The Mysterious Case of the Missing Perpetrators: How the Privileged Escape Blame and Accountability

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Abstract

When we focus on asymmetries of power in our society, we find that blame and praise are unfairly distributed, partly due to cultural narratives that favour and exonerate the privileged. This paper provides a partial explanation for this skewed distribution of blame and praise. I draw on three analyses of disappearance narratives that erase and exonerate privileged perpetrators and therefore skew the responsibility system in their favour. Then I defend an emancipatory theory of responsibility that treats blame and praise as communicative entities that can, and should, be used to debunk and dismantle these disappearance narratives, along with other oppressive ideologies. Blame and praise, on my emancipatory proposal, serve to identify and take a stand against agents of oppression and to recognize and celebrate resisters.

1. Introduction

Elsewhere, I have argued that blame and praise are unfairly distributed in our moral ecology due to identity prejudices and related cultural myths that influence ordinary people's moral emotions and judgments (Ciurria 2019). These cultural myths serve to erase or *disappear*, and therefore exonerate, privileged wrongdoers who contribute to and benefit from hierarchies of power. Hence, *disappearance narratives* operate to reinforce hierarchies of power that benefit members of privileged social groups—white people, men, the rich, and so on. These narratives make it difficult for members of oppressed groups, who are epistemically marginalized, to credibly identify such individuals as perpetrators and criticize them in virtue of their status-conferring roles in hierarchies of power, because these hierarchies of power—and therefore their sustaining members—are written out of existence. By credibly identify, I mean publicly recognize with sufficient testimonial clout to elicit uptake from the majority. And by status-conferring roles, I mean roles that confer status on the person by virtue of their identity or social-group

membership (e.g., white, rich). In general, disappearance narratives make it difficult for epistemic minorities to elicit uptake from the majority when they testify against (e.g., blame) privileged perpetrators who contribute to hierarchies of power that benefit them.

This paper will examine three sources of disappearances narratives by drawing on influential accounts of cultural myths that erase systems of power and domination, and therefore exonerate privileged perpetrators who enforce and propagate those systems. These myths create asymmetries of power in our "responsibility system" by protecting the privileged from culpability, accountability, and liability; and they unfairly inculpate the oppressed through familiar, identity-based processes of victim-blaming and scapegoating. That is, these myths both exonerate privileged perpetrators and illicitly blame members of marginalized groups.

The first part of the title of this paper is taken from Rebecca Solnit's (2016) article, "The Case of the Missing Perpetrator," which explains how popular scientific narratives erase men's culpability for gender-based violence, abuse, and neglect. The second part of the title refers to the implications of these 'mysterious' disappearances on the "responsibility system," or our system of norm-governed blaming and praising practices. *Responsibility,* on P. F. Strawson's influential description, is part of a norm-governed interpersonal practice involving the deployment of the "reactive attitudes" such as "resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings" (2008, 5). For simplicity, we can refer to these positive and negative reactive attitudes simply as *blame* and *praise*. In holding someone responsible, then, we either blame or praise the person. More recently, philosophers have begun to characterize the set of interpersonal practices examined by Strawson as the "responsibility system," which is embedded in a broader set of moral norms and practices or a "moral ecology" (Vargas 2013; cf. Hurley 2011). What philosophers have so far neglected to address in detail (though see Hutchison, McKenzie, and Oshana 2018) is the role that *malignant asymmetries of power* play in our responsibility system, which is, in reality, largely structured and regulated by heteropatriarchal and colonial norms and relations. Disappearance narratives are a central aspect of these asymmetries of power—they tilt the moral ecology in favour of the privileged, hiding their culpability for status-preserving transgressions.

In this paper, I focus on the role of disappearance narratives in erasing privileged people's roles in hierarchies of power and domination, for which they properly deserve blame. My argument will draw on three 'erasure' accounts: (1) Rebecca Solnit's analysis of the erasure of gender-based violence and abuse by scientific discourse; (2) Kate Manne's critique of the "naive conception" of misogyny; and (3) Charles Mills's indictment of "racial liberalism." All three analyses identify a specific set of *disappearance narratives* that erase, and therefore

exonerate, certain privileged perpetrators for transgressions that enforce relations of power and domination from which the perpetrator benefits (e.g., heteropatriarchy, white supremacy). I will devote a section to each analysis and underscore the implications of that analysis for the distribution of blame and praise in the moral ecology. Then, I will propose an alternative approach to moral responsibility that helps to debunk and dismantle these pernicious disappearance narratives. My proposal is an *emancipatory* one that aims to dismantle hierarchies of power using blame and praise, which I construe as communicative practices that convey information about people's roles in oppressive or emancipatory social systems, respectively. More precisely, *emancipatory blame* seeks to identify people's contributions to hierarchies of power and take a stand against them (via some negative attitude) in light of those contributions; while *emancipatory praise* seeks to identify resisters and celebrate their contributions to resistance movements that liberate the oppressed. Blame and praise, on this model, are communicative entities that contain information about perpetrators and resisters, oppression and activism, which can therefore be used to debunk and discredit hegemonic ideologies by articulating and popularizing counterhegemonic messages. Hence, blame and praise are potent political tools that can be recruited to dismantle systems of oppression by laying bare their sustaining members.

2. The Mysterious Case of the Missing Perpetrator: The Erasure of Rapists and Abusive Men

Rebecca Solnit's article is a response to a set of guidelines published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warning women about the "risks" associated with drinking alcohol. These "risks" include miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, injuries/violence, STDs, and unintended pregnancy. The guidelines explain that "[health-care] providers can help women avoid drinking too much with 5 steps." These guidelines are visually represented in the following poster.

