*Rethinking Epistemic Appropriation*

Abstract

Emmalon Davis offers an insightful analysis of an under-theorized form of epistemic oppression called *epistemic appropriation.* This occurs when an epistemic resource developed from marginalized situatedness gains inter-communal uptake, but the author of the epistemic resource is unacknowledged. In this paper,I argue that Davis’s definition of epistemic appropriation is too strong. We should drop the presupposition that epistemic appropriation involves the preservation of knowledge. I argue that epistemic appropriation should include cases in which knowledge is obscured. Being attentive to this form of epistemic appropriation allows us to identify unique forms of epistemic oppression.

**I. Introduction**

Emmalon Davis offers an insightful analysis of a pervasive, morally disturbing, and under-theorized phenomenon called *epistemic appropriation.*[[1]](#footnote-1)It is an invaluable contribution to the rich literature on epistemic injustice. For Davis, epistemic appropriation is, by definition, *wrongful.* There are no neutral cases, let alone positive ones. There aren’t situations in which an epistemic resource is appropriated without something unjust or unfair occurring. In other words, for Davis, epistemic appropriation is constituted by *two* primary harms: *epistemic detachment* and *epistemic misdirection*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I will cast doubt on Davis’s strict definition of epistemic appropriation. I will argue that she misses out on explaining particular cases of epistemic appropriation that seem to be a common feature of appropriation, generally speaking*.* For what it’s worth, I believe that it should be left open as to whether there are cases of epistemic appropriation, defined differently from Davis, that are neutral or even positive. This creates a distinction between *wrongful* and *non-wrongful* epistemic appropriation. I won’t say any more about non-wrongful cases. What I will discuss are the wrongful cases that Davis fails to characterize owing to her stringent conditions. That is, I will argue that there are cases of wrongful epistemic appropriation that do not require, as Davis seems to presuppose, *knowledge preservation –* a requirement of epistemic detachment and epistemic misdirection.

Here’s a toy example of the kinds of cases that I believe Davis fails to explain:

The Blues are a marginalized social group enslaved by the Greens. Members of the Blues share the concept greenie. They use this concept to represent members of the Greens as dominant in a pejorative way; say to represent them as vicious oppressors. Importantly, the concept greenie is used by the Blues as a means of group solidarity, to make a firm distinction between them and their oppressors. Hearing the use of this concept by members of the Blues, members of the Greens start referring to each other as ‘greenies’ in jest, representing each other as oppressors in a more positive light, and taking delight when hearing members of the Blues use the concept. The Blues stop using the concept greenie in communication since it no longer has the kind of significance it originally had.

In this case, an epistemic resource has been appropriated. However, it stands in contrast to the process of epistemic appropriation suggested by Davis. As the case shows, the epistemic resource, which was developed from marginalized situatedness, is obscured when it moves from intra-communal use, to inter-communal uptake through appropriation. If we accept that this counts as a form of epistemic appropriation, then we can distinguish between two types: *knowledge-preserving* and *knowledge-obscuring* epistemic appropriation. As it stands, Davis only accepts the former. I argue that Davis should expand her concept of epistemic appropriation to include both. Without appreciation of this latter form of epistemic appropriation, we miss out on making sense of particular forms of epistemic oppression that afflict marginalized communities.

**II. Davis’s Version of Epistemic Appropriation**

Davis begins her discussion explaining that epistemic resources can be shared in two ways.

First, epistemic resources can be *intra-communally* shared. This is the set of epistemic resources shared *within* particular groups or communities, which members draw on in order to render intelligible experience, and to communicate such experience across social space. The groups that interests Davis are those that sit in a dialectical power relationship: marginalized groups, such as people of color and women; and dominant groups, such as White people and men.

Second, epistemic resources can be *inter-communally* shared. This is the set of resources that is shared across social groups, say, between members of a given society. Such resources are utilised by marginalized *and* dominant group members.

