# The Epistemic-Merit Cycle: The Ontological, Epistemic, and Democratic Silencing of Roma Voices

by

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# ABSTRACT

Meritocracy does not simply distribute opportunity—it enacts a deeper symbolic regime that converts inherited privilege into epistemic legitimacy and reorders exclusion into perceived fairness. This project argues that merit, far from being a neutral or just principle, operates as an *epistemic regime* that authorizes dominant ways of knowing and marginalizes others. Introducing the concept of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, I trace how institutions codify hegemonic styles of knowledge production, reward intersecting forms of advantage, and confer epistemic inheritance rights upon those already structurally empowered. Engaging critical epistemology, political theory, decolonial and Romani scholarship, the analysis reveals how systems that claim neutrality systematically disqualify embodied, oral, and collective knowledge—particularly that of Romani communities. Drawing on T. M. Scanlon's framework for morally permissible inequality, I show that contemporary educational institutions fail to meet even minimal standards of fairness, procedural justice, or substantive opportunity. Beyond critique, the thesis proposes epistemic co-design: a participatory model wherein marginalized communities do not merely adapt to dominant norms but co-author the criteria of legitimacy themselves.

*Keywords: Meritocracy, Epistemic Injustice, Romani Studies, Epistemic-Merit Cycle, Symbolic Containment, Democracy, Knowledge Production, Embodied Knowledge, Colonial Epistemic Frameworks, Gadjo Scholarship, Epistemic Pluralism*

# AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, *Tina Horvath*, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society declare herewith that the present thesis titled *The Epistemic-Merit Cycle: The Ontological, Epistemic, and Democratic Silencing of Roma Voices* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.


Vienna, 25 May 2025


*Tina Horvath*

Signature

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*"To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives. - Gilles Deleuze*

## 1. Introduction

Meritocracy—broadly understood as a system that rewards individual talent and effort—has increasingly become a central concern across social and political philosophy, legal theory, and the sociology of stratification. Scholars such as Michael Sandel (2020) or Daniel Markovits (2019), among others, have contributed to a critical understanding of merit as an organising principle of education systems, the job market, and power—raising questions regarding moral justification, inequality, and democratic ideals. Throughout my research what seemed to appear ever more clearly is that meritocracy operates through a dual mechanism: first, as a system that entrenches existing inequalities via the unequal distribution of different forms of capital, and second, as an ideology that legitimizes political power concentration by presenting arbitrary advantages as "natural talents" one can claim moral credit for.

Consequently, a central normative question arises: can meritocracy (and the inequality it generates) be justified within a democratic society? To explore this, I turn to the account of T. M. Scanlon (2018) that describes the justification of inequality-generating institutions, and I argue that contemporary meritocratic educational structures fail to meet even his minimal standards of fairness, especially when examined through the systematic exclusion of Romani voices and epistemologies. In doing so, I do not only critique meritocracy as a distributive ideal, but also as

a normative, epistemic, and ontological regime. In this understanding, meritocracy does more than allocate opportunity—it determines whose voices are recognized, what counts as knowledge, and whose realities get to exist. Drawing on normative political theory, epistemology, continental philosophy, decolonial and Romani scholarship—as well as my own framework, the *Epistemic-Merit Cycle*—I show how meritocratic ideology generates epistemic injustice and constrains the conditions under which excluded groups, particularly the Roma, are permitted to participate.

To develop this argument, I begin in Section 2 by tracing a genealogy of merit, showing how it has evolved across philosophical traditions to become a legitimating mechanism for hierarchy, rather than its antidote. Then, I address and reflect contemporary critics, resulting in a complete rejection of meritocracy. I then introduce the Epistemic-Merit Cycle in Section 3, elaborating it in three parts: (1) authoritative definition—the institutional processes that define and constrain arbitrary markers of merit and therefore legitimate knowledge itself; (2) compound contingency—the way overlapping privileges amplify each other in epistemic recognition; and (3) epistemic inheritance rights—the consolidation of legitimacy and authority among those already structurally advantaged. In Section 4, I test meritocracy against T. M. Scanlon's (2018) criteria  for morally justifiable inequality-producing institutions and argue that it fails all three: it lacks just institutional purpose, procedural fairness, and substantive opportunity. When viewed through the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, these failures are not aberrations but structural necessities. Finally, in Section 5, I respond to potential objections and sketch a pathway forward. I argue for a transformation of institutional epistemic authority through what I call epistemic co-design: a model that reimagines participation not as translation into dominant forms but as co-authorship of legitimacy itself.

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Lastly, in equal measure to my aim of critiquing meritocracy, I seek to use the modest scholarly tools at my disposal to help construct alternative frameworks for thinking about the Roma. In fact, I must state that this inquiry emerges from an embodied and situated position. As someone who is Romani, and a first-generation woman from rural Hungary, I do not approach these questions from a distance. I write from a place where our knowledge has been disqualified before it is even heard, from a tradition not only excluded but overwritten. This experience does not merely inform my argument, but also constitutes it. Hence, this thesis is not only a critique, but also an intervention. It insists that Romani knowledge is not a footnote to modernity but a resource for rethinking what it means to know, to speak, and to be free. To critique meritocracy without centering those it silences is to replicate its violence in theory, but to speak from within the silencing, to expose how it works and still name our world with clarity—that is the beginning of epistemic justice.

