Epistemic Occlusion

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Abstract

I introduce the concept of epistemic occlusion to describe a form of epistemic harm that occurs when certain knowledges, frameworks, or epistemic agents are systematically rendered invisible within dominant epistemic practices, not through active silencing or exclusion, but through processes that pre-emptively block their recognition. Unlike testimonial strands of epistemic harms, which concern the unfair downgrading of a speaker's credibility, or hermeneutical strands, which arise from gaps in collective interpretive resources, epistemic occlusion names a prior and more elusive mechanism. It is a structurally produced condition in which certain knowledges or epistemic agents are rendered imperceptible. I argue that epistemic occlusion operates through mechanisms that shape what is seen, taken seriously, or even conceivable as knowledge.

1. Introduction

If we are to create a genealogy of negatively valenced epistemic Xs, it might look like this: in the beginning, there was epistemic occlusion, when certain knowledges and agents were systematically rendered invisible. After that came epistemic resistance, when resistant epistemologies were formed (Medina 2013). And then, epistemic exclusion (Dotson 2014; Settles et al. 2019, 2024), when these resistant epistemologies were excluded. This is followed by an era of epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014) that is littered with various epistemic Xs – injustices (Fricker 2007), exploitation (Berenstain 2016), appropriation (Davis 2018), ignorances (Mills 2007; Tuana 2006; Poulhaus 2012; Dotson 2012), silencing (Dotson 2011; Tobi 2024), etc.

My aim here is to introduce and sketch this genealogically prior concept, *epistemic occlusion*.

Most accounts of epistemic Xs share a common assumption that marginalised knowers or forms of knowledge are at least visible within the epistemic field, even if they are dismissed, misinterpreted, marginalised, or devalued. What this assumption overlooks is a distinct and pervasive phenomenon. That is, the systematic invisibility of certain knowledges, frameworks, and epistemic agents. This is not merely a failure to take marginalised perspectives seriously, nor a lack of interpretive tools to make sense of them, but a more fundamental filtering-out that occurs before recognition, engagement, or contestation. I call this phenomenon epistemic occlusion.

Epistemic occlusion refers to the structural, often unconscious processes by which particular ways of knowing, speaking, or being are rendered epistemically illegible. Not by being heard and dismissed, but by failing to register as knowable or relevant in the first place. Drawing inspiration from the etymology of occlusion, meaning blockage or obstruction, I argue that certain epistemic pathways are blocked by dominant social, political, and epistemic structures, resulting in a distorted and incomplete epistemic landscape. Unlike epistemic exclusion, which concerns the active marginalisation of individuals and knowledges (Dotson 2014; Settles et al., 2019, 2024), or cases of wilful ignorance, which focus on the lack of uptake by dominant audiences (Dotson 2012; Pohlhaus 2012), epistemic occlusion highlights how knowers and knowledge claims are structurally precluded from recognition altogether.

The need for this conceptual expansion is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, epistemic occlusion helps to illuminate a more primary form of epistemic harm that escapes capture by existing categories. Practically, it draws attention to the epistemic architectures, discursive norms, institutional filters, disciplinary gatekeeping, and inherited colonial frameworks that shape what is seen, what counts, and who matters in our epistemic lives. By naming and analysing epistemic occlusion, we can

better understand how even efforts at inclusion or representation may leave the deepest forms of epistemic harm intact.

This paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I conceptualise epistemic occlusion and distinguish it from related concepts in the literature. In section 3, I explore the mechanisms through which epistemic occlusion operates, including linguistic norms, norms of patriarchy, and norms of modernity and progress. In section 4, I look at two illustrative cases of epistemic occlusion. In section 5, I highlight four non-exhaustive ways to combat epistemic occlusion that include attentional responsibility, epistemic re-mapping, decolonial critique, and non-assimilative recognition.

2. Conceptualising Epistemic Occlusion

Epistemic occlusion refers to the condition in which certain knowledge or knowers are present but unperceived, not engaged, contested, or even dismissed, but structurally blocked from recognition within dominant epistemic fields. It is a structurally produced condition in which specific knowledges, epistemic agents, or interpretive frameworks are rendered unrecognisable or unintelligible within a dominant epistemic environment, not through active silencing or exclusion, but through mechanisms that prevent them from being perceived as epistemically relevant in the first place.

This condition is not reducible to acts of testimonial degradation, nor a lack of shared interpretive resources (as in Fricker's 2007 accounts of epistemic injustices), nor even to outright institutional exclusion (Settles et al., 2019, 2024). Rather, it reflects a more basic form of epistemic marginalisation and harm. The filtering of epistemic possibility itself. Occluded knowers and knowledges are not present as candidates for uptake. They are epistemically absented, often through processes that are invisible to those within dominant frameworks. This absence is not simply a contingent oversight but is structurally reproduced, often through epistemic norms, disciplinary boundaries, educational curricula, and entrenched habits of attention.

To clarify the distinctiveness of epistemic occlusion, it is necessary to distinguish it from several closely related concepts. Here, I will focus on how it is distinct from epistemic oppression, epistemic exclusion, and theories of ignorance. This move will serve the dual purpose of clarifying the contours of epistemic occlusion while showing its genealogical relation to these neighbouring concepts.

