

# Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance

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## CHAPTER 4

### Strategic Ignorance

*Alison Bailey*

[W]hite prejudice completely reverses the truth! It was the slaves and their children who had to be devious, subtle and complicated. Masters and their children kind of had to be simple people. If you can *make* people do things, you don't have to persuade them or trick them into doing what you want them to do. (Carolyn Chase, in Gwaltney 1993, 53, emphasis in original)

[W]hile the movements and productions of ignorance often parallel and track particular knowledge practices, we cannot assume that their logic is similar to the knowledges they shadow. (Tuana 2004, 196)

In ordinary language the word “ignorance” suggests a deficiency of information. Ignorant would-be knowers are uninformed or have incomplete understandings of a given phenomenon. On this view ignorance is theorized as an *accidental* omission or a gap in understanding that can be corrected by an effort to move toward certainty by finding the missing information or running the experiment again. An important aspect of feminist epistemology in general and of the epistemologies of ignorance in particular is the realization that ignorance is often an active social production. So often what people know is shaped by their social location. From positions of dominance ignorance can take the form of those in the center either refusing to allow those at the margins to know, or of actively erasing indigenous knowledges. More subtle examples of socially constructed ignorance include epistemic blank spots that make privileged knowers oblivious to systemic injustices. But what I find most interesting are the ways expressions of ignorance can be wielded strategically by groups living under oppression as a way of gaining information, sabotaging work, avoiding or delaying harm, and preserving a sense of self.

In this chapter I explore strategic expressions of ignorance against the background of Charles W. Mills's account of epistemologies of ignorance in *The Racial Contract* (1997), with two interrelated goals. I want to show how Mills's discussion is restricted by his decision to frame ignorance within the language and logic of social contract theory. And I want to explain why María Lugones's work on purity is useful in reframing ignorance in ways that both expand our understandings of ignorance and reveal its strategic uses. I begin with Mills's account of the Racial Contract and explain how it prescribes for its signatories an epistemology of ignorance, which Mills characterizes as an *inverted* epistemology. I briefly outline his program for undoing white ignorance and indicate that retooling white ignorance is more complex than his characterization suggests. Making this argument requires an abrupt shift from the white-created frameworks of social contract theory to Lugones's system of thinking rooted in the lives of people of color. So the next section outlines Lugones's distinction between the logic of purity and the logic of curdling and explains its usefulness in addressing ignorance. With both accounts firmly in place the third section demonstrates how the Racial Contract produces at least two expressions of ignorance and explains how the logic of purity underlying the Contract shapes each expression in ways that limit possibilities for resistance. I do not mean to suggest that the social contract theory's love of purity invalidates Mills's work, only that this framework limits prospects for long-term change by neglecting the relationship between white ignorance and nonwhite resistance. The final sections explain how people of color use ignorance strategically to their advantage and argue that examining ignorance through a curdled lens not only makes strategic ignorance visible but also points to alternatives for retooling white ignorance.

### Mills's Racial Contract and the Epistemology of Ignorance

In *The Racial Contract* Charles Mills uses the conceptual apparatus of the social contract tradition to reveal the cartography of white supremacy as a global political system. Contract talk, he says, is the "lingua franca of our times," and as such it can provide us with a "powerful set of lenses" for looking at society and government in ways that reveal the inner workings of white supremacy (1997, 3). His comparison points to a visible gap between the imagined nonracial normative ideals of the social contract tradition and white people's real treatment of people of color as part of the process of nation building. The social contract of Western political theory is not "a contract between every-

body ('we the people')," he argues, "but between just the people who count, the people who are really people ('we the white people'). So it's a Racial Contract" (1997, 3).<sup>1</sup>

The Racial Contract has two dimensions. As a theory, the "Racial Contract" (in quotations) provides political philosophers with an alternative model for critiquing the state: one that makes race the center of political discussion by foregrounding the racial dimensions of the polity. The "Contract" acts as a "rhetorical trope and theoretical method for understanding the inner logic of *racial* domination and how it structures the polities of the West and elsewhere" (1997, 7). The "Contract" is a conceptual bridge between mainstream (white) idealized philosophical definitions of rights, justice, and the good society, on the one hand, and African American, indigenous, and Third World nonidealized political accounts of imperialism, colonialism, and globalization, on the other. The theoretical use of the "Racial Contract" is contrasted with another use of the Racial Contract (without quotations), which refers directly to the historically documented economic, political, and social formation of polities along racial lines. There are countless Racial Contracts, and they are continually rewritten as racial boundaries shift.

