

The Perverse Pact: Racism and White Privilege

Introduction

This essay takes up, from a psychoanalytic and cultural theory perspective, the underpinnings and psychic structures of racism, as it is lived out and practiced in the North American context. Considering the investment of white people in many projects of denial and historical amnesia, this is the most daunting task facing communities, large and small. This essay, which I have worked on with considerable anxiety, is focused on the tenacity of the conscious and unconscious commitments “white” people make to *white privilege*. I believe this reluctance to take on the questions of white privilege is currently a major impediment to progress in overcoming racism in many communities and social circumstances. In this essay, however, I have tried to center my attention on my own experience, particularly my own resistances, as a white person, citizen, and psychoanalyst.

The overarching concept with which I will be thinking about these matters is one developed by Ruth Stein (2005): the perverse pact. This pact can be observed in individuals, in couples, in social formations, and in intersubjective space. What is powerful in this concept is Stein’s attention to social links that are both very close and intimate and simultaneously very violent and drenched in hostility. Both terms—“perverse” and “pact”—are necessary ingredients.

What I am concerned to do is to examine in myself and in other white persons, singly or in groups, the combined force of dissociation and violence that keeps racism in place. Disso-

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ciation and violence are an odd combination. This is precisely where the notion of a perverse pact can be useful. There is continuous racial violence in the United States. White people both know and “blank out” knowing these indisputable truths. I am using this concept—the perverse pact—to examine some of the self-imposed limits in regard to reflection and action, along with the unconscious conditions in which white guilt and white fragility inhibit our progress towards genuine civil rights (DiAngelo, 2018). We need to appreciate the power of dissociation and amnesia and be much more scrupulous and suspicious about certain common ideas about guilt. Guilt needs to be distinguished from “guiltiness.” This was an important idea in the work of Stephen Mitchell (2000): “A contrived sense of guiltiness can serve as a psychological defense against a more genuine sense of pathos or sadness for oneself” (p. 730). Guiltiness is riddled with narcissism and anxiety rather than genuine reparative impulses—it is actually a barrier to mourning and reparation.

In the contemporary context of Black Lives Matter, there is a new level of demand on white power structures and white individuals to understand the meaning of reparation, which would actually be an offering and not merely a symbol. Reparation is a process that acknowledges indebtedness and change that means a giving up, a losing of space and place and material conditions for the entrenched dominating presence of whiteness and racism.

My argument here is that to do the real and deep work of reparations, white people will need to face the power of white privilege over conscious and unconscious thought and action. Acknowledging *and* undoing the perverse pact of white privilege is one pathway to the new vision of genuine social freedom. I am not suggesting that the examination and dismantling of the perverse pact is the only right movement in the dominant white culture. I try to say here that we need to understand the depth and tenacity of the perverse pact on our minds and actions. In the Four Notes¹ that follow, I make a case for the power of the perverse pact in warding off our judgment and appreciation of the stark realities of contemporary and historic racism. I think that this notion of the perverse pact, illustrated

in the following, may speak to the ongoing difficulty we are having in its dismantling.

The perverse pact, as Stein imagined it, was built on a negative link and an overturning of reality. Stein was thinking of perversion as a way of responding and interacting that was built on destruction and alienation, and on a wish to derail and destroy the other. It is a curious, hydridic, and contradictory process in which, paradoxically, identification is intensely dominating *and* dissociated and refused. It is relatedness dominated by dissociation, amnesia, and disavowal. In essence, it is a refusal to imagine a shared humanity. It is, instead, a demand for domination and control. It is this concept, imagined as a social and intersubjective force, that I consider a necessary understanding for racism and for white privilege, which surely are closely and dangerously entangled.

It is this contradictory and paradoxical mixture of fusion and alienation that, for me, makes the concept so important for racism and for racist practices in many contexts. I want to be clear that the perverse pact I am considering is not between white people and people of color. It is a pact, lived out consciously and unconsciously, within white culture and in the individual consciousness of white persons. It is a pact that underwrites racism.

What is ironic and infuriating to many contemporary people of color writing about racism is that the revelations and analysis of continuing racism by people of color is not leading to work within the white community. I use the word “work” deliberately to mean the hard but necessary intellectual and emotional labor that will be essential to transform and unpack racism as it is lived and enacted among white persons. This is a way of suggesting that reparations, forgiveness, work across racial lines requires first work within white communities and individuals. Very often, the ugly underpinnings of this pact are revealed, they are not taken on within the white communities as phenomena to be understood and worked on within and by the white community. Ideas and demands to undertake genuine reparation and full absorption in what these pacts have underwritten, are appearing in the writing of people of color. One might say that the perverse pact is thus a pact functioning within

white cultures and individuals, around refusals to know what is in plain sight. The perverse pact is both engaged and denied.

