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## **Raced Encounter on a Hilltop: A Call for Soulful Justice alongside Social Justice Work**

Pauli Badenhorst

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## Provocateur Pieces\*

### Raced Encounter on a Hilltop: A Call for *Soulful* Justice alongside Social Justice Work

Pauli Badenhorst

This provocation begins with an emotionally charged interracial encounter during peak-hour Cape Town traffic. It goes on to consider the manner in which emotional orientations constitute everyday, internal white supremacist structures often camouflaged under the guise of caring. Later, it calls on white educators to earnestly do the work of emotional excavation to avoid the reification, reinforcement, and reproduction of subtle, well-intentioned forms of racism. Ultimately, this piece contends that soulful justice work needs to accompany the social justice investments of white educators.

*I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.*

—James Baldwin, 1955, p. 101

**T**he car shudders and chokes violently, not unlike a death rattle, before the engine dies in summer peak-hour Cape Town traffic on a packed four-lane eastbound incline. Drivers begin honking frantically, cursing as they pass by with stunted acceleration. The lights move from red to green to amber to red to what feels like an eternal green. I turn the ignition, over and over again, to be met with the type of silence only ever encountered among jilted lovers. I anxiously await the next red light before mustering up the courage to ask the four white men in the car beside me if they would please

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\*The term *provocateur* has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes's welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the "troublemaker" label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson's, who was fittingly labeled "provocateur." I can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section. *TSJ*

help me push my car out of the busy road. The driver smirks arrogantly and raises his electric window before driving off as soon as the light turns green. I retreat back to my car, unsure of what to do next. The drivers keep honking angrily in what now has come to sound like a cacophony of lost souls crying out from the engorging vortex of the throat of hell. My anxiety and frustration coincide at boiling point.

Suddenly there is a loud thud on the window of my driver's side door followed by a fusillade of thumps across the roof of the car. Bewildered, I gaze around from the inside. An impi of five Black men stand surrounding the vehicle. In a mental state true to traditional white South African laager-mentality I briefly ponder the feeling of encroachment before the question enters my mind, *Am I under attack?* Anxiously I turn down the window. A Black face peers into the window by my side. The country at this time—the year 2000—is paranoid with media reports of brutal car hijackings and vicious armed robberies. The dominant, unrelenting, historical media representation was that of Black men being dangerous perpetrators. This belief penetrated deep into the core of my soul; I believed it, and so feared those darker than me—even while considering myself to be a *good*, caring person at the time.

Another Black man who had been standing at the front of the car now walks closely along the left-hand side of the vehicle toward the rear end, exiting my peripheral field of view. I inhale, deeply, in the midst of a persistent pause that feels like the moment the needle of the clock on a time machine goes kaput. Suspended reality. Sweaty palms. Rigor mortis tongue. The Black face, smiling radiantly this time, peeks into the car, addresses me—rather politely—and asks me to drop the handbrake. *What?!* Hesitantly I comply, intending to step outside of the vehicle. Yet before I am able to react the vehicle begins to move. Forward—gliding in spite of the traffic. The five Black men push and push as I steer until eventually we reach a point in the road where the incline levels out and the curb subsides. On a small opening overlooking the mountain and Table Bay, about two hours from sunset, they leave the white man and his car intact. As they run down the hill I hear them whistle and cheer in Xhosa. Two, perhaps three minutes later they drive by in an old, beat-up, rusty builder's pickup truck—waving at me. I wave back and shout: *Baie dankie! Thank you!* I only know how to say so in Afrikaans and English, not in Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi, Tswana, or any of the other Black languages that are native to the land upon which I was born. I stay there for a while in silence, standing, broken car the furthest matter from my mind. A humbling encounter on a hilltop with those I both have deemed inferior and threatening. My emotions, *telling*.