Infographic originally from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The top half of this poster is no longer presented on the CDC website.

Solnit's main criticism of the CDC guidelines is that they avoid explaining how (cisgender) women get pregnant, and how (all) women encounter such "risks" as

"injuries/violence" and "STDs."[1] How is it that women "experience" and "encounter" pregnancy, violence, and STDs?

Men are a critical part of the equation, obviously. Women aren't magically inseminated by exposure to alcohol, and the violence/injury cited by the CDC isn't gesturing at the possibility of stumbling while drunk, which is just as much of a risk for men. The guidelines are implicitly referring to the risk of *getting raped*. And, as Solnit (2016) notes, "men are the main source of violence against women (and for that matter the main source of violence against men)." Similarly, women don't spontaneously conceive a child in the presence of alcohol: fertile females are *impregnated* by fertile males. As Solnit clarifies for the CDC, "Pregnancy results when particular subsets of men and women get together in particular ways. No man, no pregnancy."

Because men aren't mentioned as part of the explanation for these adverse effects, they are effectively exonerated. You can't hold a man responsible for rape, unplanned pregnancy, or STD transmission if *women* are the ones who took all the "risks." This man-less explanation of women's 'health problems' is a patriarchal myth presented in the guise of scientific fact: supposedly, women who drink alcohol are at risk of conceiving a child and incurring unspecified injuries with no *male agency* involved. Oddly, there's no analogous poster warning men that exposure to alcohol increases their odds of committing rape and conceiving an unwanted child. Men simply aren't held accountable for these types of infractions. As Solnit (2016) puts it, "Seriously, we know why men are absented from these narratives: it absolves them from responsibility for pregnancies, including the unfortunate and accidental variety, and then it absolves them from producing that thing for which so many poor women have been excoriated for so long: fatherless children." And on the same basis, it absolves men of responsibility for rape and abuse: it's women's 'risky decisions' that expose them to injury and violence. Because men are erased from the scientific explanation of gender-based violence, men's culpability is erased, as are the effects of gender-based violence on women as a group. Indeed, *patriarchy itself* is mysteriously disappeared, because patriarchy is a situation of unequal relations between men and women, and these relations are nowhere mentioned in the guidelines.

Solnit's analysis brings to light how scientific discourse illicitly blames women for men's transgressions (e.g., rape, failing to pay child support), thereby enforcing

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[1] Trans women don't get pregnant, unintentionally or otherwise, though they face even higher "risks" of violence and STDs than cis women, due to prejudice, housing insecurity, and other forms of discrimination (James et al. 2016). The CDC doesn't mention trans women at all, thereby writing them out of existence in their guidelines for "women."

patriarchal relations. This 'scientific' script is one of the reasons it is so difficult for women to authoritatively and effectively blame and condemn rapists, abusive intimate partners, absent fathers, and other men who contribute to, and benefit from, patriarchal dynamics of power.[2] The responsibility for these collective harms is conveniently shifted from men onto 'irresponsible' women, and this transference silences women—it makes it difficult for them to credibly blame men for transgressions exonerated by patriarchal scripts. Hence, these scripts epistemically disempower women.

3. The Mysterious Case of the Missing Misogynists

Kate Manne (2017) draws attention to a second mystery: the case of the missing misogynists. She argues that our society espouses a *naive conception* of misogyny that makes it difficult to diagnose misogyny, particularly (and ironically) in the most patriarchal milieus, in which one would most expect to find them. In short, the naive conception works to disappear misogynistic structures, individuals, and actions, depicting them as glitches or anomalies in an otherwise gender-equal society rather than structural features of a (more-or-less) patriarchal order. The naive conception, on Manne's definition, holds that

> misogyny is primarily a property of individual agents (typically, although not necessarily, men) who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions toward any and every woman, or at least women generally, simply because they are women. That is, a misogynist's attitudes are held to be caused or triggered merely by his representing people as women (either individually or collectively), and on no further basis specific to his target. (2017, 32)

Misogynists, then, genuinely and deeply hate all women as women. (Call this *naive-conception misogyny* or *NC misogyny* for short). A misogynist, so conceived, is defined by his psychological profile—more specifically, his deep-seated hatred of all women *per se*. This hatred is embedded in his deep self, or the "deep" and "ultimate" substratum of his psychological profile (Manne 2017, 18). Hence, NC

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[2] I should clarify that it is *white* men who are typically exonerated by patriarchal scripts. As Tommy Curry (2018) points out, Black men are stereotyped as rapists and this "boogeyman" of Black Masculinity makes them vulnerable to criminalization and incarceration. I am following Solnit's analysis, but that analysis unfortunately does not address the fact that the justice system favours white defendants but not racialized defendants. I discuss racial inequality in the justice system in my book, *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Ciurria 2019).

misogynists knowingly and wilfully target women with hostility and aggression because they viscerally hate all women as such.

Manne points out that this definition gives rise to a variety of problems, which can be divided into (a) an epistemic problem, (b) a legal-political problem, and (c) a conceptual-moral problem. Let's examine these problems in turn and then explore their implications for the responsibility system.

