

Disengaging and Calling Upon Others Not to Engage: Learning to Recognize Collective Epistemic Resistance

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...not all disengagements are the same. Who is disengaging from whom, the context within which disengaging occurs, and how the disengaging is enacted all *matter* here...¹

Philosophers have reckoned with the specific challenges that democratic education faces in politically polarized times. They have advanced ways that teachers can re-engage students in discussions and deliberations that aim to acknowledge divides while finding productive ways to cross them.² For instance, Elizabeth Anderson, the Philosophy of Education 2023 Kneller Lecturer, builds on pragmatist principles to propose ways that educators can help students talk with each other in the contexts of disinformation, on the one hand, and discourse harassment, such as cancel culture or mass public shaming and calls for punishment, on the other.³ Democracy is endangered, Anderson emphasizes, by toxic political discourse, including disinformation, harassment, and mass shaming. Although it may seem like disengaging and calling upon others not to engage is the antithesis of democratic discourse, other theorists insist that certain types of segregated spaces can function as important sites of epistemic resistance.⁴

A case in point—Leon Schlüter critiques Anderson’s approach and its risk of reproducing rather than disrupting epistemic injustice.⁵ Schlüter contends that Anderson’s focus on integration insufficiently gives uptake to the subversive potential of separated (rather than integrated) spaces and the need for them. Brittney Cooper powerfully mirrors this thought in her discussion of the dangers of respectability politics,

Here’s the point, I have a seat at the table because I have a Ph.D. and I’m angry every time I leave the table that I fought

my whole life to get a seat at. ... I get a front row seat to watch folks who are investing in white supremacy do levels of structural violence to our communities that we won't get out of for generations ... so I am not invested in the myth of being at the table.⁶

Recently, both Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. and José Medina have argued that epistemic inclusions can be perniciously exclusionary.⁷

In another illustration of the many attempts to bridge toxic divides that obstruct democratic dialogue, Michalinos Zembylas critically examines the individualized and psychologized ways that “cancel culture” is understood by pre-service teachers.⁸ He advocates that teacher educators must encourage pre-service teachers to shift attention away from blaming the individual which leads to “a toxic culture often filled with dogmatism and disillusion” and towards the structural issues of racial injustice.⁹ Pedagogically attending to the harms of cancel culture, Zembylas maintains, can help pre-service teachers deal with any fear they might have about being cancelled and facilitate how they discuss cancelling when their students raise the issue.

Zembylas recognizes the arguments in defense of cancelling as well as the arguments that oppose it. On the one hand, advocates acknowledge that cancelling can be a response to epistemic oppression, a form of public pedagogy that aims to disrupt systemic injustice. Cancel culture, according to its adherents, cannot be understood absent power relations in society. On the other hand, critics claim that canceling violates free speech and curtails democratic dialogue and debate. Significantly, opponents proclaim that cancelling rules out the ability for people to atone for past transgressions and be forgiven. In his attempt to meet both individual accountability and cross-difference reconciliation, Zembylas recommends a pedagogy of shame (in the sense of offering “an opportunity that produces responsibility to resist structural injustice because complicity is acknowledged”¹⁰) and a pedagogy of restorative justice (“that restores trust between people, communities, and state”¹¹ and that makes room for apology, forgiveness, and atonement).

While a shift towards structural issues and acknowledging complexity is crucial, my concern is that moves towards reconciliation and calls for re-engagement might be addressed prematurely.¹² When the central mandate in teacher education is to bring people with radically divergent views together, specifically under conditions of systemic and epistemic injustice, what might be overlooked?

Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. notes that the scholarship around epistemic injustice has been more focused on those who enact epistemic injustice and how *they* may avoid perpetuating such harms, and less focused on those who historically have been harmed by epistemic injustice and how *they* resist.¹³ Similarly, debates around cancelling are often oriented more toward a concern for those who have been or might be canceled rather than those who have been harmed by those who are cancelled.

Catch-all conceptions of cancel culture often invoke moral panic resulting in attention turned to those who are canceled while the conditions that called for cancelling can remain simplified, misrepresented, and/or dismissed. Are the harms of being cancelled more important than the conditions that underlie the cancellation? Put differently: Is the situation of the one who is cancelled more worthy of attention than the situation of the one who cancels? Moreover, can demanding that those harmed reengage with those who harm be a secondary form of harm?

