



# The misappropriation of “woke”: discriminatory social media practices, contributory injustice and context collapse

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## Abstract

This article aims to give an analysis of the phenomena of unjust misappropriation of marginalised groups’ terms online, using the example misappropriation of ‘woke’ from the Black community on Twitter. I argue that using terms such as these outside their original context warps their meaning, decreasing the intelligibility of the experiences of the marginalised agents who use them when attempting to express themselves both within their community and without. I intend to give an analysis of this phenomena, with the expectation that understanding it better will provide a crucial step in combatting it. To this end, I argue it can be understood as a specialised form of what Kristie Dotson calls ‘contributory injustice’, injustices which involve the suppression of a marginalised community’s existing hermeneutical resources, combined with a specific consequence of what Boyd and Marwick call ‘context collapse’, the removal of social norms created through the homogenising effect of social media sites like Twitter. The result is a novel misappropriation phenomenon, I label ‘Context-Collapsed Contributory Injustice’ or ‘CC.CI’. This type of misappropriation is particularly harmful due to it being faster-acting than historical varieties of misappropriation. Furthermore, unchecked continual cases of CC.CI can cause a novel form of what Miranda Fricker calls ‘hermeneutical injustice’, which is demarcated from standard cases by its ability to reintroduce conceptual lacunas through undermining existing hermeneutical resources. I finish by disambiguating cases of CC.CI from natural meaning change and critically analysing some existing philosophical treatments of “woke”.

**Keywords** Epistemic injustice · Social media · Feminist philosophy of language · Misappropriation · Race and culture · Language and society

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Consider the following (hypothetical) tweets:

- (Woke-2003) My uncle was stopped in the street by armed police yesterday, it was pretty touch and go #staywoke
- (Woke-2023) My teacher keeps preaching about misogyny in our history class, he's so annoyingly woke.

Each author uses the same slang word, “woke”, but *not* with the same meaning. In (Woke-2003), the year is 2003, the author is a Black person, and the meaning of “woke” is a warning/reminder to be vigilant about the structural trend of police violence against Black people in the US.<sup>1</sup> In (Woke-2023), the year is 2023, the author is a non-Black person, and the meaning of “woke” has shifted such that it refers to someone who is overly concerned with social justice issues in a somewhat vapid, insincere way.

The strong meaning change in the years between these cases is due to a process of *misappropriation*, largely driven by *online social media*, such as Twitter. This process has taken a word, “woke”, from a marginalised community (the Black community) into wider public usage and in the process stripped the original meaning given to it by that community and replaced it with a caricatured, novel, wider community meaning.

It is this kind of phenomenon which I seek to analyse below, in order to articulate the processes by which it takes place and demonstrate the injustice it represents, with the expectation that understanding it better will provide a crucial step in reducing its occurrence in the future.

To this end, I will argue it can be understood as a specialised form of what Kristie Dotson calls ‘contributory injustice’<sup>2</sup> combined with a specific consequence of what Boyd and Marwick call ‘context collapse’.<sup>3</sup> I label the resulting phenomenon ‘Context-Collapsed Contributory Injustice’ or ‘CC.CI’. Throughout, I will focus on the example case of the misappropriation of “woke” from Black Twitter (which is, roughly, the subsection of Twitter users who are Black and tweet with the intended audience of other Black users, often on shared issues such as social justice concerning Black people).<sup>4</sup>

In addition, I will argue that CC.CI causes a *localised* form of what Miranda Fricker calls ‘hermeneutical injustice’,<sup>5</sup> which is demarcated by its ability to *reintroduce* conceptual lacunas by undermining a particular social group’s existing hermeneutical resources.

Before we begin however, a few promissory notes. The goal of the paper is to describe the phenomenon of CC.CI, which is one factor driving misappropriation of terms in general. So, the proceeding analysis is meant to go for all similar examples of misappropriating terms from marginalised communities online, not just “woke”. In addition, as had been noted by Emmalon Davis, work in Epistemic Injustice in Western Analytic Philosophy is merely the latest in a long line of peoples and traditions,

<sup>1</sup> A trend which persisted both there and worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> Dotson, *A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd and Marwick, *I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience*.

<sup>4</sup> For more info see for example: White, *What is Black Twitter and How is it Changing the National Conversation? Baylor Expert Explains*.

<sup>5</sup> Fricker (2007, p. 147).

particularly those of African and African American origin who have addressed these issues as well as confronted them in their own life experience.<sup>6</sup> As such I too *am not claiming to have discovered a new phenomenon* but merely to, as Davis puts it—‘articulate the conceptual contours’<sup>7</sup> of this particular harm in order to contribute to understanding and resisting it.

Relatedly, as I am not a member of the Black community myself, I do not claim to have any final say on the meaning of “woke”.<sup>8</sup> The meaning of this term is nuanced, and I have done my best to do justice to it within the limits of an academic article, but because it is *my chief example* rather than my *only focus*, please accept my apologies in advance for anything which I do leave out.

Finally, this paper is intended as an analysis of how social media accelerates and creates certain processes of misappropriation, in the form of CC.CI, but this is not to be confused with claiming that no other factors are involved in misappropriation overall—after all, misappropriation occurred long before the Internet.

## 1 The misappropriation of ‘Woke’ from Black Twitter

### 1.1 The phenomenon in general

Misappropriation can be defined as the category of phenomena in which a given resource is taken and unjustly used by someone to which it does not belong. In the cases I am interested in these resources are conceptual (words, concepts, theories etc.), and they do not belong to the appropriator due to them not being part of the social community which created the resources they stole. These conceptual resources are unjustly used because by taking them, these communities lose control of their meanings, warping them over time.

I am concerned with a specific kind of conceptual misappropriation, which has become increasingly common in recent history with the advent of social media. A rough overview of this kind of misappropriation is the following:

A given term,  $x$ , is used in a specific cultural context within a given social group  $A$ ’s social media (as well as in said community’s real world conversations). Due to a number of processes, the wider community,  $B$ , start using the term  $x$  both on social media and offline conversations. The first of these processes, explored in Sect. 2, is the different sets of conceptual resources drawn upon by each community. The  $A$  community is a specific (usually marginalised) community, which draws upon a *local* set of conceptual resources as part of the meaning and use of the term,  $x$ . The  $B$  community meanwhile is the overall wider public, and they draw on the dominant (usually privileged) *global* conceptual resources to replace or alter the  $A$  community meaning of  $x$ . The second process, explored in Sect. 3, is the flattening of social norms

<sup>6</sup> Davis, *On Epistemic Appropriation*. I have in mind mainly the non-academic discourse on Black Twitter and other social spaces, though I also have referenced several Black professional and academic sources throughout (e.g. Joshua Adams and Myisha Cherry, among others). However, this does not preclude there being other sources and ideas I have missed—and it is important to bear that in mind.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Or “Cancel”.

which occurs in social media sites, which accelerates and facilitates the former process by removing social barriers to it which usually occur offline. I will have much more to say on these processes below.

Given that the cultural context is either misunderstood or ignored by the *B*-users, owing to the processes described, the meaning is changed. The result is that the general public understanding of the term is warped, presenting both a barrier for attempts by the *A*-users to describe it to those outside the group *and* an external social pressure from the warped public meaning which undermines the original meaning of the term even within the *A* group.

It is this kind of phenomenon that I am focusing on in this paper. With this overview in mind, let's look at a more specific example, around which I will frame the rest of the paper: the concept of "woke".

## 1.2 The history of "woke"

The use of the concept "woke" in American Black communities dates back to at least the 1930s but more recent usage in the community, especially online on Black Twitter, is as a warning to "stay alert to racially motivated police violence"<sup>9</sup> both in terms of immediate danger, and the structural racism in the justice system.<sup>10</sup> This is itself a specialised use of the meaning the term has held for a century in Black communities before its recent increased misappropriation by the wider community.

According to Deandre Miles-Hercules, the concept of woke can be traced to 1920s efforts towards consciousness raising about racial injustice towards Black Africans and those of Black African descent.<sup>11</sup> They argue this was then followed up with the first explicit examples of 'stay woke' in the 30s, wherein it was more specifically tied to the idea of being aware of racial injustice in America. In particular they give the example of the song 'Scottsboro boys' by Black Blues artist Lead Belly, which was a protest song in defence of nine Black teenagers accused of raping two white women.<sup>12</sup> By this time, then, the idea of staying woke was already explicitly linked to keeping aware of the racial injustice inherent in the American justice system. Other theorists, such as Tony Thorne, suggest "woke" began appearing closer to the 1940s, but maintain the same meaning of being alert to or 'waking up' to the injustices faced by Black people in America.<sup>13</sup>

Black Philosopher Myisha Cherry also identifies the history of "woke" as in part stemming from articles such as William Kelley's discussed below and that the term possibly occurred as early as the 1940s.<sup>14</sup> In addition she considers how "woke" also appeared in Black consciousness raising efforts from the 80s to 90s, specifically in terms of how some rappers, dubbed 'consciousness rappers' employed terms like

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<sup>9</sup> My phrasing, paraphrased from examples in Romano, *A history of "wokeness"*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Miles-Hercules (quoted in Romano 'A history of "wokeness"').