(a) The Epistemic Problem:

The epistemic problem, in brief, is that the naive conception makes misogyny "epistemically inaccessible" in general, but "to women in particular" (Manne 2017, 44). Because NC misogyny is a matter of an agent's deep self, and it's natural to assume that individuals have privileged access to the innermost recesses of their own minds (and thus to any evidence of misogyny lodged in their psychological substrata), it's natural to assume that accused misogynists are the ultimate authorities on whether they are *really* misogynists. As Peter Carruthers (2011) has argued, the notion that individuals have privileged (noninferential) access to their mental states, called the "privileged access view," is espoused by most people, even if it's not evidentially supported. So, if we (naively) assume that misogyny is a feature of a person's deep self, and we also (naively) suppose that people have privileged access to their deep selves, we position accused misogynists as authorities on who is and is not a misogynist; and they will, of course, deny being misogynists, if a misogynist is taken to be a rabid woman-hater. Thus, the naive view positions accused misogynists to credibly deflect accusations of misogyny. And this epistemically disempowers women who try to hold men responsible for misogynistic offenses.

Another related issue is that the naive conception focuses our attention on the deep selves of putative misogynists, distracting from the deeper problem of patriarchal oppression, which is the source of misogynistic transactions and transgressions. It's not just deep-seated woman-haters who harm women, of course: it's anyone who contributes to the patriarchal structures that systemically privilege men by virtue of their identity as men. Hence, not only does the naive view exonerate misogynists by privileging their testimony in debates about misogyny: it also diverts attention away from the banal, everyday perpetrators of "misogynistic offenses," by which I mean actions that enforce patriarchal relations of power and domination, regardless of the deep psychology of the perpetrator. In this way, the naive conception operates as a red herring, fixing attention on a "boogeyman" of NC misogyny and drawing attention away from the main source of misogynistic transactions and interactions—*patriarchal relations*, enforced by a multitude of 'ordinary folks.' Within a patriarchal order, *many diverse manifestations* of misogyny

sustain and reproduce patriarchal relations, not simply (or especially) the hatred of prejudiced men.

In this way, the naive conception gives rise to an epistemic problem, which Manne articulates as follows:

> [Because the basis of an individual's] attitudes, as a matter of deep or ultimate psychological explanation, is frequently inscrutable . . . the naive conception would threaten to make misogyny very difficult to diagnose, short of being the agent's therapist (and sometimes not even that would be sufficient). This would make misogyny epistemically inaccessible to women, in particular . . . . So in effect, this notion of misogyny would be *silencing* for its victims. (Manne 2017, 44)

When women try to accuse men of misogyny, they are silenced by the naive conception, which positions accused misogynists as arbiters of debates about who is a true misogynist. And women who accuse men of *acts* of misogynistic enforcement, without also accusing them of being rabid woman-haters, are similarly silenced by a naive conception that locates misogyny in the psychological substrata of woman-hating boogeymen. Hence, women will not be able to leverage their experiences as victims of patriarchal oppression to elicit uptake for their moral testimony about misogyny. They will not be able to credibly accuse men of misogyny, especially acts of unintentional or accidental or benevolent misogyny, which don't implicate the perpetrator's deep self. Yet these are the *main sources* of patriarchal oppression in our society.

Manne offers an alternative definition on which misogyny is not a feature of a person's deep self (to which the person presumptively has privileged access), but instead consists of anything that

> serv[es] to uphold patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination (including racisms, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on) . . . by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less circumscribed) class of girls or women to enforce and police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms). (2017, 13)

This definition shifts the presumption of authority onto women by defining misogyny as the "enforcement branch" of the patriarchal order (2017, 53). On this view, people can be guilty of committing misogynistic actions (that enforce patriarchal norms) even if they're not feverish woman-haters. Whether someone is

guilty of misogyny in this sense doesn't depend on the dark chasms of the person's psychology, or even the shallower aspects of the person's psychological economy— it's the person's *role* in the patriarchal order, as an enforcer of patriarchal norms, that makes him guilty of misogyny. This definition helps to effectuate a fairer distribution of testimonial authority because it makes misogyny accessible to women as *targets* of misogynistic transactions: women have evidence of misogyny based in their experiences as recipients of misogynistic offenses. Hence, Manne's definition resolves the unfair distribution of credit in the moral ecology by positioning women to hold men accountable and liable for acts of misogyny.

Manne's reconfiguration of misogyny has implications for responsibility, which I shall elaborate in section 5. For now, we can simply note that the naive conception erases and exonerates perpetrators of patriarchal enforcement by positioning accused misogynists as testimonial authorities in conversations about misogyny, thereby silencing the main targets of misogyny, women.[3] Hence, the epistemic problem contributes to the discrediting of women's blame.

(b) The Legal-Political Problem:
The above argument points to a related objection of a legal and political nature. Because the naive conception positions accused misogynists as authorities on whether or not they are misogynists, it makes misogyny not only difficult to *diagnose* but also "difficult to prosecute" (Manne 2017, 45). On the same basis, it makes misogyny difficult to protest and resist, because true misogynists are nowhere to be found. By granting misogynists epistemic authority on questions about misogyny, the naive conception makes it difficult for women to resist and legislate against acts of misogynistic enforcement, which are erased by the naive conception.[4]

(c) The Conceptual-Normative Problem:
Finally, Manne points to an interrelated set of conceptual and moral problems. The *conceptual* problem is the following: intuitively, we would expect to

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[3] Nonbinary and gender-queer people are also targets of misogynistic hostility. They aren't a central focus of Manne's analysis, but I would remiss not to mention that people who don't conform to binary-gender categories are also oppressed under patriarchy.

