Chapter Seventeen

Gaslighting as Epistemic Violence

"Allies," Mobbing, and Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Including a Case Study of Harassment of Transgender Women in Sport

Rachel McKinnon

In my earlier work on gaslighting, I focused on explicating the epistemic harms of gaslighting in terms of epistemic injustice (McKinnon 2017).[1] I want to take this opportunity to correct what I now see to be errors in that account, and to further explicate the epistemic harms of gaslighting. In particular, rather than viewing gaslighting as a kind of epistemic injustice, we should understand it as a kind of epistemic *violence*. By appreciating its violent nature, I will argue that gaslighting can cause posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, gaslighting can take place within organizational and institutional structures in the form of *mobbing*, which is increasingly connected to causing PTSD (Duffy and Sperry 2014).

I first began work on gaslighting in 2013. At the time, no philosophical work was yet published. Kate Abramson's paper was yet to be the first philosophical article published on the topic (Abramson 2014).[2] Fortunately, it is now fair to say that philosophical work on gaslighting has exploded.[3] Partly as a consequence of this, I've had time to revisit some of what I argued in my earlier work. More importantly, there are more philosophical interlocu-

---

1. While published in 2017, I began giving keynote addresses on the issue in March 2014, with writing beginning in 2013.
2. Kate and I spoke a number of times on the subject in 2013–2014. Without question, Kate had begun working on the topic before me.
3. An entire philosophy conference dedicated to "Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice" is good evidence of this. Carnegie Mellon University, September 2017.

tors available to help push on weaknesses in my earlier account.[4] In short, my earlier account did not go far enough.

I want to begin here with a summary of my earlier account of gaslighting. Discussions of gaslighting focus on one of two forms: an intentional form of psychological warfare where the perpetrator tries to drive the victim "crazy," such as in the 1938 Patrick Hamilton play and subsequent 1944 film *Gaslight*; or the subtler epistemic

> form, often unintentional, where a listener doesn't believe, or expresses doubt about, a speaker's testimony. In this epistemic form of gaslighting, the listener of testimony raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately. Directly, or indirectly, then, gaslighting involves expressing doubts that the harm or injustice that the speaker is testifying to really happened as the speaker claims. (McKinnon 2017, 168)

I focused on a (real) case where a trans woman is mispronouned by a co-worker, James, (who has institutional power over her) at a party. She relates the experience to an "ally" who doesn't believe her. The "ally" says things like:

> I'm sure you just misheard him: you're on edge and expect to hear mispro-nouning. I just don't believe that James would do that. He won a university diversity award for his supporting queer issues, after all. Besides, he's been a supporter of yours in the past too. He really is your ally. (McKinnon 2017, 168)

And:

> You say that he's done it before, and maybe he has, but I've never heard him do it before. (McKinnon 2017, 168)

These are classic instances of gaslighting. The perpetrator inappropriately privileges their own experiences of James as carrying more weight than the first-person testimonial authority of the victim.

I argued that "allies" routinely engage in this sort of behavior toward the very people they claim to support. In this case, it's a cis woman who conspic-uously fashions herself as an LGBTQ "ally," gaslighting a trans woman. I offered a critique of "allies" along these lines, suggesting that we should abandon what has become "ally culture." In its place, I suggested cultivating the active bystander. Someone can claim to be an "ally" without ever engag-ing in behavior to help those they claim to support. Mere expression of support, without meaningful action, is sufficient. Then, when confronted

---

4. I'm particularly grateful to Elena Ruiz, Nora Berenstain, Alice Maclachlan, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.

with harmful behavior, the "ally" will often point to their identity as an "ally" as protection from criticism. The active bystander model avoids this: one cannot claim to be an active bystander if one was not, in that particular instance, *active*. If one witnessed a harm but did not act, then one is, by definition, a passive bystander. I'm not attaching normative status to active versus passive bystander. Sometimes it's unsafe to engage. But one cannot claim to be an active bystander if one did not act, unlike those who still claim to be an "ally" but who never act.

UPDATING THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GASLIGHTING

There are two parts to my earlier account of gaslighting that I want to fix. First, I didn't go far enough in replacing "ally culture" with merely the active bystander model. Instead, I should have replaced "ally culture" with the concept of the *accomplice*. Perhaps the most important work on this issue is "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex" by Indigenous Action Media (2014). They define an accomplice as "a person who helps another person commit a crime" (Indigenous Action Media 2014, 2). One persistent problem that has evolved in ally culture is that "allies" are unwilling to take real personal risks, including social risks like upsetting a "friend" or coworker. They tend to choose their own comfort over concretely helping the marginalized people they claim to support. They can take off the ally "hat" when it no longer serves their purposes, but the marginalized folx don't have the same luxury to escape their identity-based oppression.

