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*dossier racism, colonialism and philosophy for/with children: praxis in non-ideal contexts*

# epistemic violence and philosophy for children:

## toward an epistemically capacious community of inquiry


**authors**

**alaina gostomski**

teachers college, columbia university

new york city, united states of america

e-mail: amg2405@tc.columbia.edu

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7724-6197

**sam piede**

teachers college, columbia university

new york city, united states of america

e-mail: sep2189@tc.columbia.edu

https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9470-1154





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**abstract**

This paper explores epistemic violence as it relates to communities of philosophical inquiry. The authors start by characterizing Kristie Dotson's epistemic systems framework and connect these ideas to the concept of epistemic violence. The authors differentiate between epistemic violence and epistemic injustice and highlight two key incidents of epistemic violence that serve as points of analysis: one arising in a community of philosophical inquiry facilitated by one of the contributing authors where students discussed Dutch-Lenape history in New York City and the other described by Philosophy for Children scholar Ruth Silver about an epistemic exclusion that occurred during a Philosophy for Children facilitation workshop. Using these instances, we argue that it is the impermeability of the dominant frameworks and communicative norms that govern these inquiries that may render the introduction of certain protective factors, such as historicizing and communicative reciprocity, necessary in order to uphold the ideals of a community of inquiry.



**keywords:** epistemic violence; community of philosophical inquiry; communicative reciprocity; historicizing; epistemic injustice.

## **violência epistêmica e filosofia para crianças:** em direção a uma comunidade de investigação epistemicamente ampla

**resumo**

Este artigo explora a violência epistêmica no contexto das comunidades de investigação filosófica. Os autores começam caracterizando o quadro de sistemas epistêmicos de Kristie Dotson e relacionam essas ideias com o conceito de violência epistêmica. Os autores destacam as diferenças entre violência e injustiça epistêmica e sublinham dois incidentes-chave de violência epistêmica que servem como pontos de análise: um ocorrido em uma comunidade de investigação filosófica mediada por um dos autores, onde os alunos discutiram a história dos holandeses e dos Lenapes na cidade de Nova York; e outro descrito pela estudiosa de Filosofia para Crianças Ruth Silver, uma exclusão epistêmica que ocorreu durante um workshop de facilitação de Filosofia para Crianças. Usando esses exemplos, argumentamos que é a impermeabilidade das estruturas dominantes e das normas comunicativas que regem essas investigações que pode tornar necessária a introdução de certos fatores de proteção, como a historicização e a reciprocidade comunicativa, a fim de defender os ideais de uma comunidade de investigação.

**palavras-chave:** violência epistêmica; comunidade de investigação filosófica; reciprocidade comunicativa; historicizar; injustiça epistêmica.

## **violencia epistémica y filosofía para niños: hacia una comunidad de investigación epistémicamente abierta**

**resumen**

Este artículo analiza la violencia epistémica en su relación con las comunidades de investigación filosófica. Los autores comienzan por describir el marco de los sistemas epistémicos de Kristie Dotson y relacionan estas ideas con el concepto de violencia epistémica. Los autores diferencian entre violencia epistémica e injusticia epistémica y destacan dos incidentes clave de violencia epistémica que sirven como puntos de análisis: uno surgido en una comunidad de investigación filosófica facilitada por uno de los autores colaboradores, en la que los estudiantes debatieron sobre la historia de los lenapes y los holandeses en la ciudad de Nueva York, y el otro descrito por la investigadora en Filosofía para Niños Ruth Silver sobre una exclusión epistémica que tuvo lugar durante un taller de facilitación de Filosofía para Niños. A partir de estos ejemplos, argumentamos que es la impermeabilidad de los marcos dominantes y las normas comunicativas que rigen estas investigaciones lo que puede hacer necesaria la introducción de ciertos factores protectores, como la historicización y la reciprocidad comunicativa, para defender los ideales de una comunidad de investigación.

**palabras clave:** violencia epistémica; comunidad de investigación filosófica; reciprocidad comunicativa; historicización; injusticia epistémica.

## epistemic violence and philosophy for children:

### toward an epistemically capacious community of inquiry

A few years ago, after the United States honored Christopher Columbus in an annually celebrated federal holiday that some states counter-celebrate as Indigenous Peoples' Day, one of the authors who facilitates Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC)[1] sessions in New York City decided to present a historical account of colonization to her elementary school students. The account was taken from an educational resource from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI, 2010) that discussed the relationship between the Lenape people who were indigenous to present-day Manhattan, New York City, and the Dutch colonists who settled there.

The historical account described the arc of the Dutch-Lenape relationship in a way that seemed generative for philosophical inquiry. It depicted the relationship as initially cooperative before the Dutch colonists wanted to expand their presence in the area. As the story goes, the Lenape sold the land for $24 in trade goods – roughly $1000 in a contemporary context (NMAI, 2010). While the Lenape understood this transaction as an agreement to share the land, the Dutch understood it as a sale that conferred exclusive property ownership (NMAI, 2010). As the Dutch continued to build settlements in the area, many Lenape were exposed to, and died from, diseases to which they had no immunity and were eventually expelled from Manhattan without recourse (NMAI, 2010).

