

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: PICTUREBOOKS,  
PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND RACISM

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Abstract:

Whilst continuing racism is often invoked as evidence of the urgent need for Philosophy for Children, there is little in the current literature that addresses the topic. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the related field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), I argue that racism is deeply ingrained culturally in society, and best understood in the context of 'Whiteness'. Following a CRT-informed analysis of two picturebooks that have been recommended as starting points for philosophical enquiry into multiculturalism, racism and diversity - *Elmer* and *Tusk Tusk* by David McKee, I argue that whilst the use of stories with animals is commonly regarded as offering children the comfort of distance from emotionally challenging topics, this has the effect of separating racism from its temporal and spatial realities, which limits rather than enhances opportunities for engaging philosophically with it. I argue in favour of the practice of 'reading against the text' and consider the epistemological and practical obstacles to this practice drawing on my own experiences discussing race with P4C practitioners in the UK. I attempt to illustrate how the selection of recommended materials, combined with commonly held principles of P4C, make for a climate where a philosophical engagement with race and racism that considers the discourse of 'Whiteness' is highly unlikely to occur. This leads me to posit the idea of The Gated Community of Enquiry.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry; Racism; Whiteness; Multiculturalism; Diversity; Picturebooks

El elefante en la habitación: libros ilustrados, filosofía para niños y racismo

Resumen:

Mientras que el racismo es a menudo invocado como prueba de la necesidad urgente de *Filosofía para Niños*, hay muy poco en la literatura actual que aborde el tema. Sobre la base de la Teoría Crítica de la Raza (CRT) y el campo relacionado de Estudios Críticos de Blancura (CWS), se argumenta que el racismo está profundamente arraigado culturalmente en la sociedad, y es mejor entendido en el contexto de la "blancura". A partir de un análisis de dos libros ilustrados desde una perspectiva de la CRT, libros que se han recomendado como puntos de partida para la investigación filosófica del multiculturalismo, el racismo y la diversidad - *Elmer* y *Tusk Tusk* de David McKee, sostengo que, si bien se considera usualmente que el uso de historias con animales ofrece a los niños una cómoda distancia de temas emocionalmente desafiantes, esto tiene el efecto de separar el racismo de sus realidades temporales y espaciales, lo que limita más que aumenta las oportunidades para comprometerse con él filosóficamente. Argumento a favor de la práctica de "leer en contra del texto" y considerar los obstáculos epistemológicos y prácticos a esta práctica sobre la base de mis propias experiencias de discutir cuestiones raciales con los practicantes de P4C en el Reino Unido. Trato de ilustrar cómo la selección de los materiales recomendados, junto con

los principios comúnmente sostenidos en P4C, configuran un clima donde es muy poco probable que se produzca un compromiso filosófico con la raza y el racismo que considere el discurso de la "blancura". Esto me lleva a plantear la idea de la acorralada comunidad de Indagación.

Palabras clave: comunidad de indagación; Racismo; Multiculturalismo; Diversidad; Libros ilustrados

O elefante no quarto: livros ilustrados, filosofia para crianças e racismo

Resumo:

Mesmo se o racismo é amiúde invocado como prova da necessidade urgente de *Filosofia para Crianças*, há muito pouco na literatura atual que aborde o tema. Sobre a base da Teoria Crítica da Raça (CRT) e o campo relacionado de Estudos Críticos da Brancura (CWS), se argumenta que o racismo está profundamente enraizado culturalmente na sociedade, e é melhor entendido no contexto da "brancura". A partir de uma análise dos livros ilustrados desde uma perspectiva da CRT, livros que foram recomendados como pontos de partida para a investigação filosófica do multiculturalismo, do racismo e da diversidade – *Elmer e Tusk Tusk* de David McKee, sustento que, bem que se considere usualmente que o uso de histórias com animais oferece às crianças uma distância cômoda dos temas emocionalmente desafiadores, isto tem por efeito de separar o racismo de suas realidades temporais e espaciais, o que limita mais do que aumenta as oportunidades para comprometer-se com ele filosoficamente. Argumento a favor da prática de "ler contra o texto" e considerar os obstáculos epistemológicos e práticos a esta prática sobre a base de minhas próprias experiências de discutir questões raciais com os praticantes de P4C (filosofia para crianças) no Reino Unido. Trato de ilustrar como a seleção dos materiais recomendados, junto com os princípios comumente defendidos na P4C, configuram um clima no qual é muito pouco provável que se produza um compromisso filosófico com a raça e o racismo que considere o discurso da "brancura". Isto me leva a colocar a ideia da comunidade de investigação encurralada.

