

**. Other People's Conferences:
Symbolic Violence, Methodological Failure, and
the Narrowing of Intellectual Discourse in Teacher Education**

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Abstract: I advance two claims about intellectual culture in contemporary teacher education. The first is diagnostic. Educational scholarship indulges methodologically weak habits of mind, especially overreliance on synchronic moral frameworks and displacement of historical analysis by ethical discourse. Both proliferate academic cant in teacher education. The second claim is illustrative, a case study of a presentation at the 2026 annual gathering of New York State Foundations of Education Association, which made, without evidentiary grounding, sweeping assertions about institutional complicity in White supremacy, making dissent feel unsayable. Using Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, Bloom's critique of value relativism in higher education, and Haidt's analysis of ideological homogeneity in academe, I argue the modern university subordinates truth-seeking to consensus-building, narrowing scholarly response, foreclosing critical inquiry, and undermining the reasoning higher education purports to serve. I propose alternative modes of scholarly engagement grounded in methodological rigor, intellectual play, and fidelity to inquiry.

Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children* (1995) asks a question that will never lose its analytic force: Whose knowledge counts? Delpit argued that schools transmit not only curriculum but the tacit rules of a culture of power. These rules are invisible to those who hold them and equally opaque to those who do not. Schools do not simply teach or fail to teach curriculum; they actively encode the norms, assumptions, and forms of authority of dominant groups, rendering them natural and universal while treating other ways of knowing as deficient or deviant. Delpit's central insight was that educators sometimes show less care, less rigor, and less accountability when the children in question are perceived as other people's children. The same dynamic sometimes operates in academic conference spaces. Scholars, especially those attending conferences outside their usual areas of study, may sometimes let weak reasoning, thin evidence, and underdeveloped theory pass unchallenged because the conference is not their own, because the stakes feel low, because the social cost of dissent seems too high. The scholarly gathering at which I had the idea for this paper, however, is not that kind of conference for me. New York State Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) is a community I have been part of for more than a decade; but the professional obligations of care, rigor, and accountability that Delpit describes for schools apply with equal force to academics gathered together to share ideas and disclose discoveries. Because this is my conference community, I cannot allow flawed reasoning in historical analysis or in the application of critical theory to go unchallenged. The conference has a *telos*, a purpose that organizes everything within it. That purpose is the pursuit of truth via rigorous standards of reasoning. Methodological rigor is not optional; it is essential to fulfilling the truth-finding purpose of the conference. What follows is not a rejection of NYSFEA or of the scholarly commitments it represents. It is an act of fidelity to both.

How Familiar Spaces May Transmit Normative Exclusions

There is a species of insult that flourishes not on street corners or around playgrounds but in seminar rooms and conference halls. It is distinguished not by vulgarity but by the authority with

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which it is delivered and the uncritical acceptance with which it is received. Some of the most corrosive, ahistorical discourse in contemporary American academic life is not produced by those typically associated with hostility or prejudice, but by those whose institutional affiliations and professional commitments signal moral seriousness and intellectual refinement. Academic culture does not merely permit such discourse; it legitimizes it, dresses it in the vocabulary of justice, and presents it as critique. In late March 2026, I experienced moral insult to methodological rigor while attending the annual gathering of the New York State Foundations of Education Association held at Rutgers University. A regular attendee and presenter at NYSFEA gatherings for the past decade, I want to be clear that the event is treated here not as anecdote but as an empirical scene, an instance of the intellectual culture conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1991) as symbolic violence. The argument of a presentation by a research team from the hosting institution was structured around the familiar and, in many respects, earnest ambition of preparing teacher educators as intellectuals who understand structural racism and are equipped to challenge it in their professional practice. To anchor this argument historically, the presenters invoked the history of race and slavery at their home institution as evidence that White supremacy was not an abstraction but an institutional reality with local, documentable roots, and that teacher educators therefore carried both a professional and a moral obligation to position themselves explicitly as agents against structural racism by becoming agents of social justice.

