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Don't Just "Google It": Argumentation and Racist Search Engines

Tempest M. Henning
Fisk University
thenning@fisk.edu

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Abstract

This paper examines the argumentative retort "Just Google it" in response to cases of epistemic exploitation. Critical assessments of the reply often examine the phrase from an argumentation theory standpoint, which views it as at best rude and at worst a violation of argumentative norms. However, these critiques ignore one of the functions of the term—to avoid epistemic exportation. The response may be a useful tool for Black individuals to offload some epistemic burdens concerning racial arguments, but due to racially biased search engine algorithms, the phrase has the high potential to exacerbate racial disagreements. Directing disagreeing interlocutors to "Google" anti-Black oppression and having them self-research unjust institutions runs the substantial risk of reinforcing an interlocutor's original stance, due to the ways in which search engine algorithms utilize word embedding. Rather than using the phrase "Just Google it," this paper concludes with a few alternative suggestions to combat epistemic exploitation.

Keywords: epistemic exploitation, racial artificial intelligence biases, argumentation theory, racial justice

"The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions."

- Real Talk: WOC & Allies (2017)

Recently, social justice advocates on social media have urged racially privileged folks to be mindful of tapping out Black individual's epistemic resources. The barrage of questions on racial oppression—including but not limited to asking for more resources or demanding that Black individuals explain their lived experiences—can be a drain on one's mental and emotional health. Well-meaning allies and those critical of social justice reform are often directed to do their own research regarding colonially fueled racist biases. Non-Black people are being told to Google Black oppression. However, this self-sufficient act is not as fruitful or helpful as it seems. Within this paper, I explore the problematic implications of the response "Just Google

it”—not in terms of argumentative practices, but due to the construction of racially biased search engine algorithms. Search engines have recently been exposed for racist, especially misogynistic, results when searching for terms as mundane as “professional women’s hair styles,” “clean kitchens,” or even “angry women.” Noble (2018) and D’Ignazio and Klein (2020) have uncovered several ways search engines and the artificial intelligence (AI) used to construct them perpetuates racism, specifically against Black women and girls.

It is not the stance of this project to propose racially marginalized peoples explain their oppression. Rather, I argue that society is so imbued with systemic oppression, through the utilization of racially problematic algorithms, that directing individuals to Google or utilize other search engines for research purposes has a high risk of compounding the problem of racial oppression. If the utilization of search engines is what people recommend for curbing Black epistemic exploitation, but the search engines themselves are perpetuating anti-Black racism, then this is a major problem. What was conceived as a liberatory measure for the racially marginalized is instead another tool that perpetuates oppression. Search engine results maintain oppressive narratives reflecting historically uneven power distribution in society. Moreover, directing disagreeing interlocutors to “Google” specific aspects of oppression and to have them self-research unjust institutions runs the substantial risk of reinforcing an interlocutor’s original stance. The already “deep” disagreement has the high potential to become even deeper.

This article proceeds as follows: first I review the literature on epistemic exploitation (both academic and outside the ivory tower) not only to give a genealogy of the phrase “Just Google it,” but to highlight the power and liberatory potential that this tactical phrase possesses. I briefly delve into argumentation literature, which views passing off epistemic labor as not abiding by the rules of dialectical engagement. Within the pragma-dialectic argumentation model, one should directly give their reasons and evidence when engaging in an argument. I object to the argumentative tactic of saying “Just Google it,” not on the grounds of bad argumentation but due to racist artificial intelligence systems. From here, I give an account of search engines and the artificial intelligence systems that have masqueraded as big data problem solvers but are functioning as discriminatory math. I conclude the paper with a few argumentative suggestions for Black folks caught in this bind. Until artificial intelligence used within search engines is not just opinions expressed in code, there must be other mechanisms in place to divert epistemic labor for Black individuals.

1. Epistemic Exploitation

There are countless anthologies, letters, blogs, memes, autobiographies, songs, editorials, and movies regarding the oppression faced by Black folks. Yet, when

entering debates, especially internet disagreements, more evidence is usually required to prove that racially based microaggressions occur, systematic oppression is real, or that political change should be enacted to remedy these racial injustices. This added layer of scrutiny and extra burden of proof has been well documented as draining. Nora Berenstain (2016) conceives of these added argumentative components as “epistemic exploitation.” The constant call to produce more, in addition to the shared access to epistemic resources, has given rise to Black individuals telling interlocutors to “Just Google it” if the demand for information or “proof” becomes too burdensome. Within this section, I provide an exegesis of Berenstain’s conception of epistemic exploitation that succinctly captures the pragmatic need for Black individuals to turn to the phrase “Just Google it” during deep disagreements regarding racial oppression. I also provide a case example where a retort like “Just Google it” would be applicable.

Berenstain conceives of epistemic exploitation as the exhausting and usually unpaid labor that Black people engage in when faced with skeptical responses concerning the structures and manifestations of racial oppression or “lovingly, knowingly ignorant”¹ requests for more information from antiracist allies. It “occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face” (Berenstain 2016, 570). Falling under the taxonomy of epistemic oppression, epistemic exploitation can be difficult to pinpoint due to its subtlety as well as its pervasiveness. This mode of epistemic oppression can occur in blog/article comment sections, tweets, Facebook comments, the office breakroom, family gatherings, or even grocery store checkout lines. The epistemic aspect stems from the request for epistemic resources or evidential proof, while the exploitative element reveals itself in three ways: “opportunity costs associated with the labor of educating the oppressor, the double bind that marginalized people find themselves in when faced with the demand to educate, and the default skeptical responses from the privileged when the marginalized do acquiesce and fulfill their demands” (Berenstain 2016, 572).

