Whiteness and/as war

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Abstract Viewed as the sociogenetic product of the violent instinct and historical racialization, whiteness shares the psychoanalytic impetus that also subtends the cycle by which modern war originates and repeats, seemingly perpetually and indomitably. Relating whiteness to war in this way urges a reconceptualization that generates a series of novel insights that cohere as a tripartite theory which spans the dimensions of what whiteness is, why, and how. Ultimately, this leads to a refined understanding that apprehends the distinction between whiteness and war to represent a difference of degree, not kind, and consequently suggests a possibility of liberation from white hegemony through collectively reorienting to whiteness as a melancholic object.

Keywords whiteness · race · violence · war · sociogeny

Introduction

The widespread criticisms that psychoanalysis—particularly as it began and persists in its more Freudian variants—aims unabashedly toward a presumptively universalizable and therefore universalizing metanarrative (Spivak, 1999), and that psychoanalysis thereby betrays its very own implicit (repressed, maybe) colonizing reflex (instinct, perhaps) (Derrida & Nicholson-Smith, 1991), are well-established, justifiable, and unsurprising. Notwithstanding the now largely overlooked precariousness of Freud’s living relationship, as a Jew, to contemporaneous notions of whiteness that were informed predominately by German Aryanism and professional medicine’s prevailing anti-Semitism (López, 2005), it stands to good reason that...
what we now know to have developed as a very male, mostly white, and typically bourgeois genealogy would endow psychoanalysis with at least a fraught relationship to critical interventions in race and coloniality. But the impulse, in response to this intellectual and sociocultural heritage, to conceive of psychoanalysis as necessarily antagonistic, if not outright antithetical, to liberatory praxis and a liberated subject elides the fine and admittedly blurry distinction between form and content in the psychoanalytic corpus; a distinction that demarcates the conceptual space of possibility wherein the opportunity arises to extricate the structural hypotheses posited by psychoanalysis from whatever universalist or colonialist proclivities they may have reflected or conditioned in circulation among their founding proponents. In the same way that the technical methods of structural anthropology (e.g., Lévi-Strauss, 1964/1983) need not serve—and, indeed, do not any longer always serve (e.g., Bauman & Briggs, 2003)—the civilized-man-meets-savage narrative through which they were initially formed and refined, psychoanalytic formulae might, in fact, be not only productively appropriated in ways that their original content did not anticipate (see Spillers, 1996), but turned decidedly against the very potentialities of racism and colonialism that critics have long protested reside insidiously in the subtext of psychoanalytic content if they are not part and parcel of psychoanalysis writ large (see Khanna, 2003).

We find ready evidence-in-practice of this subversive prospect-in-theory by looking to the life and work of Frantz Fanon (see, especially, 1952/2008, 2015/2018). Azeen Khan (2019) argues just the same, herself reinstating Fanon as the exception first noted by Derrida to be the qualifying limit to his indictment of psychoanalysis, vis-à-vis the International Psychoanalytic Association, for its geopolitical myopia: For each, and now for us, Fanon represents both what remains when the residue of Eurocentrism is cleared from the psychoanalytic field and what capacity psychoanalysis may offer in excess of its Eurocentric threshold. Fanon is suggestive in this way: As a once-practicing psychiatrist and radical opponent of twentieth-century imperialism who enlisted psychoanalysis as a means of each, the Martinican left a legacy of psychoanalysis with aspirations reaching beyond, if not quite fully eluding, the grasp of racial and colonial hegemony. He is simultaneously emblematic of progress and unrealized promise, leaving behind a pathbreaking program that gestures toward a broader emancipatory psychoanalysis, which is all the more hopeful for the uses to which it has not yet been put.

I want to depart precisely from this dual situatedness with which we regard Fanon, as much a victor who transcended the racial problematic inflicted by the colonial context as a victim who never found a way out—or at least never convinced himself, before his untimely death from leukemia, that escape was even possible. With this essay, I intend to apply a psychoanalytic hermeneutic to a tripartite working definition of whiteness; namely, what whiteness is, why whiteness is, and how whiteness is. And we find a point of entry in the most striking omission from Fanon’s work on Blackness; that is, any sustained attention to whiteness in and of itself—a gap which, far from representing a deficit in the Fanonian canon, actually delineates a negative definition of whiteness that, as we will see, is really the only kind of definition proper to the phenomenon that we may rightly call whiteness. We begin with Fanon—reading as much the irruptions as the silences in his work—to
ascertain what whiteness is, leaving the why and how of whiteness to resolve subsequently.

