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The Twin Tales of Whiteness Exploring the Emotional Roller Coaster of Teaching and Learning about Whiteness

Cheryl E. Matias, Allison Henry, & Craig Darland

Abstract

Teaching about race is understandably daunting, taxing, and emotionally draining especially within the U.S. context where whites significantly outnumber People of Color as teachers. In order to co-create a more humane and racially just society in the U.S. and beyond, however, race educators and scholars remain steadfast in their pedagogies and curricula, hoping that the “burden” of teaching teachers (a majority white) is a small price to pay for the hope of a better society. This article examines what happens when one educator refuses to remain silent about race—moreover whiteness—in a graduate course consisting mostly of U.S. white teachers. Employing critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness studies (CWS), and critical emotional studies (CES) to position our narratives and analyses, we detail the emotional roller coaster we all undergo when teaching for racial justice. In doing so, we begin a journal that therapeutically understands our racialized emotions for the hope of racial harmony.

Keywords: Whiteness, Race, Teaching, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Antiracism.

Introduction

Teaching about race is understandably daunting, taxing, and emotionally draining (Williams & Evans-Winter, 2005) especially within the United States (U.S.) context where 86% of teachers are white and the majority of U.S. K-12 students

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are of Color (NCES, 2012). The U.S., additionally, proclaims itself as the land of the free and the home of the brave despite the fact that race relations have not improved. Yet, race scholars and educators worldwide persist because “overturning white domination in the world is an enormous, seemingly insurmountable task,” yet chosen in order to “love humanity” (Matias & Allen, 2013, p. 298). That is, in order to co-create a more humane, racially just society in the U.S. and beyond, race educators and scholars remain steadfast in their pedagogies and curricula, hoping that the “burden” of teaching teachers (Williams & Evans-Winter, 2005) is a small price to pay for the hope of a better society. Yamamoto (2000) describes this process as a necessary commitment to racial justice; others, like Freire (1993), suggest it is a humanizing love, one that indeed incurs pain and violence. Regardless of how the movement is coined, in order to transform the educational system as a socially just vehicle for racial change, teachers themselves must see how race matters in everyday curriculum and pedagogy (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). As educators, if we continue to remain silent on the issues of race, we perpetuate the pervasiveness of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and the greater danger of proclaiming false comfort in the uncomfortable state of race.

This article examines what happens when one educator refuses to remain silent about race—moreover whiteness—in a graduate course consisting mostly of U.S. teachers, many of whom are white. Essentially this paper seeks to answer the questions: *What are the emotional dynamics white students undergo when learning about whiteness from a female Professor of Color and vice versa?* And, *posit to what extent does understanding these emotional processes produce favorable conditions for antiracist teaching?* Although the latter suggests a causal link, it does not seek to prove that link in this particular paper. The question, rather, seeks to highlight how changed disposition may give rise to the potential for antiracist teaching later on. To answer such inquiries we, the authors, must first articulate the theories and methods from which we draw our analyses. Particularly, we focus on critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness studies (CWS), and critical emotional studies (CES) to position our narratives and analyses. Second, we describe emotional events that occurred in the graduate course from three different perspectives using a narrative style and include analyses from these multiple perspectives to see the interdynamics of race and gender. Finally, we offer implications to the field of race education, and education in general. We hope that by sharing our emotional journeys we can create a better portraiture of the interdynamics of learning about whiteness while operating under it.

Before illustrating the inner emotional dynamics of teaching race, we position our identities for the purpose of acknowledging our racial locations and their inherent perspectives. Cheryl Matias is the professor of the graduate critical issues in American education course in question, offered as an elective for many graduate programs. Identifying as a brown-skinned Pinay, her research specifically investigates the emotionality of whiteness in teachers, particularly because the majority

of American teachers are white and often teach in communities predominant with students of color (NCES, 2012). Allison Henry took the course as a white female graduate student to fulfill her final requirement for her master's degree in education. She works as a literacy coach in a public school populated with predominantly middle class, white students, and is now pursuing principalship. Craig Darland is a white male and also took the course as a graduate student to fulfill his requirement for his master's. As a middle school teacher in the largest urban city of the state for nearly fourteen years, he has had many experiences with his students of color. Both graduate students took the course expecting to learn "race-neutral" issues in American education, and were initially "scared" (Allison) and "shocked" (Craig) to learn that the course had an explicit focus on race. We came to this paper because the two students often found themselves spending extra time discussing their feelings and thoughts about learning the course material with the professor outside of class. This happened so often that we collaboratively decided to write about our journeys in the course. Ultimately, our motivation for writing the article was about sharing the journeys we experienced when teaching and learning a curriculum and pedagogy that deconstructs whiteness. Although there were three students of color in the course who claim the course empowered them—later one of the students of color wrote a long unsolicited email to the dean about how the course empowered her identity as the only Black Puerto Rican in her schooling process—the focus of this article will be on how those who are racially identified as Whites engage with curriculum and pedagogy that deconstruct whiteness.

Theoretical Framework

This article assumes three things: (1) race, with specific attention to whiteness, is always operating; (2) experiential knowledge with race is predicated on one's racial identity and thus how one experiences the world¹; and (3) education is a key vehicle to transform the ideologies needed to support social change. Acknowledging these assumptions, we draw from CRT and CWS to frame our analyses because both theories are founded on the acknowledgement of the endemic nature of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). With respect to identifying the emotional journey of learning about whiteness, however, we draw from CES to excavate how our emotions are not innate feelings developed in a vacuum; rather, they are expressions produced in relation to the social positions we occupy. As such, feelings are not isolated sentiments exempt from the happenings of the world around us.

