

# Hidden Costs of Inquiry: Exploitation, World-Travelling and Marginalized Lives

Audrey Yap

## Introduction

There are many good reasons to learn about the lives of people who have less social privilege than we do. We might want to understand their circumstances in order to have informed opinions on social policy, or to make our institutions more inclusive. Or we might want to cultivate empathy for its own sake. Much of this knowledge needs to be gained through social scientific or humanistic research into their lives. The entitlement to theorize about or study the lives of marginalized others is often granted under the framework of freedom of inquiry or academic freedom. I will not question, in this paper, whether academic freedom licenses us to do so in the first place (see XXX this issue, for consideration of those questions); instead, I will highlight tensions between the moral-epistemic imperative to learn about the lives and circumstances of people who are relatively marginalized, and the cost to marginalized people and communities of making that learning possible. This list of considerations is not intended to be exhaustive, but will illustrate a range of ways in which good intentions on the part of researchers is insufficient to mitigate harm.

On the subject of the cost to marginalized individuals, I will draw on Uma Narayan's work on third-world feminism, Nora Berenstain's discussions of epistemic exploitation, and Robin DiAngelo's writing on white fragility. When it comes to communities, Maria Lugones' idea of world-travelling is a helpful model for thinking about the process of learning about the lives of marginalized others. Lugones' model helps us frame questions about the burden that world travelling places on the inhabitants of the worlds whose rules researchers are attempting to navigate. None of this is intended to argue for specific restrictions on academic research and inquiry, but is meant to note that the exercise of academic freedom, even directed towards ends that

further the social good, can place disproportionate burdens on those already marginalized.

### Ignorance and Marginalized Lives

Ignorance of the conditions of others' lives is a significant problem in achieving a more just society. Ignorance can be harmful, systemic, and willful (Mills 2007; Medina 2013; Pohlhaus 2012). For example, there may be systematic hermeneutical gaps in our conceptual schemes, such that it becomes virtually impossible for people from marginalized groups to articulate, and sometimes fully understand, their experiences (Fricker 2007). The development of the concept of sexual harassment is sometimes cited as a paradigm case of overcoming hermeneutical injustice. Carmita Wood left a job due to her employer's unwanted advances, but was subsequently denied unemployment benefits due to her inability to describe her negative experiences in a way that could be easily understood. Wood, and other women with similar experiences, are considered victims of hermeneutical injustice, because the meaning-making mechanisms available to society at large kept experiences like theirs obscure (Fricker 2007, 153). It took social coordination on their part to change this situation; several women, in discussing their shared experiences, developed the term "sexual harassment," which we now use to capture the phenomenon in question.

This example of hermeneutical injustice is often portrayed as a case in which a concept that was required to describe people's experience was entirely lacking. There can also be situations in which a concept primarily adequate to describing the experiences of marginalized people is to some extent available, but only within those marginalized communities in which it is useful. After all, the reason why those who occupy marginalized social identities are more vulnerable to hermeneutical injustice is that they have less access to the mechanisms through which social meaning as a whole is shaped. But such individuals might still be able to enact linguistic and conceptual reform within the smaller subsets of society to which they belong.

For instance, even according to Fricker's own description, Wood does not come across as someone who entirely fails to grasp the significance of what had happened to

her. Both she and the other women who had experienced sexual harassment understood that *something* bad had been done to them by their male bosses, even if they did not have a clear way to express what that bad thing was (Mason 2011). Such a point can also be made with reference to literature on the epistemologies of ignorance. A common line of argument in that literature is that agents in different social positions will likely end up with corresponding differences in knowledge. For example, many enmeshed institutions maintain White North American ignorance on matters of racial inequality (Mills 2007). Thus, while articulating the concept of sexual harassment and introducing it into *mainstream* discourse was a significant achievement, we can still distinguish the hermeneutical disadvantage of the sexually harassed women from the (probable) hermeneutical ignorance of their harassers. Mason argues that

At the social level, the ignorance of men about the experiences of women meant that the professor failed to have a proper understanding of how he was treating Wood, and it was his epistemic negligence that was seriously disadvantageous to her, not a lack of understanding on Wood's part. [...] The distortions in dominant hermeneutical resources enabled and perpetuated his ignorance, and his ignorance enabled and perpetuated those distortions. The injustice Wood suffered was that of having her social experiences misinterpreted by those with epistemic authority—authority they exerted in order to preserve the existing social order that was, in part, dependent on those misinterpretations. (Mason 2011, 303-4)

This means that Fricker's description of hermeneutical injustice as being a gap in collective resources is too simple, since it fails to account for asymmetries in those resources. The lack of understanding exhibited by those with more social power is often different from the lack of understanding exhibited by those with less; and this difference is perpetuated and exacerbated by the structures of power that are responsible for those hermeneutical gaps in the first place.

Mason's criticism of Fricker suggests some ways to remedy situations of hermeneutical injustice. Given that ignorance is perpetuated by social structures, we

want to be attentive to those structures, with an eye to dismantling or substantially altering them. This would at least help in removing epistemic barriers obscuring the experiences of marginalized people. But generally, those who are best positioned socially to do so are the worst positioned epistemically. Poor epistemic positioning often coincides with social privilege, and can manifest itself in a lack of cultural understanding.

