

# The Challenges of Thick Diversity, Polarization, Debiasing, and Tokenization for Cross-Group Teaching: Some Critical Notes

Rima Basu  
Claremont McKenna College

This is a penultimate draft.

Final version to appear in *NOMOS LXVI: Civic Education in Polarized Times*, eds.  
Eric Beerbohm and Elizabeth Beaumont, NYU Press (Nov 2023).

Teachers play an important role in our development. It is a running joke on Twitter that if you were ever your English or Art teacher's favorite you're probably gay now. I was often the favorite of both, so I guess that explains some things. More to the point, it's likely that most people can recall a teacher that made a significant positive impact on their lives. That is, a teacher that was a stabilizing source, a teacher that inspired, a teacher that believed in them when others didn't. A teacher that pushed them to become better than they were.

The powerful role that teachers can play in our development is the focus Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir's chapter in this volume. They argue that teachers, in particular teachers that don't share the same background as their students, can help counter or the increasing polarization that characterizes our current era.<sup>1</sup> This so-called 'Poitier effect', named after Sidney Poitier and his role as an inspirational teacher breaking down racial divides in the movie "To Sir with Love", is the type of transformative debiasing phenomenon that the authors seek to reproduce. That is, can cross-group teaching reduce racial and cultural biases and divides and create greater mutual respect?

However, in asking whether the Poitier effect can be adapted for today's classrooms, Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir note that there is a challenge for their project. A challenge that they identify as emerging from how different our current era is from the era in which "To Sir with Love" was released. According to the authors, the film and its reception occurred in a culture of *thin diversity*. The challenge for adapting the strategy for current classrooms is that our current era is, the authors claim, marked by a culture of *thick diversity*. Although we aren't given a full characterization of these two accounts of diversity, we are told

---

<sup>1</sup> Full Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir citation needed from typesetter.

that the distinction between thin and thick diversity should be regarded as similar to the distinction between thin and thick multiculturalism as discussed in Tamir (1995).<sup>2</sup>

To judge the proposal put forward by Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir, we must first bring to the surface three underlying assumptions and consider some important issues that might otherwise be obscured. These issues, I will argue, raise serious questions about whether cross-group teaching could help reduce polarization as well as whether this model of teaching could be implemented in a way that does not create additional burdens or harms for minority teachers or students.

First, we must question whether our current era is rightly characterized as one of *thick diversity* as opposed to *thin diversity*. Further, we must also judge whether it is thick diversity that gives rise to polarization. To address these questions, in Section 1, I attempt to give a fuller account of thick diversity by drawing on Tamir's (1995) account of thick multiculturalism. Although I grant that our current society might be characterized as one of thick diversity as opposed to thin diversity, I note that much more argument must be given to make the case for the claim that thick diversity is responsible for the polarization we see today. There are many mechanisms by which polarization can occur, but I will outline just a few of them, focusing on some purely rational mechanisms by which polarization can occur. That is, polarization doesn't only occur between people stubbornly refusing to engage with the other side and dogmatically holding onto their beliefs. Polarization can occur amongst reasonable people following epistemically sound practices. That is, there's reason to think polarization can occur in communities characterized by thin diversity as well. As a result, polarization is not a problem unique to thick diversity or thick multiculturalism.

Second, with a better understanding of the processes of polarization we then must judge whether attempts to recreate the Poitier effect can be a counterforce or bulwark against increasing polarization. That is, whether as the authors claim, "meeting an admirable teacher who belongs to 'the other' has the potential to be transformative, teach children how to respect diversity, and ameliorate social and political polarization."<sup>3</sup> Central to this claim is the following psychological theory: Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> However, as I'll demonstrate in Section 2, there are a number of reasons to doubt that contact with 'the other' can have this transformative effect on prejudice. Rather, research in social psychology since the publication of Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* has shown that increased contact can have a number of backlash effects and unintended consequences that increase rather than decrease prejudice.

