

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

**education and democracy in the world today (2025):  
aboriginal conceptions of freedom as relational**

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## abstract

This paper investigates critics' claims that John Dewey neglected to adequately engage with racism—particularly his complicity in “whiteness,” including his valorisation of American democracy as an exemplar of the Anglo-Saxon legacy, viewed by critics as a narrative of human progress from “primitive” to “modern;” his failure to address his own prejudices and assumptions about the student and the community; and avoidance of the racial realities regarding “Black experience”. These criticisms could have ramifications for philosophy for children, which Matthew Lipman has said owes a debt to Dewey. We contend that education in Western-style democracies has not adequately responded to racial intolerance, and that liberal democracy has not lived up to its philosophical ideals of equal rights and opportunities, irrespective of people's backgrounds. However, we argue that the problem goes deeper, that the very concept of freedom in liberalism is an obstacle to overcoming the problems that Dewey's critics identified. We conclude that because reconstruction is inherent in pragmatist epistemology, reconstructing some of the assumptions that inform the community of inquiry, especially assumptions about democracy and deliberation, has the potential to strengthen engagement with the Aboriginal concepts of freedom and autonomy, thereby challenging the belief in the superiority of liberal philosophical thought in Western-style democracy. We begin our argument by drawing attention to the liberal concepts of freedom and autonomy (as idealised characteristics of identity that are the foundation of liberal understanding of human nature), followed by criticisms of Dewey's ideal vision of the student and the classroom community, as well as his failure to acknowledge racial dynamics. We then introduce the Aboriginal political concept of autonomous regard (a core concept of simultaneous respect for the autonomy of others that fosters a relational worldview of community and

with the land). This relational worldview is informed by Aboriginal knowledge systems which emphasise careful, deliberate, and patient observation and engagement as a process of understanding our relationship with the world. In this sense, Aboriginal knowledge systems share characteristics with Dewey's relational epistemology, interconnectedness of experience, and continuity of the human, the organic, and the natural world, and for this reason could be understood as a forebear of pragmatism. As such, we turn to relational pedagogy to salvage the theoretical deficiencies in Dewey's theory and practice, and to focus on Indigenous experience and colonisation, particularly experiences of belonging to land as integral to identity, knowledge, and cultural practices, including governance, kinship, and society.

**keywords:** autonomous regard; colonisation; decolonising pedagogy; liberal individualism; relational pedagogy

**concepções aborígenes da liberdade como relacional: educação e democracia no mundo atual (2025)**

## resumo

Este artigo investiga as alegações dos críticos de que John Dewey negligenciou o tratamento adequado do racismo — particularmente sua cumplicidade com a “branquitude”, incluindo sua valorização da democracia americana como um exemplo do legado anglo-saxão, vista pelos críticos como uma narrativa do progresso humano do “primitivo” ao “moderno”; sua falha em abordar seus próprios preconceitos e suposições sobre o aluno e a comunidade e a evitação das realidades raciais relacionadas à “experiência negra”. Essas críticas podem ter ramificações para a filosofia para crianças, que, segundo Matthew Lipman, tem uma dívida com Dewey. Defendemos que a educação nas democracias de estilo ocidental não tem respondido adequadamente à intolerância racial e que a democracia

liberal não tem correspondido aos seus ideais filosóficos de direitos e oportunidades iguais, independentemente da origem das pessoas. No entanto, argumentamos que o problema é mais profundo, que o próprio conceito de liberdade no liberalismo é um obstáculo para superar os problemas identificados pelos críticos de Dewey. Concluimos que, uma vez que a reconstrução é inerente à epistemologia pragmática, reconstruir alguns dos pressupostos que orientam a comunidade de investigação – especialmente os pressupostos sobre democracia e deliberação – tem o potencial de fortalecer o compromisso com os conceitos aborígenes de liberdade e autonomia, desafiando, assim, a crença na superioridade do pensamento filosófico liberal na democracia ocidental. Iniciamos nossa argumentação chamando a atenção para os conceitos liberais de liberdade e autonomia (como características de identidade idealizadas que constituem o fundamento da compreensão liberal da natureza humana), seguidos de críticas à visão ideal de Dewey sobre o aluno e a comunidade da sala de aula, bem como sua falha em reconhecer a existência das dinâmicas raciais. Em seguida, apresentamos o conceito político aborígene de “autonomous regard (consideração autônoma)”, um conceito central que envolve respeitar simultaneamente a autonomia dos outros e que promove uma visão de mundo relacional da comunidade e da terra. Essa cosmovisão relacional é inspirada em sistemas de conhecimento aborígenes que enfatizam a observação e interação cuidadosas, deliberadas e pacientes como um processo de compreensão de nossa relação com o mundo. Nesse sentido, eles compartilham características com a epistemologia relacional de Dewey, a interconectividade da experiência e a continuidade do mundo humano, orgânico e natural, e podem ser entendidos como precursores do pragmatismo. Assim, recorreremos à pedagogia relacional para suprir as lacunas teóricas presentes na teoria e na

prática de Dewey e para nos concentrarmos na experiência indígena e na colonização, especialmente nas experiências de pertencimento à terra como parte integrante da identidade, do conhecimento e das práticas culturais, incluindo a governança, o parentesco e a sociedade.

**palavras-chave:** consideração autônoma; colonização; pedagogia descolonizadora; individualismo liberal; pedagogia relacional.

