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# Unraveling Whiteness\*

Melanie Suchet

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In an attempt to understand the meaning of Whiteness I find myself, born and raised in South Africa and now a U.S. citizen, yearning for a different way to be inhabited by race. “Unraveling” is my effort to undo and dislodge myself from this position of privilege. As I chronicle my struggle toward antiracism I will expose the deep feelings of guilt and shame, the layers of melancholia and then the experiences of acceptance and surrender. Take my hand as I shift registers and emotional states, moving forward and backward through my childhood memories and my clinical practice in my struggle for understanding.

The hands held me firmly. They were strong hands, weathered, and lined. They gently lowered me into the small basin of water, swishing the warmth over me as the voice that belonged to the hands, lilting and smooth, enveloped me. I held on tightly with my eyes, following the sound, the sweet sound of unfamiliar words. And then I could let go a little. She scooped me up, folded me in a large towel, my form losing itself in the layers of softness. She rubbed and dabbed, singing all the while through the transition from water to air, warm to cold. Then she kissed my naked belly, blowing bubbles as I giggled. And I found myself, once again, in the comfort of the large hands, pressed up against her as she carried me to the kitchen. I did not know, yet, that the hands were Black. I did not know, yet, that the body they held was White.

Born into Whiteness in a land divided into colors means many things. I grew up in a world of racial slavery, apartheid, a system of White supremacy

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that never hid its intent. I was born into the ruling class. I came to know that from a very early age. I came to know, without words, that to be White was to be special; to be White was to have power, even as a child. It went unspoken yet permeated every interaction. Race was the scaffolding that structured our lives.

Yet within psychoanalysis the place of race in the construction of subjectivity has always been minimized. A curious omission given that the formation of the subject is our field of study. Discussions of race today remain largely limited to an investigation of otherness when someone of a different color enters the consulting room. Further, the burden of writing about race has until very recently fallen on those with darker skins who have been trying to tell us for decades that a racialized subjectivity is crucial. It is only since the 1990s, ushered in by film critic Richard Dyer's pioneering essay "White" in 1988 and Peggy McIntosh's 1988 seminal paper on White privilege that formal studies on Whiteness began. Psychoanalysts entered the discourse only a few years ago (Altman, 2004; Cushman, 2000; Eng & Han, 2000; Lesser, 2002; Straker, 2004; Suchet, 2004). An interesting historical analysis by Allen (1997), titled "The Invention of the White Race," exposed Whiteness as a socially constructed identity exploited for socioeconomic purposes. He showed that Whites came to be White in 17th-century Virginia by a set of laws designed to specifically give privileges to Whites alone, even those of the lowest social status, to prevent the growing laboring-class solidarity between Blacks and Whites and to maintain power in the hands of the ruling White elite. The concept of a discrete White race began to take shape.

What does it mean to be White? For most people that is a strange question for which they have no answer. Whiteness is what is not seen and not named. It is present everywhere but absent from discussion. It is the silent norm. The invisibility of Whiteness is how it maintains its natural, neutral, and hidden position. This silence is central to the power of Whiteness. It is as if Whiteness has assumed the position of uninterrogated space (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), as if Whiteness lacks color (Lane, 1998). It is important to understand that Whiteness is not only about race and racism. Whiteness is a lived experience. It is an ideology, a system of beliefs, policies, and practices that enable White people to maintain social power and control (Thompson, 1997), a system into which we all get interpellated. An interesting study by Thandeka (1999) reveals that children have to be trained to be White, to develop a White racial consciousness. Despite what seems so natural, we are not simply born White but become so.

Whiteness dominates through normalizing itself and constantly mutates while always maintaining supremacy. There are enormous variations of power among White people related to class, gender, sexuality, and other

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factors and many ways to be White. Nonetheless, White power reproduces itself and can never be separated from privilege.\*

According to Baldwin (1993), privilege is sought to provide a sense of safety and security, even if sometimes illusory. In some psychoanalytic accounts it is inextricably linked with its origins in signifying freedom as opposed to slavery. Altman (2006) suggests that the ideal to be free, to remake oneself in whatever way one chooses, the American dream, is the ideal of Whiteness. Becoming White involves the denial of Blackness—what one is not but continues to haunt the self. Similarly, Whiteness has been viewed as an omnipotent fantasy of wholeness that attempts to avoid any feelings of lack, vulnerability, or humiliation (Layton, 2006). According to Straker (2004), it is a fragile, covered-over space in which we both know yet disavow our knowledge of emptiness.

A serious criticism of psychoanalysis has been its insistence on seeking only internal explanations for sociocultural phenomena (Dalal, 2006). Psychoanalysis has been especially neglectful of the importance of power in the structuring of psychic processes. Foucault (1982) showed that any ideology or body of knowledge, including psychoanalysis, cannot be separated from the power structures in which the knowledge was created.

I will emphasize throughout this paper how Whiteness, experientially and ideologically, cannot be separated from power, not in 17th-century Virginia and not now. When I refer to the position of Whiteness, I am suggesting that Whiteness is more about a hierarchical position of power in relation to another than color. In agreement with Cushman (2000), Whiteness is first and foremost a political signifier about socioeconomic power. Whiteness was produced, and is maintained, by the power relations and institutions that form our society.† We learn to take a position of Whiteness by assuming superiority, an entitlement to privileges, and a dominant belief in our view of the world.