Since much of my audience for this chapter is undoubtedly academics (although I hope that it is much wider than this), I think it is useful to quote the section on "Academics and Intellectuals" in full.

> Although sometimes directly from communities in struggle, intellectuals and academics also fit neatly in all of these categories. Their role in struggle can be extremely patronizing. In many cases the academic maintains institutional power above the knowledge and skill base of the community/ies in struggle. Intellectuals are most often fixated on un-learning oppression. These lot generally don't have their feet on the ground, but are quick to be critical of those who do.
>
> Should we desire to merely "unlearn" oppression, or to smash it to fucking pieces, and have it's very existence gone?[5]
>
> An accomplice as academic would seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or betray their institution to further liberation struggles.

5. A good demonstration of the point would be my need here to point out the grammatical error of "it's" instead of "its." Grammar policing is political. We understand fully what the sentence is communicating: pushing up our nose at imperfect grammar is proving their point. If imperfect grammar contributes to discrediting the underlying message, this is epistemic injustice!

> An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for and not be afraid to
> pick up a hammer. (Indigenous Action Media 2014, 5)

The way I like to put it is that an "ally" will put on a button, but an accomplice will grab and throw a brick. This can be literal: after all, the Stonewall Riot was a *riot* against police violence and harassment of queer and trans people, which involved literal brick-throwing. Far more commonly, though, "throwing a brick" is metaphorical. If someone says something racist, immediately calling that person out is "throwing a brick." It's standing up for and with the marginalized and taking on considerable personal risk, in whatever form (economic, physical safety, social, political, etc.). An accomplice is willing to lose friends over their being racist/sexist/homophobic/transphobic and so on.

A good example of this is the many white people who participated in tearing down the confederate statue in Durham, North Carolina, in 2017 (Graham 2018). Many of them voluntarily, en masse, surrendered to the police, overwhelming them, causing the police to turn them away. All charges were eventually dismissed by the district attorney. Those are accomplices and not mere "allies." They put their freedom on the line, perhaps their employment.

To put it succinctly: fuck "allies." "Accomplices are realized through mutual consent and build trust. They don't just have our backs, they are at our side, or in their own spaces confronting and unsettling colonialism. As accomplices we are compelled to become accountable and responsible to each other, that is the [nature] of trust" (Indigenous Action Media 2014, 8).

The second issue with my earlier account of gaslighting is that I inappropriately shoehorned my epistemic account of gaslighting into Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice. The problem is that my account explicates the epistemic nature of gaslighting as a form of credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice against the victim. For Fricker, testimonial injustice is caused, at its root, by an identity-based prejudice. For example, someone discounts a woman's testimony because women are emotional, and emotionality is inconsistent with reliable perceptions. Fricker's case is Marge in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In the case of the mispronouning of the trans woman by an "ally," I suggested that it's a core stereotype that trans women are perceived as especially overemotional due to estrogen-based hormone replacement therapy.[6]

However, I'm no longer convinced that the source of the credibility deficit being an identity-based prejudice is a necessary condition for testimonial injustice (and thus gaslighting, if gaslighting is properly understood in terms

---

6. For a discussion of trans women stereotypes, see McKinnon (2014). Not all trans women choose, or are able, to engage in hormone replacement therapy. But even for those who do not, the stereotype still carries sway in other people's perceptions and beliefs.

of testimonial injustice). Some people simply give their own perceptions too much credence such that the contrastive nature of epistemic credibility—particularly when confronting information contrary to background beliefs—produces an inappropriate credibility deficit in a speaker, thus producing testimonial injustice. I think what's more important is when we can speak to *structural* patterns in such credibility deficits.[7]

GASLIGHTING, MOBBING, AND POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Now that I've had an opportunity to update my epistemic account of gaslighting, I'd like to extend some of gaslighting's harms. Another issue with my previous work on gaslighting is that I simply didn't go far enough in explicating the epistemic harm that it causes. It's not simply a form of epistemic injustice; it's a form of epistemic *violence*. And once we appreciate that fact, we'll have a better understanding of the harms it can and does cause. Primarily, I will argue that we should understand epistemic violence much as we now understand the seriousness of emotional violence (in addition to physical violence).

