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The Epistemological Evaluation of Oppositional Secrets*

I keep secrets. Even though I am told over and over by white feminists that we must reveal ourselves, open ourselves, I keep secrets. Disclosing our secrets threatens our survival. (Lugones, 2003, 11)

Postcolonial and other oppositional literature introduces many readers to secrets from the social margins, sometimes only mentioning them, sometimes sharing their content. Moving beyond colonialism and other forms of oppression is as much a goal as a description of this writing. Because survival may be threatened, the question arises in what circumstances feminists should expect the secrets of oppressed people to be shared, and so in what circumstances we should investigate or reveal them. This issue seems to confound the central claim of standpoint epistemologists — postcolonial, feminist, or otherwise — that there is cognitive value in learning from people's experiences of oppression (Harding 1991; Hartsock 1986, Mills 1998). Whether or not one shares similar experiences, standpoint theorists argue, to begin thought from the perspective of "others" and "other 'others'", as Sandra Harding (1991) puts it, provides an epistemic advantage. Secrets concerned with resistance, such as in the Underground Railroad, women's shelters and lesbian passing, must be especially valuable and relevant to developing knowledge from a standpoint, because activism is supposed to be necessary to acquire the advantage. Yet, revealing aspects of resistance so vulnerable that they are kept secret risks undermining the potential of those secrets for resisting and opposing oppression. Thus, the epistemological value of

oppositional secrecy seems to conflict with standpoint theorists' advice of emancipatory activism.

The case of oppositional secrecy seems to indicate an exception to standpoint theory, a case in which emancipatory politics does not encourage but prohibits sharing understanding. However, as I will argue, the need to preserve oppositional secrecy is not an exception to, but only a limited case of, standpoint epistemology. Some understanding that might be gained is not barred by political considerations, but political distinctions do indicate when and where the cognitive value of such understandings tapers off. The cognitive significance of exposing hidden understanding reduces in cases of extreme political vulnerability that morally require secrecy.

Standpoint Knowledge

Cognitive value arises from a standpoint in two different ways. The first is from accessing suppressed knowledge, understandings that people in power or systems of power currently obscure. Bringing a view from the social margins to the attention of epistemic agents beyond the oppressed group moves it into spheres where it can be of benefit to, and where it can benefit from, engaging with mainstream intellectual resources. More original (in a literal sense) to marginalized perspectives is the second form, underdeveloped knowledge, including tacit understanding and practical wisdom.

Underdeveloped understandings must initially provide benefit to, and be

developed by, people who experience a common form of oppression. Only once appreciated as shared aspects of life can tacit understandings and practical wisdom become transferable knowledge. At that point, coalition and exchange with other communities becomes possible that is both politically directed and epistemologically fruitful (at least if not suppressed).

Both suppressed and underdeveloped knowledge provide special cognitive value only insofar as they are based on experiences of people in oppressed groups that tend to be difficult to access. Because of oppression, people in some groups do not have access to resources that facilitate individuals' learning, such as books or a decent breakfast. Moreover, isolated individuals won't develop strong communal perspectives. Isolation from others who share experiences of the same form of oppression makes experiences of marginalization seem idiosyncratic, or personal rather than political. This applies directly to women, gay men, and especially lesbians, because compound oppressions tend to compound isolation. Therefore, a communal perspective may require consciousness-raising and separatism. Indirectly, but no less powerfully, some forms of oppression isolate people from each other by restricting education and literacy, and so limiting the ability to share experience and understanding. Articulating the common nature of experiences of oppression not only reveals the breadth of an experienced phenomenon, such as sexual harassment or racial violence; it also reveals the contingent political situation that obscures those experiences.

So, resisting oppression provides political wisdom, and Blacks learn from Blacks, women from women, and lesbians from lesbians. Also, single straight women and lesbians learn from each other about the privilege of heterosexual monogamy and how it fosters sexism; Latino/as, Native North Americans, and Blacks learn from each other about racism, and so on.

