Philosophical Inquiry, Racism and ‘White Discomfort’ - Do we really wish to dwell together?

Mr Darren Chetty

UCL Institute of Education
dmchetty@hotmail.com
1. What is P4C?
The term ‘Philosophy for Children’ (commonly abbreviated to P4C) was first used by Matthew Lipman to describe the programme he created, with the assistance of others, (most notably Ann Margaret Sharp) for use in the US school system. The programme consisted of student textbooks, written as novels, in which fictional children and their teachers (and sometimes other adults) discussed ideas in everyday language. Lipman wrote the first of these novels, *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* for ages 11-12, in 1969. Each novel was written for a specific school grade, so that the full series comprised a curriculum for children aged 5-16. The ideas discussed were those that have been discussed by various western philosophers. Lipman decided not to explicitly attribute ideas to historical philosophers however, as his aim was for student readers to engage with the ideas and discuss or enquire in similar fashion to the characters in the story, rather than memorise who wrote what and when. Lipman originally thought of Harry as “a book children might find for themselves” but gradually came to conclude that Philosophy for Children was needed in the school as well as in the home. In addition to the texts, Lipman produced detailed teacher manuals, which included summaries of the ideas contained within the narratives along with exercises designed to deepen thinking around the ideas and discussion plans.

Whilst Lipman used the term Philosophy for Children to describe his programme, it was subsequently used by other groups and individuals who developed similar, but not identical practices. In some quarters, the term Philosophy with Children is used to describe practice that differs from the Lipman approach. However, in the UK, The Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE) use Philosophy for Children and the abbreviation P4C to describe the approach taught on its courses. Whilst SAPERE no longer prescribes use of the Lipman novels on its training courses, the courses promote a “community of philosophical enquiry” pedagogy that is largely based on Lipman’s original programme and the training courses he offered at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC).

The Community of Enquiry

Before I proceed further, I should clarify what I understand to be the community of enquiry. Matthew Lipman et al (1980: 45) tell us “When children are encouraged to think philosophically, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry. Such a community is committed to the procedures of inquiry, to responsible search techniques that presuppose an openness to evidence and to reason. It is assumed that these procedures of the community, when internalized, become the reflective habits of the individual.” Here we see the importance of intellectual ‘openness’, specifically openness to evidence and reason as integral to the classroom community of inquiry. (I intend to explore what is accepted and rejected as ‘evidence’ in series of vignettes in a later section.)
Lipman views the community of enquiry as the site where children (and teachers, for the community of enquiry is core to training courses in P4C) can learn to make better judgements and explore what it means to be ‘reasonable’. As well as the presentation of different views on a given philosophical topic, the classrooms in the stories serve as a model community of inquiry to the reader. Lipman claims that, with the added model of the teacher, children will engage in the higher order thinking and philosophical enquiry of the characters in the stories.

Subsequent P4C practitioners have invoked “ethnic and racial hatreds” (Splitter & Sharp 1995:1) and global injustices (SAPERE 2007:11) as reasons for the urgent need for P4C in mainstream schools. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that we should give serious consideration to how the community of enquiry, with its espoused values of democracy, good judgement, reasonableness, inclusion and participation might, in actuality, be operating as a ‘gated community of inquiry’. With a particular focus on racism, I propose that the community of enquiry, whilst professing to be a space open to questioning our deepest assumptions, operates in reality as a cognitive shelter or comfort zone for white people with regard to philosophical matter relating to race/racism. I suggest that the reasons for this are not straightforward and are not limited to P4C institutions, practices, methodologies and procedures. Nor are they unconnected.

