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"When Reparation Is Felt to Be Impossible": Persecutory Guilt and Breakdowns in Thinking and Dialogue about Race

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This paper examines the problem of white liberal guilt from a Kleinian perspective, considering both the reparative potential of guilt in the depressive position, as well as the ways in which racial guilt can become diverted to an internal experience focused more on the self than on the harmed other, inspiring ways of thinking and acting that have little to do with repair. Drawing especially from the Kleinian concept of *persecutory guilt*, which describes the form guilt can take "when reparation is felt to be impossible", I examine the consequences of white liberal guilt as expressed in the United States today. In particular, I argue that white liberal self-idealization and self-reproach – positions summarized as "this is not who we are" and "this is all that we are" – can function as two sides of a coin, grounded in splitting and in divergent yet related forms of exceptionalism. As an alternative, I propose thinking about reparation within the realm of the ordinary, and consider what this might entail.

"Guilt is unbearable when reparation is felt to be impossible."

Ignes Sodre (2015)

"Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

James Baldwin (1962)

"It starts to feel like everything in my life is built on crime," says a patient, a young white woman, politically progressive, thoughtful, starting to reckon with her own relationship with whiteness and its history in the Unites States.[1] "And my guilt is useless."

My best path through breakdowns in thinking has been through dialogue. I want to thank the many people who have been in conversation with me over the past few years either directly about this paper, or in general related to the internal and external realities it describes, including Han Yu, Lynne Zeavin, Donald Moss, Danielle Frank, Ben Kafka, Claudia Rankine, David Eng, June Lee Kwon, Annie Lee Jones, Alexandra Woods, Gloria Ellis, Suheyla Zubaroglu, Forbes Singer, Melanie Suchet, Cleonie White, Sue Grand, Judy Roth, Lauren Levine, Ryan Kull, Hannah Wallerstein, Cassie Kaufmann, Erin Jeannette, Stephen Anen, Lara Sheehi, Callie Watkins-Liu, Yi-Ping Ong, Katie DiSalvo-Thronson, Patrick Blanchfield, Sowjanya Kudva, Sarah Shapiro, Karen Taylor, and many others. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the spring conference of Division 39 in New York, NY, June 2016; at *On Whiteness: A Symposium*, organized by The Racial Imaginary Institute, in New York, NY, June 2018; and at *Psychoanalysis on Ice* in Reykjavik, Iceland, July, 2018.

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[1] This is my country of origin and the context I am most familiar with in terms of history and dynamics around race and racism, but I hope aspects of the ideas here may also resonate with colleagues from other parts of the world.

In this paper, I take seriously the ways in which this perspective on whiteness and white guilt – which I have heard echoed by many other liberal and progressive white people[2] (the group I address here as "we," as detailed below), not only patients but also colleagues, friends, activists, scholars and writers – is both accurate and necessary. Among other reasons, this perspective serves as a needed corrective to white liberal self-idealization; to the idea that racism and white supremacy are located "out there," in others and in the past, rather than in our own daily lives, to their foundations (e.g., Sullivan, 2014). Historically and into the present, it is true that much of what white Americans have – materially, and in terms of opportunities and unearned privilege – has been gained through violence, both physical and structural (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Coates, 2014; Kendi, 2017). As people of color have told us repeatedly and over time, this is part of the reality of being white in this country, painful but essential to face.

I also take seriously the ways in which, when well-meaning white people begin to recognize these realities about ourselves and our histories, we can be left with a sense of these harms as, to some extent, irreparable. As I will argue below, this sense of the irreparable is, in part, simply a statement of fact, given the sweeping scope and depth of racism and its impact. In this context, the wish, among white liberals, that this depth of harm could be repaired completely can function, at times, as a defense to protect our sense of our own goodness, a fantasy of erasure of debt, and a type of manic reparation (Klein, 1935, 1940). At the same time, when reparation seems foreclosed, I believe this can result in a relationship to our own guilt that can lead to breakdowns in thinking, self-reflection and dialogue (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Davids, 2011; DiAngelo, 2018; Esprey, 2017), which can make change even harder to envision and practice.

My argument here is grounded in the contemporary Kleinian tradition, drawing especially from the Kleinian concept of *persecutory guilt*. Persecutory guilt – guilt in the paranoid-schizoid position, or at the threshold of the depressive position – contrasts with reparative guilt in the depressive position (e.g., Klein, 1935, 1940), and describes the form guilt can take "when reparation is felt to be impossible" (Sodre, 2015).

The majority of the Kleinian literature referenced here – aside from Davids' (2011) essential work on internal racist organizations, which addresses different states of racial guilt and their implications – was not formulated with issues of race in mind. Yet I see this Kleinian theoretical framework as uniquely useful for understanding the ways in which our capacities to reflect, mourn and engage can break down in the face of recognizing harm to others that may feel irreparable; as well as for considering what a more constructive relationship to our own guilt might entail.