What Davis sets out to achieve is an explanation of a particular, problematic and wrongful, process by which an intra-communally shared epistemic resource used by members of a marginalized group receives dominant inter-communal uptake. She calls this *epistemic appropriation.* That is, epistemic appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource of a marginalized group receives popular uptake by dominant group members. For Davis, epistemic appropriation is always wrongful. It is constituted by two distinctive harms: *epistemic detachment* and *epistemic misdirection.*[[3]](#footnote-3)

Epistemic detachment occurs when “the intercommunal pool is expanded to incorporate new epistemic resources... but the participatory role of marginalized contributors in the process of knowledge production is obscured.”[[4]](#footnote-4) That is, marginalized knowers are undermined insofar as they are not appreciated as knowledge-makers after inter-communal uptake of an epistemic resource developed from marginalized situatedness. It’s important to note that epistemic detachment does not involve a marginalized person being prevented from contributing knowledge to the inter-communal set of resources. It requires only that such contributions go unrecognized.

Epistemic misdirection compounds the harm of epistemic detachment. It occurs when “epistemic resources developed within, but detached from, the margins are utilized in dominant discourses in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Here, the concern is that marginalized knowers make significant and meaningful contributions to the set of resources shared across social groups, but such contributions only benefit, or work to the advantage of, those already with power *in virtue of* epistemic detachment.

I won’t have much to say about epistemic misdirection. Instead, I will focus my energies on epistemic detachment. I want to shed critical light on an assumption in Davis’s definition of epistemic appropriation. It is this: Epistemic appropriation *only* occurs when the genealogy of the knowledge that is developed from marginalized situatedness is erased, *but such knowledge is* *preserved* when taken up by dominant knowers.I will argue that this only captures one unique form of epistemic appropriation. Davis’s definition is not exhaustive. Importantly, it misses out on many different primary harms of epistemic appropriation, broadly construed, in which marginalized knowers are undermined in virtue of the resources developed from within the margins become obscured during inter-communal uptake. This obscuring of marginalized epistemic resources means that marginalized people, for whom the resource was developed, lose knowledge about the world. Thus, on this version of epistemic appropriation, it is the *epistemic resource* that is obscured, not its *recognition*.

To introduce this form of epistemic appropriation, I will make use of a broad distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation – this is a general distinction between types of appropriation. I will argue that for (some) non-epistemic cases of appropriation, we can distinguish between *function-preserving* and *function-obscuring* appropriation. Both can be wrongful. Taking lesson from this distinction, we can introduce a further distinction between kinds of epistemic appropriation: *knowledge-preserving* and *knowledge-obscuring* appropriation. I claim that Davis has given us an account of the former, yet we should also allow that cases of epistemic appropriation involve the latter. A comprehensive understanding of epistemic appropriation will include both. Before I get to these distinctions, I will first explore the difference between *individual level* and *group level* appropriation.

**III. Appropriation Across Ontological Levels**

When does epistemic appropriation occur? Let me narrow the scope of this question. I am not (just) interested in what makes appropriation harmful or wrongful. Instead, I am concerned with the time at which appropriation has taken place.

Davis seems to be focused on epistemic appropriation that occurs at the *individual level*, while also being attentive to the ways that social structure shapes interpersonal dynamics:

“When epistemic detachment occurs, an *agent* is unjustly estranged from her own epistemic contributions, while those contributions are nonetheless taken up and circulated among dominant circles.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus, to the question of when epistemic appropriation occurs, it seems that Davis’s answer is this: It occurs when the contributions of an individual knower is not recognized by a community of knowers.

Perhaps this is an unfair characterization of Davis’s position. She does make use of other examples that show how appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource is developed within a marginalized group, but the epistemic resource is not attributable to just one member. Davis restates a historical event where John Stuart Mill refers to a convention attended by many prominent men, but fails to mention the intellectually esteemed women who were present. This counts as epistemic appropriation on Davis’s definition insofar as the un-naming of the women means that their role in the production of knowledge is erased. Here, we can see that epistemic appropriation can occur at the group level, albeit a very small group.