[4] There are currently heated debates about the bloated American prison system, and I am not a fan of carceral justice; my point here is simply that the naive conception makes it difficult for women to advocate for their own safety in many ways, including through legislation about pay equity, access to safe housing, and other forms of security.

find the greatest proportion of misogynists in patriarchal milieus. On this point, there is widespread agreement. Yet if the naive conception is correct (and misogynists deeply hate all women as such), then patriarchal cultures—in which women are acculturated into serving men in a spirit of enthusiastic deference—will contain vanishingly few misogynists, since men will have no good reason to hate *any* women (i.e., people socialized into being their complacent servants), let alone *all women*. In Manne's words, "The naive conception of misogyny would effectively define misogyny out of prevalence within a patriarchal order, which I take to be the setting in which it should be (most) naturally occurring" (2017, 45). A patriarchal order, she clarifies, is a social milieu in which social institutions and practices position women as subordinate to men by virtue of their gender, and enforce this hierarchy with systems of rewards and punishments. In such a milieu, men would have very little reason to hate women, who have been socialized into performing "emotional, social, domestic, sexual, and reproductive labour" for them, not grudgingly but "in a loving and caring manner or enthusiastic spirit" (Manne 2017, 46). Any woman who refused to serve men in the 'correct' spirit of enthusiasm would be punished by the institutions and practices designed to discipline women into a position of subservience. In the most patriarchal milieus, then, men should have *the least* reason to hate women. NC misogyny should be rare, then, in the most patriarchal societies in which we would most expect to find it.

The naive conception thus fails *conceptually* because it fails to locate misogyny in the milieu in which one would expect it to be most prevalent: an absolute patriarchy. Instead, it (inadvertently) locates misogyny in the most feminist milieus: those in which patriarchy is being actively dismantled by feminists. In such milieus, misogyny is likely to be manifested in *angrier* forms—such as hostility and violence toward 'unruly' women—but it will be less prevalent, since feminists will be working to dismantle the institutions that demand their subservience.

This covers the conceptual problem. But the conceptual problem gives rise to a moral problem. The *moral* problem is that, by defining misogyny out of prevalence in patriarchal societies, the naive conception makes it excessively difficult for women to credibly identify, criticize, or resist the most common forms of misogyny in those contexts. In societies in which the naive conception is dominant, misogyny is *mythologized* as a peculiar feature of rare moral delinquents (namely, men who viscerally hate all women as such). This "boogeyman" makes it difficult for women to authoritatively blame men for banal acts of misogyny, such as sexual harassment by 'nice guys' and 'good mentors' and 'artistic geniuses,' men who aren't *seen as* misogynists. Hence, the perpetrators of these (properly) misogynistic transgressions are let off the hook.

Although Manne focuses on the naive conception's role in erasing misogyny as a system of oppression, she also discusses its impact on specific *transgressions*

that serve to enforce patriarchal relations, thereby illustrating the *personal* aspect of misogyny. Her main example is *strangulation*, which is a crime typically perpetrated on women. Manne (2017, 2) points out that strangulation is "a prevalent form of intimate partner violence," with "the large majority of strangulation . . . victims [being] female intimate partners" (followed by children and infants). She notes that there are affinities between literal strangulation and "testimonial smothering" (Dotson 2011; cited in Manne 2017, 3), which is a type of self-silencing common to women under conditions of epistemic injustice. Strangulation often leads to testimonial smothering, such as the use of euphemisms like "choke" and "grab" to describe the more serious crime of strangulation, and reversals in allegations under social pressure (Manne 2017). In this way, the prevalence of *intimate partner strangulation* is minimized within a patriarchal order that seeks to suppress evidence of gender-based violence, and this threatens the persistence of the patriarchal order. Strangulation, Manne clarifies, is *literal torture*: "Researchers draw a comparison between strangulation and waterboarding, both in how it feels— painful, terrifying—and its subsequent social meaning. It is characterized as a demonstration of authority and domination" (Manne 2017, 3; citing Sorenson, Joshi, and Sivitz 2014). Yet the psychological and moral significance of strangulation— indeed, its *very existence*—is rendered invisible by patriarchal scripts that suppress and silence women's testimony about that topic. If the act of intimate partner strangulation is disappeared in our society, then the men who strangle women are effectively exonerated and cannot be brought to justice for their offenses.[5]

Most examples of misogynistic transgression erased by patriarchal scripts are more insidious than strangulation but can be just as marginalizing. Elinor Mason (2018) discusses an (ostensible) omission that has received a great deal of philosophical scrutiny: a husband forgets to pick up the milk for his wife on the way home from work. On a naive interpretation of the situation, the husband isn't responsible for his forgetting because he didn't mean it, which is a valid excuse on the Strawsonian model. His forgetting, to be precise, doesn't express *ill will* toward his wife and is therefore excusable. (It was an innocent mistake, not a reflection of his deep self.) But now let's zoom out and consider the broader context within which he commits this 'omission': if the husband is someone who often forgets to pick up the milk—and to pick up the kids from school, and to wash the dishes, and to do other feminine-coded forms of labour—then his forgetting begins to look less like an innocent mistake and more like a contribution to a patriarchal division of labour that benefits men as a group. That is, the omission, on a context-sensitive

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[5] I should note that I sympathize with anti-carceral feminists who seek to abolish carceral justice, but I believe that certain violent offenders should be socially isolated, preferably in rehabilitative, reparative, and humane confines.

(and relational) analysis, appears to enforce patriarchal relations by foisting the majority of the feminine-coded labour on the wife, consistent with the patriarchal conventions and relations of the broader patriarchal cultural. Thus, the omission is, on closer inspection, an act of patriarchal enforcement, and hence, on Manne's definition, an *act of misogyny*. This transgression may not be as egregious as strangulation, but it has the same epistemic effect: the silencing of women, who are positioned as men's domestic servants by binary gender norms. A position of servitude is not a position of epistemic authority; domestic servants are *epistemic patients* or *recipients* of knowledge, not knowers or epistemic *subjects*. Hence, the positioning of women as domestic servants contributes to the epistemic oppression of women.