This paper is part of a part of a larger project of unpicking the underlying assumptions of the practice and theory of P4C, informed by the theoretical lens of the critical philosophy of race and critical whiteness studies, in which I offer a philosophical analysis of theoretical literature, training materials and resources related to P4C. In an earlier paper (Chetty 2014), I critiqued some of the practices and procedures for P4C with regard to dialogic enquiry into questions relating to ‘race’ and racism. In so doing, I drew attention to the fact that whilst Lipman’s model communities of enquiry discuss fairness, justice and equality they almost never refer to racism. I also highlighted, in the UK, the continued absence of the work of philosophers of colour, of children’s books and materials written by writers of colour and of people of colour in general amongst the ranks of P4C trainers. Clearly the under-representation of philosophers, writers and teachers racialised as other than white, is by no means an issue unique to the philosophy for children movement. Indeed, there has been recently some recognition of the need to actively address this under-representation in the respective fields of philosophy, literature and education in the UK and USA. However analyses of absences that point to structural inequalities can run the risk of being interpreted as denying agency to individuals and of providing a ready-made response to those who one is seeking to address, along the lines of – *this is such a big problem that you can’t possibly expect me/us to solve it*.

In this paper, I wish to extend the consideration of the community of enquiry as it applies to the philosophy for/with children movement so that it includes not only classrooms and groups of young people but also something perhaps closer to C.S. Peirce’s original use of the term. Whilst Peirce was referring to the science/academic
community, I refer to Philosophy for/with children, practitioners, practitioner trainers, scholars and writers. P4C community of enquiry spaces are both literal: rooms at international, national and regional conferences, seminars, training courses and school staffrooms and virtual/metaphorical: journals, websites and books. Rather than viewing the community of inquiry as a term for a clearly delineated, procedural timetabled ‘event’ in schools I take it to mean those adults and children who inquire together philosophically and those who think philosophically about such a practice. Choosing to bring this second notion of the community of inquiry into the definition is perhaps unusual, but I suggest, both useful and justifiable. SAPERE courses contain substantial immersive elements, and it is emphasised that one learns how to get better at teaching/facilitating philosophical inquiry and building a community of inquiry by taking part in philosophical inquiry in a community of inquiry.

2. The ‘Gated Community of Enquiry’

I suggest that the community of enquiry is ‘gated’ at different levels. Who enters the space for deliberation, which philosophical perspectives enter the space for deliberation, and how they are presented are all issues relating to the gating of the community of enquiry – with whom and with what do we dwell when we dwell in a community of enquiry? I use ‘dwell’ here not in the sense of Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, but rather to bring together in one term common concerns for advocates of P4C, namely the questions of how are we to think together and how are we to live together. Writing with Lawrence Splitter, Anne Margaret Sharp, described as Lipman’s principal colleague (SAPERE 2010) states that the procedure of the community of inquiry “will enable children, as present and future world citizens, to come to terms with problematic issues relating to their own schooling, the society at large and the global community” (Splitter and Sharp 1995:2). The SAPERE Level 1 handbook offers a working definition of a community of enquiry as “A group of people used to thinking together with a view to increasing their understanding and appreciation of the world around them and of each other.” Thus ‘dwelling’ in the sense I have outlined above, would seem to be integral to the P4C movement. In the UK, and at international P4C conferences it is not uncommon for me to find myself in a community of inquiry that is multiracial only because I am present. What bearing might this have on the shape of philosophical enquiry in a dialogical pedagogy where “it is assumed that every participant is a potential source of insight.”? (SAPERE 2010:16) Themes such as diversity, difference and equity are often given to conferences where racial diversity, difference and equity are not visible amongst the participants. We might be able to build an argument that this is not significant if we hold that who we are and how we are socially located are not significant factors in how we philosophise, the experiences we share and the insights we offer. Certainly this is an argument that one encounters amongst academic philosophers. However it does not appear to be an argument made by P4C practitioners, whether they explicitly identify as working within a Deweyan tradition, as Lipman did, or not.
In this presentation, I will examine real-life instances where the comfort of white people is disrupted in the community of enquiry. Rather than focusing on descriptions of ideal communities of enquiry sometimes found in the literature written by P4C practitioner/advocates, I choose to examine actual communities of enquiry, which in two of the three vignettes are comprised of experienced P4C practitioners. I will explore how the behaviour directly shapes, and in some cases closes down, philosophical enquiry into racism and is thus in need of closer examination. Drawing on literature from the field of critical whiteness studies I hope to illustrate that what I term ‘white discomfort’ contributes significantly to the gating of the community of enquiry, where certain topics and perspectives find themselves situated as ‘out of bounds’ resulting in the incongruity of what we might consider a gated community discussing diversity and equality in earnest.

