

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

dwelling with middle schoolers on race and racism in us history

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abstract

In a 2018 article, Darren Chetty draws attention to a serious problem in the field of Philosophy for/with Children (P4/WC). Framed as gated, Chetty challenges the role of reasonableness in the creation and function of the community of inquiry. A community of inquiry based on an ahistoric conception of reasonableness not only limits what can be said but who can say what. Chetty ends the critique by calling on P4C practitioners to de-center reasonableness and re-center historical perspectives to challenge racialized common sense in the community of inquiry. I'm motivated by the call from Chetty to center historical perspectives in the community inquiry and forgo the traditional commitment to reasonableness in dialogical deliberation. This paper reports how I approached facilitating philosophical conversations with middle schoolers on issues of race and racism in United States (US) history—inspired by how Chetty and Abigail Bentely conducted philosophical conversations on race and racism, I frame my pedagogical approach as dwelling. Like Chetty and Bentley, I facilitated philosophical conversations on race and racism while sitting in a half circle, prompting discussion through engagement with shared stimuli. Unlike Chetty and Bentley, who recruited adult

participants from their campus, I enacted these conversations with middle schoolers.

keywords: communities of inquiry; race and racism; history education.

reflexões profundas com alunos do ensino fundamental II sobre raça e racismo na história dos estados unidos

resumo

Em um artigo de 2018, Darren Chetty chama a atenção para um grave problema no âmbito da Filosofia para/com Crianças (Fp/cC). Considerado um sistema fechado, Chetty questiona o papel da razoabilidade na criação e no funcionamento da comunidade de investigação. Uma comunidade de investigação baseada na concepção a-histórica de razoabilidade não apenas limita o que se pode dizer, mas também quem pode dizer o quê. Chetty conclui sua crítica exortando os profissionais da Fp/cC a descentralizarem a razoabilidade e voltarem a centralizar as perspectivas históricas, a fim de questionarem o sentido comum racializado na comunidade de investigação. Sinto-me motivado pelo apelo de Chetty para que se dê centralidade às perspectivas históricas na comunidade de investigação e se renuncie ao compromisso tradicional com a razoabilidade na deliberação dialógica. Este artigo relata como abordei a facilitação de conversas filosóficas com alunos do Ensino Fundamental II sobre questões de raça e racismo na história dos Estados Unidos da América (EUA) – inspirado na forma como Chetty e Abigail Bentley conduziram conversas filosóficas sobre raça e racismo, enquadro minha abordagem pedagógica como *reflexão aprofundada*. Assim como Chetty e Bentley, facilitei conversas filosóficas sobre raça e racismo em semicírculo, estimulando a discussão por meio do envolvimento com estímulos compartilhados. Ao contrário de Chetty e Bentley, que recrutaram participantes

adultos de seu *campus*, conduzi essas conversas com alunos do Ensino Fundamental II.

palavras-chave: comunidades de investigação; raça e racismo; ensino de história.

reflexiones con alumnos de secundaria sobre la raza y el racismo en la historia de estados unidos

resumen

En un artículo de 2018, Darren Chetty llama la atención sobre un grave problema en el ámbito de la Filosofía para/con Niños (P4/WC). Enmarcado como un sistema cerrado, Chetty cuestiona el papel de la razonabilidad en la creación y el funcionamiento de la comunidad de investigación. Una comunidad de investigación basada en una concepción ahistórica de la razonabilidad no solo limita lo que se puede decir, sino también quién puede decir qué. Chetty concluye su crítica haciendo un llamamiento a los profesionales de la P4C para que descentren la razonabilidad y vuelvan a centrar las perspectivas históricas con el fin de cuestionar el sentido común racializado en la comunidad de investigación. Me motiva el llamamiento de Chetty a centrar las perspectivas históricas en la comunidad de investigación y a renunciar al compromiso tradicional con la razonabilidad en la deliberación dialógica. Este artículo describe cómo abordé la facilitación de conversaciones filosóficas con alumnos de secundaria sobre cuestiones de raza y racismo en la historia de Estados Unidos (EE. UU.); inspirándome en cómo Chetty y Abigail Bentley llevaron a cabo conversaciones filosóficas sobre raza y racismo, enmarco mi enfoque pedagógico como «morada». Al igual que Chetty y Bentley, facilité conversaciones filosóficas sobre raza y racismo sentados en semicírculo, promoviendo el debate a través de la interacción con estímulos compartidos. A diferencia de Chetty y Bentley, que

reclutaron a participantes adultos de su campus, llevé a cabo estas conversaciones con estudiantes de secundaria.

palabras clave: comunidades de investigación; raza y racismo; enseñanza de la historia.

