



# When Reparation *Is* Impossible: A Discussion of “‘When Reparation Is Felt to Be Impossible’: Persecutory Guilt and Breakdowns in Thinking and Dialogue about Race”

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In this paper, Dr. Kali Cyrus thoughtfully responds to Dr. Jane Caflisch’s comments (this issue) on the schizoid-inducing nature of racial conflict for white people. Using personal and professional experiences confronting racially complex dilemmas, Dr. Cyrus describes why ultimately, repair of racial trauma may be impossible for white people to achieve but is nevertheless worth the pursuit.

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

— Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail (1994)

## INTRODUCTION

The invitation to comment on “When Reparation Is Felt to be Impossible” (this issue) could not have come at a better time. By this, I mean to say that the timing of this opportunity amidst the COVID-19 crisis and uproar over the murder of Ahmaud Arbery presented itself as a good time to work through challenges posed by repairing racial trauma. Seeing Black bodies disproportionately at risk of dying of COVID-19 while still facing the everyday risks of brutalization from white policing (includes policing from citizens), takes its toll on the psyche. Thereby discussions like these are incredibly important, but also pose the risk of replicating acute on chronic trauma to the Black psyche.

In “When Reparation Is Felt to be Impossible,” Dr. Jane Caflisch examines white liberal guilt from a Kleinian perspective, and its existence along the spectrum between the depressive and paranoid schizoid positions. Before delving further into the exploration of white guilt, she generously shares her concerns about reproducing oppressive dynamics by writing about antiracism in a way that situates white people as the subject. For me, these concerns fulfilled two purposes: to warn me as a Black person of the risk of emotional harm that may come from

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a white person discussing race and to put white readers on notice that situating white people as subjects is a gesture that can prove problematic. For this thoughtfulness, I am thankful. Caflisch's vulnerability aided in lowering my resistance to take in her words as fully as I could. But this approach is not without consequence, as I will describe.

I will be responding to the Caflisch's paper from the perspective of someone socialized as a Black, queer, androgynous, invisibly disabled, woman, and first-generation doctor raised by parents from the South. Intellectually, I have studied Psychology, Human Biology, Public Health, Medicine, and the practice of Psychiatry. As it pertains to psychoanalytic studies, I served as a Fellow of the American Psychoanalytic Society. As a result of my social, emotional, and intellectual experiences as a person of a color, I consider myself an informal expert in the manifestations of white privilege, and its complement, white guilt.

Caflisch discusses the potential for white people to drift into a paranoid schizoid state when confronted with their participation in social dynamics that lead to emotional harm for people of color (POC). I believe that the intensity of the harm that can result from seemingly minor and unintentional manifestations of white guilt is central to its suppression, avoidance, and denial. This harm is more nuanced than discussed by Caflisch, and likely impossible for Caflisch, as a white person, to fully characterize because it is even incredibly painful from the subjective position of a POC. Using relevant examples from Dr. Caflisch's discussion, and my own experiences with individual and group dynamics within the psychoanalytic and academic contexts, I will describe the subjective trauma that results from actions I believe are influenced by white guilt.

Secondly, I will examine Dr. Caflisch's discussion of reparation, and the significance of the "dichotomous" division between "us" and "them" that she draws as central to the psychic challenge faced by white people to see white guilt as a problem that harms everyone. I believe that progress will come from confronting the violent nature of white guilt, particularly violence that is deemed unintentional. Using work from Fanon, I will show that thinking of white guilt as a driver of crime that plagues everyone can help mitigate the sense of irreparability by serving as motivation for racially related harm reduction. Lastly, I will offer brief thoughts on how to move forward.

## THE PROBLEM OF WHITE GUILT: THINGS CONTINUE TO REMAIN THE WAY THEY ARE, EVEN THE TRAUMATIC THINGS

At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude.

-Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (1963/2004)

The observation posited by Dr. Caflisch, that guilt can be both productive and a hindrance is a good one. Unfortunately, as Audre Lorde (1981/1984) herself acknowledges, too often guilt does not lead to change, but instead serves to "protect ignorance and the continuation of the things the way they are" (p. 130). For some whose fate is precariously tied to the actions of others, the continuation of the "way things are" can be dangerous. This is the case when white guilt continues to go unexamined; it causes recurrent, psychic pain to POC.

