On Intellectual Generosity: A Response to Rebecca Tuvel’s “In Defense of Transracialism”

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ABSTRACT: In this response I compare Rebecca Tuvel’s article, “In Defense of Transracialism,” to several other recent examples of philosophical and social justice scholarship in which authors (Eli Clare, Alexandre Baril, Cressida Heyes, Ladelle McWhorter, Judith Butler) draw comparisons between diverse identities and oppressions, and draw ethical and political conclusions about experiences that are not necessarily their own. I ask what methodological or authorial differences can explain the dramatically different reception of these works compared to Tuvel’s, and whether these differences in reception were justified. In this response I also challenge the often-heard claim that Tuvel failed to draw on the evidence of experience in her article, as well as the assumption that social justice scholars should always do so. Finally, I consider Tuvel’s motivations in writing her article and describe them as intellectually generous, and I call for more intellectual generosity in academia as it is transformed by social media.

Key words: social ontologies, Foucault, transracialism, transgender, transability, confession, experience, curiosity, compassion, generosity

In approaching the question of transracialism, I would follow Foucault in insisting on the political nature of ontologies, and particular of social ontologies. Consequently, I am less interested in whether we should say that Dolezal is white, or Black, or trans-Black, than in the power effects of saying that she is one of these versus another. Put otherwise, what do the ontologies of race that underpin these positions do? As Meena Krishnamurthy writes, “in asking whether we ought to refer to Dolezal as ‘black,’ we have to ask ourselves, would doing so be consistent with and express a commitment to justice in the United States?” Along similar lines, Esa Diaz-Leon has argued that “the most
question is [thus] not about what ‘race’ or ‘black’ actually mean in our language (or what our current concepts are), but rather what the most useful concepts are, given our aims and purposes. What are our main goals when we talk about race, and what are the concepts that can better satisfy those goals? This is the relevant approach in order to answer questions such as ‘Is Rachel Dolezal black?’

Although this is the approach that I would follow with respect to the controversy of Rachel Dolezal, I confess that I have no burning interest in the question of transracialism. When the Dolezal story was in the news, I read about it and listened to the discussions and understood why her cultural appropriation was problematic, but I also felt sorry for her. Most of all, however, I thought that there are far bigger issues that we as academics should be using our skills and privilege to draw attention to and seek solutions to. We are living in a period of mass extinction; billions of animals are being kept in excruciatingly cruel conditions and slaughtered every year for an industry that is rapidly making the planet uninhabitable for our own species and countless others; the planet’s oceans are becoming acidified and bereft of life; people of colour, trans people and poor people are subjected to relentless police violence and hyperincarceration; and of course the list goes on, and on, and on. In this context, although I could see why Dolezal made people angry, I thought that there are far more pressing social justice issues.

Today I remain less interested in the topic of Tuvel’s article than I am concerned by what the response to her article says about and does to the state of feminist philosophy and social justice scholarship generally. I worry that we are being locked into a kind of anti-intellectual identity politics in which some of us (especially those who are without job security) are too anxious and afraid to think, or to say what they think, while others (especially those with job security) are creating a great deal of fear by posting on social media whatever they happen to think, even if they have not thought carefully. I am sad to have seen the reputations of respected feminist scholars who were my friends deeply damaged by this controversy, and far, far sadder when I hear from junior scholars and students that they are too scared to publish or even pursue their research projects because of the lack of generosity for inevitable mistakes and unpopular positions that are becoming the academic norm.

The controversy over Tuvel’s article occurred a few months after I taught a course on Prison Abolitionism that was more or less destroyed by social media bullying within my class, in which a few students live tweeted the least generous possible and cruelly mocking interpretations of what their peers were saying, creating a contemptuous and hostile environment in which students (and I as well) became afraid to speak for fear of making a mistake or exposing an area of ignorance and being publicly villainized, shamed and ridiculed. I am generally sad and disgusted by what social media bullying has done to academia. What I
want to write is a call for more intellectual generosity, and also a reading of Tuvel’s article as intellectually generous.

In May, when the *Hypatia* controversy rapidly unfolded, I was reading Eli Clare’s new book, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure.* In this work Clare reflects on having his healthy breasts removed, and compares this experience to that of transabled people who want to have healthy limbs amputated. He admits that he does not understand transability, or why anyone would want to have a healthy limb removed, and yet he nonetheless compares the outrage and disgust to which both transabled people and transgender people are subjected. As Clare notes, this is a comparison that has also been made by critical trans and disability studies scholar Alexandre Baril. In *Brilliant Imperfection* Clare also describes arguing with a close friend who had gastric bypass surgery the same year he had his breasts removed. Clare was very critical of his friend’s decision to have gastric bypass surgery to lose weight, thinking she should resist sizeism and fatphobia and love her fat body rather than alter it to conform to social norms. Clare’s friend, in turn, was very critical of his decision to have his breasts removed, arguing that he should accept his butch female body instead of giving in to transphobia and gender binary normalization—which is how she interpreted his desire for surgery. Although both Clare and his friend have been bullied all their lives for the ways their bodies appear, neither could initially understand the other’s desire for a surgery that would allow some respite from this bullying and give them a body in which they could feel more at home. In retrospect, rather than condemning his friend’s decision to have gastric bypass surgery, Clare draws connections between her desires for self-transformation and his own, and he comes to empathize with her decisions around her body and identity.

