Critical affective civic literacy: A framework for attending to political emotion in the social studies classroom

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A B S T R A C T

Heightened political polarization challenges civic educators seeking to prepare youth as citizens who can navigate affective boundaries. Current approaches to civic education do not yet account for the emotional basis of citizenship. This paper presents an argument for critical affective literacy in civic education classrooms. Drawing from concepts and theories in critical emotion studies, affective citizenship, and agonistic political theory, critical affective civic literacy challenges the rationalistic bent of civic education, and offers instructional strategies for educating the political emotions of students. The voices of late-arrival migrant youth enacting affective citizenship are featured in order to help illuminate the contributions of critical affective literacy to social studies research and practice.

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1. Introduction

Increasing political polarization challenges civic educators to prepare youth as citizens who can navigate ideological and affective boundaries. A 2014 Pew Research Center poll found that not only are Republicans and Democrats more ideologically divided than they have been in decades, but also feel more animosity towards each other (Pew Research Center, 2014). For example, “27% of Democrats see the Republican Party as a threat to the nation’s well-being,” up from 16% in 1994 (Pew Research Center, 2014). The current presidential administration’s use of emotion-based discourses to label people of color, Muslims, and migrants as fearsome, or not deserving of citizenship, has a measurable impact on the work of civic educators. According to a study by the Southern Poverty Law Center, following the 2016 presidential election, “four in ten [teachers] heard derogatory language directed at students of color, Muslims, [and] immigrants” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Moreover, in schools with racially and socio-economically diverse student populations, tensions have flared due to students reportedly being less trusting of each other.

As diverse public spaces, schools are uniquely situated to prepare students to navigate affective boundaries in the broader political discourse (Parker, 2003). However, there is limited research that theorizes emotion and its role in the civics classroom. Current approaches to civic education rely primarily on deliberative models of citizenship that relegate emotions to the private sphere (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Knowles & Clark, 2018). Recent scholarship has explored the affective dimension of citizenship, including the links between political emotion and civic engagement (Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019), and sought to better understand how teachers conceptualize emotions in the social studies classroom (Sheppard & Levy, 2019). This nascent...
work challenges the predominant approach of teaching students to resolve social issues through rational deliberation and dialogue (Lo, 2017).

Looking to the field of literacy education, promising scholarship links critical literacy approaches (Freire, 1970) with critical affect studies (Ahmed, 2014) in order to develop an educational response to the current polarized political context. Anwaruddin (2016) proposed a conceptual framework of critical affective literacy (CAL) to address ethical dilemmas regarding how to respond to human suffering, and asks why some people are deemed worthier of moral concern than others. CAL is based on the theory that emotions do not reside solely in the body, or in society, but are performative and interactional (Zembylas, 2007). In addition, CAL draws on the work of critical affect scholars who argue that “emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and outside in the first place” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10).

Understanding how emotions delineate citizenship boundaries is pivotal to the work of social studies education and the preparation of youth as engaged and compassionate citizens who can respond to human suffering. For instance, through greater awareness of the role emotion plays in creating affective boundaries, we can critically examine how our emotional response to state-sponsored violence committed against “Others” may be linked to discourses of fear or pride. For example, Donald Trump’s portrayal of asylum seekers and their children as an “invasion” (realDonaldTrump, 2018) conditions how we respond to the inhumane treatment of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, including the policy of child separation (United States Department of Justice, 2018).

Attention to the emotional work that takes place in social studies classrooms also builds on previous critical citizenship frameworks (Banks, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004) to challenge liberal conceptions of citizens as rational actors, by inviting civic educators and their students to explore their emotional commitments at different scales (e.g., family, neighborhood, community, world) and to reflect on the emotional basis of their civic engagements (Zembylas, 2014). Greater attention to the role of emotions in political life also opens up new avenues for the civic engagement of disenfranchised groups who are excluded from a civic sphere where universal agreement or consensus is the end goal (Lo, 2017; Ruitenberg, 2009).

In this paper I outline how CAL’s four principles — (1) examining why we feel what we feel; (2) striving to enter a relation of affective equivalence; (3) interrogating the production and circulation of objects of emotion in everyday politics; and (4) focusing on the performative effects of emotions to achieve social justice — could be implemented in the civic education classroom. I will offer an analytical argument that young citizens develop a critical awareness of the role emotion plays in political life as part of their civic preparation in order to address unequal power relations in society. I begin with a discussion of the limitations of current empirical and theoretical research on the role of emotion in citizenship preparation. I then describe the political theories of affective citizenship and agonism that inform an approach to social studies education that takes emotions seriously. Next, I discuss each of the four principles of CAL in turn, and their specific application to the K-12 civics classroom, and social studies teacher education. In order to further illuminate this approach to educating political emotions, I feature the voices of migrant students enacting affective citizenship (Keegan, 2019). Their narratives demonstrate how a critical awareness of emotion can contribute to a more engaged citizenship. I conclude with a discussion of the contributions of agonistic political theory towards implementing CAL in civic education classrooms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Educating political emotions in the social studies

