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Catherine Maloney

York University, cathy.maloney@utoronto.ca

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From *Epistemic Responsibility* to *Ecological Thinking*: The Importance of Advocacy for Epistemic Community

Cathy Maloney

Lorraine Code's 1987 book *Epistemic Responsibility* connects the epistemological realm with the ethical realm and develops the idea that knowing well is possible when knowers are engaged in and can draw on the resources of an epistemic community. Her work has been influential upon ensuing work in feminist epistemology and social epistemology more generally, having helped to open the way for discussions that challenge the notion of value- and context-independent epistemology. Revisiting and building on the notion of epistemic responsibility in her 2006 book *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, Code suggests that while her earlier work was sound in its basic assumptions, it relied on "an excessively benign conception of community, imagined without contest to provide space for and uniform access to debate" (2006, vii). By contrast her 2006 work provides a robust account of the social imaginary—both instituted and instituting—and its connection to epistemic responsibility, and introduces advocacy as a crucial mode of knowing across difference and destabilizing epistemologies of mastery. This paper will highlight some of the common threads in the two works, as well as where they diverge. I will approach this mini-genealogy by focussing on three concepts: epistemic responsibility, which is central and common across both works; cognitive interdependence which is common to both works, but undergoes a major transformation in *Ecological Thinking*; and advocacy, which is entirely absent from the discussion in *Epistemic Responsibility*. Concurrent to developing this mini-genealogy of Code's thought, I will consider how her work intersects with specific aspects of the work of two other thinkers—Miranda Fricker's hermeneutic injustice and Mikhail Bakhtin's creative understanding—as a means of bringing out the nuances of Code's argument and delving deeper into the troublesome issues of knowing across difference, reflexive thinking, and destabilizing hegemonic ways of knowing, all of which are integral to knowing well. I will conclude that advocacy as it emerges in *Ecological Thinking* must include a dialogical process with the other that leads both to and from greater self-understanding if it is to do the work of destabilizing dominant modes of knowing; and further, I will conclude that advocacy is both necessary for, and can only happen within, epistemic community.

The idea that knowers are responsible for "what and how they know" (Code 2006, ix) shapes the landscape of both books. In *Epistemic Responsibility*, Code introduces the idea that there is a moral element to knowing well beginning with examples suggested from legal and political situations where not being informed of

local laws or political situations is not enough to relieve a person from her burden of duty to act correctly—for example, the legal obligation to drive on the correct side of the road (1987, 1). From here Code builds to the more significant claim that “knowers, or would-be knowers, come to bear as much of the onus of credibility as ‘the known’” (1987, 8–9). The shift she is effecting here is away from the predominant epistemological tradition’s focus on “products [or] end-states of cognition” (Code 1987, 8) and towards the act of knowing or “cognitive activity”. As is now both well known and well understood, the import of this shift is in acknowledging the particularity and locatedness of knowers and the consequent impact this has on the construction of knowledge. What is known is no longer a static object “waiting only to be read” (Haraway 1991, 198) and understood in the same way by every passing knower (who is *himself* interchangeable with every other generic knower), but rather is the result of a dynamic between the specific knower and the known. It is a process of making meaning that is located in specificity but still constrained by reality. This epistemological approach begun in *Epistemic Responsibility* continues right through *Ecological Thinking*. As Christine Koggel writes in her 2008 essay on *Ecological Thinking*, Code is able to “reveal the spaces between realism and relativism” (178) and in this way allows access to previously discounted knowledges without losing the ability to make judgments about the quality of what is known. The shift in thinking that Code affected in her 1987 book remains central to her work, and the work of many others, today.

