

# We Need to Talk About the Backlash

## What Is to Be Done?

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*CSHPS – The Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science*

*CSWIP – The Canadian Society for Women In Philosophy (now the Canadian Society Working for Inclusion in Philosophy)*

*CPA – The Canadian Philosophical Association*

*FHSS – The Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences*

### Introduction

In the current political climate, there is a groundswell of voices attacking “woke-ism,” “gender ideology,” “cancel culture,” and critical race theory that particularly target academics and academic institutions. Troublingly, the vilification of voices from these (and other progressive) perspectives is not simply external to the university, but is sometimes proffered by our own colleagues, often in the name of academic freedom. A number of scholars who speak up about controversial social justice issues—particularly those who are women, Black, Indigenous, people of color, or people with minoritized gender or sexual identities—have experienced threats and personal attacks. An extreme recent example is the violent attack on a professor teaching a philosophy of gender course at the University of Waterloo in the summer of 2023.

On June 19 at the 2024 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences, CSHPS, the CPA, and CSWIP co-hosted a panel to address these issues, *We Need to Talk About the Backlash—What is to be Done?* This panel comprised feminist philosophers (from junior scholars to administrators) with expertise in critical race theory, academic freedom, characterizations of misogyny, belief change, coded (hate) speech, equity interventions in institutions, and education. Presentations were given in the first two hours of the session and the last hour was reserved for discussion.

While feminists and other progressives are often characterized as opponents of academic freedom, this is a troubling misrepresentation. Academic freedom is highly prized among feminist scholars and other progressives, but it hardly deserves the moniker “academic” if it is not informed and constrained by academic integrity, basic ethics, political astuteness, and scholarly care and accountability. This was the spirit of the discussion.

This report recounts their presentations. It identifies insights into the current problem, assesses some responses, and discusses the fundamental values that emerged throughout the panel. The point of this report, like the panel itself, is not to create a final authoritative proposal but to outline the current landscape and identify opportunities, issues, pitfalls, and problems that various institutional approaches to addressing these issues might create.

## Overview of key points

This section provides an overview of key insights that were shared by panelists or emerged through the discussion.

### Understanding the problem

- The backlash is not only anti-feminist and anti-progressive, but also anti-intellectual, particularly targeting the humanities and social sciences, where the theories grounding these movements are often developed.
- Examples include the “anti-woke” backlash targeting Critical Race Theory and gender education. This is often enacted through the use of racist coded language in both political and educational settings.
- Ideological narratives about identity grounding the backlash are often held dogmatically and are resistant to challenges or charitable argumentation (as is evident in many anti-trans interventions).
- Concerns about cancel culture and free expression are treated as a more significant threat than stochastic terrorism.

**Stochastic terrorism** is the use of mass communications to stir up random lone wolves to carry out violent or terrorist acts that are *statistically predictable but individually unpredictable*.

(Hamm & Spaaij, 2017)

“Learning is a constitutively vulnerable thing to do. To learn is to linger with the things you don’t know, to be open to having your perspective shifted ... That vulnerability becomes even more salient in courses and disciplines related to anti-oppression.”

–Dr. Shannon Dea

### Barriers to education

- The existence of stochastic terrorism makes students and teachers feel unsafe.
- Anxiety and a sense of not belonging are barriers to effective *teaching* and *learning* as well significant stressors with possible health implications for teachers and learners.

### The roots of the current problem

- Political and institutional histories inform the present.
- These histories are particular and their effects are intersectional. So, for instance, the anti-Black racist violence experienced by Black scholars and students is distinct from the colonial violence faced by Indigenous scholars and students (people who are Black *and* Indigenous thus experience intersectional violence). Both anti-Blackness and colonialism intersect with gender, creating particular challenges for Black and Indigenous women and other non cis-male genders.

“Anti-CRT backlash “troubles this myth we have that education is the great equalizer. How is it the case that education equalizes the terrain when Black children are being sent home from school in police cars?”

