

## On Black Women, “In Defense of Transracialism,” and Imperial Harm

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*This essay is a response to the events surrounding Hypatia’s publication of “In Defense of Transracialism.” It does not take up the question of “transracialism” itself, but rather attempts to shed light both on what some black women may have experienced following from the publication of the article and on how we might understand this experience as harm. It also suggests one way for feminist journals to reduce the likelihood of similar harms occurring in the future. I begin by describing a discussion that occurred in my classroom which bears some resemblance to the much larger debate that emerged around Hypatia. Next, I elaborate a concept of imperial harm. I then address how that concept comes to be relevant to the experience of black women within the discipline of philosophy in general, before briefly describing how academic feminism (including feminist philosophy) has served as a particular site of imperial harm for black women. Finally, touching on the idea of expressive harm, I conclude with an appeal for the adoption of more feminist publication ethics.*

I write this essay as a response. It is a response to the events surrounding *Hypatia’s* publication of “In Defense of Transracialism.” It is not a response to the arguments or conclusions of that article. It does not take up the question of “transracialism” itself. Rather, I hope, from my particular perspective and in reference to a particular classroom experience, to shed light both on what some black women may have experienced following

from the publication of the article and on how we might understand this experience as harm. I also suggest ways in which *Hypatia*, as a well known (and often well regarded) feminist journal, might work to reduce the likelihood of similar harms occurring in the future.

I will begin by describing a discussion that occurred in my classroom which bears some resemblance to the much larger debate that emerged around *Hypatia*. Next, I will elaborate a concept I am calling *imperial harm*. I will then address how I believe that concept comes to be relevant to the experience of black women within the discipline of philosophy in general. From there, I will briefly describe how academic feminism (including feminist philosophy) has served as a particular site of imperial harm for black women. Finally, touching on the idea of expressive harm, I will conclude with an appeal for the adoption of more feminist publication ethics.

### Transracialism Comes to My Classroom

When I first heard mention of “In Defense of Transracialism”<sup><1></sup> on Facebook – before the first open letter and the Associate Editors’ apology – it caught my attention. Not because I knew it would become a big deal in the primary circles of my academic life, but because, two weeks earlier, a student in my undergraduate Critical Epistemology classroom had attempted to compare Caitlyn Jenner and Rachel Dolezal, provoking deep classroom tensions.

I was teaching at a predominantly-white liberal arts institution that operates on an unusual academic calendar called “The Block Plan.” Students only take (and professors only teach) one class at a time, which meets 2-3 hours a day, five days a week. It’s worth noting

that the unusually condensed nature of these classes tends to make them fairly intimate (if short-lived) spaces, especially when the class falls well below the regular cap of twenty-five students. I had eight students. Adding to the sense of intimacy was my use of a pedagogical strategy I've only tried three times (and about which I still remain ambivalent): Citing the fact that critical epistemology sees standpoint as crucial to one's understanding of the world and general relationship to knowledge, I encouraged the students to give detailed introductions on the first day of class, highlighting those aspects of their background, upbringing, and racial identity that they felt would influence their interactions with the course themes. I began the exercise by introducing myself with this level of detail and particular focus, which can help some students to reciprocate with similar openness. On one hand, I suspect that one student dropped the course because of his discomfort with this exercise (as one student in my previous course had done). On the other hand, we learned a lot about each other right at the beginning, and it was incredibly interesting.

The makeup of this small, eight-student class was exceptional for the institution. Only one student (a British-American dual citizen) self-identified as white. The other seven consisted – in simplified and necessarily artificial terms – of two black women (one with direct Caribbean ancestry), one black/mixed-race woman, one black man, two Asian men born in China with different amounts of time in the U.S., and one mixed-race Latina. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, as a “majority minority” classroom with a black/mixed-race woman instructor, discussions around race were both more complex and more contentious than my experience of the norm. Students found themselves confronted with the fact that the classroom sometimes felt like a very safe space, and was sometimes experienced as a very fraught one.

The class had been meeting daily for just over two weeks, reading about and discussing both the way that social identities affect knowledge and perception, and the way that social identities can leave people vulnerable to various forms of epistemic injustice. My Latina student – whom I will call Carla – was giving the last of our student presentations. Her self-chosen topic was “Transracial Identity,” and her aim was to explore what sorts of transracial identity might exist and whether such identities could be productively compared to transgender identities. She briefly presented Falguni Sheth’s theory of race as a political technology, Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender, and various first- and second-hand accounts of transracial identities. The case of Rachel Dolezal was among these accounts, but was not her only example. Several of the firsthand accounts came from videos by transracial adoptees posted on YouTube. Carla concluded that there were both strong analogies *and* disanalogies between transracial and transgender identities.

Unfortunately for the breadth of Carla’s work and research interest, discussion quickly narrowed to the Dolezal case, with several black women in the room, including myself, voicing anger and frustration with Dolezal’s claiming of a black identity and the various actions that accompanied it. Things didn’t get tense, however, until my black male student – whom I will call Shehu – argued that if we didn’t have a problem with Caitlyn Jenner’s transition then we should also allow that Dolezal was justified in her claim to an inner reality of blackness. Moreover, Shehu argued that Caitlyn Jenner’s politics (as something less than feminist) ought actually to render her a more problematic person or figure (in the eyes of black women) than Dolezal. Attempts were made to differentiate the cases, with particular reference to Dolezal’s many deceptions. My black/mixed-race student – whom I will call Maya – also expressed her discomfort with having the

conversation without any trans\* identified people in the room. But Shehu persisted, seemingly convinced that if he could make us understand the logical power of his argument, we would necessarily accept his conclusion.

