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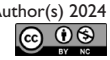

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Skin deep: A review of early childhood policy affordances for anti-racist practice in England and Scotland

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Abstract
The role of anti-racism in early childhood remains a salient concern for many educators working with young children. Yet to what extent, and through what socio-political paradigms, government guidance supports proactive engagement remains an area to be mapped and explored. In this article, through a critical scoping review we aim to consider the context and policy landscape for anti-racist practice in Scotland and England and examine confluences and divergences between each country.

Keywords
Anti-racism, childhood, decolonisation, policy review

Introduction

In the early childhood field, questions about how we, as researchers and practitioners working with young children, can meaningfully address racial inequalities remain a salient concern. Set against a sustained background of 'diversity' strategies which too often whitewash difference (Ahmed, 2012; Robinson and Diaz, 2006), *anti*-racism – proactively concerned with challenging the legacy of inequality against Black and minoritised children – is still yet to find a consistent place within practice in England and Scotland. In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in public discourse, it continues to demand sustained statutory attention. However, while there are a range of tentative commitments

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towards anti-racism in primary and secondary education, the predominant narrative around early childhood that young children are 'innocent' of racialisation continues to marginalise and obscure concerted training or action (Jenks, 2005). There is an urgent need, then, to map and evaluate to what extent and through what socio-political paradigms government guidance currently supports anti-racism in statutory early childhood provision. In this – the first of two articles (Tembo and Bateson, 2024) – we scope the dominant political contexts and policy frameworks influencing early learning and childcare (ELC) practice in Scotland and England. This builds on our preliminary inquiry into our own experience of collaborative writing with, in and against race in the study of early childhood (Tembo and Bateson, 2022). As ELC rapidly expands in both countries alongside the resurgence of populist politics and culture wars resistant to anti-racism in these contexts (Somerville, 2022; Uthmani/The Scotsman, 2020), such an inquiry offers a timely, if not overdue, intervention.

The current contexts in England and Scotland

This section provides an examination of how race and anti-racism have been approached in both England and Scotland. Methodologically, we draw from the principles of a scoping review that, according to Jesson et al. (2011: 76), 'documents what is already known. Then, using a critical analysis of the gaps in knowledge, helps to refine the questions, concepts and theories and thus points the way to future research'. It will therefore not aim towards a comprehensive overview but instead seeks to chart several key developments from the early 2000s until the present day and examine implications for early years practice. Theoretically, our approach is rooted in an understanding of policy texts as both epistemically and ontologically significant (Sellar, 2015; Webb and Gulson, 2012). That is, policy is productive of particular ways of *knowing* about children, childhood and race and racism, and is also productive of particular ways of *being* and *becoming* in practice at an affective level. As Thompson et al. (2022: 2) note, 'policy coordinates desire, it represents or codifies values and behaviours in an attempt to make them consistent'. Hence, policy can be understood as *affecting*, towards the practitioners and children, and also as *affected by* broader societal norms and values. Such an understanding enables us to better grasp how ELC is figured in the English and Scottish contexts. Finally, we maintain a level of criticality to any notion that this research can be fully objective and instead situate ourselves as ethically accountable for the knowledge produced (Braidotti, 2019).

Affordances for anti-racist pedagogy in the Scottish context

Public discussion about the role of racism in Scotland has generally appeared progressive on the surface, with the Scottish National Party (SNP) waving the flag for civic nationalism and social democracy (Duclos, 2016; Meer, 2015). In power since 2007, the SNP is broadly left of centre and viewed as sympathetic to social democratic concerns about inclusion and equality. This is driven by a general consensus about Scotland's poor life expectancy rates and profound poverty in certain regions (Alston/United Nations, 2019). At the same time, the SNP is committed to campaigning for independence from the United Kingdom. Accordingly, it maintains, like the Scottish Labour government before it, a close relationship with Scottish business and, consequently, its policies are routinely entangled with neo-liberal fiscal and social values (Davidson et al., 2010; Hassan, 2020; MacFarlane, 2020). This reflects an essential dichotomy at the heart of ELC policy between – on the one hand – values of co-production (Scottish Government, 2016: 32) which to some extent affirm children's social 'identities' and, on the other, a neoliberal concern

with liberating children from their social backgrounds by figuring them in the curriculum as enterprising individuals. To what extent the UNCRC incorporation into Scottish law may advance children's political rights and identities remains to be seen. The same legislation is not likely to appear in England within this current Parliament, even despite the scrapping of the post-Brexit Bill of Rights (UK Parliament, 2022) – that was likely to remove previous protections afforded by the European Court of Human Rights.