Palavras-chave: Comunidade de Investigação; Racismo; Multiculturalismo; Diversidade; Livros Ilustrados



THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: PICTUREBOOKS,  
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## 1. Introduction

Continuing racism and social injustice are sometimes invoked as evidence of the urgent need for Philosophy for Children (P4C) in education. For example, Laurence Splitter and Ann Margaret Sharp begin their text on Philosophy for Children and the Community of Inquiry with the following words,

“We live in difficult times... Conflict and discontent are widespread, ethnic and racial hatreds flourish, the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ is wider than ever...”

(Splitter & Sharp 1995:1)

More recently, the 2007 version of the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE)<sup>1</sup> Level 1 Handbook states,

“In a world where 35,000 people die every day of starvation, where one in five are malnourished and where 16 per cent of the global population controls 80 per cent of the world’s GDP, there must be – surely – a desperate need for reasonable, responsible, informed, freethinking and active citizens to change this appalling situation for the better. P4C has demonstrated over 30 years that it can be non-partisan, and yet give rise to the thoughtfulness that is needed to challenge injustice and suffering.”

(SAPERE 2007: 11)

However, there is little in the current literature relating to Philosophy for Children that explicitly addresses the topic of race and racism. In the UK, some SAPERE (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education) trainers have reported that teachers often request more guidance on facilitating philosophical enquiry around issues of race and inequality and that they themselves are not always sure as to what to advise. Haynes and Murriss write that for teachers on P4C/PwC<sup>2</sup> courses, “Race and racism often crop up as problematic ‘no-go’ areas.” (Haynes & Murriss 2012a:128)

In this paper, in order to attempt to make sense of this reported uncertainty about discussing race, the apparent lack of attention to race and racism in P4C

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1992, SAPERE is a UK educational charity that promotes P4C.

<sup>2</sup> Some writers use the term “Philosophy with Children (PwC) to distinguish between Matthew Lipman’s original Philosophy for Children (P4C) program and other practices which differ in varying degrees from this.

literature<sup>3</sup> and the sometimes dismissive, sometimes hostile reactions to my own attempts to discuss race in P4C seminars in the UK, I draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the related field of Critical Whiteness studies. CRT argues that everyday racism is best understood in the context of 'Whiteness' (which I will discuss in the following section). I offer a CRT-informed analysis of *Elmer* and *Tusk Tusk*, two picturebooks that have been recommended in the UK and internationally by Philosophy for Children practitioners as starting points for philosophical enquiry into racism, multiculturalism and diversity, and argue that rather than providing opportunities for philosophical enquiry into racism, they can be read as cultural products that perpetuate Whiteness by providing narratives that are seemingly about racism but that remove its temporal and spatial realities. Whilst not wishing to ignore the potential for alternative readings of texts in philosophical enquiry, I reflect on my own experiences of discussing racism with P4C practitioners and highlight evidence that supports my belief this is not commonplace in the UK. Rather than attempting to persuade the reader of the correctness of Critical Race Theory, I attempt to illustrate how the selection of recommended materials, in this case children's books, combined with commonly held principles of P4C practitioners, make for a climate where a philosophical engagement with race and racism that considers Whiteness is highly unlikely to occur.

Finally, I pose the questions of whether the recommendation of such materials and the omission of more critical perspectives of race amongst recommended starting points and training materials might constitute a form of 'gate-keeping' of philosophical thought and thus whether the notion of 'The Gated Community of Enquiry' might be illuminating in considering how P4C practitioners approach the subject of racism.

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## 2. The Community of Enquiry

"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 openness to evidence and to reason. It is assumed that these procedures of the community, when internalized, become the reflective habits of the individual."

(Lipman et al 1980: 45)

The community of inquiry is central to Matthew Lipman's hugely influential *Philosophy for Children* programme. Lipman's programme includes philosophical novels and teacher manuals. Lipman believed that narrative was the most appropriate medium for introducing children to the history of Western philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> See Chetty (2008) for discussion of this.



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 behaviour of the characters in the stories.

Whilst Lipman claims to have “neutralized” the “godlike power of the author” in his philosophical novels, this has been strongly questioned by Kohan (1995), and Rainville (2000), both of whom argue that it is not neutral to ignore the foundations of systematic discrimination and the ways institutions have arisen out of and continue to perpetuate the repression of minoritised groups.

