

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

Faculty Publications - Philosophy

Philosophy

Fall 2017

Tracking Privilege-Preserving Epistemic Pushback in Feminist and Critical Race Philosophy Classes

Alison Bailey

Illinois State University, baileya@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpphil>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bailey, Alison, "Tracking Privilege-Preserving Epistemic Pushback in Feminist and Critical Race Philosophy Classes" (2017). *Faculty Publications - Philosophy*. 4.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpphil/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Philosophy by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUReD@ilstu.edu.

Tracking Privilege-Preserving Epistemic Pushback in Feminist and Critical Race Philosophy Classes

ALISON BAILEY

Classrooms are unlevel knowing fields, contested terrains where knowledge and ignorance are produced and circulate with equal vigor, and where members of dominant groups are accustomed to having an epistemic home-terrain advantage. My project focuses on one form of resistance that regularly surfaces in discussions with social-justice content. Privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is a variety of willful ignorance that many members of dominant groups engage in when asked to consider both the lived and structural injustices that members of marginalized groups experience daily. I argue that this dominant form of resistance is neither an expression of skepticism nor a critical-thinking practice. I suggest that standard philosophical engagements with these expressions of resistance are incapable of tracking the harms of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback. I recommend treating this pushback as a “shadow text,” that is, as a text that runs alongside the readings in ways that offer no epistemic friction. I offer this as one critical philosophical practice for making students mindful of the ways they contribute to the circulation of ignorance and epistemic violence during the course of their discussions.

Racism is especially rampant in places and people that
produce knowledge.
—Anzaldúa 1990, xix

There are days when I envy my colleagues who teach a standard Western philosophy curriculum. With the possible exception of discussions about God’s existence, most traditional philosophical puzzles do not implicate the self in the deeply emotional ways that courses in feminist and critical race philosophy do. Classroom discussions of race, gender, and their intersections with class/caste, ability, and sexuality use on-the-ground experiences with injustice as their starting point and as such have strong psychological and affective dimensions. We know injustice when we feel it. Productive engagement

with these topics should call our collective attention to the relationships among knowledge, power, and embodied identity in ways that challenge students' default assumption that knowledge is marked by certainty, universality, and objectivity.

Classrooms are *uneven knowing fields*: contested terrains where knowledge and ignorance are simultaneously produced and circulate with equal vigor. There are constellations of resistances at play here. Dominant groups are accustomed to having an "epistemic home-turf advantage"; that is, we are used to having conversations about racism or sexism in discursive spaces where our perceptions go unchallenged. So, when our epistemic home terrain is under threat, we hold our ground. Consider the white student who is unwilling to hear the testimonies of students of color about the daily injustices they experience as anything more than complaining. Members of marginalized groups also resist: we push back against texts and conversations that distort, erase, or fail to acknowledge our experiences. Consider the Latina who chooses to be silent or to skip class rather than have another conversation about race and immigration with white folks who just want to argue.

As a white feminist philosopher I want to focus on one particular node in this constellation of resistant responses. *Privilege-preserving epistemic pushback* is a variety of willful ignorance that dominant groups habitually deploy during conversations that are trying to make social injustices visible. I want to work with, not against, this ground-holding reflex by offering a possible strategy for tracking it productively, with the caveat that resistance can be nuanced. It's not always easy to spot or interpret. I focus on these ground-holding responses because they are pervasive, tenacious, and bear a strong resemblance to critical-thinking practices, and because I believe that their uninterrupted circulation does psychological and epistemic harm to members of marginalized groups.

My discussion begins with two examples from undergraduate feminist and critical race philosophy classrooms with strong applied intersectional content. Privilege-preserving pushback takes at least two forms. The first strongly resembles critical-thinking practices that encourage students to carefully consider the truth of a particular claim. The second is more sophisticated: it occurs when philosophical concepts are enlisted to fortify this resistance. I argue that this privilege-preserving expression of ignorance is neither a form of skepticism nor an expression of critical thinking. These expressions are doing a different kind of work. I treat them as *shadow texts*, that is, as texts that run alongside the readings in ways that offer no epistemic friction. I briefly offer a pedagogical exercise designed to help students track shadow texts and to raise questions about the possible harms of letting shadow texts circulate uncritically. In closing I consider the possibility that shadow texts not only help track the production of ignorance, but also the harms of epistemic violence.

DOES THIS HAPPEN WHEN YOU TEACH?

DeEndré walks into class and sits in his usual seat in the back row.¹ We are discussing Claudia Card's "Rape as a Terrorist Institution." DeEndré, who has positioned himself as the class gadfly, busily searches the internet for statistics on sexual assault

and domestic violence against boys and men. He finds some, raises his hand, and says: "Men are victims too, according to a recent statistic more men than women are victims of intimate partner violence. It's over 40%!"² Armed with new information, he asserts that our discussion would be less biased if we focused more *generally* on intimate partner violence, rather than always focusing on violence against girls and women. Women in the class challenge his response by explaining why gender and race are important to the discussion. They offer more accurate statistics. They tell their stories about how the ever-present threats of sexualized violence affect their daily movements, but he insists that they are reading too much gender into simple episodes of human-on-human violence.