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Thorne (quoted in Kate Kg, 2021, *What is the history of the word 'woke' and its modern uses?*).

<sup>14</sup> Cherry (2020).

“woke” in order to invoke awareness of ‘how social structures function’ to systematically oppress.<sup>15</sup> One of her other chief examples is novelist James Baldwin’s use of the concept of ‘relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks’.<sup>16</sup> Baldwin employs a concept of people whose consciousness has been raised so as to be attuned to social injustice particularly toward the Black community, and stood both ready to do something about it and help raise the consciousness of others.<sup>17</sup>

Between these early uses and the 2000s Romano suggests the term remained in this kind of usage within Black communities with little occurrences of the phrase in the wider community, but usage of it increased steadily on Twitter by Black users shortly after its founding in 2006.<sup>18</sup> During this time, two new meanings were added: staying alert to cheating partners and staying literally awake.<sup>19</sup> However, the original meaning of staying alert to racial injustice in the justice system was retained, and all three usages appeared to be limited to usage within the Black community (online and offline) still. Romano and others also cite the influence music had on popularising the term within the community during this time, especially Erykah Badu’s “Master Teacher” and Childish Gambino’s “Redbone”, the latter of which featured heavily in the Black horror film *Get Out*.<sup>20</sup> Romano notes the huge uptick on Twitter uses of the political sense of woke tied to racially motivated police violence after both of these songs were released.<sup>21</sup>

Around 2013–2014, the response of the Black community to the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson meant that the word began picking up speed online both within the Black community and without. In the immediate aftermath of the event, the hashtag ‘#StayWoke’ began to appear increasingly in tweets about the Ferguson protests—deliberately invoking the “stay alert to racially motivated police violence” meaning.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the rest of the decade this usage increased, and “stay woke” the phrase and hashtag has been increasingly used by Black communities and activists online with this as its main meaning.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.3 The misappropriation of ‘woke’

However, as the phrase began to gain traction on Twitter, this exposed it like never before to wider community scrutiny and misappropriation. This appears to have occurred in the following way, which I have organised into three chronological phases

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Baldwin (1993, p. 105).

<sup>17</sup> Cherry falls short of claiming “woke” is identical to consciousness raising and notes that Baldwin only uses the term “conscious” not the term “woke”.

<sup>18</sup> Romano, *A history of “wokeness”*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. These new meanings are important, as they show how criticising misappropriation is not the same as criticising the fact that word meaning changes at all. I return to this below.

<sup>20</sup> Cherry also includes this in her history.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. A non-exhaustive list of others referencing this connection is the following: Hunt (2020), Martin (2017), Adams, *How “Woke Became a Slur”* and Holliday, *How ‘woke’ fell asleep*.

<sup>22</sup> Romano, *A history of “wokeness”*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

of misappropriation: expansion, caricature and obscuration.<sup>24</sup> All three phases constitute a form of misappropriation *in their own right* in addition to contributing to the formation of the other stages.

Also note that while in the case of “woke” there were these three phases, it is possible for the expansion phase to be skipped and the misappropriation to jump straight to caricature. For example, the recent caricatured meaning of “critical race theory” did not have an expansion phase preceding it.<sup>25</sup> This will vary on a case-by-case basis, e.g. “cancel” (which I discuss in Sect. 4.2) did have the same phases as “woke”.

### 1.3.1 Phase 1: expansion

In the first *expansion* phase activists from outside of the Black community co-opted “woke” into the language of their movements. For example, Romano cites activists in the American 2017 women’s march tweeting the phrase as well as photos of some of their banners with “stay woke” written upon them.<sup>26</sup> This is corroborated by Miles-Hercules and Joshua Adams, among others, who argue that the initial misappropriation by white progressives laid the foundations for reactionary forces to caricature the term later:

Like many terms that have become popular and have broad purchase in African American communities, it has been appropriated by people who consider themselves allies [...] Conservatives then took it and weaponized it as a way to demonize people who were interested in social justice, equity and freedom.<sup>27</sup>

This misappropriation took on an expansionist character because it applied the term to social justice issues outside the Black community, such as LGBTQA+ rights, class issues, and feminism more broadly for example. Nicole Holliday points this out starkly in her blog post for Oxford Dictionaries, citing the example of MTV’s 2016 list of new words:

[MTV] define it simply as “being aware — specifically in reference to current events and cultural issues”. In MTVs conceptualization, woke simply means being aware, **without any connections to black oppression or consciousness** that it had when it re-entered wider usage in 2013. In this way, **woke has been racially sanitized** for a mainstream audience.<sup>28</sup>

However, it didn’t only expand the set of relevant cases to apply the term too, it also expanded the terms meaning to a cultural practice of censoring people for not having the right attitudes or beliefs concerning these social justice issues. As Adams puts it:

the first people to start, you know, co-opting the term were white progressives and what they kind of **used it to mean**, while it still took on that, you know,

<sup>24</sup> It isn’t certain whether these phases happened chronologically or concurrently, but most authors assume the former. I will follow suit, but I don’t think much hangs on this.

<sup>25</sup> Wong (2021).

<sup>26</sup> Romano (2020).

<sup>27</sup> Miles-Hercules, quoted in interview, in Adams, *How “Woke” Became a Slur*.

<sup>28</sup> Holliday (2016, my bold).

hue of meaning of social awareness, it became to mean a certain type of, you know, virtue signalling, in the sense of like, in order to show that you're woke, you have to kind of, you know, say the right things, use the right terminology.<sup>29</sup>

So, in the expansion phase, progressives misappropriated the word “woke” and expanded it to social justice issues in general, and began the process of attaching a normative practice associated with “being woke”, complete with social censure for not being up to date on relevant practices and terminology.

### 1.3.2 Phase 2: caricature

This first expansion phase helped lay the groundwork for the caricature phase by opening up the idea of the term “woke” applying to social justice issues in general and beginning the normative practice surrounding this expanded wokeness. However as noted above, its' possible (even likely) the caricature could have happened immediately without a transitional phase.

Pundits both on Twitter itself and mainstream news outlets leapt at the chance to criticise straw man versions of “woke” the term and “woke culture” based on this expansion. For example, Romano cites the 2017 Boston Globe article in which the author wrote: “The real purpose of ‘woke’ is to divide the world into hyper-socially aware, self-appointed gatekeepers of language and behaviour, and the rest of humanity”.<sup>30</sup>

Similar opinions abounded in the years that followed from both left and right, progressives and reactionaries, such that the term “woke” took on a caricatured meaning.

For left leaning people ‘woke’ was caricatured as a condemnation of people considered performative in their social justice values, while right leaning people caricatured it as a condemnation of people who use political correctness to excessive degrees or their own advantage.<sup>31</sup> As Romano puts it, it’s ‘as if there’s a shared agreement that embodying wokeness is a kind of trap, no matter what side of the aisle you’re on.’<sup>32</sup>

Adams agrees, adding more texture to the conservative side of the caricature:

woke has become kind of a catch-all term, just to kind of mean, that, really anything that is tied to what conservatives see as progressive virtue signaling,<sup>33</sup> that’s kind of on one hand, maybe, you know, empty and duplicitous in the sense that sort of, you know, they’re saying they want tolerance but are intolerable[nt] and on the other hand as a kind of, you know, social control.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Adams (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, in interview).

<sup>30</sup> Beams (2017). Note this was published in March—**after the women’s march**.

<sup>31</sup> Adams also argued in a Twitter thread that there is, within this group, a chronological descent of misappropriation as the term began to be discussed by different subgroups: ‘-Black Folk -Real Allies -Skeptical/Contingent Allies -Challengers -Opponents -Anti-Black Folk’ (Adams, *Twitter Thread*).

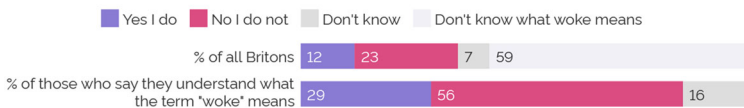
<sup>32</sup> Romano, *A History of ‘wokeness’*.

<sup>33</sup> Tony Whyman also characterises the caricature meaning like this: ‘the right wing press in the past few weeks started using the word ‘woke’ as if it refers to an organised political tendency, as opposed to just a loosely arranged constellation of things they don’t like?’ (quoted in Thorne (2021)).