---

<sup>2</sup> Yael Tamir, "Two Concepts of Multiculturalism," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 2 (1995): 161–72.

<sup>3</sup> Binyamin, Jayusi, Tamir. Page number needed from typesetting.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

Third, and following from the first and second points, as is clear by now, I am not as optimistic as Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir about the power of teachers to reverse the polarization that plagues society today. But as I hope to make clear in these comments, my lack of optimism doesn't stem merely from my general disposition towards pessimism, nor from any lack of faith in the ability of talented teachers to connect with and inspire their students. Rather, the source of my pessimism stems primarily from serious concerns about the costs that minority teachers and minority students would have to bear under this proposal. So, in Section 3, I turn to worries about problems of tokenization, instrumental rationales for diversity, and the combination of the 'politics of deference' and 'being-in-the-room privilege' that could occur with this type of teaching model.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Thick Diversity and Polarization

### A. *Thin vs Thick Diversity and Thin vs. Thick Multiculturalism*

As I noted in the previous section, although a central claim of Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir's paper is that our current era is one marked by thick diversity as opposed to thin diversity, the reader isn't given a full characterization of these key concepts. Rather, the reader is told that the distinction between thin and thick diversity should be regarded as similar to the distinction between thin and thick multiculturalism as discussed in Tamir (1995). To judge whether thick diversity gives rise to polarization, however, we must first understand precisely what is meant by thick diversity. So, let us turn to that now by first explicating this distinction between thin and thick multiculturalism to then understand the distinction between thin and thick diversity.

According to Tamir (1995), thin multiculturalism involves different liberal cultures whereas thick multiculturalism involves both liberal and illiberal cultures. For thin multiculturalism, Tamir's example is the debate between English- and French-speaking communities in Canada wherein "the two communities share a set of liberal-democratic beliefs, [as a result] the debate is an intra-liberal one."<sup>6</sup> In short, the two communities have a shared set of beliefs and as a result, "disagreements over basic principles do not arise."<sup>7</sup> For thick multiculturalism, Tamir's example is the French ban on face coverings, which "French officials see as imposing neutrality [whereas] Muslims see as a campaign

---

<sup>5</sup> I want to note that I am in general quite optimistic about the power of teachers and other attachment figures to shape who we become, see Rima Basu, "The Ethics of Expectations" in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford University Press, Forthcoming), but teachers can only do so much when they operate against greater socio-historical injustices that give rise to racism and prejudice. I should also note that although Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir's focus is on replicating the Poitier effect in schools in Israel, in my critical comments I focus on issues of polarization and segregation and socio-historical injustice in the United States as it is the context I am more familiar with.

<sup>6</sup> Tamir, 161.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 162.

against Islam.”<sup>8</sup> This is a deeper disagreement than the first example because there is a deep disagreement about whether religion can or should remain strictly private.

Our current era, Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir claim, is one marked by a lack of common ground, one in which there’s no agreement on common rules, one in which we are increasingly polarized and segregated. That is, just as thick multiculturalism is marked by deep disagreement about fundamental matters, thick diversity is similarly marked by deep intractable disagreement.

At first glance this might seem like an odd claim to make about our current time period in contrast to the 1960s. However, a report published on the 65th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* observes “a disconcerting increase of black segregation in all parts of the country.”<sup>9</sup> And as reported in Vox, “black students in the South are less likely to attend a school that is majority white than about 50 years ago.”<sup>10</sup> Hand in hand with growing segregation there is also growing polarization. For example, a 2014 report from the Pew Research Center notes that “Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades.”<sup>11</sup> These are not the conditions under which civic education can thrive.

So, what are the conditions under which civic education can pave a path towards virtuous active citizenry? Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir identify two conditions that I reproduce below.

