

CHERYL E. MATIAS

8. WHITE TUNDRA

Exploring the Emotionally Frozen Terrain of Whiteness

*How sad is it that we don't feel
We don't want to feel
As if our tears or shouts are meaningless
Castigated down
Buried deep
At Bell's¹ bottom of the well
– C. E. Matias*

I'm often asked why I study what I study. "Isn't race over with?" naysayers ask. "Isn't it best to take the emotions out of race?" they insist. Regardless as to whether or not these inquiries stem from good intention, they are nonetheless violent to me; for I spent twelve years in higher education to refine my studies in race in education to a point where I can clearly state, "*I study a feminist of color approach to deconstructing the emotionality of whiteness in urban education.*" Therefore, to say emotions and race are meaningless is like rendering my entire educational journey valueless and, for that matter, made worthless by someone who probably has zero years of academic training in the matter. The irony of it all is that as I probe further in my discussions of race—specifically, the emotionality of whiteness—my naysayers get exponentially more uncomfortable, often flailing their arms with adamant certainty that emotions have nothing to do with racism, let alone whiteness. In fact, they argue that we should take emotions out of race discussions, opting for "objectivity" as if emotions are meaningless in how we "objectively" experience a world that subjugates us by virtue of our skin color, eye shape, and/or language we speak. In my insistence that race and emotions go hand-in-hand, my naysayers who claim they are objective and not emotional about the subject get visibly more upset. They pound their fist onto the table. Some cry. Others scream and spout off anything to refute the realization of race, all while claiming that I, as a brown-skinned Pinay, should not get emotional over the topic. As interesting as their emotional displays are, I find another emotional display more interesting. There are those naysayers who, when confronted with issues of race dialogue or racial experiences, stay emotionally frozen "like a deer on the highway, frozen in the panic induced by the lights of an oncoming car" (Tatum, 2008, pp. 147–148). No words are uttered. No behaviors suggest any penetration of the on-goings

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around them. Rather, they remain emotionally frozen in the face of race. This piece is dedicated to them because as they stare blindly into the abyss of society with a seemingly apathetic look, lacking breath, conviction, and/or soul, they nonetheless participate in operations of whiteness that ultimately uphold white supremacy. Plainly, the emotional frozenness of whiteness is one factor that supports white supremacy; a process that then turns around and substantiates enactments of racism. And in this frozen white tundra, the hellish heat of race still burns.

This chapter takes an emotional approach to unveiling the psychoanalytics behind the emotionality of whiteness, particularly emotional frozenness in whiteness. I begin with a detailed definition of the emotionality of whiteness and its emotional and psychoanalytic roots. Then I explore the specificities of emotional frozenness and how it metaphorically relates to the white tundra. In order to illuminate these theoretical postulations, I include poems (Lorde, 2007), counterstories (Matias, 2012), and fan-fiction (Preston, 2013). To be clear, I take ownership of the emotions that racism brings forth by engaging in them freely instead of masking, projecting, or repressing them. I do so to forever remind humanity that racism hurts and that such a pain is a natural emotional process in response to the dehumanization embedded in white supremacy.

WHY DO I DO THIS?

*They call me the angry brown chick, a militant, the 'real' racist for simply bringing up race
But alas I'm not angry; I'm hurt for your lack of love despite your claims of love
I pity you, for you never see how blindly hateful your heart truly is
I refuse to let your lovelessness infect my heart again
I am a soldier for humanity forever protecting
The purity of my heart
The hearts of others
Unbeknownst to you
Yours as well
– C. E. Matias*

Fanon (1967) writes about the psychoanalytical effects of colonial racism and describes how it makes him feel. He writes:

I am enraged. I am bled white by an appalling battle, I am deprived of the possibility of being a man. (p. 88)

He then divulges how such emotions cannot be separated from him, for as he feels them he knows it intimately ties him to the fate of other Black men and people in a white supremacist world.

I cannot dissociate myself from the future that is proposed for my brother. Every one of my acts commits me as a man. Every one of my silences, every one of my cowardices reveals me as a man. (p. 89)

Like Fanon, I am no different. My emotions with race are a direct response to the institutional racism and racial microaggressions I am forced to endure each day of my life as a single motherscholar of color in the academy. So yes I'm pissed. I'm hurt. And I refuse to silence those emotions, for in doing so I silence the anger and pain of so many others. As hooks (1995) suggests only when we locate our pain and struggle can we possibly make "all our hurt go away" (p. 75). The "Ph.D." behind my name has afforded me the opportunity and the confidence to speak out, hoping never again to mask my feelings. In modeling such an approach, I hope others too wake up from this emotional slumber so that humanity can feel once again.