We are discussing institutional racism. Jennifer, a white philosophy major, shares a story about racist graffiti that uses the "n" word. She says the word, animating it with that two-fingered scare-quote gesture to signal that she is mentioning it. I ask her to consider the history of the word and how it might mean something different coming from white mouths. I ask her not to use it. She gives the class a mini lecture on the use-mention distinction, reminding me that it "is a foundational concept in analytic philosophy" and that it's "perfectly acceptable to mention, but not to use the word in philosophical discussions." Sheila, one of two Black women in the class, offers a history of the word and how it was used to degrade and discipline Black bodies. Jennifer nods in agreement, but holds her ground: "Exactly!" she says, "that's what happens when the word is *used*, but I'm just *mentioning* it." Sheila shares how she feels when white folks *mention* the word. She asks Jennifer politely to neither use nor mention it. Jennifer calmly responds that Sheila does not understand the distinction, and proceeds to explain it again.

WHAT IS PRIVILEGE-PRESERVING EPISTEMIC PUSHBACK?

Feminist philosophers and critical race theorists will be intimately familiar with these kinds of exchanges. Perhaps your own stories spring to mind as you read them. These responses are not limited to classrooms; one hears them everywhere, but I focus on philosophy classrooms because this is where I spend most of my time engaging them. As part of this engagement I've thought about how privilege-preserving epistemic pushback functions in academic spaces, and I've wondered aloud about the impact these utterances have when they pass as legitimate philosophical skepticism or critical thinking. To answer this question, I need to say more about the nature and movement of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback.

Feminist epistemologists have long noted the connections between the social location of knowers and a particular social group's understandings of the world. I like Lorraine Code's notion of epistemic terrains because it offers an on-the-ground visual cartography that I find useful when tracking the epistemic social dynamics of the classroom. As Code famously notes, we need to develop a

new geography of the epistemic terrain, one that is no longer primarily a physical geography, but a population geography that develops qualitative analyses of subjective positions and identities and the sociopolitical structures that produce them. Because differing social positions generate various constructions of reality and afford different perspectives on the world... these analyses derive from a recognition that knowers are always somewhere—and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations. (Code 1995, 39)

If knowledge is shaped by a knower's location on a particular social epistemic terrain, and if that terrain is an unlevel knowing field, then it will produce situations where some knowers are epistemically advantaged and others disadvantaged. One species of disadvantage is the structural ignorance that follows from an inability to easily notice certain facts about the world from one's epistemic home terrain: most men struggle to understand why cat-calling women in public places is harassment and not flattery. Most white folks struggle to understand how white privilege can contribute to our safety, prosperity, and health.

Epistemic home terrains must be constantly and vigilantly guarded and defended. Broadly speaking, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is a form of worldview protection: a willful resistance to knowing that occurs predictably in discussions that threaten a social group's epistemic home terrain.³ Defending that terrain is one way for dominant groups to resist "new material that deeply unsettles the paradigms through which they make sense of the world. When ideologies like the myth of meritocracy or their sense of who they are as a person, are deeply unsettled, students will often fall back on various defense mechanisms to try to maintain order" (Case and Cole 2013, in Berila 2016, 95). In practice, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is a family of cognitive, affective, nonverbal, and discursive tactics that are used habitually to avoid engaging ideas that threaten us. This resistance, as José Medina argues, offers a form of "cognitive self-protection" (Medina 2013, 5). When our sense of self, group identity, core beliefs, and privileged place in the social order is challenged, we adopt defensive postures to resist what we perceive to be destabilizing. Protecting our epistemic terrain requires that we put up barriers made of opinions and prejudices, which are fortified by anger, shame, guilt, indifference, arrogance, jealousy, pride, and sometimes silence. These feelings sit in our bodies: our hearts beat faster, our muscles tighten, we scowl, and our minds chatter. Sometimes we shut down completely.

Privilege-preserving epistemic pushback has a strong normative dimension. Terrain-defending habits partially stem from the feeling that others are challenging the basic sense we have of ourselves as good people living in a basically just world. These are not mere disagreements. As Barbara Applebaum observes, they are discursive strategies deployed to protect our sense of both innocence and goodness; this single-pointed focus obscures our complicity in the subtle workings of white racism (Applebaum 2010, 184–86). Members of dominant groups are more comfortable discussing social justice from the comfort and safety of our epistemic home terrain, so

when we are nudged onto a more critical terrain we become disoriented and unsettled. We defend our epistemic home terrain not only for the sake of maintaining our worldview, but also to preserve our perceived entitlement to a racial and gendered comfort that is strongly tied to our sense of being good white folks. When our goodness is threatened we respond by redirecting the conversation back to more comfortable turf.⁴ If racialized and gendered locations are always epistemic locations, then racialized and gendered (dis)comfort will always yield epistemic discomfort. So, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is not only a form of cognitive self-protection, it also helps us to maintain an image we have of ourselves as good people or reliable allies.⁵

The lure of being a good white antiracist or a good male feminist is strongly linked to the desire for ontological wholeness, a form of metaphysical comfort. Robin DiAngelo's account of "white fragility" has advanced my understanding of the deep and abiding hold metaphysical comfort has on most members of dominant groups' desire for innocence. White people, she observes, move through social environments in ways that insulate us from race-based anxiety and stress, and this fosters expectations of racial comfort. We have a low tolerance for racial stress. In general, white fragility triggers a constellation of behaviors that work to steer us back to epistemic terrains where we feel whole, comfortable, and good. Consider how white folks repeatedly bolster our metaphysical wholeness with stories about our good deeds, merit-based accomplishments, immigration stories, or the long hours we've worked. These narratives keep us whole.