- (a) Members of the diverse groups that constitute a society share an agreed upon set of basic norms and principles or;
- (b) The dominant group dictates the norms and principles while members of other groups abide by these rules.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>9</sup> Erika Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, and Gary Orfield, “Harming Our Common Future: America’s Segregated Schools 65 Years After Brown”, [www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu), May 10, 2019 (research). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23j1b9ny>, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Alvin Chang, “The Data Proves That School Segregation Is Getting Worse,” Vox (Vox, March 5, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/5/17080218/school-segregation-getting-worse-data>. However, it is important to note that these statistics are also due to a declining number of white students in public schools and the changing demographics of the United States as discussed by Frankenberg et al.

<sup>11</sup> “Political Polarization in the American Public,” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, April 9, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

<sup>12</sup> Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir, page numbers for this volume need to be added by typesetter.

Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir note that this characterization resembles the characterization of thin diversity outlined earlier. Although the argument isn't explicitly given this form, their remarks may seem to suggest that combating polarization requires returning to thin diversity. That is, one might think that the liberal culture of thin diversity or thin multiculturalism is either more rational or at the very least less likely to lead to polarization than thick diversity because of the shared set of basic beliefs. Such a view, however, would be mistaken as polarization can result from a number of mechanisms, including rational ones. I turn next to spelling out how.

### *B. The Processes of Polarization*

Although it might seem intuitive, on a first blush, to assume that belief polarization is the result of epistemically irrational processes, there has been pushback against this view in recent years. For example, as Tom Kelly (2008) has argued, paying more attention to evidence for views we disagree with—a practice you would think would help counteract polarization—can actually increase polarization.<sup>13</sup> More strongly, Kevin Dorst (2019) argues that many of the reasoning “biases” discussed in the psychological literature, e.g., searching for confirming arguments, interpreting conflicting evidence as confirmatory, and becoming more extreme in reaction to discussion, are in fact *rational* processes.<sup>14</sup>

On the one hand, demonstrating that polarization is a rational process can help bolster Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir's point that in a polarized society we cannot overcome differences and reduce hostility through rational deliberations. On the other hand, in demonstrating how polarization happens it's also clear that polarization is not a problem *that arises uniquely because of* thick diversity. That is, polarization can also occur in cultures of thin diversity.

To demonstrate rational polarization, I want to consider some results from a computer simulation run by Singer et al. (2019).<sup>15</sup> Let's assume two groups, A and B. Each group has a set of beliefs that are epistemically rational for them to hold. And now each group shares the reasons for their beliefs with one another. For the simulation, it does not seem to matter whether the groups beliefs are

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Kelly, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 105 no. 10 (2008): 611–22.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Dorst, “Why Rational People Polarize,” *The Phenomenal World*, January 24 2019, <https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/why-rational-people-polarize/>. For the more general point that biases can be rational and part of epistemically sound reasoning processes see also Louise M. Antony, “Bias: Friend or Foe? Reflections on Saulish Skepticism,” in *Implicit Bias and Philosophy, Volume 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, eds. Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul (Oxford University Press, 2016) and Gabrielle M Johnson, “The Structure of Bias,” *Mind* 129 no. 516 (2020): 1193–1236.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Singer, Aaron Bramson, Patrick Grim, Bennett Holman, Jiin Jung, Karen Kovaka, Anika Ranginani, and William J. Berger, “Rational Social and Political Polarization,” *Philosophical Studies* 176 no. 9 (2019): 2243–67.

distinct from one another or whether there are beliefs shared in common. Singer et al. found that in their simulation “agents with unlimited memories in pure deliberation (with no outside input) [...] eventually end up with the same set of reasons, giving them the same view with the same strength.”<sup>16</sup> However, we’re not agents with unlimited memories.<sup>17</sup> A more rational strategy for us is that of what Singer et al. call a *coherence-minded agent*, that is, one who given their limited memory, prioritizes remembering the reasons for the view that is best supported by all their reasons. What Singer et al. find is that in their simulations such agents *always polarize*. Importantly, these coherence-minded agents do not commit the epistemic sins that most of the literature on polarization focus on. Coherence-minded agents in Singer et al.’s simulations aren’t overtly biased, they do not “misjudge the content or strength of their evidence, nor do they misprocess evidence they receive. Our agents incorporate new reasons before deciding what to forget, and as such they aren’t irrationally stubborn like biased assimilators.”<sup>18</sup>