Many who are members of dominant cultural groups find their own traditions respected automatically, and rarely if ever need to become aware of the customs of others. In an incident that took place on Vanderbilt's campus, a pig's head was left, purportedly as a prank, on the doorstep of a Jewish community centre. The perpetrator claimed that he did not know the Jewish affiliation of the building, the particular significance of pigs for Jewish people, or the extent to which his prank would be seen as a chilling anti-Semitic act (Medina 2013, 135). Perhaps his protestations of ignorance were not made in good faith; nothing I say here is intended to tell us how to distinguish between feigned and genuine ignorance. But even if this was a case of genuine ignorance—the pig-head-dropper genuinely did not know that he was committing a politically harmful act—this would not necessarily absolve him of responsibility. Medina, in his discussion of this act, argues that such cases can generally be considered situations of culpable ignorance. I will not go through his arguments here, but will suppose that they establish that we have some kind of collective responsibility to ensure that we are politically responsible agents who are attentive to the social world around us (Medina 2013, 148). Thus even if we disagree on the thresholds for culpability when evaluating cases of ignorance, at the very least those who are relatively privileged have some social responsibility to overcome their ignorance about those who are less privileged.

Once we grant that we do have such epistemic responsibilities, the practical question is how to fulfill them. One intervention Medina offers is beneficial epistemic friction due to epistemic counterpoints, “that is, a friction that enables us to acknowledge and engage alternative viewpoints and to reach epistemic equilibrium among alternative perspectives on a problem or phenomenon.” (Medina 2013, 176) We

might need such measures when we engage with our social world, and critically evaluate the information we take in. For instance, critics of Western feminist discourse note the relatively homogenous construction of “third world women” as helpless and perpetually victimized subjects (Mohanty 1991). Such approaches tend to erase the work that many feminists in these countries have done to work against gendered oppression, or misinterpret their work through the lens of western imperialism (Narayan 2013; Khader 2019). As a prescription when considering, say, the spectacularization of dowry murders, or gendered violence in other countries, we might pursue epistemic counterpoints as correctives:

These counterpoints can be issued and entertained in different ways: by comparing and contrasting how related phenomena are treated when they appear in different cultural contexts; by comparing and contrasting how social problems appear to differently situated groups of subjects within the same culture; or by critically examining how our approach to an issue changes when we approach related issues elsewhere (Medina 2013, 181).

While this prescription is largely a matter of individual corrective effort, structural issues are also present in the pervasiveness of particular kinds of cultural stereotypes and tropes that we might work to counteract. Regardless, though, of the corrective strategy that we employ, living up to our collective epistemic responsibility takes considerable effort.<sup>1</sup> Now, in seeking out alternative points of view, as relatively privileged social agents, we are often seeking the knowledge of those who are already socially marginalized. These lines of inquiry are likely protected under the privileges accorded by academic freedom. The concerns that I will raise in the next sections are not intended to undermine this. I do take us to have collective epistemic responsibilities of the kind that Medina outlines; learning about the lives of others does seem to be part of being socially responsible knowers. But our undertaking to learn about such lives can have a cost to the people about whom we are learning, and attempts to fulfill our

---

<sup>1</sup> Which seems like a feature, not a bug.

responsibilities need to be balanced with broader considerations about the impact of our learning on others.

### Whose Job is it to Educate You?

If we do not seek epistemic counterpoints and alternative points of view, we run the risk of misrepresenting others and failing to question our stereotypes about them. National media often presents a relatively narrow cultural perspective of other countries seen as sufficiently far away, exotic, or to which our own government stands in a tenuous relationship. Given the extent to which Western countries have intervened in Middle Eastern politics, it is not particularly in federal interests here to present rich and nuanced portrayals of those areas. So if we are North Americans with no clear personal connections to those countries, learning about them solely through the lens of national media leaves us epistemically vulnerable to controlling images and tropes.

However, even learning that comes from culturally appropriate sources comes with its share of epistemic and social risks (Narayan 2013). If we take a relatively common stance, that Narayan calls the anthropological perspective, on the global south, we adopt a pair of imperatives: (a) take an interest in other cultures, but simultaneously (b) refrain from any moral criticism of them (Narayan 2013, 125). This runs the risk of recruiting so-called cultural insiders into potentially problematic roles. Admittedly, the anthropological perspective is frequently motivated by good intentions, and is an improvement over many other stances that one might take. Indeed, the previous section has outlined and endorsed several reasons why those from the global north should take an interest in other cultures, as well as pointed out that this might be supported by academic freedom. So the problems are not with the spirit of these imperatives, but with the general ways in which they are frequently acted upon. While we do want to respect others' lives and practices, such respect is compatible with informed critical engagement.

For example, a feminist from the global south might be called upon to showcase and speak to the artistic and literary riches of their home culture with an eye to high art or great achievements. Such an approach has the virtue of attending to the fact that such

artistic riches exist, and avoids stereotyping the global south as primitive. Yet this approach can encourage the glossing over of genuine social problems such as inequalities that privilege some forms of artistic expression, or the artistic expression of certain social groups over that of others (Narayan 2013, 128-9). As such, it provides an idealized and partial view of another culture—one that runs the risk of further marginalizing its more vulnerable members.

The anthropological perspective can also manifest itself through a kind of white or colonial guilt. This restricts the range of acceptable information about another culture, so that we are only supposed to talk about them in terms of the evils they have suffered as a result of external influence. In such a way, people—women in particular—from other cultures serve only as mirrors through which those from the global north can see themselves reflected in a negative light. Of course, it is important to acknowledge the damage of imperialism and colonialism, but this acknowledgement should not crowd out the ability to recognize other cultures as having their own sets of practices (and problems) that are not directly causally related to external intervention. And viewing other countries as entirely under the control of the “Big Bad West” ignores the agency of non-Westerners (Narayan 2013, 140-1). In fact, such a dismissal of agency can potentially lead to the also problematic impression that other countries’ problems are best solved by the global north, lending itself to another form of imperialism. After all, if another nation’s problems are primarily caused by the intervention of others, it might follow that it is the responsibility of those others to solve them. This in turn allows well-meaning but ignorant activists from the global north to neglect the efforts of those who are already engaged in projects to reform their societies from within.

