

Hysteria, Hypermania, & Hullabaloo: How White Emotionalities Manufactures Fear of Critical Race Theory & Teaching

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Abstract

*From a global pandemic that killed 6.5 million people to worldwide awareness of police brutality leading to the systematic murders of Black people, the world today has set a new precedent in what constitutes fear. Plainly, fear is not always some sentimental whim one conjures up against a fantastical boogeyman; instead, fear in today's sense is tantamount to life and death themselves. Therefore, one can understand how absurd it is to hear that the nation has become quickly obsessed about the fear of a potential new "threat:" not monkeypox or nuclear war, not white supremacist marches or the Ukrainian war, but the big, "bad," CRT. That critical race theory (CRT) is the boogeyman, moreover the big bad wolf, lurking behind K-12 classrooms waiting to huff and puff at the doors of K-12 schools, simply to blow down their very existence is *ridonkulous*.¹ This series points out how we are being swayed by ridiculousness and how we can think more critically and rationally regarding CRT, antiracism, and racially just education.*

Keywords: *anti-CRT ban, teachers, race, whiteness, teacher education*

Manufacturing Fear

From a global pandemic that has killed 6.5 million people to worldwide awareness of police brutality leading to the systematic murders of Black people, the world today has set a new precedent in what constitutes fear. Plainly, fear is not always some sentimental whim one conjures up against a fantastical boogeyman; instead, fear in today's sense is tantamount to life and death themselves. Therefore, one can understand how absurd it is to hear that the nation has become quickly obsessed about the fear of a potential new "threat:" not monkeypox or nuclear war, not white supremacist marches or the Ukrainian war, but the big, "bad," CRT. That critical race theory (CRT) is the boogeyman, moreover the big bad wolf, lurking behind K-12 classrooms waiting to huff and puff at the doors of K-12 schools, simply to blow down their very existence is *ridonkulous*. And before anyone turns away from this publication simply because they are too ashamed that they too were caught up in the sensation to fear that which they know not of, then let me spell out this *ridonkulousness*.

First, anyone who has actually studied CRT knows that it is an analytic tool used in graduate schools like legal studies and education to theoretically and empirically examine how race,

1. According to Urban Dictionary, *ridonkulous* is "Used when an event or action is way beyond 'ridiculous.' Extremely unbelievable." <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ridonkulous>

racism, and white supremacy impact laws, policies, and practices in society and schools (see Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Taylor et al., 2009). Regardless of whether it is rooted in racial theory (see Cabrera, 2018), CRT has spread in various sub disciplines to 1) help professionals understand the effect of race on all people 2) hold professionals accountable for how they engage in their respective professions, especially reflecting on whether those engagements truly honor the humanity of us all. For example, Romero et al. (2009) used CRT in their research to help educators understand how Latinx students experience schooling, so that educators can check their biases and improve the educational attainment for Latinx students. Ammann et al (2017), employed CRT in her study to illustrate the intersections between disability studies and race, thus helping educators identify the racial implications in their pedagogies around students with disabilities whilst improving teaching practices that better support students with special needs. Solórzano & Ornela (2002) used CRT in their analysis to critically examine advanced placement classes and how they might have racial implications that ultimately harm students of color. By doing so, educators are more informed about the unconscious racial biases that may leave students of color, as CRT founder so offered, “at the bottom of the well” (Bell, 1992). Clearly, CRT is NOT THE BIG BAD WOLF others claim it to be. Unlike CRT’s haters who have probably never read any book on CRT by critical race theorists themselves, those who actually employ and understand CRT *and* identify themselves as critical race theorists realize how CRT is helping, not harming, our society. In a world where accountability is key, CRT keeps professionals accountable for their thoughts, actions, and biases so that society can move forward in more humanizing ways. Therefore, frankly speaking, if school age children are indeed engaging in IRB-approved empirical or theoretical research that deconstructs the racial ramifications within court cases, legal or educational policies, pedagogical practices, and/or larger systemic change then, by all means, I, as a former K-12 teacher in both Los Angeles Unified School District and New York Department of Education, am impressed. WOW! Good for them. In fact, if CRT is being taught in K-12 schools, then why did I, now a full professor, have to pay back a hefty graduate school loan to UCLA to learn it? Half-jokingly, I, myself, would like to know exactly what K-12 schools are teaching CRT so that I can enroll there too. Alas, for the God-giveth time, CRT is NOT taught in K-12 schools, but its intent for antiracism, racial justice, and humanizing ALL human beings may be embedded in K-12 schooling practices and curricula and, if that is so, is that a bad thing? In fact, I question an educator’s morals if something like CRT—that seeks to help students who are most vulnerable academically achieve—is seen as bad. Simply put, if you don’t want to help *all* students why are you in the classroom in the first place?

