

On the Challenges of Removing Race from Relational Philosophies of Education

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In *ColorMute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*, Mica Pollock (2004),¹ notes that the word “all” comes to both highlight and mask discussion of race in the two schools her research focused on, as well as broader discussions of school policy in the US. She writes:

Race is nowhere explicit in talk of education for “all,” yet the phrase seems to generate a lot of controversy over how race does or should matter to educational policy. To some, talk of education for all specifically demands the active pursuit of racial equality; to others, the word demands that educational policy actively ignore race.²

It is clear then that even in the latter usage “all” is a committed way to talk about race, by not talking about race. Pollock states it this way, “race is deeply buried in the word and as a policy word that is colormute and race-loaded simultaneously, ‘all’ can be both a useful and a dangerous word for equality efforts.”³ There is of course a long history of euphemisms through which discussions are race loaded, yet claimed to be colormute – welfare, food stamps, stand your ground – and Pollock’s work specifically details the ways in which teachers and these two school communities deploy and work with such terms as “all.” Pollock writes not only as a researcher on these schools but also as a former teacher of one of them at a precise moment when the language of “all” became a crucial part of the policies guiding classroom practices. As a former teacher in one of these schools and as a Stanford-trained anthropologist, she goes on to make the point clear: “de-raced words we use when discussing plans for achieving racial equality can actually keep us from discussing ways to make opportunities racially equal.”⁴

Indeed, Pollock goes on to describe how teachers in her study, and the adults more generally failed to talk about race at the most important moments: “Columbus adults not only exhibited an understandable fear of reproducing anti-black ‘racism,’ but also helped reproduce such ‘racism’ *by placing the full weight and fear of racial inequality and tension on young black people rather than opening up the analysis of racial orders to include the school’s adults.*”⁵ While Pollock is generous in her engagement with and interpretations of the predominantly Euro-American teaching force of the schools she studied, it is clear that they avoided a teacher-student relation based on the racial identities of the very students they spent day after day with. They enacted a practice of education for “all,” even as they avoided the ways in which they used other coded language to note the academic and extra-curricular exclusions that occurred due to race. One could argue then that in practice the relationship they had to these youth was not respectful, encouraging of self-confidence, or exhibiting of reasonableness (on discussions the relation and legacies of racialization) or trust. Indeed, Pollock’s teacher participants make clear that they did not trust themselves to talk about race; sharing her book with the teachers in her studies they “argued that they themselves ‘lacked the language’ to talk successfully about race.”⁶

Pollock’s research is unfortunately not new information. Indeed, she notes that black youth as the ones at the center of an active analysis of race and “adults dodging the issue,” was something “DuBois would have predicted long ago.”⁷ Euro-American teachers have a difficult time talking about race then because of the “racial order” and systems of discrimination and oppression that go with it. This is, to employ two other philosophical- theoretical frameworks, to enter into the personal and institutional structure of anti-blackness in settler colonialism and likewise to acknowledge a lived acceptance of the dominant racialized socio-economic order within the colonality of power.⁸

Pollock’s work helps elaborate what I take to be a crucial aspect of Dum’s emphasis on the relational goods of education as the foundation for justice. Dum highlights the ways in which respect, self-confidence, self-esteem, trust, and effective communication are the normative aspects and thus relational standards of education. She argues that insofar as these go overlooked by some

strands of justice-oriented philosophies of education, the conception of justice is set on the wrong foundations. Those wrong foundations are those that assume an input/output conception of education whereby philosophers and other theorists consider differing ways to distribute resources for student outcomes: “Justice in education is not solely a matter of bringing about the right kinds of distributive outcomes or providing just distributions of educational resources,” she writes in *Ends, Principles, and Causal Explanation in Educational Justice*.⁹

In a way then, I read all of these terms – respect, trust, justice and educational relations – as ways of talking about race. And so, with this in mind Dum’s focus on the “internal aspects of education” and the educational relation for alternative foundations for justice is a call for racial justice. Yet, like “all,” the language is muddled and imprecise, even where we know we are talking about a disproportionately white, female teacher force. Moreover, given Pollock’s work I agree with Dum’s argument that “only if education is understood as a complex set of practices can more light be shed on the various aspects of educational justice and how justice may be attained in practice.” Likewise, I also agree with Dum’s suggestion that “participants are essential for grasping how educational practices work and how educational injustices come about.” But, I think Dum and I perhaps diverge in two primary ways: first, making racialization an explicit topic of the educational relation of participants; and second, the kinds of scholarly resources that are best suited for a discussions of the complex practices of participants and, in this instance, teachers. In using the work of Pollock, then, I am highlighting one practical issue and two methodological points. Practically, how does Dum’s model lend itself to the call by Pollock’s teachers to learn how to talk effectively about race in their educational relation, particularly if justice for Dum stems from a normative internal aspect of education that avoids racism? With regard to methodology, the study of the participants of educational relations entails that philosophers either participate in ethnographic work, rely on those who do so, or elaborate personal critical self-reflection on their pedagogical practice. Finally, insofar as educational relations are always already caught in racialized categories, philosophers committed to an understanding of the normative dimensions of educational relations should engage with the

