

Ignorance as a Resource for Social Justice Education?

Barbara Applebaum
Syracuse University

Ignorance is the curse of God, knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.
— Shakespeare, *King Henry VI*

INTRODUCTION

Inquiries into knowing and not-knowing have been given much attention in studies that examine how systemic racial injustice is perpetuated. Ignorance, for instance, has often been simplistically perceived to be the primary culprit behind racism and many still believe that the remedy for racism is simply more knowledge. Recently, however, a burgeoning body of scholarship has complicated the meaning of ignorance and its role in the perpetuation of racial injustice. More specifically, epistemologies of ignorance examine “the complex phenomena of ignorance, which has as its aim identifying different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices.”¹ This focus on ignorance contributes to our understanding of the subtle and not so subtle ways that power works through the practices of knowing and unknowing in order to maintain systemic oppression and privilege.

Unlike traditional understandings of ignorance which consider ignorance as individual deficiency, these theorists understand ignorance as systemically related and supported, not passive but active. In his now classic text titled *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills draws attention to how, on matters related to race, there exists an inverted epistemology in which “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional) protect the privileges of the racially dominant group and shield such privileges from contestation.”² A persistent epistemic arrogance and presumptions of excess credibility to members of dominant social groups,³ as well as attributions of credibility deficits to members of marginalized social groups,⁴ are among the effects of such ignorance and support white denials of complicity. These are just some of the ways in which ignorance plays a role in the maintenance of systemic racial injustice. The implication within this scholarship is that ignorance is undesirable and to be eradicated.

Is ignorance, however, always undesirable? Is the elimination of ignorance always an uncontroversial good? Are there types of ignorance that social justice educators might want to cultivate with their systemically privileged students? In her examination of non-oppressive ways of knowing other subjects, Cynthia Townley argues that some types of ignorance can function as positive, epistemological resources. First, this essay critically examines Townley’s arguments and the type of ignorance she advocates and finds it problematic as a resource for social justice educators. In the second part of the essay, I turn to Judith Butler’s recent work on the relationship between ethics and opacity of self to advance a type of ignorance that can be a resource for social justice pedagogy and, more specifically, for countering systemic ignorance.

IGNORANCE AS AN EPISTEMIC VIRTUE

The recent proliferation of studies in epistemologies of ignorance, the type of ignorance that is based on a deep-seated resistance to knowing, has made a strong case for the role of ignorance in reinforcing and safeguarding established patterns of dominance and privilege. Within this same body of scholarship, however, there are indications that ignorance can also be deployed as a critical weapon to fight oppression. In her discussion of “strategic ignorance,” Alison Bailey,⁵ for example, describes how racially marginalized subjects have utilized cultural assumptions about their own ignorance for survival.

Another positive role for ignorance, however, is advanced by Cynthia Townley⁶ who begins by identifying a type of ignorance as an inherent aspect of epistemic responsibility especially among differently socially situated subjects. While acknowledging the deleterious effects of ignorance, Townley makes room for a type of ignorance that “contributes positively to epistemic responsibility ... and (that) is not necessarily a regrettable epistemic flaw” (*TRI*, 38).

First, Townley argues against epistemophilia and notions of epistemic independence that characterize traditional epistemology. An excessive/obsessive emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge or truth, Townley contends, leads to “myopia” that hides other epistemic factors involving relationships that are integral to epistemic practices. Townley is specifically concerned with the type of testimonial injustice that occurs where one is not treated as a serious source of knowledge because of identity prejudice.⁷ She maintains that epistemic agency is constricted when participants in epistemic communities are “discredited, dismissed, excluded, or treated merely instrumentally” (*TRI*, 40).

Second, Townley reasons that if being acknowledged as a reliable or trusted interlocutor is vital for full membership in a community of epistemic agents, epistemic responsibility requires trust. The value of recognizing a person as one who is trustworthy, according to Townley, is not dependent on veritistic outcomes but is a good in its own right. To defend this claim, she points to the distinction between reliance and trust in testimony. In so far as we instrumentally treat others *merely* as a source for one’s own knowledge, we rely on them but just as an informant. Echoing arguments put forth by Alison Jones, bell hooks, and others,⁸ Townley contends that treating others as if they function to “fill my epistemic gap” (*TRI*, 41) is appropriative and manifests exploitive ways of knowing that only benefit the one who claims to want to know.