I became more aware of my Whiteness, how power and history get reenacted, through my treatment of Sam who entered my office in 1999, after

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\* Cushman (2000), in contrast, distinguishes privilege from power. He suggests that Whiteness signifies a kind of political power that few in U.S. society actually attain, that Whiteness implies privilege but not necessarily power, and that without power privilege is just a kind of passing. Although I agree with him in part, that few in fact attain the power that he is alluding to, it is also true that White privilege, in many small and significant ways bestows the person so designated with power, albeit not the amount of power that may be fantasized. According to Cheryl Harris (1993), all Whites regardless of class position benefit from the wage of Whiteness.

† Whiteness also functions to mask the pervasive class problem of the White American worker. It began as a way to split the working class and continues to function as such.

being court mandated to enter therapy for physically abusing her girlfriend.\* Sam was wary. She was fulfilling what was required of her, but no more than that. She watched me closely, doling out information with careful precision. She held herself with poise, hiding any shame that may have accompanied her to my office. Over time she revealed the many forms of abuse and neglect she had experienced growing up as an African American whose father abandoned the family and whose mother's collapse marked them. She felt that she had lost both parents simultaneously as her mother never fully recovered to raise the seven children alone. Sam was adamant: "I will not become my mother. I will not need anyone." She constructed her personality around always being in power, choosing a profession in which she was respected and well paid and girlfriends whom she felt were weaker, "beneath" her. Sam needed to be in control. Her final act of violence had followed the enormous shame of having her girlfriend walk out on her.

As the work progressed Sam showed me other sides. I enjoyed her acerbic humor, her intelligence and the playfulness that was beginning to emerge. Approximately a year into the treatment, instead of "putting up stop signs" Sam was allowing herself to be curious about me, to get a little closer, perhaps to even let me mean something to her. I felt hopeful. Then she asked me where I was from. I had thought the referring person had informed her. "No," she said, she did not know. I hesitated. "I was born in South Africa," I said trying to sound as calm and self-assured as she believed me to be. Her reaction was horror; she remained speechless, visibly recoiling for a few seconds. "Did you grow up racist?" she asked. Silence. A long silence ensued. "Yes," I responded. I no longer felt calm, I felt deeply shamed. I felt exposed. I was no longer the idealized therapist, the benevolent godly figure she had portrayed me to be; I was now the aggressor, a person who could perpetrate horrors on innocent Blacks. In a matter of moments, I was losing my footing, spinning into the domain of self-loathing. I wanted to proclaim my innocence, to explain a life's struggle against apartheid, culminating in my emigration. I wanted to disown my history.

Davies (2004) has articulated how the analyst's most secret and shameful self is usually dissociated and extruded outward. Shame forces one to hide, to mask oneself as cover is sought from this sense of deep pain. Halberstam (2005) has noted how the physical experience of shame "records in dramatic fashion a failure to be powerful, legitimate, proper—it records the exposure, in psychoanalytic terms, of the subject's castration, be it racial, gendered, class-based or sexual" (p. 225).

Sam and I moved through this experience without obvious repercussions after discussing what the South African part of me would mean for

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\* A detailed account of this case was written up in 2002 and published in 2004 in a paper titled "A Relational Encounter with Race" (Suchet, 2004).

our relationship. However, we never addressed the complex way shame was central.\* There was clearly a shared desire to keep out of the territory of shame. We continued to work together for another year, well beyond her court-mandated time. Her relationships began to change as she engaged, for the first time, in a nonviolent relationship with a new woman. However, she left treatment prematurely at the moment when she was starting to explore her childhood in depth, accompanied by feelings of disgust, despair, shame, and profound sadness. I focused on her inability to tolerate the painful aspects of the depressive position and the increased intimacy of allowing me to know more fully the shameful aspects of her life.

Only posttermination did I discover that, unconsciously, I had missed how the structure of our work replicated that of slavery and apartheid. In the court-mandated treatment, I was placed in the position of master and she the slave, indentured to me. We never spoke about that. I never saw it. Nor did I sense the humiliation that may have been recreated. Yes, certainly we tried to ascertain how her being forced into treatment impacted our work together and the transference, but we never considered the issue in racial terms. I could not see that my position of power was linked with Whiteness. I did not want to own Whiteness as supremacist, as racist. She had entered the treatment as the aggressor, and how quickly it changed as I became identified as the perpetrator of violence. The fantasy of separateness, of clean, well-demarked identities, became contaminated as distinctions between good and bad, the traditional positions of White and Black dissolved.

With hindsight, I have wondered how the wish to be benevolent, to not have the interference of race and its attendant experiences of shame may have contributed to the termination. Had I, earlier, been able to deal with my own racial shame, the shame of the abuser, the despised, a powerful shared experience between us, it may have created a different psychic space for her to deal with her own deep shame. How quickly I shifted back into the safety of my unspoken position of Whiteness—the good object, non-violent and unraced in contrast to her who so easily carried the mark of inferiority. Did I resort to the illusion of Whiteness as goodness as a way to avoid the shameful of Whiteness as racist? I have also wondered if I sufficiently questioned her identity as the violent abuser or did it fit too readily into a racial stereotype I could so easily understand? For those of us who work hard on being antiracist we have to be more vigilant as to how we carry our racism, our shame, and our Whiteness.

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\* How shame is implicated in the production of gay and racial identities, how they inform each other, how they differ, is beyond the scope of this paper. For further readings see Halberstam (2005), Perez (2005), and Sedgwick (1993).

This case and the process of understanding my own dynamics through the write-up forced me to delve further. I knew I had to confront and take on what it means to be White. This included struggling with self-loathing, my silences, and my complicity in the seductiveness of Whiteness. After reading my paper based on my work with Sam, Carole Maso, an experimental writer and teacher, remarked that I had never fully acknowledged being racist only growing up racist. I found myself silent, once again. I started writing, excavating deeper, yet she would keep pushing me, gently, but relentlessly to get closer, to go further. I felt frustrated and angry at times. Did she have any idea how difficult this was, I thought? And what was she asking of me? And then it came to me—I had to enter territory I had never been able to broach before. I started to write a piece about Dora,\* my nanny. Here are some excerpts.