One detail stopped me. The presenters made sweeping claims about White supremacy at Rutgers without citing the *Scarlet and Black Project*, the collaborative institutional history of slavery and race at Rutgers edited by Marisa Fuentes and Deborah Gray White (2016). I knew the reference from past reading I had done. The *Scarlet and Black Project* is, as a work of institutional history, a genuine contribution to our understanding of Rutgers's difficult racial history. Fuentes and White's editorial direction of this collaborative excavation of slavery and racism at Rutgers represents precisely the kind of historically grounded recovery work that universities need more of, not less. The problem arises when scholarship is imported wholesale, without adequate methodological scrutiny, into a normative framework for teacher education. This is what the Rutgers team's presentation appeared to do. In the presentation, moral implications of studies like the *Scarlett and Black Project* were abstracted from their historical specificity and converted into a general moral indictment of a set of untoward social practices. The historically diachronic was transmogrified into the ahistorical synchronic. This altogether too atemporal indictment then was made to function as a self-evident premise for pedagogical practice. The central claim was that Rutgers' historical entanglement with slavery constitutes evidence that White supremacy is structurally operative in educational institutions, and that pre-service teacher educators must understand themselves as agents of resistance against it. This is a significant claim, and not without purchase. But notice what it requires methodologically. It requires treating moral categories available in 2026 — White supremacy, systemic racism, complicity — as adequate descriptors not only of historical institutional practices but of the present professional context of every teacher educator in the room. Moreover, there is something pedagogically troubling about presenting pre-service teachers with a framework in which cultural inheritance is characterized by structural fiat as the foundation of a system inherently involving domination.

One does not produce critical thinkers by handing them a conclusion and calling it a starting point. Substituting moral say-so for scholarly surety is not a trivial mistake. The *Scarlet and Black Project* (2016) represents the actual scholarly foundation of what the presenters were asserting, and its explicit absence from the presentation heralds something significant about the

intellectual culture surrounding academic discourse. When historical claims circulate without their scholarly grounding, they cease to function as history. They function as performance. My deepest concern is that claims made in the presentation about Rutgers's racially checkered past were never intended as statements of scholarly fact but as a performance of moral consensus. I sat. I nodded in the way one nods when calculating the social cost of not nodding. I participated in the performative assent that the conference, by its structure and norms, had already constituted as the only available response. Here, however, as an alternative response to that episode of felt alienation during the presentation, I attempt to recover what could not be said in that room, not as polemic, but as genuine scholarly inquiry into why it could not be said, and what that tells us about the state of intellectual discourse in academic spaces devoted to social justice. Kelly Oliver (2004), in *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, argues that alienation is not simply a universal human condition but is often produced and exacerbated through specific processes of social exclusion and discursive domination. Oliver's concept of colonization at the level of subjectivity illuminates what was happening in that room. The presenters' framework positioned me inside a predetermined narrative, one that spoke over me, defined me in advance, and rendered my actual social location analytically invisible. I found myself wondering if I was being asked to consent to a colonization of my psychic space, to adopt an interpretive regime that assigned meaning to me while refusing to encounter me.

Two central claims organize what follows. The first is diagnostic. The presentation that troubled me was an example of a larger trend. A significant body of contemporary educational research, particularly where history, social justice, and teacher education intersect, has developed methodologically weak and morally inflated habits of reasoning. These habits are most visible through the misuse of legitimately diachronic frameworks as if they were, instead, synchronic, virtually taken to be sempiternal in their temporal scope. The second is illustrative. The NYSFEA presentation functions as a case study of a methodologically askew intellectual culture. The presentation reveals how these bad habits of mind manifest in institutional settings through morally sanctioned acts of intellectual insult, performative assent, and constrained discourse. Everything that follows develops outward from these two ideas, and both are understood through the lens Delpit provides. The intellectual seriousness we owe one another in the spaces we share is not negotiable, precisely because those spaces are not other people's conferences. *I* was present at the NYSFEA conference. I lacked language in March 2026 to state and to resolve the concerns that arose in that context. I try to develop a way to talk about those concerns now. This is not a rejection of systemic analysis. Anti-Black racism in American schooling is a specific, documented, and devastating force that cannot be reduced to a general theory of class disadvantage. Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1987) demonstrated, with sociological precision, how class and race intersect in ways that disadvantage Black students differently and more severely than poor White students. The point is not race or class equivalence. The point is analytical complexity and the cost of abandoning it. What I experienced in that room, and what critical pedagogy in its best form seeks to produce, is conscientization in Paulo Freire's (1970) sense of the development of critical consciousness as an active, transformative process. The discourse at the NYSFEA conference claimed to be emancipatory and critically conscious, yet it functioned as exclusionary because analytically careless, it struck alienation while aiming for liberation. In the face of such a structural paradox, it's time to turn upon teacher education the open, illuminating eyes of conscientization. To ask ourselves what we are doing to conscientize our students in ways that give them the strong sense that teaching is an active and transformative process. Otherwise the project of teaching teachers becomes morally selective and conceptually

