

The Imperatives of Feeling: Alain Locke's Critical Pragmatism and Commitments to Antiracist Education

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Beyond helping future educators develop intellectual and skill-based resources, teacher educators are increasingly asked to prove their students possess requisite dispositions insuring they *commit* to required teaching proficiencies. Reviewing arguments about dispositions, Mary Diez suggests these are “*moral commitments* to guide how faculty, candidates, and other personnel conduct themselves.”¹ While currently changing, emerging standards require programs to “illustrate candidate commitment and dispositions such as ... coachability, empathy, teacher presence of ‘with-it-ness,’ cultural competency, collaboration, [and] beliefs that all children can learn.”² Standards also emphasize the need to demonstrate commitments through observable behaviors,³ thus precluding examining the emotional aspects of commitments, while also legislating they be viewed as relatively finished projects rather than ones in development. At least two unexamined questions emerge: How do affect and reason play roles in educational commitments?, and Should commitments be conceived as being relatively stable or remaining under development at the end of an educational program? The answers to these questions matter because they directly influence how we come to recognize and understand both our students’ and our own commitments, while also influencing the types of educational opportunities we design to foster their development.

In order to push the importance of understanding the complexity of an educational commitment, in what follows I focus on a specific one: What does it mean for a white educator to have a commitment to antiracist education? This question pushes us to examine the instability of an educational commitment and especially the powerful role emotion plays not only in the development of our commitments, but also in how we sustain them over time. I also ask this question because inspiring students to cultivate commitments to create emancipatory, socially just educational spaces, like those associated with antiracist education, are a prime focus for many social and philosophical foundations courses.⁴ Such commitments have been critiqued for how they are implicitly and explicitly enacted in classrooms,⁵ thus understanding the complexities of educational commitments addresses concerns that span beyond the specifics of the dispositions debate and into long-standing questions facing social justice educators.

Before moving fully into that discussion, we first must pause to acknowledge some important opening concerns particular to whites engaging in antiracist education, which push us to examine the role of emotion in our educational commitments. Once those opening concerns are outlined, I turn our attention to Alain Locke’s pragmatist value theory because it is simultaneously focused on the ways emotions and reasons are inextricably linked with our commitments and actions. His work

from the early part of the last century continues to be relevant as it is supported by current research in the philosophy and psychology of emotion and moral reasoning. In the final section I draw out initial implications for education.

MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL STUPOR: WHITE COMMITMENTS TO ANTIRACIST EDUCATION

A commitment to antiracist education is fraught with contradictions and complications because racial oppression entails a complex web of personal, historical, and institutional dimensions. When white educators specifically make commitments to antiracist education, we must confront our own white privilege and complicity with white supremacy. As a white educator, I place myself squarely in this dynamic: We must confront how we are unable step outside the features of personal, cultural, and institutionalized racism because a commitment to antiracism is tested repeatedly within a social fabric that obfuscates how racial privilege works, and thus how and why we are always complicit in the very racist dynamics we commit to change. Sandra Bartky⁶ aptly captures the heart of the problem: “There are some inequalities from which we cannot entirely divorce ourselves no matter how hard we try. White skin privilege is a case in point. One cannot have clean hands where the polity is unclean.”⁷

Despite commitments to antiracist education, the inability of whites to divorce from racial privilege almost universally leads to the need to respond to and confront a profound emotional reaction — one associated with guilt, shame, and a fear about how to proceed. As research on white racial identity development demonstrates, these emotions can directly impact the desire and ability to commit to antiracist education.⁸ We find this eloquently expressed by Marilyn Frye. In the following passage she is working through the understanding that racism profoundly influences her ability to understand her white racialized existence and its impact on how she perceives the world, including herself:

It all combined to precipitate me into profound and unnerving distrust of myself. All of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me — my perception, my common sense, my good will, my anger, honor and affection, my intelligence and insight. Just as walking requires something fairly sturdy and firm underfoot, so being an actor in the world requires a foundation of ordinary moral and intellectual confidence. Without that, we don't know how to be or how to act; we become strangely stupid.... If you want to be good and you don't know good from bad, you can't move.⁹

Frye's description of the moral and cognitive stupor she confronts while coming into a white racial understanding suggests a commitment to antiracist education involving an emotional and intellectual metamorphosis as a racialized agent. Frye's conceptual and emotional challenge also emphasizes how our interior emotional lives are also socially embedded. Frye's turmoil emerges amidst her coming into realization of racist dynamics she cannot individually change despite any desires to do so. Working through the resulting emotional and intellectual tumult associated with her new understanding of racism pushes the need to develop news way of perceiving, thinking, and acting within the world, which will be an ongoing project rather than one entailing a discrete set of actions. In order to proceed, we whites in Frye's position need to forge ways to be individually responsive to the *social* demands placed upon us, and these are demands that we *cannot* escape if we wish to commit ourselves to antiracist projects.