First, CRT, though birthed from critical legal studies (Bell, 1992), has been increasingly applied to education (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) because of its parallels to institutional racism. Although CRT examines the dynamics of race and racism (how it is expressed, felt, understood, etc.), the dynamics of whiteness is better explained through CWS. That is not to say that one theory is preferred over the other; rather, we employ both theories so that the analyses

account for how these dynamics are understood, while also deconstructing how whiteness enacts, oppresses, and defies (see Leonardo, 2013). Race, in this sense, is two sides of the same coin: one side represents the experiences of People of Color, the other represents the experiences of Whites. Although we understand that the experiences of Whites and People of Color are never homogenized we do look at how experiences are generally felt under a larger system of race. That is, People of Color will experience race differently but all do so because of white supremacy. To solely focus on one side does not allow for a nuanced illustration of the emotional interdynamics that occur between white students and their Professor of Color while learning about whiteness. Thus, we employ both.

With respect to race and education, Lewis & Manno (2011) argue that race—more specifically white supremacy—has embedded itself in the systemic processes of schooling because “schools do not merely produce racial subjects; they produce racial disparities in life outcomes” (p. 109). Leonardo (2009) argues that whiteness has become so invisible that its strategies become seemingly “innocent or harmless” (p. 79). Yet whiteness in education nonetheless “perpetuate[s] white racial supremacy through color-blindness, historical justifications, and sleights of mind” (p. 79). In order to assuage past racialization processes of schools, educators banded together to offer multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2008, Sleeter & Grant, 1988), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), and culturally relevant curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teacher education programs are challenged to incorporate these curricular and pedagogical approaches (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Yet, in its incorporation of such techniques, teacher education haphazardly overlooked its own manifestations of whiteness and how they may impact the original racially just intent of such techniques (Matias, 2013b). Without an honest examination of whiteness, such socially just strategies leave whiteness intact (Allen, 2004).

Second, the study of race is emotional. The oft-cited trope of research on the emotionality of race is how Whites resist (Rodriguez, 2009), act hysterically (Gonsalves, 2008), cry (Frankenberg, 1993), and/or get angry, all of which are explicated within the transdisciplinary nature of CWS. Equally important, however, is how the emotionality of race is expressed and felt within people of color. For instance, faculty and graduate students of color experience racial battle fatigue in the academy by virtue of racial stereotypes, presumptions, and whiteness exerted (Fasching-Varner, Albert, Mitchell, & Allen, 2015; Stanley, 2006). Such fatigue is saddening, maddening, and exhausting. With respect to CRT’s and CWS’s intersectional approaches, this pain is rearticulated in the intersection of race and gender claiming that, because the academy is replete “with its masculine bent, there is no easy way to articulate or deal with the emotional, psychic, or the spiritual” (Gutierrez y Muhs, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012, p. 7).

Emotions, and the critical study of emotions, also play a vital role in deconstructing whiteness. In general, emotions “impact teaching and learning significantly” (Winans, 2012, p. 150), especially when topics produce uncomfortable emotionalities.

By emotionally distancing themselves, students inadvertently “reinforce rather than question inequitable social norms” (Winans, 2012, p. 152). Winans (2012) demands that education include critical emotional literacy so that it becomes a social practice that provides a means of analysis or “an ongoing critical inquiry regarding emotions, an inquiry that allows us to attend effectively to difference and identity” (p.152). For the purposes of this article, applications of critical emotional literacy allow for critical analyses of emotions so that we can investigate from where these emotions stem.

Instead of assuming that emotions emanate from one’s innate sensibilities, Ahmed (2004) posits that emotionality “is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value” (p.4). Boler (1999) corroborates this claiming that “feeling power refers to the ways in which our emotions, which reflect our complex identities situated with social hierarchies, ‘embody’ and ‘act out’ relations of power” (p. 3). Henceforth, emotions are not isolated from the context and the power structures embedded in those contexts. Rather, emotions become a process of social interaction, one which is bound by the rules of power. Race, for example, is one structure wherein whites are positioned as “normal” and “superior,” while People of Color are categorized as “different” and “inferior.” In order for the structure of race to manifest systemically, the process of white supremacy ensues via enactments of whiteness. Allen (2001) suggests “Whites, whether knowingly or not, act as agents of whiteness in the surveillance of white territories, thus constructing psychosocial spaces of trauma and alienation, such as schools, for people of color” (p. 480). It is within these domains that emotions are situated and cannot escape the subtleties of white supremacy.

Consider the oft-invoked emotions of guilt, anger, and denial when engaging a critical race dialogue with white students. Such emotional expressions are often categorized as *white resistance*, routinely and “performatively staged in the classroom” (Ringrose, 2007, p. 328). Left unexamined, these emotions become recentered “in ways that serve to reinscribe whiteness as the normative centre for discussion while continuing to marginalize other social groups (Solomona, Portelli, Daniels, & Campbell, 2005, p. 166). This reflective pedagogical analysis reconsiders the complexities of emotions, particularly the emotionalities of whiteness, so that as antiracist white educators can deconstruct their emotions and thus engage in prolonged projects of racial justice.

Using a trifecta of CRT, CWS, and CES provides a more nuanced interpretation of the effectiveness of teaching and learning about whiteness and the emotional dynamics in doing so. For when these theories are used together, we are better able to situate the narratives while providing an interpretive analysis of how the emotions that stem from learning whiteness—while operating under its influence—manifest themselves.

Methodology

In order to answer the posed questions above we employ a methodological strategy that best captures the learning and teaching journey of both the students and professor specifically with regard to the curriculum and pedagogy. Though this method is by all means not the only method one can use to document a journey, it is the preferred method because our means of understanding our feelings in response to teaching and learning about whiteness was wrought with infinite sensations, uncertain paths, and insecurities as to why we felt the way we felt. Thus, we align ourselves with the tradition of *teacher reflection* because “teachers begin to reflect authentically on past experiences beyond the walls of the classroom to address the idiosyncrasies that prevail in classrooms” (Milner, 2003, p. 195). Since we are educators, we opt to use race reflection to “locate experiences that can guide [our] thinking and teaching” (Milner, 2007, p. 586). Specifically, we located our emotional experiences of teaching and learning whiteness based upon the curriculum and pedagogies employed in the course. True to the method of teacher reflections, included as narratives here, we wrote these narratives after the course was completed to best capture our emotional journey throughout the entire course. Thus, the pedagogy for the course did not include personal emotional reflections instead we re-read some of our course assigned essays and online postings to identify our feelings.