inconsistent, which is precisely the kind of intellectual failure teacher educators have a professional obligation to remove from the thinking of their students.

Backstory to the Argument: The University's Contested *Telos*

Two theoretical frameworks organize the argument that follows. The first concerns the purpose of the modern academy. Jonathan Haidt (2016) argued that universities must choose between two incompatible purposes: the pursuit of truth or the pursuit of social justice. When social justice becomes the organizing *telos*, the conditions of permissible inquiry contract. Agreement confirms moral seriousness. Disagreement becomes evidence of ideological defection. Second, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) remains one of the most diagnostically precise analyses of academic culture produced in the twentieth century, and it has grown more relevant in the decades since its publication. Bloom argued that the elevation of openness to the status of an unquestioned good produced a paradox at the heart of liberal education. A university committed above all to not judging could no longer perform the act of judgment that serious intellectual work requires. When openness becomes the sovereign value, then the evaluative framework that distinguishes rigorous scholarship from ideological performance collapses. The university loses the capacity to say that some claims are better supported than others, that some arguments are more carefully reasoned, and that historical assertions require evidentiary warrant. What remains is institutionalized indifference dressed as tolerance. Bloom's critique was widely dismissed upon publication as the complaint of a cultural conservative uncomfortable with pluralism. That dismissal was, in many quarters, more reflexive than reasoned. The subsequent decades have vindicated Bloom's structural concern with considerable force. The contemporary academy does not merely tolerate weak claims advanced in the name of social justice; it frequently confers upon them a prestige that forecloses examination, precisely because examination has come to feel like aggression. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff's *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018) maps the psychological and institutional consequences of the shift Bloom described, showing how prioritizing emotional safety over argumentative rigor leaves students and scholars less equipped to navigate difficult intellectual terrain.

What Bloom and Haidt and Lukianoff describe are successive phases of a single institutional drift. First, the university abandoned the authority to judge by enshrining openness. Then, having hollowed out its evaluative core, it replaced judgment with protection, substituting the management of feeling for the pursuit of truth. The result is an institution that is simultaneously open to all claims and closed to genuine scrutiny of those same claims. This configuration connects both critiques to Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence. Bourdieu defined symbolic violence as the imposition of systems of meaning that the subject is made to accept as natural, beneficial, and just, often without recognizing the imposition as such. When the assertion of contested historical claims becomes the unmarked norm of scholarly exchange, and when questioning those claims is coded as a moral failure rather than an intellectual obligation, the conditions of symbolic violence are fully in place. Participants are not coerced into acceptance; they are invited to demonstrate their fitness for the community by embracing, without examination, the terms of their own indictment. The symbolic violence is real, but it wears the face of welcome. Tamer Tabrizi (2020) extends this diagnosis into the philosophy of language itself, arguing that academic claims of objectivity and neutrality function as mechanisms of power. The modern university's sanctioned language encodes metaphysical commitments, including secularism, naturalism, and, in postmodern forms, a nihilism that denies

transcendent moral foundations, while presenting those commitments as default and unquestioned. Tabrizi argues that contemporary academic social justice activism depends on strong moral claims while operating within a postmodern framework that denies any objective moral foundation. This is an unresolved philosophical tension the academy has not confronted. Taken together, these critiques converge on a single structural diagnosis. The modern university has fashioned an increasingly fragile and internally contradictory framework for engaging with truth, one that advances strong moral claims while simultaneously disavowing epistemological foundations needed to evaluate them. This dynamic is the central tension I encountered at the NYSFEA conference. The NYSFEA presentation I observed demonstrated this dynamic with quiet precision. The presentation on developing teacher agency was not an invitation to inquiry but a conclusion awaiting affirmation. That is, the general methodological crisis facing the university as a whole had found specific expression in a discussion of teacher education. This is my concern in writing. I wish to examine the intellectual culture of contemporary teacher education with an aim of advising us away from a position of uncritical, cliquish openness concerning our fundamental concepts.