Also drawing from a Kleinian perspective, I am interested in the ways in which white liberal self-idealization and self-reproach can function as two sides of a coin, grounded in splitting (Klein, 1946), and in divergent yet related forms of exceptionalism. I could summarize these positions as "This is not who we are" – a common refrain among white liberals in the U.S., with each breaking news story illustrating our society's racism – and "This is all that we are." In other words, self-concepts either as completely innocent or completely corrupted. Both can be limiting and counterproductive as stances from which to approach racial justice, and can

[2] While I am using these terms (liberal and progressive) somewhat interchangeably for the purposes of this paper, I do not mean this to obscure the real political differences they imply.

block access to the kind of depressive guilt, responsibility and concern that might, in fact, be generative and lead to reparative action.

A NOTE ON ADDRESS, AND ON CENTERING WHITENESS

This paper examines a tendency among white liberals and progressives to oscillate, when confronted with the realities of white racism, between negating our own guilt and projecting it into "other, bad" white people, while idealizing ourselves as virtuous and good; and at the other extreme, seeing everything we have and are as "built on crime," with little possibility for repair.

It is this group that I am addressing here when I write "we": namely, well-meaning, liberal white people who, at least consciously, hold ideals of racial justice as valued – even idealized – aspects of our identities, yet whose subjectivities have been shaped in the context of a society where whiteness confers power, and who continue to benefit from structural inequalities based on race. In other words, white people who feel guilt about the ways in which our histories and actions fall short of our ideals of racial justice, yet are unsure how to address this guilt. I include myself in this group, and believe it also describes many white psychoanalysts and clinicians, though certainly not all.

Likewise, when I write "they," I am referring to people of color. I do not mean this to distance nonwhite readers, but instead to describe a group that I don't, myself, belong to. In addition, while many of the examples here refer specifically to anti-Black racism in America, and the concept of reparation holds a particular meaning in this context, I also do not mean to overlook the experiences of non-Black people of color, or of people of color outside the United States. The American tendency to construct race in binary terms can at times obscure the experiences of other people of color, or falsely reify whiteness and Blackness as dichotomous (e.g., Eng & Han, 2019). Because I grew up in an American context, this dichotomous view has shaped my understandings of race in ways I am still uncovering. But I hope aspects of the dynamics I describe will also resonate beyond this context.

One concern I have about situating white people as the subjects of this paper – and about anti-racist writing on whiteness, generally – is that this may reproduce societal dynamics in which white people's experiences are centered at the expense of the experiences of people of color, rendering white people's subjectivities with nuance, and leaving what it means to be an *object* of white racism overly abstract. This is an important debate that is still evolving, within psychoanalysis and elsewhere, and that I want to name, despite not having a clear sense of how to resolve it.

Another concern surrounds the implications of writing in theoretical language about a topic that touches on acutely painful aspects of lived experience, for white people but, more importantly, for people who have been objects of white racism. I also realize that having the space, as a white person, to reflect on these dynamics through the lens of theory, at some remove from an experience of daily personal threat, may seem like a luxury born of privilege – which it is.

At the same time, I believe in the usefulness of theory to help us think about, understand, and engage differently with parts of our lives and relationships that can become stuck in an impasse, stalling both personal and societal change. It is with this in mind that I wrote this paper, alongside an awareness of its limitations and my own. I hope it will be useful as one small piece of a much larger conversation.

THE PROBLEM OF WHITE GUILT

In her 1981 essay "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Audre Lorde describes white guilt about racism in the following terms:

> Guilt … is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness. (p. 130)

This nuanced view of guilt – as a potential force for change that, when diverted from this goal, can also lead to paralysis and communication breakdowns (e.g., DiAngelo, 2018) – is strikingly resonant with the Kleinian view of guilt I am drawing from here, especially as it applies to guilt about racial injustice. It also crystalizes what I see as the problem of white guilt: that in different manifestations, it can both foster and hinder efforts to take responsibility for racism.

The counterproductive aspects of white guilt are likely the associations that come to mind, first, when we hear this term. An object of critique and caricature on both the right and the left, deployed by the alt-right to portray white liberals as weak, and by progressives to differentiate truly anti-racist whites from the self-indulgent and hysterical, "white guilt" is not a term I think any of us would willingly use to describe our own attitudes toward racism and whiteness – although others might describe us this way, likely causing us to cringe and feel ashamed.

This cringe reaction isn't without reason. There is much about white guilt that is worthy of skepticism. Like the "guiltiness" described by Mitchell (2000) in contrast to reparative guilt, white guilt can be performative and excessive (e.g., Harris, 2012). There can be "something self-indulgent in (its) self-mortification" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 726).[3] It can lead to a confusion between who, in fact, is the subject versus the object of harm, "psychically colonizing" the suffering of the other and claiming it as our own (Eng, 2016; Hartman, 1997; Zeavin, 2018). It can get stuck in a melancholy space where sorrow is romanticized but responsibility is deferred (e.g., Harris, 2007). It can be used to cover over, rather than address, our aggression; can lead us to demand comfort and forgiveness from those we have harmed in a way that perpetuates these harms; and can mimic, but in fact block, genuine remorse and efforts at repair (Harris, 2012). It can lead white people to abdicate our sense of moral agency out of a belief that only people of color possess moral authority (Sullivan, 2014). It can be used to preserve a sense of omnipotence, through a wish that our guilt could purify us of racist badness (Benjamin, 2002).