From an academic point of view, this can also lead to relatively privileged researchers furthering their career by appropriating the stories from marginalized communities and portraying them in a particular light. This has led to criticisms of the “fixation social science research has exhibited in eliciting pain stories from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight.” (Tuck and Yang, 2014, p. 236). In collecting such stories, said researchers may criticize the effects of colonialism and other kinds of imperialisms, but in ways that do not benefit the communities who have been

harmed. Tuck and Yang criticize research into indigenous communities in particular, following work on the subaltern by Gayatri Spivak (2010). But as they note above, the overemphasis on pain stories is not unique to the colonial context, nor are the harms isolated to the individuals from whom stories are extracted and used for research. We will return to these issues in a later section.

While researchers external to marginalized communities may end up building their careers on extracting those communities' stories, researchers from those communities might find themselves pigeonholed. If their voices are respected, it is often because they are deemed sufficiently "authentic" as cultural representatives. However, in being treated as Authentic Insiders, their perspective is treated as comprehensive and monolithic, rather than something stemming from their own situatedness within their particular cultural context. Westerners, Narayan points out, are rarely required to qualify their statements to clarify that they do not speak for all feminists, all North Americans, etc, while many non-Westerners, even when they do provide such a disclaimer, find it implicitly ignored. Being called upon to speak for the entirety of one's culture can be exhausting (not to mention, one is likely to get it wrong at least some of the time) (Narayan 2013, 144-5).

It seems both patronizing and essentializing to limit a scholar's intellectual contributions to the "Third World perspective" on an issue. Further, many educational tasks that relatively marginalized people are called upon to perform can be costly for them. Following the work of women of colour activists and scholars such as Audre Lorde, Julianna Britto Schwartz, and Toni Morrison, Nora Berenstain (2016) uses the term "epistemic exploitation" to describe the phenomenon whereby relatively marginalized people are called upon to educate those with more privilege about the oppression they face. As with many of the phenomena that Narayan describes, epistemic exploitation can often be accompanied by good intentions, as attempts by the relatively privileged to fulfill their epistemic responsibilities. But well-intended actions can still have unintended costs.



Three costs that Berenstain outlines of epistemic exploitation are (a) the unpaid and unacknowledged emotional labour required in the educational process, (b) the double-bind frequently faced when facing demands to educate, and (c) the default skeptical responses of the privileged even when their demands are met (Berenstain 2016, 572). Frequently a single demand can cost someone in all three ways. As an example of this, much anti-racist or anti-colonial work in academia is done under the auspices of equity and diversity committees. Indigenous women and women of colour are often expected to be on such committees, as well as to serve on other committees in order to ensure adequate representation. The motivation for this kind of institutional move is to ensure that diverse perspectives are represented in important decision-making processes; the problem, however, is that the epistemic benefits to the committees and institutions involved come at disproportionate cost to the “diverse” committee members.

Diversity work in institutions can be rewarding, but it almost inevitably takes time away from other, better recognized parts of the job, such as teaching and research, and thus has an opportunity cost: faculty who spend time serving on diversity committees are not spending those hours polishing articles for submission to peer-reviewed journals. Admittedly, committee work can always be refused. But refusal to serve on a diversity committee, particularly when one is (even implicitly) seen as fulfilling a kind of diversity quota, is easily seen as a sign of bad faith or failure to contribute positively to the academic community. In other words, the expectation is that one will engage in diversity work. Thus there is a double-bind in which the refusal to bear the cost of educating others can lead to a judgement of being uncooperative, selfish, or difficult.

Another feature of diversity work is that it is frequently expected to produce a relatively narrow range of results, namely affirmations that the institution in which one works is a place in which diversity is supported and celebrated. It is an ironic feature of anti-racist work that it is generally not meant to point out instances of racism (Ahmed 2012). When such work does name and highlight the mechanisms of colonialism or white supremacy, it typically triggers a defensive response. Dealing with such

defensiveness is among the many emotional costs that anti-racism educators typically bear. To explain this phenomenon, Robin DiAngelo (2018) argues that in North America, white people are insulated from race-based stressors, and from learning about racism. Her discussion of white fragility points out that many white people experience learning about racism as a personal attack or accusation, even in the context of anti-racism workshops. This means that even in contexts in which white people expect to be learning about racism, pointing out individual instances of racism (much less ways in which they might be complicit in it), often leads to denials and defensiveness, effectively shutting down further discussion.<sup>2</sup> What this means is that, while the end result of the inquiry might be beneficial—assuming people actually do learn about the realities of racism—the process is costly, especially for educators who are already marginalized on the basis of race.

While research into marginalized communities is not the same as diversity work, the pitfalls of the latter can still give us insight into potential problems with the former. Researchers from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, or who occupy marginalized social locations, can often be called upon to support the work of others. This kind of supportive work can certainly fall into the category of epistemic exploitation. Also, the relatively narrow range of results expected of diversity work has its analogue in research into marginalized communities or other, less privileged, cultures. Researchers, particularly from those communities, might find their work ignored if it does not adhere to the guidelines set out by the anthropological perspective.

