
A responsibility to representational justice: A few notes on reading Davina Cooper's 'Taking responsibility for gender'

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What is/can be an intersectional life of institutional gender? Davina Cooper's thoughtful and interesting paper begs this question for me. I am fascinated by Cooper's paper, which explores gender as an institution, and in particular, what taking up responsibility for gender involves. In centring the public/institutional life of gender, Cooper gets us to imagine the possibilities of redoing and undoing institutional gender. She carefully distances herself from arguments that either make gender a private thing reduced to individual subjects, or indeed one that is dependent on the law for its articulation, to explore different possibilities for thinking about the public life of gender. As Cooper rightly argues, gender is a public and institutional 'patterned constellation' that plays out in 'asymmetrical patterned ways'. And, to acknowledge the public and institutional life of gender, Cooper writes, is to unmoor it from subject centred discourse of group or individual rights, and towards taking up responsibility for gender, albeit, without legal certification. Accordingly, taking up responsibility for gender directs attention to what we do to ourselves and to others, where responsibility may consist of readiness or obligation—self-imposed or laid by others—to exercise care. But this begs the question: by whom, to whom and towards what should care and responsibility be exercised? Now generations of Black, indigenous and postcolonial feminist scholars have powerfully argued for caution and vigilance against the ready and entitled taking up of responsibility for othered peoples. They have pointed to the epistemic, institutional and material histories of imperial power and to the contemporary forms of coloniality driving institutions, practices, politics, and norms (Combahee River Collective,

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1995; Crenshaw, 1989; Cusicanqui, 2012; Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 2001; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 1996; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1988) animated by the desire to take up responsibility for civilising, developing and improving ‘other’ populations by not only producing knowledges, especially theory and history, but also devising ‘appropriate’ forms of politics and political institutions for ‘them’. As opposed to this taking up of responsibility as entitled ‘benevolence’ (Landry and MacLean, 1996: 269-270) *for* the ‘other’, these scholars have argued for an epistemic and political accountability *to* the other, and for a responsibility that centres ‘ethical actions’ and acknowledges complicity and implication in the institutional structures of intersectional gender violence.

An intersectional lens brings into view institutional structures and social relations forged within complex and intersecting fields of power. As is well established, it is only when there is an accounting of the intersections of racial power, hierarchy, oppression, coloniality, differentiation and marginalisation that racialised gendered subjects come into view.

Acknowledging intersectionally positioned subjects is, of course, to acknowledge the silenced and invisibilised material histories of violent dispossession, coloniality and epistemic erasure but it is also to register, tell and hear different stories of political struggles for justice and freedom.

These different stories of struggles for justice are not only over the collective right to define oneself as a collective people but also over dominant norms and embodied practices of gender and sexuality that violently exclude but also inform majoritarian representations of who the collective is. At stake in these different stories of struggles is the question of representational justice: of asking not only who is excluded but also which imaginaries of gender and sexuality become normative and why, and also inform the collective struggles for freedom and liberation?

These different stories of struggles for representational justice prise apart formal models of equality and citizenship to show the exclusionary architecture of intersecting axes of privilege, dominance and power that underwrites them.

But what does acknowledging the intersectional and gendered histories of political struggles over representational justice mean for taking up responsibility for institutional gender? Quite simply, it means that people ought to have both the right and the liberty (freedom and autonomy) to decide on the gender they wish to inhabit and claim for themselves and, therefore, taking up responsibility for institutional gender must not only uphold this freedom to define one's gender identity but also view the public life of gender in dynamic, intersectional and historical terms. Importantly, it also means to foreground the gendered political struggles for representational justice. In other words, to recognise that gender is intersectional and political—and is a signifier of power relations—is also to recognise that the axes of oppression/power relations it signifies are themselves dynamic, located in place, time and in political struggles, and are therefore always changing (Madhok, 2020), which in turn, implies that gender itself is dynamic and changing. If gender is political, intersectional, dynamic and located, then taking up responsibility for institutional gender is to produce an institutional response to dynamic intersectional gender relations that aligns with representational gender justice. By aligning with intersectional and representational justice, I mean the ethical imperative for institutions, including judicial ones, to not reflect and reproduce the political and gendered imaginaries of power and of the powerful, but to safeguard and protect marginalised and non-normative ways of being in the world. And, while influential feminist texts have insightfully pointed to the difficulties of turning to the law for instituting gender justice and rights, it is also the case that gendered and sexual rights are fundamental to a life of liberty and dignity. Quite simply, without legal and institutional recognitions, protections and safeguards, not only is the liberty and freedom of marginalised and precarious subjects to define their gender identity and sexuality exposed to severe jeopardy and risks but so is their right to life and to living put under extraordinary peril.

