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

the lesson

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abstract
The following contribution is a work of fiction, submitted as a response to the call for papers for this dossier on 'racism, colonialism and philosophy for /with children: praxis in non-ideal contexts'. Putatively written by the English-language philosopher A.M. Moskovitz (with an introductory note by Susan Lang), the story describes the 'author's' childhood experience of a philosophy outreach programme. A stranger visits a classroom and enacts white forms of discursive violence upon the children with the perceived aim of oppression and control. The submission is followed by 'uncomfortable meditations', intended to stimulate thought and discussion.

keywords: fiction; discursive violence; oppression; control.

la lección

resumen
El siguiente texto es una obra de ficción, presentada en respuesta a la convocatoria de artículos para este dossier sobre "Racismo, colonialismo y filosofía para/con niñas y niños: praxis en contextos no ideales". Supuestamente escrita por el filósofo angloparlante A.M. Moskovitz (con una nota introductoria

de Susan Lang), la historia describe la experiencia infantil de la autora en un programa de divulgación filosófica. Un desconocido visita un aula y ejerce formas blancas de violencia discursiva sobre niñas y niños con el objetivo percibido de opresión y control. La presentación va seguida de «meditaciones incómodas» destinadas a estimular la reflexión y el debate.

palabras clave: ficción; violencia discursiva; opresión; control.

a lição

resumo
O seguinte texto é um trabalho de ficção submetido como resposta à chamada para publicação no dossiê "racismo, colonialismo e filosofia para/com crianças: praxis em contextos não-ideais". Supostamente escrito pelo filósofo anglófono A. M. Moskovitz (com uma nota introdutória de Susan Lang), a história descreve a experiência do autor em um programa de divulgação filosófica em sua infância. Um desconhecido visita uma sala de aula e exerce formas brancas de violência discursiva sobre as crianças com o objetivo percebido de opressão e control. O texto é seguido por "meditações desconfortáveis", destinadas a estimular a reflexão e o debate.

palavras-chave: ficção; violência discursiva; opressão; controle.

the lesson

The reclusive academic, A.M. Moskovitz, is known – if he is known at all – for his contributions to philosophical horror. His stories, published in his ill-fated collection *Notes from the Crawl Room* (Bloomsbury, 2021), deal with the affective dimension of life within the analytic, anglophone tradition. To some, he is merely a made-up purveyor of semi-readable pulp; to others, his writing captures the psychic harm that results from certain 'logical' forms of thinking and talking. In the following short reflection, found among his personal effects, Moskovitz describes philosophy as it is experienced by a child – and possibly the child is him, and possibly he is the oppressive Mr Matty Dewer – and the fears it instils. It has been submitted to this volume because, despite his resistance to be drawn on the topic, the horror appears to emerge from, revolve around, and seep out of Whiteness.

Susan K. Lang, 30th November 2025

I was a child, not much older than seven I suppose, and brimming with all the childish fears common to that age, quicksand, mannequins, spiders, space – inner space and outer – and the true if distant fact that at some point the sun, which I was supposed never to look at directly, would die a cold and planet-killing death. Perhaps, back then, some of these fears were exacerbated by a recent move to the city – this, despite the efforts made by my teachers and my fellow students to welcome me, or at least to avoid actively excluding me. My parents loved me, though they, like the sun, would one day die as well, and my younger sister was tolerable despite being my intellectual inferior, and my grandparents were still alive and, in those days, sensical.

I suppose you could say I had a nervous disposition, or an active imagination, or a tendency to worry, but I was not what they once called 'damaged' or 'troubled' or otherwise a 'problem' child, whatever those poor souls are taken to be. Constitutionally or otherwise, I was sensitive to danger, which I suppose is why I responded in the way that I did when the man appeared in our classroom.