Finally, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback cannot be dismissed as an occasional set of responses from a few random individuals who happen to be uncomfortable with social-justice topics. These responses are predictable, and their regularity points to their historically deep systemic origins. Like all forms of privilege, these discursive patterns are unmarked and circulate subtly. As Beth Berila notes, privilege is the oil in complex systems of domination that help these systems work smoothly. When the works get gummed up, these systems have a "back-up plan that involves built-in, learned reactions that will come flooding in to protect the system of privilege, usually in the form of defensive, so-called resistant reactions... This back-up buffer prevents [us] from really questioning privilege and neatly reroutes [us] back into upholding the system" (Berila 2016, 92). Consider how easy it is to forecast most non-Black people's responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. The words barely leave our lips before the chorus of "I think all lives matter!" or "Blue lives matter too" fills the room. So, the pushback I have in mind cannot be attributed exclusively to a few stubborn students who are unwilling to leave their epistemic home terrain. The predictability of these discursive moves signals that these forms of privilege-protection are deeply historical and continue to be culturally active.

Predictability, however, does not always translate into visibility. The discursive patterns associated with privilege-preserving epistemic pushback are unmarked, nuanced, and are extremely difficult to spot in philosophy classes because they easily pass as acceptable philosophical engagements. I confess that, in the interest of meeting students halfway, I've sometimes treated this pushback as an objection to an

argument; but I feel extremely uneasy about doing so because treating willful ignorance as critical engagement muddies philosophical waters. Philosophy classrooms should be spaces where students learn to engage material carefully and critically, and “I don’t buy it! I think you are wrong. You need to convince me!” is a psychological and not a well-reasoned response.⁶ Treating privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as a form of critical engagement validates it and allows it to circulate more freely; this, as I’ll argue later, can do epistemic violence to oppressed groups. For these reasons, we need to be clear about the differences among critical thinking, healthy skepticism, and privilege-preserving epistemic pushback.

CRITICAL THINKING, HEALTHY SKEPTICISM, AND PRIVILEGE-PRESERVING EPISTEMIC PUSHBACK

Philosophers of education have long made the distinction between critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Both literatures appeal to the value of being “critical” in the sense that instructors should cultivate in students a more cautious approach to accepting common beliefs at face value. Both traditions share the concern that learners generally lack the ability to spot inaccurate, misleading, incomplete, or blatantly false claims. They also share a sense that learning a particular set of critical skills has a corrective, humanizing, and liberatory effect. The traditions, however, part ways over their definition of “critical.” Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk’s comparison of the traditions provides a useful background for my discussion in the next section. The critical-thinking tradition is concerned primarily with epistemic adequacy. To be critical is to show good judgment in recognizing when arguments are faulty, assertions lack evidence, truth claims appeal to unreliable sources, or concepts are sloppily crafted and applied. For critical thinkers, the problem is that people fail to “examine the assumptions, commitments, and logic of daily life... the basic problem is irrational, illogical, and unexamined living” (Burbules and Berk 1999, 46). In this tradition sloppy claims can be identified and fixed by learning to apply the tools of formal and informal logic correctly.

Critical pedagogy begins from a different set of assumptions rooted in the neo-Marxian literature on critical theory commonly associated with the Frankfurt School. Here, the critical learner is someone who is empowered and motivated to seek justice and emancipation. Critical pedagogy regards the claims that students make in response to social-justice issues not as propositions to be assessed for their truth value, but as expressions of power that function to re-inscribe and perpetuate social inequalities. Its mission is to teach students ways of identifying and mapping how power shapes our understandings of the world. This is the first step toward resisting and transforming social injustices. By interrogating the politics of knowledge-production, this tradition also calls into question the uses of the accepted critical-thinking toolkit to determine epistemic adequacy. To extend Audre Lorde’s classic metaphor, the tools of the critical-thinking tradition (for example, validity, soundness, conceptual clarity) cannot dismantle the master’s house: they can temporarily beat the master at

his own game, but they can never bring about any enduring structural change (Lorde 1984, 112). They fail because the critical thinker's toolkit is commonly invoked in particular settings, at particular times to reassert power: those adept with the tools often use them to restore an order that assures their comfort. They can be habitually invoked to defend our epistemic home terrains.

The line between these traditions is not hard and fast, and I concede that there are times when these traditions can work well together to navigate difficult questions. But I'm adamant that philosophical engagements on issues of social justice must simultaneously track the production of knowledge and ignorance. Teaching social-justice issues requires an attentiveness not only to the ways students take up course content, but also to the strategies they use to resist it. I neither want to encourage nor silence student resistance. I want to make its operations visible by tracking the movements on the unlevel knowing field.

