

# HOW WHITE PEOPLE SUFFER FROM WHITE RACISM

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**ABSTRACT** *One major but subtle manifestation of white racism is the failure to recognize whiteness as a cultural and racial category. Rather, whiteness silently functions as the 'standard' from which other racial and cultural groups deviate. In this way, non-white groups and people become 'deviant' in the very act of defining them. Recognizing whiteness as a category in every way correspondent to blackness opens the door to thinking about the particularity of the state of whiteness, and the ways in which people defined as white may benefit from the privileges, and suffer from the burdens, of whiteness. The disavowal of qualities defined as 'black' or 'coloured' or 'non-white' is shown to have a special distorting and limiting effect on people defined as white.*

**Key words:** racism, psychoanalysis, race, whiteness

Who am I? – perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt' – evidently referring to what I must have ceased to be in order to be who I am. (Andre Breton, *Nadja*)

White Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. (James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*)

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny. (Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*)

Toward the end of her moving personal account of 'hate and being hated' as an African-American person, Kathleen Pogue White writes:

What seems missing from the understanding of racial hating is an appreciation of the texture of being white in relation to the experiences of racism. We are used to thinking about what it is to be black. What is the experience of being white? Does the experience of being white in our world create faces of hatred other than those I know? (White 2002, 421)

How is it that White's question is so rarely asked, let alone answered?

It is in the nature of being human that we are both subjects and objects, that we both know and are known, experience and are experienced. Since Descartes, there has been a split in Western philosophy between the subject position, from which one knows and has experiences, and the object experience, from which one is known and is experienced. 'I think, therefore I am' (Descartes, 1999) means that occupation of

the subject position is tantamount to being human, to existence itself. There has been, since the Industrial Revolution, an overlap of this split between subject and object in the philosophical realm and the dominant-submissive split in the realm of power relations. The one who rules is the subject, the one who is ruled over is the object. In showing how knowledge is power, Foucault (1980) demonstrated that the subject position constitutes dominance over whatever or whoever occupies the object position. In extreme cases, those who are thus objectified are denied subjectivity, the capacity for having experiences at all. They can thus be treated as objects, enslaved, killed, manipulated and exploited without the sense of guilt that would otherwise attend identifying with the experiences of the person one is oppressing. Kathleen White, speaking from the position of the object, the one who is known, challenges and invites white people to be known as well, so that black and white people can become more fully human, in the sense of being both knower and known.

I grew up Jewish and white in the Upper Midwest. The surrounding community was Scandinavian-American and Irish-American. There was an African-American community several miles away. As an elementary school-age child I rarely came in contact with black people. I lived on the edge of the Jewish neighbourhood, so I ended up in school with mostly Scandinavian and Irish children, and I remember regarding the Irish kids as tough, sometimes, but not usually frightening. As I became high-school age, however, I developed a wariness of the local Catholic school. My stereotype of the Irish kids was that they were dangerous, that they liked to fight and would be eager to victimize me, a physically small and Jewish kid. This stereotype was minimally based on experience; I had never been beaten up by

anyone, Irish or otherwise. My fear of the Irish kids, though, was minimal compared to my fear of the black kids; here again, not only had neither I nor anyone I knew ever been beaten up by a black kid, but I never even met any black people. There were vague and unsubstantiated stories of Jewish kids being beaten up by black kids but nothing like any personal traumatic experiences that could form the basis for such a strong level of fear.

There was another experience about which it is more difficult to write, but one that is at the core of the virulence of white racism. When I was perhaps an early adolescent, I had a friend who called telephone numbers that he thought would ring households in the black part of town, shout a racial epithet into the phone, hang up, and dissolve in laughter. I found out about this behaviour when I visited his home one day, and I was present when he did it once. I was quite titillated by this behaviour of his, and even had an impulse to do it myself, though I could not bring myself to take action. I had no conscious misgivings about what he was doing – only a sort of excitement that goes with exploring the forbidden. On the other hand, I suspect that the reason I could not engage in this form of verbal violence myself was that I could not have tolerated hearing the voice of an actual person on the other end of the telephone; it would have made me realize that I was causing human pain. Nonetheless, I was capable of the kind of dehumanization that made me able to stand by and resonate with my disturbed friend's violent act. I would not have been able to stand by and tolerate the infliction of physical violence, like the people who stood by and observed lynchings. Nonetheless, I participated in some part of the dehumanization process, the inhuman excitement, which makes such events possible. This ability to turn other

human beings into things, so that empathy is suspended or obliterated, is also part and parcel of what makes the other, the African-American in this case, a suitable container for the disavowed parts of the racist's self. My own violence, for example, once projected onto the African-American, could take on a thing-like, objectified quality that facilitated disidentification. It is interesting to remember that around the same time in my life, the first African-American ever to attend my school joined my class (I was one of the first Jews ever to attend this private school). I became friends with this boy and visited his home, never thinking about the fact that it might have been he, or his mother or father or brother, who might have picked up the phone when my friend made one of his harassing calls, or how they would have felt if that had happened.