Though the elementary students seemed to have varied impressions of this historical account, the majority wished to discuss whether the land belonged to Dutch colonists or to the indigenous Lenape. The way this question was phrased imposed a conceptual framework onto the issue where land only ever belongs to, or can be owned by, any one group. The majority of students were convinced that, by purchasing the land, the Dutch colonists were the rightful owners of Manhattan, even if the Lenape had not fully recognized what the transaction

[1] This incident occurred within a Philosophy for/with Children (p4wC) program. Throughout the article, P4C, PwC, and P4wC are all used to describe scholars' work in the field in an attempt to reflect how these authors identify their own practice.

meant to the Dutch. These students were particularly invested in the idea that "deals" are socially binding agreements that ought not be broken, and they were resistant to any counterexamples posed by classmates with other views. The minority group emphasized that the indigenous Lenape were on the land first and highlighted that the Lenape did not fully understand the terms of the agreement, as stated in the text. The majority insisted that the Dutch settlers were not wrong. The session seemed to reinforce the Western epistemic frame of property-ownership and contract-based morality. The situation also illustrates how dominant epistemologies render certain types of knowledge and ways of knowing unintelligible, as the students who were more sympathetic toward the Dutch colonists had great difficulty understanding the validity of the Lenape people's position.

Various Philosophy for Children scholars might identify the students' sympathy for Dutch colonists as revealing something epistemically unjust. For example, Nell Rainville (2000) describes the effects of systematic marginalization on indigenous people as a type of unjust epistemic authority (p. 68). Commenting on Rainville, Peter Paul Elicor (2020) labels these examples as indirect forms of Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice (p. 7). However, we believe that this descriptor is misleading. Though we agree with Elicor that an injustice with epistemic implications has occurred, we believe that exchanges like the ones Rainville and the facilitating author describe represent an instance not merely of epistemic injustice, but also of epistemic violence. While these two concepts share territory, in that they both describe harm done to those who are marginalized, the respective loci of offense is perceptibly distinct.

We argue that elucidating this distinction is critical. Properly distinguishing epistemic violence from epistemic injustice allows us to accurately identify the root cause of a very specific issue. Epistemic violence allows us to recognize communicative exchanges that fail not because of prejudicial attitudes, but because the logic and norms of the communicative space have been rendered impermeable to some individuals' ways of knowing. By identifying the root issues, we can, in turn, work towards introducing protective factors that address them directly.

To do this, we characterize Kristie Dotson's epistemic systems framework and connect it to the concept of epistemic violence. We differentiate between epistemic violence and epistemic injustice and then identify two key incidents of epistemic violence that serve as points of analysis: one arising in the community of inquiry described above and the other described by P4C Scholar Ruth Silver about an epistemic exclusion that occurred during a P4C facilitation workshop[2]. Using these instances, we argue that it is the impermeability of the dominant frameworks and communicative norms that govern these inquiries that may render the introduction of certain protective factors, such as historicizing and communicative reciprocity, necessary in order to uphold the ideals of a community of inquiry.

### *a systems approach to epistemic violence and oppression*

The term "epistemic violence" originates from Gayatari Chakravorty Spivak's seminal text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In the text, Spivak analyzes harms incurred through colonialism and imperialism as not only material, but also epistemic and ontological. Epistemic violence is described as "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (1988, pp. 280-81). Here epistemic violence is viewed as a consequence of systematic forms of violence, such as imperialism or colonialism, which silence subjected groups by repressing their ways of life and forms of meaning-making. Later, philosophers like Kristie Dotson expanded Spivak's term to elaborate on the ways silencing serves as a foundation for epistemic violence.

Viewing situations in a community of philosophical inquiry, like the P4wC session about the early Dutch-Lenape history, through the lens of epistemic violence offers some distinct interpretive advantages. Firstly, doing so helps articulate the nature of specific harms that result from the impermeability of structures that make up a discursive space. Secondly – and equally as importantly – it provides a framework for addressing the root cause. If we believe that these harms come from the norms, concepts, and forms of logic that bolster epistemic systems, as opposed to from prejudicial actions of individual actors, we can take

[2] For this, we are grateful to Darren Chetty, who, in his 2025 NAACI presentation on racism and P4wC, called for researchers to take up this incident.

structural action. We can learn to identify structures within that system that aid and abet these harms, and we can work to ameliorate the system so that it becomes more epistemically capacious.

For Dotson (2014), an epistemological system consists of ideas, beliefs, speech patterns, and norms of logic rendered intelligible within a given context. These systems are influenced and shaped by various aspects of human life, from a given historical and social milieu to the era's intellectual and scientific developments. For instance, the rate at which the contributing author's students failed to grasp differences between indigenous American and European Dutch relationships to land likely reveals something about the epistemological system that these students inhabit. Scholars (Burgh & Thornton, 2019; Dotson, 2018) have described Western settler colonialism as a considerable influence within the epistemological systems of Western colonial nations. An operative characteristic of Western colonial thought is a "logic of elimination," which Gilbert Burgh and Simone Thornton (2019) describe as giving way to epistemic violence because it allows one group to deny another group's ability to continue life as it was before colonization (p. 14). The logic of elimination justifies various violent colonial practices, such as the suppression of language and cultural practices, forced displacement from one's homeland, and genocide. Through this logic, colonized people's lives are not only disrupted materially and physically, but their ways of life and meaning-making become unintelligible to the dominant culture and, eventually, to new generations of the colonized group if not intentionally preserved.