dwelling with middle schoolers on race and racism in us history

introduction

In a 2018 article, Darren Chetty draws attention to a serious problem in the field of Philosophy for/with Children (P4/WC). Framed as gated, Chetty challenges the role of reasonableness in the creation and function of the community of inquiry (Chetty, 2018; Sharp, 1987). A community of inquiry based on an ahistoric conception of reasonableness not only limits what can be said but who can say what. Chetty ends the critique by calling on P4C practitioners to de-center reasonableness and re-center historical perspectives to challenge racialized common sense in the community of inquiry. I'm motivated by the call from Chetty to center historical perspectives in the community inquiry and forgo the traditional commitment to reasonableness in dialogical deliberation (Chetty, 2018).

This paper reports how I facilitated philosophical conversations with middle schoolers on issues of race and racism in United States (US) history—inspired by how Chetty and Abigail Bentley (Chetty et al., 2020) conducted philosophical conversations on race and racism, I frame my pedagogical approach as *dwelling* (Meghna Gupta, 2018). Like Chetty, I facilitated philosophical conversations on race and racism while sitting in a half circle, prompting discussion through engagement with shared stimuli. Unlike Chetty and Bentley, who recruited adult participants from their campus, I enacted these conversations with middle schoolers.

In the summer of 2023 I taught a course, “Race and Resistance in the United States,” to seventy-five high-achieving Black and Latine¹ middle schoolers. For the summer enrichment program, I was tasked with teaching US history through an amplification of multicultural voices and examination of activism against racial and social domination. In addition to lectures, source analysis, and experiential learning activities, the students and I engaged in weekly philosophical conversations on what we read and analyzed throughout the week. Over five weeks of instruction, the students and I had four philosophical conversations

¹ On the meaning and use of Latine, see (Freeland, 2024). I also follow the APA style guide for capitalizing racial and ethnic identities, see (*Racial and Ethnic Identity*, n.d.).

across five different sections. The summer enrichment program crafted an exceptional space for pedagogical experimentation while providing social, academic, and mental health services for all the students enrolled.

In setting up and facilitating the four philosophical conversations, I approached dwelling in the following ways. First, I centered present and past multicultural perspectives and experience. Second, the students and I did not establish ground rules—the terms and conditions of our conversations remained open for debate. Third, I encouraged students to cite their personal experience and framed emotional engagement with others as legitimate practices of deliberation. Fourth, I intentionally began the conversations with “the experiences and philosophical thinking of People of Colour,” (Chetty & Ferner, 2020). This includes, Chetty notes, actions taken by “people racialized as white toward People of Colour,” (Chetty & Ferner, 2020). Fifth, I was theoretically aware and emotionally sensitive to the dynamics of discussing race and racism. Sixth, and finally, I intentionally sat with discomfort and allowed for dissensus—I neither expected nor required comfort or consensus.

This paper begins with my approach to creating the course and setting up the philosophical conversations. The second section highlights two challenges—trust and time—before introducing and reflecting on the conversations. The third section presents and analyzes two exchanges of the conversations. The fourth section reflects on an enduring challenge for dwelling on race and racism in schools across the US.

the approach

The stated educational aim of the private educational access organization I taught for was clear: to prepare Black and Latine students for success at elite high schools, colleges, and universities. For the summer enrichment program, students are required to take courses across the liberal arts curriculum while also engaging in various socio-emotional and physical activities. The summer academic schedule spans five weeks, four take place at the home institution while the last week takes place on the campus of an elite private school. The program staff offers extensive support for both teachers and students. Each teacher is provided two

college-enrolled teaching assistants who help in planning and organizing materials and assessing student work. Students have access to an excellent support staff when academic, social, and emotional problems arise. Taken together, the summer enrichment program offers an outstanding educational environment that balances rigor, experimentation, and playfulness. While the enrichment program took place outside the bounds of traditional schooling, the basic grammar of schooling remained ever present (Tyack & Tobin, 1994).

The course was already in place before I began teaching, but I was encouraged to shape the curriculum as I saw fit. As a survey course of US history, spanning from the founding of the Republic to the Civil Rights Movements, the aim was twofold. Critically analyze the mechanism of race and racism to understand the American past; center and amplify non-White historical agency and voice. The explicit and intentional use of Critical Race Theory and multicultural knowledge production was part of the design. Because the students will enter elite White spaces, they should see themselves in the past and gain the necessary knowledge to challenge and critique the traditional bounds of US history.

To that end, the course centered around four questions:

1. How and why was race created?
2. Why did Americans harm other Americans?
3. How do you see the world?
4. How does the world see you?