As an adult I am horrified to remember the level of dissociation and dehumanization of which I was capable, and the violence I was prepared to witness and tolerate. Having been through psychoanalysis, and considerable life experience, in the intervening years, I can also now see how my fear of the black and Irish kids was based on the disavowal of my own violence and the projection of this aspect of myself onto those whom I defined as other. The overriding need was to maintain a sense of myself, and my people, as good, benign, not destructive in the face of what should have been clear evidence of great destructive potential. In order to come to the point at which I have now arrived, I have had to subject myself to scrutiny, to feel shame and horror, to occupy the object position in order to be known. But, at the time, I was not aware of myself dehumanizing other people, of constructing prejudiced and racist images of people, I only experienced those other people as actually being dangerous. I was not aware of being dangerous myself.

Attempting to occupy only the subject position, I did not have available to me a position from which to reflect on myself and to be reflected upon. Self-reflection requires taking oneself as an object. This possibility may be foreclosed when one is raised to regard the 'other', however defined, as the object. Consciousness-raising is required to become aware of, then to transcend, the images of self and other on which we are raised. In this sense, psychoanalysis, as collusive as it can be and has been with respect to the status quo in society, has the potential to be a revolutionary force insofar as it puts people in a position to reflect on themselves and what they have always taken for granted.

## **WHITENESS**

In American society, there has, until recently, been little thought given to whiteness, to what it means to be white. Whiteness is simply the standard, the baseline, the unremarkable, unremarked upon background on which blackness or other colours show up. It is revealing that Caucasian people in the United States are called 'white', since the colour of their skin is not literally white, but rather something more like pink. But pink is a colour like other colours – in fact it is not so far on the colour spectrum from brown – which is the skin-colour of most so-called 'black' people in the United States. White, of course, is a colour too, and whiteness, as we know, is actually the colour that contains all the other colours. But we tend to associate an absence of colour with white, and it is this meaning that determines our choice of whiteness to signify the unremarkable state, the non-objectified state.

Recently, there have been some studies of whiteness, for example Jacobson (1999) and Ignatiev (1995). Jacobson points out

that whiteness in the early history of the United States meant 'fit for self-government'; originally only people of Anglo-Saxon origin were considered fit to govern themselves. Each new immigrant group, from Europe or elsewhere, was originally not considered white in this sense. Ignatiev points out that the early Irish immigrants, based on their experience of oppression at the hands of the British, were inclined to identify with black people, the slaves, in the United States. But when they realized the social and economic advantages that would accrue to them if they sought a white identity, many Irish turned anti-abolitionist. Thus, adopting racist attitudes was one way to seek entrée to a privileged position. Cornel West (1993), Toni Morrison (1993) and others have pointed out how whiteness as an identity category depends on the existence of blackness; in this sense, blackness is the background against which whiteness appears, as much as the other way around. Morrison speaks of how whiteness came to signify freedom, with blackness, and black people, coming to represent unfreedom, slavery. James Baldwin (1993) wrote of whiteness as signifying privilege, with blackness signifying underprivilege. In these and other ways, whiteness has been objectified and studied along with blackness. Whiteness is little by little losing its privileged status as signifying the 'way people should be'.

### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LEVEL

To the extent that black people represent the objectified human being, the objectified part of all of us human beings, people defined as black become suitable containers for our sense of oppression and for all aspects of ourselves from which we wish to create distance, from which we wish to

disidentify. To the extent that we wish to believe that our violence, our greed, our exploitativeness, our passivity, our dependence is 'out there', not 'in here', then the 'other' group, the group that is 'different' can easily come to represent what Harry Stack Sullivan called the 'not me'. Our sense of being oppressed and exploited, deprived of our freedom, is also easily projected onto and into the 'not me' group of people. Toni Morrison (1993), for example, points out that most white people in the United States were not and are not actually so free and privileged. How convenient, then, to have a not-me group of people, enslaved, impoverished, exploited, by contrast with whom one can feel free and privileged.

