The Politics of Survival

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CONCLUSION

To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination.

bell hooks, 2003b, 36

For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures.

Audre Lorde, 1984, 123

These words from bell hooks and Audre Lorde underscore a problematic lack of social critical sensitivity that informs Peirce’s philosophy, as he largely failed to address the oppressive dynamics that can undermine, in actual communities, the ideal of infinite inclusion. While infinite inclusion itself cannot be literally achieved in flesh-and-blood communities, I would argue that the fallibilism and openness represented by this ideal can be achieved. This achievement requires work on the part of community members in hegemonic groups to unearth nonconscious exclusionary beliefs that can tempt them to inappropriately reject feedback that represents non-hegemonic perspectives. Resisting this rejection, through agape, enacts infinite inclusion as an ongoing epistemological ideal.

I have argued that Peirce’s philosophy, especially its affective dimensions, has resources to contribute to discussions in social criticism when his work is proactively read in conjunction with social critical thinking. Had Peirce not been blinded by his own race, sex,
heterosexual, and social class privilege, he might have made more explicit that a community of inquiry is epistemologically deficient to the extent that it refuses membership and/or input from non-hegemonic groups. His later work’s focus on agape and the repudiation of greed is likely an outgrowth of his own experience of poverty in his later years, coupled with his exclusion from social, scientific, and other intellectual communities of inquiry (Brent 1998, 136–322, esp. 259–62). These biographical factors are arguably experiential inroads that helped Peirce’s philosophy grow into its incorporation of agape, which is a key affective strategy for those in hegemonic groups to employ when they have difficulty being open to non-hegemonic perspectives. Nonetheless, in order for its social critical potential to come to fuller voice, Peirce’s philosophy needs input from social critical thinkers. Thus my project’s proactive reading of Peirce has been fueled by insights from race theory and feminism.

While contributions and challenges from social criticism help render his ideas more attuned to justice and thus more consistent with his own ideals, Peirce can make contributions to social criticism as well. Primary among these contributions are conceptual tools that can help those in hegemonic groups come to awareness about nonconscious exclusionary belief-habits and the mechanisms through which these nonconscious belief-habits can shape their thoughts and behavior. Achieving this awareness is a crucial initial step for changing such growth-inhibiting belief-habits, for those who are so inclined.

Peirce’s ideas can help those in hegemonic groups grasp the oppressive dynamics that a hegemonic society hides from their view, while also affirming the possibility for self-controlled growth beyond these dynamics. His account of reality acknowledges both the perniciousness of indurate, exclusionary socio-political habits and the possibility for humans to change these habits. The affective and phenomenological dimensions of his thought point to the subtle ways exclusionary socio-political bias can inform the very concepts one uses to understand her or his world and other persons. At the same
time, his Critical Common-sensist ideals are underwritten by the ideals of science and agape, both of which are committed to embracing diverse perspectives. Actual communities of inquiry are challenged by Peirce to cultivate agape, especially those in which privileged groups continue to be overrepresented, such as Euro-Americans, men, heterosexuals, the economically secure, and other hegemonic groups in the United States. This cultivation of agape is enhanced by a flexible imagination schooled in coloring outside of conceptual lines, so to speak. This way when individuals from non-hegemonic groups identify ongoing discrimination, their input can be embraced as a source of communal growth out of oppressive habits.

Peirce’s account of child development illuminates where the seeds of socio-politically shaped common-sense beliefs are first planted, and why these beliefs can be difficult to change. The preceding chapters have shown that the seeds planted in childhood—and reinforced by society—can grow deep roots, becoming some of the illegitimately indubitable background beliefs with which Critical Common-sensism contends. Young children are vulnerable and dependent upon their caretakers and communities to teach them how “reality” works. In hegemonic societies, children can internalize growth-inhibiting habits whether they belong to oppressed or to privileged groups. My focus has been on the latter. The coercive survival dilemma makes it difficult for privileged children to resist forming exclusionary socio-political habits, such as the false universalizing tendencies of white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, and other forms of privilege.