Eventually, the black women students simply withdrew from the discussion, but they shared their strong reactions with me through private class journals (reproduced below with their permission). Maya, writing her journal entry during the class itself and “trembling because I’m so angry,” asked:

Does [Shehu] have any idea how much space that he takes up? And does he have any kind of self-reflexivity that the things that come out of his mouth are incredibly misogynist/transphobic?... How did we jump from Rachel Dolezal to Caitlyn Jenner? Rachel Dolezal lied--what historical suffering did she encounter that made her "get it"? She has not lived the black American experience, but she is adopting the oppression of black Americans.

Another black woman – whom I will call Tiffany – wrote that:

Conflating trans people and Rachel Dolezal’s blatant use of white privilege is abhorrent and a disgusting notion on a personal level. I absolutely understand trying to parse out the term “transracial,” but I’ll never be here for allowing disgust and offense over Caitlyn Jenner, or any trans person, living their truth [to] justify Dolezal, or anybody trying to introduce terminology in order to invade spaces for marginalized groups.

Tiffany also expressed her feeling that it was “infuriating to be asked in such a condescending manner to ‘teach’ someone about gender identities, then be told what I was saying was illogical and not true.” The third black woman in the class – whom I will call

Aneka – found Shehu’s “disregard of how someone like Rachel Dolezal could be offensive to Black women and his attempts to justify her actions with transphobia to be symptomatic of a much larger issue within the Black community.” Later in her entry, she continued:

And now we have [Shehu] advising women to be offended by Caitlyn Jenner and not Rachel Dolezal. Part of his defense of Rachel stemmed from this idea that White male politics are somehow more harmful than the political actions and beliefs of White women. This belief seems to be widespread across the Black cisgendered male mindset. White women are for the most part considered innocent. Rachel transitioned from a position of White privilege to a position of Black power. Her White privilege and entitlement drove her to become the head of the NAACP. That is not genuine activism. Infiltrating Black spaces and taking leadership positions is not activism. Wearing Black womanhood like a costume is not activism. It is not a compliment.

Notably, in her journal almost a week later, Carla expressed surprise at the *intensity* of the classroom reaction to the Dolezal case and, as a self-proclaimed student of psychoanalysis, remarked: “I perceived that there was a deep injury in the room, a shared injury in the social imaginary. This woman [Dolezal] deeply wounded the African American community in ways that I had not previously understood.”

I share this classroom experience as a prelude to comments on *Hypatia’s* publication of “In Defense of Transracialism” because this tense discussion occurred in person (and in private journal entries) among a small group of people, rather than in the intimate-yet-oddly-anonymous, ever-echoing space of social media. The class had met many times before this discussion and met several times after it. No one was performing before a larger

audience; the reputation of a major journal among marginalized groups was not at stake; no careers stood to be impacted. No one appeared from outside the classroom to inject their own, potentially tangential, concerns into the discussion, or to denounce the course of the discussion itself. No one was urged to speak out or pick a side.

And yet, black women were hurt. Still, insofar as I, the instructor, represented the institutional context in which that harm took place, the black women in my class knew that their opinions and feelings mattered and that, though those feelings had been dismissed by an individual (Shehu), they would be heard, considered, and valued by the institution (me, as instructor). I asked them, via their journals, whether I could have done better as a classroom leader, but they reported satisfaction with my handling of the situation (which amounted to simply allowing Shehu to speak and countering some of his broader intellectual points with concepts from texts beyond our readings). Thus, at the end of this essay, I would like to consider what *Hypatia*, as a moderating institution for feminist scholarship, might do *in the future* to reduce the type of harms that accrued with its publishing of “In Defense of Transracialism.”

Notably, all three black women quoted above accuse Shehu of transphobia. Likewise, “In Defense of Transracialism” has been described as transphobic. The details of the arguments were not the same, and Shehu’s remarks were ad hoc, while Tuvel’s involved time and deliberation. But for what it’s worth, I believe that both Shehu and Tuvel *intended* to defend the right of trans\* people to self-identification. Yet neither can escape the fact that both were *experienced/read* as transphobic. Nevertheless, I will leave discussion of the harms experienced by trans\* readers to those more qualified and better positioned than I.

I turn now to conceptualizing two of what I see as the primary harms to *black women* readers, before ultimately suggesting possible means of avoiding (or reducing) such harms in *Hypatia's* future. Perhaps this analysis will also speak to trans\* readers, perhaps it will not. Indeed, it may fall short of adequately describing the experiences of other black women, but it does track with some comments I have seen on listservs and social media, and I hope it will at least be helpful. The two harms I will attempt to describe are an *imperial harm* (manifest, though unintended, in the article itself), and an accompanying *expressive harm* (resulting from the article's appearance in a prominent feminist journal).

#### Theorizing Imperial Harm: Part I

Different opinions have emerged as to why the publication of "In Defense of Transracialism" caused such uproar among many scholars of race and gender – a label to which Tuvel herself lays claim. Many of those critical of the uproar itself (both inside and outside of philosophy/academia) believe the objections to the article stem from its *conclusions*. They see this as a case of the "liberal left" policing academic work for its "political correctness," thereby stifling genuine intellectual inquiry and academic freedom. Yet, I do not know anyone who objected to the article who is simply against intellectual inquiry or academic freedom. I think it would be fairer to ascribe to many objectors a commitment to balancing concern for academic freedom with concern for improving academic climates – that is, for reducing the hostility of academic environments to underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Yet many of those who have objected to the article's publication have simply cited the article's scholarly merit (or lack thereof) as the source of the problem. Here it is the



*content* and *methodology* (argumentation, citation and representation of relevant literature, and use of appropriate frameworks and terminology) of the work that are described as “falling short of scholarly standards.” The “Open Letter to *Hypatia*” notes that its signatories’ concerns “reach beyond mere scholarly *disagreement*,” but this distinction seems to be lost on many who feel *Hypatia* has nothing for which to apologize. Many of those critical of the “Open Letter” (including Tuvel herself) cannot understand why its signatories would request a retraction of the article, rather than simply engaging and challenging its premises and arguments in their own writings. Such disagreement and challenge is, for them, the very essence of the philosophical discipline.