Even just writing this account of how white guilt can go wrong, and perhaps also reading it, a feeling of futility – and maybe also of shame,[4] and difficulty thinking – creeps in. Our guilt *itself* may start to feel "built on crime," corrupted and worthy of suspicion. As I will elaborate

[3] Mitchell was not writing about race or white guilt here, but about "guiltiness" more generally. Harris (2012) later used his concept of "guiltiness" to reflect on the more problematic aspects of white guilt.

[4] While a detailed discussion of white shame is beyond the scope of this paper, I believe there is some overlap between shame and persecutory guilt, in the sense that both can be evoked in moments of exposure that threaten an idealized sense of self. See (Watkins, 2018; Grand, 2018), for more extended discussions of shame in the context of whiteness.

below, I see this as a state of persecutory guilt, which can mobilize paranoid anxieties that interfere with self-reflection. This is one of the dilemmas of writing and thinking about white guilt – namely, that recognizing its presence and impact can also *evoke* it in ways that shut down thinking rather than fostering it.

These risks are real, and have genuine consequences. At the same time, I also see guilt as an appropriate response to considering the vast, ongoing racial inequities that exist in our society, as well as the overwhelming debt, emotional and material, that white people owe for these inequities. As Eula Biss observes in her essay "White Debt," in German the words for guilt and for debt are the same: *schuld* (Biss, 2015). Our guilt, in this way, is matter-of-fact, pointing to a debt that is concretely real, and that requires action as well as reflection.[5]

By invoking this debt, I refer not only to direct legacies of slavery and overt racial violence, but also to the more subtle yet pervasive daily circumstances that shape our lives in ways that are colored by racial difference, including the networks of social, educational, professional and economic access we receive by accident of our birth, where we send our children to school, where and with whom we practice and for what compensation, etc.

When we are functioning within depressive rather than paranoid-schizoid states of mind, in addition to its many possible pitfalls I believe there is also potential for our guilt about these realities to serve as a compass of sorts, guiding us to take responsibility for the debts we owe (e.g., Klein, 1940).

At least in theory (which I recognize can diverge greatly from lived experience), depressive guilt is painful but can also be hopeful in that it points toward aspects of ourselves and our society that can, and should, be changed. Again, ideally, it is grounded in an acknowledgment of our own aggression and destructiveness, without collapsing into a view of ourselves as irredeemably harmful or broken; and in respect and concern for those we have harmed, maintaining an awareness of their separateness, rather than identifying with their suffering in an appropriative or masochistic way (e.g., Berlant, 1998; Eng, 2016; Hartman, 1997). And, at least as I see it, it is grounded in an understanding of reparation – at an interpersonal level and also, I would argue, at a societal, political, material level – as something we are responsible for, even when the breadth of repair is beyond what we, as individuals, can bring about on our own.[6]

Yet this reparative guilt can often become diverted to an internal experience focused more on the self than the other, inspiring ways of thinking and acting that – like the defensive moves described by DiAngelo (2011, 2018) as *white fragility* – have less to do with repair than with protecting ourselves from a sense of persecution, by others and by our own thoughts and feelings.

Guilt can take on this persecutory tone when we see ourselves and the world in starkly divided terms, as all-good or all-bad. In this split state of mind, the presence of guilt may be felt as a total threat to the self's goodness – a persecutor threatening to spoil our sense of ourselves

[5] For example, the cost of reparations for slavery in the United States has been estimated at between 5.9 and 14.2 trillion dollars (Craemer, 2015), and the racial wealth gap continues to grow (Chetty et al., 2020).

[6] As many writers and activists of color have argued, sometimes reparation may also involve ceding aspects of our own power and privilege in order for others who have been marginalized to lead.

as clean or as worthy, which needs to be warded off. We may then experience our guilt less as a feeling from within, inspiring concern and repair, and more as a threat or injury from without, from which we need to defend ourselves.

KLEINIAN AND CONTEMPORARY KLEINIAN CONCEPTS OF PERSECUTORY AND REPARATIVE GUILT

The above descriptions of persecutory and reparative guilt are woven together from my own understanding of Kleinian and contemporary Kleinian theories of guilt in the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, applied to white liberal guilt. I will pause, here, to elaborate on the theory I am drawing from to build this account.

Melanie Klein's writings about guilt locate it mainly as belonging to the depressive position, with its capacities for integration, concern and repair (e.g., Klein, 1935, 1940); yet she also alludes to experiences of guilt characterized by splitting and paranoia (e.g., Klein, 1932, 1957).