The discussion in this section has focused on harms done to marginalized individuals. The next section will consider ways in which research—even when it aims at social good—can potentially harm the communities that it studies. I will focus primarily on research that considers what it is like to occupy particular social locations. But to do so, we need first to understand the ways in which our social location can be connected to our ignorance. For example, if we are trying to design an inclusive environment, we might not know what the barriers are for people who are relevantly unlike us. Worse yet,

---

<sup>2</sup> DiAngelo, who is white, is clear that her non-white colleagues who also do anti-racism work face even worse consequences for doing it than she does.

we might not really know what questions to ask in order to find out what knowledge we are missing. Part of identity privilege is being free to be ignorant of certain things (like the extent to which a building is accessible, or the locations of gender-neutral washrooms). But such privilege frequently sustains a state of meta-ignorance, so that we are not even aware that these are things to be known.

### Meta-Ignorance

White ignorance is shaped by the ways in which social structures obscure racial inequalities (Mills 2007). We can generalize this beyond the racial and consider the general phenomenon of meta-ignorance: other ways in which unjust social structures might obscure the gaps we have in our object-level knowledge of the lives of others (Medina 2013). Object-level ignorance might of course be caused by factors other than meta-ignorance. But it is difficult to remedy object-level ignorance that does result from it, since the meta-ignorance entails our lack of awareness that are even lacking relevant knowledge in the first place. For example, if I face no barriers with respect to mobility, I may well be unaware of the locations of ramps, elevators, and automatic doors in campus buildings that I frequent. This is object-level ignorance. I would be displaying meta-ignorance in this particular case if I was, say, organizing a conference in this building without first investigating the accessibility of the rooms in which I would be scheduling talks. This would presumably indicate my lack of awareness that other people face mobility challenges in navigating university campuses. This ignorance, Medina argues, is grounded in our background assumptions about normalcy:

about what counts as normal or mainstream or to be expected. These attitudes about normalcy that often guide social perceptions make the normal go unmarked and unnoticed, resulting in social phenomena such as the invisibility of whiteness, of Christianity, of heterosexuality, and so on—not because these things are not perceived at all, but rather, because they are seen everywhere, because they are constitutive elements of the lens through which the world is looked at (Medina 2013, 153).

In other words, the perspective of those with dominant social identities is sufficiently ubiquitous that we forget that it is simply one perspective among many, treating it instead as a kind of default way of being. Indeed, Medina's own ambivalence about the visual metaphors such as "blindness" and "invisibility" used throughout his work can be seen in these terms, as a struggle with the ableism of everyday discourse, even discourse about injustice itself (Medina 2013, xi-ii). While Medina acknowledges that talking about ignorance in terms of insensitivity is better in many ways at avoiding treating sightedness as normal, he nevertheless uses metaphors of blindness as stand-ins for ignorance in order to acknowledge the history of discussions in such terms.<sup>3</sup> Since I am less confident that the continued use of such terminology is worthwhile, and not a manifestation of problematic ignorance, I will avoid using Medina's visual metaphors except when quoting him.

There are considerable parallels between knowledge that overcomes meta-ignorance and the kind of knowledge required for successful empathy. Though there is often little consensus on how to define the phenomenon itself, many philosophers who write about empathy identify a kind of perspective-taking as necessary but not sufficient (Coplan 2011; Oxley 2011). Coplan, for instance, distinguishes between two kinds of perspective-taking: self-oriented perspective-taking (calling it pseudo-empathy) from other-oriented perspective taking (which is part of genuine empathy). When we employ pseudo-empathy, we do attempt to see another's point of view, but by imagining how we ourselves would feel in that position. This is the psychological process that results from asking a question like, "How would you feel if that happened to you?" So our access to another's view is mediated through our own likely responses and emotional states. In contrast, other-oriented perspective taking involves simulating another individual's experiences as though you in fact were that person. Such a perspective, as Coplan notes, requires "greater mental flexibility and emotional regulation and often has different

---

<sup>3</sup> Though some have argued that the epistemology of ignorance is more fundamentally ableist, in ways that cannot be rectified by just a shift in language (Tremain 2017).

effects than self-oriented perspective taking” (Coplan 2011, 55) and as such is much more difficult to achieve.<sup>4</sup>

The reason why pseudo-empathy is a phenomenon related to genuine empathy (hence the “pseudo” in its name) is because it is easy to mistake for empathy in many cases. Though we might engage in a sincere attempt to understand another’s experiences they do, rather than as we would if we were in their place, this is no easy task, and one for which we often display overconfidence. We often overestimate our ability to predict the responses of another person (Dunning et al. 1990) and underestimate the extent to which our assessments of a situation have been influenced by cognitive biases (Ehrlinger et al. 2005). What this means, practically speaking, is that we might think we are engaging in other-oriented perspective-taking, but failing to do so, and instead projecting our own perspective and our own knowledge onto the person whose experiences we intend to simulate (Keysar et al. 2003). As Coplan notes, we might not always have the insight required for genuine other-oriented perspective-taking, which she argues is necessary for real empathy instead of just pseudo-empathy. Meta-ignorance is just one way in which we might be led to mistake pseudo-empathy for actual empathy.

