

# A critical reflexión to (re)open the pedagogy about race and racism with toddlers during neighborhood walks

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**Abstract:** Anti-racist education in early childhood education centers the voices, experiences, and knowledge of people of color, fostering both positive racial identity development and critical awareness of racial issues. However, the practical implementation of anti-racist education—particularly in classrooms with very young children—remains underexplored. In response, this reflexive essay revisits two vignettes from neighborhood walks with older toddlers (ages 29–35 months) in a gentrifying community of color to examine the potential of integrating a place-based approach into anti-racist pedagogy. Grounded in the conceptual framework of haunting, this study highlights the silenced yet ever-present histories that emerge through young children's everyday interactions with their surroundings. By critically reflecting on these moments, the paper bridges the gap between theory and practice in anti-racist pedagogy, and advocates for practical, embodied teaching strategies that make space for race-conscious conversations in early learning environments. Ultimately, this essay offers a way to reimagine anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education, with particular attention to the unique needs and capacities of toddlers.

## Article History

Received: 30 March 2025

Accepted: 19 June 2025

## Keywords

Race; Haunting; Toddler; Anti-racist pedagogical practice

## Introduction

The global rise in racism underscores an urgent call for radical anti-racist practices and pedagogies within early years and childhood education. Responding to *the Journal for Childhood, Education, & Society's* thematic issue, this paper offers a reflexive exploration of two critical moments experienced with toddlers during routine neighborhood walks. Through this work, this paper aims to (re)open conversations about race and racism in early childhood settings, beginning to illuminate potential ways to transform daily practices into anti-racist pedagogy. By drawing on the concept of haunting to interweave toddlers' everyday experiences, their physical environment, and the often-unseen stories of people of color within their community, this paper explores how to develop transformative, contextualized, and concrete strategies for early childhood educators. These strategies would center the voices and experiences of historically marginalized communities in ways that are realistically applicable within existing daily classroom routines. Ultimately, by illustrating how educators' critical consciousness can fundamentally shift routine conversations and interactions, this paper seeks to provide conceptual tools for supporting early childhood educators in engaging with radical anti-racism, moving beyond theoretical ideals to illuminate practical pathways for addressing and challenging systemic inequalities from the earliest ages.

Scholars and educators in early childhood education (ECE) have long advocated for classroom discussions on race and racism, particularly through the influential Anti-Bias Education (ABE) framework developed by Derman-Sparks (1989) and later expanded into the Anti-Racist Education (ARE) framework (Iruka et al., 2020). Building on ABE, Escayg (2019) developed ARE to develop pedagogical approaches explicitly centering the voices and perspectives of people of color, and broadly, communities of color, and to foster racial literacy. Husband and Escayg (2022) argued that anti-racist early childhood curriculum, when used broadly in various learning environments, should at least aim to: 1) encourage anti-racist behavior; 2) help children understand their racial identity; 3) teach them about race and racism; 4) increase

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their awareness of racial issues; and 5) promote racial healing. They also suggested that when educational content consistently and meaningfully addresses how racism works within society, it helps children move beyond a naive and detached understanding of race and racism toward a more critical view of social justice. A child's ability to grasp ideas about race and racism in a way that connects to their own life is a crucial building block for developing their identity.

While a substantial body of literature underscores the importance of anti-racist education in early childhood classrooms and offers resources for fostering critical race literacy (Summer, 2014), concrete examples detailing how to practically implement anti-racist curriculum—particularly for young children, including toddlers—remain limited. Critical scholarship in early childhood education (ECE) has identified two primary obstacles that hinder the implementation of anti-racist pedagogies: the dominant framing of childhood as innocent and educators' resistance to discussing race. Scholars have interrogated the colonial origins of childhood innocence, illuminating that the taken-for-granted understanding of an "innocent child" marginalizes discussions of race and racism across all aspects of early childhood education, from classroom practices to broader policy frameworks (Butler et al., 2019; Templeton & Cheruvu, 2020). This construction, they have argued, ultimately upholds white supremacy. For example, Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol's (2018) intersectional analysis illustrated how Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), when applied as a singular framework, defined quality in ways that normalized white, monolingual, and monocultural values and experiences. They contended that this normalization justifies deficit paradigms that frame the developmental trajectories of minoritized children as abnormal, erasing their cultural knowledge and perpetuating racial inequities (see also Mac Naughton, 2005).