**las concepciones aborígenes de la libertad como relacional: educación y democracia en el mundo actual (2025)**

### resumen

Este artículo analiza las afirmaciones de los críticos de que John Dewey no abordó adecuadamente el racismo –en particular, su complicidad con la «blancura», incluida su valorización de la democracia estadounidense como un ejemplo del legado anglosajón, vista por los críticos como una narrativa del progreso humano de lo «primitivo» a lo «moderno»–; su incapacidad para abordar sus propios prejuicios y suposiciones sobre el alumno y la comunidad; y su evasión de las realidades raciales relativas a la «experiencia negra». Estas críticas podrían tener repercusiones en la filosofía para niños, que, según Matthew Lipman, tiene una deuda con Dewey. Sostenemos que la educación en las democracias de estilo occidental no ha respondido adecuadamente a la intolerancia racial, y que la democracia liberal no ha estado a la altura de sus ideales filosóficos de igualdad de derechos y oportunidades, independientemente de los orígenes de las personas. Sin embargo, argumentamos que el problema es más profundo, que el propio concepto de libertad en el liberalismo es un obstáculo para superar los problemas que identificaron los críticos de Dewey. Llegamos a la conclusión de que, dado que la reconstrucción es inherente a la epistemología pragmática, reconstruir

algunos de los supuestos que conforman la comunidad de investigación –especialmente los supuestos sobre la democracia y la deliberación– tiene el potencial de reforzar el compromiso con los conceptos aborígenes de libertad y autonomía, cuestionando así la creencia en la superioridad del pensamiento filosófico liberal en la democracia de estilo occidental. Comenzamos nuestro argumento llamando la atención sobre los conceptos liberales de libertad y autonomía (como características idealizadas de la identidad que constituyen la base de la concepción liberal de la naturaleza humana), seguido de críticas a la visión ideal de Dewey sobre el estudiante y la comunidad del aula, así como a su incapacidad para reconocer las dinámicas raciales. A continuación, introducimos el concepto político aborígen de «consideración autónoma» (un concepto central que implica respetar la autonomía de los demás y que fomenta una cosmovisión relacional de la comunidad y de la tierra). Esta cosmovisión relacional se inspira en los sistemas de conocimiento aborígenes, que hacen hincapié en la observación y la interacción cuidadosas, deliberadas y pacientes como proceso para comprender nuestra relación con el mundo. En este sentido, comparten características con la epistemología relacional de Dewey, la interconexión de la experiencia y la continuidad entre lo humano, lo orgánico y el mundo natural, y podrían entenderse como precursoras del pragmatismo. Como tal, recurrimos a la pedagogía relacional para subsanar las deficiencias teóricas de la teoría y la práctica de Dewey, y para centrarnos en la experiencia indígena y la colonización, en particular en las experiencias de pertenencia a la tierra como parte integral de la identidad, el conocimiento y las prácticas culturales, incluyendo la gobernanza, el parentesco y la sociedad.

**palabras clave:** consideración autónoma; colonización; pedagogía descolonizadora; individualismo liberal; pedagogía relacional.

## education and democracy in the world today (2025):

### aboriginal conceptions of freedom as relational

#### *introduction*

In his essay, “Education and Democracy in the World Today (1938)”, John Dewey wrote:

We are unfortunately familiar with the tragic racial intolerance of Germany and now of Italy. Are we entirely free from that racial intolerance, so that we can pride ourselves upon having achieved a complete democracy? Our treatment of the Negroes, anti-Semitism, the growing (at least I fear it is growing) serious opposition to the alien immigrant within our gates, is, I think, a sufficient answer to that question. Here, in relation to education, we have a problem; what are our schools doing to cultivate not merely passive toleration that will put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin, but what are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society? (Dewey, 2012, p. 98)

Dewey’s own educational response to this question left much to be desired, as we will explore later in the article. Nevertheless, if we fast forward to 2025, his concerns still hold relevance. Not only has education in Western-style democracies failed to adequately respond to intolerance, but liberal democracy itself has failed to live up to its philosophical ideals, particularly its commitment to freedom and integrity of the individual and that all people are given equal rights, opportunities, and limitations, irrespective of their backgrounds. Or is the very concept of freedom as expressed in liberalism, as a political philosophy, an obstacle to overcoming the problems Dewey identifies? If so, what can education do about it? To answer this question, we first turn to the history of liberalism as a now somewhat confusing term, before presenting critiques of both Dewey and liberalism. We then compare the foundational concepts in liberal theory of freedom and autonomy that underscore Western-style democracies with Aboriginal perspectives of freedom as captured in the concept of autonomous regard, which offers an alternative way to view onto-ethical relations with others, viz., as ecological relations.

We concur with Eve Tuck (Unangaû) and K. Wayne Yang (2019) who argue that “Indigenous and decolonizing perspectives on education have long persisted alongside colonial models of education, yet too often have been *subsumed* under

broader domains of multiculturalism, critical race theory, and progressive education” (n.p., *italics added*). To avoid further subsumption, we acknowledge “Indigenous worldviews and decolonizing theory as distinct philosophical traditions” (p. x), while also seeking to draw greater attention to one such worldview in particular, Aboriginal philosophy. We also note here that colonisation, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) puts it, is a “structure, not an event” and that structure is given shape in part by a certain way of colonial thinking.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if decolonisation is to function as more than a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012), educators must become critically attentive to the ways colonisation continues to structure both education and philosophy. Such attentiveness requires recognising that colonisation, in its diverse global forms, is grounded first and foremost in the dispossession and reordering of land.

To contextualise our discussion, we draw on Australia as a primary example of the insidious ways in which colonisation homogenises, by restructuring ways of knowing, being, and doing. Ultimately, this article argues for a place-responsive relational pedagogy that brings Indigenous knowledge traditions into genuine dialogue with dominant Western educational discourses. Through a comparative analysis of individual freedom and autonomy which are central to liberal theory and the Aboriginal socio-political concepts of relational freedom and autonomous regard, we reimagine education as a relational, land-attuned praxis oriented toward decolonisation and onto-epistemic diversity.

### *the assimilationist qualities of liberal identity*

Liberalism has been the dominant social and political ideology of modern Western history, building on ideas dating back to the 16th century in Iberia, Britain, and Central Europe (Dickerson, Flanagan & O'Neill, 2009; Douma & Magness, 2018; Renshaw, 2014), and later providing the foundation for the American and French Revolutions in the late 18th century and modern Western-style democracies (e.g., the UK, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of *placing* ourselves, we are all located on stolen land on the continent now called Australia. We acknowledge the traditional lands of the Yugambah peoples (which include the Kombumerri clan), the Gubbi Gubbi peoples, and the Jagera, Yuggera, and Ugarapul peoples. Mary Graham is a Kombumerri/Wakka Wakka person, Gilbert Burgh is of Dutch, English, German, Portuguese, and Indonesian descent, and Simone Thornton is of Irish and English descent.

