

Chapter 11

Wrongful Requests and Strategic Refusals to Understand

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Abstract In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Patricia Williams notes that when people of color are asked to understand such practices as racial profiling by putting themselves in the shoes of white people, they are, in effect, being asked to, ‘look into the mirror of frightened white faces for the reality of their undesirability’ (1992, 46). While we often see understanding another as ethically and epistemically virtuous, in this paper I argue that it is wrong in some cases to ask another to attempt to understand certain positions or lines of thought. In developing my argument I draw on the work of María Lugones to argue for a view of agency that is epistemically interdependent. I examine the case described by Patricia Williams to demonstrate specifically how the understanding requested in this case unfairly undermines both epistemic and non-epistemic agency. I distinguish appropriate requests for understanding from inappropriate requests so as to make clear that I am not suggesting that it is wrong to make such requests when the understanding sought after is difficult, painful, or even when it forces one to reconsider the meaning of one’s actions. Finally, I examine an example from Susan Brison to show how strategic refusals to understand may provide a pathway toward new ways of knowing and being in resistance to oppressive regimes.

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In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Patricia Williams recounts how during debates in the 1980s over the use of buzzer systems by store owners in New York City, there were 'repeated public urgings that blacks understand the buzzer system by putting themselves in the shoes of white storeowners – that, in effect, blacks look into the mirror of frightened white faces for the reality of their undesirability' (1992, 46).

In *Aftermath*, an extended reflection on her survival from sexual assault and near death strangulation, Susan Brison writes 'When I started telling people about the attack, I said, simply, that I was a victim of an attempted murder. People typically asked in horror, "What was the motivation? Were you mugged?" and when I replied, "No, it started as a sexual assault," most inquirers were satisfied with that as an explanation. I would have thought that a murder attempt plus a sexual assault would require more, not less, of an explanation than a murder attempt by itself' (2001, 3).

In the first of these scenarios, legal theorist Patricia Williams focuses attention on a situation in which persons are asked to understand others in a way that seems utterly inappropriate. In the second, philosopher Susan Brison engages in what I will call an appropriate and strategic 'refusal to understand,' expressed through her confusion over why a murder attempt plus a sexual assault makes more sense to her interlocutors than a murder attempt alone. While we often view understanding others, and particularly understanding those with whom we do not share a common viewpoint, as ethically and epistemically virtuous, in this paper I consider: (1) whether and when it is wrong to ask another to attempt to understand certain positions or lines of reasoning and (2) whether and how explicitly refusing such requests might be ethically¹ and epistemically productive.

By 'understanding others' I mean attending to the sense of another's reasoning so that one is able to follow and to feel the possible force of that reasoning. We ordinarily expect understanding in this sense from responsible knowers for a number of reasons. First, it seems unreasonable to reject another's position before one has attended to her argument or to the possible reasons that could support her position. As a matter of responsible inquiry we are often implored to 'consider all sides.' Second, genuine disagreement arises only when one has seriously considered another's reasoning, and engaging in genuine disagreement can be epistemically productive. For one, we may find out that we are wrong to disagree. In cases where we do not find that we are wrong to disagree, such engagement often results in more clarity about where and why we disagree, thereby deepening self-understanding. Finally, attempting to understand another in a way that would be recognized by the speaker as capturing what she means or is trying to say, as opposed to 'twisting her words' or dismissing her out of hand, is something we generally think we owe our interlocutors as a matter of respect. Explicitly refusing to do so could even amount to a refusal of an interlocutor's position as an epistemic subject insofar as it preempts her from making a particular contribution to an important and common knowledge practice, the giving and receiving of reasons. Given the importance of

¹I use 'ethically' rather than 'politically' here to indicate that the kind of productivity involved, as I will show in the second half of this paper, is not toward any particular politically identifiable end but rather productive toward opening possibilities for a more ethical life together for which there are, as of yet, no defined ends.

this type of understanding, why might it be wrong to ask for it? Moreover, why might it be not only warranted to refuse a request for this type of understanding, but even ethically and epistemically productive to do so?

While merely considering someone's reasoning may seem innocuous, particularly when one is not required to concede the conclusion, there is a deeper problem operative in cases like that which Williams describes. Understanding another's reasoning requires one to do more than hold a particular set of claims in the mind. It requires one to follow the sense of those claims, so that the claims may be evaluated for what they mean. The meanings of words and our ability to discern those meanings, however, is not something that exists independently of human practices and ways of being in the world. To follow the sense of a claim is to comport oneself toward the world in particular ways and to participate within the 'grammar' which structures the sense of the claim. Our words and language practices situate us in relation to the world and one another not simply by pointing us toward objects waiting to be discovered but rather by providing socially established patterns from which we interact in and with the world. In Sara Ahmed's language, the senses of our words 'orientate' us.² When we accidentally misunderstand another and then subsequently correct ourselves, there is a shift both in comportment and response from disorientation to 'following the sense' of what was said. This reorientation manifests itself in various ways. For example, it may shift our affect, as happens when we suddenly understand a joke. Or it may bring some things into focus while (or by) placing others out of focus as might happen when we realize that our interlocutor is talking about a dream as opposed to an actual event. In the former, attention might focus on images and emotive details, whereas in the latter, both images and emotions might be disregarded altogether with attention paid to the logistics that could render such an event plausible.³ Once oriented to what was meant, we find that we can continue our engagement with the person instead of talking past one another, we are now 'on the same page.' When we are already attuned to the sense of what another is saying, the propositional and non-propositional attitudes that give sense to what is said and the range of responses (both physical and verbal) that indicate proper uptake of that sense go largely unnoticed as the field within which our claims figure as prominent. And when seeking to understand another whose claims we do not yet quite understand or see the point of, we try to find out where exactly she is 'coming from' so that we can 'find our feet' in what she says.

Importantly, the various attitudes and practices within which our claims make sense are held in place intersubjectively. To use one of Wittgenstein's examples,

²For more on 'orientating' see Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), particularly Chaps. 1 and 2.

³The connection between understanding, practice, background assumptions and range of sensible responses is also demonstrated in the following anecdote from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: 'I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that is a tree," pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow is not insane. We are only doing philosophy"' (1969, #467).

the shape of an arrow points in a particular direction not because that is how arrows in some predetermined way direct attention, but rather, the direction we follow just happens to be the way ‘we’ do things (1965). It is this ‘doing’ along with the place(s) it holds within our various practices that maintains the normative force of the arrow’s ‘directedness.’ Of course, history is rife with ways of doing things and practices that have been called into question, rightfully criticized, and challenged. Among the things we do is to direct our attention to the ways in which things are done, to consider the implications of doing things in that way, and to attempt to change them. Just because our language and practices have a somewhat arbitrary nature (we do not *have* to follow arrows in the way they ‘point’), does not mean that we can change them at will from a place outside them.⁴ We change our ways of proceeding from where we are and with the engagement of others who may or may not follow us. Once followed, our ways of approaching the world and one another become a new background within which we make and evaluate claims. The practices that comprise this new background (as with all practices) are maintained through our continued use of them. Consequently, following the sense of another’s reasoning is not wholly neutral, but requires one’s participation in, and so maintenance of, that which gives sense to her claims. In some cases, as I will argue, that which gives sense to another’s reasoning can alter and even curtail the listener’s range of possible significant action. The curtailing of the listener’s agency and the request that the listener participate in that which curtails her agency is what makes such cases as the first I quote at the outset of this paper so offensive.⁵ In contrast, explicitly refusing to think within certain structural contexts, as I contend is happening in the Brison passage, can expand agency in a way that brings listener and speaker into a more ethical epistemic relation.

In what follows, I first clarify the type of actions with which I am concerned and make the case for the claim that one’s range of agency with regard to these types of action is determined intersubjectively by practices that structure the senses of what we say and do. I then return to the case described by Patricia Williams to demonstrate specifically how asking for understanding in this case unfairly undermines the agency of certain persons. I distinguish appropriate requests for understanding from inappropriate requests so as to make clear that I am not suggesting that it is wrong to request understanding that is difficult or painful, or that forces one to reconsider the meaning of one’s actions. Finally, I examine the Brison quote to show how strategic refusals to understand may provide a pathway toward new ways of knowing and being in resistance to oppressive regimes.

⁴In ‘Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground’ (1996) Naomi Scheman argues cogently that this fundamentally Wittgensteinian insight need not lead to relativism or caprice.

⁵It should be noted as well that part of the insult involved in cases like the one presented by Williams is that marginalized people are more often than not the ones being asked to understand. I owe thanks to Alison Bailey for reminding me of this point. What I aim to show in this paper goes further, arguing that even if this history of asymmetry were empirically absent there is something wrong in asking for some positions to be understood.

11.1 Meaningful Action and Agency Shortchanged

Feminists have argued in numerous ways that one's ability to act in the world depends upon other agents. Here I draw on insights from a number of those arguments to demonstrate the degree to which meaningful action is enabled and constrained by intersubjective coordination with other agents. By intersubjective coordination I mean the manner in which agents recognize and respond to the world (including each other) within a background of propositional and non-propositional attitudes that determine what in that world is significant and how. This coordinated recognition and response is maintained (at least in part) by the way agents habitually comport their bodies over time within and toward the world in complex patterns that support the continuing of those very patterns.

To demonstrate simply what it means to habituate one's body in coordination with others, consider the example of driving a car. When one learns to drive a car, one must keep in mind various rules and practices, but also learn to use one's eyesight in particular ways (paying attention, not only to what is ahead, but also behind, and to the side through the use of mirrors). Once one has familiarized oneself with the 'rules' and has sufficiently habituated one's movements and one's attention accordingly, those rules and compartments become largely unconscious. Habituating the body and attention in this way greatly enhances one's ability to traverse long distances on roadways. At the same time, however, this very expansion of agency can constrict others' agency. If, in response to this expansion of agency, the placement of buildings and services is adapted solely to those bodies that can readily use and access motor transit, then some parts of the social world and the interactions that take place within them may become out of reach for people who can neither use nor access motor transit. Social constructionist disability theorists have long argued in this manner that one's ability to act in the world is something that does not reside in the individual as such, but rather is a function of the relationship between bodies and an environment that is shaped to fit particular bodies and not others.⁶ Consequently, how the world is shaped by those who move within it has an effect on who can do what. For these reasons, the ways in which we coordinate our bodies and attention with others can expand *and* constrict agency; moreover, they can do both at the same time.

Our coordinating capacities, however, go far beyond habituating our bodies to particular patterns so as to facilitate movement at high speeds without running into one another. Specifically, how we understand and respond to particular movements of the body and the practices within which those movements have significance is an important component of certain actions. These kinds of action are typically ones that make life something more than a mere biological existence, as in the case of the action of 'eating the first bite of cake on one's birthday' as opposed to simply

⁶For a good articulation of the social constructionist position on disability see Chap. 2 of Susan Wendell's *The Rejected Body* (1996).

consuming food.⁷ To clarify, certain actions depend upon what those actions *mean* and the way in which actions mean depends on far more than the way my individual body does or does not move. This is because the significance of my actions requires uptake, or recognition of the act that I intend, and whether this recognition occurs is not something within my complete control. For example, as a female, I cannot, no matter how hard I try and no matter what I do, perform a Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. I could perform something like it, provided that there were a couple who would ask me to perform such an action, but even if all parties present should wish me to bestow matrimony on a couple, this would not make the ceremony Roman Catholic. In a similar vein, agency is at stake in the current debate over same sex marriage. While a same sex couple wishing to enter into a marriage could perform a ceremony that they, their friends and family recognize as a marriage, in most of the United States (to the extent that national government and most local governments in the U.S. refuse to recognize their union by denying them all the rights and responsibilities of married couples) the couple is prevented from marrying and being married. In neither case is the action something that I am merely told that I cannot do, leaving open the possibility that I could transgress the law, perform the action, and suffer the consequences. Instead, our social set up and the meanings made available within it prevent even the possibility of my performing the action in question. These two examples show that my agency with regard to meaningful action depends upon particular social systems and the responses of others within them. Just as the arrangement of material space can enable and disable whole groups of people, so, too, can the arrangement of ‘rhetorical space’ (to use Loraine Code’s apt phrase).⁸

The examples above show that the possibility of a specific action can be foreclosed by a particular set of social practices. Of course, with regard to the second example, there are a whole range of actions that are either made difficult or illegal for a couple who wishes to be but is not recognized as married. Still, the case that opens this paper is one where what appears to be at stake is a less formally, yet equally binding constraint, and a constraint that directly affects a whole range of actions. This kind of constraint is like that found in an example María Lugones gives in her book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* within the context of demonstrating what she means by the term ‘world.’ Understanding both the example and how Lugones uses the term ‘world’ can help to clarify further the kinds of cases with which I am concerned.

In the chapter of *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* entitled ‘Playfulness, World-Traveling, and Loving Perception,’ Lugones explains how she came to understand and use the term ‘world’ when she encountered a confusion about the nature of her own

⁷The point here is not limited to the sociological claim that different societies have different things they take to be significant for living a life. Rather, to build and to have a life that is sustained over time regardless of one’s particular society requires sets of social practices within which actions take on significance.

⁸See Loraine Code’s *Rhetorical Spaces* (1995).

character and ability to act. Specifically she found that she was able to say truthfully about herself that she is fundamentally a playful person and that she is not playful at all. In other words, she could remember occasions in which her character was that of a fundamentally playful person and could call on persons she knew who were able to confirm that she indeed is playful even while she could remember occasions in which she was a person incapable of being playful at all and could call on other people to confirm that fact (2003, 86–87). To resolve the contradiction of being both playful and not playful, Lugones develops the notion of a ‘world.’ Before turning to that concept, however, I would like to dwell a bit on what Lugones means when she says that in some cases she is not playful at all even though she remembers herself as being fundamentally playful elsewhere.

One possible way of resolving the contradiction of both being and not being playful that is considered by Lugones is to say that while she *is* a playful person, she just has difficulty expressing that playfulness in particular situations, for example, because she is not at ease in them (87). However, Lugones stresses that this does not accurately describe her experience, for in the hypothetical case that would resolve the contradiction, Lugones notes she ‘could work on it’ (87), suggesting that in the actual cases where she is not playful she finds that no matter how much work she could possibly do, it would never result in an ability to be playful. This case resembles a description Lugones gives in an earlier chapter concerning agency under oppression, where she notes that often an oppressed person can remember being able to perform an act, but then finds that in the present situation she, ‘cannot do so because the action does not have any meaning or has a very different sort of meaning than the one it has in the other reality [she remembers]’ (57). If indeed this description fits Lugones’s own experience with not being playful, then ‘playfulness’ and all actions associated with being playful are simply not an option for Lugones in a way that bears resemblance to a woman’s inability to perform a Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. No matter how her body moves, no matter what she says, ‘doing something playful’ is not among the possible descriptions for her actions.

To explain how it can be possible to remember being able to do something one now finds it in principle impossible to do, Lugones posits that there is more than one ‘world’ and that she is not the same person across different ‘worlds.’ While Lugones indicates some characteristics of what she means and does not mean by ‘world,’ she does not stipulate an exact definition of it since, as she says, ‘the term is suggestive and [she does] not want to close the suggestiveness of it too soon’ (87).⁹ Nonetheless, what she does say about the term and her manner of using it are enough, I think, to help clarify the way in which possibilities for action are intersubjective and can be unfairly constrained in some cases due to the nature of that intersubjectivity. Of ‘worlds,’ Lugones says they are spaces inhabited by people

⁹The fact that Lugones leaves the term open ended and ‘suggestive’ allows her to show rather than just say one of the key insights she develops in the essay in which she introduces it. Specifically, Lugones’s treatment of the term ‘world’ exemplifies the kind of attitude she advocates as a way of being with and loving others.

containing ‘a description and construction of life, including the constructions of the relationships’ that sustain them (89). Worlds are ‘not autonomous, but intertwined semantically and materially, with a logic that is sufficiently self-coherent and sufficiently in contradiction with others to constitute an alternative construction of the social’ (20). In other words, within any individual world, material life is infused with semantic life and semantic life is animated by material relationships. As Lugones notes, a world must ‘be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people,’ so it is not an abstraction that exists independently of human interaction. Rather, worlds are actual ‘lived social arrangements’ (25) that exist in tension with one another due to relations of power that are imbedded in and made possible by human intersubjective relating.

Lugones’s use of the term ‘worlds’ is similar to (if not the same as) her modification and use of Victor Turner’s term ‘structures’(Turner 1974) so we can supplement what we have said so far with what Lugones says about structures. Lugones describes structures as “‘patterned arrangements”... [that] construct or constitute persons ...in the sense of giving them emotions, beliefs, norms, desires, and intentions that are their own’ (2003, 60). In contrast to Turner, Lugones does not see the enacting of roles within these patterned arrangements as personae that are put on and taken off by an individual who transcends the roles and relations, since even the ability to take on a persona depends on some sort of structure (60). In discussing this issue, Lugones uses the example of moving from the role of ‘husband’ to the role of ‘doctor,’ which she notes is itself structure dependent (60). In other words, that the same person can move from the role of husband to doctor requires a particular set of patterned social arrangements which enable this possibility and within which we can make sense of one person’s taking on these two roles. To highlight this point, we can contrast Lugones’s example with the example of being a ‘mother’ and being a ‘hospital chief of staff.’ Sexist structures do not allow fluid movement between these two roles, which is to say: the dominant set of practices and meanings within which mothers are mothers and within which chiefs of staff at hospitals are chiefs of staff does not support the possibility of being both. To the extent that the replacement of sexist structures with non-sexist structures changes the situation, allowing more possibilities for movement between these two roles, what it means to be such things as a ‘mother’ and ‘chief of staff’ has also changed. Importantly, these changes in structures and meanings do not come about because of an individual act of will or an individual way of understanding what it means to be a mother or chief of staff. Individual intentions, actions, and understanding are made possible by structures and not the other way around. Nonetheless, the patterns and practices that comprise structures exist only insofar as they are animated in material and semantic relationships.

Keeping in mind what Lugones says about ‘structures’ we can return to the notion of ‘worlds’ to say that within the heterogeneity of any given world, resistant practices and meanings can arise among persons that bring new worlds into being. This is not a matter of thinking about oneself however one happens to choose, but rather it is a matter of coherently and creatively inhabiting meaningful relations with others that give rise to agential possibilities. When this happens, it is possible

for there to be more than one world in any given present. Because these worlds exist simultaneously, anything that happens in one of them will potentially have effects in all present worlds. What those effects will be depends upon the set of patterns and practices that maintain the given world in which those effects happen.

Returning to Lugones's example of being playful, to say there are worlds in which she is not playful attests to there being historical practices and meanings that construct her possibilities in such a way that make playfulness impossible for Lugones in principle. To say that there are worlds in which she is indeed a playful person, attends to alternate historical practices and meanings that construct Lugones in ways that make playfulness not only a possibility, but a fundamental part of who she is. These 'worlds' exist in tension and are embodied in her interactions with others.

In sum, Lugones's notion of 'worlds' helps us to see that who a person is and what she can do occur within a living context; the meaning or significance of our thoughts and actions is something that cannot be separated from the circumstances in which they occur. These circumstances are connected to a number of aspects of human social life, including the history of ways we understand and interact with one another. This history does not determine how we *must* proceed, but it does set constraints on our range of possible action insofar as it is the place *from which* we proceed. When such histories include categorizing certain persons as members of particular groups constrained by such things as stereotypes and institutional prejudice, the range of meaningful action available can be unfairly stratified in ways that are both material and semantic. Nonetheless, the possibility of multiple 'worlds' shows that our sustained relating with one another can form creative agential resistance that exceeds the bounds of worlds of oppression, even while standing in precarious tension with those oppressive worlds. Importantly, this resistance is not individual and the possibility of resistance does not make or guarantee an *actual* world of resistance. Rather, worlds must be animated interactively among agents. Insofar as our practices of understanding are integral to the way in which our material relations have semantic life and to the way our semantic life directs us materially, whom we understand and how we understand them can be a matter of continuing worlds of domination or animating worlds of resistance.

11.2 Wrongful Requests

Returning specifically to the first scenario with which we began, we can now detail why some requests for understanding are epistemically and ethically wrong. As Williams's essay reveals, in the case she describes, persons are being called to understand something that only makes sense from within patterns and practices that hold oppressive power relations firmly in place and that actively prevent those asked to understand from calling attention to this fact. To use Lugones's language, in this kind of case, persons are being asked to inhabit worlds that oppressively constrain their agency, including their epistemic agency, so that it is impossible to

fill the request of understanding without simultaneously foreclosing the ability to demonstrate the harm perpetuated by the world that sustains the understanding. In these cases, demonstrating the harm that the requested understanding does can only be done from worlds that actively resist the sense of the world one has been implicitly asked to inhabit.

The piece from which the Williams's example comes is, as its subtitle announces, 'a commentary on the genre of legal writing' (Williams 1992, 44), investigating the relationships between communication, understanding, and agency. Specifically, one of the main insights conveyed by the essay is that the call for neutrality and for 'understanding all sides' in our communication with one another is anything but neutral and can make certain 'sides' of the situation invisible without appearing to do so. While Williams focuses on what can and cannot be conveyed via legal writing, her essay sheds light on the question of what understanding another can *do* with regard to one's possibilities for action and communication generally speaking. The essay invites the reader to think about calls for understanding within the context of at least two infringements on Williams's own agency: (1) being refused entrance to a Benetton clothing store and (2) being thwarted on multiple occasions and in a variety of contexts from her attempts to convey that story. Williams's rendering of the first of these infringements demonstrates how a 'world' can unfairly constrain certain persons' range of possible action while simultaneously making invisible the way in which it does so. Williams's attention to the second of these infringements shows how the call to neutrality and to understand 'all experiences' can reassert the very 'world' analyzed in the first of these infringements.

Williams's detailing of the initial infringement begins with an explanation of the use of buzzer systems to allow entry into stores during the 1980s in New York City and some examples of the reasoning given at that time in support of their use. Of note is that some of the arguments, specifically those that contrast the infringement on agency in being refused entrance to a store with that of murder and assault, were persuasive enough that 'even civil rights organizations backed down' (44). It is important to note here that Williams does not analyze these arguments directly nor does she ask her reader to follow their logic to see if they are cogent. Instead she indicates what those arguments *do* (put those who follow them in a place from which they cannot respond) and then proceeds to offer a way of thinking about how they do it. Demonstrating how the arguments have this effect requires us to see the arguments from a world that explicitly resists the commitments that maintain the sense of those arguments themselves. Williams accomplishes this task by writing from a field of sense that is maintained by anti-racist gestures and assumptions. Williams's own account of the use of buzzers to profile shoppers incorporates details and moves that are actively suppressed and/or deemed insignificant according to the sense of the public debate. This shift has the effect of bringing the background of the public debate into focus thereby allowing her readers to analyze the 'ways of seeing' that maintain the sense of the public debate. Using Lugones's language, Williams's own account asks us to see the debate on buzzers from within a world that is resistant to the one in which that debate took place. This resistant world emphasizes what racial profiling does with attention to the concrete (as opposed

to abstracted) agency of the one profiled. It also shows how the world from which the practice of racial profiling is understood ‘only as an abstract precaution’ (46) is structured by racist assumptions concerning what it means to be Black and by racist omissions concerning the history of race in the United States.

Williams presents to the reader a specific example from which to think about the use of buzzers, her own experience of being refused entry to a store. She begins by indicating why she wanted entrance to a particular store on a particular day: Benetton Clothing store on the Saturday before Christmas to purchase a sweater she saw in the window as a gift for her mother. These details call the reader’s attention to Williams as a unique source of valuing, a person whose experiences are imbued with meanings generated from within her own life and relations with others. This attention foregrounds the ‘fullness’ of Williams’s ‘public participatory self’ (46), as one who has a life from which the significance of our social interactions can be understood. In contrast, these kinds of details are actively prevented from mattering within the world that structures the public debate, as Williams reminds us: within that debate there are people, ‘who approve of those who would bar even as they deny that they would bar *me*’ (46 emphasis in original). Of course, *every* person barred from entry to a store is a ‘*me*,’ but this point is actively discounted in the public debate by figuring the one profiled as an abstract individual whose defining characteristic is to be either a purchaser or a criminal. Reducing the one profiled to such a narrow description invites the use of crime statistics (actual or imagined) as the most significant aspect to be considered among groups divided according to racialized categories with no attention whatsoever to the history from which those categories came to be. Under such a framework, race matters in racist ways (generalizing action across a group of individuals as though being a member of that group caused members to act in particular ways) while engaging in racist omissions that do not allow race to matter in anti-racist ways (the profiled is imagined to be one who ‘happens’ to belong to a group devoid of any attention to the historical and institutional inequalities that created the group to begin with).

Actively resisting the move to consider herself primarily in terms of a statistic, Williams details the character of her encounter with the store clerk to whom her own meaningful relations in the world brings her. What is considered a ‘mere inconvenience’ from the perspective that framed the public debates now comes to light as a fundamental disrespect of another’s personhood that leaves open very little possibility of response. The structure of power in the situation literally constrained the range of sensible action available to Williams. In Williams’s words, when she was denied access to a store for which access was clearly being given to those whose skin was not racialized Black like her own:

There was almost nothing I could do... No words, no gestures, no prejudices of my own would make a bit of difference to [the white store clerk]; his refusal to let me into the store...was an outward manifestation of his never having let someone like me into the realm of his reality. He had no compassion, no remorse, no reference to me; and no desire to acknowledge me even at the estranged level of arm’s-length transactor. (45)

Within this light, namely a light that makes sense of Williams as a full agent within the context of racism in the U.S., the use of buzzers is neither necessary nor

merely inconvenient; rather it is an enactment of power relations with a long tradition that maintains white privilege and dominance. As Sara Ahmed writes, “[being] “stopped”...does not simply stop one from getting somewhere, but changes one’s relation to what is “here”” (2006, 160).

Moreover, the details of the clerk himself, a ‘white [male] teenager wearing running shoes and feasting on bubble gum’ (Williams 1992, 45), reverberate with the arguments of the public debate, cited by Williams just four sentences earlier, that ‘it is not all blacks who are barred, just “17-year-old black males wearing running shoes and hooded sweatshirts”’ (44). The contrast asks the reader to consider how it is that things like ‘wearing running shoes’ and ‘chewing bubble gum’ appear differently when inhabited by white teenage males vs. black teenage males, when worn by those inside New York City boutiques vs. those left standing on the streets outside them. In other words, the contrast asks us to consider not only what kind of worlds make it possible for some to bar entrance to others, but also that make it possible to ‘see’ this barring as a ‘necessary evil’ rather than a fundamental infringement on the rights of those barred.

In highlighting the way in which profiling via buzzers sets up an asymmetrical relation between persons, both of whom are capable of being sources of value, Williams reveals the public debate to be grounded in white privilege in ways that reduce Black persons to types of bodies considered nothing more than potential criminals. Given the orientation of the debate, the ‘repeated public urgings that blacks understand the buzzer system by putting themselves in the shoes of white storeowners’ is a demand that Blacks inhabit a world (that is, operate within a set of patterns and orientations) in which their very own bodies are regarded as ‘kinds’ of bodies whose movements take on predetermined meanings in ways that white bodies are not subjected to. Such an understanding makes sense only within a world that is maintained by ‘whiteness’ as an invisible ground within which that which is not white appears as a particular type about which one can make generalizations.¹⁰ As Williams points out, when white men engage in all kinds of acts, most people, ‘not only [do] not claim but actively resist [believing] that [they represent] any kind of ‘white male’ norm’ (243). Within a world that is oriented in this way, those whose bodies are identified as Black cannot simply move through the world as those whose bodies remain unmarked (in their whiteness) can, but must anticipate and negotiate within a context that already finds them suspect. Moreover, because these assumptions are built into the sense of the debate, it curtails the ability of people of color to convey this fact from within that debate. In other words, if Williams were to approach the debate directly, understanding it on its own terms, she would have to consider herself as less than a full epistemic agent to begin, as one in the presence of whom it is reasonable to fear for one’s life. From within such a world, it is hardly possible to call attention to the outrageousness of being asked to engage from this position. Asking Williams (or any Black American) to understand

¹⁰See Ahmed (2006) Chap. 3.

the arguments of those who support racial profiling is to ask her to follow (and subsequently maintain) the sense of a context in which her agency, including her epistemic agency, is automatically curtailed for no good reason.

The remainder of Williams's essay details her attempts at creative resistance to the world that structures her agency in such oppressive ways. In each case, she highlights how calls for a 'neutral' presentation of the information implicitly require one to participate in worlds or habits of thought that undermine her own epistemic authority and/or agency in racist ways. For example, in attempting to publish an article about this incident in an issue of a law review journal on inclusion and exclusion, Williams was asked to remove all references to her race from her account because the journal had a 'race neutral' policy that forbade references to one's race. Williams notes that the removal of race from her story made it lose all sense. Why on earth was she barred entrance to a store in New York City on the Saturday afternoon before Christmas? And given that there must have been some bizarre occurrence that would help us make sense of the refusal to allow her to shop, why is she so upset about it? Alternately, if one is to make sense of the story, the account becomes one, 'in which the reader [has] to fill in the gap by assumption, presumption, prejudice, or prejudice... [one in which the reader is made] to participate in old habits of cultural bias' (Williams 1992, 48). In other words without the information that Williams is Black clearly stated in the story, it becomes a story which can only be understood by a habit of thought in which one fills in the detail that Williams must be Black so that the store clerk's actions can 'make sense.' However, it is precisely this kind of 'making sense' that Williams is working against. Instead, Williams insists on conveying her story on terms in which the sense of the story is not dependent on filling in an assumption about who she is based on what is done to her, but rather in seeing and understanding the store clerk for who *he* is based on *his* actions, namely, racist. This example highlights yet again that the sense of our claims depends on a set of background attitudes, commitments, and habits of thought, or what Lugones would call a 'world,' and that asking another to understand one's claims is in effect asking another to inhabit the world that gives those claims their sense. In this particular case using the assumption that 'black persons are frightening to some people' constrains Williams in a way that the assumption 'a white person who uses his power in a situation to deny access to a Black person is a racist' does not.

In sum, while understanding an argument, position, or viewpoint need not require one to agree with what is understood, it does require one to participate within the world that gives sense to what is to be understood. Continued participation in (or cooptation into) the practices and habits of thought required to understand from within particular worlds sustains the life of those worlds. Because material and semantic relations are infused with power, some worlds are arranged in ways that unfairly constrict some of its members' possibilities for meaningful action and epistemic participation. For that reason, it is wrong, both ethically and epistemically to ask another to understand when the conditions for the possibility of that understanding systematically and asymmetrically constrict her agency.

11.3 Some Caveats

Here I would like to clarify a few things that I am *not* saying. First and foremost, my argument does not imply a condemnation of requests for understanding others who have something to tell us that we simply do not want to hear. There are many cases in which we ought to understand what others have to say even though it is troubling or even damning, for example, when we have hurt another through our actions. Notice, however, that understanding that my actions are unjust need not limit my agency in the way that understanding the white storeowner's fear in Patricia Williams's essay limits the agency of Black subjects. Consider for example that the white storeowner ought to understand how his use of a buzzer system is unjust. An attempt on the part of the white storeowner to understand or follow reasoning that supports the view that his actions are wrong might be difficult or painful for him, since he may like to think of himself as someone who acts rightly. That this is difficult or painful, however, in no way unfairly limits his possibilities for action. He may find himself no longer able to make sense of the thought that he is innocently trying to protect himself and his business by barring certain persons from shopping at his store. But there are many actions he can perform that would meaningfully embody 'protecting my business;' the understanding does not require him to forfeit all possibilities for action that can be recognized in this way. Nor are there significant actions available to others that are absolutely unavailable to him due to a prior categorization as a type of person.

In saying that it is wrong to request others to understand in cases that unfairly limit those others' agency, I am not suggesting that agency is, should, or could be infinitely unlimited. As indicated above, the meaning of my words and actions is not, nor should it be, determined solely by what I think or want them to mean. This is an important point, since often persons in dominant positions say and do things that effectively harm others without expressly thinking that is what they are doing; the fact that they do not consciously intend for their actions to do harm does not take away the harm that those actions do. To wit, the case of wrongfully 'asking another to understand' may not be consciously *intended* to be asking another to limit her agency, but that is what these requests do. What one thinks or wants one's words to mean is not automatically equivalent to what they mean. We often make mistakes and are corrected for those mistakes, and in some cases we are even held accountable for those mistakes. Instead, I am arguing that we should approach others and have the right to expect to be approached by others in ways that enable an equitable range of possibilities for meaningful action. This range is not infinite; nonetheless, it ought not to be systematically asymmetrically bounded.

Lastly, my argument does not necessarily imply that one ought to cut off all engagement with others who proceed in ways that limit one's range of meaningful action. First, it can be quite dangerous and in some cases impossible to refuse to engage with those in relation to whom one is materially vulnerable. Navigating power relations safely may force one to attend to how others understand the world, even when that understanding leaves little or no room for one's own agency.

So I do not condemn those who *do* understand others in ways that shortcut their own agency. My argument concerns only the wrongfulness, both ethical and epistemic, of requesting that type of understanding from others. The ethical wrong consists in asking another to participate in a set of meanings that constitute her in ways that unfairly constrain her agency. The epistemic wrong lies in the preemption of the one who is requested to understand from bringing this constraint on her agency to light. In such cases it is worth noticing that there is something peculiarly epistemically violent about situations where someone is forced or even asked to understand the world in ways that asymmetrically limit her agency.¹¹

In spite of this violence, the possibility of simultaneously animating multiple worlds provides resistant opportunities to play on and within those understandings in strategically useful ways. Using Lugones's language, by occupying multiple worlds simultaneously, one can use dominant meanings in oppressive worlds to accomplish vital tasks in worlds of resistance, as, for example, when slave songs were used to navigate the Underground Railroad during the time of slavery in the United States.¹² Alternately, one can in some cases refuse to understand another without refusing to engage with her in ways that hold open possibilities for ethical epistemic relations. Using Lugones's language, refusing to follow the sense of worlds that limit my possibilities is not the same thing as simply disengaging, since multiply present worlds are always 'intertwined materially and semantically.' A refusal to engage from within a world of domination can be an invitation to others to experience that world from within an alternate world that resists domination. In other words, a refusal to engage from within a particular background by way of not understanding can call attention to that background; it can also provide a starting point for re-coordinating our ways of thinking and acting together. Clearly, this kind of refusal might not prove productive when engaging with persons who have no expressed interest or commitment to dismantling worlds of oppression. However, it can be a way of snapping those who do hold such interest out of bad habits of thinking and toward creatively animating new ones. Such refusals are one way to begin the work of dismantling worlds that oppressively construct some inhabitants as partial agents and welcoming knowers to worlds that do not.

¹¹This kind of knowledge produces what W.E.B. DuBois referred to as 'double consciousness': 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder' (1989, 3).

¹²Allsion Bailey's 'Strategic Ignorance' (2007) details these types of cases. My own suggestion below differs insofar as it provides a way of thinking about the destruction of oppressive worlds, whereas Bailey's suggestion is for considering how resistant subjects can get things done in spite of the continued existence of oppressive worlds.

11.4 Strategic Refusals

Consider Brison's confusion (feigned or unfeigned) when she says, 'I would have thought that a murder attempt plus a sexual assault would require more, not less, of an explanation than a murder attempt by itself' (2001, 3). Brison's refusal to understand why the addition of a sexual assault to a murder attempt would give sense to the latter brings into relief the ground within which others (including ourselves) are able to make sense here. In a world in which a random murder attempt makes no sense at all, but a random sexual assault followed by a murder attempt makes perfect sense, women's agency is constrained in a way that would be unthinkable for men. By calling our attention to this fact, Brison's refusal calls on us to consider how the world we live in allows this situation to continue. It also asks us to think about what it would mean to live in a world in which rape and sexual assault made no sense at all. To think in this way is to consider the conditions for the possibility of female agency and to expose the ways in which common habits of sense making intertwine with material conditions to constrict women's possibilities.

Brison's refusal to understand is not a denial of the actual and real oppressive world in which women's agency is under both material and discursive constraint. Instead, her refusal positions her in relation to that world in a way that refuses that world's terms; in other words, at the moment of 'not understanding' Brison refuses to rely on sexist attitudes or habits of thought as the ground within which she makes sense of things. For that reason her refusal does not deny the reality of sexual assault, but brings into focus the gestures and attitudes that maintain sexual assault as nothing peculiar. This type of refusal foregrounds the violence of those material forms of life that sustain worlds in which sexual assault does make sense while simultaneously reaching toward the possibility of worlds in which it does not.

A strategic refusal to understand does not completely dismantle an oppressive world, since worlds are maintained not only by our comportments and habits of mind, but also by the practices and institutions within which those comportments and habits have a place. For this reason, so long as oppressive institutions and practices exist, the maintenance of oppressive worlds continues. Nonetheless, a strategic refusal to understand can help us to illuminate how those institutions and practices work by bringing them out of the background and to the fore. Moreover, such refusals affirm that oppression is not necessary, but actively maintained by our interactions with one another, even on the most basic level of how we approach the world. Lastly, a refusal to understand can be not only a way of animating resistance, but also of lovingly inviting others to interact in ways that make the conditions for more equitable agency possible. In other words, Brison's refusal to understand invites the reader to consider why and how a person might find sexual assault incomprehensible and to further reflect on how our institutions and practices might be arranged so as to make that incomprehensibility the norm.

Contrasting Brison's refusal to understand with a refusal that fails to open women's agency helps to further define the strategic use of refusing to understand. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw cites evidence that women jurors are often the

last to recognize that rape survivors are not responsible for being raped, precisely because doing so reveals female jurors' own vulnerability (1996, 371). Similarly, we could imagine a refusal to understand a murder attempt plus a sexual assault in a way that hints at the possibility that the victim of such an attack did something to provoke it, so as to assure oneself that one is not vulnerable to attack in the way the victim was. In effect this kind of refusal would posit an all too familiar, 'That makes no sense. What did she do to end up in that situation?' Notice, however, that this refusal to understand remains firmly implanted in a world where *sexual assault itself* makes sense. In contrast, Brison's strategic refusal calls into question why sexual assault would make any sense at all, no matter what women do or do not do. When used strategically, refusals to understand highlight the ways in which oppressive worlds constrain agency. Such refusals are *political* insofar as they forward the aim of the feminist project to call into question the conditions of women's oppression. At the same time, such refusals can be *ethically and epistemically productive* insofar as they ask us to move toward new ways of making sense within which we might discover new possibilities for acting in and thinking about the world together.

Meaningful action is something that does not begin and end with the person acting. How others understand the world and make sense of their experiences has an impact on what we are able to do and how we make sense of our own experiences. Moreover, how we all understand and make sense of our experiences is held in place not only by each other, but by the institutions and practices within which we find ourselves living and acting. These institutions and practices are perpetuated by our use of them to understand ourselves and each other. Consequently, the contexts within which we make sense of, or refuse to make sense of, our own and others' reasoning have significant implications for our ethical and epistemic lives.

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