Reading this work in the midst of the *Hypatia* controversy, I was struck by Clare’s admission that although he doesn’t understand transability—and although there may be ample ways and important reasons to distinguish between transability and transgender—and although he finds weight loss surgery politically problematic, he ultimately chooses to see connections between his experiences and those of transabled people and of his friend who chose to have gastric bypass surgery. As I read these last pages of Clare’s book, I thought about the intellectual generosity involved in seeing connections rather than differences—connections that allow us, at least in some cases, to accept and respect other people’s complex political decisions to change their bodies and identities—and how this generosity was currently in short supply.

Clare’s shift from criticizing self-transformations involved in transabled identities and weight loss surgery to seeing connections between these experiences and his own also made me think of Ladelle McWhorter’s discussion of the “twin dangers” of sameness and difference, or of “lumping” and “splitting,” in her book, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America.* As a Foucauldian, McWhorter
notes that she is intellectually and politically compelled by genealogies that emphasize differences and contingencies, and thus identifies more as a “splitter” than a “lumper.” Put otherwise, she is normally more wary of the dangers of sameness than those of difference. Nonetheless, in *Racism and Sexual Oppression* she emphasizes the interconnected history of sexual and racial oppression. McWhorter’s genealogy of the interlocking history of racial and sexual oppression proves to be more politically generative than the often conservative insistences that racial oppression and sexual oppression are not alike, such as views expressed by those who would like to advance an anti-racist politics but continue to reject queers.

Also being a Foucault scholar, I am, like McWhorter, more generally compelled by the work of splitting than of lumping, and yet I am also drawn to the ways that the recognition of affinities in experiences alongside differences creates more space for political empathy and generosity of thought. Another moment where I see this move to lumping—or connecting—rather than splitting in the Foucauldian feminist literature is in the Introduction to Cressida Heyes’s *Self-Transformations*, where Heyes describes a resonance she feels with some accounts of transgender people despite being cisgender herself. She recounts that as a woman who experiences her body as bigger and heavier than her sense of the body that would match her (quick, sharp, lithe) mind, she has some understanding of the feeling of not being at home in the body one has, and the desire for physical self-transformation, that many trans people describe. She too wants a body that better reflects her idea of her inner self, and this insight helps Heyes to understand something of the experiences of trans people and to see the flaws in political reasoning that characterize transphobic feminist thought.

I am also reminded of Judith Butler’s account of the social illegibility of genderqueer and trans people in works such as *Precarious Life* and *Undoing Gender*. Butler describes the pain of having a body-mind or identity that isn’t recognized as a human category, and how this can drive people to death but also how people will still choose (if it is a choice) this body-mind or identity over conforming to what society wants them to be, because the alternative is even more unlivable. I wonder if this can be said of other emerging or purported trans identities, such as transabled and transracial identities. Although I think that by then we will be too preoccupied with trying to survive weather catastrophes, wild fires, floods, droughts, famine, and climate wars to worry about these issues anymore, I am curious about whether forty years from now feminists will look back on the current hatred for and public shaming of transracial and transabled people—and for a cisgender and cисracial author who dared to write on the topic—with the same embarrassment with which we now look back on the transphobia of feminism in the 1970s and ’80s. Assuming such academic debates still exist, I wonder if we will one day reference this episode of the *Hypatia* controversy as a particularly unfortunate incident of that prejudice. Will we one day consider the apparent non-
existence of “transracialism” as a social phenomenon not as a reason to dismiss Tuvel’s article, but as an instance of hermeneutical injustice?

I recognize that there are serious methodological differences between how Clare, Baril, McWhorter, and Heyes have argued for the affinities between transability and transgender, weight loss self-transformations and gender self-transformations, and racial oppression and sexual oppression, and how Tuvel compares transgender and transracialism in her article—and these differences may or may not explain why Clare and Butler signed the open letter condemning Tuvel’s article, and the key role Heyes played in denouncing the article. Most importantly, Clare, Baril, McWhorter, and Heyes engage more extensively with the experiential accounts and philosophical writings of transgender people and people of colour than did Tuvel—although it is not the case that Tuvel did not do so at all. Clare, McWhorter, and Heyes also each situate themselves as an author in a way that Tuvel does not, incorporating autobiography into their philosophical reflections. As one queer Black feminist philosopher friend put it to me in the first days of the Hypatia controversy, this raised questions about whether Tuvel didn’t have “better things to do.” Clare, McWhorter, and Heyes each describe and build on lived experiences to make a case for the affinities that they see and mobilize politically and intellectually, which means that this question is not raised with respect to their work. Although Heyes, like Tuvel, is white and cisgender, Clare, Baril and McWhorter are directly implicated by and experiencers of at least some of the structures of oppression that they describe and compare to other forms of oppression. Tuvel could have, but did not, mention her own experiences as a Jewish person whose relatives were murdered during the Holocaust when discussing conversion to Judaism, or in explaining her own interest in the philosophy of race. She also could have, but did not, mention her own experiences of gender.