## 2. The Historical and Normative Construction of Merit

Michael Young's utopian-satirical *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1994) popularized the term "meritocracy", yet the concept of merit as a foundational principle for societal organization—and as such the notion of merit as moral desert—has deep historical roots. Throughout various civilizations and philosophical traditions, the relationship between merit, justice, and political legitimacy has been consistently debated, though with varying interpretations and implementations. Meritocratic tradition has its roots in Eastern philosophy; particularly, in ancient Chinese thought (Fan, 2019) propagating that the purpose of government is promoting the well-being and virtue of people, and as such, political power should be based on virtue and talent over hereditary privilege. Importantly, their conception of merit was primarily focused on governance and the cultivation of virtue, rather than the broader distribution of social goods.

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Similarly in Western philosophy, Plato advocated for the rule of philosopher-kings, arguing that political authority should be allocated based on merit and wisdom. (Plato, 2008, Book 5) Aristotle (1905; 1984) expanded on this concept by applying meritocratic principles to the distribution of social goods more broadly. He suggested that governance has a specific purpose (telos), which is to promote the good life and shape character. Following this teleological reasoning, then, political authority distribution is based on honoring the person who has the best virtue by fitting him to this role. Then, a significant evolution in meritocratic thought is marked by the Enlightenment period and the quest to regard people as individuals—consider Jefferson's vision of a 'natural aristocracy' based on virtue and talent rather than birth and wealth (Wooldridge, 2021). Similarly, the motto of the French Revolution (carriers open to all) represented a decisive break from feudal systems. Through this increasing sentiment towards valuing individual merit, education became a central mechanism for identifying and cultivating talent (Smith, 1996) and gradually, merit became the foundation of anti-discrimination laws to ensure fair competition, abolish status regimes, and challenge hierarchies based on traits historically associated with oppressed groups (Ganty, 2023) Thus, the turn towards a merit-based conception of justice relies on its promising, yet undermining propaganda of dismantling arbitrary barriers of class, race, and gender.

In contemporary society, per se, merit is generally understood as a combination of *talent* and *effort*. Yet critics of meritocracy, such as Markovits (2019), draw attention to its masked third feature: *investment*. Meritocracy, when working as designed, favors those whose parents are best positioned to invest in them through their money, skill, or even time; as such, allowing kids to be "perfectly prepared" by "perfect practice" to adhere to hegemonic measures of merit. This is evident in the economic diversity of elite institutions; at the top 146 colleges in the US, only

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25% of the poorest group of the population is present (Kahlenberg, 2015). In Britain, Oxford University stands as another stark example; despite only 7% of British students attending private schools, these privately educated students comprise 40% of Oxford's student body. Even more telling, approximately 80% of Oxford students come from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds (Sutton Trust 2018). Elite employers prefer these similarly prestigious educational credentials as indicators for merit and potential (Rivera, 2015). Since arbitrary standards of selection criteria often exclude ethnic minorities, migrants, or economically disadvantaged individuals, they face barriers in accessing the education and the professional opportunities that are prerequisites for political influence. As a result, many voices are underrepresented in decision-making spaces. Here, it becomes evident how meritocracy reinforces discrimination and social selection: anti-discrimination laws not only make social hierarchies fluid and visible, but also modernize them through merit without challenging the fundamental principle of social selection and the perpetuation of hierarchies based on class, cultural capital, or adherence to social norms. Consequently, contemporary manifestations of merit through credential acquisition serves as a crucial mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of privilege, elite power maintenance, and concentrated socio-political influence—ultimately, showing how merit based selection undermines, rather than reinforces the principles of equality and democracy.

In light of the previous paragraphs, the idea of some sort of "ideal meritocracy", a world devoid of historical hierarchies, must be touched upon too. The concept of pure merit still raises ethical questions regarding people who may be less performant or energetic. Some might argue, such as Isaiah Berlin (1978), that differences between people can be morally justified as these differences would result from natural talents and ambitions rather than race, gender, or other such characteristics. Berlin (1978) claims that in meritocratic societies inequalities are inevitable due

to the distribution of "natural gifts," leading to differences in wealth or power. Here, I question the degree to which natural talent differs from characteristics like race or gender. If talents are integral and predetermined, they are only the products of heritage and chance, or of one's upbringing and environment—hence, they are morally arbitrary. Moreover, the very fact of what forms of merit are valued is itself socially and historically contingent, as well supply and demand dependent, making the evaluation arbitrary too. Here, then, I must revisit meritocracy's true promise: it is not equality, but mobility, implying that inequality itself can be right. However, I argue that while we may not be able to completely get rid of inequality, it is not morally right to state that it can be just. Even under an "ideal meritocracy", the political message would continue to echo: you can rise only as far as your talent can take you. This creates a weird approach to welfare systems and how we think about what people who have fallen due to their "own fault" deserve. As Sandel (2020) argues, meritocracy creates a sense of failure among those who do not succeed, promotes bias against individuals without formal qualifications, and encourages the belief that complex issues should be addressed solely by experts—ultimately leading to a hollow, technocratic democracy that alienates and disempowers ordinary citizens. Thus, I arrive at the same conclusion Sandel does: even a perfect meritocracy would be unjust, or simply put, not a good society to live in.

In the end, while the idea of meritocracy—whether in its current form or as an ideal—presents an attractive framework for rewarding individual talent and effort, its real-world application within societal and democratic contexts exposes deep structural flaws. A critical reassessment of meritocracy is therefore necessary if we are to build a society that truly embraces diversity, advances equality, and honors democratic principles. However, when we turn our attention to the role of meritocracy in educational selection, it becomes clear that more is at

stake: specifically, forms of epistemic and ontological obstruction. In what follows, I will elaborate on these concerns by introducing the concept of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle.