Claim One: Academic Cant and the Methodological Crisis in Teacher Education

The problem is not that some subjects are illegitimate for study. Race, power, inequality, and the history of American institutions are precisely what Foundations of Education scholarship should examine. The problem arises when examination descends into cant. Harold Bloom (2000) defined 'cant' as language that has lost its meaning through overuse and moral inflation, becoming a substitute for genuine thought. For purposes of my analysis of teacher education presented here, 'educational academic cant' refers more specifically to the deployment of language in the name of social justice or equity without supporting arguments or rigorous evidence. Rather than serving as a tool for historical analysis, educational academic cant functions as a badge of institutional belonging. It asserts morally legible claims without the evidentiary apparatus that would make those claims defensible as scholarship. The NYSFEA presentation provides a case in point of cant's operation. The frameworks of critical Whiteness studies and antiracist pedagogy were deployed in ways that foreclosed internal differentiation. The category of White supremacy was applied to institutional histories, pedagogical contexts, and professional identities at a level of abstraction that made it analytically inert. The critique failed to distinguish among historically different forms of racial domination, between individual complicity and structural inheritance, and between a useful critical concept and a rhetorical device. The presentation, if made in a setting more demanding of scholarship, would have likely invited substantive methodological questions rather than have been received with nodding approval and murmured affirmation. When the argument leaned toward assertion rather than evidence, the room's collective response treated unattested assertion as scholarly confidence. What was lost in that room was not merely an opportunity for enlightening intellectual friction. What was lost was the very process the conference's ostensible purpose required, the preparation of critical, reflective, agency-bearing teacher educators. One cannot prepare people to think critically by modeling the foreclosure of critical thought. One cannot teach reflective practice by performing unreflective assent. The very vocabulary of critique can, under the right institutional conditions, become an instrument of the intellectual conformity it purports to resist. Frameworks of moral performance, ritualized assent, or institutional norm enforcement twist critique into conformity. A university-specific species of insult to inquiry, delivered with institutional authority and framed as justice, operates in these spaces,. However, the goal here is not to

dramatize offense but to understand, with as much precision as the evidence permits, how these exchanges operate socially and institutionally.

A methodological clarification, one that is frequently collapsed in contemporary scholarship in ways that generate considerable confusion, reveals the source of educational academic cant. Historian Reinhart Koselleck's *Futures Past* (2004) established the distinction with particular precision. The historian's craft requires holding in tension two fundamentally different modes of analysis, the diachronic and the synchronic. Diachronic analysis situates historical actors within the unfolding of time. It asks what a figure could reasonably have known, what conceptual tools were available, what constraints and possibilities shaped their choices, and how meanings evolved across successive generations. Synchronic analysis, by contrast, freezes a framework and examines its internal structure, applying it across time and place to reveal patterns that allegedly transcend individual context. Both modes of thought are legitimate; both are indispensable. The trouble begins when one is mistaken for the other. Synchronic categories are abstracted from the flow of historical experience when they are retroactively imposed on historical actors as though those actors had access to the very language being used to evaluate them. This is not a trivial methodological slippage, especially when it occurs within moralized frameworks that contain a grammar of culpability and a vocabulary of guilt. The result is what Bourdieu (1991) identifies as symbolic violence.