So what happens when we treat privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as an expression of healthy skepticism? We can't track its movements. Students routinely justify their resistance by explaining that they are "playing devil's advocate" or that their responses should be taken in the spirit of the healthy skepticism that philosophers are encouraged to adopt as part of our disciplinary best practices. I think this is inaccurate: there is a difference between a lack of agreement and a lack of understanding. The resistance captured by my opening examples is not motivated by a belief that certainty is impossible, or that, as a matter of practice, we must suspend judgment on questions of social justice. What's troubling here is not that students enjoy playing the skeptic in philosophy classes. They most certainly do. What's worrisome is that members of dominant groups become habitually skeptical during conversations that threaten our epistemic home terrain. As Gaile Pohlhaus insightfully remarked in conversation, "I have seen white students who balked at Descartes' skepticism (and had great trouble understanding how and why anyone would doubt in that way) become perfect Cartesians when it comes to talking about race" (Pohlhaus, personal communication; see also Pohlhaus 2014).

If the need for worldview-protection rather than the quest for certainty is what truly drives privilege-preserving epistemic pushback, then students' doubting reflexes work to obstruct rather than to create knowledge. DeEndré and Jennifer are not merely expressing their doubt; each has an implicit worldview to defend—an epistemic ground to hold—in the face of competing worldviews. Their engagements are aimed at resisting the content of the discussion rather than suspending judgment about the claims being made. Unlike expressions of genuine skepticism that advance classroom discussions by encouraging open-minded, cautious, curious, and engaged doubt, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is driven by what Medina calls the need for "cognitive self-protection" (Medina 2013, 5). So I don't think that it accurately describes what is happening here.

We can't track privilege-preserving epistemic pushback if we treat it as an expression of critical thinking either. Critical thinking, when done well, encourages clear, open-minded, cautious, curious, and engaged thinking on difficult issues, but

pushback actually fails to do this. Medina's distinction between engagements that are beneficial to knowledge-production and the kind that obstruct knowing well makes this clear:

Resistance can be a good and a bad thing, epistemically speaking. The resistances of your cognitive life keep you grounded. As Wittgenstein would put it, in order to have a real (and not simply a delusional) cognitive life, "we need friction," we need to go "back to the rough ground." But there are also resistances that function as obstacles, as weights that slow us down or preclude us from following (or even having access to) certain paths or pursuing further certain questions, problems, curiosities. (48)

Beneficial epistemic resistance helps us to establish an entry point onto unfamiliar epistemic terrain. It moves the discussion forward productively. In Medina's words, there is a beneficial epistemic friction that prompts us "to be self-critical, to compare and contrast [our] beliefs, to meet justificatory demands, to recognize cognitive gaps, and so on" (50).

DeEndré's engagements offer no beneficial epistemic friction. In fact, they fail by both critical-thinking standards and Medina's criteria. Technically, his response is a red herring. He diverts the focus from the terror of rape culture to the unfairness of how our sexual-violence conversation is framed. He steers it onto an epistemic terrain where he feels less fragile. But more important, the red herring is not just a logical misstep: it does something. It allows him to neutralize any consideration of how racism and sexism are used to maintain rape culture. His response mirrors the race-neutralizing discursive moves that Alice McIntyre characterizes in her account of "white talk" (McIntyre 1997).⁷ You can't focus productively on the racialized/gendered dimensions of sexualized violence when you are operating on epistemic terrain that confines the conversation to broad claims about the "violence that happens to people in relationships." Epistemic friction is impossible when conversations are pulled onto epistemic terrains where terms such as *white privilege* or *rape culture* have absolutely no hermeneutical currency. So what's going on here is more than just a logical misstep. DeEndré's resistance has a deeper obstructive nature that Medina (and the critical-pedagogy tradition) find important. His discursive move creates an obstacle to further inquiry. It keeps his affective-cognitive wheels spinning in place by censoring, distracting, dodging, silencing, or "inhibiting the formation of beliefs, the articulation of doubts, the formulation of questions and lines of inquiry" (Medina 2013, 50).

Jennifer's resistance is more difficult to unpack. It attempts to apply an accepted philosophical concept in an effort to move the conversation forward. Understanding the lack of epistemic friction in this instance requires both an awareness of the discursive dynamics at play and an understanding of how the use-mention distinction is being used. We need to ask: does Jennifer's appeal to use-mention offer us beneficial epistemic friction, or it is just a case of using the master's tools to defend the master's epistemic home terrain? I'm not suggesting that she uses the philosopher's toolkit

maliciously. There is power in mastering the tools of the discipline, and she takes pride in arguing well. I'm just curious as to whether she is pressing the use-mention distinction into the service of a broader strategic refusal to understand. One way to explore this possibility is to ask whether these moves create useful points of traction (I like to think of them as footholds) in unfamiliar epistemic terrain, that is, whether they offer us the beneficial epistemic friction required to know well.