In her earlier work, she discusses this in relation to the early superego, composed of relatively unintegrated idealized and persecutory internal objects (e.g., Klein, 1932). She later refers to this as the "envious superego," which she argues is "felt to disturb and annihilate all attempts at repair and creativeness" (Klein, 1957, p. 213). According to Klein, when a person is unable, either in a transient or more enduring way, to bear depressive guilt, "the object that rouses guilt is turned into a persecutor," and guilt itself can be "felt as persecution" rather than as an opportunity for repair (Klein, 1957, p. 194).

The concept of persecutory guilt grew out of Klein's work, and was explicitly formulated by other Kleinian analysts such as Money-Kyrle (1952) and Grinberg (1964), who first used the term to refer to guilt in the paranoid-schizoid position. Money-Kyrle draws on Klein's earlier work to propose "two types of conscience," depressive and persecutory. Grinberg similarly distinguishes between depressive and persecutory guilt, with the former characterized by sorrow, remorse, concern, and responsibility, and the latter by resentment, despair, fear, and self-reproach (p. 368). In Grinberg's view, persecutory guilt can be experienced as an attack on one's idealized sense of self, interfering with both mourning and reparation.

Several contemporary Kleinian writers have built on these ideas in ways I find useful for understanding white liberal guilt, although aside from Davids (2011), issues of race are not their focus. Among these are Rosenfeld (1962) on the "persecutory superego"; O'Shaughnessy (1999) on the "pathological superego" and its attacks on our capacities for thought, reflection, memory, and understanding; and Steiner (1990, 1993) on pathological organizations and psychic retreats as defenses against unbearable guilt. More recently, Davids (2011) has described the workings of internal racism from a Kleinian perspective, and Sodre (2015) has explored manic defenses against guilt "at the threshold of the depressive position." While a detailed discussion of these ideas is beyond the scope of this paper, I will introduce a few main themes that I see as particularly salient for understanding persecutory guilt about racism among white liberals.

Central among these is the idea that guilt is experienced as "unbearable" and persecutory "*when reparation is felt to be impossible*" (Sodre, 2015, p. 24, italics mine); and that experiencing guilt as "unbearable" and irreparable can lead to a shift from depressive to paranoid-schizoid states of mind in which thought and reflection break down (Davids, 2011).

When I refer to "unbearable" guilt or anxiety (a common term in the Kleinian literature), I do not mean this as a plea for sympathy for white people's distress at facing our complicity in racial harms, or as an attempt to center white subjectivity at the expense of attention to racism's impact. I also do not mean to compare the experience of facing guilt about racism to the daily, often unbearable reality of being an *object* of racism. I am instead using the word "unbearable" less in terms of its causes and more in terms of its consequences. Specifically, I am using it to refer to experiences that are felt to apply strain or pressure to our minds in ways that shut down our capacities for thought and understanding (e.g., Bion, 1959), resulting in states of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018) and "defensiveness destructive of communication."

In other words, as Davids (2011) argues in his work on internal racism, "Guilt felt to be unbearable cannot be processed mentally" (p. 50). It can lead, instead, to concrete repetition rather than reflection (p. 225); as well as a reliance on pathological organizations and psychic retreats (Steiner, 1990, 1993) – a network of defenses built to avoid emotional contact with painful aspects of both inner and outer reality – as a refuge from facing guilt and responsibility (Davids, 2011, p. 205).

Persecutory guilt is seen as "unbearable" in this way because the possibility of reparation – which makes reparative guilt ultimately bearable and usable, though painful – seems foreclosed. This can give rise to projection of our guilt and aggression onto others in an attempt to protect ourselves from persecutory anxiety, leading to a confusion between subject and object in which the harmed other, and the fact of their suffering, comes to be experienced as a threat to the idealized self.

Rosenfeld (1962), Steiner (2011), and Sodre (2015) have each described this experience in terms of facing the "accusing eyes" of the injured object, either in external reality or as represented internally, and have sketched nuanced accounts of the aggression (Rosenfeld, 1962), retreats from emotional contact (Steiner, 1990, 1993), and manic defenses (Sodre, 2015) mobilized to defend ourselves from recognizing responsibility for harm.

For example, when something we have said or done is described as "racist," we may feel attacked in a total way, to our core; and may perceive whoever was hurt by our words or actions – with their "accusing eyes" reflecting back an image of ourselves that we don't want to acknowledge as true – as the *actual* persecutor. When this happens, we lose our ability to make reparative use of our guilt because it has now been projected and disowned (e.g., Davids, 2011; Rankine & Loffreda, 2016).

Davids (2011) makes the essential point that relying on these types of defenses against facing racial guilt, which he refers to as "internal racist organizations," can lead to a vicious cycle of escalating harm, guilt, and retreat from contact with reality. The more we use these defenses – especially if we are aware, on some level, that their use harms others who, at least consciously, we do not want to harm – "the more guilt there is to face, making the burden (of guilt) more unbearable, and the more in need we are therefore of the (racist) organization as a refuge" (p. 51).