It is both ironic and deeply problematic that white persons forget or refuse an insight into this perversity, which has been visible in the writings of people of color for decades. Consider the analyses made by Frantz Fanon (1961, 1957) in several prescient and still acutely meaningful books. Fanon (1957) speaks of the black man's body as "phobogenic." It is a potent term, containing eerily the very contradictions that operate in the perverse pact. The body of the black man is desired *and* feared. This toxic mixture of need and disavowal dominates the perverse pact. I will be arguing that this toxicity acts as a powerful barrier to the process of surrendering white privilege and to finding the unconscious and conscious roots of racist practices. James Baldwin, in his moving *Letter to my Nephew* (1963) says clearly, "It is the innocence which constitutes the crime" (p. 6). Here we must understand that innocence is meant as the site of evacuation and disavowal. There is a perverse refusal to know.

Stein's work on perversion and the perverse pact was both clinical and social. For her, the intersubjective and the intrapsychic were always entangled and interactive. She was thinking about the way that trauma (historic or familial) can enter and poison intimate relations. I extend this idea of the poisoning effect of the unwitnessed and unacknowledged trauma of racism to the context of white persons' histories as perpetrators of unremitting violence and domination in American social, personal and political life. I have been interested in charting the close ties of intimacy and social violence in situations like human trafficking (Harris, 2016), ties that I would now identify as elements of a perverse pact.

One important figure for me has been Yolanda Gampel (1998) who speaks of the *radioactive toxins*, circulating in the environment—social or actual—which because so poisonous [as to] remain unintegratable (p. 245), these toxins are kinds of present absences (Gerson, 2009). Perhaps it feels contradictory to call a toxin a present absence. Gerson made this point while looking at the harsh intensity of denial and negation in post-Holocaust reckoning and reflection. Racist practices are a violent and damaging poison in North American culture,

but they are too quickly and systematically blanked out. Green (1986) speaks of “*psychose blanche*,” a gap, an absence in psychic structure. I think we can import his term and see that the gap, the absence, is actually also a place holder for hatred and destruction.

If we think of the toxic effect of some of the experiences surfacing and being processed in the light of the #MeToo movement we may have a way of considering a kind of radioactivity in the culture, a toxic presence of misogyny and racism that is widely and deeply unsettling. I am drawing links between the forces and processes that underwrite and perpetuate sexual harassment and other forms of social hatred and malevolence which I subsume under or relate to “the perverse pact.”

Stein says that in a perverse pact lies and truth change places. Here is where we might see the complexity of sexuality in the perverse pact, not as a matter of kinds of sexual practices but as an aspect of the interpersonal and social transactions in which racism flourishes.

This matter is one I take up later in this paper in excavating and analyzing clinical material from Joan Riviere’s analysis (1929) of a woman from the American South in the early 20th century. Lynching was almost always the punishment for imagined sexual transgressions by black men, and the manic excitement in many accounts and photographs of these practices is overwhelming (Harris, 2017; Ifill, 2007). At the end of the 19th century, when the patient would have been a young girl in the American South, lynching and the activities Ku Klux Klan were a pervasive and devastating social force. These facts are both generally known and erased from awareness.

Envy and fear of the potency of the “other” wards off awareness of acts of enslavement, murder, and degradation. The perverse pact of racism involves much overturning of reality, disavowal of envy, and murderous rage and actions in which sexuality is both potently intrusive and radically denied. A lynching that has been inaugurated in reaction to some imagined sexual overture by a person of color can be described in many ways: illegal, provocative, and vengeful. I want to attend to this other aspect of racial violence: its refusal, its overturning of reality. The murderer presents as victim, the lawless avenger claims a moral right. Racism sits on and depends on many social

forces. I want to include denial and disavowal of reality among the nightmarish elements in racial hatred. This, as Fanon and others have well analyzed, is part of the excruciating anxiety in which racism flourishes.

This might require our return to the concept introduced earlier, the important distinction between guilt and guiltiness. The latter term, guiltiness, was one that Mitchell (2000) reserved for feelings in which actual guilt and remorse were quite foreign, replaced instead by anxiety and narcissism. To the degree that white privilege maintains a perverse pact through the presence and bastions of “guiltiness,” it will remain unchanged. Carveth (2018) makes a somewhat similar argument, distinguishing between reparative and persecutory guilt, the latter formation being more primitive, more asocial, and often tied to deep experiences of shame. The goal is control, not reparation, and interestingly Carveth sees a very limited role for shame in moving towards genuine contrition. Perhaps the interesting question in regards to examining white privilege is to wonder about mechanisms of genuine transformation. In a certain sense, the eruption of alt-right terrorist attacks and the more sluggish, slow-moving examination of white privilege as white fragility are built on the same core of shame and asocial narcissism. The differences in the liberal and far right responses are significant and important to notice. So are the commonalities.

James Baldwin’s *Letter to my Nephew*

In 2018, there was a meeting organized in Boston on racism that focused on James Baldwin’s *Letter to my Nephew* (1963), a literary treasure that is intimate, loving, and heartbreaking. But in the context of this essay on white privilege, it can also be dangerous. The depth of Baldwin’s emotional responsiveness, his even imagining forgiving the unforgiveable, can generate a powerful pull towards easy resolutions. I think this happened for me in listening to Baldwin’s deep counsel and abiding love for his nephew and his family.