So, what can we learn from this? Importantly, polarization is a structural problem. That is, it is not a problem that is necessarily tied to individual biases (implicit or explicit) or individual prejudices. For example, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2009) has argued, racism can persist without racists.<sup>19</sup> Returning to polarization, polarization can occur in societies characterized by both thin and thick diversity. Whatever explains the greater polarization of our current society is not merely a matter of greater disagreement or divergence among racial or ethnic groups. To propose a solution to growing polarization requires identifying the mechanisms for our growing polarization.

Furthermore, in assessing whether teachers can be a bulwark against polarization in our current political climate, Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir’s own discussion of the panic over critical race theory suggests that teachers might in fact be poorly situated or limited in their capacity to turn back the tides of polarization. There are reasons to doubt whether the presence of minority teachers in classrooms can be effective in reducing bias in a highly polarized society. For example, consider more closely the United States context and the moral panic over critical race theory. Although teachers are in a position to change students’ minds because of the authority they have in virtue of their position, that is precisely why they are seen as a threat and being targeted in the

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>17</sup> It is not necessarily a bad thing that we’re not agents with unlimited memories as I discuss in Rima Basu, “The Importance of Forgetting”, *Episteme* (Forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009). Similarly, I’ve argued that one can have racist beliefs without harboring any explicit or implicit racist attitudes or ill-will, rather you might have racist beliefs simply from responding in seemingly rational ways to the evidence. See Rima Basu, “The wrongs of racist beliefs,” *Philosophical Studies* 176 no. 9 (2019): 2497-2515.

current debates about critical race theory in schools.<sup>20</sup> A process that we see being employed is what Endre Begby (2021) calls *evidential preemption*, and this process is central to the creation of *echo chambers* (see Nguyen 2020).<sup>21</sup> Understanding these processes can help us understand impediments to cultivating a form of the Poitier effect.

To spell these concepts out, evidential preemption is most easily recognizable as the following sort of claim: “My opponents will tell you that *q*; but I say *p*.”<sup>22</sup> As Begby notes, it is a characteristic of many right-wing pundits such as Bill O’Reilly and Newt Gingrich. What evidential preemption does is it turns disagreement into a way to reinforce the views of the group. For example, if you’ve been primed that others will try to undermine your belief in some conspiracy theory by drawing your attention to *x*, *y*, or *z*, then when in conversation someone brings up *x*, *y*, or *z* then that’s evidence that your conspiracy theory is right. Further, as C. Thi Nguyen notes, “by making undermining predictions about contrary testimony, inside authorities not only discredit that contrary testimony, but increase their trustworthiness for future predictions.”<sup>23</sup>

To see this in action, consider how students may be warned that universities are full of the illiberal left that are intolerant of conservative viewpoints. That is, students may be given a preemptory warning that their teachers will try to undermine their faith or turn them into atheists.<sup>24</sup> When someone is evidentially preempted in such a way then any pushback that they experience in response to their views will then be seen as precisely the kind of threat they were warned against and as evidence of a left-wing conspiracy against conservatives.<sup>25</sup> This helps to create an echo chamber, which Nguyen defines as follow:

---

<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, since the original presentation of both Binyamin, Jayusi and Tamir’s paper and my comments, the situation with respect to education in the United States has gotten worse. In addition to the panic over critical race theory, teachers, in particular LGBTQIA+ teachers, are now being accused of “grooming” children. For example, the popular TikTok account “Libs of TikTok” reposts content by so-called “activist” and “groomer” teachers to over a million followers resulting in events involving drag queens being attacked by far-right extremist groups and death threats against school officials.

