

Book Review of White Tears, Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color

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White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrayed Women of Color by Ruby Hamad. Catapult, 2020. 284 p.p. \$21.85 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-948226-74-5.

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White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrayed Women of Color by Ruby Hamad addresses the distress around teaching Critical Race Theory in educational systems from the standpoint of a politics of emotions and interpersonal interactions of the dominant social groups with racial minorities. The author articulates some of the emotional tactics that make up “toxic femininity,” specifically for white women, and unveils the scars caused by these delicate yet intruding performances. Through shedding “white tears,” which Hamad defines as dishonest emotions, white women utilize emotional expression, primarily crying, to shut down the conversation about race and suppress the agencies of their sisters of color (p. 12). Not surprisingly, the author received severe waves of global backlash on social media in calling out white tears as another racist microaggression (p. 9).

Hamad makes an argument that white women weaponize crying against women of color to either avoid difficult conversations about racism or to get away with toxic femininity. For instance, Hamad describes Fox News host Melissa Francis’ visible discomfort when discussing the Charlottesville Riot in which white nationalists, neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, Klansman, and right-wing militias, rallied to unite the right while counter-protesters demonstrated against racism and white supremacy. The rally became violent when a car was driven into a group of counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring 35 others. As the issue was brought up, the news host burst into tears and exclaimed, “I am so uncomfortable having this conversation” (p. 3)! Utilizing this example, Hamad explains how this scene functions as an exemplar of how white women use emotion and tears to avoid discussing race. By calling out how white women utilize emotions to avoid contending with race and racism, Hamad disarms presumably authentic emotional subjects from experiencing, expressing, and benefitting from emotional racism. This move also debilitates racism from one of its focal pillars: capitalizing on white women's emotions by and through white men's savior role.

Throughout the book, Hamad offers examples from everyday life, anecdotes narrated by her interlocutors, social media, and popular culture, to further prove her point. For instance, when Luvvie Ajayi, a woman of color, asks a co-worker to stop touching her hair, the white woman makes a complaint to the Human Resources office. Ajayi is forced to leave her position unjustly, because of the toxic environment caused by co-worker threats (p. 8). In another example, Lisa Benson, an Emmy-winning African American television journalist, lost her job after sharing Hamad’s (2018) article on her Facebook page for “creating a hostile work environment based on race and gender” (p. 4).

Hamad argues this weaponization of tears and emotions has resulted in marginalizing, overshadowing, wounding, and gaslighting women of color in different spheres, including academia, workspaces, and streets alike (p. 9). The author goes on to argue for “actions and attitudes of white men and accompanying silence of white women [as] the defining historical feature of Western settler-colonial society” (p. 28). She asserts, “white settler women were aware of what was going on [about sexual harassment of women of color by their white male partners] and frequently took out their frustration by blaming the victim” (p. 31). As beneficiaries of racism, Hamad demands that white women check their emotions and confront their racism every time they are engaged in an interaction with a person of color.

Because of its unapologetic and fluent language in addressing a more implicit version of racism and specific animosity toward women of color, the book opens multiple avenues at the forefront of feminist pedagogy. First, the author's validation of women of color's hurt and suffering as a source of knowledge reminds the reader of the importance of feminist knowledge built from the bottom up. While women of color have found their emotions negated by the people in power, the author invites us to ponder deliberately and ask the question: How would feminist knowledge be different if we locate voices of women of color in the canon? Secondly, the book provides feminist pedagogy with a critical mission of examining the relationship between women of color and white women in educational settings. This question can illuminate the relationship among women in three different ways:

1. Between white feminist teachers and their students of color.
2. Between students of color and white feminist theory.
3. Between academic feminists of color on predominantly white campuses.

In the first case, conscious reflections of white feminists can result in some improvements. For example, instructors can make their syllabi more culturally responsive and incorporate anti-oppressive pedagogies into their praxis. However, the situation becomes more complicated when students of color enroll in women's, gender, sexuality, and feminist studies classes. Feminists of color have frequently declared how white feminist literature results in their alienation. Therefore, teaching this literature remains a problem that needs addressing. Finally, Hamad's frank discussion about the problematic relationship between women of color and white women can serve as a conversational opening in which academic feminists can work to acknowledge, document, and contend with the lived experiences of students and faculty members of color at predominantly white institutions.

In 2020 the world experienced new atrocities, from the outbreak of a pandemic to inequality of access to basic resources of food supply, medication, and accommodation for the poor, which resulted in enhanced discrimination in healthcare, increased police brutality, and mounting economic injustice. Simultaneously, pervasive hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BlackintheIvory, and #DismantleWhiteSupremacy have obliged increased discussions of racism, sexism, and colonialism in mainstream contexts. In this precarious moment, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color* offers a fresh perspective for anyone interested in the intersection of race and gender, invested in the feminisms of women of color, and committed to change. Additionally, the urgency of addressing race and racial inequalities in the relationship between women of color and white feminism makes the book a viable candidate for courses on a broad spectrum of topics on race and feminism, from media studies to the study of pop culture, feminist pedagogy and theory, and professionalization for students.

References:

Hamad, R. (2018, May 7). *How white women use strategic tears to silence women of colour*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/08/how-white-women-use-strategic-tears-to-avoid-accountability>