I want to offer the concept of the perverse pact as a counterweight to any easy assumption concerning forms of repara-

tion and forgiveness. The work of unpacking and disentangling the investment in racism is going to be hard for white people. My argument is that we are currently, for the most part, stuck in the conditions in which powerful denials and unconscious foreclosures underwrite perverse pacts. White people have a lot of work to do

There was, for me, an unexpected prelude to this meeting in Boston. The 2017 Division 39 of the American Psychological Association conference was held in New Orleans, with a strong focus on race and racism, and on the complex task of reparations and white privilege. There was a highly emotional centerpiece to that meeting: visits to and lectures about the Whitney Plantation, the first plantation to become a museum about slavery, and now a foundation directed by African Americans.

The man who developed this project, John Cummings, talked about his stunned reaction to getting the real estate history of the property when he bought it in early 2000. The 19th century real estate transactions sent on to the new owner listed the transfer, not just of buildings, but of people. Cummings spoke of the thunderclap of knowing what he had always/never known. This mixture of amnesia and passionate attachment to privilege is I think still foundational for white people in the United States. It is interesting that the real estate documents maintain the documentation of enslavement. As John Cummings discovered in the real estate transaction in which he purchased the Whitney Plantation, the evidence of slavery is visible to anyone who looks for it. But, too conveniently, enslavement is evacuated from working memory. Is the keeping of documents, which now works to establish a history of exploitation and a case for reparation, also a part of white fragility? As in the holding of totemic artifacts, the evidence of criminality is erased. It is, as is much traumatic material, neither remembered nor forgotten.

Bion would be more directly interested in calling this process and problem the matter of lies and telling the truth. This mixture of disavowal, hatred, and the toxic control over others, couched in the language of erasure and amnesia is what Bion would term lying, and I am extending this to Stein's concept of the perverse pact. Lying is of course a powerful charge but it is perhaps true to call amnesia a form of radical falsehood,

not a forgetting but a refusal to hold what is clearly known and understood in mind.

In regard to racism, this pact, among white citizens, is built on amnesia about phenomena actually deeply and terrifyingly known. “Perversion often manifests itself as a disguised, often sexualized, enactment of hatred and destructiveness, which is actualized within an object relational structure” (Stein, 2005, p 77). In many situations, personal and political, this is the subtext, the inner conscious and unconscious scene in many experiences of racial violence, a phenomena deeply inscribed in lynchings (Ofill, 2007).

In so many of the discussions at the Division 39 conference, any conventional imagining of reparation, guilt, or apology were mercifully absent. The overarching mood was of uncertainty, sometimes tumbling into hopelessness. What could change, what must change, what is as yet unbridged and can seem unbridgeable? Lynne Layton (2018), in a Plenary address, coined a term, “The Ethics of Dis-illusion,” (her invention to make forcefully the point that we must unpack and disavow our illusions to think of the practices that might undermine the maintenance of white privilege and “whiteness”). To link Stein’s perverse pact to Layton’s Dis-illusion is to see, in both arguments, that these practices of privilege can only lead to denials of reality, reversals of good and bad, of reality and fantasy, of doer and done to.

This practice of dis-illusion is easier to define than to imagine how it will be deployed or developed. How do we turn that task of dis-illusion back upon ourselves—by feeling remorse for acts (ours and our ancestors) which are actually unforgivable? I need to be clear that I do not think this essay undoes the perverse pacts of racism or the illusions of white privilege. I am hoping through this writing to suggest our necessary tasks. I remain uncertain of whether we—white citizens—can want to make these changes and if we want them, actually carry them out. I find I want to say this sentence again and again in this essay. It is the fundamental underlying question: Are white people prepared to, are we insistent on such radical change as the step away from privilege?

Baldwin (1963) names the problem that holds white people in an implacable gaze: To make headway in this process, we

must lose our identity. I think this means our identity as “exceptional,” as “privileged,” as “better than.” From all sides of the racial divide, I think it is understood that this will be much more difficult to do than anyone imagines. Something must be given up. Is this possible? It is a question that is hard to ask and certainly it will be hard to answer. This essay is an attempt to insist on the necessity of the question

In our current economic neo-liberal culture where the distribution of wealth is dramatically changing, the professional classes, including psychoanalysts, are already losing privilege. This might be a stimulus for some transformative thinking or it might tilt these professional classes, so used to “cultural capital” as well as capital, to a more reactionary stance. As the question of reparations, concretely imagined and proposed, becomes louder, the question of will and motivation among white persons becomes increasingly relevant. Questioning the social will for social changes around racism, looking at examples of the tenacity of the perverse pact and my own acts of complicity and perversion, are my current contributions to this discussion.