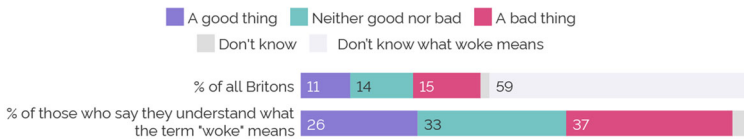
<sup>34</sup> Adams (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, in interview).

## 12% of Britons consider themselves "woke"; 15% of Britons think wokeness is a bad thing... and most don't know what it means in the first place

As far as you understand the term, do you consider yourself to be "woke"?



And do you consider being "woke" to be a good or a bad thing, or is it neither?



YouGov

26-28 February 2021

Fig. 1 How many Britons know what the term “woke” means?

The result of this second phase was to strip away the specific racial focus of woke and supplant it with not merely alertness to all social justice issues, but a character trait exhibiting a caricatured obsessive focus on these issues, considered worthy of moral rebuke from both right and left.

### 1.3.3 Phase 3: obscuration

This in turn gave way to the third phase, in which the original meaning of “stay alert to racially motivated police violence” has been largely obscured in the wider community at large, to such an extent that it has begun placing external social pressure on the Black community to drop the term, despite many Black Twitter users and activists continuingly using the term’s original meaning throughout these phrases.

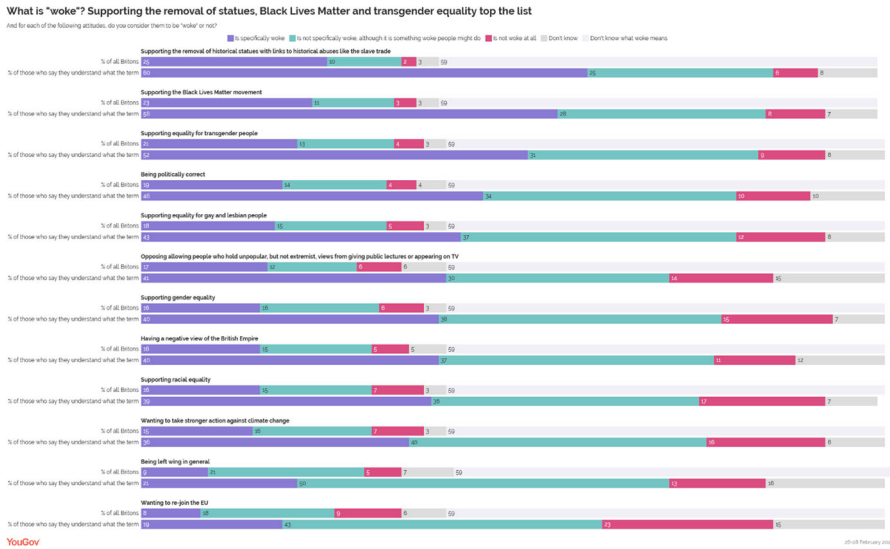
Striking evidence for this is found in a poll conducted by yougov on the British Public, which found significant divergence of opinion on what the word woke meant<sup>35,36</sup>:

What’s striking is not only the hugely different meanings people now assign to the term, but also that the study authors themselves clearly didn’t have the original meaning in mind. Note in Fig. 1 that the pollsters only asked participants if they already consider themselves to know what the term means or not (and many didn’t), but not to define it. The closest of the questions we get to defining “woke” is Fig. 2 wherein participants were asked to answer *what attitudes* were “woke”, and even here, of the available options given to participants in the study, ‘supporting Black Lives Matter movement/racial equality’ are the closest we get to the original meaning. But supporting a movement which one might be external to the community it concerns, is clearly not the same thing as the original term’s sense of make sure you, yourself, as

<sup>35</sup> Smith (2021).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.





**Fig. 2** What beliefs are woke?

a member of the Black community stay alert to the racially motivated police violence and structural racism in the justice system.<sup>37</sup> So not only the British public but also the yougov pollsters have an obscured view of the meaning of “woke”.

There is some evidence that this continued misappropriation is beginning to obscure the term even in the Black community, with some viewing its misappropriated meaning as primary. For example, in Romano’s interview with the Black Activist Chloé S. Valdary, she noted ‘I always saw it as a tad performative,’ [...] decrying what she described as ‘the unwieldy jargon of self-identifying as “woke.”’<sup>38</sup>

Malaika Jabali shared a similar sentiment in a recent Guardian article:

It’s mostly people who don’t understand the original connotation of “woke” who still say woke. They can have it. Whether we’re talking about “critical race theory” from Black scholars, “identity politics” from Black feminists, or “woke” from Black slang, terms indigenous to our way of thinking or advocating get co-opted and distorted beyond recognition in mainstream society.<sup>39</sup>

A word of warning, however: I don’t want to over-emphasise the idea that the word has been undermined within the Black community. It’s still the case that some within the community use the term in its original meaning and think that this misappropriation hasn’t yet jeopardised that.<sup>40</sup> However, the misappropriation of woke into mainstream circles online has at least clearly presented challenges for Black people using the term. Even if only some people feel they need to abandon the term, that is still an injustice.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>38</sup> Valdary (quoted in Romano, *A history of ‘wokeness’*).  
<sup>39</sup> Jabali et al. (2021).  
<sup>40</sup> Adams (2021b).

Moreover, many note it is a common pattern for terms from the Black community to be misappropriated and then have to be abandoned like this—most notably one of the earliest known print examples of “woke” comes from an article by William Kelley about white appropriation of Black slang terms in the 60s.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, I’m not claiming that this distortion of “woke” completely prevents attempts to warn about police violence in the Black community, or otherwise criticise structural racism, however its disruption does represent a clear example of how the terms which marginalised people use to discuss these issues can be seriously undermined. And given that this is one example among many, the phenomena of CC.CI is worth taking seriously as a damaging factor on the ability of marginalised peoples to employ their hermeneutical resources for these kinds of purposes online, adding to existing silencing factors.

Overall, then, this kind of online misappropriation of a term, illustrated by the misappropriation of “woke” from specific warning about racially motivated police violence to caricatured social justice extremism, is the phenomenon I will be analysing in the rest of the paper.

## 2 The (epistemic) injustice of misappropriating ‘Woke’

With the phenomenon more clearly established I will now turn to explaining why misappropriating terms in this way is unjust. Some of the reasons should already be clear from the foregoing, but in this section I will highlight in particular how this phenomenon constitutes a form of epistemic injustice, specifically a specialised form of contributory injustice. In addition, I will argue below that the above kind of misappropriation occurs due to the combination of this specialised form of contributory injustice with the context collapse inherent in some forms of social media.

### 2.1 Epistemic injustice

Epistemic Injustice is a phenomenon studied in Epistemology, popularised by Miranda Fricker’s, 2007 book of the same name.<sup>42</sup> Although Fricker was responsible for pulling these discussions into the mainstream, many have criticised her for failing to cite the large philosophical tradition from marginalised thinkers, especially Black and African American theorists, who have been grappling with these issues for much longer both in their work and in their everyday experiences.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless as Fricker’s terminology has become common place it is worth employing it here in order for it to be clear how the CC.CI phenomena fits into the general epistemic injustice picture, as well as justify why it counts as an injustice. My main focus will be on Kristie Dotson’s work in epistemic injustice, rather than Fricker’s.

<sup>41</sup> Kelley (1962). N.B. This irony has been widely referenced (see for example: Martin 2017; and Romano, *A History of ‘wokeness’*)

<sup>42</sup> Fricker (2007, p. 1, my italics).

<sup>43</sup> For more details on this criticism see for example: McKinnon, *Epistemic Injustice*.

An *epistemic* injustice is understood as one which wrongs someone specifically ‘in their capacity as a knower’.<sup>44</sup> In Fricker’s work her examples are testimonial injustice,<sup>45</sup> in which one is wronged by not having their testimony believed due to prejudice and hermeneutical injustice,<sup>46</sup> in which one is wronged due to a gap in their concepts for describing an unjust experience, due to structural prejudice. I leave aside testimonial injustice for this paper, and briefly outline hermeneutical injustice as it is important to understand in order to understand contributory injustice.

Fricker defines Hermeneutical Injustice as ‘the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.’<sup>47</sup>

Here she uses two technical terms which are important: ‘collective hermeneutical resources’ and ‘structural-identity prejudice’.