Systems that uphold a colonial logic of elimination manifest in the conscious or unconscious silencing of groups, taking the form of structural and interpersonal epistemic violence. A clear example of epistemic violence as silencing owing to a colonial logic of elimination is given by Rainville (2000), who describes how colonial repression in Canada led to the "cultural annihilation" of indigenous North Americans (p. 66). As Rainville explains, under colonization, indigenous North American children were separated from their families through government-ordered mandates and sent to residential boarding schools where they were forcibly assimilated to Western culture and shamed for their indigenous heritage. Laws were created that prevented indigenous Americans from gathering

for cultural ceremonies and from arguing for fairer land treaties in court. North American colonialism worked to eliminate indigeneity by silencing "Aboriginal voices through systematic shaming and lack of political recognition" (p. 66). This resulted in epistemic violence because it made it "difficult, but not impossible, for First Nations peoples to speak out and…be heard" (p. 66). Rainville's account clarifies the structural effects of colonial epistemologies and demonstrates how certain epistemological systems can perpetuate violent forms of logic, like the logic of elimination. These forms of logic or gaps in knowledge are also captured by Dotson's concept of 'epistemic oppression,' which is "primarily characterized by detrimental exclusions from epistemic affairs" and concerns "routine and harmful exclusions from some domain of knowledge production" (Dotson, 2012, p. 36). By placing Dotson and Spivak in conversation, epistemic oppression can be reasonably conceptualized as the result of continued epistemic violence and is particularly useful in illustrating the systematic nature of this violence. In other words, while epistemic violence can happen to an individual, epistemic oppression describes the repeated patterns of epistemic violence that derive from structural harms like imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, and so forth.

In the article "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," Dotson (2014) offers a systems approach to understanding structural harms that limit one's intelligibility or ability to speak at all due to persistent exclusions in knowledge production, or pervasive 'epistemic oppression.' While this article dispels the notion that epistemic harms are always reducible to social and political oppression, we use Dotson's systems approach to examine two forms of exclusion that *are* reducible to social and political forms of oppression.[3] These exclusions can most reasonably be addressed within a community of philosophical inquiry, which we discuss. We focus on two epistemic exclusions–first-order and second-order–and the remedies for these harms that Dotson provides (2014). This systems-approach to epistemic oppression offers a means for analyzing and

[3] Dotson presents first-order, second-order, and third-order exclusions, with the third-order exclusion being a form of epistemic oppression that is irreducible to social or political causes. While the authors are unable to conceive of ways that discussion facilitators could address third-order exclusions in a community of philosophical inquiry, the authors agree that this is an important form of epistemic oppression to contend with that future scholars might take up in their research.

proposing ameliorations to the two highlighted cases of epistemic violence within communities of philosophical inquiry which are discussed later.

A "first-order epistemic exclusion" describes an exclusion impeding the epistemic agency of some knowers due to an inefficiency within an epistemic system (Dotson, 2014, p. 123). This can take the form of a credibility deficit that prohibits certain groups from contributing to knowledge production. However, this exclusion requires minimal challenges to the dominant epistemic system because the correction is contained within that system. Philosopher Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (2020) explains that examples of first-order epistemic exclusion include Dotson's concept of 'epistemic silencing,' which include various ways that testimony is inadequately taken up or reciprocated by an audience owing to prejudicial views, and Fricker's concept of 'testimonial injustice,' which occurs when someone's credibility is deflated for prejudicial reasons (p. 235). In order to ameliorate a first-order exclusion, one can draw from resources that currently exist to attenuate whatever gaps in knowledge exist.

One example of first-order epistemic violence is found in Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's (1999) reflection on her school experiences as a young girl. Living in Texas on the border between Mexico and the United States, Anzaldúa frequently felt pulled between worlds. She experienced harsh treatment from "Anglo" Americans and describes being silenced by teachers in her youth. She writes, "I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for 'talking back' to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. 'If you want to be American, speak 'American.'' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong" (p. 75).

This situation demonstrates a first-order epistemic exclusion because it is through Anzaldúa's teacher's prejudice around the Spanish language that Anzaldúa is prevented from making a contribution - in this case, helping her teacher pronounce her Spanish name correctly. The teacher also suggests, wrongly, that Spanish is not an American language when it was, in fact, the first European language spoken in the Americas. Much of Anzaldúa's teacher's ignorance is characteristic of the logic of elimination, which is made especially obvious when the teacher expresses that Anzaldúa should remove herself from the country if she continues to insist on the Spanish pronunciation of her name. While this situation

could be corrected in multiple ways, one common way in which this type of situation can be corrected is by hiring teachers and school leaders that reflect the same or similar racial, ethnic, or cultural background of the student population. School faculty members that share these similarities are often more prepared to challenge racial, ethnic, or cultural ignorance like that of Anzaldúa's teacher as well as support students victimized by such ignorance. While this would not directly challenge the current epistemic system–Anzaldúa's teacher may not be forced to alter her prejudicial views about the Spanish language simply because of a change in faculty demographics–it could theoretically supply enough supportive faculty members to counter existing prejudices.