Likewise, our commitments are embedded in emotions. As teacher narratives in particular demonstrate, educators' reasons for teaching and the commitments that drive their work cannot be reduced to stances that are devoid of emotional content.¹⁰ Likewise, as Frye's description of coming into consciousness of white supremacy signals, engaging with racism is not exclusively or even principally a cognitive affair; it is also one that is grounded within a complex mixture of emotional responses that emerge and reemerge throughout the lifespan of such an endeavor. Thus, our conception of a commitment to antiracist education is incomplete if it does not account for the complexities of emotion. But a question arises: If white emotional responses to racism are so personal and potentially toxic to the antiracist educational project, can they be conceptualized as part of the educational process, or must they be minimized because they threaten it? In what follows, I draw on Alain Locke's value theory to argue that emotions are not only inseparable from our educational commitments, but the pivot upon which they turn.

THE IMPERATIVES OF FEELING

As the publisher of the landmark literary anthology, *The New Negro*,¹¹ Alain Locke is most famous as a leading theorist of the Harlem Renaissance, but with origins as a student of Josiah Royce and William James, Locke was also an important African American pragmatist philosopher.¹² Leonard Harris suggests that to call Locke a pragmatist is to miss the radical implications of his work. Because Locke focuses on racism, power, emancipation, and democratic life, Harris and others characterize him as a *critical* pragmatist.¹³ Amongst other contributions to pragmatism, Locke specifically offers us resources for considering how to reconcile our emotional lives with our commitments and intellectual understandings of something as complex as racism. As a place to begin, Locke argues that we need to engage with our emotional responses to our value commitments because they arise out of our social lives and cannot be considered to be the private province of our inner selves. In his pragmatist value theory, he suggests that emotional attachments are themselves the places where our commitments emerge, not exclusively from our intellectual understandings.¹⁴ Grounding his work in the critical project of understanding the dynamics of racism, he suggests that we need to engage each other in exploring our culturally bound emotional commitments and how they underwrite our intellectual ones. For Locke, we must equally focus on emotions *and* ideas, but moving distinctly counter to what we often do in educational contexts, Locke argues that if we want to change or bolster a commitment to something like antiracist education, then we must *begin* with our emotional attachments not our intellectual understandings. This must be a social project as the emotional aspect of value theory is as socially learned as the values themselves. So, again, rather than trying to change an idea as part of the development of an antiracist commitment, Locke argues for a change in the emotion *first*.¹⁵

Locke develops a complex and interlocking philosophy of value theory that blends moral, procedural, and empirical analyses to offer a vision of a cooperative, emancipatory anti-oppressive social project. As Judith Green emphasizes, "his central emphasis is on *reorientation of feeling* as the key to the cooperative struggle toward the kinds of economic and political transformations that a lasting democratic peace

ultimately requires” (*DD*, 108). While Locke does place great emphasis on reason in this process, he privileges emotion because he sees “the primary judgments of value are emotional judgments.”¹⁶ Locke sees the emancipatory project as entailing multiple “dialectical processes interactively combining reflective uses of reason with feeling-laden perception, action and re-perception — rather than as merely momentary appraisals” (*DD*, 109–10).

Locke argues that our emotional attachments to values are fundamental aspects of how we view and respond to situations and information. He divides our immediate emotional responses to situations into what he describes as four feeling-modes: exultation, tension, acceptance, and repose or equilibrium. These also have cognitive value forms: religious, ethical/moral, logical/scientific, and aesthetic. Finally, each of these feeling-mode and cognitive value forms can be either directed outwardly or inwardly, while also containing negative or positive valences.¹⁷

To illustrate, let us examine white guilt and shame through Locke’s value feeling-mode framework. Again, Frye’s description illustrates something that has been widely discussed in the social justice education literature: one of the most common reactions to engaging whites about racism in our society and schools is an emotional reaction of guilt and/or shame. Coming to an understanding of racism is difficult for many of us whites because we have to confront a complex set of beliefs, ideologies, and practices that support racism. This can be an emotionally jarring experience because, as Charles Mills argues, white culture is ensconced in an active “epistemology of ignorance” that underwrites the racist structures of our society. Mills argues that this produces “the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”¹⁸ Thus, engaging in public explorations of one’s commitment to antiracist education is one that is fraught with confusion and emotion for whites.

