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The Epistemology of Ignorance

Nancy Tuana explores the nature of the epistemology of ignorance in her essay titled, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance”. She describes our current epistemologies as too narrow, lacking in scope and truth because they focus only on the knowledge we have and ignore the knowledge we don’t have. If we want to more fully understand how our culture produces information, “we must also understand that practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, our *lack* of knowledge about a phenomena or, in some cases, an account of the practices that resulted in a group *unlearning* what was once a realm of knowledge” (Tuana 195). Essentially and somewhat paradoxically, if we want to understand how we have knowledge, we have to know what we don’t know, and why. The epistemology of ignorance serves to marginalize types of knowledge and erase or simply make invisible what was once and has always been available. This activity of making certain knowledge invisible contributes to the oppression of one class to those in power. It is this power dynamic that I will explore in specific relation by the science of women’s raced and classed bodies.

It is important to understand who is served and who suffers at the active cultivation of ignorance. Tuana focuses on our active ignorance of pleasure to explore the epistemology of ignorance, explaining that, “female sexuality is a particularly fertile area for tracking the intersections of power/knowledge-ignorance” (Tuana 196). The science of the female body remains a hotly contested topic where male dominated colonial interest and female agency and autonomy have fought for freedom and control. Scientific knowledge should be factual and

objective,¹ but Tuana reveals that such knowledge is influenced by the cognitive authority of male scientists who diminish the importance of the female orgasm and reinforce myths about female pleasure. Consequently, scientific ‘fact’ reflects social biases that work against women and maintain the gender disparity that exists between men and women.

Emily Martin investigates another misogynistic power dynamic which takes place at the cellular level in her article, “The Egg and the Sperm.” By examining the way gendered adjectives are attributed to the egg and the sperm, Martin discusses the impact that doing so has on our conception of “natural” female and male characteristics. This assumed naturalness serves to enforce and reinforce male dominance and is an example of the way in which science and culture are inseparable; a fact that the epistemology of ignorance often tries to make invisible. Finally, this paper examines how the activity of the epistemology of ignorance affects the racial power dynamic by silencing Henrietta Lacks’ contributions to science and world health in the story of the HeLa cells, as presented in Lisa Weasel’s article, “Feminist intersections in science: Race, Gender and Sexuality through the Microscope.” Weasel remarks, “yet what is also troubling from this perspective is the way in which the evolutionary debate within science over these cells, now given a ‘race’ of their own through their connection to the individual Henrietta Lacks, is itself mutated by the contextualization of the debate within a socially derived gendered racial framework” (Weasel, 188).

Tuana developed her notion of the epistemology of ignorance to account for gaps in our knowledge that she claims are hardly accidental. Often, ignorance is directly linked to oppression of one group by another, and Tuana cites Charles Mills as saying, “On matters related

¹ (from Latin: *scientia* meaning "knowledge") is an enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the world. An older and closely related meaning still in use today is that of Aristotle, for whom scientific knowledge was a body of reliable knowledge that can be *logically* and *rationally* explained.

to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Tuana 195).

Tuana conceptualizes a link between the racial epistemology of ignorance that Mills explains and a near replica of the epistemology of ignorance concerning gender that society perpetuates to maintain the subjugation of women to men.

This theory of ignorance is exhibited by clouding knowledge about the female pleasure system. Examples of this include likening the female reproductive system to an inverted penis, historically and contemporarily shaming women’s pleasure by identifying it as a threat to men, and claiming that if female orgasms do happen at all, they are an ancillary effect to the important (colonial) activity of reproduction. The knowledge generally available about women’s and men’s bodies, sexuality and pleasure is so disproportionate, favoring the latter, that we must allow ourselves to understand what this fact means: either women are scientifically and socially unimportant, or there is a system at play that reduces the amount of information we have about women and their bodies, *and that someone benefits from this lack of knowledge*. Arguing for the latter, Tuana focuses on the female orgasm to investigate who it is that benefits from the epistemology of ignorance concerning the science of women’s gendered and classed bodies.

In the mid-20th century Sigmund Freud created a classification of orgasm that deemed any clitoral pleasure deviant, describing the “child-like” clitoral orgasm and the “mature” vaginal orgasm. The move from the immature clitoral orgasm to the adult vaginal orgasm was made, according to Freud, during “a fresh wave of repression in which it is precisely clitoroidal sexuality that is effected” (Tuana 216). In other words, during puberty a girl must forget the