Where the two works begin to diverge is in how community or the cognitive interdependence of knowers is construed. The inherently social nature of knowledge and the resultant impossibility of opting out of epistemic community (Code 1987, 188) remains in *Ecological Thinking* as a core tenet that opposes the regulative principle that good knowing is autonomous knowing. However, whereas *Epistemic Responsibility* conceives the structure of epistemic community as a combined form of life/contract/practice model in which one knowing subject has more or less the same access to the resources of the community, *Ecological Thinking* gives much greater weight to the role of testimony and considers its epistemological weight within the context of communities of knowers who are governed by particular social imaginaries. In opposition to the image of an autonomous knower (2006, 171) Code makes the strong claim that “testimony makes knowledgeable living possible” (2006, 173). The idea that each person’s knowledge base is communally built from information that we have learned from others (e.g., the location of the North and South Poles) is a shift away from the possibility of autonomous knowing, but locating testimony and knowing within a social imaginary is a radical reconfiguring of the epistemic landscape. In *Epistemic Responsibility*, the knowing subject builds her understanding by experiencing the world and interacting with others, and then processing that interaction within the creative synthesis of her

own imagination. By contrast, in *Ecological Thinking*, the knowing subject is embedded in a relational framework of knowing that situates and shapes the limits of understanding in a way that was not at issue with the more straightforward cognitive interdependence of the earlier work—that is, in *Ecological Thinking*, understanding happens within an ecosystem of meaning making.

At the end of Code's 1991 book *What Can She Know*, she outlines the framework and potential benefits of an ecological model of knowing. She writes that

an ecological model can shift epistemological inquiry away from autonomy-obsession toward an analysis explicitly cognizant of the fact that every cognitive act takes place at a point of intersection of innumerable relations, events, circumstances, and histories that make the knower and the known what they are, at that time. (269)

This suggestion of the benefits of an ecological model of knowing announced at the end of the 1991 book is fully developed in the 2006 book and is a marked shift from the framework of *Epistemic Responsibility*. The knower is now bound to and by the limits of her community's imaginary, complete with all its sociopolitical implications. The addition of a sociopolitical dimension to what was formerly simply an ethico-epistemological discussion adds a layer of significant complexity to the possibility of knowing across difference.

Having brought in the sociopolitical dimension of cognitive activity, *Ecological Thinking* diverges even further from *Epistemic Responsibility* with the introduction of the need for advocacy as an element of responsible knowing. Recognising the imbalance of power between various epistemic communities and the impact that this imbalance has on the acceptance of testimony, advocacy becomes a necessary tool. Code writes that

advocacy practices work to get at truths operating imperceptibly, implicitly, below the surface of the assumed self-transparency of evidence. They can be strategically effective in claiming discursive space for 'subjugated knowledges,' putting such knowledge into circulation where it can claim acknowledgement, working to ensure informed, emancipatory moral-political effects. (2006, 176)

Advocacy becomes a means of "developing an *instituting* social imaginary" (2006, 170) which is capable of destabilising the instituted imaginary and making space for subjugated ways of knowing. Responsible knowing takes on more aspects under this view of advocacy practices than it did in *Epistemic Responsibility*. In addition to the increased complexity of the epistemic terrain in the latter work, a responsible

knower now has a responsibility beyond her own imperative to know well. Now a responsible knower has the additional duty of “putting such knowledge into circulation” (Code 2006, 176). This may mean acting as an advocate under appropriate circumstances, but more importantly it means being attentive to difficult, uncomfortable, and potentially even seemingly incoherent testimony. It means listening to and taking seriously the testimony of others, even when that testimony seems at first hearing to have no merit—perhaps because it is so far outside the hearer’s own imaginary. This may be the testimony of first-hand experiencers or of second-hand advocates.

Code is quick to acknowledge that advocacy faces at least two legitimate obstacles: the first is a reputation that is at odds with responsible knowing, when for instance it is used to obfuscate the truth (think for example of the tobacco lobby); and the second is the very real worry that advocacy is “tantamount to paternalism” (2006, 179). While acknowledging that both are dangers, Code states that neither is inevitable (2006, 178). The response to the first point is fairly straightforward. That is, yes, advocacy has been and sometimes is not epistemically responsible, but this is of course not the type of advocacy under discussion. It would be quite easy to discern between a self-interested “advocacy” that aims only to promote its own ends and one that aims to uncover truths that are uncomfortable and disruptive to dominant ways of knowing. The former is monologic and the latter dialogic. Thinking through a frame that is both epistemically responsible and, now, ecologically sensitive, advocacy in this latter, dialogic form—in opposition to the autonomy ideal—would pay close attention to testimony while mapping the “interrelations, consonances, and contrasts” (Code 2006, 51) involved.