In the UK, the notion of the Community of Enquiry is central to SAPERE’s model of P4C just as it is to Lipman’s Philosophy for Children programme<sup>4</sup>. The SAPERE Level 1 Handbook begins with a section on the Community of Enquiry, which includes a working definition: “A group of people used to thinking together with a view to increasing their understanding and appreciation of the world around them and each other” (SAPERE 2010: 15). Robert Fisher, one of the first people to publish P4C materials in the UK, claims that, “A community of enquiry can help children develop the skills and dispositions that will enable them to play their full part in a pluralistic and democratic society.” (Fisher 2013:54)

The SAPERE model of P4C differs from Lipman’s programme, however, with regard to the starting points or stimuli for enquiry. Neither Lipman’s first P4C novel *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* nor SAPERE founder member Roger Sutcliffe’s adaptation of the novel were ever central to SAPERE courses and it is no longer mandatory for Level 1 courses to include at least 1 Lipman extract. Instead, the SAPERE approach emphasises that P4C can be practised with any story that raises philosophical issues. Karin Murriss, a founding member of SAPERE, pioneered the use of picturebooks as starting points for philosophical enquiry with children (Murriss 1992) and many SAPERE trainers report using picturebooks on SAPERE Level 1 courses with teachers.

By not regularly using the Lipman novels, Philosophy for Children in the UK has grown to be a different entity than that in the USA, and SAPERE trainers and practitioners are free to choose whatever materials they wish as starting points or ‘stimuli’ for philosophical enquiry. The approach of selecting any story that might provoke philosophical enquiry, is potentially a liberating one for practitioners of philosophy for children, particularly those who are concerned with what is, and is not, said by characters in the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) materials. It may appear then that the concerns raised by Kohan

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<sup>4</sup> The switch from ‘Inquiry’ to ‘Enquiry’ was to facilitate the SAPERE acronym, and does not reflect any methodological difference (Roger Sutcliffe, private correspondence).

(1995), Rainville (2000) and Chetty (2008) regarding IAPC novels may not be relevant to P4C as widely practised in the UK. However, I will argue that the alternative materials advocated and some of the key principles of P4C in the UK may still serve to perpetuate rather than interrogate key epistemological assumptions that characterise Whiteness.

### 3. Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grew out of the field of Critical Legal Studies in the USA and was first used as a term by Derrick Bell, the African-American Harvard Law professor. CRT views racism as endemic and the normal state of things in the USA; something that is not aberrant nor rare but rather 'deeply ingrained legally and culturally.' Gillborn describes CRT as multi-disciplinary, and as 'crossing epistemological boundaries' and lists its 'conceptual tools' as "story-telling and counter stories that honour the experiential knowledge of people of colour", the notion of "interest convergence" and "critical White studies". (Gillborn 2006:251) CRT has spread beyond its legal roots and, most pertinent for this paper, influenced the work of scholars in education studies (Ladson-Billings 1998) (Gillborn 2008) (Dixson & Rousseau 2006) and philosophy (Mills 1997, 2003).

The last twenty years have seen a growth in the number of articles on the subject of Whiteness, which is increasingly regarded as central to what we might term 'the antiracist project' and important to intersectional analyses of inequalities. Scholars in the field of Critical Whiteness Studies, which originates in the USA, are in agreement with multiculturalists and anti-racists who hold race to be a discredited biological construct. However, Whiteness studies emphasises the day-to-day lived reality of race and racism and is '...not an assault on White people per se' but rather 'an assault on the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of White identifications and interests. (Gillborn 2008:33) In Zeus Leonardo's view, "'Whiteness' is a racial discourse" and thus "race studies that do not sufficiently address whiteness are at best disingenuous and at worst ineffective" (Leonardo 2009:9).

Critical Whiteness scholars argue that Whiteness is not easily recognized by those who benefit from it. In Richard Dyer's view, "The colourless, multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness" (Dyer 1993: 143). Sarah Pearce observes that, "[m]ost white people do not have to give a great deal of thought to race" (Pearce 2005: 110) and Saynor claims that, "[m]ost white people consider themselves "the natural order of things" (Saynor 1995 cited in Bonnett 2000).

In arguing for White supremacy to be regarded as "a theoretical object in its own right - a global social system comparable in current significance to Marx's class



society and feminist thinker's patriarchy," (Mills 2003:178) philosopher Charles Mills emphasises the need to challenge the ahistoricism that he sees as being part of liberal thought. Mills makes the distinction between de jure and de facto White supremacy. During the period of de jure White supremacy, a period that included slavery, colonialism, segregation and unequal employment and educational rights in the US, a huge disparity in wealth and property ownership accrued between those deemed to be White and those not. Furthermore a narrative of the naturalness of White dominance served to connect in law Whiteness with full personhood. Mills, in an analysis with important implications for liberal theory and theories of social justice, shows how Kant's theory of persons and sub-persons served to legitimise the process of colonisation and the social construction of the White race.

