# Comments on Yael Tamir's "To Sir with Love: Advancing Civic Awareness through Cross Communal Teachings"

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I want to begin with two preemptory notes. First, I'm approaching this paper as a bit of an outsider. I've not been thinking about this topic for as long as Yael Tamir or Kristine Bowman have and it's a bit outside of my usual wheelhouse. So I appreciate the opportunity that the paper offers to think more seriously about the important bulwark against polarization that civic education and diverse teachers play in increasingly polarized and segregated societies. Second, although Tamir and her co-authors focus is on civic education in Israel, in my comments I will be drawing mostly on literature about polarization and segregation in the United States because it is the context and the literature that I am more familiar with.

In their paper, Tamir and her co-authors note that the distinction between thin and thick diversity is similar to the distinction between thin and thick multiculturalism, so I looked back at Tamir's "Two Concepts of Multiculturalism" to see how the distinction could be drawn out with the following two aims in mind. First, to get a more worked out account of what precisely thick diversity is. Second, to try to understand better how thick diversity leads to polarization in order to assess the proposed solution to polarization that depends on the ability of teachers from minority groups to "pave their students' way into civic maturity, preparing them to become virtuous, active citizens" (1). So, first I will raise some concerns about the relationship between thick diversity and polarization. Second, I will turn to the contact hypothesis and question whether the presence of minority of teachers will be sufficient to debias students. Further, I raise some worries about unintended consequences and backlash effects. Third, I turn to concerns about tokenization and the unjust distribution of burdens in combatting injustice. Tamir's paper raises a number of interesting questions which I hope to do justice to below.

## 1. Thick Diversity and Polarization

In "Two Concepts of Multiculturalism", Tamir distinguishes between thin multiculturalism, which involves different liberal cultures, and thick multiculturalism that involves both liberal and illiberal cultures. For thin multiculturalism, Tamir's example is the debate between English- and French-speaking communities in Canada. As Tamir (1995, 161) notes, the "the two communities share a set of liberal-democratic beliefs, the debate is an intra-liberal one." In short, the two communities have a shared set of beliefs and as a result, "disagreements over basic principles do not arise" (162).

For thick multiculturalism, Tamir's (1995, 167) example is the French ban on face coverings which "French officials see as imposing neutrality [whereas] Muslims see as a campaign against Islam." This is a deeper disagreement than the earlier Canadian example because there is a deep disagreement about whether religion can or should remain strictly private. As Tamir (1995, 167) notes:

> the idea that religion or culture could remain strictly private is one that fits well a Western Christian society but is daunting to Muslims or Jews whose religion cannot be restricted to the private sphere. No orthodox religious Jew can agree to take off his skull cap at school, or in court, or in parliament - God's commands apply everywhere and could not be overridden by state law.

If the distinction between thin and thick diversity maps onto the distinction given above, then central to thick diversity must be the lack of shared common beliefs. This then seems to be central to Tamir's claim that thick diversity leads to polarization. With that in mind, here I think it would be illuminating to consider how this problem of how thick diversity leads to polarization resembles a familiar problem from epistemology. If two groups have different prior beliefs, then through purely rational processes the same piece of evidence can lead them to polarize because those prior beliefs will lead them to update in different ways (see Kelly 2008). In light of this, it might be natural to 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. This, however, would be a mistake.

Although the standard view amongst social psychologists has been that belief polarization is the result of epistemically irrational processes, there has been pushback against this in recent years. For example, as Tom Kelly (2008) has argued, paying more attention to evidence for views we disagree with, something you think would help counteract polarization, actually increases polarization. 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.[1]

On the one hand, demonstrating that polarization is a rational process can help bolster Tamir and her co-authors 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 unique to thick diversity.

To demonstrate rational polarization, I want to consider some results from a simulation run by Singer et al. (2019). 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 distinct from one another or whether there are beliefs shared in common. Singer et al. (2019, 7) 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." However, we're not agents with unlimited memories. 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 (2019, 17) simulations aren't 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."

So, what can we learn from this? Importantly, polarization is a structural problem. And this is where Tamir and co-authors suggestion comes in as a way to structurally combat the effects of polarization: the presence of minority teachers in classrooms. There are, however, reasons to doubt whether such a strategy will be effective in a highly polarized society. For example, consider 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 current debates about Critical Race Theory in schools. A process that we see being employed

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[1] See also Antony (2016) and Johnson (2020) for the more general point that biases can be rational processes.

is what Endre Begby (2021) calls *evidential preemption*, and this process is central to creation of *echo chambers* (see Nguyen 2020).[2]

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*" (Begby 2021, 2). 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 the group. For example, if you've been primed that others will try to undermine your belief 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. As C. Thi Nguyen (2020, 147) notes, "by making undermining predictions about contrary testimony, inside authorities not only discredit that contrary testimony, but increase their trustworthiness for future predictions."