However, even unified perspectives may be suppressed. Actively seeking out marginalized views is necessary for bringing together all potential approaches. Africanists may learn from feminists, lesbians may learn from Quebecois francophones, and iconic straight White heterosexual Western able-bodied men may learn from us all. Only less can be learned from the political center, because people in that situation already receive a disproportionate amount of attention.

The development for political reasons of views from the social margins has a distinctively epistemological result because it encourages effective egalitarian social sharing of information (Harding 1991). Effective sharing requires both counteracting the social pressures that marginalize some perspectives, and making sure that experiences of life at the margins develop into generalizable perspectives. Even canonical Western philosophers (e.g. Mill 1956) recognize cognitive value in the consideration of multiple perspectives. Learning from a range of positions (social or ideological) is cognitively valuable in order to counteract people's stubbornness and science's undemocratic tendencies.

Working against the underdevelopment and suppression of views from the social margins requires special attention to these views. This involves affirmative action in the name of stricter cognitive standards. Of course, benefiting the understanding of people in general by developing perspectives from the margins is no straightforward matter. In addition to the general problems of moving “from margin to center,” particular situations of political oppression and corresponding cognitive resources require particularized accounts. Nevertheless, in general, knowledge improves when addressed to the interests of people on the social margins, and reflects their concerns and problems that otherwise tend to be sidelined or remain isolated. In this way, for instance, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, insider-outsiders, who resist a particular form of oppression but who have some access to the authority of the political center, help create better sociology (1991).¹

Oppositional Secrecy

The very nature of secrecy makes it difficult to find examples — and so much the worse because suppression and underdevelopment make understanding from an oppressed perspective difficult to recognize. However, even a thoroughly privileged Western feminist can discern two forms of oppositional secrecy. First, oppressed people build covert networks to escape or mitigate oppression, as in the case of the Underground Railroad or illegal systems providing contraceptive information and services. Second, people belonging to an oppressed group may “pass” as having a more politically

central identity. For instance, Blacks may pass as White, or gays and lesbians pass as straight; indeed, all sorts of passing is possible through marriage and name-changes.

These two types of oppositional secrecy take special forms. For instance, a casual form of secret arises when people covertly share information by using a language different from the politically dominant tongue. Francophones in English Canada and Latino/as in the U.S. occasionally make use of this tool for secrecy, and we can consider it an ad hoc networking provision, an Underground Railroad in microcosm. The goal is to secure safe passage, not of whole people or physical provisions, but of information alone, just as some birth control networks provide.

Some oppositional secrets combine the two strategies of passing and networking. Passing as a typical house or generic institution may be important for a women's shelter, but this requires a network of support by volunteers, and strict privacy policies that keep the shelter beyond easy access by abusers; all this together makes it possible for residents to hide their identities. (More completely covert networks may be necessary for highly endangered clients.) Likewise, same-sex couples in the United States seeking access to marriage may use networks to provide temporary addresses and pass as residents of states that provide access to legal marriage; and in Japan they may pass as parent and child to gain access to the property rights otherwise afforded to couples (Maree 2004).

Another hybrid of passing and networking that disrupts oppression is secret sabotage, including feigned helplessness, an underground activity that depends on passing. A slave who intentionally damages farm machinery to provide another slave time to recuperate from an illness wishes to pass as a dutiful slave but also to negotiate systematic reprieve for the other (Douglas 1995). Appearing dutiful is also necessary for the mother who intentionally asks nonsensical questions, or burns dinner and breaks dishes. Her behavior provides reprieve from the indignity that can infect motherwork, a reprieve provided by demonstrating to herself her own measure of independence (Lugones 2003, 5-6).

