Restructuring Intellectual Authority:
Affective Democratic Friction
Sally J. Sayles-Hannon
Syracuse University

In an effort to generate racial democracy in higher education, Susan Sánchez-Casal and Amie A. Macdonald argue for a postpositive realist pedagogy that centralizes the epistemic function of identities. Acknowledging that pedagogical methods are one of many structural changes needed to create “critical access” for students of color in the academy — “academic worlds and campus communities that are responsive to the pervasiveness of white privilege” and “acknowledge, support, and develop the intellect and full humanity of students of color” — they claim postpositive realist pedagogy has the potential to restructure epistemic authority in the classroom. Postpositive realism was first articulated in Satya Mohanty’s 1993 essay, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On Beloved and the Postcolonial Tradition,” which proposes an alternative to essentialist and postmodernist understandings of identity. Postpositive realism claims our identities are materially, as well as socially, based; that is, our identities have very real, material consequences in everyday life.

Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald define identities “as the evolving products that emerge from the dialectic between how subjects of consciousness identify themselves and how they are identified by others.” Their understanding of postpositive realism views identities as part of how people comprehend and epistemically navigate the social world. To clarify, their postpositive realist theory explores how one’s experiences, understandings of one’s self, and one’s societal viewpoint impact one’s comprehension of knowledge, individuals, and social locations different from one’s own. By contending that all students in the classroom are speaking from a subjective viewpoint, Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald argue white students’ presupposed objectivity is challenged and the “unequal intellectual ground upon which racially diverse students engage with each other” is restructured (Identity, 18–20). Redistributing epistemic authority, they claim, enables students, specifically dominantly-located white students, to engage with worldviews that force them to question how their identities “provide a specific lens through which to read the world” (Identity, 20). Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald assert their postpositive realist pedagogy restructures intellectual authority by (1) acknowledging and centralizing the social and historical positioning of knowledges; (2) privileging traditionally marginalized voices; and (3) drawing attention to how students’ identities mediate their comprehension and construction of the social world (Identity, 18–20).

As a social-justice educational practitioner, I find Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s realist pedagogy appealing because of the recognition of identities as educational resources. Thinking more in depth about the application of realist pedagogy and the presumed redistribution of epistemic authority, I contend their claim is too simple, though. While Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald acknowledge the importance

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 2015 | Eduardo Duarte, editor
© 2016 Philosophy of Education Society | Urbana, Illinois
of one’s identities in one’s evaluation and production of knowledge, does simply giving more epistemic authority to excluded voices challenge the epistemic authority of dominant voices? Just because the realist classroom is constructed to highlight how students’ social locations frame their understandings of the world, does that generate more accurate testimonial assessments? If an educator privileges the work of traditionally excluded populations, which may call attention to how knowledges are sociohistorically positioned, does it follow that dominantly located students will afford such voices credibility?

In contrast to Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s postpositive realist pedagogy, I argue merely centralizing the epistemic function of identities and privileging marginalized voices does not necessarily restructure epistemic authority in the classroom. I contend, then, that Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s realist pedagogy conceives of epistemic authority too simplistically. Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald acknowledge the social dimension of knowledge creation and encourage a form of collective knowing in their concept of “communities of meaning” — groups that “are formed anytime a group of students generate common perspectives about the world from similar social locations” (Identity, 26) — but they do not address the process by which epistemic authority is conferred within the whole class context. Yes, the epistemic authority of marginalized authors may be elevated by privileging such voices more frequently. In contrast, I argue that epistemic authority is, more often than not, conferred at an individual level based on one’s assessment of a testifier’s “sincerity, reliability, trustworthiness, and ‘objectivity.’”6 If the process of attributing epistemic authority occurs privately and is not brought into the classroom dialogue, it raises the question of whether such redistribution of intellectual authority serves to democratize the classroom at all.