writings of scholars from those communities. Pollock and DuBois have relevant things to say on the normative relations of/in education. When scholars ignore the intellectual labors and insights of this rich body of work, this is not only a failure of relationality but also a further marginalization of those participants in the very moment one claims to seek them out. Substantive articulations on the link between justice and racialization/anti-blackness and methodological commitments for philosophical formulations appear to me to be minimal standards in an effort to hold true to the goal of grasping the complex practices of racialized educational relations. To not do so, is to inadvertently rely on the language of “all” and to maintain a methodological practice that again obscures a fundamental topic of relations for/with the participants. In other words, we agree that we are not talking about ice cream.

SEEKING COMMON GROUND IN DUM AND ANDERSON

My differences with Dum seem to be attended to by several of her primary foils and interlocutors, in particular Elizabeth Anderson. My reading of Anderson is different from Dum’s on both the substantial problem of attending to the structure of racism inherent in the educational relation and the methodological commitments and topic of race. Perhaps I am a more generous reader of her project. If one stays focused on the important issue Dum raises, that “participants are essential for grasping educational [practices perform, assert and affirm] injustice,” then we must have some kind of deliberative uptake of these participants in our writings. Anderson does so by providing a detailed discussion of precisely teacher participants under the term “elites.”¹⁰ Let me suggest for the sake of this argument that teachers fit within the notion of “elite” that Anderson outlines in “Fair Opportunities in Education.” She writes there: “let us call elites those who occupy positions of responsibility and leadership in society; managers, consultants, professionals, politicians, policy makers.”¹¹ Insofar as teachers and school administrators are in positions of leadership and responsibility for the day to day lives, educational and otherwise, of millions of young people and that these are professional managers of individual classrooms, schools, districts, and the budgets and policies of said entities, teachers can fairly

be placed within this conception of the elite.

Understood as elites Anderson goes about the task of engaging those methodologies well suited for philosophers to hear something from/about these participants; namely, relying on sociological and social psychological studies and then clarifying the ways in which those studies advance concrete opportunities for these elites to overcome their “cognitive deficits”¹² due to segregation and stereotype. Now it is true that we encounter here in Anderson’s work terms – stereotype and segregation – that are race loaded without necessarily always encountering a discussion of racism *per se*. Yet, it would be misguided to overlook Anderson’s committed effort to provide an empirically based argument for how to disrupt the cognitive deficits of the elites due to racism. To paraphrase Anderson’s thorough argument, the elite must physically move into the spaces of the disadvantaged to have face to face encounters, to develop communicative competence, and increase the ability of perspective taking in order to build rapport across differences and advance the expectations in decision making within the social whole. Dum is, I think, inspiring in her cautiousness to any impulse by Anderson to instrumentalize the educational relation here for a distributable end. I think that is critically important, but I also think an anti-racist end for a pedagogical relation cannot be ignored where the foundation of that relation has been found to be tacitly anti-black insofar as it avoids the ways in which racialization already orients the relations of participants.¹³

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

So, I think that there are important areas of common ground between Anderson and Dum on the topic of overcoming racism in the educational relation and I look forward to greater explorations of it by the latter. With those elaborations in mind, I would like to know more about the allocation of resources from Dum’s perspective insofar as it seems removed from discussions of justice altogether. Where and how does her relational stance attend to this crucial issue, particularly as it intersects with racialized identities? At its worst, one could read her position as ambivalent on the very important issue of resources,

calling upon racialized communities to accept a relational educational project of respect and a conception of social justice without resources. This would sound dangerously close to Dum's own worry of professional theorists – not participants – deciding that resources are unimportant in considerations of justice.

Lastly, I have highlighted Pollock's work to allude to a methodological problem in Dum. Specifically, it is her call to focus on the participants of education and I again applaud that emphasis. Yet as noted, Dum does not provide a way for her readers to hear any teacher or student on the topics she is concerned with. Moreover, the normative vision that she provides of relational goods, is deeply complicated by Pollock's descriptions of white teachers avoiding discussions of the racialization of their students and the ways economic and educational hierarchies intersect in that very avoidance of race. If Pollock gives us the normative relation between white teachers and black and brown students – one of avoidance of these individuals and their communities – how can Dum's theory *not* participate in this problem?

1 Mica Pollock, *Colormute: Race Talk as Dilemmas in an American School* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

2 Ibid., 74.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 75.

5 Ibid., 206, my emphasis.

6 Ibid., 220.

7 Ibid., 206.

8 See Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

9 Jenn Dum, "Ends, Principles, and Causal Explanation in Educational Justice," *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 2 (2017), 10.

10 Elizabeth Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 595-622.

11 Ibid., 596.

12 Ibid., 598.

13 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008).