Revisiting our experiences unearths our initial emotional journey of teaching and learning about whiteness, especially in U.S. graduate education courses where the majority of students (pre-service or in-service teachers) is white and the professor may not. Although there are some teacher reflections that may reflect inconsistencies (Mansour, 2013), we opted to review each other’s essays that were assigned in the course and our course online postings while doing additional independent research on whiteness. We acknowledge that upon each re-read of our course essays and postings there were a range of emotions experienced; to concentrate fully on the emotionalities that were present during the course itself, however, we opt to construct narratives as a reflective method of capturing our journeys. Thus, each re-read of the essays and online posting from the course coupled with new resources in whiteness literature helped us construct our narratives after the course ended. In doing so we better understand the emotional dynamic between teaching whiteness and learning it and how we were emotionally responding to it.

Background

The course is an elective graduate course offered every fall and spring semester, enrolled mainly by U.S. K-12 teachers. It is designed to “provide an examination of the social values and philosophical foundations in contemporary U.S. American society which shape or influence the aims, methods, content, problems, and controversies facing the American educational enterprise” (Course Syllabus). The intent of the course is to “prepare critical educators with a critique of the hegemonic

philosophies and social values that pervade both society and U.S. American urban education while developing a critical activist stance against these oppressive mechanisms” (Course Syllabus). Since the focus of the course was about U.S. American urban education, it is befitting to focus our literature and theoretical framework in the U.S. context. The two students whose narratives are included in this article are co-authors of this paper and completed the course in different semesters, spring 2014 and fall 2014 respectively, with Henry acting as a teacher’s assistant in the latter. Seventeen graduate students were enrolled in the fall 2014 course with a majority of the students from the School of Education, three students were of color, and the rest were racially identified as white.

Narratives

Cheryl Matias’ Narrative

I took with me on the first day of class all the racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007) I had to endure as a young-looking, female faculty member of color, teaching graduate courses that are predominated by white teachers. Each semester my students second-guessed my intellectual abilities or accused me of being biased against them because they were white and I was not. They would send me emails instructing me to print out their assignments or threaten to go to the dean if I did not heed to their uncomfortable emotional condition when talking about race, as if I was a customer service representative. In order to assert my status, I had my students call me “Dr.” instead of by first name as I usually did in the past when teaching in a state previous that had a majority of students of color. I frontloaded my credentials, something I knew my white male colleagues did not have to do.

Additionally, I had to include a disclaimer on my syllabus that “warned” my students that they would learn about “tough” stuff and would need to engage with the argument instead of refute it merely because they “felt bad.” I added that they would be graded on how they demonstrated their emotional investment in the course and their learning. I included a bulleted list of what an emotional investment may look like. Some examples were seeking further knowledge of the subject outside of class with the professor, writing blogs, organizing field trips to museum exhibits on race (e.g., Colorado’s History Museum exhibit on Race: Are We That Different?), or involvement in student groups or community organizations that also promote racial justice. Additionally, I lectured on the first day of class what emotions might be felt when discussing whiteness such as fear, guilt, anger and/or dismissal. One way to do this is by asking my white students why they do not want to talk to “Uncle Joe” (a fictitious white uncle who is very adamant that race does not exist) about racism at the Thanksgiving Dinner table. Despite the fact there are some who may want to challenge Uncle Joe in an argument over white privilege, I opt to list on the board the reasons

why my students might not want to talk to some of their white family members about white privilege. Some say “Uncle Joe” will:

- ◆ be angry,
- ◆ deny everything,
- ◆ ask them to prove white privilege with detailed evidence,
- ◆ deem everything they say as irrelevant, from only one perspective, or of the passed and not present,
- ◆ become defensive,
- ◆ shout,
- ◆ resist,
- ◆ take things personally instead of focus on larger systemic issues,
- ◆ react instead of learn, etc.

Then I let my students know that when they read articles written mostly by Scholars of Color that focus on whiteness they too may react like Uncle Joe, and that, in and of itself, is the enactment of white emotionalities that we will be deconstructing for this course. Specifically, the students know we will be interrogating the following: Where these emotions come from? Why are these emotions there? Why do so many people have these same emotional reactions to whiteness? By doing so, my students are aware that I know of these emotional displays and how, upon their surfacing, they can severely limit their willingness to learn. By frontloading emotions students can begin to identify them and process how emotions are an important factor in how we choose to learn or not learn about race. Hence, doing this activity, creates a critical space that acknowledges white emotionalities instead of rendering them as invisible as hegemonic whiteness itself.

Further, instead of sidestepping hard discussions by focusing the racialized educational disparities between People of Color to whites (which is only a symptom), I opted to focus on the disease itself: whiteness and white supremacy. Doing this, I know my mainly white students will find discomfort because although they are aware that African American and Latino students have lower graduation rates than whites or Asian Americans they often still describe this disparity using deficit approaches such as “they don’t speak English,” “their parents don’t care,” “their culture does not value education,” etc. Therefore, the onus of failure is placed on the students and their families, never upon the teacher, the processes of schooling, or the educational system writ large. They typically have not explored a deeper examination of the larger systemic reasons.

To better illustrate this mentality, I drew from a class discussion about the presence of metal detectors in certain high schools. One student claimed that his urban school, filled with Black and Brown students, does have metal detectors. When I asked if the school had a history of gun violence, he said he was unsure, then quickly added that it “had to because African Americans and Latinos have a propensity for crime.” He backed his claim by pointing out that African American and Latino males mainly populate the prison system. On the one hand, the student

could clearly see the racial disparities in the prison system; yet, what he could not articulate the more nuanced understanding of how African American and Latino males are strategically targeted and racially profiled as criminals. Other students chimed in to this end, explaining that Blacks are more likely to get pulled over and that most violent mass school shootings are perpetrated by white males in predominantly-white schools. Upon hearing this racial reality, the student grew increasingly frustrated and seemingly obstinate in his position. Here the emotionality of whiteness came into play more clearly: no amount of statistical proof could increase this student's understanding of race, unless we dove right into the problem itself: that of whiteness. Hence, the curriculum I used was strategic in learning about the overarching disease of whiteness and white supremacy, thus providing a deeper rationale behind the already understood (or misunderstood) statistics. That is, I had to create a curriculum about race that centered on how whiteness and white supremacy "colors" statistics.