The “Open Letter” also calls the legitimacy of *Hypatia*’s review process into question, a point taken up in the apology issued by “A Majority of the *Hypatia*’s Board of Associate Editors” (but not endorsed by the Editor or Board of Directors). The associate editors write:

Clearly, the article should not have been published, and we believe that the fault for this lies in the review process. In addition to the harms listed above imposed upon trans people and people of color, publishing the article risked exposing its author to heated critique that was both predictable and justifiable. A better review process would have both anticipated the criticisms that quickly followed the publication, and required that revisions be made to improve the argument in light of those criticisms. <3>

While I agree that the harms caused by the article could have been foreseen, I question how the review process can be effectively modified toward that end. I suspect that the reviewers who recommended the article for publication appeared (and, in fact, *were* in many senses)

qualified to review the article. Though I may suspect that the reviewers did not include scholars who self-identify as black and/or trans\*, they no doubt self-identify as working on race and gender, just as Tuvel does. <4> *Hypatia* would place itself in a problematic position if it tried to require of all its reviewers the ability to place themselves in the shoes of Others and anticipate harms. The change I will propose instead is one of editorial policy, and it is based on my diagnosis of the principle type of harm in this incident – *imperial* harm.

Imperial harm occurs when a scholar or researcher makes Others into an object of study, without due consideration of those Others' own subjectivity. Imperial harm is only compounded when the scholar or researcher then *re*-presents findings or conclusions to Others, especially in ways that try to dictate the Others' thoughts, feelings or behavior. I would argue that when the three black women in my class expressed their anger at Shehu's comparison of Dolezal and Jenner, they were not merely expressing disagreement with the comparison, they were pointing to this imperial harm. They were angry because Shehu was telling them that their disapproval of Dolezal was logically inconsistent with their acceptance of Jenner. He was implicitly claiming *not only* to fully understand their reactions to Dolezal and to Jenner, but moreover to understand those reactions *better* and *more logically* than the black women themselves.

Unfortunately, imperial harm is all too common, and cannot be chalked up to an individual attitude of condescension or lack of intersectional awareness on Shehu's part. I call the phenomenon *imperial* harm precisely because its roots go back at least as far as European colonialism – that is, as far as the very emergence of today's academic disciplines. Indeed, the harm itself is constituted by its own history. Imperial harms are not mere

interpersonal insensitivities or misunderstandings; they are manifestations of relations of domination established in colonial eras and sedimented through subsequent centuries of knowledge-production practices both within and outside the academy.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith draws out the connections between the European Enlightenment, imperialism, and the emergence of Modern academic disciplines. She explains how colonies and indigenous peoples were the laboratories and research subjects of Modern “rationality” and Western science, with the instruments or technologies of research also serving both as instruments of knowledge in general and as instruments for legitimating various colonial practices. By claiming the power “to ‘see,’ to ‘name’ and to ‘know’ indigenous communities,” the West established (and maintains) the positional superiority of its knowledge. This establishment was essential to colonizing not simply indigenous lands, but indigenous minds (Smith 2012, 62-3).

Smith describes the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and the institutions that support them as structures of research that help to regulate the “underlying code” of imperialism and colonialism (8). She argues that, through academic writings, indigenous or otherwise marginalized people are often told either that they do not exist, that they do exist but not in terms they themselves would recognize, or that though they exist it is a lesser existence rendering the thoughts and perspectives that emerge from that existence invalid (36). This means that even when marginalized groups learn to speak or write in Western discourses in order to be taken seriously, they run the risk of reinforcing their own marginalization by upholding marginalizing modes of thought.

“Imperialism still hurts,” writes Smith, “still destroys and is reforming itself constantly” (20). She describes the experience of what I am calling *imperial harm* from the indigenous perspective as follows:

It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of brief encounters with some of us. It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (1)

Calling into question the ideal of research as always necessarily serving a greater good or benefiting “mankind,” she argues that indigenous people often talk about research “both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument” (3). Such absolute usefulness includes obtaining academic positions and furthering academic careers. This contrast between the usefulness for the researcher and worthlessness for the people being researched marks such research practices as exploitative, even where indigenous people were not compelled to work or dispossessed of material resources.

