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Tell the Devil I'm Back: A Self-Reflection on the Radical Possibilities for Racial Justice

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A Self-Reflection on the Radical Possibilities for Racial Justice

Cheryl E. Matias

I'm tired.

*Of bullshit, runaround, avoidance, fake support, passive aggressiveness, CCing,
long response emails, backstabbing, and
Routinely performed white emotionalities,
-Guilt, defensiveness, fear, anger, sadness, etc. etc. etc.,-
Perching themselves above the fatigue and trauma of female faculty of Color.*

*I'm tired of yessums,
House slaves who, upon the favors of white masters and gatekeepers,
Begin to believe they too are better than field slaves,
Tirelessly working to prove I ain't like them, massa.*

*I'm tired of rhetoric that minimizes the reality of woke Folks of Color
Claiming everyone else experiences the same thing,
"You're not the only one"
"What about me",
Like a good old #alllivesmatter argument.
I'm tired of the refusal to radically listen
To those experiencing macro-aggressions, threats, and intimidations
For who we are, what and how we research, and how we teach,
Instead of validating,
Operating from a place of sisterhood, comadreship (kumare-ship), or community
Find themselves constantly justifying
Behaviors, actions, speech, and decisions.*

Tired. I'm tired

Of those who hope that my soul, spirit, heart, and mind will wither away

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*Like a faint hopeful balloon rising to oblivion
 Just so the words of whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege
 Are never uttered
 Swept under the rug like the history of white terrorism.
 Although I'm tired, I am not beat.
 For my hope for a true loving humanity
 One not defined by hellish racial standards
 Or a purgatory of racial sins
 Rises Above
 So
 Tell the Devil I'm back*

Three Considerations for Radical Possibilities

When asked to reflect on radical possibilities of my work in racial justice I momentarily held my breath. I had many reservations. First, I labored over whether or not to write a strict academic article, only to later opt out of that possibility because my reflection should be accessible to more than academics, precisely because if anyone wants to engage in racial justice—one that actively seeks to dismantle hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy—then they must know what they are in for. *I would be dishonest if I didn't tell what life is truly like as a racial justice worker, specifically for a young-looking Filipina who is constantly racially stereotyped as docile, compliant, and, based upon those stereotypes, is expected to nurse¹ the needs of others.* As such, my reflection will be just that: a honest reflection of the radical possibilities for racial justice that did and did not happen in my career, to caution others who may also envision such possibilities. Unlike most articles, I will not cite in-text so the flow of this reflection remains consistent. I will, however, pay homage to the many scholars who aided in my intellectual journey at the end.

Secondly, I questioned whether or not I should draw from my life experiences, despite one of my in-house tenure reviews minimizing my research to mere autobiography. Regardless to that critique, I knew all too well that this particular reflection is not about adding one more to my publication record—which, by the way, the larger academic field supports—nor is it about stroking the insecurities or egos of those who provided such critique. Instead, I write this reflection as my honest commentary to humanity and, if my “autobiographic” stories shed light to how whiteness operates in dehumanizing ways, then so be it. I will share my stories because the reason as to why I entered the academy was—and will always be—to teach about the dehumanizing effects of race, even if it means engaging myself.

Finally, I also thought about whether or not I should be brutally honest in my reflection or should I, as I often had to do in the past, sugar coat what I have to say in order to make it more palatable for those who are too emotionally instable to handle words like whiteness, emotionalities, and white supremacy? Here, I opt

for the former with all its brutal realness. *Sometimes one just needs to rip off that Band-Aid already.*

Before Radical Possibilities for Racial Justice, Why Emotionalities of Whiteness?

Before I get into whiteness and white supremacy I must reflect on what is most distracting in the radical possibilities of racial justice: white emotionalities characterized by guilt, defensiveness, anger, guilt, sadness, shame, and/or anxiety. Those folks who engage in them are emotionally instable because merely mentioning such terms freaks out most white folks (and folks of Color who subscribe to whiteness ideology) such that they start a routine performance of whiteness: pontificating that they have Black best friends, aggrandizing their support in the 1960 Civil Rights marches, or—specific to People of Color who aren't *woke*—will weave in and out of whiteness ideology by saying stuff like “We need to be colorblind...but as a Latina.” *Wait, I thought you were colorblind so then why are you seeing your Latina-ness now, especially when you're using it as a racial marker to justify whiteness rhetoric?* Opting in and out of whiteness is a privilege yet sadly, those un-woke folks, whether they want to admit it or not, are just pawns to a master game, again benefitting off the ostracism of those Othered further away—a strategy commonly referred to as divide and conquer.