White(ness)

Fanon’s psychoanalytic engagement with race and colonialism abides no illusion of separability between individual mental life and the social environment—or between ontogeny and phylogeny, as Freud would have put it. Introducing a third schematic term in order not to merely triangulate the binary model of ontogeny and phylogeny, but more likely to rupture, altogether, this dichotomous interpretive frame, Fanon (1952/2008) writes:

Reacting against the constitutionalizing trend at the end of the nineteenth century, Freud demanded that the individual factor be taken into account in psychoanalysis. He replaced the phylogenetic theory by an ontogenetic approach. We shall see that the alienation of the black man is not an individual question. Alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny. (p. xv)

Fanon’s sociogeny “finds in the last instance … a new history of the human as a new object for theory” (Marriott, 2011; see also 2015). For Fanon, though, the history of the human starts from and ultimately returns to historical Blackness as his own autoethnographic locus and, more importantly, as the living record inscribed with the inverted projection of the instincts that have shaped the modern global landscape, characterized, as it is, by racialized imperial capitalism and (neo-)colonialism. That is to say, Blackness, as Fanon observes, bears the sociogeny of its own being and that of its Other in a way that its Other does not and cannot possibly reciprocate; it tells the sociogenetic story of Blackness and, unavoidably, that of whiteness, too (see Stephens, 2014). Sylvia Wynter (2011) further elaborates Fanon’s sociogeny as a system of “nature-culture laws … ones whose processes of functioning, while inseparable from the physical (that is, neurobiological) processes which implement them, would, at the same time, be non-reducible, as the indispensable condition of what it is like to be human” (p. 32). Fanon’s sociogeny, then, locates Blackness in the psychohistorical dialectic, restoring the Black psychoanalytic subject as an agent who uniquely defines and is defined by history, thus recovering a dimension of specificity that traditional psychoanalysis tended, before Fanon, not to capture, and that it still struggles to sufficiently apprehend in its mainstream iterations today. It is only as the result of this adjustment that the contours of Black being—to use Wynter’s phrase—become legible to psychoanalysis and that we may sociogenetically read whiteness, too, in negative relation to Fanon’s sociogeny of Blackness.

The original sociogenetic rendering of Blackness articulated by Fanon, drawn in contradistinction to whiteness and differentiated from conventional understanding, puts the matter more aptly in its full form than any paraphrasing possibly could; likely, in part, because it sits heavy with the autobiographical pain that reverberates as Fanon reels in the wake of the interpellation, “Look! A Negro!”—pain that opens onto insight inaccessible by any self-driven pursuit because it follows from an
absolute denial of the very autonomy in which the possibility of selfhood consists. Fanon (1952/2008) writes:

In the weltanschauung [worldview] of a colonized people, there is an impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation. Perhaps it could be argued that this is true for any individual, but such an argument would be concealing the basic problem. Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. (pp. 89–90)

Situated in sociogenetic terms—again, irreducible to either the constitution of the individual (ontogenetic) or the evolution of the species (phylogenetic) and historically inextricable from both—Blackness manifests in and as a certain relationship to whiteness. This analysis of Blackness against whiteness is paradigmatic of Fanon’s thought. Here, we see the essence of Fanonian Blackness as a mode of existence whose necessary condition is its relation to whiteness (“he must [emphasis added] be black in relation to the white man”); as a form of subjectivity whose substance is (violently) determined by whiteness (“the black man has no ontological resistance [emphasis added] in the eyes of the white man”); and as an externalized, petrified (Marriott, 2015) singularity enveloped by a seemingly nebulous yet omnipresent whiteness that cannot be positively defined, let alone particularized—Fanon’s rejoinder, “Not at all,” preemptively refutes any suggestion that there might be a “double meaning” at work, or that whiteness must, in the same way, exist without ontological resistance in relation to Blackness. We cannot, Fanon insists, square whiteness according to dimensions equal or analogous to those we have only just settled upon as the parameters of Blackness.

