



dossier racism, colonialism and philosophy for/with children: praxis in non-ideal contexts

experiences: p4c as an anti-racist & decolonial pedagogical tool in the college classroom

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abstract

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the educational model of philosophy for children (P4C) can function as a powerful pedagogical tool within the *college* classroom. It might challenge students to consider philosophical concepts in new contexts, allow them to reflect on their own childhood and consider their philosophical growth, provide them with tools for thinking philosophically with children in the future (as caregivers or educators), or provide philosophical concepts greater vibrancy through narrative or illustration. More specifically, in my own teaching, it has proven to be an effective pedagogical strategy for tackling antiracist and decolonial themes. In the following, I will outline how I have designed teaching methods and course assignments that have interfused my expertise in philosophy of childhood and/or P4C with the fields of Jewish studies, philosophy of race, and critical race theory, the result of which has produced both a dynamic scholarly dialogue and a rich educational environment. Incorporating P4C methods into the college classroom—such as the use of children’s

books as a form of philosophical inquiry has played a pivotal role in developing of community of *mutual* inquiry where students learn from each other and even I as the professor have learned from my students.

keywords: anti-racist pedagogy, p4c, decoloniality, philosophy of race, Jewish philosophy

experiencias: fpn como una herramienta antirracista y decolonial en el aula universitaria

resumen

El objetivo de este ensayo es demostrar cómo el modelo educativo de filosofía para niños (FpN) puede funcionar como una poderosa herramienta pedagógica en el aula *universitaria*. Puede desafiar a los estudiantes a considerar conceptos filosóficos en nuevos contextos, permitirles reflexionar sobre su propia infancia y considerar su crecimiento filosófico, brindarles herramientas para pensar filosóficamente con niñas y niños en el futuro (como cuidadores o educadores), o brindar mayor dinamismo a conceptos filosóficos a través de la narrativa o la ilustración. Más específicamente, en mi propia docencia, ha demostrado ser una estrategia pedagógica eficaz para abordar temas antirracistas y decoloniales. A continuación, describiré cómo he diseñado métodos de enseñanza y tareas de curso que han entrelazado mi experiencia en filosofía de la infancia y/o FpN con los campos de los estudios judíos, la filosofía de la raza y la teoría crítica de la raza, lo que ha producido un diálogo académico dinámico y un entorno educativo enriquecedor. La incorporación de métodos de FpN en el aula universitaria (por ejemplo, el uso de libros infantiles como una forma de investigación filosófica) ha jugado un papel fundamental en el desarrollo de una comunidad de investigación *mutua* donde los estudiantes aprenden unos de otros e incluso yo, como profesor, he aprendido de mis estudiantes.

palabras clave: pedagogía antirracista; fpn; decolonialidad, filosofía de la raza; filosofía judía

experiências: a fpc como uma ferramenta pedagógica antirracista e decolonial na sala de aula universitária

resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é demonstrar como o modelo educacional da Filosofia para Crianças (FpC) pode funcionar como uma poderosa ferramenta pedagógica na sala de aula *universitária*. Ele pode desafiar os estudantes a considerarem conceitos filosóficos em novos contextos, permitir que eles reflitam sobre suas infâncias e considerem seu crescimento filosófico, proporcionar-lhes ferramentas para pensarem filosoficamente com crianças no futuro (como cuidadores ou educadores), ou ainda dar maior vitalidade a conceitos filosóficos através de narrativas ou ilustrações. Mais especificamente, na minha própria prática, esse modelo mostrou ser uma estratégia pedagógica efetiva para o enfrentamento de temas antirracistas e decoloniais. Neste artigo, descrevo como desenvolvi métodos de ensino e atividades que combinam minha experiência em filosofia da infância e/ou Filosofia para Crianças com as áreas de estudos judaicos, filosofia da raça e teoria crítica da raça, o que resultou em um diálogo acadêmico dinâmico e um rico ambiente educacional. Incorporar métodos da Filosofia para Crianças na sala de aula universitária - como o uso de livros infantis na investigação filosófica - teve um papel fundamental no desenvolvimento de uma comunidade de investigação *mútua*, onde os estudantes aprendem uns com os outros e até eu, como professor, aprendo com meus alunos.

palavras-chave: pedagogia anti-racista; fpc, decolonialidade, filosofia da raça, filosofia judaica.

experiences: p4c as an anti-racist & decolonial pedagogical tool in the college classroom

