



# Word to the Wise: Notes on a Black Feminist Metaphilosophy of Race

Kristie Dotson\*

Michigan State University

## Abstract

It is not uncommon to ask a race and gender-based question of a philosopher of race, only to hear ‘I do race, not gender’. To the ears of many Black feminists, this sounds, to be frank, utterly foolish. Here, I identify three metaphilosophical assumptions, i.e. the disaggregation, fundamentality and transcendental assumptions, that aid in underwriting the ability to use the statement, ‘I do race, not gender’, as a means for avoiding gender-based questions in ‘race talks’. Then, I gesture to a reason to reject the fundamentality and transcendental assumptions, i.e. the promotion of intellectual slumming.

Figurations of nationhood and identity are frequently as raced themselves as the originating racial house that defined them. When they are not raced, they are... imaginary landscape, never inscape; Utopia, never home... We are already being asked to know such a world as aftermath – as rubbish, as an already damaged experience, as a valueless future... It is therefore more urgent than ever to develop nonmessianic language to refigure the raced community, to decipher the deracing of the world. It is more urgent than ever to develop an epistemology that is neither intellectual slumming nor self-serving reification.

– Toni Morrison, ‘Home’ (1998, 11)

## 1. Introduction

As a Black feminist, professional philosopher, it is not uncommon to ask a race and gender-based question at a ‘race talk’, only to hear ‘I do race, not gender’. Usually, there is a palatable sigh of relief from the audience that the person who utters this excuse has steered the conversation back to its proper course, away from thorny and, it would seem, irrelevant questions of gender to ‘pure’ investigations into race. Often, too often, ‘race’ is investigated as a singular phenomenon. Whether one is offering a cultural, social, political, metaphysical, ontological, existential, phenomenological, and/or biological understanding of race, it is often seen as a stand-alone idea.<sup>1</sup> In my estimation, Black feminist theory and philosophy is a body of thought that challenges the notion that race can ever ‘stand alone’ as a concept to be analyzed. The nature and implications of this challenge are little investigated and even less understood than a handful have ever stopped to genuinely consider what happens to the investigation of race when it appears in a list, like ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.’, though many have assumptions with respect to this discourse. For example, often work that invokes ‘race’ along with other social positionalities is not seen as, properly speaking, ‘race talk’ (Hooks 1995). It is this inclination that I explore in this paper.

Here, I give a reading of why people think they can utter a statement like, ‘I do race, not gender’ to avoid a gender and race-based question and not sound utterly foolish, because, to my Black feminist ears, this is thoughtlessness *par excellence*. Ultimately, I postulate that the phrase ‘I do race, not gender’, indicates a subscription to three assumptions, i.e. disaggregation

assumption, fundamentality and transcendence assumptions, that work to facilitate conclusions that require the use of fewer intellectual resources while elevating the importance of those conclusions over more complex investigations.

This paper will proceed in three short sections. *First*, I will identify three assumptions that help to underwrite the so-called reasonable deployment of the statement, 'I do race, not gender', as a means for avoiding gendered questions. They include: (1) the disaggregation assumption, (2) the fundamentality assumption, and (3) the transcendence assumption. *Second*, I briefly outline the charge of 'intellectual slumming' to which the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions are particularly susceptible. *Third*, and finally, I conclude with a 'word to the wise', i.e. some assumptions guarantee unwarranted exclusion no matter who deploys them.

## 2. 'I Do Race, Not Gender': A Tale of Three Assumptions

The notion that philosophical investigations into race are radically distinct from inquiries that include gender, for example, is underwritten by a number of assumptions. One assumption concerns the idea that there is a 'pure' discourse on race, which is separate from a discussion that takes up race as a category intermeshed with other categories. To a certain degree, this division makes sense. For example, 'race as a category among many' is already presupposing a *race-only* understanding of race, where race is understood as a 'category' of some sort. That is to say, there seems to be an already existing assumption of 'what race is' in 'race, class, gender, etc.' investigations. The idea is this: if a list that includes race already assumes a preliminary answer to a 'race is x' investigation, then, at least in theory, one can isolate the idea of race and conduct a 'race-only' investigation. I call this, the disaggregation assumption. The *disaggregation assumption*, here, refers to the idea that, at least in theory, sole inquiries into race can be seen as analytically distinct from other discussions of race, where, for example, it is only a component part of that investigation. This assumption allows that investigations into 'race is x', for example, are significantly different from 'race, class, and gender' investigations. Another way to think about this is to say that 'race only' investigations are analytically distinct from 'race-and' investigations.<sup>2</sup>