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3. Vignettes

Vignette 1
At a conference, I co-present a session on the subject of philosophical enquiry in multiracial spaces. Our full paper is printed in the conference booklet, which means that people are able to make a reasonably informed decision. We talk about the responsibilities of white teachers in facilitating philosophical enquiry in multiracial classrooms – to dwell together on a question/issue rarely explored in the P4C literature or at P4C seminars and conferences. One of the most experienced P4Cers at the conference does not attend the workshop. I happen to speak with him some time afterwards. Without my asking, he tells me that whilst he was interested in our workshop he felt that, having read the workshop outline he didn’t have the emotional energy required to attend the session.

Central to the project of P4C is the notion of children and adults thinking together in a community of philosophical enquiry. However, in order to think together we must first be willing to inhabit the same space; to dwell together. Who makes it into the community of enquiry? Who does not and for what reason? My colleague is perhaps to be thanked for his honesty. His absence is unlikely to affect his professional development as a P4C practitioner, both because he has a considerable level of experience and also because the issues I was raising are not central to his work or indeed the work of the P4C community more broadly. Of course, I think they should be. So his presence at a session on P4C and race is perhaps more important to me than it is to him. He did not denigrate my work in any way; indeed he was complimentary about it. What I am terming his discomfort did however result in his not thinking with us. He wasn’t ready to dwell with us – so he didn’t. I had no sense that he was telling me this as a way of regulating my future work. This cannot be read as ‘censorship’ in the conventional use of the word. Indeed he was merely exercising his choice. He had read the extended abstract in the conference handbook and made his choice, just as those of you here right now presumably made yours. I face a dilemma as a presenter and as a
speaker in the community of enquiry. Do I foreground my concern with racial injustice and run the risk of causing discomfort and loss of audience? Do I avoid all reference to it until people are in the room and run the risk of people feeling ambushed and deceived? Or do I moderate what I have to say so as to mitigate against discomfort and in so doing run the risk of delivering platitudes? Or faced with such unsatisfactory options, do I simply acknowledge a sense of not being at home and find another intellectual neighbourhood in which to dwell?

I offer this not as a way of claiming that I have a uniquely difficult challenge in the community of enquiry, but as an illustration of how the (dis)comfort of white people is a necessary consideration when attempting to philosophise about race/racism in dialogic enquiry. Of course, my account is just that - my account. I cannot be sure that, in sharing it, I will be believed. Other interpretations are possible. And, even if my interpretation is deemed reasonable by my audience, one might ask how representative this vignette is. I will offer two more.

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Vignette 2

I am invited to present at a weekend seminar for experienced Philosophy for Children practitioners, by a SAPERE trainer who has shown some interest in my research. I am first on the programme. I make it a priority to introduce myself and chat briefly before the seminar begins with the two or three people whom I haven’t met before. I want to try and convey a sense of warmth and establish a sense of community amongst attendees before my presentation begins.

By now, I have completed a research project focussed on Philosophy for Children, multiculturalism and antiracism. My presentation, for about 14 people all racialised as white, is entitled, “The Unbearable Whiteness of P4C“ and, unlike any SAPERE training material at this time includes the work of black philosophers and scholars of colour – Cornel West, George Yancey, bell hooks, Zeus Leonardo, Charles Mills - alongside the work of white philosophers of education. I outline an argument that P4C is a ‘movement’ that espouses a commitment to democracy, yet overwhelmingly ignores issues of race. I mention that my MA dissertation was reworked after two of my interviewees, both SAPERE trainers, asserted their right to withdraw their data. I consider the possibility that despite their training in dialogic enquiry some P4Cers may find it uncomfortable to dialogue about race/racism and acknowledge that my own inexperience as an interviewer may have contributed to the discomfort.