To see this in action, consider how students are warned that universities of full of the illiberal left that are intolerant of conservative viewpoints. That is, students are given a preemptory warning that their teachers will try to undermine their faith or turn them into liberals. 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.[3] This helps to create an echo chamber, which Nguyen (2020, 146) defines as follow:

> 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.

This definition closely resembles the kind of illiberal communities that were Tamir's concern with regard to thick multiculturalism. In her earlier paper, Tamir (1995, 169-70) 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.

Given these mechanisms of evidential preemption and the creation and maintenance of echo chambers in highly polarized societies, I can't help but wonder if contact with minority teachers will be enough to create a common ground for shared citizenship. This now takes me to my second concern.

## 2. Contact Theory: Unintended Consequences and Backlash Effects

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[2] See also Leydon-Hardy (2021) for a similar account of the processes by which individuals can be groomed for this kind of evidential preemption.

[3] 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."

First, perhaps there is some room for hope with regard to contact theory. In his discussion of how to escape from an echo chamber, Nguyen discusses 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, as such he 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.'" At New College, however, where Derek enrolled to study medieval European history, things changed. As Nguyen (2020, 158) 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 lead 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.

Notice, however, that this required a friendship, and the trust that one can earn in extending a promise of friendship to another. This is not a position that teachers can be in towards their students, but it is an important part of making not only depolarizing efforts possible, but it's also a key part of integration (see also Anderson 2010).

With this story in mind, I want to think more about contact theory—i.e., the idea that increased contact between individuals from different backgrounds can reduce prejudice—as this claim is central to Tamir and her co-authors thesis that increasing the number of minority teachers in the classroom will help to reduce racial hostilities, creating more virtuous and active citizens that respect diversity. There are some unintended consequences and backlash effects that call into question whether this strategy will be effective. That is, 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. For both these points I draw on Alex Madva's (2016) work on structural interventions to reduce bias.

For example, Madva (2016, 707-8) notes the following unintended counterproductive effects of increased contact:

> 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.[4]

In addition, Madva raises concerns about the ability of counterstereotypical exemplars, in the form of minority teachers, in debiasing their students. Madva (2016, 713) notes that although undergraduate women are more likely to pursue STEM majors if they have women math and science professors:

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[4] This result seems to be corroborated by the meta-analysis Tamir and her co-authors discuss in the paper where Moaz (2011) 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" (Binyamin, Jayusi, and Tamir, 6).

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 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).

What these unintended consequences and backlash effects call into question is the efficacy of minority teachers to accomplish Step 4 in the 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 an counterstereotype to stereotypes about people that look like me can be easily assimilated by treating me as an exception thus leaving the stereotype untouched.

### 3. Tokenization and The Unjust Distribution of Burdens in Combatting Injustice
Finally, I want to end by noting some concerns about typecasting, tokenization, and the kind of compulsory representation that minority teachers will be required to perform. As Tamir and her co-authors note, the hope that minority teachers can enable encounters where others, notably students, "experience the teacher not only as a human being, but also as a knowledgeable person, an authority, and often as a beloved educational figure" (6). They also note that the first stage of the 8-stage process is cultural alienation, and I want to focus on these feelings of alienation and estrangement from a community that you've been placed in and explore just how harmful that can be.[5] I've often experienced this feeling of being a token, especially in philosophy it's not uncommon to be the only brown person in the room. As Emmalon Davis (2016) has documented more thoroughly, there are many harms that stem from the practice of tokenization. As Davis (2016, 492) 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.

Now I want to be clear that I'm not saying that the process discussed in Tamir and her co-authors' paper 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 the discussions of 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, a matter of justice. For example, they note that "that the purported educational benefits described in instrumental

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[5] See Shelby (2018) for criticisms of Anderson (2010) along these lines.

diversity rationales largely serve to provide educational value to White individuals" (2). 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)" (2). 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" (2). Thus, we find ourselves in the following problematic place: 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 (see also Warikoo 2016). So we must ask: whose interests are being sidelined for whose, and is that just?

In closing then, just as with the concern about minority teachers carrying unjust burdens in correcting for unjust structures present more widely in society, we can ask the more general question of whether there are any just paths out of an unjust world. Every path seems to come with a compromise, a tradeoff, and every path is inequitable with regard to whom the burdens of justice fall upon. However, although it seems inevitable that the burdens of correcting the injustice will fall disproportionately on the shoulders of those already suffering the worst of the injustices of this world that does not relieve of us the moral general point I've been gesturing at throughout these comments: the obligation that we must ensure that we don't inadvertently make things worse or only act in the interests of those already privileged within the system.

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