So, if I, as a liberal white person, don't *see* myself as someone who would respond to a statement that something I said or did was racist by feeling persecuted, but I nevertheless *do* respond this way, then recognizing the dissonance of this response with my idealized sense of self may cause even *more* guilt. If I then struggle to face this guilt, perhaps because of a fear that I won't be able to repair it, I may get stuck in a loop where

I oscillate between a sense of myself as irredeemably bad, and a conviction that I am in fact innocent; that all the aggression belongs to the person who "accused" me (Davids, 2011, p. 48), and not to me. In both these positions, concern for the other gets lost, and so does the possibility of repair.

This is essentially how Sodre (2015) describes persecutory guilt: as a "constant shifting backwards and forwards from 'It is my fault' to 'It is not my fault'" that leads to splits in the mind. Struggling to avoid both a loss of self-idealization and a dawning awareness of responsibility for harm, the superego is split into idealizing and persecutory parts, and the ego is also split such that "the internal observer, the ego's capacity to know itself, is attacked." "Violence," she continues, "is therefore directed not only against the persecuting object and the persecuting superego, but also against the functioning of the mind" (pp. 25–26).

I will return shortly to this argument about the impact of persecutory guilt on the functioning of the mind, as this affects thinking and dialogue about race. Because persecutory guilt is catalyzed by a sense of harm as beyond repair, however, I will first consider some of the factors that contribute to this sense of the irreparable with regard to racial injustice.

RACE AND THE IRREPARABLE

To shift for a moment from the internal world to the political and historical: In "The Case for Reparations," Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) argues in favor of H.R. 40, the "Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act," while also suggesting that a full repayment for the harms of slavery is likely impossible.

"Perhaps after a serious discussion and debate – the kind that H.R. 40 proposes – we may find that the country *can never fully repay* African Americans" (italics mine), he writes:

> But we stand to discover much about ourselves in such a discussion – and that is perhaps what scares us. The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper – America's heritage, history, and standing in the world. (pp. 200-201)

I find this resonant on multiple levels, including the recognition that white Americans are responsible for irreparable harms; that reparation is nevertheless essential, despite its incompleteness; and that engaging in efforts at necessary yet incomplete reparation involves relinquishing an idealized view of our own goodness and exceptionalism, as individuals and collectively.

Whether we are thinking about reparation in political, material and economic terms, or at the more intimate scale of interpersonal relationships, the idea that some racial harms may be irreparable, or at least may appear this way, is crucial for understanding white liberal guilt. I will consider several reasons this may be the case.

First, when we speak about racism and its impact, we are speaking not only about the present but also about history. This includes violence that unfolded over centuries and can't be undone, even if its active reproduction in the present is radically altered. Facing this scale of harm that is irreparable because it is past, though ongoing, can lead to states of persecutory guilt, as can reckoning with the paradox of a country (in this case, the United States) founded on ideals of liberty but materially "built on crime" – on slavery and genocide (e.g., Anderson, 2017; Coates, 2014; Jones & Obourn, 2014; Kendi, 2017).

Second, white supremacy as a system – of ideals, political and economic policies, and ways of relating with ourselves and others – is bigger than any of us as individuals, and as such, is beyond what any of us as individuals can fully repair. To imagine we could is essentially a white savior fantasy, cathartic but naïve and counterproductive. But to engage anyway, despite our relative smallness in relation to a problem of this scale, requires a level of internal structure, tolerance of frustration, recognition of our own limits, and ability to collaborate with others without centering ourselves that can sometimes elude us as white people, through lack of practice and, as DiAngelo (2018) has argued, lack of stamina in addressing issues of race.

Third, because of their scale, issues of race and racism often evoke intense group process and a "first person plural" voice (Moss, 2001) prone to splitting, projection, and basic assumptions (Bion, 1961) that can make it very difficult to think or to work effectively. I will discuss this further below, regarding breakdowns in thinking and dialogue about race in our field and elsewhere. This group process, and the rifts it can both cause and expose, may itself seem irreparable at times, because it can take hold so quickly and so intensely.

On a more intimate scale, racial reparation may seem elusive if we are thinking about racial privilege and oppression solely as abstract phenomena, rather than also as forces that shape our own daily lives with people we love. I believe this disconnect can be heightened when, as white people, we live lives that are relatively segregated, with few close relationships with people of color; and beyond this, when we are socialized not to even recognize this segregation as a *loss*, which impoverishes our own lives as well as those of others (e.g., DiAngelo, 2018). This interpersonal distance – coupled with a failure to see and feel the loss this distance entails – can make reparation seem even more out of reach, because reparative guilt tends to grow out of intimacy, not abstraction.

When we stop relating to racism as something abstract and outside ourselves, and begin to reclaim some of our own projections, another possibly irreparable fact emerges: namely, that the history and present-day realities of racism are inscribed in our own minds, permeating and shaping our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and relationships, at times outside our conscious awareness, or at the edges of this awareness (e.g., Davids, 2011). In this regard, feelings of the irreparable around racial guilt can resemble feelings of the irreparable that we experience when any area of our minds that is dissonant with our ideals, yet that we feel unsure how to change, is first exposed.