The social contract has political, moral, and epistemological dimensions. Politically, it is an account of the origins of government and citizens' obligations to the state. The contract grounds moral codes and authors the laws that regulate human behavior. The social contract also has an overlooked epistemic dimension: there are socially enforced cognitive norms to which the signatories must adhere. The Racial Contract mirrors these three dimensions with attention to racial formation. Politically, the Racial Contract establishes a society by transforming raceless populations in a state of nature into "white" citizens and "Black," "Native," or "Colored" subpersons. But Mills's most interesting argument—and my primary focus here—explores how the Racial Contract tacitly presupposes a color-coded epistemological, moral, and judicial contract that reflects white dominance and prejudice. That is, the Racial Contract is partially held in place by an implicit consensus about cognitive norms: it concerns what counts as a correct interpretation of the world, and what actions are right and legal in it. Signatories to the Contract must be socialized into epistemic communities. Agreement with the officially sanctioned reality allows some to be contractually granted full cognitive membership in the (white) epistemic polity. If you follow the official epistemic regulations, then you are in! Diverge from the epistemic gold standard and you will be regarded with suspicion at the least and dismissed as crazy at the most. Yet the officially sanctioned view of reality is not an *actual* reality. It is imagined. As Mills explains:

To a significant extent, then, white signatories will live in an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland, a “consensual hallucination,” . . . There will be white mythologies, invented Orients, invented Africas, invented Americas, with correspondingly fabricated populations, countries that never were, inhabited by people who never were—Calibans and Tontos, Man Fridays and Sambos—but who attain a virtual reality through their existence in travelers’ tales, folk myth, popular highbrow fiction, colonial reports, scholarly theory and Hollywood cinema living in the white imagination and imposed on their alarmed real-life counterparts. (1997, 18–19)

Implicit agreement to misrepresent the world is coupled with constant cultural pressure to accept these counterfeit images as real currency. Mills’s list brings to mind Samuel Morton’s scientific attempt to correlate race and skull size with intelligence, minstrel shows, John Ford westerns, Amos n’ Andy, and U.S. government representations of Asians as vermin.<sup>2</sup> These images are not accidental; they are prescribed by the Racial Contract. Members of the racial polity must learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that their mistaken ways of making sense of events count as accurate explanations. This is especially true for whites. “[O]n matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an *inverted epistemology*, an *epistemology of ignorance*, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have created” (Mills 1997, 18, emphasis added).

White ignorance is the axis around which white Americans construct our political identity.<sup>3</sup> This steady parade of misrepresentations generates a racialized moral psychology in which white perception and conception, memory, experience, and testimony are shaped by a willful and habitual inversion of reality (Mills 2004). The white eye is socialized to see lynchings and racialized torture as entertainment worthy of picnics and postcard reproductions.<sup>4</sup> Whites are taught to see indigenous land as vacant, women of color as sexually available, and Indian schools as charitable. More recently, the American press has described September 11 as the worst enemy attack ever perpetuated on American soil while remaining willfully ignorant of the Trail of Tears or the 1886 U.S. invasion of Mexico’s territories north of the Rio Grande. As a political system white supremacy requires that everyday experiences and interactions uphold racial ignorance by resisting corrective information, and that inconsistencies be explained as only momentary slips from contractual ideals.

If the inverted epistemology at the heart of the Racial Contract helps maintain white supremacy, then how should whites go about tearing up the Racial Contract, undoing white ignorance? Mills suggests a twin-

pronged solution: a historical revisionist project and a program of cognitive reform. The historical project is offered as a corrective to empirical ignorance fostered by whitewashed versions of history. It is supposed to reveal the contradictions between lofty contractual ideals and their unbalanced application along racial lines. But pointing to the disturbing truths of the past is not enough; we must also understand the racialized moral psychology that favors pleasing falsehoods over displeasing truths (1997, 98). The reason whites were consistently able to act wrongly while thinking they were acting rightly is, in part, "a problem of cognition and of white moral cognitive dysfunction. As such, it can potentially be studied by the new research program of cognitive science" (1997, 94–95). If cognitive science can reveal dysfunctional thought patterns, then perhaps it can also offer strategies for correcting them.<sup>5</sup> Mills does not give readers much detail here and, to be fair, this is not his project. However, the Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT) offers an example of what I think he has in mind. During the Racial IAT, subjects are asked to quickly sort words and faces into categories. "Concept names" (e.g., "glorious," "wonderful," "evil," and "failure") are paired with black, white, and ambiguous faces. Quick responses to these pairings reveal subjects' implicit attitudes. From there it is a short step to asking how these preferences influence moral deliberation. If associations such as "white = glorious" are learned, then they can be unlearned. Perhaps this is what Mills has in mind when he encourages people to think against the grain and to "learn to trust [our] own cognitive powers, to develop [our] own concepts, insights, modes of explanation, overarching theories, and to oppose the epistemic hegemony of conceptual frameworks designed in part to thwart and suppress the exploration of such matters" (1997, 119).<sup>6</sup>