Second, there have been a lot of misrepresentations of what CRT is and what it is not. One newspaper headlines how CRT is abusing students (see Stabile, 2021) another claims CRT is dangerous (see Blackburn, 2021). Butcher and Gonzales (2020) go as far to say it teaches intolerance and hate. None of these claims are true. The truth is, as posited by Matias and Allen (2016), that CRT, unlike its naysayers posit, is about LOVE not hate. They write, “CRT is a loving praxis that centers the voices of those most hurt by racism: people of color” (p. 3). Further, they argue that CRT is about love for whites as well because:

CRT, as curriculum, can reveal to them [whites] how they are taught a false love for whiteness, a “love” largely built upon unjust material privileges and distorted ideological rationalizations (Allen, 2009; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996). Whiteness is posed as a problem to

white students, which, if combined with literature from fields like critical whiteness studies, can lead them to a better understanding of their problematic relationships with racialized Others (Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009). This type of curriculum can help white students release themselves from a limiting sense of self and realize a more humanizing love by working in alliance with people of color to undo structural racism and create humanization for all (Matias & Allen, 2016, p. 3).

Clearly, CRT is about reaching deep into the biases we hold within our hearts, and pushing us to investigate them in ways that will expand our way of knowing, even if it is a difficult task to do so. In fact, when it comes to abuse, whiteness left intact, especially in education, indeed abuses students of color (see Matias, 2016a) not the other way around where white students who already get eurocentric curriculum that affirms their white eurocentric identities. I wrote, “Just as teaching white children how to be white and act white is racially abusive (Thandeka, 1999), so too is institutionally supporting Whiteness through dispelling ideas of benevolent saviority, adopting false racially coded terminologies, and denying an understanding of the white self by deflecting focus only to ‘the Other’” (p. 3). Therefore, ignoring how whiteness operates in classrooms, and in society, leaves the cycle of racial abuse alive. That is where the abuse resides.

White Emotionalities as Culprit

The question then becomes why? Why is it that one fears something whilst not knowing what it truly means and, regardless of that, still recklessly jumps onto the bandwagon? It is as if these individuals have lost all mental faculty and rational thought needed to delineate and discern fact from fiction and, instead opt for an irrational, emotional knee jerk reaction that recklessly allows sheep to lead. Simply put, what is compelling people to let go of their rationality in ways that compel them to act as nothing more than a horny teenager, acting on impulse alone? The culprit is *white emotionalities* (see Matias, 2016b).

As described in *Feeling White* (Matias, 2016b), white emotions are the surface leveled emotional reactions commonly described as white guilt (Steele, 1990), whitelash/defensiveness (Bonilla-Silva, 2020; Kellner, 2017), unsubstantiated fear (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014), white rage (Anderson, 2016), or white ethnic shame (Thandeka, 2007) whereas white emotionalities (see, Matias, 2021) are the deeper psychoanalytic reasons that undergird those surface leveled emotional defense mechanisms. Meaning, the emotionalities of whiteness are the core human emotions and are root causes for manifestations of defense mechanisms; emotional defense mechanisms that surface up in ways that seek to protect and keep those deep-seated core values hidden.

Take for example a monogamous couple who just realized one of the partners was unfaithful, engaging in infidelity. The surface leveled reaction may be anger, though that emotion is real, it is not the underlying emotion in this case. Instead, it can be an emotional defense mechanism that, when fixated solely on anger alone, detracts from deeper issues like the fear of human abandonment. Obviously, issues like infidelity in a monogamous relationship are not just about anger and betrayal. Instead, infidelity hurts deeply because the trust one initially had in walking through life together with this other person has been compromised. Now, their entire sense of security is put into question. Plainly, infidelity is not only about anger. Rather, it is also about a human core value of extreme loss and sense of abandonment from a once trusted person, and this realization can trigger an angry response. Inasmuch as infidelity can induce complex emotions, so too do white emotions.

To better understand white emotions we must attend to both the surface level expressed emotions alongside the deeper emotions rooted in the core of humanity that undergird them. So, for CRT, it's not just about identifying that one is afraid of or angry at CRT, despite not having read one book on the topic, more so than understanding what is the core human value which makes one so afraid of CRT. This is the beginning of self-realizing inquiries that dig deep at the human core; a process that ultimately requires the self-work that many are afraid or refuse to do. For example, consider the self-investigative work one must do to free their minds, and in this case, hearts from racialized emotions (see Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Matias, 2016b). Indeed, emotions about race are socialized because for naysayers of race who claim they do not see race, they show an awful lot of emotions when discussing race. Yet when talking about unicorns—another item naysayers claim to not see—those same emotional reactions are not expressed as they are with race. So, to unlearn socialized emotions about race, otherwise racialized emotions, especially with regards to white emotions, anti-CRTers have a lot to consider. For example, do anti-CRTers, many of whom are racially identified as white, feel as if they will lose the following:

1. Their identity. If that is so, then what identity do they fear to lose? White identity? American identity? Why this sense of loss? Does one feel they lose who they are when learning a new task, activity, or skill like skiing? Then why race? Perhaps, could being white be something they feel they possess?
2. Their humanity. Do these individuals believe there's a conflict in being human when one learns about racism? Why is that? Does learning about another sports team make a sports fanatic love their favorite team less? Or perhaps has adoption of whiteness ideology developed a skewed sense of white identity that is now feeling threatened because the truth sometimes hurts?
3. Their path. What presumed predestined path were these individuals on, which then causes great strife to consider paths anew? How does one know that path to be true? What if it is not a true path? How does learning about others thwart one's path? Why does one feel compelled to stay on one path? Why is one afraid to explore new paths?