Using *Stamped Racism, Antiracism, and You* (2020) by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi as the central text, each week followed a similar format. The first and second days interchanged between direct instruction, close reading, and classroom discussions. The third and fourth days were dedicated to analyzing primary and secondary sources based on the time periods and themes covered in the pages of *Stamped*. The fifth day was dedicated to dwelling together on a central question that connected what was read and studied throughout the week.

The weekly philosophical conversations unfolded in several steps. First, breaking from conventional P4C pedagogical practice, I picked the question and attached a short textual or visual stimulus to begin the conversation (Reynolds,

2023). While sitting in a circle of desks and chairs, I first read the question, read the text or introduced the image, then I asked: What comes to your mind? This way of holding the conversations was inspired from reading Amos Bronson Alcott's *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (1836). Importantly, the students and I did not set ground rules. Before the first conversation, I expressed my intent to keep the conversations as free flowing as possible and encouraged them to jump in the conversations when they liked, raising hands was not required (although many students did, and I frequently would interject to let the group know who was in line to speak after they gestured toward me). While not required, students often referred to *Stamped* or the prompt when agreeing and disagreeing over what was said. I also made clear that not participating in the conversations was okay, students were assessed solely on the written reflection that came after the conversation, not on how much or whether they participated in the conversation.

As the conversations proceeded, I focused on four things: asking clarifying questions, encouraging expansion of thought, restating interesting and important points, and managing the flow by stopping and starting conversations while switching the direction, if needed, by asking new questions. I made a personal commitment to allow for maximal disagreement and tried not to intervene when voices were raised, or emotions ran high. But if a physical threat, a deeply personal insult arose, or a comment reified racist or colonist tropes, I planned to stop the conversation and address the incident head on. I intended to both call out the incident and call in the student after the conversation ended (Rogers, n.d.). I recorded each conversation, so students could listen back as they answered the central question in a written reflection. Students were encouraged to pull evidence from what they read in *Stamped*, the primary and secondary sources they studied, and what was said during the conversations.

The conversations revolved around the following questions:

1. How and why was race created?
2. John Brown: Martyr or Murderer?
3. Why did US citizens harm other US citizens?

Inspired by a debate I listened to between John McWhorter and Gloria Ladson-Billings on Critical Race Theory in schools (2021) and reading Lawrence

Blum's *High Schools, Race, and American's Future* (2012), I decided to bring in text directly from academic scholarship. The first prompt was a snippet from Cheryl Harris's (1993) classic paper, "Whiteness as Property." The second prompt was pulled from the American Anthropological Association's (1998) statement on race. For the third conversation we looked at *The Last Moments of John Brown*, a painting by Thomas Hovenden (1882). The text for the final was cited from "Schooling as a White Good" by Benjamin Justice (2023).

two challenges

Building trust and finding time were the two biggest challenges when dwelling on race and racism in US history. Developing trust between and amongst ourselves was necessary for the conversations to deal with difficult history while speaking truthfully about race and racism. Perhaps the biggest thing to confront were our different racial identities. I, the teacher, was the only White (Latine) person in the classroom. The difference in racial identity was compounded by the imbalance of pedagogical power between teacher and student. I was as honest and explicit as possible when discussing whiteness—I made clear the privileges historically afforded to White people throughout US history while also being honest, if warranted, when I experienced White advantage in my own life. There was one time, for example, when my racial identity was brought to the fore of a conversation. A student, a Black girl, was telling a story of a time she felt a White lady was racially profiling her. While asking a clarification question, I noted that she was White like me. The student responded, "Yea, but you're not that type of a White person." This comment stuck with me. The comment spoke to a static view of racial identity. Namely, there are good and bad types of White people; such a view, consequently, can constrict inquiry when teaching race as a subject of study (Thompson, 2022). But the comment also signaled a recognition of epistemic safety. The comment communicated an underlying trust between this student and me—as a White person who will not racially profile her and as a teacher with whom she can speak openly and frank with. Such epistemic trust, I hope, was felt by most of the students during our conversations.

Time was also a major challenge. Both in the constricted five weeks of instruction and in the forty-five minutes I dedicated to having the weekly philosophical conversations. Given these two restrictions on time, I felt an intense urge to jump in whenever silence cast over the conversations. Especially in the beginning, we confronted intervals of silence. But it is key, I think, to resist the need to interject as a facilitator. Students should be given the space to sit with it. Participation in dialogue, even at the microlevel, is not simply a matter of choice (Burbules, 2000, p. 262). In my attempt to dwell I not only tried to forgo prescribed dialogical commitments (i.e. the establishment of ground rules and the need for group consensus while allowing for oppositional disagreement) but also understood the limited emancipatory value of dialogue in the classroom. In addition, unlike Chetty and Bentley, I did not employ the spectrum activity. Before their conversations were filmed (Gupta, 2018), Chetty and Bentley read to their participants a series of statements on procedural and conceptual positions, participants were encouraged to position in the room to signal their agreement of the given statement (for more on the activity and the statements, see Chetty et al., 2020).