## 3. The Epistemic Merit Cycle

### 3.1 Authoritative-Definition

At the foundation of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle lies a question of power: who, and by whose standards, gets to be recognized as a knower? I argue, maybe not so surprisingly, that the answer is neither accidental nor neutral. The determination is moderated by institutions of colonial legacy that get to define, regulate, and authorize what are legitimate markers of merit, via and thanks to the accumulation of different capitals amongst its participants. These structures are not only passive arbiters of truths, but rather, they are active agents of epistemic construction embedded in deep symbolic, historical, and racialized systems of dominance. Then, what is framed as "merit" is the result of *authoritative definition*—a system of institutionally imposed arbitrary and epistemically harmful norms that dictate which forms of expression, style, language, and formats are seen as credible markers of merit. These norms, both hegemonic and colonial in nature, regulate and therefore decide what constitutes knowledge itself, as well as who is permitted to produce it.

The case of Romani scholarship, particularly the domination and relevance of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS), demonstrates how authority over knowledge production can be tightly regulated by racialized and colonial logics. The figure of the Romani Rai—typically a gadje (non-Romani) scholar who claims special insight into Romani life (Lee 2000, pp. 129-156)—shows how epistemic legitimacy is manufactured through insider status granted by institutional or social proximity, not lived experience. As Ken Lee (2000, pp. 129-156) explains,

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these Rais were mostly self-appointed or affirmed by networks like the GLS, presenting themselves as uniquely capable of accessing and interpreting "authentic" Romani knowledge. The implications were twofold: first, Romani people themselves, especially those considered "mixed" or not conforming to invented racial-purity standards, were excluded as legitimate knowers; second, the power to define what counted as Romani culture or language was monopolized by outsiders, just to reproduce narratives of racial and linguistic "degeneration", echoing earlier Gypsylorists. Lee (2000, pp. 129-156) continues to explain that this pattern extended beyond individual figures, as central to the Gypsylorist project was the idea of "preserving" Romani language—a project framed as cultural salvation, but premised on transforming an oral, communal tradition into a standardized written form governed by gadje linguistic rules. In doing so, Gypsylorists assumed epistemic control over Romani expression itself; they critiqued and corrected Romani speakers for using allegedly incorrect or debased forms and even invented a derogatory term in Romani—*poggadi chib* or"broken tongue"(Lee 2020, p. 144)—to classify dialects that did not conform to their codified standards, constituting a unique form of harm that may fall under hermeneutical injustice. Further, when Romani people spoke English, their words were often, on purpose, transcribed as crude, ungrammatical, and vulgar. Ultimately, through this domination, Gypsylorists institutionalized themselves as the primary knowers of Romani life, creating a closed circuit in which epistemic authority depended on conformity to gadjo, or colonial, metrics of merit, such as that of their linguistic project. In effect, they exemplify the workings of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle: the symbolic and institutional production of legitimacy that excludes those most closely tied to the lived reality under study.

### 3.2 Compound Contingency

This system does not simply reward effort or talent; rather, it rewards the performance

and accumulation of multiple arbitrary advantages in what I call *compound contingency*. This mechanism shows how different kinds of privilege (often seen as isolated) interact in ways that magnify their impact. Rather than accumulating linearly, these advantages transform one another and generate new forms of authority altogether. Simply put, a student in possession of greater cultural capital, travel and educational access, and ultimately, of a "legitimate" and "white" body does not just do well academically; they gain a form of "institutional literacy" that is implicitly treated as a sign of superior judgment. Educational institutions reward those who already possess these combined advantages, while labeling other forms of knowledge as "unscientific," or "unprofessional," while participation in democratic or academic discourse becomes increasingly tied not to insight or truth but to the ability to perform knowledge in pre-approved ways. Thus, the Epistemic-Merit Cycle arises as a recursive structure that refines and recodes advantage at each stage; it does not merely preserve privilege but actively reconfigures it into new forms of epistemic legitimacy. This process becomes particularly visible when we examine who is granted authority to speak, research, and represent marginalized communities, such as the Roma.

As Margareta Matache (2016) argues and demonstrates, academic and policy discourse has embraced almost anyone as an "expert" on Roma realities, except for Romani scholars themselves. Despite being embedded within the communities under study, Romani researchers, with no underlying evidence, are frequently perceived as overly political, emotionally invested, or too closely aligned with NGOs. Their work is often dismissed as subjective or insufficiently rigorous, while gadjo scholars are presumed to possess the neutrality and objectivity that Romani scholars are denied. In this context, Romani identity becomes a liability in academic settings and a mark of compromised detachment rather than a source of valuable perspective, constituting what Miranda Fricker (2009) would call testimonial injustice, that is, the unfairness

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related to trusting someone's word due to their identity. This epistemic devaluation is further sustained by the long-standing tradition of othering research on the Roma, which frames them as morally degenerate, lawless, and inherently untrustworthy. For example, in *Bury Me Standing*, one of the most acclaimed studies on the Roma, the author claims that gypsies lie, specifically to the non-Roma, finding enjoyment in the activity (Matache 2016). This casual essentialization illustrates how deeply entrenched biases distort the interpretive frame through which Romani subjectivity is viewed.