While this happens, some even display neurotic behaviors when hearing the word whiteness. They begin an elaborate performance of defending adamantly that they are not racist, which is interesting especially since work on whiteness rarely identifies racists. Instead, research on whiteness typically focuses on mechanisms of whiteness which, when expressed, impacts folks of Color. *Perhaps, it is a surfacing of inner guilt? And why is it that folks are more afraid to be called a racist than understand how they might be participating in racist behaviors?* So instead of placating the tender fragilities (and I say that sarcastically) of folks who think their discomfort with a word equivocates to the hurt and pain that stem from racism like the systemic murders of Black and indigenous folk, the alienation, denigration, and language-cide of Latinos and Asian Americans, or the terror of being Muslim or gay in a Christian-centric and hetero-aggressively homophobic society, I cannot help but #smh. *What are you so afraid of? History, laws, and government have always protected straight Whites males.*

So, when people ask me why I study the emotionality of whiteness as a way towards enacting racial justice I can't help but say, “Are you fucking kidding me?” These hyper emotionalities of whiteness that seeks to silence my work (e.g., “Just stop talking about it”), intimidate me to submission (e.g., “If you continue this path you may not get tenure”), and threaten my existence (e.g., “You're the racist for bringing up racism! You should kill yourself!”) are what make my work in racial justice so damn difficult. And, it is not only me. I recognize that others, too, are

also inundated with such overwhelming white emotionalities that they end up getting their home address posted on white nationalist pages, swastikas on their front lawn, and/or flyers passed around near their home by neo-Nazis.² It is as if people still believe the world is flat and since they wrongly bounded their identity to that belief, they hysterical react to teachings that prove the world is indeed round. *How do I even begin to teach the manifestations of race, racism, and white supremacy, if these emotionalities of whiteness cannot be checked?* Therefore, in order to begin racially just education that focuses on how white supremacy and hegemonic whiteness influence the educational landscape—expressed by culturally biased testing, racial achievement gap, or Eurocentric curricula—then I must first break down the guilt, defensiveness, shame, anger, sadness, and emotionally frozen feelings of folks who, despite denying race, truly know whiteness is operating. However, are too ashamed to admit that they benefitted from the operations of whiteness at the expense of those Othered. *Hence, the often spoken “I need to give back to urban schools” speech from white teacher candidates who grew up in middle class, white U.S. America. Essentially, what is it that they have taken from urban students of color such that they feel so compelled to give back? Equity, perhaps?*

Some of my critics suggest that I simply need to replace words like whiteness and white supremacy with neoliberal, multicultural kumbaya-esque vocabulary like diversity, culture, and inclusion. In fact, I even had a senior scholar in my own department tell me I just needed to stop saying and making up—*yes he believed I made it up*—words like whiteness! Is the mere word, “whiteness” too scary for them? Instead of silencing me in saying and researching about whiteness perhaps they should consider why such a simple word freaks them out. If, for example, I said the word “australopithecine” would that make one feel nervous, threatened, and/or guilty? Obviously not. The reason the word whiteness freaks out people, particularly white folks, is because such a word is value-laden with privilege, hypocrisy, and historical pillage—a historical fact that folks try to suppress and act as if weren't true. And, in suppressing and denying what they know is true these folks end up feeling guilty or defensive and find themselves oddly compelled to justify their dignity and humanity by propaganda-izing their friendships with Black folks. *If those Black folk happens to be in the likes of Andre Lorde, Angela Davis, or James Baldwin then I digress but true to whiteness, whites self-segregated themselves away from woke Folks of Color.*