The situation in which the subject is split off from the object is highly unstable. The disavowed position is always there, requiring continual warding off. The underprivileged, exploited, unfree whites to which Morrison refers must continually renew their oppression of blacks to avoid the awareness of their own state. White people who justify repressive police tactics in black ghettos with belief in the essential violence of black ghetto dwellers must continually reinforce the denial that police repression itself is also violence. Any crack in the armour of racist belief might let in the sense that there is a vicious circle of violence between the police and ghetto residents, so that we are all implicated in the violence. A commonplace example of this dynamic on the everyday level occurs when a white person, frightened to see a black man approaching on a dark, isolated, street at night, quickens the pace and crosses the street. The white person's experience is of fear of violence 'out there', but the black person experiences the white person's act as a violent one as well. The white person's

belief in the dangerousness of the black person provides a way to avoid experiencing the violence generated by his own fear.

This example should make it more clear why I came to believe that my fear of black kids as I was growing up served to disavow my own violence. As I look back on those times, I remember knowing quite well that there were people in my own Jewish community who were involved with the 'underworld' of crime. Some of my best friends at one time were the children of Jewish people who, I knew, had a reputation for unsavoury business practices. Those friends, too, were quite antisocial. They stole things and engaged in acts of vandalism for fun. I participated in some of these activities. I colluded with acts of verbal violence against African-Americans myself. Such knowledge did not put a crack in the armour of my stereotyping, or make me feel that maybe there wasn't such a big difference between the various ethnic and racial groups after all. Why? Two factors dovetail here: on one hand, the defensive need to deny that certain unacceptable psychic characteristics are indeed part of me, as I have just described. On the other hand is the need to ward off guilt: the pain of knowing that damage has been done to human beings like myself, by me, or in my name, or with my collusion, or passive consent. Avoidance of guilt is a powerful force motivating continual reinforcement of racist attitudes, for to the extent that we experience black people as 'me', as people with feelings just like mine, realizing the suffering to which they have been subjected could generate an intolerable level of pain. Thus a vicious circle is put into motion: the more we project onto others unacceptable aspects of self, thus creating a justification for oppressing them, the more we cannot bear the guilt associated with realizing that

we are doing so. As objectified 'containers' of the white person's disavowed self, black people must be kept separate, but not too far away. There is always a longing to be reunited with parts of ourselves that are sent away, deported and deposited in other people. Anti-miscegenation laws in the United States enforced the separation between black and white, while white males reserved to themselves the privilege of reuniting with their lost 'black' selves in ecstatic midnight rendezvous with female slaves. The United States then, and now, maintains a state of 'hypersegregation' (Massey, 2002), but there is no way black people would ever have been sent away as far as Africa. White people would have lost an essential foundation for their sense of identity, at least until some other group of people, preferably with a difference as obvious as skin colour, took their place.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND LANGUAGE/DISCURSIVE ANALYSES**

Alongside the psychological factors just mentioned, we must acknowledge that there is a level of discursive, socio-economic and political factors that also constitute and reinforce racism. From a Marxist point of view, racism exists in the service of the capitalist need for a pool of underpaid, exploitable, labourers. Racism is thus seen as an aspect of social-class based oppression. Racism can also be seen as a function of a colonial worldview, and the discursive formations that go with it. For example, believing that one's country is justified in ruling over other people in the service of assisting in their 'development' builds a racist view of the colonized people into a whole worldview. Privileging economic development over all other

aspects of human development so that 'quality of life' implies material comfort, for example, is part of this discursive structure. Behind such a discursive structure, too, one can find the influence of the capitalist need for cheap labour, raw materials, and mass markets in the colonized country. The roots of racism in both the psychological and the language/discursive spheres can thus be thought to derive, ultimately, from the imperatives of economic growth and exploitation.

In my opinion, however, one cannot view any of these levels, the psychological, the socio-economic, or the language/discursive, as more fundamental than the others. The Marxist makes a good point in arguing that economic imperatives drive colonialism and the racist psychology that supports the system on the individual level. But where do these economic imperatives come from? Are we not talking about human greed, both a psychological factor on the individual level and an enshrined element in our economic system? Otherwise, where does the capitalist system, as a human creation, come from? If we believe otherwise, we must then believe that greed and exploitativeness arise from the minds of some people, but not of others. This sort of thinking falls back into the sort of splitting, the we-they mentality, which we noted gives rise to racism in the first place. This sort of thinking was arguably the fatal flaw in Marxism as a system in the real world, in that it led to the idea that the proletariat and their representatives, to the extent that they had power, would not be as greedy and ruthless and exploitative as the capitalists they had displaced. It is also easy to observe how people with socialist values remain invested in their cars, the availability of cheap oil, and so on. We cannot deny the 'capitalist within', coexisting with other, contradictory, values. So, ultimately, the

struggle to transcend racism and other forms of oppression is equally an inner and an outer struggle.