A "second-order epistemic exclusion" occurs when epistemic agency is impeded by gaps in epistemic systems consistent with historical gaps about what is known or has been known (Dotson, 2014, p. 127). Addressing this form of epistemic oppression requires that ideas and understandings expand to accommodate new knowledge. This is more difficult than addressing first-order epistemic exclusions because it requires that the existing epistemic resources be stretched. Dotson likens this exclusion to Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice (p. 127). To describe hermeneutical injustice, Fricker (2007) draws on the advent of the term "sexual harassment" as a correction to the absence of language available to describe such a phenomenon (pp. 150 - 152). Fricker argues that individuals, typically women, were largely barred from fully understanding experiences of sexual harassment because of the epistemic gaps preventing this form of harm from being recognized as harassment. From this perspective, such a harm is ameliorated by stretching an existing concept within a system – harassment – to include unwanted sexual attention. Fricker notes that it is socially powerless groups who experience this form of hermeneutical marginalization (2007, p. 155). This often requires socially powerful groups to change their ideas and understandings, which they may not be incentivized to do.

The delineation between these types of systemic epistemic oppression is useful when analyzing different epistemic harms. As Pohlhaus (2020) argues, Dotson's systems approach is critical to understanding epistemic harm within histories of "domination, oppression, and colonization" because "what knowers can do is a function of relations among knowers (not some quality within knowers

themselves)" (pp. 238 - 239). A systems approach offers a way to situate where epistemic oppression originates within the relations that mold epistemic practices.

Thinking through these levels of exclusion gives us language to begin articulating where and how epistemic violence arises in the two cases preoccupying this article: the discussion of the Lenape and the silences later discussed in an article by Ruth Silver.

Before elucidating this connection, however, it is important to clarify why Spiak and Dotson's work around the concept of 'epistemic violence' is a more apt identification for the harms discussed than the commonly employed concept of 'epistemic injustice' coined by philosopher Miranda Fricker. After all, Dotson's systems approach to epistemic oppression includes forms of epistemic violence and epistemic injustice. What, then, is the reason for analyzing these cases through the frame of epistemic violence? We argue that framing these harms in terms of epistemic violence elucidates the role that is played by logics of elimination – that is, structures, rules, and frameworks that render the discursive space impermeable to certain marginalized concepts – in the resulting harm. By drawing facilitators' attention to the role these logics of elimination play, we hope to offer practical ways that can render the discursive space more epistemically capacious.

## *characterizing epistemic violence*

In order to characterize epistemic violence, it is useful to contrast it with Miranda Fricker's notion of 'epistemic injustice', coined in her 2007 book of the same name. Fricker describes epistemic injustice as a form of "prejudicial dysfunction" on behalf of a hearer that can occur in two ways–through hermeneutical or testimonial injustice–in which an individual knower is harmed in their capacity *as* a knower (2007, p. 17, emphasis in original). In cases of "testimonial injustice," a listener might unduly deflate or, alternatively, unduly over-credit testimony from a speaker in a way that is informed by what Fricker calls "identity power" (2007, see pp. 14-16). To demonstrate a case of under-crediting, Fricker draws on the example of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the novel, Robinson is falsely convicted of the sexual assault of Mayella Ewell, despite demonstrable evidence that he is

innocent. The all-white jury dismisses the credibility of Robinson's testimony – that he had been comforting the girl because he "felt right sorry" for her – on the prejudicial grounds that they do not accept that a Black man could feel pity for a white woman (Lee, 1960, p. 224). Fricker writes,

> Feeling sorry for someone is a taboo sentiment if you are black and the object of your sympathy is a white person. In the context of a racist ideology structured around dogmas of white superiority, the fundamental ethical sentiment of plain human sympathy becomes disfigured in the eyes of whites so that it appears as little more than an indicator of self-perceived advantage on the part of the black subject. (2007, p. 24)

The harms against Robinson are twofold. He is *legally* wronged by the false incrimination, and he is also *epistemically* wronged as a knower by having his truth dismissed. This dismissal constitutes a testimonial injustice.

In contrast, while the term "epistemic violence" also refers to a harm against a knower, the root of the offense is different. In her seminal text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak illustrates the concept of epistemic violence by drawing on the history of British colonization in India, highlighting the imposition of a Western legal code. Spivak asserts that pre-existing Hindu law was founded on conceptions of legal guidance that view the law as a "polymorphous structure of legal performance" that is "'internally' noncoherent and open at both ends" (1988, p. 281). This conception of legality was at odds with British concepts of a monolithic legal system, which distilled the law into what could be codified and administered. Codification effectively systematized an approach to the law that had, until that point, purposefully emphasized circumstance and fluid interpretation. Subsequently, Hindu conceptions of legality as flexible and responsive were rendered unintelligible within the colonial system, in which acts 'were' or 'were not' legal. The logic of Hindu legal scholarship, and the native population who followed these practices, was thus rendered mute: unable to be heard and understood within an existing structure. In this way, British rule imposed "a complete overhaul of the episteme" (Spivak, 1988, p. 281). A way of seeing and understanding legal structures had been systematically annihilated.

Juxtaposing these two cases helps us distinguish the respective loci of Fricker and Spivak's concerns. Though Fricker demonstrates that Robinson's dismissal by an all-white jury represents a clear case of testimonial injustice, the logic of the testimony itself is still *interpretable* within U.S. legal codes. Robinson

and the jury still share a common epistemic frame; his statement is called into question, but the claim's content remains intelligible to the jurors. The jury prejudicially does not *believe* him, but it does *understand* him. Fricker's notion of testimonial epistemic injustice helps us understand cases in which the root of injustice is the prejudicial dismissal of agent *qua* agent. It is for this reason that Fricker describes testimonial injustice as a sort of "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (2007, p. 28). Conversely, in a case of epistemic violence, the statement *itself* would be rendered 'unhearable' within the discourse.

