



Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors

How Epistemic Violence Undermines Democracy

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that epistemic violence—practices within universities, scholarly platforms, journals, and repositories that marginalise multilingual, interdisciplinary, independent scholars, and university applicants—constitutes a severe fiduciary breach. Drawing explicitly upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, Miranda Fricker's epistemic injustice, Michel Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge regimes, Elizabeth Anderson's epistemic democracy, Joseph Raz's epistemic irrationality, John Rawls's justice as fairness, Tamar Frankel's fiduciary theory, Ronald Barnett's ecological vision of universities, and my original scholarship, I show how epistemic violence is embedded in academic governance, perpetuating colonial epistemic structures, institutional authoritarianism, and democratic harm.

To address these fiduciary failures, I propose specific fiduciary-epistemic reforms: inclusive peer review and admissions practices; explicit institutional support for multilingual, multimodal, and interdisciplinary scholarship; robust fiduciary accountability frameworks; and fiduciary-epistemic ethical commitments such as an academic fiduciary oath. These reforms are grounded in my concept of ‘epistemic transposition’, reframing fiduciary ethical duties as epistemic responsibilities directly owed to knowledge itself.

Ultimately, I call upon academic institutions to abandon epistemic sovereignty and adopt genuine fiduciary stewardship, restoring democratic legitimacy, epistemic plurality, and intellectual integrity.

Keywords

epistemic violence, epistemic injustice, fiduciary theory, epistemic democracy, academic gatekeeping, fiduciary-epistemic duties, higher education reform, institutional governance, epistemic colonialism, epistemic plurality, fiduciary accountability, microfascism, multilingual scholarship, multimodal scholarship, interdisciplinary scholarship, epistemic irrationality, epistemic transposition, democratic legitimacy, intellectual diversity

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Illustration Description and Analysis

The illustration accompanying this essay, generated using the DALL-E AI image-generation model with stylistic instructions influenced by the pop-art style of Roy Lichtenstein, depicts a senior scholar-gatekeeper seated prominently on a throne. Wearing traditional academic regalia—a scholar's gown and cap—he holds a sceptre symbolising epistemic authority. Before him bow subordinate figures, including both men and women, depicted in deferential postures, chanting 'VIVE LE ROI!'.

The image critically symbolises institutional gatekeepers acting as sovereign rulers rather than responsible fiduciaries. By illustrating gatekeeping as a monarchical practice, the artwork underscores the central theme of this essay: academic institutions should function not as emperors imposing rigid epistemic standards, but as fiduciary stewards dedicated to genuine epistemic democracy, openness, and plurality.

1. Introduction

Some of the most profound violence within academia leaves no visible marks. It occurs quietly and invisibly within universities, scholarly journals, academic platforms, and repositories. Each day, students, university applicants, researchers, and independent scholars face epistemic violence: the systematic suppression, marginalisation, or silencing of their ideas—not due to lack of merit, but because they challenge dominant epistemic frameworks or institutional interests. This subtle yet pervasive violence restricts collective knowledge, undermining democratic discourse.

I use the term ‘epistemic violence’, first articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak {‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ 1988} and closely related to Miranda Fricker’s concept of ‘epistemic injustice’ {‘Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing’ 2007}, to describe institutional practices systematically marginalising specific forms of knowledge. Institutionally, epistemic violence manifests through rigid peer review, restrictive disciplinary norms, monolingual standards, and subtle authoritarian dynamics termed ‘microfascism’—everyday practices enforcing conformity and suppressing dissent {Kuyumcu et al 2022}. It also occurs through biased admissions, privileging conformity over genuine epistemic potential. Collectively, these mechanisms reinforce oppressive epistemic hierarchies, perpetuating the coloniality of knowledge: the structural privileging of dominant epistemologies while excluding alternative ways of knowing {Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007}.

In our current academic context, epistemic violence is compounded by an additional problem: the irrational delegation of epistemic autonomy. Joseph Raz argues that delegating epistemic agency to institutions of questionable legitimacy constitutes epistemic irrationality, further entrenching oppressive knowledge structures {‘The Morality of Freedom’ 1986}.

My central argument is that epistemic violence represents a serious fiduciary breach. Academic institutions assume fiduciary responsibilities through their public commitments and society’s epistemic trust, incurring fiduciary-epistemic duties of care, fairness, inclusivity, and transparency toward diverse epistemic contributions. By perpetuating epistemic violence, these institutions breach these duties, reinforcing social stratification, undermining cohesion, harming democratic discourse, and limiting collective intellectual potential.