Finally, even when we acknowledge the realities of racism in our own histories, inner worlds, and present-day actions, and commit to repairing what we can, grounded in this awareness, we may begin to notice the places where we hesitate at the threshold of even *possible* repair. We may notice that, for example, even after identifying things we have that aren't rightfully ours, we all, at times, still cling to them fiercely.

This dynamic is captured evocatively by Harris (2012), who describes her relationship with a collection of Haida objects passed down through generations in her family. She travels to visit a Haida village in Canada and meets the people to whom these objects once belonged. She is moved to tears when hearing about a museum returning their artifacts to the tribe from which they were taken. She reflects on the ways in which her possession of the Haida objects she has come to cherish is based on a "delusion of ownership" (p. 205).

Yet she also reckons with a growing recognition that, despite all this, she doesn't want to give these objects back.

Harris uses this story from her own life to reflect more broadly on experiences of guilt and "guiltiness" about what we don't actually own, yet want to keep as white people. Suchet (2007) likewise examines this grasping relationship we can have to our own privilege, even as we try to disown it, which she describes as "this deep, visceral refusal to let go" (p. 881). This applies not only to "possessions" as specific as particular objects, but also to a wide array of privileges, social, economic, institutional, and otherwise, that we come to see ourselves as owning – including, as Cheryl Harris argues in her classic paper "Whiteness as Property," whiteness itself (Harris, 1993).

In other words, some things may feel irreparable not because they *are*, but because they involve giving something up that we have grown attached to and don't want to relinquish, even when this goes against what we see as our ethics and our politics (e.g., Harris, 2012).

Recognizing these truths about ourselves can evoke intense guilt and shame. It can also lead to breakdowns in thinking, as we outwardly express anti-racist ideals, yet internally contend with a realization that, in many areas of our lives, we are clinging to things that are "built on crime" but that we don't yet want to part with (D. Frank, personal communication, December 2018). This dissonance may not be fully resolvable. Yet acknowledging these sites of "refusal to let go" can be profoundly useful, because they point toward forms of repair that *could*, in fact, be possible – beginning in our own daily lives, and expanding out to larger structural issues that reflect the same dynamics.

I will return shortly to some implications of these dynamics for how we might understand and engage with reparation. But first I will consider the breakdowns in thinking that I believe can result from these states of dissonance and persecutory guilt. I see these thinking breakdowns as important both because they are one common, outward manifestation of the internal dynamics I have been describing; and also because, when they occur, they can cause our reparative efforts to grind to a halt and our discussions to get lost in confusion.

FRAGILE TALK, AND BREAKDOWNS IN THINKING

I am in the audience at a panel at a psychoanalytic conference.[7] The theme is racism in America. I assume that everyone present chose to attend this panel, at least on a conscious level, because we see racism as an urgent issue that we want to address – personally, politically, and as clinicians. I also assume that, at least consciously, we do not want to do harm, either in our work, or through our participation in this conversation.

Yet when the session is opened for commentary from the audience, things quickly start to unravel. Many comments from white audience members are difficult to follow, because they seem to start going in one direction and then reverse course, as though suddenly there is danger – from outside or inside, it isn't clear – that needs to be dodged from all sides. Many of these comments converge around split positions, with refrains of "This is not who we are" – racism exists outside this room, and belongs to others, whom we can judge, and feel united in

[7] This is a composite of my experiences at a number of psychoanalytic events on the topic of racism.

judging – and "This is all that we are" – we are bad and broken, and there isn't much we can do about this except hope to be absolved and forgiven. As white participants, in other words, we quickly find ourselves in a paranoid-schizoid place, dominated by splitting and a sense of threat and suspicion.

I don't mean to single out other white audience members for criticism. I feel these pressures, too, and partly as a result, decide not to speak, which isn't a constructive solution. I have trouble formulating what *would* be a constructive way of engaging. This conversation starts to feel increasingly hopeless and confusing, and as I'm trying to gather my thoughts – as I imagine many others are, too – more harmful things are being said and enacted that make it even harder to imagine how, as a group, we might repair the damage we are doing in the moment, let alone the damage we are speaking about.

This is one example of what I mean by breakdowns in thinking around sites of persecutory guilt about racism. These are moments when our capacities for self-reflection become fractured; our speech stops making sense; we try both to communicate and to hide at the same time (D. Frank, personal communication, December 2018), attempting to preserve an idealized self-image while recognizing traces, in ourselves, of its opposite; and we become deeply confused about who is causing harm to whom.

A number of psychoanalytic thinkers have identified this phenomenon as occurring specifically in the context of conversations about race. Leary (2000) has observed that talk about race can be "extremely fragile and easily subject to collapse" (p. 642). Esprey (2017) has discussed "thinking-thwarting enactments" around race, dominated by "mindlessness and non-thinking" (pp. 20–21). And Davids (2011) has captured the tendency, among white liberals speaking about race, for there to be "an atmosphere … in which all [are] on the right side, but the capacity to think [is] utterly paralyzed" (p. 99).