This tension is anchored in the SNP's prevailing twin discourses in and around ELC. *Getting It Right For Every Child* ('GIRFEC') (Scottish Government, 2022) – a flagship left-of-centre policy for over a decade – emphasises inclusion. It prompts (typically when things go 'wrong') teachers and social workers to develop a close knowledge of children and families and (theoretically) support tailored adjustments to promote their learning and wellbeing. Conversely, *Closing the Attainment Gap* (Scottish Government, 2021) focuses on driving up universal (or rather, minimum) standards of 'progress' and ability, against which neurological and certain cultural differences must be 'managed'. To be clear, we align our views with those who write against the neo-liberal standardisation of achievement that 'the basic problem is not to "close gaps" but to nurture, recognise, and utilise the wide range of talents that are available in the population' (Raven, 2018). In any case, these standards are defined both by the Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, 2019), which children in Scotland aged 3 years old and over are formally assessed by, and within the National Health Services' linear child development benchmarks (NHS GGC, No date). The latter are promoted from birth by each child's Health Visitor (the panopticonic 'named person' in Scottish law binding every pre-school child to the State). While GIRFEC and the 'attainment gap' discourse are theoretically complimentary, politically the neo-liberal underpinnings of the latter prevail (OECD, 2021). One result is that GIRFEC (along with other wellbeing strategies) has not uncommonly been co-opted to mitigate *against* divergence rather than adapt to it (Coles et al., 2016), blurring the boundaries between wellbeing and welfare, with children's political rights obscured (Tisdall, 2015).

This tension – between enfolding children's unique cultures and marginalising them – is mirrored in affordances, or lack thereof, for anti-racist practice in education. As in England, the attainment agenda positions 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' as commonalities shared by all children. This modality assures us of a level playing field, and imagines it easily achievable, the better to assess children's heterosocial and cognitive assent or 'achievement'. Since cultural difference is figured as ubiquitous, it may (supposedly) be left largely at the door – excepting benign admittance and delineation via a handful of contained, symbolic gestures (stories, projects, token festival days – sometimes simply 'Diversity Day' or 'Culture Day' – and often pre-determined regardless of a setting's cultural make-up and hinterlands (Robinson and Diaz, 2006). GIRFEC, in line with broader inclusion and equity policies (Casey/Scottish Government, 2015; Scottish Government, 2016), is sympathetic to authentically excavating difference, antecedent to anti-racist discourses (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey, 2011). Vitally, it fully underpins the latest national practice guidance for ELC, *Realising The Ambition* (RTA) (Education Scotland, 2020). Moving on from a previous deficit-based obsession with the 'adverse childhood experiences' (McEwen and Gregerson, 2019) of primarily low-income families (disproportionately of colour; see Meer et al., 2020) which was prevalent in previous guidance (Education Scotland, 2014; Swadener, 2000) and which still dominates elsewhere (Growing up in Scotland, 2005–present), RTA (2020: 37) advocates that children have a right to:

- live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe,
- be creative and celebrate [their] diverse culture.

It is interesting to note the romantic conflation of culture and creativity here. Still, RTA (2020: 42) does not shy from later signalling what would likely, under the current Conservative Government in England, be rebuked as 'woke':

> We all have unconscious biases, and it's important to be aware of these in our interactions with babies and young children. . . Although admitting and dealing with your own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them openly with colleagues.

