

The Question of Reparations for Black Americans—Psychological Factors

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Before I start, let me say that I will not be using much psychoanalytic terminology in this talk. But I would like you to keep Melanie Klein's concept of the reparative impulse in mind for its evocative value with regard to reparations. For Klein, the reparative impulse emerges in the transition from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, from a polarized adversarial dynamic to one which involves concern for the other and responsibility for one's own aggression.

I first heard of reparations in connection with the punitive reparations that the victorious Allies imposed on a defeated Germany at the end of World War I. In contrast, the model underlying current arguments for reparations to Black Americans is based not on punishment but on apology. Roy L. Brooks, a prominent scholar and advocate of reparations, calls it the atonement model: "We have done something wrong and caused you harm; we are sorry and want to make up for it as best we can."

I'm going to assume that even though you might be inclined to support reparations to Black Americans, many or most of you are unfamiliar with the details of the arguments for reparations. So I'm going to go over the basics of the argument using the apology model. Was harm done? To whom? Who

was responsible for the harm? Are they sorry? What can they do to make up for what they've done?

Was harm done? By now I think we all accept that slavery was harmful to the enslaved people. But, you might say, I don't own any slaves and never have. Slavery was abolished in the 1860s and no one in the US now is a slaveholder or a slave. Isn't this all in the past? Where is the harm done now to living people who are therefore owed reparations? A legitimate question. Without an answer to this question there is no justification for reparations.

Essentially, the answer is that the harm of slavery was carried forward in what is known as the Jim Crow era, or the era of neo-slavery, or the era of racial terror, in the form of legalized discrimination, segregation and institutionally sanctioned or supported violence. As Frederick Douglass said, the abolition of slavery was not the end; it was the beginning [of the struggle for freedom].

A short list of the injustices and violence done to Black Americans during the Jim Crow era would include suppression of voting rights through various governmental stratagems; employment discrimination that barred Black Americans from many professions and labor organizations; the variety of federal and local policies like racial covenants and the practice of redlining that kept Black Americans out of home ownership; the practice of siting environmental hazards in Black neighborhoods and breaking up Black

neighborhoods with freeways or through urban renewal; the segregation of educational institutions so that those for Black Americans were underfunded and inferior; the design of the Social Security Act such that it did not cover the professions in which most Black Americans were employed (domestic work and farming); barriers to Black veterans accessing the benefits of the GI bill; medical experiments on Black people without informed consent. Think of the convict leasing system, in which unemployed people, mostly Black, were convicted of vagrancy, given fines they could not pay and then leased to private enterprises-- mines, factories-- thus providing income for the local governments and cheap labor for those enterprises. The prison-laborers might never get out alive. Think of the prosperous Black communities like Rosewood, Florida or Tulsa, Oklahoma, in which white mobs destroyed buildings and murdered inhabitants. Think of the lynching of Black people by white mobs, after the Civil War and well into the twentieth century --some 4000 or more -- with sometimes thousands of white spectators present to watch, and almost none of those responsible being prosecuted or convicted.

To what extent do these injustices and horrors of the past affect people in the present? Though the Jim Crow era can be said to have ended with the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s, the harms of that era have in turn been carried forward into the present. Some of the injustices I listed above are no longer being practiced, or have at least been made illegal. What is called “the last lynching in America,” for instance, took place in Mobile, Alabama in 1981-- and the three Klan perpetrators were prosecuted and convicted, something

that differentiates this from earlier lynchings. The convict leasing system was stopped by the federal government in 1941, when the government was concerned that Germany and Japan could use it in their propaganda efforts. But some of these practices continue in other state-sanctioned forms: think of the mass incarceration of Black men, of current attempts to suppress voting rights, of police brutality directed especially at Black people, of informal forms of employment discrimination.