In particular, I tender this preceding account—18 years on—as demonstration of the profound manner in which emotions populate the relations of white people to racial others, and in line with Ahmed’s (2004) reasoning that feelings mediate the relation between individual and collective bodies (p. 39). Consequently, rather than exclusively viewing racism as a matter of twisted ideology, in this piece I want to propose the need for renewed reflection on the importance of engaging with emotions in our thinking regarding both racism and antiracism work. Remarks Matias (2013), “Understanding racialized emotions is a vital source of what makes us human, and that in itself makes it noteworthy for examination” (p. 6). Emotions work on the surfaces of bodies—and skin, in particular (Ahmed, 2004, p. 30)—leading to the racialized production of, among others, violent and exclusionary practices, affective ideological alignments, covert prejudices, and identity politics predicated on the attribution of value or neglect toward others.

My desire in this piece is not to embark on a lengthy confessional of the racism that I formerly invested in as a lifestyle. As pointed out by Bonnett (1997), the genre of white confession all too often results in moralizing discourse comprised of “self-generated altruistic interest for ‘others’ as well as for ‘White people’s’ own moral well-being” (p. 182). In such confessions, white experiences and identities come to be foregrounded as the moral epicenter of antiracism discourse, frolicking in navel-gazing, self-berating accounts of privilege and guilt. Consequently, the vital accounts of Black and Brown people reporting their historical and lived experiences of racism come to be diminished within the sphere of white racial consciousness, and white supremacist structures are concurrently left unchallenged (see Lensmire et al., 2013). Additionally, neither is it my motive to point a castigating finger at white people, even though I will be regularly and broadly referring to white people throughout the remainder of this piece. Instead, when referring to *white people* I am doing so as a “practical category” (see Brubaker, 2002, p. 197) predicated on a shared range of ancestry and phenotype, and not through any assumption that white people exist as a simple monolith (see Lensmire, 2014). Ultimately, I wish to invite you—the reader—into an open, humane conversation regarding the social ramifications of white people’s underexplored emotional orientations upon both Black and Brown people and selves. I also summon white people, throughout this process, to consider evaluating our<sup>1</sup> lives in an honest, albeit vulnerable manner—to take stock, so to speak—and do the work of rigorous emotional evaluation so as to avoid the reification, reinforcement, and reproduction of subtle, albeit *well-intentioned* forms of racism. Too often the need for engaging in *social justice* work is tendered, especially within education contexts, yet it stands to reason that

*soulful justice* work needs to accompany attempts at social restoration (see Staples, 2016) lest we ourselves are left unchanged amid the change.

I want to suggest that white people are not entirely whole or healthy in relationship to Black and Brown people, and here I am including those who may think of ourselves as *postracial* and *colorblind*. The way in which many well-meaning white people all too easily resort to statements like *we are all human* and *we are all equal*, as noble as such ideals may be, jumps the gun in that such utterances betray an ignorance of the ongoing, daily dehumanization encountered by Black and Brown people in both personal and structural forms. Yet, such statements also betray an ignorance of that dehumanization inherent in the way white people became white. White people are, after all, implicated in the persistent deleterious social effects of colonialism, slavery, segregation, and racial violence and terrors of every kind: physical and psychic. On a more personal level, however, Thandeka (1999) frames white racial identity as “an impaired sense of a core self” (p. 127). She goes on to provide empirical evidence of the coercive policing of white children throughout their socialization into racial subjectivity by parents and peers, resulting in a loss of relations with racially proscribed others through the evisceration of impulses to engage in community with Black and Brown persons (Thandeka, 1999, p. 24). Alternately stated, the ways in which white people are socialized into becoming white produce negative, shame-based psychoemotional effects that often inhibit the formation of deeper, more meaningful human relationships with Black and Brown people, leading to anxiety and disciplinary codes of silence. Such silence, in turn, maintains class exploitation of many white people under the guise of *white-skin privilege* and works to mask racialized feelings of poor self-esteem, self-contempt, and shame that Thandeka (1999) refers to as the *wages of whiteness*. Such latent shame is potent in that it is able to erupt over Black and Brown people from whom white people are estranged.