The term 'unconscious bias' is not itself unproblematic, being rooted in narrowly humanist psychological discourses that may simultaneously limit accountability (Noon, 2018; Phoenix, 2021). It is also frustrating that the term is only explicitly named in RTA in relation to gender and not race. Nevertheless, in comparison to the English context, where efforts to address inequality have largely been met with fierce resistance from conservative networks (Gillborn et al., 2022), obfuscating any meaningful discussion, the recognition of bias in RTA is at least a clear acknowledgement of the need to address the complexity of inequality.

More recently, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the (polarised) public acknowledgement globally of the Black Lives Matter movement, new national guidance on anti-racism (Education Scotland, 2021) has offered conceptual, strategic and tactical frameworks for educators and learning communities to recognise and tackle explicit acts of discrimination and institutional racism. However, this guidance together with limited Local Authority offers of (non-statutory) unconscious bias training (welcome if reductive) (City of Edinburgh Council, 2022) has been afforded minimal dissemination and broadly excluded (or bypassed) ELC. Critically, while play is very strongly emphasised across Scotland's early childhood frameworks, it does not feature in this guidance, making its occlusion in anti-racist discourse all the more pronounced. Its nod to 'coloniality', however, indicates potential receptivity to future engagement around affective experiences of race, perhaps including our work. The current effect, though, is that discussion about race within most ELC settings remains scant – and indeed largely unsanctioned – let alone embedded in practices which foreground everyday entanglements with coloniality. It will be interesting to see what effect the Promoting Race Equality and Anti-racist Education guidance (Education and Scotland, 2022) will have in the coming years, or if it will disappear as the initial impact of Floyd's murder retreats.

While pronounced attention in the ELC sector was briefly aroused by alleged discrimination against the infant children of then Scottish Government Minister Humza Yousaf at a nursery in Fife (BBC News, 2021), there persists a prevailing silence or resistance to the idea that racial and cultural hegemonies may negatively encroach on children's experiences of ELC. A small handful of nurseries in Scotland have independently sought anti-racism training for their staff. However, in our everyday conversations with practitioners, babies and young children remain unhelpfully figured as innocents (Mayall, 2000; Robinson, 2013), and racism – or as we prefer to focus on, racialisation – is still deemed, at best, an outlier in these 'caring communities', and at worst, a left-wing scourge ('*Councils hire 'Maoist' consultants to 'decolonise minds' of nursery school children'* (Somerville, 2022)). This fusion of avoidance, denial and deferral in Scottish ELC policy is reflected in the relative paucity of literature on race and anti-racism in ELC contexts generally and the total absence through the affective lens we propose. (For our analysis of the wider literature, see Tembo and Bateson (2024). Such silence is doubly amplified in white majority settings which frequently interpret race as produced only around families of colour (Gaine, 2005). This may be an even greater challenge in parts of Scotland, with an overall lower percentage of non-white citizens than in England (roughly −10%; Scottish Government, 2011). In any case, it

reflects larger silences and disavowals by Scotland's elites ('we're all Jock Tamson's bairns'), despite important avowals to change (Davidson et al., 2018).

While our own work is highly wary of reinforcing broad-brush sociological segmentations of racial and ethnic groups, we note finally that the latest ELC Census in Scotland incorporates a new commitment to monitoring the correlation between ethnicity and the uptake of increased childcare provision (the Scottish Government's flagship '1140 hour policy'). Current data indicates parity of access among white and non-white families. However, it does not yet interrogate any broader trends in non-white families' and children's experiences of ELC. To date such studies have been limited to older children (Arshad and Moskal, 2016; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018), who are living and learning within different institutional parameters.