The effects of secrecy vary according to context and are difficult to predict. What is meant to be oppositional may instead be collaborative, and generally involves both. Any oppositional activity is likely to be “curdled”, that is both blended with repressive aspects, and ambiguous in the face of interlocking oppressions (Lugones 1994; 2003, 8-16). On the oppositional side, consider how passing tends to be more useful for lesbians than gay men who may confront heterosexism without the complications of sexism (Card 1995). Yet, for lesbians, passing entails a special risk of collaboration: the invisibility of lesbian identity encourages neglect of lesbian issues and dismissal of specific lesbian concerns as merely personal or at best marginal and insignificant. Thus, lesbian invisibility can perpetuate lesbians’ minority status; indeed, any case of passing can perpetuate servility to the dominant culture, and so undermine personal dignity (Card 1995, 120). So, the strategy of passing is

easily corrupted. Note how passing as White is fraught for African-Americans seeking the benefits of skin privilege, who may therefore perceive themselves and be perceived by others as traitors.

Unintentional collaboration in oppressive systems is less a danger for deliberate underground avenues of resistance. Admittedly, a casual linguistic secret or underground network depends on those in power being substantially ignorant, and ignorance of marginalized lives can be a source of oppression.ⁱⁱ The occupation of separate physical and linguistic domains may support oppressive social systems. Yet, employing the marginalized environment as an avenue for resistance need not validate the system of privilege in the same way or to nearly the same degree as acquiring the privileges of the political center by passing. The ignorance that makes possible underground networks does not directly create the oppressive environment. In no immediate sense does a slave-owner's ignorance of survival means in the wild oppress the slaves, or a Canadian anglophone's ignorance of the French language oppress francophones.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, collaboration may result indirectly from even the most pointed of oppositional actions, and thus to hidden emancipatory networks. The success of the Underground Railroad was double-edged, as warned abolitionist and escaped slave, Frederick Douglas. Of course, some slaves gained hope and abolitionists gained inspiration from hearing of it. However, even the very limited awareness of it available to slave-holders, an awareness that might be

dismissed as rumour, could make the slave-holders extra vigilant, and may ultimately have served their interests more than the slaves (Douglas 1995, 60).

Despite such frequently ambiguous implications of political secrecy, it certainly can be very effective, and it is not a strategy unique to the oppressed. Covert networks and disguises also undermine legitimate forms of social control. Still, underground systems of prisoners whose social suppression is politically warranted can be left out of this discussion, at least insofar as we can distinguish between oppression and politically warranted suppression. Inmates in a prison may find means of sharing drugs and weapons, and for continued illegal and immoral behavior, means that resemble those of Jews in a concentration camp for sharing food and water; yet revealing unjust networks poses no problem for standpoint theory. The relevant difference is not the materials exchanged and particular activities of networks, which only illustrate the contrast with networks mobilized against oppression. What morally distinguishes the cases – or aspects of the cases, as they are curdled – is the *purpose* for the form of underground network, whether the goal is politically justified. People imprisoned as a result of racist or classist social policies that may, for instance, lead them to steal in order to eat, have oppositional knowledge. Their perspective provides cognitive advantage, productive alternative perspectives.

As for networks, so for passing. Consider the moral dilemmas of Blacks passing as White in the Harlem renaissance that provide the backdrop for Nella Larsen's novel, "Passing" (1997), Gertrude's passing as White motivated by love

is sympathetic, and so it is interesting for standpoint theory. By contrast, standpoint theorists can find little of cognitive significance in Gertrude's friend, Clare, passing as White insofar as it is motivated by luxury. Straightforward social climbing is not politically justified and reflects only a mainstream perspective. Apparent similarities between oppositional secrets and other forms of secrecy need not confound people who use standpoint epistemology.

Political Value

Given the two distinguishable forms of oppositional secrecy, the question remains what political reasons generally keep people who oppose oppression from revealing or investigating the secrets of the oppressed despite the potential understanding to be gained. How does a person guided by standpoint theory decide when an oppositional secret may be revealed? How does an intellectual activist against oppression, who may or may not share a particular experience of oppression, know when to resist revealing or investigating politically justified secrecy?