–Dr. Laura Mae Lindo

## Institutional responses to stochastic terrorism

Institutional responses	Concerns with those responses
Increased campus security/police on campus	<p>This is a carceral response.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Carceral responses often make people who are already the targets of institutional violence less safe (consider members of racialized and Indigenous communities).</li> <li>○ When increased security makes people who are already vulnerable feel less safe, this amplifies barriers to teaching and learning (with possible health implications).</li> <li>○ The sense of security produced for those who do not experience carceral responses as threatening is false as carceral approaches provide little actual protection from stochastic terrorism because of its unpredictability.</li> </ul>
Reduced amount of information (about classes and instructors) on university websites	<p>This creates barriers to access and is contrary to the spirit of openness that characterizes a public education system.</p>
University statements condemning violence	<p>Often the language used in such statements is coded in different ways for different groups and may serve to antagonize those it intends to support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Terms like “gender ideology” and “freedom of expression” are regularly used as dogwhistles in rhetorical spaces that support stochastic terrorism.</li> </ul>
<p>Efforts to respond to stochastic terrorism must be sensitive to how it and related forms of political violence work.</p>	

Sometimes universities appear to be more interested in managing liabilities rather than addressing fundamental issues; they then intervene in ways that perpetuate the very problems they claim to be trying to address.

### Values

Here we list the key values that were expressed and informed much of the discussion.

- Academic freedom and freedom of expression
  - Academic freedom includes the freedom to teach and learn. All students and professors have this right.
  - Academics should retain the phrases “freedom of expression” and “academic freedom” to describe social justice-oriented work, both academic and activist.

- The importance of the wellness of *all* students, staff, and faculty.
  - For instance, violence against Black students is often seen an *exception* to an otherwise harmonious and peaceful normality, despite evidence that the *normality is racist violence*. In such a light, the dismantling of white supremacy in our universities becomes a priority.

#### Philosophical tools

- It is important to recognize the tools of argumentation and critical engagement with an awareness of their dangers and limits.
  - For instance, negotiation and cooperative argumentation hold value for social justice activism insofar as they can improve both uptake and understanding compared to adversarial argumentation. However, adversarial argument can be an empowering tool for identity oppressed people, especially when they have been excluded from spaces where this is the primary means of engagement.
- Anti-colonial, critical race, feminist, and other analytic strategies provide political, structural, and institutional awareness of how messaging and policies affect those in the classroom.
- Knowledge of histories of advocacy have something to teach us in the present; in this way, contemporary advocacy becomes part of a continuing movement.

#### Panel participants (in order of presentation)

Dr. Shannon Dea is Dean of Arts at the University of Regina. She is known for her work as a feminist philosopher as well as her regular column, “Dispatches on Academic Freedom,” in *University Affairs*.

Dr. Margaret Robinson, Indigenous Studies; English; Sociology and Social Anthropology (Dalhousie University) is a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Reconciliation, Gender, and Identity.

Dr. Stephanie Kapusta, Philosophy; Gender and Women’s Studies; Law, Justice and Society (Dalhousie University) is an expert on trans philosophy.

Dr. Jennifer Saul (Waterloo University) is Waterloo Chair in Social and Political Philosophy of Language. Her book, *Dogwhistles and Figleaves: How Manipulative Language Spreads Racism and Falsehood*, was recently published by Oxford University Press.

Dr. Moira Howes, Philosophy (Trent University), spent years as the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Trent University and works on argumentation.

Dr. Laura Mae Lindo, Philosophy and Gender and Social Justice (University of Waterloo) is an expert in critical race theory and pedagogy and was also Waterloo region’s first black MPP.

Dr. Carla Fehr (co-chair and organizer of session), Professor, Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy, and Gender and Social Justice Advisor (University of Waterloo).

Dr. Letitia Meynell (co-chair and organizer of session), Professor of Philosophy and Gender and Women's Studies (Dalhousie University).

### Detailed summary

A new problem? Or a perennial problem?