### **WHAT DOES WHITE RACISM DO TO WHITE PEOPLE?**

With these considerations in mind, let us now return to the question of what anti-black racism does to white Americans. I speak of 'white' and 'black' as both locations in language and in a particular socio-economic system, rather than with reference to the experience of particular individuals. Nonetheless, what I am about to describe not only profoundly affects, but is constitutive of, the experience of particular individuals in the United States. In the particular, the experiences of any individual is not fully encompassed by the categorical statements I will make. From the individual's perspective, the categories 'black' and 'white' will appear as stereotypes, not applicable in whole or even in part. The experience of individuals in the United States is, however, organized by the categories and forms I am about to describe, wherever on the black-white spectrum one may fall at the moment.

'Whiteness' and 'blackness' assume meaning within a context of relations characterized by a dominant/submissive structure. This structure has taken the form of colonialism, slavery, discrimination in housing, access to employment and education, and in myriad other forms of prejudice. In this context, 'white' refers to one way of occupying the superordinate position in this structure, 'blackness' to the subordinate. With reference to a capitalist economic system, whites own capital, blacks' labour is exploited. Whites are privileged, blacks underprivileged; whites are autonomous and free, blacks are dependent and unfree. Clearly, when we add social

class to the mix of variables, there are many 'white' people who occupy the 'black' position as I am describing it, and 'blacks' who occupy the 'white' position. Again, I am talking about forms of experience rather than people, but people who are labelled black are more prone to have 'black' experiences, while white people have more access to 'white' experiences. Most fundamentally, racism is a symptom, a manifestation, an outcropping, of an underlying disease that might be defined as an organization of experience around power, or a dominant/submissive structure that affects all of us, black and white alike. There are many other symptoms of this disease, on the social and personal levels. Jessica Benjamin (1995, 1998) and others have demonstrated how this disease gives rise to sexism and homophobia on the social level, to dominant/submissive power-oriented interpersonal relations, on the individual level.

Now, on the surface, the privileges and freedoms gained by those who domineer over others or benefit from an unjust system would seem to be rewards, the very opposite of a sacrifice or punishment. If one is oppressed, the experience of seeing one's oppressors enjoying the fruits of their acts is intensely frustrating and, if one is to believe in a just God, forces one to imagine that they will receive their just desserts in the afterlife, perhaps at the pearly gates. Many religions maintain that the meek shall inherit the earth, but perhaps only at the coming (or second coming) of the Messiah. I will argue that, from a certain psychoanalytic perspective, people do indeed pay a price right here and now for their acts of oppression against others. In the most general terms, we must note that the idea that people who domineer over others benefit in earthly terms depends on a stark form of individualism and materialism in which one's welfare is narrowly defined in

terms of the physical comfort of oneself and one's family. To people who are forced to suffer extreme lack of such comforts, they will seem to be rewards indeed, and such they are, in a sense. But, in another sense, there are forms of suffering that derive precisely from extreme forms of individualism and materialism. From an Eastern religious perspective, human suffering derives most fundamentally from taking oneself too seriously, from getting too caught up in ego-centred concerns. As Mitchell (2002) recently reminded us, following Nietzsche, we are all in the position of building sandcastles. Our human activities are all destined to be washed away. Yet building sandcastles is all we can do, and some of those castles are quite beautiful and meaningful; they can represent the highest form of human expression and achievement. From this perspective, the art of living consists in taking our goals, ambitions and activities seriously, but not so seriously that we forget their (and our) transient nature. It follows that those who are preoccupied with personal competitive success are ultimately the most unhappy of human beings in terms of their short sightedness and endless manic efforts to hold at bay a lurking sense of futility.

A related perspective is provided by Paul Wachtel (1989, 2), who argues that

we have lost track of what we really need. Our economic system and our relations with nature have gone haywire because we have lost track of what we really need. Increasing numbers of middle class Americans are feeling pressed and deprived not because of their economic situation – we remain an extraordinarily affluent society – but because we have placed an impossible burden on the economic dimension of our lives.