WHAT IS THE EMOTIONALITY OF WHITENESS?

"I never owned slaves!" retorts Haley.

"Why are you making me feel so bad?!" projects Cindy.

"Maybe you're just being too sensitive," cries Nancy.

"It's not about race. I have Black friends!" argues Suzanne.

"I'm not white anymore! I want to be called a Pink Irishman!" attacks John.

These common phrases are verbal expression of the emotionality of whiteness. The first two can be categorized under emotional projections whereby those who feel guilty about race are unwilling to self-analyze their emotions and, thus, emotionally project their discomfort to deflect their racial culpability. The third phrase becomes a verbal expression of how one minimizes another's emotional experiences with race and, by doing so, purports white emotions to elevated status. The last two phrases emotionally obscure and deflect racial knowledge while opting in on racial discourse by calling out Blackness ("I have a Black friend") and erroneously equating "Pink" to the racist colorism that people of color experience daily.

As if talking about race is not enough, focusing on the emotionality of whiteness not only broaches the comfort levels within a system of race; it also encroaches upon the comfortability within patriarchy. Boler (1999) argues that addressing emotion is "risky business" for academics because academia often believes emotions are not reasonable or Truth, as if there is a single stamp of Truth (p. 109). Additionally, Ahmed (2004) reminds us that "emotions are not only 'beneath' but 'behind' the man/human" (p. 3) and are often associated with weakness and femininity. Debunking this primitive ideological construct, then, is emotionally unfettering for those ensnared in patriarchal thinking.

Emotions are complex phenomena that have within them a cultural politics (Ahmed, 2004), and they are not removed from the power structures that dictate their expression (Boler, 1999). As such, contrary to popularized notions of emotions being illogical or irrational, emotions are, in fact, logical and rational responses to larger systems of power and the relational interactions between individuals under these systems of power. Needless to say, emotions are relevant in understanding the racial lay of the land. Take for example the common parlance of "Angry Black

man.” If emotions are rendered irrelevant in race, how, then, is the phenomena of the “angry” Black man manifested? We cannot opt in and out of emotions when we find it most opportune. In this example, the speaker of such a phrase strategically opts in with emotional jargon to support the ideology of whiteness as innocent while perpetuating Black male racial stereotypes. Therefore, we must address emotions head on, lest we be trapped in illogical cognitions. For example, feeling one way and expressing in another way: like a white teacher who proclaims pity for urban students of color but truly feels disgust for them (cf., Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Or, feeling one way and repressing such feeling for fear of societal retribution: like a man crying over the breakup of his lover. A final example of illogical cognitions of emotions is repressing one’s emotions and projecting them onto someone else (cf., Matias, 2013a): like a white female feeling guilty in race discussions and, instead of self-analyzing why she feels guilty, she projects anger towards those who she believes are making her feel guilty. Emotions, then, are as much a part of race as water is a part of human bodies.

Defining the emotionality of whiteness has its roots in my own racialized experiences. Specifically, as the only tenure-line faculty of color in an urban-focused teacher education program at my institution, I found it disingenuous when I had teacher candidate after teacher candidate (and many of the teacher educators who trained them) profess their need to “save,” “help,” or “give back” to urban students of color yet refused to accept me as their professor or colleague (cf., Matias, 2013b). Beyond that, I recognized there were socially acceptable emotions that played into how race was discussed. In my experiences, for example, I noticed that my predominantly white teacher candidates and white teacher educators were allowed to talk about race through an emotional framework of pity, relieving, and redeeming. Yet when discussions of race went deeper—as to why, for example, these individuals believed themselves apt to redeem students of color despite never having had any foundational relationships with people of color—defensiveness, guilt, and anger surfaced. My research curiosity naturally led me to study these emotions and how they might impact how teachers, who are predominantly white females, engage in anti-racist teaching. I especially took interest in those teachers who displayed pity and concern for urban students of color but who throughout a diversity course revealed how much disgust and distaste they had for people of color. Considering this, I could not help but notice how emotions get sentimentalized as one thing to mask a deeper feeling, one that is not socially acceptable and could be tantamount to racist ideology (cf., Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Of course, no one wants to be called or labeled a racist, so the repression of one emotion is mastered.