First, while epistemic occlusion and epistemic oppression are closely related, they name analytically distinct phenomena. Kristie Dotson (2014: 115) defines epistemic oppression as 'the persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production', often through practices that restrict access, uptake, or validation. Epistemic oppression is thus primarily concerned with obstruction within epistemic systems, barriers that marginalised agents encounter when they attempt to participate in the production, dissemination, or contestation of knowledge. It presupposes a field of epistemic activity into which one is struggling to enter or be heard.

Epistemic occlusion, by contrast, describes a deeper structural phenomenon in which certain knowers or forms of knowledge are not even perceived as belonging to the epistemic field at all. Where epistemic oppression frustrates epistemic participation, epistemic occlusion forecloses its possibility. The occluded knower is not misrecognised, misheard, or devalued. They are epistemically absent, not through removal, but through a filtering out that occurs prior to perceptual registration. In this sense, epistemic occlusion is ontologically prior to epistemic oppression. It determines what can show up as a candidate for epistemic engagement in the first place. While epistemic oppression assumes a contested space in which marginalised agents struggle to assert their contributions, epistemic occlusion ensures that some never appear as contributors at all. Recognising this distinction is crucial for diagnosing the most entrenched forms of epistemic harms associated with epistemic occlusion that operate silently, under the guise of neutrality, and through the construction of epistemic invisibility itself.

Second, another closely related concept to epistemic occlusion is 'epistemic exclusion'. Isis Settles et al. (2024: 547) use the term to describe the marginalisation of scholars of colour in academic institutions, particularly the devaluation or neglect of their intellectual contributions. For them, epistemic exclusion captures the affective and institutional dimensions of being scrutinised yet not recognised, of occupying physical and professional spaces while being denied full epistemic legitimacy (Settles et al. 2019: 69). It describes the experience of being formally included in academic settings but epistemically marginalised due to a lack of support, recognition, or serious engagement. While epistemic occlusion is conceptually adjacent, it focuses less on institutional marginalisation and more on what might be called *epistemic invisibilisation*. Occlusion can occur even when agents are present in institutional spaces, granted access to platforms, or cited in public discourse. Their ideas may be spoken and even nominally acknowledged, but they fail to register as epistemically salient, rigorous, or generative within the dominant framework.

In this sense, epistemic occlusion marks a more elusive and insidious form of harm. Where epistemic exclusion concerns who is allowed to participate and how their contributions are received, epistemic occlusion targets the deeper structures of intelligibility that determine what is even recognisable as knowledge. It can operate in contexts where diversity is institutionally valorised, yet the epistemic field remains fundamentally unchanged, where non-dominant contributions are tolerated but not integrated, seen but not taken seriously. The occluded agent is not merely excluded from epistemic participation. They are rendered conceptually peripheral, operating outside the horizon of what counts as knowledge worth engaging. Thus, epistemic occlusion can persist within, and even be masked by, superficial gestures of inclusion. The site of epistemic harm in cases of epistemic occlusion is not simply at the stage of access or participation, but at the more fundamental architectures that determine visibility, intelligibility, and epistemic value.

Third, the concept of epistemic occlusion also bears important affinities with, yet crucial differences from, theories of ignorance, including Kristie Dotson's (2012) 'contributory injustice', Charles Mills' (2007) 'white ignorance', and Nancy Tuana's (2006) 'epistemologies of ignorance'. While all these frameworks are concerned with how power operates in the production, transmission, and obstruction of knowledge, epistemic occlusion identifies a distinct structural phenomenon. One that precedes discursive engagement, operates at the level of epistemic recognition, and concerns the architecture of visibility itself.

Dotson (2012: 31) defines contributory injustice as a form of harm that occurs when dominant epistemic communities fail to appropriately utilise the epistemic resources developed within marginalised communities. In such cases, members of marginalised groups are denied uptake not because of individual credibility deficits, but because the dominant community lacks, or refuses to engage with, the conceptual frameworks needed to understand their contributions. Epistemic occlusion, while adjacent to this concern, names a deeper epistemic failure. In cases of contributory injustice, the marginalised knower is at least positioned as a contributor whose conceptual tools are intelligible to herself and, in principle, offered to the dominant community, albeit ignored or misunderstood. Occlusion, by contrast, precedes the possibility of contribution altogether. The epistemic agent, their frameworks, or their knowledge do not even register as potentially epistemically relevant. It is not merely that dominant audiences fail to appreciate marginalised epistemic resources, but that those resources are filtered out before they enter the space of potential engagement. Epistemic occlusion, therefore, operates at a more foundational epistemic level. It governs what counts as a contribution at all.

Similarly, Charles Mills' (2007: 15) account of white ignorance explores the persistent, socially constructed patterns of ignorance that sustain white supremacy. White ignorance is not merely a lack

of knowledge, but an actively produced epistemic stance shaped by racial interests, power, and historical amnesia of sorts. It is maintained when white subjects come to know the world wrongly in ways that preserve their epistemic and moral innocence. Epistemic occlusion is compatible with, and often undergirded by, white ignorance, but it describes a different phenomenon. White ignorance concerns misperception and distortion within an already-constituted epistemic field. It is a way of *seeing wrongly*. A form of misrecognition. Epistemic occlusion, by contrast, names the condition in which certain knowledges and knowers are not seen at all. It is not misrecognition, but non-recognition. Additionally, while white ignorance focuses specifically on racialised forms of ignorance (20), epistemic occlusion can occur across multiple axes of marginalisation and may manifest even in spaces not explicitly marked by white racial dominance. In short, occlusion identifies the structural horizon of epistemic possibility, where white ignorance operates within that horizon.