<sup>21</sup> Endre Begby, “Evidential Preemption,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102 no. 3(2021): 515–30 and C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme* 17 no. 2 (2020): 141–61. For another account of the processes by which individuals can be groomed for this kind of evidential preemption see Lauren Leydon-Hardy, “Predatory Grooming and Epistemic Infringement,” in *Applied Epistemology*, ed. Jennifer Lackey (Oxford University Press, 2021), 119–50.

<sup>22</sup> Begby, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Nguyen, 147.

<sup>24</sup> In contrast to “To Sir with Love” consider the movie “God’s Not Dead”, where Kevin Sorbo plays a left-wing atheist philosophy professor who insists his students declare that God is dead.

<sup>25</sup> This is not to be considered only a right wing phenomenon. As Nguyen (2020, 150) notes, “echo chambers surely exist elsewhere on the political spectrum, though, to my mind, [however] the left-wing echo chambers have been unable to exert a similar level of political force.”

I use “echo chamber” to mean an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members’ epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust.<sup>26</sup>

In support of Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir’s distinction between thin and thick diversity, it is worth noting how this definition of an echo chamber closely resembles the kind of illiberal communities that were Tamir’s concern with regard to thick multiculturalism. In her earlier paper, Tamir notes:

liberals expose their children to illiberal forms of life while defenders of illiberal cultures make a special effort to shelter their children from any form of cultural diversity. Taking into account that complete closure is impossible, members of illiberal cultures also make sure to disparage other cultures, religions and traditions as sources of knowledge and self-reflection. In fact they often ridicule the idea of self-reflection, contrasting it with the idea of absolute truth proclaimed through revelation or the handing down of wisdom from one generation of sages to another. By claiming that the only valid source of knowledge is internal to the group they attempt to lessen the importance of multicultural exchanges and to render them less harmful.<sup>27</sup>

However, given these mechanisms of evidential preemption and the creation and maintenance of echo chambers in highly polarized societies, one must wonder whether learning from minority teachers will be enough to create a common ground for reducing bias and generating shared citizenship. This now takes me to my second concern.

## **2. The Contact Hypothesis: Unintended Consequences and Backlash Effects**

In the face of such extreme polarization, the promise of civic education for promoting civic bonds seems unachievable. However, by exploring the use of some methods of cross-cultural interaction and teaching as practiced in the Israeli education system, Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir suggest that there may be some hope for overcoming the forms of polarization we see today. Notably, their methods build on the insights and operation of Contact Theory, which was initially developed by Gordon Allport as a method to humanize the other

---

<sup>26</sup> Nguyen, 146.

<sup>27</sup> Tamir, 169-70.

through ongoing personal contact. That is, according to the contact hypothesis, prejudice between two groups can be reduced through ongoing contact (provided certain conditions are met).

First, let me start with some reason for hope for contact theory before I turn to my critical comments. In Nguyen's discussion of how to escape from an echo chamber he highlights the story of Derek Black. Derek Black is not only the son the creator of the white nationalist site Stormfront but also the godson of David Duke, a white supremacist, far-right politician, and former Grand Wizard of the KKK. Thus, Derek Black was heralded as the heir to the white nationalist movement. As reported in the Washington Post, he was pulled from his "public school in West Palm Beach at the end of third grade, when [his parents] heard his black teacher say the word 'ain't.'"<sup>28</sup> At New College, however, where Derek enrolled to study medieval European history, things changed. As Nguyen writes:

Black went to college and was shunned by almost everyone in his college community. But then Matthew Stevenson, a Jewish fellow undergraduate, began to invite Black to his Shabbat dinners. Stevenson was unfailingly kind, open, and generous, and he slowly earned Black's trust. This eventually led to a massive upheaval for Black – a slow dawning realization of the depths to which he had been systematically misled. Black went through a profound transformation and is now an anti-Nazi spokesperson.<sup>29</sup>