Collective hermeneutical resources are the conceptual tools, words and context of a society—both our concepts, their meanings and the cultural understanding of how we apply them to make sense of the world.<sup>48</sup>

A structural-identity prejudice is a prejudice towards some social people (i.e. LGBTQA+, Black people, women etc.) which may not be held as a conscious value by any individual, but is instead ‘structural’ because it is built into the collective hermeneutical resources of a society itself. For example, we have structural-identity prejudices against women in modern western society, due to our legacy of patriarchal domination.

Thus, hermeneutical injustice occurs when a structural-identity prejudice obscures some part of a person’s experience in the collective hermeneutical resources (due to their experience being from one of the groups discriminated toward) and makes it difficult or impossible for them to conceptualise it. This results in a ‘lacuna’ or conceptual gap to describe the experience, which requires novel concepts to fill it.

The paradigm case of hermeneutical injustice in the literature (owing to its discussion by Fricker), is that of sexual harassment.<sup>49</sup> In the mid-1900s a growing number of women began talking about shared experiences of inappropriate sexual behaviour from colleagues and other areas of public life. They agreed that how they were treated was wrong, but could not explain why. Fricker argues, they lacked the hermeneutical resources required to conceptualise what was happening, because the existing collective hermeneutical resources were structurally prejudiced against women and failed to account for things they commonly experienced. The term ‘sexual harassment’ was settled upon and the concept we now regularly use formed around it, providing the required hermeneutical resources to fill the lacuna.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 154 (my bold).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 6–7.

<sup>49</sup> Fricker (2007, pp. 149–152).

<sup>50</sup> Note Fricker’s discussion of this example has been criticised for ignoring the knowledge of sexual harassment as a *phenomenon* existent before this time, especially that of women of colour: ‘Long before white women activists such as Lin Farley led the meeting of the feminist consciousness-raising group to

## 2.2 Contributory injustice

Kristie Dotson discusses a third category of epistemic injustice distinct from the two offered by Fricker, and through it develops an understanding of how hermeneutical resources vary by different social groups. I argue that it helps capture one important facet of what is so wrong about the misappropriation of “woke” as well as provides part of the answer as to how it occurs.

Recall from our discussion of Fricker that hermeneutical resources are the collective conceptual understanding of a society. In Fricker’s examples of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, hermeneutical resources are discussed in terms of the resources of an entire society, so that when conceptual understanding is lacking, such as in the sexual harassment case, it is lacking for everyone. Hence, in Fricker’s account, there is the assumption that ‘there is but one set of collective hermeneutical resources which we all rely upon’.<sup>51</sup>

Dotson heavily criticises this assumption however, as not taking into account the fact that different social groups can (and do) develop differing hermeneutical resources from the wider society’s collective resources ‘among themselves’.<sup>52</sup> She argues that since the oppressive social forces which produce structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources are not omnipotent, they therefore still allow for pockets of life wherein people can conceptualise their experiences in ways that do justice to their experiences, and hence ‘there is always more than one set of hermeneutical resources available’.<sup>53</sup> This means that the hermeneutical resources of different social groups can vary, often dramatically. The failure to notice this on Fricker’s part leads to her incorrectly labelling some cases of epistemic injustice as mere epistemic bad luck.<sup>54</sup>

Dotson describes this failure to notice these alternative resources *as well as* attempts to suppress them, in terms of a third form of epistemic injustice she labels ‘Contributory injustice’.

Contributory injustice involves the unjust suppression of a marginalised groups’ hermeneutical resources, resulting in their epistemic agency being undermined. Dotson claims this happens through a process of ‘wilful hermeneutical ignorance’,<sup>55</sup> which is itself Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.’s concept.<sup>56</sup>

Wilful hermeneutical ignorance refers to the situation in which even though hermeneutical injustice has been overcome to the extent that some social group has

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Footnote 50 continued

which Fricker attributes the origin of the concept of sexual harassment, Black women were speaking out about coercive sexual practices of the men they worked for. Despite this, Fricker ignores the entirety of Black women’s resistant knowledge of sexual harassment just as she ignores the role of white supremacy, ableism, capitalism, and settler colonialism in producing the structural conditions for sexual harassment and the conceptual resources to understand it’ (*White Feminist Gaslighting*, Nora Berenstain).

<sup>51</sup> Doston, *A Cautionary Tale*, p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> For more details of Dotson’s criticism, see: Dotson, *A Cautionary Tale* (esp. pp. 31–42).

<sup>55</sup> Polhaus Jr (2012).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

developed the relevant hermeneutical resources<sup>57</sup> to describe their social experience (i.e. fill the lacuna), they lack the power in society to produce ‘uptake’<sup>58</sup> of these resources. This happens when two things occur:

- The most widely adopted hermeneutical resources (usually those used by the most powerful social group in the given context) fail to capture the social experience of one group.

And

- Those relying on the most widely adopted hermeneutical resources fail to take the time to learn the hermeneutical resources of the marginalised social group, and in the process unjustly obscure their social experience despite the existence of the conceptual resources to prevent this.

For example, in the twentieth century the LGBTQA+ ballroom culture community had developed a sophisticated set of hermeneutical resources for describing the intricacies of different family units created by the community, as well as nuanced language for describing varying gender identities.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, these concepts are still in use today, though there is more mainstream acceptance of them.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the depiction and discussion of these groups by the mainstream media, which employed dominant wider community hermeneutical resources (which are structurally prejudiced in the way Fricker describes), chose to ignore this terminology in favour of their own simplistic categories of nuclear families and binary gender. The result of this was a gross misrepresentation of the LGBTQA+ ballroom community similar to a hermeneutical injustice, except that the terms to describe their relationships and identities *did already exist* they were just ignored and suppressed through wilful hermeneutical ignorance. Textbook contributory injustice.

In this way ‘Contributory injustice occurs because **there are different hermeneutical resources that the perceiver could utilize besides structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources**, and the **perceiver willfully refuses**’.<sup>61</sup>

Contributory Injustice, then, is the perpetuation of wilful hermeneutic ignorance to the detriment of those whose hermeneutical resources are being prevented from attaining uptake.

### 2.3 Misappropriation: a specialised case of contributory injustice

I argue the misappropriation of marginalised terms can be construed as a specialised type of contributory injustice.

<sup>57</sup> N.B. Polhaus uses ‘epistemic resources’ but Dotson takes it that she is referring to roughly the same phenomena as Fricker calls hermeneutical resources: ‘I take Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical resources to be akin to Gaile Pohlhaus’s concept of epistemic resources’ (Dotson, *A Cautionary Tale*, p. 29). Therefore, I will keep to the hermeneutical resources phrase too.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Uptake’ is J.L. Austin’s term (Austin (1962). Roughly, when someone utters a sentence, it requires various conditions to be met to constitute a successful action. If it fails to be acknowledged by the listeners then it has failed to secure ‘uptake’, and thus fails as the type of speech action it is.

<sup>59</sup> Braithwaite (2018).

<sup>60</sup> Bailey (2021).

<sup>61</sup> Dotson, *A Cautionary Tale*, p. 32. My bold and italics.

In the canonical case of contributory injustice, a group's hermeneutical resources are suppressed through rejection by the wider community, who refuse to take the time to understand it. But this is not exactly what has occurred with the misappropriation of "woke", as the wider community *has* begun using the term rather than ignoring it. Instead, in the case of misappropriation, although the wider community *does* engage enough to attempt to use a concept from the marginalised group, this engagement is surface level.

As an example consider the following article: 'Netflix's He-Man reboot has been panned by fans – and its creator isn't happy'.<sup>62</sup> This article highlights how He-Man fans have been calling out the show on Twitter for "giving He-Man the 'woke' treatment", by focusing on a female lead instead of the titular male protagonist.<sup>63</sup> Here woke is clearly intended to invoke one of its caricatured meanings (i.e. something like "pandering to social justice advocates asking for more female leads"), which obviously has very little to do with racially motivated police violence or structural racism. Indeed, understanding it via its misappropriated meaning is *both expected and required* by the tweet's authors, as the sentences they write would not make sense with the original meaning intact.

The reason this surface level engagement of "woke" occurs in misappropriation cases like this is that even though they employ the *word* "woke", they do so within the **structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources** of the wider society of the US (or at least the English speaking internet), which is largely dominated by the hermeneutical resources of the white, middle class, cis, straight men who have historically been in power in education, government and media.

In doing so, these actors continually ignore the hermeneutical resources of the Black community which underpin the original meaning and use of the term, and instead transpose the word into the overall society's (dominant) collective hermeneutical resources. This means that even though a part of the hermeneutical resources of a marginalised social group (i.e. the Black community) is not rejected, i.e. the *word* "woke", the rest of the social group's hermeneutical resources are, i.e. the *meaning and use* of woke ("stay alert to racially motivated police violence")—just as in the canonical cases of contributory injustice. And the result of this rejection of the social group's hermeneutical resources is that the word enters the wider society's collective hermeneutical resources *as if* it is a word from that wider community context, whereupon its concept is filled out in that wider context by the conceptual and cultural understanding of the wider society *supplanting the meaning and context developed by the Black community*.