Dr. Caflisch provides a thorough explanation of how white guilt can lead to harm to the white subject, but less so as it pertains to the impact of white guilt on POC subjects. The reasons why this discussion is cut short could be many, but nevertheless wise given the inability to fully speak from the perspective of a POC who has experienced that harm firsthand. Regardless, Caflisch's (this issue) descriptions of how guilt leads to breakdowns in communication, paranoid anxieties, and the psychic colonization of the "suffering of...other[s] and claiming it as [y]our own," (p. 581) feel very real to me as a POC who has felt these things projected into me (Eng, 2016; Hartman, 1997; Zeavin, 2018). It can be incredibly painful, so much so that immature defense mechanisms appear to be the only tools available to contain the suffering—to cast it out from consciousness.

### The Microtrauma Imposed By Projections of White Guilt

After having confronted white people about comments or behaviors that are prejudicial in nature, I have found myself feeling shame, difficulty thinking, and an aggressive desire to apologize to them. These projections occur across all social settings that include white people with strangers, friends, and colleagues including those within the psychoanalytic community. I perceive a deferral of responsibility exemplified through statements like "I didn't mean it that way," "I'm not racist," or "you know what I meant." These statements may seem minor, but illustrate the wish of the aggressor not to be wrong. These wishes can be so strong that many times, I end up being the one *offering* an apology instead. While the intent may not be to make me feel at fault, where is the guilt to osmose if not to its original source, white people, but to me instead? In this way, Caflisch's (this issue) observations ring true: white guilt can "cover over" (p. 581) and lead to demands for comfort and forgiveness. What is covered over does not evaporate, it serves as a reminder to the POC that they cannot breach the white person's sense of reality or put themselves at risk for negating their own. The POC must then choose whether to continue the conversation and risk drifting deeper into the denial of the aggressor, preemptively internalize the blame before it is further projected onto them by the aggressor, or dissociate from the experience altogether. There are more hopeful possibilities, such as sublimating into a positive outlet, though these are only available if a POC is able to do so amidst the bombardment of daily racially themed assaults.

For these reasons, I identify with Dr. Caflisch's discussion of paranoid anxieties from her perspective as a white person: I have felt them. For the POC who empathizes with the white subject, the desire to avoid white guilt makes sense, and demands for forgiveness may be met albeit superficial. However, the consequence of a refusal to interrogate white guilt is that it removes the option for harm reduction the next time conflict happens—and the cycle of harm continues. Many times, I have been faced with the decision to confront a white person about racist comments with the fear of immediate harm to me as well as downstream harm to POC. The most psychologically damaging conflicts are those that are met with skepticism about my claims of racism, or those that result in critical statements about POC in general. Most often, these statements serve to label POC as "unprofessional" using coded language that really signifies "not-white" behavior. Both have the potential for widespread harm because not only do they undermine the reputation of POC through trickle-down social dynamics but also reinforce aversively racist gestures to others in the vicinity who are susceptible to influence. In these moments, I am left with two undesirable options: either confront the speaker for the

prejudicial nature of the comment and risk being perceived as unprofessional myself. In either case, I risk bearing the responsibility for processing these feelings with the aggressor after they have been projected into me. The end result is hurt; hurt that is sometimes too painful to keep present in consciousness and is cast out into the subconscious of my psyche.

### *The Macrotrauma Imposed By Projections of White Guilt*

While the instances above can be considered micro-traumas, the impact of more intense traumatic experiences of POC in response to unexamined white guilt warrants further discussion. I understand why Caflisch may have opted for less elaboration on this topic, as white writers face ethical risks describing the trauma of POC. I also understand the risk I face by elaborating on more serious trauma: that is, to potentially worsen the sense of irreparability that may already be felt by white people. However, per Baldwin (1962), “nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