Kristie Dotson (2011) offers the following definition of epistemic violence:

> Epistemic violence in testimony is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons). Reliable ignorance is ignorance that is consistent or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources. According to this definition, a reliable ignorance need not be harmful. (Dotson 2011, 238)[8]

Fricker (2007) suggests that epistemic injustice harms people *as a knower*, but since being a member of an epistemic community is central to human life, I think it's more appropriate to say that epistemic injustice, and epistemic violence, harms people *as people*. As Gayatri Spivak (1998) and Dotson (2011) note, epistemic violence harms the victim's *agency*. I suggest that it can also harm dignity as well as contribute to posttraumatic stress disorder.

Dotson offers two new forms of epistemic violence focusing on practices of silencing: testimonial smothering and testimonial quieting (Dotson 2011). Testimonial smothering is when, typically, a marginalized person judges that their potential audience will respond to their testimony with such a severe

---

7. Kate Manne (2017) discusses a great many ways that women face structural violence, including epistemic violence.
8. Dotson also draws from Spivak (1988).

credibility deficit that they might as well not speak in the first place. The marginalized person thus smothers their own potential testimony due to a perceived likelihood of suffering testimonial injustice. For example, there's not much point bringing up the concept of white privilege to an audience of white nationalists.[9]

Testimonial quieting is when, typically, a marginalized person does speak, but their audience causes them to suffer such a severe credibility deficit that it's as if they didn't speak at all: the deficit causes their testimony to be mere sounds, rather than words with meaning and epistemic weight. We find this in many white people's response to the Black Lives Matter movement, saying that the people protesting police violence are "just screaming and being angry," or that they "just want special treatment," rather than expressing legitimate concerns about institutionalized police violence against black people.

I want to expand our understanding of epistemic violence to include gaslighting. In my previous work, I focused on gaslighting as a betrayal of trust by someone who purports to support the victim—an "ally." I noted that one of the consequences of this is isolation and withdrawal: if someone we trusted betrays that trust, we're less likely to go to them for support again.[10] And if the people who claim to support us betray our trust, then a natural response is withdrawal and isolation. But at the time I didn't appreciate just how serious these effects can be. *Gaslighting can cause posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).*

One might initially balk at this claim (or find it obvious, as victims I speak to often do): "I thought that only singularly traumatic events like abuse, rape, or being a soldier in war cause PTSD!" Not exactly. Such events certainly can cause PTSD, often better understood as *acute* PTSD. One particularly traumatic event can be enough. However, psychiatrists are increasingly understanding how a number of repeated smaller micro-traumas can accumulate to produce what's increasingly called *Complex*-PTSD (abbreviated to C-PTSD or CPTSD).

The US Department of Veterans Affairs introduces the concept in this way:

> Many traumatic events (e.g., car accidents, natural disasters, etc.) are of time-limited duration. However, in some cases people experience chronic trauma that continues or repeats for months or years at a time. The current PTSD diagnosis often does not fully capture the severe psychological harm that occurs with prolonged, repeated trauma. People who experience chronic trauma often report additional symptoms alongside formal PTSD symptoms, such as

---

9. For an analysis of the political concept of "privilege," see McKinnon and Sennet (2017).
10. For one particularly good account of trust, see Jones (1996, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2010, and 2012).

changes in their self-concept and the way they adapt to stressful events. (US Department of Veteran Affairs)[11]

Karatzias et al. (2017) distinguish between PTSD and CPTSD in this way

PTSD is comprised of three symptom clusters including: (1) re-experiencing of the trauma in the here and now (Re), (2) avoidance of traumatic reminders (Av), and (3) a persistent sense of current threat that is manifested by exaggerated startle and hypervigilance (Th). ICD-11 CPTSD includes the three PTSD clusters and three additional clusters that reflect "disturbances in self-organization" (DSO): (1) affective dysregulation (AD), (2) negative self-concept (NSC), and (3) disturbances in relationships (DR). . . . These disturbances are proposed to be typically associated with sustained, repeated, or multiple forms of traumatic exposure (e.g. genocide campaigns, childhood sexual abuse, child soldiering, severe domestic violence, torture, or slavery), reflecting loss of emotional, psychological, and social resources under conditions of prolonged adversity. (Karatzias et al. 2017, 2)

The eleventh revision to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) also includes a distinction between PTSD and CPTSD:

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Complex PTSD) is a disorder that may develop following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible (e.g., torture, slavery, genocide campaigns, prolonged domestic violence, repeated childhood sexual or physical abuse). The disorder is characterized by the core symptoms of PTSD; that is, all diagnostic requirements for PTSD have been met at some point during the course of the disorder. In addition, Complex PTSD is characterized by 1) severe and pervasive problems in affect regulation; 2) persistent beliefs about oneself as diminished, defeated or worthless, accompanied by deep and pervasive feelings of shame, guilt or failure related to the traumatic event; and 3) persistent difficulties in sustaining relationships and in feeling close to others. The disturbance causes significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. (World Health Organization 2018)

One of the primary features of CPTSD is the experience of repeated betrayals of trust by someone in authority over the victim. This can be a parent or caregiver, and chronic emotional abuse, or it can be workplace harassment, bullying, and mobbing.[12] Thus, while CPTSD is typically associated with the forms of repeated traumatic exposures quoted above, it can include more

---

11. The VA primarily cites Herman (1997).
12. For a landmark book, see Duffy and Sperry (2014).

"mundane" experiences like workplace and recreational sources of trauma or micro-trauma.

For the purposes of this chapter, I want to focus on the recent concept of *mobbing*. At the end, I will draw out an important role for gaslighting and epistemic violence. According to Maureen Duffy and Len Sperry (2014):

> Mobbing is not bullying. It is often far worse than bullying. Mobbing takes place within organizational or institutional settings and always includes organizational involvement. Key organizational members become involved in mobbing through overt or covert actions against a target or through failure to act to protect organizational members from abuse. Bullying is the subjecting of a targeted individual to hostile and abusive acts by one or more individuals without the presence of organizational involvement. The key distinction between bullying and mobbing is the absence of organizational involvement in bullying and the presence of organizational involvement in mobbing. (Duffy and Sperry 2014, 8)

The "presence of organizational involvement" can include a *lack* of engagement in stopping or responding to claims of harassment or mobbing.

I firmly believe that real, detailed examples are best in elucidating issues. For this chapter, I want to focus on a case study in mobbing and harassment in competitive women's cycling. In particular, I will focus on the experiences of a transgender woman's experiences of bullying and harassment that eventually escalated to mobbing when she was racing at the domestic elite level in the United States. Cycling in the United States is primarily governed by United States of America Cycling (USAC) and the international cycling federation Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). Both the UCI and USAC allow trans women to compete in women's categories. In recent years, USAC has had an unstated policy that trans women may compete if they can present government identification consistent with their gender, such as a driver's license. In 2017 they formally updated their policy to provide clarity to all. The details of the policy are not particularly important. What matters is that the victim of the mobbing, Victoria, unambiguously meets the UCI and USAC requirements for trans participation.[13]

However, it wasn't long until she started facing transphobic harassment, albeit indirectly on social media. Although people didn't recognize her as trans when meeting her, it was easy enough to Google her and find out about her trans status through public activism that she has engaged in.

Victoria turned out to be a relatively gifted bike racer, progressing well in her training and competing in bigger and more prestigious races. However, her success started to anger some other (cisgender) women racers. Victoria

---

13.   Indeed, since the UCI requirements were more restrictive than USAC's policy, Victoria meeting the UCI requirements thereby means that she meets the USAC requirements, even before USAC clarified their policy.

was winning races that these women were used to winning: she was taking *their* prize money and victories, they felt. And they expressed this to USAC officials. A number of these women approached the regional USAC coordinator who oversees races in the region, and who is responsible for handling all complaints.

At first the cis women (and it's a minority of the racers Victoria has faced, let's be clear) merely expressed displeasure at Victoria's presence in their races: trans women shouldn't be allowed to compete with (real) women. But as it became clear that Victoria wasn't going anywhere, and she was steadily improving, the women felt compelled to act. The next step was to escalate to complaints to the regional USAC official that Victoria should be drug-tested for endogenous testosterone. The UCI, via the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) 2015 policy on transgender athletes, had a maximum level of endogenous testosterone that trans women could have and still be eligible for women's competition. (Victoria was well within these requirements.)

Fortunately, this second level of complaint had no effect: the official told the complainants that the sort of testosterone testing that an antidoping test would do doesn't measure endogenous testosterone: that can't be done via a urine test (as is typical in antidoping tests for *exogenous* testosterone doping). It would require a blood test, and that is a deeply invasive procedure for an athlete for whom there is no evidence of breaking rules. The complainants were not satisfied: they repeatedly requested that Victoria be tested for testosterone. They even escalated this complaint over the regional official's head to the national USAC coordinator. But they received the same answer: no.