Wachtel (1989, 3) advocates that we measure our lives 'in terms of social ties, openness to experience, and personal

growth instead of in terms of production and accumulation'. Along these lines, Frantz Fanon (1967) writes: 'The soul of the white man was corrupted, and as I was told by a friend who was a teacher in the United States, 'the presence of the Negroes besides the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of colour and ask them for a little human sustenance' (1967, 129).

Building on the Western philosophical formulations, Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963) and Nicholson (2002) argue that Western people, Western Europeans and North Americans, have lost a sense of being part of nature. As a result, we have set ourselves apart from our environment, using and abusing it in a way that is coming back to haunt us as we threaten the very foundations of our own being. The natural world being as basic to our existence as our own bodies, it is as if we are exploiting our bodies without realizing that we cannot live if we don't take care of it ('it', in fact, being our very selves). The philosophical tradition associated with Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty attributes this untenable rupture between ourselves and the natural world to the formulations of Rene Descartes and the philosophers of the Enlightenment who followed in his tradition. As noted above, Descartes separated out the subject (the thinker) from the object (the thought about) and identified our very being ('I am') with this subject position. Along with the scientific advances associated with the Industrial Revolution, the result has been the objectifying of the natural world and of peoples thought to be closer to a state of nature, leading to colonialism, patriarchy, the forced removal of 'native' peoples from their land. Heidegger took strong exception to this subject-object split. He maintained that

'Dasein', his word for the human being, is 'always already' in relationship with his environment. 'Being in a world belongs essentially to da-sein' (1996, 11). 'Being in the world' is the 'constitution of being' (1996, 49). 'It is not the case that human being "is" and then on top of that has relation of being to the "world"' (1996, 53). 'The world of dasein is a with-world' (1996, 112). From this point of view, then, to separate ourselves out from our environment and from our fellow human beings, setting the stage for use, abuse, and exploitation, is tantamount to self-abuse, ultimately suicidal. This statement applies to us Westerners as a culture, but it also applies to us as individuals as we live cut off from the ground of our being in the matrix of life, human and otherwise.

In recent years, we see the hysteria that attends the desperate effort to be admitted to the right college, or the right nursery school, on the part of precisely the affluent segment of the population. Sometimes only admission to the top Ivy League schools is sufficient to ward off feelings of failure among these students and their parents in the 'best' (most competitive) high schools in the United States. Once in college, the *New York Times* of 17 November 2002 reports: 'Having honed the habit of achievement in the race to get into college, students are increasingly pursuing double, triple, even quadruple majors when they get there, amassing credentials they hope will show their diligence and, perhaps, give them an edge getting into graduate school or landing a job in a difficult market.' A large proportion of the 'privileged' segment of the population live their lives on treadmills, working endless hours in highly competitive situations to maintain their level of security and comfort, which is often illusory in any case as is revealed by the recent rounds of layoffs on Wall Street and elsewhere.

Recently, we have seen how the top management of companies like Enron and WorldCom, in their desperate efforts to garner more and more wealth, self-destructively engaged in questionable business practices, guaranteed sooner or later to bring them down. When and if material success is felt to be achieved, there is often a sense of threat from those who are disadvantaged, fear of their envy and their potentially violent efforts to grab what had been won 'legitimately'. One form this fear takes is anxiety about crime, leading people to flee to distant exurbs, or behind doormen and security guards. This situation reveals that the sense of privilege, comfort, freedom, and security sought through domination and material things is like an ever-receding mirage; one must run faster and faster when pursuing it because it keeps receding. It recedes because the inherent insecurity and suffering of the human condition refuses to be ameliorated. We are all subject to illness, death, the unpredictability of events. Money, status, prestige, material comforts do not exempt one from the human condition; at best, they win one a temporary reprieve that stimulates false hopes. What matters to people in the end is the quality of their human connections (no one ever says, on his or her deathbed, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work', as the saying goes). In sum, one price paid by those who appear to benefit from domination and oppression is that they are led to believe that by their competitive success they can gain an exemption from suffering; since we know somewhere, in our nightmares if not in our daytime reality, that suffering is always lurking around the bend, we run faster and faster to ward it off. Thus, one price paid by the 'privileged' is a modern version of the suffering of Sisyphus, the suffering of running faster and faster on a treadmill ultimately to end up where one started. This is the problem that resides in

consumerism, that particular and extreme form of materialism. The belief that material things can bring 'happiness', an exemption from the ordinary vicissitudes of life, keeps us buying more and more things in the search for that ever-receding state. Failure of acceptance of the truth of the human condition, to value sand castles for what they are, is one price paid for 'privilege'. Devaluation of human connection is a second devastating price paid.