Throughout the presentations and further discussion, many people emphasized that the contemporary backlash is not unique or distinct from historical backlashes harming equity-denied people. In this way, while backlash to “woke-ism” might appear (to white scholars) to be a new phenomenon, it is not. Various identity oppressed folks have experienced backlash to their presence in academic institutions and their professional projects for as long as there have been members of underrepresented groups in these spaces. Therefore, it is important to remember the ways systems of oppression obscure social and political reality for those occupying more privileged positions.

Since social and political backlash to academic work is a perennial problem, there are a few things that seem important when considering what sorts of responses will prevent harm. First, there are histories of resistance and contemporary movements that can instruct us in helpful ways. Justice-oriented work is not the type of thing that needs to be constructed out of thin air. Second, an ethos of non-harm or preventing institutional harm seems minimally required for any attempt at reforms.<sup>1</sup> Since identity oppressed people often experience violence in academic institutions, attempts at revising institutional norms should centre those voices.

### Responses to violent backlash

A number of the panelists focused on institutional responses to the Waterloo attack, which became an important area for discussion. They pointed out that institutional responses were, at best, misguided and, at worst, harmful. For example, increased securitization and police involvement on campus are actively dangerous for non-white people. Additionally, many of the presentations and the discussion that followed noted that institutional responses appeared to misunderstand the nature of the threat of the contemporary backlash for those on campus. The threat of stochastic terrorism, for example, is not the type of thing that securitization can combat. Rather, academic institutions are better able to respond to stochastic terrorism by using their cultural position to advocate for identity oppressed people and anti-oppressive institutions and practices.

Additionally, since many of the presentations analyzed the theoretical presuppositions that appear to inform some problematic institutional responses, they also provided insight into ways that individual instructors and institutions might better respond. One important theoretical consideration is the potential for harm in speech about backlash. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the desired reforms are possible, of course, is up for debate.

coded speech is not clearly understood or addressed through institutional responses with the stated aim of protecting academic freedom. The misuse of the term “academic freedom” by anti-progressive politicians and media personalities can communicate inappropriate messages in the wake of violent backlash, especially in a context where reactionary movements aim to protect hate speech in the name of free expression. Ambiguous use of the concept by institutions, then, can cause real harm. Academic freedom is not tolerance of all and any speech on campus. Instead, it is the freedom for academics and students to teach, learn, and research safely—without discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Clear use and advocacy for academic freedom, then, seems an important starting place for our responses.<sup>3</sup>

It is also important to notice the epistemic norms at work in the background of critical engagement within institutions and society at large. In the presentations and discussion, many folks pointed out that epistemic norms can problematically mandate certain terms of engagement, thus shedding light on how our institutions perpetuate harm. When institutional policies go uncriticized, and when systems of oppression are easily interpreted as an unchangeable social reality, colonial and racist violence can run rampant without recognition from more privileged people within these institutions. Epistemic norms can also offer insight about polarizing political disagreement (about “wokeness,” for instance). While the norms of argument, for example, can themselves perpetuate unfair conditions for those engaging in argumentation, what’s further troubling is that argumentation itself may not be a method that addresses problematic beliefs or dangerous political commitments effectively. Understanding the underlying epistemic mechanisms then, seems like an important area for consideration when offering commentary or critique of potential responses to contemporary backlash.

Of course, the above considerations closely relate to pedagogy and its use both in responses to stochastic terrorism and in resistance to a broader cultural backlash to anti-oppressive disciplines. Since students and scholars are at risk within institutions and classrooms—precisely because it is so easy to perpetuate or fall prey to harms by way of the epistemic norms of these spaces—an important place where instructors have the power for reform is in their own classrooms. With a more robust understanding of how violence occurs on campus, and by creating spaces that are safe for learning (for all students), classrooms have the potential to be liberatory spaces on campus.

### Emerging Values

The session was revelatory in many ways. Each of the presentations offered a challenge to the current conditions of our institutions. It is, first, important to take the real physical and epistemic danger in our academic institutions seriously. Further, it is important to take the theoretical connections presented in academic discussions like the Backlash Panel as tangible

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<sup>2</sup> From this, the perennial problem of backlash is shown to be closely related to concerning and problematic limits to academic freedom. Instances of institutions maintaining existing social systems of dominance that limit academic freedom include: Black academics who are removed from their positions based on their activism and social justice-oriented research; those advocating within academia for better working conditions; and those advocating for better treatment of identity oppressed colleagues who experience discrimination for those efforts.