The effectiveness of Peirce’s ideas for consciousness-raising has been shown to me repeatedly in my upper-level Self and Identity philosophy course, where I teach Peirce’s phenomenology and his ideas about ideal communal inquiry. I present Peirce’s thought alongside Antonio Damasio’s work and insights from social criticism, as I have done in this book. My white students, who form the vast majority in these classes, have repeatedly demonstrated how helpful they find Peirce’s ideas for articulating race dynamics of which they had not previously been aware. They talk with fluency about firstness, secondness, and thirdness, as they realize how their whiteness can operate
within their firstness, causing secondness to people of color, even though they themselves have not intended to be the source of racist secondness. My students of color often use Peirce’s ideas, alongside social criticism readings, to describe their own varied experiences with racism dynamics in the United States.

In this course (and others), I make efforts to incorporate a plurality of perspectives into my course material, in order to challenge the false universalization of the typical white, male, Western canonical philosophy syllabus. In conjunction with these curricular efforts, I also facilitate class discussions about racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. This facilitation includes coaching my students about agapic listening with respect to being in a hegemonic group. I also explain how Peirce’s admonition not to block the road of inquiry involves careful and considerate contributions to class discussion. This means that each student who participates must work to frame her or his contributions to discussion—in tone and in word choice—so that others may still feel safe and comfortable responding, even if they disagree. This conscientiousness in communication helps keep inquiry open.

Beyond work in the classroom with college-age students who are primarily eighteen to twenty-two years old, I think that Peircean/affective/social critical insights can be fruitfully applied in children’s classrooms. In fact, attention to how children are educated transforms the dependency and malleability of childhood habit-taking into a source of hope and social change. I am not suggesting that elementary school students be asked to read Peirce! I am suggesting that formal and informal elementary education can introduce children to an agapic social outlook that both embraces diversity and is attuned to invisibilities that result from hegemonic exclusions.³ The trust children must place in their caretakers, as well as the corresponding belief-habit formation that occurs, can be the targets of growth-promoting guidance and reinforcement.

Does this promotion of agape involve a political manipulation of children’s habit-taking? Yes. The linkage between politics and education, however, is a natural one.⁴ Education is how a society passes on
its values to future generations (Dewey [1916] 1944, 2 ff.). And this need not involve ideological indoctrination. As John Dewey and Paulo Freire each argue, education can involve the mere transference of facts or propaganda, but it can also be liberating. Students can be taught how to actively think about the world and to view it critically (Dewey [1916] 1944; Freire 1970 [1997]). In a democratic society, like the United States, education is all the more important, since voting citizens are ideally literate ones who can converse intelligently about the concerns of the state (Nussbaum 1997, 1–14).

Moreover, unlike the limited democracy of ancient Greece, the United States is a democratic society that “talks the talk” of including all people, regardless of their race, sex, sexuality, economic class, etc. (a marked exception, in 2010, being the social and legal resistance to same-sex marriage). It thus follows that childhood education should be seen as a way to invest in this inclusion (Sharp 1994; Greene 1997). It should also be noted that educational experiences that either promote or overlook the false universalization of hegemonic experience (as white, male, heterosexual, economically secure, and so on) involve a political manipulation of childhood habit-taking too. Only in this case, nonconscious racist, sexist, heterosexist, economic classist, etc., belief-habits are being reinforced, and these same nonconscious belief-habits often render invisible the types of discrimination actually experienced by people of color, women, GLBTQs, the poor, and others in non-hegemonic groups. I have demonstrated how these nonconscious belief-habits can lead to the dismissal of feedback given by these groups, because of the continued overrepresentation of whites, men, heterosexuals, the economically secure, and other hegemonic groups in actual communities of inquiry in the United States. Because of the limited experience that whites and men, for example, have with racism and sexism, respectively, they often have limited capacities for imagining the continued presence of these social ills.

I suggest that the elementary school classroom is a place where cultivating children’s imaginations toward the embrace of diversity can help break the cycle of perpetual false universalization and its corresponding blind spots. In classes where students belong primarily to
hegemonic groups, the cultivation of the imagination can be a way to compensate for the lack of diversity among the students. With imaginations exposed to diversity, children belonging to hegemonic groups may gain an enhanced ability to spot economic classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination for themselves. They may also be better prepared to listen to the corresponding testimony of the poor, GLBTQs, people of color, women, and others in non-hegemonic groups.6

As Peirce scholars know, Peirce values the imagination as a source of creativity and growth. He says that “next after the passion to learn there is no quality so indispensable to the successful prosecution of science as imagination” (CP 1.47, ca. 1896).7 He promotes musement as a state where one’s imagination can engage in “Pure Play,” understood as freedom to roam about without the constraints of control and purpose (EP 2:436 ff.). In other words, he promotes the cultivation of an imagination open to embracing what is different from existing belief-habit systems. The agapic embrace of difference is facilitated by an imagination exercised in welcoming ideas that are radically different from what has been experienced or thought of before. Peirce encourages the muser to let her imagination experience freedom from all rules (EP 2:436 ff.). It is this freedom that helps a person learn to step outside the familiar.