In an effort to build on Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s realist pedagogy, I first examine how the process of evaluating testimonial evidence and epistemic authority in the realist classroom may perpetuate epistemic injustices due to engrained, often unconscious, prejudices or ignorances towards testifiers. Drawing on John Hardwig’s principle of testimony,7 I then explore how appraisals of testifiers’ trustworthiness could cause epistemic harm to marginalized testifiers, especially if such evaluations are grounded in biases or one’s interest in maintaining one’s innocence regarding social injustices. Since Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald are primarily concerned with racism, this essay will focus on how invalid appraisals of trustworthiness can possibly cause white students to epistemically harm marginalized testifiers.8 Lastly, building on my investigation, I argue generating just testimonial assessments necessitates acknowledging how emotions cognitively function in evaluations of testifiers’ trustworthiness and how giving attention to emotions can create a more just process of ascribing intellectual authority. Such a process, which I call “affective democratic friction,” encourages the mobilization of all classroom participants’ emotional beliefs — beliefs “where emotion and cognition meet”9 — and actively engages in the dissonances and connections relationally — that is, simultaneously employing “analysis, imagination, and self-reflection.”10 The goal of this essay is
not to contend that Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s pedagogy is ineffective, but rather to enrich dialogue on the possibilities postpositive realist pedagogy offers social justice educators.

**Testimony, Trust, and the Realist Classroom**

Testimonial knowledge — how we come to know information without direct, firsthand evidence — appears to be an indispensable element in the realist classroom. Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald assert that subjectively positioning identities in the realist classroom utilizes students’ “experiential knowledges” as a spring board for “examining how those knowledges are conditioned and mediated by ideologies that yield either more or less accurate truths” (Identity, 17). Students’ experiential knowledges serve as testimony to other students to explain their knowledge processes, whether through first-hand experience or previously heard testimony. In my reading of Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald, they contend it is through students’ engagement with differently socially-located testimony that prompts students to reevaluate the accuracy of their worldviews. Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald illustrate this process in their example of a white student’s assertion that black women are “welfare queens” who take advantage of America’s welfare system. It is their hope that the student will eventually revise this picture of social reality by exploring countertestimony — testimony that contradicts their understanding by providing alternative reasons for the disproportionately high number of people of color and women in poverty — for example, how institutional racism and sexism structure U.S. economics (Identity, 21–22). While Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald acknowledge that a reevaluation of students’ beliefs will require a willingness to challenge previously received testimony and understand how social identities may contribute to false knowledge, they do not explore how these testimonial reassessments are encouraged or operate.

Testimonial assessments, according to Hardwig’s principle of testimony — “If A knows that B knows p, then A knows p” — functions on a premise of presumed trust.\(^{11}\) If I, a white student, knows April, a Latin@ student, knows U.S. immigration policies have had adverse effects on Latin@ populations, then I know immigration policies adversely influence Latin@ populations. Hardwig’s principle of testimony, while practical, assumes I believe April’s testimony to be true. Due to my social positioning as white, I may not believe April’s testimony is true because doing so could implicate me in this injustice or reveal possible prejudices towards Latin@s. I may not comprehend April’s reasons because of the limited frame of reference my social location provides; therefore, how do I evaluate the reliability of April’s testimony? If, as Hardwig claims, one evaluates the reliability of a testifier on the testifier’s moral character (truthfulness) and epistemic character (competence),\(^{12}\) do my previous patterns of trust and social location influence my evaluation of April’s credibility? If our world were free of prejudice, trust would simply be afforded to someone on the basis of their sincerity, reliability, and honesty. Assessing the trustworthiness and trusting a testifier in a world where prejudices and ignorances regarding race, class, gender, or sexuality exist, means it is possible, whether consciously or unconsciously, that one could epistemically harm a marginalized testifier by not affording them the authority or trust they deserve. I could find April’s testimony untrustworthy because
of my exposure to stereotypes about Latin@’s moral character or competence, or I might lack previous patterns of trusting Latin@’s in order to accurately assess the reliability of April’s testimony.

Returning to Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s example of the white student’s view about black women as “welfare queens,” does countertestimony assure that the white student will reevaluate her beliefs or patterns of trust? Even though the white student may have access to contradicting testimony, she may not trust such testimony because of her epistemic socialization — “a social training of the interpretive and affective attitudes in play when we are told things by other people.”13 In other words, trust operates affectively and is influenced by previous patterns of trust.14 When one is prompted to trust, one often relies on who one has previously trusted and seeks out similar evidence for trustworthiness. If Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s white student was not exposed to many counter narratives about black women and welfare, her reservation to trust countertestimony in course readings may be more accurately attributed to her social location’s biases. Catherine Elgin explains, “Because a feeling of trust can be experienced at an instant, we are apt to overlook how richly textured its conditions are, how much we had to learn and internalize in order to be in a position for the deliverance to be a deliverance of that emotion.”15

Failing to recognize how our feelings of trust toward a testifier are produced by internalized beliefs poses the possibility of epistemically harming a testifier by not affording sufficient epistemic authority. Even though Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s realist pedagogy necessitates questioning the impact of one’s social location on one’s knowledge, their theory lacks an explanation for such critical reflexiveness outside the examination of countertestimony.