introduction

I intend to demonstrate that P4C methodologies and my courses in Jewish studies and philosophy of race can be mutually beneficial in the process of developing and implementing a decolonial, anti-racist pedagogy. However, given the current political climate in America in which teaching of this kind has become heavily scrutinized, it seems necessary to defend such a project. This current state of politics means that merely advocating a decolonial, anti-racist pedagogy could result in instantly being targeted as un-American, Marxist, or ideological. In what Martin Luther King Jr. called a “white backlash” (1967/2010), in response to the racial justice and equity advances made in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests (2020–22), conservative politicians have mounted a comprehensive disinformation campaign claiming that the boogymen of “CRT” (critical race theory) and “DEI” (diversity, equity & inclusion) are “divisive concepts” and even racist ideologies in themselves that only intend to make white children feel bad. Under the direction of Governor Ron DeSantis, in April 2022 Florida was one of the earliest states to ban the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 education, describing it as “indoctrination” and a “pernicious ideology” (Papaycik & Saunders, 2022). Since then, dozens of other states have followed suit and in some states, these laws are now controlling what is taught on college campuses as well (Douglas-Gabriel, 2025). This has culminated in a Trump executive order, titled “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” that claims teaching about America’s well documented history of genocide, slavery, and justification of violence is “anti-American, subversive, harmful, and false” and that teachers must instead offer a “patriotic education” that consists of a “celebration of America’s greatness” (The White House, 2025). Not surprisingly, this white backlash has led to a tidal wave of banning over 10,000 books, many of which have disproportionately targeted Black authors or books with Black protagonists (Pen America, 2025).

Bracketing for a moment the specious claims that CRT—a sophisticated legal theory primarily only found in a small sampling of law schools—is actually

being taught to elementary school children (it's not – but perhaps the world would be better if it was), or that the intentional disinformation in this crusade claiming that teaching about America's history of racism is racist in itself (it's not – but there's a long history of using 'reverse racism' as such a ruse), built into this white backlash is a philosophy of education that presumes educators are supposed to maintain impartiality and not impose their beliefs on their students. In Florida, for example, DeSantis's bill was dubbed a law for "Individual Freedom," suggesting that education about race is coercive and "oppressive" (Papaycik & Saunders, 2022). Going further, Trump's executive order claims teaching about "White Privilege" or "unconscious bias" ultimately "erode[s] critical thinking" (White House, 2025). It didn't take long for the logical endpoint of this view of impartiality to become clear, as one conservative Indiana state senator, while promoting a bill that would ban CRT, suggested that educators "need to be impartial" even while teaching students about Nazism (Peiser, 2022).

This sentiment of impartiality is pervasive in the neo-liberal social imagination of the modern university. My philosophy majors have regularly been taught to take up a position of universality, as a 'detached observer,' with an alleged "view from nowhere." This viewpoint is solidified in particular by an op-ed by renowned academic Jonathan Haidt, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* during the thick of the George Floyd protests, in which he claimed that the academic search for truth and the movement for social justice were "two incompatible values" and the only "North Star" of any university ought to be truth (Haidt, 2022). Numerous scholars in the field of P4C have likewise observed that the founders of P4C were similarly devoted to a position of unquestioning neutrality (Kohan, 1995; Reed-Sandoval, 2019; Rainville, 2000; Elicor, 2020), which should make us cautious about the revolutionary potential of P4C (Kohan, 2014; Reed-Sandoval, 2019). In my mind, this vision of education as disinterested or impartial is embodied in the Socrates of the *Meno* where the teacher simply functions as a midwife to allow the learner to merely recollect or re-remember what he or she has forgotten.

Of course, one need only scratch the surface to observe that right-wing politicians who advocate impartiality have their own ideologies and motivations driving their approaches to education. In Florida, DeSantis mused, "We are not

gonna use your tax dollars to teach our kids to hate this country” (Papaycik & Saunders, 2022). Drawn from the same playbook, Trump’s executive order advocates the creation of a commission committed to “promoting patriotic education” (White House, 2025). In other words, an ideology that promotes a blind loyalty to American nationalism, fueled by the mythology of American goodness—and thus, beyond the reach of criticism—is perfectly permissible. The white backlash protects and preserves its own ideology of maintaining the power of the state, of justifying its penchant for exploitation and extraction, of preserving an “uncritical acceptance of the *status quo*” (Kohan, 1995, p. 26). The appeal to impartiality, then, turns out to be a ruse that masks the biases that are so thoroughly habituated into the social imagination of a society constructed to maintain white supremacy that they are treated as normative. This is all the more clear given that their solution to lessons on White privilege, critical race theory, or America’s history of racism is not to teach it with an open mind but simply to *not teach it at all*. In my mind, this vision of education as a tool for maintaining state power through total allegiance is distilled in the Socrates of the *Crito* (and parts of *Republic*) in which philosophy exists to uphold the state (Kohan, 2014). This version of Socrates concludes that he must not disobey the Laws which have functioned like a parent to him.

In this context, neutrality is not merely a ruse but ultimately functions to maintain a system of dominance. As Freire put it: “the interests of the oppressors ‘lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them’; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (Freire, 2005, p. 74). Philosophers of race and decolonial thinkers have regularly pointed out that Enlightenment claims of universality or appeals to *Reason* by philosophers and political theorists like Hume, Locke, Kant, Jefferson, Hegel, and others functioned to mask how they were influenced by and supported a Eurocentric, colonialist episteme that presumed their white (and male and Christian) positionality had no bearing on their philosophical inquiry (Mills, 1997; Wynter, 2003; Grosfoguel, 2013). Likewise, critical race theorists have argued that given the racist history of the United States, white supremacy functions as the unspoken, presumed norm of its legal system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It was in the name of “universality” and “reason” that

the genocide of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans, and the promotion of eugenics were rationally and legally justified. Hence, appeals to “neutrality” or “reasonableness” or “color-blindness” mask how an epistemology of whiteness has historically functioned as the normative assumption and guiding principle in the creation of school curriculums (Chetty, 2018; Reed-Sandoval, 2019). In this vision for education, what has been deemed ‘reasonable’ has often been a program of intentional ignorance about America’s history of racism and colonial violence.