<sup>3</sup> Whether or not the term “academic freedom” has been tainted by reactionary groups using the term as a dogwhistle or slogan (meaning a different term should be used) is up for debate.

information that offers insights for navigating forward. Many points made in the session can guide our practices. Below are some key takeaways.

First, to focus on the external threats of unpredictable (individual) bad actors misrepresents the causes of stochastic terrorism, which is socio-political, and ignores the actual hostility of our institutions. A guiding principle of preventing harm, then, will avoid carceral solutions, since the aim is to make learning spaces safe for *all* students (as well as *all* faculty and staff). Additionally, there needs to be serious engagement from instructors (or those with more social capital in the institution) to challenge and remove institutional barriers and norms that harm non-dominant students and instructors. This can include a wide range of responses, such as: (i) challenging norms of engagement in classrooms; (ii) studying content that empowers students to identify and challenge institutional violence; (iii) transgressing institutional norms that are harmful (e.g., non-adherence to colonial classroom/institutional policies, advocating for students navigating the institutional bureaucracy, or organizing to advocate for colleagues/students experiencing mistreatment at the hands of the institution); and (iv) clearly communicating about the political threats to academic freedom and institutional violence.

These are all small ways to begin preventing harm in our classrooms and other academic spaces. What exactly these responses amount to on the ground and how to approach them responsibly and ethically is likely to vary from context to context. Beyond this, however, what is important for academics, especially those who occupy positions of privilege, is to engage in activities that counter the broader cultural/political backlash “upstream.” This includes things like community involvement and advocacy outside of the institution for political change. Since social justice work belongs to a long lineage of knowledge and practice, there is much to learn from these traditions.

## The Presentations

Shannon Dea

### How to Create Safer Classrooms in the Age of Stochastic Terrorism

Dr. Shannon Dea discusses the challenges associated with ensuring classrooms are safe learning places for *all* members. Academic freedom, of course, includes the freedom to teach and learn, not only the freedom for scholars to pursue particular areas of research. This means unsafe classrooms are a danger to academic freedom.

The attack in Waterloo could be understood as an instance of *stochastic terrorism*. Stochastic terrorism describes one of the ways rhetoric can produce violence. Stochastic terrorism is “the use of mass media to provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable” (Hamm and Spaaij, 2017, 84). Dea emphasizes that far-right organizations’ targeting of equity-denied people can lead “lone wolves” to take up terroristic violence against equity-denied people, even though exact details of those attacks are entirely unpredictable. In other words, when hate is broadcast widely, we can’t always predict where violence will pop up in response.

When there is misguided political backlash to entire areas of research (think backlash to Critical Race Theory, gender studies, etc.) and there are resultant terroristic attacks related to this backlash, students and instructors are left feeling especially vulnerable. Responses from

universities, however, are often misguided. After the attack in Waterloo, many universities increased campus security, including an increased police presence on campus, and reduced the amount of information available on institution websites (see Aziz 2023). More intense security might offer a false sense of safety for white folks, however carceral approaches do not support the safety of *all* students.

The risk of harassment and violence is higher in the home and in institutions than other areas of a person's life. In this way, universities are perfect storms because they are institutions that are homes to students. As we think about how to improve safety in anti-oppressive courses, then, it should be clear that classroom design, course design, and university design is where important work needs to be done. Increasing securitization excludes equity-denied folks and paints a false image of how political violence occurs. External danger is ambiguous—and when it comes to the risk of stochastic terrorism, entirely unpredictable—whereas internal dangers are more obvious and at the direct control of the institutions where we teach. With these considerations in mind, Dea argues universities have *internal* responsibilities to students to make campuses and classrooms safer. This sort of inward response is how universities can improve the safety of classrooms today.