Finally, Nancy Tuana (2006: 9) uses the term 'epistemologies of ignorance' to capture the systemic production of ignorance through social, political, and epistemic mechanisms. She emphasises that ignorance is not merely a passive absence of knowledge but an active, often strategic production of non-knowing, including through scientific omissions, educational curricula, and disciplinary blind spots. Epistemic occlusion shares with Tuana the claim that ignorance is structured and produced. However, it differs in its focus and function. Epistemologies of ignorance typically concern the maintenance of ignorance among dominant knowers, why they do not know certain things, or how they remain unaware of alternative epistemic perspectives. Epistemic occlusion, in contrast, highlights how certain knowledges and knowers are never rendered epistemically available in the first place. The emphasis is not on how ignorance is sustained, but on how entire epistemic possibilities are filtered out before ignorance becomes an active epistemic stance. In this sense, occlusion is pre-ignorance. It operates not at the level of what is known or unknown, but at the level of what can be known at all within a given epistemic structure.

Beyond the theoretical differences between epistemic occlusion and these neighbouring concepts, one of its most troubling features is that it forecloses the very possibility of *direct* epistemic resistance. Unlike other forms of epistemic harms where a speaker may still contest the credibility deficit they suffer or labour to create new interpretive resources, epistemic occlusion operates upstream of recognition, such that no contestation can be registered. The occluded knower or knowledge claim is not simply unheard or misunderstood. It is unperceived as epistemically relevant in the first place. This pre-recognitive invisibility renders resistance unintelligible, if not ontologically impossible, within the dominant epistemic field. There is no position from which to resist if one's epistemic presence does not appear on the map of what is knowable.

In this way, epistemic occlusion functions not only as a mode of exclusion but as a pre-emptive disqualification of dissent. It shapes the perceptual and conceptual conditions under which resistance could even be legible. The result is a profound form of epistemic harm that not only harms knowers but neutralises their capacity to challenge that harm – something that is assumed in cases of 'appreciative silencing' (Tobi 2024) and 'intra-group epistemic injustices' (Tobi 2023). Epistemic occlusion is thus epistemically totalising. It not only removes marginalised knowledge from the space of epistemic contestation altogether, but it also renders even resistance structurally inaudible.

The concept of epistemic occlusion is necessary for at least three reasons. First, it fills a theoretical gap in the literature by naming a form of harm that occurs prior to credibility deficits, interpretive gaps, or institutional exclusion. Second, it accounts for the insidious forms of harm that persist even in contexts that have formally 'addressed' epistemic harms by including 'diverse voices' while still operating under paradigms that occlude non-dominant epistemologies. Third, epistemic occlusion clarifies how epistemic harms are not only a matter of who is heard or understood, but of who and what is structurally permitted to appear as epistemically significant in the first place.

3. Mechanisms of Epistemic Occlusion

To understand how epistemic occlusion functions, we must turn to *some* mechanisms that structure recognition, visibility, and intelligibility within epistemic systems. Epistemic occlusion does not arise from isolated acts of dismissal but from patterned social and cultural architectures that determine which forms of knowledge can circulate and who is recognised as a knower. These mechanisms operate upstream of evaluation or contestation. They structure the field of visibility itself, deciding in advance what counts as knowledge and which contributions are epistemically legible. To see how occlusion functions, we must, therefore, examine the norms, practices, and inherited frameworks that silently delimit epistemic possibility. Some of these mechanisms are overtly institutional, as in academic gatekeeping and disciplinary boundaries, while others are embedded in cognitive habits and cultural schemas that shape attention and intelligibility. Together, they reveal that occlusion is not an accident of oversight, but a recurrent feature of our epistemic life sustained by apparently neutral standards and entrenched habits of thought.

In this section, I identify three such mechanisms: (1) language hierarchies, (2) patriarchal norms, and (3) norms of modernity and progress. These mechanisms are not isolated (or exhaustive). They interlock with one another to produce environments in which certain knowledges and knowers are not merely undervalued but rendered structurally invisible.

3.1 Language Hierarchies

Language is not a neutral medium for communication; it is an epistemic infrastructure that structures what can be expressed, transmitted, and recognised as knowledge. When dominant languages are naturalised as the proper vehicles of knowledge, alternative linguistic forms and vernacular epistemologies are occluded in advance. This is particularly evident in the global dominance of English, which functions not merely as a lingua franca but as an epistemic filter. Knowledge articulated

in African, Indigenous, or other minoritised languages is routinely absent from global epistemic circulation, not necessarily because it is evaluated and rejected, but because it is never translated, archived, or accorded epistemic standing (Ngũgĩ 1986; Mignolo 2009: 167).

The occlusion enabled by linguistic dominance is structural. The dominance of English (and, historically, other colonial languages such as French, Spanish, and Portuguese) establishes a hierarchy in which entire knowledge traditions remain illegible. Oral traditions, proverbs, and narrative forms often carry epistemic weight within Indigenous communities, but these forms are dismissed as folklore or culture rather than recognised as knowledge proper when mediated through dominant languages. This filtering does not occur at the point of engagement but prior to it, through the tacit assumption that knowledge must appear in particular linguistic and textual forms in order to count.