I elect to present sitting down rather than standing up as I have previously been told that a earlier presentation of mine, which I gave standing, was delivered in an ‘aggressive manner’. Half-way through my presentation, I am interrupted. A white, male senior academic says, “Can I ask a question?” I reply that I will take questions at the end but as I do so he proceeds to ask his question anyway. “You’re half-Indian,” he begins, using a
term I did not use in our brief introductory chat nor ever would. “Are YOU responsible for the caste system?” He jabs a finger in my direction as he speaks. I am unsure as to how to proceed. The seminar convenor suggests that I should be allowed to finish my presentation. He slumps back in his chair, arms folded. When I conclude, his hand is the first raised. He begins “As a white man I am oppressed by women and black people constantly going on and on about racism and sexism...” He continues animatedly for some time. He tells us that racism is a thing of the 80s yes but that he has never encountered racism at his university. I look around the group. Some people are looking at him; many have their heads down. I wonder if he is voicing the thoughts of some, or many, or all of the other white people in the room. None of them make any reference to his comments. There is a moment of silence then a couple of questions before he interjects again, appearing to accuse me of indoctrinating children. I have not spoken at any point about how I work with children.

I focus on writing down as accurately as possible what is being said. There is barely any reference made to any of the main points in my presentation or the many quotes I have included, partly as ‘intellectual back-up’ – an attempt to emphasise that I am working with the ideas of many absent others.

That evening in the bar, and over subsequent weeks I learn that some of the other participants were very uncomfortable with the actions of this person.

I think it fair to say that my presentation caused this man discomfort. Rather than absent himself from the community of enquiry like the person in the previous vignette, he interrupted a presentation that drew heavily on philosophers and scholars of colour. When I chose not to accept his redirecting of my presentation, he expressed his annoyance through his body language, before asserting his status as a victim – a victim of ‘black people and women’ (an interesting addition given how little attention I gave to gender in my presentation). Having reflected on this moment, I now read his question to me as an assertion of his relative power rather than one of intellectual curiosity; his power to interrupt, to challenge, to redirect and ultimately to set the agenda. Had it been intellectual curiosity, there would have been no need to interrupt me. The relatively small amount of time in the seminar’s two days dedicated to thinking about whiteness and P4C was still too much time for this man to bear – he needed to reclaim the space from what he took to be a dangerous intruder. His phrase “I am oppressed by...” was, I suggest actually standing in for an expression of discomfort. Rather than admit that he felt uncomfortable in having his familiar, comfortable place unsettled or invaded by an uninvited disruption, and the suggestion that he share his space or even redefine its contours, he choose instead to reframe himself as the victim of an aggressive, oppressive agent - me.

I was bringing to the community of enquiry ideas and perspectives that rarely receive attention there. I would suggest that rather then being received as a philosopher, I was received as an intruder. Having engaged with this man on friendly, personal terms
before my presentation, I now revealed myself to be a Trojan horse (a term with new connotations in the UK) – in the space in order to commit ‘violent’ acts, having gained entrance under false pretences. His claim that he had not experienced any racism at his university, I suspect, would be seen by him as being akin to saying that there wasn’t any racism at his university. This would appear to be an example of the assumption that one’s social location is not relevant to one’s ability to formulate claims, arguments (or in this case, simple assertions) or to assess evidence.

I had no sense that he was interested in opening up for enquiry why he and I might have such different perceptions of the continuing existence of racism, though this might have made for a rich line of enquiry in the post-presentation discussion. Robin Di Angelo notes that, “Those who lead whites in discussion of race may find the discourse of self-defence familiar. Via this discourse, whites position themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, attacked, and being used as ‘punching bag[s]’” (Di Angelo 2006)

Lured into a false sense of security by my status as a fellow P4C practitioner, he and other delegates appeared to have been shocked to hear me speak in a manner that for them constituted an attack both on them and on their understanding of the space that they inhabit. It is noticeable that with the exception of the colleague who had invited me to speak, nobody else in the room addressed this man. Whilst some later offered me words of support and distanced themselves from his actions, in the moment it was not possible for me to discern to what extent he expressed the feelings of all present. In Robin DiAngelo’s terms my presentation had triggered white fragility by:

“Suggesting that a white person’s viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity); …talking directly about (my) racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes);” “and by my “choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort);” Di Angelo (2011)

It is possible that the disequilibrium that people experienced explains why nobody who privately sympathised with me later felt willing and/or able at that moment to speak to this man in our ‘public’ space. Or perhaps it was part of a ‘culture of politeness’ (Leonardo and Porter 2010) or a ‘culture of niceness’ (McIntyre 1997) that, it has been argued, is evident within P4C practice (Chetty 2014). I think it likely that the exchange was viewed as being between two individuals rather than being something that occurred within the community. This second reading opens up consideration for the moral obligations of bystanders in community spaces. Whatever the reason, it is worth asking - what was the affect of it going unchallenged? Who benefited? What was lost?

Might it be that however objectionable other delegates found the behaviour of this man, in allowing him to speak at great length unchallenged he operated as a protective device against the need to discuss the actual topic of my presentation. His ‘vigilante’ approach to the intruder (me) was privately condemned but publically accepted as less
uncomfortable than the alternative – an awkward encounter with the idea of whiteness. Thus the silence of the other white people in effect produced a white solidarity, which meant that this man’s voice was given centre-space in the community of enquiry, and acted as a defence to a potentially greater discomfort of engaging with the ideas I shared.

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Vignette 3

I am invited to speak about my research on Philosophy for Children and racism at a P4C seminar. I express some doubts as to whether the audience will want to hear what I have to say. I am told by the organiser that my work is exactly what the audience needs to hear.

As well as highlighting the lack of racial diversity in P4C training materials and the lack of attention to race/racism in the P4C literature, I attempt to bring the issue into the room – or rather point to what is present but unspoken. I remark that SAPERE events are the only events I attend where I can be reasonably confident that I will be the only person of colour in the room. It becomes clear that some people think my presentation very relevant and timely. Someone asks for more time to be made on the programme for discussion of the issues I have raised. Others, however, are far less keen. In the break, some people avoid my eye contact, and there are hushed conversations in corners. I am told that someone has been asked words approximating to ‘if that’s how he feels, why is he here?’ and ‘why is he so worried about being the only ethnic minority person here?’ After some deliberation, the programme is adjusted but this decision is not well-received by everyone. A seminar participant tells me that people do not like it when one person tries to dictate the agenda because it is undemocratic. By the end of the seminar I have a sense of new perspectives emerging. I am feeling emotionally drained but optimistic. A participant describes themself as ‘changed’ by my presentation and the subsequent discussion. I am hugged farewell and thanked by someone who had previously avoided eye contact with me. Another person thanks me for insisting we “stay close to the central values” of P4C and “the constant pain of justice (sic)”. A closing minute from the organiser includes a statement of the “need to act” and to “agree to support [my name] in preparing a position statement.” It is agreed that next year’s seminar should have a theme related to ‘diversity’.

However, this does not actually happen. In fact I am not invited to speak the following year. I am not even invited to attend. When I contact the organiser, they tell me they regret changing the programme the previous year. In what I sense is a tense phone conversation for both of us, they talk about their plan for the next seminar. More than once they begin a sentence with “All I want to say about last year is...” They use the word ‘aggressive’ four times in the conversation though never directly about me.
4. White Discomfort

If vignette one shows discomfort leading to avoidance and vignette two shows discomfort leading to anger, derailing and silence, vignette three (whilst containing all of the aforementioned) offers a glimpse of a philosophical discomfort that, as I discuss below, might be productive. Clearly resistance is articulated – and justified in terms of an understanding of democracy that appears to view it as synonymous with majoritarianism rather than concerned with, say the protection of minority interests. The vignette also highlights that when majoritarianism in the community of enquiry serves to prioritise racial justice it is seen as suspect. In a rare instance of racism being placed on the agenda in a community of enquiry by a democratic vote, the democratic nature of the vote is called into question. This leads me to wonder whether the continued lack of Black and Brown bodies in the community of enquiry is, at some level, desired.