Dora, dark, chocolate brown Dora. I am sitting next to you on the steps outside. You let me taste your food as you eat from your white tin plate. I scoop up the *mielie pap* with my hands, dipping it in the gravy and then trying to shovel it into my mouth without messing. You laugh at my clumsiness. I sneak behind you into your room in the back of our house. Perhaps you won't notice me. It is darker and colder than I had imagined; the one small window doesn't let much sun in. Is this where you live when I don't see you? It seems so bare. The walls are empty, and uneven, lumpy looking. I see your bed is perched to the sky, propped up on five or six layers of bricks. I ask you why you are so high up in the small bed, you will fall off. "Shhh," you tell me, "it's so the Tokoloshe doesn't get me." Who's the Tokoloshe, I wondered? The "Tokoloshe is very short and dangerous," you say, "but I am safe up here." Will he get me, I think to myself? Something is bothering me. My feet are cold on the gray concrete floor. The space is too small. And then there is the smell. It is a smell I do not like. I want to go now. I want to go back. I must get out. "Come, come," I say, taking your hand and pulling you out into the bright sunshine.

Dora, who were you? You died when I was 13 before I could know. Were you hidden to me behind the mask of your Blackness, in the darkness of your room? Was it perhaps I that never tried to see you? You were our servant. Your role was to serve. You served us well. You were not to be a person among us. I saw you through those eyes. I treated you as such, but there was so much more, so much living on inside of me. I was your master; you were the slave. But you were also my nanny-mommy; I was your child. No, you were the servant, but, but ... you were part of the family, and I was your love. No, no, no! I do not know. I do not know who you were to me and who I was to you.

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\* Dora Mocketzie was her full name.

Melancholia haunts the psyche. I am who I am, in part, through the markings of my losses. Your loss was sudden and unexpected. You were there, and then in the morning you were gone. They took you away to be buried in your other home, the one I never knew, I never saw. There was no good-bye. There was no process of mourning. You were an African servant from another world, who went back there without me. How could I have loved you so effortlessly, yet you were not to be a person worthy of loss? It is now that loss, deeply ingrained and ungrievable that lives on in me. And it is also the person that I was with you that haunts me. Who am I to myself, when I allow myself to see? I am not the person who I want to be.

Straker (2004), also a White South African, who lived in pre- and post-apartheid eras, articulates with brilliance the racial melancholia of Whiteness. Melancholia was first contrasted with mourning by Freud (1917) as unresolvable grief, mourning without end resulting from the melancholic's ambivalence toward the lost object or ideal. This was considered a pathological formation. Later, Freud (1923) referred to the structuring role of melancholia whereby the subject takes the lost object into the ego as a way to circumvent giving up the object. In other words, the melancholic preserves the lost object in the form of an identification. Judith Butler (1990) reworked Freud's theory of melancholia into her understanding of gender based on disavowed losses. Two of her protégés, David Eng and Anne Cheng, expanded her ideas on melancholia to include racial melancholia, understanding attachment and loss through the axis of race. Eng and Han (2000) articulate melancholia as a group phenomenon among Asian Americans arising in part from the loss of racial identity that marks the experience of assimilation of minorities into the dominant culture. Racial melancholia also results from the loss of an ideal experienced by those forced to mimic a Whiteness that they can never attain. Therefore, the loss is of Whiteness and Asianness, being both and neither simultaneously. In an interesting move to depathologize melancholia, Eng and Han suggest that the melancholic's refusal internally to relinquish their racial identity, their reluctance to denounce what is being denigrated, is one way socially disparaged objects live on in the psychic realm. Even at the cost of their well-being the melancholic preserves the lost racial object. In their framework melancholia can be regarded as a political act, a form of revolt in which the melancholic maintains the loss of the racial other (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003).

Extrapolating from Eng and Han's (2000) work on racial melancholia, Straker focuses on the melancholia experienced by Whites. It is not only the oppressed who struggle with this condition; it afflicts the oppressor too. The paths to melancholia are multiple including the recognition of one's limited access to Whiteness as real power and the loss of the ideal of Whiteness as expressed in its humanitarian values of equality and justice (Eng & Han, 2000). It is a third route added by Straker that particularly

interests me—racial melancholia initiated through the recognition that one is the involuntary beneficiary of Whiteness. Not only is the ideal of Whiteness betrayed, but one benefits from precisely what contradicts one's fundamental values.

The melancholia of the beneficiary, a poignant and complex term, is the experience of loss, a diminishment in the sense of self as we see through Whiteness. It is the recognition that under the mantle of Whiteness there is the perpetration of violence, terror and the infliction of psychological damage. It is with horror that we come to own the destructiveness that is a part of Whiteness. The rewards and benefits given to Whites automatically implicates us in the acts performed to attain those privileges. There is a realization of our complicity as the beneficiaries of Whiteness. We benefit despite ourselves, despite our beliefs, values, and ideals.\*

Dora, when was it that I came to understand that my happiness was at your expense? The idyllic childhood I had was in part because of what you gave up, what you could not have. You were only able to see Abie your son two or three times a year when he came to visit on vacations. I remember playing together with him, without words, in the backyard. You would not let him swim in the pool with us. He had to know his place. He had to know what could not be had. The sacrifice of your life is what made mine, as I swam unencumbered, unaware of all that I had in the heat of the African sun.