In order to become active, informed, and engaged citizens, youth must develop a critical awareness of emotion and its role in politics. However, emotion is rarely mentioned in the literature on the skills and dispositions necessary for youth to acquire as part of their civic preparation. The widely referenced report, The Civic Mission of Schools, published by The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, defines “competent and responsible citizens” as “having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting,” as well as ”moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference” (CIRCLE, 2003, p. 4). Notably absent from this definition is any reference to the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that goes into acquiring the necessary civic virtues. Instead, it is assumed that being tolerant is a mere cognitive exercise of understanding the reasonableness of worldviews that differ from one’s own.

In their review of the social studies literature, Sheppard, Katz and Grosland (2015) found that while the topics of emotion and affect are of interest to researchers, “they are un-theorized, and their role in the process of teaching and learning social studies remains primarily hidden” (p. 157). An area of research that has made an important contribution to understanding emotions in civics classrooms have been studies examining how teachers facilitate controversial issues discussions, including under what circumstances they disclosed their feelings on political issues (Hess, 2005; James, 2009). A reason some teachers gave for withholding their political beliefs, was to remain “objective” to students (Hess, 2005). This pedagogical stance may reflect an underlying conception of school as a public space where “unbiased” facts take precedence over consideration of feelings, which belong to the private sphere.

Shepard and Levy (2019) found that social studies teachers weighed a variety of contextual factors in deciding how to attend to emotions in the classroom. Whereas some teachers chose topics they considered controversial in order to invite impassioned debate, others avoided topics they deemed too emotionally sensitive for their students in order to maintain what they believed to be a safe classroom space. Research surrounding the 2016 presidential election found that some teachers...
responded to their Muslim and immigrant students’ fears of a Trump presidency by avoiding discussion of the election outcome altogether, and trying to remain neutral (Dunn et al., 2019).

A small number of studies consider the place of emotion in social studies teacher education. This is an important area of investigation, since teachers are unlikely to welcome emotions into their classrooms if they have not had an opportunity to explore the relationship between emotion and their own civic commitments. Garrett’s (2011) study about difficult knowledge explores the relationships between emotion and learning with pre-service teachers. Grounded in psychoanalytic theory, Garrett investigates “the affective relationships that individuals have with social knowledge” (p. 344). Teachers’ empathic feelings towards the recent past has important implications for civic education, including awareness of present-day injustices and the ability to join in solidarity with others to address inequity.

However, the conception of politics as reasoned debate may be so ingrained in current models of civic preparation that attempts to spur critical awareness of emotion will meet with resistance from pre-service social studies teachers. Reidel and Salinas (2011) found it difficult to dislodge the theory of emotion as individual and private in a teacher education course that sought to engage emotions explicitly in classroom discussions of controversial issues. Despite the instructor’s repeated efforts to bring attention to the role of emotions, students were critical of classmates they judged as being too “emotional” during class discussions. In order to raise critical awareness of emotion, theories are needed that explain how emotions function in civic education, how emotions can motivate different forms of civic engagement, and how emotion-based civic discourses regulate who is deserving of “concern” and “tolerance.”

2.2. Challenges to deliberative models of civic education

The lack of attention to emotion in social studies education is due in part to the pervasiveness of liberal assimilationist conceptions of the public sphere, which advocate a strict separation of public and private spheres in order to reach agreement on universal rules of civil discourse and ensure equality (Rawls, 1971). Because emotions are viewed as a threat to rational deliberation and the ability to arrive at democratic consensus they are confined to the private sphere. However, feminist political philosophers have contended that calls for a ‘universal’ public sphere privilege particular forms of ‘manly’ speech that merely reinforce power imbalances in society and exclude minoritized groups from particular forms of civic participation (Fraser, 1992; Young, 1990). Feminist critiques of democratic dialogue rightly point out that classrooms are public spaces that reflect societal inequalities, and therefore not all voices may receive equal consideration (Boiler, 1999). Speech that is deemed too ‘emotional’ may be dismissed in favor of supposedly ‘reasoned opinion.’ Moreover, critics of liberal assimilationist citizenship education have called for the recognition of cultural rights and group-based identities in the public sphere so that diverse members of society can experience civic equality (Banks, 2008; Flores & Benmayor, 1998) Finally, liberal conceptions of citizenship that focus on the individual as the carrier of rights and responsibilities neglect the importance of group affiliation and belonging to civic engagement and ‘the political’ (Mouffe, 2005).