This precariousness in white thinking and dialogue about race has been described with nuance, outside psychoanalysis, by DiAngelo (2011, 2018) in her work on white fragility, which she defines as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable" (or in the language of this paper, unbearable), triggering feelings of being under attack, interpersonal defensiveness, and increasing verbal incoherence (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). She especially observes this among white liberals, because of the dissonance evoked when we consciously hold one set of ideals about race, but find that our thoughts and actions reflect something else altogether.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's studies of "colorblind racism" (2003) also document the incoherent talk that can result from living within a dominant culture that, in his words, "forbids the open expression of racially based feelings, views, and positions" (ibid, p. 91), but that nevertheless allows the *power* relations that proceed from and inform these racial views to remain intact.

In other words, if we relate to racism as a form of impurity that must not be spoken about or exposed, which characterizes the "colorblind" worldview (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; DiAngelo, 2018; Sullivan, 2014), we become paranoid toward our own thoughts about race, and our thinking breaks down. Our speech may become a kind of purity ritual (e.g., Shotwell, 2016; Sullivan, 2014) aimed more at reassuring ourselves and others that we are "clean" from the contamination of racism than at actual thought and communication. As a result, as we lose our ability to think clearly and openly, we lose access to the kind of reflection that could lead to change.

Many psychoanalysts of color (e.g., Holmes, 1999; Leary, 2000) have observed similar processes at play in their clinical work with white patients, especially liberal white patients, describing the ways in which these patients' thinking and speech can unravel when issues of race come up in their presence; or even when these issues *don't* come up directly, but are evoked simply by the fact of speaking with a person of color and fearing that some racist thought or feeling will be exposed.

This is essentially a paranoid-schizoid stance: fearing exposure of something "bad" in the self – a part of the self that feels "built on crime" – while also experiencing the other as fundamentally threatening, simply for witnessing and holding a mirror to our internal process (e.g., Rankine & Loffreda, 2016). We may respond by trying to hide these parts of ourselves, both from ourselves and others, and by feeling wronged when they are noticed, anyway. Or, we may respond by defensively idealizing the other, in the hope that an idealized image of ourselves will be reflected back in turn. But when we engage with others in this way, grounded in splitting and suspicion, communication and emotional intimacy become increasingly out of reach.

I believe similar dynamics can arise in white liberal clinicians' work with patients of color, as well as in our interactions with colleagues of color – at conferences, in training institutes, on listservs, and in supervision. If, in their presence, we are in the paranoid state of mind that comes with persecutory guilt, even if we are not directly discussing race *at all*, our abilities to think, understand, and connect will be damaged by our fears of exposure. We may feel pulled to obscure areas of internal racism by, for example, relying on excessive idealization without actual depth (e.g., Straker, 2004; Suchet, 2007), which can be used defensively both in treatment and in dialogue among colleagues, creating a superficial atmosphere of harmony at the expense of engaging with another person in their complexity. Or we may place unfair claims on patients or colleagues of color to affirm us as "good" white people; to be our teachers when that is not their role; and/or to be our judges, handing out punishment or absolution – each of which can be burdensome, in its own way.

These dynamics can also arise in white liberal clinicians' work with other white people, and in our interactions with white colleagues. We may think of racism as situated entirely outside ourselves, in other white people – including, potentially, white patients and colleagues – and project our own racism into them, rather than recognizing it as something we, too, have "an ongoing struggle with" (Davids, 2011, p. 101). In other words, we may take a stance that "This is not who we are," despite evidence to the contrary; and by disidentifying in this way, damage our abilities to understand others or ourselves (e.g Moss, 2001). At the other extreme, we may insist that "This is all that we are," a way of relating with other white people that may begin with a desire to take responsibility, but that can end, instead, by evoking states of persecutory guilt that shut down reflective space.

At a fundamental level, whether we are working with people who share or diverge from our own racial backgrounds, as clinicians we work with our minds, and we can't do so effectively unless we can face and bear what we find there. An ability to reflect and communicate openly about race is not, in itself, reparative, but it is a beginning, and very little is possible without it.

REPARATION

I have been considering two, perhaps on the surface contradictory, ideas about racial reparation, as this relates to white guilt. One has to do with what can't be repaired, at least not fully; and how we might remain engaged without shutting down our reflective capacities when this is the case. The other has to do with what I will refer to, here, as the ordinary, and what is in fact within reach for meaningful, though incomplete, change.

From the first perspective, I have been arguing for the importance of recognizing that some of the harms caused by racism and white supremacy *are*, in fact, irreparable; that some of the privileges we hold as white people are "built on crime" in an indelible way; and that the guilt, and even the moments of hopelessness, that this reality can evoke for liberal white people is something we need to learn to sit with, and bear, without looking for the relief of reparation to make it go away.

This stance is captured evocatively in an exchange from Claudia Rankine's play *The White Card* (2019). In it, a liberal, white male art collector, deeply invested in being perceived as a "good" white person on the side of racial justice, but hesitant to look at the ways in which he is also implicated in racial oppression, is speaking with a Black female artist whose work he wants to acquire. As she urges him to recognize his own participation in the white supremacist system he critiques without rushing to cast himself as a white savior, he laments: "That is so hopeless."