Iceland, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, South Africa, Canada, the USA, Brazil, and Chile).<sup>2</sup> Liberalism is a broad and diverse tradition—it includes both “classical” (libertarianism with its emphasis on rights) and “progressive” (liberal egalitarianism with its emphasis on equality) variants. These diverse strands share a commitment to securing the conditions of individual autonomy, or self-rule, as the cornerstone of political organisation. Emphasis on individual rights and ethical relations are founded on the principle of respecting the freedom of individuals to make autonomous choices, whereby governments can intervene with an individual’s actions only if they cause harm to others (i.e., an individual’s actions impinge on the rights of others).

The liberal conception of the self as an autonomous individual has colonised Western social and political institutions at all levels. In universities and schools, knowledge is seen from the perspective of Western history and discourse traditions which are underpinned by this conception of self. As a result,

[a]lmost all other knowledge systems have been excluded, or their existence and value denied as beneath the standards of Western traditions. Assumptions about what knowledge is, its sources and potential uses, reflect various scientific and humanistic attempts to understand relations within the natural and human world and our place within them. (Langton, Curkpatrick & Reweti, 2024, p. 9)

Assimilationist educational practices rest on a Western/Other dualism, reinforced by centuries of belief in the superiority of Western knowledge, science, and values over other cultural knowledge systems and traditions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, on the other hand, have, for tens of thousands of years, “created, maintained and adapted rich and complex knowledge traditions steeped in unique relations between people and place” (Langton et al., 2024, p. 10). Unlike the liberal concept of self as an abstract individual, self is shaped by “being in place” through diligent practices and obligations inherited from a continuous body of ancestral knowledge. As Warlpiri leader, Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu, puts it:

Knowledge makes the land our home and helps us *become* our home. Our lives are enmeshed in life-giving patterns of place, ecology, family and community that give everyone the possibility of learning how [...] to carry home within. Knowledge is curated over time and generations, joining those who are gone

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<sup>2</sup> Western-style democracies have various constitutional arrangements, including constitutional monarchies (e.g., Australia, Belgium, Canada, Japan, Norway, Spain, UK), and republics (e.g., Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, USA). They also differ with their governmental systems, including parliamentary systems (e.g., New Zealand, Canada, India, Israel, Ireland, UK), presidential systems (e.g., Indonesia, USA), and semi-presidential systems (e.g., France, Romania).

with those yet to be. It helps us navigate life by locating us within a dynamic system known as *kuawarri* (law) to the Warlpiri people that shapes purposeful belonging and links us to things in creation – places and ancestors, plants and animals, earth and sky, day and night. (Pawu et al., 2024, pp. 16–17)

Place, the self, belonging, and sovereignty are intertwined and, therefore, integral to Aboriginal identity as a relational concept.

This has implications for education in Western-style democracies; not only the banking concept or teacher-centred pedagogy, but also student-centred teaching, such as inquiry-based approaches to education. An example of the latter approach is philosophy for children, an application of educational philosophy (i.e., philosophy functioning educationally), which was influenced by Dewey's implicit pedagogical guidelines and thoughts on democracy and education found in his writings, and has at its core the pedagogy of the community of inquiry said to be an exemplar of democracy in action. According to Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp (1978), the community of inquiry has the potential to encourage students to become more reasonable democratic citizens through engagement with philosophical narratives on everyday issues.<sup>3</sup>

However, we contend that education practitioners and researchers in ostensibly democratic countries with a documented history of settler-colonialism can reaffirm forms of colonial violence. Communities of inquiry can perpetuate existing power structures by replicating dominant ways of knowing, being, and doing, thereby silencing marginalised voices and reinforcing power imbalances. Education in colonial societies is, for the most part, a continuation of an assimilationist agenda centred on the creation of a Eurocentric concept of citizenry that typically overlooks non-European perspectives. This discursive construction, replete with colonial knowledge systems, social structures, and practices, has been normalised, manifesting in many ways, including defining citizenship based on European historical and political models, accepting European development as the universal standard of progress, and perpetuating colonial power structures that

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<sup>3</sup> Lipman and Sharp's reconceptualisation of education as a community of inquiry, with an emphasis on educational philosophy, draws heavily on Charles Saunders Peirce's pragmatist epistemology and its reliance on communities of disciplinary inquiry to construct knowledge, as the building blocks for philosophy for children. In addition, Lipman (2004) also admits that philosophy for children is also indebted to Dewey, especially his championing of practicality, i.e., understanding education as experiential and experimental learning.

are antithetical to First Nations knowledge systems centred on relational and place-based understandings of the world.

To highlight the ongoing presence of colonial structures in education, in the next section, we draw attention to the liberal concepts of freedom and autonomy, as idealised characteristics of identity that are the foundation of the liberal understanding of human nature. We, then, explore the degree to which these ideals are embedded in Dewey's philosophy and, consequently, in the community of inquiry, given that they form the foundation of the philosophy for children curriculum and its pedagogical approach. This is followed by a discussion on the inextricable link between the politics of knowing, theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands, and racist ideologies that have enabled the perpetuation of the dominant political discourse and silencing of Indigenous knowledge systems. To address this form of racism, we introduce the Indigenous concept of autonomous regard, i.e., respecting and considering the autonomy of others, which relies on a relational view of freedom rather than the Western ideal of individual freedom. To conclude, we argue that Aboriginal relational worldviews, informed by knowledge systems that emphasise careful, deliberate, and patient observation and engagement, are vital for understanding our relationship with the world as both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples. In this sense, these knowledge systems share characteristics with Dewey's relational epistemology, interconnectedness of experience, and continuity of the human, the organic, and the natural world, and could be understood as a forebear of pragmatism. Herein, lies its potential to aid in the reconstruction of the community of inquiry as a decolonising strategy, i.e., as a relational pedagogy, and by extension democracy, to address the systemic biases stemming from colonialism and the privileging of Western knowledge systems, especially biases towards nature. This is vital to the kind of social justice education Lipman envisioned, as such privileging is perpetuated by institutions that prioritise certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others, which is itself a form of racism. Consequently, Indigenous knowledge systems are often taken to be inferior, and the prevailing viewpoint in dominant developmental narratives equates modernisation with technology, urbanisation, and industrialisation, and thereby the Indigenous notion of land as a

reciprocal relationship where people belong to the land, rather than owning it, is devalued as “archaic,” “primitive,” or “backwards.”