This is not to say there aren't any ubiquitous threats to studying in anti-oppressive disciplines. However, these threats are political. Reactionary opposition to these disciplines hinders our ability to support students in our institutions. Thus, the university has a role to play in combatting stochastic terrorism—public education and advocacy for these areas of study.

Making classrooms safer, then, must include a more robust understanding of how violence can occur in classrooms. Dea notes that since vulnerability is characteristic of learning in the first place, instructors have a duty to ensure all students can engage safely. The way to deal with stochastic terrorism isn't to focus on individuals who might be moved to terrorize—in some ways, this is a hopeless task. The ways we can advocate for change, aiming to improve the safety of classrooms, is not related to the “downstream” effects of political rhetoric, it is instead a task that is “upstream”—that is, working to combat the dangerous rhetoric that leads to stochastic terrorism in the first place.

Margaret Robinson

On the Relationship Between Settler Imposters and Anti-Feminist Backlash, and its unique harms for Indigenous women

“Pretendians”—or, settlers who claim an Indigenous identity—are not new. However, Dr. Margaret Robinson encourages us to think about recent cases of settler imposture and how these are related to contemporary anti-feminist and anti-intellectual backlash. More than this, Robinson paints a clear picture of how current attempts within academic institutions to remedy these sorts of identity problems often further ostracize those with intersecting oppressed identities—namely, Indigenous women without Indian status.

In 2021, an investigation revealed that Professor Carrie Bourassa, a leading Indigenous-identifying health scientist in Canada, had no Indigenous ancestry (Leo 2022). Ultimately, after concluding that Bourassa had fabricated her identity, the University of Saskatchewan removed her from her position. Similar stories followed, and the impact was felt across the country. Universities began implementing policies with the explicit aim of avoiding further settler



imposters in the institution. Of course, one can reasonably see the additional aim of avoiding embarrassment in the media. Robinson argues that institutional policy changes following the Bourassa scandal were not aimed at protecting Indigenous people and their communities, but rather were attempts at managing liability.

Dalhousie University, for example, invited a group of (status) Indigenous people to develop an identity-vetting process.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to come up with criteria for verifying Indigeneity, this group's report remained "unable to account for several categories of Indigenous people who hold Aboriginal rights under section 35 of the Canadian Charter," including non-status Indigenous people living off-reserve.<sup>5</sup> Robinson points out that sexism in the Indian Act paired with sexism at the local band-level has historically pushed many women and their children off reserve, removing their ability to gain recognition from the Canadian government as Indigenous. Universities, of course, are often colonial tools that are hostile to Indigenous people and culture in the first place, but they are also steeped in histories of racism and sexism. All this taken together, then, multiplies the systemic discrimination against non-status Indigenous women: academics who do not have status cannot identify themselves as Indigenous, but it is sexism and colonial conceptions of identity that exclude them from contemporary vetting practices.

Indigenous academics face additional identity challenges when their community members view those working in academia as "more assimilated" than non-academics. This also disproportionately affects women because there are more Indigenous women in academia than men (McFarland et al., 2017). This is additionally troubling when we consider that non-status folks have fewer options for political representation compared to their status counterparts. Where people with official recognition from the Canadian government can provide documentation to their academic institution, people from women-headed families who were pushed off reserve do not have this option.

Future implications of the widespread adoption of identity vetting, then, are especially concerning. Uncritically adopting the sexism in the Indian Act and focusing on status or letters from reserve governments will inevitably exclude large groups of Indigenous people—who are already disproportionately affected by institutional sexist and colonial violence. When Indigenous people are denied recognition by government, Robinson points out, this is effectively legislating Indigenous folks out of 'official' existence.

Stephanie Kapusta

Early 'Gender-critical' and Catholic Attitudes towards Trans Women: A common Logic?