The man was an average man. He was a man of unremarkable height, and an average level of facial hair, a pale hue, with pink cheeks and the most ephemeral of blue tinges to the veins that latticed the backs of his hands. He was what some of my classmates would refer to, knowingly, as *White*, and this was a characteristic that I knew he and I shared, although I had been informed in

roundabout ways that I was not always wholly White, because sometimes I was Jewish, an equation I found considerably more confusing than those we faced daily in our mathematics lessons.

This white man, this blonde man with his patchy blonde beard, arrived in our classroom on a grey Tuesday morning in November, accompanied by our class teacher Mr Darryl Robson, a tall, kindly Liverpudlian, whom my mother admired for his poetic turns of phrase, his boot-strap mentality and, I suspect, for his well-defined forearms, which emerged that day, as indeed most days, from his rolled-up sleeves. That morning, our Mr Robson arrived with a small but unmistakable divot between his eyebrows, and while he greeted us with his usual enthusiasm, I remember sensing tension, and seeing his long, graceful fingers curling and uncurling at his sides like spiders in their death throes.

'…And this is Mr Dewer', said our precious teacher, who like Socrates was mortal and would one day die along with the sun and my parents. He indicated the man, the stranger, who was at this point leaning against the doorframe of the classroom, a threshold man, neither inside nor out, and perhaps not a man at all.

'Matty', corrected the threshold man, this stranger, placing a worrying hand on Mr Robson's fore-arm, which while well-defined seemed suddenly fragile under those blue-latticed fingers. It was an off-hand gesture and what I would later come to understand as an action of power. Then the man smiled at us. 'You can call me Matty.'

By this stage in my school career, either through classroom direction or playground discussion, I had discovered that any number of previously unthinkable things were not only thinkable but possible: there were miniscule creatures living inside our bodies that both helped and hindered our biological functioning; outer space was not only airless, but also impossibly cold; babies were the result of the inopportune mixing of genitals. Many bizarre things were possible, yet calling this pale, seemingly smiling man Matty did not, just then, seem to be among them.

'Who is he?' asked Ricky, voicing the uncertainty and suspicion we all felt. 'We're supposed to have Art with Helen and Cathy.'

Ricky was the strongest child in our class, despite being one of the shortest. The only person who had come close to beating him in our ritualistic games of Peanuts was Mariam W., who had lost on a technicality, having failed to keep her wrist rigid throughout the contest. I believe it was because of his strength and his associated good-standing amongst his peers, that Ricky felt able to speak to grown-ups in such a commanding fashion. I admired him, and was heartened whenever he acknowledged my existence, an occurrence that was admittedly infrequent. I was pleased he had spoken.

'Not some guy', our precious teacher chided Ricky. 'Mr Dewer is going to be working with you today. There was an announcement about it in assembly on Monday.'

'Philosophy', said Mandy Two, who was one of two Mandys in our class, and who distinguished herself from Mandy One by paying attention to the grown-ups, and wearing her hair in plaits rather than a ponytail, and by sporting blue hairbands with butterflies. I liked Mandy Two, whose given name was Mandeep because, unlike many of us, she was not ashamed to be outspoken and clever, and frequently, or at least occasionally, she shared snacks with me at breaktime. 'He's the philosophy man, the man who's going to teach us philosophy.'

This man who could not really be a man, Mr Matty Dewer, arranged his mouth into what I can only describe as a simulation of a smile. Had you asked me then to explain what disturbed me about this apparition, this pendulous man depending from the doorframe, I would have been unable to say, but I am sure I had a deep and determinate sense that something was wrong with him, and the way his smile worked was a symptom of this wrongness. His lips were too thin, and pulled back too far across his teeth, in a manner I later learned to be characteristic of corpses undergoing rigor mortis. His eyes were bright, and blue, but to my child's eyes, they seemed somehow inhuman; there was that cold, alien intelligence one finds in the movements of insects, as if he were picking over us in his mind, rolling us toward some hidden and inescapable burrow.

'I'm not going to be teaching you', said the man, 'We're going to be learning together. Philosophy isn't taught, it's a way of life!'