Equally important, past laws and policies continue to harm people in the present through their cumulative impact over generations. The most familiar example of this is the wealth disparity between Black and white households, with white households having approximately ten times the wealth of Black households. This disparity is due primarily to the difference in home ownership, which is the foundation of wealth for most Americans. The difference in home ownership is due in turn to the various laws and policies of the Jim Crow era that kept Black people out of home-ownership during the period when housing was more affordable and incomes of working people were relatively higher – that is, before the Reagan era. The result of those laws and policies is the residential segregation that characterizes the US now – well explained in Richard Rothstein’s book *The Color of Law: a forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. And since school districts are largely determined by residential patterns, this same residential segregation continues to work to segregate schools, almost to the same extent as when segregation was the law of the land. Those who say that

the US is a meritocracy and individuals succeed by their own efforts are ignoring the fact that the road to advancement is well paved for most whites but thoroughly obstructed for Blacks.

Another way to see how the past is affecting the present is to think about the life experiences of Black Americans living today. Black children born in the 1950s and 60s during the violent struggles around desegregation, for instance, will now be in their 60s. Those of us alert to the transgenerational transmission of trauma will note that those children were raised by parents and grandparents who in various ways experienced the horrors of the Jim Crow era, whether in the South or the North. And of course all this is to say nothing of contemporary Black people's ongoing experience of the injustices and indignities of systemic racism.

This is the argument that harm was done, and that it affects living Black people. But who alive today is responsible for these harms? And if reparations are to be made, who should pay for them? This is a crucial question. No matter what form the reparations might take – cash payments over time, scholarships, land grants, housing aid, educational programs, etc. – programs of reparations cost money, probably very large sums of money. Where will it come from?

In *The Color of Law*, Rothstein makes the crucial point that the practices he describes—redlining and so on – were matters of official law and policy and

not simply the private actions of bigoted individuals. In legal terms, they were *de jure* not *de facto*. This means that institutions made and enforced those laws and policies. Those institutions are responsible for the damage created, and they are responsible for repairing it. Thus, currently individual institutions like Georgetown University and individual towns like Evanston, Illinois are instituting programs of reparations – Georgetown for descendants of slaves it owned, Evanston for Black people residing in the town during the redlining period prior to 1965. But the primary institution responsible is the US government itself, since the harmful practices were the law of the land, and either instituted or tolerated by the federal government. So it is the US government that is going to need to pay for the major part of the reparations.

But if the federal government is going to pay, it is the taxpayers who are going to pay. How can individual taxpayers who are not guilty of the crimes of segregation and Jim Crow be required to pay reparations for them? Is that fair? What about recent immigrants? Are the citizens of a country responsible for the things a government does in their name? That is the key question. After World War II it was debated with regard to the question whether the German people were responsible for the crimes of the Nazi era. The philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that citizens of a country, essentially members of the country, are not *legally guilty* for the government's crimes, but they are *responsible* for what the country does, including what it has and has not done in the past. Citizens of the US, no matter when they arrive, inherit the benefits of the government's past actions, but they also inherit the

wrongs the government has done and the responsibility of making reparations for them. This is what being a citizen means.

Those are the basic elements of the case for reparations – the harms enduring into the present, the people who continue to be harmed by them, the responsible parties.

The next question is, what would a program of reparations need to consist of such that it would actually help to repair the harm done? (And perhaps this is the time to acknowledge that no program of reparations could possibly come near to erasing the harm done.) This question also raises what one might call practical questions: how much money should be budgeted, for instance, and on what basis will it be calculated; how will eligibility of participants and recipients be determined; what time period will be covered; who should design the programs, and so on. These questions are being discussed, both by scholars – economists, civil rights lawyers, historians-- and by advocacy groups. Reparations for a harm of this magnitude will almost certainly entail not only a long process of discussion beforehand but also a long process during which the features of the eventual program are implemented, not to mention a long process of adjusting to the changes that reparations brings.

Details of these practical proposals are not the focus of my talk. I will simply say that there has been a bill before the US House of Representatives – HR 40, named for the forty acres and a mule that freed slaves were promised but

did not receive at the end of the Civil War – which proposes a commission to study the issue of reparations and make proposals. (This was the process followed when the government made reparations to Japanese-American internees.) HR 40 was first introduced in 1979, received its first committee hearing in 2019. and made its way out of committee for the first time in 2021.