The second obstacle to successfully implementing anti-racist pedagogy in young children's classrooms is resistance among ECE educators. Often manifested through colorblind approaches or developmentalism, this resistance further impedes meaningful engagement with anti-racist teaching (Boutte et al., 2011; Husband, 2010; Husband & Escayg, 2022). As Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2007/2017) explain, the standardization of multicultural education has led to its depoliticization, often reducing it to surface-level celebrations of cultural diversity. When multicultural approaches are institutionalized in this way—emphasizing fixed categories of culture and difference without addressing underlying power relations—they tend to reinforce dominant norms, particularly the white gaze. In teacher preparation programs, this manifests as a focus on "benign pluralism" (McCarthy, 1994, p.95), where diversity is acknowledged but stripped of its socio-political context. As a result, the deeper, transformative goals of critical multiculturalism—such as confronting systemic racism and fostering equity—are displaced, leading to a disorientation of the original intent of anti-oppressive, justice-driven pedagogies. As a result, while curricula may reference race, bias, and equity, the dominant narratives of race often remain either colorblind or limited to a superficial celebration of cultural diversity—effectively closing off critical conversations about race and racism (Doucet & Adair, 2013; see also Tobin & Kurban, 2018).

To address these obstacles, scholars in teacher education have turned to teacher preparation programs, emphasizing the importance of educators' critical consciousness of race (Allen et al., 2021; Escayg, 2024) and the significance of their lived experiences—particularly those of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) educators—in shaping anti-racist teaching practices (Cheruvu & Martinez, 2023; Henward et al., 2021;). For anti-racist educators, enacting critical consciousness requires ongoing reflection on their teaching practices—moving beyond superficial celebrations of diversity during special events—and a deeper examination of how race and racism shape their attitudes, instructional choices, and decision-making in the classroom (Allen et al., 2021; Iruka et al., 2020). Such critical consciousness is cultivated from lived experience of oppression, and some studies on teachers of color and immigrant educators have highlighted how they draw upon their lived experiences of systemic oppression and exclusion, utilizing them as funds of knowledge (McDevitt, 2018) or curriculum texts (Ngo et al., 2023) to creatively implement in-situ teaching practices that foster students' critical consciousness.

However, while previous studies have laid important groundwork by establishing the significance of critical consciousness and the value of teachers' lived experiences, the field now faces an urgent need to

move from theory to practice. I strongly believe that without concrete examples that illuminates the potential to practice anti-racist education through critical reflexión, critical consciousness risks remaining a rhetorical ideal rather than a transformative force in classrooms. This gap disproportionately affects early childhood educators, who are often working within standardized, developmentally normative frameworks that do not readily support race-conscious or justice-oriented pedagogy. If educators are expected to engage in anti-bias and anti-racist practices, they must be supported with tangible strategies—grounded in context—that help them translate critical awareness into meaningful, daily interactions with young children. Providing concrete examples is not simply a matter of pedagogical clarity; it is a matter of educational justice.

To address this critical need and provide such concrete examples and strategies, this paper applies critical reflexión to a routine early childhood classroom experience – the neighborhood walk – to ask how teachers can organically support toddlers in developing an awareness of race and racism in the context of everyday experiences, like taking a neighborhood walk. Toddlers are primarily engaged in developmental tasks such as developing gross and fine motor skills, building self-recognition, and expressing creativity. Accordingly, toddler curricula are designed to offer abundant opportunities for autonomous exploration, supporting the development of knowledge about the physical world through active engagement (Bergen et al., 2009; Bergen et al., 2020). This paper offers examples that align with their primary developmental task of actively exploring and making sense of their physical world. By focusing on opening up a story around the place during a neighborhood walk, we aim to cultivate an early awareness of the social world they inhabit, including its diverse human elements and the implicit narratives embedded within it. This isn't about deep conceptual understanding of time; rather, based on the in-depth reflexión of the moments with the conceptual understanding, this paper seeks to ways to foster young children's curiosity, observation, and initial engagement with differences in a developmentally appropriate manner. Just as toddlers are supported in building knowledge about the physical world through active engagement, this practice seeks to lay foundational groundwork for future, more complex understandings of race and racism by encouraging them to observe and interact with the social landscape around them, guided by a critically conscious educator.

As a teacher educator working with both pre-service and in-service teachers, I view teacher educators' reflexive practice as essential for supporting and guiding educators in rethinking their own pedagogical approaches. This process is the initiative gesture to create a space for teachers to critically examine and transform conventional strategies, enabling the development of anti-racist practices that are not only meaningful and context-specific but also developmentally appropriate for toddlers. Rather than relying on externally imposed models, the reflexive practice enables to make this work emerge from educators' situated reflections and commitments, grounded in the realities of their classrooms and communities. In this context, I selected the sociologist Avery Gordon's (2008) concept of haunting as a generative theoretical lens as it allows to recenterize the voices and experiences of communities of color that are often erased, silenced, or forgotten throughout remembering, and ultimately, inviting new ways of seeing and thinking (see also Okechukwu, 2022). Gordon's concept of haunting serves as a framework for foregrounding how these past injustices continue to shape our everyday experiences in subtle yet powerful ways (Best & Ramírez, 2021). Practically, this paper ultimately contributes to implications in teacher education program by offering the collaborative partnership with community is the key in anti-racist education.