For many, a general acceptance of the disaggregation assumption is enough to utter the statement 'I do race, not gender' and to avoid gender-based questions, for example. However, the idea that 'race-only' investigations are *different from* 'race-and' investigations does not also imply that 'race-and' investigations are *irrelevant to* 'race-only' investigations. The refusal to answer a gender-based question on the basis that, 'one does race, not gender', assumes that discourses on 'race' and those on 'race and gender', for example, are not only distinct but are also conceptually unrelated in such a way that 'race and gender' questions are irrelevant to 'race-only' inquiries. The idea that 'race-and' investigations are immaterial to 'race-only' investigations implies, at least, two further assumptions. One assumption concerns the idea that 'race-only' inquiries are more fundamental than 'race-and' inquiries and, by virtue of that fundamentality, 'race-only' investigations are more important. Here, the *fundamentality assumption* refers to the notion that 'race only' inquiries are more conceptually basic and, by virtue of being more basic, more central than 'race and' inquiries. On this assumption, 'race-only' investigations are afforded a central importance that the disaggregation assumption does not itself accomplish.

Now, just because one might assume that 'race-only' investigations are both different and more central than 'race-and' investigations, this does not also entail the irrelevance of 'race-and' inquiries to 'race-only' investigations. As such, there is often one further operative assumption that allows the statement, 'I do race, not gender', to serve as a reason to avoid race-and-gender-based questions. What those who subscribe to the fundamentality thesis also commonly assume is that because 'race-and' investigations might entail 'race-only' conclusions,

thereby supposedly making ‘race-only’ investigations and conclusions more ‘basic’ and ‘central’ (i.e. fundamentality assumption), then ‘race-only’ investigations and conclusions transcend ‘race-and’ inquiries. I call this latter idea the transcendence assumption. Here, the *transcendence assumption* refers to the assumption that ‘race-only’ inquiries and conclusions are not, in general, impacted by ‘race-and’ inquiries and conclusions, even though ‘race-only’ inquiries are thought to be able to inform ‘race-and’ inquiries (by virtue of being more fundamental). It is important to note that the transcendence assumption maintains a single-directional flow of relevance, whereby so-called conceptually basic investigations and conclusions can inform compound discussions and conclusions, but not the reverse. For example, according to the transcendence assumption, ‘race-only’ inquiries are relevant to ‘race-and’ conclusions, where ‘race-and’ inquiries are, in general, supposedly not relevant to ‘race-only’ conclusions. This unidirectional arrangement of relevance is underwritten by, *first*, separating single and complex inquiries into different discourses, *second*, establishing a single inquiry as more fundamental, and then, *third*, elevating that single inquiry so that more complex inquiries cannot be said to inform it. Taken together these assumptions, i.e. the disaggregation assumption, the fundamentality assumption, and the transcendence assumption, insulate single-focus inquiries by establishing a schedule of relevance that allows the statement, ‘I do race, not gender’, to make sense by making ‘race-and’ questions seemingly irrelevant to race-only investigations. That is to say, one need not ‘do gender’ to ‘do race’ (disaggregation and transcendence assumptions) but one, presumably, must ‘do race’ to do ‘race and gender’ (via the fundamentality assumption). Many Black feminists reject this position and its accompanying assumptions. Here, however, I will focus on a salient challenge to the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions.

In Black feminist thought, the exact character of rejections of the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions ranges from exceedingly complex to generally straightforward. There are many ways to challenge these assumptions. The challenge I focus on here concerns the charge of ‘intellectual slumming’.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, one can disagree with the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions on the basis that they encourage ‘intellectual slumming’.

### 3. ‘Intellectual Slumming’ and the Fundamentality Assumption

Taken together, the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions are susceptible to the charge of promoting and insulating intellectual slumming. *Intellectual slumming*, here, refers to requiring fewer resources for intellectual production than might ordinarily be required while retaining the notion that one’s work is centrally important. That is to say, intellectual slumming is marked by work that utilizes fewer resources for itself but presumes central importance. The ‘central importance’ retained by so-called basic conceptual inquiries follows from the idea that getting back to ‘the basics’ of some issue will supposedly aid in clarifying all relevant aspects of that issue. The fundamentality assumption can routinely lead to intellectual slumming according to how one understands the notion of the ‘central importance’ of so-called conceptually basic ideas.