Look, we know that Native American genocide was justified under whiteness rhetoric. *Manifest Destiny for us—meant, for white folk—to rule from sea to shining sea—despite who was there in the first place.* We know that African American slavery and discrimination was justified under whiteness rhetoric. *Jim Crow laws, eugenics, racially biased intelligence testing like the Bell Curve, are some examples of how whiteness rhetoric influences policies, laws, and education.* We know the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII and the proliferation of state adopted anti-miscegenation laws were justified under whiteness rhetoric. *Whites are pure and*

thus should not intermix with folks of Color; however white men have always had access to the bodies of women of Color. Asian Americans are to be under suspicion forever because of Orientalism and exoticism. Yet, despite all of these historical facts, white supremacy creates institutions that force historical amnesia, especially in the predominantly white communities, simply to relinquish any culpability of wrongdoings. This in and of itself is what makes folks feel so guilty. They know it's true yet they are taught to act as if it never happened. And, yet, if anyone proves the reality of these truths then they get defensive and ashamed for their complicity. Worse yet, most times the people who get ashamed hold a power position over the person who is bringing it up and instead of working out their shame misuses their power to once again suppress the shame. It's a twisted game of the Emperor and his new clothes because as everyone clearly sees his nakedness to whiteness, the emperor uses his power in whiteness to force others to act as if they didn't see it. It's called "Let's just be colorblind" rhetoric. And since we have been playing this twisted game for so long, we don't even know how to say, "Your whiteness is showing" anymore.

Why Not Diversity in Radical Possibilities for Racial Justice?

In reflecting on my work to identify the emotionalities of whiteness that stifle whites'—and folks who subscribe to whiteness ideology—progression towards a more humane society, I am often met with resistance not only from neo-Nazis, alt-right, or white nationalists. Alas, some so called progressives or liberals also want the candy-coated version of white supremacy that never mentions those two words. Or, the version that solely focuses on institutionalism and grandiose systems without ever looking at how individual behaviors, emotions, speech, and power can also contribute to systemic white supremacy. Instead of the words white supremacy, they favor words that focus on the symptoms of white supremacy like discrimination, prejudice, and racial or cultural bias—all of which would cease to exist if white supremacy was not a reality. *Do we want to address the symptom or do we want to get rid of the disease?* Metaphorically speaking, one can't just put a Band-Aid on a skin boil hoping that the Band Aid will cure the cancer that led to the skin boil. Furthermore, what people forget or, more precisely, refuse to acknowledge, is that in their quest for the elusive cultural diversity, diversity and inclusion, and multicultural celebrations that hopes to combat discrimination, prejudice, and cultural bias is what was the preexisting condition for us to now be demanding for inclusion? Despite the difficulty one may have in digesting the following fact, it must be said. U.S. society, with its educational, political, legal, and social institutions, was historically EXCLUSIVE to whites. And that fact alone is why we now are fighting for inclusion and diversity. *Perhaps, figuring out how it was exclusive first may give us a deeper understanding of why others were not included.*

What Radical Possibilities Are Possible and at What Cost?

Although radical possibilities within a white supremacist society imbued with hegemonic whiteness in all institutions are limited, there were a few possible avenues that led me towards the hope for racial justice. However, in reflecting on my experiences in that hopeful endeavor, I must first admit that those possibilities were exacted at the cost of my health, so much so that I caution incoming scholars to seriously consider negotiating into their tenure-lined contracts the following:

- paid multicultural counseling services,
- additional health care benefits (like a pre-tax flexible account),
- annual funding support to attend faculty of color conferences or quarterly meetings with other race scholars for mentorship,
- security services for office hours and escort services to and from classes
- funds to secure legal services in the face of white supremacist smear campaigns
- a written contract supporting new race based core courses, and/or
- a line item budget specifically dedicated to facilitating an organization dedicated to racial justice.

The argument here is if an institution claims to be serious about retaining faculty of color or faculty members whose research directly relates to issues of diversity then make them back their mouth with their pocketbook. And, I cannot stress enough the importance of this negotiation tactic for scholars, who are female, faculty of color entering a field, discipline, or institution that is predominantly white.