If white ignorance is the product of an "inverted epistemology," then a revisionist history buttressed by a race-sensitive program in cognitive science should replace race-ignorant with race-cognizant knowing. The historical project speaks for itself: read history through a racial lens, and get the bigger picture. My real interest is with Mills's cognitive science project. I think undoing white ignorance requires something more complex than cognitive therapy, but this is difficult to see given Mills's characterization of ignorance as an inverted epistemology. His language suggests that solutions lie in *reinverting* the epistemology, as one would turn a sweater right side out. The limits of this metaphor raise two concerns. First, I want to understand white efforts to undo ignorance as part of a broader coalition of resistance to the Racial Contract that also includes strategic uses of ignorance by people of color. Next, I think that a more radical and long-lasting epistemic resistance comes from learning to think in new logics, rather than from turning faulty logics right side out. The overall long-term solution to white cognitive dysfunction will

need to be some combination of white epistemic retooling *and* the ability to see, understand, and join forces with people of color as they resist the Racial Contract. To convince readers of the limits of Mills's inversion metaphor, I need to shift away from questions about how white agency and ignorance are shaped by the Racial Contract and instead begin in a framework generated by people of color's resistance. For that I turn to María Lugones.

### María Lugones on The Logic of Purity and The Logic of Curdling

Mills focuses on white ignorance and how complex systems of domination disfigure white moral agency. He inherits his tools of analysis from the social contract tradition. María Lugones's *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (2003) starts with nonwhite voices and lets the logic flow from them rather than trying to jam them into existing white-created frameworks. Rejecting established political frameworks as a means of sense making, she begins in "a dark place where [she sees] white/Angla women as 'on the other side,' on 'the light side,'" and where she sees herself as "dark but [does] not focus on or dwell inside the darkness, but rather focuses on the other side." She argues that if we stop thinking about oppressed people as victims consumed and exhausted by systems of oppression (e.g., the Racial Contract) and instead considers how oppressed subjects resist systems aimed at disciplining, violating, and erasing them, then different ways of making sense emerge (2003, 12). Her project is at once backward and forward looking. She offers an extensive critique of the logic that shapes modern subjectivity, so her observations apply nicely to the subjects of the Racial Contract. But she also theorizes with an eye toward developing a more dynamic, creative, curdled alternative to modern subjectivity—starting from a "dark place" makes this possible. It is this aspect of her work that I think offers a promising way to expand on Mills's insights on ignorance.

People who struggle against multiple oppressions often describe themselves as having multiple personalities: they feel torn between many identities.<sup>7</sup> For instance, many indigenous women find themselves in tribal solidarity with men of their nations while working against colonialism, but they are frustrated with men's failure to address gender issues. Oppression makes it difficult to see all facets of our identity at once. To highlight this Lugones develops an account of subjectivity that centers on multiplicity. For her, systems of oppression create coexisting logics: a logic of purity (a logic of oppressive systems such as the Racial Contract) and a curdled logic (a logic of resistance and transformation). She illustrates how each logic shapes social identity by tying the



two uses of the Spanish verb *separar* (to separate) to a culinary metaphor. She begins in the kitchen. Two kinds of separation can occur during mayonnaise production. The first requires that one cleanly and completely split and separate the egg white from the yolk by moving the yolk back and forth between two halves of the shell so that the white drops gently into a bowl. This is an exercise in purity: no yolk in the white, and no white in the yolk.

The split-separation logic of purity defines two kinds of subjects: unified subjects and fragmented subjects. Both are fictions designed to erase, control, and distort the true multiplicity of all social beings. A good example of the unified subject is the abstract individual of classic liberal theory. Unified subjects are marked by universal traits such as “rational-autonomous-ends-chooser” and not by their privileged racial and gender status. Here, reason *essentially* defines human nature, while sex and race count as *accidental* properties. The fundamental assumption is that unity (essence) underlies multiplicity, and here multiplicity is reduced to an unmarked status that privileges the subject. The essence and accident distinction serves this purpose: subjects appear unified when accidental properties are split-separated out and an unmarked universal human trait (reason) remains. Maintaining the fiction of unity additionally requires that unified subjects—lest they be reminded of their multiplicity—be separated from a second kind of subject: the *fragmented* subject. Fragmentation is a consequence of group oppression that also follows the logic of purity, but unlike unified subjects, a person is split-separated into a fragmented subject when she is reduced to a racially marked identity. Fragmented identities are composed of “*pieces, and parts that do not fit well together; parts taken for wholes, composite, composed of parts of other beings, composed of imagined parts, composed of parts produced by a splitting imagination, composed of parts produced by subordinates and enacting their dominators’ fantasies*” (Lugones 2003, 127, emphasis in original). For example, in the Anglo imagination the “American” is split-separated from the “Mexican” and “Mexican/Americans” become simply Mexicans.<sup>8</sup> “The Anglo imagines each rural Mexican/American as having a dual personality: the authentic Mexican cultural self and the American self. In this notion there is no hybrid self. . . . As an American, one is beyond culture; as [a] Mexican one is culture personified. The culturally split self is a character for the theatrics of racism” (135–36). This passion for orderliness that drives the logic of purity is conceptually linked to a desire for control. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs’ use of blood quantum to verify tribal status is an exercise in split-separation. Anti-abortion statutes that isolate the fetus from the pregnant woman’s body are exercises in split-separation. It is the logic of apartheid, red-lining, citizenship, and anti-miscegenation laws.