Affordances for anti-racist pedagogy in the English context

In the wake of Stephen Lawrence's murder in 1993, a raft of policy reports and inquiries were published to diagnose the state of race relations within England. The Parekh (2000) report on *the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* was published at the start of the millennium against the political backdrop of New Labour discourse about a more multicultural and inclusive society (Curran-Vigier, 2008). Intended to offer a new vision for Britain, the report affirmed the value of difference, challenged colour-avoidant attitudes and articulated the need for all in society to 'find ways of nurturing diversity while fostering a common sense of belonging and a shared identity among its constituent members' (Parekh, 2000: xi). Such declarations can be read in stark contrast to other dominant narratives during this period. For instance, the Crick report (Citizenship Advisory Group, 1998) that, while emphasising tolerance, also supported an assimilationist political framework that shored up a homogenous white British imaginary, unavoidably casting difference as other (Chadderton, 2018; Olssen, 2004). In many ways, the Parekh report offered several affordances to affirm difference productively. It was broadly welcomed at the time and signalled generative possibilities beyond the narrative of assimilation. In the same year, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 placed a statutory duty on public bodies (children's centres or nurseries directly run or maintained by the local education authority) to 'eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between people of different racial groups'. An Early Years Trainers Anti Racist Network (1999e: 3) was also well established, advocating recommendations to Parliament for 'a national commitment to a supportive, and sensitive training programme, with concomitant national and appropriate funding, to implement anti racist practice in the early years'. Such developments pointed towards a more optimistic outlook for racial equality at the dawn of the century.

Yet enthusiasm was arguably short-lived in light of Tony Blair's emergent New Labour government (Andrews, 2018; Back et al., 2002; Fortier, 2008). Despite significant rhetoric on the need to promote inclusion and celebrate the diversity of English society, multiculturalism (which itself is not unproblematic; see Kiwan, (2008) soon gave way to the language of 'community cohesion', which emphasised the integration of minoritised groups to conform with 'British values' (Garner, 2016; Home Office, 2001; Kundnani, 2002). For the early years sector, while there were some targeted interventions to address the inequalities faced by children in minoritised groups (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008, 2009; Department for Education and Skills, 2003a), it can be said as equally valid that colour-avoidant attitudes, informed by the broader rhetoric of a 'post-racial' society (Bhopal, 2018; Clarke, 2021), remained the status quo.

Osgood's (2021) analysis also points towards a smoothing over of difference in the curriculum during this period, where the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (Department for Children

Schools and Families, 2007: np) states that 'Children should be treated fairly regardless of race, religion or abilities'. As Osgood notes, mirroring our analysis of the Scottish context, the term 'regardless' arguably diminishes the significance of racial differences between children following a colour-avoidant belief that all children should be treated the same. On balance, the Labour Party sought to strengthen the importance of early childhood during their tenure, namely through the introduction of *Every Child Matters* and the rise of Sure Start centres (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b). However, the extent to which racism was specifically addressed in young children's lives remains subject to much scrutiny.

Succeeding Labour in 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government dropped the discourse of *Every Child Matters* and initially focused their efforts on reviewing the since revised *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2012) introduced 2 years prior. Albeit within a largely developmentalist framework, *Development Matters* did offer some affordances to recognise and address the role of difference among children. It asked practitioners to:

> Be aware of cultural differences in attitudes and expectations. (p. 11)
>
> Be positive about differences between people and support children's acceptance of difference. Be aware that negative attitudes towards difference are learned from examples the children witness. (p. 37)
>
> Help children to learn positive attitudes and challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes, e.g. using puppets, Persona Dolls, stories and books showing black heroes or disabled kings or queens or families with same sex parents, having a visit from a male midwife or female firefighter. (p. 38)

The EYFS statutory framework (Department for Education, 2012) also included a section on equal opportunities. This placed a requirement on settings to promote equality of opportunity; promote and value diversity and difference; explain how inappropriate attitudes and practices will be challenged; and explain how the provision will encourage children to value and respect others. However, the wording was since rephrased in 2014 to remove this requirement. Early Years settings remained bound by the Equality Act 2010, yet the argument has been made that this was essentially a dilution of the duties required to promote equality at a time when incidents of racism were seen to be on the rise (Bhopal, 2018). It was during this period that the Department for Education (2014) introduced statutory guidance on promoting 'fundamental British values'.