In anticipation for distressing moments and consideration of student well-being, I relied on relational strategies through active listening and yearned to foster human connection (Way & Nelson, 2018). In other words, I made time outside of the classroom to build authentic relationships with students. For example, if I saw them walking the hallways, I asked how they were doing; if I noticed something off, I checked in on how they were feeling; if teachers were invited, I participated in extracurricular activities; if they needed another player, I played basketball; most importantly, inside and outside the classroom, I listened. As Megan Lavery (2015) has argued, the practice of philosophizing with children is a form of listening education. While I noted what was said to facilitate the conversation, I also bore witness to how students were emotionally and physically reacting to the conversation (Hansen, 2017). Relying on relationships fostered, if a student's well-being was negatively affected, I intended to check-in with them and individually address any issues that arose during our conversations and throughout the course.

distressing moments

In what follows I quote two extended exchanges from the second and third conversations, both come from the first class. The names of the students are redacted; some parts of the conversation are lightly edited for clarity. Before I introduce and reflect on parts of the conversation, there is a need to note the legal backdrop.

In the two years (2021-2022) before and during (2023) the conversations, state legislatures across the US introduced legislation that banned or constricted the teaching and discussion of racism and sexism in K-12 classrooms. Most of the state legislation came from a model legislation developed by Stanley Kurtz. The seventh provision of Section B in The Partisanship Out of Civics Act (Kurtz, 2021) outlaws the following: "... (f) an individual, by virtue of his to her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex; (g) an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex..." If our conversations had taken place under the seventh provision in Section B, our conversations probably would have been deemed unlawful. (The model legislation, however, was not enacted in the state we dwelled in.) The pedagogical practice of dwelling is intimately tied to Megan Boler's pedagogy of discomfort, a pedagogy that encourages students to wrestle with emotional distress when faced with "inscribed habits of (in)attention," (Boler, 1999). The seventh provision of Section B in The Partisanship Out of Civics Act can be read as an explicit civic punishment of teachers who do not enforce ignorance by excluding knowledge, on the grounds of psychologically protecting students. In short, the act functions as a legal mandate to construct a gated community of inquiry across public school classrooms (Chetty, 2018). As the first exchange demonstrates below, students are not only capable but interested in discussing the issues sanctioned by The Partisanship Out of Civics Act.

first exchange

Student #1: I disagree with the idea that racism will never come to an end. Everything that has a beginning must come to an end. Some ideologies from the olden times died off over time like bloodletting.

Teacher: Can you define bloodletting for us?

Student #1: Bloodletting is a medical term. Just, uh, if you got a bacteria or bad, uh, stuff in your body, they just cut a part of your arm open and let the blood flow out and hope it gets clean. All right. Uh, so ideologies like that they disappear over time. And so, uh, like it says in *Stamped*, to make America not racist, you must, uh, realize where the problem of racism, uh, originates. It originates from uh, the rich White people which originates from the south and that's, uh, and limited, uh, books in the south, uh, transforms the ideas of people in the south.

Teacher: Is it just the south?

Student #1: Well not just the south, but it's more prominent in the south because of most the banned books are in the south. My history teacher told me that the South's concept of the Civil War is...the South wanted to leave America because America was, uh, sooner or later gonna get rid of their uh, slaves, which was happening sooner and sooner. The South says it's because of, uh, legal issues with their slaves, with their, uh, legal issues with well equals, uh, laws between the south and the north. So sooner or later once that barrier breaks, uh, all that knowledge that was being kept from the South will be given back. The racism sooner or later will die.

What role, if any, does the facilitator have to qualify assertions? A wealth of historical and social science scholarship has argued that structural racism was foundational to the very creation of the US, across Northern, Southern, and Western state formation (Blackhawk, 2023). The origin of racism, some historians now contend, was built into the settlement of North American land and the creation of the American republic (Hernández, 2017; Rana, 2011; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). To locate the origins of racism more in the South than the North, as student #1 argues, is a contestable position. In fact, student #1's position can be read as a reasonable stance on racism. Namely, racism is a result of ignorance, therefore, the more knowledge people gain on the issue of racism, more racial progress will follow, which will eventually bring an end to racism. Critical race theorists, however, argue that racism functions as a social system that rewards certain racialized people with special rights and privileges while harming others who are not a part of the dominant racial group. Racial progress, then, comes from recognizing this system of racialized social domination while dismantling and redistributing the special rights and privileges from the dominant racialized group to all groups.