In this way the original meaning of "woke" is stripped away in the wider community's collective hermeneutical resources and suppressed by rejecting the hermeneutical resources of the Black community. Since contributory injustice is constituted by this exact kind of suppression of hermeneutical resources through wilful hermeneutical ignorance, misappropriation thus constitutes a specialised case of contributory injustice. And as this occurs through the application of structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources, this is a form of discrimination also.

<sup>62</sup> Power (2021).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

### 3 Context collapse and media ideologies

With the discriminatory and unjust nature of misappropriating terms from marginalised communities established as due to it being a specialised form of contributory injustice, I will now turn to explaining how this misappropriation occurs.

One part of the answer has already been discussed above, wilful hermeneutical ignorance on behalf of the users of the wider community's hermeneutical resources suppresses the hermeneutical resources of the marginalised group from which the term is taken, and its meaning is thus stripped from it through contributory injustice.

However, how does this happen in practice, and why has misappropriation of terms like 'woke' suddenly accelerated so recently after a century of being left largely alone? I will argue that one key factor explaining these questions is the 'context collapse'<sup>64</sup> produced on social media sites, and in particular Twitter, combined with a mismatch of 'media ideologies'<sup>65</sup> concerning their use. Each of these terms will be explained as I come to them.

#### 3.1 Context collapse

Context collapse is a concept introduced by Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd to describe the removal of social boundaries which occurs when different people enter a place in which multiple social contexts they usually keep separate collide.<sup>66</sup>

Though our focus is on the strong form of context collapse which occurs online, it's easier to understand the phenomenon they are describing by considering context collapse in the real world first. For example, Boyd discusses the example of a wedding:

In a wedding the couple invites their respective friends, family, and acquaintances. Normally each of these varied groups would form its own social context, in which you might expect different norms of behaviour.<sup>67</sup> However, in a wedding, each of these separate contexts undergo a process of 'flattening out'<sup>68</sup> and 'collapse'<sup>69</sup> into one larger context of wedding guests. The result is a collapsed context in which it becomes hazier which norms are expected, and how to apply them. The existing norms are tossed out with the bouquet.

Boyd argues that social media, and Twitter in particular, produces a version of context collapse which is *stronger* by two degrees.<sup>70</sup> Firstly, Twitter collapses *more* contexts than any real-world example of context collapse. By being structured such that all tweets are publicly available/searchable to anyone, Twitter collapses a much larger group of people into a single Twitter-based super-context. This is like a wedding in which everyone in the world was invited!<sup>71</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Marwick and Boyd (2010).

<sup>65</sup> Gershon (2010b).

<sup>66</sup> Marwick and Boyd (2010).

<sup>67</sup> Boyd (2008, p. 38).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Marwick and Boyd (2010, pp. 122–123).

<sup>71</sup> This is my way of explaining it, based on Boyd's wedding example.

Secondly, Twitter's collapsed context is maintained *longer* than real world examples. Twitter has stayed active since 2006. Thus, unlike a wedding which eventually ends allowing the contexts of different social groups to recover, Twitter retains its context collapse over time, both normalising and creating a space in which people have to learn to navigate in perpetuity with unclear norms.

The result is that Twitter, and similar social media sites, constitute a hitherto unprecedented context collapse, in which users can never be certain of how to act on the platform, or who their audience is. Thus, users are forced to imagine an audience and adjust their behaviour online accordingly. As such the context collapse social media sites constitute is fertile ground for prolonging and enlarging the haziness of norms leading to accelerated misappropriation (more on this below).

### 3.2 Navigating Twitter: social media ideologies

Marwick and Boyd note these navigational issues caused by context collapse, and have conducted some empirical work to discover the kinds of imagined audiences people think of, and the strategies people use to navigate them.

For example, they discovered that some users deliberately self-censor.<sup>72</sup> These people have certain subjects they are only willing to discuss in certain social contexts (i.e. relationships with friends but not family). Since they consider people outside of those contexts could see their tweets also, they avoid it in the collapsed context of Twitter outright.

Others take a balanced approach,<sup>73</sup> wherein they imagine their audience as varied enough that some will care about some tweets (i.e. personal, emotional) while others will care about others (i.e. informative, political, etc.) and so they produce a balance of different types of each, and target them to these different users with related hashtags (although due to how Twitter works other users are still able to see these tweets).

Others reported that they tweet whatever what they actually think instead of curating themselves, imagining their audience as interested in their authenticity.<sup>74</sup>

Isaac Record<sup>75</sup> has argued that Marwick and Boyd's discussion of context collapse can be understood in tandem with Ilana Gershon's discussion of 'Media Ideologies'.<sup>76</sup> Gershon gathered case studies pointing to the existence of different, culturally specific ideologies concerning how different media should be used for communication. For example, some people consider certain things (i.e. colloquial language) appropriate on Facebook messenger but not on email, but this varies by their background. In this way, some people might choose self-censorship, others balance/authenticity or any alternative media ideologies based on norms *they think* hold on social media.

Since one cannot be certain that these norms *are actually* holding for other people however, due to the total context collapse, this means authors of social media posts rarely realise their audience doesn't all share the same media ideologies they do,

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> Record (2021).

<sup>76</sup> Gershon (2010a).



causing potentially problematic unintended takeaways from their posts once these assumptions are taken into account.

### 3.3 Social media ideologies and misappropriation

I argue that the misappropriation case under discussion is a specialised consequence of this phenomenon, in which the reverse mismatch of media ideologies occurs: the audience doesn't realise the media ideologies of the author do not align with theirs.

More specifically, in the case of Black Twitter, some people outside of the Black community have a media ideology along the lines of "all Twitter users can be involved in all Twitter threads". These people then see the tweets of, for example, a Black activist at a BLM protest using the hashtag '#staywoke', and assume this Twitter user shares their media ideology.

However, instead, the Black Twitter author has a media ideology that they are writing for their own community of Black Twitter users. This is why they have used the hashtag to target it to that group who will understand the term as the warning to "stay alert to racially motivated police violence" that it is.

Nevertheless, due to context collapse, the wider audience doesn't realise their media ideology mismatches with the author's. This assures them it is reasonable to interact with the tweet and crucially, the *term* 'woke', just as if it had been uttered in conversation with them in their local pub. So, they feel entitled to use the word without understanding the hermeneutical resources of the Black community, and thus substitute their own (structurally prejudiced) hermeneutical resources instead.

Had the phrase stayed within its original context, this would not have occurred (or at least would not have been so pronounced) as there would be no mismatch of media ideologies or context collapse to fuel the misappropriation. This is what makes the context collapse of social media sites crucial to explaining the accelerating rise of this phenomenon. After all, recall it was when "woke" became a common hashtag on Twitter after the Ferguson protests in 2014 and thus was shown to the wider audience of the platform frequently, that the misappropriation began to increase exponentially.

This assumption will likely also be strengthened by non-Black users drawing on the dominant hermeneutical resources of the wider society described earlier, as they would expect that conversations will conform to them just as they do in their everyday life. For example, a person in the UK expects societal values and concepts of British English to be the tacit assumptions of any conversation unless other social cues change this—but due to Twitter's context collapse these social cues are gone so there is little to prevent their assumption that they and everyone else in their Twitter feed is drawing on these dominant hermeneutical resources in their media ideologies.

Of course, this is not to say that misappropriation doesn't happen offline—of course it does! It's merely to point out how much *faster and more pernicious* it can be when most social barriers are removed in this way.

Thus, the specialised form of contributory injustice of misappropriating terms like "woke" on social media platforms like Twitter, is *itself driven* by context collapse and mismatched media ideologies online.

## 4 Context-collapsed contributory injustice (CC.CI)

In this section I will attempt to put all these moving parts together into describing the overall phenomenon I label ‘Context-Collapsed Contributory Injustice’ or ‘CC.CI’, and discuss the alternate example of “cancel” in addition to one particularly damaging consequence unchecked CC.CI can have.