In what follows, I critically examine two current trends, often found in social media, that have attracted controversy: cancelling and echoing. The aim is to distinguish when these trends are forms of collective epistemic resistance. Directing our focus to why collective epistemic resistance is necessary can help social justice educators to elucidate the required conditions of just democratic dialogue that implicit or explicit calls for reconciliation might obfuscate. This is not a defense of cancelling for any reason or a sweeping approval of echo chambers. Rather this is a call for assisting students to recognize when cancelling is not a “woke mob” violating free speech that makes democratic debate impossible. It is a call to recognize when collective epistemic resistance is a demand for a different conversation.

In the first part of the paper, I define collective epistemic resistance, examine two illustrations of such resistance taking the form of cancelling and echoing, and I begin to explore the epistemic conditions that might deem these actions necessary and reasonable. The second part draws on the work of Kristie Dotson¹⁴ and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.¹⁵ to further clarify these unjust systemic epistemic conditions. Finally, I argue that it is incumbent on philosophers of education to address these epistemic conditions for without doing so, considerations aimed at reconciliation and democratic dialogue risk not only being counterproductive but may themselves be unjust.

COLLECTIVE EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE OR AN UNREASONABLE MOB PURSUING A WITCH HUNT?

According to José Medina, resistance is “the heart and soul, the epistemic centerpiece, of democratic culture.”¹⁶ Qualifying Anderson’s arguments in her book, *The Imperative of Integration*,¹⁷ Medina critically accentuates the limits of the imperative of integration. Democracy, according to Medina, requires the acknowledgment that there are unequal levels of epistemic privilege that obstruct free and equal epistemic interaction among groups. In this context, the imperative to integrate may replicate the injustices that such calls attempt to remedy. Epistemic resistance rather than integration, Medina argues, might be necessary to combat epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice has been defined by Miranda Fricker as the wrongful harm done to an individual in their capacity as a knower and as a knowledge producer.¹⁸ Medina underscores that acts of epistemic resistance are not isolated acts of heroic individuals but “chained actions” that echo previous acts of resistance, enabling such actions to be meaningful. They are also acts that inspire others to echo similarly, unlocking possibilities for marginalized epistemic resources to be more broadly accorded credibility.

In his latest book, *The Epistemology of Protest*, Medina offers a theory of protest as a response to epistemic oppression that constrains and inhibits the epistemic agency of marginalized knowers, both at the level of social interaction and at the level of institutions, these levels working jointly and

simultaneously.¹⁹ Medina's call for resistant collective epistemic action not only focuses on resisting injustice from the position of the one perpetrating injustice, but more importantly, *what such resistance means from the position of those who are epistemically oppressed*. For Medina, protest is a mechanism not only for political communication, but also for group solidarity and an expression of epistemic agency.

Medina's theory of protest makes visible the epistemic labor that marginalized knowers must exercise in the context of challenges to their credibility and because of the double-binds they experience when their testimony and hermeneutical resources are distorted, silenced, and dismissed. According to Medina, there is a democratic obligation to give appropriate uptake to protests, that is, to give serious credibility to what makes protest necessary.

Protest is one form of collective epistemic resistance. Cancelling and echoing, I submit, can similarly be forms of collective epistemic resistance. Understanding why and when these are forms of resistance can illuminate *not only* the conditions that make such resistance necessary and reasonable *but also* can clarify the required conditions for just dialogue.

Let's begin with the phenomenon of cancel culture. While the definition of cancel culture has evolved to mean different things to different people, at its most basic, cancelling refers to the phenomenon of a withdrawal of support of a person or a refusal to give airtime to certain problematic viewpoints. Recently, the ethical dimension of canceling has received philosophical attention. Jenny Janssens and Lotte Spreeuwenberg explore the ethics of cancel culture highlighting the complexities of this trend.²⁰ Cancel culture, they note, has evolved into a blanket term to oppose what is labeled a "woke" brigade that employs merciless mob intimidation, outrage, and call-out. Among the actions under the cancel culture label, one can find withdrawing attention online or deplatforming, disinviting speakers, call outs and public shaming, depriving people of their livelihood, suppressing speech and encouraging self-censorship. Janssens and Spreeuwenberg distinguish between two types of cancelling, one aimed at punishment which they claim is morally wrong, and another aimed at redistribution of attention which is not necessarily so. They conclude that

cancelling cannot be morally wrong tout court. Without denying that cancel culture can be problematic, in this paper I underscore what the *sweeping dismissal* of cancel culture can conceal.

To understand when cancel culture is an expression of collective epistemic resistance and not an unreasonable mob pursuing a witch hunt, it is crucial that the conditions that make such resistance necessary be clearly exposed. Some preliminary clues as to when cancelling is a form of resistance can be found in Sara Ahmed's defense of deplatforming trans-exclusionary feminists. Ahmed makes two important points about "no platforming" or canceling as a form of resistance. First, she draws attention to how claims of victimhood based on being cancelled can be themselves a platform of oppressive speech. Second, Ahmed exposes the oppressiveness of views that deny certain groups the right to exist.