As a former K-12 Los Angeles schoolteacher and having been raised in public schools there too, the majority of my teachers and colleagues were People of Color, many who grew up in the same communities in which they now teach. In this course this was not the case. Many of my students in my graduate courses at this institution were white teachers who taught in communities of color that were greatly different from their own home communities. I had to change my pedagogy to find a pedagogy that teetered between disrupting whiteness and ensuring I was not victimized by it. So, I used laughter, social media, and/or popular culture to disrupt whiteness. At the same time, because Women of Color are often presumed incompetent (Gutierrez y Muhs, et al., 2012), I had to be steadfast in my dominance, which countered the literature on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1988). Essentially, I had to realize that whiteness was operating regardless of my professorial standing (Author 1, 2013a), and the only way to debunk it was to expose its violent nature (see Leonardo & Porter, 2010) which I knew students would find intimidating. In fact, I knew it would be more intimidating for my white female teachers than my white male teachers since women of color (specifically, Asian American females) are often reduced to sexual fantasies of dominance due to heterosexual white supremacist patriarchy (Espiritu, 2001). So, I made hard pedagogical decisions by calling out whiteness ideology, and at times forcibly had the rest of the class take onus of the whiteness ideology.

I recall a class discussion in which a student (a former teacher) argued why "they" (Students of Color) are failing. He argued that Students of Color lacked motivation. After no one spoke up (which is a common practice in white complicity), I questioned the class by asking, "So you all think like this, right," challenging them to step up and take onus.

Despite how racially microaggressive my students' behaviors were, I had to remember that I was responsible for their learning, impacting how they will teach the next generations of Students of Color. There was a time when I engaged a

counterstory in the discussion to illustrate a larger dynamic of racial prejudice. Such a practice, according to CRT, is methodologically sound because it counters majoritarian stories that are often left unchecked (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In response, one student claimed I needed to stop personalizing the matter and be more objective, assuming that his statements, claims, and inquiries about his experiences in teaching urban students of color were more objective. Although this was clearly an exertion of the power in whiteness, which assumes its legitimacy and objectivity, I had to rethink this situation as a teachable moment for both student and professor. As a student, he had to learn how he was exerting his whiteness, while I had to relearn how to approach this racial microaggression pedagogically.

Allison Henry's Narrative

I signed up for the course assuming we would examine contemporary issues plaguing education like poverty, funding, and equity. As a white educator, examining the pre-course survey questions, I was surprised and a bit threatened: each question seemingly held a hidden agenda, one I assumed would determine just how racist a person I might be:

Question: In your opinion, why do urban schools struggle?

Question: Are there differences between urban students and suburban students?

Question: What does an urban classroom look like?

I was afraid to answer the questions honestly because I was petrified knowing my words would be examined and was concerned with what they might uncover about myself. To protect my privilege, I remained vague and filled with a sense of obliviousness: “I think the main difference between urban and suburban students is their access to experiences.” When asked what an urban classroom looks like, I could only guess because I have only taught in predominantly white, suburban schools:

I would imagine the rooms are filled with students who excel, who struggle, who could care less, who couldn't care less, who are active in the school, who rarely attend school... I would also imagine there may be a greater variety of access to funds among students.

Repeatedly I avoided using any verbiage that had to do with race or ethnicity. Whitewashing the notion of poverty, I used terms such as “access to funds” and “access to experiences.” I knew I was trying to make my perceptions of urban schools seem just like “other schools,” but I was too afraid to admit that I was really comparing urban schools and students to my view of what is normal – in a word, whiteness (Allen, 2004). I entered Dr. Matias' classroom for the first time with my completed survey and chose to sit at the side of the classroom, hoping to go unnoticed, fearing my white body would betray me. From the moment Dr. Matias walked in, I was overwhelmed by her. Her energy, humor, and intelligence filled the

room. I remember being overcome with intimidation. She spoke openly on topics that I deemed taboo, topics of social justice, race, and privilege. She spoke in a manner I had never heard from a professor before, using Spanish words, Filipino words, Black diction, and profanity. She also used terms I hadn't allowed into my vocabulary such as "social capital," "critical race theory," "privilege," and the most troublesome of all, "whiteness."

It wouldn't be until midway through the semester I would realize Dr. Matias' pedagogy had been deliberately chosen not only as a means to protect herself, but more importantly to push the thoughts of her students enveloped in whiteness. Being a middle-class white woman I was accustomed to many things—excess funds to treat myself to dinners, coffees, vacations, etc.—however, I was not accustomed to having these privileges and my whiteness examined, especially by a person of color (Allen, 2004). As I progressed through Dr. Matias' class, the content and discussions we had regularly confronted me with the impact of my privilege and my whiteness. Initially this process made me itchy, especially as it was led by a woman of color, one who, unlike me, was clearly well-versed and thoroughly experienced in racial dynamics. An emotional response developed within me. I became bitter and scared; I didn't like the taste of my exposed privilege. For the first few weeks of class, I was afraid to speak, afraid to offend. I whitewashed my verbiage and relied on my colorblindness to maintain a sense of political correctness.

In the coming months, Dr. Matias insisted I identify with my racial positionality—after all, I didn't choose the skin I was born into but I am eternally impacted by it, and I began to see the need to expose my whiteness (Matias, 2013c). Therefore, I began to speak from the view of a middle-class, white, single motherscholar² and I was able to identify how I was afforded privileges others were not. However, after Dr. Matias had the class read Giroux (1988) and Allen (2004) I truly started to see things differently:

Giroux's (1988) discussion of hidden curriculum awakened me to a world of sleeping giants: ideas of supremacy and power were running rampant in the daily actions and words of the educators I know and respect. Everywhere I turned and every conversation I had began to ooze undertones of [oppression], illuminating my own personal blindspot to my whiteness, to my privilege, to my contribution of hegemonic structures and ideas (Allen, 2004).