### 4.1 Context-collapsed contributory injustice

Roughly then, the story goes as follows:

- (1) A Black Twitter user uploads a tweet in support of the Ferguson protests in 2014, using the hashtag #staywoke.
  - In doing so, they rely on the hermeneutical resources of the Black community, which contain the necessary concept and contextual understanding of woke as a call to “stay alert to racially motivated police violence”.
  - Due to context collapse, there are few specific markers of what norms to use nor clear audience, so the author chooses the media ideology that most tracks with the norms of conversation with the people *they* are writing for.
  - Since users of the Black community’s hermeneutical resources are used to their concepts being suppressed or ignored by the wider community, it makes sense for them to invoke a more closed media ideology. Thus, in this case, they invoke a media ideology that only the Black community is the audience of this tweet, and that hashtags are a clear way of highlighting this intended audience. Indeed, this is how much of Black Twitter operates (e.g. appending #BlackTwitter to tweets).<sup>77</sup>
- (2) After this tweet, non-Black Twitter users see it and begin using the phrase “woke” themselves, using the *expanded* or *caricatured*, wider community meaning.
  - In doing so they rely on the dominant, wider community’s structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources and ignore the Black community’s hermeneutical resources required to understand the original meaning and application of “woke”, instead substituting the new, *expanded* or *caricatured* meanings, which apply the term to social justice issues beyond that of racial injustice/racially motivated police violence. They thus engage in ‘wilful hermeneutical ignorance’. A *caricatured* meaning tweet is a stronger form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance than an *expansion* meaning tweet, as it contains even less of the focus on racially motivated police violence, if any. Though both constitute CC.CI misappropriation.
  - Again, due to context collapse, the author chooses the media ideology that most tracks with the norms of conversation with the people *they* are reading/writing for.
  - Since users of the wider community’s resources are used to them being the standard, they invoke a more open media ideology. Thus, in this case they invoke

<sup>77</sup> White (2019).

a media ideology that all language in tweets are fair game, and *assume this was the media ideology under which the author wrote the tweet*. This creates a media ideology mismatch between Twitter audience and author, mirroring that Gershon, Boyd and Marwick describe appearing between author and audience.

- In cases like “woke”, where there is also an *expansion* phase misappropriation to begin with, this expansion aids the caricature misappropriation, by making each of the factors above more salient to the critical non-Black Twitter user. That is, the widespread use of “woke” in its diluted meaning applying to issues outside of the Black community, makes it more salient to ignore the Black community’s hermeneutical resources and employ a more open media ideology as it shows mainstream examples of people already doing this, and it amplifies Twitter’s context collapse by obscuring the few markers Twitter has of the original audience’s norms/audience (tweets using the expanded misappropriated meaning won’t often include any Black Twitter hashtags for example).
- (3) When non-Black Twitter users tweet the phrase “woke” under the new, expanded/caricatured meaning, invoking the wider community’s structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources, they fundamentally sever the word “woke” from the meaning it carries in its intended context of the Black community’s hermeneutical resources.
- Each individual case of this constitutes a specialised case of contributory injustice due to the suppression of the Black hermeneutical resources governing the *meaning* of “woke”, despite the apparent engagement with the *word* “woke”, which due to the foregoing, is only surface level.
  - In addition, as the new meaning’s usage continues, the specialised contributory injustice cases become more severe and start to sever the bond between the concept and the word for all users—not just the misappropriating users in the wider community—and risks destabilising the concept in the Black community itself. Sufficient continual misappropriation of this kind eventually leads to the obscurity phase, wherein some members of the Black community may have to start considering abandoning, replacing or reclaiming the term.

The end result is a particularly nasty form of epistemic injustice which undermines the conceptual resources of a community by severely damaging a term used within that community. Since it ignores the existing non-structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources of the Black community through wilful hermeneutical ignorance, it is a form of contributory injustice. And since it relies on context collapse in order to fuel the mismatch of media ideologies, it is driven by this phenomenon also. Hence overall I label it as a specific phenomenon called ‘Context-Collapsed Contributory Injustice’ or ‘CC.CI’. My hope is that in understanding CC.CI better here, we might be in a stronger position from which to combat it occurring in the future, regardless of which term or community is targeted.

## 4.2 “Cancel” another case example of CC.CI

Although “woke” has been my chief example throughout, I believe this story captures the phenomenon in general. A few other terms which were likely misappropriated through successive cases of CC.CI include “critical race theory”<sup>78</sup> and “cancel”,<sup>79</sup> the latter of which I will briefly focus on as a case example.

The term “Cancel”, just like “woke” began being popularised on Black Twitter following its use on a 2014 reality TV show ‘Love and Hip Hop’, although as with “woke” the traditions it calls upon likely stretch back further.<sup>80</sup> Dr. Maia Hoskin gives the following definition of this original meaning:

cancel culture originated in Black Twitter around 2015 to call highly problematic people, products, and companies to the carpet and hold them accountable for their misdeeds. Topics originally revolved around racism, oppression, and various forms of abuse directed toward BIPOC and other marginalized groups. The trend was intended to encourage members from marginalized groups to reconsider their choices and financial, digital, and moral support of events, celebrities, films, music, and trends that don’t practice or uphold equity and inclusion.

Andre Brock concurs, arguing that what separates “cancel” in its original sense from the caricature we later saw is that the original cancel practice was ‘often a critique of systemic inequality rather than an attack against specific, individualistic transgressions’—this critique of the wider structural issues which cause racism were of paramount importance.<sup>81</sup> “Cancel” then, just like “woke”, was an important concept for Black Twitter users to conceptualise of their world and communicate between each other concerning structural racism and a warning about which companies and people to avoid due to their complicity in its maintenance.

However, just as with “woke”, “cancel” received its own misappropriation online from outsiders to the Black Twitter community. This again took on the form of an expansion and a caricature phase. The former being the use of “cancel” outside of the Black community to cancel people for all manner of social justice issues not explicitly tied structural racism. This was facilitated by its widespread use on Black Twitter, and the mismatched media ideologies of the users once again. These users then also employed the wider community’s structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources in order to interpret this as a term which should be used for any social justice case, whether racist, structural or not. As with “woke” this already constituted a misappropriation despite it coming from progressives.

But it is the latter caricature misappropriation phase which has again conjured the most successful misappropriated meaning for “cancel”, defining it as a kind of ‘witch hunt’,<sup>82</sup> which goes after victims for the slightest slip up and relentlessly destroys their lives through a total silencing of their public voice (despite the fact that almost

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<sup>78</sup> Wong (2021).

<sup>79</sup> McGrady (2021).

<sup>80</sup> Romano (2021).

<sup>81</sup> Brock (2020, p. 220).

<sup>82</sup> Bletchley (2021).

no celebrities which have been “cancelled” in this sense actually ended up losing their platforms in any meaningful sense).<sup>83</sup> Notice how this simultaneously hyperbolised the critiques of “cancel” as spurious nit-picking *and also* heavily focused on its attack on individuals in order to excise the structural critique from its meaning—we see this in “woke” CC.CI also. This came along with the similar condemnation of “cancel culture” which “being woke” received once its caricatured meaning became the most prevalent. Again, this caricature could rely on examples from the expansion phase, along with exploiting the mismatched media ideologies and wider community’s structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources to effectively amplify this caricature meaning. Meredith Clark appears to reference this phenomena of the exploitation of mismatched media ideologies/hermeneutical resources inherent in CC.CI although she uses different terms: ‘[the term “Cancel”] was subsequently seized upon by outside observers, particularly journalists with an outsized ability to amplify the(ir own) white gaze’.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, the real harm this causes is also as clear as in the “woke” example. Firstly, the prevalence of these misappropriated meanings result in an obscuration of the original practice’s point of undermining and critiquing complicity in structural racism.<sup>85</sup> Secondly there has been a weaponisation of the caricatured form of “woke” to silence prominent Black voices<sup>86</sup> and to re-wage political culture wars similar to those centred around political correctness, leading to extremely damaging legal efforts to legitimise this silencing.<sup>87</sup>

“Cancel”, then, is another example case of CC.CI and the more we look at vilified terms which originate in marginalised communities, the more examples of this phenomena I expect to be found.

### 4.3 Obscuration and re-introduced hermeneutical injustice: a major consequence of CC.CI

With the story for CC.CI laid out, we are now also in a position to see one of the most damaging consequences of the phenomena: it can re-introduce a localised form of hermeneutical injustice. This is one of the main driving forces of the obscuration phase in which even the original community’s usage can be undermined.

Recall that hermeneutical injustice is the epistemic injustice which occurs when one has a conceptual lacuna they cannot fill, leading to an inability to conceptualise or describe their experiences. In Fricker’s canonical examples, these are gaps in the wider communities’ collective hermeneutical resources which occur due to their structural prejudices. In the cases she describes, once a term to fill the lacuna is found the

<sup>83</sup> For example, ‘Louis CK for example, admitted to masturbating in front of female comedians’ but ‘still sells out of tours regularly’ (Hoskin, *White Women’s Misappropriation of Cancel Culture*).

<sup>84</sup> Clark (2020).