In contrast, being part of a community of epistemic agents involves a commitment that we do not merely rely on other knowers but trust them in ways that imply they are subjects. Trusting relationships involve a commitment on the part of the trustor not to damage the trustee’s epistemic agency by limiting the trustee’s participation in shared epistemic practices. This virtue can get lost when one is concerned exclusively with obtaining truth. Ignorance is, thus, inherent for this type of trust because refraining from verifying what one tells us (remaining ignorant) strengthens the epistemic agency of the one we are listening to.

Townley, therefore, promotes the value of an intentional commitment not to alleviate ignorance because it is constitutive of a trusting relationship. She insists that under certain conditions holding on to ignorance, rather than trying to discharge it, is a way of treating epistemic subjects with respect and entails a “forbearance to seek supplementary or corroborating information” (*TRI*, 41). Townley offers that to trust a colleague means to take her word for it without verification. Moreover, if we see ourselves merely as collectors of knowledge then our capacity to consider other epistemic factors such as “the background social conditions that construct patterns of credibility and authority” (*DI*, 25) may be inhibited. Townley asks us to consider what gets ignored when we are exclusively focused on truth.

The type of ignorance she wants epistemologists to make room for involves “a lack of knowledge or information that could be acquired relatively simply, by, for example, observing or asking” (*DI*, x). Yet checking up or questioning the other’s knowledge claim might jeopardize trusting relationships. The point is *not* that verifying what one tells us is *always* irresponsible (she is not advancing gullibility) but rather to recognize *when* verification may damage the conditions that foster epistemic agency in oppressive ways. Since certain types of ignorance can play a positive role in supporting non-oppressive and cooperative relationships, an epistemically responsible agent should not seek *always* to eliminate ignorance.

Yet what type of ignorance is being advanced? Is it a “tolerating” type of ignorance that feigns not knowing? Forbearance demands that one refrain from doing something that one has the right to do and requires patience, self-control, and toleration. We get a better sense of the type of ignorance that can be a virtue if we examine Townley’s analysis of the role of ignorance in empathy.

Townley takes as a starting point the conception of empathy as a way of knowing that entails engaging with others and leaving them “a space to contribute their knowledge, even to develop it” (*TRI*, 44). For Townley, empathetic knowing⁹ involves always being “provisional, revisable, and modifiable” (*TRI*, 44). Because empathetic knowing is always incomplete, there is a place for ignorance. As Townley puts it, “even as I know, I am also ignorant” (*TRI*, 44). Empathetic knowing involves relating to the other as an epistemic agent in his or her own right and engaging with the other in a responsible manner. To do so, Townley claims, one must also be aware of one’s own social location and the role it plays in the relationship. In a powerful description of this epistemic interdependence, Townley writes, “Empathy requires a high level of sensitivity to one’s own experience and position within the interaction” (*TRI*, 45). And this is where we get a clearer sense of what Townley means by valuable ignorance.

One is epistemically irresponsible when one does not acknowledge one’s privileged location in the interchange. To counter this situation, Townley advocates two things. First, that one realize the “limits of what I know, the provisionality of my *knowledge of another person or of forms of social injustice*” (*DI*, 79, emphasis added). In addition, she is concerned to move into the forefront “how my social position might relate to those of epistemic agents likely to know things I need to take

into account or with whom I seek trustful engagement” (*TRI*, 45). Townley insightfully proposes a type of ignorance that allows for the paradox of saying “I know” but also that “I allow that you can tell me that I am wrong, and I am prepared to take that seriously, not defensively, arrogantly, or dismissively” (*TRI*, 50).

Townley offers theorists concerned with epistemic injustice an important account of the epistemic harms of credibility excess and how they are linked to the harms of attributions of credibility deficit. Over-claiming or taking for granted one’s privileged credibility is related to failing to sufficiently acknowledge the epistemic authority of others who are differently positioned. To refuse to acknowledge one’s social location, therefore, is not only ethically and political irresponsible but also epistemically irresponsible because it damages the conditions required for epistemic community from which knowledge is appropriately produced.

I endorse Townley’s emphasis on the way power and privilege work through social location to affect attributions of credibility and I endorse some of the claims she makes about the relationality of knowledge production. She, however, also maintains that ignorance can “foster attention to selective and invested ignorance and offers a critical perspective that can supplement those provided by feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonialist theorists” (*DI*, 88). I raise two reservations about this latter claim.

