

“Emotional Truth”: Challenging White Supremacist Notions of Belief and Legitimacy

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People of color speaking on their experiences are frequently discredited and disbelieved. A long theological, philosophical, scientific, and legal tradition has invalidated testimony from people of color and constructed a rigid and ultimately reductive definition of “truth”; moreover, racialization and oppression are lived experiences that are extremely difficult to articulate, often involving interactions in which racism is not explicitly apparent to non-marginalized people. The insidious nature of racism has forced non-white philosophers, writers, and artists to be creative in crafting tools to express the “emotional truth” of the experience of marginalization. White listeners must approach these works with humility and openness, employing a “hermeneutic of charity” and exercising empathy. This framework enables the questioning and reimagining of white supremacist notions of truth, aiming to center marginalized individuals’ experiences and include the “emotional truth” as a legitimate element of credible testimony.

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Section I: Introduction

In September, *The New Yorker* published “Hasan Minhaj’s ‘Emotional Truths,’” an article fact-checking the Indian- and Muslim-American comedian’s autobiographical standup specials. The journalist, Clare Malone, pokes holes in Minhaj’s stories about an FBI informant infiltrating his childhood mosque, an anthrax scare threatening his infant daughter, and a prom rejection by his white date. “Does it matter,” Malone writes, that many of Minhaj’s encounters with racism “never happened to him?”¹ She repeatedly criticizes Minhaj’s use of the phrase “emotional truth” to more deeply convey to the audience his experiences and how they affected him.²

Minhaj later responded to the article in a Youtube video, providing his own evidence and defending his use of exaggeration and fictionalization to spotlight relevant issues.³ The accusations themselves and the larger question of the ethics of lying and comedy are messy. But the core of Malone’s piece has a certain gravitational pull: this enigmatic “emotional truth,” a phrase repeatedly defended by Minhaj, a non-white comedian, and derided by Malone, a white journalist. The phrase contains bigger considerations about conveying the experience of marginalization, about testimonies offered by people of color, about belief and accusation. What is the “emotional truth,” what is the basis for its suppression, with whom does it resonate and find its expression, and how and why should we legitimize its value?

In this paper, I will...

- Explore a theological, philosophical, scientific, and legal tradition that has long invalidated non-white testimony on the basis of a lack of rationality and personhood and undermined emotion as a source of testimony;
- Explain the insidiousness of the experience of racism and provide an overview of works of philosophical and creative resistance from non-white authors who, against all odds, articulate that experience;
- Offer alternative approaches of interpretation based on charity, openness, and empathy that make the listener more receptive to experiences that fall beyond the scope of their own life; and
- Propose a reexamination of white supremacist notions of truth and defend the value of the “emotional truth.”

Section II: Experiencing Racism and the Philosophizing of the Oppressed

Undermining non-white testimony

The structure of white supremacist theology, philosophy, and biology has repeatedly denied personhood to non-white people, providing the basis for the delegitimization of their testimony—essentially, putting them in a position to be constantly disbelieved.

¹ Clare Malone, “Hasan Minhaj’s ‘Emotional Truths.’” *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-communications/hasan-minhaj-s-emotional-truths>.

² Ibid.

³ Hasan Minhaj, “My Response to the New Yorker Article,” video, 3:02, October 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABiHlt69M-4>.

Initially, Christianity was a proxy for personhood, with western European philosophers labeling non-Christians as lesser and uncivilized. (Spanish missionary José de Acosta described the indigenous targets of Spanish Catholic proselytization as “barbarous and brutish” in his 1604 account of the Americas.⁴) The initial standard of Christianity as a proxy for personhood later evolved into a rationality standard, with white philosophers claiming Black people were incapable of thinking on the same level as white people. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson writes that Black people are “in reason much inferior.”⁵ Hegel posits that European Christians are the only race to have “the concrete universal, self-determining thought,”⁶ and Kant’s theory of personhood excludes people of color. Scientists later built on these tenets with theories about biological inferiority, with Samuel Morton claiming in *Crania Americana* that the “structure” of the Native American’s “mind” is “different from that of a white man.”⁷ These racist works argued the fundamental inferiority of non-white people and set the stage for a legal tradition that has invalidated their testimony.