The emotionality of whiteness encompasses all the emotions one feels to exert the hegemonic dominance of whiteness. With respect to the examples above: if I were to challenge, for example, a professor’s sentimentalization of urban students of color, I would then be greeted with coldness, anger, claims of reverse discrimination—all of which is well documented in the literature of critical race theory in education. That was, in fact, what did happen to me throughout my experiences in academia.

Regardless of my own trauma in dealing with this, the phenomena was clear. In order to maintain the emotional rhetoric that whiteness upholds—namely, that whites save people of color—I needed to be silenced about its falsity. Similar to Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of surveillance, my behaviors and speech were surveilled in order to protect the hegemonic dominance of the emotionality of whiteness. Whiteness, then, maintains itself through emotionally co-optive ways. That is, often invoked in educational rhetoric are the notions of care, love, and hope in teaching. These emotions are socially accepted in the field, such that they are identified as the appropriate emotions to have when teaching. However, there has been a litany of literature that details how these emotions are truly being fully felt in classrooms that are predominantly students of color. For example, Valenzuela (1999) argues that teachers (who are mainly Anglo) need to have authentic care for their Mexican American students. Duncan (2002) reveals how false empathy manifests among his white pre-service teachers. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) argue that Black students are “still not saved” because of the “psychocultural assaults” they undergo in a racist education system (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Suffice it to say that although most teacher candidates, in-service teachers, and teacher educators claim to be loving, caring, and empathetic to diverse student populations, they are not. And this disingenuous expression of emotions results in two devastating phenomena.

First, it continues to racially oppress people of color because what is undergirding most emotions in whiteness is not genuine. That is to say, if one blindly subscribes to whiteness ideology, one cannot possibly move beyond its hegemonic power. How can one see outside of a telescope if one refuses to take one's eyes off it? As such, whiteness is maintained when one refuses to (1) identify the hegemonic manifestation of whiteness and (2) realize how it leads to enactments of whiteness. And in these enactments of whiteness people of color and white anti-racist racists² suffer. In fact, Matias and Allen (2013) argue that whites who refuse to let go of whiteness self-enlist in a sadomasochistic relationship with whiteness, one that knowingly hurts people of color and unknowingly hurts their own humanity.

Second, as people of color continue to be racially oppressed by the exertion of the emotionality of whiteness this also reifies white supremacy. In other words, when the emotionality of whiteness is given more credence than the emotionality of people of color, this then reinforces white supremacy, rendering the emotions and concerns of people of color only three-fifths of a white person's human worth.

Psychoanalytically, where do these white emotions derive from? Several scholars have attempted to detail the psychoanalytics of race. Fanon (1967), for example, describes how Black men develop an inferiority complex in surviving white colonial racism. Critical race theorists argue the emergence of defeatist behaviors or internalized racism that manifest in people of color under prolonged racism, a process that berates their own racial identities (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, with respect to how whites internalize their racially superior status, Thandeka (1999) argues that white children have been racialized into the white community by their white parents, claiming that “the price *for* the right to

be white had already been exacted: wholeness” (p. 87). As such, “what remained was a self that was conflicted and fearful” (p. 87). In this state of confliction and fearfulness, whites stray from humanity, for if “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity,” then loyalty to whiteness is treason to humanity (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996). The white self is thus left in a perpetual state of human emptiness, and it masks this emptiness with colorblind discourse rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and rationales to justify its usurped positionality in whiteness. For example, Memmi (1965) states that those who accept a colonizer position (in this case racial colonizer) are usurpers and “will defend it by every means” (p. 52). In this illegitimate usurpation the colonizer finds himself needing to “absolve himself of it and the conditions under which it was attained” (p. 52) and thus will “falsify history, he rewrites laws, he would extinguish memories—anything to succeed in transforming his usurpation into legitimacy” (p. 52). This illegitimate usurpation thus demands constant production of rationales and performances of whiteness, which leads white colonizers to feel shame and guilt (Thandeka, 1999). This shame and guilt, in turn, are emotionally defended to self-protect the lies of whiteness; hence, the emotional expressions of anger, defensiveness, or guilty sadness. However, there is another emotional response that self-protects the lies of whiteness. Emotional frozenness.