Likewise, Matias (2016) provides a rich analysis of *emotionalities of whiteness* such as guilt, shame, anger, defensiveness, denial, sadness, dissonance, and discomfort that leave painful impressions on Black and Brown people. For Matias, emotions are a state of being that—relative to the persistent presence of race—are both able to spill over into embodied outbursts and manifest through physical pain and psychic trauma. Matias (2013), for instance, reports frequently being on the receiving end of “rituals of microaggressions” (p. 60) enacted by the white teacher candidates whom she teaches, and culminating in emotional traumas such as “waking up periodically throughout the night before class, hoping to cry myself back to sleep” (p. 57). Therefore, both Black and Brown people and whites are

significantly affected by whiteness and racism, albeit in different iterations and forms. Admittedly, most white people may not consider themselves affected by race or even remotely racist, yet I wish to persist and suggest that even our most seemingly pure and banal emotional orientations require scrutiny, and here I specifically want to steer the discussion toward white teachers and our oft-common emotion-laden desire to *care* for racial others. Whenever I ask the white preservice teacher-trainees with whom I work why they desire to work with minorities and marginalized peoples, their well-intentioned kneejerk response usually is that of overwhelming consensus: the desire to care. Yet, can *care* and *caring* potentially camouflage invisible, internal white supremacist structures?

To briefly engage this question I would like to highlight how seemingly banal displays of caring by white educators—if left unexplored—can come to reinforce the idea of *good whites simply acting on the behalf of Black victims* (Hoagland, 2007, p. 102). Think here of the general premise of a host of *white savior* films (Vera & Gordon, 2003) where the tears of white educators come to signify well-intentioned behavior in contrast to the tears of Black and Brown urban students cast as a sign of their weakness, wretchedness, and need of salvation (Matias, 2016, p. 6). At their core, cinematic representations of white people and educators *caring* for Black and Brown students such as *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, and *The Blind Side* (see DiAngelo, 2012, pp. 143–146) do little more than reify deep-seated, emotion-laden assumptions of deficit and pitiable helplessness. Matias (2016), with surgical precision, dissects the matter as follows:

Through her trials and tribulations, wrought with tears and well-intentioned behavior, the White woman's tears are deemed worthy of sympathy because of her strength to endure people of Color. However, in the same films, the people of Color are portrayed in ways where their emotionalities—their tears—are pitied for their weakness thus are in need of white savority. (p. 6)

Matias (2016) continues, “Let me be clear, the tears of White ladies are depicted as a symptom of innate goodness which is not mutually recognized in the tears of people of Color” (p. 6). Such sentiment is blind to the reality that my pleasure and my sense of moral goodness as a white person doing social justice work in education could only emerge if the other is in a position to need and so be grateful for my *gift*: “It is not the other person's need that requires our sense of benevolent charity . . . it is rather our sense of benevolent charity that requires the other person's need” (Hoagland, 2007, p. 103). It is especially important therefore to become aware of the manner

in which the antiracism and social justice investments of white educators can in fact work to *use*, and exploit, the racial and marginalized other as the means whereby white educators replenish a seemingly benign *feel good* patronage and resource antiracist, progressive identities. Here, the construction of a politically sanitized projection of whiteness ultimately obscures the asymmetrical power disparities left lurking beneath the generosity of whites. To sum up, *caring* needs to be recognized as a social practice that holds the potential to enact covert forms of racism and white supremacy.

Crucial to this conversation at this point, however, is a revalorization of the term *white supremacy*. As Alcoff (2015) highlights:

White supremacy . . . can manifest itself quite differently depending on historical periods and social groups: From Klan violence to law-backed disenfranchisement to paternal scolding that blames victims for their “culture of poverty” to entitled gentrifications of neighborhoods that force the nonwhite poor out of cities with an indifferent shrug. (p. 15)

I propose considering *white supremacy* beyond the predictable media-sensationalized realm of Klansmen and angry tiki-torch, confederate-flag wielding protestors. It is too convenient to sublimate racial estrangement and insecurities outward onto explicit racists without probing how white supremacist structures still comprise the otherwise unspoken internal and emotional life-worlds of white people. Joseph (2011) tenders the following personal account as an example:

