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Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing

KRISTIE DOTSON

Too often, identifying practices of silencing is a seemingly impossible exercise. Here I claim that attempting to give a conceptual reading of the epistemic violence present when silencing occurs can help distinguish the different ways members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to testimony. I offer an account of epistemic violence as the failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges. Ultimately, I illustrate that by focusing on the ways in which hearers fail to meet speaker dependency in a linguistic exchange, efforts can be made to demarcate the different types of silencing people face when attempting to testify from oppressed positions in society.

Gayatri Spivak uses the term "epistemic violence" in her text, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," as a way of marking the silencing of marginalized groups. For Spivak, "general, nonspecialists," "the illiterate peasantry," "the tribals," and the "lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (Spivak 1998, 282–83) are populations that are routinely silenced or subjected to epistemic violence. An epistemic side of colonialism is the devastating effect of the "disappearing" of knowledge, where local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices. Spivak's account of "subaltern classes" has come under fire, but her insight into the difficulties of addressing a type of violence that attempts to eliminate knowledge possessed by marginal subjects is still useful today. As she highlights, one method of executing epistemic violence is to damage a given group's ability to speak and be heard. Because of Spivak's work and the work of other philosophers, the reality that members of oppressed groups can be silenced by virtue of group membership is widely recognized. Much has been said about the existence of silencing, though relatively little has been done to provide an on-the-ground account of the

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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. I claim that these two practices of silencing are predicated upon different formations of epistemic violence within a testimonial exchange. It is by locating the forms of epistemic violence in silencing that we can begin to delineate, with contextual detail, practices of silencing on the ground.

Epistemic Violence

Understanding epistemic violence in testimony begins by identifying one fundamental feature of linguistic communication. That feature concerns the relations of dependence speakers have on audiences. Jennifer Hornsby identifies dependence relations between speakers and audiences when she articulates what makes for a "successful linguistic exchange" (Hornsby 1995, 134). She explains:

> I give the name "reciprocity" to the condition that provides for the particular way in which successful illocutionary acts can be performed. When there is reciprocity among people, they recognize one another's speech as it is meant to be taken: An audience who participates reciprocally does not merely (1) understand the speaker's words but also, in (2) taking the words as they are meant to be taken, satisfies a condition *for the speaker's having done the communicative thing she intended.* (134; emphasis added)

For Hornsby, conditions of reciprocity aid in deciphering whether illocutionary acts are successful.[1] As such, reciprocity requires that an audience understand a speaker's words and understand what the speaker is doing with the words. Hornsby's model of a "successful linguistic exchange" is built upon her understanding of illocutionary acts that is very much an extension of her work linking pornography to the silencing of women (Hornsby 1994; Hornsby and Langton 1998). However, her insights are also relevant to examining silencing with an epistemology-of-testimony lens. Hornsby offers an under-

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standing of reciprocity in communication that points to relations of dependence between speakers and audiences. Speakers require audiences to "meet" their effort "halfway" in a linguistic exchange. Much has been made of the dependency audiences have on speakers in the epistemology of testimony, that is, accounts of good informants and requirements of speaker trustworthiness and competence for testimonial knowledge (Fricker 1994, 1995; Craig 1999; Faulkner 2000; Fricker 2002; Faulkner 2006).[2] Hornsby's account accurately highlights that the success of a speaker's attempt to communicate ultimately *depends* upon audiences.

Presuming dependency relations in communication allows focus to be placed on the conditions that must be met for being "heard" in any given linguistic exchange. In fact, what appears to be at issue in reciprocity, for Hornsby, is "being heard." She writes, "The existence of reciprocity is actually a perfectly ordinary fact, consisting in speakers' being able not only to voice meaningful thoughts but also to be heard" (Hornsby 1995, 134). The necessity of "being heard" is more than just a way in which speakers depend upon audiences, though it is certainly a point of speaker-dependence on audiences. It also points to the ways a speaker's *dependence* on an audience *identifies a need* any speaker possesses.[3] Every speaker needs certain kinds of reciprocity for successful linguistic exchanges. 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. A speaker cannot "force" an audience to "hear" her/him, where hearing refers to an audience fulfilling the demands for reciprocity in a successful linguistic exchange. Indirect motivation and/or "force" may be used, like power differentials that coerce or motivate a relatively powerless audience to "take seriously" a more powerful speaker (Langton 1993, 314–15). But a speaker has no direct way to force an audience to "hear" her/him, where direct control would take the form of some kind of mind control.[4] In short, to communicate *we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us*. The extent to which entire populations of people can be denied this kind of linguistic reciprocation as a matter of course institutes epistemic violence.