### *liberal conceptions of freedom and autonomy*

When Lipman, and Dewey before him, speak of democracy, they refer to the widespread model of liberal democracy, which is still in practice today, albeit they were also critical of aspects of its theory and practice, particularly the lack of emphasis on deliberation as central to citizen participation in governance. The term liberal democracy is often mistakenly used as a combination of two compatible values. Although liberalism and the democratic movement have become closely associated, the two doctrines are, in fact, distinct with different historical origins, core purposes, and, sometimes, contradictory goals, such as diverging over issues of individual rights and popular sovereignty. Liberalism more-or-less requires that all government power, and thereby the will of the majority, be limited. Democracy, on the other hand, is the view that the will of the people is the only legitimate means by which a government can secure a mandate to rule. Historically, liberalism appeared in different forms throughout Western and Central Europe. In Britain, especially, it was a political movement of the bourgeois for freedom from feudal control. It has since developed into a widespread political creed in which the protection of liberty (i.e., the protection by law of individual freedom of action, insofar as such freedom is compatible with an equal freedom for all others, against all arbitrary coercion) is the vital premise on which the formation of civil government rests. The doctrine supports basic civil liberties and human rights and is often associated with laissez-faire economic theory. Liberal democratic societies are essentially liberal societies which have added elements of popular rule, i.e., the people rule themselves through elected representatives who are restricted to legislating within the confines of a set of principles either explicitly laid out in a constitution, or accepted by general opinion, interpreted usually by judicial decisions, customs, and conventions.

To avoid a lengthy (and perhaps unnecessary) discussion on the evolution of liberalism and on what distinguishes classical liberal theory from other liberal traditions, we shall use the term liberalism to describe a variety of movements in which adherents profess a belief in individual freedom of action and equality for

all others.<sup>4</sup> This is important as the liberal concepts of freedom and autonomy are founded on the idea of individual liberty with an emphasis on the capacity for self-governance. These concepts are often taken to be the building blocks for governance aimed at a free and just society. Freedom can be understood as negative liberty and positive liberty. Negative liberty is *freedom from* interference, specifically the absence of external constraints. Positive liberty emphasises *freedom to* act and pursue one's goals, which encompasses an internal psychological component, as the capacity to think critically and independently; to make choices without being unduly shaped by unexamined beliefs and societal coercion (e.g., norms, expectations). The closely related concept of autonomy refers to the ability of the individual to make informed, rational choices, and be responsible for the actions resulting from those choices. This depiction of the citizen has become normalised in democratic politics; the citizen is typically seen as, and is synonymous with, liberal citizenship, and the idea of the autonomous individual, possessing fundamental rights and freedoms protected by a legal framework, who participates in society through established institutions. However, the normalisation of the ideal citizen who values their independence and freedom, assumes a universal and, thus, homogenised conception of the individual and their relationship to others and the world around them which informs ethical relations, social and political ordering, and governance.

To examine the extent to which such ideals are infused in Dewey's philosophy, and by extension the community of inquiry, in the next section we turn to Dewey's theories on democracy and education, which underpin the philosophy for children curriculum and pedagogy.

### *democracy as "a mode of associated living"*

According to Dewey (1916), democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience" (p. 87) serves to minimise the exclusion or marginalisation of others and increase diversity, as "[d]iversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenging thought" (p. 85), which, he argued,

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<sup>4</sup> To avoid ambiguity, we use the term "liberalism" to refer to the political and moral philosophy and historical movement that developed from the Enlightenment into the variants of liberalism expressed here, rather than its usage by US political commentators as an ideology to refer to the politics of "progressivism" in opposition to "conservatism." The Democratic Party is often referred to as the home of US liberals, and the Republican Party as their conservative opponents.

is vital for democracy as a communicative practice and a mode of associated living. Dewey's vision means that a democratic society comprises individuals actively participating in shared experiences, openly communicating through deliberation, and collaborating to shape their collective lives. In this sense, he emphasised the social and experiential dimensions of democracy, highlighting the importance of shared learning and the development of individual capacities within a community. His educational theory and practice also intended to reflect such a society in the classroom. Students do not merely learn about democracy or focus on the acquisition of skills to improve the capacity of future citizens to participate effectively and contribute to social, political, and economic life, they engage in communicative practice. This approach recognises that children and adolescents have an integral role to play in shaping democracy.

All well and good, but, for Dewey (1981), such an education system of discipline emphasises

freedom from self-consciousness on the mental and moral side; the ability of a child to put all his native initiative and enthusiasm into his work; the power to indulge his natural desire to learn; thus preserving joy in life and a confidence in himself which liberates all his energies for his work. (Vol. 8, p. 228)

Here, Dewey refers to the intellectual struggle to be free from parochialism or the inculcation of the faiths and ideologies of society. Moreover, he assumes these to be universal struggles. However, Frank Margonis (2009) contends that this "quest of the new self" has implications for Indigenous students,

whose cultures, languages, and practices have suffered massive assaults – from a legacy of genocide, stolen land, removal, forced assimilation in boarding schools, and the encroachment of globalization – rebuilding tribal practices, languages, and cultures is often valued far more highly than surpassing traditional tribal beliefs. (p. 31)

In other words, given that European colonisation is an ongoing form of structural violence wherein European epistemologies are assumed to be superior (Wolfe, 2006), it should not come as a surprise that Indigenous peoples place greater value on rebuilding practices, languages, and cultures, rather than prioritising breaking away, as Dewey would have it, from old ideologies to envision new possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> While our focus is on Dewey's position on Indigenous peoples, it is noteworthy that his position on racism in America is contested among contemporary philosophers. Although Dewey influenced progressive education, publicly opposed racism, and rejected notions of racial inferiority, critics argue that his philosophical work largely failed to grapple with race as a structural feature of democracy. For example, Glaude (2004), Margonis (2009), and Taylor (2004) contend that Dewey's

Explaining Dewey's approach from the perspective of Indigenous history, Matthew Villeneuve (2021) has this to say: "Dewey was ideally positioned to learn from Indigenous people, principally in the Great Lakes, as a matter of personal experience. Instead, Dewey saw Indigenous people as Indians refracted through a frontier discourse" (p. 17). Margonis (2009) points out that Dewey's vision of education is potentially hostile to Indigenous peoples who have had their ways of knowing, being, and doing stolen from them. He contends that "[t]he forward-looking, experimental quality of Dewey's new self might, from some Native perspectives, be viewed as one more way in which norms from the dominant society have operated to undercut valued tribal traditions" (p. 31). This is but one example of how "Dewey's vision of the student embodies the values and situations of particular European Americans to the exclusion of many other people" (p. 31).