Mills argues that in the present period, where White supremacy is no longer in formal existence, we have instead de facto White supremacy, where Whites' dominance is for the most part, "a matter of social, political, cultural and economic privilege based on the legacy of the conquest." (Mills 1997:73) Whereas in the de jure period Whiteness and race was emphasised, the de facto period, Mills argues, marked a switch to an emphasis on "racelessness, an equal status and common history in which all have shared, with white privilege conceptually erased." (Mills 2007: 23)

So whilst we live with the legacy of colour-coded inequality under the law, we now inhabit a time of near-equality under the law – but with a corresponding 'colourblindedness'. In this period reference to race is often argued to be retrogressive, recalling a time when all were not equal under the law. Thus, attempts to challenge the prevailing notion of colour-blindness by reference to both a racial history that has advantaged some groups and disadvantaged others and empirical data of patterns of continuing inequity in educational outcomes, employment and treatment under the criminal justice system amongst these groups, is often met with the idea that talking about race is *itself* racist. However, this argument serves to silence discussion of the economic and cultural legacy of de jure White supremacy.

Inspired by Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (1988), a re-examination of social contract theory, Mills develops the notion of 'The Racial Contract', which prescribes, "*an epistemology of ignorance...producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.*" (Mills 1997:18; italics in original). This ignorance, he argues, is maintained by " simply *the failure to ask certain questions*, taking for granted as a status quo and baseline the existing color-coded configurations of wealth, poverty, property, and opportunities, the pretence that formal, juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege" (Mills 1997:73-4)

By severing racial history from analysis of the present, "White epistemology... can only be concerned with 'how things are and not how they got to be that way'." (Leonardo 2002:40) Mills argues that White signatories to the Racial Contract will, to a

significant extent, live in “an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland.” (Mills, 1997:18) In this setting, a belief in a meritocracy is preferred to examination of structural racial inequality as a legacy of de jure White supremacy. Thus, for many (but not all) White people their relative privilege is unacknowledged on a day-to-day basis.

Researching the racial identity of White student teachers in New York, Bree Picower identifies what she terms “tools of Whiteness” which she categorises as ‘emotional, ideological and performative.’ Amongst the emotional tools, she lists anger and defensiveness when the topic of racism is raised with White teachers. Amongst the ideological tools she lists expressions such as “Now that things are equal” (a refusal to acknowledge persisting inequalities), “Everyone is oppressed somehow” (an attempt to draw equivalence between race and all other human differences), “It’s personal not political” (a perspective that racism is an individual pathology without an institutional or structural dimension) and “Just be nice - I’m colour-blind” (A belief that not acknowledging race is both complimentary to people of colour and helpful in ensuring racial equality) (Picower 2009).

These tendencies can create tensions in multiracial classrooms, for whilst White teachers generally do not view race as being a significant element of their identity, children of colour generally do. As Meira Levinson (2003:166) notes, studies of identity development in the US have shown that “Black, Hispanic, and Asian children consistently describe themselves from a fairly young age as being black, Hispanic, or Asian (as well as being tall, having brown eyes etc.)” (Levinson 2003:166). These tensions are significant for P4C in the UK, where the teaching population is disproportionately, and in the case of SAPERE trainers exclusively, White. Critical Race Theory explains why this tension between teachers' refusal to acknowledge race and children's lived experience of race exists. Teachers who do want to discuss race, however, are often directed towards picture books as a way of doing so. In the next section, I attempt to show why this is not sufficient to interrupt the entrenchment of Whiteness that Critical Race Theory has highlighted.

#### **4. *Elmer & Tusk Tusk***

In this section, I will discuss two picturebooks that have been recommended by P4C practitioners as useful for discussing themes of multiculturalism, racism and diversity. I will then raise a number of aspects of each story that, I argue, are not analogous to the realities of racism and multiculturalism, but rather reaffirm the discourse of Whiteness.

At a recent conference in Graz, Austria, the presenter, a teacher educator and P4C practitioner, argued that the picturebook *Elmer* by David McKee (1989) was an





excellent starting point for philosophical enquiry with children related to the broad theme of multiculturalism. Gasparatou and Kampeza (2012) also include *Elmer* as one of the books selected to raise questions and provoke interactions on topics of friendship and diversity in their work with P4C with Kindergarten children in Greece.

The title character of *Elmer* by David McKee is a multi-coloured 'patchwork' elephant in a world where all the other elephants, though differing in age and size, are grey or "elephant colour". Early in the story, Elmer decides that he is "tired of being different". He rolls around in "elephant-coloured berries" until he looks "like any other elephant". Then he re-joins the other elephants. However they have changed in demeanour; he has "never seen them so "serious before." Elmer shouts "Boo!" which both surprises and amuses the other elephants. The rain washes off his berry covering prompting an old elephant to remark that "it didn't take you long to show your true colours." The elephants decide to celebrate this day annually by decorating themselves brightly. On this day only Elmer is "ordinary elephant colour."