Now, in many ordinary situations, the difference between empathy and pseudo-empathy may be so minimal as to be negligible. This may be because the stakes of the situation are sufficiently low. If all I know about a stranger on campus is that they want a coffee and the only place nearby at which they might procure one is the Student Union Building, I might be a reliable predictor of their practical decisions despite my only superficial knowledge. In that case, whether I am taking a self- or other-oriented perspective on their experiences, the predictive “output” of my empathy will likely be the same. After all, there are many ways in which others in our social world are similar to us. The problem is that our meta-ignorance might entail that we do not know when

---

<sup>4</sup> This account of empathy is not universally accepted. Given how difficult it is to achieve it, some criticize the extent to which other-oriented perspective taken is even possible, and question in general the extent to which empathy is helpful for morality (Goldie 2011; Prinz 2011). Also, there are other, less individualistic, conceptions of empathy that approach the question from a different angle altogether (Gruen 2015). However, the idea of simulating another’s experience is the conception that is most relevant to this discussion, so I will not consider different accounts of empathy in detail here.

others are different from us in significant ways. Someone without dietary restrictions might enthusiastically recommend a restaurant to another person knowing of their preferences for spicy food, perhaps accurately simulating the perspective of someone with those culinary preferences and price range, but without thinking to ask whether the person to whom they are speaking is a vegetarian, or has significant food allergies that might affect their ability to eat at a particular place. In such a situation, the onus may be on the person soliciting recommendations to state their needs. But in cases in which we study the lives of others, most of those people did not ask to become objects of study.

If we consider a cis researcher who wants to better understand the prejudice that trans people face, they might undertake their inquiry with good intentions, but in a state of meta-ignorance even about basic practical matters. Someone who has never felt discomfort with their assigned gender identity or expression may not possess the relevant background understanding to properly empathize with a trans or non-binary person who is uncomfortable with, for instance, using a single-gender bathroom. In that case, the purported simplicity of a practical matter (and the extent to which one accurately perceives it as being a simple practical matter) may depend in key ways on social identity. For these reasons, many who write about empathy as a potential solution to injustice emphasize that it can only be achieved when we are genuinely informed about the lives of others rather than simply imagining how their lives must be going (Harvey 2007; Emerick 2016). The consequences for academic freedom, though, are that the social benefits of inquiry must be balanced against the social costs to those about whom we are learning. The previous section gave some examples of how we might think of the social costs to individuals, for instance if meta-ignorant researchers adopt the anthropological perspective with respect to a marginalized community, or if they engage in epistemic exploitation of a community member. The next section will introduce the idea of world-traveling as a way to think of potential adverse effects on communities that are being studied.

### The Dangers of World-Traveling

Social responsibility is an important principle of academic freedom, and requires taking seriously the idea that universities and other knowledge-producing institutions are responsible to the communities in which they are situated. As such, many institutions aim to offer service or community-based learning as part of preparing students to be actively engaged citizens. These often involve partnerships between academic institutions, in which those carrying out the coursework or research activities are based, and community institutions, in which the learning or research is to take place. But such projects are subject to pitfalls of various kinds (Ledoux and McHenry 2008). In this section, I will argue that Maria Lugones' concept of world-traveling is a useful lens through which we can understand a range of potential ways in which research can harm the communities it studies.

Lugones (2003) motivates the idea of world-traveling by noting that it is a common experience among those who are typically positioned outside of mainstream society. World-traveling in her sense does not necessarily mean literal travel or relocation, but encompasses the various ways in which those who are (for instance) not white/Anglo, or are from immigrant backgrounds, must learn to code-switch in North American society. As such, world-traveling is simply a fact of life for many outsiders to dominant culture. Much of life in North America is organized with the presumption that its inhabitants are white/Anglo, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, etc. Those who do not fall under those descriptions are often constructed as outsiders, sometimes interpellated as strangers (Ahmed 2000). Making one's way through mainstream society as an outsider often involves going back and forth between worlds in which one is seen as an outsider to ones in which one feels more or less at home (Lugones 2003, p. 77). Most researchers from non-dominant cultures, or from marginalized backgrounds, who participate in North American academic life are engaging in some form of world-travel to do so.

As another illustration of the phenomenon of world-travel, some first-generation or immigrant university students experience it when they go back and forth between the contexts of home and school. Vocabulary, body comportment, and background knowledge can all differ across class or cultural divisions. And it can take a great deal of

time before a person can genuinely feel at home in multiple worlds. Feeling at ease in a world often requires us to know a great many things, and be sensitive to a great many social conventions. One way to think of becoming at ease in a world is as analogous to becoming fluent in a language, where one understands its idioms and common patterns of use.<sup>5</sup> But just as people make many mistakes when they are learning a language, there are generally many mistakes in learning how to navigate others' worlds. Inhabitants of a world may face a wide variety of consequences for failing to live up to those conventions, ranging from minor discomfort to severe social sanction. And the types of sanction to which a particular person is subject may depend on where they are situated in society as a whole.

Because of the multiplicity of ways in which one might engage in world-travel, Lugones resists strict definition of a world. For her, a world contains people, at least some of which must be flesh and blood, though some of its inhabitants may be fictional or imagined. It might be an actual society given its dominant culture's description and construction of life; but it might also be that society given a resistant or an idiosyncratic construction. Worlds might be incomplete, insofar as they refer to things outside their scope, or insofar as some of the concepts and characterizations they employ are still up in the air. And not all the inhabitants of a world may understand or accept how that world constructs them, either. Understanding another person, though, and the ways in which they navigate the complexities of social relationships and institutions, involves understanding the circumstances under which they feel at home in particular worlds. In the previous section, we used the language of empathy for this kind of understanding, but Lugones follows Marilyn Frye (1983) in thinking of such understanding in terms of loving, rather than arrogant, perception. Loving perception of others involves the understanding that they might be world-traveling when they engage with dominant society. But it also involves the ability to travel to their world as well. What we know about someone and how we treat them in a world in which we are at home and at ease may be very different in another world in which we are not. Our first-generation