Jennifer understands the distinction between using and mentioning the n-word. She is mindful that her usage picks out the word itself and not the group of people it historically references and degrades.⁸ Her usage concerns me for a few reasons. First, the distinction itself is not particularly sensitive to the politics of dehumanizing speech acts. Knowing how the distinction works does not absolve us of the responsibility of choosing to mention those words. She mistakenly thinks that the use-mention distinction is helpful regardless of which words are used/mentioned. Maya Angelou's insight makes this powerfully clear. In a wonderfully candid interview with Dave Chapelle, she explains:

I believe that a word is a thing. It is non-visible and audible only for the time it's there. It hangs in the air, but I believe it is a thing. I believe it goes into the upholstery, then to the rugs, and into my hair, and into my clothes, and finally even into my body. I believe that words are things and I live on them. I look at the word—the “n” word—which I'm really obliged to call it that because it was created to divest people of their humanity. And, when I see a bottle come from the pharmacy and it says “POISON” and there is a skull and bones, then I know that the content of that thing, the bottle is not that, but the content is poison. If I pour that content into Bavarian crystal, it is still poison. (Angelou 2014)

Angelou's observations suggest that the use-mention distinction is unhelpful here: it neither neutralizes the offensiveness of the word, nor does it offer us beneficial epistemic friction. If using the “n” word counts as a ten on a one-to-ten scale of offensiveness, and mentioning it counts as a nine on that scale, then does reducing the harm one step really make it that much better? Use may be more offensive than mention, but the difference is not sufficient to justify uttering the word. The word is poison; and an academic appeal to the distinction does not reduce the damage.⁹ So Jennifer's appeal to the distinction does not help us to know well. And if she were to insist that it does, then I'd ask whether philosophical conventions should be privileged over the well-being of students of color in our class.

I'm also curious about the normative dimensions of this move: the use-mention distinction may also be deployed to bolster white folks' desire for innocence and goodness. We might equate our goodness with knowing this distinction. One might imagine a well-meaning white person saying: “I just mentioned the ‘n’ word. I'm not using it. I know the difference, so I can't be accused of intentionally causing harm. I'm innocent.” The appeal functions to redirect our epistemic attention to the white person's intentions and away from the effects of the n-word on students of color in the classroom. When conversations are framed around how someone meant to use

the word, the inner life and intentions of the white student become more important than the silencing and constraining effects of its use on the epistemic agency of students of color.

USING “SHADOW TEXTS” TO TRACK PRIVILEGE-PRESERVING EPISTEMIC PUSHBACK

If privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is neither healthy skepticism nor thinking critically, then what is it? How might we engage these responses productively? Are there ways of engaging pushback that offer us at least some beneficial epistemic friction?

It has taken me some time to understand that privilege-preserving epistemic pushback cannot be navigated exclusively with academic philosophy’s standard pedagogical playbook. At some point I ditched traditional pedagogies in favor of affectively centered engagements aimed at creating “safe spaces” (Freedman 2014). I thought that establishing conversational ground rules would provide the beneficial epistemic friction necessary to move discussions forward; but these approaches were also flawed. Classroom spaces have never been safe spaces: not everyone feels secure and confident in them. I now recognize that classrooms are by nature *unsafe* spaces that benefit from pedagogies of discomfort.¹⁰ So I engage students honestly, in ways that name discomfort by making whiteness, maleness, and heteronormative assumptions visible, decentering them, and rendering them strange. Naming discomfort should not be mistakenly equated with fomenting a hostile environment. At root the discomfort comes from inviting members of privileged groups to leave our epistemic home terrains, to sit with discomfort, and to explore the possibility that there is knowledge in understanding how privilege-preserving epistemic pushback functions. This knowledge can be found in cultivating *mindfulness* around pushback, coupled with an active *understanding* of how resistance maintains ignorance and does epistemic damage. In the end, this focus may offer beneficial epistemic friction.

Good teaching must track simultaneously the social production of knowledge and ignorance. As Nancy Tuana explains, “if we are to fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of factors that account for why something is known, we must also understand the practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, for our *lack* of knowledge about a phenomenon” (Tuana 2006, 9–10). Willful ignorance circulates in even the most progressive spaces. We can make these spaces of ignorance mindful, but never ignorance-free. If privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is an expression of ignorance, then we need a critical philosophical practice for making it visible and tracking it productively. To this end I’m recommending that we work toward becoming attentive to privilege-preserving epistemic pushback and to use these episodes as points of traction to explore how we cling to ignorance in the service of dodging discomfort. I work with students to cultivate this mindfulness by treating privilege-preserving epistemic pushback neither as a logical misstep nor as healthy skepticism, but as a *shadow text*.

Shadow texts direct our attention to the ways epistemic resistance circulates during classroom discussions. I use the term metaphorically to point to the written and the spoken cognitive-affective content of this discursive resistance. DeEndré's claim that "It's better to talk about intimate partner violence in general!" is a shadow text. His response shadows the readings in the same way a detective shadows a suspicious person. Good detectives follow their subjects tenaciously without being noticed. The word "shadow" calls to mind the image of something walking closely alongside another thing without engaging it. If Jennifer continues to press philosophical concepts into the service of a broader refusal to understand the dehumanizing history of the n-word, then "I mentioned but didn't use the word 'n-----'" is a shadow text. Shadow texts can certainly be understood as *reactions* to course content, but I prefer to think of them as *being called up* by deeply affective-cognitive responses to the material. They are deployed protectively. When an idea or comment makes us feel uncomfortable, we stalk the offending claim in an effort to monitor and control its circulation.