Early colonial laws dictated that no person of color could give evidence against any white Christian, with the preamble of a 1717 Maryland statute noting that “it may be of very dangerous Consequences to admit and allow as Evidences in Law [the testimony of any] Negro, or Mulatto Slave, or Free Negro, or Mulatto born of a White Woman, during their servitude.”⁸ The 1856 Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford* determined that the plaintiff had no legal standing to testify because his Blackness meant he was not a citizen.⁹ Being believed relied on being perceived as a person, which was contingent on whiteness. Black people’s dehumanization in particular stemmed from the fact that white people only intended for them to be studied, owned, and exploited, with no place for their thoughts or experiences in public discourse.

A tradition of delegitimizing non-white voices expresses itself through specific mechanisms, which Kristie Dotson explores in her essay on epistemic oppression. Testimonial injustice occurs when a listener confers less credibility to certain speakers because of underlying prejudice, undermining the words of marginalized individuals through instant disbelief—for example, when a Black teenager talks about her experience being followed around a clothing store and a white listener dismisses her as paranoid.¹⁰ Hermeneutical injustice is one step higher, wherein a large facet of a marginalized person’s experience is obscured from external understanding because of gaps in existing structures of knowledge and interpretation (hermeneutical resources), which are themselves prejudiced.¹¹ For instance, before the arrival of the word “microaggression,” our collective hermeneutical resources lacked the tools for people

⁴ Joseph de Acosta, *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Clements R. Markham (Hakluyt Society, 2010), 303.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), 149.

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, “Anthropology,” in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2000), 43.

⁷ Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana* (Philadelphia: 1839), 82.

⁸ “Blacks before the Law in Colonial Maryland,” Maryland State Archives, msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/sc5300/sc5348/html/chap3.html.

⁹ S.A. Cartwright, “The Dred Scott Decision” (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1860), 25-26 hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuo.ark:/13960/t2891986h.

¹⁰ Kristie Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): 26, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.33.1.0024>.

¹¹ Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 29.

to explain the everyday slights they experienced because of identity or appearance. Finally, contributory injustice occurs because non-marginalized people are ignorant of marginalized hermeneutical resources, leading them to dismiss certain experiences that fall outside of their understanding.¹² The white person may not believe the Black teenager because something like that has never happened to them, and they cannot comprehend a world in which someone would be unprovokedly harassed.

People of color regularly encounter racism in ways that white people either immediately dismiss or fail to understand because of structural prejudice built into the ways they confer credibility and interpret the world, shaped by a long history of the delegitimization of non-white voices. A wait staff might take much longer to serve a Hispanic family than white patrons. A white man might follow a Black man for a few blocks on an unfounded hunch of suspicious activity. An American-born Asian woman might be repeatedly asked “Where are you ‘really’ from?” In these scenarios, the perpetrators of the racist acts retain plausible deniability, as white listeners might not understand or acknowledge that racism occurred. But the victims of these incidents retain the nagging belief that something *did* happen to them. They hold onto how the encounters made them *feel*, the unshakable sense that they were mistreated and harmed—the “emotional truth” at the core of their experiences.

What is the “emotional truth?”

The “emotional truth” can thus be defined as the internal reaction to and interpretation of an event; lived experience is its essential animating element. In the sense of marginalization, it is a person of color’s feeling towards encountering racism. The “emotional truth” diverges from a plain, external recounting of events in that it is not readily obvious to a non-marginalized listener, if not intentionally suppressed. A seemingly mundane interaction (“Where are you really from?”) conceals hurt and prejudice experienced by the victim.

Black philosophers have articulated certain concepts that buttress the “emotional truth” and imbue it with the proper significance. Franz Fanon uses the term “overdetermination” to describe having an incorrect and externally crafted perception imposed on his racialized body, denying his inward self-perception.¹³ Linda Martín Alcoff describes overdetermination as “occupying a position already occupied and fashioned elsewhere.”¹⁴ Du Bois articulates the closely intertwined concept of “double-consciousness,” which describes how a person occupying a racialized body sees themselves through their own eyes *and* through the eyes of others.¹⁵ These two Black-created philosophical concepts describe the internal fragmentation and turmoil that racialization inflicts. On paper, these ideas are complicated and nebulous. But the key to making them click is having experienced them and recognizing the *feeling*—the feeling of being externally defined, the awareness of how others wrongly perceive you.