¹ I use the phrase “lovingly, knowingly ignorant” from Mariana Ortega, which she situates as “a type of ‘arrogant perception’ that produces ignorance about women of color and their work at the same time that it proclaims to have both knowledge about and loving perception toward them” (2006, 56). The ignorance is loving due to the professed love toward women of color, yet it is ignorant because the love is superficial, and knowledge can easily be tainted through a privileged lens. To be “knowingly ignorant” is to be aware of some seminal works by women of color, and the focus is on what academia (read: white academia) deems important. But because these works are read through a white lens and are selected as noteworthy through a white lens, there is still an ignorance pertaining to the work.

Regarding opportunity costs and unpaid labor, the exploitative aspect involves ignoring the additional cognitive and emotional burdens involved in engaging in arguments or discussions pertaining to one's own experiences of oppression. Even if an individual is not directly commenting on their own experiences, it can be extremely emotionally taxing to even talk about oppression that might not be your exact experience but has the *potential to be you*. Given the argumentative norms to avoid "negative" or "strong" emotions and the strong emphasis on reason over emotions within Western argumentation theory,² Black individuals run the risk of being seen as irrational, nonsensical, or poor interlocutors if they do not adequately place aside their emotions during arguments.

However, the opportunity cost of not engaging in an argument or providing overly detailed explanations of one's premises is high. This leads to the double bind characteristic of epistemic exploitation. If one decides not to educate, explain, or engage, then they are seen as either being a poor argumentative interlocutor or unintelligent for not being able to articulate their points. Within Western argumentation practices, the other party would perceivably have "won" the argument. This is a classic case of damned if you do (unseen emotional and cognitive labor costs associated with engagement) and damned if you don't (the other party "wins" the argument or you are perceived as ill-educated). As Berenstain (2016, 576) writes, "The existence of the double bind means that there is little possibility of a marginalized person choosing to engage an epistemically exploitative demand without fear of what might happen if they refuse." Not only is there a fear of being perceived as unable to defend one's argumentative stance, but there is the added concern of a "missed opportunity" to educate or correct another's misinformed views. As Holloway (2015) states:

When POC refuse to take on this dual role of spokesperson and resource library, they're often accused of having shirked an assumed responsibility. The idea seems to be that we've missed an opportunity, that it's our duty to hold white people's hands and educate them, that we're condemning some poor white person to a continued life of ignorance.

At best, a refusal to take on these additional, burdensome roles can be interpreted as not being a gracious interlocutor—or worse, not possessing the ability to defend one's

² See van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002, 2006), van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), Snoeck Henkemans (1997), and van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans (2017). For critical pushback against stigmas concerning emotion within arguments see Gilbert (2001, 2004, 2014), Carozza (2007), and Howes and Hundleby (2018).

argumentative stance. Moreover, it can be seen as a refusal to remedy our own oppression. If we are not educating others about our experiences and standing our ground within arguments concerning racial justice, then how are things supposed to change? The squeaky wheel is the one that gets the grease, right?

The notion of condemnation has an added element when we consider Black professors and teachers. While educating others does involve a certain degree of carefully walking students through a line of reasoning or providing evidence, counterevidence, and refutations of arguments, there is an added burden when doing so on matters of racial oppression. It can be extra exhausting for educators of color to provide details of their lived oppression to white skeptical/resistant students. This problem becomes compounded when general or introductory courses now require a certain number of readings or modules on racial justice issues.³ Some educators and scholars of color choose not to work on racial matters. That is their business, and I am not knocking any Black person who does not incorporate racial oppression into their class time or their research. But given the heavy push for diversity and inclusion curricula, those who have actively chosen not to have that additional burden no longer have that choice. This is an added epistemic burden for those who have chosen not to specifically work where they live. A generalized response of "Just Google it" doesn't quite cut it in the classroom the same way it might possibly pass in a disagreement on Twitter. Telling students to "Just Google it" could easily be perceived as shirking off on one's responsibilities as an educator. Nevertheless, not using this tactic adds additional epistemic and emotional burdens on Black educators. Moreover, the additional labor is not adequately compensated.