Shadow texts do deep epistemic work. By definition, shadows are the product of obstacles. They are dark areas or shapes produced by bodies (obstacles) that come between a light source and a surface. They are disruptive in the sense that they interrupt the movement of light from its source to a surface. Recall Medina's claim that epistemic resistance can "function as an obstacle, as weights that slow us down or preclude us from following (or having access to) certain paths or pursuing further certain questions, problems and curiosities" (Medina 2013, 48). *When privilege-preserving epistemic pushback functions as an obstacle, it casts a shadow text*. Shadows are by definition regions of opacity, so shadow texts are regions of epistemic opacity.¹¹ The discursive detours and distractions signal epistemic closure; they tell listeners "I'm not going there. You need to convince me." I use the term *shadow text* to focus students' attention on this double meaning.

Treating privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as a shadow text may not always offer the *beneficial epistemic friction* that knowledge-production demands, but it doesn't follow that shadow texts cannot be tracked in pedagogically useful ways. Shadow texts are produced by epistemic obstacles, but the obstacles are not always immovable barriers. Shadow texts provide a useful way to identify and work with privilege-preserving epistemic pushback. Learning to spot shadow texts can offer epistemic friction: they help the class focus on what shadow texts *do*, rather than just on what they *say*. We can ask ourselves, how do shadow texts redirect the conversation? Where do they take us? In this way shadow texts offer us toeholds—something to grasp that serve as useful points of departure during our conversations—even if the audience remains unmoved in the end.

DeEndré's response offers the clearest example of the shadow-text pedagogy. I've used it with some degree of success to prompt students to become mindful of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback moves on the unlevel knowing field, although there are always a few learners who respond defensively to the method itself! I begin by writing a question on the board such as: let's be curious about Card's claim that "rape is a terrorist institution." What do you think she means? Students respond by

defining terrorism or by explaining Card's definition. I write all of their responses on the board:

- 1) The threat of rape is analogous to the threat of terrorism.
- 2) Rape culture terrorizes women.
- 3) The threat of rape and the threat of terrorism are completely different!
- 4) Men are victims too, according to a recent statistic.

Next, I invite the class to be curious about these responses by asking them to identify which ones communicate resistance. I mark them parenthetically:

- 1) The threat of rape is analogous to the threat of terrorism.
- 2) Rape culture terrorizes women.
- 3) The threat of rape and terrorism are not the same! [**Resistant Response**]
- 4) Men are victims too, according to a recent statistic. [**Resistant Response**]

Next, I ask us to consider how the responses that engage Card's claim directly (1 and 2) differ from the resistant responses (3 and 4). I invite them to think about whether responses 3 and 4 are resistant in the same ways. I try to prompt them to notice that the third response works to resist Card's analogy, and the fourth response works to resist the conversation entirely. Response 3 offers beneficial friction because it engages Card's text in ways that lead to productive conversation on the psychological impacts of terrorism and rape culture. The last response offers no beneficial epistemic friction: it refocuses the discussion to questions about violence against men. Finally, I introduce the term *shadow text*, and ask them to identify which resistant response counts as a shadow text.

- 3) The threat of rape and terrorism not the same! [**Resistance to Card's text**]
- 4) Men are victims too, according to a recent statistic. [**Shadow Text**]

The point of this exercise is to make visible the tension between the question and the shadow text. We speculate about why the fourth response "went there," and consider what triggered the resistance. I invite them to track these movements. I keep the conversation short. We do this exercise together for the next two or three instances of pushback, but before I move on to the question of epistemic violence. My hope is that students will learn to identify shadow texts themselves, and most of them do eventually understand the basic goal of the practice.

At some point I ask our class to consider how identifying shadow texts might help track the production of ignorance. This requires work. Students will almost always understand ignorance to mean that the speaker is saying something stupid. It's essential for them to understand that tracking ignorance requires that our attention be focused not on a few problem individuals, but on learning to identify patterns of resistance and tying ignorance-producing habits to a strategic refusal to understand. We focus on the discursive moves and not the people who make them.

PRIVILEGE-PRESERVING EPISTEMIC PUSHBACK AND EPISTEMIC SILENCING

Until this point I've focused on how shadow texts might be used to track the social production of ignorance on the unlevel knowing field, but we need to track privilege-preserving epistemic pushback for another reason: its uninterrupted circulation can be psychologically and epistemically damaging.

Psychologically speaking, allowing privilege-preserving epistemic pushback to circulate as if it were skepticism or a critical-thinking practice can create a hostile learning environment. Repeated performances of pushback function as microaggressions: words and behaviors that happen in everyday interactions that “send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue 2010, 24). In the cases under consideration, privilege-preserving epistemic pushback functions as a form of microaggression called a “microinvalidation,” which happens when words or actions are aimed at excluding or denying a person's thoughts or feelings about their lived reality. Consider the impact that DeEndré's *repeated* attempts to neutralize gender has on the women who repeatedly try to counter his “skepticism” with testimony about their lived experience navigating rape culture. The collective effects of his refusal to give uptake to their testimonies is invalidating and has a silencing effect on the classroom climate. There were days when I could prompt no one to respond to his comments. The silence may have been a resistant silence—a tactical refusal to let his pushback continue to wear them down, or it may have been a sign that they had given up, but it was a silence nonetheless. On the one hand, the testimonial agency of the women in class was undermined. They could not get DeEndré to listen. On the other hand, the women's testimonies were heard by many of their peers.

