

# The Emotional Labor of Race-Gender Dialogue in Higher Education

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In this current iteration of anti-Black racism that we are experiencing in society, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education is needed more than ever. However, it is under attack by those in positions of privilege (i.e., those who are white and male) because there is a fear that the exposure of structural racism and sexism will result in the interrogation and possible termination of said privilege. In this article, I specifically discuss how this attack on CRT—at the intersection of race and gender—is a very emotional response, particularly one based on fear. One example of a fear-based response is the recent threat to schools and institutions that choose to use CRT in their curriculum. On September 4, 2020, the Director of the Office Management and Budget to President Trump, Russell Vought, “banned any training within the federal government related to critical race theory” and referred to it as “anti-American propaganda” (Chemerinsky, par. 2, 2020). This critique of CRT as “anti-American” is not new. It is similar to the critiques of Ethnic Studies or Mexican American/Raza curriculum being anti-American, for instance. It is important to observe how CRT is being discussed; the emphasis on how it is anti-American prioritizes, maintains, and protects the interests and emotions of whites and men. In other words, to be American is to maintain and protect the interests of white-male emotions.<sup>2</sup> The non-verbal

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<sup>2</sup> In *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education*, Cheryl E. Matias (2016) described what she calls the emotions of whiteness ideology. Extending

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message this sends is: Be outspoken and speak to the extent that you do not disturb how we feel about our complicity in maintaining white supremacy and patriarchy. As educators, we need to start talking about racism (and other forms of oppression) *without* being preoccupied with the emotions of the privileged.

In this piece, I discuss how we cannot speak of racism and other forms of oppression in ways that converge with white students' emotional needs (and others in positions of privilege). I argue that moving toward racial and gender justice means not simply lamenting singular instances of injustice and violence but understanding both how emotions are triggered when engaging in race-gender dialogue and which emotions are prioritized. In "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) challenged the multicultural paradigms in education by bridging CRT with the field of education. Of particular relevance is how Ladson-Billings and Tate discussed the importance of storytelling when embodying a CRT approach in education, specifically the "naming of one's own reality" with the intent "to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression" (p. 57). At the core of my work, I argue that CRT overlooks the question of emotions in storytelling in the field of education, particularly in the context of race-gender dialogue.

As educators, we need to be aware that the processes of naming one's reality in the classroom, particularly stories related to racial and gendered pain, inevitably produce emotions in constant movement through and within the classroom dialogue. Whether or not triggering, emotions can either help to understand one's racial oppression further or act as a tool to continue this oppression. To avoid the latter and promote the former, we need to consider how emotions are not only "psychological states," but also "social and cultural practices" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 9) that exist in the classroom. Emotions—or what Sara Ahmed (2015) called the *sociality of emotions*—are not something tangible or that we have, but instead it is "through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made" (p. 10). In relation to telling our intersecting stories of racial and gendered oppression, Ahmed's work on emotions serves as a way to promote dialogue where students can better understand their racial oppression and the emotions that circulate during classroom dialogue. Ahmed contended that emotions do not necessarily circulate between people, meaning that emotions are not necessarily something held by people. Thus, the sociality of emotions means we can understand the socialization that is circulated. That is, the sociality of emotions implies that we have the ability to make meaning of how emotions circulate from both the *inside out* and the *outside in* (Ahmed, 2015). In the context of the classroom dialogue, the goal would be to have students understand how emotions related to racial/gendered oppression are not just what they as individuals feel, but that those individual feelings are in circulation with other students' emotions. The hope is that this approach would produce greater vulnerability, humility, and compassion.

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this, I use the term white-male emotions to signify the existence of a system of emotions simultaneously tied to both whiteness and maleness ideology.

Reflecting on the first time I taught a course centered on interrogating racial, ethnic, and gendered forms of oppression in education—prior to the current COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movements—I recall my Students of Color expressing how they never talked about race the way we did in our course. They believed that the class should be required for all students on campus. Intrigued, I asked these students what they meant, and they shared anecdotes of the silence and silencing that occurred in college classrooms because they “didn’t really” talk about race and racism. Fast forward to the current pandemics,<sup>3</sup> and I *continue* to hear similar sentiments from students. Although we are seeing the term “anti-racist pedagogy” thrown around, we are still not having critical dialogues of racial oppression. To encourage critical dialogues in my classroom, I include prominent CRT theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and, most importantly, allow storytelling that honors Black and Brown students’ anger and pain related to racial injustice. Returning to Ahmed’s (2015) sociality of emotions, I strive to allow the movement of these emotions to make significant connections among various stories, which I refer to *critical emotionality*. Truly critical dialogue should be welcoming of emotions tied to racial and gendered oppression.