The phenomenon can be understood as a form of *linguistic epistemic occlusion*. It is not that Indigenous languages lack concepts capable of carrying epistemic weight, but that dominant epistemic cultures preclude recognition of those concepts. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the context of African philosophy. Many African philosophers have noted how debates about whether African philosophy 'exists' were themselves structured by Eurocentric linguistic expectations: philosophical discourse had to appear in the conceptual and stylistic forms of European traditions in order to be acknowledged (Hountondji 1983; Masolo 1994). Here, occlusion is enacted by a background hierarchy of languages, where what is not articulated in the dominant linguistic medium becomes epistemically absent.

3.2 Patriarchal Norms

A second mechanism of epistemic occlusion is the set of patriarchal norms that structure which voices and forms of knowledge are deemed epistemically authoritative. Patriarchy does not simply devalue women's contributions; it shapes epistemic spaces such that women's knowledge frequently fails to register as knowledge in the first place. This dynamic is evident across contexts where women's

experiential, embodied, or relational knowledges are relegated to the private sphere, cast as emotional or domestic, and thereby rendered epistemically illegible.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on testimonial injustice highlights how women's credibility is unfairly downgraded in epistemic exchanges. But epistemic occlusion identifies a deeper phenomenon. In many contexts, women's knowledges are not misjudged after being heard, but never register as candidates for epistemic uptake. Consider, for example, midwifery and reproductive knowledge historically developed by women. Long before being dismissed as unscientific, such knowledges were structurally occluded by patriarchal norms that defined science as the domain of men and domestic or reproductive labour as epistemically irrelevant (Federici 2004: 92). The very categorisation of women's knowledge as 'domestic' knowledge ensured that it failed to appear within dominant epistemic fields.

This mechanism also applies to contemporary professional spaces. Women's knowledge of workplace harassment or caregiving burdens is often epistemically occluded because hegemonic norms define such experiences as personal rather than epistemically significant. They are relegated to the realm of private troubles rather than public knowledge, even when such insights could illuminate structural dynamics of injustice. In this sense, *patriarchal epistemic occlusion* is not only about explicit dismissal but about cultural norms that pre-emptively position women's contributions outside the domain of knowledge.

Patriarchal epistemic occlusion also interacts with linguistic hierarchies. As feminist scholars of the Global South have argued (and as I will show in section 4.1), women's oral traditions, songs, and storytelling practices often carry epistemic insight, yet these are doubly occluded: first, by being feminised and relegated to the private sphere, and second, by being articulated in minoritised languages that fail to circulate globally. The result is a compounding occlusion that renders women's knowledge invisible both within their own societies and in global epistemic exchange. Thus, patriarchal norms do

not simply create epistemic injustice in the sense of credibility deficits. They enforce a cultural architecture in which women's knowledge is structurally precluded from recognition, demonstrating the occlusive force of gendered norms in shaping epistemic life.

3.3 Norms of Modernity and Progress

A third and perhaps most pervasive cultural mechanism of epistemic occlusion is the norm of modernity and progress. Colonialism did not simply exploit material resources; it established a civilisational narrative in which European knowledge was positioned as universal, scientific, and modern, while non-European knowledges were relegated to the status of superstition, myth, or tradition (Tobi 2020, 2022). This was not only an act of epistemic exclusion but a form of occlusion where alternative epistemic systems were pre-emptively filtered out as epistemically irrelevant because they were coded as pre-modern.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014: 92) calls this process 'epistemicide', the killing of knowledge systems under the guise of civilising progress. The 'civilising mission' relied on a narrative of temporal hierarchy, in which European modernity represented the pinnacle of rationality and non-European peoples were consigned to earlier, 'primitive' stages of development (Tobi 2020: 259). This temporal ordering did not merely marginalise alternative knowledges. It made them unthinkable as contemporaneous sources of epistemic insight. They belonged to a past that modernity had supposedly transcended. In this way, the very category of 'progress' functioned as a mechanism of epistemic occlusion.

The effects of these norms persist. Contemporary discourses of development often assume that Western scientific and technological solutions represent the path forward, while Indigenous or local knowledges are seen as relics of the past. Even when such knowledges are acknowledged, it is often as supplements or cultural resources rather than epistemically robust systems in their own right. For

example, Indigenous ecological knowledge is frequently reframed as 'traditional wisdom' useful for supplementing scientific data, rather than as a knowledge system with its own conceptual and methodological integrity. This framing reproduces the civilisational narrative of modernity, where alternative epistemologies are occluded by being situated outside the temporal horizon of progress.

The narrative of modernity also intersects with gendered occlusions. As María Lugones argues, inherent to the colonial project is a patriarchal dimension which denied gender and thus humanity to colonised peoples in a way that renders colonised women's resistant subjectivities and alternative social organisations invisible (2010: 2–5). Here, patriarchal and colonial occlusions converge, reinforced by the civilising mission's claim to universal progress. The epistemic horizon was thus structured by a double occlusion: non-European knowledges were invisible because they were deemed pre-modern, and women's knowledges were invisible because they were feminised and relegated to the private or 'traditional' sphere. This mechanism of occlusion is particularly insidious because it presents itself not as an act of exclusion but as a neutral, even benevolent, commitment to progress. The narrative of modernity naturalises epistemic occlusion by framing alternative knowledges as self-evidently outside the domain of knowledge. Looking at the civilising mission, thus, demonstrates how norms of modernity and progress are not just cultural narratives but epistemic filters that shape what can appear as knowledge.

