

Theorizing racial justice and the city: learning from the ‘Tuvel affair’

“We would do well to notice that scholarly and activist questions can, at times, be so tightly tied to bits and pieces of narratives that dwell on anti-black violence and black racial death – seeking out and reprising ‘terrible utterances’ to reclaim and recuperate black loss and somehow make it all the less terrible – that our answerable analytical futures are also condemned to death” (McKittrick 2014: 18).

What is it, exactly, that scholars of race and the city mean to accomplish when they set out to measure, trace, chart and analyze the way the urban shapes and is shaped by racialized dispossession? Is it based in a sense evolving from Enlightenment thought that injustice is a knowledge problem and an expectation that if we *know* better we will *do* better? Or is it a liberal sense that our institutions can and will learn if injustice and dispossession is revealed? Or is it a response to a cry and demand from existing struggles to mobilize academic inquiry and institutions of higher education toward their own goals – to ask and pursue questions they want answered?

I have argued that scholars should work in solidarity with actually existing social movements or groups that articulate anti-racist visions, and based on my own such work have offered an approach to mobilizing the resources of institutions of higher education to contribute to these kinds of efforts (see for example Derickson and Routledge 2015, Derickson and MacKinnon 2015). This is an ethical/political stance, but it is also an epistemological argument; we can make better, more accurate, and more politically effective knowledge that comes from engaged, responsive and collaborative scholarship. I have made this argument at length elsewhere with respect to the urgent questions facing anti-racist scholars in the “Age of Ferguson,” (Derickson 2016, 2017) as well as approaches to theorizing urbanization (Derickson 2015) and climate justice (Derickson and MacKinnon 2015). In this brief piece I want to trouble the tacit assumption that injustice is a knowledge problem to be solved with reasoned analysis and careful empirical comparison that I think pervades some scholarship that understands itself to be anti-racist, and turn our attention instead to the social relations engendered by the act of knowledge production itself. To do so, I want to take us a bit afield from urban scholarship as such to consider a recent series of events that illustrate politics of epistemology in anti-racist and social justice seeking scholarship.

Earlier this year, Rebecca Tuvel, an assistant professor of philosophy at Rhodes College published a piece in *Hypatia*, a journal of feminist philosophy, arguing that social-justice seeking people who have embraced what she called “transgenderism” ought to also embrace “transracialism” as practiced by Rachel Dolezal, a woman born to white parents who presented herself as Black and claimed to “feel” Black when her background was revealed. “When confronted with such an individual” she asks, “how should we respond?” (Tuvel 2017). Tuvel, a white, cis woman, goes on to say that her

intention is not to litigate Dolezal's case specifically, but rather use it and the "the public reaction to it serve helpful illustrative purposes" (Tuvel 2017).

Dolezal's case and her many subsequent claims to being "transracial" offended and infuriated many, not least because of her decision to take a scholarship at Howard University, a historically Black college, under the pretense that she was Black. But critics were upset at more than the material and cultural appropriation they saw in Dolezal. Critiques were raised about the nature of the *knowledge* that Dolezal purported to have. She taught courses in African American studies while leading students to believe that she herself was Black. As Ijeoma Oluo points out, while white teachers can and do teach African American-centered courses well, "it's important for students to know if they are getting first or second-hand perspective. It's important to know if opinions being discussed come from people who have actually experienced what they are talking about" (Oluo 2015). Oluo goes on to point out that Dolezal led the NAACP under the pretense that her guidance was coming from "the black experience." It was this outrage and its coincidence with what Tuvel considered to be an embrace of Caitlyn Jenner's very public transition from male-to-female that prompted Tuvel to make her argument.

Tuvel's piece alarmed scholars of color, transgender scholars and their allies and ignited debates about language and the process of peer review. One letter signed by over 800 scholars objected to the arguments she made, but also pointed out that the language she used showed distance from the established field of trans studies and trans activism. For example, she used the term "transgenderism," an awkward and rejected term in the transgender community, and she engaged in the practice of "deadnaming" – or using a person's pretransition name. As Tuvel herself notes in her response to the outcry, "A valid reproach is that my article discusses the lives of vulnerable people without sufficiently citing their own first-person experiences and views."¹ Tuvel went on to say that she "wrote this piece from a place of support for those with non-normative identities, and frustration about the ways in which individuals who inhabit them are so often excoriated, body-shamed, and silenced." Her concern with "silencing" is particularly interesting, and where I want to direct my attention.²