This dynamic exemplifies how epistemic legitimacy is not merely earned through evidence or insight, but conferred through the performance of institutional norms—or what I have called "institutional literacy." This includes using the "right" vocabulary, appealing to "objective" frameworks, and avoiding any perceived over-identification with one's subject. The privileges of whiteness, elite education, and institutional affiliation combine to establish a default position of legitimacy. In contrast, Romani scholars must continuously prove their "objectivity," a demand that is never equally applied to others. This epistemic double standard is reinforced through everyday scholarly practices. Matache (2016) points out that academics frequently reference high crime rates among Roma communities without reliable data, or refer uncritically to "famous Gypsy palaces", reproducing exoticizing and criminalizing stereotypes. She continues by explaining that these rhetorical choices are rarely marked as problematic, meanwhile, the perspectives of Romani scholars—who might contest such language—are frequently absent from panels, conferences, and publications. For example, at the ASN panel *Stereotypes, Exclusions, and Ethnic Categories in the Roma Experience*, there was not a single Romani panelist (Matache 2016). Similarly, at the 2014 Gypsy Lore Society conference, fewer than 10 out of over 100 speakers were of Romani background (Matache 2016). At that same

ASN panel, two of the presentations contained problematic methods and anti-Romani bias, while a third barely mentioned Roma at all (Matache 2016). Yet none of this was challenged in the scholarly setting, suggesting that trivialization and distortion of Romani issues are tolerated—even normalized—when performed in the language of academic legitimacy.

This is not a coincidence but a function of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle. Conference organizers often accept papers of poor quality or vague relevance to Roma, without actively reaching out to Romani academic networks or supporting the participation of Romani scholars, many of whom lack institutional funding or affiliations that would enable attendance (Matache 2016). Despite the extensive research conducted on Roma across Europe, Romani inclusion on research teams remains the exception rather than the rule.

Romani scholars are also consistently underrepresented on the editorial boards of journals and in research governance. The newly established *Journal of Gypsy Studies* includes no Romani scholars on its board, nor does *Romani Studies*, published by the Gypsy Lore Society (Matache 2016). Even the European Academic Network of Romani Studies failed to elect a single Romani scholar to its scientific committee during its initial formation (Matache 2016). By questioning the academic credentials of Romani scholars while accepting substandard work from others, the academic field itself reinforces the very powerful dynamics it claims to study. It rewards those who can perform credibility in institutionally sanctioned ways—often through a combination of whiteness, elite affiliation, and detachment—while systematically denying that same legitimacy to those with lived expertise. In doing so, it reveals the true function of the epistemic-merit regime: not to measure knowledge or insight, but to regulate who may speak, who may be believed, and who may belong.

### 3.3 Epistemic Inheritance Rights

At the peak of the cycle lies what I call *epistemic inheritance rights*, that is, the unearned transmission of epistemic legitimacy, authority, and access across generations or institutional networks. Here, those already deemed credible by the epistemic-merit cycle pass on their status, affiliations, and norms to their successors and create a feedback loop, thus reinforcing exclusionary structures and naturalizing their epistemic and ontological reality.

Here, I might return to the example of the *Romani Rai* to illustrate how such authority can be inherited rather than earned through lived experience. The title of Romani Rai, as previously explained, was often self-ascribed or conferred by other Rais within tightly knit academic or social circles, rather than granted by Romani communities themselves (Lee 2000, pp 129-156). A striking case is that of Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, a writer and editor known for his work on naturalist topics, who had no prior expertise on Romani life. Nevertheless, with the support of members of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS), he compiled and published *The Gypsies of Britain* in 1944, a work containing a dedication in Welsh Romani dialect. The book was warmly received in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (JGLS) and celebrated as a long-awaited, authoritative text on British Gypsies. Soon after, Vesey-Fitzgerald joined the GLS, began contributing to the JGLS, and reviewed works on Romani topics (Lee, 2000, pp 129-156). Despite his outsider status and lack of background, he was quickly accepted as a Romani Rai. In doing so, he inherited not only the symbolic status conferred by the GLS but also absorbed and perpetuated their racialized frameworks. This example, I believe, highlights how epistemic inheritance functions: authority is reproduced within exclusive networks that treat legitimacy as transferable property, bypassing the lived realities and voices of Romani people.

Furthermore, this dynamic is most evident in elite educational and research institutions, where epistemic power is institutionalized. Graduates from such spaces do not merely represent a perspective, they also often become gatekeepers of legitimacy itself. Their bodies are not scrutinized in the same way; they are allowed to speak as subjects, not spectacles. They become default knowers, while others must prove their right to even speak. Importantly, as I must stress, the Epistemic-Merit Cycle is self-legitimizing; it reproduces itself not through conspiracy but through recursive validation: those who hold epistemic authority define standards, produce the literature, teach the frameworks, and then evaluate future participants by those same standards. This is how epistemic injustice becomes invisible: what appears to be neutral merit is actually a heavily mediated form of symbolic rule.

### 3.4 The Nature and Implications of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle

Nonetheless, despite the general aim of anti-discrimination laws and growing popularity of meritocracy, the imposition of norms measuring some kind of merit regulated by any dominant group might be committing what I call symbolic containment; that is, the elevation of specific markers of merit arising from a situated position—such as "academic language" or the myth of depersonalized objectivity—as universal signs of epistemic legitimacy. In other words, certain selected criteria come to be treated as the official indicators of credibility, even though they are not inherently more valid or truthful, yet, they are upheld as the only acceptable way to demonstrate knowledge. Through this symbolic codification, institutions do not only define markers of merit, but ultimately, determine which ideas matter and whose bodies are allowed to speak them.

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Here, I must press my belief that knowledge begins in the body. In like manner to Merleau-Ponty (2013), I argue that knowledge is not a detached representation but an embodied openness to the world, that is, a lived orientation toward a world already saturated with meaning. The body does not just take up space, it also produces it; it is precisely through the body that time becomes lived, emotion becomes intelligible, and relation becomes real. Our capacities to know, speak, and act are grounded in, as Fanon (2008, pp. 82-108) would call it, a "corporeal schema", a pre-reflective structure through which we locate ourselves, interpret others, and inhabit the world. Yet symbolic containment violently disrupts the lived experience of knowing. The body of the speaker—racialized, gendered, classed—becomes a site of scrutiny, suspicion, and regulation. Rather than focusing on what is said, institutions still evaluate *who* is speaking, mapping epistemic legitimacy onto bodies already trained, credentialed, and socially positioned to perform legitimacy "correctly." The result is a form of epistemic gatekeeping that disqualifies entire lifeworlds from participating meaningfully in knowledge production.

