

## Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

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**Article/Essay Title:** “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing”

**Author:** Kristie Dotson

**Readability:** Moderate (though verging on difficult because it is somewhat jargon heavy)

**Thesis:**

“Much has been said about the existence of silencing, though relatively little has been done to provide an on-the-ground account of the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced. This paper is a step toward providing a mechanism for identifying on-the-ground practices of silencing.

“I claim that attempting to give a reading of epistemic violence in circumstances where silencing occurs can help distinguish the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to giving testimony. I will demonstrate this claim by first offering an account of epistemic violence as it occurs in testimony that can be used to demarcate practices of silencing. Second, I will use this definition of epistemic violence to identify two different practices of silencing testimony offered from oppressed positions in society. The two kinds of silencing I will identify are testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering.” (236-7).

**Key Definitions:**

Epistemic Violence – “Epistemic violence is a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance” (242).

Pernicious Ignorance – “Pernicious ignorance is a reliable ignorance or a counterfactual incompetence that, in a given context, is harmful” (242).

Reliable Ignorance – “Reliable ignorance is ignorance that is consistent or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources” (238).

Speaker Vulnerability/Dependency – “Speakers are vulnerable in linguistic exchanges because an audience may or may not meet the linguistic needs of a given speaker in a given exchange. ... [T]o communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us.” (238).

Instances of Silencing – “An instance of silencing concerns a single, non-repetitive instance of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker” (241).

Practices of Silencing – “A practice of silencing, on my account, concerns a repetitive, reliable occurrence of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker that finds its origin in a more pervasive ignorance. ... [T]he distinguishing characteristic between a practice of silencing

and an instance of silencing is the kind of ignorance that causes audiences to fail in a linguistic exchange. A practice of silencing is caused by *reliable ignorance*, whereas such a condition does not exist in an instance of silencing” (241).

Testimonial Quieting – “The problem of testimonial quieting occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower” (242).

Testimonial Smothering – “The truncating of one’s own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (249).

Situated Ignorance – “Situated ignorance follows from one’s social position and/or epistemic location with respect to some domain of knowledge. It is an ‘unknowing’ that is prompted by social positioning that fosters significant epistemic differences among diverse groups” (248).

### **Brief Summary:**

Dotson begins with a brief introduction that situates this paper in the broader literature on ‘epistemic violence’ and ‘silencing.’ The objective of this paper, Dotson tells us, is to get a more precise, granular, and grounded picture of silencing/epistemic violence as a form of oppression by providing an account of epistemic violence (in regards to testimony), and then identifying two different practices of silencing: (1) testimonial quieting, and (2) testimonial smothering.

### Section 1 - Epistemic Violence:

Here, Dotson gives us her account of epistemic violence, which “is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (238) [see definitions above for more]. This account builds off the idea that speakers are dependent—and therefore in a state of vulnerability—on their audiences. In order to “be heard” in the rich sense, speakers require their audiences to communicatively reciprocate. Epistemic violence occurs when audiences fail a speaker in this regard, owing to a pernicious—that is reliable and harmful *in this specific context*—ignorance.

Dotson takes on three objections in order to clarify her view. These are (1) all ignorance is harmful; (2) her definition of epistemic violence is too broad, because of a consequentialist approach to harm; and (3) her account dismisses the possibility that instances of silencing that do not result from reliable ignorance are not harmful. Dotson dismisses (1) quickly, and in taking on (2) and (3) clarifies her view. Namely, she explains how “epistemic violence is a broad practice,” and it does not require intention, nor capacity. Also, she clarifies that she takes “harm” to include both specifically linguistic harms, as well as non-linguistic harms like property damage. And lastly, practices of silencing relate to epistemic violence in a direct—definitional—way, whereas instances of silencing need not.

Here are two helpful quotations that summarizes the section well:

[t]he state of reliable ignorance insures that an epistemic agent will consistently fail to track certain truths. If this failure to track the truth also happens to cause harm, then it is a pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance that causes failures in linguistic exchanges constitutes epistemic violence, on my account, not simply because of the harm one suffers as a result, but because epistemic violence institutes a practice of silencing. (241)

Epistemic violence is a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance is a reliable ignorance or a counterfactual incompetence that, in a given context, is harmful. Children are not exempt from demonstrating pernicious ignorance and, thereby, are not exempt from acting in ways that are epistemically violent. Intentions and culpability do not determine epistemic violence in testimony. Reliable ignorance, harm, and the failed linguistic exchange itself determine epistemic violence. (242)

## Section 2 – Practices of Silencing: Two Testimonial Oppressions:

In this section, Dotson outlines two types of testimonial oppression, each of which constitutes a practice of silencing, and hence epistemic violence.

### Testimonial Quieting:

The first she calls *testimonial quieting* [see above for definition], which she says is illustrated in Patricia Hill Collins's work, particularly her *Black Feminist Thought*. There, Collins claims "that by virtue of her being a U.S. black woman she will systematically be undervalued as a knower. This undervaluing is a way in which Collins and other black women's dependencies as speakers are not being met" (242). Dotson gets in to this example, explaining the different mechanisms, such as harmful "controlling images" or stereotypes, at play. This type of mechanism demonstrates how a reliable ignorance need not be a simple lack of knowledge, but is more often an active practice of unknowing (which has been described by Charles Mills and others). Importantly, Dotson shows how her account can accommodate the variety of harms that might result from testimonial quieting, and how identifying these harms is a context-dependent exercise.