Whether one shares the particular experience of oppression, or shares the secret itself, the most obvious reasons for respecting the secrets of the oppressed rely on moral and political considerations. The political project of emancipation depends on keeping the secret, at least to some extent or in some way, and so an inquirer must be aware that violating the secrecy jeopardizes those who participate in it. The cost may be even their lives. Clearly, no

foreseeable substantial moral or political threat to the participants in a secret can result from a permissible revelation.

How is the threat to the oppositional project recognized and evaluated? People tend to resolve such dilemmas by seeking out those who share in the form of oppression, and those who are already trusted in sharing the secret. In the wrong hands secrets are dangerous, can be misused, and indeed can reinforce the circumstances of oppression, however noble one's intentions. The type of ignorance encouraged by social privilege may make a knower unaware of the dangerous implications of a particular piece of knowledge for the welfare of marginalized people. Consider how White or straight folks may be oblivious as they "out" and thus endanger a person who is passing. To ward off the potential danger, we appeal to the immorality of disrespecting the secrets of others. The decision of when and how to reveal a secret is left as much as possible to the judgment of those whose secret it is.^{iv} The more removed one is from the content being hidden – whether or not the circumstance involves oppression, but with special care if it does – the less political authority one has to evaluate that circumstance and to investigate or share the secret.^v So, one avoids revealing or inquiring into the sexual or racial identity of others. The person or people in question judge best the full practical and political import of open identification.

Of course, deference to people who are party more than oneself to the secret only practically postpones the issue of secret revelation, leaving open at least two problems.^{vi} First, in most cases, it is not clear who is an insider to

the secret and who an outsider. For instance, one may know that a secret exists on some topic or among some people, but not know other details. Moreover, being aware of the incompleteness of one's understanding tends to motivate inquiry. Most people faced with decisions about revealing or investigating secrets are both insiders and outsiders: they are insiders insofar as they know at least that there is a secret, even if they have stumbled upon it accidentally; and they are outsiders insofar as they are interested themselves in a deeper understanding of it, or insofar as they are connected with people who don't share but might be interested in it. Second, deference to insiders does not resolve philosophically the issue of how insiders, and partial insiders who are the majority of concerned actors, decide for themselves and for others.

A variety of ethical, pragmatic and social considerations come into play in deciding whether an oppositional secret may be revealed or investigated. However, whether their significance is greater than the potential for improving the community's knowledge by sharing the secret is a further matter.

From Political to Epistemological Evaluation

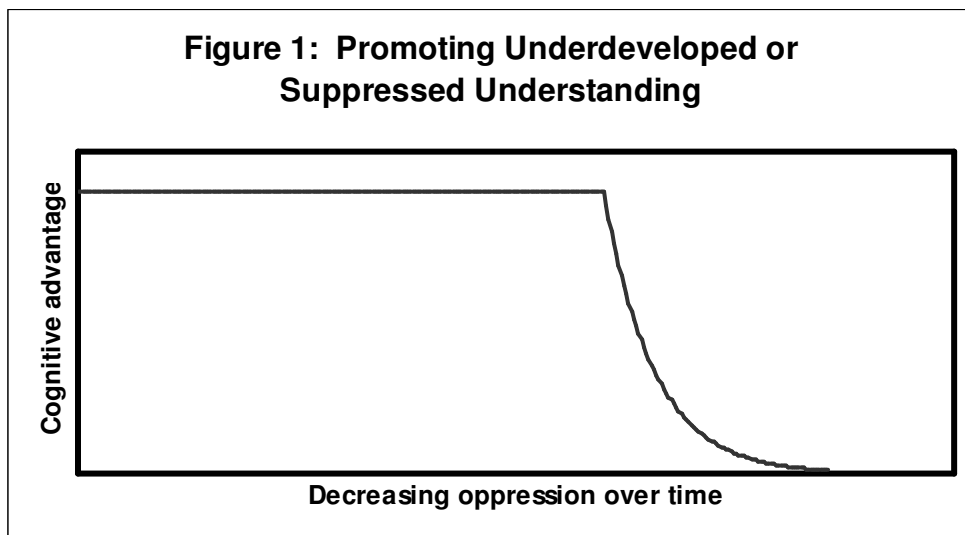
Whether to reveal or investigate oppositional secrecy concerns knowledge writ large: not apolitical, timeless, placeless, disembodied knowledge, but the knowledge of marginalized communities as they exist in combination with other communities, that are smaller or larger, and politically central or differently marginalized. People in these other communities are also cognitive beneficiaries of oppositional politics. Admittedly, the ways in which knowledge