It is increasingly evident that the imposition of a monolithic notion of identity only perpetuates cultural supremacism, islamophobia and racism (Bhopal, 2018; Clarke, 2021). Yet rooted in a broader political discourse on counter-terrorism, education providers in England, including early years settings, are now required to promote four 'British' values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. Somewhat in contradiction to the latter, there is also an expectation to challenge 'opinions or behaviours in school that are contrary to fundamental British values' (Department for Education, 2014: 5). In nurseries in England, the guidance states that early education providers who 'fail to promote the fundamental British values . . . do not receive funding from local authorities for the free early years entitlement' (Home Office, 2021). Inevitably, this has produced a paranoid atmosphere of suspicion where practitioners are constrained to deliver a pedagogy of diversity that implicitly supports certain (white, British) cultural values over and above more pluralist ways of knowing about difference (Habib, 2018; Osgood, 2021). Nationalist rhetoric has remained the flavour of the day in the more recent Sewell report (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), which represents an attempt by the UK Government to dispel the idea that Britain is not a

racist society. This report was strongly condemned by the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (2021) Where the early years is discussed, the report notes three sources of disparity between children: family, geography and poverty, yet ignores the extent to which racial inequalities figure as a factor within each (Centre for Research in Race and Education (CRRE), 2021; Tikly, 2022).

The recently revised statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2021b) is currently in place along with the non-statutory guidance *Development Matters* (Department for Education, 2021a). An alternative non-statutory guidance document, produced by the early years sector in response to perceived shortcomings in the DfE guidance, *Birth to 5 Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021) is also available for the profession. *Birth to 5 Matters* cites the context of Black Lives Matter in a guidance document that explicitly addresses contemporary issues in children's lives. Racism is named as a hidden yet present force through which black and minoritised groups are disadvantaged. Practitioner training is cited as an 'important step towards opening dialogue and developing understanding about white privilege, systemic racism, and how racism affects children and families in early years settings' (Early Years Coalition, 2021: 25).

In the revised *Development Matters*, the need to value a range of 'diverse range of cultures' is emphasised and provide books and play materials that 'reflect the diversity of life in modern Britain'. We see then that both Development Matters and Birth to 5 Matters advocate diversity in explicit curriculum resources. Yet what is noticeable about the revised *Development Matters* is the omission of any discussion about how children might become sensitive to racial prejudice and discrimination. This is arguably a lost opportunity to engage with the existing literature but is also striking in light of the claims made in *Working with the revised Early Years Foundation Stage* (Grenier, 2021). This accompanying guide, produced to explain the underpinning knowledge informing *Development Matters*, states that opposing racism is 'integral to good practice in the early years' (Grenier, 2021: 1). It invites practitioners to develop a 'deeper understanding by engaging with anti-racism reading materials, contributing to an environment which permits dialogue to happen openly about race and racism and by challenging racism in all its forms' (ibid). However, racism is not specifically mentioned anywhere within the revised *Development Matters*. This raises questions about the performative nature of the anti-racism statement offered (Ahmed, 2004). The admission and subsequent omission of racism in these texts follows on from the broader deluge of Black Lives Matter statements outlined in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of the police. Though stating opposition to racism as 'integral' marks a recognition of the *problem*, failing to offer any meaningful guidance beyond this offers no meaningful *solution*.

Confluences and divergences between England and Scotland

As has been demonstrated, both Scotland and England explicitly refer to race equality in key educational policies. However, while the main guidance in England is more explicit, there is less Government-sponsored secondary policy cementing the commitment to equalities than is seen in Scotland. Moreover, there is strong evidence that, in England, key equalities discourses and provisions have been steadily watered-down or buried in the lead-up to and following the Brexit vote that polarised Westminster politics (Clarke, 2021). Meanwhile, colour-avoidance, abetted by whitewashing commitments to multiculturalism and diversity, infuse both countries. While English politics casts a long and increasingly intolerant shadow over Scottish cultural and political discourse (with immigration, media regulation and taxation being wholly or heavily reserved to Westminster), Scotland, for its part, bears its own responsibility for certain aspects of colour-avoidance and neocolonial affordances, for example in its sometimes simplistic nation-building rhetoric (Liinpää, 2018).