Thank you for bearing with me for this brief version of the case for reparations. Now I want to move to the question of the psychological factors involved.

If the federal government is to enact a program of reparations, the support of white Americans will be crucial. I personally find the case I've outlined convincing, but do most white Americans support reparations? If you look at the most recent poll I could find – from a year ago, April 2021 – you will find that the majority of Americans are not in favor of reparations. In particular, white people, older people, and Republicans tend to oppose reparations, while younger people, Democrats and African-Americans are more likely to support them.

Because most white people are opposed to reparations, I want to look primarily at what psychological factors might be at play in their opposition. I'm not going to talk about the psychological factors behind Black support for reparations, because most of the advocacy for reparations has always been

done by Black people – both scholars and activists—outlining the case for reparations much as I did at the beginning of this talk. Now, when I say psychological factors, I do not mean that I will be looking at the presence or absence of conscious racism or bigotry in individual white people. Rather I will be trying to articulate the underlying dynamics that manifest themselves in this widespread opposition, acknowledging that just as conscious racism varies in its strength from one individual to another, so the underlying dynamics will vary in their degree or intensity from one person to another.

Essentially, the opposition to reparations derives from a fundamental aspect of the way American society is organized – a rigid opposition between a dominant group and a subordinate group, between whites and Blacks. (And here I should emphasize that both white and Black are socially constructed categories. Biologically, people range from fairer-skinned to darker-skinned, with many different nuances of color as well.) This is the American version of the global phenomenon of white supremacy. Since most white people think of white supremacy as an extremist ideology rather than a fundamental dynamic in American society, it may help to follow Isabel Wilkerson and think of the white-Black opposition as a caste system like the ones in India or Nazi Germany – a system that establishes and enforces an unbridgeable social gap. In the US, this caste system is racialized, and has only two castes - white and Black. The system is both fixed and hierarchical: in the US caste system whites are superior and Blacks are inferior. Following W.E.B. DuBois, we could speak of the unbridgeable gap between these two

castes as the color line. As James Baldwin puts it, on the ladder of success and status in the United States, “the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there....*”

We can think of this racialized caste system as internalized in the form of what Lynne Layton would call a normative unconscious dynamic, in which social norms are established on an unconscious level. The system affects all of us, unconsciously and consciously. It tells people their place and shapes people’s behavior. It tells white people what we can do and what we can’t do. It also tells Black people what they can and can’t do. The system is embedded in institutions, which in turn reinforce these social codes.

Note that there is nothing personal about this system. It does not define one white person as racist and another not; it tells all white people how we should behave, especially in relation to Black people. So while few white Americans think of themselves as white supremacists, or as racists, all of us are shaped to some extent by this polarized force-field of the US caste system with its color line dividing Black and white.

The strength of this force-field makes the prospect of fundamental change seem remote. But in fact this polarized, caste-like system is not as absolutely fixed as the dominant group would hope. First of all, the system exists in a historical context and adapts and modifies itself over time in response both to external events and to forces within the system itself. The unbridgeable gap

between white and Black, for instance, was established only piece by piece during the colonial period, when Black slaves were made lifelong chattel (property), in contrast to white indentured servants, who could hope to become free. Being differentiated from Blacks was advantageous to poor whites, and they found a role in policing slaves. And as new European groups immigrated into the US, they “learned to be white” in order to differentiate themselves clearly from Blacks. As the story goes, the first word new immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the “n” word.

But forces within the system also create tension and threaten to disrupt it, and they are met by forces that attempt to maintain and reinforce the system. Economic self-interest and moral considerations, for instance, would tend to draw poor whites and Blacks – the people at the bottom of the dominant white group and the people in the subordinate Black group – into alliances with each other. And at the same time, counterforces – the idea that Blacks are trying to take whites’ jobs, for instance, work to reinforce the color line and prevent such alliances. Similarly, while empirical reality contradicts the hierarchical characterization of whites as superior to Blacks, other forces work to reinforce this false conception. And of course the explicit ideals of the US – that all men (sic) are created equal, and that there is liberty and justice for all in America – are always available for use in the service of both the forces that tend to disrupt the system and the counterforces that work to maintain it.