Lugones contrasts this first meaning of *separar* with a second sense—"to curdle-separate." Curdle separation counts as culinary failure when making mayonnaise. Mayonnaise is an oil-in-water emulsion. Emulsions are formed when two or more nonmixable liquids (e.g., lemon juice, egg, and oil) are blended so thoroughly that the mixture *appears* homogenized. All emulsions are unstable. Manufacturers must add emulsifiers to puddings and salad dressings to prevent curdling (Winter 1989, 128). Curdle separation is never clean. When mayonnaise curdles, it does not separate into distinct parts; instead, "you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk" (Lugones 2003, 12). Lugones rejects the split-separation logic that generates unified and fragmented subjects in favor of a pluralist logic that recognizes all persons as complex multiple subjects. The logic of impurity—of *mestizaje*—offers a broader understanding of how interlocking oppressions shape subjectivity. A curdled logic produces *multiplicitous* identities such as Creole, Mestizo/a, Métis/se, and Chicano/a.<sup>9</sup> Multiplicitous selves defy control and categorization by "asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts" (2003, 123). Curdled logics generate subjects who resist the hard-edged schemas of purity aimed at categorizing, dominating, and controlling the openness of possibilities. *Mestizaje* is a metaphor for both impurity and resistance. To highlight agency under oppression, Lugones refers to these subjects as oppressed<->resisting subjects. Curdle separation is an active not a reactive process—a creative practice of resistance (Lugones 2003, 145).

As she investigates the split-separation logic of purity, Lugones asks us to keep the logic of curdling and *mestizaje* superimposed onto it. "The reader needs to see ambiguity, see that the split-separated are also and simultaneously curdle-separated" (2003, 126). These logics flicker back and forth.<sup>10</sup> Think bad radio reception. For example, when I tune my car radio to 90.1 FM, I pull in both the Urbana classical station and the country-western station in Farmer City. Sometimes the classical signal is clearer, and sometimes the country-western station dominates. Other times the receiver pulls in an almost inseparable mix of Hank Williams's vocals and Chopin's piano nocturnes. An analogy can be made with the logics of purity and curdling: both are present (although the purity signal is usually stronger). While listening to the logic of purity, we must also learn to hear the curdled broadcasts that sometimes disrupt and distort purity.

I now return to Mills's account of ignorance with both of these logics in mind. The logic of purity is clearly broadcast in Mills's characterizations of ignorance, but this connection needs to be clarified. In addition, I want to train myself to listen for curdled signals. It is my hunch that a curdled reading of ignorance will offer us a more relational understanding of ignorance by revealing the ways in which people of color have strategically engaged with white folks' ignorance in ways that are advantageous.

### The Racial Contract, Purity, and Two Expressions of Ignorance

Lugones's account of the purity, impurity, and resistance is immensely helpful in understanding how the Racial Contract shapes the ignorance of those who must abide by its epistemic standards. If, as she suggests, "the desire for control and love of purity are conceptual cousins," and if the Racial Contract is about control, then I suspect that the logic of purity is what shapes white ignorance, the erasure of nonwhite history, resistance, and other means of maintaining white supremacy (Lugones 2003, 129). The Racial Contract is a political strategy for controlling multiplicity. It is intolerant of spatial ambiguity: it split-separates polities into white civilized space and wild savage lands occupied by nonwhites. It rejects ontological ambiguity: white signatories of the Racial Contract come to understand themselves as unified unmarked subjects while learning to see nonwhite subjects as less than human, or fragmented. If purity is at the structural heart of the Racial Contract, then all expressions of ignorance will bear its imprint. I think the Racial Contract generates at least two expressions of ignorance. A form of privilege-evasive ignorance, which Mills later calls "white ignorance" (2004), and an expression I call "the ignorance of internalized oppression."<sup>11</sup> It is worth briefly spelling out how purity crafts each expression.