While I have distinguished language hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and norms of modernity as separate mechanisms, in practice, they can operate together. Language hierarchies ensure that epistemic recognition is mediated through dominant linguistic forms. Patriarchal norms position women's knowledges as private or emotional. And the narrative of modernity frames alternative epistemologies as pre-modern. Together, they constitute a cultural base of occlusion that circumscribes epistemic visibility across social life. These mechanisms show that epistemic occlusion

is not simply a matter of academic gatekeeping or institutional exclusion. It is embedded in the cultural logics that structure perception, intelligibility, and value. They demonstrate that occlusion is not exceptional but constitutive of dominant epistemic cultures, silently delimiting the horizons of what can be known and who can be a knower.

4. Illustrative Cases of Epistemic Occlusion

To understand the dynamics of epistemic occlusion, it is important to examine concrete cases in which structurally mediated invisibility of knowledge occurs. This section focuses on two illustrative cases: Dalit feminist scholarship in India and the hegemony of Evidence-Based Medicine. Both cases reveal how epistemic contributions can be rendered invisible not through overt exclusion or silencing alone, but through structural preconditions that preclude recognition and engagement within dominant knowledge frameworks.

Just to note, identifying cases of epistemic occlusion is inherently challenging. By the time such cases come to our attention, they are often already framed as instances of other epistemic harms like testimonial or hermeneutical injustice, epistemic exclusion, or silencing. Yet this retrospective framing risks obscuring the prior invisibility of certain knowledges or agents within dominant epistemic frameworks that define epistemic occlusion. If we look more closely, which I attempt to do here, what initially appears as a case of another epistemic harm is better understood as having first been a case of epistemic occlusion, where absence from collective understanding precedes and enables other forms of harm. It is with this difficulty in mind that I attempt to illustrate epistemic occlusion through the cases that follow.

By examining these cases together, this section shows the structural and intersectional dimensions of epistemic occlusion. Both instances show how agents can possess and exercise epistemic insight while

simultaneously being rendered epistemically invisible, highlighting the need for frameworks attentive to pre-recognitive structural barriers.

4.1 Dalit Feminism: From Epistemic Exclusion to Epistemic Occlusion

One case that I found to be illustrative of epistemic occlusion has been argued for as a case of epistemic exclusion in the literature. In 'Epistemic Exclusion: Theorizing Dalit Feminism,' Swati Arora et al. (2025) argue that Dalit feminist scholarship is systematically marginalised in Western Anglophone philosophy, despite being a crucial precursor to contemporary theories of hermeneutical injustice. The authors argue that Dalit feminists have long identified and combated hermeneutical injustices through various conceptual tools that are rooted in autobiographical testimonies (Arora et al. 2025: 5 – 11). However, these conceptual tools are missing from mainstream philosophical debates on this topic. Two reasons the authors identify as responsible for this absence are the low status given to experiential knowledge in mainstream epistemology (12) and the systemic bias against non-Western philosophy (15).

While this framing is illuminating, I suggest that the Dalit feminist case might be more aptly theorised as one of epistemic occlusion rather than epistemic exclusion. Whereas exclusion describes a dynamic of being kept out of a space one is trying to enter, occlusion describes a prior, structural condition of being rendered invisible within that very space. Analysing the case of Dalit feminism through this lens reveals a more insidious and foundational form of epistemic harm, one that operates not at the level of evaluation or citation, but at the level of epistemic recognisability itself. The shift in terminology from exclusion to occlusion is not meant to be merely semantic. It entails a fundamental shift in diagnosing the site, mechanism, and intractability of the harm.

The core distinction lies in the architecture of the epistemic field. Epistemic exclusion occurs within a constituted field of engagement. It describes the experience of marginalised persons and perspectives

who are present but whose contributions are devalued, neglected, or marginalised. It is a harm of misrecognition within a game whose rules are, in principle, known. Epistemic occlusion, by contrast, operates upstream of this engagement. It shapes the architectures that determine visibility, intelligibility, and epistemic value in the first place. The occluded knower is not struggling to be heard within a contested space but is instead positioned outside the horizon of what counts as knowledge worth engaging. Arora et al. (2025) provide the evidence for this when they note that Dalit feminist work is simply 'not cited, and their examples not included' in Western philosophical literature on hermeneutical injustice (12). This is not primarily an act of conscious dismissal following engagement, but a symptom of a prior filtering, a failure of these works to even register as potential candidates for philosophical citation. They are epistemically absent, not epistemically marginalised.

This prior filtering is enacted through mechanisms that are central to the concept of occlusion. Arora et al. (2025) identify two key reasons for the neglect of Dalit feminism. The devaluation of experiential knowledge and systemic bias against non-Western philosophy. Viewed through the lens of occlusion, these are not just biases but active occlusive mechanisms. Let us go through both.