In the spirit of opening inquiry into how to cultivate imagination in the elementary school classroom, I suggest literature as one fruitful avenue. This avenue can be especially helpful for the relatively homogenous classrooms that often characterize the experience of Euro-American, white, middle-class, heterosexual children in the United States, who may grow into well-meaning adults who are unaware of the extent of racism, sexism, discrimination against the poor, heterosexism, and other social ills in this country. Let me be quick to acknowledge that educational reform is desperately needed in the United States, in order that these homogenous classrooms stop reflecting extreme racism-based disparities in funding and resources.8 Until this reform is achieved, I would argue that interim measures should occur now in these hegemonic-group-dominant classrooms,
to promote awareness in children, so that more future adults can be sensitized to the deeper issues at play.

To offer a brief sketch: Literature can address two dimensions of imagination that especially need cultivation in order for those in privileged groups to counter the false universalization of human experience that can occur in the United States. These two dimensions are the agapic ability to embrace the different and the ability to notice the absence of diversity. The first dimension involves an expansion of the capacity for empathy—that is, the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes. The second involves an attunement to the invisible, such that someone notices that, say, there were no people of color in the movie she just watched.

Regarding the imagination’s appreciation of different perspectives, Martha Nussbaum contends that literature helps make empathetic knowledge of others possible, especially in instances where “[d]ifferences of religion, gender, race, class, and national origin make the task of understanding harder”—for literature provides a rich cast of characters who are different from oneself (1997, 85, 86). She uses the term “narrative imagination” to refer to sympathetic imagination that is developed via literature. Literature helps to develop in readers/students an awareness of and respect for the complex and deeply meaningful inner worlds of others, a respect that carries with it a natural boundary of “respecting [the] separateness and privacy” of others (90). This is because, along with recognizing the inner worlds of others, the reader/student comes to understand that an inner world is not something that is fully “open to view” (90). Important educational by-products of literary exposure, Nussbaum argues, are empathy and compassion, sentiments that are part of students’ moral development (90 ff.). These sentiments fall under Peirce’s portrayal of agapic sympathy, which involves a person’s care and concern for others in her community.

Literature that portrays characters belonging to non-hegemonic groups can help the hegemonic-group student resist exclusionary beliefs that would otherwise fuel dismissal of non-hegemonic perspectives. It gives this student an opportunity to relate to the characters
as human beings who share with her or him the basic experience of trying to move through life the best one can. Imagining what it might be like to be this character is an important educational moment, especially when the character embodies circumstances—and thus experiences types of secondness—that the hegemonic-group student has no way of experiencing personally, such as being of a different race or sex (Nussbaum 1997, 92, 87 ff., 95 ff.). Teachers can help facilitate narrative imagination, in this case, through discussions or writing assignments that elicit personal responses to the story and that explore what it might be like to have experiences similar to those of a particular character.

The detection of false universalization involves a second dimension of imaginative flexibility that can be cultivated through childhood education: an imaginative attunement to the invisible. It involves seeing what is not there, so to speak. Nancy Tuana coined the phrase “reading as a woman” as a strategy both men and women can use to engage texts with a critical awareness of any implicit, as well as explicit, gender issues at play (1992, 5 ff.). I would call “reading with an attunement to the invisible” a development in imagination that builds on the first dimension of imaginative growth.¹¹ Hegemonic-group students who are equipped with an appreciation for the richness of human experience represented by the diverse characters in literature can, in turn, learn to recognize the absence of richness when they encounter it. These students can be encouraged to problematize portrayals of human experience—in literature, textbooks, the media, etc.—that represent primarily, for example, Euro-American white, middle-class people (Greene 1997).¹²