As other P4C scholars have insisted, political neutrality is a myth (Kohan, 1995; Reed-Sandoval, 2019; Rainville, 2000). If philosophers of race are correct that Western society and education has functioned as a habituation into a colonialist, white supremacist episteme and praxis (Dussel, 2000; Alcoff, 2007; Yancy, 2016; Ngo, 2017), then a philosophy of education that is truly liberatory and democratic must instill an alternative set of habits that are decidedly race-conscious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), explicitly anti-racist (Kendi, 2023), and committed to decolonizing the mind (Thiong’o, 2005). Here *veritas, justitia, libertas* [truth, justice, freedom] (the motto of the Free University of Berlin) or *veritas et utilitas* [truth and service] (the motto of the famous historically Black college, Howard University) are not mutually exclusive but complementary and co-constitutive. Hence conservatives are correct about one thing regarding this model of education: it is radical and subversive, seeking always to “dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984). In my mind, this vision of education as a means questioning the status quo, of developing a praxis of an examined life, and of the cultivation of virtue or “formation” (Kohan, 2014, p. 33) traces its roots to the Socrates of the *Apology* who is so moved by *both* truth and justice that he is willing to break unjust laws and speak truth to power.

I seek to be decidedly anti-racist and decolonial in how I develop my syllabi and educate my college students.¹ I have also found that my scholarly background in philosophy of childhood and the teaching methodologies of P4C can be

¹ I should add that I use ‘decolonial’ in this manner mindful of the dangers of turning it into a mere metaphor, of rendering it superficial, and of ultimately reducing it into meaningless buzzword. As Tuck and Yang (2012) insist, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” but is first and foremost a commitment to reparations (both to indigenous people and to the land) and to undermining the existing material conditions that persist due to the legacy of a settler colonialist logic. This is an important critique both for myself and for other scholars advocating for a “decolonial” or “postcolonial” version of P4C (Rainville, 2000; Reed-Sandoval, 2019). If we are not advocating for a return and repair of land, then we are not doing decolonial work.

employed for such a task. Hence, in the following, I will highlight how I have experimented with teaching methods and course assignments in my Modern & Contemporary Jewish Philosophy and Philosophy of Race & Religion classes, respectively, that simultaneously introduce students to a P4C pedagogy and support an anti-racist and decolonial educational framework.

contemporary jewish philosophy

My Contemporary Jewish Philosophy class is an introduction into the varieties of Jewish intellectual thought, primarily from late 18th century onward. I use “Jewish” and “philosophy” somewhat loosely, as some of the thinkers are more theologians or religious leaders, while others were philosophers who were Jewish but are often not recognized as *Jewish* philosophers (e.g. Adorno, Arendt, Levinas). The course covers a wide variety of subjects, focusing especially on antisemitism and post-Holocaust thought.

There is some debate whether Judaism is a “race” or ethnicity (or a religion or “a people,” as some Jews like to put it) and thus whether antisemitism functions as a form of racism. In my view, Judaism isn’t reducible to the arbitrary social construct of race, but it makes sense to think of antisemitism as a form of racism for four reasons: (1) The modern concept of race grew out of European Christian conceptions of Jews & Muslims. Christian antisemitism and Islamophobia was a foundational generator of race/ism that was utilized in the colonialist project beginning in 1492 (Grosfoguel, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2014). (2) While conceptions of race vary throughout the world, in European colonialism, religion and race were co-constitutive in defining a person’s status (Goetz, 2012; Weisenfeld, 2016). (3) Even if Jews today do not consider themselves to be a race, many racial taxonomies *did* classify Jews as an inferior race (including the Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan [KKK], also Kant), or as a sub-class of white people (and to be white is also to be raced). Racial categorizations as social constructions invented for the purpose of profiting from exploited human labor are notoriously arbitrary, and even as most Ashkenazi Jews are often treated as “white” today, that is often not the case for Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews. (4) All of this is made further complicated by Israel’s own depiction of itself as a “Jewish state” which follows the pattern of European Nation-States arranged by ethnic populations.

While not every single topic in my Contemporary Jewish Philosophy revolves around race it is decidedly decolonial and anti-racist in scope. My course bookends with the racialization of Jews, beginning with the expulsion of the Jews in Spain in 1492 and ends with essays that specifically discuss decolonial, anti-Zionist themes. Other scholars have noted that the revolutionary and decolonial possibilities of P4C is limited by how the entire field of philosophy is dominated by a Eurocentric & Christian emphasis that gatekeeps what counts as philosophy (Rainville, 2000; Reed-Sandoval, 2019), which is problematized throughout the course.

My use of P4C methodologies in this course is pretty straightforward as students are invited to give a presentation on a children's book that I have already paired with one of our academic readings.² The assignment requires students to acquire the book they've chosen, present an 8–10 minute summary, and then draw connections with the philosophical text we are covering. In the spirit of P4C, this assignment demonstrates how dense philosophical concepts might be communicated through children's books and how a wide variety of children's books might be utilized for philosophical inquiry.

