INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The concept of epistemic injustice derives from philosopher Miranda Fricker’s seminal 2007 monograph Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing and has gone on to be explored across disciplines as a valuable framework through which to analyze how privilege and oppression function in the construction and communication of knowledge. Before delving into epistemic injustice, however, it is perhaps useful to define epistemology, the concept’s philosophical root. According to The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology, epistemology refers broadly to the study of knowledge including what it means to know something, the sources of knowledge, the limitations of knowledge, the role of humans as knowers, the nature of knowledge itself, and the extent of human knowledge, among other topics (Moser, 2002, p. 3). Knowing that epistemology concerns itself with questions around the definition, construction, and communication of knowledge, we can infer that epistemic injustice refers to instances in which individuals and groups are subject to injustice in their roles as knowers and creators of knowledge.

In her text, Fricker further defines two separate types of epistemic injustices: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice refers to a phenomenon in which an individual’s testimony of their own lived experiences is dismissed, ignored, or contradicted based on prejudicial stereotypes about their identity (Fricker, 2007, p. 7). The example provided by Fricker is a woman who complains to a male superior at work about experiencing sexual harassment only to be told that she is not actually being harassed and, in fact, has simply misunderstood her harassers attempts at friendliness (Fricker, 2007, p. 8). In this circumstance, the victim of harassment is not accepted as a credible knower of her own experience, while her male boss, without any first-hand knowledge of the relevant events, is placed in the position of arbiter of knowing what her experiences are. This dynamic is based on gendered stereotypes which position women as too sensitive, emotional, and/or irrational to be reliable knowers. Testimonial injustice can be found both in interpersonal interactions as in the example above, or within structures informed by their creator’s prejudicial beliefs.

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, is a primarily structural phenomenon. In addition to not accepting the testimony of individuals, hermeneutical injustice excludes individuals and groups from the process of knowledge creation. This creates a cognitive disadvantage in which those excluded from the development of shared social understandings are prevented from creating the resources that would allow them to conceptualize and communicate their experiences. Returning to the previous example, “A central case of this sort of injustice is found in the case of the woman who suffers sexual harassment prior to the time when we had this critical concept, so she cannot properly comprehend her own experience, let alone render it communicatively intelligible to others,” (Fricker, 2007, p. 6). Unlike testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice is completely structural and exemplifies the way in which society’s failure to attempt to meaningfully understand the experiences of marginalized groups places those groups at a disadvantage. Not only does hermeneutical injustice reinforce existing marginalization, but it increases access to power of those not subject to the injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 152). In this way, existing hierarchies of power and privilege are reinforced by our collective knowledge practices.

Fricker goes on to introduce credibility excess and credibility deficit, the notions that individuals and groups experience either an excess of undeserved credibility or a dearth of credibility, based on prejudicial stereotypes about their identities (Fricker,
To this, I would apply Kimberle Chrenshaw’s (1989) framework of intersectionality to suggest that credibility deficits and excesses locate themselves within the context of a complex web of intersectional identities, both on the part of the individual receiving credibility and those who are perceiving them. For example, while women, generally, and Black men both experience credibility deficits, Black women experience both the epistemic injustices of Blackness and womanhood as well as the unique injustices that come from being a Black woman in, as bell hooks called it, a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal (hooks, 2000, p 109). Patricia Hill Collins further explores the engagement between intersectionality and its attempts to address and rectify epistemic injustices in the context of academic work noting that, “Painting identity politics as an inferior form of politics and standpoint epistemology as a limited and potentially biased form of knowing illustrates this general practice of discrediting the epistemic agency of oppressed subjects” (Hill Collins, 2017, p. 119).