Microinvalidations have a collective epistemic impact; they discredit a person's *knowledge* of her lived reality, and thus reduce her credibility as a knower. The psychological harms associated with allowing privilege-preserving epistemic pushback to circulate uncritically do epistemic damage because they function as “on-the-ground practices of epistemic silencing” (Dotson 2011, 237). In “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Epistemic Practices of Silencing,” Kristie Dotson uses Gayatri Spivak's definition of epistemic violence as a starting point to explain how members of marginalized groups are regularly silenced or subjected to epistemic violence with respect to giving testimony. Epistemic violence in testimony, she argues, “is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to... any reliable ignorance that, given context, harms another person (or set of persons)” (238). A clear understanding of epistemic violence rests on recognizing a basic feature of linguistic communication. Speakers are always in a relationship of dependence with their audiences. Speakers have little or no control over whether their audience hears them in exactly the ways that they wish to be heard. Successful communication requires reciprocity; it demands that the audience both understand what the speaker is saying, and that the speaker's words are taken as they were intended to be taken (Hornsby 1995). This makes speakers vulnerable during linguistic exchanges. Communication commonly fails when the

audience's pernicious ignorance (a form of willful ignorance) interferes with these linguistic exchanges.

Dotson uses the linguistic-exchange model to identify two patterns of epistemic violence, both of which rest on invalidating (silencing) the testimonies of members of oppressed groups. The first practice, testimonial quieting, happens when "an audience member fails to identify a speaker as a credible knower" because the speaker is a member of a group that has been historically stereotyped as lacking epistemic credibility (Dotson 2011, 242). If the speaker is not recognized as a credible knower, then she cannot give testimony. If audiences fail to treat her as a credible source of knowledge, then her testimony will misfire: it will fail to get uptake. DeEndré's gender-neutralizing moves produce testimonial quieting: the women in the class are not treated as knowledgeable about their own lived experiences, and become less vocal about them as the class goes on.

The second practice, testimonial smothering, occurs when the speaker self-censors or restricts her remarks because she senses that her audience will either be unable or unwilling to give them appropriate uptake. Testimonial smothering is a practice of coerced silence that exists under any or all of the following related circumstances: (1) the content of the testimony feels unsafe and the speaker may either fall silent or tailor her testimony because she perceives that the audience may find it unintelligible and may form false beliefs about her or her community based on her testimony; (2) the speaker's audience demonstrates a "testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony of the speaker"; and (3) "the testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance" (Dotson 2011, 244). Jennifer and Sheila's exchange touches on all three of Dotson's circumstances. The content of Sheila's testimony is unsafe. In challenging Jennifer's retreat into an established Western philosophical apparatus and appealing to her own experience of how the n-word makes her feel, she may be opening herself up to the charge that she can't do philosophy, because she doesn't understand the conceptual apparatus of the discipline. She may fear that the class will think that Black women in general are not cut out for abstract thought. The exchange illustrates, in Dotson's words, "an epistemic side of colonialism," that has "the devastating effect of the 'disappearing' of knowledge, where local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices" (237). Jennifer's privileging of the use-mention distinction also marks her incompetence with respect to Sheila's testimony: it disappears Sheila's knowledge by cutting her out of the conversation. Jennifer has won the argument, but has done so unfairly by retreating to an epistemic terrain where Sheila's concerns about how the use of the word affects her have been erased. Jennifer's desire to make the "n-word" issue into a question about speech acts is ground-erasing, and it seems to stem from her pernicious ignorance about racism. It frames the discussion in ways that not only make the history and politics of dehumanizing speech acts irrelevant, but also makes it difficult for students of color to offer testimonial evidence of the continued impact of this word on racialized bodies. The conversation becomes a question about speech acts and not about epistemic violence, so the conversation is thus drained of its normative content.

Dotson's mechanism for identifying on-the-ground *practices* of epistemic silencing is extremely helpful in bringing out the normative epistemic dimensions of my shadow text pedagogy. Assessing the harms of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering is a context-dependent exercise (243), but shadow texts offer helpful ways to track these forms of epistemic violence. If shadow texts are already tracking the production and circulation of ignorance, and if epistemic violence is deeply tied to pernicious ignorance, then it takes very little additional effort to connect privileged groups' epistemic resistance to on-the-ground practices of epistemic silencing. Shadow texts are already tracking the obstacles to knowing, and with a few additional questions we can address questions of epistemic silencing. We can point to the examples I put up on the board and ask: Whose voices and texts get centered with this move? And, whose voices have you erased? How do these moves meet, or fail to meet, the conditions for epistemic silencing?