For example, when confronting evidence of complicity in maintaining and benefiting from white supremacy in our society because of personal choices, beliefs, and unearned institutional privileges, whites may initially engage in an outwardly focused reaction of surprise. That initial feeling may move into a more intensely felt inwardly directed guilt and/or shame or a feeling of toxic emotion and value stupor. This might then lead to an outwardly focused denunciation of evidence of racism, and even simultaneously into a feeling of contempt for people of color because they threaten the agent’s identity congruence. This may then morph into an outwardly focused shock over the power of oppression in our social lives and institutional structures that govern them, only to be inwardly directed as a profound aversion to the lack of congruence between deeply held moral convictions and the position of being white in a racist society. The person may then move into a reflection on the contrast between moments of intellectual and emotional clarity when first understanding racism’s power and the daily mode of living while steeped in an epistemology of ignorance. That string of observations may lead the agent to create a new resolution to continue to develop the knowledge and habits that help maintain the critical insight gained in this moment while aligning the individual’s actions with intentions, or, of course, it may also lead to a rejection of the antiracist commitment.

One of the keys in Locke's analysis is his emphasis on how these value feeling-modes are intertwined and are connected to the ways we perceive the details of a given situation.¹⁹ In the preceding, I tried to capture how Locke conceptualizes the shifting relations amongst all the various feeling modes; they often seamlessly move between each other, even when they are in contradiction. Locke's work fits well with current work in the philosophy and psychology of emotion. Research indicates that emotion is "nearly ubiquitous in the life of the mind and thoroughly intermingled with the operations of desire, belief, intention, imagination, and other basic forms of mental function."²⁰ For example, David Haekwon Kim's philosophical exploration of the intersections of racist guilt, shame, and contempt complements Locke's analysis. Kim argues that our emotions intermingle and operate together in what he describes as "emotion matrices" which emerge in and are sustained by our interactions with situations that challenge our needs and interests. Kim describes "emotional alloys" in which emotions are fused together, most likely unconsciously, which can lead to an emotional ambivalence, or what he describes as a "ghostly background presence" of emotion that influences how we think and react.²¹ Kim describes the ways that racist contempt can be an emotional alloy of guilt and shame, and like Locke, he theorizes that it can be directed outward toward others or inward toward the self. Kim describes other-directed contempt as a general sense of negative affect grounded in an offense about the racialized other's perceived inferiority.²² As such, the emotion itself functions as an emotional backdrop to the maintenance of racial status hierarchy, which, Kim suggests, can result in a feeling of pride and investment in such maintenance, a point that Locke directly takes up and makes a central focus of his project: Our affective states provide the backgrounds upon which we evaluate cognitive information, and thus we can experience a pervasive emotional dogmatism that prevents us from engaging in rational analysis.²³

Locke describes the "underlying imperative of feeling" (*DD*, 112–13) associated with feeling-modes as bringing a psychological urgency to influence how we evaluate and accept certain judgments about a given situation over others. Again, this can result in what Locke describes as value absolutism even toward other, conflicting value modes that we may hold simultaneously. While value feeling-mode rigidity can lead us to favor some ways of perceiving over others, as the research on emotions indicates,²⁴ Locke's arguments about the ways that emotions blend and flow into each other are crucial because they point us to how emotional matrices create internal value conflicts that may support and/or counter this rigidity. In the case of white guilt and shame, Locke's analysis helps us see that the seeds for an active commitment may co-emerge with the emotions that inspire inaction and avoidance.

Locke argues that the key to resolving emotionally grounded value conflicts is to engage them directly. Because the different value feeling-modes lead us to different perceptions and judgments, we can move through value conflicts by reframing situations through consciously adopting different value feeling-modes. "Once a different form-feeling is evoked, the situation and value-type are, *ipso facto*, changed. Change the attitude, and irrespective of content, you change the value-type; the appropriate new predicates automatically follow."²⁵ While our responses may be habituated

and predicated upon our customary value form-feeling mode in a given situation, we actually have more latitude to shift into an alternative value mode, thus giving ourselves different feeling-laden resources for evaluating and responding in a given situation. As he states above, this may be done somewhat consciously. Likewise, an outward experience may impact us and spontaneously change our feeling modes, thereby bringing us into a different value feeling-mode of perception. Locke suggests that while difficult, we already possess the nascent resources to make such shifts as they are already required for us to resolve value conflicts whether we do so consciously or not. Green suggests that these require “*personal self-directive skills* and the *habitual character virtues*” to support such a change (DD, 114).

THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR IMPERATIVES OF FEELING

Consistent with other pragmatists, Locke emphasizes that while our value feeling-mode conflicts may be experienced internally, they are always learned and situated within our social lives. As Green observes, Locke argues that our tendencies toward value absolutism are rooted in our developing “shared habits of initial perceptual orientations, related loyalty-building cognitive rationalizations growing out of our shared experience, and shared habitual patterns of resultant action” (DD, 114). Furthermore, this socially embedded process of habituation conflicts with the naturally dynamic way that we shift between feeling modes imperceptibly. If we bring our shifting value-mode experiences to the forefront of our perception, we may be able to learn how to avoid what Locke describes as a rigid value feeling-mode bias in favor of a more internal cosmopolitanism where we embrace *value feeling-mode pluralism* in order to open new possibilities for perception, judgment, and future action.

Rather than envisioning the process of value feeling-mode pluralism as being one of individual development, Locke emphasizes that the process of developing individual value plurality is one that must be embedded within our social communities. Once again, his stance is supported by research into emotions. As has been widely discussed, guilt and shame are usefully conceptualized as different emotions because of their relationships to situating the individual within a broader community. If one feels guilt, one can make reparation and atone for one’s mistakes, allowing the individual to “reenter” the moral community.²⁶ This contrasts with shame, a destructive emotion, and one that isolates the agent because it does not allow for positive reintegration into the community. As Alexis Shotwell describes, shame has the potential to “make unspeakable things viscerally present — things that seem too horrible to talk about or that are so assumed that they go without saying.”²⁷ These are important details to understand whites’ experience of unpacking racial privilege. While the common emotions of guilt and shame are powerfully and individually felt, we see that they are both internally and outwardly directed and thus helpfully understood through a social lens. Internally felt shame has the potential to isolate the individual from the broader community, and furthermore, the emotion itself is one that is learned through the broader discourse about racism that may offer rigid visions of what being a racist entails. One is either a racist or not a racist; no complex middle ground to offer emotional resources for understanding white privilege

is easily available in common discourse. Thus, newfound information that spurs shaming emotions may conflict with other more rigid emotions that support and sustain a vision of the self as morally virtuous without offering more complex and pluralistic resources. Locke emphasizes the importance of attending right to this very value feeling-mode rigidity that may exist simultaneously with a more natural and fluid value plurality or cosmopolitanism.

Through Locke we see that rather than viewing an intense and mixed emotional response as threatening, *it is exactly the axis upon which social justice commitments turn*. Places of emotional “stuckness” like the ones associated with white guilt and shame are important situational opportunities for potential inquiry and the development of new insights, understandings, and commitments if we attend to them and develop habits that support value feeling-mode plurality. One of the central points here is that acknowledging the emotional challenge is not enough; it cannot be a passive endeavor: The committing of oneself is an action, and in the case of a white person’s commitment to antiracist education, the commitment must be an ongoing *action* that involves directly engaging with how our background value feeling-modes impact our abilities to perceive, reason and commit to the ongoing antiracist project.

John Dewey offers resources that complement Locke’s analysis.²⁸ From a Deweyan perspective, developing and maintaining a commitment requires a host of habits that emerge as we develop new responses to problems that arise in our social and physical environments; we must have a *desire or a need* to develop new resources to address new situations, problems and dilemmas. Put another way, all learning begins in an unresolved need or a doubt, and in the words of Jim Garrison, “doubt is a living, embodied, and impassioned condition, a state of need and active seeking.”²⁹ This is the antidote to the stuck place that Frye describes: In order to develop the habits associated with value feeling-mode plurality that Locke envisions, one that supports the ongoing development of the antiracist education commitment, we must directly inquire into our places of emotional and intellectual resistance. From a Lockean/Deweyan standpoint, these explorations of felt tensions inspire inquiry that help develop a value feeling-mode harmony across the competing emotional tensions associated with being a white person who cannot escape the privileges nor the complicity associated with white supremacy. It may be helpful to liken the exploration of these racialized value feeling-modes to the aesthetic inquiry that artists make, which, for Dewey, is precisely grounded within a felt tension. The act of artistic creation is a result of inquiry and the culmination of the desire to restore balance and harmony, thus, engaging with a place of discomfort like that associated with white shame and guilt is exactly the place to begin with the development of a commitment. In Dewey’s words, the

adequate yielding of the self is possible only through a controlled activity that may well be intense. In much of our intercourse with our surroundings we withdraw; sometimes from fear.... Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in.³⁰