 I take it that epistemic appropriation can occur at any socio-ontological level. It can, as Davis has pointed out, occur as a matter of an individual not being given due recognition. But, it can also occur when a marginalized community’s epistemic resource is co-opted by a dominant group. This seems to following traditional ways of thinking about the general phenomenon of appropriation. Consider cultural appropriation.

Individuals can perpetrate cultural appropriation. For instance, think of a White person who decides to get dreadlocks, yet disregards the socio-historical context and culture in which the hairstyle is embedded. However, groups are also guilty of cultural appropriation. Think of logo of the Chicago Blackhawks, an NHL team. It uses the image of a Native American man, covered in war paint. Here, it is the (wrongful) appropriation of a group of people (i.e., Native Americans) by another group of people (i.e., the Chicago Blackhawks). This is characteristic of sporting teams around the world: they use images of Indigenous groups as a matter of getting across the message to other teams that they are ‘warriors’ to be reckoned with.

Unlike Davis, I am going to focus solely on cases of epistemic appropriation that occur between groups. To get clear on the phenomenon I have in mind, think back to the example mentioned in the introduction. In this case, the concept greenie, an epistemic resource developed by the Blues, has been appropriated. It was co-opted by members of a dominant group who used it in a deviant way. Members of the marginalized group, the Greens, stopped using the concept since it had lost its significance and, as a result, the group lost its ability to represent their oppressors pejoratively. Further, they lost their ability to convey this information across social space – to themselves, and to their oppressors. I will say more about cases like this later on. For now, I will introduce the distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation.

**IV. Function-Preserving and Function-Obscuring Appropriation**

Appropriation, as a general phenomenon, occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use.[[7]](#footnote-7) As discussed above, one example of this is cultural appropriation*.* Often, in the philosophical literature, cultural appropriation is presented in a neutral light. It is suggested that the appropriation of a culture involves a kind of one-way transaction without any social, moral, or political overtones; it is just “the taking of something produced by members of one culture by members of another.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Some theorists are even skeptical that there is a serious harm that occurs in cases of cultural appropriation. James O. Young suggests that with respect to the appropriation of art, he is doubtful that “artists will do much harm to the cultures from which they borrow.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Though appropriation may be offensive, it’s not clear that it involves a significant moral wrongdoing. This controverts a more typical, value-laden understanding of cultural appropriation. Erich Hatala Matthes claims “there is general agreement that, if cultural appropriation is morally objectionable, it is only objectionable when a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates from a member of a marginalized group.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Matthes puts this claim in the context of Western colonialism. History has taught us that dominant groups tend to flex their muscle in order to force cultural assimilation, or else to degrade or destroy cultures altogether. Thus, it is important not to downplay the moral significance of cultural appropriation lest our nefarious past haunts us once again.

With this in mind, I want to introduce a distinction between *preserving* and *obscuring* appropriation. Here are some rough definitions:

**Preserving appropriation** occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the appropriated object is preserved.

**Obscuring** **appropriation** occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the appropriated object is obscured.

As it stands, these definitions doesn’t tell us much. After all, both simply restate the broad definition of appropriation mentioned above, and add in ‘preserved’ or ‘obscured’. Thus, we might ask: *What* is preserved or obscured in cases of appropriation? The answer to this varies depending on the kind of appropriation one is interested in. To see how this distinction is useful for our discussion of *epistemic* appropriation, first compare two cases of wrongful *cultural* appropriation.

Here’s the first. In 2017, the movie *Ghost in the Shell* was released. It is based on the hugely popular Japanese seinen manga of the same title, authored by Masamune Shirow. In the movie, the main character, who is Japanese, is played by Scarlett Johansson, a White American. This caused outrage in different Asian communities, as it was seen as an instance of cultural appropriation – in particular, ‘whitewashing’. It was argued that Hollywood, a predominately White community, took from Japanese culture, with disregard, and benefitted from this. This follows a more general trend of Hollywood whitewashing Asian cinema. I will refer to this as Case (i).