Berenstain's last exploitative element regarding epistemic exploitation concerns the "default skeptical responses." Such responses include but are not limited to skepticism towards a larger pattern of oppression (as opposed to merely isolated and individuated experiences) and gaslighting (a flat-out denial of the experiences in the first place or minimizing said experiences), as well as a skeptical stance regarding the harms that occurred. So, the incidents and ties toward an overall pattern of oppression could be acknowledged, but there is an insistence that degrees of harm regarding experiences of racial oppression are not as detrimental as they seem. Improbable counterexamples and defeaters are revered as equal to the testimony of oppressed racial minorities. If these unqualified objections are not addressed, then the proposed "equal" epistemic footing is solidified. The double bind's exploitative nature, as well as the unfair and often unpaid compensation, also

³ While I am not arguing that diversity and inclusion initiatives within the curriculum are inherently harmful, there is a difference between including racially marginal voices and racially marginal voices whose research involves oppression. Unfortunately, the two are often conflated.

plays a role when engaging with the default skeptic. This extra argumentative labor not only is unpaid and comes at a high cognitive cost but also “is frequently dismissed by those who demand it” (Berenstain 2016, 574). Either more epistemic labor is demanded, or the labor perceivably goes to waste. The added information is left to rot like the ever-replenished spring salad mixes in our refrigerators. The default skeptical response springs eternal. In some ways, they can never be satisfied. The same can hold true for the lovingly, knowingly ignorant ally, albeit their objectives may differ. Regardless of intentionality, Audre Lorde (2007, 113) states that “this is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.” If our attention is focused on trying to reason with or explain oppression to the masters, then *our* energy, effort, and attention is on *their* needs, *their* understanding, *their* point of view.

The idea is that if Black people do not help with education or provide a succinct and detail-oriented account to counter anti-Black racist arguments, then racism will continue. Accounts of racism or arguments geared toward social justice are subject to a hostile skepticism that at times can seem almost impossible to counteract, despite the *centuries* of firsthand accounts, quantitative data, books, articles, and blogs. Arguments towards racial justice tend to be examined with fine-grain scrutiny. Not only are we expected to be acquiescent to such high-level requests, but as Lorde (1995, 284) points out, “The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions.” This expectation places unnecessary constraints on Black individuals, which exacerbates the epistemic exploitation we experience. One way to help combat our exploitation is to provide an avenue for white individuals to do their own research on their own time. Telling someone to Google for more information and to find the evidence on their own not only cuts down on the opportunity costs associated with engagement but also helps to alleviate the double bind. Offering up an avenue for gaining information is still engaging with one’s interlocutor. So, some of the pressures found within the second aspect of epistemic exploitation, the double bind, are assuaged.⁴ In terms of the default skeptical/lovingly ignorant listener, the onus of seeking out and determining what might change their mind is then on their own terms.

Let us consider an example. Suppose I, a perceivably Black woman, am walking down a street and cross paths with a white individual wearing a Confederate-flag T-

⁴ Tone plays a role in how the response “Just Google it” could be interpreted. One could certainly say this in an exhausted, fed-up tone, which could plausibly be interpreted as dismissive. But this type of engagement could also be said in a very patient and helpful tone. By no means am I asserting that Black folks have the obligation to be polite or helpful. What I am saying is that to tell someone to “Just Google it” is not inherently dismissive. Tone and context matter.

shirt. If this person were to attempt to engage in a debate with me regarding recent racial protests in America, there would be some quick calculations as to whether I would engage this person in a discussion. I would consider the opportunity costs, the double bind I face, as well as whether the person I have encountered is taking a default skeptical position to the existence of Black racial trauma within the United States of America. If they are displaying a default skeptical position and refusing to take any consideration into my stance or my evidence, the discussion comes at a high emotional cost to me. If I supply more evidence, yet I am met with even more requests for evidence, then telling someone (who is not an epistemic peer of mine) to "Just Google it" appears to be a very plausible response. I have engaged with them and have provided an avenue by which they could gain more information and find the answers they are trying to seek.

I can experience a similar quick calculation and respond with "Just Google it" during a discussion/debate with a white feminist who questions the need for Black feminist thought distinct from "mainstream" (read: white) feminist theory.⁵ Engagement in the discussion has still occurred, while opportunity costs have decreased since I have deferred the energy it would take to explain the need for Black feminism to those who have already made the arguments. Telling an interlocutor to "Just Google it" points them into the direction of arguments that have already been made. It refers people to a (seemingly) reliable source where individuals can find the answers they seek without further compounding oppression and exploiting people who are marginalized.

The onus should fall on non-Black individuals to educate themselves regarding anti-Black racism. If there is a consistent burden to provide continual and ceaseless evidence, then this falls under epistemic oppression. Kristie Dotson (2014, 116) construes epistemic oppression as "a persistent and unwarranted infringement on the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources that hinders one's contributions to knowledge production." Since most Americans have access to the internet, it is not unfathomable to assume that we share numerous epistemic resources.⁶ Most of us carry around devices in our pockets, purses, and backpacks that can connect us to almost any resource in the world. I can even say "Okay Google" to pull up information while driving in my car. Why spend the energy to educate others and provide detailed evidence during arguments when I can defer the epistemic labor to someone else? If we all have relatively the same access to this information, why should I have to hand-hold others or catch them up to speed when

⁵ Yes, this still happens.

⁶ While we might share access to numerous epistemic resources, that does not mean we all share the same ability to interpret or understand said resources. More can be said on this, but that is not within the scope of this paper.

my time could be spent doing other things in my life that bring me joy? Telling someone to “Just Google it” as opposed to laying everything out point by point seems to be an extremely viable option to preserve my mental energy and to reclaim my time. However, as I detail in the next section, this argumentative move can be perceived as an argumentative fallacy or, at the very least, as not properly engaging within the dialectical norms of argumentation.