Nussbaum brings together these two dimensions of imagination development (the embrace of different perspectives and the attunement to lack of diversity) and underscores the importance of the linkage between childhood and the imagination. She advises that the development of narrative imagination begin in childhood, as children engage with their caretakers in storytelling (Nussbaum 1997, 89 ff., 93): “A child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of certain ways
of viewing other people” (89). The more children are exposed to stories and the rich casts of characters that can be found in literature, the more they will be attuned to the richness of perspectives that humanity represents. Literature, then, by providing windows into different perspectives on human experience, helps children develop their imaginative expectations regarding both specific texts and reality in general. The attuned intentionality through which children engage the world will be one that, ideally, expects to see a plurality of perspectives accounted for in their world. It will thus problematize and, again ideally, work to change a reality in which perspectives have been rendered invisible (Greene 1997). Cultivated imaginations in children can thus lead to growth toward social justice.

As nice as this all sounds, I need to qualify my suggestion of focusing on childhood education as an important part of fostering change in the United States. While it is true that cultivating agapic imaginations in children fosters inclusive habits that can contribute to societal growth in the United States, it is imperative to hold in place the larger tensions in which this suggestion is situated. As much as I appreciate Nussbaum’s vision regarding the power of literature, I do not want to be complacent with its optimism. Children receive many more messages about the world around them than what they are explicitly taught in school. They are inundated with extracurricular education from caretakers, other adults, and society in general, an education often permeated by exclusionary beliefs toward those in non-hegemonic groups. Such exclusionary messages are often portrayed to children without the conscious intention of adults, who may be unaware of their own behavior and/or who may be unaware of the heterosexist, racist, sexist, and other discriminatory messages that children are receiving from society at large, especially through the media. I agree with sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin, who conclude their book *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* by noting, “Obviously, the realities of race and racism do not start with children, and programs to eradicate racism cannot begin there either. . . . It is not a mystery where [young] children get their ideas: We adults are a primary source. . . . They will not unlearn and
undo racism until we do” (2001, 214, my emphasis). Thus, the elementary education classroom efforts that I suggest for helping to foster agapic imaginations must be coupled with the ongoing efforts of adults to “unlearn and undo” racism, as well as heterosexism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. And such efforts must be informed by openness to the fact that discrimination often happens by means of nonconscious belief-habits.

I will be the first to admit that, as helpful as Peirce’s work can be for consciousness-raising, it does not offer concrete social-activist solutions regarding the individual and societal discriminatory belief-habits that his philosophy helps identify. My book points beyond itself in relationship to such solutions, solutions that will foster more concrete reform in U.S. schools, other institutions, and mainstream society as a whole.

Nonetheless, Peirce’s ideas can help those in hegemonic groups who are committed to unlearning nonconscious discriminatory belief-habits. I use a Peircean lens to frame my own efforts to unlearn discrimination. I view these efforts as an imperfect, ongoing, and open-ended pursuit of agape. I know I will never finish unlearning unintentional racist, sexist, heterosexist, economic classist, etc., behaviors. If I were to consider myself finished, I would thereby become part of the problem, unwilling to listen to feedback about work I may still need to do in any of these areas.

I actively work to continually educate myself about different forms of oppression, pursuing readings, workshops, and conferences, as well as cultivating personal and professional relationships. For example, in October 2008, I attended the fifth annual California Roundtable on Philosophy and Race, where María Lugones gave the keynote address, “Coloniality of Gender and the Colonial Difference.” Her talk, as well as the other paper presentations I attended, made it clear to me that my efforts in the present book lack a deep enough attunement to the impact of colonialism, past and present, within and beyond the borders of the United States. At this point in my professional development as a philosophy scholar, I need to educate myself much more fully about these issues. My work in this book thus points
beyond itself in this respect as well, toward a better sensitivity to colonization-critique that highlights how many people around the world, again past and present, have not been considered “human” from the standpoint of dominant Western countries, such as the United States. Lugones helped me to see this blind spot in my thinking and research.¹⁴

I thus see the conclusion to this book as an opening, not a closing. There is much more for me to learn as I work to use my privilege against itself¹⁵ to promote social change. My corresponding developmental telos will continue to be Peirce’s ideal of “giving a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable,” as I continue to unlearn my own nonconscious discriminatory belief-habits and to help others in hegemonic groups do the same (EP 2:255).