This analysis of acts of misogyny as acts of patriarchal enforcement reveals that misogyny isn't just a system of norms and relations: it's a system of power structures *enforced by* discretely embodied individuals—individual stranglers and negligent husbands and (as Manne also mentions) incels and family annihilators and sexual harassers and other agents who enforce patriarchal relations through their choices and actions. These enforcers are guilty of misogyny. They exploit their position of privilege to enforce patriarchal norms and epistemic inequalities.

The disappearance of misogyny by patriarchal narratives serves to exonerate perpetrators of patriarchal oppression. It makes it exceedingly difficult for women to credibly accuse men of misogynistic transgressions, since their testimony is at odds with the dominant cultural narrative on which misogyny is a rare form of moral delinquency, not a system of interpersonal transactions that works to oppress women, and is exploited and enforced by the privileged. Hence, the naive view exonerates men who enforce patriarchal norms to their own advantage.

4. The Mysterious Cases of the Missing Racists

Charles Mills presents a third mystery: the case of the missing racists. In his analysis of liberal theory (2017), he argues that white intellectuals have constructed a mythic version of liberalism that erases racial oppression and reinforces the established "racial liberal" order. In what follows, I will outline this analysis and draw out the implications for the responsibility system.

In "Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism," Mills describes the society we live in as *racial liberalism*, a liberal society "in which conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized. And the contract, correspondingly, has really been a racial one, an agreement among white contractors to subordinate and exploit nonwhite non-contractors for white benefit" (2017, 29). White intellectuals have hidden this reality in plain sight by mythologizing the social contract as relatively egalitarian rather than structured by

norms of racial inequality. Anyone who subscribes to this myth will not be in a good position to diagnose or criticize forms of racism.

Mills himself is a liberal, but a *radical* liberal who seeks to "recognize the historic racialization of liberalism so as to better deracialize it" (2017, xv). The erasure of white supremacy within liberal theory has "left a legacy of white wrongs . . . not merely material but also normative and conceptual" (2017, xvi), which have been perpetuated not only by neo-Nazis but also by "white moderates" (a.k.a. ordinary white liberals). As Martin Luther King noted when he wrote from Birmingham City Jail, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice" (quoted in Mills 2017, preface). Mills traces racial liberalism back to the postfeudal intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, led by prominent philosophers such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith. While liberal philosophers promoted the *ideals* of rationality and equality, they failed to address the relations of power and domination that made the realization of these ideals an impossibility. Hence, liberal philosophies— together with false historical narratives—worked in tandem to whitewash and rationalize structural racism. Mills explains how historians and philosophers have worked together to erase the reality of racial oppression and silence counterhegemonic narratives from Communities of Color.

Even today, many American history textbooks present America through an idealizing lens that erases the nation's history of genocide and white supremacy. As James Loewen notes, "The Indian-white wars that dominated our history from 1622 to 1815 and were of considerable importance until 1890 have disappeared from our national memory," resulting in a "feel-good history for whites" (1996, 133; quoted in Mills 2017, 65). In the same vein, white historians have rationalized slavery by presenting it as a benevolent enterprise undertaken for the benefit of racialized communities. As Mills puts it, "The 'magnolia myth' of paternalistic white aristocrats and happy, singing darkies . . . dominated American textbooks as late as the 1950s" (2017, 65). The erection of Confederacy statues throughout the twentieth century similarly reflects a reimagining of American history in the triumphalist spirit of the Colonial South. This historical narrative depicts the Confederacy as a legitimate branch of the US military rather than a rogue militia that tried to overthrow the government for the sole purpose of keeping racialized citizens in shackles. Far from being a legitimate national interest, the Confederacy represented one of the great obstacles to the theoretical ideal of democracy in the United States.

On Mills's analysis, philosophers haven't just been complicit in the whitewashing of American history, they have been the primary protagonists of white supremacist ideologies. If history textbooks hide white supremacy by writing it

out of the historical record, then philosophy textbooks justify white supremacy by providing a series of rationalizations for the racial contract. Some of the primary proponents of racial liberalism, says Mills, are Rawls, Kant, and Locke, and these figures remain staples of the philosophical canon in modern-day universities.

To better understand the erasures of racism in professional philosophy, we can home in on the central "ideal theorists" named by Mills. Rawls offers a theory of justice that derives principles of justice from a decision procedure in which decision-makers abstract away from their identifying characteristics, including race. This approach "marginalizes . . . concerns [about racial injustice] not contingently but structurally" (Mills 2017, 16). By erasing race in the "original position," Rawls's heuristic makes it impossible to address racial injustice as a social fact and an obstacle to the implementation of liberal ideals in the real world. Hence, his theory lacks the resources needed to identify and remediate structural racism. Rawls's predecessor, Kant, didn't just refuse to analyze race: he defended white supremacy as a scientific ideal, positioning himself as "one of the founders—or (for some theorists) *the* founder—of modern 'scientific' racism" (Mills 2017, xviii). Kant is famous for developing the categorical imperative, which (on one formulation) says never to treat a person as a mere means; but his 'scientific' theory reserved the term "person" for white men. Kant's predecessor, Locke, provided an economic rationale for white supremacy by sanctifying the property rights of white landowning males, effectively disenfranchising everyone else, and offering a convenient justification for the plantation economy and the carceral state. In practice, Locke lived up to his philosophical principles by investing "in African slavery, justif[ying] Native American expropriation, and help[ing] to write the Carolina constitution of 1669, which gave masters absolute power over their slaves" (Mills 2017, 31). In short, these three philosophers helped to erect the doctrine of racial liberalism that remains the crux of the liberal state and the core of political philosophy in the modern age. Many philosophy students today read selected excerpts of these texts, not knowing that their authors were proponents of a white supremacist social contract.