As public spaces, civic education classrooms are necessarily shaped by debates over the role of emotion in democratic deliberation and citizenship. Civic educators must equip our youngest citizens to recognize how emotions are situated within unequal power relations in society, and how emotion-based discourses regulate feelings towards “Others” or promote feelings of pride or loyalty to the nation-state (Helmsing, 2014). Zembylas (2014) discussed how emotions help to regulate the boundaries of belonging in multicultural, pluralistic democracies. Affective boundaries create us/them distinctions that determine “who is seen as the ‘legitimate’ object of empathic and tolerant feelings” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 11).

Another challenge to liberal conceptions of the public sphere comes from the agonistic model of democracy that sees conflict as inherent to political life (Mouffe, 2005; Ruitenber, 2009). According to Mouffe’s conception of pluralist politics, “the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate the passions from the sphere of the public, but to mobilize these passions towards democratic designs” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 103). Several researchers have drawn on the agonistic critique of liberalism to argue for greater attention to emotion in civic education. Ruitenber (2009) contended that “political education cannot consist in skills of reasoning and civic virtues alone, but must also take into account the desire for belonging to collectivities, and attendant political emotions” (p. 274). An example of a political emotion is political anger, which is “the indignation one feels when decisions are made and actions are taken that violate … the ethico-political values of equality and liberty that, one believes, would support a just society” (Ruitenber, 2009, p. 277). Building on agonistic political theory, Lo (2017) argued that deliberative discussions that emphasize consensus over conflict alienate students who “already feel distant from the status quo, [and] accentuate their lack of power in the current system, especially if they were not involved when the commonalities were first deduced” (p. 2). Instead, Lo proposed several changes to how deliberative discussions are conducted in civic education classrooms, including agonistic deliberations that allow students to draw upon their passionate responses to social injustice. Rather than compromise or consensus, the end result of agonistic deliberation is negotiated action steps to address a social issue.

Recent research seeking to better understand political emotion was a case study by Abowitz and Mamlok (2019) of youth civic activism to address gun violence following the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. Political emotion, according to the authors, “can be thought of as the explicit connection between affect or feeling and political actions, events or ideas” (p. 161). The leaders of the political campaign to end gun violence, known as #NeverAgainMSD, were driven by the indignation they felt at the normalization of gun violence. Rather than make rational appeals to lawmakers to address the violence, the youth expressed their anger publicly and shamed politicians for offering ‘thoughts and prayers’ instead of concrete actions.
However, not all political emotion may be directed at redressing injustice. Emotions like hate and fear can be used to manipulate citizens into feeling certain ways towards the nation-state. An important consideration, then, is how to channel political conflict into democratic commitments, rather than as a means to sow affective divisions in society (Ruitenberg, 2009). While agonistic political theory sees conflict as inherent to democratic deliberation, it does not go far enough in explaining how affective boundaries construct citizens in particular ways, or how emotion can become a site of resistance. In order to address these concerns, in the next section I will discuss how the concept of affective citizenship disrupts the concept of citizenship “as a strictly legal, institutional product of state authority and rationality” (Fortier, 2016, p. 1038).

3. Theoretical framework: affective citizenship

The concept of affective citizenship “identifies which emotional relationships between citizens are recognized and endorsed or rejected, and how citizens are encouraged to feel about themselves and others” (Zembylas, 2014, p. 6). The feelings youth have for the nation, neighbors, migrants, or those deemed “Other,” are not predetermined, but rather socially mediated and constructed. Feminist scholarship laid important groundwork for understanding the affective basis of citizenship. Hochschild (1983) wrote about the existence of ‘feeling rules’ that govern our emotions. Feeling rules are most apparent when a discrepancy arises between our feelings and how social convention tells us we should feel. Ahmed (2014) offered a model of the sociality of emotion in which emotions are not something we have, but rather emotions move and circulate to transform certain ‘Others’ into objects of feeling. Ahmed’s theory helps explain why some emotions, whether fear, love, hatred, or concern “stick” more to some bodies than others, leaving their impressions, and creating us/them distinctions.