This methodological difficulty may find its most developed scholarly articulation in Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019) because Kendi's framework offers a most intellectually ambitious version of synchronic-diachronic methodological slippage. Kendi proposes a tripartite taxonomy — segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist — that he applies systematically across the entirety of American racial history. Applied to the nineteenth century, this framework produced at least one striking verdict. William Lloyd Garrison, whose abolitionism was immediatist, uncompromising, and personally and professionally costly to him (Mayer, 2008), appears in Kendi's analysis shadowed by assimilationist assumptions. The concept of assimilationism, as Kendi uses it, is a critical instrument forged in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century critical race theory. It was not available as an element of self-understanding to nineteenth-century actors like Garrison. Garrison could not have been an antiracist in Kendi's sense because this category had not yet been defined. To retroactively impose "Assimilationist!" as a judgment upon Garrison is to use a synchronic framework as though it were a diachronic one, to claim that the standard of moral evaluation appropriate to 2019 was available to, and therefore binding on, an actor operating in 1831. This is an important matter. It matters for how history is taught, how critical thinking about the past is modeled, and what kind of moral imagination is cultivated in students. A history that cannot recognize William Lloyd Garrison as a historical hero, or that can do so only with extensive qualification, is an unfair history, a history that has sacrificed the diachronic complexity on which genuine moral understanding depends in order to easily achieve synchronic consensus in the present. Foucault (1984) would likely see Kendi's devalued classification of Garrison as a political polemic, which does not seek truth but, instead, defines alliances, unites interests, establishes the other as an enemy who upholds opposed interests and must be fought to the point of his defeat or surrender.

Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) operates on a similarly synchronic architecture. Without adequate attention to the considerable variation in how Whiteness has been constructed, contested, and revised across time and place, DiAngelo treats White people as a historically stable social category producing reliably uniform psychological effects. The framework's

internal circularity, in which resistance to its claims is recoded as evidence of the phenomenon being diagnosed, produces a structure that is, in Bourdieu's (1991) terms, unusually resistant to critical engagement. The fallacy of simplification of analytical complexity is exemplified as well by Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989). McIntosh's framework, which has shaped academic discourse on race for more than three decades, was developed from the experience of a White woman in a particular class and cultural context and generalized outward into a universal account of White experience. McIntosh labeled it all "White privilege" and packed it into the invisible knapsack. In doing so, she did not merely generalize; she ideologically foreclosed what was quite literally in front of her as she wrote. The kind of pluralistic White worlds visible in places like Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, where the Judaism of Flatbush, the Italians of Bensonhurst, the Polish and Eastern European diaspora of Sheepshead Bay, and the Syrian Christian communities along that corridor all coexisted within blocks of each other. A grandfather who fled a massacre, an Irish Catholic youth in a deindustrialized mill town, a foster child in upstate New York, these lives are not rendered visible by a framework that treats all White experience as structurally equivalent.² The *1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones, 2021) is best understood, similarly, as a symbolic and public memory intervention rather than a work of professional historiography. As such an intervention, it has been consequential and, in important respects, salutary. The difficulty arises not from the *1619 Project* itself but from the institutional conditions in which it circulated, conditions in which a contested interpretive framework could be received as settled fact, and in which scholars who questioned specific claims could be greeted with suspicion rather than engagement. This, again, is the soft foreclosure that Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence is designed to illuminate.

Yiorgos Anagnostou (2013), writing in *Italian American Review*, observed that White ethnicity as an academic category is simultaneously utilized in intellectual circles and rarely deployed for popular self-ascription, a disconnection that reveals the category's analytic limits. What the academy has produced, in extending McIntosh's (1989) logic is a moral category, Whiteness, that functions less as a tool of historical analysis than as an instrument of categorical assignment, deployed with increasing confidence but with decreasing precision. The structural pattern across Kendi (2019), DiAngelo (2018), Hannah-Jones (2021), McIntosh (1989), and the NYSFEA presentation is the same. Moral categories, once institutionally consecrated, become resistant to the diachronic scrutiny that honest historical scholarship requires. Bloom (1987) diagnosed the intellectual conditions that made these frameworks possible. When the evaluative standards that distinguish rigorous scholarship from ideological performance are abandoned in the name of openness, the academy becomes vulnerable to frameworks that are morally consecrated but intellectually brittle. Tabrizi (2020) adds, as the philosophical dimension, that the cult of academic neutrality produces a language that prevents clear intellectual analysis rather than enabling inquiry to interrogate ideas, encoding strong metaphysical commitments while presenting them as default axioms. Taken together, these critiques converge on a diagnosis that Koselleck's (2004) framework helps formalize. Treating a synchronic moral framework as a diachronic historical account is not a minor methodological infraction. It forecloses the very

² What's done here against an overly general concept of 'Whiteness' can be done for any group by filtering race through culture, ethnicity, class, etc. For discussion of the issue from other racial viewpoints see Monreal, T. & Lathan, I. (2024). Challenging Latinidad: Learning from baseball in teaching about Latinxs. *Educational Abundance* 4: 91-100 and Bentley-Edwards, K. & Stevenson, H. (2016). The multidimensionality of racial/ethnic socialization: Scale construction for the cultural and racial experiences of socialization (CARES). *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25(1): 96-108.

historical insight it claims to provide. History that cannot situate actors within the unfolding of time is not history. It is, at best, moral taxonomy. At worst, it is liturgy.