Given these critiques, Dewey's educational ideas stand in need of reconstruction, and as Jim Garrison (2008) draws to our attention, "Dewey is a philosopher of reconstruction. Those who claim to understand Dewey yet do not reconstruct him for their time, place and purpose fail to appreciate what was perhaps his most profound message" (p. 1). This sentiment is echoed by Bill E. Lawson and Donald F. Koch (2004), who contend that "contemporary pragmatists must ask themselves whether they are content to restate the *old* ideas of the founders of the movement or use these ideas to work out a *reconstruction* of pragmatism to deal with contemporary problems and issues" (p. 1). Eddie S.

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reliance on abstract ideals like "the student," "community," and "democracy," combined with an exceptionalist belief in American progress, allowed him to overlook how education and governance were shaped by white, European norms. As such, Dewey did not recognise his own positionality within systems of racial privilege, resulting in educational prescriptions that reinforced paternalism and inequality. So, despite his stated egalitarian commitments, Dewey's privileging of idealised democratic theory over non-ideal racial realities ultimately limited his capacity to address Black experience and systemic racism in education. As Feinberg (1975) points out, John and his daughter Evelyn Dewey's endorsement of a vocational education program, offered only to African American students at Public School (PS) 26 in Indianapolis, failed to acknowledge racial dynamics and, thus, compromised Dewey's commitment to egalitarianism and his own democratic principles. However, Shook (2004) argues that Dewey was not a philosopher of race, and, therefore, "cannot be justly lumped together with so many other prominent American philosophers who turned a blind eye to racism and violence" (p. 50). As one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), "his efforts on its behalf won him the admiration of black leaders" and his "educational theory has influenced several black social philosophers" (p. 50).

Glaude, Jr. (2004) makes a similar claim, but in the context of American democracy, that “Dewey’s philosophy of democracy must be reconstructed in light of the realities of race that have defined this nation” (pp. 89–90), adding that it “is a hypothesis to be tested in action” (p. 90). Reconstruction is ongoing, as new issues arise and need to be faced and old issues resurface. Increasingly, there has been a move toward critical re-assessment of philosophy for children to address the developments inside and outside that challenge aspects of its theory and practice. As such, scholars and practitioners are engaging in this kind of reconstruction, taking place globally,<sup>6</sup> but also locally in Australia (see Thornton & Burgh, 2019). In the discussion that follows, we explore further how the inclusion of Aboriginal philosophy and politics can challenge Dewey’s educational ideas that inform Limpan’s views on the relationship between education, philosophy, and democracy, thereby contributing to the ongoing reconstruction of the community of inquiry as a social justice pedagogy.

Engaging with other cultures that have not adopted Western-style democracy and liberal thinking, can offer a way of informing our present context of liberal democracy’s seeming failure to deliver social and ecological justice. We argue that Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, especially the relationship to land as a deep onto-ethical relationship that informs the notion of “caring for country,” have an educative function that has implications for dialogic thinking. Further, these ways are not totally at odds with pragmatism and indeed could be thought of as forebears. For example, Dewey’s theory on human nature, the social environment, and ecology is not completely incompatible with Aboriginal views. As Hugh P. McDonald (2004) writes, “the social environment is itself within the physical environment for Dewey, as well as common to humans and other gregarious species” (p. 80). In addition, he points out that Dewey understood the environment to be “a condition of human life, our ‘home’. The environment is not separated from the human, but part of the natural human context because there is continuity between human nature, the organic, and the natural environment” (p. 80). The reference to “home” cannot be construed as

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<sup>6</sup> Routledge’s *Philosophy for Children Founders* series, edited by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty, provides a series of critical anthologies. Currently, two volumes have been published with others forthcoming.

<https://www.routledge.com/Philosophy-for-Children-Founders/book-series/P4CF>

having the same meaning to the quote above by Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu, that “[k]nowledge makes the land our home and helps us *become* our home.” However, read in conjunction with Dewey’s pragmatist epistemology and naturalistic metaphysics, it is possible to reconstruct Dewey’s views on the interconnectedness of the student, community, and democracy that critics have contended harbour Western exceptionalism. Bringing Dewey into conversation with Aboriginal knowledge systems, then, has the potential to address the problems of neglecting race dynamics, in this case being in dialogue with Indigenous epistemologies. This would necessitate, at a minimum, a reconceptualisation of pedagogy as relational pedagogy, and of curricula through the introduction of non-Eurocentric literature and other classroom resources (see Chetty, 2014; Elicor, 2019; Wurtz, 2024), including work by authors Indigenous to the region in which teachers find themselves.

If, as Villeneuve says, Dewey was in an ideal position to learn from Indigenous peoples, but, indeed, failed to do so, and instead viewed them through the lens of a frontier discourse (i.e., participating within a discourse of colonisation), then as Garrison, Glaude, and Lawson and Koch have stressed, the task is for contemporary pragmatists to work out a reconstruction of pragmatism to deal with contemporary problems and issues.

*the inextricable link between the politics of knowing, theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands, and racist ideologies*

The two concepts of freedom in liberal theory hold very limited claims on us as individuals. In a sense this is the point. But what happens to the stability of our wider community and environment if we are narrowly concerned with individual freedom? To address this question, we draw on Aboriginal political science and philosophy to unsettle the importance of the liberal concepts of freedom, autonomy, and identity, based on individualism and self-preservation, concepts that carry through to education. We argue that it is vital to unsettle education as a site of identity formation and the reproduction of the values of the nation state to make space for diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. Indigeneity cannot be homogenised, and so we draw on Australia as the place we are embedded as one of a myriad of perspectives.