Despite the fact that there are many who are marginalized yet meet such standards, to speak under these conditions requires more than 'having merit'—it demands performance. The subject must disembody their knowledge, repackage it in institutionally legible codes, and erase the very context from which that knowledge arose. Symbolic codification thus filters not only ideas but also the people permitted to express them; the knowing subject is no longer an embodied being-in-the-world, but a disembodied voice performing institutional fluency. This is not mere exclusion, but epistemic displacement.

My claims echo Serene Khader's (2011) critique of "discursive incorporation", arguing that efforts to empower marginalized subjects often impose external frameworks that misrecognize their agency, permitting expression only when it aligns with institutional norms. As

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she warns, this form of incorporation can undermine real empowerment by translating context-bound knowledge into sanitized, liberal terms. The result is not epistemic pluralism, but an echo chamber that mistakes conformity for consent. As Khader greatly puts it, "Attempts to promote autonomy often involve endorsing values that are foreign to the individuals whose lives are being improved. When this happens, it is not clear that the person has been empowered rather than merely changed" (Khader, 2011, p. 24). This insight reframes symbolic inclusion as a possible mode of epistemic harm, where empowerment operates more like assimilation than recognition. Thus, ultimately, the cycle does not simply deny recognition; it demands disembodiment. In doing so, it obscures the very conditions under which knowing becomes possible.

Further, I must shortly describe the nature of this performance. As already stated, participation is conditional on adopting dominant norms; one may speak, but only if they speak in ways already legible to power. Yet, even when marginalized knowers pass, their identity is called into question. In this light, I must turn to Homi Bhabha's (2004, pp. 85-92) notion of mimicry, and to his suggestion that the marginalized are allowed to appear "almost the same, but not quite." That is, even if one performs imposed constructions of merit or knowledge, one's body stays classed, racialized, and gendered. Consequently, the racialized body becomes not simply disqualified, but overdetermined by colonial schemas. As Fanon (2008, p. 82) puts it, "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me

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to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.' Fanon reveals how the body, which for Merleau-Ponty is the ground of openness, becomes under colonialism a surface of overcoding, constantly interpreted, mistrusted, and fixed. Instead of being recognized as knowers, racialized subjects become figures defined by others. This shift is not just about perception, as it violently shuts down people's fundamental capacity to participate in knowledge.

You see it in how the world treats Romani people: how we are framed, how we are spoken about, how we are not allowed to speak for ourselves. Consider the construction and popular use of the word Gypsy by the gadjo. Gypsy, a catch-all term that erases lived identities, imposes a racialized and externally constructed label that reinforces stereotypes of Roma (and of groups like the Sinti, Lom, or Irish Travellers—many of whom do not identify as Roma but are categorized as Gypsy by the gadjo) as criminal, nomadic, and uncivilized in opposition to the white European (Matache 2016). Thus, it shows the persistence of white institutional power to define and control minority identities and voices. Further, the constant reproduction of colonial stereotypes like: "criminal," "exotic," "backward"— they do more than describe us. They are contaminants. The gadjo do not only misunderstand us; they overwrite us. We were not asked; we were categorized. We were not listened to; we were studied. Our stories, passed down through generations with care and memory, were dismissed as myth. Our oral traditions, our songs and sayings and lived philosophy, were seen as non-rigorous — not because they lacked meaning, but because they did not conform to institutional styles of reason. We were not engaged as epistemic subjects, but managed as objects of knowledge. The scholar came before the

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listener. Even today, our knowledge—when it is recognized at all—is filtered through paternalistic frameworks that demand we speak in dominant languages, adopt dominant styles, and leave our own epistemic grammar behind. Yet, our knowing is not reducible to text or data. It lives in us—in our bodies, our breath, our gatherings. It survives despite centuries of being ignored, distorted, or absorbed into someone else's theory—and to reclaim that knowledge is not just a right,  but an act of resistance.

To tie back with the beginning of this section, the consequences of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle are far-reaching. Certain forms of knowledge, those rooted in lived experience, oral tradition, or collective memory, are treated as inherently suspect, meanwhile institutionally fluent expressions are granted automatic epistemic elevation. What appears to be an open, meritocratic system of evaluation is, in fact, a closed loop of epistemic reproduction: it translates inherited social and economic privilege into the appearance of earned intellectual authority and converts symbolic exclusion into structural legitimacy. This is the core of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle; not a breakdown in how we value knowledge, but a system that functions precisely by restricting who may define, produce, and authorize it. It starts with a single question, asked again and again and again in classrooms, journals, conferences, *et al*:  Who do we allow to count as a knower?

As Elizabeth Anderson (1995) and Sandra Harding (2015) argue, epistemic justice requires redefining objectivity itself; not as neutrality, but as a pluralistic process enriched by diverse perspectives. That is, the world is best understood through multiple, sometimes incommensurable, lenses. But the Epistemic-Merit Cycle shows why even inclusionary gestures often fail because what counts as legitimate inclusion is still being defined by those with epistemic inheritance rights. What starts as arbitrary advantage becomes recognized merit, then epistemic capital, then definitional power. This cycle undermines fairness, reshapes democracy

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itself, and distorts the epistemic foundations of democratic life. Breaking this cycle demands more than expanding access; it requires transforming the symbolic codes that determine what is legible, valuable, and rational. It means shifting from a model of mimicry to one of epistemic co-creation, where marginalized knowledge is not simply allowed, but authorized as constitutive in the approximation of truth itself. Maybe, then, the task is not just to ask "Who speaks?" but rather "What kind of world does this speech create?" Only then can we imagine institutions that move toward true epistemic democracy.

