

Valerie Elverton Dixon

June 9, 2009

### Servant Knowledge

During the course of my life, I have heard African-American women talk about their white people. It was a curious language of ownership. These women were servants, working in the households of white people. Some had good white people, some had bad white people, and almost all white people were strange in some way. These women knew intimate details about their white people's lives. These servants knew more about their white people than their white people knew about them.

In the movie The Nanny Diaries, Scarlett Johansson plays an anthropology graduate who takes a job as a nanny for a rich couple living on the Upper East Side of New York City. The comedy comes as she tries to live her own life and keep her job a secret from her mother while navigating the various dysfunctions of the family that employs her. We see that the servant knows more about the employers than they know or care to know about her.

As a womanist, post colonial moral philosopher, the theoretical name for this is: the epistemological privilege of the oppressed. Servant knowledge. Yet, like nearly all terminology, this concept has more than one meaning. One meaning is that the oppressed know more about the oppressor than the oppressor knows about them. Such knowledge is necessary for survival. It also means that when considering what is right to do, we ought to choose the action that benefits the oppressed.

When Judge Sonia Sotomayor made the statement that a wise old Latina would make a better decision than a wise old white man, she was no doubt considering servant knowledge. Her statements have been mischaracterized as racist and or racialist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The White House and the nominee are working to clarify her statement. Senators on the Senate Judiciary Committee will no doubt ask her to explain the statement during confirmation hearings. What neither she nor the White House will say is that very often people who are in conversation with servants, people who gain knowledge of the realities of life from the bottom, have information that people who see life from a position of advantage do not.

In his thinking regarding the education of oppressed people, Paulo Freire understood that everyone has knowledge. Following his logic, we can see that people working in kitchens, nurseries, laundries, fields and factories have knowledge that comes from work in these locations. When knowledge of this or that academic discipline – book knowledge—supplements these experiences one has a wider more complete range of information from which to make decisions. A justice with servant knowledge would have a wider, thicker context of interpretation.

This idea that Judge Sotomayor's comments were racist or racialist is nonsense. The accusation of racism reflects the blindness and ignorance that servants, people living at the bottom of society are human beings who are paying attention.

On the second meaning of the concept of an epistemological privilege, our moral acting ought to benefit the least among us. The logic is that when we work to relieve the suffering of the least, such action benefits all. When President Obama spoke about empathy and experience, I understood that to mean he wanted justices who would employ an epistemological privilege for the oppressed.

Too often, justice privileges those who already hold power. The bright shining moments of the nation's history come when justice privileges the powerless. In so doing, the nation moves forward. *Brown v Board of Education*, the decision that struck down legal segregation in this country is an example. If Judge Sotomayor remembers the stories she has heard from people at the bottom and add them to the knowledge she learned from Princeton and Yale and add that to the knowledge she has gained from her other experiences as a lawyer and as a judge, she will have broad knowledge to make better decisions than she would make without servant knowledge. If she interprets the law with the privilege of the oppressed in mind, she could be a major figure in helping the United States become a more perfect union.