---

<sup>5</sup> But sometimes we are at ease in a world because of the relationships, bonds, or histories we share with its inhabitants. Even if I am not a "fluent speaker" in a world, it may be that others in that world who love me may be able to put me at ease.



university student may have friends from different backgrounds who believe they know her well, only to find that she is different at home with her family than she is at school. But this is part of what happens when someone is a world-traveler:

The shift from being one person to being a different person is what I call traveling. This shift may not be willful or even conscious, and one may be completely unaware of being different in a different “world,” and may not recognize that one is in a different “world.” Even though the shift can be done wilfully, it is not a matter of acting. One does not pose as someone else; one does not pretend to be, for example, one of a different personality or character or someone who uses space or language differently from the other person. Rather, one is someone who has that personality or character or uses space and language in that particular way (Lugones 2003, 89-90).

In other words, this student may not be purposefully trying to act in different ways with her family and her classmates; it may simply be that she has developed the understanding over time that different behaviours and patterns of speech are appropriate in the different contexts in which she finds herself, and acts accordingly. The point is that neither the loving daughter nor the studious classmate (even if they seem to be very different people) should be thought of as mere personas. Each one is genuinely the person that she is in that world. But we should also recognize a difference between those who are often required as a matter of social location to be world-travellers, and those who are not. Her friends from middle-class backgrounds might never travel to her world, though she must travel to theirs in order to attend university. Many who belong to dominant social groups can spend most of their lives exclusively in worlds in which they feel relatively at ease. They may share their world with others who see them differently, but lose nothing by it. As Lugones writes,

I am interested in here in those many cases in which white/Angla women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely along, interpret us as crazy. All of this while we are in their midst. The more independent I am, the more independent I

am left to be. Their “world” and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidarity. (Lugones 2003, 83)

Lugones is here describing cases in which, despite contact with others that could potentially serve as sites of epistemic friction, those with relative privilege are free to ignore the perspectives of those others. Many North American women of color must be world-travellers, whether or not we are at ease in the worlds to which we travel, simply for the sake of getting good jobs or educations. But the converse does not apply; and the white/Anglo inhabitants of those worlds face little consequence for failing to see such travellers with loving perception—as subjects with rich inner lives and histories. The consequence here is that researchers from privileged social backgrounds who study people from marginalized communities can sometimes fail to be world-travellers in Lugones’ rich sense. Instead, we could see them undertaking a kind of potentially damaging tourism, even when they conduct their research out of love (Ortega 2006). This is important, because learning about the circumstances of marginalized lives is important, and gaining immersive knowledge is often promoted by experiential learning programs. Many students, as researchers-in-training, who attend field schools or intensive cultural programs hope to learn by being in the worlds of others. But part of Lugones’ point in calling this a matter of world-traveling is that it must be more than spectating.

Further, as we have noted, one does not automatically know how to behave in a different world. The first-generation student may not initially have known to address her professor as “Dr” or “Prof,” and may have been told off for having addressed him as as “Mr” or by his first name. Compare, though, the situation that might take place at her graduation, when she introduces her professor to her immigrant mother and he mangles the pronunciation of her first name. In both of these cases, the power dynamics are such that it is the student and her family that is likely to feel embarrassed—even though in the second case it is the professor who has made the mistake. This is simply an illustration of an earlier point, which is that not everyone faces the same kinds of social sanction for failing to understand the conventions of a world. Researchers attempting to travel to the worlds of others will often have to discover who they are in the worlds they

are entering. But when the inhabitants of that world—those who are at home there—have less social power than those who are conducting the research, we must consider who is most likely to bear the cost of mistakes. The rest of this section will discuss more concrete examples of the potential hazards of world-travel.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has been the subject of its fair share of research on poverty, homelessness, and drug addiction. For example, Gabor Maté (2009) documents many of his experiences and conclusions about addiction as a medical doctor working in community there. Such research has positive potential for the development of programs and policies. However, the research also runs the risk of causing harm to community members, such as perpetuating stigma, forcing people to relive trauma through questioning, or sapping resources from the communities that could be spent in more directly beneficial ways (Boilevin et al., 2019). Some of this can arise through a lack of care or through failures of reciprocity. Researchers who collect their results and then leave without reporting their findings to the community are seen by many community members as failing to be accountable, and in places such as the Downtown Eastside, informal guides exist to help potential researchers anticipate problems that might arise.

But the problems of creating research and learning partnerships that are beneficial to all parties involved—community stakeholders as well as those involved in the research or educational process—are general ones, and not the kinds of things that lend themselves to simple procedural solutions. Further, good intentions without adequate understanding, reflection, and flexibility throughout the process may also cause damage, by producing dysfunctional attempts at helping the marginalized populations being studied. Well-meaning researchers might attempt to step in to fill needs in ways that disempower community members. Or they might attempt to provide original solutions to problems when what is needed is support for existing pathways (Stanlick and Sell, 2016). In general, though, while a misunderstanding of the world to which the researchers travel might harm them in the production of a sub-par project, or a loss of research partnerships, it might harm the original inhabitants of that world in ways that more directly affect the material circumstances of their lives, and the lives of

their loved ones. Researchers then need to ask themselves who suffers (and how they suffer) if their background assumptions are incorrect, or if they make mistakes out of ignorance. Many who are protected under the auspices of academic freedom may suffer professionally to some extent from a botched project—but not to the same extent and in the same ways as those whose lives the project studies. Thinking of potential risks in terms of world-travel in Lugones' sense might encourage potential researchers to think about the ways in which their failures might harm the inhabitants of those worlds, and how much their presence in that world might cost them. At the very least, researchers need to understand that the person they are in another world is not entirely up to them, and is not entirely determined by their intentions. While they might firmly intend to be people whose effect on others is benign or even beneficial, they may be more like uninvited guests whose presence is burdensome at best.<sup>6</sup>