Here’s the second. In a scene in the Netflix show *After Life*, Ricky Gervais can be seen seated in front of what appears to be a piece of Indigenous Australian art. When a journalist from NITV—a television channel that broadcasts shows primarily produced by Indigenous Australians—saw this, he went to the web to see if he could find the artist. It turned out that the artist was a White British woman named Timna Woollard. Again, this caused (rightful) outrage. The concern was that Woollard’s attempt to mimic Indigenous Australian art fails to recognize how such images are connected to Indigenous Australian culture; it makes the mistake that Indigenous artwork is simply a matter of ‘style’. Call this Case (ii).

Both Case (i) and (ii) are instances of cultural appropriation. However, there is a sense in which they are distinctly different. Case (i) is an instance of *preserving* appropriation; Case (ii) is an instance of *obscuring* appropriation. Specifically, the former is *function*-preserving; the latter *function-*obscuring. What does this mean? Let’s start with the former. Define function-preserving appropriation as follows:

**Function-preserving appropriation** occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, and the *function* of the appropriated object is preserved.

In Case (i), we can see that the function of *Ghost in a Shell* is preserved. In other words, despite the main character being played by Scarlett Johansson, a White American, the storyline remains the same. It still tells the futuristic story of a cyborg supersoldier who tries to get to the bottom of her unknown past. That is, the appropriation involved in the re-make of *Ghost in a Shell* does notobscure its revered narrative.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In contrast to function-preserving appropriation, we can define function-obscuring appropriation as follows:

**Function-obscuring appropriation** occurs when an individual or group takes something for their own use, but the *function* of the appropriated object is obscured.

We can see this kind of appropriation in Case (ii). In Indigenous Australian communities, artworks are more than just paintings. They are connected to stories, culture, and land; they are imbued with a social significance that reflects ceremonies important to the communities who create the artwork. The symbols used in each artwork tell complex narratives through the combination of an alphabet of cultural icons. Thus, when a White person, totally unconnected[[12]](#footnote-12) from this culture, paints something that attempts to mimic Indigenous art, under the guise of ‘appreciation’, they are not preserving the original function of the artwork.[[13]](#footnote-13) They do not have the necessary ‘inside’ knowledge to decipher the significance of the work that they are copying.

*IV.I. Knowledge-Preserving and Knowledge-Obscuring Appropriation*

We can apply the general distinction between preserving and obscuring appropriation to the epistemic domain. That is, preserving and obscuring appropriation extends beyond the appropriation of culture and functions. We can distinguish between *knowledge-preserving* and *knowledge-obscuring* appropriation. Define knowledge-preserving appropriation as follows:

**Knowledge-preservingappropriation** occurs when an epistemic resource is taken from an individual or group, but the epistemic resource preserves *knowledge* for those who developed the resource.

This is the kind of appropriation that interests Davis. Consider the first case that she offers. In this case, John Stuart Mill puts himself as the sole author of a document entitled “The Enfranchisement of Women”, of which Harriet Taylor was a collaborator. Though Mill has the consent of Taylor, Davis claims that this still counts as epistemic appropriation since there is knowledge that is given to the broader community, but such knowledge is not recognised as coming from its source (i.e., Harriet Taylor).[[14]](#footnote-14) Here, we can see that the appropriated epistemic resource is maintained as a source of understanding. The wrong is *specifically* epistemic detachment (and misdirection).

There’s no doubt that Davis has located a unique and important form of epistemic appropriation. However, her account is not exhaustive. It is one kind of epistemic appropriation out of (at least) two. And her failure to countenance other kinds means that she misses out on explaining distinctive forms of epistemic oppression. Thus, while Davis has located the primary harms of knowledge-preserving appropriation, she has not explained the primary harms of other forms of epistemic appropriation. One form that she hasn’t discussed is knowledge-obscuring appropriation.