"Go further into that hopelessness," she replies, "and then we can begin to really see each other" (p. 87).

Sometimes trying to move immediately to reparation, in other words, can cause us to avoid the kind of internal reckoning and interpersonal understanding that we need in order to engage, deeply, with the realities of racial injustice and our role in it.

The second perspective, which I see as complementary, is that some of the harms of racism may seem irreparable not because they *are*, but because of how we relate, as white people, to what reparation is and should be, which in turn deeply affects how we relate to racial guilt.

As liberal white people, we may imagine reparation not in the sense Klein intended, which involves an acknowledgment of loss and of our own limits; but instead as a fantasy of omnipotence and erasure known in Kleinian theory as "manic reparation" (Klein, 1935, 1940; Mitchell, 2000; Sodre, 2015). In other words, a desire "to repair the object in such a way that guilt and loss are never experienced" (Segal, 1973, p. 95).

This manic approach to racial reparation – described by philosopher Shannon Sullivan (2014) as a "desire to pay off and thus sever (our) connections with white history" (p. 70), and by Suchet (2017) as a wish to be "a different kind of white … expunged of some of the guilt and shame of whiteness" (p. 50) – is ultimately more about establishing our own exceptionalism than about meaningful repair.

The problem, however, isn't only that thinking about reparation in this way – as something cathartic that will erase what we owe and restore ourselves to an idealized state of "goodness," debtless and clean – is essentially a narcissistic goal, though I believe it is. The problem is also that it is an *impossible* goal.

And because a cathartic, self-idealizing kind of reparation is, in fact, impossible, thinking about it in this way makes it nearly *inevitable* that we will experience our guilt as persecutory, with all the breakdowns in thinking and relating that come with this.

I want to argue instead, then, that we think about reparation within the realm of the ordinary. An ability to accept ordinariness, within oneself and others, is seen as a central goal of psychoanalysis within the Kleinian tradition – an idea I have found both moving and grounding, and that I also see as deeply relevant to social as well as psychic change.

When I refer to the ordinary, I mean a stance of accepting our own ordinariness: understanding ourselves, as white people, neither as exceptionally good nor exceptionally broken, and giving up the excitement, self-idealizing or masochistic, that can come with either view. I also mean, following Davids (2011), coming to recognize the ordinariness – the full complexity and humanity, beyond denigration or idealization – of people of color, rather than demanding, as the internal racist organization does, that "s/he *is not and must not be an ordinary person*" (p. 47). And I mean a stance of accepting the ordinariness of our efforts to repay our debts: understanding that these efforts will be neither futile nor absolving, just *necessary*, and real despite their limits.

Outlining what these efforts might entail is beyond what I can address here,[8] but I do want to stress that they may involve loosening our hold on privileges we have been clinging to, also within the realm of the ordinary. For example, within the field of psychoanalysis, the assumption that what we learn and teach about human experience will in fact be structured, by default, around white experience (e.g., Ahmed, 2007). This implicit assumption shapes much of our literature, the structure of our training institutes, who holds power within these institutes, what is seen as universal versus particular knowledge, who is seen as an authority on what, and why (e.g., Swartz, 2018). Our efforts to shift these underlying assumptions and structural issues will likely be messy and incomplete. But I see our willingness to engage with them as crucial to the ethics, as well as the continuing relevance and vitality, of our field.

Davids addresses this reality when he reflects that "doing something about racial injustice in the world, rather than turning a blind eye to it, does not abolish one's inner racism but it does mitigate guilt and allows one to live more easily with it." He continues:

> There is a dialectical relationship between engagement and internal racism. Failure to engage allows the internal racist organization to claim that to do so would be just impossible, and its protection is therefore the only way. Engagement, on the other hand, shows the task to be not impossible, but … just very difficult, at times. (Davids, 2011, p. 227)

The gap between impossible – or unbearable, or irreparable – and "just very difficult, at times" may seem modest, but is actually vast. This, too, has to do with the ordinary, and our ability to recognize and pursue the ordinary yet meaningful possibilities for repair that present themselves constantly in our lives as citizens, friends, clinicians, colleagues, and across the many different roles we occupy. As DiAngelo (2018) has argued, as we engage in this way, our sense of what is bearable begins to expand, and more engagement becomes possible; the opposite of retreat.

[8] Recent work by Lynne Layton and others aimed at involving American psychoanalysts in dialogue and activism related to reparations for slavery serves as one meaningful example.

This is one of the insights that psychoanalysis has to offer, in the sense that its goals have to do, essentially, with giving up fantasies of exceptionalism, innocence and control, and facing realities that may at first feel unbearable, in a way that allows us to continue to think, to take responsibility for ourselves and our histories, and to act with integrity in both work and love. All of which are among our tasks, as white people, if we want our guilt to be useful, and our efforts at reparation to have meaning for anyone beyond ourselves.

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