Reparations – whether they are being advocated for or actually carried out – represent a challenge to this basic Black-white polarization. They represent a movement toward equality, toward blurring or erasing the color line. The three specific dynamics in white opposition to reparations that I’m going to talk about – and of course they are not the only ones – are reactions to that challenge.

The first is a sense of whiteness under threat, gripped by fear of Black retaliation. Black people were made slaves against their will, through coercion and violence, and they were kept slaves through coercion and violence. Having acted toward Blacks with coercion and violence, it is not surprising that whites would be afraid of them retaliating. Whites’ fear gives rise to efforts to control and police the color line, often through violence. Historically, this was not an idle fear. White slaveholders knew that they were living with people who had good reason to want to kill them, the same people they depended on for labor on their plantations. Slaves were referred to as “the internal enemy” or the “domestic enemy.” Slaveholders in the South were terrified by the successful slave revolution in 1791 in what is now Haiti, and again by Nat Turner’s rebellion in South Carolina in 1831. Intensifying fear gave rise to intensified efforts to control and police the color line, so that for instance, it was made illegal to teach slaves to read and write, lest literacy be used to plot rebellion. After the Civil War, when all Black people were officially free and therefore potentially out of whites’ control, efforts to reinstate control took the form not only of new repressive laws (the

Black Codes) but also of massive violence in the form of massacres and lynchings. Whites severely restricted economic opportunities for Blacks, and in consequence feared and still fear economic retaliation as well. “We took their liberty and their labor and gave them nothing. Why should they not try to take our livelihoods now?” Hence mob violence was often directed particularly toward successful Black enterprises and communities like Rosewood or Tulsa.

Today this adversarial dynamic of violence and fear of retaliation is manifested in whites’ terror of the prediction that as of 2042 whites will no longer be in the majority in the US and in slogans like “If it’s good for the Blacks, we’re against it.” From this perspective, reparations seems like a defeat of the soon-to-be-in-the-minority whites by the Blacks. In Vamik Volkan’s terms, whiteness is the core of white people’s large-group identity. That identity is threatened, and the large group is regressing under the pressure of the threat and the unresolved historical trauma of racial violence. Those whites who consciously and militantly espouse white supremacy and white nationalism are spokespeople for this regressive response.

Thus if it sometimes seems bewildering that poor and working-class whites can be so attached to the racial polarity when their economic self-interest would be better served by allying themselves with Blacks, remember that a cause under threat inspires intense loyalty, and the cause of white supremacy

under threat can be enthralling. One will give one's life for it if necessary. In his book *Dying of Whiteness*, Jonathan Metzler reports a very ill Tennessee man proclaiming his opposition to the extension of Medicaid to Tennesseans. For this man, Medicaid would represent the government giving his money to good-for-nothing Black and Mexican people. "Ain't no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it," he proclaims. "I would rather die."

The second and perhaps even more primitive psychological dynamic at work in white opposition to reparations is what I will call the taboo on touching. If we think of the reparations project as a challenge to the racialized caste system with its unbridgeable social gap, touching in its various literal and metaphorical manifestations represents a closing of that gap, a blurring of the strict divide. In her book *Caste*, Wilkerson points out the parallels between Blacks as the lowest caste in the US and the so-named "untouchables", the lowest caste in India. Heather McGhee gives us a story from Robin di Angelo, the author of *White Fragility* who tells how she grew up very poor, with a single mother without the resources to take care of her children. They lived in their car, and young di Angelo was hungry. But when she reached out for something like food that had been left out, her mother reprimanded her: "Don't touch that. You don't know who touched it, it could have been a colored person." In other words, if the colored person touched it, it was dirty. But, says Di Angelo, "I was dirty. . . . Yet in those moments the shame of poverty lifted. I wasn't poor anymore. I was white."