Notice, however, that this involved a friendship among peers, and the trust that one can earn in extending a promise of friendship to another. Although peer-to-peer friendship is not a position that teachers can be in towards their students, the model of peer-to-peer friendship is an important part of making not only depolarizing efforts possible, but it's also a key part of integration. So, I turn now to discussing the specifics of the teacher-student model for depolarization.<sup>30</sup>

Now, is it the case that increasing the number of minority teachers in the classroom will help to reduce racial hostilities thereby creating more virtuous and active citizens that respect diversity? It is easy to see why the contact hypothesis would be important to this thesis. After all, according to the contact hypothesis, increased contact between individuals from different backgrounds can reduce prejudice. However, it is worth noting that since being introduced in 1954, the claim that contact reduces prejudice is not a matter of consensus amongst social psychologists. Given how much the success of developing a new

---

<sup>28</sup> Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black," The Washington Post, October 15 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html).

<sup>29</sup> Nguyen, 158.

<sup>30</sup> For more on this point see Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

Poitier effect depends on the contact hypothesis, one cannot gloss over the ways in which contact can have both unintended consequences and backlash effects that worsen prejudice. These complications and points of contention aren't discussed by Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir, so I will discuss them here. For these points I draw on Alex Madva's (2016) work on structural interventions to reduce bias.<sup>31</sup>

First, let us question whether the presence of counter-stereotypical exemplars—in the form of minority teachers—will be sufficient for reducing prejudice and bias to create more virtuous students. This type of contact can have the unintended consequence of preserving an unjust status quo, as Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir acknowledge. For example, Madva notes:

In particular, it leads members of low-status groups (including blacks in South Africa, Arabs in Israel, Muslims in India, and black college students in the US) to perceive the status quo to be fair, to be less supportive of structural reform, and to (often mistakenly) expect fair treatment from members of high-status groups. “When the disadvantaged come to like the advantaged, when they assume they are trustworthy and good human beings, when their personal experiences suggest that the collective discrimination might not be so bad after all, then they become more likely to abandon the project of collective action to change inequitable societies” (Dixon et al. 2012: 11). In short, social contact leads them to like the advantaged group more, but also saps their motivation to fight for social change.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the morally bad consequences of preserving an unjust status quo and sapping the motivation of students to fight for social change—surely we want active and engaged students that want to make the world better!—there is also reason to doubt the ability of counter-stereotypical exemplars, in the form of minority teachers, to debias their students. Madva notes that although undergraduate women are more likely to pursue STEM majors if they have women math and science professors:

research increasingly suggests that having women professors has no effect whatsoever on undergraduate men's implicit or explicit stereotypes about math ability and gender. This particular debiasing effect applies only to ingroup members (women) rather

---

<sup>31</sup> Alex Madva, “A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy,” *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3 no. 27 (2016): 701-728.

<sup>32</sup> Madva, 707-8. This result seems to be corroborated by the meta-analysis Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir discuss in their chapter where a study cited discovered that “contacts attempting to promote coexistence or stimulate joint projects tend to preserve and perpetuate the dominance and control of the Jewish majority group, encouraging Arab submission and passivity.” (Typesetter please add the page number here)

than outgroup members (men). Moreover, even this ingroup effect depends on several contingent psychological factors, such as the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be similar to the counterstereotypical exemplar. For example, the effect increases when participants believe that the exemplar graduated from their own university. But if women believe that the exemplar is an exceptional “superstar” genius, then the effect reverses: they report fewer career aspirations, think of themselves as less assertive, and lose interest in math and science (Asgari, Dasgupta, & Cote 2010; Asgari, Dasgupta, & Stout 2012).<sup>33</sup>

What these unintended consequences and backlash effects call into question is the efficacy of minority teachers to accomplish Step 4 in Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir’s proposed 8-stage process: the blurring of stereotypes. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve been told that I’m not like those other immigrants, or that I should disregard disparaging remarks about Indians because they weren’t talking about me, etc. My presence as a counter-stereotype to stereotypes about people that look like me can be easily assimilated by treating me as an exception thus leaving the stereotype untouched. So let me now turn to this worry about being treated as a token which preserves the underlying social hierarchy and leaves stereotypes untouched. That is, I turn next to some concerns about typecasting, tokenization, the politics of deference, being-in-the-room privilege, and more generally, the kind of compulsory representation of “the other” that minority teachers will be required to perform.