For me, this was a turning point. I felt determined to expose this world to anyone else who had lived a colorblind life of privilege. I committed myself to spreading the word of my new truth in my class reflections.

Being born into privilege and being born white has necessarily placed me in a position of power and prestige. I acknowledge the perpetual benefit all Whites have gained from this position. I also acknowledge that in order to stop this, ...the system that created it must be destroyed (Allen, 2004). As a result, I have waged a conscious war against the impact these hidden structures and ideas have on me and my surroundings... I am committing to confronting ideas, traditions

and structures that exude oppression I am committing to listening to the “spark of knowledge” only the oppressed can teach me. I am owning the fact that I am by nature an oppressor. However, I refuse to remain idle and content in my privilege (class reflection paper).

The problem with whiteness, I learned through the required readings brought forth by Dr. Matias, is the seductive power it exerts on the privileged. The comfort and luxury of my whiteness was a lure, baited and dangling in front of me, and I found many opportunities to revert to a colorblind, pseudo-post-racial version of myself (Allen, 2004). More than once during the semester I slipped out of my positive and forward-moving stage of disintegration and landed in the angry and finger-pointing position of reintegration (Tatum, 2003) and became worried about every word, action, and thought.

Dr. Matias could see this thinking in her students’ writings and discussions. It was at that point she had us read an article entitled “On the ‘Flip’ Side: A Teacher Educator of Color Unveiling the Dangerous Minds of White Teacher Candidates” that illustrated the toll taken on people of color who choose to educate white students about whiteness. Up until that point, the impact of my existence as a white woman on an educator of color hadn’t even crossed my mind because, as Tatum (2003) suggests, I had never really examined my whiteness and therefore felt the idea of race wasn’t about me. Reading that piece, very strong emotions emanated from me:

I felt guilt for her pain. I felt guilt for her fear... I felt guilt for this fucked up, stratified society in which we exist because somehow my skin color, my upbringing, my financial standing affords me a sense of superiority that I hadn’t even begun to acknowledge...(my class reflection).

I couldn’t stomach the notion that as a white person I had unknowingly committed acts of whiteness that were abusive to people of color. I started writing about how angry and defensive I felt. In that moment, I became aware. I came to understand the act of humanization and realized this journey *had* to be about me; that race was about me. I did this in one of my class reflections

I have to acknowledge what it is exactly I have spent my entire life denying. I have to acknowledge the structures that produced the faux feeling of colorblindness that I use to protect myself and wage war on others (Allen, 2014). I want to be held accountable, but more importantly I want to never contribute to someone’s sense of pain again. I am eager to learn, to know better, and to do better... I want my whiteness to be examined and my privilege to be exposed (Tatum, 2003).

Dr. Matias spent sixteen weeks laying out a curriculum that would deliberately, consistently, and critically confront my whiteness. She developed opportunities for me to safely examine my privilege and the impact it has on others and myself. By the end of the semester, I finally felt “comfortable in my uncomfortableness” and was willing to stop hiding “behind a façade of innocence or normalize[d] speech”

(Matias, 2013a). I had finally become able to openly address issues of race with my peers, colleagues, loved ones, and even my superiors. Through my new sense of optimism I have been able to develop and pursue the opportunity to write a semester-long course for my predominantly middle to upper-class, white, middle school students on the issues of whiteness and privilege. In class we regularly deconstruct issues of race as well as the emotions that come up while examining these issues. While my personal learning journey resulted in an awakening of hopefulness and optimism, it started with intimidation, fear, and defensiveness. However, my heightened understanding, passion for, and commitment to anti-racist pedagogy both inside and outside of the classroom wouldn't have been possible without deconstructing my initial emotionalities of whiteness. In the end, it seemed that all my life I was humming a song about race, however in my blissfully ignorant state of wanting to not be a racist, I refused to know the lyrics of the song. Deconstructing my emotionalities of whiteness I finally learned the lyrics to that song. Meaning, I have developed from simply being "not a racist" to being actively anti-racist and thus I find myself with more emotional fortitude to engage in longer projects of racial justice such as the social justice course I am now teaching in my middle school and the social justice student organization that I facilitate for my campus.

Craig Darland's Narrative

Having been an educator in an urban environment for the past fourteen years, I assumed Dr. Matias' course would focus on topics like poverty, family environment, state funding, changes in educational law, and possibly teacher evaluation systems, all of which I believed I had a great deal of knowledge about.

Walking into Dr. Matias' classroom for the first time was not intimidating to me at all. Although being a white male makes me a minority among students in these courses, I've never felt this to be a disadvantage. Never in my life had I been made to feel like I was a minority in power. I soon learned that a minority in numbers does not necessarily mean I was a minority in power. That is, I learned that being one of the few white males in the course does not mean that patriarchy and sexism ceases to exist in society and within the classroom. This came from reading an article called, "The Flip Side" where the author indicates that although she is the professor of the course and has professorial standing over students she is still outnumbered by the whiteness of her students. At first glance, I was a little taken back by Dr. Matias' physical appearance. I'm not used to having my professors look the way she does. She is an Asian-looking woman of slender build. She has fair and beautiful features with the face of a woman in her mid- to late-twenties but she has the eyes of a woman much older. In short, I was comfortable, at least at the start. That first class she told us that we would be forced to feel emotion. Upon hearing this I questioned her in my mind. *Who does she think she is? What makes her think she has so much power over me?* I felt, at the time, that being forced to feel emotion was an arrogant and presumptuous

stance. I really did not take her seriously up until now because before meeting her emotions were never a part of my learning.

It was a pre-course survey that forced an emotional response from me. I remember that after I filled it out one question particularly bothered me:

Question 11: Have you had experiences/relationships with people of color in authority? Describe. Have you had experiences/relationships with people of color not in authority? Describe.