The extent to which Elmer's difference is analogous to race is of course debatable. It is a colour difference, but a fantastical one. It could be analogous to any number of differences. However, it does seem reasonable to read the text as being about ethnic or racial difference, and the P4C practitioners I mention above who advocate using *Elmer* seem to agree here.

*"Elephants like this, that or the other, all different but all happy and all the same colour. All, that is, except Elmer."*

Whilst the artwork shows each elephant to be a slightly different shade of grey, Elmer is one-of-a-kind. He is not presented as part of another group. There is the group, which we may read as analogous to a class or a community, and Elmer. As such this is not analogous to multiculturalism or to the lone child of colour in a classroom who will most likely have a family. When read as an analogy of diversity, Elmer's uniqueness makes it difficult for us to consider the relative power of different groups in society. There is no apparent power dynamic between Elmer and the other elephants, and the other elephants appear unconcerned with his colour difference. Depicted as without family, the story appears to exist independently of history, a feature shared with Whiteness discourse. There is no suggestion that elephants like Elmer have ever existed before and thus no suggestion that they have experienced differential treatment by the other elephants. Without this history, *Elmer* shows a colour difference without any of the common connotations that exist in real-life.

*"Elmer was not elephant colour."*

The depiction of elephants, and contrasting their natural colour with Elmer's unnatural multi-colouredness, appears to reaffirm rather than disrupt the White normativity that is a core aspect of Whiteness. Whilst there is such a thing as 'elephant colour', there is not such a thing 'human colour'. McIntosh (1988) has commented on the use of 'flesh - coloured' for plasters as an everyday example of this conflation of white people with humankind.

*"No wonder they laugh at me"*

Whilst no discrimination or prejudice is portrayed in *'Elmer'*, Elmer is shown as being so unhappy with his superficial colour difference that he attempts to remove the difference. Thus the problem of being different is not given a social context but rather seen as a psychological condition. The behaviour of the other elephants toward Elmer is consistent throughout the story. The story is of his emotional journey, from being "tired of being different" to accepting his difference. A message that it's OK to be different raises the possibility of thinking the opposite - that it might not be OK to be different - but why not? The story has little to support enquiry into this.

*"This will be Elmer's Day. All elephants must decorate themselves and Elmer will decorate himself elephant colour."*

The story ends with the elephants dressing up in what can be read as a celebration of difference. This has become an annual event, rather like the multi-cultural/International evenings I have experienced as a teacher in a London primary school. This resolution makes sense in the fantasyland of *Elmer* apparently devoid of inequality, but has been critiqued as a patronising form of tokenism in the real world. Whiteness is not threatened by the existence of those not White - indeed their existence may enrich the experience of the White majority, as in the case of Hip-Hop music or Indian 'curry' which may be consumed without troubling continuing inequalities. Elmer, through his jokes and his different colour, which is mimicked annually, appears to enrich the main group's experience. Without the colour he brings to their life, the other elephants are 'serious'. He adopts a role akin to joker-mascot, which perhaps has echoes of Minstrelsy - however I see nothing in the story to indicate that this role is at all problematic for Elmer.

### ***Tusk Tusk* by David McKee**

*Tusk Tusk*, also by David McKee (1978), is included on a list of picturebooks suitable for P4C (Nottingham & Nottingham 2008) found on P4C.COM, a web-site that provides resources for P4C practitioners. Haynes and Murriss appear to comment favourably on *Tusk Tusk* being used as a starting point for philosophical enquiry in post-apartheid South Africa. (Haynes & Murriss 2012: 115) Furthermore, after sharing my emerging critique of *Elmer* as a starting point with SAPERE trainers, *Tusk Tusk*



was recommended by one trainer as being a more appropriate text for enquiry into racism.

What follows is the entire text of *Tusk Tusk*;

*“Once, all the elephants in the world were black or white. They loved all creatures, but they hated each other, and each kept to his own side of the jungle. One day the black elephants decided to kill all the white elephants, and the white ones decided to kill the black. The peace-loving elephants from each side went to live deep in the darkest jungle. They were never seen again. A battle began. It went on...and on, and on...until all the elephants were dead. For years no elephants were seen in the world. Then, one day, the grandchildren of the peace-loving elephants came out of the jungle. They were grey. Since then the elephants have lived in peace. But recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks.”*

(Mckee, 1978)

*“...but they hated each other..”*

There is no declared reason for the black and the white elephants to start fighting. There are no territorial disputes; no historical account of the conflict is provided; indeed, the conflict does not seem to be about anything specific. The conflict appears to have its origins in murderous, irrational hatred of difference, rather than any desire for land, resources and power. The hatred precedes the violence and does not grow out of it. It appears to be caused *by* the difference rather than the difference being constructed as significant due to the situation. If we read the story as an allegory of race, its ahistoricism is potentially mis-educative; there is little to help children make sense of current racial tensions, save the possible implication that we naturally hate those who are different from us.