Traditionally, Western political philosophers and theorists have heavily focused on the state as the central concept in their analyses. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that governance and political activity can exist outside of state structures, otherwise this oversight could lead to an incomplete understanding or misinformed view of political phenomena in non-Western contexts. Moreover, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that any political theory inherently depends on a specific conception of human nature, which shapes its core assumptions about individuals and society and influences the design of political systems and the types of social structures considered ideal. Theories are not value-neutral, thereby political theorists cannot avoid making assumptions about gender and race. However, there has been a tendency in philosophical and educational discussions about human nature to overlook the significant impact of gender or race, focusing instead on so-called universal aspects of humanity, which neglect the diverse social realities shaped by gender and racial identities, leading to oversimplified generalisations about human behaviour. It should be noted that claims regarding human nature, or what defines us as human, have also been explored through scientific and cultural narratives, which inform politics, morality, and cultural practices. These narratives are constructions that shape socio-political realities, maintained and perpetuated by environmental, educational, legal, and political structures. As a result, these structures are internalised and become part of collective knowledge in the context of citizenship, and often go unquestioned, i.e., they become dominant. For example, political narratives inherited from Europe have largely shaped Australian political science, which has ignored Aboriginal political philosophy and systems. Undoing this kind of silencing,

necessarily involves attending to the politics of knowing in the context of Indigenous-Settler relations to gain distance from European-derived understandings of politics and generate movement into exchange and conversation with Indigenous people and approaches to politics. Only by first grappling with this politics of knowing is it possible to turn to the study of both Indigenous-Settler relations and Indigenous politics per se with some confidence of not reproducing the colonial entailments of extant Australian political science. (Brigg, Graham & Murphy, 2019, p. 424)

While at first blush a focus on the politics of knowing could appear to overlook ontological forms of domination (e.g., physical and structural violence), when understood as epistemic violence, i.e., not as oppositional to ontology but as a necessary part of the justification for ontological violence, it holds explanatory

power and is a vital step in preventing the uncritical reproduction of dominant ways of knowing that shape ontology and become entrenched ideologies. For Charles. W. Mills (2017),<sup>7</sup> “[i]deologies are illusions, but illusions whose power and resistance to elimination are based in material conditions” (p. 104). As it is materially beneficial for the socially dominant to remain socially dominant, especially in colonial countries where the wealth generation is fuelled in large part by the disenfranchisement of the Other, the resistance to illumination often goes in one direction. Those who are being dominated are not under any illusions. Rather, they

*already* know the social truth, viz. that they are living in an unjust society of white supremacy, and that its founding principle (nonwhite inferiority) is false. They do not need to be illuminated, nor are there hermeneutical gaps in their cognitive apparatus and mappings of the world. The cognitive problems are on the other side – the heedless whites who, walking in the bright sunlight, exist in a cognitive darkness, a white ignorance. (p. 108)

Mills also draws on the work of Tommie Shelby, who, he says, “points out that ideologies work in different ways, through moral legitimation (depicting existing power relations as just), social reification (representing as natural what is actually the product of social causality), and metaphysical mystification (resorting to supernatural explanations of subordination)” (p. 104). He argues that all three are present in the construction of racist ideologies. Returning to our discussion regarding human nature, here we are particularly concerned with the second, but they are interwoven rather than distinct. Marilyn Frye writes that for “efficient subordination, what’s wanted is that the structure not only not appear to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appear natural” (Frye, 1983, cited in Plumwood, 1993, p. 436). Nature, in this sense, is taken to be an objective truth or absolute beyond the reach “of human manipulation or revision” (p. 436). But conceiving nature as such perpetuates the structures and simultaneously escapes responsibility for them. If the structures are

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<sup>7</sup> In his influential book *The Racial Contract*, Mills (1997) contends that social contract theory, which has influenced the theory and practice of liberalism and Western-style democracies, including US democracy which Dewey touted as exceptional, is inherently racialised. According to Mills, the social contract is more than a theoretical construct but is, in fact, an operative system that has shaped global power structures that normalise the assertion and maintenance of white dominance over non-European populations. Mills’ framework is an explanation of white supremacy as not merely an aberration but embedded within the very fabric of Western democratic society and its social and political institutions. As such, white people, as the dominant racial group, fail to recognise their own complicity in a system of racial privilege, allowing them to engage with the world without being reminded of their racial identity.

natural, they are not created by humans. Following this logic, if we did not create the problem, then it is not incumbent upon us to solve it. It is important to note that the first step in this process of denial of responsibility is the othering of nature conceived as non-human other. For social reification to work, nature must first be stripped of any kind of ethical value. A dehumanised nature as a category must be created into which other forms of dehumanisation can then be placed. If nature were to be granted inherent value, the recourse to nature as justification for discrimination would no longer work. Challenging the othering of nature, then, is an important step in addressing racism writ large. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) puts it,

For Indigenous people, white possession is not unmarked, un-named, or invisible; it is hypervisible. In our quotidian encounters, whether it is on the streets of Otago or Sydney, in the tourist shops in Vancouver or Waipahu, or sitting in a restaurant in New York, we experience ontologically the effects of white possession. These cities signify with every building and every street that this land is now possessed by others; signs of white possession are embedded everywhere in the landscape. The omnipresence of Indigenous sovereignties exists here too, but it is disavowed through the materiality of these significations, which are perceived as evidence of ownership by those who have taken possession. This is territory that has been marked by and through violence and race. Racism is thus inextricably tied to the theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands in the first world. (p. xiii)

To address this form of racism, we turn now to autonomous regard, as a concept important to all.