Framing privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as a shadow text is pedagogically useful for a number of reasons. First, classrooms are unsafe spaces. Naming and engaging privilege-preserving forms of resistance and discussing the epistemic harms of the pushback turn these epistemic exchanges into teachable moments. I've had some success with helping students to understand that resistance is not always reducible exclusively to isolated incidents of bad behavior, prejudice, or obnoxious interruptions. Engaging epistemic pushback is not just an exercise in keeping conversations on track by steering students back to the issues at hand. I want class members to become aware of the fact that these moves are political and that sometimes they are driven just as much by fear and ignorance as they are by the desire to engage with the text. Something deeper and more complicated is going on here, and it is worth noting and exploring how discursive resistance runs alongside our readings and discussions. Next, acknowledging resistance as a text to be engaged, rather than as an interruption to be managed, can help to diffuse the anger or fear. When resisters' concerns are engaged respectfully, they will feel heard and hopefully will listen more carefully. Initially, shadow texts may not offer the beneficial epistemic friction Medina finds necessary for positive epistemic resistance, but if navigated in the ways I've recommended, they can help to steer classes onto a more active and politically sensitive discursive terrain.

NOTES

Thanks to Gaile Pohlhaus, Allison Wolf, Maureen Linker, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts.

1. These events are composite descriptions of classroom exchanges that happen on a regular basis. The students' names and the details of the events have been fictionalized.
2. DeEndré was referencing Hoff 2014.
3. Chandra Mohanty and Charles Mills also use cartography metaphors (Mills 1998; Mohanty 2006).

4. Redirecting conversations back to one's epistemic home terrain is a way to "take back the center." See Ahmed 2007; Applebaum 2010; and Sullivan 2014.

5. For a complete discussion of white complicity and goodness, see Applebaum 2010.

6. Thanks to Lawrence B. Solum for his clarification of this point.

7. *White talk* is a predictable set of discursive patterns that white folks habitually deploy when asked directly about the connections between white privilege and institutional racism. See McIntyre 1997 and Bailey 2015.

8. For a discussion on why mentioning the "n-word" is okay, see Kelrin 2000.

9. Angelou's account of the n-word does not capture the more resistant uses of the word among Black folks. I'm mindful of these instances because there are times when epistemic resistance from students of color can be "world opening."

10. I first realized this when two male students repeatedly ignored a sexual assault survivor's testimony. Under the banner of "speaking in a safe space," they continued to appeal to rape myths and "men too" reasoning to dodge questions about their complicity in rape culture. See Boler 1999 and Yancy 2011.

11. I want to deepen the reader's understanding of obstacles here. Obstacles can be solid and uniform, but the structural nature of privilege-preserving epistemic pushback suggests that these obstacles are sedimented, historical objects. They don't suddenly appear. They are the product of centuries of racial and gendered laws, social scripts, visual vocabularies, cultural productions, and political and economic decisions.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Sara. 2007. The phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist theory* 8 (2): 149–68.
- Angelou, Maya. 2014. *Iconoclasts: Maya Angelou*. By Dave Chapell. YouTube video, 22:35. Posted May 29, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okc6COsgzoE> (accessed May 1, 2017).
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1990. Haciendo caras: Una entrada. In *Making face, making soul/haciendo caras: Creative and critical perspectives of women of color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books.
- Applebaum, Barbara. 2010. Being white, being good: White complicity, moral responsibility, and social justice pedagogy. Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bailey, Alison. 2015. White talk as a barrier to understanding the problem of whiteness. In *White self-criticality beyond anti-racism: What is it like to be a white problem?*, ed. George Yancy. Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books.
- Berila, Beth. 2016. *Integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy: Social justice in higher education*. New York: Routledge.
- Boler, Megan. 1999. *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Burbules, Nicholas, and Rupert Bert. 1999. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. In *Critical theories in education*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler. New York: Routledge.
- Code, Lorraine. 1995. Incredulity, experientialism, and the politics of knowledge. In *Rhetorical spaces: Essays on gendered locations*. New York: Routledge.

- Dotson, Kristie. 2011. Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–57.
- Freedman, Laura. 2014. Creating safe spaces: Strategies for confronting implicit and explicit bias and stereotype threat in the classroom. *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 13 (4): 3–12.
- Hoff, Bert H. 2014. More men than women victims of intimate partner violence, physical violence, and partner aggression. *ManWeb: An Online Journal*, May 8.
- Hornsby, Jennifer. 1995. Disempowered speech. *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 127–47.
- Kelrin. 2000. The use–mention distinction. *Everything2*, November 12. <http://everything2.com/title/the+use-mention+distinction> (accessed May 1, 2017).
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press.
- McIntyre, Alice. 1997. *Making meaning of whiteness: Exploring racial identities with white teachers*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Medina, José. 2013. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, Charles. 1998. Alternative epistemologies. In *Blackness visible: Essays on the philosophy of race*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2006. *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile. 2014. Discerning the primary epistemic harm in cases of testimonial injustice. *Social Epistemology* 28 (2): 99–114.
- Sue, Derald Wing. 2010. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sullivan, Shannon. 2014. *Good white people: The problem with middle-class white anti-racism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tuana, Nancy. 2006. The speculum of ignorance: The women’s health movement and epistemologies of ignorance. *Hypatia* 21 (3): 1–19.
- Yancy, George. 2011. Loving wisdom and the effort to make philosophy “unsafe.” *Epistemologies Humanities Journal*. <http://c961210.r10.cf2.rackcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Essay-Yancy-Loving-Wisdom.pdf> (accessed May 1, 2017).