The direct implication of one's privileges is difficult to absorb. The location of the hated other is now inside. It is this de-idealized self (Straker, 2004), stripped of its narcissistic accoutrements, that we must confront. How shame is implicated in melancholia is an intriguing question. The melancholic state results, in part, from confronting one's racial shame; the shame of Whiteness as wounder, racist, and supremacist. Shame and the loss of a sense of the idealized White self is a necessary step in the undoing of Whiteness.†

Turning back to my clinical work, I find myself shifting in my position of Whiteness and my relationship to race. For a long while, in what I thought was a state of enlightenment, I tried to be the ultimate "good racialized object" (Eng & Han, 2006), where good became a superficial attendance to racial issues hiding the real desire to avoid any messy encounter. I wanted to imagine that I could be above it all. I now recognize the dissociation, the

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\* This melancholic condition is quite different from what may be termed "White liberal guilt." The state of melancholia is a place of loss, necessary for the reevaluation of the self through an integration of what has been dissociated.

† For the oppressor the way through shame is not to pride. Pride in the form of a White supremacist identity has functioned to cover over and mask the shame of the abuser, the profound harm that Whiteness perpetuates. For the oppressor, shame must be unveiled and confronted in the movement toward antiracism.

splitting off that entailed. It is only from a place of acceptance, not of the other but of the self, that we move forward.

Justine walked into my office 6 months ago, hoping I could help her untangle from her first romantic love, Jose, a man 15 years her senior whom she declared had a litany of problems. These included his arrogance, inconsideration, criticalness, and stubborn badgering of her. Yet she could not let him go. She painted a picture of her gradual deterioration over the 2 1/2 years of their relationship. She had been a passionate fighter for social justice, working successfully in the United Nations, but now was resigning and going into business in pursuit of money. She had loved her body, which did not fit in the Western ideal; she had full curves, secret tattoos, a passion for dancing, and a carefree attitude toward any material possessions. In my office sat a restricted, depressed woman, who, despite her height, appeared small in her body, moved slowly, spoke cautiously, and never let her eyes leave my face.

Justine was the only child of very ambitious West Indian parents from Guyana who had both become successful professionals, leaving behind the struggles of poverty and working class status in their home of origin. Justine carried an upper-class identity, private schools, tutoring, scholarships of merit, Ivy League degrees, and money at her disposal.

She had never let anyone define her before, refusing her parents' pressure to conform to their ideals of beauty, success, and status. She had reveled in her resistance. Yet how quickly it had all crumbled. Jose had remarked on her chubbiness, deriding her, and soon an intermittent involvement with dieting became a bulimic obsession. He felt scornful of her intelligence, suggesting her success was a product of her economic privilege alone, and despite fighting him she found herself in self-doubt. He hated the United Nations, with its hypocrisy and ineptitude and without being aware his attitude toward social justice had become hers and his interest in acquiring wealth was now her motivation. She felt an increased violence toward her body, cutting more frequently than she had before and throwing up as she tried to force her hatred out. She spoke of sacrificing her body and her sense of self. She was becoming the woman he wanted and the socially acceptable daughter she had refused her mother, who always focused on Justine's appearance to others. Yet, simultaneously, she was contesting her perfect girl image in the cutting and sculpting of her body.

Loss became, quite quickly, the central theme. Beyond words, beyond articulation, she felt she had lost something, perhaps her childhood. "I feel sad for the little me," she said, as we watched her diminishing before us. The major loss she could identify was that of her nanny, who had mothered her from infancy and had returned home to Guyana when she was in college.

And race remained silent. After the perfunctory engagement, the "what does it mean to have chosen a White therapist" and the "it is not important

to me” dialogue, the matter seemed to not be one at all. But race hovers in the background, hidden from sight. It does not always present itself in the manner we might expect. However, if one believes in the inevitable structuring role of race in all our subjectivities, vigilance is necessary to make it visible.

We were exploring the mystery of loss that seemed so pervasive yet so inexplicable. I inquired as to the losses she may carry from other generations, the losses of her parents, their country, their home, perhaps. She associated immediately to a memory of her mother dressing her up in two outfits a day. I smiled. “You know what I am referring to, don’t you?” she said. Nonverbally I communicated my understanding. Although I had not had a similar experience I was familiar enough with colonial history to understand the reference to getting dressed for dinner as the colonial powers had once done. We laughed together, and she left the session on that intimate moment.

As the day progressed, I started to rethink the experience. I had felt a connection in our shared colonial heritage, an understanding of how colonialism lives on. Then I wondered who am I in her mind? Am I, like she, a subject of British colonial influence, which is how I felt at the moment, or am I, in my Whiteness, the colonialist? Do I not want to see myself as the imperial power, preferring to align myself with the oppressed? On the other hand, I had in that moment identified with her as the colonized, not simply as an evasion of being the White colonizer but also as a genuine and deep experience of being with her and understanding her. We all inhabit multiple subject positions simultaneously, positions that contest and subvert each other (Dalal, 2006). In fact, it may have been our shared ability to slide between the positions of colonizer and colonized that helped open up a psychic space between us.