**V. Knowledge-Obscuring Appropriation**

In the introduction, I outlined a toy case. In this case, the concept greenie, developed from marginalized situatedness, was appropriated by a dominant group; this changed the sense of the concept, and undermined its significance. It involved knowledge-obscuring appropriation. Define knowledge-obscuring appropriation as follows:

**Knowledge-obscuring appropriation** occurs when an epistemic resource is taken from an individual or group, and the epistemic resource is obscured such that knowledge is lost for those who developed the resource.

With this definition in mind, I want to now introduce a real-world case. There are many that we can pick from. The appropriation of concepts used in Black communities in the U.S. such as bae, on fleek and trap; the appropriation of religious or spiritual concepts such as zen and karma; the appropriation of Australian Indigenous concepts such as yakka; and the appropriation of Native American concepts such as spirit animal. In what follows, I will discuss the concept woke.

In recent time, woke has made its way into common understanding. First used in the 1940s, its roots are found in Black American communities.[[15]](#footnote-15) Historically, it has been a concept that symbolizes understanding and awareness of social justice issues, in particular the oppression and liberation of Black Americans. In more recent time, 2008, the concept was used in Erykah Badu’s song “Master Teacher”. However, woke became hugely popular when it was picked up by the Black Lives Matters movement, and used frequently (over 30 millions time on Twitter) in relation to the racially motivated shootings of Black Americans by police. Users of the concept aim to represent something along the lines of being conscious of White supremacy and the surreptitious ways that it materializes. Given the state of socio-political affairs at the time of this usage, woke invoked a careful skepticism of supposedly protective institutions. The concept allowed an individual to be conscious of the ways that flawed ideology can take a grip on one’s understanding of the social world. Fast-forward to the present.

 When certain online communities got hold of the concept, it was co-opted and turned into something quite different. The purpose of the concept is still to represent a conscious understanding of something ‘implicit’ in the world – of ‘being aware’ of what’s really going on. However, it is now used in all sorts of ways that takes attention away from the unjust treatment of Black Americans. Take a look online and you will see that woke is used to express sentiments unrelated to Black lives: to issue anti-feminist warnings, to disseminate celebrity gossip, to warn of the dangers of soft drink and razors, and to make fun of progressives. In short, it is used with no awareness or regard of its origin and socio-political purposes.

At one point in history, woke was a socially and politically important epistemic resource, circulating intra-communally within Black communities, that was used to render intelligible unique marginalized experience, and to inform others of the ways that oppression can take shape. Now, after dominant inter-communal uptake, the concept is used for all sorts of things unrelated to Black lives. The significance of the concept woke has been diluted; its social meaning has been *obscured*. This constitutes knowledge-obscuring appropriation. Why?

First, those who once used woke to render intelligible experience, say, about police violence against Black Americans, are no longer able to do so in the same way. The concept fails to capture the unique and unjust experiences of Black Americans given its widespread uptake and inter-communal, varied usage. That is, Black Americans, it seems, cannot make sense of their experience using woke owing to the fact that the concept no longer serves a specific purpose.

One might ask: Though woke serves a particular purpose in the broader community, doesn’t it still serve the same old purpose in Black American communities? It seems to me that the answer is: No. To suggest otherwise fails to appreciate the ways that epistemic resources are interconnected after inter-communal uptake. To see this point, consider the toy case above. In the case, the Blues decide not to use greenie since it was taken up and obscured by the dominant group – it doesn’t have the same sense or utility it once did. The same can be said for woke. In virtue of having its time in the inter-communal sun, woke inherited new and unintended social meanings that can’t be shaken off. Now, its broad usage, by White people in particular, means that the concept might be perceived as ‘tired’, ‘whitewashed’, ‘uncool’, ‘useless’, ‘played-out’, etc.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Second, when knowledge-obscuring appropriation occurs, it means that marginalized groups cannot convey certain knowledge across social space – especially to whom such knowledge is needed, such as dominantly situated people. For instance, owing to the obscuring of woke, Black Americans have less epistemic resources available that would enable them to understand and convey the their experience of oppression (and hope for liberation).

