

Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

Article/Essay Title: “The Problem of Speaking for Others”

Author: Linda Alcoff

Readability: Easy/Moderate

Thesis:

“In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak; nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there” (14).

Key Definitions:

“Crisis of Representation” – In both speaking for and speaking about, we engage in representing the needs of others through our own situated interpretation

“Rituals of speaking” - Discursive practices of speaking or writing which involve not only the text or utterance but their position within a social space

“Autonomous conception of self” – The idea that one’s authentic self is unconnected to others

“Hierarchy of civilizations” – View in which U.S. speakers are positioned as authoritative and knowledgeable, while developing nations are reduced to victims that must be championed

Brief Summary:

The assumed argument is that we can’t speak for others:

1. Where I speak from (social location or social identity) affects both the meaning and truth of what I say; no one can assume to transcend her location. One’s location is epistemically significant; it either authorizes or dis-authorizes what one says. Only those in an oppressed location can speak for those in that particular oppressed location.
2. Certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. The trouble is that if someone from privilege writes on behalf of the oppressed, others listen to the privileged voice and not the voices of the oppressed. The voices of the oppressed are thus silenced and their subject positions are constructed for them (who they are) based on the privileged position.
3. Thus, we cannot speak for others; we can only speak for ourselves and from our locations. Putting it that way may be too strong. I can only speak for myself and only from my location.

The question:

As social theorists, our job is to develop theories that “express and encompass the ideas, needs, and goals of others.” So, when, if ever, is it legitimate to speak for others, especially for those not like me or who are less privileged than I? Should all speaking for others be condemned or just some?

Criticism of the Assumed Argument

Retreat (“I can only speak for myself”) undercuts the possibility of effecting political change.

Retreat approach assumes that I can retreat into my own discrete location and make claims from it as if it is complete and singular. But I can’t; my location is entangled with networks of other locations, politically, socially, epistemically, metaphysically. This assumes a kind of autonomous self, which Alcoff says does not exist.

My practices have an effect on others. If I say that I am speaking only for myself, I avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others.

So, when I “speak for myself” I am re-inscribing the dominant (western, patriarchal, phallographic) way in which my own self and other selves are constituted.

“Speaking for myself” may also be an attempt to avoid criticism, a desire for personal mastery, or a privileged discursive position. The goal is to be immune from criticism and errors, rather than a “desire to advance collective goals.”

In refusing to speak for the oppressed we assume that the oppressed can speak for themselves. But this is not always true.

Result: “speak to” and “with” as much as possible. When needed “speak for” but limit the dangers as much as possible.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Article/Essay Title: “The Problem of Speaking for Others”

Author: Linda Alcoff

Possible Applications:

- Ethics
- Phil Language
- Political Philosophy
- Course or unit on Feminism
- Ethics
- Epistemology, Feminist epistemology
- Stand point theory

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Readings:

Cheshire Calhoun, “Standing for Something,” *Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 5 (1995): 235–60.

Robin DiAngelo, “Nothing to Add: A Challenge to White Silence in Racial Discussions,” *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* 2, no. 1 (January 17, 2017).

Rachel McKinnon, “Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice,” accessed June 28, 2017.

Linda Martín Alcoff, “Sotomayor’s Reasoning,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 122–38.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Nonviolence as Compliance,” *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2015.¹

Film:

Black Like Me

Possible Class Activities:

- Early class introductions/icebreakers where you introduce a fellow student. Ask students to reflect on this activity. How might introducing another person in this way be related to the claims Alcoff makes? How might it differ?
 - Current related conversations in the media and pop culture: Cultural appropriation and the Washington DC football team
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- Kenan Malik, “Opinion | In Defense of Cultural Appropriation,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2017, sec. Opinion.
- Discuss the ethics of creating art about people that are not in your identity group. (ex. white artists who make art about the black experience)
- To introduce standpoint theory, talk about claims that certain people can say and others can't. For example, I can make fun of my sister but you can't!