To explore innovative anti-racist pedagogical strategies, this paper begins by outlining the conceptual framework of haunting as a lens for rethinking conventional practices in early childhood education and for reimagining their connection to anti-racist pedagogy in a toddler classroom. It then introduces critical reflexión as a methodological approach, followed by two vignettes drawn from walking experiences with young children in their communities. The paper concludes by proposing a contextually grounded approach to anti-racist pedagogy that emerges from and responds to the lived realities of these communities.

### Conceptual Framework: Haunting as a Pedagogical Approach

As articulated by sociologist Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), haunting refers to how unresolved histories continue to exert influence on the present. Haunting is “the way of the ghost” and “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied” (p. xvi). Haunting “raises specters” (p. xvi), and it demands relinquishing one’s faith in the linear concept of time: “To be haunted is to make choices within those spiraling determinations that make the present waver. To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects” (p.190). Gordon employs the metaphor of the ghost to investigate the interconnectedness of history, individual experiences, and the broader social context.

Within education research, a growing stream of literature has taken up haunting as a conceptual framework to illuminate how social injustice is continuously unfolding in education. Education researchers have paid particular attention to how historically rooted and unequal systems persist in schooling, teaching, learning, and curricula, even when the systems have nominally been reformed or abolished (Ewing, 2018; Varga, 2024; Zembylas, 2013). For instance, Varga and Monreal (2021) drew on haunting to trace the debris of whiteness and white supremacy embedded within their institutional space, arguing that engaging with ghosts involves an im/possible paradox acknowledging both the continued presence of oppression and its simultaneous absences. Their research illuminates the “haunted knowledge” that is systematically erased or silenced by dominant master narratives, limiting possibilities for (re)tracing the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable.

Some studies have adopted haunting as a pedagogical framework to explore how to teach historically unresolved tensions (Porto, 2021; Zembylas, 2013; Varga & Monreal, 2021). Loss and absence were used as critical entry points to challenge established historical narratives, to “bring the past into the present in a tangible, material sense” (Zembylas et al., 2021, p. xx) and interrogate the ideological foundations of what has been accepted as “truth.” Zembylas (2013) conceptualized the pedagogy of hauntology as a way to “trouble the hegemonic status of representational modes of knowledge in remembrance practices, undermining their ontological frames and ideological histories” (p. 69). For example, Zembylas et al. (2021) illustrated how geomatics mapping can be used to trace the sedimented land on which a university is built, demonstrating how hauntological inquiry could function as a decolonial curricular approach. The hauntological tale can be used as a central part of curriculum that foregrounds subjugated knowledge and examines how Eurocentric supremacy continues to shape what is considered legitimate knowledge in educational spaces. Similarly, Porto (2021) introduces a language education project in Argentina that employs the pedagogy of hauntology to challenge uncritical narratives of the dictatorship. By engaging with language education as a means of subversion, students were encouraged to critically interrogate official historical discourses, fostering a deeper awareness of human rights violations in recent history while also cultivating empathy toward the suffering of others. By positioning students as ““tertiary victims” who experience a “collective loss” as a group that is extended to community and society” (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002, p. 103, cited from Porto, 2021, p. 147), Porto (2021) illustrates how students engaged in narrative diffraction—a process through which they indirectly witnessed, reinterpreted, and constructed alternative narratives of place based on their observations and emotions. This approach enabled students to critically engage with history, challenging dominant narratives and fostering a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their collective past.

This understanding of haunting in education is closely connected to early childhood education (ECE), where the histories, stories, voices, and experiences of marginalized groups are often ignored or deemed irrelevant within dominant pedagogical narratives. Traditional ECE practices tend to emphasize the individual child’s linear developmental trajectory as detached from broader social and historical realities (Malone et al., 2020; Murriss & Osgood, 2022). Murriss and Osgood (2022) argued that dominant adult epistemologies—rooted in categorization, boundaries, and hierarchies—inevitably involve processes of inclusion and exclusion. As a result, the prevailing representation of the child in ECE, defined primarily

through biological and physiological categories, obscures the non-innocent, ethically charged, and political dimensions embedded within these constructs. In this context, the concept of haunting invites ECE educators to engage in critical reflection and to situate children within broader socio-historical frameworks—fostering meaningful connections between the child, their community, and the environments they inhabit and move through across multiple spatial and temporal dimensions (Furman, 2022; Powell, 2022; Lyu & Roop Miheretu, 2024). For instance, employing a new feminist materialist approach known as time-hopping, Furman (2022) argued that viewing the child as “a knower who lives among ghosts” (p. 253) enables educators to draw on the past experiences of children and their families to reimagine both childhood and curriculum. This perspective supports a practice of re-membering in education—an intentional process of reconnecting fragmented or forgotten histories and identities within pedagogical contexts. Thus, as a conceptual framework, haunting offers a significant contribution to ECE and teacher education by enabling educators to reimagine the child in relation to their environments, emphasizing their entanglement with the spatial and temporal complexities of place.