Within a week of moving to an area of South Seattle designated by the 2010 U.S. Census as the most diverse in the country, I was cautioned by a well-intentioned, liberal White neighbor about the frequent incidence of car burglaries in the neighborhood. In our shared parking lot the neighbor told me, gesturing to her Obama/Biden bumper sticker, that her car was burgled “even though we have an Obama sticker!” (p. 389)

Here, the subliminal, problematic racialized undertones of the neighbor’s comment betray uninterrupted unconscious avowal of the stereotype of Black criminality, albeit in a covert manner that operates beneath the covers of benevolence and good intention. Benevolence and good intention have allowed racist emotions and desires to boil and froth relatively unhindered at the bottom of the illusory so-called melting pot for decades—to incubate deep within the hearts of otherwise liberal, well-meaning, good-to-do white folk who largely exhibit “white middle-class moral goodness” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 5). To complicate matters, contemporary liberal-progressive forms of multicultural censure by white people that sanction and shame individual eruptions of racist utterances as akin to the behavior of *rednecks* or

*white trash* often serve to scapegoat other white people to create antiracist identities—scapegoating rituals meant to secure the aggressor's identity and belonging as an antiracist (Lensmire, 2017). Here, it is helpful to recall the at times self-righteous and angry indignation poured out by self-identifying progressive whites on racist aggressors such as Michael Richards, better known as Kramer from the famous comedy sitcom *Seinfeld*, and Donald Sterling, former owner of the LA Clippers basketball franchise, following their explicit public racist outbursts. Supremacy and condescension are therefore able to operate independent of explicit racist allegiances among whites through those emotions, sentiments, and orientations left underexplored.

In conclusion, this short piece has sought to underscore the need for white teacher emotions to be self-interrogated by white teachers. Here, antiracism work comes to be as much a work performed upon self as within the social spaces within which white educators work. Such enterprise is in line with the practice of critical teacher reflection (Brookfield, 1995) and the kind of racial literacy work called for by Guinier (2004). White educators daily engage in encounters with Black and Brown people: students, colleagues, and administrators as well as people in a wide array of social contexts outside of school. Such encounters hold the potential to become profound *hilltop* encounters of restoration and reconciliation if white people are prepared to apply the required vulnerability and honesty necessary to scrutinize their emotional responses and investments toward Black and Brown people. It is therefore incumbent on white educators to pay close attention to emotional reactions during such encounters, to honestly ask what emotional reactions indicate regarding their inner assumptions and beliefs pertaining to Black and Brown people. Whites are also compelled throughout this process to earnestly contend with those racialized feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame into which they have been unconsciously socialized (Thandeka, 1999) as people who bear association with the violent colonial and racist remnants of a rapacious past that continues to manifest itself in the ongoing racial aggressions and disparities that mark our present day and age. After all, such debilitating emotions ultimately paralyze white people in their ability to engage in honest, wholesome relationships with Black and Brown people—relationships characterized by integrity, vulnerability, transparency, and solidarity. Yet, such endeavor requires that white people dispense with the kinds of emotional fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) often relied on to protect the ego from the kind of analysis and scrutiny that is essential toward deep and lasting change: *soulful* justice work.

## Note

1. Here I intentionally incorporate the possessive plural pronoun *our* in order to—as a white man—declare my participation in being white. However, such a rhetorical move does not assume that all readers engaging with this text are white. Instead, white people in particular are being addressed in this subsection. Additionally, where the plural pronouns *they* and *their* are used later in the work to refer to white people, such are not deployed independently of myself as a white person but are framed in this manner to keep in mind readers who do not constitute or identify as white.

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**Pauli Badenhorst** works as an assistant professor of teacher education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He specializes in integrated research surrounding the development of politically sustainable and culturally relevant educational approaches and practices rooted in empathy, equity, and

social justice. He is also particularly focused on the design of holistic epistemological and pedagogical frames to inform culturally ecological teaching, learning, and curriculum, and he explores the relationship between socio-political consciousness and the pedagogical philosophies and practices of aspiring teachers. He can be reached at [pauli.badenhorst@utrgv.edu](mailto:pauli.badenhorst@utrgv.edu).