



## **When Whiteness Attacks: How This Pinay Defends Racially Just Teacher Education**

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### **Abstract:**

When it comes to engaging in racial justice amidst the overwhelming presence of whiteness (Sleeter, 2001), it is important to recognize that life inside teacher education, or in the field of racial justice itself, is either living a hopeless hope or hoping for audacious hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Yet within these dimensions of hope are a range of emotionalities like pain, endurance, sacrifice, isolation, fortitude, ostracism, and callousness. This paper paints a verbal picture; so to speak, of how one critical race motherscholar of color navigates the intoxication of whiteness inside *and* outside the academy. Despite the deleterious impacts such intoxication has on her soul she continues to remain steadfast in the pursuit of racial justice. Written in story form and interspersed with actual hate mail received to illustrate the vitriol racial justice educators endure, this chapter identifies the emotionalities of whiteness. Suffice it to say that, although white emotionalities such as guilt, defensiveness, anger and sadness are often described as hysterical (Gonsalves, 2008), resistant (Rodriguez, 2008), resolute (Picower, 2009) and/or instructive (Matias, 2013a), they are ones that berate the heart of those trying to enact projects of racial justice. And thus, should be identified and made known.

**Keywords:** Whiteness, racism, teaching, whitelash

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“you must be a jew. your White parents wasted their money sending you to school.”

“Latinos are dumber than a sack of hammers. They have two thing on their tiny little brains - food & sex. Your culture is carnival-like..I've seen your pop culture.. It's a HUGE joke..There has NEVER been a successful "Latino" nation.. EVER...!!!!”

“STFU [shut the fuck up], \You LIBERAL racist scum. Signed; Real Americans.”

**Introducing the Vitriol of Whiteness:**

**Investigating the Emotionalities of Whiteness**

Whiteness ideology *is* a disease that infects many, from the most ignorant of souls to the most well-intentioned folks. The quotes above – and throughout this article – are just a few verbatim examples of the vitriolic hate mail I receive as a female Professor of Color, teaching and researching about the *emotionality of Whiteness* in teacher education—defined as those racialized feelings that surface when teaching and learning about race that can either hinder (e.g., guilt, denial, resistance, anger, silence, etc.) or better support (e.g., empowerment, acceptance, determine, love, etc.) the fruition of racially just education. Though daunting, I remain steadfast because *understanding Whiteness is necessary in developing the emotional fortitude needed for prolonged racially just projects*. Therefore, I openly engage emotions, just as Fanon (1976) and hooks (1994) demand because, while my “day job” is to deconstruct them, I live a very real sadness and fear at the hands of its expression, constantly summoning the emotional fortitude to bear such vitriol, to understand how it might make sense, and then, ultimately to teach about it. This is my prolonged project of racial justice and, thus, it *is* the work of teacher educators. I share this hate mail because other teacher educators who fight against racial injustice and whiteness will likely face the same aggressions. In fact, a good number of

teacher educators already have. Cross (2003) describes how difficult teacher education has been in having “a meaningful dialogue at a national level about the role race has on teacher quality” (p. 203). Similarly, Nieto (2000) argues “despite recent attempts in teacher education programs across the country to include multicultural issues, many programs have been steeped in negative assumptions about diverse populations based on deficit theories” (P. 181). Although, Nieto does not say the word “racism,” she does suggest that unlearning racism is a key factor in bringing multicultural education into teacher education.

In light of such ongoing concerns, this article explores what happens when Whiteness attacks. Though humiliating to some degree, *I share these hateful emails so that other racially just teacher educators can better navigate Whiteness and continue the work of racially just education.* More specifically, these particular examples of hate mail arrived in response to an article I had recently published (Matias, 2016), “Why Do You Make Me Hate Myself?: Re-Teaching Whiteness, Abuse, and Love in Urban Teacher Education.” This article focused on how racism, white supremacy, and the emotionalities of whiteness in teacher education produces teachers who maintain their whiteness ideology at the expense of their students of color; a process that makes students of color eventually learn to hate themselves. From this foundation, the article argues that we as educators cannot get to symptoms like the achievement gap until we address an underlying disease of Whiteness.