Further, if we accept that part of conveying conceptualized experience involves transmitting information about a *specific context of use*, then we can see how this is obscured when a concept receives dominant uptake. When a marginalized group’s concept becomes less exclusive owing to its acquisition and inter-communal use by members of a dominant group, it expands the concept’s context of use. This means that information about a *specific* context of use is lost. If the information about a specific context of use was socially and politically useful for members of a marginalized group, then its absence means that this usefulness is lost.

To see this, consider woke. If the context of use for woke was still restricted to intra-communal transmission of information about, say, police violence against Black Americans, then the deployment of the concept would pragmatically convey information about this context of use. It would express contextual information about the group’s use of woke to make sense of particularpower structures. However, since woke is now used quite broadly, especially by White people, it does not convey information about a specific context of use. Its context of use is now diverse and widespread.

**VI. The Harms of Knowledge-Obscuring Appropriation**

Like Davis, I take epistemic appropriation to be a form of epistemic oppression: “Epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production.”[[17]](#footnote-17) That is, epistemic appropriation is oppressive insofar as it undermines our epistemic agency; and epistemic agency is intimately tied up with our basic human capacities. Thus, when our epistemic capacities are undermined, we are undermined as human beings.

As said spelled out in §II, Davis argues that the primary harm of epistemic appropriation is epistemic detachment and misdirection – forms of epistemic oppression. However, the primary harm that Davis reveals is not the primary harm of knowledge-obscuring appropriation. Cases of knowledge-obscuring appropriation *might* involve erasing some understanding of the epistemic contributions of marginalized knowers, but because the epistemic resource is obscured when inter-communally taken up, the author of the epistemic resource isn’t *really* the marginalized community. It is sourced in the act of knowledge-obscuring appropriation itself.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, we can ask: What is the primary harm of knowledge-obscuring appropriation?

I argue that knowledge-obscuring appropriation constitutes a distinctive form of *epistemic injustice*: An injustice that occurs when one is undermined in their capacity as an epistemic subject.[[19]](#footnote-19) How? A useful starting point is to recognize that knowledge-obscuring appropriation involves an individual or group of people *losing* knowledge in virtue of their epistemic resource being tainted through inter-communal uptake. It appears, at first glance, that knowledge-obscuring appropriation undermines someone, or some set of people, in their capacity as an epistemic subject. After all, taking knowledge away from someone infringes their epistemic agency – it does not respect their ability to contribute to knowledge production and maintenance. However, there seem to be cases in which knowledge-obscuring appropriation occurs, but such cases do not appear to be wrongful. Think of the *re*-appropriation of the concept queer. In such cases, it is a marginalized group that takes something from a dominant group. Thus, taking lesson from Matthes claim at the start of §IV, we might say that if knowledge-obscuring appropriation is wrongful, it is only wrongful when a dominant group appropriates from a marginalized group. That is, *wrongful* knowledge-obscuring appropriation occurs when an epistemic resource developed from marginalized situatedness is inter-communally taken up through usage by dominant group members, and, owing to this usage, the epistemic resource is obscured such that knowledge is lost for marginalized group members.

Another wrong of knowledge-obscuring appropriation that I want to draw attention to is *hermeneutical injustice*. Hermeneutical injusticeis a structural epistemic injustice that occurs when an agent’s experience is obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource – the stock of epistemic resources that we collectively share.[[20]](#footnote-20) This is a function of *hermeneutical marginalization*: prejudicial structural constraints (e.g., being a woman who is not taken seriously) that limit one’s ability to participate equally in determining the epistemic resources shared by members of a community of thinkers and speakers. Someone can suffer from hermeneutical injustice in, at least, two ways.