Epistemic violence in testimony is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons). *Reliable ignorance* is ignorance that is *consistent* or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources. According to this definition, a reliable ignorance need not be harmful. For example, taking ignorance as merely indicating a lack of knowledge, a three-year-old child is ordinarily reliably ignorant of voting practices in the state of Michigan. This and other like instances of ignorance are gaps in knowledge that can be reasonably expected in would-be three-year-old knowers. The three-year-old's reliable ignorance

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may not necessarily be harmful, however. The mere state of possessing reliable ignorance is not, in itself, harmful, so that identifying *harmful*, reliable ignorance requires an analysis of context. In fact, identifying pernicious ignorance that leads to an audience failing to meet speaker dependencies in a linguistic exchange is a context-dependent exercise. It requires not only identifying ignorance that would routinely cause an audience to fail to take up speaker dependencies in order to achieve a successful linguistic exchange, but it also requires an analysis of power relations and other contextual factors that make the ignorance identified *in that particular circumstance or set of circumstances* harmful.

Assessments of which kinds of harm result from epistemic violence are also context-dependent exercises. Insofar as the harms of epistemic violence are hardly ever confined to epistemic matters, the harm resulting from pernicious ignorance that interferes with linguistic exchanges will require a case-by-case analysis. That is to say, ignorance that is perfectly benign in one epistemic agent, given a certain social location and power level, would be pernicious in another epistemic agent. A manifestation of ignorance that is reliable, but not necessarily harmful in one situation, could be reliable and harmful in another situation. Pernicious ignorance should not be determined solely according to types of ignorance possessed or even one's culpability in possessing that ignorance, but rather in the ways that ignorance causes or contributes to a harmful practice, in this case, a harmful practice of silencing. Epistemic violence, then, is enacted in a failed linguistic exchange where a speaker fails to communicatively reciprocate owing to pernicious ignorance.

At least three objections to this understanding of epistemic violence may immediately spring to mind. By responding to each of the three objections, a more robust understanding of epistemic violence will emerge. First, some may object to the concept of pernicious ignorance because of an inclination to believe that all ignorance is harmful. What I am offering here presupposes that all ignorance has *the potential* to be harmful, but ignorance becomes harmful only in certain circumstances and to the extent that it actually causes harm. It appears to be an unsustainable position to take all ignorance as harmful. This is because some ignorance is arguably necessary. Ignorance can act as an impetus for study (Merton 1987; Proctor 2008). Or, as Cynthia Townley argues, some kinds of ignorance are necessary for responsible epistemic practices (Townley 2006). Ignorance, it would seem, is not always harmful, though one could certainly argue that the potential for harm is always present.

Second, one may be concerned that the definition of epistemic violence is too broad, particularly in light of the consequentialist understanding of pernicious ignorance. To detail this objection, let us return to the three-year-old child's ignorance of Michigan voting practices. I explained that this kind of ignorance, where ignorance simply refers to not-knowing, is reliable, but not

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harmful. One of the reasons it is not harmful is because a three-year-old is not allowed to vote in Michigan. There are very few, if any, possible harmful consequences of a three-year-old's ignorance of voting practices in Michigan. If the three-year-old were allowed to vote, it is possible this kind of reliable ignorance could indeed be harmful. However, there are conceivable cases were a three-year-old is reliably ignorant in harmful ways. For example, it is easy to imagine a three-year-old being reliably ignorant about the effects of fire. It is also easy to imagine that this three-year-old could fail to communicatively reciprocate in an exchange about fire due to her reliable ignorance. By possessing reliable ignorance and failing to communicatively reciprocate in an exchange warning her about the potential damaging effects of fire, this child could be acting in epistemically violent ways. Whether our three-year-old *is* acting in epistemically violent ways depends upon whether the reliable ignorance is, in fact, harmful in the specific linguistic exchange. There is at least one way to see this child's ignorance of fire as harmful. The child's ignorance concerning the destructive effects of fire could cause harm to the speaker by way of silencing the speaker. However, under what conditions can we conceive of this kind of harm? Assessing whether a child's ignorance causes harm by silencing the speaker depends upon the context. If an adult is warning the three-year-old about fire, it is unlikely that an adult will take offense at a child's neglect. In fact, such behavior is almost expected of children, which is why adults carefully monitor children around fire. Warnings are not always enough. It is not clear that the reliable ignorance that led to a failed linguistic exchange causes harm between the three-year-old audience and the adult speaker.

However, there is another way to frame this example where harm in the form of property damage can result from the three-year-old's reliable ignorance about fire. It is easy to imagine a case where a three-year-old's ignorance of the destructive effects of fire would cause harm by the child setting fire to something, even while receiving a warning against such action, because she finds fire pretty. In this case, the property damage caused by the fire is where the harm is located. I do not find it strange to say that the child in this instance acted in an epistemically violent way by not heeding the words of the speaker who warned her against starting a fire. The charge that the definition of epistemic violence is too broad fails to recognize the reality that epistemic violence is a broad practice. It is, to my mind, perfectly reasonable to say that a child is, at least, acting in an epistemically violent manner by not heeding the warning. Epistemic violence does not require intention, nor does it require capacity. It does, however, require a failed communicative exchange owning to pernicious ignorance. In this instance, the child *does* silence the speaker who warned her about the effects of fire, facilitating a failed communicative exchange, but, more importantly, the reliable ignorance operative *in this context* is harmful.