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In between her choking sobs Malina lifted her tear-stained face to address her classmates. Although embarrassed for her emotional display, she was compelled—determined if you will—not to silence herself for the sake of sparing someone else’s unwillingness to witness her tears. She knew all too well this was the space she could finally speak the truth about her racialized experience as a brown-skinned Filipina; for this was, after all, a class on race, teaching, education. Around her were many other college students of color, many of whom either ran over to hold her hand, had familiar tears in their own eyes, or were shaking their heads with empathetic furiousness. The class was worked up. The professor examined the face of each of her students sitting in the circle for critical class dialogue. Malina’s tears streamed openly. Geneva (a Black female) refused to lift her face hoping to shield her tears. Roberto (a Latino male) shook with anger and Naomi (a Hapa³ female) threw her hands in the air seemingly tired of being mislabeled. Among the students were two White students: one who remained sympathetically silent but seemingly engaged during the entire racial interlude and the other who appeared emotionally frozen, as if staring into space.

“Haley,” said the professor, “Do you have anything to add?”

Hayley, a white female, barely moved her head to face the professor, for she was committed to staring at the exit sign that glowed above the classroom door. Without any movement, not even a breath, she replied, “No.”

The professor, notwithstanding the obvious disengagement of the content and dialogue, followed up with “Hayley, how are you feeling about all of what you heard?”

Haley’s apathetic face showed no anger, sadness, elation, or any emotional response. As if frozen like the Alaskan tundra, everything was still with her. She unexcitedly and expressionlessly remained looking at the burning green glow of the exit sign and nonchalantly replied, “Fine.”

The fan-fiction counterstory (Preston, 2013) described above illuminates how emotional frozenness is expressed. Some argue that such frozenness stems from the paralysis of fear, claiming that “fear is a powerful emotion, one that immobilizes, traps words in our throats, and stills our tongues” (Tatum, 2008, p. 147). Although I find this emotional interpretation fruitful in describing one avenue of the emotionality of whiteness, specifically emotional frozenness, I offer another psycho-emotional interpretation of emotional frozenness that is not predicated on *proclaimed* emotions of fear and/or isolation. Like emotional responses that are argumentative or aggressively combative, emotional frozenness is also an emotional strategy that purports whiteness to elevated status, albeit differently. Unlike those abovementioned emotional expressions, emotional frozenness reifies hegemonic whiteness by simply racial reality and refusing to engage in reality that does not emotionally cater to whiteness. Suffice it to say that when one chooses to remain emotionally frozen during racial dialogue or incidents, one refuses to bear witness to reality of race and instead remains faithful to a false white imagination. And it’s this loyalty to a false white imagination that obscures racial reality and reinforces whiteness.

Because of this loyalty to the white imagination, I entertain theorizations of what constitutes imagination and how subjective positionality impacts the development of imaginations. hooks (1995) argues how whiteness is manifested in the Black imagination, claiming that it’s an accumulation of shared experiential knowledge of whiteness “gleaned from close scrutiny of white people” (p. 31). In this shared knowledge is a repertoire of terror that “all black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness” (p. 46). That is, the Black imagination is not fictive or simply a thought process that dreams of “things that are not real.”⁴ Rather, the Black imagination is, indeed, realness wrought with a mental chronology of the terror felt under racial oppression. Plainly stated, the Black imagination is a mental inventory of racial Truth.

Whereas the Black imagination is a historical documentation of shared racial terrorism in Black communities, the white imagination is developed under the hegemonic dominance of whiteness in white communities (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). In this dominance whiteness is rendered invisible, natural (Leonardo, 2009), and central to Americanness while rendering Blackness as its ontological opposite; namely un-Americanness (Morrison, 1992). Additionally, whiteness is wrought with the falsity of colorblindness, often referred

to as colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). And within this colorblind racism “the act of enforcing racelessness...is itself a racial act” (Morrison, 1992, p. 46). Thus, though one characteristic of whiteness is the false profession of not seeing race or color, those who subscribe to it often “throw the white race card” when they find it more opportune to do so (Leonardo, 2009, p. 116). If whiteness, as Thandeka (1999) suggests, stems from a process of white racialization that produces a shamed feeling of “someone who is living a lie” (p. 34), then anything stemming from that point of departure is in turn a lie as well. As such, the white imagination—produced within the vacuum of whiteness—that imagines racial cohesion, legitimization of white racial superiority and innocence, and release of racial culpability via an epistemology of racial ignorance (Mills, 2007) is nonetheless false too. Plainly stated, the white imagination to which emotionally frozen individuals remain loyal is nothing but a false white mecca used to shield whiteness and protect against racial realism.