Further, the costs of research to communities have led some scholars who do world-travel between academic worlds and other worlds in which they are at ease, to criticize the ways in which research is frequently conducted (Tuck and Yang 2014). Social science research that focuses exclusively on the pain that colonization has brought to indigenous people is playing an important role. But while that damage is genuine and needs to be acknowledged, the overly narrow focus on pain stories could potentially cause more harm than it mitigates. Not only does this perspective end up constructing marginalized people exclusively as victims, but it may obscure ways in which the damages done may be repaired:

Logics of pain focus on events, sometimes hiding structure, always adhering to a teleological trajectory of pain, brokenness, repair, or irreparability—from unbroken, to broken, and then to unbroken again. Logics of pain require time to be organized as linear and rigid, in which the pained body (or community or people) is set back or delayed on some kind of path of humanization, and now must catch up (but never can) to the settler/unpained/abled body (or community

---

<sup>6</sup> Hilde Lindemann (2014) says much more on how our identity can be constituted by the perspectives of others. This paper does not depend on any particular account of personal identity, but does rely on the assumption that who we are in the world is not completely up to us.

or people or society or philosophy or knowledge system). In this way, the logics of pain has superseded the now outmoded racism of an explicit racial hierarchy with a much more politically tolerable racism of a developmental hierarchy. (Tuck and Yang 2014, 231)

What we see, then, is that a mere awareness of the harms that colonialism, racism, or other kinds of discrimination, may have done to others, is not necessarily helpful, and can serve to reinforce those harms rather than dismantle them.<sup>7</sup> We can see this failure of research as a failure of world-travel. Settler researchers who solicit pain stories from indigenous people generally fail to see them with loving perception. Even if they do technically follow appropriate protocols, they might fail to see who they are in the worlds they are attempting to enter, namely settlers attempting to extract narrative resources. As Lugones points out, world-travel involves becoming someone else. If we attempt to stay just the same, and maintain the same status and authority we enjoy in worlds in which we are at home, when we travel to the world of another, we might simply be refusing the travel. Arrogant perception on the part of settlers typically costs us very little, and our meta-ignorance may even obscure the fact that we are perceiving in these ways. And a consequence of this may well be that we ought to refrain from (or hold off on) conducting some research in order to avoid harming the communities we want to study.

### Social Responsibility, Knowing With Others, and Refusing Research

The pessimism of the previous sections could be taken to point towards a dismissal of social science research into marginalized communities, or the sense that one ought to stay out of cultural dialogue as an outsider, for fear of adopting an anthropological perspective. But given the extent to which, in contemporary society, a failure on the part of the privileged to understand the lives of others also frequently leads to harms, staying out of the conversation seems also to be a shirking of epistemic responsibility. This final section of the paper will indicate some ways in which conscientious researchers might want to think in more complexity about incorporating

---

<sup>7</sup> As such, Tuck (2010) argues for desire-based frameworks instead.

social responsibility into one's academic freedom. As the previous sections have indicated, even research that is undertaken with a concern for social responsibility can harm communities and people along the way. Solutions—or at least mitigating factors—for this can range from domain-specific guides, such as the aforementioned guide to doing research in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, to more general discussions of how to take a decolonial approach to research that incorporates indigenous methodologies (Smith 1999; Wilson 2008; Archibald et al. 2019).

In general, though, we can try to move towards an approach that Gaile Pohlhaus (2006) discusses as a way of “knowing with others” rather than just “knowing others.” Following Lugones' own concerns about the extent to which dominant perceivers do not need to care about the worlds of others, Pohlhaus writes that to improve our epistemic practices,

we need a different kind of attitude than one in which our interest is to control or predict phenomena, in part because the phenomenon with which we are interested here involves ourselves as knowers with other knowers. When our inquiry is guided by an instrumental attitude (of controlling or predicting) we approach knowing with a fixed set of interests and our perception of the world is patterned by those interests exclusively; however, because the kind of knowledge that is sought is that which would alter our way of viewing the world via knowing another with a different (and perhaps even changing) set of interests, it makes no sense to approach her in the same way we would, to use [Cora] Diamond's example, approach a tornado (Pohlhaus 2006, 196).

While of course researchers generally understand that the principles through which we conduct research involving other humans are generally different from the principles we use to study inanimate objects or the weather, learning about the circumstances of others' lives requires a particular kind of epistemic positioning. However, this paper has argued that overcoming the ignorance required to do responsible research and position ourselves appropriately, comes at a cost. It might cost an individual from that community, who is epistemically exploited as they are called on

to support the research of one of their academic peers. It might also cost the community as a whole if a researcher or research group missteps in their attempt to world-travel there.

Those unaccustomed to world-travel need to accept that to do responsible research that requires entering others' worlds, they may find themselves constructed in ways they do not understand or want to accept—as untrustworthy, as a cop, as an outsider, as “Other.” But a prerequisite for knowing with another (if that is in fact what we want to do) is indeed to be with them, in their worlds as they might be also in ours. This might mean that research does not go as the researcher plans, or that the findings are difficult to interpret in ways that would satisfy funding agencies' needs for deliverables.