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Third, some may object to this account of epistemic violence and its relationship to the harm caused by practices of silencing by saying that *all* instances of silencing are harmful, and the offered definition of epistemic violence in testimony does not account for that reality (see Maitra 2009 for a position that implies this kind of critique). This possible objection springs from teasing out an implication that follows from making "pernicious ignorance" a necessary condition for epistemic violence in testimony. Doing so may indicate that instances of silencing, which do not result from reliable ignorance of any sort, are arguably not harmful. It is true I have implicitly drawn a distinction between an *instance of silencing* and a *practice of silencing*. An instance of silencing concerns a single, non-repetitive instance of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker, whereas 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. An instance of silencing can cause harm and, as an instance, can occur predictably or unpredictably. However, the 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. "Reliable" here refers to a kind of *counterfactual incompetence* with respect to some to domain of knowledge. Counterfactual competence, here, concerns tracking the truth of some proposition *p*, where "if *p* weren't true, S wouldn't believe that *p*" and "if *p* were true, S would believe that *p*" in possible worlds that are "close" to the current epistemic situation (Nozick 1981, 255). A reliable ignorance is an epistemic state, then, that would indicate a counterfactual incompetence with respect to some domain of information. That is, a counterfactual incompetence concerns a maladjusted sensitivity to the truth with respect to some domain of knowledge. Such an incompetence is not only a failure to track the truth of some proposition, where "if *p* were true, S wouldn't believe that *p*" *and/or* "if *p* were not true, S would believe that *p*," though this state is possible. Rather, a person who possesses a reliable ignorance possesses an insensitivity to, or abject failure to detect, truth with respect to some domain of knowledge. That is to say, the 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. If left unaddressed, epistemic violence and the resulting practices of silencing will continue, whereas instances of silencing may occur only once and never again. This is not to say that an instance of silencing is not harmful, but that epistemic violence concerns a practice of silencing that is harmful and reliable.

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At this point, a robust understanding of epistemic violence can be articulated. Epistemic violence is a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owning 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. It is in mapping the ways in which epistemic violence is enacted by an audience against a speaker, or where audiences do not meet a speaker's dependencies (that is, do not adequately meet the demands of reciprocity in a successful linguistic exchange) due to pernicious ignorance, that we can begin to track practices of silencing with greater detail and precision. In what follows, I will identify two practices of silencing, *testimonial quieting* and *testimonial smothering*. I will identify these practices by showing how an audience commits different forms of epistemic violence against a speaker.

Practices of Silencing: Two Testimonial Oppressions

The first testimonial oppression, which I call *testimonial quieting*, concerns the kind of silencing illustrated in Patricia Hill Collins's work. The problem of testimonial quieting occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower. A speaker needs an audience to identify, or at least recognize, her as a knower in order to offer testimony. This kind of testimonial oppression has long been discussed in the work of women of color.[5] Take as an example a popular analysis of black women's lack of credibility found in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins 2000), she 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. To undervalue a black woman speaker is to take her status as a knower to be less than plausible. One of Collins's claims is that black women are less likely to be considered competent due to an audience's inability to discern the possession of credibility beyond "controlling images" that stigmatize black women as a group. A set of stereotypes about black women serves to make the unfair treatment and negative assessments of black women appear "natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins 2000, 69). She identifies four images that control how black women are perceived socially. According to Collins, they are perceived as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and/or whores (72–81). Regardless of whether these specific stereotypes of black women are accurate, what is important about Collins's analysis is her understanding of

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black women as belonging to an objectified social group, which hinders them from being perceived as knowers.

With respect to epistemic violence, Collins offers an account of ignorance caused by the "controlling images" of black women that facilitates a recurring failure of audiences to communicatively reciprocate black women's attempts at linguistic exchanges by routinely not recognizing them as knowers. Here reliable ignorance needs to be understood not as a simple lack of knowledge, but as an active practice of unknowing, as Charles Mills suggests (1999, 18). Understanding certain social groups according to stereotypes that strip them of the ability to be "uncontroversially" identified as knowers results from and facilitates a type of reliable ignorance. Nancy Tuana calls this kind of ignorance the "ignorance produced by the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities" (Tuana 2006, 13). According to Tuana, certain social identities can be made to indicate a lack of credibility. She writes: "In instances such as these [where epistemically disadvantaged identities produce ignorance] it is not simply facts, events, practices, or technologies that are rendered not known, but individuals and groups who are rendered 'not knowers'" (13).