might serve the oppressed was the original issue for standpoint epistemology (Smith 1974; Harding 1986; 1991). Standpoint theorists contest the ways in which science serves men at the expense of women, for instance by not testing medications on women, and then assuming women respond as men do. However, an emancipated science benefits not only the oppressed. The community in general is supposed to gain understanding by thinking from the perspective of “others” and “other ‘others’” (Rose 1983; Harding 1991). So, to be justified according to standpoint epistemology, revealing oppositional secrecy should improve the knowledge of all, or perhaps in utilitarian terms, provide the greatest understanding for the greatest number.

Can cognitive advantage to the general community be sufficient to outweigh the political disadvantage of marginalized people losing a strategic secret? Does it make sense to think this way? Weighing cognitive against political values seems like comparing apples with oranges. On the other hand, speaking as if cognition can be wholly separated from and contrasted with political or ethical values not only sounds crass it can only be a heuristic for identifying conflicting interests. Such dichotomies are denied by feminist philosophers of science (Longino 1997; Nelson and Nelson 1995), and particularly by standpoint theorists (Hartsock 1983; Rose 1983), who maintain that the cognitive value to accrue from obtaining an oppositional standpoint is always politically dependent. If the secrets are used to resist oppression, the political interests clearly take priority, but it is not clear just how much priority relative to the epistemological interests. Yet, an account of the intersection

between political and epistemological interests can aid responsible inquiry, both personal and scientific. Distinguishing epistemological concerns may be artificial, but still informative, if only because people tend to divide up human interests by separating cognitive from ethical and political values.

The epistemological value of a standpoint depends on there being a political center and contrasting social margins. Without the existence of oppression, no perspective provides a special epistemological advantage. A certain cognitive value derives from a particular form of oppression up until the point at which we eradicate it. With the achievement of social justice comes the elimination of what made that perspective demand special political and cognitive attention. Without oppression, understanding from a particular social perspective is no longer underdeveloped or suppressed, and so it brings no special cognitive advantage (Figure 1).



Epistemological Value

I suggest that just as for both suppressed and underdeveloped knowledge, political conditions can be portrayed in epistemological terms in the case of oppositional secrecy. There are both cognitive and political reasons for respecting the authority of those experiencing oppression. This means that decisions about investigating or revealing secrets can be covered in the terms of a standpoint epistemology, and are not simply a matter of the political values outweighing the epistemological. What *appears* to be an ethical trumping of cognitive interests is simply a nonstarter in cognitive terms that *cannot motivate* the revelation of politically necessitated secrets. Little potential for gaining understanding about the world can arise from perspectives that are extremely vulnerable because of political circumstances.

Admittedly, secrecy restricts access to certain information and cognitive skills, detracting from the flow of information that makes multiple perspectives available, and that benefits a community in general. For those who don't share the secret, especially perhaps whom are pointedly deceived — the slaveholders, batterers and homophobes, the withheld wisdom could be very valuable.