The very notion of ‘central importance’ preserves the idea of marginal discourses, of course. In other words, the fundamentality assumption establishes weighted values among similar, though different kinds of discourses. These weighted values create skewed scales of measurement that, may look innocent, but have real consequences. To see this, consider a weighted value like monetary systems, e.g. the EUR to USD. When the euro is strong to the dollar, then it takes more dollars to acquire, essentially, the same amount of goods and services. This measurement system determines what one can and cannot do in terms of one’s monetary resources in certain social, economic, and geographical spaces and places. The weighted value of so-called conceptually basic inquiries to ‘complex’ inquiries turns on a similar

comparison scale. When so-called conceptually basic notions are conceived as strong (or more central) with respect to more complex inquiries, then it takes more work for a complex inquiry to acquire the same scope of relevance, which is a kind of intellectual value, as a so-called basic inquiry. The reverse would also be true. Because so-called basic investigations are perceived as having central importance, they actually have to accomplish less to have greater impact.

Let us be clear; the intellectual resources one needs to utilize to do thorough race and gender work, for example, can be significantly greater than race only investigations. More streams of analyses generally means more work to do. So though race and gender accounts, for example, often require more work and more intellectual resources, they are often penalized with a reduced centrality that translates into a reduced value. This mirrors, in structure if not content, the strength of currencies to each other.<sup>4</sup>

When the fundamentality assumption is operative, those conducting 'race-only' investigations need not know anything about gender discourses, for example, in order to claim some elevated importance for one's work. The fundamentality assumption allows this possibility. 'Race' inquiries need not consider gender. In fact, they *should not* consider too many considerations if they want to be deemed abstracted enough to be fundamental. And should one consider gender, because that is the way many, if not all, of us *live*, then the central importance of one's investigation decreases. This is because the inquiry is in danger of losing the status of being 'conceptually basic'. After all, as the disaggregation assumption goes, a race and gender investigation is conceptually different than a race investigation, right? And even though the intellectual resources required to do race and class and gender work, for example, increases significantly, this increased workload causes one *to lose centrality for its conclusions*, a kind of intellectual value, because it has moved from being conceptually basic to being too complex. *If a set of assumptions actually assigns importance according to the necessity of utilizing fewer intellectual resources, and, then, has the audacity to reduce the importance of projects utilizing more intellectual resources, then it is an assumption that encourages intellectual slumming.* The question becomes: who wouldn't gravitate towards an investigation of 'central importance' that paradoxically requires fewer intellectual resources? Who indeed. I challenge any assumption that requires lower intellectual resources for its own subsistence while simultaneously bolstering its own importance. The fundamentality assumption does just this and, in doing so, promotes intellectual slumming. When philosophers of race say, 'I do race, not gender', as a means of avoiding a gender-based question about their conclusion, then they are intellectually slumming.

To be clear, by itself, intellectual slumming is not a big problem. It can, however, promote a kind of theoretical shortsightedness that needs to be balanced with other kinds of inquiries. A major problem with the excuse, 'I do race, not gender', is it removes the ability for complex inquiries, like 'race-and' investigations, to appropriately balance so-called conceptually basic investigations. The fundamentality assumption may promote intellectual slumming, but what assures its persistence is the transcendental assumption. It does this by making inquiries from complex investigations seem irrelevant to so-called conceptually basic investigations.

To understand this, imagine the following two scenarios. In the first scenario, you are offered the opportunity to research a range of factors that impact our landscapes, institutions, and material possibilities. In order to do this research, however, you will need to research several relevant considerations to the point of advanced proficiency. You will not be credited for this study, but you may be able to produce complex analyses of our social landscapes. The conclusions of these complex analyses, however, will always be vulnerable to one-sided critiques from more 'basic' discourses. In the second scenario, however, you have the opportunity to study one single factor that impacts our landscapes, institutions, and/or material possibilities. In this case, you will only need to focus on one relevant consideration. The work one produces will be considered centrally important (via the fundamentality assumption). What's more, because of

the conceptually basic nature of one's singular investigation, it cannot be held accountable by more complex analysis (via the transcendence assumption). It can be held accountable by other similarly basic analyses but not by discourses that are not as so-called basic. Which would you choose? Most people, if they were honest, would choose the second scenario. It is easier and has greater rewards. The second scenario, however, is an example of intellectual slumming. That is to say, it is engagement in work requiring fewer resources for intellectual production than might ordinarily be required while retaining the notion that the work produced is of central importance to intellectual endeavors. The fundamentality assumption promotes the notion that one can do work utilizing fewer intellectual resources while retaining an elevated status. However, the transcendence assumption insulates the practice from being accountable to more complex analysis. Together, the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions distort perceptions of intellectual labor so that the fewer intellectual resources one uses, the more important one's work appears. This, in my estimation, is a problem and is one of the reasons many Black feminists reject the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions. Quite simply, they promote and insulate intellectual slumming.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: *Word to the Wise*