Incorporating children's books into this course provides a number of avenues for students to reflect on childhood, race, and antisemitism. For example, Reed-Sandoval (2019) has emphasized the importance of representation, advocating "utilizing children's books that center on different types of experiences and perspectives" (p. 38). While at least half of my students who take this course identify as Jewish, for the other half this may be the first time they have encountered a children's book with a Jewish person as the protagonist. I ask them to reflect on their childhood and consider what exposure they had to Jewish culture. Students are also challenged to think of their positionality and consider how education and book publishers determine what counts as knowledge (Elicor, 2020).

Finally, Rainville (2000) suggests we play close attention to the "racial stereotypes" (p. 70) that are often featured in children's books. In this context, I ask

² I say 'invited' as I do grant students the option to present on a contemporary news article or a significant historical event that they believe is substantially connected to the essay, but in my experience in teaching the course, the vast majority of students opt to present on the children's book. In the spirit of a more democratic approach, students are also allowed to choose their own children's book if they opt to find another one that they find more suitable to the topic at hand.

students to pay attention to what roles Jews typically play in children's books, consider how they are depicted in their dress or looks (notably, Jews of color are rarely represented), and note what level of religious diversity is presented.

In the heart of the semester, we cover the Holocaust, and thus, consider how one might go about discussing such a heinous event with children. For example, Meg Wiviott's *Benno & the Night of Broken Glass*³ and Eve Bunting's *Terrible Things*⁴, books I pair with post-Holocaust scholarship, both narrate the realities of genocidal violence through the perspective of animals. Wiviott's *Benno* narrates the chilling experience of Kristallnacht (also known as the *Reichspogromnacht* or *Novemberpogrom* in Germany) through the experience of a cat who is befriended by everyday Jews as he roams the neighborhood. The extensive hospitality Benno receives from the Jewish community stands in stark contrast to the violence the Jews experience at the hands of the Nazis. For her part, Bunting recounts an amorphous "Terrible Thing" that comes into the forest and takes away different types of animals, one by one. As each species is taken, other animals come up with negative stereotypes (e.g, "those squirrels were greedy") to rationalize why they deserved their own annihilation, thus exposing the rhetoric often utilized to legitimize segregation, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

As powerful as these books are, they do have their limitations. As Chetty (2014) has pointed out, when children's books utilize animals as a way to provide "distance from emotionally challenging topics," this often depersonalizes injustice and "has the effect of separating racism from its temporal and spatial realities" (p. 11). Using animals often results in an uneven analogy that renders opaque the structures of racial supremacy (p. 25) and treats racism as an ahistorical phenomenon, as if the hatred merely arises out of nowhere (p. 17). Indeed, Bunting's amorphous "Terrible Thing" implies a complete lack of agency on the part of the actual human perpetrators of the Holocaust. Other children's books in the syllabus dare to take children's capacity to consider complex philosophical and ethical issues more seriously by tackling the Holocaust head on, such as Loic Dauvillier and Greg Salsedo's graphic novel *Hidden*⁵.

³ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJAaWbk63U4>

⁴ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKEHJKpa6II>

⁵ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGZf5sjlfeE>

To be sure, racism and antisemitism *are* completely arbitrary systems of hierarchy and exploitation, but such ahistoricism obfuscates how white supremacy, eugenics, and segregationist policies, which undergirded Germany's Nuremberg laws and the United States' 20th century anti-miscegenation, Jim Crow, and immigration quota laws were presented as a coherent rational systems by many of the most influential scientists, philosophers, medical doctors, and politicians of the Western world. Philosophers such as Levinas (1969), Adorno & Horkheimer (2002), and Dussel (2000) have pointed out that the Holocaust was in many respects the teleological conclusion of an Enlightenment epistemology borne of colonial violence, exploitation, and the promise of continual progress. "Reason" can unfortunately be used to accomplish profoundly nefarious ends. This calls to mind the critical points by Kohan (1995) and Chetty (2018) who have called into question the naivete of the P4C founders who believed that encouraging children to think reasonably and philosophically would automatically lead to a more just and democratic society. If the discipline of (Western) philosophy is guided by colonialist and white supremacist assumptions (Mills, 1997), then merely "doing" philosophy from a neutral standpoint will never offer a means to internally critique the discipline's taken-for-granted presuppositions.

One children's book I pair with decolonial scholarship and its critique of Israel's apartheid system toward Palestine Fawzia Gilani-Williams's *Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam*. This book has certain drawbacks, but these drawbacks can also lead to important questions to discuss with students: Why, for example, is it (now) relatively easy to find children's books⁶ that talk about the Holocaust, but nearly impossible to find one about the Nakba?