Claim Two: The Conference as Case Study in Constrained Discourse

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence refers to the imposition of systems of meaning that participants experience not as arbitrary domination but as natural, beneficial, and just. Its most effective operation depends on the internalization of its norms as legitimate. At the NYSFEA conference, this internalization was actively cultivated. The synchronic framework of social justice achieved the force of common sense. Disagreement became legible only as evidence of bad faith, and the tacit rules of the discourse made genuine scholarly contest structurally difficult to articulate. Bourdieu's concept, however, travels in unexpected directions. Symbolic violence need not flow only downward from the powerful to the powerless. It operates with equal efficiency within intellectual fields themselves in the implicit norms of scholarly communities. If the problem I perceived in the presentation had not been discernible throughout the field of Social Foundations I probably wouldn't have thought about challenging the presenters. However, if the problem were not a systemic one, I probably wouldn't have felt trepidation at the thought of issuing my challenge. While preparing this paper for publication, Greg Seals told me the story of how one of his former Philosophy professors, Angelo Corlett, became a philosopher. Corlett related to the students in his epistemology seminar, Greg among them, that he had originally worked on a doctorate in the field of Religion. One day at the seminary during a particularly heated class discussion a very frustrated Corlett blurted out, "But guys, guys, guys...! All these arguments *assume* the existence of God." The awkward silence that followed was finally broken by Corlett's professor who said, "Mr. Corlett! You do not need to study Theology. You need to study Philosophy." So Corlett, quite successfully, became a philosopher.

The point of Corlett's story is that the more a doctrine defines a field of study, the more guts it takes to critique the doctrine.³ However tactfully or politely it may have been accomplished by his professor, Corlett was shown the door out that day. Of course, it is much more commonplace to think within a field than it is to think about revising or recreating a field, especially the field one is in. Nonetheless, I am asking that we in Social Foundations analyze the conditions under which the frameworks of our field circulate and investigate what happens to critical inquiry when those conditions go into effect. Challenging the presenters would have involved pointing out an anomaly which, when recognized, requires us to rethink our understanding of social justice, a concept fundamental to the field of Social Foundations. The presenters and I were thinking quite differently about the same phenomenon. I diachronically. They synchronically. That's what gave me pause. What I wanted to ask might, in the moment, have been asking too much. I would have been in effect asking for a reconsideration of the presenters', perhaps uncritically held, philosophy of social justice. Dewey (1938, p. 6) is right to remind us about the destiny of disciplines that devolve into 'isms: "For in spite of itself, any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems, and possibilities." But, more apt to the circumstances in which I found myself at the presentation, we are perhaps more wisely or,

³ I hereby vow greater courage at future conferences as I continue to read, write, and reflect upon the issues discussed in this paper.

at least, shrewdly advised by Kuhn (1962) that requests for paradigm change are extremely unlikely to be happily received.

To exemplify my argument in an explicitly academic case, it is worth placing Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Robin D. G. Kelley in genuine intellectual tension with each other. They are not antagonists. They are scholars whose careers illuminate the need to inform synchronic social assertions with diachronic deliberations. Moynihan's 1965 report on the Black family was, by any rigorous standard, a serious work of social analysis. It was also, in the context of mid-century American sociology, historically situated and complicated. Moynihan's (1996, p. 63) later observation that the liberal left can be as rigid and destructive as any force in American life was not ideological contrarianism. It was a structural diagnosis about what happens when moral consensus displaces intellectual honesty in institutions that trade on the currency of truth. Moynihan never resolved the fundamental problem his work encountered: How does a scholar describe a community shaped by centuries of institutional oppression, material deprivation, and deliberate destabilization without reducing that community to its wounds? How does one document the consequences of structural violence without making the consequences the story? Moynihan's deficit framing synchronically measured Black family life against a normative White middle-class standard and located structural problems in cultural pathology. The framing was damaging. The problem is that, over time and in response to the damage it was causing, Moynihan's work became effectively unspeakable, treated less as a flawed contribution to an ongoing argument than as evidence of ideological contamination.