Giving a marginalized testifier less epistemic authority than merited could encourage dominantly-located students to dismiss or disassociate themselves from their complicity in perpetuating potentially biased knowledge. If the class is examining how U.S. economics adversely affects women and people of color, as in Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s example, an internally biased assessment of readings and facts that counter their beliefs may unjustly blame people of color and women for poverty. The white students may resort to a form of “victim blaming,” which Kim Case and Annette Hemmings explain, “is a standard catch phrase in attacks on theories that hold people of color responsible for the poverty, lack of education, crimes, and other social problems they experience.”16 Victim blaming enables a white students to not only cause epistemic harm to a marginalized testifier by granting them insufficient intellectual authority but also distances the students from understanding their possible complicity in systems of oppression.

In an effort to offset white distancing strategies, Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald encourage “communities of meaning” — “groups that are formed anytime a group of students generate common perspectives about the world from similar social location” (Identity, 26). Such groups provide additional testimony that can, potentially, corroborate course-reading evidence and highlight the political and moral components of issues like welfare. While I understand Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s hope that such communities may increase the odds of dominantly-located students
reevaluating their previously held beliefs, they do not object to communities of meaning that are organized around dominantly-located social positions that may perpetuate victim blaming. For example, Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald present common examples of communities of meaning that include “white middle- to upper-class students who come up with the same ideas about racism — ‘it’s a thing of the past; the racial playing field is now even’ or about welfare — ‘the welfare lines are populated mostly by black and Latin@ people who are too lazy to improve their lot in life’” (Identity, 25–26). By encouraging communities of meaning that provide more epistemic credibility to white students’ victim blaming, countertestimony in course readings or from marginalized students could be entirely dismissed. If white students in the community of meaning that believes racism is no longer relevant to present discussions of inequality grant an epistemic surplus to that community’s testimony, those students could feel justified in dismissing counterarguments in order to maintain their moral innocence (e.g., “good white” label).¹⁷

What are the dangers involved in dominantly-located students’ perpetuating testimonial analyses that promote the unjust status quo? I have argued inaccurate testimonial assessments by white students about racism can enable those students to avoid addressing how their social positioning influences their knowledge about racism and their potential complicity, but such replication could create a self-perpetuating cycle of epistemic injustice.¹⁸ If one relies on previous patterns of trust to assess whether a testifier is worthy of trust, a white student’s habit of affording less epistemic authority to marginalized testifiers can perpetuate potentially biased testimonial assessments. Nancy Duakas explains, “We make discriminating judgments regarding the different epistemic value of different (actual or potential) testifiers in particular situations, regarding particular domains.”¹⁹ White students affording more epistemic authority to a community of meaning that corroborates their beliefs that racism is a thing of the past could result in white students unintentionally always privileging such testimony about racism. The consequences of white students’ routine of customarily assigning less epistemic authority to countertestimony — that is, testimony that contradicts their subjective positioning — “perpetuate[s] the inequalities that fulfill, and therefore seem to justify, the discriminatory expectations that perpetuate unjust epistemic exclusion.”²⁰

Assessments of trustworthiness in the realist classroom, when left unacknowledged, make possible replications of unjust powerrelations between dominant and subordinate populations. While the realist classroom asserts that all knowledges are socially and historically positioned and need to be interrogated, I contend Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald have not dug deep enough into how such reflexive examinations are to be encouraged. The examples I have given explore how a hearer’s assessment of a testifier’s trustworthiness may still produce epistemic injustices in the realist classroom, especially if a hearer is unwilling to analyze how one’s internalized prejudices and social identity impact testimonial exchanges.²¹ If dominant students’ assessments of testimony are not critically examined in the realist classroom, students may not identify their habits of assigning less credibility
to countertestimony that could potentially call attention to their possible culpability due to engrained prejudices or ignorances. I argue, then, that exposing and examining processes of evaluating testimonial evidence are methodologically crucial for the realist classroom. Such examinations may prevent the reproduction of epistemic injustices and aid in encouraging students to reevaluate how their social locations provide interpretive frameworks, which can construct both accurate and false knowledge, about the social world.