The second concern Code raises regarding paternalism is tougher, but still not insurmountable. In contrast to a paternalistic practice that would keep the subject of its actions reliant on or beholden to a master, advocacy that is epistemically responsible should ultimately yield autonomy; an “autonomy remodelled” as Code writes (2006, 195). That is, while advocacy can seem to strip those who are spoken for of their autonomy, by using whatever dialogical power the advocate has (i.e., her greater credibility) to push against “intransigent imaginaries” (Code 2006, 178), advocacy can in fact bring formerly silenced voices forward for the first time. Code writes that “when advocacy is effective, those advocated for may come to be well placed to claim the autonomy of acknowledged knowledgeability” (2006, 180). So for example, drawing on one of Code’s examples, when the *Harvard Women’s Health Watch* wrote an article corroborating the experiences of women with Syndrome X, the credibility of the testimony of people with this illness

increased (2006, 193).¹ The social-political complexity that Code's articulation of autonomy, testimony and advocacy in *Ecological Thinking* adds to the concept of epistemic community in her earlier work is transformational. Advocacy becomes an irreplaceable element of responsible epistemic community.

But how is advocacy possible at all when knowing across difference in the first place is so difficult? That is, how does the advocate come to understand? Further, how does advocacy function to destabilize an instituted imaginary when the testimony of the original experiencer was not able even to enter the ring with the dominant or centralizing imaginary, let alone unsettle it? In chapter six of *Ecological Thinking*, Code brings in the concept of "imaginative empathy" (231). In contrast to the imagination's creative synthesis in *Epistemic Responsibility*, Code is here excruciatingly aware of the pitfalls and difficulty entailed in understanding across difference. She writes that "'We' may indeed be imaginative creatures, but prototypes and hegemonic imaginaries block responsible imaginings at least as frequently as they enable them" (2006, 229). While Code concludes the chapter with

¹ During the presentation of a version of this paper at CSWIP 2015, Naomi Scheman suggested that there may in fact be an additional problem to consider in relation to advocacy. That is, that those advocated for may not benefit from having their experiences made comprehensible within the dominant social imaginary. This reminded me of a woman's testimony as recounted in the Irish documentary *The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name*, by Bill Hughes, which screened on the Irish television station RTE in 2000. In one particular scene a woman recounted her experience of living as a lesbian before and after her experience became more widely understood in her country. Previously she had been able to "fly under the radar" and, for example, easily check in to B&Bs and other establishments with her female lover without problem, because the social imaginary at the time she was speaking of did not include the possibility of two women being anything more than platonic friends. After a shift in public understanding, however, her relationship became visible, and she no longer had the freedom she had previously enjoyed. While I would certainly not want to trivialise the difficult and often violent eras that becoming visible can entail for individuals in newly visible groups (consider the recent and tragic events in Orlando), nor would I want to suggest that remaining invisible is ultimately a desirable alternative (at least as it plays out in this example—consider that same-sex marriage is now legal in Ireland). In either case however, the idea that advocacy can be problematic in this way is certainly worth pursuing further. For the purpose of this paper, please consider that advocacy practices refer to situations in which it is either clearly beneficial for the person or groups in question, as I believe it is in the example of Syndrome X, or at least arguably beneficial.