Without actually reading the article, these *haters* misquoted my work, claiming that I said, “Whites are a disease” and in doing so was “racist against Whites,” a claim that went viral on hate groups’ radars across medias. This led to ceaseless racist and sexist attacks through my university email, voicemail, and personal social media accounts, intimidating my family and me. Hence, my scholarship in racial justice in teacher education soon became a fight for my life and the lives of my family.

Beyond the maliciousness of their words and numerous threats, I occasionally had to pause to note the authors' improper grammar usage, misspelling, excessive use of CAPITAL LETTERS, and illogical arguments—errors and uses that were all the more noticeable in their claims of intellectual superiority that they tied to notions of racial and gender superiorities. Amidst their protests claiming that I am the “true” racist, they called me a “spic,” “Jew” and, once, a biracial (Black and White) “dirty mix.” Their hypocrisy was almost laughable because in the article in question I clearly self-defined as a “brown-skinned Pinay” (Filipina American); an identity that acknowledges 1) my racialized experiences from being mistaken as a Latina and 2) the historical overlooking of the U.S. colonial and military context of the Philippines for which my ancestors served in the U.S. military despite never setting foot on mainland U.S. But because my racial phenotypes are a bit ambiguous, these racists did not know how to label me, and, as a result, I got them all. In their hypocrisy, the ranters' hate mail clearly demonstrates that: 1) an overly-simplistic understanding of race begets the need to truly define and understand it, 2) the emotionality of Whiteness serves as a way to enforce White supremacist ideology, and 3) the hopes for racially just teacher education are stifled when Whiteness is maintained as a central aspect of educational policies and practices. In sum, *these emails are the very emotional responses I argue Whiteness is all about, and these emotions serve to uphold Whiteness yet again*—and, in so doing, uphold the validity of both the claims and body of my work.

Before I delve deeper into how Whiteness attacks me in the racially just work I do for teacher education, it is important to realize that Whiteness is so resolute that, when attempting to debunk it, Whiteness can appear resistant (Rodriguez, 2008), hysterical (Gonsalves, 2008), and full of denial (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, Campbell, 2005). This is gravely important because, as Sleeter (2001) argues, there is an overwhelming presence of Whiteness in teacher

education. How then are racially just teacher educators to address Whiteness in teacher education when the field is intoxicated with it?

One avenue, and that which I often utilize, is to understand the emotionalities and languages used to uphold Whiteness. For example, to more deeply understand how emotions and language can manipulate understandings, I explicate the current U.S. racial state that precipitates the mentalities of modern day racists—individuals who often incorrectly label themselves as “patriots,” “freedom fighters,” “constitutional militia,” or, as suggested in the above emails, “real Americans.” My use of the phrase “incorrectly label themselves” is because these terms are strategic maneuvers used to mask White supremacist ideologues who have co-opted Civil Rights vocabulary or American freedom terminologies for the purpose of masking their bigotry as *the* moral, patriotic way. As a result, racists of today are often even more emboldened to parade their racism in some perverted and twisted application of 1960s civil rights vocabulary or American freedom fighter rhetoric.

Take Kim Davis for example, the county clerk in Kentucky who refused to issue a marriage license to a gay couple, claiming doing so went against her (individual) civil rights and freedom of religion. Not only was her refusal a violation of the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling that gay marriage was federally legal (c.f., *Obergefell, et al. v. Hodges*, June 26, 2015), it also was a blatant display of discrimination. However, what I found the most fascinating was how Davis compared herself to Martin Luther King, Jr., claiming she too was a civil rights leader because forcing her to comply with the law was against her civil rights. This is the same warped application of civil rights language used in my hate mail. By re-appropriating language and civil disobedience of Black civil rights leaders for use by Whites in (usual) positions of power, Davis not only presents dominant positionalities as oppressed but also simultaneously erodes the parameters of what *freedom*, *equity*, and *rights* truly