My waiting to exhale moment was finally teaching what I research: whiteness. The course was entitled *Problematizing Whiteness: Education for Racial Justice* and was first offered in spring 2016 with an initial enrollment of close to 50 undergraduate and graduate students. Although it took me almost 6 years, having previously offered the course as an independent studies course that did not count towards my faculty load, it finally saw the light of day. Having the ability to teach a course that directly relates to your research is paramount to your sanity and career. However, beware. Too often institutions hire a race scholar only to have them teach that pesky mandatory diversity course while never offering specific courses on race. The student resistance in these mandatory diversity courses is mind-blowing (and not in a good way) and such mind-blowing behavior will show up in your evaluations, which in turn, will bite you in the rear when tenure comes up. Therefore, support in developing your own courses and eventually programs that acknowledge racial justice as a viable possibility for education must be considered. That is, make sure racial justice is a written aspect in the program's philosophy.

However, in developing such courses one must be prepared for the whitelash (backlash from whites who resist learning or acknowledging racism) that stems from white emotionalities—especially during a time of emboldened misinformed bigots who re-fashion Civil Rights terminologies originally conceptualized to liberate People of Color, to their twisted white nationalist agenda. *No, it is not freedom*

of speech to call people racial epithets when history proves that using such dehumanizing language has led to white terrorism. And no, using the words whiteness and Whites does NOT equate to calling someone an N word simply because there is no historical proof of People of Color interning Whites in camps, forcing Whites into slave labor, mass lynching Whites, or mass deportations of Whites. Therefore, understand that there may be harassments, intimidation, and threats made to you, your career, and your family simply because your class will finally point out the elephant in the living room: whiteness.

Another breath of fresh air is recognizing that there are some woke students and colleagues who have not found a place, moreover a sanctuary, to deepen their understanding of race. Observing this I cofounded with my doctoral students a collaborative think tank that was not strictly a student organization nor did it confine its membership to one university. Instead, in the spirit of community and collaboration, we opened the Research Advocacy in Critical Education, a collaborative think tank of scholars, activists, faculty, staff, students, and community members seeking sanctuary where discussions of and lessons on race can actualize without institutional and individual repercussion, ostracism, and scrutiny. In fact, the acronym (R.A.C.E.) itself was purposefully created to force university stakeholders to simply say the word race and not the semantic discursive synonyms like diversity, urban, low SES, or free reduced lunch that are so commonly used as aversion tactics. In this space we were able to push each other's ideas on race, learn how to engage in race talks, heal each other when news broke of another unarmed murder of Black peoples occurred, share ideas on racially just projects, support each other on projects of race, invite national speakers who conduct racially just research to Denver, involve community members to the "academic" learning of race, and, most importantly, provide a space for a community of people who all invest in humanity by dismantling white supremacy in all its forms. Although this is a radical possibility for racial justice I prefer to refer to R.A.C.E. as my saving grace. I say this because when the devil of whiteness rears its ugly head, threatening with the same white terrorism that has historically intimidated people of color before, we cannot help but want to retreat.

In speaking of retreating, I even had one of my mentor professors in whiteness (who is white) advise me to focus on methods instead of whiteness, knowing that my experiences as a woman of color, particularly a Filipina, would be drastically different from hers. She knew all too well how I would be received in a predominantly white field. Oddly enough, she proved her point. Although my research on whiteness was shunned by senior instructors or clinical professors who ran the teacher education program I was initially hired into, they started posting quotes about white privilege during one of their meetings. And, those quotes were taken from research on whiteness made by my mentor and another white, female race scholar who I even published with! Clearly, the color of the messenger matters to them. Therefore, in the radical possibilities for racial justice the messenger must

consider how possible their work will be within a space that cannot fully accept the expertise, let alone the humanity, of scholars of Color.

In this endeavor to provide a sanctuary for racially just workers, understand that the emotionalities of whiteness will once again surface and be emotionally projected onto you. Because the aim—that of dismantling white supremacy and hegemonic whiteness—of R.A.C.E. threatens whiteness within the ivory tower, the organization may never be formally recognized by an administration, school, or university. In fact, some colleagues who are enmeshed in whiteness ideology will dumbly ask if white people can attend or wrongly assume that the group is against white people. *How many times do I have to say this? Whiteness does not mean only white people; for it can inhabit the mindsets of People of Color, albeit through a distorted sense of survival. With that said, whiteness is typically found in white people because adhering to it provides them racial benefits in a white supremacist society. Meaning, it is in the best interests of Whites to claim to not see race so that they never atone for their amassed accumulation of wealth off the backs of those who were deemed not white.*