Liinpää's (2018) chapter on the selective uses of Scottish history in nation-building discourse is a salient example here. Recent 'Homecoming' events, intended to promote Scotland's cultural diversity, history and heritage, have leaned more heavily towards a celebration of particular (white) Scottish histories at the expense of any acknowledgement of Scotland's colonial debt.

Despite important differences, both countries also remain fundamentally in thrall to neo-liberal economic and educational principles of attainment and competition, which position children as 'foretold becomings' (Moss, 2022) towards reductive ideals of citizenship. In Scotland, this is exaggerated by an obsessive focus on closing the attainment gap, which sees resources over-ridingly skewed towards improving numeracy and literacy. While this may have originated in a social justice discourse (rather than Conservative England's predominant economic growth discourse), there is arguably little difference between the reductivity of both.

This figuring of childhood as preparation for civic and economic self-sufficiency at best obscures and at worst manages away vital cultural and political differences. It cannot be denied that Scotland continues to make greater progress towards embedding equalities in its educational policies, in strategic and much as principled opposition to the Conservatives. The Scottish National Party's now formal alliance with the Scottish Greens bolsters those commitments (Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party, 2021). However, in practice both countries' explicit concerns with racial (or gender, or sexual, or disability) equalities remain both highly marginal to day-to-day curriculum delivery and, more importantly, superficial – focused near-exclusively on tackling outlier acts of racist behaviour and making small tweaks to didactic ('one world') curriculums. While much is rightly made of the current Conservative Government's deliberate stoking up culture wars and denigration of further-reaching anti-racist activity with schools, this history of superficiality is longstanding, and is likely to continue under subsequent Westminster Governments.

Not only do these limited and narrow focuses obscure the deeper ground in which race, racialisation and racism take root for *all* citizens, it critically renders race near-invisible within early childhood settings, where free play, rather than didactic curricula, is increasingly (and rightly) emphasised. Without government support, individual settings are increasingly turning to private training and consultancy on anti-racism to enhance practice, yet these remain exceptions to the rule. As such, anti-racism in ELC remains near-universally confined to promoting an undefined 'cultural sensitivity' towards the needs of children and families, alongside largely performative changes to the story book corner, the diversification of dolls, school lunches and token festivals. How racism is prefigured (and challenged) in the substrata of children's play remains an area for further exploration.

Coda: reticence about reform

This review has set out to examine the context and policy landscape for anti-racist practice in Scotland and England. Though there are clear nuances to these countries that prevent broader generalisation, scholars working across the globe in different socio-political contexts – particularly those sliding towards right-wing political values (Köttig et al., 2017; Pinheiro-Machado and Varga, 2023) – might recognise or anticipate similar tensions for anti-racist practice in ECL. Looking forward, questions arise on the status and function of policy in its very ability to meaningfully foster ways of understanding anti-racism in response to our concerns. Could a reformed policy widen its focus beyond skin deep conceptions of racism, or might we need to be creative in producing a skeleton of understanding to better support practitioners supporting young children's play? How might the existing literature on such issues support this endeavour? On reflection, we express reticence towards reform, sharing the concerns of others that calls of this kind are too often situated

within narrow conception of change that change little since they fail to address the power relations inherent in the system as a whole (by which we refer to the legacies of colonialism and humanism (Braidotti, 2013; Wynter, 2003)). Cvetkovich (2012), in her text on public feelings of depression, expresses concerns within the current political moment as the sense of being *stuck*, a feeling shared by many who care about social justice that radical potential for change so often has a way of shifting into reformism. She considers how, for example, the queer activism of the 1970s 'left some of us wondering how domestic partnership benefits and marriage Equality became the movement's rallying cry (Cvetkovich, 2012: 6)'. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in the past decade, a similar theme arises where the need to radically rethink the routine dehumanisation of Black and minoritised people's lives collapses into an inherently flawed argument for 'better forms of policing' as a means to end racism (Joseph–Salisbury et al., 2020; Phelps et al., 2021). Our closing argument within this policy review is made with the same sense of feeling; the answer to racism in early childhood is not and perhaps might never be better forms of policy. In Tembo and Bateson, (2024), we turn to the academic literature in order to pose the question of how else race can be understood at its *root*.

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