Ahmed highlights how those who are oppressed, whose existence is constantly being questioned and denied, are often claimed to be the oppressors. However, she argues against this,

Whenever ... (dominantly situated) people speak endlessly about being silenced, you not only have a performative contradiction; you are witnessing a mechanism of power. ... The narrative of being silenced from speaking has become an incitement to speak: it incites the very thing it claims is being stopped.²¹

Many of those who have recently claimed to be victims of cancel culture are currently those who exercise censorship with book bans, legislation restricting what can be taught in schools, and punishing corporations for speaking out in defense of progressive ideas.

Relatedly, cancelling others or withdrawing support under such conditions can be a demand for legibility. Ahmed explains how trans-exclusionary feminist logic constitutes a "rebuttal system" that continuously invalidates trans existence by insisting that trans women are not women.²² This rebuttal system is "a form of evidence that is directed against evidence that has al-

ready been presented.”²³ In other words, the evidence proffered is not afforded uptake. One may contest: isn’t rebuttal just a characteristic of legitimate arguments? Ahmed, however, details a harmful form of rebuttal that involves questioning *evidence of one’s own existence*. She underscores,

When an existence is understood as needing evidence, then a rebuttal is directed not only against evidence but against an existence. An existence can be nullified by the requirement that an existence be evidenced. The very requirement to testify to your existence can end up being the very point of your existence.²⁴

One might argue further: But why are the beliefs of trans-exclusionary feminists not protected positions in dialogue?

Ahmed contends that trans-exclusionary statements are not just another viewpoint at “a happy diversity table” because when you have dialogue or debate with those who wish to eliminate you from the conversation, for instance by not being willing to think your existence is possible, “then dialogue and debate becomes a mechanism of power.”²⁵ When the legibility and legitimacy of one’s being is constantly attacked (Ahmed refers to this as a “hammering away” of one’s being, personhood, and subjectivity), *then a refusal to dialogue is a tactic for survival and a form of resistance*. Some of the unjust conditions that make cancelling necessary begin to be foregrounded. Nora Berenstain’s concept of *default skepticism* echoes Ahmed’s reference to “rebuttal systems.”²⁶

Berenstain examines what she describes as “epistemic exploitation” or when marginally situated knowers are called upon and expected “to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face.”²⁷ Berenstain categorizes three harms that result from such exploitation: (1) enduring unpaid and unacknowledged intellectual and emotional labor, and its associated opportunity costs, (2) the double-bind created by demands to educate, and (3) the unwarranted default skeptical responses that marginalized knowers must bear. These harms are related. When the unacknowledged labor of marginally situated knowers is *consistently* met with skepticism of the valid-

ity of their claims, when their claims are *never given uptake*, marginally situated knowers are faced with a double bind: endure unfair epistemic and emotional labor or risk being dismissed as unreasonable or difficult, “a problem.”

This double bind becomes even more trenchant because default skepticism hides behind good intentions (“I just want to know. Educate me.”) and masquerades as critical thinking (as a necessary and even epistemically virtuous form of intellectual engagement). Such persistent calls for evidence, evidence that is never afforded credibility, can lead to a type of self-doubt that has similarities with the harms of gaslighting, a point to which I will return. Consequently, no matter what marginally situated knowers do, dominantly situated knowers set the terms of the discussion; dominantly situated knowers’ needs and comfort are centered.

Kristie Dotson’s discussion of testimonial smothering offers some more nuance not only to our understanding of when disengaging and calling upon others to disengage might be forms of collective epistemic resistance but also amplifies the conditions of just communication.²⁸

THE CONDITIONS OF JUST COMMUNICATION: NOT JUST TALKING

Expanding upon Miranda Fricker’s account of testimonial injustice, Kristie Dotson introduces the concept of “testimonial smothering” which occurs when a speaker limits her testimony in anticipation that speaking will have certain risks because her audience is unable, or more precisely, unwilling to appropriately interpret her testimony.²⁹ Dotson argues that this type of being silenced is a form of epistemic violence or a “refusal, intentional or unintentional, of a hearer to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance.”³⁰

Building on Jennifer Hornsby’s research, Dotson emphasizes that *reciprocity* is a necessary condition for a successful linguistic exchange. Reciprocity requires “that an audience understand a speaker’s words and understand what the speaker is doing with the words.”³¹ When an audience fails to understand or is anticipated to fail to understand what the speaker is doing with words,

markedly due to pernicious ignorance or a reliable ignorance, the speaker may reasonably decide to truncate their testimony in various ways.³² Withdrawal can be a form of such truncation.

