

## Pedagogical Challenges of Addressing White Complicity

Shilpi Sinha

*Adelphi University*

Barbara Applebaum, in her essay, “White Complicity and the Inability to Dissent/Disagree” incisively analyzes how the critique levelled against teaching the concept of white complicity in anti-racist education actually derives its motivating force from the desire to protect white innocence rather than any true logical or pragmatic constraint contained within the concept of white complicity itself. Further, Applebaum argues that white complicity as a concept is not about blaming, making one feel guilty, or indoctrination, but rather is about a call for vigilance that takes into account “the ways white innocence is protected and how such shielding limits what can be contemplated.”<sup>1</sup> I read Applebaum as doing two things in her paper: (1) providing the justification for teaching about what the concept white complicity stands for in response to the criticism of white complicity encapsulated through the inability to dissent/disagree charge, and (2) linking “teaching about” white complicity to a way of clearing a pathway for engagement, for enabling a confronting of the very manner in which systemic injustice is maintained. In this response paper, I am mainly interested in amplifying some of the elements that I perceive to be underlying Applebaum’s second focus and in pointing towards how such an amplification may have important implications for what educators may actually be called to do pedagogically with the notion of white complicity as a call to vigilance.

Applebaum explains that white complicity refers to the way white people, through their practices, attitudes and beliefs are imbricated within systemic white supremacy and thereby contribute to perpetuating systemic racial injustice. White complicity plays out through white people’s very constitution as white; through their ways of being and moving in the world as theorists such as Marilyn Frye, George Yancy and Sara Ahmed have detailed; through discursive practices of denial of complicity (for example, “remaining silent, evading questions, employing rhetoric of ignoring color, focusing on progress, victim blaming, and focusing on culture rather than race”<sup>2</sup>); and through benefitting from white privilege. The aforementioned are inclusive of “an epistemology of ignorance around whiteness,” where the white person does not recognize that

they do not know that they do not know that race matters.<sup>3</sup>

To recap Applebaum's argument, critics maintain that white complicity is a concept that disallows any disagreement (since you are already seen as complicit if you disagree), and therefore due to this inability or constraint the concept itself is delegitimized. Correlatively, teaching about white complicity is thus seen as a form of indoctrination. Applebaum unpacks the inability to dissent charge through an examination of situations such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and double-binds, which may serve as putative proxies for what exactly occurs when the concept of white complicity is taught. However, Applebaum convincingly lays out the disjunctures between the operation of the above situations and the functioning of the concept of white complicity. She highlights that the very charge of the inability to dissent is a dissent and thus the concept of white complicity cannot be analogous to a logical paradox. Further, dissent is being practiced loud and clear through the call for policies, practices and legislation across our nation and school boards to limit or curtail the teaching on issues of race, often lumped together under the banner critical race theory. Applebaum importantly traces what actually motivates the charge of the inability to dissent to the perception of being blamed or being damned regardless of what one does. For example, the critic of the concept of white complicity may point to whites being damned if they focus on action, on what they can do to fight racism, since that in itself is seen as partaking in white complicity, but then damned if they don't do anything to fight racism. But importantly, such perception, for Applebaum, indicates the "failure to appreciate the significance of certain concepts and what they tell us about what has been traditionally obscured by dominant epistemological frameworks." In other words, what actually motivates the inability to dissent charge is a certain investment in a socially sanctioned misreading of the world.

Hence, Applebaum brings us to the view that the concept of white complicity is actually serving as a call for vigilance about the operation of power relations, about how white innocence is protected, and about how such protection functions epistemologically. However, it is here that I'd like to explore a bit the questions, from where does the pedagogical import of white complicity flow? What ought to be the educator's pedagogical orientation when situated

within an environment in which white complicity operates? I'd like to suggest that the pedagogical import of white complicity flows in a way that may not be adequately captured by the notion of "teaching about." "Teaching about" may not be adequate for the work of engaging, confronting and being vigilant, to which Applebaum is rightly pointing.