In the next session she started to explore how Jose was similar to her in his identification as outsider. They were similar in their conglomeration of disparate parts that never seemed to fit in anywhere. I pressed on. “And how does race play out in your relationship?” I asked, wondering silently the same for her and me. Jose was from Paraguay, his family having lived in New York City for several decades, yet they had remained working class. He thought she was a privileged, spoiled girl, and he resented her families rapid rise, “the model minority” he said with disgust. We began to see a pattern in how he attacked her in so many different ways, uncovering his envy of her, her wealth, her social status, her confidence he expressed as contempt for her. I tried to expose his successful bid to spoil all she had that was not his. She began to understand his actions, yet maintained that she was the failure. She had lost her way. She felt as she had with her mother, never good enough. She could not recall anything in the last year that she could claim as success. She listed what she now thought would define

success—how she should look, dress, what position she should hold and how much money she should make. “How strange,” I said, “I was just thinking how your views mimic colonial values as to what success or failure is.” I realized the risk I was taking. Would it sound as if I was saying she should not aspire to the values of those in power? Would it sound as if I, the White colonialist, was saying, know your place, you cannot be White? Would it seem as if, like Jose, I was trying to spoil her climb to power? Further, did I have any right to say this, as I sat in my own seat of power, dressed up, well paid, reflecting the dominant values rather obviously? She laughed loudly. “I never thought of that.” It had some impact in forcing her to wonder if she was becoming the stereotype of child of immigrant parents succeeding by becoming a copy of the White colonialists they hated—and someone she too hated.

In later sessions, while trying to explore her pursuit of success, it was revealed that she was, in fact, afraid of being powerful. She could have things that symbolized power but not feel powerful. As we investigated if she had ever felt powerful she acknowledged feeling that way as an undergraduate, writing her thesis. I pushed further. Her thesis was on non-White identity, and her advisor was a critical role model. I asked if her advisor was Black. “Yes,” she replied, as was her master’s thesis advisor when she wrote again on racial identity, as was her counselor in college. I pointed to the theme of racial identity in her work, how it was linked with her sense of being powerful and the importance of her Black mentors. I wondered aloud why she had chosen me, why we never discuss race, and when we do it was always at my initiation.

“I am over race,” she said, “I am postrace, generic, unraced. It does not matter.”

I stared at her. I felt the enormity of what she was saying as she sat unfazed in my office.

“I think that you are trying to give up all that matters to you, even your racial identity, something that inspired you, empowered you, as if you can master your feelings by having none.”

I was experiencing the loss that she could not feel. I had to push further. “How do you think of yourself, racially, as you walk down the street?”

“Hmmm,” she said, smiling as if being caught. “I used to think of my body as non-White, but now, I think, maybe, I feel White.”

She had given herself over to Whiteness. She identified the turning point when Jose had come to her large house in Greenwich for the first time and told her she was not really Black, she could not live in a house like this, in a White neighborhood, in her White schools, and claim to be Black. It was as if her class privilege wiped out her race; Black and wealthy were not to accompany each other. And once again her initial anger turned into acquiescence.

It became clear that her choice of me, a White therapist, was no coincidence. In it lay a wish to remain unraced, to even be Whiteness. And Whiteness meant a loss, a disowning of her Black identity and a succumbing to be what her mother had tried to enforce and what she had refused throughout her childhood. And now through Jose, her surrogate parent, she was in effect relenting. I was chosen with the hope that I would accept her submission, or at least, not notice it as such. The pull for assimilation, to be in the position of Whiteness while obviously endowing her with power, was also an enormous loss of power, the defeat of her Black identity to be replaced by an empty shell, an elusive having while feeling nothing.\*

This is the condition of racial melancholia. To the extent that the ideals of Whiteness are unattainable, the processes of assimilation are unresolved and often accompanied by the psychological erasure of one's identity. As Freud noted the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object or ideal, identifying with this emptiness as they participate in their own self-denigration. The colonized subject's identification with Whiteness has been described as a pathological identification (Eng & Han, 2000), a wounded attachment (Brown, 1995), and, as Bhabha (1983) has put it, the inevitable failure of mimicry, "almost the same but not White" (p. 130).

What makes Justine particularly interesting is the reverse trajectory she pursues, moving from a position of owning and feeling pride in her racial identity to disowning it (Eng, personal communication). We worked on how she was vacating herself, giving up everything, especially her racial identity in this idealization of Whiteness. I pressed on for other sources of this deep loss and depression she had experienced before but was not yet explicable from her family history. She denied any early traumas, a happy childhood she declared, although she was never close to her mother whom she had feared as a child. She described a depression at age 13, initiated by a change to a new neighborhood and school. I tried to explore her parents' emigration experience. She again felt at a loss for knowledge. They had both come from poor families, gone to college in the States, then graduate school, and then, as if in passing, she mentioned that she was born while her mother was still studying, so that she was sent back to Guyana for a year, to be returned to the United States with her nanny, who was, practically speaking, her mother. I sat there, stunned, speechless for a moment, holding a complex mix of feelings.

"You lost your mother," I said, "You were given up." She could hear in my tone the import of the information she had never even mentioned. The room became very quiet. There were no words. We looked at each other.

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\* It is also possible that she needed me, the White colonialist, to validate and affirm her Blackness as goodness, that I would not erase but reinstate her racial identity (Han, personal communication).

The space was bristling with an intensity that ruptured the empty vacated experience she had been trying to create.

She reported remaining unsettled between sessions. She felt scared and small and suddenly terrified of losing me. We began to link, in a very different way, her giving up of herself—her body, her power, her racial identity, her sense of justice—and the possible violence of her early rupture. We began to understand her body, the preverbal body, the “little me” she had lost, and the body that was desperately trying to express something she had no conscious knowledge of, as she cut into herself, violently throwing up that which she refused. And far from being unraced, race was central, as she came to see her mother sacrificing her for the Whiteness of money and status, just as her mother had dressed her up in white for dinner. The room began to feel alive.