Physical touch is a metaphor for the erasure of the absolute boundary between Black and white. It announces equality, and in doing so endangers the white person's place of dominance. This is experienced by whites on a visceral level: there must be no contact between the bodily fluids of Blacks and those of whites. That contact would represent a mixing of Black and white, a contamination of the dominant by the subordinate caste. This is why whites protested desegregated swimming pools: the same fluid that touches the Black bodies would touch the white bodies. This is why it was especially toilets and drinking fountains that had to be kept separate. And of course this is the taboo on voluntary sexual contact between Blacks and whites. (The rape of Black women by white men did not fall under the taboo.) When the teenager Emmett Till was mutilated and lynched in 1955 it was said that it was because he had wolf-whistled at a white girl. In the fantasied terms of the taboo on touching, his breath, tinged with sexual energy, had left his body and made contact with hers. Today this taboo continues to affect even those who are consciously anti-racist. Wilkerson tells of a white editor who confessed to her that he experienced internal alarm bells when he needed to shake the hand of a Black writer.

The last psychological factor in white opposition to reparations that I want to discuss will probably be the one that liberal middle-class white people can most easily identify in ourselves. It is what the late philosopher Charles W. Mills calls "white ignorance." This ignorance is not a coincidental failure to

be acquainted with certain facts. Rather, it is an ignorance that is specifically related to race, a group-based “cognitive handicap” made up of denials and distortions. When it comes to questions of race, individuals may be good and well-meaning people but still be limited in their mental functioning by white ignorance.

Essentially, white ignorance is like a protective cover holding white supremacy in place. One of its manifestations is a certain kind of color blindness, so that white perception stops at the color line. What is on the other side of the color line is not seen at all, or seen only through a distorting fantasy. Hence Baldwin and others say that whites do not really see Blacks at all, whereas Blacks, in contrast, have had by necessity to acquire a detailed knowledge of whites and their ways. Ignorance means ignoring. We can think of white ignorance as a kind of cognitive segregation, so that the absence of Black people in a certain settings or professions is not noticed. The title “Black lives matter” can be understood as an effort to bring whites’ attention to what has been put out of our minds.

White ignorance affects whites’ capacity for reality-testing. It permits them to live with cognitive dissonances which cannot be resolved because white ignorance acts as a barrier to questions, curiosity, and thought. Whites’ pride in what is known as American exceptionalism-- America’s special place in world affairs as the beacon of freedom and democracy – is an example.

Wilkerson reminds us that when Hitler's policy makers were formulating the Nuremberg Laws, which would place restrictions on Jews, they began by studying how the US had institutionalized its racial caste system. America's Black Codes served them as a model. Apparently the Nazis were especially impressed by the US custom of lynching, and Hitler was reportedly amazed at Americans' "knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death." That is to say, how amazing, thought Hitler, that the US could get away with representing itself to the world as a great democracy when it practiced this system of violent racial oppression.

What is equally amazing is that white Americans get away with it with ourselves, at least most of us most of the time. How do we manage it? One way is through the collective amnesia that white ignorance entails. The history both of Blacks' oppression and of Blacks' contributions to America is forgotten, erased, distorted. Mills calls white ignorance "militant" – it resists and fights back, and presents itself as knowledge, so that it is assumed that racial issues ended with the abolition of slavery, or at least with desegregation. The assumption of knowledge, like the assumption of innocence, functions as a barrier to questioning, so that white people in all innocence can say things like "I never thought to ask..." or "It never occurred to me that..." or "I took it for granted that..."

One aspect of white ignorance, in other words, is simple denial – of the facts of history and the facts of the present. One part is ideology, the rationalization of dominance. One part is self-justification: pride in America's founding ideals and pride in Americans, who in our innocence are filled with good will toward the suffering and needy of the world.