Grounded in a posthumanist critical perspective, this study reinterprets everyday moments in the early childhood setting. Through haunting, those moments can be reconceptualized as potential catalysts for reimagining anti-racist pedagogy; haunting, as a conceptual framework, enables ECE teachers and teacher educators to recognize that the places they inhabit are not neutral, but are shaped by layered histories of race and racism. It invites them to identify moments in which children's everyday experiences can be meaningfully entangled with the spatial and temporal complexities of those places. I revisit two pivotal moments during a walk through a gentrified community that allowed us to witness and recognize the histories of loss experienced by communities of color amid gentrification. Situated within this framework, this paper contends that (re)opening the conversation of race and racism for toddlers and preschoolers involves guiding them to observe the physical landscape and connect with unresolved historical events embedded in the places they inhabit. The in-situ teaching practices of teachers of color and immigrant teachers serve as powerful tools for guiding children in tracing who lived in these spaces, what has been erased, and how the landscape has changed in the neighborhoods they walk through every day. These educators, whose lived experiences embody racial history, create opportunities for young learners to engage with the past in ways that move beyond surface-level multicultural education. This reflexive paper not only provides concrete strategies for implementing anti-racist pedagogy in ECE but also envisions a radical reimagining of how race and racism can be meaningfully taught. Before diving into the discussion of the moments, this paper first outlines the critical reflexión method used in this paper.

### **Critical Reflexión as a Method: A Way to Reflect, Revisit, and Rethink**

Aligned with *testimonio*, a methodology conceptualized by Latina feminist scholars, critical reflexión has been employed as a methodological technique to examine how individuals navigate situated power dynamics (Elenes, 2023; Espino et al., 2017; Galván, 2011). Researchers “look back” on themselves, interrogating how their thoughts, values, assumptions, and habits of mind are shaped by the vestiges of oppression. This paper draws on critical reflexión as a method to “look back” on what could have been done differently in the moment. Specifically, it focuses on interpreting the dynamics of a neighborhood walk with young children and exploring alternative pedagogical approaches to deliberately center experiences and perspectives of people of color. As a Latinx teacher educator teaching graduate students, Elenes (2023) integrated this method with an autoethnographic approach to deeply examine moments in her classroom, particularly her struggles to understand why student discussions around human rights issues were problematic. She used this method to reflect on the moments that she felt uncomfortable yet hard to challenge. At the core of critical reflexión is an examination of the self—not merely to integrate how lived experiences relate to power structures but to cultivate a critical consciousness that demands transformative action. Given its usefulness for teacher educators and educators more broadly to help critically examine classroom moments through lived experiences, reflexión offers a means to enact pedagogical change.

I position myself as a transnational researcher from South Korea a few decades ago whose lived

experience is shaped by the entanglements of both emigration and immigration contexts, as well as the coloniality of power that informs complex historical trajectories (Moon, 2022). I identify as a South Korean, East Asian individual, with English as my second language. Yet, this transnational perspective enables me to attune to the multiple layers of history and knowledge that are often dismissed, silenced, or forgotten—yet continue to linger in the present as haunted knowledge. Such an experience informs my ability to recognize the layered histories of the community where the children and teachers live, and where we walk together. My own transnational position informs my analysis and how I came to realize that these interactions between children and teachers had so much potential to (re)open the conversation of race and racism. My analysis was based on field notes I took during field work, as well as a “looking back” through my autoethnographic narrative.

### **The Two Critical Moments**

This section explores how the concept of haunting enables a teacher educator to revisit ordinary moments in pedagogical practice and reimagine them as critical catalysts for recognizing the impacts of racism. In these moments, haunting functions as a conceptual lens that brings to the surface silenced histories, racialized absences, and affective undercurrents that shape early childhood educational spaces. By engaging with haunting, the findings reveal alternative narratives that challenge dominant understandings of childhood and curriculum, offering critical pedagogical strategies that (re)open conversations about race and racism with very young children.