the suggestion that her argument is in fact inconclusive and further that her “epistemic stance . . . enjoins skepticism about the possibility of understanding across differences” (2006, 233), she goes some way in addressing both the first and second of the questions above. Starting with the first question, the advocate comes to understand across difference by engaging in at least three practices: by shifting the fulcrum of understanding, by remaining in the in-between space of commonality and particularity, and by remaining committed to contextual and relational modes of understanding. Starting with the first practice, imaginative empathy of the kind that Code wants to endorse “is less about knowing than about *believing*” (2006, 231). This means that understanding across difference, which opens the possibility of advocacy, requires open or willing listening of the kind that Jay Lampert, writing about Gadamer’s hermeneutics, refers to when he says that to engage dialogically an interpreter must “freely invite aliens into one’s home” (1997, 359). A person who wants to understand across difference cannot do so without opening herself to new possibilities. This involves risk to the knower’s own ways of perceiving and sense of self, but without this open belief of the other, knowledge remains only a monologic repetition of the knower’s own understanding. The second practice is what Code calls “the productive (thus not *aporetic*) tension” (2006, 228) of thinking both in particulars and in commonalities. Without inhabiting this in-between space, a knower falls into one of two extremes: universal thinking that is unaccountable for its social-political location or “radical particularity” that becomes incommensurable to the point of unknowability (Code, 228). Finally, imaginative empathy requires a commitment to contextual and relational thinking. Part of understanding ecologically means understanding the system in which an embodied subject lives and operates: “she or he has to be understood . . . as situated within the habitus or ethos of a society” (2006, 232). It is neither desirable nor possible to understand a subject stripped of context. Understanding across difference requires all three of these practices in order to have a chance of succeeding.

The second question about advocacy’s ability to destabilize an instituted imaginary relies in large part on the effectiveness of listening practices and willingness “to engage with the affective dimensions of lives situated outside the norms of epistemic sameness” (Code 2006, 233). A knower who is committed to understanding across difference in this way is open to the extra-cognitive elements of the other’s story and by so being allows that understanding to be transformative. Certain types of narratives can leave a knower “pulled up short by the text” (Gadamer, 268) and, as Jennifer Geddes writes, help “us unlearn what we have presumed to know or to be able to imagine” (Geddes, quoted in Code 2006, 234). The role of the advocate in this connection is two-fold: first, she must engage in the practices that make imaginative empathy possible in the first place, and second, she must devise means of provoking particularly tenacious beliefs in the wider social

imaginary. This is neither a simple nor unproblematic task, but one can see potential for a way forward.

One way in which Code's work is particularly salient to me is in its connection to my own paid work at the Centre for International Experience at the University of Toronto. One of my core projects at U of T is developing programming to promote intercultural learning among University of Toronto students. What this means in practice is helping students to develop (or improve) epistemically responsible practices in their thinking about their own cultural positionality and then, only in the context of self-reflexive practices, to consider the cultural positionality of others. The majority of the students I have worked with so far are undergraduates, although I am increasingly working with graduate students and sometimes staff and faculty. These students come from different years and programs of study and widely different life experiences. They are both domestic and international students; some are going out on exchanges or other mobility programs, and others are participating in *internationalization at home* opportunities. Many of these students are very sophisticated in their thinking about understanding across differences, and I have learned quite a lot from them; for others, the idea of knowledge as socially and politically constructed is a big shift in thinking. An analogically rich metaphor like Code's ecological thinking is useful in helping students to think through the relational nature of what they know; however, the implications of relational or interdependent knowing are, unsurprisingly, not always clear. I mentioned in my introduction that I wanted to put Code's work in conversation with both Miranda Fricker and Mikhail Bakhtin's work, as a means of bringing out the nuances of her argument and thinking through what I consider some troublesome bits of knowing across difference. To do this, I will consider the claim found in all three thinkers that an individual does not always understand her own experience. While it is common across all three, this claim does however arise differently in each of their work: In Code's work, not fully understanding one's own experience is an implicit concomitant of understanding within the framework of a social imaginary. In Fricker's work it is an explicit component of her unpacking of *hermeneutic injustice*. Within Bakhtin's work it is explicit in his claim that *outsideness* is necessary for self-understanding. In one way this claim is an unproblematic statement of fact, but taken another way it can seem to lead to the kind of paternalism that Code was concerned to avoid in her discussion of advocacy. Thinking through this claim does a few different things: (1) It complicates the idea of advocacy in an interesting way. Advocacy may not only be about helping others to see what they are missing; rather, advocacy—and the dialogical process it necessitates—may also do work to help the experiencer understand herself more fully. (2) It helps to unpack the way social imaginaries both allow for understanding and limit it. For the students I work with, this can be helpful in showing more clearly the implications of relational

knowing. (3) In relation to the evolution of Code's work, it further solidifies the importance, and necessity, of advocacy for responsible epistemic community.