### 3. Tokenization and The Unjust Distribution of Burdens in Combating Injustice

As Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir note, their hope in trying to adapt the Poitier effect is that minority teachers can enable encounters where others, notably students, “experience the other not only as a human being, but also as a knowledgeable agent, an authority, and often as a beloved educational figure.”<sup>34</sup> However, they also note that the first stage of the 8-stage process for creating a transformative cross-group teaching effect is cultural alienation. Here I want to focus on these feelings of alienation and estrangement from a community that you’ve been placed in and explore in more detail just how harmful that can be.<sup>35</sup> I’ve often experienced this feeling of being a token, especially in philosophy where it’s not uncommon to be the only brown person in the room.<sup>36</sup> As

---

<sup>33</sup> Madva, 713.

<sup>34</sup> Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir, page numbers for this volume need to be added by typesetter.

<sup>35</sup> See Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Harvard University Press, 2018). for criticisms of Anderson along these lines.

<sup>36</sup> See Eric Schwitzgebel, Liam Kofi Bright, Carolyn Dicey Jennings, Morgan Thompson, and Eric Winsberg, “The Diversity of Philosophy Students and Faculty,” *The Philosopher’s Magazine* 93 no. 1 (2021): 71-90.

Emmalon Davis (2016) has documented more thoroughly, there are many harms that stem from the practice of tokenization.<sup>37</sup> As Davis notes:

The harms stemming from this practice are abundant. First, tagging marginalized individuals as spokespersons perpetuates the myth that the members of nondominant social groups share one monolithic experience. Second, targets are placed under tremendous pressure to deliver on behalf of their entire constituency. Indeed, targets may experience anxiety, embarrassment, or even anger at having their social identity made into a public spectacle. Alternatively, the target may fear public shaming or ridicule if she does not possess (and transfer) the knowledge prejudicially attributed.<sup>38</sup>

Now I want to be clear that I'm not saying that the process discussed by Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir necessarily involves tokenization, but the risk is there and efforts must be made to ensure that the negative effects don't eventuate for the minority teachers. Minority teachers should not be used as objects for the betterment of their students.

What I am reminded of here is how discussions regarding the benefit of diversity are often presented as primarily a good for white students rather than as a good for Black students. A study by Starck, Sinclair, and Shelton (2021) notes that the instrumental rationale that universities offer, i.e., that diversity promotes learning, or that diversity prepares students for a diverse workplace, are preferred by white students whereas Black students prefer moral rationales for diversity, i.e., that it's the right thing to do, that increasing diversity a matter of justice.<sup>39</sup> For example, Starck, Sinclair, and Shelton note that "that the purported educational benefits described in instrumental diversity rationales largely serve to provide educational value to White individuals."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, that "as conceptualized, these objectives were to be achieved by introducing novel points of view to campus, implying that the educational beneficiaries of these efforts were those for whom minority perspectives were novel (i.e., majority group members)."<sup>41</sup> Whereas moral rationales for diversity, i.e., the rationales preferred by Black students, heighten white students' "concern with being labeled prejudiced due to their race."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Emmalon Davis, "Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons: A Case for Credibility Excess as Testimonial Injustice," *Hypatia* 31 no. 3(2016): 485–501.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, 492.

<sup>39</sup> Jordan G. Starck, Stacey Sinclair, and J. Nicole Shelton, "How University Diversity Rationales Inform Student Preferences and Outcomes," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 no. 16 (2021).