mean to those who historically never held them<sup>1</sup>. This is important to note because when doing racial justice work in teacher education people will erroneously claim you are the bigot for studying race. They, like Davis, do this by manipulating language and concepts like diversity, low income, urban, or at-risk which initially sound socially just but, when applied with whiteness or deficit rhetoric, again usually obscures racial justice (see, for example, Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, and Galindo, 2014). In fact, I recently attended a teacher education faculty meeting where a white teacher educator claimed we needed to be culturally responsive to our white teacher candidates (by lowering the amount of work) in the same manner as white teachers are expected to be with their students of color. NO! This is a gross manipulation of the concept and reasoning behind why culturally responsive teaching was initially conceptualized and an insult to the experiences and academic potential of and for students of color.

This same situation exists within the examples of my hate mail authors: based on the uneducated and generally low quality of their responses, it would appear as though the authors haven't had formal preparation in scholarly argumentation (let alone a course on race)—not that one need to be formally educated in order to make a strong argument; however, these were not arguments at all. Instead they reacted to my article emotionally, specifically with emotionalities of Whiteness. Authors asserted their power and privilege in Whiteness by not bothering to know the subject matter at hand, but instead by attempting to threaten, silence, and denigrate me because of my direct challenge to Whiteness. They do this through their perverse lens of emotional Whiteness that affords them the luxury of arguing that I am the racist for studying about racial justice, an understanding that allows them to avoid a realization of how racist their actions truly are in practice. Threatening a

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<sup>1</sup> see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/kim-davis-is-not-martin-luther-king-jr\\_b\\_8084636.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/kim-davis-is-not-martin-luther-king-jr_b_8084636.html)

woman of color on the basis of her race and gender is a central definition of racist, mysoginoir and the potency of this venom is particularly heightened because I am a scholar of Color and female.

This racism married to sexism produced even more hateful messages:

- “What a pathetic little racist little girl you are. You realize you only have the job you do because of the color of your skin and that thing in your pants right?”
- “YOU'RE A DUMB SPIC WHO DOESN'T [KNOW] HER ASS FROM HER ELBOW”
- “You BITCH can go fuck yourself! Low life left wing liberal CUNT!”

It is comments like these, reproduced exactly as they arrived, that document what I mean when I speak of an intensity of the emotionality of Whiteness and the practical impact and expression of White supremacist ideology. In fact, it is often the case that racists of today are emboldened to use their misguided sense of “moral” emotions to justify their immoral emotions (e.g., rancor, hate) all while presenting themselves as loving and “moral.” For example, one person stalked my Facebook page and claimed that I post a lot about Latinos. He argued that I am not a “real” Latin because “real” Latin people know the romance language of love:

...I see you have a lot of 'latino bullshit' on your pages. There's a problem with this 1) the only thing latin about latin america is the 2 languages they speak 2) I'M LATIN ..... I'M ROMAN.....YOU'RE NOT!! ..... 3) THE ISSUE OF ROMANCE LANGUAGES LANGUAGES OF LOVE AND BEAUTY ..... AND YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO A PROFESSOR, YET YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT A ROMANCE LANGUAGE IS ..... I WILL EXPLAIN. HOW IS IT THE JAPANESE AND GERMANS EVEN WITH BUDGET\$\$\$\$ .....10X TO 100X ..... THE \$IZE OF FERRARI OR LAMBORGHINI OR MASERATI ..... CAN'T BUILD "" A MORE

BEAUTIFUL AND BETTER PERFORMING" SUPERCAR THEN THE REAL LATINS ..... THE ITALIANS??? .....BECAUSE WITH LOVE AND BEAUTY COMES WHAT??? ..... "DEVOTION" .....YOUR NOT LATIN ..... YOU'RE A DUMB SPIC WHO DOESN'T HER ASS FROM HER ELBOW (verbatim).