That Fanon, one of the most brilliant scholars of Blackness to ever live, grappled so extensively with Blackness without formulating any correspondingly rigorous theorization of whiteness ought to indicate not that he failed to grasp the issue or cowered at the prospect, but that he understood exactly the implication of his abstention from any totalizing theory of whiteness. One cannot define whiteness in positive terms, but only in negative relation. What is at stake in the distinction between asserting a positive definition and interpreting a negative relation is the difference between decontextually reifying white persons and historically recognizing whiteness. Whiteness is pure relational negativity. Whiteness is not an identity, but a mode of identifying that lacks any positive form or content. In any given historical moment, whiteness has varied according to context; and in any given context, whiteness has varied according to historical moment (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Gregory, 2020; Kendi, 2016; Roediger, 2005). In terms of form, whiteness has been determined inconsistently using phenotypical, geographical, ethnic, religious, political, or cultural markers, to name only a few criteria (Lipsitz, 1998); and, within these forms, whiteness (or lack thereof) has been judged variably in reference to content, with, for example, Irish sometimes being counted as white and other times not (Ignatiev, 1995), and Jews similarly occupying a precarious and fluctuating membership status in relation to whiteness (Brodkin, 1998). Without
consistency—or, indeed, coherence—across time, context, form, or content, the only stable referent by which to discern some legibility among the myriad possible meanings invoked by whiteness is negativity—not affirmation of what one is, but negation of what one is not. Whiteness, in actuality, has only ever been the rejection of the Other. If, for complete absence of continuity, whiteness does not and has never referred to a viable self, and if such an utter lack of self equally destabilizes the possibility of a fixed Other, then the only unifying feature throughout the history of what we call whiteness is neither any enduring notion of self nor other, but the relational assertion, “I am not you.” It is, again, not an identity, but a mode of identifying. And whiteness inaugurated the process of its sociocultural spread (see Goldberg, 1993), along with its subsequent legal and political institutionalization (see López, 2006), by violently rejecting the Other it contrived by and in Blackness (Allen, 1994, 1997; Roediger, 1991), a project aided significantly by and enmeshed with European colonial imperialism, as Fanon (1961/2004) knew all too well.

David Roediger (1994) provides one of the best illustrations of how a negative definition of whiteness, like that which we read contra Fanonian Blackness, takes concrete hold in and as lived experience. It is worth quoting at length. Roediger writes:

We speak of African American culture and community, and rightly so. Indeed the making of disparate African ethnic groups into an African American people … is a genuine story of an American melting pot … There are Irish American songs, Italian American neighborhoods, Slavic American traditions, German American villages, and so on. But such specific ethnic cultures always stand in danger of being swallowed by the lie of whiteness. Whiteness describes … not a culture but precisely the absence of culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn’t and on whom one can hold back. (1994, p. 13)

This description renders a historical portrait that exemplifies the translation of whiteness from ideology to materiality, where negation manifests as oppression, and the definitively white declaration, “I am not you,” is transposed as the injunction, “This is not yours.”

Roediger implies the way in which our negative definition begets the transition from historical-material description to a psychoanalytic explanation of whiteness when he invokes terror and when he relates it to externalized desperation in the form of an act whose potentiality consists entirely in foreclosing another’s potential to act; that is, holding one back. The historicity of whiteness—in its historical crusade to dominate Blackness, foremost, along with all else whom it subjugates as Other—is terrorizing; it is a phantasm that has acquired corporeality only by rape, pillage, and plunder (Jacobs, 1861/1987). And to see the what of whiteness, by and in that very historicity, as terrorizing and therefore terrifying is to recognize the why of whiteness as terrified. William J. Wilson first singled this out in 1860, writing the following about the whiteness of whites for the Anglo-African Magazine:

What is the cause of all this discontent, this unquiet state, this distress? This answer we think may be found in this, viz: a long continued, extensive, and
almost complete system of wrong-doing. Like a man who commences the life of a pick-pocket and changes not his way, becomes not only an adept in the profession, but a hardened offender, and reaps the bitter fruits in the end thereof, so also this people. They commenced with the plunder of the Indian, theft of the African, followed by the grossest wrongs upon the Africo-American, and broils with their neighbors without, and stripes among themselves within, the fruits of which are thorough disaffection and agitation. (Wilson, 1860/1998, pp. 63–64)

In other words, whiteness as a mode of identifying both begins and finds its reason for being in a circuit of violence whose impetus is the unhappy, even fearful, destruction of ontogenetic stability that attends the unavoidable instinct toward violence in the first place, and which thereby elicits the repression of that instinct (see Freud, 1913/1955). And it is precisely the sociogenetic situatedness of this circuit of violence that gives rise to whiteness.