This distinction results in further divergence in how each phenomenon presents itself. Fricker argues, for instance, that the term epistemic injustice does not apply in cases where the hearer does their due diligence to verify the credibility of their interlocutor. She offers readers a distinction between an injustice and a mistake, one that is predicated on the process by which the listener comes to a judgment. She uses the example of an ethicist who mistakenly believes a colleague to be a medic, when he is actually a fellow ethicist, based on a careless internet search. When he offers a critical comment related to her specialization, moral fictionalism, she internally under-credits his criticism on the basis of his seemingly lacking the requisite familiarity with the field, based on her own attempts to verify his expertise. This was an error on the hearer's part, and arguably a sloppy one, but both the ethicist's mindset (that the under-crediting is not prejudicial) and approach (the due diligence of seeking out the other's credentials) deter Fricker from declaring the ethicist's faux-pas a true injustice. This kind of non-fault-bearing case is quite common, for instance, when someone mishears a comment in a loud room. Fricker argues that it is better to reserve the term epistemic injustice for cases in which "there is something ethically bad about the hearer's misjudgment" (2007, p. 22). The concept of epistemic injustice is unapplicable if a hearer resists prejudicial thinking and maintains a commitment to good faith verification.

In cases of epistemic violence, while that actions and intentions of individual interlocutors affect can be blameworthy, these actions and intentions are also embedded in a larger *structure* of epistemic exchange that is implicated in

the subjugation or obliteration of specific ways of knowing.[4] Returning to the case of the British colonial overwriting of the Indian Hindu legal code, it was the codification of binary legal concepts that rendered polymorphic legal hermeneutics unintelligible, making it difficult or impossible for those insights to be understood in the context of legal exchanges, thus erasing such conceptions from Indian legal proceedings (i.e., from the communicative space). Additionally, because epistemic violence constitutes the obliteration of forms of sense-making, the internal commitments of the interlocutors are neither its sufficient causes nor sufficient safeguards against it. As Kristie Dotson (2011) explains, epistemic violence requires neither "intention" nor "capacity" but "does, however, require a failed communicative exchange owing to pernicious ignorance" (p. 240). Thus, even a careful and well-meaning interlocutor can contribute to epistemic violence if the logic of their exchange forecloses the other's ability to make their position sensible to that interlocutor. Further, the perniciousness of this ignorance is not due to an interlocutor's "culpability in possessing that ignorance" (2011, p. 239). Whether the error derives from the interlocutor's limited exposure or 'due diligence' is irrelevant. For this reason, epistemic violence can manifest in *any* communicative space in which a speaker's contributions—well-intended or otherwise—impose a logical framework on the communicative space to the exclusion of other epistemic systems.

The impacts of epistemic violence stretch beyond the immediate discursive exchange. Spivak explains how the epistemic violence that resulted from British imperialism in India constituted Indian peasantry as a colonial subject, or "subaltern" Other counterposed to Western Europe. This treatment systematically prevented this social group from speaking and being heard on their own terms. Through epistemic suppression, Indian women were effectively silenced within the colonial-imperialist mechanism of British rule. She writes, "the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation, even if the absurdity of the non-representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved" (Spivak, 1988, p. 288).

[4] Because this article aims to ameliorate structural impediments to epistemic inclusion, we focus our attention here on the epistemic frameworks themselves, rather than other factors – for instance, issues of individual and group culpability. However, those issues too need further examination within P4/wC circles.

Since Spivak's original publication, conceptions of epistemic violence have broadened, most notably through Dotson's work. Dotson (2011) draws on, and expands Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, emphasizing the systematic silencing that Spivak's term captures and aiming to provide "a mechanism for identifying on-the-ground practices of silencing" (2011, p. 237). Dotson interprets silencing as instances when interlocutors or audiences fail to understand a speaker based on ignorance owing to a harmful "epistemic gap in cognitive resources" (2011, p. 238). These gaps are often due to historical exclusions of who and what is heard and believed, and come as a result of historical and social oppression. While Dotson offers two ways that silencing happens, the concept of 'testimonial smothering' will be described.

Dotson (2011) describes "testimonial smothering" as a type of self-censorship performed when a speaker's audience has failed to demonstrate cultural competence with a given topic. The speaker assesses that their testimony may be risky in this context, in that there is a strong possibility that their speech will be misunderstood or misconstrued in potentially harmful ways. Dotson (2011) draws on the experience of scholar Uma Narayan who began to censor her writing on dowry murders in India. Narayan felt forced to 'smother,' or self-silence, her research because of the way her U.S. readership largely interpreted the topic of Indian dowry murders through an existing prejudice about non-Western women. Narayan decided to no longer engage in dialogue around this research because it allowed "negative perceptions of third-world women's oppression" to remain unchallenged (Dotson, 2011, p. 249).This is not due to Narayan's research, but most likely due to the strength of a dominant epistemic system in the West that prejudicially views non-white or non-European cultures as less civilized. This prejudice is likely reinforced by "situated ignorance," which describes a positional form of ignorance that places some individuals in a position where there is no consequence for ignorance around a culture or language, for instance (Dotson, 2011, p. 248). A white Western interlocutor may be ignorant about Indian culture because their social and epistemic positioning prevents them from needing this information or seeing the significance of such information. This can create a cyclical relationship between systemic forms of oppression and the social and epistemic conditions that ally or enable these forms of oppression.