This begins to rise to the level of mobbing, rather than merely bullying, because the official, in their organizational capacity, does not rebuke those making the continued complaints. Although USAC has an antiharassment policy, which includes language about harassment on the basis of gender identity, those making unfounded complaints based on Victoria's trans status face no consequences. This lack of action on the official's part constitutes "organizational involvement," which Duffy and Sperry note as a necessary component for mobbing.

It's the third stage of escalation where the harassment very clearly crosses a line and becomes mobbing (although I think that their actions already constitute harassment and bullying, crossing a line). The number of women involved begins to grow as what started as a small group begins to gossip and speak to each other, recruiting others (who are either willing or unwitting). They tell lies about Victoria being dangerous and trying to cause crashes. Some of the new recruits have known the complainants for a few years and haven't known them to be liars, so why wouldn't they believe them when they say Victoria is dangerous? At one race that Victoria won with a surpris-

ing last lap solo attack (something she's never done before, as she would usually wait until the finishing sprint), a small group of women in the race complain to the official. They make two complaints: first, why didn't she (the official) tell them that Victoria was capable of an attack like that?[14] Second, they claim, falsely, that Victoria tried to cause someone to crash at the sharp corner at the bottom of the small hill. What will the official do? Will she never act to protect the (cis) women racers?

The thing is, Victoria never came close to causing another rider to crash, let alone do it on purpose. Victoria happens to race with a GoPro camera (after this incident, she started racing with two) precisely to protect herself from these sorts of false allegations. She was being accused of having a rider on her outside of a sharp corner and then riding toward the curb in order to cause the other rider to crash. But this was a lie: Victoria's GoPro camera facing behind her seat clearly showed that no such thing ever came close to happening. She was able to provide this proof to the official, who was satisfied. The women who made the complaints faced no rebuke or consequences.

So far the harassment has progressed from grumblings, to demands for antidoping testing, to false claims of dangerous riding hoping to affect the results of the race (by having Victoria relegated to last place). Unsuccessful to this point, the cis women weren't finished. However, since the USAC official has not rebuked these women for their continued harassment of Victoria on the basis of her trans status, the harassment has already risen to the level of mobbing. A few months pass, and a new season begins. Victoria starts winning early season races again, including the final race in a series. But during the wind-down lap, the second-place woman's male teammate shouted "Congrats [Betty] on being first female!" This is a fairly famous transphobic thing to say, as the second-place rider to Michelle Dumaresq in the women's downhill Canadian National Championships in 2006, the second-place competitor wore a T-shirt on the podium on which she had written "100% Pure Woman Champ." The man who said this is on a team that has a history of harassing and complaining about Victoria.

After being handed her winner's prize cheque, a controversy exploded. The chief male official angrily approached Victoria and told her that she has been accused of swearing at competitors during the race (false), throwing elbows (false), and intentionally trying to ride a junior off the course (false). The official wouldn't even entertain Victoria's explanation that this same group of women have been waging a campaign to have her banned from competitive cycling. The official said that he had confirmation of the allegations from five women on three different teams, and that was enough for him.

---

14. This is a *shockingly* absurd complaint to make: it's not an official's job to help riders defeat another rider. In fact, that would be a serious rule infringement.

Victoria was relegated to last place and the race organizers demanded that she return her winnings.

Victoria happened to have a friend at the race to advocate for her and knew the head of operations of USAC because of her previous experiences with harassments. These two people finally persuaded the chief (male) official to begin an impromptu investigation, which he should have done in the first place. After asking other racers, he found that many contradicted the allegations against Victoria, and even noted that rather than trying to run racers off the course, it was the complainants who were bumping into Victoria trying to run *her* off the course. After his investigation, the official reported back to Victoria that the original women admitted that what they had alleged was false after all. But he did not reverse his decision to relegate Victoria to last place. He offered no explanation.

It's important to note the role that gaslighting played here. When the official first approached Victoria, his mind was already made up: he wasn't interested in her side of the story. Within seconds, Victoria immediately began to explain that she had been subject to months of harassment from these same riders, trying all of the steps already listed to have her excluded from competitive cycling. He didn't want to even entertain the idea: "This has nothing to do with you being trans. I'm sure that's not the case. These women have been competing for years; we know them."