<sup>85</sup> See for example that prominent Black singer Lizzo expressed anguish at the obscuration of “cancel culture’s” original aims: ‘There was real outrage from truly marginalized people and now it’s become trendy, misused and misdirected. I hope we can phase out of this & focus our outrage on the real problems’ (Lizzo (2023)).

<sup>86</sup> Hoskin (2020).

<sup>87</sup> Romano (2021).

hermeneutical injustice is able to be resisted. Recall also that Dotson noted that there are always several existing sets of *local* hermeneutical resources available *in addition* to that adopted by a society's wider community, and that many are developed by marginalised communities to describe their particular experiences which mainstream resources fail to capture. Each of these communities can still suffer from local instances of hermeneutical injustice, restricted to their community's set of hermeneutical resources. Before "woke" was coined, even these communities didn't have a term to fill the conceptual rift it filled.

With sufficient cases of CC.CI, I think terms which were created to fill conceptual lacunas within a particular community's set of hermeneutical resources can become undermined enough that the lacunas begin to re-emerge. For example, "woke" filled the lacuna of describing the necessitated heightened awareness that Black people must cultivate toward police violence/racial injustice in the justice system, which until it was coined was not conceptualisable within the previously existing hermeneutical resources of the Black community.<sup>88</sup> However, the effect of continual CC.CI has been to undermine and change the meaning of "woke" so much as to make some Black activists resist using the word, and may mean many members of the Black community (particularly younger generations) don't come to learn its meaning or learn an obscured version of it. Thus, the effect is to reintroduce the conceptual lacuna which the term "woke" was created to fill, with a sort of "re-introduced (local) hermeneutical injustice".

This phenomena of re-introduced hermeneutical injustice, then, is one long term consequence of unchecked CC.CI, and once established it even helps perpetuate CC.CI due to it contributing to the continued obfuscation of the original term created to fill the lacuna.

## 5 "Natural" meaning change and CC.CI

In this section I'll address one potential worry by articulating why the meaning change which occurs through misappropriation in CC.CI is different from what might be called "natural" meaning change, supposing such a thing is possible.

One criticism of misappropriation accounts in general, which my account is therefore likely also to face, is the idea that meanings change naturally over time in a society, so why complain? Moreover, how can one distinguish between the good and bad cases? Putting aside the fact that there is a huge amount of, generally unequal, meta-semantic negotiation which goes into a wider society's "natural" meaning change over time, this seemingly reasonable worry misses two key differences between what happens in general cases of meaning change and CC.CI (and other types of misappropriation): *why* the meaning changes, and *who* is involved in the changing.

In a standard case of meaning change over time, such as with the word "spinster", the meta-semantic negotiation that produces the slow and steady change of the word from a term of profession to denoting unmarried women, occurs at the level of wider society's dominant hermeneutical resources. No one group produced the original word/concept

<sup>88</sup> At least as a singular term (see Sect. 5).

to describe their specific social group's experience before the wider society began to alter it. In addition, this process is usually slow, and undeliberate.

In misappropriation cases like CC.CI by contrast, the concept is created in order to fill a conceptual lacuna and capture an important part of the experiences of people in the marginalised community which created it, in their local hermeneutical resources. In the case of “woke”, Adams gives a sentence from James Baldwin which he argues captures the essence of “woke”,<sup>89</sup> and demonstrates how long a sentence is required to capture the sentiment the concept crystallises:

There was a moment, in time, and in this place [pre-abolition America], when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today.<sup>90</sup>

This origin and use of words like “woke” as crucial aids to understanding and articulating marginalised experiences, is why it is so unjust to subvert them through misappropriation. Because the terms were created by a marginalised group for a specific purpose, if their meaning changes it must only be because that group's experience has changed also, and they now need to use the concept in a new way to describe their new social reality. And this is what we do in fact see. For example, in the case of “woke”, the early twentieth century meaning of “staying alert to racial injustice” was refined to the specific experience of racially motivated police violence when that became more pressing.<sup>91</sup>

Misappropriating these important terms from marginalised communities, and undermining them with expanded or caricatured meaning, is taking a precious hermeneutical resource from a group that needs it, and adding it to the pile of words used by a wider community whose experiences are already well defined in common language, warping the meaning in the process. It is at best selfish, but at worst actively vindictive, causing unnecessary harm in the form of misappropriated meaning and misrepresentation of those who employ it, and eventually even re-introduced hermeneutical injustice.

In this way then we can both disambiguate good cases from bad, *and* show why it is wrong to misappropriate terms like “woke” through CC.CI and other forms of misappropriation—because these are specialised terms used by marginalised communities in order to be able to articulate their experiences in a way they otherwise can't. Sometimes in a way that is crucial for survival. Hence only the community which originated a term has the right to change it and when they do so these are “good cases” of meaning change for these terms. Any actors attempting to do so from outside the community represent “bad cases” of misappropriation. And “natural”, neutral meaning change only occurs to words which are not produced to fill conceptual lacunas

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<sup>89</sup> Adams (2021b). See also his tweet about this article in which he says the following about this quote: ‘In my opinion, this is the essence of “woke”’ (Adams, 2021c).

<sup>90</sup> Baldwin (1979).

<sup>91</sup> Romano (2020).

of marginalised communities, but are merely another word in the grand lexicon of a wider society's hermeneutical resources.<sup>92</sup>

## 6 Misappropriation and existing philosophical treatments of “woke”

Before concluding, it would be remiss of me to not investigate how my argument effects the existing philosophical work on the concept of “woke”. There are currently at least two philosophical treatments of “woke” as a concept in the social epistemology literature. One presents wokeness as a tool to avoid moral errors,<sup>93</sup> while the other presents it as a kind of rationally motivated partiality governing belief formation about members of specific marginalised social groups.<sup>94</sup> I will briefly outline both versions before explaining how both seem to fall under the “expansion” form of misappropriation I have been discussing above.

### 6.1 Definition 1: “Woke” as avoiding moral error

Definition 1, explored in two separate accounts by Rima Basu and J. Spencer Atkins, suggests that “woke” is a kind of epistemic normative tool which allows one to track and avoid moral errors in belief formation.

Basu considers wokeness as an environmental awareness of moral demands in the background of the circumstances one is considering, e.g. the history of structural oppressions which might have led to certain unfair assumptions about marginalised people.<sup>95</sup> Atkins meanwhile considers wokeness as a kind of epistemic virtue, the development of which fosters the awareness of when it is appropriate to consider alternative explanations to those which might occur due to stereotypes about marginalised peoples.<sup>96</sup>

Both rely on expanding the scope of epistemic justification to the moral sphere, with the controversial idea of ‘moral encroachment’. There is no single agreed upon doctrine of moral encroachment, but roughly it is the idea that moral factors of some

<sup>92</sup> One may wonder what my account says about cases of misappropriating concepts from non-marginalised online groups such as 4chan trolls. On my account such cases would not constitute CC.CI since these groups already use the wider community structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources, just a more acutely unjust subset. In addition, they employ the same “everything goes” media ideology as the wider community. Hence the wider community audience doesn't need to supplant the 4chan user's media ideologies or hermeneutical resources for their own—they are already to a certain extent on the same page. This may then lead one to worry that CC.CI might be a specialised form of conceptual distortion, one which only occurs when a term is misappropriated from a marginalised group. While I think one could tell a story like that, it would be missing the assumption there are multiple hermeneutical resources relative to each marginalised group found in the contributory injustice analysis and would instead be considering concepts as much more publicly available (the equivalent of Fricker's assumption that there are only one set of hermeneutical resources at a time), and hence would not fully capture CC.CI. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these worries.

<sup>93</sup> Basu (2019) and Atkins (2020).

<sup>94</sup> Atkins (2023).

<sup>95</sup> Basu (2019, p. 15).

<sup>96</sup> Atkins (2020, p. 97).



kind, in some way, make a difference to epistemic justification.<sup>97</sup> In Basu and Atkins' accounts this translates to the following: when considering a belief about a member of a marginalised group, if said belief coincides with a negative stereotype about said group then there is a moral requirement to set the degree of evidence and confidence as higher than in a normal case, before justification is satisfied.<sup>98</sup> The example both authors give to explain this is a modified form of that offered by Gendler<sup>99</sup>:

*Social Club.* Agnes and Esther are members of a swanky D.C. social club with a strict dress code [...] the two women head toward the coat check to collect their coats. [...] As Agnes looks around she notices a well-dressed black man [...] and tells Esther, “There’s a staff member. We can give our coat check ticket to him.”<sup>100</sup>

Were one only considering epistemic factors, the argument goes, Agnes seems justified. This is because the majority of the staff are Black, and in normal cases we take high probabilities to be enough for justification.<sup>101</sup> Basu and Atkins argue, while this might not be a rational error, it is a moral error. By stereotyping the man like this, one perpetuates oppressive assumptions about the servitude of Black people. As such, (for Basu) the environment of the social club (a historically extremely racist institution) places a moral demand to be “woke” or (for Atkins) triggers the internally fostered virtue of wokeness. In either case this wokeness invokes moral encroachment which leads us to increase the evidence/confidence one needs for justification. In both authors views, being aware of these moral factors, and adjusting one’s standards accordingly is what employing “being woke” means in an epistemic context.