*“...each kept to his own side of the jungle..” “...decided to kill...”*

The story does not appear to be depicting a group that can be viewed as dominant in any way. Rather, there is a sense that both groups are each equally wrong to fight and that the conditions of both black and white elephants are identical. Inequality does not appear to exist in the fantasyland of *Tusk Tusk*. Furthermore, the actions of both black and white elephants are identical – there is no apparent difference in the history, culture and social status of each group. The story’s irony is that it removes difference at the very point that it highlights it – that is to say, it removes a particular kind of difference (social inequality) whilst highlighting another (superficial bodily markers), which, once decontextualized, is rendered socially

insignificant. And so a book about difference becomes in fact a book about sameness, consistent with 'colour-blindness'.

*"Since then the elephants have lived in peace."*

The end of the story seems to suggest miscegenation to be a solution to colour-conflict (I choose this term over 'racism', because I do not believe racism to be depicted in the story). The 'peace loving' elephants survive, having removed colour difference through miscegenation. Until another, arbitrary difference becomes significant, again for no apparent reason. This might even suggest that conflict over difference is 'natural', with only the difference itself changing. Colour difference is merely one of many possible divisions for elephants/ people. In the fantasyland of *Tusk Tusk* there is nothing specific about colour difference compared to, say, ear size difference. Indeed, the final sentence suggests a reading that the conflict is *only* about physical difference.

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## Fables

Whilst picturebooks most suitable for P4C are, as Murriss says, "interrogative texts that do not moralize or patronize" (Murriss 2009:108), both *Elmer* and *Tusk Tusk* could be argued to be in the literary tradition of the fable. By this I mean "a short, fictional tale which has a specific moral or behavioural lesson to teach" (Grenby 2008: 10). Indeed, the first printed page of *Tusk Tusk* reads "Vive la Difference!" and the TES review, printed on the reverse reads, "A first lesson in tolerance." The books' publisher writes that, "David McKee, through *Elmer*, subtly indicates that it's okay to be different" (Anderson Press). Grenby argues that whilst the fable has become more sophisticated, "it remains fundamentally a didactic form, designed to draw in its readers through a compelling story and appealing, even cute, characters, and to teach important lessons through allegory." (Grenby 2008:11)

The lessons of these two books are commonplace in a prevailing school climate in the UK that often sees difference as superficial, racism as an irrational response to superficial difference, and tolerance and integration as solutions to racism. Tolerance is a value often claimed by practitioners to be central to P4C, yet it has been critiqued by a number of critical scholars of Whiteness (e.g. Hage 1998) as a form of patronisation, that, in asking who, what and how much should we tolerate, speaks to the dominant group. A celebration of difference and an emphasis on tolerance are defining features of the multicultural education criticised by many as leaving Whiteness and racial domination and oppression uninterrogated. Both stories have morals that are consistent with de facto Whiteness - that it is OK to look different and that we should tolerate those who are - and fail to problematise Whiteness against the norm to which all else is measured, compared, and othered. Neither book speaks to structural inequality, which is historically situated and not arbitrary, and to how it



positions groups as inferior and superior. They don't appear to portray oppression. Consequently, the solutions they offer are very different from the kind of solutions often considered appropriate for addressing racism. Elmer's difference is celebrated and integrated into the group in a tokenistic way, whilst in *Tusk Tusk* the solution is toleration, co-habitation and miscegenation. Because they don't discuss structural inequality, they don't open up for enquiry justice-based solutions like repair, redistribution or reconciliation.

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### **'Reading Against the Text'**

Whilst I cannot be sure that those recommending the texts discussed above have not themselves identified the limitations of the stories as analogies of racism, I think it unlikely, given that they do not make reference to any. As facilitators of philosophical enquiry, we might posit alternative perspectives for children's consideration. Obviously, our ability to do this rests on whether we ourselves are able to identify such perspectives. Alternatively, we might wait for such perspectives to be voiced by our students - but I would argue that this approach is problematic. It is indeed possible within the community of enquiry for a child to raise some of the very ideas I have raised about, for instance, *Elmer* and multiculturalism. It is possible for a child to say something approximating "But how it is for Elmer is not how it is for Black people in England". However, the fact that this is possible does not mean it is at all likely. In the event of children not questioning the analogy, what is the likelihood of a P4C facilitator encouraging children to consider its appropriateness? Where in the theory and practice of P4C do we see evidence for this being likely? What are we to make of a pedagogy that might be reliant on a child of colour to have both the insight and the willingness to speak out in order for critical perspectives to be considered? Can we take a child's silence on this to mean that they don't recognise the inaccuracy of the analogy? Or should we be signalling more clearly that reading 'against the text' is a useful, perhaps essential skill to develop? The practice of philosophical enquiry would seem the very place where those skills could and should be learnt.