Four Notes on Racism, Whiteness, and White Privilege

This essay will now take up, in four notes, a series of experiences and encounters which demonstrate the presence of the perverse pact, its potency, and its continuing presence. In the first note, I read and point out the work among black writers, men and women, on the project of fighting racism. Their understanding of the perverse pact and its hold over white consciousness is profound. In the second note, I look at strong creative efforts in a theater company to contest the perverse pact, noting the pleasure and freedom the actors have felt at these opportunities, and noting acts of resistance and maintenance of perverse pacts in the audiences—including my own reactions and construction of a performance I witnessed.

The final two notes are drawn from writing I have done over the past decade, some unpublished, but one particular essay in *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (Harris, 2012). I am struck and chagrined that these experiences remain un-metabolized, clearly some resistance which I take to be on a personal and

collective level. So I retell these stories, one about my own background and one about a seminal text in psychoanalysis, as evidence of the continuing of the perverse pact, of the great difficulty in moving beyond “guiltiness” to mourning.

The third note continues looking at the hold white privilege has had over my own consciousness, despite many projects with progressive emancipatory agendas, particularly in feminism. I try, using psychoanalytic tools, to unpack the perverse pacts within my own family and my own consciousness of whiteness and empowerment. The last note turns these questions on the field of psychoanalysis, looking at the collective amnesia of readers of some clinical material that could shed significant light on the complexity of racism in regard to violence and sexuality, complexity that the perverse pact tries to bury.

Note 1. Fanon, Baldwin, Coates but also Lorde and hooks

I will discuss Fanon, Baldwin, and Coates—a genealogy of black male writers theorizing race and racism. Turning the talk in Boston into a written essay, I found myself wanting also to draw on two black women of my generation: bell hooks and Audre Lorde.

Reading Baldwin in the context of Fanon’s work, I am struck by such difference in tone and affective state. Baldwin and Fanon were born a few years apart in the 1920s. Both men lived substantial years outside their birthplace. In Fanon’s case he seems to have felt subject to colonial domination in a different way. Perhaps Baldwin in France experienced something more liberatory. At any rate, Baldwin’s text is full of love and grief in his attunement to the generations of men before and after him within his own family. Towards the end of his essay he has, to my ear, such a compassionate stance towards the persistence of racism. He fears for white persons’ fragility in regard to their identity and a capacity for transformation.

Fanon is on fire. Ann Pellegrini (1997), an important scholar of Fanon, would say that in the encounter with Europe and high French culture, Fanon discovers he is black, and in France Baldwin feels some relief from racism, feels his humanity more outside the American context of violence and hostility. Fanon, perhaps because of his training in psychiatry

and psychoanalysis, has produced the most acute account of racism's perversity. Long after the formal end of slavery, he argues, white people have needed people of color, men and women, to do the hard labor of holding shame and otherness and degradation. Fanon operates always, as Pellegrini suggests, with a double vision: the social-historical circumstances that maintain racism and the intrapsychic/intersubjective experiences in which racism is held unconsciously and consciously in individual psyches. Transformation will entail liberation and decolonization at both levels.

Ta-nehisi Coates (2008, 2015) takes us many places already visited by Baldwin and Fanon, but very importantly, he takes us back to Malcolm X, a figure whose militancy at the time frightened and polarized many. Coates, too, in several beautiful and rich texts, gives his reader a window into a world of black men and women growing up. As we also see in Fanon and Baldwin, though, he focuses mostly on men. These worlds are as defined by fear as by passionate moves to grow and flourish. Coates' conclusions in regard to white privilege are stark and unforgiving, in all senses of that term. Can white people overcome their destiny? He argues powerfully that in the determination to hold racial difference, white consciousness and white persons maintain racism. Hauntingly, he says, it is our "destiny": that is, with deep pessimism he insists that white supremacy is inscribed in all our values and projects as Americans. Our democratic and our aspirational projects sit irreducibly on a racist base.

For me, powerful black female voices in my generation ('70s second wave feminism) are Audre Lorde (1981; 1984) and bell hooks. Bell hooks (1989, 1992) was alert to the double danger of splitting and othering across racial lines. Yes, danger and destructiveness are disavowed and projectively installed in the racial "other." This is the perverse pact. But, hooks, insisted that we notice the introjection and appropriation of warmth, vitality, and excitement (Fanon's phobogenic black body).

Audre Lorde, in a way that deeply anticipates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2011), was interested in differences around race, gender and sexuality. A fierce and amazing writer, she wrote:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (Lorde, 1984 p.110)

The work of these writers, necessarily focused on the revolution and transformations in black lives and cultures, do not easily point a pathway or hold out hope in the wider cultural conversation about white privilege. In what follows, I want to hold on to the complexity of reparation, in any sense of that term. One of the interesting comments from the Whitney Plantation director, John Cummings, was how many conversations he has had over the years with white visitors to the Plantation and in his social milieu in New Orleans, is “why aren't they (they = black people) *over* it.”

My answer is in these following three notes, which focus on what whiteness still enslaves.

Note 2. Stratford Shakespeare Festival, 2017: The laboratory of binaries undone.