Student #1, therefore, is not asserting a false belief but it is important to qualify how student #1's opinion fits within the larger academic debate.

Qualification, however, not only takes away from the flow of the conversation but brings back into focus the norms of reasonableness. As Chetty (2018, p. 46) writes, "...reasonableness can involve not just a cognitive model or a set of procedural norms, but also an accepted set of behaviors." The accepted set of behaviors structure who and what gets recognized as reasonable. It is important to note that the cognitive model, procedural norms, and accepted behaviors of reasonableness also shape how a facilitator facilitates the conversation. Thus, on the question of whether to qualify what student #1 said, I wondered—in the pursuit of challenging a reasonable position—if I would be enacting a hidden curriculum of reasonableness.

Student #2: Ya'll can go

Student #3: Um, okay, I don't remember when, but Student #1 said that all ideas must come to an end. Let's say slavery. Slavery was a powerful thing back then. It lasted for a really long period of time, but then it ended up like there's no more slavery. So maybe in a couple hundreds of years, maybe thousands in, that depends on how big the idea is and how, how it is implemented in our society that it'll end up disappearing, but it'll take time. Uh, and for example, the idea of race is so big that if you think symbolically White represents life, red represents blood, and Black represents death. In many movies, people that have a Black coat for example, or a Black cape, they're usually the bad, the bad person. While the one that has the White cape is the hero.

Student #4: I disagree with the idea that all ideas will die.

Teacher: Can I hold you there? We had a line, then I'll get you in.

Student #5: I actually disagree with what you said because I think comparing bloodletting dying out as an idea and a racist idea dying out. I think that's two completely different things because racism and slavery, I mean slavery was way bigger than bloodletting and it took way more to stop. And racism would take not, maybe not a war, but it would take a lot longer,

Student #3: But it will end.

Student #5: I don't think so.

Student #2: Um, so I agree with Student #5 because like bloodletting, they got more information and they found out that like it was dangerous, right? For racism, like it's been going on for so long and it's such...racism is idea while bloodletting was a practice and you can end a practice, but an idea is like, so like deep into our society that it could take so long that maybe like the world would end before racism ends. That's why I think like it'll always be a part of our society. One person will always think...

Student #4: I do disagree with you Student #1, because I don't wanna bring another topic into this, but I'm gonna briefly touch on another topic because bloodletting, that's not good. Cutting your, like, cutting your arm open is not good. And maybe that was good for them at the time, but over time technology has advanced and stuff. So now there's other ways of doing it and, and um, racism, it isn't really something that simple. Technology can't just advance to remove racism. Racism is an idea, not a practice. Racism isn't something that can just be okay, well we just don't do it anymore. There's

always going to be at least one, there's always gonna be at least one family that is racist because of the ideas that were spread so long ago.

It is important to note that the conventional goals of the community of inquiry (Lipman, 1976; Sharp, 1987) come into play while dwelling--students are building ideas off each other, uncovering assumptions, reflecting and discovering through dialogue. Student #3 agrees with Student #1, all ideas will eventually come to an end. Student #3 then reflects on how racism shows up in our society through language and popular culture. Student #4 disagrees with student #1 and student #3, all ideas will not necessarily come to an end. Student #5 then challenges the comparison between bloodletting and racism, "that's two completely different things." Student #2 extends Student #5's challenge by uncovering an assumption--bloodletting is a practice; racism is an idea. An idea, unlike a practice, means "it could take so long that maybe the world would end before racism ends." Student #4, then, reflects on the role of technology in relation to bloodletting. While medical technology can advance to a point where it replaces old practices, racism is different: "There's always going to be at least one...one family that is racist." An important difference from the traditional community of inquiry, then, comes from an embrace of dissensus.²

Student #1: So I wanna contradict, uh, I wanna go against Student #2's point. That's your name, right?

Student #2: Uh, wow, it's been three weeks. Seriously?

Student #1: All right, uh, so you said, uh, slavery, uh, racist ideas will never end because they, could you repeat your point again?

Student #2: Um, because it will be so many years that the world will probably end before

Student #1: Uh, about, uh, so people don't get, not you said, uh, sorry, bloodletting people got more knowledge about bloodletting and how it was faulty, correct?

Student #2: Correct

Student #1: Correct. So people got knowledge, right?

Student #2: Mhm.

Student #1: Did the south get knowledge because they're getting banned books about slave uh, about racist ideas?

Student #2: Yeah.