Developing a commitment as a privileged white person steeped in white dominance cannot be a passive, one-time endeavor because our socially-grounded and personally felt emotional value commitments challenge the commitment's life. This Locke-inspired analysis compliments that of Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas who argue for a pedagogy of discomfort that, "requires not only cognitive but emotional labor."³¹ Locke's argument when buttressed by Dewey emphasizes that we must pitch our inquiry into our emotional responses directly at the debilitating features of white guilt and shame in equally strong measures, and through Locke's complex social and individual value theory, we likewise see that if our educational programs wish to challenge its students and educators to embrace commitments and dispositions directed at creating antiracist, emancipatory educational spaces, then we need to create social contexts where affect, value, and intellect all combine to invite, provoke, and challenge community members to engage publicly and personally in exploring the emotional and intellectual contours of making such commitments.

Rather than seeing personal reflection that engages with affect and ideas simultaneously as being the province of isolated class offerings like reflection papers, we need to provide opportunities for community members to engage in public inquiry into antiracist value commitments. Likewise, as observed by an anonymous reviewer of this essay, we must offer avenues for emotional engagement with all our educational value commitments. We cannot see dispositions as disconnected from the cognitive and emotional labor that underwrite them, nor are they fixed ends that reveal themselves in discrete observable actions. These conclusions push us as program faculty and leaders to engage publicly with our own emotional and intellectual commitment processes. We white educators must work publicly with our own experiences of white guilt and shame as part of our ongoing commitment and invitation to newer members of our academic communities to join us intellectually and, through Locke's challenge, emotionally.

1. Mary E. Diez, "Assessing Dispositions: Five Principles to Guide Practice," in *Teacher Dispositions: Building a Teacher Education Framework of Moral Standards*, ed. Hugh Sockett (New York: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2006), 49 (emphasis added), <http://www.ied.edu.hk/obl/files/TeacherDispostions.pdf>.

2. CAEP Commission on Standards and Performance Reporting, "CAEP Accreditation Standards and Evidence: Aspirations for Educator Preparation," (Washington, DC: Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013), 49, <http://caepnet.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/commrpt.pdf>.

3. Frances C. Welch et al., "Significant Issues in Defining and Assessing Teacher Dispositions," *The Teacher Educator* 45, no. 3 (2010): 455.

4. For example, see the discussions in Dan W. Butin, ed., *Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Contexts, Theories, and Issues* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).

5. For example, see Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989).

6. I thank Barbara Houston for both of the following examples. They are discussed in Barbara Houston, "Taking Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 1–13, <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/1786/496>.

7. Sandra Lee Bartky, "*Sympathy and Solidarity*" and *Other Essays* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 148.

8. Janet E. Helms, ed., *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990).
9. Marilyn Frye, "A Response to *Lesbian Ethics*," *Hypatia* 5, no. 3 (1990): 133.
10. Geert Kelchtermans, "Teachers' Emotions in Educational Reforms: Self-Understanding, Vulnerable Commitment and Micropolitical Literacy," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 21, no. 8 (2005): 995–1006.
11. Alain Locke, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).
12. Leonard Harris, *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race, and Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).
13. Ibid.
14. Alain Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
15. Judith M. Green, *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity, and Transformation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999). This work will be cited as *DD* in the text for all subsequent references; and Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.
19. Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*.
20. David Haekwon Kim, "Self-Contempt and Color-Blind Liberalism in the Accidental Asian," in *Boundaries of Affect: Ethnicity and Emotion*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Susan Scheckel (Stony Brook, NY: Stony Brook University Humanities Institute, 2007), 5 (emphasis added).
21. David Haekwon Kim, "Contempt and Ordinary Inequality," in *Racism and Philosophy*, ed. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 114. ed. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (1999)
22. Ibid. 2300
23. Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*.
24. See Kim, "Self-Contempt and Color-Blind Liberalism in the Accidental Asian"; and Kim, "Contempt and Ordinary Inequality."
25. Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*.
26. R. E. Lamb, "Guilt, Shame, and Morality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 329–346.
27. Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011), 77.
28. John Dewey, "Art as Experience" (1934) in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).
29. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 94.
30. Dewey, "Art as Experience," 59–60.
31. Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas, "Discomforting Truths: The Emotional Terrain of Understanding Difference," in *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 110.