Practising representational justice as a form of responsibility to an institutional life of gender can also mean to interrupt the normalised workings of the oppressive and racialised histories of gender that operate and inform institutional life on an everyday basis. My thinking on representational justice was sparked off, in the first instance, by a very arresting part of Cooper's paper in which she recounts a 'dilemma' arising in a 'micro scene' of gender where four persons conducting an interview are confronted with the decision of who should 'chair' the interview panel. Cooper tells us that looking around the room, the assembly of persons appear to consist of three women and one man—but as Cooper pertinently asks: could/should this identity be assumed at all? If not, then who is the person who should chair the interview panel and on what grounds? As Cooper notes, 'scenes do different things... It can represent *what could be*, including in prefigurative registers that treat this "could be" as if it is what "is"'. In this context, what might be the possibilities of redoing/undoing gender and how might one respond to the call to responsibility to institutional gender here? This is an arresting dilemma and demands our attention, and Cooper raises hard questions. But perhaps, taking up the call to representational justice may enable us to negotiate this dilemma? Institutions are sites of power and embody histories and practices of the powerful; and subjects enter institutions already embedded within particular historically inflected and intersectionally saturated scenes of gender, and in fact, it is precisely how they get read, rendered legible, acknowledged, refused or indeed erased. Therefore, to take up responsibility for/to institutional gender is to take up responsibility for representational justice in the light of intersectional scenes of gender that have *already been staged, continue to be staged* and those *yet to be staged*. A responsibility to enact representational justice is to address gender on a continuum of dynamic simultaneity; it is to tie the present histories of gender to their past and to their future. So, while to be sure, taking up responsibility for/to the public life of gender involves thinking about gender in terms of the different possibilities for

liberation and freedom, it also means taking up responsibility for the historical-intersectional scenes of gender that play out here and now. It means recognising that institutionalised gendered norms are structurally designed to identify non-normatively gendered and racialised subjects and to wilfully expose them to institutionalised violence, terror, racial, gender and sexual policing, marginality and erasure. Given this institutional context, an attentiveness to representational justice, for instance, can show up intersecting axes of gender hierarchies and relations that are material and embodied and which reflect institutional histories of differential inclusion, erasure, discrimination and participation. For instance, recent findings have shown that within UK higher educational institutions there are only 25 Black women professors (Guardian, 2018), that 36 per cent of transgender students have experienced ‘negative comments or conduct’ (Stonewall, 2018), and that not only is there an existing gender wage gap, but that this wage gap is highest for those who identify as women of colour, with the latter earning substantially less than their academic colleagues who identify as white women (Croxford, 2018).

One way of centring representational justice as an ethical call to responsibility to/for the historical scenes of gender within institutional settings, say in the case of a university, could be to acknowledge responsibility to historically marginalised subjects removed from recognition and acknowledgement within the academy, and to take concrete steps through law, policy and curriculum to address the histories of institutional violence unleashed on subordinately positioned subjects in order to disrupt the institutional/ised structures of violence. It also requires acknowledging one’s complicity and implication in these racialised institutional structures, which one also benefits from. Representational justice in this context could mean to unlearn, produce knowledges, teach and ethically foreground the anti-colonial and transnational production of different knowledges, including on gender relations—of the histories of intersecting political struggles, movements and claim making for gendered, sexual rights and representational justice opposing excessive and overwhelming colonial and postcolonial state

power and against institutionalised oppressive and exclusionary gender relations—which can, in turn, activate and generate different intellectual, political and gender imaginaries. And, perhaps, it is this attentiveness to representational justice that could come in handy in negotiating the dilemma over who to appoint as chair of the interview panel.

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