Throughout his comments perhaps best described as a tirade, he presents himself as a “real” Latin because he claims to know the “language of love” and the culture of “devotion”, all while insinuating that Japanese and German cultures lack love, beauty, and devotion while calling me a “spic.” This particular application of love, devotion, and beauty, similar to Davis’s self-comparison to King, allows the author to consider himself perched atop a “moral” hierarchy without truly understanding how these immoral applications of emotions are a hegemonic tool to denigrate people of Color and racially just humanists. It is the metaphorical equivalent of professing his love for his abused, while he continues to beat her: a process that in many ways eerily mirrors well-intentioned teachers who proclaim to be antiracist and care about students of color yet do nothing to deconstruct their own whiteness which, in the end, nonetheless abuses students of color.

Such distinctions between metaphorical and the literal are significant as there are important material differences between actual physical violence and verbal violence, differences that make verbal violence no less hurtful or oppressive for their voicing. What is less obvious and therefore more subtle are how both blatant verbal acts of hate and violence and well-intentioned acts can have similar outcomes when their underlying biases and assumptions remain unchecked.

### **The Blatant v. the Well-Intentioned: Teacher Education and Whiteness**

The above examples are blatantly racist and sexist, and, despite how well-intentioned it proclaims to be, teacher education often follows suit.

Whether through *dysconscious racism* of not truly understanding the context of

racism (King, 1991) or *colorblind racism* of claiming one does not see color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006)—or perhaps an amalgamation of both and beyond—the racist mechanisms that insidiously weave into the daily practices and philosophies of teacher education often go unnoticed.

For example, the *teacher-savior mentality*, wherein a White female saves urban students of Color as exemplified in so many Hollywood movies (see Matias, 2013b; Emdin, 2016), is so ubiquitous that merely positing its contrary—that they are not saving; they are hurting—is too much for some White teachers to emotionally bear. To debunk this missionary mentality, I showed one of my first teacher education courses a clip of Mad TV’s “Nice White Lady”<sup>2</sup>, a spoof of how a white female teacher believes she can save students of Color simply because she is a “nice white lady.” The teacher candidates in my class, many of whom were White females, responded as emotionally as my hate mail writers, though without the same vitriolic expressions. Some claimed the spoof was “racist to Whites,” without acknowledging the systematic racism that continues to produce a predominately White teaching force in the U.S. after desegregation (see Tillman, 2004) or how racial biases lead to racist teaching practices (see Ladson-Billing, 2009). Others complained to the university’s White administrators in hopes that I would, as one email above so eloquently states, “STFU.” Still others cried in class, saying such things as “but *I* never owned slaves,” while many of the remaining were angry just hearing the word “Whiteness” and pounded their fists on tables as they voice their dissent. I even had a straight, White male student who failed the course a few semesters previously continue to contact me, claiming he needed to “straighten things out” with me, as if his prior decisions and framing could be retroactively redressed in ways that might save his grade (not to mention the depth of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVF-nirSq5s>

privilege in an assumption that his post-course realizations would amend both his grades and his behaviors). Regardless of these resistive behaviors, I stayed focus on the task of teaching racial justice even if my students emotionally projected their racial angst on me.

It was not only teacher candidates who emotionally reacted in such a fashion. Some faculty, staff, and cooperating classroom teachers and principals expressed similar emotional resistances. By this I mean that they too refused to hear about race as a key factor in educational practices and policies. For example, using their White privilege, these White educators silenced racially just professors of color by 1) blaming them for making them feel guilty, sometimes literally screaming to stop talking about race because they supported Civil Rights in the 1960s; 2) by simply cutting them out of any decision-making processes; 3) and, worst, some White faculty used their available agency and privilege to kick racially just professors out of the program, replacing them with professors who focused on questions of “culture” and/or “diversity” as a means *not* to consider race. Clearly, the emotionalities of Whiteness have a racially hegemonic disposition that insists on leaving White fragility—whites’ lowered ability to tolerate racial “stress”—intact (DiAngelo, 2011). As such, the emotionalities of Whiteness in teacher education become nothing more than Panopticon-like surveillance (Foucault, 1977), constantly using discipline and punishment to police and enforce the racial lay of the land to uphold Whiteness, ideas and ideals that comfort Whites as much as they reaffirm a social order with Whiteness at its apex.