I didn't like the way he said *together*, which I later came to understand as another act of power. I didn't like anything about this man; I didn't like his smile or that pale, taut skin, flushed at his cheeks, where the capillaries opened into a thousand invisible tributaries, or his eyelashes, which fluttered like flies' legs, or the spore of poisonous freckles across his nose. I do not think I was the only one ill at ease, and when Mariam put up her hand to ask whether Mr Robson would be staying, many of us sighed in relief when our teacher nodded.

'But listen to Mr Dewer', said Mr Robson, gently, 'He's come here specially.' There was apprehension in his tone, which is always a profoundly unnerving emotion in an adult. 'I'll be at the back', he continued, as if the man were not a stranger, with an unpleasant smile, and hungry teeth, 'marking your Geography homework.'

'Good!' said Mr Matty Dewer. 'Well then, let's get started!'

I didn't like the way he said *let's* either.

His first instruction was to stand and then sit on the reading mat in the corner of the room, the corner by the window, which was sometimes sunny, but which on that day was desolate. My memory of this particular moment is hazy; I believe I tried to resist his command, to search for Mr Robson's eyes to communicate whatever inarticulable horror I was at that moment beginning to feel, but the next second I was sat with the rest of my class on the mat, bound by the stated will of this strange grown-up. Our precious, caring teacher walked slowly, reluctantly to the back of the room, where he sat, hunched and silent.

The stranger, the threshold man, *Matty*, placed a large sheet of A3 paper on the flaking blue foam mat and began writing on it with an unpleasantly soft pencil. He wrote the words *Ground Rules*, which Hannah read aloud, to demonstrate that she was higher in the reading tree than many of her classmates. The man, who was sat cross-legged with his back against the toy box, allowed us again to see his teeth.

'Does anyone know what a ground rule is?' he asked, and I felt a sudden subsidence in my chest, and a cold certainty that whatever he was, this man was certainly not what he pretended to be.

I was not a particularly superstitious child, but like most seven-year-olds I was awake to the possibility, hinted at in synagogue and school and often in the playground, that there was a god, and maybe more than one, and maybe several. I was also, therefore, alive to the associated possibility of something less beneficent. By this I mean, I had a sense of Hell. My understanding was, in large part, courtesy of Noah S., whose parents were evangelical Christians, and who, despite Mr Robson's earnest interventions, was often found sermonising at break-time by the bike sheds. It was Noah S., indeed, who taught me about the torture of the crucifixion, and about demons and the Devil, whose very name contained the word 'evil', and who was crafty and clinging, and desperate to keep us forever in his dungeons, which he had carved in the rock below the school.

And even though I had no supporting evidence, nor a clear line of reasoning, I was taken by the thought that the man who called himself Mr Matty Dewer had some kinship with Noah's Devil, and I was so moved by this sense of foreboding that I found myself tentatively prodding Fatima in the arm. A week earlier, I had seen my friend Michael reprimanded for prodding another child in the bottom, but Fatima's arm seemed an uncontroversial place for prodding. She turned to me, blinking, because it was rare for me to talk to anyone, let alone prod them.

'What?' she asked and this, I realised, was a question to which I had no answer. Eventually, after some thought, I reached what I took to be the most accurate articulation of the problem.

'I don't like him', I remember saying. 'I want to do Art with Helen and Cathy.'

'Me too', replied Fatima, and I was overtaken by a wave of gratitude for this display of solidarity – and then very quickly by a seeping dread as I felt the man's attention shift to us – and, though every atom of my being cautioned against it, I looked at him, just as he leaned forward and pursed his lips, and made a sound like leaking gas, *Sh*, a sound I had encountered in our phonics lessons, but which in his mouth sounded unfamiliar and threatening like the start of so many bad words, like a spell. I felt my lips seal shut and saw the same happen to Fatima,

who looked away out of shame or fear or, perhaps, both. It was a word of a power and one he used to chilling effect.