I remember judging the question itself: What was she trying to do? “The president’s Black after all,” I said to my girlfriend that night. I was both angry and annoyed that Dr. Matias would even suggest that having a Person of Color in authority was something strange at all. The question seemed absurd to me: “Why would the color of a professor matter at all?” I responded with vigor, feeling strongly that I was correct in my assumptions about race:

I wouldn’t think it would be any different, knowledge is knowledge and doesn’t matter who’s dishing it out. I really think the race issues continue because of questions like this that seem to have some desire to keep it on the table. Get over it already, the president’s Black.

My answer was based on a refusal to accept racism, operating under the false understanding that racism was beaten down during the Civil Rights Movement. I felt attacked for being white; as if I was being unfairly judged for something a distant ancestor might have done long before me. I was of the opinion that economic class was the only factor keeping people of color from achieving their desired place in western society. “White privilege” was not yet in my vernacular.

As the course continued, my emotional state of mind started to unravel. Learning about race, racism, and white supremacy was extremely difficult for me as a white male. I completely rejected white privilege for weeks! I kept justifying that everything I had was solely based on my own effort and had nothing to do with being a member of the dominant white race. I grew anxious over attending Dr. Matias’ class. This course caused me to feel badly about everything I was coming to terms with. I felt personally attacked because I was white. For many weeks I rejected the material completely and it was noticed by Dr. Matias in this e-mail:

Dear Craig,
Stemming from your comments last night it appears you have some misunderstandings and personal reactions to the readings that you need to work through. We want you to be successful in the course and personalize the correct information from the readings, thus it is important to correctly understand the key concepts of the readings. In order to better support you through the process of emotionally investing in your learning process we request an appointment to go over the readings and your thoughts and feelings about them. Please let us know your availability. Personally, I will make time for you.
Respects, Profe

This e-mail angered me as I was still refusing to acknowledge white privilege at all. In doing so, I'd be forced to acknowledge that I had been living under a false understanding about race and racism. I was understandably defensive and angry as acknowledging white privilege would change my view of self. My response to her blatantly showed my anger:

Profe, I would love meet with you sometime but just to be clear, I have no misunderstanding as to what the readings were saying. I simply don't agree with their conclusions, or yours. I fully understand all the key concepts in those readings and can prove that through a verbal discussion. Understanding what they're saying doesn't mean I have to agree with them. I hope you don't expect your students to blindly agree with every reading you give them. I hope you aren't having a personal reaction to the opposition I gave to the readings last night. I look forward to meeting with you in the near future to resolve whatever issues you're having.

As the course went on I begrudgingly started to absorb the readings and slowly recognized a truth of unfair and unjustified white supremacy that was painful to think about. Dr. Matias forced me to engage in an emotional response by refusing to allow me to passively sit in class without openly interacting with her and the readings. I think the reading that had the largest impact on me was Beverly Tatum's (2003) book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*:

Several years ago, a White male student in my psychology of racism course wrote in his journal at the end of the semester that he had learned a lot about racism and now understood in a way he never had before just how advantaged he was. He also commented that he didn't think he would do anything to try to change the situation. After all, the system was working in his favor (p.13).

This was an eye-opening comment to me. On a small level, I agreed with that student and that disgusted me to my very core. I was forced to think of myself as a white person who was contributing to the oppression of people of color. Was I that type of man? Did I really care so little for justice? It shook up my understanding of self. I remember thinking, "No, I couldn't be that unethical a person, could I?" This was the moment in the course when my thinking changed from unaware or possibly ambivalent to becoming critically aware of my place in this world. It was then that I realized that white privilege existed and it was because I was benefitting from it that I was ignorant to its very existence: "...for many Whites, this new awareness of the benefits of a racist system elicits considerable pain, often accompanied by feelings of anger and guilt" (Tatum, 2003, p. 9). I think my shame was what kept me from acknowledging my white privilege for so long, even when its undeniable existence was surrounding me. It was my place in society as a white male that was allowing my mind to refuse to acknowledge what was so clearly right in front of me. Openly discussing and agreeing with the idea that I was privileged was painful for me. It implied that I'm successful not solely because of the merit of my actions

but because I've had an unfair advantage my entire life. Coming to terms with my white privilege was depressing.

As a white person, I went through a myriad of emotions at this realization. I felt that I was being a traitor to my white race by entertaining the idea. Justifications came to my mind. I felt a need to justify white privilege or rationalize it in some way. To acknowledge that I was a racist, passive or otherwise, was emotionally taxing. Dr. Matias noticed my change of mood in class sent me an email inquiring; I responded:

Profe, my mood has changed because I've come to accept the truth of these articles that we're reading. Honestly I'm still upset sometimes because I find these readings insulting and at times, biased. But my ability to reason and reflect has helped me to come to terms with this new knowledge I'm absorbing. Really it's an eye opening and fascinating experience to view the world differently after 38 years of seeing, thinking I knew what was going on. I feel like I should say 'thanks' but I'm not going to do that because now I'm depressed and angrier than I used to be.

The readings and enlightenment I underwent throughout the course in addition to my interactions with Dr. Matias facilitating that learning structured and developed my growth as human being. I credit myself with a high level of empathy that recognizes a long life history of initially failing to later understand the better path. However, the path cannot be clear unless I have a teacher who is fully committed to my learning inasmuch as she demands that I commit to her. Once I began to see the truth of white privilege through the curriculum and the pedagogy of my professor, it wasn't much of a stretch for me to believe that I had once again been wrong. Although I think that many people are stubborn once they reach a certain age—for I was close to 40 at the time—and success in life, it was also in part of my lack of exposure to the curriculum and engaged pedagogy of whiteness that transformed me. The aspect of my personality that made it possible for me to unlearn what I had initially learned about race and white supremacy (which was not real) is in the fact that I am acutely aware that most of my successes in life have come only after several major failures. Meaning, I know that I don't often get it right the first time and this characteristic allows me a certain freedom when evolving my points of view. Although I initially found it very difficult to accept the nature of white supremacy, my professor's insistence that I emotionally commit to the material gave me the space to fail and grow anew, knowing that when I did fail she would be there to pick me up again.