Emotions also circulate in schools to construct what Fortier (2010) calls the ‘affective citizen.’ According to Fortier (2010), “the ‘affective subject’ becomes the ‘affective citizen’ when its membership to the ‘community’ is contingent on personal feelings and acts that extend beyond the individual self … to the community” (p. 22). Zembylas (2014) analyzed two emotional injunctions in pluralistic societies that explain how the ‘affective citizen’ is constructed in schools. The first emotional injunction is “coping with difference” (p 12). The assumption behind the emotional imperative to cope with difference is that “multiculturalism brings discomfort to the host population, and therefore, ideal citizens have to learn to live with difference” (p. 12). However, as Zembylas contends, feelings of discomfort and unease are not distributed equally among people. Certain types of religious, ethnic, or racial differences are believed to cause greater degrees of discomfort. As Ahmed (2014) theorizes, the emotion of fear, hate, or shame attaches more to some bodies than others. Therefore, if a goal of civic education is to prepare youth to be able “to enter into dialogue with others about different points of view” (CIRCLE, 2003, p. 10, emphasis added), it is necessary to be able to critically analyze how ‘difference’ is constructed through particular emotional discourses.

The second emotional injunction that Zembylas analyzes is that of “embracing the other” (p. 11). Zembylas cites the motto of ‘we are all different, and yet, we are all the same’ endorsed by many schools as demonstrative of a tension between celebrating diversity, and expecting those who are deemed ‘different’ to assimilate. Another example of how schools ‘embrace the other’ is the practice of hanging flags in corridors to show the variety of nations represented in the student body. These public displays project a self-image of the school as a civic space that is welcoming and tolerant of diversity. In this case, the object of emotions that circulate can be a school motto celebrating diversity, or a national ideal of embracing some forms of difference. Collective ideals, whether or not they are fully realized, is another way that the affective citizen is constructed. As Ahmed (2014) explains, “identifying with the ideal of the multicultural nation, means that one gets to see oneself as a good or tolerant subject” (p. 133–134).

At the same time, the imperative to ‘embrace the other’ is not unconditional. Those who do not “reflect back the good image the nation has of itself” are not welcome (Ahmed, 2014, p. 134). A recent illustration of how acceptance and belonging is conditioned upon having the proper feelings for the nation can be found in reactions to Congresswoman Ilhan Omar’s criticism of America. Omar, a high-profile Somali American, Muslim woman, and refugee, told a group of high school students how, for her family fleeing civil war, the U.S. had not kept its promise of being “the country that guaranteed justice to all” (Jaffe & Mekhennet, 2019). In response, President Trump tweeted out that Omar, should go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” (realDonaldTrump, 2019). Omar’s belonging was predicated on her having the proper feelings of gratitude towards America for accepting her family. This example demonstrates how becoming an affective citizen is predicated on personal feelings and acts that extend beyond the individual to the nation-state (Fortier, 2010).

Emotion-based discourses can also “govern through affect” in schools. For example, refugee students may be made into the objects of teachers’ compassion or pity (Anwaruddin, 2016). In order to be welcomed into the school community, refugee and migrant students may be expected to take advantage of educational opportunities in the U.S., and demonstrate that they are ‘good’ citizens by working hard in school. The terms of conditional belonging may be used by teachers to label some migrant youth as ‘model minorities’ (Lee, 2009), or create divisions between students who show proper appreciation for education, and those who do not ‘care’ about school in the ways teachers expect (Valenzuela, 1999). Those who either criticize America,
or don’t reflect back the image America has of itself as a land of equal opportunity and tolerance can be deemed less deserving of compassion and care.

In summary, defining ‘good’ citizenship as being “concerned for the rights and welfare of others” (CIRCLE, 2003, p. 10) is insufficient without also considering how affective boundaries determine who is considered deserving of concern and social welfare. The concept of affective citizenship helps explain the emotional basis of citizenship, including “how less-desirable political emotions function in politics” (Abowitz & Mamlok, 2019, p. 172). The theory of the sociality of emotion (Ahmed, 2014) can inform approaches to CAL in civics classrooms, so that students can become more aware of the role of emotion in creating social divisions, and as a political asset for seeking justice.

4. Critical affective civic literacy

Anwaruddin’s (2016) framework of CAL is motivated by the questions, “How should we respond to violence? Are we supposed to be touched by the suffering of some, and yet be indifferent to the suffering of others?” (p. 381). Anwaruddin looks to the field of critical literacy for answers, but finds that the “rationalistic tendency of critical literacy often blurs our vision when we try to understand the suffering of others” (p 388). Similarly, I have argued that the rational approach to deliberation in civic education also makes it difficult to understand how the objects of emotion circulate to label some political subjects as more or less deserving of compassion and care. In the sections below, I describe and build on the four pedagogical principles of CAL to discuss how they can be adapted and applied specifically in the civics classroom and social studies teacher education. In order to help illustrate the application of CAL to citizenship preparation, I include the voices of migrant youth enacting affective citizenship (Keegan, 2019). I conclude by integrating agonistic political theory and CAL to explain how emotion can function as a civic asset.