Student #1: So they're getting knowledge, aren't they?

² As David Kennedy (2012, p. 41) notes: the Lipman-inspired community of inquiry's "dialectical character" is both "deconstructive" and "seeks an ultimate goal of consensus..." But, as Sarah Davey (2004, p. 14) argues, "...in the community of inquiry it is not always important to aim for consensus." The point I am trying to communicate here is how dwelling embraces dissent by adhering to a non-idealized form of dialogic deliberation.

Student #6: But there's a distinct difference between practice and an idea. Race is an idea, not a practice. Ending a practice, like Student #6 said, is easy. Ending a social issue is hard.

Student #5: Especially since our country was built on that social issue.

Teacher: Expand on that.

Student #5: So it was, this country was built completely off of slavery. So how could you, like it most likely it wouldn't go away, and I think if it, even if it would go away, do you guys think that it would be forgotten?

Student #1: It will not be forgotten because people still remember bloodletting.

Student #3: We still remember slavery. Slavery is a big part of our history. Race and someday it will be, uh, the huge part that changed the world, that started a war but also ended them. And Student #4, you said that there was be at least one family that had racist ideas, but there is this thing that when you are the only person in a...or the only family in a world full of people that believe something different, it'll just feel so bad to have something so different that you'll end up changing your beliefs. Or maybe you won't change them, but you won't share them.

Teacher: Expand.

Student #3: So maybe you have, um, you are a racist person. You have, you live in a world full of non-racist parents, people, and then you have a daughter or son, it doesn't matter. Um, you won't tell them what you think because then they will be like the weird, uh, kid in their class or in the world and then it someday, maybe it will stop.

Dwelling requires discomfort. The extended and inquisitive disagreement between student #1 and student #2 is but one example. Student #5 asserts that “our country was built on that social issue,” referring to the legacy of racialized slavery. In response to a clarification stated by student #6, who draws a finer distinction between racism and bloodletting (student #2 claimed racism is an idea, whereas student #6 states that race is an idea) and argues that ending a medical practice is easy while ending a social issue is hard, student #5 notes that slavery was foundational to the building and formation of “our country.” Implicit within student #5’s claim is the role race and racism played in enslavement. Student #3, then, picks up on student #5 – they use slavery as an example of how an idea begins and ends. The Civil War was fought over slavery, which brought an end to the legal practice of it. Thus, why can’t that also happen with racism? Student #3 goes onto note how expression of unpopular beliefs can ostracize people, which, they argue, can lead to changing social practice.

Throughout this exchange, the weight of past action and the feeling of psychological distress was ever present. The weight and distress were particularly felt by me as the facilitator of the conversation: Should I have qualified the idea that “this country was built completely off of slavery”? The back-and-forth

between student #1 and student #2 felt especially tense, should I have stepped in? Why did I feel the weight of my ancestral past in this moment? Contemplation of history through reasoned disagreement also requires discomfort. The inverse reduces the past to a single, comfortable, and simplified grand narrative (Iumetccolumbia, 2013; Stanley, 2024). Dwelling on race and racism, then, becomes one way of doing historically informed philosophy. As Chetty (2018) argues, critical race philosophers often look to the past and employ historical analysis to illuminate the mechanisms of racially-coded forms of social domination and control. The examined life, ultimately, requires historical analysis to make sense of present concepts and future conditions.

The first exchange captured moments during the second conversation that centered around the question of how and why race was created. The second exchange presents parts of the third conversation, which considers if John Brown should be understood as a martyr or a murderer.

second exchange

Student #1: Okay, if we're gonna talk about suffering, right? And how this [the emancipation of slavery in the United States after the Civil War] decreased suffering. What about all the suffering that happened after the Civil War?

Student #2: Yeah. Exactly.

Student #1: No, no, no. Just listen. If we freed slaves, what happened to slaves after the Civil War ended? They became slaves in everything except for name. More suffering was created because the only reason that White people didn't like kill Black people every single second they had is because they made them money. Now Black people aren't making them money, and the government isn't gonna do anything, uh, to stop them, so it's really increasing suffering for Black people.

Student #3: Would you rather Black people continue being slaves?

Student #4: I think segregation was a lot better than slavery.

Student #1: Not necessarily.

Student #4: Explain.

Student #1: If you have everything that you worked for right after slavery, you built a whole town like Black Wall Street, right? And then you have to see that everything burnt down, while your people that you know, died in that fire. And the government isn't gonna do anything to stop you, to stop the people that did that.

