

## **Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips**

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

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**Article/Essay Title: Missing in Action: Violence, Power, and Discerning Agency**

**Author: Alisa Bierria**

**Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult**

*Uses technical vocabulary, but reads pretty smoothly. Uses strong and accessible examples.*

### **Thesis:**

The intentional actions of traditionally disenfranchised agents are often distorted and criminalized through processes of racist social authoring. However, it is a mistake to conclude that oppression succeeds in stripping away the agency of the disenfranchised altogether. Instead of equating full-blown agency with white or hegemonic agency, we should explore various *agencies* in relation to systems of oppression.

### **Key Definitions:**

*Intention:* Intentions can be described as private mental states, but Bierria stresses that intentions are also communicated and embodied in the action of agents.

*Social Authoring:* The imputation of intentions to other agents such that their actions make sense. Normally, intentions are straightforwardly interpreted in good faith, in terms of desires, beliefs and goals. Example common in philosophy of action: If someone is running in the rain towards a large tree, we can translate their action intentionally by ascribing to them the belief-desire complex “they want to stay dry and think the tree will shade them from the rain.”

*Racist Social Authoring:* An interpretation of another agent’s intentional action that 1) differs from the account an agent would give of her own intentional action, 2) creates a new kind of actor, e.g. “looter” or kind of action, e.g. “looting” in the context of Katrina 3) often facilitated by reasoning designed to reinforce and rationalize systems of domination.

*Disenfranchised agent:* An agent who “sustains a risk of being perceived divergently from her intentions, [and] even when she attempts to clarify, her explanation” is not taken up as authoritative or corrective.

*Hegemonic agent:* An agent whose actions are sanctioned and rationalized by systems of oppression, who holds the power to distort or supplant the narratives that disenfranchised agents provide to make sense of their own action.

*Resistant, transformative agency:* “action intended to fundamentally overturn conditions of systematic oppression, especially (but not exclusively through collective action such as community organizing, movement building or political advocacy.”

*Resistant, alien agency:* “does not seek to transform systematic conditions of oppression, but is resistant in that it facilitates action that is preoccupied with cultivating its own universe of meaning and practice that affirms that which is unvalued- e.g. black life- and is therefore ambivalent about or even encourages its illegibility within the dominant public sphere.”

*Resistant, insurgent agency:* “intentional action in unstable and precarious circumstances that are difficult to escape or alter.” Practices that “subvert but still remain defined by conditions of power” or “hustles” that “require imagination and strategic thinking accessible for use in circumstances in which one is isolated and has few options.”

### **Brief Summary:**

Bierria addresses the following question: “how do we explain scenarios in which there are sustained and systemic divergences between what the agent intends her actions to mean and how others interpret the meaning of her actions?”

-White actors typically enjoy an “enfranchised” status such that “social and institutional power... helps sanction the framework of meaning on which others rely” to make sense of what they are doing.

-Black actors are often disenfranchised, in the sense of the definition above. The actions of black women in particular, Bierria notes, is “filtered through a living archive of scripts, representations and logics that define black women and their actions as criminal, uncontrollable, untrustworthy and pathological.” Example: scripts according to which black women are likely to be victims (or displaced as perpetrators) of violence within minority communities.

-However, Bierria warns against analysis which grants too much power to racist social authoring. We should be careful not to “obscure or discredit the experience and practice of agency by disenfranchised subjects who act intentionally *despite/against/within* conditions of oppression and violence.” Nor should we idealize, or standardize agencies that are backed up by structural oppression.

-New question emerges: To what extent does racist social authoring supplant the intentions and actions of disenfranchised agents? To what extent does agency depend upon social uptake? Are disenfranchised agents “failed” agents, or “non-agents”?

-Conclusion: If there is a failure, it is not on the part of disenfranchised agents. It is possible to exercise a kind of genuine agency even if one’s actions are not socially recognized or validated. Agency is a heterogeneous concept. See possible agencies

above.

**Possible Applications:**

- Philosophy of action
- Philosophy of language (especially discussion of uptake and pragmatics of speech)
- Oppression / power
- Philosophy of race
- Feminist philosophy
- Moral psychology

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- C. Riley Snorton, “On the Question of Who’s Out in Hip Hop” (especially in its discussion of modes of resistance to racist and homophobic narratives)
- Susan Bordo “Anorexia Nervosa: Psychopathology as the Crystalization of Culture”
- Resources providing context for Hurricane Katrina, 10 years later:
  - “Portrait of a City 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina” PBS documentary
  - “10 Years After Katrina” (NYT)
  - “Remembering Hurricane Katrina 10 Years Later” (Democracy Now)
- [“11 Stunning Images Highlight the Double Standard of Reactions to Riots Like Baltimore”](#) (Mic.com)
- Maria Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception”
- Nabina Liebow, “Internalized Oppression and Its varied Moral Harms; Self-Perceptions of Reduced Agency and Criminality”
- Abu-Odeh D. “Fat stigma and public health: a theoretical framework and ethical analysis.”
- Serene Khader, *Adaptive Preference and Women’s Empowerment*

**Activities:**

- Find news articles that apply different standards to different social groups
  - E.g. treatment of the crack vs. opioid epidemics
- Find examples of the different kinds of agency discussed
- In a unit on resistance to oppression, it could serve as a response to the (incorrect) interpretation of Foucault on which since “power is everywhere” it’s impossible to resist.
- Draw connections between testimonial injustice and diminishment of agency