## 4. The Failure of Merit: Scanlon's Criteria and the Epistemic-Merit Cycle

Having shown how meritocracy works, we are now in a position to ask whether such a system can be morally justified by holding it to a serious standard of evaluation. T. M. Scanlon (2018) offers a powerful way to ask this question: he outlines three conditions that any system which produces inequality must meet in order to be morally justifiable. Simply put, I argue that meritocracy does not meet these conditions. In fact, when we view it through the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, its failure becomes even clearer—not just in terms of unequal outcomes, but in how it shapes whose voices are recognized, whose knowledge is valued, and whose lives are listened to. This section takes each part of Scanlon's framework to show that meritocracy does not just fail in how it's carried out but it fails because of how it defines value and legitimacy in the first place.

### 4.1 Institutional Justification

Scanlon's first criterion requires that any institution producing inequality must justify itself by adequate explanations of its sustainment, appealing to, for example, excellence, social necessity or universal benefit (Scanlon 2018). In other words, a system that causes inequality

must show that it serves the good of everyone. On the surface, educational meritocracies present themselves as engines of social progress, rewarding talent and effort to benefit society as a whole. However, through the lens of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, this logic begins to fall apart: the system only rewards certain kinds of bodies and a narrow kind of knowledge, systematically excluding those who do not fit its definition of "merit." Who decides what counts as "social necessity"? Meritocratic institutions, as I have argued, elevate specific forms of epistemic markers, those that conform to dominant symbolic codes, while discrediting and erasing others. The claim that these institutions serve the "common good" rests on an epistemically exclusionary foundation: it presumes that only knowledge already shaped, filtered, and authorized by dominant institutions is valuable to society. Romani ways of knowing—embodied, oral, collective—are not just ignored; they are actively disqualified. Our truths are rendered illegible not because they lack depth, but because they are not written in the language of the "Rai". The terms of epistemic legitimacy are built on a racialized, colonial archive designed to justify exclusion. Thus, the system's justificatory claim is circular: it defines benefit only in terms that preserve those already empowered to define. It serves those it already recognizes as knowers and frames necessity through the lens of inherited epistemic privilege. A system that marginalizes entire lifeworlds while claiming some sort of universal justification cannot pass this first test. The notion of "benefit" it invokes is epistemically gerrymandered—structured to exclude, silence, and contain. In other words, meritocracy's institutional purpose is not social necessity—it is epistemic control.

## 4.2 Procedural Fairness

Scanlon's (2018) second requirement is that the procedures used to allocate opportunities must be fair: selection criteria must both reflect institutional goals and be applied equally. Here,

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meritocracy's failure is even more glaring. Procedural fairness is not only undermined by unequal access, but more fundamentally by the symbolic codification that predetermines what counts as meritorious. Within the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, procedural norms are neither neutral nor universally intelligible—they are embedded with classed, racialized, and colonial legacies of expression. The expectation of disembodied articulation, detached objectivity, and institutional fluency is not some universal baseline. It is a historically contingent epistemic habitus that privileges those already embedded in dominant symbolic systems. Hence, procedural fairness is illusory: merit is always already measured by the metric of institutional proximity. The Roma scholar who must translate oral histories into sanitized policy briefs, the first-generation student who must erase the affective cadence of their knowledge in favor of academic detachment—these figures are not playing a fair game, but are subject to epistemic mimicry: the demand to reproduce dominant forms of knowing and being without access to the cultural infrastructure that sustains them. They are being asked to mimic, to code-switch, to self-erase. This is *epistemic mimicry*–the demand to approximate dominant forms of knowing in order to be seen at all, but still never quite the same. In Scanlonian terms, the failure of procedural fairness is clear. When the very procedures that determine merit are designed around dominant expectations—expectations built without certain groups, and often against them—there can be no equal footing. The game is fixed and the rules were written without certain communities' grammar.

## 4.3 Substantive Opportunity: Eligibility Without Access

The final and perhaps most pressing moral question is whether those excluded ever had a real chance to succeed. For Scanlon (2018), justice is not just about being technically eligible, it is also about having a genuine opportunity to meet the criteria. But when viewed through the

Epistemic-Merit Cycle, it becomes clear that this condition is systematically denied by the very structures that claim to uphold it. Meritocratic systems tend to hide just how layered and uneven opportunity really is, how privilege builds over time through things like identity, upbringing, time and space, and access. Like I have explained, a child who grows up being read to in multiple languages, who travels with her parents, and who is taught early on how to make arguments and cite sources is not just given a chance to succeed. Rather, she is immersed in a whole way of thinking that is already aligned with what "merit" is supposed to look like. However, for children from marginalized backgrounds, whose knowledge and ways of understanding the world do not align with dominant norms, success often demands self-alteration. They must translate, adapt, or erase parts of themselves simply to be perceived as capable. What we often call "opportunity" in these systems is, in truth, a conditional invitation: not to belong as they are, but to conform. As the old saying goes, "if you cannot beat them, join them"—but in doing so, they are asked to leave essential parts of themselves behind. For Roma communities in particular, substantive opportunity is not simply out of reach due to a lack of resources and opportunity gaps—it is systematically denied before we even begin. Our ways of knowing and being are disqualified in advance. The symbolic infrastructure of merit—what styles, expressions, and knowledge forms are allowed to count—shuts us out by design. One cannot fairly compete in a game that refuses to recognize the legitimacy of one's language, lived experience, or epistemic grammar.