4.1. Examining why we feel what we feel

The first principle of CAL is for students to examine not only what they feel, but why they feel that way. Building on Ahmed (2014), Anwaruddin argues that “emotions are relational and that emotions involve relations of ‘towardness’ and ‘awayness’” (p. 390). When we come into contact with a particular object of our emotion, we may move toward or away from it based on “the object’s immediate revelation of its orientation toward us or by our own prejudgets of the object and its history ...” (p 388). Students can develop a critical awareness of emotion by tracing their emotional responses towards “Others” to discourses of fear and anxiety. Anwaruddin (2016) recommends that “teachers and students interrogate popular culture and media texts to identify which emotions are renamed for particular predefined effects” (p. 391). For instance, the continent of Africa is frequently portrayed in the media as a place shaped by tribalism and ethnic conflict, poverty and malnutrition, and wilderness and exotic animals (Ukpokodu, 2017; Watson & Knight–Manuel, 2017). Following the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in parts of West Africa, Newsweek published an issue with a racist photo on its cover, featuring a chimpanzee and the heading “A Back Door for Ebola” (Flynn & Scutti, 2014). The characterization of migrants from Africa as carrying dangerous diseases contributed to outbreaks of bullying in schools. Two brothers from Senegal, 11- and 13-years-old, were taunted and physically attacked at their school in the Bronx, NY. Classmates yelled at the boys, “Go back home” and “Ebola” (Hagan, 2014). A high school student in a study with West African migrant youth explained the effect emotion-based discourses of fear have on his sense of belonging and identity as African: “People say everywhere have Ebola in Africa. And when I hear about it I get so angry because when people see you as African, they treat us different. Because you’re from somewhere that people don’t like” (Keegan, 2019, p. 359).

As part of their civic preparation, K-12 students and pre-service social studies teachers can learn to interrogate how injunctions to feel certain ways towards people and places produce subjects who are more or less deserving of belonging by studying the history of xenophobia in the U.S. Throughout U.S. history, migrants including Chinese, Irish, and Mexicans, have been associated with disease and contagion (Lee, 2019). The supposed threat of disease labeled these migrants as foreign, and hid the true effects of poverty, racism and structural inequality. The history of xenophobia in the U.S. is an example of how racialized fear of migrants has been spread through emotion-based discourses that label migrant bodies as dangerous.

Increased racism towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) during the coronavirus pandemic is the most recent example of how fear of disease has been used to label some bodies as unhygienic and threatening. According to a recent poll by the New Center for Public Integrity/Ipsos, almost a third of Americans reported having witnessed someone blaming Asian people for the coronavirus epidemic (Jackson, Berg, & Yi, 2020), and STOP AAPI HATE has received over 1700 reports of verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assaults since March 19, 2020 (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020). President Trump has been accused of exacerbating racism and xenophobia towards AAPI by referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus” (Baynes-Dunning, 2020). Lessons that teach K-12 students how to identify and interrupt hate and bias are essential. However, they must also be educated on how to make sense of the emotion-based discourses that encounter on social media, as well as trace their own emotional responses towards migrant “Others.”

Besides fear, emotions like love and compassion can also harm and essentialize migrant, refugee, or asylum-seeking youth, by categorizing them as pitiable and vulnerable (Anwaruddin, 2017). Students can investigate whether emotional injunctions to ‘embrace the Other’ or show compassion towards migrants, are meant to reproduce an image of the U.S. as a compassionate nation, and its citizens as caring people. In order to recognize how discourses engender particular emotional responses, students could compare how different media outlets report on the same event. Bondy and Johnson (2019) suggested...
that pre-service teachers analyze how conservative and liberal news sources each portray the effect of deportations on children born in the U.S. to migrant parents. Students can assess whether and how migrants are portrayed in each source as either criminals undeserving of sympathy, or as vulnerable children separated from their parents.

4.2. Striving to enter a relation of affective equivalence

The second principal of CAL “invites ‘us to imagine standing in the shoes of others’” (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 391). More broadly, Anwaruddin asks how we are to understand the suffering of others in order to be sensitized to violence and injustice. According to Anwaruddin, the “various frames used to represent their suffering allocate the recognizability of certain human bodies as grievable while others are non- or less-grievable” (p. 391). Seeing the world through the eyes of a refugee seeking asylum in the United States, for instance, is conditioned on how the refugee’s suffering is presented to us, whether as someone to be feared, or a threat to American identity. In addition, Anwaruddin distinguishes between an act of recognition and recognizability. Anwaruddin quotes Butler (2010) to make this key distinction: “recognizability characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition — the general terms, conventions, and norms ‘act’ in their own way, crafting a living being into a recognizable subject” (p. 5).