To recapitulate what I have suggested so far about imperial harm, I offer six features, not all of which would need to be present in any particular case of harm: (1) The people experiencing the harm feel themselves treated as objects rather than subjects of knowledge. (2) Because the people harmed are not treated as subjects of knowledge or invited to participate as co-constructors of the knowledge, they may not recognize themselves in that knowledge which is allegedly about them. (3) The knowledge about the

people harmed is presented to a larger audience, such that the harmed people feel not only misunderstood, but misrepresented. (4) Implied in this misrepresentational knowledge may be the inferiority or irrationality of the harmed people, or the need for the harmed people to reform. (5) The presentation of the knowledge to a larger audience provides some benefit to the person or persons who constructed and disseminated the knowledge. (6) The harm is able to take place because of and is at least partly constituted by a wider context of inequality and domination. The role that knowledge production and dissemination play in the first five of these features suggests that imperial harm is a type of epistemic harm – that is, a harm to people in their capacities as possessors, producers, and disseminators of knowledge. <5>

### Life Under the Rule of Reason

What does it mean to talk about imperial harm in a context that is not strictly colonial? In other words, why do I think it makes sense to describe a form of harm done to black women in the discipline of philosophy as *imperial*? In answering this question, I also intended to address my earlier statement regarding the importance of climate issues and the project of reducing the hostility of academic environments to underrepresented and marginalized groups. Bluntly put another way, what's so bad about being a minority (specifically a black woman) in philosophy such that the publication of "In Defense of Transracialism" triggered a reaction strong enough to be considered an overreaction even among some who might otherwise see themselves as allies of women of color in philosophy?

Smith offers a helpful example of how imperial thinking persists and structures the contemporary “post-colonial” world, even shaping contemporary efforts to redress the very wrongs such thinking was used to perpetrate. Describing the Waitangi Tribunal, which was established to hear Maori claims regarding contraventions of the Treaty of Waitangi, she enumerates the “several different and differentiated sets of ideas and representations” that structure any claims made through it:

- (1) a legal framework inherited from Britain, which includes views about what constitutes admissible evidence and valid research;
- (2) a ‘textual’ orientation, which will privilege the written text (seen as expert and research-based) over oral testimonies (a concession to indigenous ‘elders’);
- (3) views about science, which will allow for the efficient selection and arrangement of ‘facts’;
- (4) ‘rules of practice’ such as ‘values’ and ‘morals,’ which all parties of the process are assumed to know and to have given their ‘consent’ to abide by, for example, notions of ‘goodwill’ and ‘truth telling’;
- (5) ideas about subjectivity and objectivity which have already determined the constitution of the Tribunal and its ‘neutral’ legal framework, but which will continue to frame the way the case is heard;
- (6) ideas about time and space, views related to history, what constitutes the appropriate length of a hearing, ‘shape’ of a claim, size of a panel;
- (7) views about human nature, individual accountability and culpability;
- (8) the selection of speakers and experts, who speaks for whom, whose knowledge is presumed to be the ‘best fit’ in relation to a set of proven ‘facts’; and

(9) the politics of the Treaty of Waitangi and the way those politics are managed by politicians and other agencies such as the media. (Smith 2012, 48-9)

Taken together, these various systems of classification and representation, which are “coded in such ways as to ‘recognize’ each other,” create “a cultural ‘force field’ that can screen out competing and oppositional discourses” and “ensure that Western interests remain dominant” (49). This particular example from Smith, though in some ways quite distant from the discipline of philosophy as it is currently practiced in the U.S. academy, would, I believe, resonate strongly with many black women philosophers, recalling the way the discipline attempts to “screen out” much of what they might have to offer it.

I have argued that an imperial harm is not a harm that can be perpetrated by an individual outside of a larger imperial context. A history and ongoing context of domination must be present for an action that recalls and represents that history to be experienced as harmful. Yet, though the Western philosophical tradition is implicated in the creation and maintenance of both racism and sexism (and particularly in the exclusion of non-white non-men from reason and rational capacity), black women (or women of color more broadly) do not constitute the indigenous inhabitants of a single land that the discipline of philosophy was used to colonize. Indeed, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is black women who (in extremely small numbers) have slowly begun to encroach upon the previously sovereign “territory” of white European and settler colonial men – that is, academic philosophy. It is not a space in which black women have been forced to reside or which they are trying to reclaim. Rather, it is one some of us have deliberately chosen to occupy – often the way that one might occupy a lunch counter, an administrative building, or Wall Street, that is, in protest or as a sort of demand for recognition. How, then, do we

understand the discipline of philosophy as an imperial context for black women (or women of color more broadly)?

Since it is where I began, let me turn back to that eight-student, majority-minority Critical Epistemology classroom. The class actually had an additional ninth student who, for health reasons, was only able to attend the first few classes and was not present for the transracialism discussion. In her first private journal entry for the class, the student, whom I will call Stephanie, describes her only other experience with a philosophy course. Having enrolled in Philosophy of Science as part of her interest in Environmental Studies, Stephanie dropped the class after one week (about a quarter of the total class time) at least in part due to: “the inner frustration that was quickly snowballing as I faced yet another all white classroom where I continued to listen to the opinions of intellectual alpha-males while facing blank stares each time I spoke and revealed either my own ignorance or a lack of reason.” Following this, she writes, “philosophy left a bad taste in my mouth, and I mentally confirmed that it was indeed best left to the white guys, dead or alive, to argue amongst themselves until the cows come home.” Stephanie is not black, she is Korean-American, but again, I think her words would resonate with black women in the profession. Even though many of us experienced some class or teacher or text that drew us to the field, most of us have also had subsequent experiences that threatened to push us away. It would be a rare black woman who never questioned her place in the discipline both during and after her philosophical training. In Stephanie’s experience, and the writings of black women philosophers, I think we can discern two general ways in which philosophy is not only alienating but imperial. The first concerns the structure of the discipline (such that when Stephanie speaks in a philosophy classroom she is left feeling that she lacks reason) and the



second concerns its demographics (such that in just two sentences Stephanie twice remarks on the whiteness of the philosophy classroom).