The walking moments of this reflective paper were gathered through a multivocal video-cued ethnographic method (Tobin et al., 2009) and participatory observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998) from February to July 2023. The researcher visited the childcare center once a week to build rapport and conduct participatory observation. This study took place at a childcare center within the Maple school district, a metropolitan area in the Eastern United States, which has experienced significant urban development and demographic shifts since the early 2000s. Initially, in the 2000s, the neighborhood was predominantly composed of Latinx and African American residents, representing over 80% of the population. However, rising housing costs have led to displacement, reducing this group to around 65% by 2017. While various factors contributed to these changes, increased housing costs were a major driver. This economic transformation has shifted the neighborhood’s focus towards the preferences of predominantly middle- and upper-class White residents (Golio, 2024).

The Maple Child Care Center, a non-profit organization, was established to address ongoing racial and economic tensions in its surrounding area. The center serves low-income, Spanish-speaking children and immigrant families, primarily infants through pre-K. Reflecting this community, the majority of the center's educators are long-term local residents, most being bilingual Spanish-speaking immigrants who migrated to the U.S., often in the 1980s, seeking economic and political stability. Among them, the three educators central to this paper have lived in the community for over 20 years, granting them a critical awareness of its shifting context and the impacts on their students' families. They acutely recognize how families who rebuilt their lives after migration now struggle to remain in the remaining affordable housing units, which are rapidly being converted into luxury apartments and condominiums. This awareness is powerfully evident in their understanding of the center's high rate of family turnover. As one educator described, it was “heartbreaking yet eye-opening” to witness the profound racial displacement reflected in his own memories of the community over time.

This study was conducted in a classroom for two-year-olds, with children ranging in age from 29 to 35 months—some turned 36 months during the observation period. All three educators in the classroom—one lead teacher and two assistant teachers—are bilingual immigrant women who have worked at the center for over two decades. Similarly, the majority of the children in the classroom come from bilingual, Spanish-speaking immigrant families. Although I, a bilingual Korean-speaking ECE teacher educator and researcher, was initially considered an outsider among the teachers when the research project launched, I gradually became integrated into the classroom community. This was due not only to my consistent presence and active support in daily classroom activities but also to a shared sense of connection rooted in

our common experiences of living in the United States as immigrants.

### *Looking at the Absence*

Walking is a common activity in preschool settings, often used to promote physical health as part of outdoor play. I turn to moments emerging from these walks to examine what knowledge became visible through the lens of haunting. This framework reminds us that places are often layered with unresolved pasts, urging us to recognize echoes of the past that linger in the present, shaping how we see and engage with our surroundings. The following vignette is the field note I generated while walking with the children.

Children are walking along the street where a plaque displaying its history is installed. As the children and their teachers strolled along the street, the sight of a body shop's yard stopped them in their tracks. Wrecked cars and a chaotic collection of crumpled metal and shattered glass lined the perimeter. Excited chatter filled the air as they pointed and traced the lines of damage with their fingers. "Mira! Look!" they exclaimed, urging Ms. Hannah to notice a particularly battered car. Its bumper was torn off and crushed. "Qué le pasó a ese carro? Qué le pasó a ese carro?" [What happened to that car? What happened to that car?] Ms. Hannah asked, her attention drawn to their discovery. But the children, insistent, continued to shout, "Mira! Look at the car!" Ms. Hannah leaned closer, acknowledging their excitement. Still, they weren't satisfied. "Ms. Hannah, look!" they repeated, their voices filled with urgency. Finally, Ms. Hannah understood. "Ese carro fue chocado. Oh oh, el carro fue chocado. Por eso en el carro usamos...vamos a usar el cinturón porque si pasa un accidente, el cinturón nos protege." [That car crashed. Oh oh, the car crashed. That's why we use...we're going to use the seatbelt because if there's an accident, the seatbelt will protect us.] But the children kept insisting that Ms. Hannah look at the car.

In this scene, children expressed curiosity, while the teacher validated their observations and sparked inquiry through thoughtful questions and explanations. This seemingly ordinary interaction exemplifies DAP. But when we use haunting as a conceptual framework, there is something more available; while the walking scene may appear mundane, what stands out is the children's persistent attention to the car, and their repetitive gestures towards the car.