Yaffa and Fatima is a story of two women, one a Jew and the other a Muslim, in Israel-Palestine who grow dates and sell them in the market, and when famine strikes, they share their bounty with one another. The story strives to highlight the possibility of hospitality across religious and ethnic differences. While this book offers the possibility to discuss interreligious dialogue, there are significant limitations. It notably ignores the power dynamics and colonial conditions that privilege Israeli citizenship and treat Palestinians as second-class. This fact is directly relevant to the story as the Israeli government often proactively makes it

⁶ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edAP7sh131Y>

difficult for Palestinians to obtain employment, so the prospect that both women could sell their dates at the same market is fanciful. Finally, the book even depicts Palestine as “the land of milk and honey,” and thus buys into the common Zionist practice to use biblical language to legitimize Israel’s colonial project (Pappe, 2017). Even well-intentioned children’s books can still perpetuate a colonial epistemic.

philosophy of race and religion

In my Philosophy of Race & Religion course, the connections between race/ism, childhood, and education are addressed from day one and then permeate the course. On syllabus day, I begin the class with a challenging (and perhaps, uncomfortable) quotation by philosopher of race, George Yancy:

By the time White students have arrived in our classrooms, they have already been shaped by White ways of being-in-the-world, White ways of avoiding the issue of White privilege, White ways of constructing nonwhite bodies as 'different,' White ways of seeing themselves as 'innocent' of White racism, and White ways of taking up space and moving through that space in the capacity of ownership and possession. (Yancy, 2014, p. 11)

Here Yancy describes how whiteness is habituated through the American education system, how it functions as a normative lens of childhood experience, and how it fosters a colonialist epistemology of comprehending (*com* = to encircle; *prehensile* = to grasp with one’s fingers) the world. To this I ask my students directly: “What are some ways you were taught a white supremacist education? How was whiteness enforced in the children’s books or textbooks you read?” Students are often reluctant to answer such a straightforward question on day one (some do), but it’s important to set a precedent for the semester. Throughout the course several of my teaching practices and homework assignments bring students back to the themes laden in Yancy’s quotation, challenging them to reflect on their own childhood and how children are educated within a political context with a colonialist legacy.

Citing Yancy provides an avenue for me to be honest about my own positionality, a practice other P4C scholars have encouraged (Elicor, 2020). Yancy was one of my philosophy professors in graduate school, and I recount how he was, in fact, the very first Black educator I ever had. I mention briefly how I have changed my mind about many issues related to race over the years as I have matured. I name the fact that I am a white male professor – which is treated as the

norm in philosophy departments – and how that means there are aspects of the experience of racism that I cannot fully describe or understand.

incorporating philosophy of childhood and/or p4c in my teaching methodologies

Throughout the semester I incorporate materials into my teaching that continue to challenge my students to reflect on how white supremacy is habituated into children through the education system. I offer three examples. First is the use of Native American liberationist perspectives. As Rainville (2000) discusses, there remains a “silencing of Aboriginal voices” (p. 66) in both philosophy departments and in children’s education. For most of my students, this is often the first time they have ever read a Native American scholar. Native Americans are rendered invisible in American mythology and American life. The cultural genocide of America’s Indian Boarding Schools, built on the slogan to “kill the Indian, save the man,” continues, as many American children are brought up to think of indigenous people as relics of the past.

This invisibilizing as a tactic of white supremacy was made particularly evident in a children’s book about Johnny Appleseed my daughter was assigned in second grade that I read to my students. The book was riddled with historical inaccuracies, most glaring among them the complete absence of Native Americans, with whom Appleseed regularly engaged. On one page, the text states, “John lived on the frontier. Most of the land to the west of where John had been born was wild.”⁷ This is a fabrication, for the so-called “wild frontier” was inhabited by hundreds of thousands of Native people, and indeed, much of the land that has been incorporated into America’s national parks was land cared for and cultivated by Native people. Depicting land as wild or barren is a common ploy by colonial powers, used to justify the violent dispossession of land from Native people who are allegedly not actually there (or allegedly not working). This was done by Spanish and British colonizers in the Americas, and was a common ploy in Zionist narratives with the slogan, “A land without a people for a people without a land” (Pappe, 2017).

⁷ While I still have screen shots of pages of the book, I apologize that I do not have the actual citation material. I have searched long and hard to finding the actual book, but to no avail.

The text continues: “John thought a while. Of course! He would plant [apple trees] in the wild. No one had settled there yet. But they would one day. Sure, there were dangers out there. There were venomous snakes and wild wolves. But that wouldn’t stop the settlers ... And the new nation would grow.” The story doubles down on the invisibilizing of Native Americans and the so-called wildness of the land Appleseed cultivated but then compounds this colonialist framing of the narrative by depicting him as a hero of nation-building and capitalist enterprise. Never mind that nations already existed there, or that Appleseed’s wealth was created on land he often received for free through federal land grants that forcibly took the land from Native people. On the next page, this vision of nation-building and entrepreneurship is reinforced: “The settlers paid money to Johnny for the land and trees. ... And every new home helped the United States grow.” America’s westward expansion, fueled by Eurocentric theological epistemologies such as the Doctrine of Discovery and the envisioning of America as a Promised Land, are here legitimized with Appleseed as a pioneer.

Here again is an opportunity to further expound on Yancy’s quotation that students are habituated into a white supremacist education (Yancy, 2014) but also raise Chetty’s (2018) question: who is included—and who is rendered invisible—in the community of inquiry? I ask students to reflect on their own education about Native American history, to ponder what they know, what they don’t know, and what stereotypes they were presented. I ask them to consider how the children’s books or textbooks they read depicted Native people, how they depicted white people, and what messages they sent about colonialism.