First, the disciplinary preference for abstract theorisation over experiential knowledge functions as a powerful gatekeeper. Philosophy's 'widespread disciplinary reluctance to draw on relevant published autobiographical material' (Arora et al. 2025: 13) is not a neutral methodological choice. It is an occlusive norm that pre-defines the very form legitimate knowledge must take. The testimonies of writers like Bama and Baby Kamble, which are the foundational sources for concepts like 'Brahmanical patriarchy,' are thereby pre-emptively disqualified. They are not deemed less credible contributions to epistemology. They are not deemed contributions to epistemology at all. This is a clear case of what I have termed patriarchal epistemic occlusion, where knowledge rooted in specifically feminised and subaltern experience is structurally positioned as private, anecdotal, and therefore not epistemically

relevant to the 'universal' theoretical questions of philosophy. The harm is not that their credibility is downgraded (a testimonial injustice), but that their epistemic offering is rendered unintelligible as philosophy before it can even be assessed.

Second, the 'systemic bias against non-Western philosophy' (Arora et al. 2025: 15) is underpinned by what I identify as norms of modernity and progress. This mechanism occludes by imposing a temporal hierarchy on knowledge. Arora et al. (2025) note that Indian philosophy is often 'mistakenly thought to be inseparable from religion' and stereotyped as 'mystical' (16). This framing is a quintessential occlusive move. It places non-Western thought in the category of the pre-modern, a relic to be transcended by the progressive, secular trajectory of Western reason. Consequently, the conceptual labour of Dalit feminists is not engaged with as a contemporaneous philosophical resource but is filtered out as 'culture,' 'folklore,' or 'identity politics,' categories situated outside the domain of rigorous philosophical inquiry. This is not exclusion from a conversation. It is the active construction of a conceptual boundary that prevents the conversation from ever beginning. The dominance of English acts as a reinforcing linguistic hierarchy, ensuring that works originally published in Tamil or Marathi remain untranslated and thus epistemically unavailable, further naturalising their occlusion.

The most critical implication of framing this as occlusion rather than exclusion concerns the possibility of resistance. Epistemic exclusion, while pernicious, presupposes a field in which resistance is possible, where scholars can contest their devaluation, labour for uptake, and challenge citation practices. Dotson's (2012) contributory injustice, for instance, assumes that marginalised knowers have developed hermeneutical resources that are, in principle, available for uptake, even if the dominant community refuses to use them. However, epistemic occlusion forecloses the very possibility of direct epistemic resistance because it operates upstream of recognition. How can Dalit feminists contest their absence from the Western philosophical canon on hermeneutical injustice when their work is

not even perceived as being about hermeneutical injustice within that paradigm? Their pioneering work predates Fricker's by decades (Arora et al. 2025 – 2), yet this prior claim is rendered invisible by the occlusive norms that define what counts as a legitimate origin point for philosophical concepts. The pre-recognitive invisibility of occlusion means their resistance is structurally inaudible. There is no position from which to be heard when one is not on the epistemic map.

Therefore, the solutions proposed by Arora et al. (2025), inclusive citation and comparative philosophy, must be understood not as simple remedies for exclusion but as radical interventions aimed at dismantling occlusive structures. Citing Dalit feminist autobiographies in philosophical works is not just an act of inclusion. It is a direct challenge to the patriarchal and methodological norms that occlude experiential knowledge. It forces a redefinition of what counts as a philosophical source. Similarly, embracing comparative philosophy is not merely adding diverse voices to a static curriculum. It is an active effort to break down the temporal and cultural hierarchies of the norms of modernity that have defined the philosophical canon. It requires, as the authors argue, shifting the burden so that 'Western philosophers must strive to understand how their scholarship might make sense (or not) to non-Western philosophers' (Arora et al. 2025: 18). This is a project of expanding the very horizons of intelligibility, of fighting occlusion at its root.

While the language of epistemic exclusion usefully describes the marginalisation Dalit feminists face, it does not fully capture the depth of the epistemic harm. The concept of epistemic occlusion allows us to see that their work is not just on the periphery of the philosophical field. It is systematically prevented from appearing in that field at all. By highlighting the mechanisms that filter out their knowledge prior to engagement and by revealing how this pre-emptive disqualification neutralises resistance, the concept of epistemic occlusion provides a more comprehensive and severe diagnosis

of the harm. It shows that the struggle is not only for a seat at the table but for a fundamental re-architecting of the table itself.

4.2 Evidence-Based Medicine and Epistemic Occlusion

Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM), the dominant paradigm of modern clinical practice, is widely lauded for grounding healthcare in rigorous, scientific evidence (Sackett et al. 1996). However, a critical examination reveals that its rigid epistemological framework functions as a powerful, systemic engine of epistemic occlusion. While EBM aims to eliminate bias, its methodological architecture systematically renders the lived, phenomenal knowledge of patients, particularly those with complex chronic illnesses, structurally invisible. This is not a simple case of testimonial injustice or exclusion, but a more profound harm where patient testimony is pre-emptively disqualified from the realm of legitimate evidence, foreclosing the very possibility of its uptake.