2. Defensive Argumentation

According to argumentation theory, telling someone to “Just Google it” is either partaking in an argumentative fallacy or erroring on key principles of the norms of engagement. In the worst-case scenario, not fully engaging with one’s interlocutor when you have the truth, but are not explaining the truth, renders you as failing your epistemic obligations to explain it. Assessments of the severity of telling an interlocutor to “Just Google it” vary within argumentation literature and depend upon the theorist’s aims of argumentation. That is to say, the extent to which someone should or should not partake in an argument is usually dependent upon how certain strands of argumentation theory perceive the *purpose* of argumentation. Due to space limitations, I cannot adequately account for all the different strands of theory, so I focus instead on the pragma-dialectical approach as well as the non/minimal-adversarial school of thought. Within this section, I cover these views regarding the purpose of argumentation as well as obligations on providing evidence and explanations. I conclude this section with my rejection of norms concerning cooperation and obligations to engage in arguments, especially when racial epistemic exploitation occurs.

Drawing from Gricean conceptions of speech acts, the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation views arguments as interactional and communicative (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). Parties involved in disagreements, arguments, or differences of opinion are to obey a set of rules that helps ensure that both interlocutors are cooperating within the language game. The maxims aid in the fair exchange of ideas and discourse. This model perceives the end goals of argumentation to be a resolution of a difference of opinions; as in, if you state “p” and I state “~p,” we can either agree that “p” or “~p,” jettison the notion of “p” altogether (i.e., “p” is no longer up for debate), or we can negotiate “q.” Strategies are utilized to maneuver between one’s dialectical obligation in “maintaining reasonableness” as well as “aiming for effectiveness” of one’s argument regarding their rhetorical content (van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans 2017, 142). Dialectical obligation refers to rules of engagement within the pragma-dialectical program. What is important within the model is the balance between getting out the contents of the argument while still adhering to the rules of engagement, which consist of ten rules.

However, the “burden of proof rule” as well as the “closure rule” is my focus for this project.

The burden of proof rule (BoPR) stipulates that “a party that advances a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked by the other party to do so” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 182). Regarding the BoPR, if an interlocutor puts forth a stance (standpoint or premise), and the other interlocutor calls said stance into questions, then the interlocutor who holds the position is obligated to provide sufficient evidence or proof defending said view. While the BoPR involves engagement during the argument, the closure rule (CR) pertains to an ending of an argument. CR involves the demarcations regarding failed defenses. If there is a failure to defend one’s point of view, as in a case where the BoPR was not met, then the argument ought to “result in the party that put forward the standpoint retracting it and a conclusive defense of the standpoint must result in the other party retracting its doubt about the standpoint” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 183). If an interlocutor is unconvinced by a premise or stance, then it is up to the one proposing the premise to provide sufficient reasons why said stance should be accepted. Shifting the burden of proof is seen as a fallacious maneuver, which does not assist in the advancement of critical discussion. However, these shifts do not have to be overt refusals to provide more evidence nor proof. “A subtle way to avoid the obligation to defend a standpoint is to present the standpoint as something that needs no proof at all” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002, 115–16). So, the delivery of premises as true could easily fall under the fallacy of “evading the burden of proof.” If the premises are presented as self-evident, then the stance is perceived to be common knowledge, which by default should need neither explanation nor evidence.

Given my example from section 1, if either the racial skeptic or the knowingly, loving ignorant ally found the evidence to be self-evident, then neither would ask for more evidence or clarification. Another way evasion of the burden of proof could occur is via construction of a view that is immune to criticism—meaning that the view is formulated in such a way that it is infallible. The construction could be due to the stance’s inability to be tested or verified, or the utilization of intangible qualifications (i.e., words such as “real” or “essentially”). Returning to my section 1 example involving the knowingly, lovingly ignorant ally, if I give evidence of my first-hand experiences—that is, place the emphasis on who I felt as opposed to what is true—then it would be impossible to deny that I experienced the event. CR is of interest to me because if the BoPR is not met (or if there is a failed defense), then given the CR, a party should withdraw or retract their statements. Failure to back down or retract one’s standpoints is seen as an obstruction of the dialectical process. As van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans (2002, 135) state, “A protagonist who has not managed to successfully defend the standpoint must be prepared to give up this

standpoint.” It is important to note that just because a standpoint has not successfully been defended, that does not mean, under the pragma-dialectical model, that the standpoint is false. Similarly, if a standpoint has successfully been defended, we can’t assume that the view is necessarily true. All it means is that the position is defensible, nothing more.