### Testimonial Smothering:

Dotson calls the second kind of testimonial oppression she identifies *testimonial smothering*. She says that this testimonial smothering, "ultimately, is the truncating of one's own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (244). This occurs "because the speaker perceives one's immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony" (244).

Dotson identifies three circumstances that routinely exist in instances of smothering. These are "1) the content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky; 2) the audience must demonstrate testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony to the speaker; and 3) testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance"

(244). And while Dotson says that when this occurs a speaker “smothers” *their own* testimony, she highlights that this should be seen as a type of “coerced silencing.”

To explain “unsafe testimony,” Dotson uses the example—coming from Kimberlé Crenshaw—of the silence around domestic violence in some “nonwhite communities.” As Dotson explains, “it is because testimony about domestic violence within a given context can be seen as unsafe and risky [because of the risk of reinforcing damaging stereotypes] that there is pressure to remain silent with respect to it” (244-5). When a speaker capitulates to these pressures, testimonial smothering exists.

To explain the second circumstance—when an audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of testimony—Dotson introduces two terms, *accurate intelligibility* and *testimonial competence*. Accurate intelligibility “refers to an audience’s ability to understand the content of proffered testimony along with her/his ability to detect a failure to understand” (245). Testimonial competence is the speaker’s “positive assessment of an audience’s ability to find potential testimony accurately intelligible” (245). Testimonial *incompetence*, then, is the failure of an audience “to demonstrate to the speaker that they will find the proffered testimony accurately intelligible” (245). Dotson uses the example of a layperson listening to a lecture on nuclear physics, as well as racist microaggressions displayed during conversations about race, to explain the intricacies of these terms. When an audience demonstrates perceived testimonial incompetence to a speaker with respect to a certain topic, this can lead a speaker to avoid speaking on that topic, and therefore an instance of testimonial smothering.

To explain the third circumstance—when the testimonial incompetence detected appears to follow from pernicious ignorance—Dotson introduces the idea of *situated ignorance*. “Situated ignorance follows from one’s social position and/or epistemic location with respect to some domain of knowledge. It is an ‘unknowing’ that is prompted by social positioning that fosters significant epistemic differences among diverse groups” (248).

Dotson brings this all together by claiming that testimonial smothering constitutes epistemic violence because, “when the testimonial content is unsafe and risky, failing to demonstrate testimonial competence to a speaker in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance is equivalent to a failure to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance” (250). That is, “part of the demand on an audience to communicatively reciprocate in linguistic exchanges concerning unsafe, risky content is demonstrating testimonial competence. Without such a demonstration, audiences execute epistemic violence on speakers (251).

### Conclusion:

Wraps things up! Also, Dotson here points to one important upshot of her account. She says:

The understanding of epistemic violence in testimony I have outlined here can aid in identifying practices of silencing by dispersing the burden of proof for proving the

existence of practices of silencing *between* a speaker and an audience as opposed to the sole burden being placed on the speaker who has been silenced. The activity required for locating a practice of silencing becomes less about the victim of the practice and more about the socio-epistemic circumstances of the silencing. (251)

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Author:** Kristie Dotson

**Possible Applications:**

This paper is applicable to several different areas of philosophy, including philosophy of language, Introduction to Philosophy, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy. It would work well in courses that deal with violence, oppression, and justice. It is also great for the topics of “harm ‘as a knower’” and the responsibilities of public discourse (what does it mean to be a good citizen? How high a bar must one meet?). Finally, it would work well in a Bioethics course in the context of testimony from PoC about their pain.

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

Interview with Kristie Dotson: <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/01/kristie-dotson/>

Robin DiAngelo. 2011. “White Fragility.” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*. 3(3): 54-70.

Miranda Fricker. 2009. “Testimonial Injustice.” In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Kimberlé Krenshaw. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*. 43: 1241–99.

Charles Mills. 2007. “White Ignorance.” In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Iris Marion Young. 2003. “From Guilt to Solidarity: Sweatshops and Political Responsibility.” *Dissent*. 50(2): 39-44. Would work well in a conversation about whether you are demonstrating solidarity.

Also would work really well in conjunction with implicit bias literature, culpable ignorance, porn and silencing, hermeneutic injustice, and ally literature (especially blog posts about being a good ally).

“Beyond Mansplaining: A New Lexicon of Misogynist Trolling Behaviors.”  
<http://flavorwire.com/511063/beyond-mansplaining-a-new-lexicon-of-misogynist-trolling-behaviors>

“Everyday Feminism – Intersectional Feminism for Your Everyday Life.”  
<http://everydayfeminism.com/>

“Rachel McKinnon on Allies & Active Bystanders.” <http://www.podcastchart.com/podcasts/the-unmute-podcast/episodes/episode-006-rachel-mckinnon-on-allies-active-bystanders>

### **Possible Class Activities:**

Possible example of testimonial smothering: “1970: A First-Person Account of the First Gay Pride March.” <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/1970-a-first-person-account-of-the-first-gay-pride-march-6429338>

Place students into groups and have them come up with examples of testimonial silencing/quieting. Analyze as a group with focus on each of the three conditions.

Come up with an example and connect it to other course ideas.

Talk about whether there are any times when you should smother yourself.

Talk about the work of some art and activist spaces in relation to silencing and quieting. What are the pragmatics of talking and not talking about some topics?

Examples of “lower stakes” testimonial smothering (which might be relatable for many students) include: what you post on social media and what you don’t, as well as Thanksgiving home visits.

### **What traditional texts might this text replace?**

This text is a newer area of philosophy and doesn’t necessarily replace a traditional topic.