Classic gaslighting. In my earlier work, I argued that the epistemic nature of gaslighting involves inappropriately prioritizing the gaslighter's perceptions and inappropriately discounting the speaker's. As José Medina (2011) notes, epistemic injustice is contrastive: in order for a victim to suffer an inappropriate credibility deficit, someone else must inappropriately enjoy a credibility excess. Two sets of people inappropriately enjoyed a credibility excess here: the women engaging in mobbing and lying about Victoria and the official who trusted his own judgment and perceptions of those women over even entertaining Victoria's side of things.[15] The official's immediate response, cutting Victoria off, "This has nothing to do with you being trans," is classic gaslighting.

So far Victoria has faced at least two sets of false allegations about being a dangerous rider. In the second case, the complainants admitted to lying. But in both cases *none of the cis women faced formal (or informal) consequences*. Even when caught lying, and successfully having Victoria's win vacated, they received no punishment. This likely emboldened them: there was no cost to trying this at every race, which continued to happen throughout the season, and there continued to be no consequences. The women continued to tell lies and misleading statements about Victoria to other racers, often unwittingly recruiting these women to their cause of opposing

---

15.   See Medina (2011).

Victoria's participation in the sport. They would message racers and "warn" them about Victoria.

Victoria has now been a clear victim of mobbing due to multiple officials' inaction. Recall part of the description from Duffy and Sperry: "Key organizational members become involved in mobbing through overt or covert actions against a target *or through failure to act to protect organizational members from abuse*." USAC continually failed to protect Victoria from the harassment. There were no consequences for the perpetrators, even when caught lying. This is a failure to act to protect a member of USA Cycling from abuse. And Victoria had tried, but her pleas were dismissed: well, that's just how those women are. It starts small and spreads. With each risk-free attempt at exclusion and harassment, the original perpetrators become emboldened. No one is there to counter the lies. Those who engage in mobbing often trade on their organizational credibility. And this is most effective against those already marked as "new" or "outsiders" (as a trans woman athlete certainly is).

Her experiences of harassment have had a number of serious effects on Victoria. She developed, and was diagnosed with, CPTSD. She feels isolated at races, not knowing who will be friendly if she strikes up a conversation— or who will be friendly to her face and then engage in harassing behaviors behind her back. One aspect of PTSD is hypervigilance and difficulty trusting others. I suggest that another aspect is heightened *attributional ambiguity* (McKinnon 2014).

Attributional ambiguity is when a person behaves in a way toward us where it's unclear what motive or reason that we should attribute as the cause of the behavior. For example, if you're an attractive woman and a man chooses to hold a door open for you, is it because he's being chivalrous and the attendant sexism that comes with it, or is he just being polite because he holds open doors for everyone regardless of gender? It's ambiguous. Queer and trans people (and I suggest *any* socially marginalized intersectional identity) face this all the time. Is that person staring at me because they think that I'm queer and they may want to harass me, or do they think I'm cute and they want to be nice to me? It's ambiguous. Here, that ambiguity causes stress. And those with CPTSD, due to the attendant hypervigilance of the disorder, will sometimes attribute the worst motive to resolve the ambiguity. They feel unsafe taking a risk that it's the positive motive. When people's motive for their behavior toward us is ambiguous in a stressful situation, it requires *trust* for us to be charitable in assuming positive motives. But those with CPTSD regularly experience exactly this lack of trust in terms of feeling close to others.

I suggest that one key mechanism for successful mobbing is gaslighting or epistemic injustice, whether testimonial or hermeneutical.[16] Let's consider Victoria's case where the USAC officials did not participate themselves in the mobbing, but they did not adequately act to protect Victoria. One reason for this is that they systematically (though plausibly unintentionally) devalue Victoria's own pleas and testimony about what she's suffering, even if she happens to be an expert on the phenomena. Consider the official who relegated her (to last place) in the race where a group of women ganged up and lied about her racing. He wouldn't even entertain Victoria's testimony that those very racers had been engaging in a months-long campaign of harassment to have her banned from racing for being trans. When she tried to plead her case and explain the presence of mobbing, she was gaslit: "This has nothing to do with you being trans," he said. And when he eventually did his due diligence to investigate the allegations, they were found to be lies, yet there were no repercussions for the perpetrators: someone with institutional power failed to act in a case of mobbing.