A central feature of white ignorance is the ability to ignore people without white privilege. White ignorance is a form of not knowing (seeing wrongly), resulting from the habit of erasing, dismissing, distorting, and forgetting about the lives, cultures, and histories of peoples whites have colonized. Consider the all-too-common, color-blind responses to racism, such as: "We all bleed the same color," or "We're all human." The logic goes something like this: People who are prejudiced see color and make unfair judgments based on color. To be absolutely certain that we are not making unfair judgements based on color, we should ignore accidental properties, such as color, and just see people. Color blindness is essentially a form of ignoring that equates seeing, naming, and engaging difference with prejudice and bigotry, and not seeing, naming, noticing, and engaging difference with fairness. Purity is at work here. To be color blind you must learn to split and separate race from humanity. Color blindness relies on the cognitive habit of training the multiple (racial diversity) into a fictitious unity (we are all human). The color-blind responses to racism initially seem to be just, until we consider how the illusion of equality is purchased at the cost of multiplicity. Color blindness is just the sort of cognitive dysfunction Mills has in mind. When members of dominant groups actively ignore multiplicity, they practice hearing and seeing wrongly. So, color-blind responses to racism are an

agreement to *misinterpret* the world.<sup>12</sup> They are a perfect instance of how whites can act in racist ways while at the same time believing they are behaving rightly!

As Mills observes, an epistemology of ignorance “requires labor at *both ends*” (1997, 87–88). If the logic of purity underwrites the Racial Contract, then all members of the polity, and not just the privileged ones, are required to live and move within this framework. A second expression of ignorance occurs when oppressed groups become ignorant of their own multiplicity. What Mills refers to as an “epistemology of victims” acknowledges that people of color may simultaneously understand the harmful impacts of the Contract while at the same time internalize its basic message. Here, learning to see wrongly means learning to see your past as a “wasteland of nonachievement,” to loathe the racialized aspects of your appearance, to distance yourself from your culture, to play up the white aspects of yourself, and to silence those dark parts of the self that cause pain (Mills 1997, 109). Cherríe Moraga’s early writings make this distressingly clear:

I went to a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading. . . . What Ntosake caught in me is the realization that in my development as a poet I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my brown mother—the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems—emotions which stem from the love of my mother. . . . I was shocked by my own ignorance.” (2002, 29)

Purity is at work here too. Having split-separated herself into brown-and-white fragments, Moraga realizes the impact of ignoring the brown parts of herself. Mills briefly mentions how people of color might resist this form of ignorance. The solutions run parallel to the revisionist history and cognitive science projects he offers in response to white ignorance. The necessary public political work for people of color begins with an internal psychological battle to “overcome the internalization of subpersonhood prescribed by the Racial Contract and recognize one’s own humanity. . . . One has to learn the basic self-respect that can casually be assumed by Kantian persons, those privileged by the Racial Contract, but which is denied to subpersons (1997, 118–19).<sup>13</sup> Recognizing one’s own humanity requires rejecting European beauty standards, challenging the colonizer’s versions of history, and cultivating cognitive resistance to the “racially mystificatory” aspects of white theory. People of color need to trust their own thinking, to develop their own concepts, insights, explanations, and theories, and to oppose the epistemic hegemony of the conceptual frameworks designed to suppress views that challenge dominant understandings.

These expressions of ignorance bear the imprint of the logic of purity, but it does not follow that resistance must also bear this imprint. Purity may be at the heart of the Racial Contract, but we need not rely on this logic for resistance. Mills's allegiance to contract talk as "the lingua franca of our times" (1997, 3) ensures that resistance will take place on the very epistemic turf that gives rise to it. If these expressions of ignorance are the product of an inverted epistemology, then resistance will be understood in terms of reinversion strategies. Reinversion strategies are the only solutions purity has to offer. However, I do not think reinverting inverted epistemologies will have radical long-lasting effects. *Under purity, inverted epistemologies can only be reinverted and not shattered.* The epistemic retooling that Mills describes requires something more structurally complex for it to be effective in the long run.<sup>14</sup> Mills's suggestions for retooling our moral vision are initially helpful, but my fear is that his prescription will only correct our vision until the Racial Contract is rewritten. Learning to see wrongly is a by-product of purity, so, purity-driven solutions, to use Audre Lorde's wonderful metaphor, may count as instances of using the master's tools (purity) to dismantle the master's house. I think the logic of purity can be used in resistant ways, but to see this we need to look at ignorance through a curdled lens.