First, a marginalized person *lacks* an epistemic resource that would enable them to render intelligible their experience. This is because dominant group members have more influence over the processes that determine which concepts are introduced into the collective hermeneutical resource. As a result, marginalized knowers lack understanding that is in their best interest to have. Miranda Fricker calls such instances of hermeneutical injustice *maximal cases.*[[21]](#footnote-21)

Second, a marginalized person *possesses* the relevant epistemic resource that is required to render intelligible experience, but cannot convey this experience across social space. This form of hermeneutical injustice occurs when a marginalized person has access to sophisticated interpretive assets yet such assets “are not shared with at least one out-group with whom communication is needed”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Members of dominant groups, often in willful ignorance, do not possess the epistemic resources that would enable them to interpret and make sense of important experiences of marginalized group members.[[23]](#footnote-23) In Fricker’s words, “Members of such hermeneutically self-reliant groups are vulnerable to hermeneutical injustices whose form does not involve any confused experiences whatsoever, but only frustratingly failed attempts to communicate them to members of an out-group.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Fricker calls instances of hermeneutical injustice like these *midway cases*.[[25]](#footnote-25)Davis does not discuss such cases.

Knowledge-obscuring appropriation can constitute a maximal case of hermeneutical injustice. Through appropriation, an epistemic resource developed from marginalized situatedness is obscured, thus affecting the set of epistemic resources available to marginalized group members. That is, marginalized group members are no longer able to use the appropriated epistemic resource to render intelligible experience. There is a lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resource. What’s important to note is that this is not the typical story of hermeneutical injustice. In paradigm maximal cases, hermeneutical injustice occurs in virtue of an *existing* lacuna in the set of epistemic resources. Knowledge-obscuring appropriation *creates* lacunae by removing, or obscuring, epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness.

In addition to this, knowledge-obscuring appropriation can constitute a midway case of hermeneutical injustice. Consider woke once more. It was intra-communally used as a means of making sense of the unjust treatment of Black Americans, but was then co-opted and obscured to be applied to basically anything. When Black Americans used this concept to express the significance of their experience, White Americans ignored this and, therefore, through dominant uptake, diluted the social and political usefulness of the concept. This constitutes a midway case of hermeneutical injustice insofar as dominant group members failed to respect the significance attached to the concept developed from marginalized situatedness when it was expressed to them. Marginalized group members were not able to convey knowledge across social space, especially to those whom such knowledge is needed.

**VI. A Potential Problem?**

One might feel that there is an immediate problem with the notion of knowledge-obscuring appropriation: The concept that was used in marginalized communities is not the same as the concept that is circulated by dominant knowers. That is, when a member of a Black community deployed the concept woke before appropriation, they were deploying a different concept than the one that White people deploy today. If it turns out that they are different concepts, how is it that the dominant group has *taken* something from the marginalized one? This speaks to a much more difficult question in the philosophy of concepts: How are concepts individuated? There is no agreed upon answer to this. Thus, it is entirely plausible that there is a story that could explain identity-preserving changes to concepts when subject to knowledge-obscuring appropriation.[[26]](#footnote-26)

However, even if the concepts turn out to be different, I don’t think that this is a unique problem for my account of appropriation. This is because a similar problem might be posed to paradigm cases of function-obscuring appropriation. Take the example of the British woman who appropriated Indigenous Australian artwork. What exactly did she *take*? We can she took the iconography of that is typical of Indigenous Australian art. However, the problem with the case is what she *didn’t* do (or what she *couldn’t* do). She didn’t respect the traditions associated with the iconography; the stories they tell and the ceremonies they reflect. Thus, the painting that she created *isn’t* Indigenous Australian art. It is something different. In the same vein, we might say that in knowledge-obscuring appropriation, though it might result in a different concept, it still counts as appropriation. This is because through appropriation, some aspects of the original concept are maintained (i.e., those that serve dominant groups) yet other aspects are ignored (i.e., those that don’t). We can see this in the example of woke. It was intended to be used as a matter of being conscious of the implicit structures that oppress Black Americans, but then the concept was co-opted to be used as a matter of being conscious of implicit structures more generally. Thus, if we accept that cases of function-obscuring appropriation count as paradigm forms of appropriation, which we should, then we must accept that cases of knowledge-obscuring also count as appropriation.