**Affective Democratic Friction**

Reflecting on Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s example about the white student’s belief that black women are “welfare queens,” the white student was not prompted to reexamine her beliefs in light of countertestimony. We must consider, then, why the student did not trust such evidence and what underlying emotional beliefs may orient her analysis toward maintaining her original position. If trust is in fact affective, it seems a recognition and evaluation of students’ “emotional beliefs” for granting a testifier trust may enhance testimonial assessment. Jonathan Mercer describes “emotional beliefs” to be “where emotion constitutes and strengthens a belief and which makes possible a generalization about an actor that involves certainty beyond evidence.”

In application, if the white student in Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s example reflected on her initial feelings of distrust toward countertestimony, the teacher could create an opening for her to discover that her feelings of distrust were not rational. That is, a critical evaluation of her emotions of distrust may reveal prejudicial attitudes or ignorance regarding the epistemic credibility of presented countertestimony.

How would an evaluation of our emotional beliefs assist in more accurate testimonial assessments? Elgin and Elizabeth Anderson have both asserted that emotions have the ability, when recognized and assessed, to provide information that could otherwise be overlooked. Emotions are not unprompted reactions, but rather are responses which are motivated by events, people, and so on. If we acknowledge the presence of emotions, “we can correlate emotional reactions with the events that trigger them … and use those reactions as sources of information about the environment.”

If the white student recognized how her distrust of countertestimony regarding welfare was emotionally motivated (e.g., guilt, anger, and so on), she could analyze whether her reasons for distrusting such testimony were influenced by engrained prejudices or ignorances. Assessing her emotions of distrust might enable her to reorient her inquiry regarding the epistemic credibility of countertestimony and, additionally, explore how such emotional habits may have made her complicit in past epistemic injustices. Reflecting on the past calls for one to focus on the future, to understand how one’s feelings guide one’s “obligations and opportunities, and [one’s] sense of [self] as a moral agent with on-going relations to other moral agents.” In this vein, her evaluation of her emotions of distrust might enable her to view that the willingness to accurately assess countertestimony requires moral motivation. When one is in a dominant position, it is important for one to exercise, to a degree, epistemic humility — to be aware of how one’s dominant social status
influences one’s automatic evaluations of others’ testimony. One’s willingness to reevaluate — to dig deeper into one’s positionality — is necessary for the realist classroom, as Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald acknowledge but do not clarify.

If one’s willingness to reevaluate, to explore one’s affectively-motivated reasons for trust, is a moral commitment, how can realist educators encourage students, specifically dominant students to engage with countertestimony? I disagree with Hardwig and Duakas that a willingness or moral motivation to review countertestimony can be encouraged by advocating students to hold a default position of trust toward testifiers. Such a position encourages gullibility and credulity and, potentially, diminishes one’s reflection on how one’s testimonial assessments can be influenced by one’s social positioning. Miranda Fricker advocates hearers have an epistemic responsibility to develop a “well-trained testimonial sensibility” — a sensitivity to identify how and when our social location can influence our testimonial evaluations. As I have claimed earlier, an analysis of one’s emotions of trust may be one way to help develop a testimonial sensibility that can identify how our beliefs can be influenced by prejudices or ignorances regarding testifiers. However, what epistemic virtue motivates one to analyze their emotional responses of trust or distrust every time one evaluates countertestimony?

While it seems that there is no surefire pedagogical method to solve possible inaccurate testimonial evaluations in the realist classroom or in any context for that matter, Fricker asserts that encouraging a virtue of “reflexive critical openness” — an alertness to the impact of the testifiers’ social location and to one’s own social location in granting epistemic authority — may assist in producing more just testimonial assessments. By cultivating a reflexive critical awareness of one’s potential prejudice or ignorance in affording testifiers epistemic authority, one takes the first step toward amending authority deficiencies or surpluses. Fricker contends reflexive critical openness works to correct for prejudice by making the hearer more alert to “sensing cognitive dissonance between her perception, beliefs, and emotional responses, or … self-conscious reflection.”

In contrast, José Medina argues reflexive critical openness is not enough to facilitate more just testimonial assessments, especially when systemic ignorance is potentially involved. Systemic ignorance, he claims, inhibits hearers’ ability to recognize the validity and content of testimony, especially when accepting such testimony could challenge their beliefs and worldviews. Medina’s basis is that systemic ignorance operates at a meta-level and “should be understood as grounded in meta-blindness.” “Meta-blindness” is used by Medina to symbolize that sociohistorically privileged hearers often fail to recognize how the dominant social imaginary — “the collective social imagination that govern [sic], for instance, what it means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on” — influences their capability to comprehend testimonies of marginalized individuals. Instead of acknowledging one’s lack of understanding, systemic ignorance operates to make dominantly located hearers aloof to social and historical differences and feel justified in dismissing or distrusting testimony from individuals that could upset the dominant social imaginary.
In order to correct or make room for multiple social imaginaries to operate simultaneously, Medina argues we must seek to create “epistemic friction.” Epistemic friction is created by “actively search[ing] for more alternatives than those noticed, to acknowledge them or their possibility), and to attempt to engage with them whenever possible.”