Despite the advantages of racial exploitation and white supremacy, whites pay a heavy price for their dominant position in the racialized caste system. White ignorance and the distortions it requires amount to a mutilation of the white mind, a loss of mental freedom and moral vision. Maintaining membership in the white group entails constant vigilance lest one fail to conform to the prescribed caste behaviors, constant opposition to any perceived challenge to white supremacy, and the constant mental and emotional work of maintaining denial and falsification. This in addition to poor and working-class whites' sacrifice of their economic self-interest.

There is a self-destructive dynamic at work here. The Tennessee man who opposes the extension of Medicaid will in fact die of the illnesses he cannot afford to treat. And in a perfect parable, McGhee tells of the wonderful public pools enjoyed by many American towns in the first half of the twentieth century – for whites only, of course. When segregation was made illegal and the swimming pools needed to open to Black people, white people protested, sometimes violently. They did not want to swim in the same pool

as Black people. Some towns found a simple solution: drain the pool, fill it with dirt, and pave it over. Never mind the tears of the children who used to enjoy it. No more public pool: no more dealing with desegregation!

The forces of white supremacy and its protector, white ignorance, are very powerful. But they are not absolute. A white person's identity as white may be basic and precious, but it is not a white person's only identity. White ignorance warps the white mind, but white people retain some capacity for reality-testing and empathy, emotional attachment, and moral reflection. These capacities can work as conscious sources of resistance to white ignorance. If this were not the case, there would be no use making the case for reparations. In other words, though it will be easier for some than others, it is possible for a white person to shift from opposing to supporting reparations. Many whites have accomplished this, despite remaining to some degree subject to the dynamics of white supremacy. The conservative columnist David Brooks, for instance, after spending some years traveling in the US talking to people of all kinds and seeing the depth and the significance for America of the racial divide – in other words, after combating his own white ignorance – came to agree wholeheartedly with Ta-Nehisi Coates' assertion that reparations must be “more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe.” It must be “a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.”

Changing one's mind from opposition or indifference to thoughtful support of the reparations project will have its costs for white people. There will be emotional as well as cognitive work to be done. Meaningful support for reparations will mean working through losses of many kinds: loss of a sense of superiority, loss of membership in a special dominant group, loss of pride in American exceptionalism and American innocence. And because reparations represents a challenge to the social and economic system of white supremacy as well as to whites' identity and sense of self, supporting reparations also means being willing to tolerate the discomforts of a new degree of economic and social equality.

Further, even though living white Americans are not guilty of being slaveowners, we have all to some extent, despite our best intentions and our efforts for justice, been complicit in behaving according to the dictates of white supremacy. We are part of the US and therefore bear part of a collective responsibility for America's long history of harms to Black people – and for its long delay in acknowledging that history and attempting to right that wrong. As a form of apology to those whom white Americans have harmed, reparations would represent whites humbling themselves and being willing to tolerate the guilt and shame of complicity.

A key part of the cognitive and emotional work of combating our white ignorance is facing the horrors of America's history – facing the brutality of

slavery and its legacy, acknowledging the suffering white supremacy has caused and continues to cause, confronting the injustices done collectively by whites to Blacks as a group. This is an extremely disturbing and painful process. It means opening oneself to a level of empathic suffering that can be tolerated only a little at a time. If apology includes feeling regret for the suffering one has been responsible for, this is one place it will be felt, and it will take a long time for it to be fully experienced and worked through.

No one knows how long it will be before the US undertakes the work of actually providing reparations. And even putting reparations programs into effect would be only part of an ongoing process of working through the past and learning how to live with equality. But the discussions about reparations already engage white people in some of the work we need to do in order to support this effort.

If you imagine for a moment what a nightmare it would be to continue to live in this racialized caste system for another four hundred years (if the species even survives that long), you will perhaps also be able to feel that working toward reparations brings not only losses but also the prospect of relief from the way we have been living – relief from the constant fear and vigilance that accompany the Black-white polarization, relief at the prospect of belonging to a country with greater social and economic fluidity, and relief at being able

to take some pride in being a citizen of a country that at least in this instance is willing to acknowledge its mistakes and try to make up for them.

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