As the course wound down, I began to feel that I now had a duty as an educator to do something with my new understandings of race, racism, and white supremacy. Refusing to openly discuss white privilege and racism was no longer an option—I had an obligation to humanity to share my newly found knowledge and help the next generation of learners see the truth. Now, I feel a need to bring up the idea of white privilege in almost all settings I find myself in. Currently I'm finishing up my Master thesis on the nature of white privilege as it pertains to the arena of comic book superheroes. This course, Dr. Matias and the learning I underwent as a result of the

emotional enlightenment/transformation have forced me to share my understanding of white privilege in my current academic field of study, my social interactions with friends and on various forms of social media. I am optimistic as to what my future holds as far as teaching whiteness and constantly struggling with the nature of white supremacy and how it affects our world. However, I could not even get to the place of optimism and hopefulness until I was aware of the latent white emotionalities that first surfaced upon learning about whiteness. As such, I focused on my initial emotions. As a teacher, I know the impact I can have on the next generation of freethinkers and now thanks to Dr. Matias I no longer shy away from discussions of race and white privilege, I actively seek out the hard conversations and share what I have learned.

Analysis

All three narratives describe our journey of teaching and learning about whiteness with different apprehensions about it. In strategically designing the curriculum to directly address white supremacy and how that impacts our educational system, the professor forced her students to emotionally confront their own white privilege. This is seen when during a class conversation stereotypes about Black and Brown violence was being recycled. Though the class remained silent, the professor questioned their silence by modeling how it associates with complicity. That is, since silence is an act of white complicity it allows dominant ideologies in whiteness to go uncontested. She placed the onus back onto the students saying, "Because you are not saying anything does that mean you are complicit in this line of reasoning?" Until she forced them to confront their emotional deflection did the students speak up about their beliefs; many that countered the previous stereotypes about Black and Brown male violence. This became a pedagogy the professor had to enforce in order for the students to engage with instead of "Uncle Joe-ing" the curriculum.

Different emotions such as intimidation to fetishism were expressed by both students. Allison and Craig interestingly described the professor's physical appearance in different ways. True to the nature of race and gender, the reaction from the white female (Allison) to a female Professor of Color (who looks Asian) was that of intimidation: "From the moment Dr. Matias walked in, I was overwhelmed by her. Her energy, humor, and intelligence filled the room (Allison)." This intimidation factor is widely discussed in the literature of Black feminism (Hills-Collin, 1986, hooks, 1993, Lorde, 2007). Davis (1983) argues that the historical relationship between Black female slaves forced to be mistresses to their white male masters placed white females between their gendered subjugation and racial domination. On the one hand white women were unable to challenge patriarchy, specifically white supremacist patriarchy. On the other, they exerted their white supremacy in the maltreatment of the Black female slaves. Therefore, as hooks (1994) suggests when the power dynamics places a female of color in an institutionally higher position, white women are threatened or intimidated.

The emotional dynamics of Craig differed. As a heterosexual white male, his response centered on her physical features: "I'm not used to having my professors look the way she does. She is an *Asian-looking* woman of *slender build*. She has *fair and beautiful features* with the *face of a woman in her mid- to late twenties*... I was comfortable, at least at the start (emphasis added)." Espiritu (2001) argues that Asian American women are either labeled "Dragon Ladies," who are sexually dominant, or "China Dolls" who are to be sexually dominated, yet both depictions serve the sexual fetish of straight white men. Meaning, there was less to be intimidated by when the male student interacted with the female professor, however, the Asian American stereotypes and gender stereotypes of fetishism were still operating.

The most recurring theme in all three narratives is emotions. The professor deliberately included emotional investment as gradable classroom participation claiming that without emotional investment white teachers will not engage in projects of racial justice in the classroom. Craig acknowledged that "[Dr. Matias said she] would force us to feel emotion" which encapsulates his emotions of defensiveness and anger that was captured in many of the emails he sent to her. Allison described how the professor's forceful attempt to have students recognize their own whiteness made her feel "... bitter and scared; I didn't like the taste of my exposed privilege." Meaning, Allison underwent emotionalities such as vulnerability and reluctance upon her initial contact with the content and the professor. The professor did put emotional investment as a part of the syllabus and on the syllabus, explicated ways emotional investment can be graded. For example, she explained to the class starting a blog, organizing outside field trips that relate the course topic, create a panel presentation, write editorials on local teacher's outlets, post on the online discussion thread additional resources or engage in prolonged discussions. These were all examples of how to emotionally invest in the learning. The goal for her was to have students show they were committed to learning about race beyond their own discomfort about the topic. By doing so Craig moved from defensiveness and anger to acceptance and thankfulness while Allison moved from reluctance and vulnerability to vigilance and activism.

Each narrative demonstrates how emotionalities play out in the classroom and thus how they influence the teaching and learning of whiteness. Emotions become a possible conduit for how white teachers learn whiteness and how professors (of color or not) engage in teaching about whiteness to white students.

Craig noted the benefit from the professor's emotional commitment to his learning via her emails; this is the same investment she asked of her own students to learn their whiteness. Allison wrote: "Dr. Matias challenged me to analyze my whiteness as well as my contribution to oppressive racial dynamics." Herein lie the twin tales of whiteness: one is about the professor teaching about whiteness while she operates under the hegemony of it, the other is when students learn about the debilitating mechanisms and effects of whiteness while exerting it themselves.

Implications & Recommendations

As both students and professors of race, we needed to first identify our emotionalities in response to learning or teaching about whiteness, then self-reflect upon those emotionalities in order to better understand. As students, we may have felt resentful, guilty, angry, defensive, and/or fearful, yet we recognize these feelings as a process of whiteness instead of mislabeling them as mere reactions to a curriculum we did not agree with. Identifying our emotions made us realize more intimately how whiteness operates in our daily lives. As professors—specifically as professors of color—we learned that our past experiences with whiteness, though scarred, still had to be vulnerable and open to re-receive new white students. Too often the onslaught of racism and white supremacy hardens the heart of people of color, which helps us survive (Lorde, 2001). Teaching and learning about whiteness is, at best, a risk. As such, both professor and students must be willing, trusting, and vulnerable enough to take the plunge together.