The violent instinct arises, meets repression, eventually returns, and finds some degree of release, either in full expression as violence or partial expenditure as the closest approximation to violence permitted by prevailing limitations, those limitations usually being imposed by the societal norms that accompany civilization (Freud, 1930/1961). The circuit recurs when the portion of the violent instinct that fails to reach an outlet elicits repression in kind all over again (Freud, 1933/1964). Because this violent ontogeny proceeds in a manner that is inseparable from its sociogenetic milieu, the externalized excess of the violent instinct that escapes repression is sociohistorically inscribed. Whiteness is an unadulterated artifact of this sociogeny and nothing more. Specifically, whiteness is the phylogenetic residuum of the ontogenetic instinct toward violence after it is sociogenetically refracted by historical conditions; the major points of inflection being, first, the accidents of climate and geography that conferred early agricultural and technological advantage on global inhabitants who happened to possess lighter skin (Diamond, 1997), and second, the emergence of capitalism, which seized upon and amplified the tradition of imputing supposed social meaning to these happenstance disparities, particularly as this unfolded under the institution of chattel slavery in the Anglo-American colonies and eventual United States (Genovese, 1989). This is the what of whiteness: the sociogenetic product of the violent instinct as pure negativity.

Lack of/as Color

Turning to the why of whiteness, the structural-linguistic apparatus of Lacanian psychoanalysis can take us further toward establishing the motivation behind whiteness than we could otherwise advance if we were to remain committed to a purely Freudian approach, and thus to the Oedipus complex as an explanatory mechanism. Accordingly, here we trade the oedipal object and the oedipalized subject for the master signifier and the signifying subject; not, though, exactly as theorized by Lacan (1966/2002), but rather adapted to the sociopolitical field of race
where whiteness itself operates as the master signifier and racialized subjects signify—indeed, only acquire subjectivity insofar as they do signify—just as Fanon postulated, “in relation to the white man.” Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’s (2000) penetrating Lacanian analysis of whiteness is authoritative on this topic, and still stands alone as really the only thoroughgoing psychoanalytic excavation of whiteness, Lacanian or otherwise. She summarizes the situation as follows:

The structure of racial difference is founded on a master signifier—Whiteness—that produces a logic of differential relations. Each term in the structure establishes its reference by referring back to the original signifier … this master signifier, which itself remains outside the play of signification even as it enables the system. (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 20)

This adheres to the pieces of our working definition of whiteness that we have assembled so far. Whiteness exerts a unilateral, determinative and differentiating (read: violent) effect on those signifying subjects who do not or are not able to identify wholly with the master signifier of whiteness; and this transpires from a nexus of power that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, defining and indefinable, outside even as it enables.

Seshadri-Crooks’s definition implies, however, a motivation—the why of whiteness—that goes further than the preceding discussion of what we take whiteness to be. The definitive characteristic of a master signifier—racial or not—in Lacanian psychoanalysis is its denial of the constitutive lack that founds entry into the symbolic order of signification, and subjectivity therein. This lack is coterminous with the gap between the real and the imaginary, specified for the subject in the irresolvable discrepancy between need and demand, and navigated symbolically—as it only can be—in the medium of desire (Lacan, 1966/2002; see also Grosz, 1990). And this lack is founding for subjectivity because it delimits the separation that is necessary to the individuating realization that consciousness is not coextensive with all that it perceives, which reflexively gives rise to subjectivity as an object in and of itself, which is to say as a self. For whiteness to assume the position of master signifier, then, is to deny this lack—which is not actually to resolve the lack, of course—and, in so doing, to substitute an illusion (or delusion) of wholeness which insists, in spite of itself, on preserving the fiction of a white subject who does not lack; who, in effect, takes the imaginary as their real and their demands as able to be satisfied in the same way as needs. “Whiteness puts itself in the very place of being; it attempts through a purely symbolic mandate to signify the very thing that is lacking” (Seshadri-Crooks, 2000, p. 43). For its ostensible lack of lack, whiteness cannot exist as coherent subjectivity. It is a maladaptive response to the lack that constitutes subjectivity in that it denies the universality of this lack in a desperate attempt to fulfill the impossible desire for wholeness. Whiteness casts those it designates to be people of color as lacking; but, in fact, it is precisely because these very people, through their disaffiliation from whiteness, embody a mode of subjecthood that does not feign to refute subjectivity’s constitutive lack that they possess the inherent capacity to be more whole than one could ever become in the Name of Whiteness.