Miranda Fricker's work explicitly works through the idea that an experiencer may not fully understand her own experience due to social power structures. Fricker's "epistemic injustice" functions as what Code has called a "conceptual apparatus" (2008, 32) for thinking through the link between the social imaginary and harms done to individuals in their capacity as knowers. "Hermeneutic injustice"—one of the "two forms of epistemic injustice" which Fricker identifies as "distinctively epistemic in kind" (2007, 1)—in particular connects gaps in the "collective hermeneutic resource" (2007, 168) to harm, and Fricker further points out that inequity in social power tends to "skew shared hermeneutical resources" so that the powerful have access to shared conceptions of their experiences whereas the less powerful "are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly" (2007, 148). This leaves the less socially powerful vulnerable to abuses of power and, significantly, seemingly incoherent in their expressions of meaning. The explicit link between social positionality and vulnerability to epistemic harm that Fricker develops is particularly compelling and useful. One of Fricker's examples of this is the story of Carmita Wood, a woman who experienced sexual harassment in her workplace at a time when that concept was not part of the Western social imaginary. As a result of her situation Wood developed health complications, left her job, and was not able to receive any kind of compensation as she could not articulate the connection between her workplace environment and her poor health. In her memoir, Susan Brownmiller writes, "When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding—the blank form needed to be filled in—she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied" (1999, 280–281) While I find this a striking example of a case of hermeneutic injustice at work, I have never quite been comfortable with Fricker's claim that Wood herself did not have a grip on her own experience. José Medina makes a criticism of this aspect of Fricker's argument. He points out that caution should be exercised in tying "too closely people's hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of available terms and coined concepts, for oppressed subjects often find ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations are available" (2012, 208–209). Indeed Wood did know that something was wrong, but she couldn't coherently express it either to herself or to others. What I find interesting and particularly useful for the current investigation is the way that Wood did finally make sense of her experience. It was in dialogue with others:

“Lin’s students had been talking in her seminar about the unwanted sexual advances they’d encountered on their summer jobs,” Sauvigne relates. “And then Carmita Wood comes in and tells Lin *her* story. We realized that to a person, every one of us—the women on staff, Carmita, the students—had had an experience like this at some point, you know? And none of us had ever told anyone before. It was one of those *click, aha!* moments, a profound revelation.”

. . . “We decided we had to hold a speak-out in order to break the silence about this.”

The “this” they were going to break the silence about had no name. “Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs,” Sauvigne remembers, “brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for the speak-out. We were referring to it as ‘sexual intimidation’, ‘sexual coercion,’ ‘sexual exploitation on the job.’ None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviours. Somebody came up with ‘harassment.’ *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was.” (Brownmiller 1999, 281)

The others with whom Carmita Wood was in dialogue were primed to hear and work through her experiences as they could draw on similar moments from their own lives. It was only thinking through their experiences *in community* that they were able to achieve the transformative moment of understanding. Considering this example through the lens of Code’s *imaginative empathy*, all three elements were in place: This group had no problem *believing* Wood’s experience in the absence of *knowing* what it was; they could draw on the particularity of their own experience but still see the commonality of the experience of the group; and they were sensitive to the situated or contextual nature in which these experiences were occurring. Thinking back to Code’s work on advocacy and the model of ecological thinking generally, I think my concern with Fricker’s claim was not so much that I couldn’t imagine that someone might not fully understand their own experience in this case, but was more a worry about Fricker’s “reflexive hearer” slipping into a paternalistic mode. What emerges when looking at this case through the lens of Code’s concept of advocacy is a kind of mutual advocacy, enabled by dialogically working through the issues in community. In their search for understanding of Wood’s situation and their own, these women acted as advocates of sorts, both for themselves and each other; they helped each other to form a coherent narrative around their experiences that could be understood within the larger social imaginary. Once this internal coherence or self-understanding was achieved they could then embark upon advocacy in the usual sense. Armed with a name that