I would like to focus on a scenario that Caflisch describes, a scene familiar to me as one of few POC typically in attendance at academic and psychoanalytic panels on race. She describes the unraveling of the audience members in response to the content on race. Commentary that “reverse[s] course” (Caflisch, this issue, p. 587) to perceived social danger, and the refusal of white people as a group (or vocal members of a group) to accept whatever has been said as applicable to themselves. If the disorganization is not claimed by the actors, then it is absorbed by the bystanders who represent both white and the few POC in the audience. In this way, the impact of trauma sees no color. In the many times, I have found myself in this scenario, I too perceive social danger, difficulty in following my thoughts, and start to question whether or not I am to blame if I asked a question or made a comment. Statements like “this is not who we are” (Caflisch, this issue) make me wonder whether I am included in the “we,” since I do not look like the crowd or the speaker. Since I am not white, maybe the “this is not us” implies that the badness is then because of me, or people who look like me. I sit silently, continuing to listen to comments wondering whether I am the only one questioning who is to blame or feeling offended. I question whether what I am experiencing is real and I weigh the decision to ask a question to figure out if what I am experiencing is real—knowing that a “no” from the speaker will destroy me. For me, asking a question will not only give me an opportunity to clarify but is also an opportunity for protest, and I need the protest: I need to protest the aggression that I feel projected onto me. After all, there are already so many mainstream and community-specific messages insinuating that, as a Black, queer, androgynous appearing woman, there is something wrong about me.

### **Dissociation as a Response to Projections of White Guilt**

For me, this above is how the trauma starts, but it is not the worst of it. The worst is aptly described by Dr. Gilead Nachmani (1995), when he says:

Trauma is overwhelming. Virtually nothing that is known by the victim can prepare for it, and nothing that the victim does can avoid it. It must be endured against the wishes of the victim, without self-protection or the protection of another person upon whom the victim has depended. Among the most powerful effects of trauma, is the intrusive disruption of conscious and

unconscious thinking ... It appears that the need to save or preserve the self involves the abrupt disconnection of self from its capacities to perceive, think, and feel coherently. Descriptively, this is dissociation. (pp. 423-424).

For me, when white people drift in and out of the fragile state, the best means of protection against the introjection of those paranoid anxieties is to dissociate. Dissociation, albeit immature, is ingrained as soon as a warning that the conversation is turning to the topic of race. These moments occur at panels, lectures, and informal interactions with both senior colleagues who set the norms and with junior or peer colleagues who follow them. While my body is present, apparently listening to content that endangers my sense of self, my emotions have somehow disappeared much like the emotional memory of the experience once it is over. However, the memory is actually there but buried in recesses of my subconscious. I continue to hold onto the hurt in ways I will not know until the next traumatic experience. These moments are unfortunately all too frequent. But what is sometimes worse than the moment itself, is that the learned behavior of keeping the anguish hidden has become automatic. To show anguish as a Black woman is to risk being called irrational, emotional, "angry." To endure this, over and over again, across professional contexts, is traumatic.

Even reading Caflisch's words evoked such strong dissociative feelings that it required multiple instances of my starting and stopping in order to complete this discussion. For me, I must suppress my feelings in order to function on some days, especially days full of media coverage of Black bodies being destroyed like that of Ahmaud Arbery. This suppression functions like a band-aid over an open wound that will take months to heal, if it even heals at all, because it is at risk of being grated every time I interface with the white world.

My dissociative responses sometimes occur at the most inopportune moments. For example, during an invited Grand Rounds talk on race and academia, I suddenly froze. I have delivered this talk dozens of times, yet I found myself unable to utter transitions or engage the audience members extemporaneously, which is unusual. This paralysis was so disturbing that I ended the talk early, citing a family emergency but the emergency was in my own head: I was experiencing a resurgence of trauma when delivering content about the "hope" minorities should embody in terms of surviving white aggression within the academic context. This is how white guilt inflicts its pain; the victim reexperiences the trauma that was dissociated in the first place. What is worse, is that the risk of it happening again is ever-present because reminders of white aggression are everywhere.

I thought of this experience when Caflisch (this issue) discussed how white guilt feels overwhelming, like living in a world "built on crime." The image of crime conjures up the image of victimhood for me. In this framework, if white people feel like everything is built on crime, then POC are the natural victims of the crimes; crimes of the past, present, and future. To be Black, or a POC in America, is to be wounded over and over again. The fact that the severe quality of this pain is not spoken to in terms other than "irreparable" may be a blind spot for Caflisch, as perhaps it would be for any white person. But the degree of its severity needs to be present in this conversation to be faced, understood, and then addressed to move out of the paranoid space and dealt with from the depressive position.