This theory of argumentation raises several problems for me, especially as a Black woman. Given what I have shown in section 1, arguments and differences of opinion regarding anti-Black racism become extremely difficult to engage in, considering the very personal and emotional elements. Racialized trauma is real. Its effects are long-lasting. Should an interlocutor occupy a stance akin to the racial default skeptic, then the constant questioning and ad infinitum demand for examples and proof are impossible to satisfy. The burden of proof for the racially oppressed becomes too high to consistently achieve given the emotion labor and opportunity cost, which holds true even if one is engaging with a knowingly, loving ignorant individual. The pragma-dialectical program’s rules are also formulated without considering white ignorance. Charles Mills (2007) conceives of white ignorance⁷ as a framework that manifests and reinforces racism as the norm within society. It is a framework that holds that instances of racial injustice are not exceptions or anomalies, although the framework argues that they are the exceptions to the case, but such instances are built into the very fabric of society as we conceive it to be. Any racial injustices that occur within a system framed by white ignorance is functioning as it should be operating, because racial oppression is part and parcel to the system. Racial injustice is substantive to the epistemic practices. When we apply this to argumentational norms of engagement, such as burden of proof requirements or closure rules, then it becomes nearly impossible for Black individuals to engage in critical discussions about race with those who are operating within a white-ignorant framework. Should an individual fail to meet any of the defensive requirements, then they ought to concede. Looking at my previous example regarding the Confederate-flag T-shirt wearer, if I were to respond to any of their inquiries with “Just Google it,” then I would be sidelining the burden of proof. Moreover, because I am unable to meet the burden of proof for any of my claims (such as a claim that the racial protests

⁷ The term “white ignorance” is not implying that all white individuals are ignorant regarding anti-Black racism, nor does the term posit that Black individuals are immune to such a framework. “White” is employed because the framework was initially designed with racial dominance in mind. Mills acknowledges that white individuals may not necessarily sign onto such a social contract; however, the white privilege that is produced through the framework “white ignorance” benefits all white individuals. The degree of privilege, however, will fluctuate once an intersectional or multidimensional analysis is utilized.

in 2020 were a social good), then I must retract my statement. While retracting does not mean that my statement is false, there can be a certain level of personal defeat that a racially oppressed individual can experience should they recant. Arguments do not necessitate being taken personally, but when the argument involves one's right to exist in a just manner, having to retract a premise can potentially cause existential crisis and doubt on one's abilities to accurately be perceived as a knower. There is more to arguments "than propositions in timeless relation to one another" (Govier 1999, 14). Overall, this program does not take into consideration the pervasiveness of white-ignorant frameworks, nor can it adequately handle the emotional labor that is usually involved with discussions pertaining to racial oppression.

A non/minimal-adversarial approach to argumentation takes arguments to be more collaborative (Cohen 2004) or affiliative (Ayim 1991) endeavors. The resolution to disagreements is to negotiate, not to entirely sway another person from their viewpoint. Metaphors concerning argumentative activity include things such as dancing (one dancers with their interlocutor), barn raising (two interlocutors are engaging in a dialogue to help construct a new concept or build something together), or cross-pollination (interlocutors engage in critical dialogue, not to have one of their arguments trump the other, but to take elements from other parties and formulate a hybrid model). These metaphors differ from some of the pragma-dialectical model's depictions of argumentation, which can include metaphors of war or sports in which there are distinct winners and losers within a critical dialogue. Several of the non/minimal-adversarial models call for a movement away from oppositional metaphors of argumentation. Govier states that "when argument is understood in an *oppositional way*, difference in opinion or belief is construed as disagreement, and disagreement is regarded as conflict; conflict leads to contest between opponents; and contest to battle—real or metaphoric" (Govier 1999, 54; emphasis in original). Arguments can merely be a forum in which interlocutors articulate their differences. Difference, according to this model, does not necessitate disagreements. Difference of opinion should be more properly seen as an opportunity to learn from another person—to see their point as a view which has the potential to either improve your own stance or to lead you to a new truth. The epistemic good of truth is something that should be shared in a reasoned and polite way. Govier (1999, 55) maintains that we can argue in nonconfrontational ways "with due respect for those whom we are addressing, and consideration for their beliefs and values."⁸ Part of respecting another's stance is to adequately address their concerns and respectfully take up their position with care and consideration as if it was our own.

⁸ I want to flag this notion of *prima facie* granting respect to an individual and consideration for their beliefs. I argue that not only is this call for charity harmful to Black as individuals, but it also reinforces systemic racism.

While this model would reject a racial skeptic's persistence of evidence and sees them as violating the norms of argumentation, there are other conceptual underpinnings that I consider problematic. Telling someone to "Just Google it" can be seen as signaling that your interlocutor is not an epistemic peer, possibly that you have more epistemic authority, and that you are unwilling to engage in the conversation with an interlocutor because they are "not on your level." Suggesting that your interlocutor should "Just Google it" does not directly address their concerns. It can also be conceived as not properly taking their viewpoint under consideration. The perceived shirking of wanting to engage in the argument also does not reflect upon the other party's standpoints. According to a non/minimal-adversarial model, it is salient that we begin to understand the other's point of view. Ayim (1991, 85) states,

We have to begin with the recognition of other people's beliefs and feelings, even if those beliefs are as intolerable as those of the Ku Klux Klan. We can dismiss such beliefs as false and the behaviour which springs from them as morally unacceptable, but our dismissal will not end the harm which they generate. Ending the harm demands that we start by recognizing very clearly the nature of such beliefs, noting in whose heads they reside, and understanding how they shape the world.