Taking Smith's analysis of the Waitangi Tribunal as a model, one could make a list of the ways in which the discipline of philosophy in the United States structures the participation of black women within it. We might describe the relevant "different and differentiated sets of ideas and representations" as follows:

- (1) a philosophical canon, which includes views about what constitute "real" philosophical questions and specialties;
- (2) a textual orientation, which will privilege written texts (in particular languages) over knowledge or wisdom passed down orally within families or communities;
- (3) views about logic and argumentation, which will allow for the efficient selection and arrangement of ideas, excluding some sorts of ideas all together;
- (4) rules of practice, such as expert lecture and agonistic debate, which mark participants as serious philosophers, and discourage alternatives like dialogue and collaboration;
- (5) ideas about objectivity, abstraction, and universality, which underlie philosophy's vision of itself and are used to "relegate" anything too subjective, concrete, or particular to other disciplines;
- (6) views about human nature that take the individual to be the primary unit of reason, knowledge, and moral worth, and suggest that individuals can be productively theorized as isolated units;

- (7) norms of graduate education in philosophy by which philosophy faculty reproduce elements their own graduate training, whether consciously or unconsciously, without critical reflection;
- (8) rules for academic tenure and promotion that, in many cases, prioritize research over teaching, and in most cases, do not reward faculty of color for time spent mentoring and supporting students from underrepresented groups; and
- (9) the politics of US higher education, which has placed the value of humanities disciplines in question while touting a need for “diversity,” two pressures that have arguably triggered further retrenchment around philosophy’s disciplinary norms and traditions. <6>

If this list indeed describes the structuring ideas and representations of the discipline of philosophy in the US, then the broad alignment of this list with Smith’s suggests that philosophy can be understood as imperial in the sense that it was built upon and furthers the same ideals and practices of knowledge creation that are implicated both in past colonial projects and in current structures of global inequality. Moreover, it is imperial in the sense that its norms and practices work to create “a cultural ‘force field’ that can screen out competing and oppositional discourses,” not only maintaining existing power relations within the discipline itself, but helping to ensure in a broader political and ideological sense that “Western interests remain dominant” (Smith 2012, 49).

This analysis based in Smith also resonates with work by black women on the discipline of philosophy and its general inhospitality or hostility to diverse practitioners. Kristie Dotson’s description and critique of philosophy’s pervasive culture of justification provides an example, which itself references and incorporates the views of several other

black women philosophers. <7> According to Dotson, to say that philosophy has a culture of justification is to say that “the profession of philosophy requires the practice of making congruent one’s own ideas, projects and . . . pedagogical choices with some ‘traditional’ conception of philosophical engagement” (Dotson 2013, 6). This need to justify one’s current work in terms of historical or contemporary disciplinary norms (which involve many of the components of the above list), relies on two primary presumptions: (1) that the resulting legitimization narratives are manifestly valuable and (2) that there exist justifying norms that are both commonly-held and univocally relevant (8).

For Dotson, philosophy’s culture of justification is part of what makes the discipline’s environment inhospitable to diverse practitioners. In the first instance, she notes how “historical, unwarranted exclusions come to inform the very justifying norms relied upon for legitimation” (11). However, even where historically excluded groups “might actually meet many of the demands imposed by operative, justifying norms,” they may still be excluded through exceptionalism, which Dotson defines as “the unfounded, exclusion of large bodies of investigation based upon the privileging of one group (or set of groups) and their investigations over others” (12). In other words, bias is exercised not only through the construction of justifying norms but also through their application, where adherence by diverse practitioners to the norms goes unnoticed because such practitioners are assumed in advance to be incapable of participation in those norms. Another problem for diverse practitioners comes when they experience “a sense of incongruence with respect to justifying norms for ‘proper’ philosophical conduct and investigation” (14). Here, for potentially myriad reasons, diverse practitioners either do not accept or feel they cannot fulfill philosophical expectations.

This sense of incongruence is also described by George Yancy in his discussion of “inappropriate philosophical subjects” in the introduction to his edited volume of African American and Latino/a philosophical voices, *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy*. Yancy describes how, for his white students, “feelings of ownership of ‘genuine’ philosophy and ‘real’ philosophical texts” are a given and the ability to “cognize themselves as the genuine audience to whom these texts speak and for whom they were written” relatively uncomplicated (Yancy 2012, 8). By contrast, he writes:

It is unsettling to read a text, to engage it, to feel its texture, its spine, and yet to realize that such a text—say Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—wasn’t written for your eyes, but written on the assumption that you were not one of its “appropriate” subjects, *could not* have been one of its “appropriate” subjects/readers. (9)

This, of course, echoes not only Dotson’s discussion of incongruence, but also her description of exceptionalism. Moreover, as Yancy goes on to describe, this sense of being an inappropriate philosophical subject is not merely a mental phenomenon, but a deeply embodied one. “White bodies move through the pristine halls of academia in the mode of ownership,” he writes. “Philosophy departments, philosophy meetings, and philosophy social gatherings are sites of white bonding, forms of bonding that function as confirmation that one has come to the ‘right place’” (10).

