The Terrifying Tale of the Philosophical Mammy

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Recently I’ve been reflecting on the possibility that choices I’ve made and commitments I’ve accepted—choices and commitments like being part of the academy and treating philosophy as a productive way to pursue truths about race and racism—have made me into a Philosophical Mammy.1 In short, as a Black Feminist Philosopher, I have been thinking about my role in philosophy. Despite the worrisome evidence, I hold fast to the belief that my intellectual identity can be defended to include all of my intellectual ancestors: both those in the canon of Western philosophy and intellectual forebears such as Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Patricia Hill Collins, among others.2 Some of those to whom I owe an intellectual debt are more like cousins; alongside a small but growing number of black female philosophers, I occupy a unique position.3 It is to them that I most owe an account of myself. I believe I have one to give, an earnest defense that is not simply self-serving but one that is also not a concession.

The goal of this essay is to investigate and answer the challenge posed by the possibility of a Philosophical Mammy. What is revealed is not just the personal, social, and professional location of one particular philosopher, but a surprising and valuable stage in the ongoing progress of both black feminism and philosophy.

How Does One Get the Job “Philosophical Mammy”? Like other black female archetypes, the Mammy first emerged in ideological service to slavery. Depicted as happy, she challenged “critics who argued that slavery was hard and demeaning.”4 The “happiness” of the Mammy relies on her having a very specific character:

Mammy had no personal needs or desires. She was a trusted adviser and confidante whose skills were used exclusively in service of the white families to which she was attached. . . . She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children. Her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white[s].5

The Mammy survives into Reconstruction as a symbol of unification: from loyal Southern slave to loyal Northern servant. For the black community, however, the Mammy is a race traitor. “Whatever [the Mammy] had . . . she surrendered to those who lived to lynch her sons and ravish her daughters.”6 She survives

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into current popular culture in various films and television shows as sassy, as little seen, as a wise black friend who appears briefly to magically solve the problems of white heroines and disappear just as quickly.

What does it mean to be a Philosophical Mammy? The central charge against the Mammy is that she sacrifices her own interests and those of her kindred to serve an Other who oppresses her. The charge against me is that I have struggled to defend, protect, and prop up the Anglo-American philosophical tradition—and by extension its institutional manifestations—despite its apparent woeful disregard for both my social peers and my intellectual interests and methods. The Philosophical Mammy is the black woman carefully promoting and protecting the traditions—both institutional and methodological—of Anglo-American philosophy while it disregards and suppresses her and her kindred. She does this despite the fact that little has been done to improve the representation of women or blacks in the profession. She does this despite the fact that while some room has been made in the profession for discussions of methodological approaches to philosophy that aren’t commensurate with analytic and other Western traditions, very few philosophers are successfully integrating those approaches into the profession. Although we are allowed to sometimes talk about the possibilities of such approaches, because the proof is in the publications, hard questions remain: Is it possible to publish enough to maintain one’s place in the profession when these different methodologies are applied? Will philosophy allow one to build a career if that career’s central focus is on work that will improve the social and material circumstances of blacks and other minorities?

My unique material and social circumstance—numbering among the zero percent of philosophers in the United States who are black, female, and fortunate enough to enjoy paid employment in the profession for which earning a doctorate in philosophy is commonly an apprenticeship—necessarily changes my relationship to academic philosophy. My presence in the profession—in its physical spaces like departments, conferences, and in its conceptual spaces like committees and editorial boards—is controversial and a problem. My intellectual identity—as a Black Philosopher, a Feminist Philosopher, and a Black Feminist—frames that already contested relationship as a bind: Does choosing academic philosophy position me to ignore my kindred in favor of securing the well-being of those who are (ideologically and otherwise) indifferent to me or worse?

I Was Warned . . . Repeatedly

Weeks away from my first semester of philosophy in graduate school, a once-removed cousin asked me a smart question that I thought was dumb. He said, “Are you going to study their philosophy or our philosophy?” I tried to look wise and nodded condescendingly as if I was pretending to understand a story told by a toddler, then patiently replied that there was no “us” and no “them” in philosophy. The worst part is that I knew better. Long before I began my apprenticeship into professional philosophy, I had already been warned.
While enrolled in a specialized liberal arts program that was especially concerned with critical engagement, I first encountered Audre Lorde’s worry that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” While I take Lorde to have been worried about a very specific set of tendencies that she believed white feminism to have borrowed from patriarchy, the worry about the master’s tools seemed to demand an interrogation of all of my disciplinary practices. Philosophy, a discipline that still struggles to incorporate and benefit from the critical feminism and critical race theory that has had considerably more success in other disciplines, seems especially worthy of such scrutiny.

Lorde was, in fact, worried about the way that marginalized women’s resources are spread thin by the requirement that those women make sense of themselves, their needs, and their oppression for their oppressors:

To stretch across the gap of [privileged] ignorance and to educate [the privileged] as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.

The same worry is expressed in Donna Kate Rushkin’s “The Bridge Poem”: “I’ve had enough / I’m sick of seeing and touching / Both sides of things / Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody.” This worry is spread throughout the namesake collection of essays—This Bridge Called My Back—that Rushkin’s poem opens. In these texts, Lorde, Moraga, and Anzaldúa, alongside other women of color called forth the Third Wave of Feminism. This next stage of feminism endeavored to learn from, rather than silence, the discordant voices within the feminist movement. These feminists also heralded a feminism centered on women of color. In order for feminists of color to do the hard work of understanding and interpreting themselves, they had to put down the burden of interpreting Others.

I was warned again in graduate school. My graduate training immersed me in the Western canon of philosophy and feminist philosophy, and I was torn between optimism and pessimism. Feminist thought was slowly influencing the way people read and understood canonical philosophical thought; I hoped black feminist thought would as well. On the other hand, research that didn’t locate me in that Western canon—that did not clearly build the bridge from there—seemed ill-advised, even dangerous. I struggled to understand what an earnest commitment to my black feminist heritage would look like. I became especially worried about Derrick Bell’s “Third Rule of Racial Standing”:

The black person who publicly disparages or criticizes other blacks who are speaking or acting in ways that upset whites [is] granted “enhanced standing” even when the speaker has no special expertise or experience in the subject he or she is criticizing.

When I dedicated my efforts to better understandings of Kant and even feminist criticisms of Kant, did I tacitly endorse those thinkers and their methodologies over black feminist ones? Was I succumbing to “pressure to . . . legitimate a system that

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devalue[d] and exclude[d] the majority of black women? Was I “trading up” by real-locating my resources to the care and concern of a perspective that wasn’t truly mine?

As I have passed through the trial of apprenticeship into the crucible of professionalism, the worries provoked by Lorde, Bell, and Collins have ceased to be anxious conjectures and have become genuine predicaments. My work concerns gender, race, racism, sexism, and moral agency and is informed by several intellectual traditions including black philosophy, feminist philosophy, and black feminism. I struggle to understand the intersections of racism and sexism in ways that will reveal and undermine the systematic oppression to which black folk, particularly black women, are still subject and by extension promote black flourishing.

This pursuit has taken me in some surprising directions both in terms of some of my chosen methodologies—cognitive science and experimental philosophy, for example—and in terms of the ideas to which I’ve committed. As I’ve earnestly struggled to understand the social construction of race and the consequences of the complicated ways race and gender identities are constructed and privileges distributed, I have found myself making what at least appear to be worrisome commitments both in writing and in public. A number of experiences blend into an amalgam containing these shared particulars: me smiling broadly, nodding encouragingly at a room full of white faces (often white male faces), reassuring them of the certainty of my privilege. That I have class privilege (as well as privilege related to age, ability, and sexuality) and that it shapes other social dimensions of my life—like race and gender—is not a particularly controversial idea. However, this image—a black woman standing up in a room full of white folk, testifying to her privilege, in a way that smacks of the effort to bridge some gap, in a way that could be understood by those present as a concession or criticism of theories articulating the problems of white and male privilege—has worried me. This is the danger of the Philosophical Mammy.

A closer look, however, reveals that my worries have focused too much on how the content of my ideas—the thinkers I read and criticize, the positions I occupy relative to those thinkers—might constitute a betrayal of my intellectual heritage. They have failed to see my dedication to the methods of black feminism.

The Bridge I Must Be

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful.

Fundamental to black feminist thought, argues Patricia Hill Collins, are the alternative methods black women employ to produce and validate knowledge. Detached researchers, producing objective generalizations, absent emotional or even ethical investment in their subject, are required to legitimate black women’s knowledge claims in the “Eurocentric, masculinist knowledge-validation process.” However,
even after substantial mastery of white masculinist epistemologies, many black women scholars invoke their own concrete experiences and those of other black women in selecting topics for investigation and methodologies used. . . . Such women felt that . . . the best way of understanding another person's ideas was to try to share the experiences that led the person to form those ideas. At the heart of the procedures used by connected knowers is the capacity for empathy.¹⁹

There are two features of the black feminist epistemology that Collins describes here that I am interested in highlighting: (1) the elevation of concrete experience as both a source of intellectual concern and a criterion for critical analysis, and (2) the import of empathetic extension to the employment and function of that method. Armed with this reconsideration, I am finally able to articulate why, appearances to the contrary, the Philosophical Mammy is an illusion.

Before Joyce Mitchell Cook earned a doctorate from Yale in 1965, in an important sense, there were no black women philosophers (professional or otherwise).²⁰ I say that in no way to discount the incredible intellectual contributions that black women and Black Feminists have made to a multitude of disciplines, including philosophy. My point, rather, is that the arrival of the first black woman philosopher is a requisite step in the path leading to the hundredth. Moreover, it is a practically and socially necessary stage before the possibility of a Black Feminist Philosopher. The struggle to interpret black feminism for philosophy and integrate its concerns and methods is possible only because of the unique location occupied by particular women enamored with both black feminism and philosophy.

Nearly fifty years later, though our numbers still haven’t risen to statistical significance, evidence suggests that there are more and more black women committing to philosophy. Our rising numbers will lead to the development of distinct intellectual voices and perspectives. The lessons taught by black feminism—that we should resist the urge to silence dissenting or controversial voices; that concrete experience is a valuable resource for a richer and deeper understanding of our social lives; that empathy is a necessary tool for harnessing the value of concrete experience through discourse and sharing—apply here. Though the philosopher in me might be inclined to seek objective universal claims, the black feminist sees the virtue in starting my analysis from my precise social location—with all the complexities of privileges granted and withheld entailed therein. I must give an honest appraisal of the world viewed through my eyes. I must tell my true story—controversial, threatening, self-critical, and complicated—if I have any hope of ever being useful. The claim is not that my story is a universal one or even correct in some epistemological “absolutist” sense; it is, however, a starting place—the one deeply available to me—and valuable as such.

In the end, the Mammy is merely an illusion. To see the Mammy is, as it always has been, a willful failure to see the flesh-and-blood woman. Historically, the Mammy was a rewriting of the identity of slave and paid

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domestic workers. As confidants, loyal companions, and “almost members of the family,” they did not need time off to care for their own family’s needs, overtime pay, benefits, or evening a living wage. The Philosophical Mammy is no different. She is a phantom disrupting the unity and suppressing the complication, variation, and expansion of black female voices in philosophy. I am not a Philosophical Mammy; I, alongside others, am a stage in the evolution of philosophy and black feminism. I am a Black Feminist Philosopher.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay, I will discuss both ordinary social groups, like members of racial groups or professions, and intellectual canons—sets of texts, authors, and practitioners unified by common ideas and practices—using the same or extremely similar language. To distinguish black philosophers, professional philosophers who happen to be identified as of African descent, from Black Philosophers, people committed to particular sets of intellectual traditions, I will treat the latter as proper nouns and capitalize accordingly.

2. My intellectual debts extend far beyond this short list and include a variety of philosophers living and dead, black and white, women and men. I have focused on the intellectual lineage that I believe is most relevant to issue being explored in this essay: Black Feminists and Black Feminist Philosophers.

3. I owe a multitude of debts to all the women in the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers (and to Kathryn T. Gines) for founding that organization. They, especially, share this fascinating journey with me.


8. I have chosen this construal for the express purpose of capturing the incredible and disappointing absence of black women among the ranks of professional philosophers. Cf. National Center for Education Statistics, 2009 Digest of Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_256.asp?referrer=list, accessed March 15, 2012. We fail—in virtue of numbers—to meet reporting standards for full-time faculty in philosophy and represent possibly 0.5 percent of part-time faculty and instructional staff. A generous estimate, however, makes black women about 0.3 percent of the 26,000 professional philosophers in the United States.

10. Uncle Rudy, please forgive me. You were right; folks like us have to watch where we step.


12. Ibid., p. 113.


16. I am interested, for example, in racial cognition and its importance to the moral understanding of racism. Experimental philosophy has features that can be used to analyze implicit racial attitudes and their relationship to racist action.