The fact that theories of epistemic injustice and epistemic violence share common concerns about the dismissal of others' sense-making explains their conflation in existing literature. For instance, Elicor (2020) describes incidents in P4wC practice in which "a Filipino child's ideas are not taken seriously because 'it is not philosophical enough'" (Elicor, 2020, p. 21). Though Elicor uses the term "epistemic injustice" to describe this phenomenon, it is notable that he does not speak of prejudicial attitudes towards the Filipino student. Rather, he comments that such exchanges can go unheard "when only Western criteria are used to evaluate local ways of thinking" (Elicor, 2020, p. 21). This places the locus of the offense on the logic of the exchange, rendering the offense conceptually closer to epistemic violence than to an incident of epistemic injustice.

We argue that such a recategorization is more than simply 'splitting hairs'. Distinguishing epistemic violence from epistemic injustice is critical, for it allows us to properly identify an offense's root cause. Describing this as a case of epistemic violence highlights that what is most needed for Elicor's hypothetical student to be heard is for the community to adopt a more capacious understanding of philosophical thought beyond Western rationalism. It requires re-examining the systems and logic that organize our exchanges. How we solve the problem is dependent upon how we identify the problem.

### *epistemic violence in p4c spaces and its consequences*

Using the concept of epistemic violence can offer more precise language to describe concerns that have already arisen within P4C scholarship. For instance, Marguerite and Michael Rivage-Seul (1994) describe a 1987 P4C program in Guatemala used to study the effects of P4C and democratization (p. 42). As they note, while the program sought to improve life in Guatemala by promoting ideas about democracy and a democratic form of education, certain aspects of the program reinforced cultural imperialism. The program devalued "Guatemalans' understanding and rationality concerning democratic processes" by assuming that they did not already have ways of understanding democracy within their country that may have conflicted with US conceptions (1994, p. 45). The program's conceptual framework also centered a particular conception of democracy as a 'given' that was "treated unproblematically," whereas there had historically been

struggle in Guatemala "between government and armed opposition over the theoretical and practical definition of democracy" (1994, p. 45). Such programs can produce epistemic violence by imposing particular bodies of knowledge, ways of understanding, and social and political institutions onto a population in ways that effectively replace the current ideas, beliefs, and values present within a culture.

In another example, the Rivage-Seuls explain that the Guatemalan children read and discussed a Spanish translation of Matthew Lipman's P4C text *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1974). The philosophical novel depicts a middle-class Western boy whose life looks very different from the chronic hunger and poverty experienced by many Guatemalan children who participated in the program. (Apparently, the novel was not, or not sufficiently adapted culturally to reflect the Guatemalan context, as is the norm with translations of Lipman's novels.) It would have been relevant for the children to ask, or be encouraged to ask, questions about the novel characters' quality of life compared to their own. However, as the Rivage-Seuls note, these types of questions were not encouraged because the texts were selected by P4C scholars for Guatemalan children to "think about significant concepts in the philosophical tradition," and not to philosophize about their current situation (1994, p. 50-51).

By the Rivage-Seul's analysis, it appears that the existing imperial relationship between the United States and Guatemala seemed to, in some ways, shape the dynamics throughout the program's implementation. As the Rivage-Seuls' note, the United States operated as an imperial power within Guatemala, intervening in Guatemalan politics and benefiting significantly from the country's natural resources (Rivage-Seul & Rivage-Seul, 1994, p. 46). They also note that the program's implementation appeared to signal that "democracy [was] not being realized because of the deficiencies in reasoning on the part of the Guatemalan adults" (Rivage-Seul & Rivage-Seul, 1994, p. 45). This analysis suggests an asymmetrical dynamic where the U.S. researchers and practitioners could have potentially collaborated more with the Guatemalan researchers, practitioners, and educators involved to create a truly U.S.-Guatamalan Philosophy for Children program.

While this U.S. Philosophy for Children program did not intend for these effects, the outcomes are illustrative of epistemic violence. By using Dotson's systems-approach to epistemic oppression, these problems could have been tracked and corrected as 'second-order epistemic exclusions'. The researchers and practitioners from the U.S. might have committed themselves to learning more about Guatemalan history and culture, as well as the Guatemala-U.S. relationship. They could have also collaborated more closely with the local researchers, practitioners, and educators. This may have assisted the U.S. researchers and practitioners in stretching their conceptions of democracy and political engagement to better support the aims of the program within the context of Guatemala.

Ultimately, the Rivage-Seul's work demonstrates the systematic nature of epistemic violence and how this harm can present itself in a Philosophy for Children program. These harms would be misattributed if they were analyzed through the concept of epistemic injustice. Such an analysis would locate the harm as a consequence of a few 'bad actors' or 'bad attitudes' rather than the result of the longstanding history of United States imperialism that perpetuates epistemic violence within the country and continues to shape international dynamics, even within a well-intentioned program.