**4.4 Toward an Epistemically Just Framework**

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Thus, meritocracy fails all three of Scanlon's criteria. It is not justified in institutional purpose, it lacks procedural fairness, and it forecloses substantive opportunity. But it fails even more profoundly when seen through the Epistemic-Merit Cycle: it not only produces inequality but legitimizes it through a performative spectacle of fairness. It converts embodied marginalization into disembodied deficiency and distills cultural capital into epistemic right and calls it merit. If we are to take Scanlon's framework seriously, then we must not just reform the metrics of merit, but we must interrogate and reconfigure the epistemic foundations on which those metrics rest. This requires moving beyond redistribution toward epistemic reconstruction: a transformation of who gets to define value, authority, and truth. In short, and without resorting to cliché, the problem is not just that the gates are closed; it is that the gate itself is built upon stolen bricks—taken from worlds we have long refused to recognize as epistemically real. To meet the moral demands Scanlon outlines, we must not only open the gate –we must confront whose knowledge was excluded to build it, and whose truths must now be centered to dismantle its design.

## 5. Reframing Merit: Objections, Responses, and Epistemic Reconstruction

A rigorous critique of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle must anticipate and respond to potential objections—not only to strengthen its claims but to acknowledge the complexity of building more just systems. Critics might argue that despite its imperfections, meritocracy still offers the best available mechanism for distributing opportunity. Others may worry that emphasizing epistemic pluralism risks destabilizing shared standards for truth or fairness. This section addresses those concerns and draws on analytic framework.

### 5.1 Objections to the Epistemic-Merit Cycle

One common pushback may be that the Epistemic-Merit Cycle exaggerates how biased institutions really are. One might argue that academic and professional standards are not designed to exclude people, but to keep the focus on seeking truth rather than subjectivity. From this perspective, merit-based evaluation protects epistemic integrity by ensuring that knowledge is not diluted by relativism or identity-based partiality.

A second objection suggests that the critique risks relativism, or essentializing marginalized identities. If Romani or other non-dominant communities are always framed as excluded or as carriers of alternative epistemologies, the critique may unintentionally fix them into the role of the "epistemic other," denying the diversity of thought and internal disagreement within those communities.

A third concern challenges the practicality of alternatives. Critics may argue that abolishing meritocratic systems could lead to chaos or favoritism, raising questions like: What would replace them? Could non-merit-based criteria be fair or effective? Would quotas suffice? Or, simply, how can we justly determine who gets to participate, hold power, gain opportunities, or influence policy?

**5.2 Responses: Epistemic Co-Design**

In order to answer the question, "Are not standards necessary to protect epistemic integrity?", we must ask: neutral *by whose measure*? Creative thinking requires that we flip the frame. Suppose we imagine an institution where knowledge is evaluated not by mastery of dominant styles, but by one's ability to express insight in lived, affective, or communal terms. A conference where oral storytelling, collective memory, or musical interpretation are forms of scholarly proof. A journal whose peer reviewers prioritize clarity of harm or healing over citation

metrics. Such spaces might sound utopian, but the present system already is, just for someone else. The Epistemic-Merit Cycle does not reject rigor—it expands the imaginative terrain of what rigor can look like. Rigor need not mean detachment. It can mean reflexivity. It can mean a commitment to understanding power and positionality. It can mean using methods that bring us closer to justice, not just control. When institutions use "rigor" as a gatekeeping mechanism, they are not protecting truth. They are protecting themselves.

Next, I may respond to critics of relativism and essentialism. Some may fear that emphasizing marginalized standpoints collapses into relativism ("anything goes"), or essentialism ("all Romani people think alike"). But this objection misunderstands the nature and goals of epistemic justice. Similarly to Richard Rorty (1989), I offer a pragmatic understanding of truth, not as correspondence to some metaphysical order, but as what "works" in a given community: what solves problems, what reduces suffering, what generates solidarity. From this angle, truth is not weakened when rooted in human needs and consequences, rather, it becomes more responsive. Under Rorty's view, epistemic justice is not a threat to rational inquiry; it is its deepening. To say, for example, that climate change is real is not to impose a view from nowhere—it is to respond meaningfully to overwhelming evidence and urgent harm. Falsehoods like climate denial or racism are not "alternative truths"; they are epistemically irresponsible because they fail to be useful in the pragmatic, collective sense. Thus, expanding the range of who counts as a knower is not a rejection of standards—it is a rethinking of which standards help us build a better and more just world.

Sandra Harding's (2015) standpoint epistemology reinforces this. Marginalized perspectives are not epistemically valuable because they are pure or unified—they are valuable because they expose the partiality and blind spots of dominant systems. In other words, they *see*

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things others cannot. Harding argues, as I have been throughout this paper, that knowledge is always socially situated, and that critical inquiry is strongest when it begins from those most affected by injustice. This complements Gloria Anzaldúa's (2012) "borderlands epistemology," which refuses fixed categories and embraces contradiction. The knowledge that emerges from in-between spaces—between languages, between cultures, between recognition and erasure—is not essentialist, but radically plural. To center Roma voices, then, is not to collapse them into a single narrative; it is to let their multiplicity speak and reshape the conditions under which knowledge itself becomes possible.

