

On Being “Good” and the White Center of Inclusion

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The discourse on inclusion offered by Mordechai Gordon and JT Torres is anything but banal. Thoughtfully, they reason that contemporary educational discussions of inclusion often illustrate a “banality of good” in that they are “well-intentioned words or deeds that are motivated by democratic ideals but are not fully thought through and hence often result in shallow practices.”¹ Measures like inclusive language and including all students in the classroom are assumed to be good or virtuous because they are inspired by “worthy ideals.” However, as Gordon and Torres elaborate, these discussions on inclusion are often banal, ordinary, and unreflective, drawing from Hannah Arendt’s sense of the banality of evil. After Arendt wrote “Eichmann in Jerusalem” she gave a sequence of lectures titled “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” wherein she describes the breakdown of morality during the Nazi regime as it “collapsed into a mere set of mores—manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will—not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in.”²

Gordon and Torres not only critique the fallibility within discourses of inclusion to enact truly inclusionary realities but also highlight the lack of “educational value” within such declarations. What I understand to be central to their point is that if we—as teachers, students, scholars, humans—take up the conventions of inclusion as a socially accepted ideal, without thinking seriously about them, we neglect the educational opportunity and collective responsibility in Arendt’s claim that we must “think what we are doing.”³ In thinking with Gordon and Torres, I will extend one piece of their argument to continue deepening thought. If discourses of inclusion represent the banality of good, then what is the meaning of the good in relation to notions of inclusion? In other words, does inclusion assume an inherent goodness of the person who works toward inclusion?

The banality of good prioritizes *intention* over action. To intend to

do something good is not the same as enacting something good. If I were to do something good yet banal, like posting a black square on my Instagram during the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests to perform racial consciousness to my friends, I would not be grounded in a moral commitment to do something about racial injustice but rather propelled by my desire to be perceived as a good, moral, righteous ally—that is to say, not racist. The banality of good is the desire to be seen as a *good* person and not as a *bad* person. Many people before us have warned about good intentions, like James Baldwin, Ivan Illich, and Sara Ahmed.⁴ More recently, Ibram X. Kendi reminds us that “many prominent Americans, many whom we celebrate for their progressive ideas and activism, many of whom had very good intentions, subscribed to assimilationist thinking that also served up racist beliefs about Black inferiority.”⁵ The impetus to do good but not be morally responsible has roots in whiteness and white supremacy. And within white supremacy are the supremacies of ethnicity, class, ability, gender, sexuality, age, citizenship, religion, and colonialism.

The good intentions of inclusion in reality are exclusionary. Inclusion affirms the notion that there is a center and there are people outside of that center who must be accepted, invited, and assimilated into it. “It is not enough to simply open doors to spaces that are not inviting,” Gordon and Torres affirm. It is like saying, come inside our house, you are welcome here. But we will not create the conditions or a system in which there is no center, in which you belong, in which you do not have to receive an invitation, but a place in which you already belong on the basis that you are human.

Toni Morrison asserts, “the center is white.” Morrison was often asked when she would write something not about race, meaning when she would finally write about white people. Morrison responds that those who ask this question forget that they are also “raced.”⁶ The same could be said of banal discourses of inclusion. Those who discuss inclusion, unreflectively and unthoughtfully, forget that the center of inclusion is white. Morrison affirms, “[T]here’s the center, which is white, and then there are these regional Blacks or Asians, or any sort of marginal people. That question can only be asked from the center . . . I’m gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me.”⁷

The move to include people who are typically on the margin into the white center is the banality of good. I want to be good and so I am going to invite everyone in, but I am including them into a white normative where they are expected to conform and assimilate. I believe what Gordon and Torres push us to question is this: Why is there an outside and an inside in which people need to be invited into? Instead of destroying the white center, we seek to incorporate people into it. Inclusion into a white center is not sufficient, nor is it the only possible action. Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz write of calls for universities to “indigenize” the university. They write of the inherent assumption of inclusion—without thought and reflection—to be a catch all for every matter of marginalization and oppression. As an unsystematic and fragmented approach, inclusion may look good on the outside, but it reaffirms assimilation into a white center. Gaudry and Lorenz write of three typical responses of universities in regard to indigenization.