To address this fiduciary breach, I propose radical fiduciary-epistemic reforms inspired by insights from Miranda Fricker, Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Anderson, John Rawls, Joseph Raz, and my earlier scholarship—including ‘Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI’ {Kahl 2025}, ‘The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education: Why Educators Must Not Be University Administrators’ {Kahl 2025}, ‘Towards Academia’s Own Hippocratic Oath’ {Kahl 2025}, and ‘Foucault’s Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation’ {Kahl 2025}. Specifically, these reforms include restructuring peer review and admissions practices, institutionalising multilingual and multimodal scholarship, and adopting explicit fiduciary-epistemic ethical commitments. These measures promise tangible benefits: eliminating epistemic violence, restoring epistemic agency, and substantially enhancing democratic plurality and intellectual diversity within academia.

2. The Quiet Violence Within Academia

2.1 Victims and Consequences

Epistemic violence disproportionately affects multilingual scholars, interdisciplinary researchers, marginalised communities, and university applicants. Multilingual scholars experience systemic marginalisation due to monolingual academic norms. Interdisciplinary researchers face restrictive peer-review criteria demanding disciplinary conformity, and students pursuing interdisciplinary research struggle to find qualified supervisors, further excluding potentially transformative scholarship.

Marginalised communities face epistemic exclusion when their knowledge is dismissed as irrelevant or ‘unscientific’, perpetuating oppressive structures rooted in colonial epistemological frameworks {Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007}. University admissions similarly privilege conformity over genuine epistemic merit, reinforcing epistemic hierarchies—a dynamic I previously termed ‘colonial peer review’ {Kahl, ‘Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI’ 2025}.

These practices produce severe consequences, including ‘fiducial hollowing’: the erosion of fiduciary commitments toward epistemic plurality and democratic openness {Kahl, ‘Foucault’s Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation’ 2025}. Such erosion undermines democratic deliberation, exacerbates social stratification, weakens cohesion, and impairs society’s intellectual advancement.

2.2 Fiduciary Abuse and Institutional Responsibility

As previously established, academic institutions assume fiduciary responsibilities toward epistemic plurality and democratic openness. However, institutions routinely breach these duties through exclusionary gatekeeping, biased admissions, and microfascist practices {Kuyumcu et al 2022}.

These fiduciary abuses partly arise from what I previously identified as the ‘conflict of dual roles’ in higher education—tensions between fiduciary duties to epistemic integrity and institutional self-interests such as reputation, rankings, or market-driven pressures {Kahl, ‘The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education: Why Educators Must Not Be University Administrators’ 2025}. Institutional priorities frequently overshadow fiduciary accountability, perpetuating epistemic marginalisation.

Institutional fiduciary obligations also extend to educators—lecturers, supervisors, tutors, and mentors—who bear fiduciary duties to students, the scholarly community, society, and knowledge itself. My concept of ‘epistemic transposition’ frames fiduciary ethical duties as fiduciary-epistemic duties owed directly to knowledge, emphasising active stewardship, humility, and care {Kahl, ‘Towards Academia’s Own Hippocratic Oath’ 2025; Kahl, ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ 2025}.

Thus, fiduciary abuses involve both institutions and educators. Radical fiduciary-epistemic reforms must foster ethical accountability, institutional transparency, and active epistemic stewardship to effectively counter systemic injustice.

3. Epistemic Violence as Institutionalised Oppression

3.1 Power-Knowledge Regimes

Epistemic violence constitutes institutionalised oppression deeply embedded within academia's knowledge practices. Foucault's analysis of power-knowledge regimes {Foucault 1980} clarifies how institutions define knowledge boundaries and legitimacy. Academic gatekeepers impose rigid epistemic standards, preserving hierarchies that privilege dominant epistemologies while excluding alternative forms of knowing, reinforcing the coloniality of knowledge {Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007}. These practices represent fiduciary breaches examined in Chapter 4.

3.2 Epistemological Oppression and Coloniality

Antonia Darder {Darder 2018} critiques educational institutions that perpetuate oppressive epistemological hierarchies, silencing alternative perspectives and reinforcing dominant norms. Institutional preferences for monolingual standards further exacerbate colonial epistemological structures, marginalising non-Western, Indigenous, and multilingual epistemologies.