Through her articulation of "controlling images," Collins describes the ways in which the social identity "black woman" can be rendered an epistemically disadvantaged identity. However, that epistemic disadvantage exists only because of the dependency every speaker has on an audience to be recognized as a potential testifier or knower. Several kinds of harm result from the failure of a speaker to be appropriately cast as a knower. Miranda Fricker points to a harm being done to one's "intellectual courage" (Fricker 2007, 49); Cynthia Townley points to harm being done to one's epistemic agency (Townley 2003, 109); Collins points to harms done to the intellectual traditions of entire groups (Collins 2000, 3–8). On my account, determining which kind of harm results from testimonial quieting is a context-dependent exercise. One can imagine circumstances in which one's intellectual courage is undermined through routinely being taken as a "non-knower" as a result of social perceptions of one's identity. One can also imagine circumstances in which one's epistemic agency is undermined through testimonial quieting (Townley 2003; Maitra 2009). Collins's observations concerning the "suppressed" intellectual traditions of black women in the United States can certainly constitute a harm that results from testimonial quieting. How harms are identified will require more of an analysis of context that can be offered here. However one identifies the harm in a given practice of testimonial quieting, the epistemic violence present in such happenings should be located at the juncture where an audience fails to accurately identify the speaker as a knower, thereby failing to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange due to pernicious ignorance in the form of false, negative stereotyping. On my account, Collins gives a description of a site of epistemic violence with respect to black women in the United States.

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The second kind of testimonial oppression occurs because the speaker perceives one's immediate audience as unwilling or unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony. I call this kind of silencing *testimonial smothering*. 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. Testimonial smothering exists in testimonial exchanges that are charged with complex social and epistemic concerns. In an effort to explain testimonial smothering, I will identify three circumstances that routinely exist in instances of testimonial smothering, which are actually tied to one another in ways that make them difficult to analyze separately; nevertheless, I will attempt to do so. The three circumstances 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. As a result of these three circumstances, a speaker "smothers" her/his own testimony. But this silencing should be seen as a type of coerced silencing. Many forms of coerced silencing require some sort of capitulation or self-silencing on the part of the speaker. Testimonial smothering is merely a type of coerced silencing. In what follows, I will explain testimonial smothering by explaining each of these conditions.

A linguistic exchange that might prompt testimonial smothering concerns situations where "unsafe" testimony, which is testimony that an audience can easily fail to find fully intelligible, runs the risk of leading to the formation of false beliefs that can cause social, political, and/or material harm. In testimonial smothering, testimony is omitted that is both unsafe and carries the risk of causing negative effects by virtue of being unsafe. Kimberlé Crenshaw highlights what has been historically seen as unsafe, risky testimony in some "nonwhite" communities when she points to women-of-color silence around occurrences of domestic violence. Crenshaw gives this example when she highlights the "public silences" on domestic violence and rape in "nonwhite communities":

> [R]ace adds yet another dimension to sources of suppression of the problem of domestic violence within nonwhite communities. People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intracommunity problems. Yet the cost of suppression is seldom recognized, in part because the failure to discuss the issue shapes perceptions of how serious the problem is in the first place. (Crenshaw 1991, 1256)

Domestic violence within, for example, African American communities is often shrouded in silence given the possibility that testimony about domestic

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violence can be understood to corroborate stereotypes concerning the imagined "violent" black male. African Americans have often engaged in a "politics of respectability in order to fend off these kinds of 'racist stereotypes'" (White 2001, 36). Some, though certainly not all, African Americans have considered the ramifications of testimony about certain kinds of occurrences, like domestic violence and/or rape, to be a detriment to African American communities at large, often at the expense of those who suffer from domestic violence and/or rape (Crenshaw 1991, 1256–57). It is because testimony about domestic violence within a given context can be seen as unsafe and risky that there is pressure to remain silent with respect to it.[6] It is not unusual for some types of information to be risky and unsafe in different contexts. However, when a speaker capitulates to the pressure to not introduce unsafe, risky testimony, then it is possible that testimonial smothering or some other form of coerced silencing is afoot.[7]

The second circumstance that exists in testimonial smothering is when an audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of potential testimony. To explain this circumstance I will introduce 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. In other words, testimony that meets the dictates of accurate intelligibility for an audience is testimony that is clearly comprehensible and defeasibly intelligible to that audience. When an audience is able to meet these two requirements for receiving proffered testimony, then that testimony is accurately intelligible to that audience. From a speaker's perspective, audiences demonstrate a *testimonial competence* with respect to some domain of knowledge when they demonstrate the ability to find proffered testimony clearly comprehensible and defeasibly intelligible. The label of accurate intelligibility refers to a state possessed by the audience in a linguistic exchange. Testimonial competence, then, in this analysis, refers to the speaker's positive assessment of an audience's ability to find potential testimony accurately intelligible. As such, when proffered testimony is accurately intelligible to an audience, then the audience can clearly comprehend the testimony and, if required, would be able to detect possible inaccuracies in her/his comprehension. When an audience is testimonially competent in a given testimonial exchange, then the audience has demonstrated to the speaker that she/he can find proffered testimony accurately intelligible. In similar fashion, *inaccurate intelligibility* refers to a failure of an audience to find proffered testimony accurately intelligible, and *testimonial incompetence* refers to the failure of an audience to demonstrate to the speaker that she/he will find proffered testimony accurately intelligible.[8]