In the summer of 2017, I was invited to participate in a forum held at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada where I was part of a group that included actors in the company talking about new and radical casting projects.² These are new practices, called variously blind casting, divergent casting, or conscious casting. These are projects that explicitly address both questions of diversity and the trap of binaries. Women are considered for men's roles. Actors of color are playing roles usually only imagined as high status or whites only. Older women take on the roles of generals and political leaders, expanding the presence of older women beyond the witches in Macbeth. Each actor's story about the expanding of these opportunities came with such a mixture of pride and anxiety. The black man

spoke about endless casting as a gangster, the Indian woman of the equally endless roles as a maid, often a comic rather than a romantic or serious figure.

I sat with these actors and marveled both at their vision, their determination to be open to a new range of roles and acting experiences, but finally at the anguish and pain entailed in such a project. I think it is both exciting and arduous for these actors to play these roles in a way that forces expansion and self-confrontation by the audience. Viewing these experiments now over several years at the Stratford Festival, one sees the pleasure in these new opportunities and you can feel in the energy in performances the expansion of power, presence, and imagination.

I had wondered with the actors whether they felt, from the audience, the complex kinds of reactions that sometimes surface in post-performance public discussions of these casting policies. The actors all, with their differences of race and gender, sexuality, and cultural identity, spoke of the pleasure and excitement of these new opportunities. A stranglehold over identification, which we all live with in culture and social experience, has lifted for a moment and the performers are empowered into new forms of subjectivity. The actors report exhilaration. The audience, in some cases consciously and, as I will recount in my case, unconsciously, inhabit and are inhabited by some complex anxieties, along with the excitement of new unimagined possibilities.

What is most powerful in gender blind and race blind casting is that these imaginative leaps and presentations open the audience to their inner convictions, perhaps ones they did not know we had. Our categories of what is manageable or good are intense and often unconscious. We have very exacting categorical judgment of who is a right kind of being. Among the crucial insight of Kahneman and Twersky (2000, 2011) is how fast and how unconscious these perceptions and judgments are. In general, we expect our experiences of each other to be orderly and reliable. Yet under the radar of awareness we are processing much more troubling and unsettling questions: Is this person safe? Exciting? Is this person like me or alien, because they are different and hard to code? These new casting practices are generative and potent for the communities of ac-

tors engaged in these practices. They are revolutionary for the creative artists, actors and directors. They have that potential for the audiences as well. But that potential has some snags and conflicts embedded within it.

In the midst of this talk at Stratford, I had to tell another story. A moment in which my racism flared up. I had been at a public discussion about race held at the Stratford Festival in the summer of 2016.³ A young black man—an actor in the company it turned out—sitting at the back of the auditorium described an experience playing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at a small regional theater in Canada and how he had encountered racist comments and experiences in the local community where the play was performed. It was a harrowing story and as the lecture ended and we all filed out, people came up to him and spoke about how moved they had been. I approached him and spoke to him to thank him for speaking out. As he moved through the lobby, he pulled off his cap, and I saw suddenly that he was the actor I had just seen the night before in *All My Sons*, an Arthur Miller play set in the post-World War Two period in the US.

In the next instant, I realized something else. Shamefully. During the play, where this actor plays a doctor in an upper middle-class community in the postwar period and in a strong and loving mixed race relationship, I had coded him, quite without consciousness, as Indian, East Indian not indigenous, and not African American. Subtly, but this is how fast racism can move, I had shifted him into an ethnicity more likely to have a medical degree and an upper middle-class life in the postwar 1950's when the play was set. This psychic move I had made under the radar of my consciousness. It is this potential to open us to our anxieties, our phobic constructions, our judgments outside of awareness that makes what these actors and directors are doing so radical. I want to honor the actors' pleasure and excitement at the expansions of their creativity. But I worry: how do they manage their anxiety and our projections?

A year after this experience with my own racism and the conversations about racism and prejudice in casting, I rethought the public discussion with the actor at the Festival Forum, a discussion that is also now on YouTube. The actor and I had been talking about this experience and I asked his permission

to speak of what I had done. He agreed. But only this winter, in the midst of discussions that are becoming more trenchant and probing about white shame and fragility, did I ask myself about my public speech that was both an apology and a representation of racism. Was I asking the actor to help me with my crimes, my fragility? Does this not continue the enactment in which white people, such as myself, continue to ask for help in processing racist perceptions and actions?

Note 3. My Colonial Identity

It was the experience of reading the work of Melanie Suchet (2007) and Gill Straker (2004) recounting the ordeals, burdens, and entrapments of colonial identifications in South Africa that began, for me, a process of remembering. I grew up in English Canada, in a family with old roots in the colonial management of that country. The history of the genocides of indigenous populations was not in the mid-20th century curriculum of Canadian schools. We learned British history and read English novels. Canada was, apparently, a large, white, empty, receptive site for British and colonial hegemony.

Maurice Apprey (1996) argues that it is precisely through the management of these public discourses and products that intergenerational trauma is reproduced and at the same time disguised. Might a pluperfect errand sometimes or even inevitably be embedded in a perverse pact? What is entailed in all the transmissions of property from its original thefts to a series of totems, cultural forms, and projects whose original links and lineage disappears?