A reader who has reached this point could certainly be forgiving for wondering—is epistemic injustice simply another word for injustice? While epistemic injustices are based on oppressive stereotypes which assert themselves throughout our society, the heart of Fricker’s work is that epistemic injustice is not merely a byproduct of other forms of oppression, but a unique form of injustice in its own right. Epistemic injustice serves the distinctive function of disempowering people as knowers. Central to this understanding is the cliché, “knowledge is power,”—that is, having access to the mechanisms of constructing and communicating knowledge is empowering to individuals and groups. Knowledge is also relational—when one group or individual denies the knowledge of another, or prevents them from participating in knowledge creation, they are exercising power over them in order to oppress. It is Fricker’s conclusion, and mine, that this oppressive power imbalance is fundamentally unethical (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). As knowledge workers, it is essential that librarians understand that injustices inherent in how we create and communicate knowledge have been, and still are, ingrained in our professional practice. While, of course, librarians may be subject to epistemic injustice as a function of their identities, I argue that, for better or worse, the role of “librarian” inhabits a privileged epistemic position in many institutions and, by virtue of this privilege, it is important for the critical librarian to engage with epistemic injustice in their instruction. Though epistemic injustices can be found across loci of oppression, this presentation and paper focus specifically on the intersection of epistemic injustice and white supremacy, how it manifests in traditional academic library practices, and how the critical information literacy instructor can begin to address these injustices in their teaching.

I would like to acknowledge my own limitations in this arena—I am not a philosopher and the depth and breadth of work undertaken by philosophers and critical theorists in this area certainly goes far beyond what I am able to describe in this paper. However, as a librarian interested in critical praxis, I have been personally and professionally concerned with the epistemic for some time, likely before I even knew to call it that. If we accept that, by virtue of the deep trust our users place in libraries as sources of credible information, librarians function as arbiters of authority, credibility, and even truth (McGeough & Rudic, 2017; Putnam, 2018), critically considering how knowledge is constructed, and the ways in which the knowledge systems we work within privilege or oppress is the first responsibility of socially just librarianship.

### Literature Review

In his essay “Dismantling Whiteness in Academe” Salvador Videl-Ortiz (2017) describes the often unspoken practices of academics which undermine the claims by institutions to value diversity, equity, and inclusion. The themes of white-washing, othering, and bypassing of race he describes have been explored by scholars of color in many disciplines (Monzo & SooHoo, 2014; Patton, 2004; Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Sayles-Hannon, 2009). In the introduction to their edited volume, Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance, editors Sullivan and Tuana (2007) describe the epistemological challenges of existing in a world which systematically ignores or devalues the experiences and ways of knowing of non-white people. Similarly, the dominance of white ways of knowing, or epistemologies of whiteness, have been explored as an oppressive phenomenon rooted in pervasive white-supremacist and colonist attitudes (Dwyer & Jones, 2010; Kubota, 2020; Matias & Newlove, 2017; Moreton-Robinson, 2004). The structural racism upheld by such practices has the effect of gatekeeping BIPOC people from participating in scholarly conversations; even when working within structures of whiteness, BIPOC scholars are not published or cited at the same rate as white colleagues (Delgado, 1984; Ray, 2018). Given that information literacy instruction undertaken by academic librarians is frequently rooted in the necessity of supporting students navigating the often unfamiliar landscape of scholarly communication, librarian educators who have not engaged with issues of racism and other forms of oppression, including epistemic injustice, within structures of scholarly knowledge production and dissemination cannot hope to avoid perpetuating harm both within their classrooms, and by acculturating students to racist systems.

Scholars of critical librarianship have also explored the unique role academic libraries assume in upholding and reinforcing academia and academic libraries as white spaces. Many have explored how in a society in which whiteness is perceived as the default, the value of library “neutrality” is in fact a coded means of reinforcing oppressive white norms, values, and ways of knowing within academic library spaces and praxis (Brook et al., 2015; Lewis, 2008). Similarly, white neutrality has been identified as a defining feature of librarians’ professional practices and dispositions (Jensen, 2008; Espinal et al., 2018). Others have focused on the historical development of libraries of all types as sites of acculturation to norms defined by white supremacist culture (de Jesus, 2014; Gohr, 2017; Warner, 2001). Michele Santamaria’s (2020) recent autoethnographic work explores “The Library” as a fantasy
space rooted in white authority, which librarians both arbitrate and wield. Finally, as Leung and López-McKnight (2020) eloquently describe, even in conversations around critical information literacy, critical pedagogy, and in critical library praxis, there remains a disturbing dearth of meaningful engagement with race, racism, and white supremacy. While the information literacy classroom is only one space in which the library communicates its values, the continued inability or unwillingness of academic librarians as a profession to meaningfully address institutional white supremacy affects all areas of praxis, including information literacy instruction.