Let me provide an example to further explain what I mean by accurate intelligibility. For example, I can listen to technical testimony on nuclear physics

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as a layperson and comprehend some portions of the testimony, but I will always be on guard for failures in my ability to find the testimony accurately intelligible. The information gleaned from the testimony may become knowledge if I engage in more dialogue with the presenter or an interlocutor with requisite expertise in nuclear physics; then again, it may not. However, what I rely on in these instances is my ability to detect when I am not "getting it." Unfortunately, not all gaps in intelligibility are as clearly detectable. The gaps in intelligibility that occur when I am listening to a technical lecture on nuclear physics are a result of my own limited knowledge about nuclear physics *and* my sensitivity to my lack of knowledge in this domain. I do not have a large base of background information and/or beliefs concerning topics in nuclear physics. Therefore, it is relatively obvious to me when I demonstrate an inability to understand testimony on nuclear physics. At those times, I cannot "make sense" of the offered testimony. Furthermore, when I do manage to comprehend testimony on nuclear physics, I am wary of my comprehension. I may think to myself, "I wonder if I understand this correctly." This doubt can be a defeater of my initial understanding, but this defeater arises because of my sensitivity to the lack of background information and/or beliefs needed to find technical lectures on nuclear physics completely intelligible. One can say that though I do not find testimony on nuclear physics fully intelligible in many cases, testimony in nuclear physics is accurately intelligible to me. This is because I would meet the conditions of accurate intelligibility with respect to testimony on nuclear physics. I would be able to form understandings for testimony offered and be sensitive to defeaters of my initial understandings (where those initial understandings will most likely be defeated). Thus, audiences can find testimony less than fully intelligible and still meet the conditions of accurate intelligibility.

Sometimes an audience does not demonstrate to a speaker that she/he is testimonially competent. That is to say, the audience gives the appearance of not being in a position to find potential testimony accurately intelligible. An audience can fail to demonstrate testimonial competence with respect to potential testimony in a number of ways. For example, some social psychologists are providing increasing evidence for the existence of racial microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Schacht 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008; Sue et al. 2009; Sue 2010). As a species of aversive racism, racial microaggressions are defined as "brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally" (Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008, 329).[9] A conversation about race in the United States where the given audience demonstrates racial microaggressions against an African American speaker would be, for example, an instance in which an audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence with respect to potential testimonial content concerning corresponding topics on race.

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In her article, "Conversations I Can't Have," Cassandra Byers Harvin expresses her reluctance to engage in conversations about race in a U.S. context due to the ways "race talk" has been framed in U.S. public discourse. She expresses her desire to avoid conversations about O. J. Simpson and to avoid speaking candidly about race with her colleagues as a result of the "hurt feelings and surprise and defensiveness" that her audience may take on during such conversations (Harvin 1996, 16). She describes one encounter in a public library with a white woman, "early-50s-looking" who asks Harvin what she is working on. Harvin responds by indicating she is researching "raising black sons in this society" (16). The white woman promptly asks, "How is that any different from raising white sons?" Harvin notes that it is not only the question that is problematic, as it indicates a kind of lack of awareness of racial struggles in the United States, but also the tone of the question that indicated the white woman believed that Harvin was "making something out of nothing" (16). Harvin explains that in response to the question she politely pretended that she was running out of time in order to extricate herself from the situation. This is a situation where the audience of potential testimony demonstrated, through a racial microaggression, testimonial incompetence. Racial microaggressions take on different forms. One of the forms is microinvalidations. A microinvalidation is "characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al. 2007, 274). The unnecessarily skeptical question concerning the possible differences between raising black sons and white sons in a U.S. context can operate to effectively negate the experiential reality of many people of color. The insult, which is carried not only by the question, but also by the tone of the question, indicates a testimonial incompetence with respect to potential testimony on the difficulties of raising black sons in a U.S. context. As Harvin describes this encounter, the perception of her audience's testimonial incompetence with respect to the potential topic of discussion led this encounter to be a prime example of a "conversation she couldn't have." This, on my account, is an instance of testimonial smothering.

A further analysis of Harvin's example of testimonial smothering can lead to an articulation of the third circumstance that exists in testimonial smothering. Arguably, testimony concerning "raising black sons" is unsafe, risky testimony. There simply are too many negative "controlling images" concerning black males in the United States, young and old, to think that testimony concerning some difficulty with respect to them runs no risk of reinforcing those negative images. So the first circumstance of testimonial smothering can be seen to be present in Harvin's experience. Also, as already explained, the existence of the, most likely, unconscious racial microinvalidation indicates that Harvin's audience was not testimonially competent with respect to testimony about raising black sons.[10] A third circumstance emerges here that attaches itself to the

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"tone" of the question, "How is that [raising black sons] any different from raising white sons?" In asking this question in the manner in which it was asked, Harvin's audience demonstrates more than testimonial incompetence, but also an ignorance with respect to racially different experiences of child-rearing in the United States (that is, the fact that there are racial differences in child-rearing in the United States at all).