Yet, despite the amnesia-inducing whiteness that Canada conjures up for me, Straker's (2004) use of the term "fetish," catches my eye. She links her ideas of fetish to Bhabha (1994), who makes the link between fetish and racism quite explicit. In regard to the fetish, Bhabha has used this concept to understand the nature of racism and prejudice, as played out via the stereotype. He essentially posits that stereotyping in the public domain draws on the same mechanisms that underlie the fetish in the private domain. These mechanisms, as already indicated, involve the defense of disavowal. Bhabha argues that stereotyping draws on disavowal in the following ways: in the

first instance, the dominant individual projects otherness and difference (e.g., dirtiness, impurity) onto the disparaged group; in the second instance, by seeing the entire disparaged group as the same (i.e., as dirty, impure), the dominant individual reduces all in the disparaged group to the same level. Thus, difference becomes assumed and projected, then denied and negated (Straker, 2004).

With this in mind, I found myself thinking about my grandparents' house, a big part of my life in the 1940s. I have described it in a previous essay as evocatively as I could:

This house, I came to see, was a museum of fetish objects, the captured fetish objects drenched in meaning for their original communities, now reduced to decoration. The late 19th century men in my family had soldiered, prospected, and toured around the world sending back roomfuls of artifacts, looted from the cultural and natural world. My grandfather had been a surveyor for Cecil Rhodes in South Africa and Rhodesia, an engineer in Western Canada and the Yukon, so the rooms and hallways of his house were filled with tiger skins made into rugs, elephant feet transformed into umbrella stands, skulls of creatures large and small, shot and stuffed and set out in long rows along the front hall. As a small child I was mesmerized and entranced (not horrified), following along hallways where each skull was mounted, identified and dated. Emu, ibex, eland, even the names of these creatures were exotic.

Now, in retrospect, I notice the jumbling of animal parts, military trophies, and cultural artifacts. This is surely part of what Neil Altman describes as a feature of racism, as an alienated rupture with the natural and the social world. There is the perverse equalizing of animal and tribal culture into one new category—the domesticated decoration, the bourgeois celebration of fetish, airbrushed into fashion and style. This style, we might see, made a chic of fetish objects, coinciding, all too neatly, with the imperial and capital expanding end of the 19th century. (Harris, 2012, pp. 201–202)

I re-read this and I can see how hard I was trying to be amusing and hip about these rooms and objects, distancing myself from the reality of cultural appropriation and theft. The story goes on, and in a way that would seem amply to confirm Coates' absolute conviction that white privilege is far from loosening, indeed continues as a too insoluble danger.

In the 1990's while on a family vacation in Western Canada, I learned in depth of the fate of the Haida community, now called First Nations. The Haida had an amazing cultural legacy, including art, sculpture, totems, a rich and intense literary and poetic tradition, all damaged and compromised late in the 19th century by these same colonizer British and English Canadians (surely people in my family) who undermined the stability and strength of the Haida and other communities by the deliberate introduction of smallpox and disease into these communities. I know that I have to think about all of this history: mine, Canada's, the western First Nations groups. These deliberate genocidal practices, in the case of the Haida and their allies in the indigenous world, left a weakened impoverished remnant on the West coast, "taken in" as charitable work by the various religious groups undertaking missionary projects in North America.

Particularly, I had to think about this when members of the Haida came to the Museum of Natural History in New York to repatriate bones and materials, which had been taken by collectors and museums. Such practices, whether in personal or institutional hands, are one of the forces in which white privilege traffics.

While I felt tearful reading about the acts of prayer and ritual with which the Haida reclaimed their heritage, I was also aware that I had, for some years, owned a number of Haida objects, carefully on view in my apartment. And, even as my children and I have investigated the routes to the return of these objects, I know that my attitude to these objects and the project of repatriation is at the heart of the problem of white privilege.

It is my awareness that I don't want to give back the objects that actually constitutes the problem. I was surprised when I made this discovery. Despite many decades of a liberal and progressive identity, I had to notice that while I

would give back these objects, restore the cultural integrity that my family, country, and social group had destroyed; underneath of that right action, the dangerous and shameful truth is that I did not want to. This is my perverse pact. Interrogating the perversion in my “owning” Haida objects, I need to examine how and why I think that my identity, my history, apparently seem at risk without these fetish objects. There is a feral, willful adhesion I feel in relation to these objects. But this word “feral” is, I suspect, designed to get me off the hook. It is, rather, a primitive, avaricious, basic, passionate attachment to objects linked to family. It is not some biologically-based primitive need that operates. It is an attachment to domination, bastioned by guiltiness. Mitchell thought of this kind of emotional experience as a kind of hysteria and guiltiness. It is not guilt of a kind that leads anywhere healthy or productive. This is one element in the unconscious forms of colonization in the maintenance of white privilege.