At its core, the democratic agonism (Mouffe, 1999) inherent within dwelling goes against the need to find consensus. Unlike the proscriptive rules-based community of inquiry, the pedagogical practice of dwelling challenges the hegemony of reasonableness (Burbules, 2000). Because the norms of

reasonableness are not the aim, conventional “no go areas” become viable places to go when dwelling (Chetty & Suissa, 2016). Take the assertion made by Student #1, namely the suffering experienced by Black Americans remained after the emancipation of legal slavery in the US. Students #1 claims that after emancipation enslaved African Americans became “slaves in everything except for the name.” In addition, the student goes on to claim that the “only reason that White people didn’t like kill Black people every single second they had is because they made them money.” Such an assertion is not only unsettling, especially felt by the only White person sitting in the room, but would be procedurally impermissible had reasonable rules of engagement been in place. Had I not committed to dwelling, I would have stopped the conversation and made clear that this was a “no go area.” While I sat with the discomfort at this time, as the conversation went on, I became uncomfortable with the discomfort.

Student #4: Most of segregation was really just in their head and slavery was more physical. Although there was some points in segregation when like...

Student #1: So, you're saying the church bombing in Alabama was in their head and it wasn't because the KKK said that the government isn't gonna do anything against me hurting these Black people because I have no use for these Black people, so I might as well just kill them.

Student #5: So, you think that slavery was better than segregation?

Student #1: I didn’t say that. I think their equally as bad.

Student #6: But after slavery, we are all free at this point. So that’s better for us.

Student #7: When they were slaves, they were told that they were less than the White people. When they were segregated, they were told that they were equal, but they were treated bad. They were given hope and they, they were treated equally as bad if not worse. They were sent to prison just because they were that way.

Student #1: Can you imagine everything you had being slowly and surely teared away from you? That is one of the most devastating things in the world when you're a slave.

Student #5: Well, what do you have as a slave?

Student #1: You have nothing but you, you're not immediately gonna die because they, the White people, they need you to make money. If there were no slaves, the White people wouldn't have money. But now since slavery is abolished, there's no need for a lot of these racist White people that think Black people are horrible, disgusting creatures to keep them around. All they have to do is kill them and the government will do nothing about it because the government turns a blind eye to the people that give them the most money.

Student #8: And also like the entirety, like back then or like still now, the entirety of America was built on Black people, like by Black people or like by minorities. So basically they still needed those Black people to build stuff for them.

Teacher: Who's they?

Student #8: Rich White people.

Student #9: I wanna like, I wanna kind of agree with you, Student #1, because segregation and slavery, they were pretty similar, but slavery was a much more intense and more physical. And so the ideology of, is that like the ideology or the definition of slavery was that slaves were, or Black people were less than, or criminals or savages and stuff. So, and segregation was like a way less intense, a little bit more freedom than slavery, but it was, less physical. So, um, segregation, they still had like freedom. They still had like right to own homes and stuff, but it was, it was, it was a little better than slavery only because they were, it was like way rarer than segregation had way their times of like Black people getting beaten on.

Student #10: Okay, well like Student #1, this is what you're basically saying. Would you rather slaves be tortured every day of their life?

Student #1: Okay, that's not what I said at all. Not at all. I'm saying that what happened after slavery, wasn't much better. I...

Teacher: Can I just stop you for a second? The tone that you're giving off is combative. So, if you're trying to convince one of your points, be mindful of the way it's coming off. Your points are valid, but the energy that you give off blocks another person from being able to understand what you're saying because they're more focused on how you're saying it than what you're saying. So, take a deep breath, I'm gonna come back to you in two seconds.

Taken together, the points made and developed echo cutting edge scholarly debates over race and racism in US history (see, for example, Gordon-Reed et al., 2022). Ultimately, though, I end up stopping student #1 – the distress this time was palpable throughout the room, which was expressed by the tone of student #1's speech and the agitation of students who disagreed with the ultimate claim. I felt at this moment a real tension between my role as a teacher and my role as a facilitator. I felt a need to check the student. I wanted to impart a lesson: the way things are said is often more important than what is being said. The move to teach this lesson communicated a hidden lesson: "combative" tones were not acceptable and would be shut down. In this moment, I went against my commitments to allow for maximal disagreement and emotional engagement with others.