Who I am to her at this moment, and who will I become as the transference unfolds, I do not know in any clear way. I know that nannies, mothers, Black and White, power and loss are all interwoven. Her psychodynamics are threaded through with racial meanings and overtones, as are mine. I know that this time I am in the room, thinking and watching, ready to embrace the racialized transferences that will inevitably oscillate between us.

As I try to unravel my Whiteness, unraveling myself at times, I keep searching for a way through. I know somewhere I covet a fantasy that I can be completely undone, my Whiteness erased.\* This cannot be so. I want to dispense with my Whiteness as one does a cloak that no longer fits. Yet I am confronted over and over again with turmoil. No matter what I do I will always retain the power associated with being White. Bear with me in this struggle. I want to offer you a solution, yet I also know that there is none, only a continual process of opening up.

I wonder, too, if there is a small part of me that wishes to remain White, the White I abhor? As Altman (2004) noted, are we always the unwilling beneficiaries of Whiteness or are we more willing than we care to acknowledge? Is it easier to take up the position of challenging Whiteness, fighting for antiracism because we are still guaranteed our access to privilege?

This leads me to the exploration of Whiteness by Adrienne Harris (2007). She describes herself, a Canadian, as a British colonial subject whose grandfather's house was a museum of fetish objects. Then, she ventures into the “bite and grip of perversion” in her psyche. She has three Haida objects from her grandfather's expeditions. The Haida tribe, nearly wiped out through smallpox, is now negotiating with the American Natural History Museum to return similar artifacts. She explores her perversity in not wanting to give her objects back, although she knows it is the right thing to

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\* Justine and I share a similar fantasy of erasing our racial identities.

do. She articulates the grip of unconscious forces, a feral, willful adhesion to the objects, to the fetish, to Whiteness. She interrogates herself as to why owning and relinquishing power is so difficult. Her conclusion is what intrigues me. Whiteness, she declares, is a *psychose blanche* (Green, 1970). She describes it as a space that is deeper than depression, deeper than rage; it is blankness. It is a place with insufficient structure for mourning, one that refuses signification. Harris is suggesting that Whiteness is unreachable, beyond symbolization; it is a register that cannot be heard. It is through Harris' remarkable honesty that we are able to access something in us all. The grip of Whiteness. The deep, visceral refusal to let go. A space we have inhabited for centuries, crystallized and sedimented so firmly in our psychic structure we can feel as if it would be impossible to shift. However, with deep respect, I disagree with her conclusion.

In my struggle to come to terms with Whiteness I keep excavating, grappling with layers of racial experience that accumulate, old and new, one on top of the other. I am coming to understand that I, like Justine, had two mothers. I had a Black and a White mother. I did not know that then. I did not frame it as such. How does one come to define a deep loving relationship that is socially devalued and ambiguous within the family? How does one reconcile such an intense intimate relationship with the status of servant? I need to reclaim Dora's role in informing my life. She was a consistently loving and accepting parent whose strength and endurance marked me. There is also a deep, unconscious identification with her as the socially shamed other. I am reminded that racial melancholia is one way that the lost and racially disparaged other persists in the unconscious. She does live on inside me. I hesitate to claim an identification with Blackness. I do not want to identify with or be the racialized other in a way that denies or minimizes the complexity of the construction of Blackness. It is clear that as a White person I can never know what it means to be Black. Feminist critics, such as Fuss (1995) and Wyatt (2004), warn against an idealization of the racial other that elides their historical context and material conditions. It can also have the unintended effect of erasing the power differential between Black and White and replace the need to examine the position of Whiteness with its inherent privileges. Furthermore, to idealize differences is not the same as trying to find a way to recognize the other as an equal subject.

However, psychologically, it is necessary to integrate the dissociated, to repair the splits, and to acknowledge and affirm the love I received from my Black nanny. It is a struggle to resolve the contradictory messages embedded in the structural aspects of race from the personal relationship I had with Dora. The social framing that overlays the psychological tears asunder the ability to love fully, to admit that love, and to value both the Black and White mother. Yet it is precisely this relationship with Dora, this

very personal contact, that has given me a way of altering my experience of race.\*

In a reframing of Klein, Eng and Han (2006) make a plea for a theory of racial reparation, where the good and bad objects are racialized objects, and the task at hand is the desegregation of love so that it is distributed “across the field of foreclosed, repressed, and unconscious objects” (p. 162). The task is to open the space to have good and bad simultaneously pertaining to both racialized mothers, resisting the splitting and devaluation of the larger social context.

Trying to shift from the position of Whiteness asks of us to inhabit a different internal space. It is a place that is not dominated by White guilt or the racial shame of Whiteness or the melancholia of the de-idealized self. That space opened up for me, in part, through returning to the profound early racial relationship I had with Dora, returning to the inescapability of the racialization of that relationship and to acknowledging the ways race has and continues to impact me. It is more than an integration of good and bad, more than a refusal to be complicit in the splitting of Black and White along those lines, but a way to be aware of, to live in and experience race, to allow its presence to be felt, noticed and acknowledged. It is a way of sinking deeply into one’s lived experience as a racial experience.