### ***autonomous regard: respecting and considering the autonomy of others***

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and many Indigenous communities that have been affected by the colonisation of liberal ideals, *human nature, belonging, sovereignty, and nature are intertwined*—or put another way, *they are integral to identity*. The colonisation of the liberal concepts of freedom and autonomy, therefore, are in many ways incommensurable with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. However, the concept of autonomous regard, in the context of Aboriginal political philosophy, can help to provide an understanding of how Aboriginal peoples view freedom beyond the individual. It is a necessary first step toward reflectivity, which is the process of seeking development of the self beyond a purely physical and egoistic self that is concerned only with survival— a process of understanding the self in relation to land and human and

non-humans. On this view, we are not, primarily, fully contained selves who enter a social contract motivated by self-preservation, but selves in the process of becoming, which is facilitated by reflectivity, thereby allowing humans to become fully and completely physical and spiritual beings. In this process of becoming human, an obligation to care for that which creates us arises (i.e., land and our relations with others).

An important part of this relationalist obligation is autonomous regard. Autonomous regard (AR) is a major aspect of human interaction. Every person has physicality and spirituality, personhood and agency and is therefore an autonomous being. To maintain and protect one's own autonomy we demonstrate regard (full respect) for each other or others. AR counters and/or disrupts the inclination towards survivalist tendencies—to see the other as a 'means to an end'. AR forms an important part of the relationalist ethos, as it provides stability and security in human relations. *The Land then becomes a template for political, social and ethical ordering, which taken together becomes culture.* (Graham, 2023, p. 5, italics added)

Put another way, autonomous regard refers to a specific ethical and political disposition (i.e., way of being) that allows for both the maintenance of one's own dignity and integrity and, simultaneously, requires humans to act in such a way that respects and considers the autonomy of others, including in situations of conflict. Arguments and disagreements are allowed to take place but are carefully managed. They are not seen as personal failures, but as natural expressions of feelings and as short-term aberrations of a wider order. Indeed, autonomous regard accepts conflict as an inevitable part of navigating complex relationships and balancing individual freedom and autonomy with the needs and responsibilities within the context of an ontology of a relational and interconnected world. In this sense, "[l]earning, doing and ethics are not discrete areas. The developing ethical self is a calibrated being with an autonomous regard identity; he or she *grows into*, across time, a fully rounded human being—not just an anatomically correct, reflective and identifiable human being" (Graham, 2023, p. 14).

In addition, like humans, Place is also autonomous, which acts as an organising principle to respect and protect the integrity of a nation/regional group. The concept of autonomous regard, when applied to Place, becomes an integral component of an Aboriginal ethic—a way of gazing at each other from a distance, which "is necessary for respect, for recognition of sovereignty, of limits, and also the existence of the self in the other, because, although distant, the self is

not starkly separate from the self of the other” (Graham, 2013, p. 5). Thus, autonomous regard extends to non-human others; “nature, as human, non-human and land, is not seen as starkly other, and the value it holds is not only monetary or instrumental, but sacralised” (Graham, 2013, p. 5). Here, sacralisation refers to the profound spiritual significance of the land and, therefore, all aspects of the natural world, derived from the Dreaming—an interconnectedness between people and land that is central to Aboriginal identity and worldviews, which shape social structures, political ordering, laws, ceremonies, and other aspects of governance.

In many cultures around the world, spirit conjures up thoughts of the supernatural, the transcendental, that which is not earthly or human, but greater than, or superior to, both. However, in many other cultures, spirit is not superior, but equal to earth and humans. Human and earth are sacred, valued, relational; based on relationships of respect learnt over enormous spans of time. Spirit can be thought of as an ethic, but of a particular kind, not a deontological rule-based ethic, and not a consequentialist, outcome-based tool used to determine right or wrong, but an ethic of obligation informed by autonomous regard. It is an art of doing, a skill that must be learned, i.e., acquiring a proficiency in being an ethical human. Learning and maintaining autonomous regard are essential for the stewardship system in that it helps to strengthen and stabilise community, which requires obligations among nations and communities.

This brings us to a crucial question: what are the implications for pedagogy? To answer, in the next section we seek to first situate Indigenous dispossession as foundational, rather than as a subset of broader racial critique. We argue that philosophy for children must move beyond critical race theory alone and integrate Indigenous and decolonial frameworks that centre land, sovereignty, and the enduring impacts of colonisation, thereby recognising that racism against Indigenous peoples is inseparable from settler colonial structures.

### *relational pedagogy: what if we begin inquiry from land?*

The ways in which colonialism functions to privilege the dominant social and political narratives that accompany Western colonial epistemologies are slowly receiving sustained attention in the philosophy for children literature (see

Elicor, 2019; Hernandez, 2026; Rainville, 2000; Reed-Sandoval, 2019). However, much of the emphasis on race in philosophy for children is through the lens of critical race theory. While critical race theory provides valuable tools for analysing racism in settler colonial contexts, some of which we have utilised in this article, it is not enough to address racism against Indigenous peoples. Critical race theory is not centred on land, and critics argue that the focus on race as a social constructionist framework of racial identity can undermine the distinct legal and political status of Indigenous peoples as sovereign nations, as their claims (regarding identity, sovereignty, and political ordering) are founded on prior occupation of land as custodians, not solely on race. The significance of this difference is raised by Nikki Moodie (2018), who contends that “when indigeneity is constructed as a ‘racial category’ rather than as a sovereign status, the political project of Indigenous self-determination is undermined” (p. 37). This view stresses that Indigenous peoples were self-governing prior to colonisation, rooted in their enduring relationship to the land (which for Australian Aboriginal peoples has been for at least 60,000 years) as its first peoples, and in their distinct cultures and legal systems derived from their onto-ethical relationship that informs caring for country (see Watson, 2015). As Lilly Brown, Odette Kelada, and Dianne Jones (2021) have observed, “[c]ritical race theory is rightly critiqued for failing to see colonisation as foundational and interrogating implications within the invader/settler colonial dynamic – an erasure that is interrogated through Indigenous theorisations of race” (p. 87). As such, Indigenous theorisations recognise that racism is endemic in society, however, its origins and consequences are explained in terms of colonisation.