These investigative inquiries into one's understanding of their human core of existence are important because "if humanity is to really understand why we feel the way we feel...it is imperative that we excavate the remnants of our emotionalities lest we succumb to a strictly socialized state of emotion" (Matias, 2016b, p. 6).

Another noteworthy aspect of white emotionalities is that despite the regular appearance of white emotions in discussions of race or racism, like national discussions of CRT, what people do not realize is 1) *why* they so regularly show up *and* 2) how these emotions can be weaponized to operationally shut down progress towards racial equity. First, to be clear, as social scientists, our main task is to understand social patterns and find ways to intellectually understand these patterns. Be it as it may, the almost predictable display of white emotions surrounding topics of race and racism are essentially an emotional pattern that is in need of intellectual understanding. Meaning, white emotions, undergirded by white emotionalities, are themselves patterns because they systematically pop up every time the fragile sensibilities of whiteness is challenged (see Di-Angelo, 2018). Ignoring this pattern or even dismissing the regular displays of white emotions provides race scholars, antiracist, racially just educators, and racial equity minded individuals with no understanding as to how to be effective in delivering messages about racial justice. Instead, this

type of antiracism will go in one ear and out the other, rendering the work behind antiracism useless. As such, it behooves us, racially just educational scholars, to understand how to more effectively teach a message of racial humanity even if it means understanding the complex dynamics of white emotions and its hirsute cousin, white emotionalities.

Second, white emotions are not simply emotions; they carry racial power. Suffice it to say that “if white supremacy, upheld by the ideological beliefs in whiteness, continues to maintain a racial power structure, then the emotions subjected to such a structure will also be impacted by it” (Matias, 2016b, p. 5). To illustrate, consider the belief of white racial purity. Though there are individuals who still believe in white racial superiority, the belief that whites are pure was more commonplace in yesteryear. This widespread belief led to emotional responses like fear of Black people which set the basis for the passing of anti-miscegenation laws; sadly a similar suit to anti-CRT bans. During the first half of the twentieth century 30 of the then 48 states passed and enforced anti-miscegenation laws barring interracial marriage between whites and Blacks, Mexicans, and even men from the Malay race. Beyond marriage, this emotional sentiment (fear of racial Other) also undergirded large scale racial segregation in forms of racial covenants and redlining. Hence, white emotions *have* white racial power and, overlooking their substantive power, renders us at the mercy of them. One has only to look into the murder of 14-year old African American boy, Emmett Louis Till, who was wrongly accused of sexually harassing a white woman. Despite later confessing she lied under oath, Carolyn Bryant’s white woman’s tears were powerful enough to have her then husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J. W. Milem, kidnap, torture, and murder the child. But white emotions have even more power. Instead of convicting the white men for murder or indicting Carolyn later for false reports, these emotions were substantive enough that all three individuals lived a long life, free from the legal responsibility of their murderous actions. This is no different than how white woman, Amanda Cooper, weaponized her white emotions in response to an African American man’s request to leash her dog, per Central Park’s Ramble regulations. Instead of abiding by the park regulations, Cooper is videotaped manipulating her emotions from anger to false fear in a 911 call, hoping that her emotions would be enough to get an African American man arrested by police. Simply put, white emotions and the emotionalities that undergird them are dangerous because when they surface they engage in enactments that ultimately harm Black, Indigenous, People of Color period. And, when anti-CRTers engage in emotional vitriol of a theory that is, by virtue, conceptualized to engage in equitable treatment of people of color, one cannot help but fear white emotional retribution, precisely because there is a history of it wreaking havoc. Per DiAngelo & Sensoy (2014), the sentimentalized fear of CRT is *not* equivalent to the tangible fear people of color face when white emotions overpower their humanity. For all that needs to happen to substantiate the maltreatment of people of color is white people’s emotional fear of something they have no historical proof to be fearful of.

Conclusion

The BIG BAD CRT is NOT so BIG and BAD inasmuch as white emotionalities are. This fixation on one’s fear or hatred for CRT is only but a surface leveled expression of deeper issues of one’s core sense of self. Meaning, these individuals are so insecure about their own identity that they huff and puff when hearing that other people are very secure, even proud, of their identities. For example, their identity has been so sadly intertwined with delusions of whiteness such that any discussion of multiculturalism leaves them feeling abandoned. To be clear, the thought of divorcing from the delusional marriage between whiteness and identity *is* the real fear. Essentially, who

am I if I cannot be white? Alas, anti-CRTers must, like in the Christian sense, have a come to Jesus moment whereby they deeply investigate why they so fear new paths, new identities, new histories, and new people. Unless they do that they will, as sheep do, irrationally follow a path that takes them farther away from humanity and closer to a life of eternal fear.

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