Dr. Stephanie Kapusta explores the unlikely convergence of anti-trans beliefs shared between conservative Catholics and gender-critical feminists. Drawing on Butler's (2024) observation that TERFs—trans exclusionary radical feminists—might be hesitant to identify with the radical

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<sup>4</sup> The report is titled "Understanding our Roots" (Dalhousie 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Two Mi'kmaq legal scholars and Dalhousie employees, Naiomi Metallic and Cheryl Simon, wrote a human rights and legal analysis of "Understanding our Roots" pointing out many of the Dalhousie report's shortcomings, A Human Rights and Legal Analysis of the Understanding Our Roots Report (2023) (<https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/reports/83/>).

right even though their beliefs create the same “fear and repression,” Kapusta offers a commentary on what our role as philosophers might be to challenge these harmful beliefs.

Kapusta highlights that the logics of gender critical feminists mirror the logics of anti-trans sentiment offered by the Vatican. Kapusta points out that arguments found in Janice Raymond’s (1979) influential work, *The Transsexual Empire*, remain popular among gender critical feminists. Raymond paints trans women as (i) fabricating an identity that (ii) that undermines female creative power, (iii) which prevents them from achieving higher order liberation they might have realized were they not trans. Ultimately, for Raymond, (iv) this impedes the formation of a society and impedes the ability of female communities to organize free from patriarchy. Messaging from the Vatican follows a strikingly similar structure (John Paul II, 1993; Benedict XVI, 2005, 2008; Francis I, 2015; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). Trans women, in a catholic sense, (i) shape their bodies and psychologies as they see fit, (ii) usurping sexed participation in God’s creativity, which (iii) opposes a transcendent orientation towards God. This, of course, (iv) impedes the building up of the family and the church. Notice the implications in both these logics are the same: “trans self-determination is morally wrong.”

This type of logic, or group of associations, in which Catholics and TERFs (and other groups) project an image onto trans people to portray them as perpetuating some grave moral wrong, appears to be rooted in fear, repression, and participation in fantasmic constructions of reality (in Butler’s (2024) sense). Since this is the case, Kapusta invites us to think about what the role of argumentation might be when dealing with such logics—or perhaps more accurately, non-logics. If these portrayals of trans people are not based on facts about trans people, then reasoning with these types of logics or associations might not be the most constructive way to protect trans people inside and outside our academic institutions.

Jennifer Saul

The Pragmatics of a Bad Response

Dr. Jennifer Saul examines the University of Waterloo’s problematic response to the attack on campus. Saul points out that there are indeed difficult linguistic issues that can hinder our ability to discuss things like stochastic terrorism. In this presentation, she carefully examines whether the phrases “gender ideology” and “freedom of expression”—phrases used in University of Waterloo’s post-attack messaging—can function as reactionary dogwhistles. According to Saul, *overt code dogwhistles* are communicative devices that are fully understood by only part of an audience. These devices function like a secret code, where the phrase or word appears innocent, but there is an underlying meaning understood by the target audience. With this type of *intentional* dogwhistle, there is intent to send the message, intent to conceal the message, and a cover, i.e., another message that is widely understood. It is important to note, of course, these devices can also be used *unintentionally* since the cover message has its own unique meaning.

The University of Waterloo issued a series of statements after the attack on campus in 2023 (Marchesan 2023). Some of these statements were short-lived and were almost immediately removed from university websites; almost all these statements were poorly received by the student body. Some of the messaging included phrases like “gender ideology,”

and other statements focused on “academic freedom” and “freedom of expression.” The criticism that ensued questioned why these statements seemed more concerned with freedom of expression and cancel culture than the risks of violent stochastic terrorism. What’s additionally troubling is that students took these terms in the university’s statements to be anti-progressive dogwhistles.

Saul ultimately argues that “gender ideology” is not an anti-progressive dogwhistle and “freedom of expression” could be. When it comes to the use of “gender ideology” in anti-trans circles, Saul points out that it misses a crucial component of an overt code dogwhistle: the intent to conceal. Anti-trans activists seem to want everyone to use the term “gender ideology” as they do. This means there is no attempt to conceal the true meaning of the code message—anti-trans activists seem to use the term more like a slogan. When it comes to the use of “gender ideology” in the University of Waterloo’s messaging, it seems they did not intend to send a dogwhistle in the first place, and additionally, there is the same missing intent to conceal given anti-trans groups’ use of the term. What makes the University of Waterloo’s phrasing problematic is that it is the slogan of anti-progressive groups.