First, although Townley acknowledges that white ignorance is a product of an epistemology of ignorance that is systemically supported, it is not clear that she appreciates that whites have a vested interest in sustaining white ignorance. The corrective ignorance that Townley recommends with its emphasis on *not remedying ignorance even though it would be easy to do so* understates the difficulty of challenging systemic ignorance. On the one hand, one may wonder if a refusal to seek out knowledge when one easily could is an instance of ignorance. On the other hand, given the research on white distancing strategies and denials of white complicity,¹⁰ countering systemic white ignorance requires more than just refusing to verify what another says. It demands a different way of listening that her analysis of ignorance in empathetic listening only begins to capture.

Second, while Townley emphasizes incomplete knowledge and even refers to the limits of knowing in her analysis of empathetic knowing, it is not clear if she is referring exclusively to incomplete *knowledge of the other* or also incomplete *knowledge of oneself*. This is crucial because it is not only prejudices or negative beliefs about the other’s credibility that get in the way of listening to others. A dominant group’s moral frameworks also require critical analysis. To focus primarily on what one does not know about the other because of prejudice risks ignoring how good intentions and seemingly moral beliefs can obstruct genuine listening as well.

While the *space* that Townley opens for the positive role that ignorance can play in challenging social and epistemic justice is particularly useful, the type of ignorance she advances is extremely narrow. I turn now to another type of ignorance that might be a more promising resource for social justice educators.

IGNORANCE AS OPACITY

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler¹¹ works to deconstruct the subject as the ground of ethics in order to re-present the subject as a problem for ethics. Problematizing subjectivity as stable, transparent, and sovereign has long been a central aim of Butler's work. Recently, however, Butler has sought to *explicitly* articulate the ethically productive aspects of presuming a subject that cannot "fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (GAO, 7) and a type of unknowing is at the heart of her approach.

Traditionally, ethics requires a subject that can give an account of oneself — what did you do and why? Although there are exceptions, traditionally in order to be held accountable for one's actions one needs to know who one is and what is going on in one's mind. Such an understanding of ethics assumes a self that is coherent and transparent, a self that presumes authorship.

However, Butler, following Michel Foucault, insists that the subject is authored and the effect of discourses. In giving an account of oneself, according to Butler, one finds that "the self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration" (GAO, 7–8). Subjects are constituted by a fundamental sociality in at least two respects. First, subjects are formed in the context of primary relations that we may never be able to recover but that shape "lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life" (GAO, 19). Second, our status as recognizable beings is discursively constituted when we are addressed by another in encounters that are embedded within frameworks of intelligibility and meaning. Norms are invoked when we give an account of ourselves.

When we are called to give an account of ourselves, we are not only addressing and being addressed by another but such addressing can only take place through the normative frameworks of intelligibility that we have at our disposal. An account is not just dependent on the concrete other but also on the larger system of meaning within which livability becomes possible (or not). As Butler explains, "[T]he very being of the self is dependent, not just on the existence of the other in its singularity ... but also on the social dimension of normativity that governs the scene of recognition" (GAO, 23).

If we are forced to use language that is "not of our making" (GAO, 20), then any account will be constrained by discursive categories and terms. The account must "fit" discursive frameworks to be told and what falls outside of these categories and terms becomes untellable. Butler does not reject the need to give accounts but rather problematizes what such accounts do. Butler's conception of subject formation entails that one's self-knowledge will always be incomplete. She maintains that acknowledging this opacity is the first step for a new conception of ethical relationship.

If opacity follows from our epistemic limits and the subject emerges relationally, opacity is also a necessary condition for recognizing the other as the other is. Not only is self-knowledge incomplete, one can also never fully know the other. Both self and the other emerge within the context of limited frames of intelligibility.

Instead of expecting to know the other fully, we should let the question of the other remain an open one and we must “become critical of the norms under which we are asked to act” (GAO, 24). Responsibility consists in the critical interrogation of the limits of knowing.

Three points require emphasis about such not-knowing or opacity. First, such opacity is *not only* an ignorance of the other but *first and foremost* ignorance about ourselves and it is exposed when we recognize the limits of our normative frameworks. Butler explains that “my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others” (GAO 84).