Second, when teaching Cotton Mather’s *The Negro Christianized* (1705), a pro-slavery Puritan text explicitly outlining how to habituate and catechize enslaved Black people into slave religion, I present students with this quotation:

To help them endure the difficulties of slavery, God gave Christian slaves the ability to combine the African heritage of song with the dignity of Christian praise. Through the Negro spiritual, the slaves developed the patience to wait on the Lord and discovered that the truest freedom is from the bondage of sin (qtd. in Singer, 2021).

I ask students to observe what this quotation is implying. They note how the language suggests African music is inferior to Christian worship (and insinuates that “Christian” and “white” are synonyms), that the proper “Christian” response to slavery is to “endure” and “wait” rather than to overthrow an unjust

system, and that spiritual “slavery” is presented as a far more serious condition than *actual* slavery. This quotation comes from a Christian school history textbook, *America Land I Love*, published by A Beka Book in 2005. In short, millions of children who are being educated at private Christian schools in America are still being taught a version of history that upholds slave religion, minimizes the horrors of chattel slavery, and ignores how white Christians maintained this system of exploitation for their benefit. It is not surprising that such quotations are common in Christian school curriculum, as private Christian schools were created as a response to desegregation and the Religious Right fought to maintain segregation within their schools (Ballmer, 2014; Hawkins, 2021). On this point, I show an image from the anti-Civil Rights Movement that consists of a group of white mothers with their children supporting segregation, as one child holds a sign that reads: “All I want for Christmas is a clean white school.” All of this is a reminder that education is not neutral but is always shaped by the political viewpoints of publishers, curriculum designers, school boards, and parents (Chetty, 2018). These systems of power habituate students into white ways of being-in-the-world. Indeed, many of the white children supporting segregation in the 1960s are still alive and remain in positions of power today.

It is not only Christian schools that have downplayed America’s history of racism, as there is a long legacy of American educational materials depicting enslavers as genteel, overlooking the post-Reconstruction era, or ignoring the expansive influence of the KKK. Most students who take my course reflect at some point: “Why is it that I am just now learning about this?” These omissions are all part of an intentional “epistemology of ignorance” (Mills, 1997) of the education system, a willful desire *not to know* on the part of white America. Dotson describes this as a “willful hermeneutical ignorance” whereby individuals intentionally refuse “to acknowledge and acquire the necessary tools for knowing whole parts of the world” (Dotson, 2012, p. 31–32). This intentional ignorance leads to a form of epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2012; see also Elicor, 2020) in which historically marginalized people are not treated as knowers, not treated as experts of their own experience, and not included in the canon. It is precisely why advocates of critical race theory have advocated for what they call “revisionist history” (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2017), that is, a retelling of legal history that centers narratives of those on the underside of Empire.

Third and finally, just as the education of children was one of the key battleground sites of opposition to the Civil Rights movement, I illustrate how this is playing out in the current anti-CRT and anti-DEI movement. While many examples abound, one that I have used is the backstory of the publication of the children's book *Love in the Library*⁸ by Maggie Tokuda-Hall. The book is based on the true story of Tokuda-Hall's Japanese grandparents who meet and fall in love during their imprisonment in one of America's WWII internment camps. While the book was originally published by Candlewick Press, Scholastic, which is based in Florida (and thus influenced by Florida's politics) and overwhelmingly dominates the children's publishing field, wanted to buy the rights for the book and include Tokuda-Hall in a collection that highlighted AAPI (Asian-American Pacific Islander) voices. There was a condition, however: the editors wanted her to remove the word "racism" from the book (Bowman, 2023). Tokuda-Hall refused and declined participation in the collection, pointing out not only the censorship Scholastic was enforcing but the tokenizing nature in which they were supposedly highlighting AAPI authors who make up such a small portion of the children's book world while expecting them to cater to Scholastic's demands. This story illuminates how those in positions to educate children curate information, soften storylines to the point of misrepresentation, and potentially utilize children's books as propaganda.

diversity data project

I end by detailing an assignment my Philosophy of Race & Religion students research that allows them to draw connections between P4C and race. Students are given three options:

- (a) Visit a local library or bookstore and peruse the philosophy and/or religion section(s). Choose 15 books at random from the shelves throughout this area of the library/store. Catalogue the diversity of representation in the books (both authors and themes). Then write a 2-3 page reflection of your findings and consider how it relates to your own life experience. What did you discover in your analysis as it relates to diversity? How regularly in high school or college have you read academic texts by authors who are not white? When you think of the word "philosophy" or "theology," what thinkers and themes most

⁸ Link: <https://youtu.be/5jS5Z74ltFg>

immediately come to mind, and what kind of diversity (if any) is represented by that? How have you been trained to think about *who* counts as a philosopher or theologian? What are the personal and social implications of the representation (or lack of it) of minoritized people in academic inquiry?

(b) Visit a local library or bookstore and peruse the children's book section. Choose 15 books at random from the shelves, not all from the same shelf, but throughout this area of the library/store. Catalogue the diversity of representation in the books (both authors and themes). Then write a 2–3 page reflection regarding your findings and your own life experience. What did you discover in your analysis of the bookshelf as it relates to diversity? Do you remember reading books with characters like yourself? Of reading books that included people of color? What themes do you find are typically addressed in children's books that do include people of color? What are the personal and political implications of the representation (or lack of it) of diverse people in children's books?