While Ayim's aim for understanding is to "end the harm," I argue understanding an oppressor's viewpoint can potentially be harmful and detrimental to the psyche of racially marginalized individuals. To force the oppressed to understand the logic of their oppressors *is* a form of oppression. Pohlhaus (2011, 225) states that "understanding another's reasoning requires one to do more than hold a particular set of claims in the mind. It requires one to follow the sense of those claims, so that the claims may be evaluated for what they mean." In objecting to understanding an oppressor's viewpoint, I am not asserting that racially oppressed individuals do not understand their oppression. To understand the epistemic object of anti-Black racism can be at times to understand the reasoning and rationale of the white dominant framework. But understanding the object does not necessitate that one must understand the reasoning of every individual who utilizes the framework white ignorance. However, forced understanding of a play-by-play account of an oppressor's reasoning regarding racial oppression is mentally taxing and emotionally harmful. Let us revisit the example of the white, Confederate-flag T-shirt wearer who stops me to engage in a racial justice debate concerning the 2020 racial protests. If their stance is that there is no racial oppression (i.e., that we are currently in a postracial era), ergo the protests were unnecessary, to fully occupy their line of

reasoning and “see things from their point of view” would be mentally and emotionally exhausting. I would want to disengage from the enterprise of reaching a resolution because I would not consider us as epistemic peers.⁹ This would be unacceptable to the non/minimal-adversarial model of argumentation because I am not open to engaging in barn raising or cross-pollination with another. Ayim (1991, 83) contends that “turning a deaf ear to the speaker” will not likely reach any “affiliative” goals. This especially becomes the case when we consider our knowingly, lovingly ignorant ally. We both have the affiliative goal to end anti-Black racism, so it seems counterintuitive to not engage with them to reach this goal.

The fallacies and “bad” argumentative practices laid out within this section all heavily depend on social positioning, tone, and social setting. Basically, they are all contextual. Our obligations to engage with others in arguments, especially when the disagreements are deep, greatly vary upon the situation in which we find ourselves to be disagreeing. The obligation to engage with an interlocutor could increase if our interlocutor is a spouse, friend, colleague, or family member. Likewise, our obligation—and, moreover, willingness—to engage in a deep disagreement might decrease if our interlocutor is a random stranger from the street, as in my previous example. Not only can our willingness to participate in deep disagreements vary, but also our argumentative commitments or end goals might also vary as well. In some instances, the purpose of an argument is to allow the other side to see the truth of your argument (Govier 1988, 1999; Godden and Casey 2020), while in other cases it may be more prudent to reach a consensus or engage in a negotiation (Hundleby 2010, 2013; Cohen 2004; van Laar and Krabbe 2016a, 2016b). I adamantly disagree that there is an obligation that the oppressed must explain their oppression to those who have more power and privilege. Not only should the onus not be on the oppressed to explain their oppression, but requiring them to fully understand their oppressor’s argumentative position compounds oppression. I also disagree with the notion that all evidence should be given within an argumentative exchange, which occurs in both the pragma-dialectical camp as well as the non/minimal-adversarial model.

There are instances in which giving too much information to the oppressor can further harm the oppressed. Catherine Hundleby (2005) makes the case for “oppositional secrets,” which are cases where oppressed individuals should not fully expose their experiences and tactics for surviving their oppression. Otherwise, the survival tactics for certain oppressed standpoints run the considerable risk of being co-opted or subverted, thus rendering them of little use. For example, during the period of African enslavement, it would have been counterproductive to argue for

⁹ There is some debate as to whether resolution is the same as settling a dispute; for more on this, see Godden and Casey (2020) and van Laar and Krabbe (2016a).

abolition by exposing the Underground Railroad system. Highlighting the existence of such a system as evidence of the need to free African slaves would have literally derailed many individuals' chances at freedom. Hundleby (2005, 48) states that "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." Ignorance to the workings of the racially oppressed allows them to resistantly work without interruptions from the oppressors. Similarly, racially oppressed peoples can utilize racial misconceptions and white-ignorant frameworks to their advantage. Alison Bailey (2007) refers to the tactic of keeping oppressors in the dark regarding specific aspects of one's experiences, despite this upholding false beliefs, as "strategic ignorance." It is "a way of expediently working with a dominant group's tendency to see wrongly" (Bailey 2007, 88). Oppressors' inclination to misperceive or not recognize evidence qua evidence can be useful in resisting white systems of oppression. Given the need to remain secretive and keep oppressors strategically ignorant, it becomes more plausible for the response of "Just Google it" to mitigate epistemic exploitation. Referring someone to Google can also serve to cut down on the amount of oppositional secret sharing that is in play. If the information is already out there for general consumption—that is, it is out there on the web—then minimal harm will be done in terms of strategic ignorance. However, in the next section, I offer up reasons as to why this argumentative tool either should not be used or should be deployed minimally.

3. Racist AI

Having given an account of the "Just Google it" response's utility in truncating exploitation as well as the tactic's position in argumentation theory, I now turn toward the issue of racialized search engines. As shown within the previous two sections, I disagree with argumentation theorists who would situate "Just Google it" as a defensive maneuver which creates indisputable or unallowed refutation, therefore violating several norms of argumentation. I maintain that the argumentative move does have liberatory potential; however, due to the current racist and sexist algorithms of Google and many of the other search engines, such an argumentative maneuver could potentially do more harm than good.