For example, despite the realism of racial terror, white people “imagine there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing” (hooks, 1995, p. 45). One may ask how does the truth about terror get buried behind the façade of whiteness as innocent? The truth about this terror is silenced because of “accusations of reserve racism or by suggesting that black folks who talk about the ways we are terrorized by whites are merely evoking victimization to demand special treatment” (p. 47). Therefore, when a white person is finally given the space to bear witness to racial violence via race dialogues (cf., Leonardo & Porter, 2010) or by observing racial incidents, remaining emotionally frozen becomes an emotional way to deny racial reality.

Essentially, this denial becomes symbolically violent (Bourdieu, 2003) when it turns into the dominating “language” that “governs without the collaboration of those it governs” (p. 113). Stated another way, when the emotional frozenness becomes a way of silencing and dismissing others’ racial reality it becomes symbolically violent. The silence or dismissing embedded in frozenness *is* the “language.” Therefore, it is (1) the language that is spoken (or in this case not spoken), (2) the speaker’s racial positionality, and (3) the speaker’s racial positionality in relation to the receivers that brand emotional frozenness symbolically violent. Bourdieu (2003) writes:

The power of the words is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokespersons, and his speech—that is, the substance of his discourse and inseparably, his way of speaking—is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the *guarantee of delegation* which is invested in him. (original italics, p. 107)

The situation is tantamount to a mother who refuses to address or acknowledge the whines of her child. It’s not only the act of dismissing the child’s whine; rather, it’s about the mother’s power relation to the child and her choice to engage that power by refusing to entertain the child’s cries. Thus, remaining emotionally frozen has deleterious impacts on the state of race relations because engaging it means one can opt out of participating in race, which in itself is racial privilege.

The question then is why? Why do mainly whites—and I acknowledge people of color who are indoctrinated by whiteness ideology—engage in emotional frozenness? Although the intent may not be malicious or decisively about perpetuating whiteness, the impact nonetheless is just that. Since white racialization is performed by constant repression of racial reality and the adoption of a knowingly false color-blind society (Thandeka, 1999), whites, then, as Bonilla-Silva (2010) suggests, have mastered rhetorical, discursive, and emotional maneuvers that exert hegemonic whiteness while feigning racial epistemological ignorance (Mills, 2007). As Matias and Zembylas (2014) argue, the emotionality of whiteness is strategically expressed in one way—one that is more socially acceptable and politically correct—to mask racial disgust, an emotion that is not socially acceptable or politically correct. This mastery of performed whiteness had to be learned, practiced, and perfected. Specific to learning emotional frozenness, there exists a pedagogical process passed down from generations on how to perform it. By freezing, whites do not have to acknowledge or participate in race until they find it strategically opportunistic to do so. They, as the generations before them, remain frozen because although they see race and know of its existence—seen by their avoidance of driving through communities of color, refusal to bring home a Black boyfriend, etc.—they are racialized to believe it does not exist. By accepting this false premise they are forever conflicted, shamed by their acceptance of the falsity of colorblindness and constant performance of racial naiveté. Yet, in their acceptance the racial benefits are still greater; for once they accept the white lies (Daniels, 1997), they are given an exclusive invitation to the world of whiteness.

AND WHAT OF THE TUNDRA?



Whiteness is a lonely, frozen tundra, leaving one immobile to expand beyond the confines of its chilling landscape. Entombed beneath its icy layers rests the reality of racial Truths unable to surface beyond the glacial surface. In this frigid climate

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the warmth of humanity freezes and the hope of a more temperate society remains still. People of color are then left to pick up the bitter icy remnants of race that nonetheless burn the loving beats of their hearts. In our forever pursuit to build a warmer racial humanity—one that melts away the Othering of people of color—the emotional frozenness must evaporate. For if it doesn't, the warmth of the human heart freezes over.

SPECIAL NOTE

To those individuals who remain fully present despite the discomfort in race dialogues: May you always have the strength and endurance to fully participate in racial analyses and dialogues for the purpose of racial harmony.

NOTES

- ¹ Referring to critical race legal scholar Derrick Bell and his 1992 book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.
- ² Terminology stems from personal conversations with critical whiteness scholar, Dr. Ricky Lee Allen. He argues that whites can be white anti-racist racists at best because they continue to reap institutional benefits under a racist system despite their individual efforts.
- ³ Hapa refers to someone who is mixed race with Japanese ancestry.
- ⁴ According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imagination>

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