(c) Research one of the U.S. school boards that has banned books/restricted their access and consider what role 'race' played in the process. Who is spearheading the book banning? What kinds of books are being banned (both the authors and the characters/themes represented in the books)? Is there any connection between this and the disinformation/distortion of 'Critical Race Theory' in the media? What is the ultimate goal of banning these books? Please include citations if you draw from outside sources.

In the following I'll detail some of the student findings of those who pursue options (b) or (c). Here, I will draw heavily from my students' comments, inviting them into the community of inquiry. Noting Elicor's point that one facet of epistemic injustice (Miranda Fricker's term) is that children are not treated as "knowers and sources of knowledge" (Elicor, 2020, p. 20), I highlight their findings and reflections for I often learn from them as they increase their own self-reflection by doing the assignment.

With regard to option (b), students were able to do this assignment over spring break, which afforded them the option to visit a local library or bookstore from their hometown. The results of this survey vary widely depending on location and even time of year, leading to some selection bias. When I teach the course in the spring, students may do this assignment during February, and thus, encounter an entire Black History Month table of children's books, which likely warps their findings. For the most part, however, a common general trend is that students are pleasantly surprised to find far more diversity in the children's books and their authors than what they were exposed to as a child. This confirms my own experience as a parent. A few decades ago, the majority of children's books tended to limit Black protagonists to being either former slaves, Civil Rights

activists, or athletes. While much more work needs to be done, the field has certainly diversified.

Students who research this topic note the importance of representation and how exposure to a variety of different experiences can generate empathy for experiences that might be different than one's own. One student particularly highlighted the children's book *Parker Looks Up*⁹ by Parker and Jessica Curry, which centers black girls as the protagonists and whose authors explicitly discuss the importance of representation in their afterword. The authors intentionally write in order to bring visibility to a narrative that has historically been rendered invisible, and as Black authors themselves, they are serving as models of representation for a new generation of future authors. As one student summarized, "Representation ... makes you feel seen, important, and not like an outsider in society and media." Another student concluded: "A lack of representation may make youngsters feel invisible, but varied stories can broaden viewpoints, foster empathy, and instill a feeling of belonging."

As students analyze the children's books, many of them notice how books featuring children of color tend to address themes not typically discussed in "standard" storylines. One student noted how books with minority protagonists "frequently focus on self-acceptance, cultural pride, or overcoming obstacles." Two students wrote almost the exact same observation that books with children of color are often "about what it means to be a person of color and embracing yourself." Both students found this theme to be important and necessary, yet they also lamented that it was more "difficult to find a book [with a Black protagonist] about an average children's story." In other words, books with Black children seem to be focused on "specifically Black experiences" – that is, learning to live in a racist society that will treat you as different, lesser than, or excluded.

This activity allows my students to observe how whiteness functions as the normative standard in children's books and brings the theories we discuss in class to life. Students regularly bring the texts we cover in class to bear in their analysis of their observations, such as "white privilege" (Sullivan, 2017), "epistemic oppression" (Dotson 2012), or "double-consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903/2007). "Normal" experiences tend to be represented by white kids, and hence, one of the

⁹ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdpOqh3RO2s>

benefits of being a white child is that you don't have to be *told* that your identity and difference is accepted because *it already is assumed to be accepted*. One student, after assessing the children's books at a bookstore in her hometown in Maryland summarized: "I noticed how none of the books I selected from authors of color dealt with topics *outside* of diversity. Meanwhile, the books I selected from white authors touched on a variety of subjects and genres. ... Solely including authors of color when they write about issues of diversity compartmentalizes the experiences of people of color and does not fully humanize them."

Conversely, children of color are expected to be more resilient and address more mature themes. One student assessed: "It feels as though, compared to those with white main characters, that it is meant to not only entertain but prepare [Black and Brown] children for potential heartaches they may come across due to growing up as a minority in a majority white country." This mirrors research in social psychology with both college students and police officers that has demonstrated that when they are shown images of Black boys and have to guess their age, they regularly perceive them to be nearly 5 years older than they actually are, and thus, are not given the benefit of childhood innocence (Goff et al, 2014). Whereas the anti-CRT book banning movement rests on protecting white children's feelings, the ordinary childhood feelings of Black and Brown children are neither perceived nor prioritized by white people.

Students note there is a bit of a catch-22 here. As one student reflected: "Many of the books about not fitting in featured non-white main characters. It's sad to see that this is such a common theme ... Many of the authors probably felt those same feelings in their youth." In short, authors of color have likely had their own experiences with living in a white supremacist world, and thus know it is important to pass on this wisdom to the next generation so they too can learn how to maintain their sense of self (it is also possible *publishers* are tokenizing Black experiences and forcing books to generally align with these plots). And yet given the prevalence of this (important and necessary) storyline, this also potentially pigeonholes the storylines Black kids are afforded.