The core mechanism of this occlusion lies in EBM's celebrated hierarchy of evidence. This pyramid explicitly ranks knowledge sources, with randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses at the apex (Burns et al. 2011: 306), and unsystematic clinical observation or patient narrative relegated to the base, often dismissed as 'anecdotal' (Greenhalgh 1999: 324). This hierarchy is not merely a guide for weighing evidence. It is an epistemic filter that determines what counts as a legitimate claim within medical encounters. For patients with conditions like Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) or Fibromyalgia, whose pathologies often elude standard biomarkers, their primary evidence is their own bodily testimony, their detailed accounts of post-exertional malaise, cognitive dysfunction, and widespread pain (Institute of Medicine 2015: 71). Yet, within the EBM framework, this knowledge is epistemically occluded. It is not that the physician actively disbelieves the patient (a potential testimonial injustice), but that the patient's report is processed as a symptom in search of a sign, not as a valid data point in itself. The system is structured to seek objective,

quantifiable correlates, and in their absence, the patient's knowledge is filtered out before it can be recognised as evidence of disease. It is rendered unrecognisable or unintelligible within the dominant epistemic environment, not through malice, but through methodological design.

This dynamic fundamentally distinguishes epistemic occlusion from other forms of epistemic harm. As already noted, testimonial injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007), occurs when a hearer assigns a speaker a credibility deficit due to identity prejudice. While this is often a compounding factor (e.g., the gendered dismissal of women's pain), the harm of EBM is more foundational. A physician may have no prejudicial bias against a specific patient, yet still be unable to 'hear' their testimony as medical evidence because the EBM paradigm provides no epistemic slot for it. The harm is not a credibility deficit assigned to the speaker, but a legibility deficit assigned to the form of knowledge itself. The patient is not a *harmed knower* but an *absent knower*. Their voice is audible, but its semantic content as evidence is silenced by the system's architecture.

Similarly, epistemic occlusion operates differently from Dotson's contributory injustice. Contributory injustice occurs when a dominant group wilfully refuses to use the hermeneutical resources developed by a marginalised group (2012). In the case of EBM, the issue is often that the requisite hermeneutical resources do not yet exist within the dominant framework to make sense of the patient's testimony. The patient's descriptions of their illness experience constitute a way of interpreting bodily states that has not yet been codified into the medical lexicon. EBM, in its demand for pre-existing, 'objective' categories, occludes this nascent hermeneutic. It cannot be subject to contributory injustice because it has not been allowed to contribute in the first place. It is occluded at the point of entry.

In these sorts of cases (e.g., testimonial injustice or contributory injustice in healthcare), the harm is distinguishable from the harms of epistemic occlusion. As has been theorised (Carel & Kidd 2014), epistemic harms in the medical space happen in scenarios where patients (for example, women, people

of colour, and those with disabilities) are systematically afforded less credibility due to pervasive identity prejudice. A clear and egregious example is the well-documented phenomenon of under-medicating Black women for pain, where racist and sexist stereotypes directly corrupt the physician's credibility judgment, leading to tangible harm (Hoffman et al. 2016). This is a classic case of individual or culturally systemic bias distorting an otherwise functional epistemic exchange. The physician, in principle, recognises the patient's report of pain as a legitimate form of evidence but unfairly discounts its weight due to prejudice.

However, the case of EBM and chronic illness, for example (Bueter 2019), reveals a more foundational, structural problem. Here, the epistemic failure occurs upstream of credibility assessment. When a physician, trained within the EBM paradigm, encounters a patient with a complex chronic illness, the issue is not necessarily that they disbelieve the patient due to bias (though this can compound the issue). Rather, the epistemic architecture of their profession provides them with no robust methodological toolkit to process the patient's testimony as clinical evidence. The patient's narrative is not deemed a less credible version of a recognised type of evidence. It is often not recognised as a type of evidence that belongs in the diagnostic calculus at all. This is not testimonial injustice but epistemic occlusion, the structural pre-emption of a knowledge form's very intelligibility. The physician is not a biased hearer but a constrained one, operating within a system that has methodologically filtered out a crucial source of knowledge before the clinical encounter even begins.

This distinction is crucial for the diagnosis and remedy of epistemic occlusion. Addressing testimonial injustice in cases like pain management requires interventions aimed at correcting individual and cultural biases. Addressing the epistemic occlusion inherent in EBM, however, requires a metaphysical and methodological overhaul of medical epistemology itself. It demands a critical examination of why the subjective, the phenomenal, and the narrative are exiled from the realm of robust evidence. It calls

for the development of new epistemic virtues, not merely as personal attributes for clinicians, but as structural requirements for a revised evidence-based practice. This revised practice would formally incorporate patient expertise and develop methodologies for systematically gathering and interpreting qualitative, experiential data, treating it not as a fallback when tests are negative, but as a primary and indispensable source of insight into diagnostic processes.

Hence, while the literature on epistemic injustice in healthcare rightly highlights the discriminatory distortions within the medical epistemic system, the concept of epistemic occlusion exposes a constitutive flaw of the system itself. In the case of chronic illness, the physician relying on EBM is often not a perpetrator of bias but an agent of a structure that is epistemically blind to certain realities. Recognising this shifts the blame from individual clinicians to the disciplinary norms they inherit and challenges the field of medicine to expand its very definition of what counts as evidence, moving beyond a hierarchy that inadvertently occludes the very subjects it is meant to care for.

As I have already argued, one of the most epistemically harmful effects of this occlusion is how it forecloses the possibility of resistance. A patient trapped within this system cannot effectively counter a physician's 'your tests are normal' conclusion. Personal symptoms are dismissed as anecdotal, and pointing to online patient communities is deemed unsystematic. The patient's attempts at self-advocacy are structurally inaudible because the only currency the system recognises, RCTs and biomarkers, is the very currency their condition lacks due to the research neglect that is a direct consequence of its initial occlusion. This creates a perfect, self-reinforcing epistemic vicious cycle: patient knowledge is occluded because it lacks EBM-sanctioned evidence. This occlusion justifies the withholding of research funding and investigative urgency. Without research, no EBM-sanctioned evidence is produced. The absence of this evidence is then used to reify the initial occlusion, pathologising the patient as having medically unexplained symptoms.