The lens of haunting shifts our attention from what is present to what is absent, urging adults to look beyond the surface of the moment. It compels me to re-turn my perspective with a questioning mindset: Did they really point at the car? Did they even want Ms. Hannah to look at the car itself? What were the children seeking with their demand? What do young children's repeated demands remind us as adults about the neighborhood they walk? Through the lens of haunting, the vignette compels us to stop looking at the broken cars but to attend to what has been forgotten in the place where the broken car is. In this way, the teacher's question—"What happened to the car?"—can be seen as one that shifts the pedagogical approach toward an engagement with place, history, and the unseen forces that continue to shape the present: *Were there accidents around here? What brought them here? What happened to this place?*

As a transnational researcher with a personal history of crossing borders, I recognize the haunted knowledge embedded in the moment—one that lingers in the place as a legacy of Latinx activism and a sanctuary for refugees displaced by civil unrest and the Cold War. This history lingers with the children and their teachers as well; they have migrated to the United States, witnessed and experienced the histories of the civic movement to reclaim immigrant rights, protested against immigration laws that dehumanize undocumented immigrants, and lived the racial tensions among Brown, Black, and White people occurring in their neighborhoods. The broken car was surrounded by the physical remnants of Latinx activism, including the YMCA for Latinx youth and a bilingual preschool specifically serving Spanish-speaking immigrant families. The street where the broken cars were located is the same street that once served as a site for the immigrant rights civic movement.

However, these local histories remain unaddressed—not because teachers dismiss their significance, but because cultural storytelling in early childhood education is often limited to sanitized, celebratory representations of heritage. Such narratives are filtered through the lens of childhood innocence, prioritizing themes of unity, tradition, and festivity while omitting the complexities of struggle, displacement, and resistance. As a result, the rich, layered histories of the local community—stories of activism, migration, and systemic injustice—are often deemed too complicated, too unsettling, or simply irrelevant for young children. This omission reflects a broader tendency to shield children from difficult

histories rather than fostering early engagements with critical perspectives that encourage them to see their surroundings as shaped by the past.

### *The Ghost Story*

As the children and their teachers walked further down the street, they approached an abandoned apartment building. A faded green colored eviction notice, signaling imminent redevelopment, was plastered to the front door. Noticing an open window, one child pointed and exclaimed, "Look! The window is open!" Ms. Veronica, walking beside them, responded, "Yes, the window is open. But it is empty." The child, with a playful grin, threw up their hands and whispered, "Boo!" mimicking a ghostly gesture. Ms. Veronica paused, considering the child's response. "I think the house is empty," she said. "Maybe it is a haunted house."

In this scene, the child playfully responded with an imagined ghost, perhaps influenced by the approaching Halloween season during the observation. The teacher, in turn, affirmed and engaged with the child's imaginative narrative of the house by extending the child's discovery. This scene illuminated the co-creation of a story of a haunted house—an empty house where a ghost emerges through an open window. However, this seemingly ordinary playful interaction between teacher and child subtly reveals a deeper invitation for a researcher to carefully look beyond the surface of the moment again and see the underlying histories, absences, and transformations embedded in the place where the haunted house is located. As Gordon noted, the empty house, opened window, and the green colored eviction notice may serve as "the flashing half-signs ordinarily overlooked until that one day when they become animated by the immense forces of atmosphere concealed in them" (p.204, italics in origin).

Through the lens of haunting, a child's imagination is no longer just a playful or cute response to the empty house but, again, an opening to re/turn to what has happened yet barely addressed. As a transnational researcher who is constantly cultivating new places to call home, the haunted knowledge of this neighborhood prompts me to reflect on the complexities of the lived experiences of its long-term residents. Their voices—when they are heard at all—are often reduced to mere markers of cultural authenticity of the neighborhood, rather than recognized as testimonies of struggle, resilience, and belonging. Mirroring other gentrifying communities, this area experienced a demographic shift in the early 2000s, as White populations, who had previously migrated following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, returned in conjunction with urban renewal projects. This influx soon created mixed-income neighborhoods that seemed to be successful; however, it was marked by the subtle, yet persistent, social and cultural displacement of long-term residents of color due to the increased housing costs (Howell, 2018). Beyond material changes, gentrification fostered ambivalent feelings among long-term residents, leading to affective and epistemic impacts (Thurber, 2018).

The empty apartment building with its eviction notice stands as a remnant of gentrification, a material trace that makes visible the layered histories of racial displacement. In this light, the child's ghostly gesture is a cue that animates the past, focusing on those who once lived here but have since been displaced and forgotten. Their playful interaction provokes the questions: *Who are the ghosts? Who lived here? Who will live here? Where have they gone? Will they return to the newly built apartment?* These questions, emerging from a child's seemingly ordinary response, call attention to the lingering presence of histories that refuse to be fully erased.