### **PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES**

From a different and more psychoanalytic perspective, the price paid for our individualistic and competitive ethos is the price paid for any act of psychic un-integration, any act by which one defensively disavows part of oneself in the service of anxiety avoidance or the maintenance of a sought-after, but illusory, sense of self. There is a self-rupture that parallels the rupture of self from environment that I spoke of above. Categories related to race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation might be regarded as the symptom of a collective neurosis that consists in alienation from ourselves.

The Kleinian notion of 'reparation' (Klein, 1975) is helpful in understanding the price paid by those who disavow and project. To Melanie Klein, reparation for damage done is the wellspring of the highest forms of human activity. Klein and her followers believed that being human necessarily entails a degree of destructiveness. Klein wrote about human destructiveness in terms of the Freudian 'death instinct' (Freud, 1920) but I don't think we need to buy into that vague idea in order to appreciate the inevitability of destructiveness, both fantasized and actual. Fantasized destructiveness follows from children's

egocentrism, from their belief that they cause whatever happens, including bad things like a death or severe illness in the family. Adults, for all their development of rational thought, retain on an emotional level the same liability to irrational guilt. Leaving aside for the moment intentional desires to hurt other people, real destructiveness occurs because there are inevitable conflicts of interest between people, and because people inevitably misunderstand each other simply because they are separate people. Parents inevitably hurt their children, sometimes because, under stress from some outside source, they can't take their children's very ordinary demands for one more second; or, they hurt their children because they need to work or have a social life outside the family. Children inevitably hurt their parents by growing up, becoming separate people, displacing them as they become adults and their parents grow old and die. People feel intensely guilty for these things; it is not easy to say whether that guilt is rational or irrational. Damage is indeed done to a child when a harried parent snaps back at a child who needs to be tucked in for one more minute; yet, such experiences of being failed are essential preparation for life. When a battered woman leaves her husband who desperately tries to get her to stay she may indeed be damaging him but her very existence may require that she do so. One may hope that she can tolerate her sense of guilt, her knowledge that her husband is being hurt, so that there is room for her anger and her self-preservative needs.

The point is that people inevitably feel destructive. If they can tolerate feeling that way, they find ways to engage in constructive activities, reparative activities, to restore a sense of goodness. If they cannot tolerate feeling destructive, there is nothing to do but to disavow these feelings

and, since the fact of destruction cannot be denied, to locate the guilt in other people. This dynamic occurs on both the individual level and the broader social level. I argue here that this dynamic both produces racism – a set of 'not-me' people onto whom one can easily project unwanted feelings – and that racist acts, themselves destructive, produce a self-reinforcing process in which the more other people are hurt by racism, the more we may deny our common humanity with them, the more we may attribute destructiveness to them.

A founding act of the United States was the removal from their land of the Native Americans who had been there from time immemorial. Greed was rationalized with the idea that the Native Americans, being closer to their natural environment, were almost like the environment itself – to be mastered and exploited. People of African origin could be enslaved with the same rationale. The knowledge that we had thereby created a rupture in the fabric of humanity, in the foundation of our own being, leads to the potential for feelings of guilt and loss. But, if we cannot bear the pain of guilt, or if we are unwilling to experience guilt because we want to keep on exploiting others without being troubled by guilt, then we are led into the vicious circle of attributing the suffering of those we exploit to their own failings and their 'badness', then inducing in them the 'bad' behaviour that gives our rationalization plausibility. Cheng (2001) speaks of white America's failure to mourn our past abuses of African-Americans. Part of what has to be given up, then mourned, is the spotlessly 'good' image we have of ourselves that is associated with the relentless projection onto others of 'badness'.