<sup>40</sup> Starck, Sinclair, and Shelton, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, we find ourselves facing the following dilemma: using instrumental rationales in order to preserve White students' sense of belonging at the cost of moral rationales that boost Black students' sense of belonging.<sup>43</sup> Ordinarily in a dilemma, both horns are equally bad and undesirable. However, in this dilemma we can recognize that given historical injustice choosing one horn over the other is likely to detrimentally affect some students more than others, and especially students from groups that have been historically oppressed, disadvantaged, or negatively stereotyped. The opting for instrumental rationales for diversity naturally raises the following question: whose interests are being sidelined for whose? Further, is that just?<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, there are additional worries that go beyond tokenization and instrumental rationales for diversity as opposed to moral rationales that must also be raised here. First, the act of offering the disadvantaged a seat in the room, even if it's in the front of the room, can itself be a problematic exercise of what Olúfémi O Táíwò calls *the politics of deference*.<sup>45</sup> As Táíwò warns, adding a minority voice to the room can often end up being at most a symbolic act, and at worst “a performance that sanitizes, apologizes for, or simply distracts from the fact that the deferrer has enough ‘in the room’ privilege for their ‘lifting up’ of a perspective to be of consequence—to reflect well on *them*.”<sup>46</sup> Although the politics of deference is right to pay attention to lived experience and the sharing of lived experience by being a counter-stereotypical exemplar in the room can be a powerful tool, it puts too much weight on the ability of mere stories and contact to change the unjust structures underlying why you were originally left out of the room.<sup>47</sup> As Táíwò notes, if we focus on merely elevating “the voices and perspectives *in* the room, the harder it becomes to change the world *outside*

---

<sup>43</sup> However, it should be noted that a reason these instrumental rationales dominate is because they have been important for school's attempts to justify and protect forms of affirmative action. For more on this point, see in particular Kristine Bowman's contribution to this volume, (typesetter please add the citation) and Bowman's discussion of Derrick Bell's interest convergence dilemma (Derrick A. Bell Jr., “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518-533). Thanks to Elizabeth Beaumont for pressing me to say more on this point. Also, for an accounting of these different rationales for diversity, see Natasha Warikoo, *The Diversity Bargain And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admission, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016)

<sup>44</sup> For more on unjust burdens befalling those already disadvantaged in the system, see also Sally Haslanger, “Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 1 (2014): 109–36.

<sup>45</sup> Olúfémi O Táíwò. *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)*. (Pluto Press, 2022).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>47</sup> See also Darien Pollock's “Political action, epistemic detachment, and the problem of white-mindedness,” *Philosophical Issues* 31 (2021): 299 where Pollock notes “how it's possible for institutional actors to fail to properly represent the interests of a politically disenfranchised group, even if these institutions include certain members of the disenfranchised group as a part of their organizing efforts.”

of the room.”<sup>48</sup> That is, we can be concerned that, in its current, preliminary formulation, Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir’s proposal seems to ask little of the rooms the teachers are in, little of the larger social structure, and it allows the material differences to stay the same.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Although my comments have been critical, I offer them in a friendly spirit to aid further work on these topics. Anyone interested cultivating some beneficial version of the Poitier effect as a bulwark against polarization must do so with a fuller understanding of the processes of polarization and, of the controversy surrounding the contact hypothesis. Perhaps most importantly, and they ought also to be mindful of the how the burdens of correcting the injustices of racial and ethnic oppression and prejudice will be distributed. This is not to say that Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir have not been mindful of these concerns, but rather that there is *a lot* to consider and these critical comments scratch just the surface of complicated issues of addressing injustice in an unjust world.

To end, just as Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir end on a quote let me do the same with a quote from Táíwò that captures the spirit of their proposal: let us “be accountable and responsive to people who aren’t yet in the room, and [let us] build the kinds of rooms in which we can sit together, rather than merely seek to navigate more gracefully the rooms history has built for us.”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Táíwò, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Táíwò, 84. This approach he calls “the constructive approach to standpoint epistemology”. For more on standpoint epistemology see Briana Toole’s “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 598–618 for an overview.