## 6.2 Definition 2: woke as group partiality

In more recent work, Atkins has developed an alternative definition of “woke” as a kind of group partiality when forming beliefs about marginalised group members.<sup>102</sup>

Atkins builds his second definition on the foundation of Sarah Stroud’s epistemic partiality account concerning friendship.<sup>103</sup> He also employs Goldberg’s names for the features Stroud discusses.<sup>104</sup> Roughly speaking, Stroud argues that when considering an accusation about a friend, we owe them additional partiality in the form of due diligence before accepting the belief is justified especially in cases where the belief is negative. This partiality is borne out in four features. Additional ‘serious scrutiny’ of the claim rather than immediate acceptance, the search for ‘different conclusions’ than immediately presented by the accusation or evidence, the use of ‘interpretive charity’

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 89–93.

<sup>98</sup> Basu (2019, p. 13).

<sup>99</sup> Gendler (2011).

<sup>100</sup> Basu (2019, p. 10). Note this is the version given by Basu based on Gendler’s example.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Atkins (2023, pp. 2–6).

<sup>103</sup> Stroud (2006).

<sup>104</sup> Goldberg (2019).

to attempt to explain the behaviour as charitably as possible and the assumption that the friend must have a good ‘reason’ to have acted as such even if it is unclear.<sup>105</sup>

Atkins argues that wokeness can be understood as a form of epistemic partiality in like manner, only to members of marginalised social groups rather than friends.<sup>106</sup> He argues this partiality employs all four features Stroud suggests for friendship in addition to two new features.

The first of these ‘extra epistemic mechanisms’ is ‘Inquiry Degree’: the woke person will not only be more likely to scrutinise a belief about a member of a marginalised social group but will also devote ‘more time seeking counter-evidence’ or otherwise assessing the extent to which ‘racist structures’ determined the belief’s seeming validity.<sup>107</sup>

The second new mechanism is ‘Base Rate Neglect’. Base rates are ‘the percent of a given thing among a local population’.<sup>108</sup> For example if the base rate of people working in an office who are managers is 10%, then in an office of 100 people we would expect roughly 10 to be managers. But recall from the Social Club example that these base rates also risk perpetuating stereotypes, due to the historical oppressions which led to the base rates being obscured when considering them in abstract. Hence the Woke person on Atkins new account is suspicious of justification based on base rates which concern marginalised people.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the differences in Definitions 1 and 2, the result when Atkins applies this new definition to the social club example is roughly the same. Drawing in particular on the ‘base rate neglect’ and ‘inquiry degree’ mechanisms, the woke-as-epistemic-partiality agent would also demand a higher degree of evidence/confidence for justification relative to whether ‘the belief contributes to overarching racism or whether the belief recognizes individuality [rather than stereotype]’.<sup>110</sup> This is expected however, as Atkins aim was to capture the original accounts phenomena without resorting to moral encroachment.

### 6.3 Misappropriation in existing philosophical treatments of “Woke”

The above accounts both fall prey to what I have termed above the “expansion form” of the misappropriation of “woke”. In this section I will explain why this is the case. That it is so, is extremely unfortunate as it means that these accounts are also vulnerable to the criticisms against CC.CI-based misappropriation which this article has discussed above.

First it will be observed that the focus on racially motivated police violence, and even on the Black community itself has been severely muddled in both definitions of “woke” in the Epistemology literature. Both Basu and Atkins (in his first and second accounts) discuss “wokeness” as an awareness of social injustice in general as well

<sup>105</sup> Atkins (2023, pp. 2–3).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

as an epistemic feature of some kind (moral demand/virtue/epistemic mechanism) which helps avoid the ethical and epistemic pitfalls of social injustice. Recall that the expansion phase misappropriation of “woke” did just the same thing, expanding the term from the original target of awareness within the Black community of racially motivated police violence towards *them*, to those in other marginalised community’s adopting the word for awareness of socially unjust structures of all stripes and how they affect *every* marginalised group.

In addition, recall that the expansion phase brought with it the beginning of social censure for not being so aware whether a member of the Black community or not. Moreover, the expansion meaning’s social censure for not “being woke” (to all social justice issues whatever) became the basis of the caricature misappropriation. Unfortunately, it appears to be this social censure feature of the expansion misappropriation of “woke” which these Philosophical accounts seem to have focused on, with serious meaning warping results.

By focusing on the social censure for “woke” these accounts present it as a demand/virtue/epistemic mechanism which is mainly there for *non-marginalised* agents looking in on marginalised spaces or situations to avoid the errors (moral or epistemic) of accidental racism/sexism/classism etc. We can see this most prominently in the choice of the Social Club example. In the example, it is not the well-dressed Black man who is the agent, and he does not remember to “stay woke” by being aware of the structural racism around him, nor the danger posed to him by the police or security at the club. Instead, it is the white, privileged club member Agnes who we are meant to consider, and we are concerned with her being “woke” enough to not accidentally racially profile the Black man. This means that not only has the meaning of the term been expanded to all social justice issues, but the very users of the term have been reversed. Instead of Black agents using “woke” to keep awareness of structural racism and the judicial dangers it poses them and their community, it is instead inverted to being used by a privileged white lady in order to be aware of and avoid contributing to injustice which she will not experience.

The most egregious example of this comes in Atkins first account, when he is discussing “woke” as a virtue. Atkins uses the example of a ‘woke police officer’ who ‘is aware of the possibility that the young Black man in the hoodie just likes his hoodie, rather than signalling gang membership’.<sup>111</sup> It should be clear that the original meaning of “woke” could not even logically be used in this way, as it was so tied to being aware of police violence perpetuated towards Black people that the idea of a “woke” police officer is an oxymoron. Note therefore that it is only due to how the misappropriated expanded meaning introduced the social censure feature of wokeness, which Atkins and Basu have based their accounts upon, that such a sentence could start to make sense. Nevertheless, the fact that the use and users of the term have been wrenched by their accounts from the Black community and into the hands of not merely outsider privileged agents looking in but even the police themselves should be more than enough to show they constitute a clear case of expansion misappropriation (and possibly even caricature in the case of the police example).

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<sup>111</sup> Atkins (2020, p. 98).

Atkins is aware that his accounts might constitute a form of misappropriation, citing Emmalon Davis on the subject.<sup>112</sup> He offers two responses to these charges. Firstly, he argues that given that “woke” has already become ‘pejorative’ in wider society usage (using a similar idea to what I have described as the caricature misappropriated meaning of “woke”), his project at least offers some defence to the idea that “woke” is a valid rather than vapid thing to be.<sup>113</sup> He is thus hoping his account is in some way able ‘to return to the original intended meaning of the term [...] and] do justice to the term’ better than the wider society usage.<sup>114</sup> However, as we have seen, the usage that Atkins has defended is still extremely divorced from that of the original Black community, and involves wrenching its meaning and expected users from the perspective of the oppressed to that of the oppressors. Hence this defence does not stand up to scrutiny.

His second defence is more reasonable. Atkins notes that the misappropriation worry is an ‘authentic problem with any research inspired by nomenclature from marginalised communities’, and so one should put these ideas to discussion with members of said communities for development.<sup>115</sup> On this we agree, however the problem is that Atkins has begun from a misappropriated expanded meaning of “woke” and only after developing *that*, suggested going back to engage with marginalised (i.e. Black) communities about his account. Instead, as I have been arguing throughout, the term should be left to the communities which created it and, where discussed by outsiders, we should refer to meanings which they have used or developed themselves. To do otherwise is to warp the meaning and unjustly misappropriate it in a different direction.

## 7 Conclusion

We have seen how the account of CC.CI helps explain both the process and unjust nature of this particular kind of misappropriation of marginalised groups’ terms online, and in particular how online context collapse facilitates and accelerates this exponentially. We’ve also seen how unchecked spread of CC.CI long term can produce another harmful consequence of re-introduced (local) hermeneutical injustice in its wake. Finally, we’ve taken some time to outline the difference between misappropriation reflected in CC.CI and natural meaning change, as well as critically analysed the misappropriation reflected in existing philosophical treatments of “woke”.

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<sup>112</sup> Davis (2018).

<sup>113</sup> Atkins (2020, p. 99).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

## Declarations

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