To incorporate Indigenous experience and address Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty, it is essential to integrate Indigenous-centred theories alongside critical race theory. This is so because

[d]ecolonial and Indigenous theories map structures of oppression differently from how they are mapped in critical race and gender theories. Decolonial theories also offer critical accounts of the cultural genocide experienced by colonised people and seek land-based sovereignty as a necessary component of restorative justice. Equally importantly, Indigenous theories articulate worldviews that are systematically misunderstood and dismissed by colonizers, thereby giving rise to situations of epistemic injustice not accounted for in critical race and gender theories. (Burgh & Thornton, in press)

In addition, decolonial and Indigenous theories consider race as a function of political oppression that occurs in different ways and in specific geographical and historical contexts. In Moreton-Robinson's (2015) analysis of scholarly accounts of the construction of Whiteness in the history of migration and slavery in the U.S., she notes that "the black/white binary permeates these analyses, enabling tropes of migration and slavery to work covertly in these texts, thus erasing the continuing history of colonization and the Native American sovereign presence" (p. 51). In an Australian context, Brown et al. (2021) state that "to develop a racial literacy approach which is able to contend with the complexity of race as it functions in Australia, the role of race in Indigenous dispossession and the ongoing legacies of colonisation must consistently be foundational" (p. 87).

To grapple with the challenges colonisation presents, philosophy for children requires attention to these dynamics. Pedagogically, classroom practitioners must recognise that inquiry is not neutral but shaped by pre-existing beliefs and prejudices (often unconscious and so deeply ingrained we seldom question them), which influence how they and their students interpret information and their approach to learning. These hidden assumptions can significantly impact our understanding of reality and limit our ability to engage with diverse perspectives. To think otherwise fails to meet the core tenet of pragmatism, that all knowledge is fallible and always subject to revision or potential falsification based on new evidence or experience, and thereby let dominant narratives go undetected.

A pragmatist reconstruction of philosophy for children must, therefore, incorporate decolonising strategies to challenge the Eurocentric assumptions that inform pedagogy. In this way, inquiry can open pedagogical opportunities for recognising and addressing the ongoing impact of colonialism on knowledge, power, social structures, and environment, by providing dialogic space for marginalised or epistemically silenced voices, diverse ways of knowing, being, and *doing*, and promoting critical engagement with power dynamics along with existing physical and epistemic structures. However, to achieve these goals requires more than adapting critical pedagogies of race. To undo colonial processes, calls for a relational pedagogy, an approach to teaching and learning

that critically examines complex interrelated factors and shifting practices that might be oppressive to individuals and groups, particularly Indigenous peoples and earth others, within colonial contexts. The aim is to dismantle the ongoing effects of colonialism on education systems and knowledge production, including the cultural norms of the institutions and educators.

Relational pedagogy is more than merely building relationships between teachers and students. Instead, relational pedagogies emphasise relationships, interactions, communication, and interconnection of people and place in the students' sociocultural contexts. In the context of engaging with Indigenous knowledge, culture, and practices, the socio-cultural context includes the relationship to land, as identity formation is dependent on such a relationship. In this way, relational pedagogy draws attention to education as place-responsive communication, drawing on autonomous regard as an alternative to the concept of freedom typical of liberal philosophical thinking inherent in Western-style democracies, in order to enable educators to discern the types of educational interactions that engage diverse groups of students. Relational pedagogy has the potential to strengthen engagement with the Aboriginal concepts of freedom and autonomy, thereby challenging the belief in the superiority of liberal philosophical and political thought in Western-style democracy, and by extension education. A pragmatist reconstruction of philosophy for children, therefore, requires the use of relational pedagogy as a decolonising strategy that challenges Eurocentric assumptions, foregrounds place and Indigenous sovereignty, and creates dialogic spaces for diverse, land-based ways of knowing, being, and learning.

### *conclusion*

We have argued that recognising Indigenous knowledge traditions, in which "being and knowing are intimately connected" (Pawu et al., 2024, p. 16), and bringing them into conversation with the dominant Western discourse traditions that inform curriculum and teaching, can fundamentally shift our understanding of these traditions through shared dialogue, which is essential to the creation of shared ways of knowing, being, and doing, as well as new forms of non-dominant identities, and by extension, the citizenry. As both traditions presuppose different understandings of self in terms of freedom, autonomy, and

connection to place, we have provided a comparison between the liberal understanding of these concepts and the concept of autonomous regard as relational freedom practised by First Nations peoples in the colonially named Australia. This comparison is important for education, as it highlights how such concepts shape our identities and the world around us, which, in turn, shapes democratic institutions and practices.

While we do not presume to offer a blueprint for reconstruction that guarantees race-conscious habits and a commitment to decolonisation, what we are asking is for teachers to become more philosophical (in the Aboriginal sense of the word), not just in their teaching but in their examination of the genesis of their own ways of knowing, being and doing. The relational pedagogy we advocate here reconceptualises pedagogical practices away from an emphasis on students and communities to that of place-responsive pedagogical relations to develop a praxis of an examined life (Burgh & Thornton, 2022; Thornton, 2024). Such a pedagogy turns toward land as the primary site of relation, asking how teaching and learning emerge within, and are accountable to, the places that sustain them. In this way, pedagogy becomes place-responsive and attuned to the histories sedimented in land, to the sovereignties it exceeds, and to the material conditions that contour thought itself. Such an orientation seeks to cultivate not merely participation, but a praxis of the examined life grounded in situated responsibility rather than abstract universality (Graham, 2023).

By focusing attention on active awareness of and reflection on the relational dynamics of collaborative communication – dynamics always already inscribed by land, power, and history – in order to facilitate onto-epistemic diversity, this approach can avoid the shortcomings identified in Dewey’s educational thought, and in traditions such as philosophy for children that draw upon it, by fostering an inclusive and nuanced understanding of racial dynamics. In both, democratic exchange can risk bracketing the racialised and colonial conditions of its own possibility. A place-responsive pedagogy, by contrast, situates inquiry within the contested terrains of land and life, fostering a materially grounded and ethically demanding engagement with racial dynamics.

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Gilbert Burgh published widely on educational philosophy, especially in the areas of democratic education, place-responsive pedagogies, and the role of genuine doubt in classroom inquiry. He has several books, including *Teaching democracy in an age of uncertainty: Place-responsive learning* (2022) (with Simone Thornton).

### **simone thornton**

Simone Thornton is the author of *Eco-rational education: An educational response to environmental crisis*. Her research intersects the areas of political philosophy, educational philosophy, environmental education, and place-responsive pedagogies, disruptive philosophy, focusing on the development of ecologically rational forms of education.

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