Several scholars and techno-activists have led the crusade exposing the racism and sexism of algorithmic search engines. For example, Noble (2018, 1) outlines a process of "technological redlining," highlighting how "discrimination is also embedded in computer code and, increasingly, in artificial intelligence technologies that we are reliant on, by choice or not." This new digital redlining has several features, but for the purpose of this project, I limit myself to one: algorithms. AI systems are based on models that are abstract representations and universalizations of complex realities. Because of the oversimplification of intersecting identities, a

plethora of information gets left out. These AI models are seen as neutral—appearing to offer the same search engine results to anyone who might input the exact same words. The algorithms pose as impartial and objective mathematics; however, the code is based upon human (usually white, male, cisgender) individuals who input their own opinions into the system. Moreover, many tech companies—from app developers, to social media sites, to search engines—utilize a “default user” setting. The default can range from a standard background on your phone to a standard avatar for your Hulu profile. But as journalist Lena Groeger (2016) points out, “Someone, somewhere, decided what those defaults should be—and it probably wasn’t you.”

One of the elements that goes into search engine results is word-embedding systems, which examine the frequency with which certain words are usually paired together, allowing the system to anticipate semantic meaning. Word-embedding systems are considered accurate if they successfully can complete analogies such as “Sun is to day, as moon is to ____.” Wachter-Boettcher remarks that this is a great feat; however, the system will also churn up results such as “man is to woman as computer programmer is to homemaker,” “man is to architect as woman is to interior designer,” or even “man is to coward as woman is to whore” (2017, 117–18). In some ways this does make sense because these are cultural realities. Women are more likely to be associated with being homemakers. But if word-embedding systems are given word linkages that are rooted in biases and historical oppression, “then those biases will be reflected in the resulting word embeddings” (Wachter-Boettcher 2017, 118). The algorithms are indeed accurately reporting and linking word associations—women typically are associated with the term “whore.” But any preexisting negative biases or patterns of linguistic oppression are being not only maintained but perpetuated. Google search-engine results utilize such word-embedding systems (e.g., Word2vec), which also include recommendation features.

Google prides itself on being driven by these algorithms. Marissa Mayer states, “Google products are machine-driven. They’re created by machines. And that is what makes us powerful” (quoted in Levy 2011, 206–7). Mayer’s comments posit the machines as responsible for creating these word linkages. The human element is removed. Outliers (e.g., men who might be whores) are seen as “edge cases,” which is “a classic engineering term for scenarios that are considered extreme, rather than typical” (Wachter-Boettcher 2017, 39). Such cases are considered “exceptions that prove the rule,” which is highly problematic given several of the rules themselves (e.g., if it’s a whore, then it’s a woman) are oppressive. Search engines which rely upon word-embedded systems utilize stereotypical heuristics. The system determines what users want to see based upon certain tendencies in demographics. That is, if Google determines that you tend to gravitate toward web content that is more tech savvy, up until a few years ago, the company would determine that you were a millennial-aged, white male. Both Google and Facebook maintain that they do not

collect racial demographic data; however, “race is embedded into the data they are choosing to employ” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 55). This means that while Google is not overtly collecting user data based upon race, searches for items such as hair grease or sleeping bonnets are racially linked. These proxies are seen as neutral; however, they are anything but unbiased. Demographic proxies are contingent upon assumptions, which over time become more deeply embedded. If AI algorithms formulate a user’s search results based upon stereotypical heuristics, then any outliers will fade out over time: “Proxy data can actually make a system *less* accurate over time, not more” (Wachter-Boettcher 2017, 96), since “once [an] assumption is baked in, it skews the results” (96). If word-embedded systems “misalign” a relationship, then they will continue to do so, which further reinforces the misalignment.

However, the issue goes even deeper. It is not just a user’s search history that helps to shape which websites come up first during a search engine inquiry. The location of the internet protocol (IP) address also contributes to the search engine’s decision-making process on what content ought to appear at the top of the page—meaning, if you live in a prominently white, middle-class, Republican-leaning neighborhood, the content that is given greater precedence is content that the algorithm determines would be appealing to white, middle-class, Republican individuals. This is in conjunction with one’s previous search history, but location and proxy attributes associated with one’s location are part of the equation (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020; Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; Wachter-Boettcher 2017). These proxies are not purely objective. They have built-in biases, both individuated and systemic. Despite the assertion that machines are neutral and that search engines such as Google can provide equal access to information, which promotes data fairness, “any notion of algorithmic fairness must also acknowledge the systematic nature of the unfairness that has long been perpetrated by certain groups on others” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020, 62). The professed neutrality comes at a cost to those who have historically been oppressed.

This should not be surprising. Benjamin (2019, 95) states,

When it comes to search engines such as Google, it turns out that online tools, like racist robots, reproduce the biases that persist in the social world. They are, after all, programmed using algorithms that are constantly updated on the basis of human behavior and are learning and replicating the technology of race, expressed in the many different associations that the users make.