### **So What Do These Moments Allow Us To Do?**

The concept of haunting enables me to unearth layers of meaning from everyday routines prompting pedagogical practices that extend beyond the boundaries of DAP and open space for more critical, justice-oriented engagement. My transnational position attunes me to the blurred boundaries between past and present, here and there. This *reflexión* supports the development of new pedagogical strategies that open space for conversations challenging race and racism with toddlers, drawing on the lived experience of the teachers in those moments while also recognizing young children as active agents in constructing knowledge about race and racism. The two vignettes reveal haunted knowledge as a form of knowledge that already lingers in the places children walk every day but has remained unspoken or unacknowledged. A city accretes multiple layers of social, cultural, and historical narratives (Powell, 2008). However, not all

narratives are selected to be remembered; only some are memorialized materially and discursively through buildings, photos, historical plaques displayed along the street, or murals on the walls. Nevertheless, those suppressed or overlooked narratives resist being relegated to the past and linger in the physical landscape. They evoke a sense of unease when we encounter materials in a specific place or enact a spatial practice such as walking. In this reflexive paper, my positionality and experience as a transnational teacher educator and researcher provoked me to see and sense the gravity of the teachers' own life stories as immigrants from Latin America and Ethiopia, the local history of civic movement, and the lived experiences of residents during the urban renewal project. By bringing these silenced or forgotten narratives to the surface, the lens of haunting enables us to see that the sedimented history of a place has great potential to center the experiences, histories and perspectives of people of color who once cultivated the place as "home."

While haunting conceptually reframes the place where we walk everyday as the debris of broader racial histories, it can also be used to reimagine anti-racist pedagogical practice. Scholars of place-based education have emphasized the importance of foregrounding the local history of place as a teaching tool (Gruenewald, 2008) that can connect the broader concept of racism to children's everyday lives, routines, pathways, materials, and surrounding environments. Given that walking is an important pedagogical activity in the daily routine of toddlers, centering place in pedagogy can help young children recognize how racial histories are not abstract or distant but deeply woven into everyday life. In gentrifying communities of color, therefore, attending to who lived in a place, what happened there, how communities disappeared or persisted, and how these histories continue to linger in the present, centers the perspectives of people of color. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of historical and ongoing racial injustices, while also helping children develop a sense of belonging and connection to the spaces they navigate daily.

When integrated with project-based learning, anti-racist pedagogy can be naturally practiced, sparking young children's curiosity about their communities, encouraging them to explore the connections between past and present through the narratives of local residents—families, educators, and friends—who serve as living experts. The vignettes can be seen as valuable data that can inform educators in designing meaningful anti-racist projects and guide educators in developing their own inquiries into the realities of their community (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Summary of anti-racist pedagogical practices based on haunting*

	Vignette 1: Looking at the absence	Vignette 2: The ghost story
Guiding questions for educators	In what ways are you related to this neighborhood? Were there accidents around here? What brought the broken cars here? What happened to this place? In what ways has the surrounding environment been influenced by gentrification? How are the children affected by this changing landscape?	How many new apartments have you seen when walking on this street? How many empty houses or houses under construction have you seen? Who has lived in the houses? Where are they now if they are alive? Who will live in this new house? How far is this empty house from your house? In what ways are the children affected by this changing landscape?
Assessment of prior knowledge of community	<p>Family involvement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite families to share their memories of the neighborhood.</li> <li>• Collect visual materials such as photos or illustrations.</li> <li>• Walk in the neighborhood with families, retelling their stories.</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Neighborhood walk:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirm young children's discovery of objects and note where repetitive questions occur.</li> <li>• Guide young children to observe the surrounding physical landscape of the objects they are interested in (e.g. what surrounds the broken car).</li> <li>• Build on children's observations to co-create a story of the history of the neighborhood and its residents and add another layer to the story.</li> </ul>	
Extended activity	<p>Then &amp; Now: Exploring Our Neighborhood</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce historical neighborhood photos collected from families, highlighting key features and landmarks.</li> </ul>	

- Encourage children to observe and discuss the photos using open-ended questions (e.g. “What do you notice?”, “What looks the same or different?”), then collaboratively select a photo that sparks the most interest.
- Walk to the corresponding location in the neighborhood and pause for side-by-side comparison with the photo (e.g. “What do you see now that’s not in the picture?”).
- Teachers model curiosity and use rich, descriptive language to help children understand change over time.
- Teachers intentionally use identity-centered language, highlighting who lived in the area and drawing connections between the place and the stories of children’s families.
- Teachers affirm children’s and families’ belonging in the neighborhood, pointing out sites of community resilience, such as spaces that were preserved, reclaimed, or culturally significant.

There are several possible projects designed to spark young children’s curiosity and deepen their engagement with the history and transformation of their community. One such project involves walking with old photographs of the neighborhood and comparing them to the present-day landscape. As children move through familiar streets, they can observe, identify, and discuss changes in buildings, landmarks, and public spaces over time (see Figure 1 below). This activity encourages children to develop observational skills, ask critical questions, and reflect on the forces that shape their surroundings. By engaging in this process, they notice not only physical transformations—such as the construction or disappearance of buildings—but also the social, cultural, and economic shifts that have influenced these changes. Educators can guide discussions on why certain changes have occurred, prompting children to consider factors such as urban development, gentrification, historical preservation, and community needs. Additionally, this project fosters intergenerational learning by inviting local residents, families, and/or long-time community members to share their memories and lived experiences. Through these conversations, children gain firsthand insights into how their neighborhood has evolved, developing a more nuanced understanding of place, history, and belonging.