World-traveling in a way that is not simply an empty exercise in tourism might require a great deal of work. It might require learning a new language, acclimatizing to a new environment, and cultivating genuine, rather than simply pseudo-empathy with another (Ortega 2006). Organizations and institutions that measure a researcher's productivity do not always acknowledge the amount of work that must go into a project that involves world-travel in Lugones' sense. Particularly when such work involves a researcher building trustful relationships with others, or learning the unspoken rules of an unfamiliar community, it is often difficult to articulate, much less measure. So while part of the onus is on researchers to carry out work in more ethical ways, these considerations are also crucial for organizations that enable research of various kinds.

The last consequence I will mention of these hidden costs of socially responsible inquiry is constructing into one's methodology the idea that research subjects might refuse. This is not exclusive to research that requires world-travel. Audra Simpson, a Kahnawake scholar, talks about asking herself in the midst of interviews with members of her nation, “Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?” (Simpson 2007, 78) Perhaps sometimes academia does not deserve one's knowledge. Following Simpson's treatment of refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that refusing research should be theorized as

potentially generative, and as part of treating the relationship between researchers and subjects as a genuine relationship between people. Refusing research can illuminate ways in which the research itself, perhaps in its orientation or background assumptions, is harmful to the people it presumes to study. Refusal does not need to be a flat denial, but could be a redirection to better courses of study that the research team might not have planned to undertake.

The implications, then, for socially responsible inquiry are not so dire (unless of course one is wedded to a colonial framework of knowledge). Ignorance can harm, but so can its remedies. Still, it is possible to take a stance on the pursuit of knowledge that positions us as knowing with others, rather than extracting knowledge from them as a resource. Such a stance may require a great deal of flexibility in how researchers perceive of themselves, their work, and its overall social value. But given the state of meta-ignorance in which many researchers who are not already at home in marginalized communities begin their projects, this need for flexibility should be expected. In other words, we should expect to get things wrong about others, and this will require us to change the ways in which we think with them (not just about them) in fundamental ways.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to XXX

## References

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. New York: Routledge.

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Archibald, Jo-Ann, Jenny Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo, editors. 2019. *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Berenstain, Nora. 2016. "Epistemic exploitation." *Ergo* 3(22):569–590.



Boilevin, Louise, Jules Chapman, Lindsay Deane, et al. 2019. "A manifesto for ethical research in the Downtown Eastside." Accessed August 30, 2019. <http://bit.ly/R101Manifesto>.

Coplan, Amy. 2011. "Will the real empathy please stand up? A case for a narrow conceptualization." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49:40–65.

DiAngelo, Robin. 2018. *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Dunning, David, Dale W. Griffin, James D. Milojkovic, and Lee Ross. 1990. "The overconfidence effect in social prediction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58(4):568-581

Ehrlinger, Joyce, Thomas Gilovich, and Lee Ross. 2005. "Peering into the bias blind spot: People's assessments of bias in themselves and others." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31(5):680–692.

Emerick, Barrett. 2016. "Empathy and a Life of Moral Endeavor." *Hypatia* 31(1):171-186.

Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Frye, Marilyn. 1983. *The Politics of Reality*. New York: Crossing Press.

Goldie, Peter. 2011. "Anti-Empathy." In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 302-317. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gruen, Lori. 2015. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals*. New York: Lantern Books.

Harvey, Jean. 2007. "Moral solidarity and empathetic understanding: The moral value and scope of the relationship." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38(1):22–37.

Keysar, Boaz, Shuhong Lin, and Dale J. Barr. 2003. "Limits on theory of mind use in adults." *Cognition* 89(1):25–41.

Khader, Serene. 2019. *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ledoux, Michael W. and Nadine McHenry. 2008. "Pitfalls of school-university partnerships." *The Clearing House* 81(4):155–160.

Lindemann, Hilde. 2014. *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Lugones, Maria. 2003. *Pilgimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mason, Rebecca. 2011. "Two kinds of unknowing." *Hypatia* 26(2):294–307.
- Maté, Gabor. 2009. *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Toronto, ON: Random House.
- Medina, José. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, Charles W. 2007. "White ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, 11–38. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1991. "Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, 51–80. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Narayan, Uma. 2013. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Ortega, Mariana. 2006. "Being lovingly, knowingly ignorant: White feminism and women of color." *Hypatia* 21(3):56-74.
- Oxley, Julinna C. 2011. *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, London.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile. 2006. "Knowing (with) others." *Social Philosophy Today* 22:187–198.
- Pohlhaus, Gaile. 2012. "Relational knowing and epistemic injustice: Toward a theory of willful hermeneutical ignorance." *Hypatia* 27(4):715–735.
- Prinz, Jesse. 2011. "Is empathy necessary for morality?" In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 211-229. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simpson, Audra. 2007. "On ethnographic refusal: Indigeneity, 'voice,' and colonial citizenship." *Junctures* 9:67–80.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2010. Can the subaltern speak? In *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind Morris. New York: Columbia University Press.

Stanlick, Sarah and Marla Sell. 2016. "Beyond superheroes and sidekicks: Empowerment, efficacy, and education in community partnerships." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 80–84.

Tremain, Shelley Lynn. 2017. "Knowing disability, differently." In *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, 175–184. New York: Routledge.

Tuck, Eve. 2010. "Breaking up with Deleuze: Desire and valuing the irreconcilable." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23(5):635–650.

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. 2014. "R-words: Refusing research." In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, edited by Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn. Sage Publications.

Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing.