

UC Santa Barbara

Activist Scholarship: 2006 Chicana/o Graduate Student Colectiva Conference

Title

Under-representation in Academia: A Chicano Philosopher's Perspective

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/61r5p9x3>

Author

Haro, José A

Publication Date

2008-12-16

Under-representation in Academia: A Chicano Philosopher's Perspective¹

José A. Haro

University of South Florida

Graduate education in the United States is fraught with under-representation, particularly in the traditional fields of the academy – the humanities and sciences. The last half of the 20th century saw the development of areas studies, which one could group together as ethnic or gender based (Chicano/Latino Studies, Women's Studies, African-American/Black Studies, Africana Studies, Queer Studies, etc.), opening up space to focus on particular perspectives amenable to the interests and experiences of the under-represented students. Other traditional fields, however, have not attracted the number of under-represented individuals as these area studies have. In particular, the field that I am in, philosophy, is faced with an acute under-representation of Latina/os. A report published in 2000 by the American Philosophical Association Committee on Hispanics/Latinos, found little more than 2 percent of the graduate student body in the field of philosophy was Latina/o. A consequence of this problem is that there are not many of us to discuss our perspectives and experiences in relation to the philosophical discipline that we are a part of. In other words, we are dispersed throughout many different programs across the country, often leaving us isolated from other under-represented students who may share similar perspectives and concerns.

Being isolated often leads to introspection and, in particular, the questioning of how one fits into the profession. The problem of under-representation, therefore, has led me to investigate the following questions. First, could this problem be rooted historically in the discourse of philosophers who contemporary graduate students must study? Then, what is some of the content of this historically rooted prejudice? Further, what seems to be the contemporary trend in dealing with questions of under-representation? Finally, what can we, as under-represented minority students, do in order to address this problem?

¹This paper was originally presented as "A Call to Action: Addressing Continued Stereotyping and Discrimination in United States Graduate Schools" on 5 October 2006 at the Chicano Graduate Student Conference hosted by the UC Santa Barbara Colectiva.

I would like to thank my mother, Jenny, and my spouse, Sandy, for all their love and support. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. I would also like to thank Dr. Ofelia Schutte for all your help and comments. You are a guiding light, helping me to find my way in this difficult profession.

Throughout the history of philosophy, discussion of race is quite pervasive and patently obvious in many instances. In this short treatise, I will focus on David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and G.W.F. Hegel, as these men are considered luminaries of the Enlightenment and are undeniably important for the development of modern philosophy. Their “mature” work is canonized leaving nearly all graduate students, including those who are under-represented, with the responsibility of learning some aspect of their work. Regrettably, some of the conjectures affirmed by these philosophers reveal unambiguous ignorance and racism. The English empiricist, David Hume, holds that non-white peoples are inferior to whites. A striking feature of his order of rank is that non-whites had been unable to achieve any success in the arts or sciences during his time. Hume notes: “there never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in *action* or *speculation*” (qtd. in Eze 29). This is simply not true. Was Hannibal (c. 247-183 BCE), the great military general of Carthage, whose army subdued Roman territory for more than a decade, white? Were the Moor scholars, who saved and translated the works of the Ancient Greeks such as Aristotle and Plato, white? It would be rash and even unreasonable to discount the rigorous philosophical work of David Hume because of this comment. Hume was an exemplary philosopher. Unfortunately however, his general views of the world were bigoted. For Hume to make a philosophical argument justifying the superiority of the white race would have required much stronger evidence and more research leading him to inevitably find that non-white individuals were/are “eminent” in both *action* and *speculation*. Maybe this explains why Hume’s comment is buried in a footnote!

Taking Hume’s cue, Immanuel Kant affirms his assertions and adds that being “black from head to foot (is) a clear proof” of ignorance (*Of the Beautiful* 113). Ironically, the conceptual developer of the categorical imperative demonstrates willful ignorance by uncritically citing Hume, and unabashed racism. I wonder if Kant’s particular character and beliefs would contribute to universal reason’s “Kingdom of Ends?” Can the maxim that one should judge individuals based on their skin tone be universalized? It seems that neither postulate would be consistent within the framework of Kant’s categorical imperative. Assigning moral value to an arbitrary feature of a person’s physical make-up leads to making rash and uncritical judgments about the capacities of individuals. This overlooks the content and reasons for the beliefs and commitments these individuals may stand by, and it obstructs dialogue and discourse that would lead

to the further development of knowledge. The logic of universalizing Kant's beliefs leads to white elitism, racism, paternalism and patriarchy. These problems have led to the destruction of the life-world, not its development; and therefore, not fit to be a universal maxim. Like Hume, Kant's prejudicial views indicate that his understanding of everyday life is distinct from how he understands the "real" world. It seems that Kant did not apply his philosophical conjectures to his *own* understanding of the life-world.

Finally, G.W.F. Hegel, whose conception of history and its evolution is demonstrably Germano-centric, claims that the "inferiority of these individuals (non-Europeans) in all respects is manifest" (qtd. in Dussel 69). What is interesting about Hegel is that he does account for non-whites in the conceptualization of the history. That is, non-whites are either epigones, a previous, preliminary stage in the development of Absolute Spirit² (the Chinese), or are not part of the world-historic movement (the indigenous of the Americas and Africans, save Egyptians). Hegel though, claims that "the Americas" is the land of the future. A Latina/o may flippantly take solace in being situated in the so-called land of the future, but the future was not of genuine concern to Hegel, given that the apex of history was achieved in 19th century Prussia.³ With regard to Latin America in the world-historic movement Hegel notes: "We have evidence of the development of America and its level of civilization, especially in Mexico and Peru, but as an entirely particular culture, which *expires* the moment in which that Absolute Spirit approaches it" (qtd. in Dussel 69, emphasis added). These indigenous civilizations may have been sophisticated but the importance of these cultures is only *particular*, not universal, and will perish when confronted by the movement of the Absolute. For Hegel, Latina/os and Africans are inconsequential

² Absolute Spirit (*Geist*) refers to the transcendental movement of history. This concept attempts to account for the history of the world as the history of the movement of universal reason. Although Hegel's is considered dense and obscure, Singer's work in the Works Cited section offers a brief, but clear introduction to the thought of Hegel. Interestingly, Singer does little in the way of addressing the ethno-centric, racist beliefs of Hegel.

³ Enrique Dussel has convincingly argued that Hegel's view, a common prejudice amongst his contemporaries, developed during the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Prior to this Eurocentric appraisal of history, the world-system extended to the Far East (China and the South Pacific) with Europe being the far western periphery. See Dussel's "Eurocentrism and Modernity" in *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*. Eds. J. Beverley, J. Oviedo, & M. Aronna. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism" in *Napantla: Views from South* 1.3, Duke University Press, 2000, and "World-System and 'Trans-Modernity'" in *Napantla: Views from South* 3.2, Duke University Press, 2002

regarding the movement toward the Absolute and any significance attributed to them can only be understood within the so-called universal world historical movement. The people of the future should be understood as people who are overtaken and transformed by the movement of the Absolute. Or, as in the words of Hegel's predecessor Kant, these people will be shaken from their "self-incurred tutelage" when Spirit approaches the Americas (*On History* 3).

What conclusions can we draw from this brief look at these racist statements made by these prominent philosophers? What can we Latina/os and other under-represented people learn from these comments? First, unlike the racist scientists of the past who tried to employ science to justify claims about the innate inferiority of the non-white races, these philosophers held these conjectures without doing in depth research.⁴ Rather these assertions are simply beliefs. Thus, at the zenith of the Enlightenment we find that the discussion of race amounts to baseless stereotyping. Consequently, these men were excellent philosophers, but could not overcome their *human, all too human* prejudicial, herd instinct. Second, the history of philosophy places non-whites outside of its discourse. Our intelligence, moral capacity and talent do not amount to the ability to engage in rational philosophical discourse. Finally, non-whites were never imagined to be the intended or possible audience of these men. They would possibly find it inconceivable that non-whites and women are reading, developing and even critiquing their work. As such, the current problem of under-representation would likely seem absurd and ridiculous to them.

It seems that the problem of under-representation is historically rooted in the attitudes and beliefs of the predominant Western white male philosophers. Accordingly, the opportunity for minorities to fruitfully engage in philosophical discourse would require contemporary philosophers to overcome and address the historical and contemporary prejudicial beliefs regarding the under-represented people and their unique circumstances. But to assume that the field has not changed would be presumptuous as I and many other under-represented individuals are and have been in

⁴ Zammito, J.H's article "Policing Polygeneticism in Germany, 1775 (Kames,) Kant, and Blumenbach" in *The German Invention of Race* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), discusses Kant's playful "game" of racial categorization. He demonstrates that the game was intended to mask his pseudo-scientific understanding of race, and of how other scientists of the era would not have recognized Kant as a natural scientist if he were to make such an outright claim. What's more is that Zammito argues that Kant viewed himself as a natural scientist.

the field of philosophy for quite some time. Maybe the field of philosophy has changed, leaving behind these ignorant attitudes of Hume, Kant and Hegel. Unfortunately, to my great dismay, I have found that the contemporary field of philosophy does little to constructively address this blatant history of racism, leading me to believe that this may be one of the many problems with recruiting and retaining under-represented individuals. This is evidenced not only by the low numbers, but in how the contemporary field seems to dismiss the problems of racism (along with sexism and elitism). Moreover, when the issue is discussed it is generally done on the margins of the mainstream field.

In my discussion with professors and fellow graduate students, I have often heard that past philosophers were not interested or concerned about race. Consistent with this lack of acknowledgment is that the racist statements and beliefs of the philosophers are parsed away and discarded as being merely products of the socio-cultural milieu. It is accepted by many philosophers, perhaps detrimentally, that their predecessors' developed work stands above or transcends their particular cultural circumstance, and that the work that reflects the prevailing "common sense" of their time is anomalous and unimportant. This amounts to ignoring unsavory questions about the character and even aptitude of the enlightened, modern philosophical forefathers. Moreover, this way of dealing with race is a means to avoid questioning the universal, humanistic foundations of the philosophical tradition. This dismissive attitude thus reflects the lack of critical discourse around the topic of race and philosophy, and in some cases, leads to the denial or obfuscation of the problem of under-representation.

My experience, nevertheless, is merely one of many that minorities and individuals at the margins have experienced. A relatively recent example of this dismissive and culturally imperialistic attitude is manifested in Ofelia Schutte's report "Notes on the Issues of Cultural Imperialism." The account is of the XI InterAmerican Congress of Philosophy held in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1985. Schutte reports that the conference "promised a unique opportunity for dialogue and mutual recognition" as philosophers from all over the Americas and the Caribbean attended (757). Although this did occur in some of the smaller sessions Schutte notes:

I heard some prominent Latin Americans refer to it (the Congress) later as '*ungran desencuentro*' ('a great dis-encounter'). For the most part, they were referring to the failure of the United States representatives at the

plenary sessions—Professors Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam—to break the pattern of cultural imperialism that keeps Latin American thought and Third World thought in general in the position of subordination, and dependence with respect to the ‘greater achievements’ of U.S., British, and Western European thinking” (757).

One may argue that this is only one example of an international incident of cultural imperialism and has nothing to do with the problem of race and philosophy, as well as under-representation in the United States. However, the likes of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam are still prominent, present-day figures in the field of philosophy in the United States. If these men are going to Mexico, and are unable to shake-off their imperialistic, prejudicial attitudes, what would lead one to believe that their behavior is otherwise in the United States? How would a young Latina/o graduate student approach such an individual about problems of under-representation and the development of thought not centered on the Western canon and its “greater achievements?”

Many of us who are under-represented have experiences that differ from the majority of Western white male philosophers, and we bring different interests and concerns because of our unique backgrounds. Yet, because of the method of training generally focuses on learning the Western philosophical canon, it may be difficult to develop those of our interests that do not coincide with the canon, as we like most other graduate students, lack sufficient time and resources to substantially explore them. Our interests, moreover, may be deemed marginal, and cultivating them as a graduate student is generally not considered practical because we are much more likely to find a job if we base our work and dissertation around the accepted canon. In other words, for the purposes of finding gainful employment we need to avoid the margins by developing the centered canonical thought.

In the field of philosophy, for example, the critical examination of philosophy and race is ghettoized; that is, a critical analysis is undertaken on the outskirts of the mainstream field in a *subfield* that commands little attention from philosophers who base their study around the canon. This is not to say that work on the topic of philosophy and race is not done, but the amount of work amounts to very little when compared to the overall number of publications within the limits of the mainstream philosophical catalog. Moreover, the work in the areas of race and philosophy is

undertaken mostly by individuals who are faced with questions of identity and understanding their historical relationship to the philosophical tradition; that is, under-represented minorities.⁵ Feminist theory has done a great deal to address these problems of race/ethnicity, representation and the difference in perspectives and interests of each group or individual. Yet the field of philosophy has done very little to truly address these problems.

In a review of the proceedings of the American Philosophical Association (APA) from September 1999 to September 2006, I found that each year a handful of papers, colloquia, and discussion panels are dedicated to understanding the problem of race and issues of under-representation. Again though, this work tends to be sponsored and limited to the special committees that focus on developing a diverse and vibrant field. It would seem that the APA attempted to make a strong move in the direction of addressing the problem of under-representation at the annual meeting of the Eastern division in 2000. At this conference, the APA arranged a special reception for people of color. The flyer notes: "there will be a special Reception for People of Color, sponsored by the Committee on Hispanics/Latinos and several other committees concerned with diversity in the profession" (APA Eastern). Although this seems welcoming to "people of color," the notice implies that not everyone in the field of philosophy is concerned with diversity. Only certain committees, particularly the Committee on Hispanics/Latinos, are concerned about the problem of under-representation. The notice again demonstrates the dismissive attitude toward this very problem. Moreover, the dismissiveness is evidenced further as the APA has yet to follow through with the recommended action of the aforementioned report by the Committee on Hispanics/Latinos. The proposal called for social scientists to engage in studies regarding representation and recruiting of minorities into the field of philosophy. Hence it seems that race and under-representation are not mainstream concerns and topics of discourse for many philosophers.

Although this analysis only begins to delineate some of the problems concerning the philosophical tradition, under-representation, and their inter-relatedness, it does point to serious problems that must be addressed if the fields of philosophy and others are to develop into vibrant, rich disciplines that will be relevant to the future of the

⁵ A few philosophers who have done or due work in the area of race or identity are Emmanuel Eze, Lucius Outlaw, Charles Mills, Linda Alcoff, Jorge Gracia, Ofelia Schutte, Naomi Zack and Lewis Gordon.

United States. We, as under-represented graduate students, cannot allow our heritages and accordant perspectives to be overlooked and dismissed. We cannot let our voices to be subsumed by the dominant mainstream discourse. As such, I suggest a modest proposal to minority graduate students in philosophy and other severely under-represented fields. First, I want all of us to make race, ethnicity, identity a hot topic of discussion. We must go to our departments and talk with professors and other graduate students about race, the history of philosophy (or the field you are in), how they relate, and how this problem may represent an *unspoken* tradition of the field. Second, and more importantly, the isolated students must seek each other out and develop a community in order to discuss experiences and develop strategies for reconciling the racist tradition with our own work and experiences. Developing solidarity will only enhance the advancement of the study of philosophy and other fields, and it will provide a healthy outlet for dealing with our frustrations and existential issues. Finally, we must work to recruit and inform other under-represented individuals about the problems and concerns within the field. I assume that we love our work and would like to see more familiar faces with similar, or even radically dissimilar experiences. Moreover, I know that part of our work is teaching undergraduates. When we encounter minority students who may have interests in field we are in, we must share our passion. However, we must also inform them about the issues faced by minority students.

All these suggestions are intended to focus on *praxis*. Not only must we think, but we must do. We must talk and write—to each other, our fellow specialists and the public. In the words of Anzaldúa:

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out your spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on paper (173).

We also must teach and share our passion. With Anzaldúa's words in mind and a commitment to overcoming the problems of racism, sexism, elitism and under-representation, it is quite probable that these fields will be substantially enriched by

these acts of solidarity as they will contribute to the work within the specific fields and to overall enlightenment of the human race.⁶

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers." *The Bridge Called My Back*. New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983. 165-173.
- APA Committee on Hispanics: Report on the Status of Hispanics in Philosophy. Chair, L.M. Alcoff. February 2000. Downloaded from <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/governance/committees/hispanics>. 4 July 2006.
- APA Eastern Division 97th Annual Meeting. Flyer: "Reception for Colored People." December 2000. Downloaded from <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/divisions/eastern/2000meeting/index.html>. 13 March 2007.
- Dussel, Enrique. "Eurocentrism and Modernity." *The Postmodern Debate in Latin America*. Eds. J. Beverley, J. Oviedo, & M. Aronna. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. 65-76.
- Eze, Emmanuel. *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. Trans. J. T. Goldthwait. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- . *On History*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.
- Schutte, Ofelia. "Notes on the Issues of Cultural Imperialism." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (Jun. 1986). 757-759.
- Singer, Peter. *A Very Short Introduction to Hegel*. New York: Oxford, 2001.

⁶ Please contact me if you desire to discuss your experiences and strategies that will help to bring this problem into the light of the mainstream academic fields. I can be reached by email at haro0101@yahoo.com.