Lastly, I turn to worries regarding the feasibility of alternatives. This objection rightly names a real concern: that removing merit-based criteria might simply replace one form of arbitrariness with another. After all, any selection system requires some criteria, and any criteria risk reinforcing power in new ways. Here, I do not propose a simple replacement, but a paradigmatic shift. First, we must recognize that quotas—while sometimes useful—are insufficient. They still require marginalized individuals to succeed within a framework of institutional mimicry: to perform neutrality, to code-switch, to leave parts of themselves outside the room. They help diversify *faces*, but not *foundations*. Second, I turn to Alexander Guerrero's (2024) proposal of lottocracy, a system where representatives are selected via randomized lotteries. Lottocracy bypasses entrenched hierarchies and disrupts elite capture by decoupling authority from credentialism. Drawing inspiration from this model, I propose a hybrid institutional framework: abandon strict meritocratic selection in favor of *deliberative lottery-based inclusion*, in which a portion of participants are randomly selected regardless of institutional pedigree. Yes, this creates trade-offs. But it invites those excluded by traditional gatekeeping to reshape epistemic agendas from within.

Crucially, as I must stress again, this does not mean abandoning standards entirely—but relocating them. Let us hold institutions to the standard of epistemic justice, not institutional reproduction. Let us judge systems by the harms they avert, the solidarities they sustain, and the voices they help amplify. A better system may not be perfect—but it can be fairer, more open, and more honest about whose knowledge has historically counted, and why. A shift toward epistemic co-design demands rethinking everything from university admissions and grant review panels to curriculum design and public policy formation. It challenges liberalism's emphasis on procedural neutrality, replacing it with a normatively rich commitment to situated justice constructed through real encounters with difference, vulnerability, and world-making.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Reconstruction of Merit

This thesis has examined the relationship between meritocracy and democratic life by focusing not only on distributive injustice, but on the quite deeper epistemic structures that authorize who may speak, who is believed, and what counts as knowledge. I have argued that meritocracy functions as more than a system for allocating opportunity—it is a symbolic regime that performs fairness while reproducing inequality, a system of epistemic sorting and containment that converts privilege into legitimacy and silence into failure.

Through the framework of the Epistemic-Merit Cycle, I have shown how advantage accumulates and is codified through three interlocking mechanisms: (1) authoritative definition which privileges dominant forms of knowledge; (2) compound contingency, which amplifies intersecting privileges; and (3) epistemic inheritance rights, which consolidate authority among those already positioned to define value. Drawing on thinkers such as Miranda Fricker, Homi

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Bhabha, or Merleau-Ponty, I have demonstrated how meritocracy disembodies knowledge and disciplines the knowing subject into institutional legibility, turning epistemic recognition into a test of conformity rather than truth.

## 6.2 Responding to Objections

Throughout, I have engaged with potential objections to this critique, from the defense of neutral standards to concerns about epistemic relativism or essentialism, these counterarguments reflect the stakes of questioning deeply embedded ideals. Yet, as Fricker's work on testimonial and hermeneutical injustice makes clear, epistemic exclusion is not an error, but a feature of systems that discredit certain voices by design. Harding's standpoint theory and Anzaldúa's borderlands epistemology respond to these concerns not by rejecting rigor, but by redefining it, showing how pluralism, contradiction, and lived experience enhance rather than dilute the pursuit of knowledge.

Khader's (2011) critique of discursive incorporation further pushes us to see how inclusion alone is insufficient when it demands mimicry, translation, or erasure. The problem is not simply that marginalized people are excluded, but that their knowledge is deformed in the very act of being admitted. True empowerment cannot be predicated on conformity; it must be premised on epistemic agency, the right to speak in one's own body.

## 6.3 From Critique to Co-Design

And so, while much of this thesis has been a negative argument—showing how meritocracy fails morally, structurally, and epistemologically—it ends with a positive claim. Against symbolic containment and epistemic erasure, I briefly and not too ambitiously propose a

model of epistemic co-creation. Co-creation is not mere inclusion; it is not about adding marginalized voices into pre-existing frameworks. It is about remaking the frameworks themselves—through shared authorship, mutual recognition, and the radical reconfiguration of authority.

Drawing from feminist epistemology, this model embraces the idea that knowledge rises from dialogue among irreducibly different standpoints. Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* (2012) offers a vision of this hybridity—where contradictions are not flattened, but held in tension to generate new insight. As per Khader's (2018) suggestion, justice begins not in projecting universal norms, but in encountering the normative worlds of others with humility and responsiveness. Merit is not a neutral measure, but a cultural invention bound to histories of exclusion. To transform it is to resist epistemic domination by redesigning what counts as value, voice, and reason itself.

To bring this full circle, we return to the epigraph that opened my thesis. As Deleuze writes, "To affirm is not to bear, carry, or harness oneself to that which exists, but... to set free that which lives" (Deleuze, 1983/1962, p. 185). Co-creation, as I have argued, is precisely this Deleuzian gesture. It does not seek access to existing epistemic orders, nor does it ask to be simply heard within inherited frameworks. Instead, it aims to unfasten the suppressed, the disqualified, the living knowledges long confined by the symbolic codes of merit. It seeks not inclusion but liberation—not epistemic repair alone, but ontological creation.

**6.4 Conclusion**

This essay has traced how meritocracy silences under the sign of fairness, how it legitimizes domination through the appearance of merit, and how it demands disembodiment in

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the name of legitimacy. However, it has also shown that another world is possible—not simply by broadening access to existing systems, but by transforming the symbolic, institutional, and epistemic terms on which value is assigned. To move toward epistemic justice is to move from mimicry to authorship, from containment to co-creation, from silence to the act of naming. It is here, in the practice of co-authorship—in the rewriting of legitimacy itself—that democracy may begin again.

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