What price is paid when we fail to take responsibility for our destructiveness, past and present, inflicted directly by our own

hands, and indirectly by our collusion and silence? We remain haunted by those parts of ourselves, by those elements of our common humanity that we have disavowed, caught between longing to be reunited and needing to distance ourselves, we condemn ourselves to an endless anxiety and fear-driven process of building and reinforcing the walls that separate us and those who embody our disavowed selves, to running away faster and faster from our ever-accumulating guilt. On the macrocosmic level, one sees Americans fleeing the cities to ever-increasing distances from the urban cores to which the 'other' is relegated, to the 'exurbs' seeking an escape that the suburbs had failed to provide. The sociologist Douglas Massey (2002) refers to American racial segregation as 'hyper segregation' and notes that no country in the world with the exception of South Africa has such a degree of residential segregation. This segregation mirrors an internal hyper-segregation that white Americans enforce to hold at bay their 'shadow' selves, and an unbearable pain and guilt that would arise from the warded-off fellow-feeling with those who suffer. We are unable to engage in constructive activities that would attenuate our sense of guilt. Running away faster and faster, we are haunted by a sense of fear and anxiety, reflections of which are identified by Michael Moore in his 2002 film *Bowling for Columbine* and the book *The Culture of Fear* by Glassner (1999). In this book, the author demonstrates the way in which the media, especially television news, has increasingly highlighted frightening news, murders and other violent crimes, fomenting fear of the black man as perpetrator. Seeking refuge from internal and external demons and persecutors, white Americans frantically chase after ever-increasing levels of privilege and security. This is the hell to which we have

condemned ourselves. It is only because we have grown up with it, become habituated to it, that we do not see the price we pay, and what alternatives there might be. Only the outsider, the very 'other' we have created, can see who we have become, and can speak to us with words such as those of Fanon and Baldwin.

## CONCLUSION

I began this paper stimulated by White's questions about the experience of being white, about the experience of racial hatred from a white person's point of view. I have tried to write on a personal level, and reflect on a more abstract level about how I, and white people in general, came to be who we are. Reflecting in the abstract on the psychological, socio-economic, and language/discursive factors contributing to white racism might entail a flight to the abstract, an intellectualization process that removes us from the pain and the shame. On the other hand, understanding how we come to be who we are is an essential part of the consciousness-raising process necessary to effect personal and social change.

I have argued in this essay that 'whiteness' entails, most fundamentally, organizing experience around power, around the dominant/submissive polarity. I do not mean to imply that other, non-white people do not similarly organize experience around this polarity, seeking and maintaining power over other people and over the natural world. People of European origin in the last several centuries, however, have been uniquely focused on this dimension of experience, leading to the massive subjugation of non-European peoples and of the natural world. As Europeans and North Americans of European origin have engaged in this project, cultural polarities have opened up in which 'Third World' peoples

have come to occupy the complementary, submissive, position, in the minds of white people, and in the minds of non-white people. From within this framework, as white people have sought to occupy the favoured, privileged, powerful position, non-white people have been forced into the powerless and underprivileged position. A psychoanalytic perspective, I have argued, deconstructs such polarities, revealing the underlying powerlessness in the seemingly powerful position. Those who seek to occupy only one position on such a polarity remain haunted by the disavowed position. For one thing, as demonstrated by Toni Morrison, the 'powerful' people are as dependent on the 'powerless' for their sense of power as the powerless might seem to be for the resources controlled by the powerful. For another, the existential powerlessness in the face of death and the uncontrollability of life's events is actually increased by efforts to evade it, as I hope to have demonstrated. Finally, the seemingly powerful can be seen as enchained by their ever more desperate efforts to sustain an illusion of invulnerability.

Those who seek to occupy the powerful position on the polarity are arguably more chained to the rigidities of the polarity than are those forced into the powerless position; the latter, having less to lose, may be more free in their slavery to transcend the imperatives of power and powerlessness. Thus, it may be clear to black people in our society (as it was to Baldwin) that, in their preoccupation with power and control, white people lack a certain humanity, a feeling of kinship with other people that leads to empathy and kindness. It was the genius of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King to find a way to break out of the power/powerless paradigm, confusing their masters with the paradox of non-violent 'power'. White people, unconsciously envious of this

freedom from the need to seize and maintain power, seek to persecute its manifestations in the form of sexuality, or to trivialize and/or coopt it in the form of musical expression (the prenatal memory of the mother's heartbeat in the form of musical rhythm, the primordial sense of closeness that, sacrificed when one domineers over others, must be envied, hated, and longed for).