Because of these and other such experiences navigating Whiteness in teacher education, I had what might have seemed like an unusual reaction and laughed aloud when a fellow teacher educator asked if I was appalled that I received hateful emails about my scholarship. I honestly did not mean to belittle the question or the person. In fact, I found it ironic that this particular person asked me such a question since she too displayed similar emotional

reactions to my scholarship—to a point where she cannot even say the word “Whiteness.”

Let me be clear: it is not appalling or shocking to know the emotionalities of Whiteness so well that they are as predictable as Bill Murray’s famous movie *Ground Hog Day*. Emotionalities of Whiteness are indeed quite like a recurring nightmare with predictable events refusing to ever be acknowledged or even spoken aloud. Because I study the emotionalities of whiteness, I know where these feelings stem from, why it manifests itself, and usually how it will be expressed. With men it is often vitriolic and domineering; for women it is often guilt and tears, depending on the level of hetero-normed genderization the individual has experienced. However, despite the manner in which it is expressed, the underlying and latent emotions that undergird the resistance to Whiteness are the same. One may call me a “cunt” as an emotional reaction to the work of racial justice, whereas another uses emotional avoidance, never giving credence to the work of racial justice. *Regardless of the path one’s expression may take, Whiteness is nevertheless about refusing to listen or learn, or giving credence to racial realism; by not doing so, the racially just hope in teacher education halts* (see chart below).

Therefore, my hate mail are not outliers of racism, they are an emotional expression magnifying the racism that exists in teacher education. Below is a chart that documents the two types of emotional expressions of Whiteness. Again, despite the varying pathways for its expression, they are nonetheless used to reinforce a hierarchy of Whiteness.

**Expressions of the Emotionalities of Whiteness**

<b>Examples of Hate Mail</b>	<b>Common Reactions from Teacher Candidates When Learning Whiteness</b>	<b>Emotionalities of Whiteness</b>
“Racist pos [piece of shit]!”	She always talks about race. She must be racist against Whites.	Emotionally resisting learning because it is too emotionally discomforting. Then deflecting racial culpability by emotionally projecting one’s insecurity for not knowing about race onto the person who is teaching about it, and denigrating her for doing so while using one’s privilege to refuse to learn in the first place.
“Please do us all a favor and kill yourself bitch.”	Hoping that telling an white administrator will silence the professor from talking about race	Emotionally defensive and refusing to acknowledge privilege, yet using one’s emotional discomfort with learning a difficult topic as a right to enact their power and privilege to silence racially just educators.
“Kiss my white ass you ignorant bitch.”	Whatever. Race has nothing to do with teaching.	Emotionally shutting down while emotionally projecting their insecurity about their lack of knowledge about race onto the racially just educator and using their privilege in Whiteness to denigrate the educator despite never having learned the topic itself.

**Dares for a Bold Racially Just Teacher Education**

My experiences, though extreme, are no different than those of many other racially just scholars who work tirelessly to combat the daily effects of racism, White supremacy, and Whiteness. That is why I share it. The sad reality, as Derrick Bell (1992) so beautifully captures in his parables, is that we know all too well how race will play out. Alas, *racial realism*, as Bell defines the term, acknowledges that, despite our hopes, the reality of living in a racist society is ever-present and that backdoor deals, overlooking injustices, and resisting racial reality will be an endless task for racially just advocates to address. One of his parables, “Afrolantica,” focuses on how African Americans, though depressed at not being able to start their own nation free from racism, maintain a sense of hope that recognizes their survival amidst racism (Bell, 1992): *although hegemonic Whiteness will continue to intoxicate the field of teacher education, as does the racism in Bell’s parable, we, as racially just educators, continue to breathe deeply, knowing full well that vitriolic racist mentality will continue to prove our work necessary.*