Part of what's going on here, with mobbing in general, is what Gaile Pohlaus Jr. has called *willful hermeneutical ignorance*.[17] "Hermeneutical" resources are concepts that are sufficiently socially shared such that we can use them to communicate with others. "Mobbing," "gaslighting," and "epistemic violence" are all hermeneutical resources. Sometimes, though, people (and typically those with more social power) refuse to adopt new hermeneutical resources. This has been the case with the concept of "white privilege" and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The "#AllLivesMatter" response is an active rejection of the idea that BLM isn't about nonblack lives *not* mattering, or about *only* black lives mattering: it's about the systematic devaluation of black bodies and lives in the United States. Those who respond to BLM with "AllLivesMatter" are actively rejecting the hermeneutical resources: that's willful hermeneutical ignorance.

One way that mobbing is successful is when a victim knows that they're being mobbed, but those with institutional power to whom they complain reject that mobbing is a real phenomenon. If they only understand harassment or bullying as overt, obvious, and intentional, they will fail to understand how sincere "good" people can unintentionally participate in mobbing and harm. And since they reject the critical hermeneutical resources to understand the harm to the victim, they will likely place the blame on the victim themself: "If there's this much smoke, there must be fire somewhere." Even if Victoria could prove that every single allegation against her is a lie, an official thought that there must be *something* she was responsible for doing wrong to cause all the lies. But all she did was exist. This is a form of

---

16. C.f. Friedlaender and McKinnon (forthcoming).
17. Drawing importantly from Mills (2007).

Rachel McKinnon

epistemic bootstrapping. Every claim is falsified, but the existence of false claims is taken as evidence of an underlying (nonexistent) "truth" causing the claims.[18] No: victims are not responsible for their harassment and mobbing. Sometimes there's smoke due to prejudice. A common outcome to workplace mobbing, for example, is firing the victim since they're perceived as the "source" of the problem (the smoke). To an extent, the discord in the workplace will be resolved simply by firing the victim, but this comes at the cost of a deep injustice and often long-standing harm to the victim.[19]

OVERCOMING GASLIGHTING AND MOBBING

I'd like to close with some preliminary thoughts on what can be done to overcome the epistemic violence of gaslighting and mobbing. Unfortunately, discussing CPTSD caused by gaslighting often involves a kind of *meta-gaslighting*: people gaslight victims of gaslighting when the victim claims PTSD as a result of gaslighting. This happens when people complain of gaslighting and mobbing, as well. In a sense, there's little the victim can do to overcome it: it's systemic.

One concrete solution to overcome this, though, is for marginalized folx to have a network of accomplices. One of the features of mobbing and gaslighting is that the victim isn't able to credibly advocate for themselves: they're often suffering from testimonial quieting. Victoria could not successfully advocate for herself to the official since he wouldn't even entertain the idea: it was only when others stepped in and spoke entirely on her behalf that anything happened. I think that this is typical. Meta-gaslighting is endemic. So is the epistemic circle of hell: emotionality is used as an excuse not to believe someone, which makes them (more) emotional, which is used as further evidence not to believe them. The phenomenology of this is *infuriating*. People suffering this need to be able to turn to their "brick-throwers" to step in. I have a few, and the rare instances that they've been present have made all the difference. It also helps alleviate the feelings of isolation that those with CPTSD from gaslighting experience; furthermore, it can help rebuild the capacity to trust others.

I don't think there's good reason, presently, to be optimistic about the ability to "overcome" gaslighting and mobbing. We're still only just developing the hermeneutical resources to name and circumscribe the phenomena, let alone have the concepts propagate through the social imaginary to the point where they're not routinely met with willful hermeneutical ignorance.

---

18. See Vogel (2000).
19. The other common outcome is for the victim to quit and (hopefully!) find another job. This is particularly troubling for marginalized people, especially those for whom finding employment is difficult, such as trans people.

But one concrete way for people, even other marginalized folx, to help others is to provide what's known as a *sanity check*. While the term is widely used in database management, it has a different meaning in activist communities. Think back to the last time that you saw something a little racist/sexist/transphobic and you weren't entirely sure if what you think is happening is really happening. A look to another person who reciprocates with a "Yeah, I saw that too" look can make a massive difference: oh good, I'm not just imagining it. This often happens in situations where there's attributional ambiguity.