### Strategic Ignorance

Let us dwell in purity for a moment longer. Mills's strategies for undoing the ignorance of internalized oppression focus on one type of resistance—the refusal to accept one's status as subperson—but there are others. Internalizing the logic of purity need not be fatal. If we examine Mills's "epistemology of victims" through a curdled lens we see that it also includes an epistemology of resistance. Lugones theorizes oppressed subjects not only as victims but also as oppressed<->resisting subjects. The logic of curdling reveals additional resistant paths through the Racial Contract. Navigating the dominator's world requires that oppressed<->resisting subjects employ ways of knowing that reduce the risks of oppression. To extend Audre Lorde's metaphor, the master's tools may not be able to dismantle the master's house, but they might just come in handy when walking through his neighborhood, attending his schools, or working on his assembly line. There are ways of using the dominator's tools that do not replicate dominance. One variety of curdling is to negotiate the Racial Contract in ways that use the logic of purity to your advantage. Perhaps ignorance is a tool that can be used strategically.

James Baldwin once said that segregation worked brilliantly, because it "allowed white people, with scarcely any pangs of conscience whatever, to *create*, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see" (1961,

69, emphasis in original). Patriarchy also seems to have a knack for celebrating only those archetypes of femininity that serve the purposes of male domination. Happily, members of oppressed groups have long taken advantage of dominant groups' tendencies to see wrongly and to misrepresent their lives. Think about how people of color have historically been portrayed as unintelligent, childlike, hypersexual, or primitive. Strategic ignorance is a way of expediently working with a dominant group's tendency to see wrongly. It is a form of knowing that uses dominant misconceptions as a basis for active creative responses to oppression. It seeks out resistant paths through the logic of purity that turn white ignorance back on the oppressor jiu-jitsu style. Some examples follow the practices I have in mind.

One way of using ignorance strategically is to play dumb as a means of gaining information. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass explains how he tricked white boys into teaching him to write. He recalls, "[W]hen I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, 'I don't believe you. Let me see you try it.'" I would then make the letters, which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way" (2003, 70). Douglass's approach relies on white ignorance: it presupposes that the white boy he tricks will have an inaccurate understanding of black character. It only works if white folks cannot imagine folks of color being literate or clever.

Strategically acting in ways that conform to white expectations is also a clandestine way of getting revenge for poor pay, bad working conditions, or avoiding harm. Robin Kelly's research on black working-class resistance suggests that Southern black laborers had a working understanding of what he calls the "cult of true Sambohood," which defined black folks' conscious theft as immorality, their calculated slowdowns as laziness, and their tool breaking as incompetence or carelessness. Kelly explains how the "mask of 'grins and lies' enhanced black working people's invisibility and enabled them to wage a kind of underground 'guerilla' battle with their employers, the police, and other representatives of the status quo," and that "the mask worked precisely because most Southern whites accepted their own racial mythology" (1994, 7). Black domestics "accidentally" broke china while dusting, or pretended they could not read when confronted with their employers' questions about civil rights literature. The unnamed narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* wonders if another black man "was dissimulating, like some of the teachers at the college, who, to avoid trouble when driving through the small surrounding towns, wore chauffeur caps and pretended that their cars belonged to white men" (1980, 211). Strategic ignorance

worked precisely because most whites believed that domestics were dishonest, workers were clumsy, or that black teachers could not afford their own cars.

The logic of curdling is visible in strategic ignorance. It is a perfect example of how oppressed<->resisting subjects, as agents, can animate their ambiguity as a tool for resistance. Strategic ignorance allows oppressed <->resisting subjects to take hold of the double meaning of their actions. In the logic of curdling, the social world is complex and selves are multiple—not fragmented. This means that there is more than one reading of a subject's actions: Douglas is "dumbly clever"; the maid's actions are "clumsy on purpose"; the driver is a "chauffeur car-owner." Purity's hand in white ignorance ensures that the first part of each description (e.g., dumb, clumsy, chauffeur) is the only one that makes sense. In the logic of curdling both readings are visible and sometimes indistinguishable because they flicker back and forth quickly. Oppressed<->resistant subjects willfully animate this ambiguity to their own advantage. This is the essence of strategic ignorance. As my examples illustrate, strategic ignorance is a political strategy that goes beyond merely inverting existing perceptions. Under the logic of purity, Douglas would just challenge the stereotype of the dumb black man by demonstrating that he really could read and write. His actions will hopefully challenge the white boy's existing perceptions while boosting his own sense of self. This is the strategy that purity offers. Under the logic of curdling, we might understand Douglas as skillfully animating the ambiguous space between literate and illiterate in order to get a lesson in writing. These curdling techniques can either be haphazard techniques for survival, or they can be consciously cultivated into an art of resistance and transformation (Lugones 2003, 145). Unlike white ignorance, strategic ignorance cannot take the form of active ignoring, erasure, and unconscious detachment. Here, ignorance is not bliss. Servants and braceros must be attentive to their employers' moods. Women in violent relationships cannot ignore the shift in body language and tone of voice that signal violence.<sup>15</sup>