This principle of CAL is aligned with the goal of considering multiple perspectives during democratic deliberations, which is frequently touted in civics education. Some scholars of teaching and learning in history consider empathy to be a necessary element of historical thinking, including “affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions” (Endacott & Brooks, 2013, p. 41). Barton and Levstik (2004) contend that “perspective recognition,” their preferred term for historical empathy, “is indispensable for public deliberation in a pluralistic society,” where people hold diverse views and opinions based on their lived experience (p. 224). Many civic educators agree that schools should cultivate empathy so that students will become citizens who make decisions that benefit the least advantaged members of society, and not just themselves (Parker, 2003). Moreover, preparing youth for global citizenship can include “perspective consciousness,” which Merryfield (2012) defines as “the recognition that our view of the world is not universally shared, [and] that this view of the world is shaped by influences that often escape conscious detection . . .” (p. 20).

However, these pedagogical approaches to perspective-taking in social studies classrooms do not consider how the ability to empathize with others or imagine their suffering depends on how ‘they’ are presented to ‘us.’ CAL challenges civic educators to think differently about the skill of perspective-taking, and how to teach students to recognize how particular perspectives, and the people who hold them, get framed as un/reasonable. Furthermore, CAL strives to feel ‘with’ the suffering of others. Notably, this relation of affective equivalence is not the same as feeling sad about others’ suffering, which diverts attention away from the person who is suffering, and makes them the “object of our feeling” (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 21).

As public spaces, schools can further promote relations of affective equivalence in the classroom by framing the diverse perspectives of students as civic assets to be leveraged. In a study with West African youth attending a high school for late-arrival migrants, teachers created instructional groups so that a variety of native languages were represented (Keegan, 2019). Students heard from and drew upon a diversity of perspectives as they completed group projects, and developed an awareness of how culture shaped one’s worldview. Moreover, in accordance with CAL, the youth developed an awareness of the conditions of recognizability, because teachers situated every perspective as valuable to listen to and learn from.

4.3. Interrogating the production and circulation of objects of emotion in everyday politics

The third principle of CAL focuses on the affective politics of emotions, notably fear, to manipulate the populace into supporting particular policy decisions. Anwaruddin contends that “instructional activities have to be designed to show how emotions — such as fear — are created and circulated.” Fixing certain subjects as the objects of fear enables political leaders and others in positions of power to take preemptive action against those who would supposedly do us harm. Anwaruddin uses the example of President Bush’s decision to invade Iraq based on the false premise that Saddam Hussein harbored weapons of mass destruction to illustrate an affective politics of fear. A more recent example is President Trump’s portrayal of migrants at the U.S. southern border seeking asylum as an “invasion” (Bondy & Johnson, 2019). The Trump administration justified its policy of detaining migrants at the border, including putting children in cages and separating them from their parents, by portraying asylum-seekers as people who would do harm to America. The emotion of fear conditions the response of American citizens to the suffering of these migrants seeking entry to the U.S., so that their lives “do not touch us, or do not appear as lives at all” (Butler, 2010, p. 50).

In order to investigate the circulation of emotion in everyday politics in civics classrooms, and in social studies methods courses, students could compare speeches by Trump and President Barack Obama on the topic of immigration. For example, after studying the discourse of fear of migrants used by Trump in his public comments, students could analyze the circulation of emotion in remarks made by President Obama at a naturalization ceremony in 2015:

Just about every nation in the world, to some extent, admits immigrants. But there’s something unique about America. We don’t simply welcome new immigrants — we are born of immigrants. Immigration is our origin story. And for more than two centuries, it’s remained at the core of our national character; it’s our oldest tradition. It’s who we are. It’s part of what makes us exceptional (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2015).
Students could explore what emotions are engendered in Obama’s speech, such as when he refers to immigration as America’s “origin story,” and to America as “exceptional.” The concept of American exceptionalism has been used by a variety of U.S. politicians, on the ‘left’ and the ‘right,’ to engender feelings of pride in the nation, and to promote policies of American imperialism, manifest destiny, and war (Zinn, 2005).

In a similar vein, triumphalist narratives of the U.S. nation-state can be found in U.S. history textbook narratives that portray America as a beacon of freedom and democracy in the world (Helsming, 2014). In doing so, textbooks produce the U.S. nation-state as an object of pride. Therefore, it is not only emotions such as fear or hate that create us/Them distinctions and affective borders. As Ahmed points out, the language of love can be used to exclude certain people from the domain of concern; it is not the hate of “Others” that necessitates the tightening of national borders against migrants, but rather love for the American people and the ideals that the U.S. nation-state represents to the world.