As Applebaum has noted in a previous essay, within critical whiteness studies, white complicity has been understood through two frames: through unconscious negative attitudes and beliefs, or through the practices and habits of being or habits of whiteness, (which "may or may not connect complicity with unconscious beliefs"<sup>4</sup>). In the discussion currently at hand, I think Applebaum focuses more so on the latter frame of white complicity. Recent work in critical phenomenology from the likes of Sara Ahmed, Helen Ngo, Alia Al Saji and Tyson Lewis, has highlighted that such habits are predicated on the historico-racial body schema, which, quoting Lewis, signifies "the pre-representational sensory motor capacity that functions below the level of reflective awareness, and provides a posture toward a certain task, actual or possible."<sup>5</sup> To have a historico-racial body schema indicates undertaking action through habituation, where, quoting Helen Ngo, "one takes up residence in the spatiality of something, reanimating the past into the present."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the memory of that which is to be abased is inscribed and re-inscribed in bodies as a muscle memory, through the very living-in-the-world that functions through the iterations of what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "history of insult and discrimination" that is encoded within many of the structures and social practices of the United States.<sup>7</sup> What results is a manner of holding onto and re-animating ways of being, moving, interacting and thinking that reinforce existing power relations and structures.

Applebaum draws on the notion of vigilance as a way to address the practice and habits of whiteness. The notion of vigilance has been previously explained by Applebaum through an extension of Kelly Oliver's notion of "bearing witness," which does not indicate recognizing what we already know, but rather, indicates responding to the new, "to something beyond one's self," and to do so in a way that the possibility of response by the other is opened up, not closed down.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, bearing witness as vigilance indicates, for Applebaum,

being open to a type of listening that interrogates our very self-understanding. It is a willingness to tarry with anxiety, vulnerability and unsettledness. To bear witness thus indicates the interruption of habituated ways of being.

If one takes seriously the concept of white complicity, then the assumption is that the practices and habits of whiteness are operative in one's white students or interlocutors. And such habits often indicate a resistance to responding to something beyond the self. In order to recognize white complicity as a call for vigilance instead of indoctrination, censorship or a nonsensical concept, white students and white interlocutors must *already* be vigilant to begin with. That is, they must have already borne witness in some sense. Pedagogically, if the aim is to set the stage for an engagement, for an ability to confront systemic injustice, something needs to occur before the "teaching about" can begin. I maintain that the ability to bear witness as an interruption of habituated ways of being retains a relational element in that one still needs the resistance of the marginalized to be felt. Here I am not thinking of resistance as limited to the form of counter-narratives, since, as Applebaum has rightly pointed out, reliance on counter-narratives can function as an exploitation of the marginalized as cultural experts, and a re-centering of whiteness by prioritizing the needs of the systemically privileged at the expense of the marginalized.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I am envisioning resistance as embodied through the material and environmental shifts that counter dominant modes of arranging and moving in spaces, in allocating goods and services, or in calling out or emphasizing certain interactions. Educators need to be invested in the spatial and environmental shifts that can engender a re-configuring of habituated ways of being. Perhaps when one's habituated ways of listening, perceiving and being, meet sustained and materialized resistance, then muscle memories may begin to take on new formations, and the foundation may be laid to potentially stay open to the vulnerability and discomfort that does not shut down or try to flee the anger of the other who has been marginalized.

---

## REFERENCES

1 Barbara Applebaum, "White Complicity and the "Inability to Dissent/Disagree," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1 (same issue).

- 2 Barbara Applebaum, "Vigilance as a Response to White Complicity," *Educational Theory* 63 no.1 (2013): 23.
- 3 Applebaum, "Vigilance as a Response to White Complicity," 21.
- 4 Applebaum, "Vigilance as a Response to White Complicity," 20.
- 5 Tyson Lewis, "But I'm Not Racist!" Phenomenology, Racism and the Body Schema in White, Pre-service Teacher Education," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* (2016) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1195354>
- 6 Helen Ngo, "Racist Habits: A Phenomenological Analysis of Racism and the Habitual Body," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42, no. 9 (2016): 863.
- 7 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Work and Wealth," in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (*The Project Gutenberg eBook*, 1920/2005), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm>
- 8 Applebaum, "Vigilance as a Response to White Complicity," 19.
- 9 Applebaum, "Vigilance as a Response to White Complicity," 19.