**Figure 1**

*Connecting the past and the present of a place*



Pedagogical strategies grounded in haunting offer two key implications for toddler classrooms. First, the common practice of neighborhood walks—particularly in urban settings, as noted by Bergen et al. (2009)—can serve as a powerful tool for enacting anti-racist pedagogy. By re-engaging with the racial histories embedded in the places children traverse daily, these walks become opportunities to critically reflect on local histories of race and racism. In this context, a teacher’s own critical consciousness of their lived experiences and understandings of racialized histories can be used to create meaningful, situated learning experiences. Second, anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education cannot be realized without recognizing the active role toddlers play in constructing knowledge. Young children are not passive or ignorant in relation to race and racism; rather, they express their awareness in varied and often subtle

ways—such as through repeated questions or observations—requiring educators to be attentive to these alternative modes of expression and inquiry.

These insights also carry important implications for early childhood teacher preparation programs. First, teacher educators must develop a deep understanding of the local context and communities in which schools and centers are situated. This contextual awareness enables them to guide both pre-service and in-service teachers in grounding anti-racist pedagogy in the lived realities of the children and families they serve. In this sense, critical consciousness in teacher education involves the ability to connect broader power dynamics with the specific places where young children live and learn. Second, teacher educators should support the development of pedagogical strategies that are responsive to local contexts and lived experiences, rather than relying solely on universalized approaches. Encouraging teachers to co-construct curriculum grounded in their own and their communities' histories fosters more meaningful, justice-oriented practices in early childhood education.

### **Conclusion**

Early childhood education is a field deeply shaped by race and racism. While scholars have long critiqued how these issues are diluted or overlooked within broader discussions of diversity, they have also worked to challenge racial inequities by advocating for justice-oriented pedagogies such as Anti-Bias Education (ABE) and Anti-Racist Education (ARE). At the core of ARE is a teacher's critical consciousness of race; however, there remains a need for research that provides concrete, practical guidance on how to implement ARE effectively in early childhood settings. Using the concept of haunting as a theoretical framework, this paper has explored pathways to reopen and sustain meaningful conversations about race and racism within early childhood classrooms. Through critical reflexión on two vignettes drawn from routine walks with preschool children, this study has highlighted how haunting brings attention to marginalized or unofficial forms of knowledge embedded within children's daily experiences and environments, prompting both children and educators to question and reflect upon their surroundings.

Ultimately, this reflexive paper, which revisits past moments to explore alternative possibilities, argues that focusing on place offers a powerful way to reimagine anti-racist pedagogy, particularly in urban settings undergoing or experiencing the lasting effects of rapid gentrification. In this context, walking can be understood as an anti-racist pedagogical practice with the potential to (re)open conversations on race and racism with young children. By embedding discussions of race and racism within the tangible and ever-changing landscape of the neighborhood, walking naturally contextualizes these topics, highlighting their deep entanglement with the processes of gentrification.

Future research should continue to explore practical ways to implement anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood classrooms, moving beyond theoretical discussions to more detailed investigations of teaching strategies that integrate various methods. Recognizing that young children's learning is not limited merely to developmental milestones but is deeply contextualized by their everyday lives and environments, it is crucial to integrate these realities into educational practices. In teacher education, as previous studies have emphasized, when educators move away from the concept of childhood innocence and resist colorblind approaches by embracing their own lived experiences with confidence, they become more attuned to the haunted knowledges embedded in a place. This awareness naturally brings forth the contextualized stories of communities of color, enriching the learning environment. Therefore, teacher education should actively prepare BIPOC educators to recognize their own embodied experiences and community histories as valuable assets for contextualizing anti-racist pedagogy, ensuring that these narratives are woven into early childhood education in meaningful and transformative ways.

### **Declarations**

#### *Authors' Declarations*

*Acknowledgements:* Not applicable.

*Authors' contributions:* This is a single-authored research.

**Competing interests:** The author declares that there are no competing interests.

**Funding:** No funding received for this research.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** This study received ethical approval from the author's institutional review board, and informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants.

#### **Publisher's Declarations**

**Editorial Acknowledgement:** The editorial process of this article was completed under the editorship of the thematic issue editors; Dr Sadia Habib, Dr Ümit Kemal Yıldız and Dr Mehmet Toran through a double-blind peer review with external reviewers.

**Publisher's Note:** Journal of Childhood, Education & Society remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliation.

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