I am drawn by the kind of thinking Fanon, Bhabha, Coates, and Baldwin encourage; that is, an excavation of the affective and unconscious links and adhesions to power and domination. I ask the question: How is “white” identity still built on an imperial stance, even if it is an identification primarily lived in the unconscious? Guralnik and Rozmarin have made the study of this massive cooptation and insertion of colonial and dominating forms of knowing and being into all individuals, and arising from various formations in the state, now in the neoliberal state. Indoctrination and interpellation are as much directed to the individual doing the state’s bidding of management and control of persons of color.

One of the tasks of dismantling white privilege must be to identify those aspects of character that do not simply tolerate the oppression of others but require and maintain it. Is this not what Baldwin counsels his nephew to think? White people must go through a loss of identity. Yet, as I have to acknowledge, even the identity of colonial thief and oppressor is too necessary, too integral to be easily given up. I realized that I had become very anxious in writing this essay and I only began to understand some of the features of this anxiety when I read Coates’ discussion of the contemporary experiences of black men shot by police. He insists, rightly, that white people feel

the link between these murderous policemen and us. But I tie this insight of Coates to the fact that the police are us—working for white people—and then to my perverse pact with the fetish objects. I see that a number of comforting ideas must be given up: innocence, power, and privilege. Is this possible, even if I return the objects? In this particular instance, the Haida objects I hold are kinds of totem objects, figures linked to the mythology and magic of that social group. To hold such objects is to want to dominate those for whom it is totem and to believe that power is drawn from the holding. In the airbrushing of theft into decoration, done over several generations in my family and continued in my experience and use, disavowal dominates. What does it mean to push against this aspect of the perverse pact? It begins with unpacking and deciphering my ambivalence and the hidden elements in the perverse pact.

Note 4. A Clinical Vignette from 1929: Hidden in plain sight.

In this note, I turn the lens on psychoanalysis.

Again, I must note, I have been studying the text of Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929) since the mid-1990s. I am in a long line of psychoanalysts and cultural theorists who have admired Riviere's analysis of femininity as performative (Butler, Pellegrini, Lacan). What is equally true along with our admiration is that we have "whitened out" a significant element in the essay. I should be clear that I am not thinking that the problem of racism and racist practices is being ascribed to Riviere herself. But I am saying that a generation of contemporary psychoanalysts and cultural theorists has addressed this text, blind to the hidden racial significance of the particular clinical material Riviera presents. Hidden, it must be said, in plain sight.

Beginning this process of looking at the disavowed elements of "whiteness" in my own psyche, led me to Riviere's important essay in psychoanalysis and to find there a racist construction at its very heart, which I discover I had both known and not known. As I said earlier in this essay, I consider these phenomena of amnesia and race blindness to belong both to myself and to the fields of psychoanalysis and cultural studies. The significant exception to this is Ann Pellegrini.

Pellegrini (1997), in her book *Performance Anxieties: Staging Race and Staging Gender*, takes up the clinical material I will be addressing. She does so to argue convincingly that while feminist and cultural theorists have had many uses for the conceptual material in the essay—female anxiety about aggression, about sexuality, about oedipal guilts and rebellions, the guilts over narcissism that seem gender saturated. Consistently, over decades, gender has been privileged at the expense of race. The racial issues—transgressions, the danger and excitement of miscegenation, the racist domination of black persons—are sacrificed, or at least recruited to an analysis of gender and sexuality. Pellegrini’s work anticipates here the work of Crenshaw on intersectionality and we can see what Crenshaw has termed mutual elision in which one form of sexuality and identification is sacrificed or occluded by other forms of identification.

At least, when I first drafted and presented this work, I thought that Pellegrini was the only writer attentive to these racial implications. Then, literally as this essay was going to press, I had a conversation with my co-teacher at NYU Postdoctoral Program, Annie Lee Jones. I was describing this material from Riviere and she immediately reacted by describing the work of cultural theorist Jean Walton (2001), who had written about this case in her book *Fair Sex, Savage Dreams: Race, Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference*. In an entire chapter devoted to Riviere, she notes that “during this period when racial difference forms the content of the fantasy life of a white female subject[...] it is not apparently a constitutive component of the psychoanalytic interpretation of the analyst” (2001, p. 19).

Here is the text which I want to put into question. Riviere is detailing a childhood masturbatory phantasy of a patient whom she identifies as an American from the South:

This phantasy, it then appeared, had been very common in her childhood and youth, which had been spent in the Southern States of America; if a negro came to attack her, she planned to defend herself by making him kiss her and make love to her (ultimately so that she could then deliver him over to justice). But there was a further determinant of the obsessive behavior. In a dream, which had a rather similar content to this childhood phantasy,

she was in terror alone in the house; then a negro came in and found her washing clothes, with her sleeves rolled up and arms exposed. She resisted him, with the secret intention of attracting him sexually, and he began to admire her arms and to caress them and her breasts. (1929, p. 309)

Riviere analyzes this material as an instance of oedipal dynamics. The dream and the fantasies are stripped of context and history, viewed as the endogenous product of drive, anxiety, and conflict. Butler reads the entire essay as an obfuscation and erasure of homosexuality. This is surely an appropriate reading of the essay, but incomplete, as we can now see. I was initially focused on the material as it related to gender and femininity. Only at a conference on race and racism could I actually look at the material and see what had been utterly obvious.