It might be argued that what I have described merely reflects a desire on the participants’ part to avoid conflict. However I think vignette two in particular shows that whilst conflict is often avoided, it is seen, for many white participants, as less undesirable than philosophical enquiry into race/racism. I will argue that this is one of the factors that leads me to call into question the choice of Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris (2011) to treat racism as one of a number of ‘controversial issues’ without sufficiently attending to its particularities. A further factor is that it can be evidenced that any unwillingness to discuss race/racism is not equally distributed amongst racialised groups but mostly seen amongst those racialised as white. The failure to give recognition to this perhaps amounts to an erasure of the concerns of people of colour and can be seen as part of a long history of attempts by people of colour to initiate conversations about race and being met with denial, resistance and anger – within philosophy, education and broader society.

However, declarations of change and of a new commitment to act in the name of racial justice seem to offer some justification for the organiser’s initial statement that ‘this is exactly what’ the delegates need to hear. What then explains the subsequent change of plan/mind/heart? I suggest that my presentation and the discussion that followed produced some level of cognitive dissonance, highlighting inconsistencies and incongruities in UK P4C training and practice and lead a significant number of delegates to conclude that something had to be done to show they are on ‘my side’. I believe this commitment to have been sincere.

The motion was written. Something was done. And yet, subsequently, nothing was done. In fact, at the next seminar, I wasn’t even invited... rather than a movement towards, there was a retreat from engaging in matters of race. Rather than a renewed commitment, there was a renewed distancing. But at that critical point, the contradiction in espoused values and values in action was closed – what critical race theorists term a “contradiction closing case”. Coined by Derrick Bell, a contradiction
closing case “is identified in those situations where an inequity becomes so visible and/or so large that the present situation threatens to become unsustainable.” (Gillborn 2008:32-3).

Delgado describes the effect of contradiction closing cases as such:

“They are a little like the thermostat in your home or office. They assure that there is just the right amount of racism. Too much would be destabilizing – the victims would rebel. Too little would forfeit important pecuniary and psychic advantages for those in power.” (Delgado 1995: 80)

He points out that the appearance of racial change can actually strengthen the opportunity for the continuity of racial injustice by providing a response that closes off space for further critique. Thus contradiction closing cases, “... allow business as usual to go on even more smoothly than before, because now we can point to the exceptional case and say, “See, our system is really fair and just. See what we just did for minorities or the poor”. Richard Delgado (1999: 445)

In the situation I have outline above, once the contradiction was closed, no further action followed. Closing the contradiction had the effect, I suggest, of easing the discomfort felt by my presentation. The change of programme was part of an emotional weekend for, I suspect, all involved. Whilst the closing minute appeared first as a physical symbol of opening up the community of enquiry, it ultimately had the effect of anaesthetising those present at the seminar. The gates were to remain intact, perhaps even fortified.

Perhaps the apparent confusion and change of plan can be better understood by considering Zeus Leonardo’s words that,

“Anyone who has performed a radical racial analysis has faced...a scenario where the messenger is dismissed because the message produces psychological dissonance between a white subject’s desire for racial justice and her inability to accept radical change.” (Leonardo 2004:1243)

Such was the dissonance produced, that the dismissal was, in this case, not immediate but rather, gradual.

Many of the responses described above are in line with what Alice McIntyre terms ‘white talk’. This is described as “derailing the conversation, evading questions, dismissing counter arguments, withdrawing from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other in creating a ‘culture of
niceness’ that made it very difficult to ‘read’ the white world.” (McIntyre 1997) Levine-Rasky adds that “resistance, denial, hostility, ignorance, and defensiveness are consistent throughout the studies” of how those racialised as white respond to discussions about racism. (Levine-Rasky 2000:265)

I have highlighted above, though only implicitly, that there is no clear correlation between exposure to philosophy / P4C and the ability to work with discomfort in philosophical enquiry. With this in mind, I suggest that the claim made by Karin Murris and Joanna Haynes, that, “Philosophical enquiry helps us guard against the thoughtless acceptance of tradition, authority, prejudices and fashion” (Murris and Haynes 2000:16) requires further qualification.