Against such backdrops, the body of color may appear as hypervisible or invisible. During my three weeks at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum in Italy (a program of lectures and seminars in Continental philosophy for philosophy faculty and graduate students), for example, I vividly recall being the only black student in attendance and tracking the serial appearance and disappearance of individual black faculty members

(who typically stayed only a week). I recall wondering if the conference would collapse in upon itself if a third black body were to enter the room. This felt like hypervisibility. By contrast, I often feel myself invisible when traveling on public transportation between an airport and any large philosophy conference. I look around at my fellow passengers and identify certain white men in sports jackets, often with glasses or beards, as likely fellow conference attendees. At the same time, I am aware that, if they are engaging in the same pastime, their eyes have likely skipped right over me. I feel invisible. <8>

The term *subjects* in Yancy's analysis also has a double-meaning, where it refers not only to the practitioner of philosophy, but also the topics to be examined. Where the philosophical "intuitions" that animate and inform certain areas of philosophical study are (typically unconsciously) congruent with one's lived experience and view of the world, one can easily feel at home in philosophy. Indeed, as a (white, male) person who enjoys thinking deeply and in abstraction, one might feel more at home in philosophy than elsewhere in the society. Where traditional philosophical topics do not resonate with one's life experience, however, one might not only feel that she is an inappropriate reader or practitioner of philosophy, but also that her life or intuitions are not worthy subjects of philosophical examination.

Here we have already shaded from Stephanie's concern over whether she truly possesses reason (as defined by philosophy) to her feeling of not belonging in a white space, two ideas which are obviously deeply intertwined. In one last attempt to get at the general imperialism of the discipline, and in keeping with my earlier references to classroom experiences, I will describe an experience of being deemed and made to feel as an "inappropriate philosophical subject" while teaching as a graduate instructor at a large,

public, and predominantly white university. It's worth noting here that I was raised in a white community in Washington state primarily by a white, middle-class mother. Most people, if they heard me on the phone without knowing my first name, would probably mistake me for a middle class white woman. That is, negative stereotypes related to *class* markers were not a part of what followed. I was an advanced graduate student working on her dissertation proposal. I had been teaching solo courses for three years. In other words, I came as close to the "norm" for a "qualified" introductory philosophy instructor as I could get without ceasing to be black or a woman.

I was teaching an introductory class called "Persons, Value and the Good Life," which I had designed around the theme of exploring and questioning American values. In the first half of the course, I taught two units, one on property and contract and the other on individualism and meritocracy. We read canonical white men like John Locke, John Rawls, and John Stuart Mill, but our main critical text was Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. The general goal of the course was to make it clear that there is injustice in this country and that that injustice can be supported and reinforced by the very values we imagine stand for justice.

I had two sections, for a total of just under 60 students, and they were nearly as overwhelmingly white as they were young – predominantly freshmen. There were relatively few men between my two sections, probably less than a quarter of the total students. All but one of these men were white. In my morning section, few of these men spoke in class, though a couple were in the habit of passing notes and occasionally whispering amongst themselves during class. In my afternoon section, the white men (and one white man in particular, whom I will call Adam) dominated class discussion. The

afternoon section was always relatively more talkative. They made it hard to get through my planned lecture. This always made them both more interesting and more exasperating. While I wouldn't have described it as my favorite teaching experience at the time, I was not particularly worried about it. The students questioned a lot of the things I said but I generally didn't perceive them to be disrespectful. I answered their questions as if they deserved to be taken seriously, but never felt myself lacking in ways to defend the positions they wanted to dismiss. I always conducted myself with authority in front of the classroom and I never felt like I was not in control of the class.

Indeed, I probably would have mostly forgotten about this semester if not for the fact that I had to leave the university halfway through the term because my mother had been diagnosed with a late stage of cancer. My department head arranged for my classes to be taken over by an adjunct instructor who was writing his dissertation for another philosophy program. I will call him Matthew. We met to discuss the course and, having similar political leanings, he easily grasped its theme and goals. He enjoyed Young's book and, though he had some quibbles with her positive account, found her criticisms to be illuminating and incisive. He came and observed a meeting of each class section. I left feeling my classes were in good hands (which they were). Matthew is a good person. Matthew is also white.

Another six weeks or so of the semester passed and I had to return to the university to defend my dissertation proposal. Matthew had emailed me wanting to discuss some "interesting" things that had occurred during the transition, so we met for coffee. To summarize his report, Matthew was surprised to find himself treated completely differently than I had been by several members of the class. One white male student, for

example, approached Matthew and told him, “I’m so glad you’re teaching this class now.” Matthew, believing that it was he and I who shared the bond of professional colleagues, was shocked that this student so clearly figured they shared the bond of white maleness. Another student told Matthew that the Young text was “the kind of book that a person like her would assign.” Spurred by these incidents, Matthew, behaving as an excellent ally, made himself a staunch defender of Young’s text (and the ideas I had put forward in the first half of the class). And so, the class accepted those ideas. Where I had been perceived as obviously biased, Matthew was taken as an appropriate authority. When he said there were injustices entangled in America values, it became true. Even the student Adam – who once told me he didn’t have anything to say during one of our classes because he fundamentally disagreed with every single thing in Young’s chapter – went on to become the class’s chief proponent of her text. That section in general, which used to challenge every other sentence I uttered, settled into relative quiet and let Matthew teach them about the world.

Upon even a little reflection, this incident wasn’t really so surprising, but the unusual instructor change made the classroom dynamics stark. In somewhat ironic ways, the incident was vindicating. The class itself performed the very sorts of injustices and unconscious racisms based on ideas of objectivity and bias that I insisted on trying to teach, even when some students did not believe me. But it was also demoralizing. It’s one thing to argue that this sort of epistemic injustice is pervasive; it was a different thing to have it happen to me under circumstances where it could not be minimized or explained away. While this sort of perception and treatment of women of color teaching in university classrooms is by no means limited to philosophy, it does form part of the landscape for



black women in philosophy. And it gains an imperial flavor when we consider that these young white men who clearly did not have a problem with *all* forms of authority assumed that they were more knowledgeable than the black woman running their class, despite the several years of specialized education required to obtain her position. Just as even the most educated and elite class of colonized subjects can never achieve recognition as the equal of the colonizers, so too are black women philosophers given a sense of themselves as always slightly suspect members of the profession.