White supremacy has accrued power by shoving aside the internal reactions of oppressed people, being selective in what counts as “truth” and controlling who has the credibility to offer an accepted testimony. In his *Notes*, Jefferson writes, of Black people, “their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection.”¹⁶ He denies them rationality, but importantly does

¹² Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 32.

¹³ Franz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000), 260.

¹⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194.

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁶ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 149.

so by elevating “reflection” over “sensation,” associating emotion with unintelligence; recall the “angry Black woman” trope, which paints emotions as faulty and obstructive and denigrates Black women on that basis. More broadly, white western philosophy, with its focus on a detached, abstract self devoid of emotion, lacks the tools to articulate, engage with, and comprehend the experiences of people of color.

Ultimately, the philosophy of the oppressed is based on lived experience—“Blackness is a *lived* existential project,” George Yancy writes.¹⁷ Thus, emotion is a legitimate source of testimony—for marginalized people faced with the insidiousness of racism, it is increasingly *the* source of testimony. David Haekwon Kim describes emotion as “a feeling *through* the body *to* what matters in the world,” indicating what is important and how, informing our perception.¹⁸ The “emotional truth” is a uniquely necessary expression of oppression and challenges existing white supremacist “truths.”

Expressing marginalization

The marginalized have produced a philosophy that is derived from lived experience and is “inherently, definitionally *oppositional*.”¹⁹ Early accounts of life under slavery, such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, articulate and wrestle with the cruelty and immorality of slavery, the authors forging their own language based on the narrative truth. Equiano’s firsthand account of being sold into slavery centers the white-slaveowners’ brutality and the trauma he endured. He puts his own narrative in opposition to dominant white supremacist thought, resisting the widely accepted “truths” that powered the transatlantic slave trade and elevating the validity of his pain.

In her speech “Ain’t I A Woman?” Sojourner Truth expresses the coexistence of sorrow and resilience within her— “when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?”²⁰ Truth’s “truth” stems from her suffering incurred as a Black woman and the anger, grief, and strength it evokes in her, the speech’s title and recurring phrase her assertion of her personhood and legitimacy on the basis of these emotions. Like her predecessors, she ties her humanity to her emotions as an act of resistance, revealing how suffering breaches the soul and reestablishing emotions as a source of truth.

The difficulty of expressing suffering under racism also stems from the fact that it is very difficult to convey something to someone who has not themselves experienced that thing. The modern genre of afrosurrealism attempts to overcome this obstacle by using the strange and surreal to evoke in the reader the same emotions felt by people who have experienced racism and marginalization. Amiri Baraka coined the term “afro-surreal” in 1974 to describe Black poet Henry Dumas’s work.²¹ In his essay “Call it Afro-Surreal,” D. Scot Miller outlines his own

¹⁷ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2nd ed., 2016), 114.

¹⁸ David Haekwon Kim, “Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation,” in *Living Alterities, Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 115.

¹⁹ Charles Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience,” *Teaching Philosophy* 17 (1994) 230.

²⁰ Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I A Woman?” *Women’s Rights National Historical Park*, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>.

²¹ Amiri Baraka, “Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist,” *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 2 (1988): 164, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904491>.

criteria for the genre, including the uncovering of an “invisible world” just beneath the visible and a distortion of reality “for emotional impact” (“We want to feel something! We want to weep on record”).²² Because a face-value retelling of a racist encounter would not elicit a strong reaction from a white audience, afrosurrealists employ the unreal to provoke a more visceral reaction mirroring the one experienced by the creator, making the seemingly unremarkable remarkable.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is a seminal afrosurrealist work, with an unnamed protagonist grappling with a feeling of invisibility as he leaves the South for Harlem in the ’30s and joins a mysterious organization. He encounters racism and oddities, including a white woman who asks him to join her “fantasy” of being raped by a Black man²³ and a Black man who propels a paint company to success by coining the slogan that proclaims, in part “It’s the Right White.”²⁴ Many of the events of the book are fantastical, hallucinatory, and ironically comedic, depicting the baffling and disorienting task of existing in white America as a Black person in the early 20th century—an experience the reader comes to understand not through a plain historical account but through this very fictionalization and excess. At the end of the novel, “hurt to the point of invisibility,” the invisible protagonist says that because the world refused to see him, “What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?”²⁵ Ellison expresses through the narrator this urge to get at a world of Black experience, unseen by white eyes, that ultimately contains the truth.