### *silencing and epistemic violence in the community of philosophical inquiry*

We now turn to two central cases that are quotidian in nature but, as we argue, demonstrative of epistemic violence. While we began with and will return to the opening story of the discussion centered around Dutch-Lenape history, there is another case that is reflective of, perhaps, a more subtle form of epistemic violence. In a 1996 article in *Analytic Teaching*, P4C scholar Ruth Silver shares her concerns about a particular discussion that she observed at a summer residential workshop for P4C practitioners. In one of the cases, the community of inquiry was discussing Matthew Lipman's short story "anybody's, nobody's and Lady Sadie," and the group took up the issue of gun violence. The conversation was largely single-minded. Many of the community members shared a common epistemic framework in which such violence was deplorable, and the participants shared lamentations about the prevalence of gun ownership in U.S. society. Silver

notes that, towards the end of the conversation, two previously silent participants offered their perspectives. The women, both from African countries, cited the role of armed struggle in overturning colonial regimes and spoke of it as a "necessity" (Silver, 1996, p. 78). After they spoke, Silver was troubled by the group's reception to these women: "Everyone looked at them. And no one responded at all. The talk rolled on as if they had not said a word" (1996, p. 79). She notes that the speakers "were of course not shouted down, but neither were they responded to in any way" (1996, p. 78).

Such moments in discussions, both within the community of philosophical inquiry and other structures, are not entirely aberrant. These moments of silence are often described by participants as 'awkward' – phrasing that emphasizes discomfort, but not necessarily harm. However, examining this through the lens of epistemic violence provides a more precise frame of analysis and reveals the systemic nature of this type of harm.

Here, Dotson's concept of communicative reciprocity offers us some interpretive resources to further explain Silver's unease. Dotson tells readers, "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" (2011, p. 237). A linguistic exchange requires proper receipt. This means that not only must a community be in a position to properly interpret an utterance, but it must also demonstrate having been truly heard through communicatively reciprocating – for instance, by taking up the idea or acknowledging its content. Dotson holds that epistemic violence can manifest insidiously as a lack of communicative reciprocity – that is, "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance" (2011, p. 238). If we take this lens to Silver's narrative, the community of inquiry has withheld their contributions to the linguistic exchange; in the resounding silence, the women have no means of determining whether they have been heard, particularly as conversation, as Silver notes, "rolled on" without acknowledgment (Silver, 1996, p. 79).

Though it is impossible to know the root of this linguistic absence with certainty, the effect is clear: that this contribution has been unable to permeate the

community of inquiry. Put more bluntly, the community has failed in their duty to reciprocate by engaging the women's contribution in any meaningful way. Failing to reciprocate an interlocutor's contribution often works to establish boundaries around 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' topics–boundaries that may foreclose the possibility of engaging a valid and worthwhile perspective that simply challenges the dominant position. As a result, interlocutors such as the women Silver discusses may begin to silence themselves during the inquiry. Such silence can thus, in turn, beget more silence. That is, a community's silence can result in a participant's resistance to contributing further to the community's discussions. P4C scholar-practitioner Amy Reed-Sandoval (2019) combines her experience as a facilitator with Aníbal Quijano's work that explains how, under coloniality, oppressed groups are often silenced or forced to speak a language that is not their home language (p. 38). Drawing theory and practice together, Reed-Sandoval assesses that certain silences within a community of inquiry might be a response to epistemic violence that reveals "active (albeit non-verbal) expressions of opposition or discontent" (p. 38). Daren Chetty (2014), another prominent P4C scholar-practioner, describes inquiry around race as another "Catch-22 situation" where non-white children may be forced to either hedge their testimony or silence their contribution (p. 24).

Here, we can see two ways in which silence is employed in the community of philosophical inquiry: defensively and offensively. Silence can be used as a defensive strategy on the part of participants whose contributions have been previously unable to permeate discussion; they may choose to avoid the embarrassment of failed communicative reciprocation by simply not saying anything at all or by disengaging. Simultaneously, a group can employ silence as a means of communicating to an interlocutor that they are choosing not to reciprocate their contribution. In this way, the acceptance of this as a practice – that failing to acknowledge a participant's contribution is considered acceptable within the community of philosophical inquiry – frames silencing as part of a logic of elimination. The group is given quiet permission to fail to take up an individual's good faith offering; because of this, a contribution can be lost. Interpreting moments like these through the lens of epistemic violence and epistemic oppression highlights that, while a community of inquiry can ostensibly adhere to

standards of free participation by opening the floor to all members, an epistemically capacious environment also requires some form of reciprocity when ideas are presented within it. The community of inquiry finds itself at risk of epistemic violence in cases where the group's quiet unanimity prevents it from engaging with frameworks in which a stated value challenges its members' core presuppositions, regardless of whether the group otherwise "listen[s] politely" (Silver, 1996, p. 78).

The consequences of such exchanges are also potentially long-reaching. Failing to address epistemic violence fosters epistemic oppression and has ongoing residual effects on interlocutors whose testimony fails to be duly received by the community of inquiry. As Rainville notes, "students may be reluctant to speak up when they feel hurt or threatened by remarks which others do not perceive to be threatening" (2000, p. 69). Dotson's conception of communicative reciprocity helps us understand that this same phenomenon can also occur because of a *lack of* remarks: through failing to engage with a rhetorical offering. This exemplifies Dotson's "testimonial smothering," in which an individual curates their speech to only present concepts with which their audience has already demonstrated competence and avoid "risky" testimony (2011, pp. 244-245). Over time, a participant may learn that their sense-making is unable to permeate a space, leading them to express only socially 'safe' positions or possibly to avoid speaking entirely.

By categorizing Silver's example and the original example of the Lenape as epistemic violence, we begin to recognize certain salient features in each of them. In both examples, the epistemic system has failed to reciprocate certain epistemic contributions from the communicative space through different forms of disengagement.