If Mills is right that we live in a *racial liberal* society in which racial oppression is both very real and very hidden from white consciousness by white supremacist ideologies, then we should expect racism, in its many forms, to be largely invisible to white people. That is, we should expect white people to be largely ignorant of racist structures, agents, and offenses in their environment. And this is precisely the case: white people are bad at diagnosing racism. Many white people cannot even recognize the military leader of the Confederacy, Robert E. Lee, as a racist. How, then, could they be expected to identify a white moderate as a racist? Many white

people cannot recognize the genocide of Native Americans as a historical fact.[6] How, then, can they be expected to recognize their white privilege as a result of generations of colonialism and imperialism? *White ignorance* is an epistemic state that makes it very difficult for white people, whether they are explicitly racist or not, to diagnose and understand, let alone criticize, racism.

Note that this is *not* to say that white people are innocent victims: white people (consciously or unconsciously) have *actively constructed,* and *continue* to actively construct, the racist ideologies that structure their cognition so as to hide evidence of racism from plain sight, because this shield of ignorance protects them from guilt, culpability, accountability, and other inconvenient truths and consequences. White people have wilfully—not accidentally or innocently—cultivated the conditions of white ignorance that protect them from knowledge of their role in society, as contributors to and beneficiaries of white privilege. Racism is an inconvenient but accessible truth within the field of white perception. If white people can't admit that they are bearers of white ignorance, this is because they are living in active denial.

Mills's analysis explains why it is so hard for white people to identify racism in liberal societies: because liberal societies are white supremacist societies, dedicated to systemically erasing evidence of racism. If there is no racism in America—the ideal liberal state—then there are no racists. By the same token, racial liberal narratives make it difficult for People of Color to leverage their experiences as targets of racial oppression to credibly accuse white people of racist transactions (which enforce racial inequality). This is because their testimony is at odds with the dominant Enlightenment myth of the 'triumph of equality and rationality' over ignorance and chaos after the collapse of feudalism. Hence, the hegemony of racial liberalism deprives People of Color of the testimonial clout they need to hold racists fully accountable.

Racial liberal ideologies, in fact, don't just exonerate racist enforcers but also displace blame onto Black people, mischaracterizing them as responsible for the effects of white supremacy. Mills gives a common example of this type of racist scapegoating—the popular belief that "after the abolition of slavery in the United

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[6] A national inquiry commissioned by the Canadian government found that the state is guilty of perpetrating a genocide on Indigenous girls and women, which continues to this day (Ian Austen and Dan Bilefsky, "Canadian Inquiry Calls Killings of Indigenous Women Genocide," *New York Times*, June 3, 2019, www.nytimes.com /2019/06/03/world/canada/canada-indigenous-genocide.html). Although the US government hasn't commissioned a similar inquiry, we can infer that it is guilty of the same genocidal tactics based on its similar treatment of Indigenous communities. Hence, the state is a colonial state, guilty of a patriarchal genocide.

States, blacks generally had opportunities equal to whites"; hence, racial disparities in wealth and income are due to Black people's *irresponsibility* as opposed to structural racism (2017, 57). This scapegoating narrative is, according to anti-colonialist critics, at the heart of neoliberal economics, an ideology that purports to be to everyone's advantage but actually functions to reproduce the colonial principles of the plantation economy—an economy that, "from the nation's genesis," served to extract "surplus value from racialized bodies (e.g., dispossession of indigenous lands, slavery, share cropping, prison industrial complex, forced labor camps)," thereby facilitating "the hyper-exploitation of certain (colorized) bodies and lands" by white landowners, as noted by Joshua Inwood (2015, 411; citing McIntyre and Nast 2011). In fact, the propagation of the plantation economy through neoliberal principles is the main reason American capitalism is "so brutal" to this day, though to no one more than racialized minorities.[7] The myth of neoliberal economics as a color-blind system of economic relations is a component part of a broader phenomenon that Angelique M. Davis and Rose Ernst call "racial gaslighting," a set of "political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuate . . . and normalize . . . a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist" (2019, 3). Racial liberal and neoliberal scripts work in tandem to "obfuscate the existence of a white supremacist state power structure" and "pathologize" resisters (Davis and Ernst 2019, 2). These mechanisms exonerate the perpetrators of racial injustice by writing white supremacy out of existence, and they simultaneously pathologize People of Color by depicting their testimony as irrational, delusional, overly emotional, childish, or 'crazy.'

      In sum, America is a racial liberal order, saturated with disappearance narratives that obfuscate the reality of the racial contract and silence People of Color who try to leverage their experiences to challenge racist scripts and practices. Because of the hegemony of racial liberalism, racialized speakers are marginalized in conversations about racial oppression.