pleasures of clitoral orgasms and learn the new delights of vaginal orgasm. This movement that Freud suggests implies that the purpose of the female orgasm, and female pleasure in general, is to encourage heterosexual reproduction. From a biological, Darwinian-evolutionary perspective this account might appear legitimate, but the social implications are striking and completely unfair, to say the least. If female pleasure can only be understood specifically for heterosexual reproduction, then the sexuality and pleasure of lesbians, infertile women, women who have reached menopause, women who have not yet reached puberty and women who do not wish to have children is called into doubt. Not only does Freud's theory of female orgasm deny the pleasure of these women, but to borrow one of his favorite words, these women's sexuality and pleasures are deviant; they are *wrong*. These ideas reduce the common understanding of experiences of women's pleasure in a dynamic of the epistemology of ignorance that can lead to an inadequate experience of sexuality and pleasure for women. This is the result of the cognitive authority that male doctors possess that contributes to the shame and loss of knowledge concerning women's ability to have orgasms that are unconnected to heterosexual reproduction. When men are able to experience sexual pleasure regardless of the context and women can only experience it in the context of heterosexual reproduction, we see the consequences of the epistemology of ignorance as a process; namely that women are stripped of the freedom and agency of sexual experience that men enjoy.

If Tuana's theory of ignorance is applied to Emily Martin's article, "The Egg and the Sperm" we can reveal another way that the epistemology of ignorance yields primacy to men. Martin discusses the way in which positive and negative adjectives, along with gendered attributes are written into fundamental medical texts such as *Medical Physiology* by Vernon Mountcastle and *Molecular Biology of the Cell*, by Bruce Alberts et. al. Herein the female

reproductive system is described as a degrading process where “far from being *produced*, as sperm are, they (the eggs) merely sit on the shelf, slowly degenerating and aging like overstocked inventory” (Martin 104). These medical texts describe the female egg as passive, waiting dormant and allowing penetration by the sperm, whereas the sperm is characterized as having motility, being active, and being strong and able to compete for the egg. Martin shows that the biases that are written into these classic scientific texts are allowed by, and replicate the epistemology of ignorance. The feminine attributes associated with the egg, and the masculine attributes associated with sperm written in at the cellular level introduce biases and normalize them so that the gendered stereotypes that are attributed to men and women, which keep them separated in hierarchical spheres, seem justified. The process of our culture’s insertion of gendered attributes onto the cellular level equates literally, to the scientific origin of discrimination and the perpetuation of ignorance that allow prejudices against women to exist.

The intersection of race and sexuality in the story of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cells, as discussed by Lisa Weasel in “Feminist Intersections in Science: Race, Gender and Sexuality through the Microscope”, provides another opportunity to investigate the effects of the epistemology of ignorance on the perceived importance and value of the HeLa cells and Henrietta herself. Weasel references two articles written in 1991 with titles alluding to the HeLa cells mutating into new, different cells. To describe the content of these articles succinctly, Weasel articulates that “The crux of these articles was the conjecture that the HeLa cell line, due to many years growing in culture, had strayed far enough from its physiological and genetic connection to the human from whom it was derived to demand denotation as a new species” (Weasel 186). The suggestion that the HeLa cells be reclassified as a new species is not entirely unacceptable, but it is the type of cells that they were suggested to be that is suspect. Similarly

to how gendered attributes are assigned to the egg and the sperm, which gives a scientific justification for discrimination against women, the epistemology of ignorance leads us to believe that a reportedly promiscuous black woman's cells devolved into simple protist cells because of the value that our culture places on women of color and promiscuity (Weasel 190). Had Henrietta been a white woman with a "clean" sexual record these cells perhaps would have been said to evolve into a stronger more robust cell. However, because the epistemology of ignorance allows scientific knowledge to reflect cultural biases, Henrietta Lacks, from whom perhaps the most significant scientific material of the 20th century had been taken, has been slandered and unappreciated. Tuana's theory of ignorance brings to light the institutionalized ignorance, which blurs the knowledge of Henrietta Lacks and her contributions to science and health to maintain the status quo, that is, that primarily white men make contributions to science and save lives, not promiscuous poor black women.²

Nancy Tuana's epistemological account of ignorance reveals that not only is our knowledge actively produced, but our ignorance and lack of knowledge are too. This activity is supported by silencing the truth about the contributions to science and genetics that a poor black woman once unknowingly made; doubt over whether or not lesbians, infertile women, women who have reached menopause, women who have not yet reached puberty, and women who do not wish to have children can or should experience sexual pleasure; cognitive authority that inserts gendered attributes at the cellular level which effectually creates a scientific justification for discrimination against women, and uncertainty that contributes to a general ignorance surrounding the science of women's bodies. The epistemology of ignorance usually produces results that deprive some while maintaining the dominance of others, but could this system of

² There was only conjecture by doctors that Henrietta Lacks was promiscuous, there was no proof. Her family members refuted such claims vehemently (Weasel 189-190, Skloot 14).

knowledge tend to produce opposite results? If the activities that produce knowledge were restructured to produce equality into society and balance scientific inquiry the epistemology of ignorance may be greatly reduced. It is our job as feminists to work towards giving rise to systems of knowledge that promote autonomy, agency and human dignity, and it is with that goal in mind that I have presented and discussed the epistemology of ignorance.

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