## *towards epistemically capacious p4c pedagogy*

Thinking through epistemic violence and how it manifests in particular cases can help us articulate what exactly went wrong in our previously cited exchanges. Further, applying Dotson's systems-approach for epistemic oppression to these failures in communication can point us towards practices that may serve as protective factors against future incidents.

In the example offered at the beginning of this paper, where one author facilitated an inquiry around the history of the Dutch and Lenape in New York, students who were sympathetic to the Dutch colonists understand the example through a particular logic.

The students may have been operating with a particular concept of "contracts" – that they are binding without exception – and "land" – that it is an ownable resource – which delimits the possibility for understanding the Lenape's perspective. This idea is commonly referred to as 'contractualism' and serves as a cornerstone of liberal thought. It is possible that the prevalence of this concept within the U.S. made it difficult for the discussion participants to accept that a land contract could be a Western construct, rather than a universal concept. Though the lapse is not inherently fault-bearing – for elementary students in New York, a state that still celebrates Columbus Day, may not have the requisite background to recognize the situatedness of this understanding of land ownership – the effect is such that the way the Lenape conceptualized land could not fully permeate the space.

However, by properly identifying the source of the rupture, facilitators are positioned to offer protective factors that might allow such a conception to be properly heard instead of bypassed. If we see this as aligned with Dotson's depiction of second-order exclusions, the children's deficit could be addressed by learning existing, mainstream accounts of various land practices and by historicizing them. For instance, such a moment demonstrates the potential for practices to follow injunctions like Frederic Jameson's – to "always historicize"– to foster more epistemically capacious spaces (Jameson, 1981, p. 9). Historicizing, as Jameson describes it, involves acknowledging "the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things" (1981, p. 9). Chetty (2018) argues that an ahistorical approach to race has, over time, structured the bounds of reasonableness in western philosophy and P4C, especially around questions of race and racialization. As Philosophy for Children scholars (Rivage-Seul, 1994; Rainville, 2000; Chetty, 2018; Reed-Sandoval, 2019) have noted, historicizing would allow facilitators to provide context that demonstrates the situatedness of particular concepts that arise within the community of inquiry. In the

contributing author's example, for instance, she could highlight for students who are firmly steeped in contractual thinking that land ownership is not a universal ideal. She might introduce the concept of usufructory rights: that a Lenape concept of land was consistent with the idea that one could serve as a steward to land, but never own it. By highlighting for students that what they take to be given is actually historically situated and culturally particular, and representative of only one view out of many prospective views, students are better positioned to understand conceptions that conflict with their dominant epistemic framework without expecting to subsume them into that framework.

Thinking through epistemic violence also persuades us that facilitators must take up communicative reciprocity as a normative *value* in the community of inquiry. It may be unreasonable – or at least untenable – to expect student participants to automatically know how to responsibly take up statements that reflect positions and epistemic frameworks beyond their comprehension; group silence may sometimes result from group *hesitancy*: an inability to identify what to say and a fear of saying the wrong thing. Facilitators, though, could amend these instances by carrying out practices they already do–asking for elaboration, clarification, and responses to the proposed counterexample–, but intentionally when these silences arise. By doing this, facilitators are committing themselves to a community of inquiry that demonstrates "respect for individual integrity, responsibility to community, and [a] lack of coercion and dominance" (Lardner, 1991, p. 23).

If the community does not take up the exchange on its own and demonstrate communicative reciprocity to a speaker who offers a contribution outside of the group's dominant epistemic frameworks, it falls on the facilitator to model this communicative reciprocity: to make sure that the content of the statement is acknowledged and integrated without being passed over. For instance, in Silver's example where community members failed to meaningfully respond to the idea that liberation struggles have, at times, required gun violence, the facilitator could use the 'awkward' silence as a cue to follow up with this position to ensure that the position is accurately understood. The facilitator could have asked one or both of the women to elaborate on their view. The facilitator could have used the moment to create an impromptu exercise in which the

facilitator asks the group to think of other counterexamples–even if members find fault with these examples–where gun violence or armed struggle secured a greater good in a given situation. (Perhaps mentioning additional instances like the military defeat of Germany at the end of WWII would have been a generative contribution).

If doing so still does not render the contribution hearable, this may point to further work that the community may have to take up: expansion of concepts or challenging dominant epistemic frameworks. However, neither is possible until it is clear to participants that these contributions will, on a literal level, be taken up.

We present these not as foolproof assurances, but as protective strategies which may reduce the likelihood of epistemic violence by limiting the ways in which it can manifest. For this reason, facilitators must remain reflective about their practice and ponder which voices and ideas have been allowed to permeate their space and which, like Silver's example, have been left to sit in silence. Additionally, drawing on Dotson's (2014) systems approach to epistemic exclusions offers a map to address different types of structural epistemic harms when they arise.

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**alaina gostomski**

Alaina Gostomski (she/her) is a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is a philosopher in residence at an elementary and middle school in New York City. Her research interests include critical philosophies of education, democratic education, and Philosophy for\with Children.

**sam piede**

Sam Piede (she/her) received her Ph.D. in philosophy and education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Drawing on twelve years in secondary education, her research focuses on articulating pedagogical moves through the lens of relational aesthetics. She teaches at Fordham University and writes on relationality, aesthetic attunement, and P4C.

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