



Volume 14

Number 1 *The Ethics of Memory: What Does it Mean to Apologize for Historical Wrongs*

Article 6

2020

Author's Response to Book Review

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Recommended Citation

Burch, Kerry (2020) "Author's Response to Book Review," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol14/iss1/6>

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Author's Response

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First, I would like to express my appreciation to Professor DeCesare for his substantive and elegantly written review of my book, *Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose* (hereafter abbreviated as *JRT*). It is always gratifying to be taken seriously, especially by someone of DeCesare's stature whose expertise in democratic educational theory is so apparent. His critical yet sympathetic treatment of *JRT* reflects a keen understanding of the challenges facing democracy and education today, as well as a lucid awareness of the challenges posed to the American political tradition by a long-overdue racial reckoning.

I think the most significant feature of DeCesare's review occurs toward the end, when he articulates doubts about the project of invoking Jefferson today as a vehicle for stimulating educational and political renewal. Owing to the ethical gravity of the controversies raised in DeCesare's review about Jefferson's complicated legacy, I would like to devote my attention almost exclusively to this highly instructive civic predicament.

I wrote *JRT* in part because I was concerned that many of us on the educational left seemed to be increasingly okay with untethering ourselves imaginatively from what George S. Counts called the "democratic-revolutionary tradition" —a tradition that may be partially indebted to Jefferson but is by no means identical to him, or for that matter, identical to any single individual. Baldly put, the assumption within this perspective appears to be the idea that efforts toward renewal of civic education, including renewal of the arts and humanities, cannot be effectuated if such efforts attempt to find inspiration and anchorage in the American political tradition that emanated from the American Revolution.

Indeed, DeCesare suggests that meaningful reform efforts can be successful only to the degree they find inspiration in struggling *against* this tradition. In DeCesare's view, and in the view of many others, Jefferson's racism, white supremacy, and status as a rapist-slaveholder, forecloses the possibility that his thoughts on education, or his insights into transitions toward democracy, might guide or inspire efforts on behalf of educational renewal. In this regard, one of the many things I most appreciated in DeCesare's review was his observation that throughout *JRT*, I sought neither to demonize nor to celebrate Jefferson. Rather, I deliberately sought to retain a productive tension throughout the book—between that which is democratic and admirable about Jefferson, and that which is racist and white supremacist.

From a pedagogical standpoint—rooted in Socrates and Freire—I felt it was necessary to keep this tension, or set of contradictions, consistently present as a heuristic device. By heightening awareness of these contradictions, I hoped to ignite novel questions and inquiries about our conflicted founding. Indeed, “making education” out of our conflicted founding is one of the preeminent aims of the book (and in the classes I teach). One of Jefferson's most egregious failures—e.g., the failure to imagine a multiracial democracy for the nation's future—must be highlighted and critically interrogated in our classrooms. This expression of white supremacy reflects Jefferson at his demoralizing worst. Even though I disagree with DeCesare on how— not if—we should frame Jefferson's white supremacy, he does a superb job of arguing why these dimensions of Jefferson's life ought to disqualify him from playing any role in reconstructing educational purposes today.

So let me try to explain why I disagree with the idea that Jefferson's legacy is unsalvageable; or at least, not desirable for intelligent use in informing our future reform efforts. Contra DeCesare, the positive argument for recruiting “Jefferson” critically and strategically that I tried to execute in

JRT, rests on two related factors. The first has to do with the proposition that Jefferson's revolutionary thought encourages *ample dialectical space for privileging intergenerational self-criticism*; and the second factor, entwined with the first, has to do with the concept of a tradition and how the *principles contained* within the Declaration of Independence—despite that document's white supremacist historical origins—can and should be read today as potential catalysts for educational, political and personal transformation.

The self-critical element within the Declaration is crucial not only for projects of political renewal but also for projects of personal renewal. I concur with DeCesare when he recognizes that a “democratic society's *permanent political revolution* requires a citizens' *permanent personal revolution*.” This recognition is key. It was this recognition that led me to bracket the human capacity for revision as the focus of my third chapter, entitled, *Educationalizing Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory*. It is also what led me to treat rather extensively Danielle Allen's magisterial book on the Declaration. Echoing and extending her arguments, I wanted to drive home the point that a critical, present-day re-reading of “our” Declaration is the best ideological channeling-device we have available for transforming our political and personal realities. One can only wonder what, exactly, the democratic alternatives to the Declaration would be once the principles and values it contains are abandoned or marginalized owing to their unfulfilled, sullied past. Would this mean that going forward, we in the social foundations of education, should teach teachers to teach that the fiery jeremiads of Douglass, Du Bois and King, each of whom relied so crucially on the language of the Declaration for their radical democratic critiques, are mere rhetorical performances that should be dismissed as inconsequential or somehow hypocritical? I hope this is not the direction we are headed. In *JRT*, I tried to laser-in on the insights into democracy that Jefferson was attempting to theorize, realizing that many would still want to sideline these insights by reducing them to *something identical* to the flawed person who gave them literary expression.