In the broader picture, I am suggesting that this process of shifting asks of us a deep surrender. In surrender, I do not mean giving up in defeat. I do not mean submitting. I am referring to a letting go, a yielding of a defensive structure that carries with it a yearning to be reached and known as so beautifully articulated by Ghent (1990). It is a fundamental need for transcendence and transformation. It is only through surrendering the brittle defensiveness of Whiteness that a space for mutual recognition can be created, where the other can be seen as a “like subject” (Benjamin, 1995) yet distinct and separate. Jessica Benjamin (2004) expands on Ghent’s ideas to focus on how analysts can free themselves from the circulation of shame and blame that characterizes therapeutic impasses, where both parties are stuck in their opposing positions. By surrendering, analysts accept and acknowledge some failure of theirs that has contributed to the impasse and the inevitability that they are at times the “wounding healer” (Benjamin, 2006). This shifts the impasse. By surrendering we allow a different space to be created in the therapeutic dyad constituted by mutuality and respect. Without this

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\* In an interesting sidebar, in reading this paper before a large audience (Smith College, July 21, 2006) and sharing it with a number of colleagues, I have been struck by how many people conveyed their experiences with their own nannies and the complexity of these relationships. Similarly, the editors of *Lilith* (2002) claimed their surprise at the response they received when putting out a call for stories about African American nannies, not only for the volume but for the emotional urgency to discuss a subject that had never been taken seriously outside of their families.

surrender, the analyst's failures or ruptures activate deep shame and guilt at harming, intensifying dissociation by the analyst, and projection into the patient of the badness.

Racial encounters can be compared to impasses. The impasse has long historical roots in the withholding of recognition, in the inability to confer the other with the same subjectivity as the self. This impasse is tied to our refusal to accept our complicity in the destructiveness toward the other.

Surrender allows one to quell the internal fight over what "I am not" and what "I would never be." In the acceptance of who one is, including all the not-me's, there is an opening up of the inner space. In writing this paper, I have struggled the most to describe this experience of surrender, which is partly unconscious and difficult to articulate. It is more experiential than formulaic. It is something that is more known than understood. This surrender implicates a process of remorse for the racist acts that have been and are perpetuated, directly and indirectly, individually and societally.\*

I yearn to surrender as I did as an infant, to find Dora again. I long for the safety and comfort of being held in her large Black hands. Knowing that the hands are Black and that I am White, I want to surrender, once again. I want to lose myself as I did then. I want to let go of all that has accumulated in between—the myths, the deceptions, the projections, and the fears. As I let go of some of me, I want to take in more of you, Dora, more of the goodness you gave me.

I know I can no longer be in a place where there is no White or Black. There is no possibility of transcending race. No space in which we can be beyond race.

The work lies in a deep acceptance of all the parts of the self and the conflicts that accompany me. I am the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, the racist and the antiracist. In accepting this I can occupy a different space with a different awareness and openness to how race is lived and experienced, intrapsychically and interpersonally. As I have tried to describe, the paradox in creating this internal receptive state is that to unravel Whiteness, to surrender, is to live more deeply in race. There is no longer the need to ward off the unacceptable. It is to let race occupy one's psyche, thinking, feeling, and reading race in the many ways it will inevitably present itself. It is to let race inhabit one, albeit in a different

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\* Leaning on some of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2003), I am bordering on the domain of forgiveness. I understand how forgiveness can be misused and reduced to a trite formulation. However, forgiveness is not necessarily a cheap prescription to relieve oppressors of their guilt but holds authentic possibilities for transformation. It is in the many acts of trying to forgive the self with all its pain, anguish, anger, and remorse that this internal space I am describing can be created. It is a way to accept and tolerate the parts of self that are the most abhorrent.

manner. It is to move beyond the shame and guilt of the paranoid-schizoid position, which leaves one split off and evasive, brittle and defensive. We have to allow the self to be immersed in the turmoil and complexity of race with the contradictions of different states of mind and feelings rather than idealizing a smooth, conflict-free, racist-free, split-off space.

The dismantling of White authority is not a smooth process. There is no linear path to absolution. The shame, the guilt, the melancholia, and the state of surrender will all coexist, processes that circulate to be triggered at different times. Moreover, it is not a process with closure, but an ongoing and open relationship between parts of the self, between subject and object and between past and present, to be continually reworked, reviewed and reconciled. The colonizer within can never be shed, only disrupted, over and over again (Reis, personal communication). My own way through some of the deep, visceral grip of Whiteness has involved a coming to accept the complexity of my own racialization with all its contradictory aspects.

There is an African philosophy called *ubuntu*, which is often translated as “a person is a person through other persons.” This is a beautiful relational expression, which captures some of the morality that has guided the transformation of post-apartheid South Africa, a morality based on cooperation, compassion, and concern for the interests of the collective especially the dignity of each person. I came to the United States to escape racism, only to find many aspects of that same racism here. It is with some irony that in allowing myself to become immersed in the racialization of lived experience and finally surrender I am returned to Africa in the form of *ubuntu*, an age-old African wisdom and way of life.

### Postscript: Further Explorations of Unraveling.

In my ongoing musings about Whiteness I have been fascinated with the struggle of Whites in post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, I have pondered how the dismantling of power affects the structure of Whiteness; Whiteness as both a sociopolitical construct and as a lived identity.

In revisiting South Africa for the first time since apartheid fell 16 years before in 1994, I was struck by the precariousness of Whiteness. Among Whites there seems to be a profound sense of insecurity, marginalization, a sense of having lost one's place, or being out of place, not knowing exactly what that place might be. With this uncertainty there is a withdrawal, a retreat into a fortified world as exemplified by the high walls topped with barbed wire or electrified fences, alarm systems linked to armed private security forces, security checkpoints, and guard dogs.

So what is the precariousness? What is it that needs to be guarded, so carefully hidden away and simultaneously so clearly visible? To step back for

a moment, race, racial identity, what it means to be White is in a transitional space, a space of uncertainty. Whiteness was, in its colonial heritage, a site of knowing, a position of clarity: One knew who one was, what one could do, what one could have and be, and who one was in relation to all others.