More modern works include Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and *Us*, horror movies featuring Black protagonists, and *Atlanta*, Donald Glover’s comedy-drama that puts a twist on a classic hood adventure with otherworldly elements. After the strange opening scene of the pilot, the protagonist wakes up and turns to his girlfriend, saying a phrase that characterizes the rest of the show: “I had a weird dream.”²⁶ *Atlanta* truly does feel like a weird dream, often teetering into nightmare. An invisible car pulls up outside a club; a white lesbian couple adopts three Black children and forces them to work in their garden; a white African-American Studies professor recites a poem about Jim Crow on Juneteenth.²⁷ *Atlanta*’s goal is not adherence to material reality but to inner, emotional reality. Glover expresses the pure weirdness of being Black in America by using the surreal to evoke in the audience the same emotions of shock, fear, offense, and confusion that Black people encounter every day.

In the *New Yorker* interview, Hasan Minhaj says, “To the people that are, like, ‘Yo, that is way too crazy to happen,’ I don’t care because yes, fuck yes—that’s the point.”²⁸ His satirical

²² Miller, D. Scot, “Call It Afro-Surreal,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian* 43, no. 34 (2009), sfbgarchive.48hills.org/sfbgarchive/2009/05/19/call-it-afro-surreal/.

²³ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 401.

²⁴ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 169.

²⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 450.

²⁶ *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 1, “The Big Bang,” *Atlanta*, directed by Hiro Murai, written by Donald Glover, aired September 6, 2016, in broadcast syndication, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/3627c052-e817-4b78-8c71-9fbdde4e5e09>.

²⁷ *Atlanta*, “The Big Bang”; *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 8, “The Club,” directed by Hiro Murai, written by Jamal Olori, aired October 18, 2016, in broadcast syndication, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/a6a6cef9-0214-481d-b1bf-612e9f7a4ca3>; *Atlanta*, season 3, episode 1, “Three Slaps,” directed by Hiro Murai, written by Stephen Glover, aired March 24, 2022, in broadcast syndication, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/3ce227f5-af2a-41e4-aec9-97c02d46db14>; *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 9, “Juneteenth,” directed by Janicza Brazo, written by Stefani Robinson, aired October 25, 2016, in broadcast syndication, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/248f3d1b-9a4e-4793-87c0-06e3b63e4182>.

²⁸ Malone, “Hasan Minhaj’s ‘Emotional Truths.’”

comedy has parallel aims to afrosurrealist works, as he exaggerates events, condenses timelines, recasts characters, and adopts a larger-than-life persona for comedic and emotional impact, spotlighting the issues faced by his community and expressing the psychological experience of racism and Islamophobia. Samah Choudhury points out that Minhaj frequently refers to himself and the audience together as “us,” implicitly alluding to a shared understanding of non-white experiences.²⁹

These creators use the surreal to express the “emotional truth” of racism, making meaning out of their suffering and challenging the accepted “truths” of white supremacy that have long dismissed their experiences. Yancy writes, “But what if the very structure of whiteness is a lie?... Wouldn’t the truth about whiteness shatter its being?”³⁰ These works raise the question of what truth even *is*—in a white supremacist world, where racism scaffolds all structures of knowledge and interpretation, notions of truth and who and what are typically believed are also racialized.

Section III: Listening to Believe

This wealth of evidence indicating the difficulties people of color face in fully conveying their experiences with racism demands that white listeners reexamine their doubtful posture towards the “emotional truth” and work towards seeing its legitimacy. This effort requires what Dotson explains non-marginalized groups lack as they perpetuate epistemic oppression: alternative sets of hermeneutical resources, or non-dominant lenses through which to see the world, that enable listeners to approach unfamiliar experiences with openness and empathy.