seemed to fit their experiences and emboldened to draw in others with similar experiences, their formerly silenced voices were now audible.

Mikhail Bakhtin adds an extra dimension to the discussion of advocacy, suggesting that understanding can really only occur in community. That is, others are necessary for self-understanding and also for understanding across difference. In his late essay “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff,” Bakhtin articulates a concept he calls “creative understanding.” Creative understanding is both situated and requires “outsideness”:

There exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture. . . . If this were the only aspect of understanding it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching. *Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*. (1986, 6–7)

Eschewing the notion that it is possible to see through the eyes of another, Bakhtin indicates a commitment to situated knowing. He recognises that unsituated knowing leads only to “duplication,” or repeating the located knowledge of the one who claims to see universally. It seems curious then that at the same time as he articulates a located concept of understanding he claims that in order to understand ourselves we must gain an exterior view of ourselves. This exterior view turns out not to involve leaving one’s own epistemic location, but engaging in a dialogic encounter with others:

In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. . . . A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by

revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without *one's own* questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign. . . . Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched. (1986, 7)

The idea that meaning can *only* reveal itself through dialogue removes any hint of paternalism in the suggestion that one may not understand one's own experience fully. Outsideness is necessary for all social understanding—whether that is self-understanding or understanding another—and achieving outsideness happens through engaging dialogically. Reflexive thinking can also only happen in community as one's own questions in dialogue with the questions of the other force reflexive thinking in a way that thinking something through on one's own simply cannot achieve.

Taking this passage together with Fricker's concept of hermeneutic injustice in mind and Code's concept of advocacy as epistemically responsible and responsive to testimony, some really important points arise here which are relevant to the Carmita Wood situation. Far from making the paternalistic claim that the socially subjugated need others to speak for them, Bakhtin's understanding of outsideness—which is clearly a located, socially positioned, outsideness—can help to clarify the process of coming to understand (whether that is one's own experiences or someone else's). Fricker's "reflexive hearer" must be in conversation with Wood, bringing her own understandings to the conversation and considering where the disconnects and tensions in the story are. Through this dialogic-creative process, the participants can potentially broaden both their own understanding and that of the wider social imaginary. This is very similar to the "critical-creative activity" (2006, 195) which Code's robust account of the decentring "*instituting* epistemic-moral-political imaginary" (2006, 35) accomplishes. She writes that

ecology (metaphorically) draws the conclusions of situated inquiries together, maps their interrelations, consonances, and contrasts, their impoverishing or mutually sustaining consequences, from a commitment to generating a creatively interrogative, instituting social imaginary to denaturalise the instituted imaginary of mastery that represents itself as "the [only] natural way" of being and knowing. (2006, 51)

Ecological thinking as articulated here maintains the situated nature of knowledge, maps the variety of complementary and contrasting situated knowledges, and invokes the creativity and reflexivity required for decentring an instituted social imaginary. While the experiencer, in this case Carmita Wood, may not fully

understand her experience, she is a necessary part of the process of coming to understand. The advocate also would not “have a grip” on the situation without the dialogical-ecological encounter. Reading Code, Fricker, and Bakhtin together helps me to see this more clearly and reaffirms the necessary role of advocacy within epistemic community.

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CATHY MALONEY is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy at York University and the Manager, Intercultural Initiatives and Learning Strategy, at the Centre for International Experience, University of Toronto. Her dissertation research focusses on dialogical models for understanding across difference.