What, then, makes Jefferson's so-called revolutionary thought so revolutionary? It is precisely his adroit theoretical attempts to capture the processual, experimental, unfinished, and thus necessarily revisionary character of democratic political cultures. As he articulated many times, Jefferson hoped that future generations of Americans would learn to exercise their capacities to reject those ideologies, opinions, habits, or governments, that were deemed to have lost their ability to be responsive to the development of new human needs. Promoting these capacities was what education in a broad sense was for. Given our own rapidly changing historical circumstances and the consequent emergence of new human needs, including the emergence new student needs, I feel compelled to say again that Jefferson wanted future generations of Americans to outgrow and leave behind any ideology—yes, leave behind even his own pseudo-scientific racial constructs—if they were judged by subsequent generations to no longer promote their safety and happiness.

To thus use Jefferson against Jefferson—to be able to turn the universal precepts that he identified against his own historically-contingent, embodied prejudices—signifies one attractive element of the “dialectical core” of his revolutionary thought. Jefferson's ability to express these deeper, *revisionary imperatives* that must be part of any authentic democratic culture, is perhaps what prompted Eddie Glaude, in his most recent book, *Begin Again*, to state that “Jefferson wrote brilliantly about democracy.” (78). I hasten to add that, in the same sentence, Glaude observes that Jefferson owned slaves, exploited Sally Hemings and wondered whether black people were biologically inferior. Thus, the question is raised:

Can we appropriate Jefferson's brilliant insights into democracy while we reject his white supremacist pretensions?

I believe that we can. I would add that part of learning how to criticize a tradition, involves learning how to make tricky moral and analytical distinctions in relation to the past/present inter-dynamic. As a teacher in the social foundations of education, for example, I frequently ask students what it

would mean for them to recover the moral spirit of the “alter and abolish” clause in the Declaration and apply that principle and energy to some contemporary problem they may identify. As Sheldon Wolin reminds us, this clause is not only concerned with “abolishing” governments but should also be read as the “right to create new forms,” whether these new forms are social movements or other politically inventive efforts. I would like to think that this thought-experiment exercises my students’ critical faculties, by rendering alive a founding idea that was previously “known” as a dead relic. Are not engagements like this one way we can refresh and renew traditions? In much the same way, I would like to think that teachers and citizens can indeed learn to metaphorically throw-out the bathwater (to dismantle the moral legitimacy of white supremacy) without throwing-out the baby (utilizing the critical elements within the democratic tradition) (Nussbaum, 2, 109-10).

To develop what it means to criticize a tradition, let us consider the question of how Americans today should read, or re-read, the Declaration of Independence. But first let’s consider how bleak and dismal the situation would be today if Americans in previous centuries had acquiesced in imagining the principle of equality along the narrow lines that Jefferson and the founders imagined it in their eighteenth-century context. In such a dystopian scenario, any movement toward democracy would have been stillborn. Fortunately, many generations of Americans struggled to expand the moral content of the equality principle and, in doing so, made the principle progressively more inclusive. I suppose that Americans in previous generations could have bemoaned the restricted meaning of equality in the Declaration (at its inception) and looked elsewhere for their egalitarian inspiration. Instead, Americans took it upon themselves to creatively expand the originally restrictive dimensions of the clause. They moved to apply that new image of equality to their egalitarian, human rights projects, from the abolitionists and suffragettes to the civil rights and gay rights movements. In view of these patterns of social change, predicated as they were on critical, inter-generational re-readings of the Declaration, another question arises:

Going forward, would it be intellectually consistent for progressives to make the case that it is okay to creatively re-interpret vital clauses of the Declaration, including the equality, alter and abolish and pursuit of happiness clauses, but then turn around and reject Jefferson's insights into democracy, insights whose qualities are virtually identical with the Declaration itself?