One need only a cursory familiarity with contemporary Black thought to know that Black women were outraged by Dolezal for a variety of reasons. It defies logic that Tuvel publishing an article that fails to take any of those critiques on board, or engage them in any way is an effective strategy for confronting the problem of "silencing" people whose voices are often sidelined in academia and the broader culture. One of Tuvel's defenders, a white male philosopher, dismissed this critique, saying that no one had pointed to any "relevant" scholarship by scholars of color.³ It is true enough that the discipline of philosophy has a serious diversity problem, but it begs belief that these scholars can't think of any relevant writing by people of color to inform this work.

¹ <http://dailynous.com/2017/05/01/philosophers-article-transracialism-sparks-controversy/> accessed 7/27/2017

² Due to space limitations I primarily focus on the racial dimensions of Tuvel's argument, but see https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1efp9C0MHch_6Kfgtlm0PZ76nirWtcEsqWHcvgidl2mU/viewform?ts=59066d20&edit_requested=true for the full text of the letter, which summarizes the critiques from a trans studies perspective, as well as O'Shea (2016) on transphobic responses to Caitlyn Jenner, and Billies (2015) on trans urban struggle.

³ <http://dailynous.com/2017/05/01/philosophers-article-transracialism-sparks-controversy/> accessed 7/27/2017

Confining ourselves to the discipline of philosophy, Kristie Dotson's (2016) work on "epistemic backgrounding" is especially applicable here (see also Dotson 2011 on "silencing"). Dotson uses Pauli Murray's work on Jane Crow (Murray and Eastwood 1965) to show how Black women are "submerged" and "epistemically backgrounded." To be backgrounded does not mean that no knowledge is ever made *about* you, but rather to say that knowledge isn't made *for* you. Black women and girls, Dotson argues, are often "let go for the sake of comprehension of something else: not them". She uses the case of the Obama Administration's program "My Brother's Keeper," which relies on data about the well-being of Black women to make a case for programs designed specifically to address the needs of young Black men. Black women are studied, but they are not "the point" of the study. This also leads to reduced epistemic confidence in that group, making knowledge from that group "difficult or impossible to acquire." This is arguably exactly what Tuvel's analysis does: use the case of Rachel Dolezal and the fact of Black women's objections to make an argument that is not about or for them in any way. They are let go for the sake of comprehension.

For Dotson, epistemology and the limited ability within the social formation to credibly know and be known is central to the marginalization of Black women and girls. The act of knowledge production, then, for Dotson, becomes a crucial site through which power is deployed with enduring material effects. In other words, making knowledge about people, rather than for or with people, has the opposite effect of confronting their "silencing." Instead, it undermines their own epistemic authority.

Crucially, epistemic authority and participation in the formation and realization of urban futures are intimately linked. It stands to reason that most social justice seeking and anti-racist scholars are drawn to the academy precisely because they perceive the epistemic authority it confers to be a valuable tool in dismantling systematic oppression. And yet in their own scholarship they, at times, undermine the epistemic authority of those on behalf of whom they understand themselves to be working, as Tuvel has arguably done.

What does this debate within philosophy have to do with urban scholarship on racial justice and the city? Following Minelle Mahtani, urban scholars concerned with racial justice and the city need to be "more vigilant towards understanding how the discipline discursively ignores, legitimizes and sustains the kinds of hierarchies that inevitably lead to racial violence" (2014: 360). It is not "epistemological insiderism" as Brubaker (2017) claims, to be reflexive about the ways that our social location and lived experience matters for the kinds of knowledge we produce and the questions we ask. Indeed, that term only makes sense if we accept that our knowledges are not inherently embedded in social, cultural and political formations. If we acknowledge the social nature of knowledge, and our own relation to forms of sociality (and the limitations they introduce), we are better equipped to be attentive to whether and how we epistemically background people and groups, and who we decide to "let go for the sake of comprehension."

Kate Derickson ([kdericks\[at\]umn.edu](mailto:kdericks[at]umn.edu)) is an associate professor in the department of Geography, Environment & Society at the University of Minnesota. Her recent work has appeared in *Progress in Human Geography*, *Urban Studies*, *The Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, and *The Professional Geographer*. She is an editor of *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.

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