The third circumstance that exists in testimonial smothering is when the testimonial incompetence detected by a speaker follows from, or appears to follow from, pernicious ignorance possessed by that audience. In the Harvin example, the audience asks a question that issues a microinvalidation that is most likely unconsciously executed. Let me suggest that this unconscious mircoinvalidation may result from something like 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. Epistemic difference, according to Lisa Bergin, is the gap between different worldviews caused by "differing social situations (economic, sexual, cultural, etc.) [that] produce differing understandings of the world, differing knowledges of reality" (Bergin 2002, 198). Our position in a given society affords understandings of reality that are marked with epistemic advantage, while at the same time they are marked by important epistemic limitations. In attempting to explain the effect social position has on knowledge, Lorraine Code writes: "Because differing social positions generate variable constructions of reality and afford differing perspectives on the world [knowers are] at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations (Code 1993, 39).

Epistemic differences are composed of varying levels of epistemic advantage and limitation related to one's social, economic, ethnic, sexual, and so on, positioning. An epistemic advantage, here, should be seen to concern only potentially good epistemic positioning with respect to some domain of knowledge, whereas epistemic limitations are composed of comparatively bad epistemic positions with respect to some domain of knowledge. Situated ignorance, which follows from one's social positioning, is a result of epistemic limitation that fosters a kind of epistemic distance between those not in possession of that limitation and those who do possess the limitation.[11] Arguably, this kind of ignorance can be mostly non-culpable and unconscious, but it is also reliable. Special effort must be made to address this kind of ignorance. Since one's existence in one's social location is the major catalyst for this kind of ignorance, mere continued existence in one's social location is insufficient for addressing it. Situated ignorance can and does lead to failing to find testimony accurately intelligible and to the demonstration of testimonial incompetence to a speaker. The audience in the Harvin example expresses skepticism concerning the differences between raising black and white sons.

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Though, as a white woman, it is unlikely Harvin's interlocutor was ever in a position to raise black sons in the United States, the situated ignorance she demonstrated probably followed from a more profound absence. It was very likely the woman never had to scale the epistemic distance between raising white sons and raising black sons in the United States and was entirely unaware of the epistemic difference that distance highlighted.

Uma Narayan provides an example of situated ignorance when she analyzes the ways issues surrounding dowry murders have been framed in a U.S. context that indicates that Indian women are suffering "death by culture" (Narayan 1997). She details the way "cross cultural understanding" is made difficult by 1) national contexts, 2) the ways those national context affect determinations of "connection-making" across differing national contexts, and 3) the ways such framing results from attempting to understand "communities of color" with "cultural explanations" (Narayan 1997, 86–87). Situated ignorance often manifests in complex ways. Narayan indicates how such ignorance is produced through how one's national context frames issues in ways that create audiences largely incapable of finding the content of some testimony, for example, testimony concerning dowry murders, accurately intelligible. For Narayan, U.S. audiences with respect to dowry murders provide evidence of testimonial incompetence by the way issues are framed in discussion, which, on my account, indicates a kind of situated ignorance. She also explains that as a result of the faulty framing of dowry murders in the United States, addressing the issue of dowry murders in dialogue often runs the risk of reinforcing negative perceptions of third-world women's oppression, where "death by culture" is supposedly daily and routine (Narayan 1997, 103). Entering into a testimonial exchange charged with situated ignorance, testimonial incompetence, and unsafe, risky testimonial content is often enough to silence even the most gregarious person. Narayan herself explains that at some point she decided to no longer engage in "dialogue" concerning dowry murders (84). And though she would engage the topic of dowry murders in writing, the fact that she feels uncomfortable holding a "dialogue" concerning dowry murders in a U.S. context, for the reasons she expresses, makes her reluctance an example of testimonial smothering.[12]

Remember, testimonial smothering 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. Three circumstances identify testimonial smothering in a testimonial exchange: 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) that testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance. I have shown examples of testimonial smothering that 1) include unsafe, risky testimonial content, 2) have audiences that demonstrate

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testimonial incompetence, and 3) include testimonial incompetence that follows from situated ignorance. I will turn to briefly demonstrate how, in the Harvin and Narayan examples, the situated ignorance is also pernicious ignorance.