This, of course, is not the final word on these issues. Not every 'race-only' investigation is guilty of accepting the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions. However, I would claim, as I do here, that if one avoids a gender-based question at one's 'race talk' with the phrase, 'I do race, not gender', then these are the kinds of the assumptions that condition the success of that tactic. Here is the irony. These assumptions should look familiar to any philosopher of race. After all, this set of assumptions, i.e. disaggregation assumption, fundamentality assumption, and transcendence assumption, have led many to question the philosophical legitimacy of the philosophy of race itself. As the general dismissal goes, the philosophy of race is not 'conceptually basic' enough to be of 'central importance' to philosophical investigations. It is indeed ironic, though not surprising, to see those same assumptions deployed by a philosopher of race to avoid a gender question, especially given how often social and political philosophers, for example, utilize those assumptions to avoid a race-based question. It seems that whether one does 'race-only' investigations or 'race-and' investigations, we should all have reason to reject the fundamentality and/or transcendence assumptions. So I will end with a word to the wise: metaphilosophical assumptions like the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions can be used against any discourse that is more complex than another. Better to have a care with these assumptions because no complex analysis is safe from their collective devaluation.

#### **Short Biography**

Kristie Dotson is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Michigan State University. She researches at the intersections of epistemology and women of color feminism, particularly Black feminism. She also works in diversity and metaphilosophy. Dr Dotson edited a special issue on women of color feminist philosophy for *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* entitled, *Interstices: Inheriting Women of Color Feminist Philosophy* (29:1, 2014) and has published in numerous journals including *Comparative Philosophy*, *Hypatia*, *The Black Scholar*, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* and *Social Epistemology*. Dr Dotson is working currently on a monograph entitled, *Knowledge and Dominion: On Varieties of Epistemic Oppression*.

## Notes

\* Correspondence: Department of Philosophy, Michigan State University, 368 Farm Lane #503, East Lansing, MI, 48824, USA. Email: dotsonk@msu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Though I list 'social' here, it is quite likely that all investigations of race are social to some significant degree. The listing of 'social' here is not meant to imply otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> I realize that this 'race-only/race-and' formulation may be ill advised. One of the major critiques of 'race, class, gender, etc.', investigations is that it marks an investigation that utilizes an additive approach for comprehension, which, as the critique goes, distorts our existent realities. Frankly, this critique is theoretically unsophisticated. Our social landscapes are multistable and, as such, require a host of different kinds of analyses to understand what is happening at any given time. No one analysis will suffice. 'Race-and' investigations are but one kind of investigation among many. (For more on this point, see Dotson 2014).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Toni Morrison, whose phrase I borrow here, does not necessarily identify with Black feminism or as a Black feminist. I choose to use 'intellectual slumming', Morrison's phrase, because her discourse in the essay, 'Home', can be taken as a 'race-only' discourse that does not assume either the fundamentality or transcendence thesis. As such, it generates metaphilosophical critiques similar to tacit and explicit rejections found in Black feminist work (See, for example, Wallace 1990; Christian 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Though this is not a direct analogy, the idea of theory as currency is not a new one in Black feminist thought. Barbara Christian highlights this notion of theory in her seminal essay, 'The Race for Theory' (1988).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the fundamentality assumption, as outlined here, most likely always promotes intellectual slumming. However, the transcendence assumption is what insulates the practice of slumming from other more complex analyses. As a result, I hold open the possibility that the transcendental assumption could be reasonably deployed when the fundamentality assumption is not also operative. However, it bears noting that there are Black feminists that reject all of the assumptions I have introduced here, i.e. the disaggregation, fundamentality, and transcendence assumptions, with very good reasons.

## Works Cited

- Christian, Barbara. 'The race for theory'. *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988): 67–79.
- Dotson, Kristie. 'Making sense: the multistability of oppression and the importance of intersectionality'. *Why Race and Gender Still Matter*. Eds. Namita Goswami, Maeve O'Donovan and Lisa Yount. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014. 43–58.
- Hooks, Bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. 'Home'. *The House that Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*. Ed. Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Wallace, Michele. *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. New York: Verso, 1990.