It would strike me as tragic were we to inform our students that the democratic tradition in this country is so deeply flawed by racism and white supremacy that it is beyond salvageability and we must therefore “relegate to the margins” the figure of Jefferson and, by extension, the Declaration. To be fair, DeCesare does not explicitly relegate to the margins the Declaration, as he suggests that we do for Jefferson. So, let me try to further get at what I mean by “criticizing a tradition as a precondition for its renewal,” by referencing Frederick Douglass’s instructive Fourth of July Oration in 1852 (Colaiaco, 2007). Obviously, at that time, slavery was legal under the Constitution and Douglass acknowledged this fact to his audience, including the fact that slavery ran counter to the equality clause in the Declaration. Yet, Douglass announces to his audience the striking proposition that, “read properly,” the Constitution is an anti-slavery document. History appears to have vindicated Douglass’s claim about the elasticity, generational and critical potential of our founding documents. In defense of his position, Douglass says, “read its principles,” “consider its purposes.” Here, Douglass orchestrates a radical break between the baby and the bathwater—between the founders’ historical context and their personal foibles, on the one hand, and the universality of the moral principles these documents put into circulation on the other. In *JRT*, I wanted to emphasize not so much Jefferson the person, but what it was that Jefferson was seeking to identify in theorizing transitions toward democracy. It was this revisionary element itself that Jefferson identified that was my highest interest. As the Verso book series on Revolutionary Thinkers illustrates, Jefferson was only one of many historical figures (including Robespierre, Lenin,

Gramsci, Guevara and others) who sought to put their finger on and name these elusive processes of personal and political transformation.

The jeremiad-like performance that Douglass enacts in relation to the American political tradition, recapitulates in broad form the very attitude that Jefferson wanted to become habitual for Americans as they engaged in intergenerational acts of self-criticism. Above all, it is this dynamic and critical element of our political tradition that is worth saving as the ultimate impetus toward democratization. The American political tradition, in other words, should not be interpreted as a conceptual monolith, as I believe DeCesare and others come close to when they excoriate—correctly—its white supremacist dimensions, but do so without teasing that apart from its countervailing democratic values and forces. To see one thing in this tradition—white supremacy—and to not see or marginalize the other—the critical, revisionary element—seems like an incomplete and unhelpful approach for interpreting, utilizing and refreshing our democratic political tradition.

Finally, I would like to remark on a couple other important issues that DeCesare raises with respect to the renewal chapters of *JRT*. In composing these chapters, uppermost on my mind was the need to extrapolate the educational implications of Jefferson's theory looking forward. I wished to contemplate what our national curriculum would look like were it to take seriously Jefferson's axiom that each generation, along with their respective institutions, must respond to changing circumstances and to the corresponding development of new human needs. As DeCesare correctly observed, I proposed, in an uncomfortably abbreviated fashion, a Curricular Redesign that featured a K-12 emphasis on Civic Philosophy, Ecological Studies and Critical Media Studies. The reason I did not suggest a stand-alone course in Philosophy was that I envisioned the moral energy and questioning spirit which philosophy embodies to be suffused throughout the curricular redesign. However, I did not make this conceptualization explicit enough. Similarly, the subject of "education

for social justice” was not identified as a stand-alone course because it, too, was a normative ideal envisioned to be suffused throughout the curriculum.

DeCesare is correct in saying that, in earlier chapters, I focused considerable attention on the education of citizens outside the boundaries of formal schooling, as per Jefferson’s theory of revolutionary transition. And DeCesare is correct in saying that this crucial theme is not treated in the book’s renewal chapters. I agree with him here and believe this oversight constitutes an opportunity lost. DeCesare’s review has given me an opportunity to think through in what manner the education of citizens outside formal K-12 settings could be more robustly integrated into ongoing reform efforts. No doubt, this crucial piece of a larger renewal project deserves far more attention than it received in my book.

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Gordon-Reed, Annette. 2017. “America’s Original Sin: Slavery and the Legacy of White Supremacy.” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb). I reference this article for three reasons. First, as both a noted biographer of Sally Hemings and a Jefferson scholar, Gordon-Reed speaks with authority in mapping the ideological machinations of white supremacy. Secondly, in my opinion, it is an incredibly “teachable” piece owing to her nuanced account of white supremacy and its relation to our founding documents. Thirdly, she quotes at length the Confederate Vice President, Alexander Stephens, who significantly opined that “Jefferson was wrong” when he claimed that slavery violated human rights and should eventually be abolished. I bring this last point up not to suggest that we let Jefferson off the hook on the slavery question, but rather, to suggest that Gordon-Reed apparently felt that it was important to remind us that the architects of Confederate ideology did not consider Jefferson as one of their own, in fact they were hostile to him. Perhaps she highlights this analytical distinction because she believes it should be accorded some weight when evaluating Jefferson’s complicated legacy.

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