I distinctly remember an incident at an American Philosophical Association conference. It was a session on decision theory (a topic that I had done a great deal of graduate work on), and a topic I was very familiar with, as I nearly wrote my dissertation on it. The speaker made a large unstated assumption early in his presentation. I thought that this assumption was not one his interlocutor in the literature would grant, and that this assumption seemed to be doing all the work in producing his conclusion. So I asked about that: isn't this unstated assumption what produces your conclusion, and isn't that exactly the claim that the [other view in the debate] won't grant? So aren't you essentially begging the question? He didn't understand the question. I restated. Still nothing. I restated one more time. Nothing. Oh, I should note that *I was the only woman in the room* of about twenty to thirty people. Someone else (a man) immediately asks his question which is a very slight rewording of my original question (nearly verbatim). The speaker now understands and gives an answer (though, I think, an unsatisfactory one). This is classic epistemic injustice: a question from a woman is thought incomprehensible, but the same question from a man is comprehensible and worthy of reply.

Immediately after the session, I asked the man who asked the follow-up question if what I thought just happened really happened. "Oh yeah, obviously! I couldn't believe it." We became friends, bonding over our shared understanding of what just happened. He provided a sanity check for me: yeah, I didn't just imagine it. While the sanity check took the form of a conversation, they're most effective immediately in the moment. I've found that (when possible) simple eye contact with a look of recognition (maybe a slight nod, subtle "what the fuck" look in the eyes or mouthing the words) goes a *long* way in resisting the self-doubt that accompanies marginalized people suffering oppression. It's perhaps not as good as speaking up and confronting the source of harm, but it's far better than nothing, and it's cost-free. It's an effective way to show solidarity.

Seriously, though: speak up. Throw a "brick."

REFERENCES

Abramson, Kate. 2014. "Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting." *Philosophical Perspectives* 28: 1–30.

Dotson, Kristie. 2011. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26 (2): 236–57.

Duffy, Maureen, and Len Sperry. 2014. *Overcoming Mobbing: A Recovery Guide for Workplace Aggression and Bullying*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Friedlaender, Christina, and Rachel McKinnon. Forthcoming. "The Fundamental Attribution Error, Microaggressions, Harassment, and Gaslighting of Transgender Athletes: A Bi-Directional Analysis of the Role of Stereotypes in Transmisogynist Harassment in Single-Gender Sports." In *Microaggressions and Philosophy*, edited by Lauren Freeman and Jeanine Weekes Schroer. New York: Routledge.

Graham, David. 2018. "How the Activists Who Tore Down Durham's Confederate Statue Got Away with It." *The Atlantic*, February 21. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/durham-confederate-monument-charges-dismissed/553808.

Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Indigenous Action Media. 2014. "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex, An Indigenous Perspective & Provocation." Version 2, May 2. http://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex.

Jones, Karen. 1996. "Trust as an Affective Attitude." *Ethics* 107 (1): 4–25.

———. 2001. "Trust: Philosophical Aspects." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Neil Smelser and Paul Bates, 15917–22. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science.

———. 2002. "The Politics of Credibility." In *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, second edition, edited by Louse Antony and Charlotte Witt, 154–76. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

———. 2003. "Emotion, Weakness of Will, and the Normative Conception of Agency." In *Philosophy and the Emotions*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 54, edited by A. Hatzimoysis, 181–200. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2010. "Counting on One another." In *Trust, Sociality, Selfhood*, edited by Arne Gron and Claudia Welz, 67–82. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Karatzias T., M/ Cloitre, A. Maercker et al. 2017. "PTSD and Complex PTSD: ICD-11 Updates on Concept and Measurement in the UK, USA, Germany and Lithuania." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 8 (sup7): 1–6.

Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., eds. 2017. *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*. New York: Routledge.

Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKinnon, Rachel. 2014. "Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women." *Hypatia* 29 (4): 857–72.

———. 2015. "Trans*formative Experiences." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 419–40.

———. 2016. "Epistemic Injustice." *Philosophy Compass* 11 (8): 437–46.

———. 2017. "Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice." In *Routledge Handbook on Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., 167–75. New York: Routledge.

———. 2018. "The Epistemology of Propaganda." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (2): 483–89.

McKinnon, Rachel, and Adam Sennet. 2017. "Survey Article: On the Nature of the Political Concept of Privilege." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 25 (4): 487–507.

Medina, José. 2011. "The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary." *Social Epistemology* 25 (1): 15–35.

———. 2012. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mills, Charles. 2007. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11–38. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

US Department of Veteran Affairs. n.d. "Complex PTSD." https://www.ptsd.va.gov/profes sional/treat/essentials/complex_ptsd.asp (accesssed January 21, 2018).

Vogel, J. 2000. "Reliablism Leveled." *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (11): 602–23.

World Health Organization (WHO). 2018. "6B41 Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." In *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 11th Revi- sion (ICD-11). https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/585833559.