As for drawing on other people’s experiences, if not her own, it is worth noting that Tuvel does try hard to understand the lived experience of others: that of transracial people, for which reason she draws upon Rachel Dolezal’s own accounts of her life as an example and possible resource for understanding an experience that is not her own. Indeed, Tuvel writes that “Dolezal’s claim that she saw herself as black as a child and drew self-portraits with the brown crayon instead of the peach crayon do strike me as decidedly odd. But I cannot say whether they seem odd because they are false, or because we are not routinely confronted with such claims. Indeed, I imagine it was once just as odd to hear people say they felt like they belonged to a sex other than the one that they were assigned at birth.” Tuvel reflects on whether Dolezal’s experience of growing up with adopted Black siblings, of having an older Black man in her life whom she calls “Dad,” of estrangement from her white biological parents, of being married to a Black man, might be sufficient for understanding her experience of herself as Black. Unfortunately, given the demonization of Dolezal, Tuvel’s engagement with
this particular person’s lived experiences has been grounds more for dismissal than serious consideration.

One lesson we might learn from this is that philosophers should always situate themselves in their writing and build on experiential knowledge, whether this is the philosopher’s own experiential knowledge or that of (preferably sympathetic) others whom the philosopher has read or listened to and whose accounts she has incorporated into her own work. I worry, however, about the need to exclude the experiences of people to whom one’s readers may not already be sympathetic, as occurred in the reading of Tuvel’s article. I also worry both about the projection of experience as the only and uncomplicated foundation for knowledge (see Joan Scott’s “The Evidence of Experience”) and also about further entrenching the confessional compulsion that already characterizes modern subjectivity (see volume 1 of Foucault’s \textit{The History of Sexuality}).\footnote{Can one write on a topic, especially stigmatized topics, without needing to “out” oneself as a person who has lived experience of that phenomenon? Can one write on a topic that does not directly implicate oneself? More contentiously, can one argue about social oppressions at a primarily theoretical level, without extensively drawing on one’s own experiences or that of others? Although I have always admired the ways that Clare, McWhorter, and Heyes incorporate their lived experiences into their philosophical writings, I have never aspired to write this way myself. I also see many instances where such writing degenerates into uninteresting narcissism, where it crosses the line from philosophically generative uses of anecdote or self-reflection into self-indulgent confession and navel-gazing. In any case, I do not believe that we should accept no other style of philosophical writing or that we should compel academic confessions, and, following Scott, I believe that we should problematize and politicize as well as attend to and incorporate the evidence of experience.

In her \textit{Hypatia} article, “In Defense of Transracialism,” Tuvel states that she follows “transgender theorist Susan Stryker’s call for those of us thinking through the Jenner-Dolezal comparison to ‘hold open a space for real intellectual curiosity, for investigations that deepen our understanding of how identity claims and processes function, rather than rushing to offer well-formed opinions based on what we already think we know.’”\footnote{Of course, this isn’t what happened in response to Tuvel’s article. In writing this article, Tuvel explored a topic that was not in her area of expertise (environmental and animal ethics), and she did so although she had no obvious reason to identify with either Jenner or Dolezal, or no clear personal stake in the debate. Tuvel wrote her article because she felt sorry for Dolezal as she was subjected to public shaming and relentless wrath, and because she was struck as a philosopher by the apparent inconsistencies in reasoning around Dolezal’s case and discussions of transgender. Tuvel was motivated by compassion for Dolezal as well as intellectual curiosity, or the desire to contribute to the public discourse on these issues.}
to make sense of what appeared to be inconsistencies in thinking among some feminist philosophers as well as the general public.

Although moving out of one's area of expertise in academic writing is always a risk—one is not familiar with the canon, one may fail to cite the right people, one may use a wrong or outdated term, one may overlook an important point—the impulses behind that move on Tuvel's part were generosity and curiosity, both of which I would describe as intellectual virtues. My understanding of intellectual generosity is less about being willing to invest time and energy in an issue in which one may have little at stake than it is about being willing to make mistakes, to acknowledge and address one's mistakes, and to give other people the benefit of the doubt—all of which Tuvel has exemplified in both her article and in her response to her critics. As a first publication in a new area of scholarship by an emerging scholar, there may well have been valid critiques to be made of Tuvel's article—as indeed there are of virtually any article. I wish, however, that these critiques had been made in the same spirit of intellectual generosity and curiosity with which Tuvel's own article was written.¹¹

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NOTES


2. Ibid.


11. I would like to thank Ada Jaarsma and Eloy LaBrada for reading this commentary and providing me with their insights. Nonetheless, the views expressed here are my own and any mistakes or errors in judgment should be attributed to me alone.