Now one might easily counter argue that Whiteness in South Africa was always precarious. And this would be true. Whiteness, with all its certainty, was built on the instability of fear—the fear of being attacked by Blacks, the fear that what one had could be taken away. However, the reality of the dismantling of power, the loss of that world, even if precariously certain, has been destabilizing and profound. Whiteness is no longer the dominant discourse.\*

To be clear, Whiteness is still enshrined in privilege, especially economic privilege, and many Whites still believe in their sense of superiority.† Nonetheless, there is an acute sense of loss of power, especially political power. Something fundamental to the structure of Whiteness has crumbled.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (with its daily broadcasting in the late 1990s of the violent acts perpetrated under the mantle of maintaining White hegemony) dispelled any illusions of innocence that Whiteness may have tried to cling to. Indeed, the refrains “We did not know,” and “We did not participate” could no longer be upheld.‡ Whiteness was slowly exposed for its brutality, and a certain façade of morality behind which Whites hid was shattered.

Perhaps the precariousness I perceived (the vulnerability of Whiteness without its veneer) is akin to the wound that lies behind a narcissistic structure. With the loss of power, with the sudden dispossession of identity, a crumbling sense of self ensued.

Undoubtedly there is not one White South African identity, as there is not one American White identity, but rather a variety of fragmented and contradictory constructions and experiences of White identity (Steyn, 2001).

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\* Unless one argues that capitalism is a form of colonial power and therefore implicated in Whiteness. Then the surprising, wholehearted embrace of capitalism by the ANC could be read as evidence of Whiteness maintaining its hegemony.

† The international measure of economic inequalities, the Gini coefficient, actually rose between 1995 and 2005, making South Africa a country with one of the greatest divides between rich and poor. And the divide still follows racial lines. Furthermore, although Blacks hold more than 80% of public sector positions, in the private sector they account for only 4% of chief executives and 2% of chief financial officers (The Economist, 2010).

‡ Many Whites claimed they did not know about the secret police, the assassinations, the hit squads, torture, and murder of anti-apartheid activists. Even in 2001, F. W. de Klerk said, “My hands are clean” (Harvard University, 2001). We can understand this as a form of dissociation that allowed Whites to live and benefit from the system while not acknowledging the violence that allowed that to be possible.

However, in trying to abstract some common patterns, I am going to take the liberty of being more general than specific.

If the precariousness of Whiteness serves to expose its narcissistic structure then one can surmise that the dismantling of Whiteness must entail a deep sense of loss and disorientation. This was evident in the sense of resignation, perhaps even defeat present in many White people's sense of their identity. In statistical terms alone, Whites constitute a mere 9% of the population (*The Economist*, 2010). Their political power has been diminished, both within the ANC and in opposition to the ANC. Furthermore, the constitution offers no special veto power or guarantee for minorities, which some believed F. W. de Klerk would negotiate during the transitional years. Even Whites who were prominent in the ANC felt sidelined when Mbeki succeeded Mandela and an Africanist vision (that Whites should not be involved in politics) predominated over the prior nonracialism (Russell, 2009). Their loss and sense of irrelevance is deeply felt. The end of White rule is stunning. "The ship has sunk," a veteran National Party member exclaimed. "We have nothing to do. We have outlived our purpose" (Russell, 2009, p. 140). Yet I do not know if sufficient space or sufficient social acknowledgment has been given for the process of mourning that is required. Rather, it seems that a melancholic structure has replaced the once grandiose construction of Whiteness. I choose melancholia for it is melancholia that remains the site of irresolvable grief, the inability or refusal to relinquish what has been lost. What I witnessed was the racial melancholia of a denuded Whiteness.

If this can be conceptualized as melancholia, then in the melancholia the lost object is not simply the Black other whose subverted gaze empowered the White sense of invulnerability but the idealized White self that can no longer maintain its sense of grandeur. It is a Whiteness that has lost its sheen, a Whiteness that has lost its relevance, since its relevance was predicated on a false sense of importance.

In this space of uncertainty, this space of flux, a space in which the old ideology has suddenly evaporated, there is a struggle to define a new sense of a White self. How does Whiteness reorient itself when the Black "other" from whom its identity was distinguished is no longer prepared to just play the part of the subjugated? If you are no longer that to me, then who am I to myself? And how does grieving take place in a culture of violence, a country still at war with itself, a country struggling with the brutal legacies of apartheid. The crime statistics are extraordinary: 50 people murdered

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\* It should be noted that a minority of Whites are "moving beyond of the safe home of their whiteness" (Steyn, 2001) into the space between Black and White, embracing the change, and absorbing the Africanization of their country. They refer to themselves as White Africans (Steyn, 2001).

a day in a population of 50 million (eight times higher than in the United States) and 50,000 reported rapes a year. And the ruling party, the ANC, is struggling to find its way—beset as it is by a culture of greed and self-enrichment, corruption, and mismanagement.

How does one come to a new sense of self in a space that is still chaotic? A melancholic turn, while temporarily providing space to hold onto what cannot be lost, if fossilized, prevents the possibility of a flexible and adaptive response. What is being asked of White South Africans is a process of letting go, surrendering, living in the liminal spaces of not knowing. From that in between place, from the place of fragility and vulnerability, self states can be negotiated and renegotiated. Indeterminacy offers the possibility of dismantling and remantling, of deconstructing and reconstructing racial self states and the relationship between self and other. But what if there is no safe container? When the country, as container, is not able to hold, when violence and mistrust are the norm, then this complex process of internal reorganization is less possible and the precariousness of identity more evident. And Whiteness, as it was, will continue to unravel.

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