Recall, however, that liberatory political commitments are vital to the development of epistemic advantage from a standpoint. It belongs less, for instance, to women or Blacks than to feminists or Africanists. The circumstances of oppression must be problematized to reveal and develop the significance of that perspective for the future and the larger world; experience and testimony are only starting places for reasoning. Novel theories about the

workings of the world that may serve to inform the larger community emerge from experiences at the social margins after being refined by scrutiny and discussion among peers (Collins 2001; Wylie 1992).

What counts as activism appropriate for opposing oppression depends on the judgments and perceived needs of those experiencing that form of oppression, such as slaves, abused women, and lesbians. Their political goals set limits on the cognitive value that might derive from their perspective. Black activism, for instance, can appear to non-Blacks as mere socializing (Collins 2001). Outsiders' respect for the self-determination of the people they would emancipate and the degree to which they recognize the insiders' purposes restricts the knowledge outsiders might gain.

Only if revealing a secret is expedient in the eyes of those who hold it, is it justified morally, and so justified epistemologically. Just as the epistemological value of a standpoint declines when oppression recedes, it must also decline when a social situation is so politically precarious that knowledge must be hidden, and the fragility of any situation tends to be best judged by those close to it.

Consider how to recognize on cognitive grounds the importance of maintaining the anonymity of women one knows or studies who reside in a shelter. Those details might provide salience to a theory or a belief, or answer a problem. However, the purpose of such a revelation can be only immediately practical; it won't provide the long-term functionality sufficient to consider it cognitively valuable.

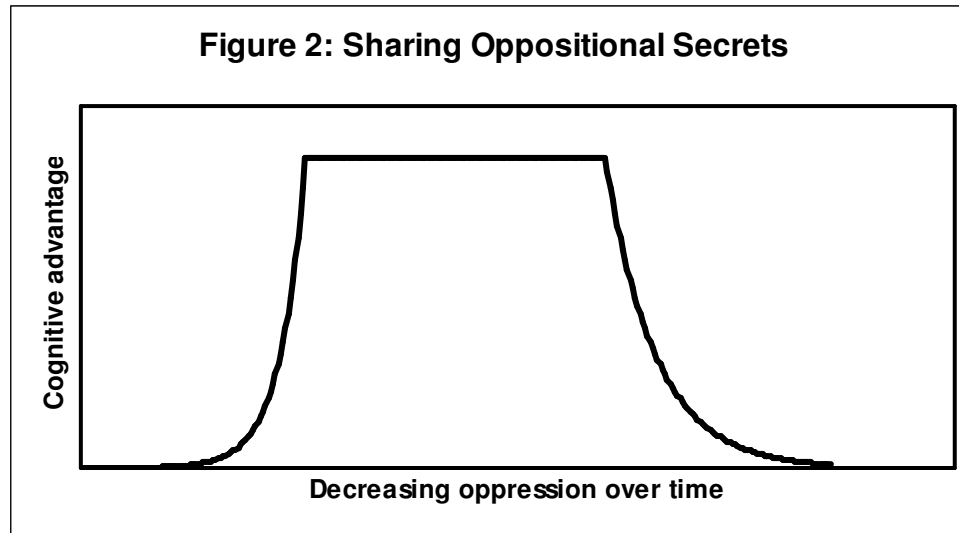
For instance, the value of a women's shelter's anonymity derives from mitigating the conditions of domestic violence. Only in regard to that barrier or resistance is the knowledge of the details about the shelter significant in longer cognitive terms rather than merely immediate practical terms. Should the practical political barrier against domestic violence become ineffective, the information concealed — the details of who resides, and so on — becomes less significant of the world. It only serves the fleeting understandings of a few individuals. An abuser, for instance, might find his or her goals — say of continued abuse or harassment — served by that information. Yet, that one person or few people matter little in the consequentialist epistemologies of contemporary pragmatist-empiricism and naturalism that support standpoint theories (Sullivan 2001). Better accuracy or empirical adequacy of knowledge, or more effective transactions, are developed through engagement with feminist and other liberatory perspectives.