As Memmi (1965) posits regarding how colonists who resist the state of colonization and side with the colonized will one day be rendered obsolete once the state of colonization is overturned, so too will racially just advocates be unnecessary when racism ceases to exist—though, as Bell (1992) reminds us, that may be a long time coming. While those like me might be out of a job, ultimately such a day is good for humanity.

In the forever struggle to engage in racial justice and to navigate Whiteness in teacher education, I offer five challenges for teacher education:

1. To institutions: instead of merely claiming social justice in mission statements, I challenge institutions to promote racial justice institutionally by implementing racial justice in every course and as an agenda topic for each faculty meeting
2. To students: I challenge them to listen and learn from someone who combats Whiteness (e.g., Critical Whiteness Scholars) everyday both

- personally (e.g., consistent private communication, etc.) and professionally (e.g., colloquia, symposia, etc.).
3. To administrators: I challenge administrators to strategically place a racially just educator who combats Whiteness in a position of power who makes institutional decisions (e.g., administrator, curriculum director, director of teacher education, etc.).
  4. To Whites: I dare them to deconstruct their own emotional resistance and reaction—without emotionally projecting your angst—to learning about Whiteness and to those who teach or research it (e.g., ask what is it about me that I cannot bear to hear about Whiteness, etc.).
  5. To those who resist your racially just teaching and research or those individuals like my hate mail authors who mistaken Whiteness for White people: Dare them to read at least five books on Whiteness and education, specifically the emotionality of whiteness. In fact, for those who are too emotionally distraught when learning about Whiteness or those who teach Whiteness to White people, I strongly urge you to read *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionalities, and Education*.

In the end, navigating Whiteness can be at times debilitating. This exhaustion is present in Hayes and Hartlep (2013) discussion of how unhooking from Whiteness takes an emotional toll. Fasching-Varner, Albert, Mitchell, & Allen, (2014) similarly capture emotional stories of faculty who deal with racism, white supremacy and Whiteness using Smith's (2004) concept of racial battle fatigue. But in my case, as a Pinay teacher educator, the blatantly racist and sexist emails, voicemails, and social media attacks I recently received were daunting as I tried to protect my myself, my students, and my family. These same feelings of exhaustion can be said for navigating the Whiteness in teacher education among well-intentioned individuals.

The once-constant resistance from students and professors alike was emotionally draining, but by having the emotional fortitude to continue the

goals of racial justice, I can now say most of the resistance is tempered. Don't get me wrong. I still encounter resistance and emotional reactions to my work; however, *what kept and keeps me grounded most is my family, my students and true colleagues, and my unwavering commitment to humanity*. Specifically, what made the transition for me is that I realized this was not about me despite the attack on my face, my identity, and my scholarship. Instead, I had to *remember I am but a representative for racial justice and in this role I will always be confronted with hate, ignorance, and the racial devil himself, White supremacy*. Suffice it to say, I came into this career with my eyes wide open, but my heart even more so. In fact, a good friend, Jennie, asked me how I maintain such a loving disposition among this hate mail, even to those who perpetrate. I told her that to succumb to their hate makes me no better than they.

By not succumbing to the hate, I have to continue supporting my students and colleagues who are invested in racial justice. I have to continue to raise my children to love, and I have to continue loving my family back amidst such expressed hatred. I have to continue to research, teach, and serve my global community. I also have to continue loving myself: who I am, what I stand for, and how I feel about everything. In doing so, I choose to remain steadfast in my commitment to love myself, and all others, however vitriolic some of them may be. When the bond in this kind of loving is so strong and concrete as stated above, the haters—no matter how vitriolic they may be—have no influence on my quest for justice and my person.

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