A crucial aspect of being white in the United States is to be in a state of unawareness or denial as to one's social location and racial/ethnic particularity. This state of unreflectiveness about being white has at least three aspects. First, the meaning of identity categories, like whiteness, is part of the discursive system of a particular culture. Our identities are constituted by categories having to do with gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and so on, in ways that are already there when we come to 'self-consciousness'. In this sense, self-consciousness is limited. Who we are in the eyes of other people, and thus who we will be in our own eyes to a great extent, is already laid out before we know that we exist. One dimension of this identity formation via others has to do with the meaning that our parents and others have made of our behaviour, the way we look, and so on, having to do with their own personal meaning system. Another dimension, the one that most concerns us here, has to do with where we fit in the sociocultural meaning-making system that defines for us, among other things, what racial category we belong to and what it means that we are thus raced. None of this is obvious to us as we come to consciousness; it is all part of the taken-for-granted, unformulated, backdrop to self-experience; indeed, it takes considerable 'consciousness raising' to bring such identity-defining processes into awareness. It is quite

common for people who are negatively defined on the basis of gender, race, or sexual orientation to feel a sense of personal shame, inadequacy, or guilt and responsibility for their 'negative' qualities. They may be aware of a sense of 'badness' or inadequacy, but may fail to be aware of the social origin of these feelings. Thus black people in the United States may have the meaning of their racial status forced on them through overt oppression and victimization, and thus be more aware of how race defines them than white people do. On the other hand, they may be unaware of how the less overt aspects of negative identity formation are instilled.

The second aspect of white self-unawareness on a racial basis operates on a personal level. White disavowal of negatively valued characteristics, with projection onto and into black people, necessarily operates out of awareness. If we really knew (not just on an intellectual level) what we were thus getting rid of, the ridding process would not have worked. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) provided us with some useful categories here, speaking of the 'good me', the 'bad me' and the 'not me'. The 'good me' refers to aspects of myself that I own and about which I feel good. The 'bad me' refers to aspects of myself that I own and feel badly about. The 'not me' are aspects of myself (remember, these are all 'me') that I have disowned. There is a hole in my self where these aspects of myself would have been visible. The hole is not visible. Its presence can be inferred, like the presence of a black hole in the universe, by the activity that goes on near the hole. In the psychological sense, we can infer the presence of a hole in the personality by the vehemence or obliviousness with which the person denies the qualities in question and insists, or acts, as if they belonged to some other person or persons. These processes operating on the

personal level mirror and reinforce the social processes just discussed, as white people in the collective make meaning of 'blackness' in terms of their collective 'not me'. The cure here, however, is not consciousness raising on a cognitive level, but rather a form of psychotherapy that engages the disavowed aspect of the personality. Such engagement may or may not be understood in racial terms (think about how the stage was set for me to know more about how I had constructed race, as I learned more about the vicissitudes of my aggression through my personal analysis).

Finally, white racial unawareness is a function of white guilt for having oppressed black people through particular actions or through collusion. To the extent that we are unwilling or unable to bear the pain of guilt, we do not want to know about what we have done individually or in the collective as white people. We have a vested interest in being unaware of what we have done, and thus who we are. We enter into a state of Sartrean 'bad faith'.

The net result of these three factors is an overdetermined blind spot in white people about what is entailed in being white. And this obliviousness, in itself, becomes a powerfully oppressive aspect of being white. Occupying no particular social location, in the sense that all other people occupy a particular location, makes one and one's people superior to all others. Whiteness says: we are the standard, the norm, from which deviations can be noted and measured. But, of course, this is not made explicit, except for those who have the bad form to state baldly their white supremacism. For those who would have conflict about formulating their sense of superiority in so many words, there is simply an acting out of this sense of superiority, an acceptance of the status quo with all its injustices. Evidence of the anxiety,

fear, and guilt that lurks in the background can be noted in the vigilance required to maintain the state of unawareness of what it means to be white and black in this society, and in the defensiveness often provoked when this unawareness is challenged.

From the point of view developed in this essay, social change with respect to racism depends, in large part, on consciousness raising, much as has occurred with respect to sexism and homophobia. The economic and political factors that maintain and reinforce racism, of course, will change, if they change, in accord with the logic of those systems. Writing this essay has been an exercise in trying to raise my own consciousness. It has been extraordinarily difficult to write. My hope is that those who read it can follow me as far as I have been able to go, and take the project further, each in his or her own way. I am grateful to Kathleen Pogue White, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and all those others who have cared enough to challenge us 'white' folks to think about what has happened, and keeps happening, to us. It may help black people to free themselves from being who we white people need them to be, if we can bear to know that we need them to be that way. On the other hand, it may help us white people as much to find the strength to know who we are, that is, to know whom we haunt, and what disavowed parts of ourselves haunt us.

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