Likewise, the cognitive value of information surrounding the Underground Railroad would be less in a world or environment where such resistance floundered. Only in a world where Africans continue to fight for or actually progress toward emancipation is there special cognitive value in learning about the Underground Railroad.

The benefit for an outsider's understanding of the world diminishes with the preciousness of the secret. Such understandings are not merely suppressed or underdeveloped, but valuable because of and therefore contingent on the possibility of social change. If an understanding is extremely

vulnerable in the current political climate, there is only a small chance that it will bear out. The project served by the secret is likely to fail. For instance, sharing knowledge of the existence of a secret may encourage others to seek out further details, and endanger the plans and corresponding projection of the world, as Frederick Douglas worried. Whatever aspect of a secret is revealed, revelation of the information tends to change the political nature of the world and can undermine the secret's cognitive potential if that potential is fragile. Fresh scrutiny will face the sabotaging wife should others become aware that there is some secret regarding her behavior. Their watchful eyes will make it difficult for her to continue to act out, and so will amplify the oppression she experiences.

The extreme case of genocide demonstrates vividly how political necessity mitigates epistemological values. There approaches nothing to learn of the future world from the understandings of peoples who do not survive. Although there is much to learn from them about their oppression, that oppression stops being part of the world as those oppressed people stop being part of the world. The world becomes less the world those people lived in and understood, and their perspectives decline in relevance and epistemological value.^{vii}



In the moderate case of a shelter, clients' identities also have less and less bearing on the world to the extent that the world shifts away from being a world where women are safe and those individuals survive and thrive. Given that clients need shelter from abuse, a funding agency, for instance, has little to learn from their identities. Identifying individuals does not enhance the shelter's hedge against their oppression and negotiations with the world in that service. The limited success of individual cases provides examples to learn from, but only in regard to that degree of success does information about individuals' identities become relevant. Epistemological significance depends on there being an element of political success or promise, a factor that diminishes in extreme cases of oppression. (Figure 2)

When people masquerade as victims to gain access to a shelter's resources, the issue of understanding who receives the benefits becomes more practical and political, and is less a matter for standpoint theory as an epistemology.^{viii} Oppression isn't resisted by secreting an abuser. So, revealing

an abuser who masquerades as abused may teach a great deal about the current reality and many likely futures. The potential reality served by an abuser's masquerade is the status quo.

Mainstream views are always somewhat cognitively relevant, though not specially advantageous, as I argued above. Yet, there is less to gain cognitively from someone who cries abuse to escape devastating poverty than from someone whose masquerade serves ignoble ends. *The unjust secret can teach about the world as it is, whereas the oppositional secret can teach more about the world as it might be.*

Whatever motivation there is for secret understandings, their cognitive value largely depends on how the world is shaped by politics now and in the possible future. The more access abusers have to their victims, the less difference the victims' meager secrets can make, even to the victims themselves, and the *less real* is the content of those secrets, in both a literal and a psychological sense. It is less possible for gays and lesbians to pass, and so less informative that they do, so long as they are persecuted. The more thoroughgoing and accepted is slavery, the less the Underground Railroad can work to develop and preserve Africans' culture, self-esteem, and individual lives. The knowledge kept secret by people who suffer these forms of oppression is useful and true only to the extent that the world might support the value and the legitimacy of those people's lives, a possibility that is threatened and undermined by oppression. Secrets of the oppressed are meaningful views of the world and have cognitively important consequences

especially to the extent that those secrets support an otherwise endangered moral status and provide for political emancipation, which is to say, to the extent that they have morally desirable consequences. Likewise, to the extent that oppositional politics require secrecy on moral grounds, the cognitive returns of revealing those secrets diminish: little is told of the present world.