That quarantine, itself a form of intellectual failure, was lifted when Robin D. G. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!* (1997) shifted the paradigm. Kelley did not simply invert the synchronically-oriented deficit framework; he diachronically dismantled the synchronic epistemological premises on which pathologizing accounts of Black culture depended. By centering practices such as "the dozens," a form of ritualized verbal combat with deep roots in African American expressive culture, Kelley demonstrated that what deficit frameworks read as dysfunction was in fact a sophisticated cultural technology, a practice that cultivated wit, resilience, rhetorical skill, and communal solidarity. His method restored the interior logic of cultural practices that had been misread by Moynihan who was looking from the outside at the culture he was studying. Kelley produced not merely a counter-narrative but a methodological intervention demonstrating that the tools of serious scholarship, rigorously applied, could talk back to dominant frameworks without abandoning intellectual standards. The central argument that emerges from placing Moynihan and Kelley together is when ideas become institutionally consecrated (or desecrated, as in the case of Moynihan), they stop being analyzed and start being performed or dismissed. They become sacred or unholy. Sacred things cannot be talked back to. Unholy things cannot be talked about. Kelley's great intellectual contribution is exactly that capacity, the ability to enter a conversation that has hardened into orthodoxy and restore it to genuine inquiry. He is analytically rigorous and rhetorically agile enough to hold complicated ideas without resolving them prematurely into verdict. Historical claims require evidentiary warrant. Synchronic moral categories cannot simply be applied to historical actors without attention to the ideas and resources available to those actors. Teacher educators have a professional obligation to model the very critical thinking they purport to teach. These are not radical propositions. They are the minimal requirements of scholarly honesty. The fact that they could not be voiced, that the conditions of the conference made them appear too costly to articulate, is precisely what the concept of symbolic violence is designed to describe.

Toward a Third Mode: Play, Talking Back, and Scholarly Resistance

There is another mode of response available. It does not require the solemnity of institutional critique, nor the defensiveness of reactionary rejection, nor the exhausted calculation of someone who has decided that the social cost of dissent exceeds its value. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's DisFunktional!* (1997) offers play as a method of intellectual engagement, not as a way of avoiding difficult questions but as a way of approaching them with sufficient rhetorical adroitness to expose what earnest refutation sometimes cannot. Play is not the opposite of intellectual seriousness. It is one of its most disciplined forms. When a framework has achieved sufficient institutional authority to make earnest refutation appear as ideological betrayal, play becomes the instrument by which critical distance is restored. Kelley's play creates intellectual third space. Exactly the conceptual room I sought at the NYSFEA conference, a space not of rejection but of refusal-without-rejection, in which concepts like teacher agency can be tested, questioned, and engaged rather than simply affirmed.

What Kelley's spirit might have looked like in that room is worth imagining, not as a record of things I should have said, but as an illustration of what intellectual play could look like in a space that needed it. The raised eyebrow, the pointed aside, the argument delivered with enough lightness to signal that one is not cowed.... These are not retreats from intellectual engagement. They are, in the right hands, its most honest expressions. A quiet, genuinely curious question: How has the *Scarlett and Black Project* (Fuentes & White, 2016) informed discussions with your students about systemic racism at Rutgers? A wondering aloud: Is this exactly what undergraduate students need, the full institutional weight of American slavery placed on their shoulders before they have taught their first class? A gentle methodological puzzlement: Tell me more about how pre-industrial New Jersey farmers organized and sustained a system of White supremacy. I want to understand the infrastructure. These are not hostile questions. They are the questions a person playing in Kelley's spirit would ask. They are also, I should acknowledge, exactly why I stayed silent. Play requires a room willing to play back. But I could not be sure the room I was in was willing to play back. The most generative response to methodological overreach is not simply to reject the offending framework, but to replace it with a richer, more analytically adequate account, to insist that subject matters be engaged with the evidentiary seriousness they deserve. I regard the scholarly inadequacy surrounding the idea of social justice in *Social Foundations of Education* as a problem worth naming, examining, and contesting. Talking back, in this sense, is not an act of opposition to the field. It is an act of loyalty to it. Kelley plays. He invents. He creates third spaces from which to gain perspective on argument oriented towards dichotomous thinking. I can't merely wish conference spaces to be more amenable to play. I must also acknowledge and act as if creating that third space remains the scholar's obligation, even when the room may not be ready to meet them there.