Admittedly, most expressions of strategic ignorance keep people of color in the role of "the Negro whites wish to see." The temporary protection that these strategies offer comes at an enormous psychological cost. Acts of strategic ignorance almost always involve some degree of dissemblance, or masking.<sup>16</sup> Dissembling reveals the true multiplicity of subjects. As Ella Surrey remarks: We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 1993, 240). Dissembling is a way to keep dominators ignorant of the important aspects of one's life. It allows oppressed <->resisting subjects to present themselves as they are not in order to protect other aspects of themselves that are important.<sup>17</sup>

## Thinking beyond Cognitive Science and Historical Revisionist Solutions

We live in a world where both dominant and resistant logics are present; the split-separated are also simultaneously curdle-separated, so why are we in the habit of turning to the former for clarification? I start with purity because I want to understand how it produces an ignorance-generating ontology. I want to undo my own ignorance. At the same time I recognize how the logic of purity is epistemically cozy for people with race privilege, and I have come to regard epistemic comfort with suspicion. Using the familiar tools of social contract theory to unpack the white ignorance generated by the Racial Contract not only erases strategic ignorance and resistant epistemologies, but it also confines white responses to epistemically comfortable solutions. Whites wanting to undo our ignorance can work hard to reverse the biases revealed to them by the Implicit Association Test. We can thumb through volumes of history to reveal the stories that have been kept from us. We can engage in both of these activities from the safety of our own worlds. These solutions offer a temporary remedy to white cognitive dysfunction, but they do so in ways that rely on isolated, noninteractive, self-reflective, and solipsistic processes. Absent from these solutions is any talk about the relations between races, political alliance building, and the daily interactions between peoples. I want to see the project of undoing white ignorance as part of a broader coalition of resistance that includes strategic uses of ignorance by people of color. Purity flattens an animated and a complex world by erasing relations, and ignorance is the product of that erasure. Love of purity drives misperception by distancing and separating ourselves from those we imagine to be most unlike us. Distance creates gaps in understanding that the imagination then rushes in to fill. Ignorance flourishes when we confine our movements, thoughts, and actions to those worlds, social circles, and logics where we are most comfortable. It grows when we fail to relate to, hang out with, and build community with folks that we are taught to hate, regard with suspicion, or dismiss as different. White ignorance does not exist separately from our failure to engage with people of color.

Ignorance also results from white folks' failure to see ourselves as multiple. I think about my own struggles with white privilege and the ignorance it generates. Who I am is the product of my interactions with others. My continuing journey from privilege-evasive to privilege-cognizant thinking on matters of race did not come from thinking my way out of these problems; it came from hanging out with people of color, interacting, laughing, and making mistakes, while being attentive to my interactions and what they reveal. If privileged groups' desire for wholeness is what gives rise to the split-separation thinking that teaches white folks to see the



world wrongly, then combating white ignorance will require that white folks abandon the myth of unified wholeness and learn to see our *own* multiplicity. To understand this we need to return to the kitchen. Recall that an oil-in-water emulsion such as mayonnaise is formed when two or more nonmixable liquids are blended so thoroughly together that the mixture *appears* homogenized. Homogenization is a fiction. If we look at mayonnaise under a microscope, we see a more curdled spread. It is only when we look at it macroscopically that it masquerades as a homogenous condiment. The logic of purity allows white folks to see our privileged identities as whole and complete rather than as microscopically curdled bits superficially held together by emulsifiers. The fiction of wholeness acts as an emulsifier: it presents white identities as stable. Undoing white ignorance requires that white folks work toward cultivating an identity without emulsifiers. We must think of ourselves as curdled beings. In contrast to purity, curdling “realizes their against-the-grain creativity, articulates their within-structure-inarticulate powers. As we come to understand curdling as resisting domination, we also need to recognize its potential to germinate a nonoppressive pattern, a mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia mestiza*” (Lugones 2003, 133). I see no reason white folks cannot cultivate this sort of consciousness. The concept of curdling helps shift our imagination to a new realm of sense. I am not suggesting that we substitute one logic for another: the desire to do so is itself a function of purity. In the name of curdling, purity can have its place if it is used strategically rather than to replicate dominance. In making curdled logics visible, Lugones points to the many frameworks of meaning that can be used to make sense of the world. Possibilities flourish when we dwell in ambiguity. Engaging complexity is one way of overcoming ignorance and establishing relations. If the logic of curdling reveals forms of resistance unseen in the logic of purity, and if it reveals complexity and relations between us, then perhaps it will be a helpful starting point for addressing questions of ignorance.