3.3 Fiducial Hollowing

Epistemic violence results in what I previously described as 'fiducial hollowing': the erosion of institutions' fiduciary commitments to safeguarding epistemic plurality and democratic openness {Kahl, 'Foucault's Dream: On the Domestication of Knowledge and Epistemic Subjugation' 2025}. Institutional pressures arising from rankings and market-driven metrics prioritise reputation and conformity over genuine epistemic stewardship, structurally undermining fiduciary accountability. Without explicit reforms grounded in recognising fiduciary ethical duties as fiduciary-epistemic duties owed directly to knowledge—what I have termed 'epistemic transposition'—academia risks further epistemic impoverishment, social stratification, and democratic harm {Kahl, 'Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties' 2025}.

4. Fiduciary Failure, Irrationality, and Democratic Harm

4.1 Breaches of Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties

Academic institutions incur fiduciary duties encompassing care, fairness, inclusivity, and transparency {Frankel 2011; Barnett 2018; Kahl, 'Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness' 2025}. Practices outlined in Chapter 3 exemplify breaches of these duties, prioritising conformity and institutional interests over fiduciary accountability, undermining academia's democratic stewardship.

4.2 Epistemic Irrationality and Delegation of Agency

Epistemic violence in academia is compounded by the irrational delegation of epistemic autonomy. Joseph Raz argues that surrendering intellectual agency to authorities lacking genuine epistemic legitimacy constitutes epistemic irrationality {*The Morality of Freedom* 1986}. Within academia, authority frequently derives from seniority and conformity rather than merit, reinforcing unjust epistemic hierarchies, oppressive knowledge regimes, and restricting intellectual freedom and innovation {Foucault 1980}.

4.3 Undermining Epistemic Democracy

Epistemic violence severely undermines democratic deliberation. Elizabeth Anderson’s epistemic democracy emphasises that inclusive, diverse epistemic contributions underpin robust democratic discourse {Anderson 2006}. Similarly, John Rawls highlights in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001) that democratic legitimacy requires equitable participation of all epistemic voices. By systematically marginalising certain epistemologies, epistemic violence erodes democratic discourse, exacerbates social stratification, and restricts society’s collective capacity for informed democratic deliberation. Radical fiduciary reforms addressing hierarchical and conformist structures are therefore essential, particularly as outlined in my analysis of ‘The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education: Why Educators Must Not Be University Administrators’ {Kahl 2025}.

5. Radical Fiduciary-Epistemic Reforms

I propose targeted fiduciary-epistemic reforms grounded in my previous scholarship. These reforms include establishing inclusive peer-review and admissions criteria that explicitly recognise multilingual and interdisciplinary scholarship {Kahl, ‘Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review: Fiduciary-Epistemic Duties, Epistemic Agency, and Institutional Openness in the Age of Generative AI’ 2025}, providing structural support for multilingual, multimodal, and interdisciplinary research {Kahl, ‘Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?’ 2025}, creating robust fiduciary accountability frameworks to clarify institutional fiduciary obligations {Kahl, ‘The Conflict of Dual Roles in Higher Education: Why Educators Must Not Be University Administrators’ 2025}, and adopting fiduciary-epistemic ethical commitments—such as the adoption of an academic fiduciary-epistemic oath {Kahl, ‘Towards Academia’s Own Hippocratic Oath’ 2025}. These measures directly counter fiduciary breaches, microfascism, and irrational epistemic delegation, thereby restoring academia’s democratic legitimacy and epistemic integrity.

6. Conclusion: Institutions as Stewards, not Sovereigns

Epistemic violence represents severe fiduciary abuse by institutions entrusted with safeguarding epistemic plurality and democratic openness. I acknowledge that implementing radical fiduciary-epistemic reforms poses practical challenges, including institutional resistance and administrative burdens. Yet, ongoing global debates around open-access publishing, the decolonisation of curricula, and academic governance highlight the urgency and feasibility of such reforms.

I call upon academic institutions to move decisively beyond epistemic sovereignty and genuinely embrace fiduciary stewardship. Such stewardship, though challenging, promises an inclusive, democratic, and

epistemically pluralistic academic culture—one capable of empowering society through robust, diverse, and democratic knowledge production.

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