**VIII. Going Forward**

What should we do in the face of knowledge-obscuring appropriation? Davis suggests that in the face of (knowledge-preserving) appropriation “[o]ur epistemic responsibilities aren’t terminated once new concepts which speak to the experiences of marginalized subjects are generated. *Our responsibilities also concern how those concepts enter into and are used within the mainstream.*”[[27]](#footnote-27) We can learn from the second half of this statement. Dominantly situated knowers should be careful about how concepts become inter-communally used. Given the risk of obscuring an epistemic resource developed from marginalized situatedness, dominant thinkers and speakers need to exercise vigilance not to use the epistemic resource inappropriately; to respect its context of use, its history, and its social and political usefulness.

1. Emmalon Davis, “On Epistemic Appropriation,” *Ethics* 128 (2018): 702 – 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Davis, “On Epistemic Appropriation,” 705. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Davis, “On Epistemic Appropriation,” 723. My emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This definition comes from the Cambridge Dictionary. “Appropriation,” *Cambridge Dictionary*. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/appropriation, (23rd of April, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James O. Young, ‘Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation’, *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Erich Hatala Matthes, ‘Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?,’ *Social Theory and Practice,* 42, 2 (2016): 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Though, even this is suspect. One might think that because bodies are imbued with social meaning, something isn’t conveyed when a White person is cast to play a character that was originally a person of color. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Unconnected insofar as she doesn’t belong to or understand that culture. She is ‘connected’ insofar as she is part of a cultural that is historically responsible for the murder of Indigenous Australian people through colonization. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I conjecture that a lot of cultural appropriation is obscuring, not preserving. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Davis, “On Epistemic Appropriation,” 707 – 708. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It was used in a 1942 first volume of a digest magazine written by J. Saunders Redding; as well as 1962 New York Times article, ‘If You’re Woke You Dig It.’ The reference of ‘remaining awake’ was also mention by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965. See Abas Mirzael, “Where ‘Woke’ Came From and Why Marketers Should Think Twice Before Jumping on the Social Activism Bandwagon,” *The Conversation* https://theconversation.com/where-woke-came-from-and-why-marketers-should-think-twice-before-jumping-on-the-social-activism-bandwagon-122713 (22nd of April, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is similar to Herman Cappelen’s notion of the *lexical effects* of words that express concepts – the cognitive and affective associations with words (e.g., the social meanings attached to brand names like ‘Coca-Cola’). See Hermen Cappelen, *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kristie Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” *Social Epistemology* 28 (2014): 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Further, given that the epistemic resource is obscured, it may be detrimental to marginalized knowers to be attributed the author of the resource. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Miranda Fricker, “Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance,” in *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance,* Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This is closely related to the notions of *contributory injustice* and *willful hermeneutical ignorance.* See Kristie Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33 (2012): 24 – 47; Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance,” *Hypatia* 27 (2012): 715 – 735. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Miranda Fricker, “Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance,” 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On some accounts of individuation, concepts can’t survive changes to their extension/intension. On other accounts, concepts can survive provided that the *core function* of the concept is preserved. For more on this, see: Sally Haslanger, ‘Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?,’ *Nous* (2000),34:1, 35; Michael Prizing, ‘A Revisionist’s Rubric: Conceptual Engineering and the Discontinuity Objection,’ *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy,* (2017),17; Amie Thomasson, ‘A Pragmatic Method for Normative Conceptual Work,’ in *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 435 – 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Davis, “On Epistemic Appropriation”, 725. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)