The harm that results from the situated ignorance in the Harvin example can come from many fronts. Some argue that part of the "stress" of living as a black person in the United States is the persistence of racial microaggressions (Pierce 1995). However, the microinvalidation Harvin experienced was itself harmful. The incident was harmful enough for Harvin to silence her own testimony and, more importantly, to write a commentary about her frustration and weariness. The energy expended "rebounding" from such instances and the denigrating messages such microaggressions demonstrate have consequences (Sue et al. 2008). One can argue that Narayan offers an example of a microaggression when she identifies the implicit message that third-world women exist in contexts where "death by culture" is possible. Such an implicit message indicates a microaggression in the form of microinsult. A microinsult is "characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (Sue et al. 2007, 274). Narayan's frustration, to the point of headaches, with the framing of dowry murders in a U.S. context and Indian women's assumed "death by culture" indicates her response to the microinsult "hidden" in such framing. She explains that the process of "figuring out" the kind of framing that facilitated the difficulties of cross-cultural understandings of dowry murders within a U.S. context was not an easy labor (Narayan 1997, 105). The energy such efforts take, the time, and the message such framing implies can all be harmful. Microaggressions institute a number of harms and harmful messages that empirical studies are just now beginning to highlight.

With this understanding of testimonial smothering in mind, let us turn our attention to identifying epistemic violence in testimonial smothering. Recall that epistemic violence, here, is defined as a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance. In testimonial smothering a speaker smothers her/his own testimony when an audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence for unsafe, risky testimony *owing* to pernicious ignorance. 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 owning to pernicious ignorance. To begin a successful "dialogue" or testimonial exchange on unsafe, potentially damaging testimonial content, speakers may have added demands, and audiences need to meet those demands. One of those demands, I propose, for communicative reciprocation concerns the need to indicate testi-

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monial competence to a would-be speaker. That is to say, 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.[13]

Conclusion

One of the difficulties of tracking practices of silencing is that, by nature, examples of silencing are difficult to locate and make evident. In places where silencing is caused by a failure of one's words to gain uptake, as in the case of testimonial quieting, it is unclear what evidence is required to establish the existence of such silencing. The problem of producing evidence for practices of silencing becomes even more difficult where the silencing results in a kind of coerced self-silencing, as is the case with testimonial smothering, which may not admit of witnesses in the ways that instances of testimonial quieting may produce witnesses. In most practices of silencing, the burden of proving the practice of silencing can appear impossible to meet. 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.

In summary, I have highlighted two practices of silencing that result from an audience's failure to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange with respect to offering testimony (that is, failure to recognize a speaker as a knower and failure to demonstrate testimonial competence) owing to pernicious ignorance. I have identified this failure of an audience to fulfill the demands of reciprocity (or speaker vulnerability) required for a successful linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance as epistemic violence. Such violence can result from pernicious ignorance that can be culpable or non-culpable. Finally, I have tried to indicate that by developing a concept of epistemic violence in testimony, which specifically attends to the failures of audiences in unsuccessful linguistic exchanges, different practices of silencing can be identified.

Notes

1. On the importance of reciprocity in epistemic communities see also Townley 2003; 2006; Fricker 2007.

2. There is a general absence within the epistemology of testimony concerning speaker-related dependencies. Feminist epistemologists, like Miranda Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice* (Fricker 2007), actually address a number of dependency relations

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between speaker and audiences. And though Rae Langton's work on pornography and silencing has provoked quite a bit of work on speaker dependencies (Langton 1993; Jacobson 1995; Langton 1998; Maitra 2004; 2009), such work has yet to fully be integrated within the epistemology of testimony. The emphasis on speech act theory in those discussions would need to be explicitly navigated in order to bridge some of the conceptual gaps between it and the epistemology of testimony. Though, undoubtedly, efforts to combine the two approaches to linguistic exchanges is needed, such an engagement is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Langton, like Hornsby, highlights the needs of speakers in linguistic exchanges in her work on silencing. Identifying three kinds of silencing—locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary—Langton highlights the ways speakers depend upon their audiences for uptake in successful linguistic exchanges (Langton 1993, 315). She also explains that the dependence all speakers have on audiences does not translate to equal levels of ability and/or inability to engage in successful linguistic exchanges. Langton indicates, "the ability to perform speech acts can be a measure of political power. . . . Conversely, one mark of powerlessness is an inability to perform speech acts that one might otherwise like to perform" (314). Political and social power aid in ensuring that one's utterances receive the appropriate uptake from one's intended utterances, even given the vulnerabilities all speakers have in linguistic exchanges.

4. I do not explore speaker vulnerabilities in more detail because my focus in this article is to identify a method for tracking silencing by tracking audience participation. Here I simply want to indicate that audience participation is necessary because speaker vulnerabilities exist in linguistic exchanges. My overall purpose in this essay is to offer a method of tracking audience-related failures in linguistic exchanges that indicate specific practices of silencing, not to highlight the many speaker dependencies themselves.

5. For well over a hundred years, women of color have remarked upon the kind of silencing that follows from not gaining the appropriate recognition as a knower. See, for example, Williams 1905; Carby 1982; Lugones and Spelman 1983; Lorde 1984; Mohanty 1984; Aziz 1992; Oyewumi 1997; Cooper 1998; and Green 2007. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it does give some indication of the range of women of color who have provided analyses of testimonial quieting and other forms of testimonial oppression.