This cycle demonstrates that epistemic occlusion is not a static event but a dynamic process that actively produces and maintains collective epistemic deficiencies. The medical community is not merely ignorant of these conditions in a passive sense. It is actively structured to remain deficient by its own epistemic protocols. Evidence-Based Medicine presents a paradigmatic case of epistemic occlusion in a high-stakes, technical domain. It demonstrates that epistemic occlusion is not only a matter of prejudice or bad actors but can be embedded within the very methodologies we design to pursue truth. EBM's hierarchical filtering of evidence, while powerful for certain tasks, creates a structural blindness to forms of knowledge that are phenomenal, narrative, and complex. Recognising this is not a call to abandon EBM, but a critical imperative to expand its epistemic foundations. A truly evidence-based practice must develop the conceptual humility to recognise when its own methods are occluding vital knowledge, and create space for the embodied expertise of the patient, not as a supplement to evidence, but as a fundamental form of evidence itself. The challenge is to build a medical epistemology that can see the patient not just as a container of pathology, but as a crucial knower in the diagnostic process.

5. Addressing Epistemic Occlusion

If epistemic occlusion refers to the structural invisibility and unrecognizability of certain knowers and knowledges within dominant epistemic systems, then the normative question it raises is *what do we owe to those who remain epistemically unseen?* This question resists easy answers. Epistemic occlusion cannot be redressed simply by listening better or by improving the quality of epistemic exchanges. Rather, it calls for deeper structural and conceptual reconfigurations of the epistemic field itself. In this section, I outline four non-exhaustive modes of response to epistemic occlusion. They are attentional responsibility, epistemic re-mapping, decolonial critique, and non-assimilative recognition.

First, epistemic occlusion shows the importance of attentional responsibility. That is, the ethical demand to cultivate practices of attention that can register what dominant epistemic habits obscure. Fricker (2007) emphasises the virtue of testimonial justice as a corrective to identity-prejudicial credibility deficits. Yet epistemic occlusion alerts us to a prior step: some knowers and knowledges are never seen in the first place. The normative failure is not just in how someone is heard, but in whether they are noticed at all. This calls for practices of attunement that go beyond epistemic charity or openness. It requires epistemic agents to interrogate their perceptual habits and their inherited sense of what counts as epistemically salient. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's (2000: 108) account of responsibility for structural injustice, we might say that agents bear positional responsibility for the background conditions that make epistemic occlusion possible, even if they are not directly culpable.

Second, addressing epistemic occlusion requires epistemic re-mapping. This is a reconfiguration of the conceptual and institutional terrains that determine what is intelligible. This is not simply a call for additive inclusion, for instance, adding 'diverse voices' to syllabi, but for a rethinking of the categories, questions, and methodologies that define the boundaries of knowledge. Epistemic re-mapping may involve pluralising epistemic standards, revising canons, or decentring dominant paradigms that have historically structured visibility. For instance, recognising African or Indigenous philosophies as generative conceptual traditions may require not only adding texts to the canon but rethinking the criteria for what constitutes 'philosophy' itself. In this way, epistemic re-mapping seeks not only to widen the lens but to question who built the frame.

A third and more radical response lies in the register of decolonial critique. As has been argued, the global order of knowledge production is structured by a coloniality that continues long after the formal end of colonial rule (Quijano 2007: 170). Epistemic occlusion is not an accident of oversight but an effect of this epistemic order, a system that universalises Western knowledges while relegating others

to the margins. Decolonial critique demands not just ethical responsiveness but 'epistemic disobedience' – a refusal to treat Western epistemic frameworks as the default or universal norm (Mignolo 2009: 162). In this sense, responding to epistemic occlusion involves not only inclusion but confrontation, disrupting the epistemologies that pretend to be view-from-nowhere objectivity. It means supporting the creation and autonomy of alternative epistemic spaces, institutions, and networks of knowledge production.

Finally, a response to epistemic occlusion must avoid the trap of assimilationist inclusion, wherein marginalised knowledges are only recognised if they conform to dominant epistemic norms. Recognition, in this context, should not entail epistemic domestication. It must be non-assimilative, respecting epistemic difference without demanding translation into dominant terms. This requires a stance of epistemic humility. A willingness to acknowledge the limits of one's own frameworks and to relate to other epistemic systems without the expectation of complete commensurability, since genuine recognition entails respecting other ways of knowing on their own terms, including their ontological and ethical commitments. In practice, this may involve cultivating epistemic partnerships based on reciprocity, rather than extraction or validation. Epistemic occlusion is not always just an epistemic failure. It is an ethical and political one. It reveals how dominant epistemic systems do not merely exclude certain knowledges but organise perception in such a way that those knowledges are never seen. Responding to this phenomenon requires more than epistemic virtue or goodwill. It requires structural transformation, attentional reorientation, and decolonial resistance. Ultimately, it challenges us to rethink what counts as knowledge, who gets to know, and who gets to be known.

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