In the article “Pedagogy of Fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of ‘Safety’ in Race Dialogue,” Leonardo and Porter (2010) argued that the safety discourse of race dialogue protects white students at the expense of Students of Color. They posited that, “pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power” (p. 139). The same can be said regarding male privilege and the benefits of it. What is being protected through the safety discourse is both the emotions of white people *and* men. In the essay, “Man Child,” Audre Lorde (2017) reflected on what it means to raise a young man. To this point, Lorde contends that “men who are afraid to feel must keep women around to do their feeling for them while dismissing us [women] for the same supposedly ‘inferior’ capacity to feel deeply” (p. 47). It is men’s (and white people’s) own responsibility to manage their emotions, especially feelings of guilt in their complicity in maintaining hegemonic structures. More than challenging racism, redirecting the labor of holding emotions that arise during race dialogue also challenges the detrimental practice of not holding men accountable for their sexist behavior. The redirection of the labor of emotions means holding whites and men accountable for facing their own emotions tied to how their privilege contributes to the oppression of others.

There is an interest convergence (Bell, 1980) of emotions in race dialogue when there exists an unbalanced labor of emotions within these dialogues. According to Bell, “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (p. 523). In the case of race dialogue, “not really talking” about race, as expressed by my Students of Color, might mean that race dialogue is happening in the classroom,

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<sup>3</sup> I consider racism, specifically what has unveiled from the Black Lives Matter movements, a pandemic. As such, here I am referring to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the racism pandemic.

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but it is happening insofar that it does not make white students uncomfortable. In this sense, the interests of whites in the context of the classroom is to produce emotions of comfort for them. If we equate racial (and gendered) equality with having spaces to make meaning of our pain and anger at the injustices, then it converges with the emotional needs of whites (and men). That is, the emotion of anger at injustice expressed by Black and Brown students, for example, is silenced and ignored as a means to protect the white-male emotions of fear and guilt. The safety discourse of race dialogue protects the emotions of white students at the expense of Students of Color expressing their *emotional intensities* (Ahmed, 2015) at racial injustices.

In a scholarly article titled “The Legacy of Derrick Bell and Latino/a Education: A Critical Race Testimonio,” Urrieta and Villenas (2013) reflected on how their own experiences—from being undergraduate students to becoming critical scholars—stemmed from having courses and faculty that provided “more knowledge and language to name and speak about the racism” (p. 518) they experienced in their K–12 educational years. This has always been and continues to be my approach as an educator. I make space for students to speak about racism. When talking about racism, the reality is that Students of Color will have emotions that originate from oppressive situations that they either directly experienced or witnessed. If the assumption is that emotions are being “felt” by students during classroom dialogue, then these emotions are not always verbalized because it is not the norm to speak about how racism makes us feel. Therefore, a classroom can be said to feel “tense” amid the silence. Amid this feeling of tension, there is a paralysis in students’ emotions not moving beyond their bodies because they are not put in dialogue with others’ emotions. I find that the tension and paralysis of emotions that happen during race dialogue protect white-male emotions. Though the goal should not be to create a space where white (and male) students cannot feel guilt or fear, the issue is that it’s *expected* that someone else (many times, People of Color) should hold the burden of understanding their guilt or fear. An educational space where this is the expectation is constructed based on a white, heterosexual, male norm. According to Ahmed (2015), the norm *feels* comfortable for those who fit the norm and uncomfortable for those who do not fit it. This ultimately means making those who have experiences based on the white, heterosexual, male norm feel uncomfortable, and those who are outside that norm feel comfortable when engaging in dialogue around race and gender.

More than validating Students of Color’s emotional intensities, it is crucial that we nurture educational spaces where Black and Brown students can freely express emotions tied to critical dialogue about racial and gender injustice as a stepping-stone toward imagining radical possibilities for psychic liberation. Rather than only framing them as intensities, I have found these emotions to be a process of critical emotionality. In this sense, emotions serve to construct the “psychic and social as object,” in which psychic pain produced by oppression, for example, is an “effect rather than a cause” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 10). This does not mean that it always has to be a painful dialogue, but it does mean a production of discomfort. Critical emotionality means facilitating what Black and Brown

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students bring to the table and fearlessly and lovingly engaging it alongside course content. It is not enough to diversify a course syllabus by including more Scholars of Color, for example. We need to be prepared to engage students' interpretations, which sometimes involves bridging their own experiential knowledge to the course content. The bridging of the two, ultimately, has the possibility to produce transformative classroom experiences rather than deepening the already-in-existence psychic pain of Black and Brown suffering. The hope and goal of critical emotionality is to utilize classroom dialogue to produce emotional pedagogies of healing of racial/gendered oppression.

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