Conclusion

Oppositional secrecy does not deliver the epistemological dilemma for standpoint theories that it seems to on first glance. Rather, if the present political environment makes secrecy valuable, then there is a substantial threat to the political future protected, but to some extent only projected or viewed as a future possibility, by the secret. Understanding threats to marginalized views of the world is implicit to the political considerations that usually guide decisions about respecting the authority of secret-holders. Oppositional secrets must be made or kept relevant to the world by initial steps progressing against oppression and toward making an egalitarian future real, in order that the secrets become more than idle hopes and dreams. In such cases, political concerns do not override epistemological concerns, but political circumstances make the epistemological value highly vulnerable.

That epistemology can capture the reasons for preserving oppositional secrets does not imply that cognitive terms should be used for making decisions. To the contrary, because the usual political terms with which we confront oppositional secrets track also cognitive aspects of the issue, we may

rest assured that we are not neglecting a full range of human values. Political vulnerabilities that recommend keeping or respecting a secret indicate that the knowledge to be gained is tenuous. So, the political concerns that motivate oppositional secrecy target epistemological implications. Political values have cognitive aspects, just as feminist philosophers of science show that cognitive values have political aspects (Longino 1997; Nelson and Nelson 1995).

The cognitive basis for preserving politically necessitated secrecy reveals several things about standpoint theory. Most generally, it helps to articulate exactly what is required for the sort of activism that can produce the epistemic advantage of a standpoint. Activism is a crucial element, according to the theory that epistemic advantage derives from experiences of oppression, yet the notion of activism at work in standpoint theories is opaque. The form of activism that yields cognitive advantage in the case of oppositional secrecy reveals the dependence of cognitive advantage on projected possible futures, and the strength of these futures' possibility. (How this strength is to be assessed is an open question, but how the futures projected by current mainstream interests in the West will fail is probably because they are unsustainable in the long run, especially unsustainable by the material environment.) Whereas suppressed knowledge and underdeveloped knowledge can provide epistemological advantage only so long as oppression remains, oppositional secrecy reveals that some prospect of success against oppression is also necessary.

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ⁱ Collins uses the terminology of “outsiders within.” However, in other discussions of standpoint theory, what is inside and what is outside can be reversed, as it is in this discussion of secrets. To acknowledge this ambivalence, I adopt Alison Wylie’s terminology (2003).

ⁱⁱ This demonstrates Charles Mills’ (1997) understanding of ignorance as a concrete phenomenon, something more than a lack of knowledge. Indeed, ignorance may function as a tool, and although created to serve oppression it may be periodically turned against it (*pace* Audre Lorde).

ⁱⁱⁱ Admittedly, food banks are networks that foster middle-class ignorance about hunger as a social problem, and that ignorance deters social change. Achieving real independence can be frustrated by passing as independent, so food banks both oppose and reinforce oppression. Further discussion of the ambiguity of activism is below. However, the collaboration results from those networks being institutions of the dominant culture, rather than being native to the poor. Being more thoroughly engaged with the needs of marginalized people, native networks are less vulnerable to collaboration in oppression.

^{iv} Detailed discussion of the general moral dynamics of secrecy, including the priority of individuals in choosing whether or not to keep secrets, can be found in Sissela Bok (1983).

^v Political assessment of authority contrasts with traditional scientific assessment of authority based on distance from the subject of study.

^{vi} In cases where the oppressed are not aware of a secret directed toward their emancipation, they are not party to it, strictly speaking. The subjects of the

secret are only the activists who are privy to it, up until such a point as others come to share in the secret. People must have access to the secret or else not really be part of it.

^{vii} It might be argued that in the case of genocide, we lose forever a cognitive perspective, and the loss of that resource is epistemologically destructive.

However, not just any view can count as good view, and even the value of diverse views need not suffer profoundly from the loss of one, because that loss need not entail a loss in human diversity. Continued diversification of human practices and epistemic resources is possible because of human plasticity.

^{viii} This might be addressed by a politics of standpoints or a form of social epistemology that goes beyond standpoint theory.