Philosophy is imperial with respect to black women and other diverse practitioners within the discipline, then, because it structures knowledge production and disciplinary participation in ways that systematically devalue and work to exclude alternative ways of knowing. Moreover, the historic and current demographics of the discipline create and maintain an environment in which even those diverse practitioners who operate within disciplinary norms are treated as suspect and denied full status as holders, disseminators, and creators of philosophical knowledge.

### Theorizing Imperial Harm: Part II

So far, I have described imperial harm generally, connecting it to the establishment of Western academic disciplines during colonial periods. I have noted that a wider context of inequality and domination is necessary for an imperial harm to take place and have endeavored to describe how the discipline of philosophy constitutes such a context for black women and other diverse practitioners. In this section, I want to take up the ideas of being treated as an object rather than a subject of knowledge and of being misrepresented in academic works that seem to benefit their authors rather than the people about whom

something is allegedly known. More specifically, I want to highlight how the reaction to the publication of “In Defense of Transracialism” can be situated in a particular imperial history within feminist movements and scholarship.

Though shorter than the larger history of Western colonial projects and academic imperialism, the history of feminist exclusions and misrepresentations of woman of color is arguably much more significant because, as a project, feminism holds the promise of promoting equity and inclusion. Black women, and women of color more generally, have been trying for a long time to hold feminism to this promise, but with limited success. Before feminist philosophy, black women were simply ignored as philosophical subjects (in both Yancy’s senses). Indeed, in early feminist philosophy (and academic feminism in general), black women continued to be ignored. But as academic and philosophical feminism began to respond to the calling out of this exclusion, attention brought its own imperialism. It is this imperialist *attention* I will briefly elaborate here.

We might begin with Audre Lorde’s “Open Letter to Mary Daly,” written in 1979. Lorde can already write in that very letter that the “history of white women who are unable to hear Black women’s words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging” (Lorde 2012, 66). As the letter continues, Lorde professes her belief in Daly’s “good faith toward all women” and “commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change,” before carefully revealing her disappointment with the exclusion of African figures from Daly’s recovery of goddess images in her *First Passage*. Lorde describes how she offered Daly the benefit of the doubt, thinking she had “made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european [sic] women,” but by the *Second Passage* Lorde realizes this is not the case. At this point, “it was obvious that

you were dealing with noneuropean [sic] women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other,” writes Lorde. “I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power” (67).

What Lorde describes here is both an absence *and* a presence of black women in Daly’s work. They are not ignored altogether, which for Lorde might have been more defensible, but nor are they situated as powerful knowers and agents with rich and complex histories and valuable knowledge of their own experiences. Noting that Daly only quoted black women’s words (Lorde’s) to introduce her chapter on African genital mutilation, and that those words were “no more, nor less” suited to that chapter than to many other parts of *Gyn/Ecology*, Lorde writes that she feels her words were misused and used against her as a woman of color. She asks: “Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us?” (68) At the end of the letter, Lorde tells Daly that she has decided to write the letter, despite an earlier decision never again to speak to white women about racism, because she does not wish to destroy Daly in her consciousness. In other words, her critique is situated as a desire to preserve a relationship with a thinker whose work she has found helpful and generative.

Lorde was probably not the first black woman (and certainly not the last) to register this sort of complaint. But it has been forty years since that letter – has the situation changed? According to Mariana Ortega (writing closer to the thirty-year mark), not nearly enough. In a piece she describes as “an excavation of important texts that somehow have become ruins, forgotten at the very same time that they are viewed and repeatedly brought

to light,” Ortega takes up critiques of white feminism by Lorde, Elizabeth Spelman, and Maria Lugones and theorizes their continuing relevance through Marilyn Frye’s concept of arrogant perception. Ortega identifies among white feminists what she calls a “knowing, loving ignorance” – “a type of ‘arrogant perception’ that produces ignorance about women of color and their work at the same time that it proclaims to have both knowledge about and loving perception toward them” (Ortega 2006, 56). Drawing on Frye’s work, Ortega identifies “arrogant ignorance” as “arrogant perception that does not make any attempt to understand the object of perception” (63). By contrast, “loving perception” seeks to understand the object of perception in her independence and complexity, and must involve not only looking and listening, but also checking and questioning – lest the perceiver unwittingly invent “a different reality” for the perceived (60). *Knowing, loving ignorance* thus forms a dangerous sort of hybrid, based *both* in the quest for more knowledge about the object of perception *and* in self-deception, wherein “the perceiver believes...herself to be perceiving lovingly even though this is not the case, and the perceiver wishes to make knowledge claims about the object of perception, even though such claims are not checked or questioned” (63).

What Ortega describes as *knowing, loving ignorance* is, on my account, a condition that allows well-meaning white feminists and other self-identified allies to commit imperial harm. As this section attempts to show, it is a particular sort of imperial harm characterized by a layering of two contexts. The underlying context is the Western academy’s longstanding practices of imperialist knowledge production, described above by Smith. All of us in the academy, at least to some extent, share in the legacy of these practices, the use of what Lorde famously called “the master’s tools.” The overlying context

is academic feminism, where the recognition and delineation of the use and abuse of knowledge and authority are foundational to the very project and yet some feminists have failed to apply that same critical lens to their own work. The master's tools (academic writing and narrow conceptions of reason) thus come to be wielded by members of some marginalized groups in ways that misrepresent members of other marginalized groups and disempower them as knowers. As in my original case of a black man telling black women how "logically" to understand their own reactions to Rachel Dolezal, the ability to perpetrate imperial harm through knowing, loving ignorance (or just plain arrogant perception) is widely accessible within the academy. It may, in fact, be quite difficult for individual academics who rightfully wish to think and work beyond their own parochial perspective to avoid committing imperial harms. But helping fellow academics catch those places where their research has been insufficient is one of the important functions of peer review.