Second, when we give an account we are not simply communicating to the other who we are and what our intentions have been. Rather, narrative is simultaneously a performance of norms that is “invariably ... persuasive and tactical” (GAO, 63). For Butler, we may not control the norms through which we emerge yet, both insofar as our subjectivity is dependent on norms and we recognize the other through norms, we transmit these norms and thus bear responsibility for their consequences. Such responsibility is inherently related to the connection between norms, subjectivity and complicity. In Butler’s words, “There is no ‘I’ that can stand apart from the social condition of its emergence, *no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms*, which being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning” (GAO, 7, emphasis added). Things are done with language when I give an account of myself that implicate me in the maintenance of norms that determine the livability of subjects.

Finally, opacity reveals that the possibility of transformation can be found *in the encounter with the other*. This draws attention to the importance of critically reflecting on the *norms within which those encounters are embedded* and which those encounters can reproduce. The acknowledgment of opacity calls for a type of responsibility where

the subject must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of that deliberation will entail a critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. In this sense ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the subject comes into being and how a deliberating subject might actually live and appropriate a set of norms. (GAO, 8)

Butler, therefore, puts critique at the core of ethical relations. Jodi Dean characterizes her position as follows: “[A]n ethics that does not involve critique, that does not call into question these norms and their consequences, is itself unethical, culpable, unresponsive as it disavows the relations of power on which it depends.”¹² I want to briefly elaborate on Butler’s notion of critique.

Drawing on Foucault, Butler¹³ contends that critique is the practice of risking the truth of the “established order” and the “settled domain of ontology” in order to inquire what might be beyond the limits of knowing and “stylizing” oneself at the edges of what is possible. Yet Butler expands upon this when she insists that critique is not about judgment and condemnation but rather a practice that “not only suspends judgment ... but offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension.”¹⁴ Critique is not about evaluating whether its object is good or bad but rather about

interrogating how the relation of knowledge and power functions to support norms which foreclose possible ways of thinking otherwise. It is not that Butler refuses to make judgments. Her point is that in *the rush to judgment* opportunities to expose power and our investments in its maintenance are forsaken. Critique, for Butler, is “a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing”¹⁵ and involves living “in the anxiety of that questioning *without closing it down too quickly*.”¹⁶

Butler’s call to suspend judgment is more complex than Townley’s appeal to forbearance or empathetic knowing. The purpose of suspending judgment is not merely to enlarge the categories of the “human” so that they are more inclusive but rather, as Sara Rushing emphasizes, to trouble the boundaries themselves “by showing *solidarity with the as-of-yet-unintelligible*.”¹⁷ Moreover, Butler’s call to suspend normative frames prompts the subject to “vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession” (GAO, 136) and to forgo transparency as a kind of conceit. Suspending judgment and acknowledging the dangers of presuming a masterly subject diminishes the possibility of an arrogant forbearance. If one can acknowledge the limits of knowing then one can be open to the possibility of what has been foreclosed and from here new horizons of being can arise.

Butler acknowledges the risks and anguish that incurs from such critique. When one critiques norms, one risks one’s own intelligibility as a subject. Butler explains, “[T]o call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectivation, is to call into question the truth of myself . . . if I question the regime of truth I question, too, the regime through which being, and my own ontological status, is allocated” (GAO, 23). This is “an anguish, to be sure” (GAO, 136). But it is also “a chance — to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession” (GAO, 136).

Butler insists that staying in the uncertainty of that risk can be productive and can offer a space for what is not yet here, for what has been foreclosed, and for what might be. Butler asks us to consider

how might we encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers? What might it mean to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be?¹⁸

Staying with the tension that such critique engenders, staying with the sense of loss and vulnerability, tarrying with the grief, is crucial for the type of responsibility that Butler promotes.

Suspension of certainty involves a kind of restraint understood as not forcing the other to give an account that is limited by my desire to know through my limits of knowing. Such restraint is captured when Butler says, “by not pursuing satisfaction, we let the other live.”¹⁹ Building on this, Rushing calls for a *politics of unsatisfaction* in which we learn to remain unsatisfied in the face of the deep desire for certainty. The impulse to staunch discomfort is enormous. Thus, staying in the moment of

uncertainty in the face of the unknowable other and resisting evasion becomes radical politics.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Townley opens up a space for the constructive role of ignorance in social justice education. Butler, however, helps to flesh out such ignorance when she demonstrates how the question of ethical relations “emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in dialogue where no common ground can be assumed” (GAO, 22). According to Butler, ethics requires “that we must risk ourselves precisely there, at the moment of our unknowingness, when what conditions us and what lies before us diverge from one another, when our willingness to become undone constitutes our chance of becoming human, a becoming whose necessity knows no end” (GAO, 80). Ultimately, Butler shows how acknowledging opacity can encourage a disposition of humility and generosity that lets the other live as the other is, even if the other is unintelligible to me (GAO, 42). Opacity, thus, can be a valuable resource for social justice pedagogy.