'We'll never get anything done if we talk over each other', said the man, who supposedly called himself Matty, his gums pink and bright and horribly well-flossed. 'Maybe this should be our first ground rule?' His intonation suggested a question, but he had already begun writing. *No talking over each other*, he wrote, and the tip of his pencil sunk sickeningly through the paper when he dotted the i, leaving a small but perfectly round hole that seemed to stare at me, or scream.

I had been informed by my parents that I was prone to panic in unfamiliar situations. I knew I didn't like new people, or new places, or new feelings, but I also knew that this man, or whatever he was, was not simply new, but old, exceedingly, impossibly old, even if he appeared fresh-faced and clean, and that the methods he now used to contain us were even older than he was, and that my lips were closed involuntarily, and my tongue was dead in the bed of my mouth. I looked at my class-mates, who were silent as well, worrying the soles of their shoes, picking fluff from the carpet, or simply staring wide-eyed out of the window onto the rain-spotted playground. This silence, which had fallen upon us, was not an organic silence; it was a cultivated silence, soil laced with salt granules.

'What's another ground rule?' asked the man, 'Come on, don't be shy, this space is as much your space as it is mine. Did someone say *no swearing*?'

No one, to my knowledge, had said *no swearing*, but having raised the issue, this horrifying man proceeded to write *No swearing* on the sugar paper, which was not in any way sugary, and also seemed to me increasingly less like paper than a trap. And since when, I thought, was this space his space as much as it was ours, through what secret means had he laid claim to our tables and chairs and reading mat? This, I have since realised, is how they work, because words can be charms and charms can be spells.

I looked behind me to where our teacher, Mr Robson, sat hunched by a display of flags and national flowers. He was bent, lower than anyone should be bent, his back to the reading mat, unmoving, except for an unpleasant twitching in his shoulders. From where I was sitting, I could see his neck straining, the tendons

tight and cord-like; his mouth was hidden from view, but I knew it was open in a soundless scream.

When I turned back to the mat, I found Ricky gazing at me, his eyes wide and bloodshot. His juvenile pelvic muscles had relaxed and a dark stain was spreading over the front of his trousers. No one spoke, nor moved, nor seemed to notice this mishap except for Ricky and myself.

A heavy lethargy had overtaken me and my classmates; we sat on the mat like the cat from our phonics books, rooted by a torpor unlike any I had experienced before, or since. To my child's mind, it seemed plausible that this grown-up man, this stranger with his strangely colourless hair, had some sway over the passing of time, and the ticking of the classroom clock, and the fluctuations of space, and these were mechanisms by which he controlled us, although to what end I could not then conceive. His words sank into us, or we sank into them, as the corpse sinks into the mire.

At this point, somewhere, in the darker, more closely guarded parts of my brain, the tighter neural networks, a thought had begun to emerge, a terrible thought, a surety, that if I stayed on this foam mat, in the corner of this classroom, I would never leave. True, a boy who looked like me, who talked like me, might one day step out into the school corridor, but this boy would no longer be me, but something else, a device belonging to the strange Mr Matty Dewer and whatever principality he served. This was a lesson I dearly wished to miss.

'No shouting', said the man, leaning forward on his crossed legs, although no one had shouted, although many of us tried. 'That's a good one, isn't it, everyone? Put your hands up if you think that's worth adding to the list.'

Invisible threads from invisible webs, drew our arms towards the ceiling.

At the back of the room, our teacher started to emit a mulish lowing. He was twitching more violently now, I could see, and I was relieved that his face was turned away from us, because I knew it would be somehow compromised.

'Sh' said Mr Matty Dewer, and the lowing stopped.