Finally, in reflecting on my experiences in the academy, the most effective aspect of racial justice was in my writing. Often times, junior faculty is advised to “tone it down until tenure.” Yet, in toning it down for so long, one can easily forget why they obtained a doctorate degree in the first place. Since my entire rationale behind obtaining a doctorate specific in race and ethnic studies in education was to teach about racial justice I knew the only radically possible avenue for my work to remain true to my purpose was to continue writing with fierceness. And this required a lot of finesse since many people may recognize historical racism but never acknowledge how their behaviors, ideology, and emotions of today may continue to contribute to it. Therefore, I needed to draw from common parlance, popular behaviors, rhetoric, or modern events to highlight the connection between past racist behaviors to modern day ones. Such a strategy is used in teaching history to K-12 students. Meaning, as teachers we often find pedagogical ways for our students to learn past concepts, events, and personas by relating to it today’s speech, events, and rhetoric. Doing so allows students to understand the connection between past to present. Therefore, in my work in writing and teaching about racial justice I often draw from modern day parlance, behaviors, and rhetoric so my readers and students can relate and make past and present connections. Although some critics may erroneously label my deliberate design to relate historical racism to modern day parlance, to simple neologism, I find that as true scholars the message and content that undergirds popular phraseologies is more important. Therefore, in reflecting on the radical possibilities of racial justice one of the most important pieces of advice I was ever given was to “be the scholar I want to be.” After a mere 7 years in the academy, I can say if some folks cannot accept the scholar you have become then re-center your initial purpose for earning the degrees, researching what you study, and why people must learn about what you study. *Why are you here in the academy? Who are you really here for?*

What Say You About the Futurity of Radical Possibilities?

The most dismissive maneuver of whiteness rhetoric is also one that simultaneously displays defensiveness. “But I’ve never owned slaves.” It is as if simply declaring this statement absolves one (particularly a white person) from any historical racism. The statement would not hold its power if it were reframed. Instead of declaring having never owned slaves, how about informing those who say it, that their ancestral family will be researched to see whether or not their family ever either directly or indirectly benefited from an ancestor who partook in the slave trade. Or, suggest those who say it take a DNA test to see whether or not they really did own slaves? Plainly put, if there were any accountability for such a statement that statement would not be so flippantly used as a way to assuage their racist guilt. That is the thing about race. Folks entrenched in whiteness ideology want to say they do not see it, yet use every operating mechanism in the book to deflect their guilt of actually seeing it. However, upon writing this I too understand the permanence of race and how the futurity of race will ever evolve to meet the needs of modernizing societies.

At this historical juncture, we are witnessing an emboldening of racist ideologies repositioning itself as patriotic, moreover, American. Indeed, a part of the American ideal is the devilish hypocrisy of race. Land of free (but not for some). Life, liberty and property (but not for some). Welcomes the sick, poor, and hungry (but not for some). So the honest truth is that (U.S.) America was birthed out of historical racism. A fact many refuse to acknowledge. However, there are two choices. One can take a Faustian deal pretending that America is great again with all its racial hypocrisies. In this deal with the devil the person will lose their humanity because they are expected to bear false witness to the reality of race and, in doing so, will forever be shamed. Or, one can be a true patriot who defends American ideals of freedom, liberty, and multiculturalism. This person stops pretending they have historical amnesia to the atrocities done to People of Color and instead of feigning racial ignorance will bear witness to it. In doing so, they earn their humanity because they refused to sit idly by witnessing the destruction of other human beings. In that heavenly return to humanity—one that thinks of another’s wellbeing instead of selfishly fixating on the self—one faces this father of lies—come hell or high water—with a celestial “I’m back.”

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Notes

¹ In reference to the many Filipina nurses who, upon U.S. occupation of the Philippines, were granted Visitor Exchanges passes to become nurses in the U.S. after the post 1965- immigration law called for highly skilled professionals.

² All these intimidations happened to real tenure-lined faculty members who teach critiques of whiteness, racism, and/or white supremacy and various institutions of higher education.