The conditions that foster testimonial smothering are key: (1) the content of the testimony if expressed is unsafe and risky, (2) the audience demonstrates testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony, and (3) testimonial incompetence follows or appears to follow from pernicious ignorance. As an example of when testimony may be silenced because it is unsafe and risky, Dotson draws attention to when women of color remain silent about domestic violence to avoid contributing to the stereotype of the “violent Black male.”

However, I am interested in the two terms that Dotson advances to explain the lack of reciprocity that results in testimonial smothering: accurate intelligibility and testimonial competence. Accurate intelligibility refers to *the audience’s* ability not only to understand the speaker’s testimony but also “her/his ability to detect a failure to understand.”³³ Dotson provides the example of a layperson listening to a lecture on nuclear physics. The person may understand something but recognizes that because of an admitted lack of expertise, they can detect and acknowledge when they fail to understand. This distinction is important because being able to recognize when one does not understand, a type of epistemic humility, is necessary for just, *reciprocal* communication.

Testimonial competence refers to the *speaker’s assessment of her audience*. The speaker must be able to *expect that the audience will find her testimony accurately intelligible*. Thus, testimonial incompetence occurs when the audience fails “to demonstrate to the speaker that they will find the proffered testimony accurately intelligible.”³⁴ When speakers anticipate that what they will say will not be intelligible, they may reasonably smother their testimony.

To illustrate the lack of accurate intelligibility and the presence of testimonial incompetence that leads to testimonial smothering, Dotson offers an encounter that Cassandra Byers Harvin describes in her article “Conversations I Can’t Have.”³⁵ While doing research in a library, Harvin meets a white woman

who asks what she is working on. Harvin explains that she is working on her doctoral dissertation on raising Black sons in this society. Rather than asking with genuine interest if Harvin could explain more, the white woman immediately and astonishingly asks a question that seems not to really be a question: “How is that any different from raising white sons?” Harvin writes that the white woman’s tone made it clear to her “that she just knows ... I am making something out of nothing.” Harvin anticipates that whatever reply she offers would not be intelligible to the white woman. Dotson underscores that this example of testimonial incompetence is also laced with pernicious ignorance because whatever Harvin would have replied would have been interpreted only from the white woman’s perspective. Harvin withdraws from the conversation.

The upshot of Dotson’s account is that reliably anticipated ignorance, harm, and the failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate due to pernicious ignorance are conditions of *unjust communication* that can lead to forms of self-silencing or withdrawal from the conversation, moves that are extremely reasonable and intelligible when the context is considered. Dotson underscores that understanding such silencing or disengaging requires considering the “the socio-epistemic circumstances of the silencing.”³⁶ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. provides additional nuance to these “socio-epistemic circumstances” by means of her account of “epistemic gaslighting.”

COLLECTIVE EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE TO EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

...resistance in the form of epistemic disengagement may be a necessary and reasonable response to mitigate the ill effects of ... structural epistemic gaslighting.³⁷

Pohlhaus is troubled that important “epistemic labor” is ignored when disengagement that results from epistemic gaslighting is labeled “unreasonable,” “irrational group think,” or “pursuing a witch hunt.” Only when such disengagement is reframed as a form of “collective epistemic resistance” does such epistemic labor become visible. Pohlhaus is focused not only on epistemic gaslighting from the political position of the Right. She is particularly concerned with the recurring incidence of white, liberal feminists demanding that

feminists of color re-engage in conversation after the latter walk away because their calling out of the racism in white feminism is met with rebuttals and tears. Audre Lorde famously addresses the responses of white women when women of color speak out about racism within feminism when she writes,

When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are “creating a mood of hopelessness,” “preventing white women from getting past guilt,” or “standing in the way of trusting communication and action.”³⁸

White feminists will often blame feminists of color for “shutting down conversation” or “disengaging from thinking” insinuating that a refusal to engage blocks feminist dialogue and solidarity.³⁹

Pohlhaus, in contrast, maintains that refusing to engage, and calling upon others not to engage, under certain conditions is a form of “resistant epistemic disengagement” that, conversely, does not shut conversation down but instead “it can be a call toward a different conversation.”⁴⁰ To understand how disengaging and encouraging others not to engage can be a form of collective epistemic resistance, Pohlhaus develops a *structural* notion of epistemic gaslighting.