## Notes

1. Mills favors the classic social contract tradition (e.g., Hobbes, Locke, and Kant) over contemporary approaches (e.g., Rawls), because he is interested in origin stories rather than the exclusively prescriptive dimensions of social contracts.

2. Helpful examples of the disjunction between what Mills calls “actual reality” and the “consensual hallucination” are found in Marlon Riggs’s brilliant film *Ethnic Notions*, which looks at representations of African Americans, and Carol Spindel’s *Dancing at Halftime: Sports and the Controversy over American Indian Mascots*, which contrasts real images of Native peoples with University of Illinois mascot Chief Illiniwek.

3. We cannot acknowledge the true human cost of nation building because it would change how whites have historically thought of themselves as good, civilized, and just: it would change what it means to be white. Whites' ignorance about the centrality of oppression in nation building keeps them believing that they are good people living in a model, one-size-fits-all democracy that is readily exported as a solution to global conflicts. It keeps their identities whole.

4. For examples, see James Allen, ed., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 1999).

5. Mills references Alan Goldman's essay, "Ethics and Cognitive Science," which addresses questions such as: What mental images accompany words such as "good," "fair," and "right" when they are used by moral agents making value judgments?

6. The IAT was developed as a tool for exploring the unconscious roots of thinking and feeling, but the test is also a good indicator of unconscious preferences and beliefs. This test can taken online at <https://www.implicit.harvard.edu/implicit>.

7. My understanding of Lugones's work on subjectivity, purity, and impurity has been greatly enhanced by conversations with Sarah Hoagland and Christa Lebens.

8. In her discussion of dual beings, Lugones uses the form "Mexican/American" and not the more standard hyphenated "Mexican-American" to "signify that if the split were successful, there would be no possibility of dwelling or living on the hyphen" (2003, 134).

9. Métis, or métisse, is the name given to people of mixed indigenous and French-Canadian ancestry. Also, it is important to note that multiplicitous identities do not exclusively describe or refer to people of color. All identity is curdled. Bicultural people are just more familiar with experiencing themselves as multiple because as a matter of necessity they have had to learn how to successfully navigate both their home worlds and the worlds of the oppressor. This shift between worlds is a shift in identity, and it reveals the multiplicity of the self: there is no underlying self that persists through this world travel. Many members of dominant groups fail to see their multiplicity because they move only in worlds where they feel at ease: in places where their identity appears unified and they feel secure. If white folks, for example, spent more time in Latina or Native worlds, or if straight folks spent more time with gay folks, then their multiplicity would be revealed.

10. I am grateful to Penny Deutscher for describing the relationships between purity and impurity as flickering.

11. I am basically following Frankenberg's distinction between privilege-evasive and privilege-cognizant white responses to racism. This distinction is not hard and fast. A great deal has been written on whites resisting their own ignorance about race, but this resistance still takes place in the logic of purity. In this respect, whites may be privilege-cognizant but metaphysically comfortable.

12. Color blindness is a post-civil rights version of the Racial Contract. Whereas earlier drafts held the racial order in place with appeals to white mythologies about invented Africas and Orients and distorted images of blackness, color blindness points in a new direction. Images of the other in the early

white imagination say “we are unlike them,” whereas the recent color-blind version says, “we are all the same underneath.” Both moves rely on a logic of purity. Neither says we are multiplicituous beings.

13. On the one hand, I cannot help but think that this is assimilationist advice. It sounds as if he advises people of color to parade themselves as pure Kantian agents. On the other hand, Mills proposed solution coincides with the work of black feminists (such as Audre Lorde) who remind us that “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us” (Lorde 1984, 123).

14. Mills’s cognitive solution is not completely ineffective. The harm of oppression is so visceral that it requires immediate attention. Perhaps my privileged stance affords me the luxury of contemplating long-term solutions that privilege fancy theoretical moves over concrete solutions. I focus on theory and not on people. The white girl philosopher in me really wants to solve this problem with clever theoretical moves. However, I do think that more radical responses to ignorance are worth exploring.

15. Isolated acts of strategic ignorance will not change the Racial Contract or the material conditions that make these acts necessary. White employers, battering husbands, or the schoolboys of Douglas’s narrative will read these actions as further evidence of subpersonhood and justification for paternalistic policies. This is the double bind of oppression and it is subject to the same sorts of considerations that Sarah Hoagland explores in her wonderful discussion of sabotage. See Hoagland (1997, 41–54).

16. It is interesting to note that the word “dissemblance” comes from the Latin “dis,” meaning reversal, and the Old French “sembler,” meaning to be like, appear, or seem. It is literally a reversal of appearance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers an obsolete usage of the word that means “to pretend not to recognize or notice, to ignore.”

17. Darlene Clark Hine’s account of how black women used dissembling as a strategy for preserving self-worth is helpful. “The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (1989, 915).

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