When I first worked on this material I was interested in women's relation to envy and to each other. Here is what I wrote in 1997:

Now an American woman in the 1920's dreaming of sending a black man to the authorities for the crime of sexual advances is a woman with lynching on her mind. In the dream the fate of a dangerous desire is to be degraded. It must be policed and destroyed. Heterosexual and homosexual longing is masked; masculinized, blackened, apprehended and headed for execution. (Harris, 1997, p. 305)

I can see now that I was appreciating the racial implications, but I can also see that I still recruited them for an understanding of the repression of femininity and female desire. Re-reading this paper has forced me to look at how, in psychoanalysis, one kind of identity (white femininity) may be, in certain situations and social contexts, founded on the destruction of another (black masculinity). Fanon would argue this is true of white identity across genders.

In trying to think about how a young southern girl's dreams and masturbatory fantasies inscribe a sexual seduction which will lead to murder, I draw on Crenshaw's ideas about

intersectionality. Let us now link Laplanche and Crenshaw and consider in this fantasy what has been conveyed from some alien other (parental, cultural, intimate or large scale, explicit and unconscious) and installed as alien, i.e. unconscious in the child. These messages are what constitute both sexuality and unconsciousness. Here we can see in the translations of messages which would remain unknown to sender or receiver (in some degree), the installation into female sexuality (in this southern subgroup) into a destructive aggressive attack on a black man. This is, after all, what Riviere describes as a core sexual fantasy of her patient. Feminine excitement emerges from a scene of racial destruction, probably a prequel to murder and lynching. Is this not one way of reading Crenshaw's idea of mutual elision?

Conclusion

Abraham and Torok (1994) would term our collective blindness to the racial practices and murderous racism in clinical material as a particular kind of phantom operation: the presence of "encrypted" identities. This is a secret in plain sight; secret to its bearer, and in the case of the Riviere text, a remarkably opaque secret to nearly a century of psychoanalytic and cultural theory readers. This is another form of the perverse pact: our collective silence concerning what is completely visible.

There is also, in the Riviere clinical vignette, an absolute muddle of love and hate, an overturning of agency and responsibility. Murder and justice are turned inside out and reality highjacked. In thinking of this material, I have focused on memory, on remembering and disrupting the amnesia and blankness with which we confront racism. Julie Leavitt has been using the term X to convey the felt experience, not merely of no guilt, but of no guilt imaginable.

In the several years since I have begun working on this paper, my attention and the general attention in the larger culture has turned to the difficult question of reparations. Initially, I imagined the reparation to be social, political, and psychological. But in the last year, perhaps stimulated from some of the revisiting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commis-

sion, the materiality of reparations appears in various models and personal stories: inheritances from families who were slaveholder/owner given over to anti-racist projects, writing and naming one's personal history, actual projects of financial reparations, formal apologies from institutions and professional and political groups.

There have also been some explicit models for material reparation, sometimes argued around unpaid labor, all designed to address a concrete reparative economic effort to redress and address the costs of enslavement to those who suffered it or are descended from those persons. It is too eerie that we are forced into debates about 8 billion dollars for Trump's wall and watch the dismantling of healthcare, VA hospitals, and social security. Perhaps it is inevitable that a serious consideration of the issues of reparation and overcoming racism would arrive, be coordinated with, or perhaps have influenced the most serious attacks on democracy in our history.

It may be that there is in "whiteness" a *psychose blanche*, a concept named by Andre Green for quite other purposes (Green, 1970). Deeper than depression, deeper than rage, there is a blankness, a place where there is not sufficient structure for mourning the depth of the criminality of slavery and white person's collusion. In this context, too often the psyche gives way. Perhaps this is what "whiteness" is—the disruption or erasure of mourning, a gap in the psyche which though "whiteness" functions like an imploding star, refusing signification.

This *psychose blanche* is built upon crimes and histories of oppression that cannot be faced without very significant psychic and social work. In an earlier draft of this essay, I raised the question: Is there the will to undertake the dismantling of white privilege? Is there the stamina and strength to do this? I said this to Anton Hart. He looked at me askance. I was speaking as though the white person, myself, might be too fragile, not determined? "How about not just too fragile, how about downright unwilling?" he said. I cringed, recognizing that I had again sugarcoated whiteness. Perhaps we cannot bear to undo the perverse pact. Hart was right to call me out. I am blinding myself to the willful refusals, including my own.

Psychose blanche makes this a malady, not just the determined resistance to dismantling racism that remains rooted and willful, even if also sometimes unconsciously erased.

Notes

1. A video version of this conversation is on YouTube: *Implications of Inclusivity*, Stratford Shakespeare Festival, 2017.
2. I use the term Notes, a convention developed to good effect by my late colleague Muriel Dimen. This paper is indebted to her thoughts and to her style of writing.
3. I discussed with the actor in question and he was willing to air in public and on YouTube.

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