Alexander Sosler’s essay, “Prodigal Love and a Hermeneutic of Charity: How Grace Changes Learning,” encourages an approach to learning motivated by receptivity and love—a “hermeneutic of charity,” which is a “humble, relational, and attentional posture toward” an object of investigation, wherein the listener seeks “the true, good, or beautiful.”³¹ This is in direct contrast to a hermeneutic of suspicion, which only seeks out points of disagreement, attempting to “question, critique, search for lies, and subvert.”³² A hermeneutic of charity charts out a different relationship between the speaker and listener, one built on trust and mutual care that seeks the truth. For the listener, this interaction begins with an openness to what the truth is and an understanding that one’s notion of truth is inherently biased and limited because of white supremacy and a confined scope of experiences.

New Yorker journalist Clare Malone writes her fact-checking piece on Hasan Minhaj through a hermeneutic of suspicion. She seeks to trip him up, to undermine his testimony. Her default posture of skepticism can be excused by her profession as a journalist, but she remains unreceptive. When offered the term “emotional truth” by the comedian, she immediately makes it into an object of derision (calling Minhaj’s stories “untrue,” “fabrications[s],” and “fibs”),³³ rather than seeking to understand it, both as a storytelling and satirical device and a term getting at something deeper in the non-white experience. Because it does not initially resonate with her, she makes the assumption that it could not resonate with *anyone*. Malone commits Dotson’s

²⁹ Samah Selina Choudhury, “American Muslim Humor, Secular Aesthetics, and the Politics of Recognition” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020), 204-5.

³⁰ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, 107.

³¹ Alexander Sosler, “Prodigal Love and a Hermeneutic of Charity: How Grace Changes Learning,” *Pro Rege* 48, no. 3, (March 2020): 25-26.

³² Sosler, “Prodigal Love and a Hermeneutic of Charity,” 25.

³³ Malone, “Hasan Minhaj’s ‘Emotional Truths.’”

third-order instance of epistemic oppression: contributory injustice, remaining ignorant of different ways of making sense of the world. Dotson writes, “Those who experience contributory injustice find that they can readily articulate their experiences”³⁴—Minhaj, a person of color, expressing his experiences through comedy and using the term “emotional truth” to describe how his artistic techniques get at how those experiences made him feel. “However, those articulations generally fail to gain appropriate uptake according to the biased hermeneutical resources utilized by the perceiver”³⁵—Malone’s refusal to listen because of a lack of experiences that would give the term “emotional truth” any meaning to her.

A hermeneutic of charity is fundamentally grounded in humility, empathy, and commitment. A listener first has to be open to the possibility that the testifier might have experienced things completely outside the scope of the listener’s understanding, which requires a humble posture towards knowledge and a belief that others have something to offer that adds to the listener’s interpretation of the world. As Dotson suggests, this involves fluency in multiple sets of hermeneutical resources, a task of knowledge-seeking that erodes white supremacy by challenging its dominance and offering alternatives to its oppressive lenses.

A white person cannot simply be made to experience racism so that they have the necessary foundation to understand it. This limitation has implications for the value of empathy—a tool to share in someone else’s inner life, their emotions and interpretations. Because racism is rooted in experience and emotional reaction, one strategy for empathy is to start from analogous experiences that have evoked similar emotions in the listener. For example, while a white woman has not experienced Fanon’s racialized overdetermination, she can attempt to understand it by drawing on parallel encounters, such as catcalling, that have similarly overdetermined her through unwanted sexualization.

Sosler further writes that love is patient, that a hermeneutic of charity requires effort because what it demands is difficult; it takes persistence to stretch one’s understanding beyond existing borders and to be open to previously unrecognized truths.³⁶ The approach is essentially one of relationship-building, which takes time. Sosler cites Parker Palmer: Through truth, “one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship....To know is a relational engagement.”³⁷ Sosler repeatedly emphasizes love in defining this new framework of learning, which is not to be mistaken for the patronizing, degrading “love” that the white world uses to control people of color. Sosler’s utilization of love is instead one that centers true care for others and introspection, demanding that the listener look inwards and question their existing habits and prejudices to identify and correct long-inflicted harms. It is a direct challenge to a white western European approach to knowledge that only values people of color as objects of possession and exploitation, devaluing their humanity. Empathy fully recognizes the personhood of the testifier and finds value in understanding their experiences of racialization and suffering—as well as the unique joy, belonging, and strength—connected to their marginalization.