For these reasons, in mixed racial groups, race dialogue is almost never for the people of color (Porter & Leonardo, 2010). This is why my presence at a panel is already wrought with tension: because I know my decision to ask a question is inherently for white people. Asking

a question is a form of protest, and per Freire, protestation is “an act of love” because it represents engagement (Freire, 1970, p. 45). This is why the depressive position is incredibly depressing, it requires one to violence because “decolonization is always a violent event” (Fanon, 1963/2004). As things are, to truly have the conversation about race that is safe for POC would be to inflict psychic violence upon white people and risk surfacing paranoid anxieties. Just like Nachmani (1995) says, “when ignorance and helplessness are facts of life ... where identities ... are confounded ... fantasy and unreality predominate” (p. 430).

### THE OTHER PROBLEM OF WHITE GUILT: ITS ASYMMETRICAL AND SELECTIVE IMPOSITION OF REINFORCED PSYCHIC VIOLENCE

The colonial context, as we have said, is characterized by the dichotomy it inflicts on the world. Decolonization unifies this world by a radical decision to remove its heterogeneity, by unifying it on the grounds of nation and sometimes race.

-*Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963/2004)

As Dr. Caflisch shifts from the internal world of white guilt to its larger political implications, I again find myself aligned with her arguments, but would like to take her assertions a step further.

I, too, believe that reparations are impossible for all reasons outlined, which include historical and present-day harms of racism, the robustness of institutionally enforced white supremacy, and the tendency to revert to immature defense mechanisms during conversations about race. These points underscore the extent to which the harm to POC by white guilt can feel overwhelming to address, but nonetheless essential to address even if incompletely. Like Caflisch (this issue), I believe the ability to accept responsibility for some kind of repair, even if it is impossible, cannot occur as long as racism is “something abstract and outside [of] ourselves” (p. 586). However, I worry that Caflisch herself does not truly believe it is impossible. I believe this point warrants further consideration for growth to truly occur. Said differently, the sheer violence of past and present-day racist acts must be faced.

### Whiteness Can Never Be Relinquished

Caflisch’s (this issue) use of words like “relinquish” (p. 585) when discussing ideas that cannot be relinquished, like the property of whiteness, feels idealistic in the context of a discussion about the irreparability of white guilt (Harris, 1993). She later makes the point that “some things may feel irreparable, not because they *are*, but because they involve giving something up that we have grown attached to” (Caflisch, this issue, p. 587, italics in the original). However, the “something” is whiteness in this case and whiteness is more than a thing a person grows attached to. Whiteness is carried from birth and is impossible to erase. No matter how hard a white person tries to “stop relating to racism as something abstract and outside ourselves,” or “reclaims...[their] own projections,” whiteness can never be relinquished (Caflisch, this issue, p. 586).

Caflisch herself proves this point by structuring the subjective viewpoint of essay as “we” and “them.” While I understand her reasons for such and appreciated the disclaimer, I could not help but cringe at reading those words. This reaction exemplifies the intrinsic way in which

a seemingly harmless decision, one that is also well explained, can still elicit a strong reaction from a nonwhite subject. The degree to which this feels uncomfortable for a POC is due to the baseline predisposition for white people to see race as abstract. Because the social world is built from the perspective of white people, it is inevitable to first see race as a concept that is foreign or abstract. Therefore, if whiteness is built into the perspective of white people as a whole, any relinquishment of white guilt is an uphill battle.

### Whiteness *Is* Built On Crime

Therein lies the difficulty of white guilt: it feels as though it is built on crime because it *is*. It may feel like a mountain of emotional debt from which a white person can never overcome. However, the goal is not to avoid the mountain, but rather to climb to the top of it: the goal should be to reduce the number of criminal acts of racism. This is further illustrated by Dr. Adrienne Harris (2012) relationship with a collection of Haida objects. No matter how much Harris knows those objects do not belong to her, she could not shake her sense of ownership of them. She could not shake it, because this sense of entitlement is instinctual and comes with being born into whiteness. Sometimes, all one can do is what Harris (2012) does: to first admit that she did not want to give them back, and to then acknowledge the “deep, visceral refusal to let go” (p. 881) of whiteness. In order to truly escape the paranoid schizoid cycle of guiltiness that emerges with an awareness of this fact, white people must find ways to decolonize their minds, or rid themselves of the instinctual reaction that “I own this.” Decolonization is the only way to ameliorate white guilt, and even then, amelioration is the ultimate goal because elimination is impossible.