5. An Emancipatory Theory of Responsibility

      The assumption that animated this paper was that blame and praise are not evenly distributed in our society because of disappearance narratives that exonerate privileged perpetrators and shift blame onto the oppressed. These narratives also silence members of oppressed groups who try to resist and debunk them with their own experiential testimony. The above three critiques illuminate some of the mechanisms behind the unfair distribution of blame and praise, and behind the

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[7] See Matthew Desmond, "In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation," *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html.

silencing of epistemic minorities. Solnit shows that the scientific community—which purports to be objective and value-neutral—is actually complicit in the dissemination of patriarchal myths about women's responsibility (and men's nonresponsibility) for gender-based violence, abuse, and unwanted pregnancy. Manne shows that the naive conception of misogyny hides misogyny in plain sight, making it difficult for women to credibly identify and blame enforcers of patriarchal oppression. And Mills demonstrates that racial liberalism, an ideology propagated by white intellectuals, distorts and obfuscates the reality of white supremacy, making it difficult for People of Color to credibly identify and blame enforcers of racial oppression (e.g., white moderates). These analyses explain why (particularly white and privileged) rapists,[8] absent fathers, abusive intimate partners, misogynistic enforcers, and racial liberal proponents so easily escape blame in our (patriarchal, racial liberal) society, and why the oppressed are scapegoated and gaslighted when they contradict hegemonic myths.

If we want to promote a fairer distribution of blame and praise, then we need to overturn these disappearance narratives, as well as the responsibility practices that support them. How can we do this?

My proposal, derived from emancipatory philosophical subdisciplines such as feminist philosophy, critical race theory, queer theory, critical disability studies, and intersectionality theory, is to adopt a *nonideal*, *ameliorative*, *relational*, and *intersectional* approach to responsibility, which conceives of blame and praise as potential tools of liberation from oppressive ideologies and systems. Let me briefly explain these four methodological principles:

(a) A *nonideal-theoretic* approach is consistent with Mills's rejection of abstract ideals, detached from social reality. A nonideal theorist trains her attention on real-world hierarchies of power.

(b) An *ameliorative* approach aims to ameliorate (protest, resist, dismantle) the hierarchies of power revealed by nonideal analysis (viz., Haslanger 2000). Rather than merely attempting to describe or systemize commonsense intuitions about responsibility, an ameliorative theorist defines responsibility in reference to a particular political goal, such as dismantling hierarchies of power and emancipating the oppressed. (This goal may take into consideration existing prejudices in commonsense understandings of the concept in question, e.g., responsibility).

(c) A *relational* approach understands persons as social and interdependent animals, necessarily implicated in social systems and networks. A relational theory of responsibility, then, wouldn't hold people responsible merely for their

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[8] The reader should see Tommy Curry's (2018) work on how Black men (in sharp contrast to how white men are treated) are mythologized as rapists and sexual predators, resulting in criminalization and persecution under the justice system.

(individually construed) intentions or deep selves but (also) for their roles in social systems and networks (e.g., patriarchy, white supremacy).

(d) An *intersectional* approach recognizes that people are affected by multiple intersecting vectors of oppression and that these intersections inform each other (Crenshaw 1989). While no one can analyze every possible intersection of oppression at once, an intersectionality theorist attempts to recognize and/or analyze more than one vector of oppression at a time.

Together, these methodological principles instruct us to focus on hierarchies of power, as understood from the standpoint of the oppressed (who have presumptive epistemic privilege). An emancipatory approach to responsibility, which combines (a)–(d), directs our attention to real-world hierarchies of power like patriarchy and white supremacy and ableism, and enjoins us to dismantle or resist these systems using the resources of the responsibility system (blame and praise). In light of the pervasiveness of disappearance narratives, one way of doing this is to use blame to identify people's status-conferring roles in hierarchies of power, and hold these people in negative regard for their contributions to these oppressive systems. Unlike most theories of responsibility, this methodological approach isn't fixated on the internal properties of discretely embodied individuals, but instead fixes attention on people's roles in the collectives and systems that structure the fabric of society—a society that is, in our case, heteropatriarchal and racist. People who enforce these oppressive norms are, on an emancipatory framework, eligible for blame, while people who resist these systems are eligible for praise. This is true regardless of the agent's quality of will or knowledge of their own social position.

The current proposal is more compatible with the critiques of oppressive ideologies offered by Solnit, Manne, and Mills than traditional (non-ameliorative) theories of responsibility because it provides us with the resources needed to identify privileged wrongdoers exonerated by disappearance narratives and to make them eligible for blame, censure, and sanctions. In doing this, it helps us better understand the inner workings of oppressive systems. By blaming members of oppressive systems, we increase the availability of moral knowledge in our society. In Miranda Fricker's words, we contribute to society's "collective hermeneutical resources" (2007, 7).

These are just some of the considerations that motivate an emancipatory responsibility ethic. In response to this proposal, however, a critic might worry that my notion of blame is still too individualistic to support the transformative sociological aims shared by Solnit, Manne, and Mills. Perhaps a focus on individual enforcement agents—even if they are understood as parts of oppressive networks— is incompatible with the structural-sociological method that feminists and critical race theorists generally favour. Maybe no individual is responsible for social oppression, as "eliminativists" have argued (viz., Waller 2011, 2015). In the next

section, I will argue that an emancipatory theory of responsibility that takes individuals to be responsible for their enforcement roles in oppressive systems is compatible with the dominant structural-sociological orientation of feminist and anti-racist analysis, and actually gains support from it.

6. Is Individual Responsibility Compatible with Emancipatory Aims?
6.1. Solnit

Solnit is clearly not averse to allocating responsibility to individuals. Her main argument is that the 'scientific' narrative promoted by the CDC absolves men of responsibility for committing gender-based violence and abuse, and transfers the blame onto women. On the other hand, she cites the lack of social resources available to women as one of the causes of gender inequality, thereby shifting the focus onto sociological explanations and systemic solutions. These two strands of explanation are not incompatible, though. It can be true both that individual men are blameworthy for committing gender-based violence, and that women are entitled to governmental support to help them navigate a patriarchal society. Hence, individual responsibility can be part of a sociological analysis that identifies systems of patriarchal oppression and individual misogynistic actors as joint causes of gender inequality. The solution to this two-ply problem is a combination of increased support for women and increased epistemic sensitivity to women's blame, including blame directed at rapists and negligent fathers.