Anwaruddin refers to “this act of renaming as metonymic practices of affective language” (p. 388). Another way that civic educators can implement CAL is by teaching students to identify such metonymic practices when promoting critical media literacy (Journell, 2019). Becoming critical consumers of information involves an awareness of our emotional commitments to certain worldviews, and how this affects our media consumption. Building on Garrett’s argument “that our orientation to news is significantly influenced by our emotional attachments and psychical investments in particular stories about the world,” I contend that students must learn to critically interrogate texts, whether social media posts, or their social studies textbook, with an eye towards metonymic effects (Garrett, 2019, p. 27). In order to become more informed citizens, students can consider how triumphalist narratives of the U.S. nation-state found in some U.S. history textbooks justify acts of violence towards ‘Others’ in order to protect ‘national interests.’

4.4. Focusing on the performativity of emotions to achieve social justice

The fourth and final principle of CAL focuses on how emotions can create a more just society. According to Anwaruddin (2016), CAL aims “to revise, expand, or create laws, norms, and practices that support critical and emancipatory speech acts” in order to transform the world (p 393). This principle of CAL draws insights from J. L. Austin’s (1962) speech-act theory, which “is based on the notion that language is not only a means of transmitting information but also a mode of action” (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 393). Austin differentiates between three types of speech-acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locution is the production of an utterance that can be heard and understood by a listener. Illocution is speech that has an effect on the world. Perlocutionary speech-acts have an effect not only on the world, but on the subjectivity of the listener by “producing certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (Austin, 1962, p. 101). Perlocutionary speech-acts can be a means to creating a more just world by appealing to the emotions of the listener.

According to liberal democratic theory, however, forms of speech that cannot result in universal agreement among citizens should not be a part of democratic deliberations. Jürgen Habermas (as cited in Allen, 2004, p. 54) “advocates a deliberative form of democracy where the aim is to make policy decisions by coming to consensus through ... modes of speech that ... should generate perfect agreement.” For Habermas, the only mode of speech that can lead to total unanimity in making political decisions is illocutionary speech. Perlocutionary speech, according to Habermas, is driven by the speaker’s self-interest; speech–acts that make emotional appeals in an attempt to persuade an audience are a form of strategic action that will undermine democratic deliberations.

Critics of Habermas have argued that removing feeling from politics is not only impractical, but that deliberation stripped of emotion is unlikely to motivate anybody to take social action. Moreover, in a majority-rule system of government total agreement is never achieved in practice. Rather, some citizens are asked to sacrifice their own interests for the ‘greater good.’ However, the continued denial of freedom and liberty to marginalized groups in society, who are disproportionately expected to bear feelings of loss, disappointment and resentment, has led to distrust and civic disengagement (Allen, 2004).

In order to promote this final principle of CAL in the civics classroom, students could analyze examples of speeches throughout history that have brought about social change and inspired civic action. For example, students could analyze the rhetorical devices of civil rights activists to raise consciousness of racial injustice. Civil rights history is frequently taught as a story of America eradicating racism, thanks to the martyrdom of iconic activists, such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks (Busey & Walker, 2017; Woodson, 2017). In addition to well-known speeches, such as King’s “I Have A Dream” speech delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, students could study speeches by lesser-known, influential grassroots activists, such as Fannie Lou Hamer’s testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, N.J. Hamer’s speech, in which she argued for the integration of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party with the all-white delegation to the convention, was instrumental in the struggle for Black voting rights. Students could read a transcript of Hamer’s speech as an example of an emancipatory speech act designed to motivate action (Brooks & Houck, 2011). Hamer’s speeches also promoted a more critical patriotism (Parkhouse, 2018) that challenged America to live up to its ideals. After identifying social causes with which they identify, students could write their own speeches modeled after the rhetorical effects of Hamer and other civil rights activists to bring about racial equality.
5. Discussion

I will conclude this exploration of CAL and its implementation in the civics classroom by revisiting the implications of agonistic political theory (Mouffe, 2005; Ruitenberg, 2009). Mouffe defines ‘the political’ as “a space of power, conflict and antagonism” (p. 9). Agonism is a political association between conflicting parties who, while not seeking a ‘rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents’ (p. 20). Agonistic political theory has important implications for how educators can prepare youth as affective citizens. According to the agonistic model, civic education that teaches the skills of democratic consensus-making alone fails to impart the skills and knowledge necessary to disrupt the current hegemonic order and replace it with one that is consistent with liberty and equality for all.

Moreover, Mouffe contends that liberalism’s focus on the individual ignores the affective dimension of politics, including the role of collective identities. According to Mouffe, too great an emphasis on achieving consensus through dialogue has left citizens without the drive to participate in democratic life. In the agonistic model of politics, partisanship plays an important role in mobilizing people’s passions towards democratic designs. Partisan identities help to fulfill the affective dimension of politics, and give people a cause in which they can believe. As Mouffe (2005) explains, “mobilization requires politicization, but politicization cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, with opposed camps with which people can identify, thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of the democratic process (p. 24–25).

