



Reading summary

Schulz, S. (2024). Death can be clarifying: Considering the forces that move us. In D. Bargallie & N. Fernando (Eds.), *Critical racial and decolonial literacies: Breaking the silence* (pp. 261–275). Bristol University Press.

Research and teaching on race in White Australia is emotional – especially within teacher education, where most preservice teachers are white. Indeed, Australian teachers frequently report being ‘scared’ to embrace this discomforting terrain. An expression of this discomfort is affective numbness: i.e., the failure, on the part of white people, to raise difficult workplace conversations that challenge racial bias, or to initiate conversations around race with majority white learners. Yet working with racialised emotions is a part of effective, ethical teaching.

This chapter reflects on the relationship between emotions and race. It adopts an affective orientation to focus not just on what race and racism *are* but on what they *do*. This orientation draws attention to what bodies do as a consequence of affective (emotional) encounters, how these events are entangled in broader structures and how the conditions of possibility generated by emotional encounters may enable circumscribed forms of agency.

This chapter recounts two emotional incidents the author experienced, the first a fatal vehicle accident in a Kenyan village where the author was a volunteer teacher – or ‘voluntourist’ – and the second the deaths of her parents. The two experiences enabled the author to develop her thinking, firstly on white privilege in voluntourism, and secondly on resisting racialised neoliberalism in higher education and recommitting to critical orientations to teaching including teaching racial literacy.

As a voluntourist in Kenya, the author realised that she was part of a global system that mediates raced and classed privileges, but she initially lacked a clear language or framework for analysis to understand this. Later she came to understand how voluntourism enables

white subjects to exploit overseas travel for personal benefit when the behaviours of altruistic (white) individuals are positioned as 'solutions' to structural problems with deep colonial roots.

The author came to understand that the same cultural logics colonise the ways we understand schooling in settler colonising Australia, where teachers are normalised as white, whiteness is a norm against which diverse student cohorts are judged, and race is not recognised as a variable that impacts education outcomes. Those who succeed in Australian schooling are white bodies, or those who are rewarded for performing whiteness.

Performances of whiteness also extend to mastery of emotional responses. One of the aims of this chapter is to consider how colonial certainties can be disrupted by moments of vulnerability and unlearning. This can include 'embodied' forms of learning that engage future teachers in discomfoting emotional experiences supported by productive discussions about emotions, including their entanglements with the structural legacies of colonialism. Learning racial literacy is thus important. If schooling and teacher education are not calibrated to bring these basic lessons to life, death can embolden us to ask: What are we really doing here. What the hell is education for?

Take-home messages

Space for resistance in academia: While universities remain imperfect spaces for race critical and feminist research or teaching, academics can still be reflexive and critical, and creatively resist or explore new possibilities in critical solidarity.

Learning racial literacy: Learning racial literacy can help teachers remember what education is really for, including consciousness of our interconnections and social relations.

Learning from vulnerability and emotions: Moments of vulnerability and discomfoting emotional experiences can lead teachers to productive discussions about emotions, including entanglements with the structural legacies of colonialism.