6.2. Mills

Mills's critique of racial liberalism focuses heavily on the systemic and ideological sources of white supremacy. This may seem to suggest that Mills is opposed to the notion of individual responsibility, and perhaps to individualist analysis in general. But this isn't the case. As a "radical liberal" (who hopes to redeem liberalism by analyzing the systems of oppression that make the realization of liberal ideals impossible), Mills affirms the reality and the moral significance of the individual, albeit as shaped by social forces. He writes, "One can without inconsistency affirm both the value of the individual and the importance of recognizing how the individual is socially molded, especially when the environing social structures are oppressive ones" (2017, 18). In other words, Mills believes that individual analysis and sociological analysis are mutually compatible, perhaps even complementary, because individuals are the engines of systemic oppression. Without individual oppressors, there can be no systems of oppression. Hence, Mills's analysis of racial injustice is consistent with an *individualist apparatus* for allocating blame to specific enforcers of racial liberalism and praise to specific members of resistance movements. There is no tension between (1) recognizing the systemic nature of racial oppression, and (2) recognizing the individual

blameworthiness of perpetrators of systemic racism. (This should, of course, be coupled with policy changes and legislative reform.)

6.3. Manne

Manne doesn't outright reject the validity of individual responsibility, but she cautions that "blame has its limits" (2017, xxi). She recognizes that blame (as a type of reactive attitude) was misunderstood by P. F. Strawson (2008), who ignored the role of patriarchal ideologies in the construction and enforcement of interpersonal norms; but Manne doesn't say much about how, or if, we can repair the inequalities entrenched in the responsibility system. As a solution to patriarchal oppression in general, she proposes a "piecemeal approach," involving specific responses to specific misogynistic offenses (2017, 30). Yet she is wary of individualist analysis, which she identifies as the main source of the naive conception of misogyny, that is, the view that misogyny is a property of *individual* woman-haters as opposed to a product of systemic forces.

In spite of Manne's sociological orientation, I think that she would be amenable to seeing an emancipatory approach as a good example of a "piecemeal" solution to patriarchal oppression, seeing that the emancipatory approach brings to light people's enforcing roles in hierarchies of power. It thereby positions women to elicit uptake for their experiential testimony about misogynistic agents, actions, and collectives. The virtue of the emancipatory approach to blame is that one doesn't need insight into a putative misogynist's deep self prior to blaming him: one only needs insight into his role in a collective or system that operates to oppress women. And women are in a good position to produce experiential evidence of people's roles in patriarchal collectives, because we live in those collectives and experience their marginalizing and disempowering effects every day. Hence, the emancipatory approach helps us solve the epistemic and moral problems that Manne attributes to the naive conception: it positions women to effectively blame men for misogynistic transgressions—namely, transgressions that enforce patriarchal norms and relations, of which women have direct experiential evidence. Women do not, on the emancipatory proposal, need to probe the innermost depths of putative misogynists' psyches to discover whether they are rabid woman-haters in order to blame them.

Having said this, I am, I think, much more optimistic about the emancipatory potential of blame and praise than any of the authors cited here. I believe that the solution to the asymmetries of power that scapegoat and gaslight members of marginalized groups—while erasing the culpability of the privileged—can be overturned if we identify people's roles in systems of power and domination, and hold them in low esteem on that basis. One reason for my optimism is that blame—as a communicative entity—contains information about perpetrators and

transgressions, wrongdoers and victims, and therefore holds the potential to transform the "hermeneutical" climate, or the "shared tools of social interpretation" that structure our understanding of our moral ecology, and our perception of who deserves blame for what (Fricker 2007, 6). When we use blame to highlight people's roles in hierarchies of power, we create what José Medina calls "oppositional discourses" and "counterhegemonic publics" that challenge oppressive ideologies (2013, 16). Emancipatory blame *is* an oppositional discourse because it seeks to overturn hegemonic narratives that exonerate and absolve the powerful.

Thus, an emancipatory approach to blame helps us deconstruct and dismantle disappearance narratives by "reappearing" agents of oppression using counterhegemonic narratives about responsibility. This positions us to hold agents of oppression in low esteem. In this way, individual-responsibility attributions are a critical part of a decolonial approach to morality, since these attributions—when deployed in an emancipatory and ameliorative spirit—communicate information about powerful people's self-serving investments in hierarchies of power.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I used disappearance accounts of misogyny and racism to help explain why blame is so unevenly distributed in our moral ecology. A large part of the reason is that dominant cultural narratives bury the reality of rape, misogyny, and racism under an avalanche of oppressive ideologies. These ideologies aren't anomalies: they're the norm. They are inscribed in history books, philosophy textbooks, popular literature—in every dominant discursive space. These narratives disappear agents of oppression and thus exonerate them from blame, silencing their victims. I have proposed an ameliorative approach to responsibility as an antidote to these oppressive narratives. Blame, conceived as a communicative practice, identifies perpetrators and transgressions. Emancipatory blame, then, rejects hegemonic scripts and faults powerful wrongdoers for contributing to hierarchies of power that give them unfair advantages. It recognizes gender-based violence, misogyny, and racism as the results of individuals' choices and actions, not eternal mysteries or the inevitable effects of inhuman, non-agentic sociohistorical forces. This proposal positions privileged perpetrators as proper targets of blame, and positions their victims as authorities on the subject of oppression. In other words, it rectifies entrenched inequalities in the distribution of blame and praise in our society.

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