Sosler articulates his hermeneutic of charity as a definitionally Christian concept. Christianity is both an architect of the white supremacist structure of truth that represses marginalized voices *and* one possible path towards the restoration of their legitimacy. It has the potential to be used for a multiplicity of ends. White people are tasked with pointing belief

³⁴ Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 32.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sosler, “Prodigal Love and a Hermeneutic of Charity,” 24.

³⁷ Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 31.

systems like Christianity towards constructive, compassionate ends, rather than oppressive ones, as well as expanding the belief systems they employ in the first place.

I am posing this as a responsibility of the dominant (white) group because that is the group to which I belong and the source of my own knowledge and limitations. I also believe that it is the oppressor's responsibility to right their and their predecessors' wrongs and break down existing violent epistemes. People of color have articulated the "emotional truth" at the core of their existence repeatedly, across time, authors, and genres. But it is up to white people to believe it; functionally, Sosler's approach is listening to believe, rather than to doubt. This responsibility is at the core of anti-racism. Its principal value is in deconstructing systems of oppression, because that is an inherently good thing to do. But there is also value for the non-marginalized people who practice it, with the continuing effort and commitment to others potentially internally transformative. White people will never truly, viscerally understand the lived experience of racism because they have not lived it. But there is value in the effort of *trying* to understand.

Section IV: Conclusion

It is only now, after exploring alternative ways of knowing, that we can reframe the concept of truth beyond an existing white supremacist framework and see the value in the "emotional truth" that Hasan Minhaj defends. The "emotional truth" is rooted in the lived experience of racism, getting at the internal feelings produced by marginalization. White supremacist theological, philosophical, scientific, and legal structures denying personhood to non-white people have laid the foundation for the delegitimization of their testimony, through the mechanisms of epistemic oppression that Dotson outlines. But the fact that racism is grounded in lived experiences that white people lack is also a barrier to white comprehension of the "emotional truths" of people of color, who have resisted racist epistemes and articulated their experiences through the creation of subversive philosophical concepts, narrative testimonies, and afrosurrealist and satirical works, the latter aiming to evoke in the audience the emotions associated with racist experiences. But for these creators to fully express themselves, white people have to listen, employing a "hermeneutic of charity," rather than one of suspicion, when faced with unfamiliar experiences. An approach of openness and empathy enables non-marginalized listeners to relinquish rigid white supremacist notions of truth and recognize the legitimacy of the "emotional truth."

It is a fair note, as an article on the Minhaj situation puts it, that "The truth is usually more complex than the way you feel about it," and assessing the racist element of an incident can certainly account for more than the victim's reaction.³⁸ This paper should not be construed to defend Minhaj's specific case in absolute terms, especially considering his positionality in the media landscape as a comedian who also reports on current events. The barebones conclusion agreed to by both Minhaj and Malone is that Minhaj *did* fabricate some details of his stories (though they debate which details), and he defends himself with the term "emotional truth." But as I parsed Malone's *New Yorker* article in the months following its release, I felt that the "emotional truth" might explain a deeper phenomenon, far beyond the Minhaj situation—and that is the subject of this paper.

This alternative notion of truth based in the experience of marginalization is not meant to evoke an oppressive, Orwellian notion of "doublethink" or mirror a Trumpian attempt to recast the media landscape through "alternative facts." In fact, it has a philosophical history beyond the

³⁸ Jason Zinoman, "Lying in Comedy Isn't Always Wrong, but Hasan Minhaj Crossed a Line," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/20/arts/hasan-minhaj-comedy.html>.

scope of this paper—Kierkegaard, for example, differentiates between the objective and subjective truth, the latter referring to a person’s relationship to the truth in which they believe.³⁹ The “emotional truth” gets at an important facet of the marginalized experience, one that dominant notions of truth and legitimacy exclude, and white people should accept it as a valid element of this amorphous thing we call “truth.” Black inferiority used to be widely accepted as “truth,” which was the basis for an overwhelming amount of harm. But Black thinkers and activists have resisted this to the point of change, and as we work towards an epistemology beyond white supremacy, we are tasked with evolving our belief systems to build what comes after. The revelations outlined in this paper challenge us to reframe our notions of knowledge and truth, not to deny but to expand, not to hurt but to heal—recasting the “emotional truth” as an object not of mockery but of belief.

³⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, “Truth is Subjectivity,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, 5th Ed.*, ed. Michael Peterson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 118.

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