Dwelling requires that I too confront "inscribed habits of (in)attention," (Boler, 1999). I not only interrupt but I comment on the "combative" tone used by

the student. Consequently, I reinforce a norm of reasonableness—the need to maintain a tone of civility—by engaging in a form of tone policing (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019). The action I take to police student #1's tone came as we were discussing the role of violence in maintaining racial stratification. The labeling of student #1's tone as “combative” denotes a potential for violence. As the facilitator, who is racialized as a White male, to label student #1, a racialized Black male, as engaging in a “combative” tone reifies a dehumanizing imagination of Black boys in the US (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). While I do invite student #1 back into the conversation later on, this moment highlights a responsibility—especially for facilitators racialized as White—to confront and deconstruct “inscribed habits of (in)attention,” (Boler, 1999) when dwelling on issues of race and racism with racially diverse co-inquirers.

dwelling on race and racism in a white good

Taken together, my experience dwelling with middle schoolers on race and racism in US history was privileged. The summer enrichment program provided expansive material and social support for both students and teachers. Removed from the ordinary pressures of schooling, the students and I interacted with each other in a less formal, more relaxed environment. The middle schoolers were academically engaged and socially mature. They handled distressing moments with grace and clarity; they were attentive throughout the conversations and completed the reflections with thoughtful, sustained responses. The conditions for our dwelling experience will be categorically different when conducted in traditional classrooms. Despite the advantages of our experience, dwelling can be an important pedagogical approach teachers could try when facilitating philosophical conversations in their classrooms.

But, dwelling on race and racism in US history is illegal (or at least legally questionable) across public classrooms in twenty states (Schwartz, 2021). An explicit outlawing of “bearing responsibility” for past actions and feeling “psychological distress” when discussing racism in the classroom operates as a form of racial erasure to preserve White ignorance (Kurtz, 2021; Mills, 2017). As Charles Mills (2015) writes:

Racism as idea and ideology, racism as national and global system, racial atrocity and racial exploitation, are collectively denied or at least causally minimized. Not merely in terms of factual account, but conceptual framework, a fanciful history is constructed whose upshot is the denial or downplaying of the extent of the violence and subordination of the previous epoch of formal Euro-domination, its structural and long-term shaping of systemic white advantage, and an accompanying white “innocence” about the role of racial exploitation in making the world what it is today, particularly its transcontinental distribution of “Northern” wealth and “Southern” poverty, but also its national racial partners of white-over-non-white privileging.

Even in states where the law is not in play, the conventional historical narrative taught functions as “fanciful history” that is more propaganda than an honest account of the past (Stanley, 2024). This is because schooling in the US, as Benjamin Justice (2023) argues, was created and functions as a White good. Compared to political and economic frames, the White good framework links schooling to the colonization of land, the conceptual erasure of non-White people, and reinterprets US schooling as a mechanism of White supremacy. The preemptive censoring of dwelling on race and racism in US history, then, can also be understood as a legislative act by US legislators to ensure schooling remains a White good.

Justice’s reinterpretation of the history of schooling in the US echoes Jonathan Wurtz’s (2024) deconstruction of P4/WC as a trojan horse for educational reform. The trojan horse argument recognizes the “coercive and hierarchical nature” of US public schooling, but maintains P4/WC should be practiced in schools as a way to reform school culture and the educational system from the “inside,” (Wurtz, 2024, p. 4). Part of Wurtz’s challenge of the trojan horse argument rests on tying the history of educational reform with the history of race and racism in the US. Calling on the work of Derrick Bell (2004) and Tommy Curry (2008), Wurtz interprets the decision and legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education* as “a weapon of racism that instrumentalized the moral discourse of anti-racism for the sake of white supremacy,” (Wurtz, 2024, p. 17).³ Taking a racial realist position, Wurtz makes clear the connections between school reform and racial domination in the US with explicit reference to the Partisanship Out of Civics Act. He urges P4/WC practitioners, consequently, to look beyond schools as ideal places of

³ As Justice’s (2023) article makes clear and a recent book by Jarvis Givens (2025) argues: White supremacy and racial domination were foundational in the formation of schooling in the US.

practice. With Wurtz's arguments in mind, I do not see dwelling as a trojan horse to enact racial progress through educational reform. Rather, I see dwelling as a pedagogical practice that can function either outside or inside schools. Dwelling refuses claims of teleological progressive change and should not be understood as a one-size-fit-all solution. By centering multicultural histories and experiences of people of color, dwelling better accounts for structural (especially racial) inequality and is more inclusive of inquirers' identities than conventional P4/WC practice.

Ultimately, if a teacher dwells with their students on race and racism in a US classroom, they will enact a type of fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021). Whether the state has enacted a ban or not, dwelling on race and racism is an explicit attempt to subvert the traditional historical narrative and norms of reasonableness. But for White teachers the institutional and narrative structures (which dwelling aims to challenge) were created and designed to promote White advantage and ignorance. An especially enduring challenge emerges when considering if and under what conditions White teachers will adopt fugitive pedagogical practices. Dwelling on race and racism, ultimately, offers (White and non-White teachers) one potential way.

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