Acknowledging the emotionality of whiteness then has many implications for teaching, learning, teacher education, and the field of social justice altogether. For one, further studies can be made to gauge the levels of emotionality expressed while learning about whiteness. In doing so, educators can find more effective routes in antiracist teaching, pedagogies, and curricula.

Second, with respect to promoting socially just projects, education can become a more formidable front runner when engaging antiracism. Beyond transdisciplinary studies of race, we hope that by positing the interdynamics of the emotionalities of learning and teaching about whiteness will bring the field of education into a new light, especially with regard to its role in transforming society. Hopefully, the field of education, rooted in the hopes of social justice (Freire, 1993), will be seen as a larger contributor for political, social, and philosophical theorizations and action of race.

Finally, imagine the possibilities of racial healing when we actually engage instead of suppress our emotions. We hope that upon addressing our racialized emotions, we open the door to a more humanizing love (Matias & Allen, 2013). The realities of resistance, denial, anger, and guilt are embedded in the curricula and pedagogies of race. Disregarding these emotions is dangerous because it can produce disingenuous antiracist educators who are unwilling to emotionally invest in racially-just projects but feign commitment. Engaging emotions, can produce antiracist educators who do have the emotional fortitude to remain committed to racially-just education.

Therefore, in order to push forward into realms of antiracist education—one that acknowledges whiteness as the precursor to race issues—we recommend that education must consider the ways in which classrooms are also therapeutic sessions. In this course, the professor included an explicit statement that students must demonstrate a deep emotional investment in their learning. Perhaps this should

be a requirement when one is preparing to be racially just advocates. However, in order to engage in such therapeutic work the professors themselves need to have experience in investigating their own whiteness through critical self-reflection. Essentially, they must see themselves as racialized bodies whose experiences, credentials, ideologies, and even emotions are structured within the hegemony of whiteness based upon their racial positionality. As Freire (1993) suggests those in oppressed positionalities see the system of oppression more clearly than those in the oppressor position. hooks (1993) and Hill-Collins (1989) both corroborate this with respects to the intersectionality of race and gender when they claim that Black women are more sensitive to the dynamics of race and gender because of their racial and gender identities. As such, delving deep into one's emotionality and requiring it in class is yet but one way to include emotions as a viable unit of analysis in the maintenance and deconstruction of whiteness. In this particular class, the professor uses the final project for the course for the benefit of the public good by having the students do a poster presentation in a local organization, business, school, etc. Students are evaluated based upon their involvement to organize the event, contribute to ongoing online discussions, participate or encourage others to participate in local or national events that corresponds to the course. In fact, during the semester in question, the students organized an extracurricular field trip to the community dialogue after the viewing of the documentary "I'm Not Racist... Am I?" at the local museum. Needless to say, if one truly emotionally invests then it will show. The determination of that investment should always be determined between the relationship established between professor and students.

Additionally, the process of critical self-reflection should not look the same between students of color and white students because they occupy different racial locations and positionalities. Hence, as professors, we cannot expect standardization in our curricula and pedagogies because, as we decolonize both minds with regards to race and whiteness, we do so.

Another recommendation is individual assessment. The professor provided copious amounts of individual feedback as a pedagogical tool to engage students individually. If white racial identity, as Helms (1990) suggests, is a progression of stages, then it would be erroneous to assume that white students are on the same progression trajectory.

Conclusion

This article illustrated the emotional interplay between a female Professor of Color and white students when teaching and learning about whiteness in a graduate course that make up the twin tales of whiteness. Although our self-reflective narratives are in no way the complete answer in the process of finding the most effective pedagogies or curricula to address racism, it is a starting point in the much-needed excavations of suppressed racial emotionalities that play out in our teaching and

learning processes. For educators, the emotional bound felt in the daily interactions with her/his students are, at times, unquantifiable. Yet despite this, it is nonetheless, felt, understood, and impactful in the ways we teach. Therefore, feelings are natural beats that occur when the heart of the class is felt and are rich with context, instructional possibilities, and excavation.

Intimidation, fetishism, defensiveness, anger, trust, vulnerability, and reluctance were just some of the emotional aspects felt in response to the curriculum and pedagogy of whiteness. They were also felt in response to the professor who delivered the curriculum and pedagogy. Though replication of such a dynamic may not be the same because of the variant factors that inhabit a classroom, it is noteworthy to recognize because if the majority of U.S. teachers are still overwhelmingly white and so are professors, then similar situations as ours will become more prevalent. Just as we cannot ignore or silence the issues of race in classrooms, we cannot ignore or silence the presence of racialized emotions brought about when learning about whiteness. These feelings, in essence, are instructive in how we, as educators, continue to implement racially just curriculum and pedagogy. In fact, racially just teaching is more than mastering learning objectives listed on the syllabus. Rather, it is about therapeutically understanding our racialized emotions for the hope of racial harmony. Thus, when we ignore what we truly feel, we ultimately risk our chance to racially heal together. And that...is a risk not worth taking.

Special Note

To students (like Allison and Craig) and professors (like Cheryl) who forever commit to learning and teaching even when the content is difficult.

Notes

¹ Although we are sensitive to the fact that there exists a wide array of racially microaggressive experiences among people of various racial categories, this article acknowledges that regardless to the experience one thing remains constant: that they are all structured in response to a white supremacist and racist structure. Meaning, they are only felt in the racially microaggressive way because of the fact that racism and white supremacy exist. As such, in order to interpret how whiteness is felt and expressed, writ large, this article takes on general experiences to understand how our personal (micro-leveled) feelings in this course can play a role in the larger system of race (macro-leveled).

² Deliberately one word similar to Leonardo's (year) postulation of raceclass as one word. Meaning, one does not exist without the other.

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