

Colin, Simon and I: No Conflict Here

Colin Poole and Simon Ellis

7 July 2018

Nice guy dissonance

(SE, normal as can be)

There's a funny thing that happens after I have performed in choreography by Colin, Simon and I. People – OK, let's call them white people, nothing like some precision – come up to me and ask, "Are you OK?" They are genuinely concerned. Do they come up to you Colin and ask the same thing?

(CP following SE)

Perhaps it's because you are big. Perhaps it's because you perform silence and resistance. Perhaps it's because you are black. Is it because you are black? I think they come up to me because they are worried for my soul. That they see a performance of me – and a performance of whiteness – that is difficult for them to reconcile as being by *and of* that nice guy Simon Ellis. And this is where it gets insidious. This is one of the ways that we the white privileged look after our own. We keep things smooth and avoid experiences of dissonance by expressing concern for our own. By expressing such concern we are saying four things:

1. I see through this performance of whiteness.
2. You are not a real racist.
3. I care about you.
4. Am I not clever and aware to notice and communicate such things?

(together) Privilege runs so deep at dance conferences that I can probably own up to racism and get away with it.

(add lick.mp4: 1:23min)

No conflict frauds

(CP whispering to SE very quietly, SE saying out loud)

My name is Simon Ellis, this is Colin Poole. Together we make and perform work as Colin, Simon and I. We are here this afternoon as frauds. As people who are no longer in conflict. We are in agreement. There are no points or areas of division. You see, we know each other quite well. We know each other's triggers. We've pushed pretty much all of them, we've felt them. We've spat, we've licked, we've rubbed, we've bitten, we've dribbled. We've worked through some shit. We are now happy bunnies. Everything is rosy from where we are sitting. There's no

tension in the air. We greet each other warmly. We smile. We make space. We joke. We are open. We listen. We are polite. We say, “after you”, “oh no no, after you”. We don’t tut in public, or kiss our teeth.

(CP kisses his teeth loudly)

The fortunate one

(SE sitting on CP on desk, academic mode, SE playing/toying with CP)

The sociologist Max Weber wrote that the “fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate”. This fortunate wants to know that “he has a right to his good fortune”; that he “deserves it”. And that the less fortunate also deserve what they get. He wants his “good fortune to be ‘legitimate’ fortune” (2009, 271).

I am that fortunate one. You can hear it in my accent. Those soft kiwi tones, the muted vowels. The expression of confidence and warmth. I’ve loved and felt loved. The hint of a smile. An air of certainty. Autonomy. To be clear that I’ve paid my debts and earned my fortune. That I don’t need to help others who ought to be able to help themselves. Better still, that the thought to help others – to provide some support, to help others take a weight off – doesn’t even cross my mind. I’ve earned this fucking seat and pulled myself up, so why can’t you? I’m not lucky, I earned it. Privilege runs so deep at dance conferences that I can probably own up to racism and get away with it.

(add carrying.mp4: 0.44min)

Privileges

(CP on SE’s lap, sitting down, animating CP; CP just mouthing the words as SE says them)

You don’t have to look good. You don’t have to appear smart. You don’t have to seem confident; to reveal your self-esteem issues. It’s OK to stutter over your answers, to blink at the questions. To talk a little less knowingly. Not everything needs to seem figured out; there are plenty of loose ends. You don’t have to be able to trust each other. You don’t have to reduce the gap between the known and the unknown; to seek the truth; to mitigate risk. You don’t have to know what is going to happen. You don’t have to ensure – and be assured of – your good fortune.

(SE stands and helps CP up; SE speaking, CP silent, cheek to cheek, SE hugging CP)

Privileges are over-rated, and I spend too much time apologising and calling out my privileges in order to appear as if I’m one of the good ones. These are confessions of privilege as a “redemptive outlet” (Levine-Rasky, in Applebaum 2016). I don’t know how or even if this is different from simply being racist. Privilege runs so deep at dance conferences that I can probably own up to my racism and get away with it.

Desire

(sit back down; CP saying, SE repeating)

What am I really prepared to give up? My seat at the table? My voice? My place? My role? My values? My value? The belief that I can swoop in and save the world at the last moment? White people – like me – desire whiteness. And the guilt, what Audre Lorde calls the “tiresome white guilt that serves neither us nor them” (2017, 56), indicates that we are not yet able to acknowledge that we wouldn’t want it any other way. What are the desires I am prepared to limit? What kinds of limits are placed on whiteness? I can begin to imagine the threats to my status; my status as a polite, caring, well-educated, thoughtful, sensitive, willing-to-listen whitey. What kind of human being am I to see abuse in the absence of any threat? There *is* no limit to whiteness. There is no limit to *my* whiteness. The default. Excessive purity. The blank canvas. The *whitosphere*. The colour that makes other colours possible.

(together): I don’t know how or even if this is different from simply being racist. Privilege runs so deep at dance conferences that I can probably own up to my racism and get away with it.

A joke

(CP says, “it says a joke here, have you got a joke? I’m all ears”)

(add joke.mp4: 1:20min)

(CP interrupts the joke): Come on mate. Have we gone to all this trouble to give the audience an easy time?

(pause the video // it goes to next (blank) slide)

(SE tells joke)

(add interrogation slide)

Interrogation of the Good – Bertolt Brecht

Step forward: we hear that you are a good man. You cannot be bought, but the lightning which strikes the house, also cannot be bought. You hold to what you said. But what did you say? You are honest, you say your opinion. Which opinion? You are brave. Against whom? You are wise. For whom? You do not consider personal advantages. Whose advantages do you consider then? You are a good friend. Are you also a good friend of the good people?

Hear us then: we know you are our enemy. This is why we shall now put you in front of a wall. But in consideration of your merits and good qualities, we shall put you in front of a good wall and shoot you with a good bullet from a good gun, and bury you with a good shovel in the good earth.

– Bertolt Brecht (1995)

(next slide: remove Brecht)

Interrogation

(SE speaking CP repeating)

I'm curious about your silence here. What's the problem? Is it that you have nothing to say? Or perhaps it's because you are tired of saying it? Has the cat got your tongue? Is it because you feel compromised? Is it because you are black? Or are you just happy hanging around letting me do all the talking? Is it because symmetry is not what it's cracked up to be? I'd love for you to come clean. Is there an unresolved problem here? Are things not really that rosy? Are we not happy bunnies? I feel a bit threatened by your silence. Are you threatening me? What are you staring at? Don't you think I'm on your side?

(add portrait.mov; 2:00min)

References

- Applebaum, Barbara. 2016. *Critical Whiteness Studies*. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press.
<http://education.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-5>.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1995. *The Interrogation of the Good*.
<https://workingclassmachinist.blogspot.com/2007/08/interrogation-of-good.html>.
- Lorde, Audre. 2017. *A Burst of Light*. And Other Essays. Courier Dover Publications.
- Weber, Max. 2009. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Routledge.