I want to make mention of one other general theme that was picked up on by my AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) students. My Asian & Asian-American students noted how they generally did not have access to

children's books that had protagonists that looked like them. Indeed, as one student put it, being Asian and reading books where the main characters were white "just felt usual." The one exception to this was from a student who was adopted as an infant by white parents. The majority of the books she was exposed to that had an Asian character were explicitly about adoption and were largely written from the perspective of the white parents. These students all noted that the availability of children's books with AAPI characters has not only expanded but the diversity of themes related to their experience has as well. Like other books featuring children of color they might place an emphasis on "accepting one's cultural roots" and that "it's okay to have a multicultural identity." One student concluded, "It made me so happy to spend time with stories that are authentically written by Asian authors and represent such a diversity of experiences." Even as an adult, this student felt seen by encountering these children's books. I am reminded of the influential psychological research in attachment theory, popularized by John Bowlby (though greatly influenced by the research of Mary Ainsworth). Now popular parlance, in the 1960s, Bowlby articulated how some children come to express a secure, anxious, or avoidant attachment with their caregivers (Bowlby, 1982). He not only stressed that a secure connection was *necessary* for human flourishing, but also that this doesn't end with childhood. Rather, we carry our habits of attachment with us throughout our entire lives. There is, in other words, a certain part of each and every one of us that remains a child, that needs that recognition, acceptance, and affection. Hence, the powerful transformative possibilities of children's books transcend childhood; they can also be moving, encourage reflection, and provoke philosophical inquiry in adults too.

This year, given the rise of book bans in America, I also allowed students to research option (c). Many of the students who chose this option specifically researched their hometown school district. Students investigated book bans in multiple counties, particularly in Florida (fueled by Gov. Ron DeSantis's political actions), Texas (driven by Texas House Bill 3979 banning "CRT"), and Pennsylvania, which to date, are the three states with the highest number of banned books. They noticed that the books being banned were often simply books civil rights activists—such as Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, MLK, and Malala Yousafaza—or books penned by some of the most remarkable Black authors of the

20th century, especially Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Richard Wright. They observed that overwhelmingly, book banners disproportionately targeted books that addressed the experiences of people of color or that centered LGBT+ identities.

Several students focused on the particularly egregious case of Central York High School, which accounted for 97% of all the banned books in Pennsylvania. As elsewhere, the banning of these books was based on a mass disinformation campaign to depict “CRT” as a Marxist tool of brainwashing children. The architects of this book ban quite literally took an anti-racism resource guide developed in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and then systematically banned those books (Paz & Cramer, 2021). This was the white backlash on full display. In an even more shocking method of book banning in Pennridge School District in Pennsylvania, two far-right Republican school board members secretly purged books from the school library they disliked by checking them out with fake student accounts, and then lied about it (Lausten, 2024).

As my students researched these attempts to ban books, they reflected on the epistemological and political motivations behind these actions. First, students noted the anti-democratic and authoritarian episteme behind such actions. One commented: “The goal of banning these books is to have control of how people think. ... When someone does not have access to books they become more powerless.” This sentiment of *control* was noted by several students. While DeSantis, Trump, and others have falsely claimed that “CRT” discourages critical thinking, this is all a ruse to *prevent* critical thinking about America’s long legacy of white supremacy.

Second, other students highlighted the role that *fear* plays in book bans, whether that be fear of the unknown, fear of discomfort, or fear of knowledge that might upend the status quo of whiteness. One student commented, “There is a drive to limit children’s education on racial and gender diversity. This shows how people fear the power of knowledge.” Another observed that the anti-CRT campaign “has created a climate of fear, where books addressing race, history, and social justice are targeted under the guise of protecting children.”

Third and finally, some students suggested an explicitly racist intent (or byproduct). One student assessed: “The ultimate goal of banning these books is to

silence the voices of people of color to protect white people from feeling any type of discomfort.” Another added: “By implementing book bans that target stories that highlight underprivileged communities ... school districts and parents rob students of gaining a full and proper education.” In short, as another student summarized it, these book bans reflect “a pattern of racial and ideological censorship” that actually harms students by *limiting* their exposure to knowledge. This motivation to eliminate access to books that reflect diverse perspectives has deeply personal implications for those who are represented in these stories. As one student put it: “Having the school board say that the experience shown, like LGBTQ+ or racial discrimination, is ‘inappropriate’ is disheartening to students and makes them feel like their experiences are being erased.” The anti-Black, anti-LGBT contingent spearheading these book bans are effectively saying that they do not want Black and LGBTQ+ perspectives to exist, and are even denying their very existence altogether.

I began this essay by arguing that P4C methodologies can be utilized within the college classroom to consider philosophical concepts, promote philosophical reflection about childhood, and complement an anti-racist and decolonial pedagogy. I have demonstrated this at length, but in reflecting on the developments in this essay, another salient point has arisen to the surface that deserves to be highlighted as I conclude: Children’s books can both serve as a reflection of society as it is and yet also challenge us to imagine the world otherwise. On the one hand, children’s books, along with the publishing industry and political machinations that encircle them, serve as a window into how institutional power works and seeks to maintain its power by preserving certain narratives. On the other hand, children’s books written and read with intention, can be anti-racist, decolonial tools that foster knowledge, justice, inclusion, and empathy. The latter option is not a guarantee but requires an active awareness and reflection on the part of authors, educators, parents, and readers.

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