

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (Karen Rice)

Article/Essay Title: “Sotomayor’s Reasoning”

Author: Linda Martin Alcoff

Readability: Easy, clearly written, includes many concrete examples and addresses common, politically relevant concerns

Thesis: Social identities are relevant to one’s ability to know because they structure one’s snap judgments and associations, and as long as one adopts a hermeneutic account of social identities, one can still make sense of individual variation and possibilities for improvement within an identity group.

Key Definitions:

- Thin-slicing: “rapid judgments that short-circuit the normal time requirements of rational deliberation by filtering a small number of relevant factors from a large number of variables.” (127)
- Sensation transference: “buying preferences for products are affected by a transfer of sensation that consumers have about the packaging of a product to the product after we buy it” (131)
- Objective identity: “the aggregate of how [one] is seen by others...[and] empirically measurable structures of power and by the history of meanings conferred on visible features” (135)
- Subjective identity: “what [one] *conceive[s]* one]self to be” (132)
- Hermeneutic horizon (from Gadamer): “a substantive, perspectival location from which the individual looks out at the world; thus it is open and dynamic, inconstant motion both temporally and spatially” (135) Or, more concretely: ““The ever-growing and changing kaleidoscope of congealed experiences from which one makes sense of new experiences.” (135)

Brief Summary:

- I. **Stage setting:**
Alcoff begins by considering in detail a speech that now Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor gave, in which she defended the claim that one’s social identity makes a difference in the content and quality of one’s judgments. Sotomayor’s statements caused an uproar, and she recanted them in her confirmation hearings for her appointment to the Supreme Court. Relatedly, during the 2008 US presidential election, many people expressed worries about people voting for Barak Obama simply because he was black, claiming that personal behavior and record should be relevant to one’s assessment, not group identity. Alcoff points out,

however, that social identity deeply structures the electoral process, from gerrymandering to debates over suffrage for convicted women, convicted felons and more.

Her summary: “[In political discourse] **the relationship between identity and judgment is widely accepted...and yet we require its persistent disavowal.**” She calls it a “dismal state of public discourse in the United States on the relationship of social identities to questions of judgment.” (125)

II. Helpful crystallization of the worries animating a rejection of identities as relevant to judgment:

“Three distinct but related claims:

(1) that to make social identity relevant in public deliberation would result in a reductionism and an essentializing of identity itself, as if those who are an identity share a point of view;

(2) that the incursion of identities into deliberation would reduce argumentation to the kind one does to advance a predetermined interest...and

(3) that it is possible to transcend one’s social identity, or at least neutralize it.” (126-127)

I. **First site of intervention: “Correct the overly volitional accounts of reasoning...especially as an entirely conscious or transparent operation”** (127)

a. Thin-slicing, *Blink*, and other snap judgment examples

i. Rapid cognition is important, and it can be more or less accurate.

b. Unconscious attitudes and associations affect how we interact, and these unconscious associations both take as their subject matter one’s social identities and are shaped by one’s social identities.

c. Alcoff rejects a pessimistic conclusion about these connections, claiming that through increased awareness and ongoing training, at least some of these are alterable.

Teaching note: establishing the exact connection that Alcoff draws between thin-slicing and identities might be useful, as this goes by quickly.

II. **Second site of intervention: “We need a more developed account of what such identities are”** (132)

a. One’s overall set of identities is composed of objective identities and subjective identities, “these can be aligned, or unaligned, and...neither should be viewed as infeasible” (134)

b. The objective identities create tension with ‘a classically liberal model of selfhood’, since they are out of our volitional control. (133), but “by stressing that identities have both objective and subjective aspects, in interaction, we can avoid losing sight of the agency that individuals possess in negotiating their identities given their context.” (135)

c. It is useful to characterize identities as establishing hermeneutical horizons.

i. Horizon: “The ever-growing and changing kaleidoscope of congealed experiences from which one makes sense of new experiences.” (135)

ii. “Group identity has an impact on both the content and orientation of our hermeneutic horizons” (136)

Teaching note: May need to spend extra time on the concept of a hermeneutical horizon, as it is rich, but tricky to grasp (see activities)

- iii. Thus with this less essentializing concept of an identity, identities can establish the relevance of certain events or concerns to people within a group, but still leaves room for individual variation in terms of response or variation.
- III. **Upshot:** “We need more discussions about the epistemological implications of race, class, and gender, to make more visible not less, what is operating in our quick judgment calls.” (137)
- IV. **Twist:** Alcoff reverses the typical claim that considerations of social identity are distorting: “To call for a boycott of considerations of race, class, and gender is to make our judgments less accountable and less subject to improvement.” (137)

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Article/Essay Title: “Sotomayor’s Reasoning”

Author: Linda Martin Alcoff

Possible Applications:

Philosophy of Mind
 (Black) (Feminist) Epistemology
 Political Philosophy
 Identity
 Oppression
 Moral Psychology

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Colbert Report, “The Neutral Man’s Burden” (excellent 5 min video clip)
 Bryce Huebner, “Troubles with stereotypes for Spinozan minds”
 Texts of politicians and others reacting to Sotomayor’s speech/nomination
 Medina, “Identity Trouble”
 Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”
 Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility”
 Any texts on:

- standpoint epistemology
- colorblindness
- diversity in the professions, e.g., philosophy of science

Possible Class Activities:

- Draw a picture on a chalkboard that illustrates the concept of hemeneutical horizon and explain how your picture illustrates it.
- Reflection
 - Class before: ask a question like, “Do you support affirmative action?”
 - Then during class, ask students to reflect on how their identities and experiences have informed their view on that topic.
- Ask students to provide original examples of when identity is relevant (or not relevant) to a person’s ability to be a reliable judge of something.

What traditional texts might this text replace?

Any text that offers a very traditional view of the self (e.g., Descartes, Rawls)

Perhaps a more traditional standpoint epistemology text