#### The Expressive Harm and Feminist Publication Ethics

Ultimately, the organized protest regarding the publication of "In Defense of Transracialism" was aimed not at its author, but at *Hypatia*. When an institution affirms the validity of a writing that causes imperial harm – as philosophy's preeminent feminist journal did in this case by publishing that writing – an additional, *expressive* harm is introduced. According to Anderson and Pildes: "A person suffers expressive harm when she is treated according to principles that express negative or inappropriate attitudes toward her" (Anderson and Pildes 2000, 1527). In this case, I claim, there is an *absence* of a principle that would reflect *Hypatia's* respectful attitude toward black women (and other underrepresented groups in feminist philosophy) and its institutional commitment to their

inclusion. The resulting expressive message is something like: *We will think and write about you when it suits us, but we don't require that you be included in the conversation.*

Yet, even as *Hypatia's* position within feminist philosophy magnified the expressive harm that occurred, that same position could also be used to systematically reduce the amount of imperial harm perpetrated within the sub-discipline. Contrary to what critics of the protest assume, this would not require the journal to start policing submitted articles based on the so-called "political correctness" of their conclusions. Rather, on my account (and as others have no doubt pointed out in online discussion of the issue), the problem can be identified (and hopefully addressed) without reference to the conclusions or content of this article (or any other) – it is a problem of methodology. It is the violation of the old slogan, "Nothing about us without us." And while a standard philosophy journal may not see that slogan as a valid or coherent methodological requirement for anything published within its pages, an avowedly feminist journal would be well advised to write it into its editorial policy.

"In Defense of Transracialism," and any other article written about Others by an outsider, should have been subject to heightened scrutiny as a matter of feminist principle. Not because of its controversial argument, but because, whether she intended to or not, Tuvel appropriated the experience of Others in order to experiment with a philosophical argument. Moreover, she appropriated the experience of *actual living Others* "in defense" of hypothetical "transracial" others – people who may or may not exist (Dolezal's particular case being suspect). It should be relatively uncontroversial in feminist circles to acknowledge, as Smith writes, that "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and

social conditions” (Smith 2012, 5). Given (1) the often hostile climate in philosophy for diverse practitioners, (2) the long history of critique of white feminist practices by women of color, and (3) feminist awareness of the use and abuse of both “knowledge” and the authority of “rationality,” the reviewers or editor of *Hypatia* would have been well within their rights to request that the author engage in “checking and questioning.”

This could be done consistently and fairly (with a margin for human error) if it were written into the journal’s policies. Thus, ultimately, this piece is a call for ongoing discussion and articulation of a feminist publication ethics. While I believe that all academic journals would benefit from adopting feminist publication principles, I would expect feminist journals to have both stronger motivation to implement such principles and better resources for drafting them. From that point, the decision only to publish work that adheres to stated standards – standards themselves subject to reflection and revision – would not be properly labeled “censorship.” It would simply constitute the everyday task of an academic journal whose stated mission already implies an investment in mitigating, as best it can, the effects of imperial harm.

*Postscript.* I sent the students quoted in this piece early draft and asked if they were comfortable with their privately communicated words being shared in this way. It made me nervous to do so; I was invested in the piece and in my desire to submit it for publication. I did not want to hear that I had gotten it wrong. Fortunately, I received their enthusiastic consent. They affirmed, as I had hoped, that this piece was not simply *about* them, but *with* them as well.

## Notes

1. See Tuvel, Rebecca. 2017. In Defense of Transracialism. *Hypatia* 32 (2): 263-78.
2. My emphasis. The “Open Letter to *Hypatia*,” which I accessed May 22, 2017 at <https://gendertrender.wordpress.com/alexis-shotwell-open-letter-to-hypatia/>, is now currently available as an archive: <https://archive.is/lUeR4>.
3. Quoted from the statement posted on *Hypatia*’s Facebook page on May 1, 2017 and signed by “A Majority of the *Hypatia*’s Board of Associated Editors,” <https://www.facebook.com/hypatia.editorialoffice/posts/1852550825032876>, accessed May 22, 2017.
4. A reviewer of this piece asked whether, by this comment, I intended to imply that members of marginalized groups were incapable of committing (or sanctioning) imperial harms. I have no such intention, as I elaborate below. The comment does intentionally suggest a greater *expectation* of sensitivity to these issues from fellow members of marginalized groups. Nevertheless, as my opening case illustrates, such expectations are not always met. Shehu, as a black man, harmed the black women in my class, and their frustration was arguably greater because they would have hoped for more sensitivity from him. Intersectionality is just one reality that may foster insensitivity.
5. See, for example, Miranda Fricker’s (2012) discussion of “The Wrong of Testimonial Injustice” in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 43-59.



6. This list is just an example. I believe the points are true, but they are not exhaustive and might admit of clearer, more comprehensive phrasing and arrangement.
7. Most notably Anita Allen, Donna-Dale Marcano and Jacqueline Scott.
8. For a discussion of this phenomenon beyond my personal experiences, see Settles, Isis H., NiCole T. Buchanan, and Kristie Dotson. 2018. Scrutinized but not recognized:(In) visibility and hypervisibility experiences of faculty of color. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*.  
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