**Epistemic Injustice & Information Literacy Instruction**

Now that we have established that epistemic injustice is a unique type of injustice, one which coincides with both larger structures of oppression and the whiteness which dictates library practice, how can we as educators make the information literacy classroom a space of resistance against injustice and what might testimonial justice look like in IL? In an era of intensive focus on equipping citizens, particularly students, with the intellectual tools necessary to detect fallacy, it is equally important to reflect on what we as information professionals and educators are espousing when discussing who or what students can trust. What roles do testimony and lived experience have in our classrooms, research, and lives? Instruction which begins and ends with scholarly publishing neither adequately prepares students for the epistemic landscape they face, nor addresses the narrow perspectives upholding systems derived from white supremacy, colonialism, and other forms of oppression, which have been, and continue to be, privileged in scholarly conversations. As is perhaps evident, epistemic injustice is a deeply complex and nuanced topic—a field of study in its own right. To attempt to meaningfully introduce epistemic injustice in a typical undergraduate one-shot instruction session is unlikely to produce more than confusion for everyone involved. I would instead argue that it is most beneficial for librarians to strive to model practices that are epistemically just in their instructional activities.

While epistemic injustice presents a novel lens through which to explore issues of authority, part of what drew me to the notion of epistemic injustice is how naturally it works in conversation with existing values in our field. Specifically, I relate epistemic injustice to the ACRL framework frame “authority is constructed and contextual,” (ACRL, 2015). If we accept this frame as having some validity, epistemic injustice provides a useful lens through which to explore HOW authority is constructed and helps facilitate critical consideration of how mechanisms of power and oppression function in academic information spaces.

With that in mind, the following activity is merely one example of a way to introduce testimony as a valid information source alongside traditional scholarly communication. The goal of this exercise, and generally of integrating epistemic justice practices into information literacy instruction, is not to pit different information sources against each other, but to acknowledge the varying knowledge domains that each addresses, to explore the processes by which information is created, and to validate testimony as information worthy of serious consideration.

**Sample Activity:**

Present students with at least two information sources, one testimonial and one a traditional scholarly article. The two sources should address the same topic or incident. For this example I will use a video of the testimony of Sacred Stone Camp founder Ladonna Brave Bull Allard on her experience protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline (Lakota Peoples Law Project, 2021) and the introduction to the article “The Dakota Access Pipeline in Illinois: Participation, power, and institutional design in United States critical energy infrastructure governance” by Johnson, et al. (2021).

How you present these sources will need to reflect the classroom context—if computers aren’t available for students, it may be easiest to play the testimony video for the class and bring printed copies of the article to hand out. If students are all using their own computers, it may be best just to share links.

Either individually or in small groups pose the following questions to the students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testimonial video</th>
<th>Scholarly article</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whose voice is being heard in this source?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do they know what they are talking about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Would you consider them a credible authority on the topic of the Dakota Access Pipeline development?

What might someone learn from this source?

Which source tells you the most about what it was like defending the land?

- Which source tells you the most about the regulatory processes which lead to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline?
- Would you use either of these sources in a paper or project for school? Why or why not?

Once students have had several minutes to review the sources, consider, and discuss their answers, come together as a class to discuss. In facilitating conversation, guide students towards critical inquiry about their answers by asking them why and how they came to their conclusions. The goal is not necessarily consensus, but rather to explore the nuances of contextual authority and to evaluate these sources as exemplative of a range of information types and sources of credibility.

**CONCLUSION**

Though this work focuses on one area in which academic librarians can use their authority to address racial injustice, the ability to recognize and confront epistemic injustice is by no means a panacea for the embedded white supremacy found throughout our society and the institutions it creates. In beginning to explore this framework, I hope to add to existing conversations about creating a culture of resistance to oppression in libraries and in our classrooms. Teaching students to think critically is to teach them to question. Further research into epistemic injustice in our knowledge practices will yield more strategies for supporting students in interrogating the structures which guide their access to and evaluation of information.

**REFERENCES**