Implications for Teacher Education and Educational Scholarship

What emerges from this account is not a rejection of the frameworks associated with Kendi (2019), DiAngelo (2018), Hannah-Jones (2021), or the Rutgers research team's commitment to teacher agency and racial justice. Each has contributed something real. Kendi's insistence that racism must be understood structurally, as a function of policy and institutional arrangement rather than merely of individual prejudice, represents a genuine intellectual advance. The *1619 Project's* insistence that slavery is constitutive of American history rather than incidental to it has reshaped public memory in ways that matter. DiAngelo helped put White people under scholarly review where they now may be disaggregated to improve diachronic understanding of

what it means in many different contexts to be “White.” The Rutgers team’s commitment to preparing teachers who take questions of equity seriously is admirable as a professional and pedagogical commitment. But institutional settings can rework important ideas in ways that hollow them out, transforming the living difficulty of genuine critical inquiry into the settled convenience of shared vocabulary. When this happens, the task of the scholar who believes in the university’s capacity for honest intellectual exchange is neither to capitulate nor to declare war. Instead, in such a predicament, the scholar is called upon to maintain, with whatever grace and wit the situation permits, the distinction between two things that the current climate has allowed to blur: the serious engagement of difficult questions and the performance of having already answered them.

The consequences for teacher education are not abstract. Scholars trained in intellectual environments that reward performative assent over genuine inquiry are less equipped to model critical thinking for their students. They are less capable of navigating the genuine complexity of race, history, and institutional power, a complexity that a rigorous education in these matters actually requires. Poor historical reasoning, narrow moral vocabularies, and weak intellectual pluralism are not merely academic problems. They shape the pedagogical practices of an entire professional field and, through that field, the educational experiences of children. Play works toward a third mode of scholarly engagement and instructional practice. It is neither the silence of the person who has decided that the cost of dissent is too high nor the fury of the person who has decided that the offense is too great. Play is not the detached historicism that refuses all moral engagement with the past, nor the moralizing abstraction that refuses all historical complication of the present.

Play is something closer to what the best teachers have always modeled: a willingness to sit with the discomfort of genuine uncertainty; a refusal to grant any framework, however well-intentioned, however institutionally endorsed, the authority to close the conversation. And, maybe most importantly, a recognition that the most meaningful intellectual act available is to keep the question open. Teachers, both in-service and preservice and teachers of teachers as well, should all be committed to seeing social justice as an ongoing, beautiful struggle unfolding before them and demanding their participation in its realization where they work and where they live. Play, in this context, is faithfulness to the complexity of the past, to the difficulty of the present, and to the possibility that the university might yet be a place where those things are held in honest, generative, and occasionally irreverent relation to one another. Play resolves the dichotomy set up by Haidt (2016) in which the university must choose between truth and social justice. Play permits, in the name of truth-seeking, diachronic analysis of ideas, including social justice, synchronically set in stone. An aphorism has it that “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”⁴ So it is with us and with our students. When we settle on a synchronic understanding of social justice we and our students are less likely to enact social justice in our own diachronic circumstances. If our students never study how our forebears, in difficult circumstances, fought and managed to promote social justice in their time then, when they become teachers, our students will lack role models encouraging and inspiring them to invent and enact practices that can bring social justice to life in their own workplaces and beyond. We will learn more about and understand better the idea of social justice if we feel good about playing with the concept diachronically rather than simply sacralizing it synchronically. We

⁴ Variation attributed to Winston Churchill; who, if he did say it, paraphrased George Santayana’s original “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” *The Life of Reason* (1905). Charles Scribner’s Sons.

can't let 'social justice' devolve into academic cant. Whatever 'social justice' may mean for all time, we cannot let that ideal distract us from instantiating what social justice we can in the here and now.

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