Reaching the threshold of relinquishing whiteness is as good as it gets. Accepting this, as hopeless as it may seem, is why the depressive position is the point from which the work is done. There is no, it “may seem irreparable” or “almost repairable,” because, from the perspective of people of color, it *is* irreparable and only capable of being made *tolerable*. Learning to tolerate white guilt as ordinary is the goal.

Accepting these truths is no doubt to embrace despair, hopelessness, and shame—which may almost feel psychologically violent to the self. However, if the violence of the crimes is not faced, it will be projected onto the other. Until white people accept that their worlds are built on crime, the aggressiveness associated with white guilt continues to loom, leading to a psychic fluctuation across the spectrum of paranoia. As illustrated by Harris (2012) and Suchet (2007), there is an ingrained pull of whiteness and its entitlement at times can be visceral, and uncontrollable. Because of this, no matter how hard white people try, they will always commit acts of racism. Thus, the goal is to acknowledge the harm and to try to reduce it the next time.

### The Role of Safety in Mixed Racial Groups

I would also like to comment on the role of safety in mixed racial groups as a goal to work toward for white people hoping to ameliorate guilt. Per Herman (1992), the establishment of safety is essential to all work on trauma. How, then, is safety forged? As I say above, safety for POC in conversations about race with white people is not really possible, especially if the country “*can never fully repay* African Americans” (Coates, 2017 in Caflisch, this issue, p. 585, italics in the original). For this reason, white people need to think of their racism as a problem



stemming from white dominance that can only be solved by partnering *with* POC. There are a number of ways of thinking through this. Per Alayarian (2019), recovery depends on developing a shared psychic space by having a listening other to help build a robust sense of self. However, consideration should occur so that the listening other is not one-sided.

In this way, the distinctions between “us” and “them” are artificial. Rather, violence impacts *all* parties involved. Although this violence may seem overwhelming, as it includes violence since our nation’s founding and the present, POC and white people need each other to work toward harm reduction. What this means is that white people must not only face the fact that most POC experience the “terrorizing force of white supremacy” (hooks, 1992, p. 174) daily, but they must also face the fact that their European ancestors fabricated the system of “slaves and monsters” (Sartre, 1961/2004, p. viii) to whom violence was excused in the first place. Due to our social worlds being built on violence toward the other, and that violence is ever-present for some, white people cannot assume that safety is at baseline, the norm for everyone.

Therefore, what must first be done is an acknowledgment of the actions that compromise safety for POC in the first place. White people must acknowledge the actions, that per Harris (2012), drive the “force of unconscious life, represented and maintained inside and outside the psyche” (p. 214) that perpetuates the racist violence against POC. To exist as white is to have white guilt, which is to inject violence in the world. In other words, what needs to be accepted is that to be white, is to be a perpetrator of violence despite best intentions.

### On Hope, Not Optimism

Acts of a repair cannot happen until there is safety for POC to work with white people, and a mind-set of “everyone” not, us or them. Let me be clear here, since repair cannot fully occur, I do not mean to say that acts by white people can repair the harm done, but that acts that embody the reparative spirit can make a positive impact on harm reduction, if and only if the futility of erasing past deeds is acknowledged. Despite the damage of the past harms and those to come, I am hopeful that white people can put forth ameliorative efforts to reduce their harm, but not repair those harms. This is a key difference that illustrates why I agree with Caflisch’s discussion of the ordinary, but under different terms. And while I am hopeful, I am not optimistic.

As long as “us” or “them” exists, which is neurologically programmed and innate, it will always be easier to inflict violence on whoever the “them” may be. While it may feel instinctual to characterize people into ingroups versus outgroups, there needs to be a path of slow thinking to check this characterization (Kahneman, 2011). To address this, I propose that white people think of processing guilt for the sake of their mixed-race communities, like family members work to process intergenerational trauma for the sake of the family.

While the hopelessness associated with irreparable can be mitigated, but not eliminated, a sense of togetherness with people of color must become the “ordinary,” per Caflisch’s use of the word. At first, I wondered why ordinariness could ever be used in conjunction with white guilt, but if ordinary implies the quality of how we should think of white guilt, privilege, and racism — as ordinary occurrences daily and part of life — then I agree. If thinking of ordinary aids in preventing the separation of racism as external to white people, as something not to be associated with or rarely associated with, then ordinary is a good goal. I might only argue that what is ordinary now, violence, should not be. What needs to be ordinary, is safety.



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