When it comes to the phrase “freedom of expression,” some people (see Climenhaga 2022) have argued that it is an effective dogwhistle since it communicates a unique message to those on the political far right. For example, a statement from government officials about the importance of “free expression” can communicate a clear *cover* message about basic freedoms in academic settings while simultaneously communicating a *concealed* message about the protection of far-right views in academia. However, there are uses of this phrase that do not attempt to conceal any message, similar to anti-trans uses of “gender ideology.” Saul points out anti-progressive arguments about protecting freedom of expression given the rise of the “woke mob” do this. To additionally complicate this issue, academics can use the phrase in an entirely different way. Saul highlights support for student protests on campus can be framed in terms of freedom of expression. For example, faculty at the University of Waterloo criticized the university’s response to student encampments in solidarity with Palestine as harmful curtailment of free expression on campus. The University of Waterloo’s use of “freedom of expression” in their response to the attack on campus could have been interpreted as a dogwhistle—which undeniably harms those closely affected by the attack—but the varied use of the term, especially in academic settings, can trouble our ability to communicate in the light of stochastic terrorism. All this together highlights how institutions can unknowingly contribute to harmful discourse in the aftermath of violence.

Moira Howes

Cooperative Argumentation, Negotiation, and Vulnerability in Social Justice Contexts

Dr. Moira Howes is interested in argumentation, especially as it is used by academic philosophers related to projects of social justice. Howes highlights how argumentation scholars tend to think about the benefits of the different styles of argumentation and argues that a liberatory and flexible approach is more promising for social justice than a commitment to cooperative argumentation.

*Adversarial argumentation* is competitive. It is usually a zero-sum situation where interlocutors are set up to win or lose, where the emphasis is on achieving one’s own goals

without attending to the goals of others. This leads to situational vulnerabilities. In order to participate, for example, people must submit to the combative format. Additionally, participants might be concerned about losing, the silencing that can occur, or other threats to identity and agency frequently present in this style of argument. A style that often contrasts adversarial argument is *cooperative argumentation*, which involves taking up another's aims and trying to accomplish those as well as one's own. Cooperative argumentation often explicitly involves stating a shared goal for mutual benefit and active listening, and negotiation is often seen as essential part of the process. Outlines of cooperative argumentation and its components have been outlined in detail by many scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Howes points out that there have been complaints about the dominance of adversarial argumentation in philosophy, where feminists have presented cooperative argumentation as an alternative that promises more equitable conditions for engagement. Cooperative argument is sometimes, in this way, presented as a "remedy" for adversarial argumentation's shortcomings. There is a social justice-oriented critique of cooperative argument, however, that should give us pause. Given social power asymmetries, cooperative argumentation can increase argumentative injustice. Such argumentation norms can expose participants to unjust politeness and civility norms in which they may feel the need to self-silence or over-edit their speech. Additionally, some identity oppressed folks may seek to participate in adversarial argumentation since they have been historically prevented from participating in this kind of argumentation. More than this, "the value and practice of adversarial vs. cooperative argument differs culturally, and cultural knowledge is important." Demanding a cooperative norm, then, can be just as harmful as requiring an adversarial one. This is especially clear when many would insist adversarial argument, or angrily condemning injustice is the appropriate response given certain social justice-oriented goals.

Howes' first important takeaway from these considerations, inspired by Hundleby (2013), is that participating in either of these argumentative formats should aim to be liberatory for participants. Liberating cooperative modes of argument, for example, proves useful for de-biasing and conflict resolution. Howes also insists negotiation has been undervalued in philosophy and academic social justice activism. Another important takeaway for Howes (also inspired by Hundleby), addresses pedagogy. In critical thinking courses, where adversarial methods are often the presumed method of engagement, introducing students to other forms of argument and ensuring students are aware of the goals of all participants is an important way to broaden student options in the discipline.