Mouffe points to the rise of extreme-right political parties in Europe as evidence of the failure of the consensus model of politics. In recent times, right-wing populism in the U.S. has fulfilled a need for collective forms of identification. Mouffe’s analysis suggests that the emotional appeal of Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign stems in part from the failure of both the Democratic and Republican party establishment to offer real political alternatives. Xenophobia and fear of the ‘Other’ take root more easily when there are few other formal outlets for expressing political emotion. Instead, agonistic political relations can channel the affective dimension of politics into counter-hegemonic projects that seek social justice.

Taking Mouffe’s argument for the importance of partisanship and collective identities in politics, civic educators can teach students about the ideological differences between the “left” and the “right,” and help students decide which party, or political platform with which they identify. As Ruitenberg (2009) has also argued, students must develop political literacy, or “the ability to read the political landscape both in its contemporary configuration and its historical genesis” (p. 278). In doing so, civic educators can prepare students as citizens who “see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20).

Prior research has shown that teachers are reluctant to introduce partisan political topics in the classroom, and even more so during times of affective polarization (Hess and McAvoy, 2014). Faced with a lack of civility in public discourse, some educators shy away from discussion of politics altogether, or emphasize consensus as the antidote to hyper-partisanship. However, in their study of political classrooms, Hess and McAvoy (2014) found that several benefits accrue from discussing partisan differences. First, students became more politically tolerant because they “see that those who disagree also have good reasons for their ideas” (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, p. 296). In order to leverage the benefits of partisanship in the classroom, teachers “modeled the importance of understanding views that differed from one’s own, [and] reinforced that it is respectable to change one’s mind about an issue when confronted with good evidence and reasons” (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, p. 297).

Another benefit of teaching about partisanship in the civics classroom is it provides a democratic outlet for the conflict that is inevitable in pluralistic societies, and can reduce partisan animus. Students can see members of the opposing party as political adversaries, not enemies. Teaching students to treat their political opponents as adversaries requires a different approach than teaching them to seek consensus with those with whom they disagree. The goal of CAL in the civics classroom is not for different sides of the ideological divide to come together, but rather to recognize one another’s legitimacy. Being able to ‘stand in the shoes of another’ does not mean adopting another’s perspective as one’s own, but rather becoming aware of how political subjects are shaped for recognition. As Danielle Allen (2004) writes, overcoming distrust in democratic politics requires citizens to acknowledge a “shared life – not a ‘common’ or identical life – only one with common events, climates, built-environments, fixations of the imagination and social structures” (p. xxi).

Put another way, CAL involves the ability to reflect upon the emotional attachments one has to particular viewpoints. Changing one’s mind is not simply a matter of weighing the evidence rationally; adopting a different position can be experienced as a loss of identity, particularly when partisan identity is linked to other social identities, such as gender, race, and class. In addition, being able to understand views that are ‘different’ from one’s own depends on the conditions of recognizability, and how those points of view (and the people holding them) are framed or presented to us for consideration. Finally, when exploring their partisan identities, youth must learn to analyze the role of power relations. As Mouffe (2005) summarizes, “power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape” (p. 18). Social studies classrooms, too, are embedded in a political context and set of power relations, and therefore play an important role in bringing about a more just social order.

6. Conclusion

Civic education plays a critical role during periods of heightened political polarization. If democracy is to function, and America is to live up to its ideals of liberty and justice for all, then our youngest citizens must develop the skills to navigate ideological divides, consider alternative perspectives, and listen to viewpoints that conflict with their own worldviews.
However, presently civic educators have approached this pedagogical challenge from a cognitivist standpoint. Whereas empathy of a variety of types is frequently held up as a goal of social studies education, research has not sufficiently theorized the role of emotion in the civics classroom. Moreover, democratic theory underlying civic education approaches has drawn primarily from liberalism, which places emphasis on rational deliberation as the best means of establishing just ends. However, agonistic political theory challenges universal consensus as the goal of democratic deliberation, and instead welcomes conflict as a core feature of pluralistic societies. Rather than shy away from emotion, we should openly discuss its place in the civics classroom and cultivate a critical awareness of which feelings are recognized, which are endorsed or rejected, and how conditions of recognizability frame some people as un/deserving of belonging and rights. CAL is a framework that can be adapted and implemented in the civics classroom as a necessary means for educating political emotions and preparing youth for engaged citizenship. However, greater research is needed that both documents the circulation of emotion in social studies classrooms to create affective boundaries, and the effects of greater attention to emotion in the social studies classroom, both at the K-12 level, and in teacher education.

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