If we live in a society that perpetuates anti-Black racism, and “we” are the ones maintaining this system of oppression, then it stands to reason that what we input

into our algorithms will also perpetuate anti-Black racism. Telling an interlocutor to "Just Google it" will in effect not yield accurate or possibly compelling evidence in the search engine results. The search engine may not pull up the desired results, and this problem is even further exacerbated if the interlocutor tends to visit QAnon sites or other webpages that are skeptical of "liberal snowflake" rhetoric or "diversity and inclusion" initiatives. That is, the wider the disagreement and ideological gap, the more probable it becomes that just Googling information will not yield the intended results of the person who suggested using Google. So, in the case of my Confederate-flag-wearing interlocutor, it is very probable that telling him to Google information concerning the 2020 racial protests would more than likely lead to results positioning the protests as riots. Regarding the lovingly, knowingly ignorant ally, the case becomes a bit more complicated; for example, the websites that may be given saliency might be less radical in nature, as in purporting more reformist measures or employing the language of skewed civility in the face of disagreement. The argumentative maneuver (telling someone to "Just Google it"), it turns out, is not as helpful in combatting systemic racism if algorithms merely reflect the persistent racism that already exists.

4. So What Now?

In lieu of a formal conclusion, I provide a few short suggestions for Black folks when entering a deep disagreement on the topic of racial oppression. By no means is this meant to be an exhaustive list, nor are any of my suggestions to be taken as gospel truth.¹⁰

1. Have a ready-made document with great sources to hand out. This seems tedious, but rather than relying on Google algorithms, it directly points interlocutors to sources.
2. Recently, I have started to ask for payment when engaging in online discussions where epistemic exploitation started to occur. It has taken me years to undo the desire and perceived obligation to provide adequate resources, citations, and argumentative "proof" when I engage with others regarding racial injustice. For my comfort, I have spent too much time searching through my arsenal of resources and citations. Trying to find the right quote that would provide the exact argumentative force to sway my interlocutor. Now if I find certain aspects of

¹⁰ To be frank, even as a Black-identified woman of color, I am not even 100 percent sure that these suggestions will help alleviate the problems I have identified thus far. Dealing with oppression is tricky business, and the oppressive systems run really deep. It is exhausting, as section 1 illustrates. But because I do have some hope and I have the commitment to place our needs first, these are some of the argumentative tactics that I personally have found useful.

conversation on racial injustice or oppression to be heading down the regressive path or requiring emotional labor beyond what I initially thought it would require, I provide my PayPal, Venmo, or Cash App account. Pay me, and then we can talk some more. While I am not fully endorsing capitalism with this suggestion, we do live in a capitalist society. And I need to eat. The request for payment is not to shut down the argument but to ensure that I am receiving what I deem to be a fair price for what my interlocutor is seeking. Should the price be too high for the other party, then I can disengage knowing that further engagement will not be worth my time. Some have declined this transaction, while others have paid me.

3. Another approach is to ask the default racial skeptic, “What information or evidence could I provide that (1) you would take to be evidence and, more importantly, (2) that you would see as a defeater or direct counterexample to your view?” It can be easy for people to just keep kicking the argumentative can one block further down the road. Skeptical responses to racial injustice tend to be insatiable: there is almost no evidence that can persuade someone or make them think otherwise. I have utilized this tactic numerous times, and the results still surprise me. More often than not, my interlocutor will say, “Nothing”—that nothing could change their mind or sway them to think otherwise. If the goal of argumentation is to build a consensus, then this is a huge problem. And if the goal of arguing is to persuade one’s interlocutor to a particular truth or to have them accept a conclusion, this is also a massive dilemma. Some people might not realize the sort of evidence that could persuade them or spur them to think otherwise, but if from the start they are epistemically closed to even consider alternatives, something above and beyond mere evidence or propositions is going to be required. Why engage in arguments with someone who is not even epistemically open? This leads me to my last suggestion.
4. Just stop engaging. After some soul-searching within myself, I have decided that there really is nothing more that I could say to someone who takes the hard skeptical stance against the existence of racial oppression that hasn’t already been beautifully articulated by the likes of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Lorraine Hansberry, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston—just to name a few. It’s already been said. As Kristie Dotson (2016, 47) testifies, “There are no ‘original’ ideas that are not also erasures of past lives or current ideas. No ‘new’ ideas waiting to be ‘discovered,’ just as there wasn’t any ‘new’ land for Christopher Columbus to ‘discover.’” For me to somehow think that I can provide the perfect refutation to the claim that racism doesn’t exist or isn’t really an issue or that I can formulate the perfect argument for white allies to kick it up a notch is (1) arrogant on my part and (2) places impossible burdens on my existence. While I know my intellectual worth, I would be eternally dissatisfied with my work and pedagogy if

I *really thought* I could produce *perfect* arguments to sway anyone towards anti-racial points of view. My life is too short, and there is too much joy to be had to be about that business. As previously mentioned, there are opportunity costs involved here. Choose joy and abundance. People may perceive the lack of engagement as a lost chance of gaining an additional ally or, at the very least, of chipping away at white ignorance or other oppressive epistemic frameworks, but as section 1 showed, it is not our job as Blacks to end oppression. That work is on the oppressors. And as I previously articulated, even if it is a chance of missed epistemic resources for the interlocutor, that just seems like bad epistemic luck on their part. We are not culpable for that.

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Dr. TEMPEST M. HENNING (she/her) is currently an assistant professor of philosophy at Fisk University. Dr. Henning's research interests include Africana philosophy, epistemology, and informal logic/argumentation theory. She has published on argumentative norms of civility, argumentative justice, epistemic injustice, and racial microaggressions.