Medina highlights one reason for utilizing epistemic friction is that our social-communicative interactions operate dichotomously — operating in “black” and “white”:

It is crucial to have more than one form of receptivity culturally available; but it is also important to have the ability to move back and forth among alternative sensibilities, to look at the world from more than one perspective, to hold different viewpoints simultaneously so that they can be compared and contrasted.

In order to cultivate the virtue of reflexive critical openness, we must first attempt to open ourselves up to the friction that occurs when multiple social imaginaries produce epistemic differences and generate moments of intelligibility. We cannot encourage the virtue of reflexive critical openness until we acknowledge other social imaginaries and open ourselves up to our possible “blind” spots that our dominant-social imaginary creates.

Building on Fricker’s concept of reflexive critical openness and Medina’s idea of epistemic friction, I argue a step towards creating the democratic classroom Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald’s postpositive realist pedagogy advocates requires “affective democratic friction.” Affective democratic friction begins with communal assessments of testimony. Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald agree that knowledge construction is a social endeavor and begin to delve into how communities of meaning can motivate students to reevaluate and reflect on their beliefs, but, as I argued earlier, such communities appear to fall short of encouraging students to evaluate counter-testimony and accord underrepresented students epistemic authority. In order to promote more just testimonial assessments, I contend, realist educators need to promote affective democratic friction — a way of promoting an environment of negotiation where students willingly discuss their sociohistorical positions in order to contribute to a more just collective interpretation of our social world. Because the realist classroom contends that all knowledges and experiences are subjectively positioned, it provides a valuable context for actualizing affective democratic friction — a practice that encourages an affectively-oriented community that cultivates the visibility of our emotional reflections — those emotions that I contend are already present in our testimonial evaluations — in a way that highlights and potentially challenges our affective reasoning.

The next step for creating a postpositive realist pedagogy that effectively promotes a democratic environment, I contend, requires finding teaching methods that cultivate emotional reflections regarding testimonial exchanges and demonstrate how our inquiries and identities are oriented by affective responses. Pedagogical practices for encouraging affective democratic friction require our proclivity as educators to reconceive critical thinking as an operation occurring in tandem with “relational thinking” — a process AnaLouise Keating claims “employs analysis, imagination, and self-reflexivity in conjunction.” Devising such practices will most likely not
be comfortable; educational institutions don’t always offer the spaces and time to realize the affective dimensions of classroom environments. My goal in this essay has been to generate further discussion on the possibilities of postpositive realist pedagogy, and, I claim, finding ways to create affective democratic friction might be a worthy goal for social justice educators. Such a process affords the possibility of mobilizing our identities in ways that promote a more in-depth, critical, and communal awareness of how our emotional beliefs are already present and influence our interactions with countertestimony — with our peers that may offer experiences different from our own.


3. What differentiates postpositive realists from postmodernists is a different understanding of objectivity. Postpositive realists take the stance, according to Paula M. Moya, that “objective knowledge can be built on analysis of the different kinds of subjective and theoretical bias or interest,” which claims to be “less absolutist and more theoretically productive position.” See Paula M. Moya, “Introduction: Reclaiming Identity,” in Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism, eds. Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 12–13.


8. While it could be argued that inaccurate assessments of testifiers’ trustworthiness by marginalized students can produce epistemic injustices towards dominant students, I will not be addressing that issue in this essay. Although I construct a student-identity dichotomy, white/black students, I do so to highlight how identities have very “real” implications for classroom social dynamics.


12. Ibid., 700.


19. Ibid., 115.
20. Ibid., 116.
25. Ibid., 41.
27. See Hardwig, “The Role of Trust in Knowledge” and Duakas, “Epistemic Trust and Social Location.”
29. Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 91.
30. Ibid., 91.
32. I agree with Medina’s notion of “meta-blindness”; however, I am aware that the term “blindness” can be derogatory and further reinscribe social constructions of disability.
33. Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, 14.
35. Ibid.