There may be a tension between argumentation and negotiation, since argument prioritizes persuasion, truth-seeking, and agreement, while negotiation prioritizes benefits for both sides or concessions for agreement. There is room for flexibility in approaching argumentation inside and outside the classroom, especially when it comes to social justice projects. In our classrooms, we should work to keep options open to students and work on mitigating harms present for identity oppressed students. Outside our classrooms, social justice

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<sup>6</sup> Howes provided many examples here, including Rogerian and delayed thesis argumentation, coalescent argumentation (Gilbert 2007), consensus argumentation (Huss 2005), invitational rhetoric (Foss and Griffin 1995), nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2015), argument repair (Hundleby 2013; Wolfe 2022), and intellectual empathy (Linker 2014).

argumentation can take a number of forms. Flexibility here allows for clearer communication and more informative public education. For Howes, this means there is also hope that moving away from adversarial methods and utilizing negotiation strategies can improve uptake and understanding.

Laura Mae Lindo

We Need to Talk About (anti-CRT) Backlash in Public Education

Dr. Laura Mae Lindo highlights that backlash to entire anti-oppressive areas of scholarship might feel new to more privileged academics, however backlash and violence in our institutions is a well-known phenomenon for Black women and other identity oppressed people in academia.

Lindo points out that Dr. Derek Bell and Dr. Angela Davis, two Black scholars who were involved in advocacy work inside and outside their academic institutions, faced significant backlash from their universities for their activism. Additionally, Lindo's time as an NDP member of provincial parliament led to public backlash from anti-progressive commentators (and the broader population) for her sponsorship of a bill calling for Critical Race Theory education. From these examples and her own experience, and drawing on Mills' *Racial Contract*, Lindo makes it clear that the racism present in our institutions will inevitably be embedded in education practices and the publics' perception of education. More than this though, Lindo highlights the epistemic and physical violence faced by Black youth in their schools at the hands of these systems.

For Lindo, there are three important points from Mills that we should consider when discussing backlash given the reality of the violence Black and other non-white folks experience at the hands of educational institutions. Mills points out that race is a "central shaping constituent" of Western ideals (Mills 1997, 18). Additionally, Mills argues that "White Supremacy is political institution [...] driving and normalizing a particular Racial Contract" working to maintain a system that prioritizes and privileges whiteness (18). Moreover, this system results in an inverted epistemology in which the sanctioned reality and actual reality diverge (18). From all this, Lindo points out that (i) since race shapes the ideals of our institutions in the first place, and (ii) white supremacy is at work in our political institutions to normalize a racial hierarchy, (iii) many people will be able to mistakenly insist schools care about the wellness of students and quality of education provided to students, when in reality, white students are the only ones prioritized in such institutions.

In light of all this, Lindo points out that these mechanisms work *epistemologically*, leading to coded racism in politics and education. "Wokeness" signifies a threat to white values, therefore, "woke" functions as a synonym for Black thought. These mechanisms also effectively *existentially* threaten Black folks, since they are perceived as threats and thus the institutions which are hostile to non-whiteness in the first place, become doubly hostile to Black folks in these spaces (even more when they are advocating against the white supremacy of the institutions).

Lindo points out that the backlash in Ontario to her involvement and advocacy for Bill 67 (and its predecessor Bill 16),<sup>7</sup> that morphed into widespread public ‘anti-woke’ backlash, had a positive impact insofar as it highlighted the history of Black advocacy and advocacy for Black folks in education in Ontario. There is a documented history of addressing anti-Black racism in education in Ontario that now includes advocacy surrounding Lindo’s work as MPP. More than this, Lindo points out that her own current work focuses on high school philosophy classrooms as important spaces for Black students to trouble the systems in which they find themselves. The study of historical movements that have aimed to advocate for Black and non-white students, then, are important to our contemporary work, participating in the same lineage.

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<sup>7</sup> Bill 67, *Racial Equity in the Education System Act*, 2022 was solely sponsored by Dr. Laura Mae Lindo. Bill 16, *Racial Equity in the Education System Act*, 2022 was co-sponsored by Laura Mae Lindo, Jill Andrew, and Lise Vaugeois.

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