoken word but also to social practices, constitutes what and how we perceive reality. For Foucault, discourse transmits and reproduces power.[23] Rather than being concerned with the question of truth, Foucault was fascinated with the *hidden* effects of truths. For instance, his genealogies were not meant to discover accurate representations of the past but rather to inquire how the present got to be as it is and, most significantly, what was excluded along the way. Understanding language as discourse involves a concern with exposing how language is related to larger social patterns of power and the ways in which power does things through language. Instead of being tools to only convey our ideas, language *actively does* things. For example, discourse constitutes subjects as certain types of beings.

The discourses we have at our disposal establish what can be said, thought, who can speak, when and with what credibility. Dominant discourses (or what Foucault refers to as regimes of truth) "systematically form the objects of what they speak … they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention."[24] For Foucault, discourses are also sites of resistance because they are unstable. This creates an opening for contesting them.

Shifting our attention from language as representation to language as discourse entails asking different questions. For example, instead of being engrossed in asking whether an utterance is true, language as discourse encourages us to ask questions such as, Who benefits from this utterance? How am I constituted by this utterance and how are others constituted by it? This is an important tool for disrupting meta-ignorance and helping white students confront their complicity in racism.

Take as an example the utterance that occurs often in my classes when we discuss whiteness and white privilege. A white student may say "but my best friend is Black." When this utterance is analyzed from the perspective of language as representation, the statement merely describes a state of affairs that can be judged for the truth or accuracy of what it described. And it may very well be true that my student's best friend is Black. When the pronouncement, however, is approached as a form of discourse, the truth or falsity of the claim is not really what is in question. Rather, the concern is what does this pronouncement do and whom does it benefit? Does the utterance constitute one's moral innocence and attest to one's anti-racist credentials? The question about how one is constituted by the utterance becomes obscured when language is understood only as representation.

Another classroom situation exemplifies the opportunities for disrupting meta-ignorance that being aware of discourse can make possible. A number of years ago, two white nursing students in my "Race and Racism in Education" course unremittingly declared that they were taking the course because they want to "help" their patients of color and they complained bitterly that we were too focused on learning about our own whiteness. The immediate retort from a woman of color in the class was, "Who is asking for your help?" The only way I could help the white nursing students make sense of what the student of color was telling them was to explain what their discursive practices were accomplishing above and beyond the truth of their intention to help their patients. Only when the white nurses began to acknowledge how discourse operates to constitute them as innocent and their patients of color as needing their help could they begin to comprehend the important message the student of color was trying to convey. As Razack explicates, the pain and suffering of others can become sources of our own moral authority and pleasure, "obscuring in the process our own participation in the violence that is done to them."[25]

Medina proposes exposure to alternative perspectives as a counter to meta-ignorance because such exposure provides epistemic friction. He insists that transformations in oppressive social imaginaries are also necessary to develop empathy and trust toward marginalized groups. Yet, as the case of my white student nurses demonstrates, white empathy and white trust also need to be discursively examined. When one is stuck in an approach to language as exclusively about representation, the recalcitrance that Medina's notion of meta-ignorance describes will be difficult to disrupt and confront.

There is a plethora of ways that whites discursively defend their innocence and protect ignorance from challenge. Studying how discourse operates has more to offer those who teach courses on social justice in terms of the critique of the sovereign subject, new conceptions of responsibility, and the complex relationship between discourse and matters of truth. Regretfully, I do not have space to address these topics here.

I conclude that teaching students how discourse operates is crucial for social justice pedagogy because "discourse is intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of inequality."[26] Without a comprehension of how discourse works, exposure to diverse perspectives may not be effective and interrupting the mutually

reinforcing cycle of first-order and meta-ignorance can be impeded. Finally, a critical vigilance with regard to white empathy, compassion, and helping practices may not develop without understanding the effects of discourse. Understanding constituting discourses can be a powerful tool that can assist social justice educators constrain the desire for innocence and curtail the perpetuation of ignorance.

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9. Robin DiAngelo, "Nothing to Add: The Role of White Silence in Racial Discussions," *Journal of Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* 2, no. 2 (2012): 14.

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16. Kim Case and Annette Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies: White Women Preservice Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum," *Urban Education* 40, no. 6 (2005): 606–626.

17. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 65–89.

18. Ibid., 70.

19. Ibid., 66.

20. Charles Bingham, "A Dangerous Benefit: Dialogue, Discourse, and Michel Foucault's Critique of Representation," *Interchange* 3, no. 1 (2002): 351–369.

21. Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE, 2001), 79.

22. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 50.

23. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, *Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, [1978] 1990), 101.

24. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 49.

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