Moreover, Butler’s focus on opacity emphasizes the need for constant critique to counter the systemic ignorance that give rise to strong denials of complicity. Similarly, George Yancy puts opacity at the center of acknowledging white discursive practices that are supported by systemic white ignorance. Whiteness, Yancy explains, “is deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that one is never self-transparent, that one is ensconced within structural and material power racial hierarchies.”²¹ Whiteness continuously “ensnares” and “ambushes” white people so that whiteness finds ways to hide “even as one attempts honest efforts to resist.” Being an anti-racist white, therefore, is a project that always requires another step and does not end in a white person’s having “‘arrived’ in the form of an idyllic anti-racist.” This should not lead to hopelessness, Yancy insists, but rather “one ought to exercise vigilance.” Vigilance, according to Yancy, involves the “*continuous* effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being.”²² Butler’s emphasis on opacity can help encourage such vigilance.

Instead of focusing *exclusively* on intentions, feelings, or identity, social justice educators might want to emphasize critically engaging with the social conditions that produce subjects, the relationality of subject formation and how we must be vigilant about the accounts that we give of ourselves. In social justice pedagogy, it is important to encourage white students to ask: To what extent do we present our story as one of victims? In what ways does our discourse interpellate us as innocent and shield us from considering our complicity?

Finally, Butler calls not only for acknowledging opacity but also appeals to the significance of *staying* in the discomfort of uncertainty. Yancy also urges whites to tarry and not flee from considering their complicity in racial injustice. In her discussion of Judith Butler’s ethics of non-violence, Fiona Jenkins²³ promotes “apprehension” as a mode of staying in the troubling space of always reworking but never overcoming the norms that do violence. This willingness not only to inhabit but *stay* in places of discomfort opens up new opportunities to learn from the unease

and unsettling of such spaces. Acknowledging that one can never give a complete account of oneself can encourage a resistance to normative complacency and thereby prove to be a key resource that social justice educators may not want to ignore.

-
1. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 1.
 2. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.
 3. Jose Medina, "The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary," *Social Epistemology* 25, no. 1 (2011): 15–35.
 4. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 5. Alison Bailey, "Strategic Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Sullivan and Tuana, 77–94.
 6. Cynthia Townley, "Toward a Reevaluation of Ignorance," *Hypatia*, 21, no. 3 (2006): 37–55; this work will be cited in the text as *TRI* for all subsequent references. Cynthia Townley, *A Defense of Ignorance: Its Value for Knowers and Roles in Feminist and Social Epistemologies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011); this work will be cited in the text as *DI* for all subsequent references.
 7. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.
 8. Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 299–316; and bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margins to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
 9. Townley uses the term *knowledge*, but I will use the term *knowing* to emphasize the active process that I maintain she is trying to articulate.
 10. See Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).
 11. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). This work will be cited in the text as *GAO* for all subsequent references.
 12. Jodi Dean, "Change of Address: Butler's Ethics at Sovereignty's Deadlock," in *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, eds. Terrell Carver and Samuel Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2008), 122.
 13. Judith Butler, "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Boston: Blackwell, 2002), 212–228.
 14. *Ibid.*, 212.
 15. *Ibid.*, 215.
 16. Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification," *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 20, no. 4 (2000): 728.
 17. Sara Rushing, "Preparing for Politics: Judith Butler's Ethical Dispositions," *Contemporary Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (2010): 296.
 18. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35.
 19. Judith Butler and William Connolly, "Interview," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 2 (2000): 24–36.
 20. A question that might be taken up in the discussion: Should this demand hold also for the marginalized? See Rushing, "Preparing for Politics."
 21. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 231.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. Fiona Jenkins, "Judith Butler: Disturbance, Provocation and the Ethics of Non-Violence," *Humanities Research* XVI, no. 2 (2010), <http://epress.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Humanities+Research+Vol+XVI.+No.+2.+2010/5271/jenkins.xhtml>.