However, if we agree that the UK is a racially unequal society, this has implications for the central notion of the community of enquiry as an egalitarian safe space. The ground rules or guidelines for philosophical enquiry may themselves serve to prohibit the voicing of critical perspectives on racism. Consider the suggestion in the current SAPERE handbook, that teachers encourage, "...positive body language, such as eye contact and smiling..." (SAPERE 2010:23) In such a scenario, we may ask what place there is for anger about injustice? Anger, as Leonardo points out "is a valid and legitimate feeling" and "when complemented by clear thought, ... frighteningly lucid." Ground rules such as encouraging 'positive body language' can give rise to a "a pedagogy of politeness" which "only goes so far

before it degrades into the paradox of liberal feel-good solidarity absent of dissent” and ultimately a “democracy of empty forms.” Leonardo (2002:39)

Leonardo and Porter alert us to the Catch-22 situation often faced by people of colour when deciding whether to participate in race dialogue or maintain silence; “Either they must observe the safety of whites and be denied a space that promotes people of color’s growth and development or insist on a space of integrity and put themselves further at risk not only of violence, but also risk being conceived of as illogical or irrational.” (Leonardo & Porter 2010: 140) The ‘safety of whites’ may be observed by choosing to speak in such a way that Whiteness is not interrupted and White people are not forced to think anew about their relationship to racism. Alternatively, it may be observed by silence. Burbules raises similar concerns when he writes that, “The proclamation of any particular dialogical genre as the instrument of human emancipation will inevitably exclude, silence, or normalize others in radically different subject positions” (Burbules 2000: 18).

Lest I be accused of such a thing, I am not suggesting that White children be made to feel guilty. Rather, I suggest that we need to take seriously Leonardo and Porter’s claim that a comfortable discussion about race is, as they say, “incongruous” and unlikely to have philosophical depth, and that if we are truly interested in promoting dialogical enquiry, then we must recognise that for marginalized and oppressed minorities, “*there is no safe space*” (Leonardo & Porter 2010:140). If we accept these conclusions, we are more likely to accept the need for “a pedagogy of disruption...” (Leonardo & Porter 2010:139), an idea that is interestingly close to the notion of the gadfly at the heart of Socratic dialogue. Identifying which starting points disrupt and which perpetuate dominant racial (and other) discourses would therefore be a useful task for P4C practitioners.

## 5. P4C & Whiteness

In *Elmer* and *Tusk Tusk*, the absence of culture, geography, power imbalances, indigenous and non-indigenous, religion, language diversity, history and racism leads to allegories of racism that have simplified to the point of falsifying. Indeed we could argue that the two books constitute a form of ideology, in the sense of being fables that conceal reality. Though it does not necessarily mean that this has been unnoticed, those who have advocated using these books have not made reference to how the books fail to depict racism as, for example, inequality or as the power to exclude. The limitations of these books as starting points for philosophical enquiry into racism should, I would argue, be a central consideration for all P4C practitioners. Golding (2006) points out that dialogue within a community of enquiry is neither “teacher-led”, nor “student-led” dialogue. Instead it is “idea-led”. However, the ideas, the questions that frame philosophical dialogue come out of the starting point. Haynes and Murriss write that,



“ The facilitator’s role is to support and guide discussion, not to manipulate or steer it.” (Haynes & Murriss 2012:6) They note however that the selection of certain starting materials is “controversial”. I suggest this controversy is partly due to the fact that the selection of a text will itself steer a discussion, inasmuch that it will make some ideas more likely and others less likely to be explored. In the case of the two texts analysed, their selection makes philosophical enquiry into the discourse of Whiteness highly unlikely because they work to obscure all understanding of racism as structural/systemic. I wish next to consider what assumptions might be behind the repeated recommendation of these two books as appropriate starting points for enquiry into racism, multiculturalism and diversity.