I am struck by the fact that, as we grow older and seemingly more mature, we try to forget the awful power of language and our fear of words. Certainly, we tell stories to explain semantic value, how terms develop and disappear, how they

act, but these stories are told to make our horror a theoretical thing. You do not need to know the difference between *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* to spot a hiding place when you find one, and know there is a reason why words are spelled. Sometimes, of course, some of us remember, or cannot forget, that fear of words. The unfortunate sense the measures taken to control words spoken, heard, read, sung and written – forbidden words, like those I whispered to myself beneath my bed covers – wicked words felt in the playground, which burned like acid on the tongue, or poison in the ear – other words, which once written must be instantly scratched out – dangerous words, which reveal some hidden part of us, some primal guilt described by Noah's sermonising. Some of us know that while no words are truly good, other words are evil – and some of us learn those words and practice them in our secret places, and use them for the furtherance of ill.

'Let's think', said Mr Matty Dewer, and there was his contraction again, which mirrored the contraction of my heart – *let us* – *let's* – which was a lie as well, creating through some horrible synergy an *us*, which was in reality determinately *him*. 'Let's have a think', he said again, 'what else can we add to our list?' Except it wasn't our list at all, it was his, and his words were creeping into our ears like spiders and casting silk around our thoughts. I was breathless and the acrid smell of Ricky's wet-patch was growing stronger and filling my lungs, and none of us could move, and words tumbled one after the other from the man's sliver-thin, chopped-liver lips into us – or not words, exactly, but sounds like words – like leaves on tombstones – like frogs in frog-holes – the sing-song wail of wind across the mouths of empty bottles – the creak in the night – the hiss of chimney soot – the begging of crickets – the whistle of nightjars – the screaming of fox cubs – the indecipherable but irresistibly compelling echoes of voices from the bottom of the well-

Sh

An incomplete word, and how does it end?

Let's think

An ambiguous contraction. *Let us think*, *will you please let us think*. An imperative, a plea.

Ground rules

To dust, grind to nothing, to earth, which is laced with worms and decomposing bodies.

And then, and I don't know how, I was at the classroom door, and it was unlocked. I turned to my classmates, still sitting on the reading mat, and found them staring back at me – Mandy, Ricky, Miriam, Noah and Fatima among them – and a few smiled weakly, and Mandy's eyes were ringed with red, and Ricky managed to nod, and all of them seemed to me to say *Go*, which is another word of power, a two-letter command that spread my fingers around the brass handle of our classroom door and twisted it. I had been spared, I thought, for reasons that were beyond me, for reasons that, coward that I was, I did not then want to understand – I had passed, some secret test, I told myself – I had passed through no virtues of my own – and so I pushed the door open and started to walk down the white linoleum – and with every step, I was certain I would feel the stranger man's hand on my shoulder, my waist, my leg, I would be dragged back with numbing words to sit with the others – but his hand never fell, and the air grew clear – I felt that familiar constriction in my throat, words overwhelmed with the swell of tears – and I pushed back the thought, which on grey days like these, when the wind rattles the windows, threatens to resurface, that maybe I had not been spared at all, and that the lesson in power continues.

unpleasant meditations:

1. How do commands like 'shh' impact a teaching space?
2. Can pedagogy be accurately described as 'horrific' and if so, whence does the horror emerge?
3. Is politesse a uniquely white mode of socialising?
4. When teaching, which 'words of power' are used to control others?
5. Are white or white-passing children complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy?
6. Is Moskovitz's depiction of an anxious, poorly adapted Jewish boy also a function of whiteness?

author's note:

This short literary intervention is an attempt to explore some of the forms of discursive violence that manifest in educational spaces – in this instance, the classroom – and to reckon with the emotional impact (the horror) of such encounters. As such, the story is informed by two intersecting strands of critical theory; critiques of educational whiteness proposed by Sara Ahmed (2012) and bell hooks (1994), among others, and critical horror studies, found in the work of Julia Kristeva (1982), Kristen Roupenian (2020) and Mark Fisher (2016). As a piece of genre fiction, it is also influenced by Thomas Ligotti (1989), Shirley Jackson (1962) and M.R. James(1931), again, alongside many others.

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