Pohlhaus begins with Kate Abramson’s⁴¹ definition of gaslighting as a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories, and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds – paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy.⁴² Abramson helps us to recognize that gaslighting is more than unwarranted credibility deficit. It involves persuading the victim to lose all confidence *in her* epistemic agency. Gaslighting not only undermines epistemic agency, but it specifically drives the victim *to undermine her own epistemic authority* so that she will conform with the gaslighter’s views because the one who gaslights is unable to tolerate even the possibility of challenge.⁴³

In this regard, the gaslighter not only aims to destroy the possibility

of disagreement but also does this in a way that ensures that the source of possible disagreement (“the independent, separate, deliberative perspective from which disagreement might arise”⁴⁴), must be so undermined that “she has nowhere left to stand from which to disagree, no standpoint from which her words might constitute genuine disagreement.”⁴⁵

Pohlhaus shifts the notion of gaslighting away from its emphasis on *psychological* breakdown, and towards *epistemic* breakdown by highlighting how epistemic gaslighting aims to “to put out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world.”⁴⁶ Pohlhaus emphasizes that gaslighting often occurs to silence protestations of systemic injustice and also that it can surface even when the gaslighter has good intentions (like the white, liberal feminists described above). Most significantly, gaslighting can have a *structural dimension* which can function *independent of individual persons*. For example, “safe zone stickers” or proclaimed “ally” status can put unwarranted pressure on epistemic agents to doubt their own perceptions when epistemic injustice is taking place and ignored.

Acknowledging that *structural* gaslighting pressures marginally situated knower to ignore what they know and instead feel compelled to view the world from the experiences of those who are dominantly positioned⁴⁷ is crucial for understanding disengagement and calling upon others to disengage as a way of “decentering of dominantly situated knowledge and attending to the experiences of nondominantly situated knowers.”⁴⁸ Given the double binds produced when refusing to engage with harmful viewpoints, it becomes nearly impossible “to escape negative judgment” whatever one does.⁴⁹

It is here that Pohlhaus offers us a way to also rethink how what might be negatively perceived as “echo chambers” can be sources of solidarity and support. Echo chambers are often thought of surrounding oneself with only like sources of information so that beliefs become amplified through repetition and circulation.⁵⁰ Pohlhaus, however, cautions against an umbrella dismissal of echo chambers. She maintains that to assume that all echoing is pernicious can be “to continue to echo the dominantly experienced world as though it is the only experience of the world that exists.”⁵¹ Thus, Pohlhaus

advances two types of “good” echoing that are necessary under conditions of structural gaslighting.

The first is survival echoing that involves withdrawal from structures that gaslight and towards spaces that provide support for beliefs that under conditions of structural gaslighting are dismissed. The second type of echoing is resistant echoing that does not entail withdrawal but rather *active and critical* engagement with gaslighting structures. Resistant echoing, then, serves “to offer support of what another has forwarded because the point seems to have been lost and so removed from consideration.”⁵² Pohlhaus argues that resistant echoing works to “reverberate meanings in spaces structured by epistemic gaslighting so as to affect those spaces themselves.”⁵³ This type of echoing can be a form of support, solidarity, as well as active resistance.

When any of these types of echoing is mischaracterized as unreasonable, mob mentality, and/or a “witch hunt,” according to Pohlhaus, the *epistemic labor* involved is obscured. It follows that these two types of echoing involve more than just repetition. As Pohlhaus explains, such echoing involves “redirecting epistemic attention and disrupting naturalized habits of (in)attention.”⁵⁴

Pohlhaus ends her essay with some important questions that can be vigilantly reflected upon in attempts to disrupt structural gaslighting. Among them, I note:

- To whom and with whom am I making sense?
- For whom are our interactions providing room for making sense and for whom are they not?
- What are the silences in these ways of making sense and what might those silences tell us?
- How is the sense of these experiences able to travel and circulate?
- How and why are my claims being afforded reception?

And she resolutely calls for the need to continually ask these questions, because even collective epistemic resistance can be coopted.⁵⁵

To conclude, if one believes disengaging and calling upon others to not engage is a witch hunt, if one believes it always prevents free speech, if one demands re-engagement and/or reconciliation, there might be much one does not have to consider. Even if one concedes that disengagement might be necessary for marginalized voices, unless *the detailed conditions of unjust communication are addressed* there is the risk of reproducing that which one intends to disrupt. Prior to addressing issues of reconciliation or restorative justice, prior to demanding re-engagement, it is incumbent upon social justice educators to help students recognize the myriad aspects of the unjust conditions to which collective epistemic resistance is a response. Learning not only to recognize these conditions but also to acknowledge one's complicity in perpetuating them can help educators to contribute to the diminishing of these unjust conditions of communication so that a different conversation based on epistemic justice becomes possible.

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