There is Indigenous inclusion, reconciliation indigenization, and decolonial indigenization. Indigenous inclusion is a policy focused on increasing the number of Indigenous peoples in the university and “it does so largely by supporting the adaption of Indigenous people to the current (often alienation) culture of the Canadian academy.”⁸ Reconciliation indigenization facilitates dialogue on whose knowledge is affirmed as knowledge, and it engages in the reconciliation between Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledges in the university. Decolonial indigenization entails “the wholesale overhaul of the academy to fundamentally reorient knowledge production based on balancing power relations between Indigenous peoples and Canadians, transforming the academy into something dynamic and new.”⁹ Decolonial indigenization would demolish the university as we know it and build it to be something quite different than what we have ever known it to be.

Gaudry and Lorenz note that most institutions are committed to inclusion alone and describe how inclusion policy is the lowest degree of commitment and often forces Indigenous peoples to “bear the burden of change.”¹⁰ Indigenous inclusion policies “merely evoke the discourse of transformative change, while using this rhetoric to preserve the status quo—the unsustainable and unjust

exclusion of Indigenous nations from an academy built on top of Indigenous homelands.”¹¹ They ultimately suggest treaty-based decolonial indigenization and resurgence-based decolonial indigenization as the way forward. If it is the case that inclusion assumes having access to the center initiates social justice, then it follows that inclusion, without critical thought, seems like doing good. Gordon and Torres note that for “inclusion to live up to its promise of social justice” the purpose of inclusion “is not just to critique, but to radically change spaces, systems, and people.”¹² However, I am not yet convinced, given our dialogue on inclusion and the banality of good, that the promise of inclusion is social justice. If inclusion presupposes a center that is white, how can such a center lead to a justice that would dismantle a system of historical and sustained exclusion? Perhaps Gordon and Torres’s point here is that a more critical and thoughtful engagement with inclusion would shift how it is often practiced as more about good intention than substantial action.

I agree with their point that inclusion without structural change is not justice. Where I diverge, perhaps until further dialogue, is in my distrust in an inclusion that assumes a white center with oscillating forces of inclusion and exclusion. I wonder if “meaningful change of traditional structures in education that are exclusionary and marginalize students that are perceived as other” would maintain the white center of inclusion rather than dismantle it.¹³ Would the need for inclusion still exist if there was no center? How can a structure change while keeping its foundational center? Like Audre Lorde professing “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” perhaps it is also true that the white center of inclusion cannot hold up the foundation of a changing structure.¹⁴ If the foundation remains the same, has the structure changed, or is the change merely cosmetic?

I am grateful to have been in conversation with Gordon and Torres on their influential work on the banality of good within discourses of inclusion. It is my hope that our dialogue is part of what they are hoping to enact: to contend seriously with the possibilities and limitations of inclusion. To do more than open than just door, we must be skeptical of what we have been taught to believe and of “moral standards” that are “socially acceptable,” as Arendt

asserted. We cannot collapse into the mores of doing good and being inclusive that can be changed with the tides. As Arendt writes, “What I propose . . . is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”¹⁵

REFERENCES

- 1 Mordechai Gordon and J.T. Torres, “Reflections on the Discourses of Inclusion: A Case Study of the Banality of Good,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1 (2023).
- 2 Hannah Arendt, “Questions of Moral Philosophy,” in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 54.
- 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.
- 4 See James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”; Ivan Illich, “To Hell with Good Intentions”; Sara Ahmed “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism.”
- 5 Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 3. Kendi goes on to write, “We have remembered assimilationists’ glorious struggle against racial discrimination, and tucked away their inglorious partial blaming of inferior Black behavior for racial disparities . . . As such, assimilationists constantly encourage Black adoption of White cultural traits and/or physical ideals.”
- 6 Toni Morrison, “Interview with Charlie Rose,” January 19, 1998, <https://charlierose.com/videos/17664>.
- 7 Toni Morrison.
- 8 Adam Gaudry and Danielle Lorenz, “Indigenization as Inclusion, Reconciliation, and Decolonization: Navigating the Different Visions for Indigenizing the Canadian Academy,” *AlterNative* 14, no. 3 (2018): 218.
- 9 Gaudry and Lorenz, 219.

10 Gaudry and Lorenz, 220.

11 Gaudry and Lorenz, 219.

12 Gordon and Torres.

13 Gordon and Torres.

14 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

15 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.