6. Remaining silent on issues like domestic violence and rape remains a controversial stance within black communities (see Hine 1989; see also Lorde 1984; Hill 1997; White 2001). There have always been advocates against remaining silent on these issues, but this does not remove the reality that given public perceptions of black people, some forms of testimony are unsafe and risky.

7. It is important to note that testimonial smothering is only one type of coerced silencing. The possible existence of a "public silence" around domestic violence and black women of the scale that Crenshaw highlights indicates that a number of coerced silences are taking place, not just testimonial smothering. To track these different kinds of coerced silences, different descriptions of epistemic violence are needed. Testimonial smothering concerns only linguistic exchanges where one smothers one's testimony in an immediate, dialogic exchange. There are certain to be other ways silence is coerced with respect to domestic violence in "nonwhite communities," for Crenshaw.

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8. *Testimonial competence* is a general term that does not, itself, track onto group membership. A concern might emerge that given the specific environment of a linguistic exchange, for example, a racist and sexist environment, a speaker might find that black women are testimonially incompetent with respect to testimony concerning a black woman's experience with racist sexism. In this example, a black woman, who is also, presumably, a possible target of racist sexism, could quite possibly be shown to be testimonially incompetent. This example points to the worry that the conditions on testimonial competence and incompetence offered here can quite possibly be used to identify people as incompetent who should "know better," given their membership in the vulnerable, target group. On the surface this might seem to be a problem. In fact, however, this example simply points to the complicated nature of offering testimony from oppressed positions in society. Group membership does not automatically indicate testimonial competence with respect to some domain of knowledge. That is to say, membership in an oppressed group does not afford a person an epistemic privilege that would *automatically* translate to testimonial competence with respect to the range of social realities faced by members of that group.

9. Though the term *racial microaggression* was originally deployed to explain subtle forms of racism with respect to African Americans (see Pierce et al. 1978), racial microaggressions are beginning to be explored in how they affect other racial groups in the United States as well (see Solorzano and Bernal 2001; Sue et al. 2009; Sue 2010).

10. It is important to note that the demonstration of testimonial incompetence does not mean that Harvin's audience would have *actually* found her testimony inaccurately intelligible. Rather, Harvin's audience gave the appearance of being unable to find the testimony accurately intelligible and, hence, demonstrated testimonial incompetence. Harvin's assessment is not contingent upon the audience's actual ability to find the testimony accurately intelligible, but rather whether this ability was effectively communicated to Harvin. This kind of assessment, then, depends on whether the audience was successful in communicating testimonial competence to the speaker. In this case, Harvin's audience was not successful.

11. Within the epistemology of ignorance, significant work is being done to illustrate that ignorance is hardly ever mere "not-knowing." Rather, ignorance is produced by the mechanisms that, paradoxically, are aimed at producing knowledge. How an issue is framed is supposed to lend itself to comprehension, but it is also a means for producing ignorance. On ignorance as the production of unknowing, see Marilyn Frye's "To Be and Be Seen" in Frye 1983; Campbell 1994; Mills 1999; Tuana 2004; Ortega 2006; Tuana 2006; Alcoff 2007; Bailey 2007; and Mills 2007.

12. Testimonial smothering is similar to Langton's understanding of locutionary silencing. She explains, "members of a powerless group may be silent because they are intimidated, or because they believe that no one will listen. They do not protest at all, because they think that protest is futile . . . [these] speakers fail to perform even a locutionary act" (Langton 1993, 315). Speakers who smother their testimony do fail to produce a kind of locutionary act, though they need not be silent. Public silences are marked by either filling up space with inane chatter or remaining silent. Also, intimidation need not be a catalyst. Though what every act of testimonial smothering may share is a sense that offering some types of testimony in some contexts is futile.

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13. The purpose of this paper is simply to demonstrate that tracking epistemic violence in testimony can aid in delineating practices of silencing. I purposely chose to include an extraordinarily difficult-to-identify practice of silencing, that is, testimonial smothering, in this analysis. There will be some pause over claiming that audiences are required to demonstrate testimonial competence to a speaker given that linguistic exchanges can be successful without such demonstrations. The caveat, of course, is this kind of reciprocation may not exist in *all* linguistic exchanges, but it is a requirement for success in linguistic exchanges *concerning unsafe and risky testimony*. It is not unusual to hear of people of color in oppressive contexts "keeping secrets." Maria Lugones explains succinctly, "I keep secrets. Even though I am told over and over by white feminists that we must reveal ourselves, open ourselves, I keep secrets. Disclosing our secrets threatens our survival" (Lugones 2003, 11). When testimony concerns material that "threatens the survival" of the speaker, a successful linguistic exchange will place higher demands on both speakers and audiences. In this instance, I am indicating one of the demands on audiences is demonstrating testimonial competence to a speaker.

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