One possible assumption is that people of colour have little to offer to the practice of philosophising about race. One does not have to subscribe to essentialised notions of race in order to argue that the process of racialization affects us in such a way that our lives and our perspectives will often be shaped by it to some extent, just as they will be by our gender, social class and sexuality, to name but a few. Yet I struggle to find a book authored by a person of colour, and dealing with issues of race and culture amongst the recommendations by P4C practitioners. Furthermore, SAPERE training materials do not include the perspectives of any philosophers of colour on racism or any other topic. As the lone person of colour in the community of enquiry, I have often struggled to express perspectives I know to be shared by other people of colour and noticed that my struggle is compounded by, and personalised by, the omission of academic perspectives that are similar to mine. I have found myself positioned as what bell hooks’ (1994) terms a ‘native informant’ and felt pressure to articulate views held by many absent others. As Leonardo & Porter point out, “something has gone incredibly wrong when students of color feel immobilized and marginalized within spaces and dialogues that are supposed to undo racism” (Leonardo & Porter 2010:147).

There may be an assumption on the part of P4C practitioners that fantastic tales are a better way of thinking about race and culture than real-life situations. It may be that they offer the comfort of distance or that they encourage a dispassionate approach to philosophising. However, it is questionable who is being comforted here. Are we to assume that children are incapable of serious thought about the real-world? Or do these ‘race fables’ provide some comfort and protection for adults working with children? And if so, do they not set boundaries for what exactly we discuss when we claim to enquire into race? For, as Leonardo and Porter point out, “A comfortable race dialogue belies the actual structures of race, which is full of tension. It is literally out of sync with its own topic ” (Leonardo & Porter 2010:153). Murriss (1992) includes racism amongst a list of “sensitive issues” that may come up when philosophising with children, before advising teachers, “if you, or your school, have strong views about any of those issues, it is probably better not to discuss them at all. You run the risk of showing disapproval, or even indoctrinating the children with your own, or the school’s beliefs.” (Murriss 1992: 14) Whilst I share Murriss’



concern with the indoctrination of pupils, I wonder about the implications of this statement. It is debatable whether it is even possible to grow up Black in Britain and not have strong views on racism. If we were to follow this advice, it would seem to position those who have experienced racism most harshly as the least able to philosophise with children about it.

There may also be an assumption that racial empathy can be developed by White people reading and thinking about fictionalised depictions of people of colour written by White authors (such as McKee) without examining the context in which they exist and one's own place in that context. Haynes and Murriss cite Neill's discussion of the relationship between fiction and the emotions: "In a fictional narrative the reader needs to adopt a certain perspective, one that involves *seeing things from another's point of view* (Neill 2002:253) This is not a position with which I would wish to quarrel. However, as Toni Morrison has shown, throughout American literature, White writers writing Black characters have themselves failed to fully empathise with their character and have instead offered their own perspective on Blackness through a lens of Whiteness. In her essay "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination", she claims that "the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white." (Morrison 1992:xiv) This is rarely acknowledged; a fact she attributes to the failure of most literary critics to give due attention to race. As a minoritised person of colour I do not feel empathy with Elmer; instead I recognise the authorial perspective as an all-too familiar one whereby a minority concern with colour is not contextualised with reference to majority historical and present attitudes to colour difference but rather understood as a psychological condition. I would argue that Elmer is not analogous to a person of colour - rather he is analogous to a person of colour as imagined through Whiteness for a White reader.

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## 6. Conclusion

My commentary on both the books and their repeated selection is, like Morrison's project, "... an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers..." (Morrison 1992:90.) Selecting stories that do not trouble the status quo while espousing a commitment to open-ended discussion and the questioning of assumptions invites accusations of 'doing' ideology, albeit in a subtle form. There are no doubt many and complex reasons for the absence of source material dealing with issues of race and racism by people of colour, and these reasons are not limited to P4C. However, I suggest that a form of gate-keeping takes place in the selection of starting points/stimuli for philosophical enquiry into racism and that this is likely to be exacerbated by the ground rules of the practice. I think it important to consider





therefore, to what extent the community of enquiry may be considered a *gated community*.

In their analysis of the rise of residential segregation in the UK, Atkinson and Flint argue that gated communities usually house the relatively privileged and can be viewed as attempts to “insulate against perceived risk and unwanted encounters” (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 875) with “people ‘not like us’”. (Atkinson & Flint 2004:890) The concerns about safety and security in gated communities enable “social distance to be maintained” (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 875). In such a social climate the unfamiliar is viewed with suspicion and as a potential intruder whose presence is illegitimate. Thus the gated community can, they argue, be viewed as a “cognitive shelter”.

I propose it is worth considering the extent to which communities of enquiry, be they school classrooms or P4C training courses, seminars and conferences, are operating as gated communities. To end with Matthew Lipman,

‘We must also be ready to realize that the ineffectiveness of our own approaches may be due to faulty assumptions we ourselves are making - or perhaps even to prejudices we ourselves hold - with regard to the nature of the problem.’ (Lipman 1991:255)

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