I hope to have provided through my vignettes and discussion some evidence that ‘white discomfort’ exists within the community of enquiry. I accept that I have not mapped how pervasive it is in this presentation. I hope to have shown that the responses to this sense of discomfort often have the effect of closing down opportunities to philosophically engage with the subject of racism. I suggest that this is important because a willingness to experience discomfort is necessary for engagement with race dialogue; a point made by Leonardo & Porter (2010). There is a need to develop what Dyan Watson (2014) terms the ability to ‘stay in the conversation’ and what Barbara Applebaum (2013) terms ‘White vigilance’ which she sees as ‘critique, staying in the anxiety of critique and vulnerability.’

Philosophical discomfort can and should be productive. Leonardo & Porter quote Martin Luther King: “Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for non-violent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.” (King, M.L. 1996 cited in Leonardo and Porter 2010)

I hope too that my discussion has highlighted how white people’s responses to their discomfort can sometimes/often contribute to the gating of the community of enquiry – that dialogical enquiry related to race is sometimes/often prevented by absences, silences, expressions of anger and derailment – as well as the exclusion of people of colour and literature and materials authored by people of colour.

5. The Gated Community of Philosophical Enquiry

The “representational and informational” segregation that occurs in broader society is at best mirrored in the community of enquiry of P4C practitioners in the UK and at worst magnified. Di Angelo (2011:58) argues that, “white people are taught not to feel any loss over the absence of people of color in their lives and in fact, this absence is what defines their schools and neighbourhoods as “good;” whites come to understand that a “good
school” or “good neighbourhood” is coded language for “white” (Johnson and Shapiro, 2003). Is it possible that a "good" community of enquiry is one where people of colour and the potential for tension and discomfort brought by race dialogue are also absent? The phenomenon of white philosophy teachers, educated in all-white communities of enquiry going into schools and experiencing racial diversity for the first time as the teacher is observable in the 1990 BBC documentary Socrates for Six-year olds, a film that played a large role in the establishment of SAPERE in the UK. A quarter of a century later this phenomenon is still commonplace. Whilst P4C advocates stress the importance of learning how to facilitate philosophical enquiries not merely theoretically but through immersion in communities of enquiry, at present their knowledge of how to do so in racially diverse communities is not learnt experientially or indeed theoretically. The ability to steer dialogue away from areas of discomfort when one is the responsible adult in the room should not be underestimated. My vignettes highlight that without the relative power of being an adult amongst children, many white P4C practitioners adopt other strategies to block enquiry into race and racism.

It is not merely that actual communities of enquiry fall short of the ideal, which may be inevitable, it is that they foreclose opportunities to move closer toward the ideal – e.g. including encounters with the other, rethinking ways of philosophising, questioning our deepest assumptions – by the way they function in reality. Philosophising about diversity, equality and difference in ‘gated communities’ needs to be recognised as incongruous – perhaps even absurd. Recognising the inescability of situatedness, a dialogic pedagogy like P4C aims to enrich one’s epistemic community, partly through experience, so as to further one’s understanding. Thus, I contend, in a racialised society a communit of enquiry which does not include people of colour, is an epistemically impoverished one.

I propose then that P4C is in urgent need of an ‘opening up’ at individual and institutional levels and that a renewed commitment toward self-criticality and staying with discomfort amongst P4C practitioners would be a step toward this. My criticism of P4C is not then a complete rejection of the approach but rather an attempt to contribute to that process. Whilst my use of vignettes may be dismissed as anecdotal and self-indulgent, I suggest that it is in keeping with the common practice in P4C of beginning enquiries with narratives intended to provoke people to think whilst serving as a demonstration of ‘opening up’. I propose that the words of bell hooks used in relation to the classroom, can be applied to the community of enquiry. Namely that, “...with all its limitations [it] remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.” (hooks 1994:207)

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