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All of this is mostly to resituate, rephrase, and reemphasize conclusions drawn originally by Seshadri-Crooks, whose arguments, in my already stated view, require no substantive modification. It is worth noting, though, a caveat plainly acknowledged by Seshadri-Crooks, herself; something perhaps secondary, in her estimation, to her work, but an important point of clarification that we ought not gloss over, here. She admits, “I have assumed Whiteness in its historicity to be the master signifier of the logic of race without any explanation of this heuristic choice” (p. 46) after which point she passes briefly over a “highly speculative genealogy of Whiteness” (p. 46) designed to sketch a minimal historical justification of the claim that its historicity does, indeed, make whiteness the self-evident master signifier of the logic of race. Seshadri-Crooks’s structural hypothesis is correct, but the historical evidence to which she turns for support in the last moment is not. The question she puts to herself—“Why did Whiteness emerge at a particular historical moment?” (p. 46)—is answerable with historical-material evidence; but not satisfactorily with an examination, vis-à-vis Hannah Arendt (1966), of intra-European nineteenth-century political rivalry, where Seshadri-Crooks erroneously localizes the genesis of whiteness as a byproduct of Franco-German contestation over continental hegemony. Whiteness developed concurrently and in symbiosis with Anglo-colonial modernity, not reactively and as a tool of European nationalism.

Theodore W. Allen (1994) notes that “when the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, there were no ‘white’ people there. Nor, according to colonial records, would there be for another sixty years” (p. x). Bacon’s Rebellion, which occurred in Virginia, 1676, so profoundly destabilized the nascent colonial social fabric that the minority of landed European aristocrats plotted to sow division between the majority populations of landless European peasants and enslaved Africans, deterring them from united rebellion against class oppression (Allen, 1994–1997; Kendi, 2016). “The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt” (Morgan, 1975, p. 328). In response to the imminent material threat to their class interest, the colonial European aristocracy invented the social construct of whiteness, which they gradually converted to a de jure and then de facto signifier of identity with legal and institutional protections (Hening, 1823; Neill, 1875; Thandeka, 2000) in order to grab power and privilege at the direct expense of Blackness (see also Anderson, 2016 on whiteness and U.S. history). “Dangerous free whites,” as it turned out, would indeed settle for intraracial class inequality so long as they could expect comparatively greater existential compensation than was afforded Blackness, and therefore joined with the very people responsible for their economic deprivation in collecting the newly minted interracial exchange value of whiteness, or what Du Bois famously characterized as a “public and psychological wage.” This sort of wedge could only have been possible in the kind of emerging marketplace that constituted the colonial American socioeconomic topography. This turning point for the soon-to-be United States marked the beginning of the transition in global history from isolated albeit consistent instances of colorism to systematic and violently defended racism; the former maintained benefits of white skin, and the latter upholds, even today, the
hegemony of whiteness. These events, taken together, provide the correct answer to the question of why whiteness emerged at a particular historical moment.

This addendum is essential to the task at hand for three reasons. First, Seshadri-Crooks’s argument hinges on—even if it does not dwell at length upon—an accurate assessment of the historicity of whiteness in order that whiteness function as a master signifier of the logic of race. In order to repurpose the terms of that argument in support of a different end here, the underlying rationale must be sound, which this historical revision allows it to be. Second, if the present project is one of definition, the greatest possible precision must, as a matter of procedure, be our standard. Otherwise, it would not be suitable to designate what is already underway as an effort to define, but more fittingly, to describe or explore. Third—and I regard this point, though somewhat peripheral to the main thesis of defining whiteness, as nonetheless worth overemphasizing for its integral value to the overarching intellectual and political endeavor of critiquing whiteness—to misapprehend the history of whiteness is to abet, knowingly or not, a relationship to whiteness in the present that is ahistorical; and for as long as contemporary whiteness persists ahistorically, the obscurantist paradigm of transhistorical whiteness prevents any interruption to the hegemonic agenda of white supremacy that it supports, tacitly or outright. Later, we will return to the imperative that we recalibrate our collective relation to the past in order to actualize the potential for our future to be anything different than what the present already is.

War

This brings us to whiteness and war—or, if the charge ends up to be merited, whiteness as war. The foregoing definitional criteria, the what and the why of whiteness, attended to retrospective questions of categorization and motivation, respectively. Here, the how of whiteness poses a prospective issue of process. Namely, assuming certain conclusions as to what and why whiteness is, as we have, how does whiteness subsist, if not flourish? (The latter course is arguably a more realistic prognosis.) Psychoanalysis, as it turns out, would suggest that whiteness maintains, propagates, and amplifies itself by a process that is structurally analogous to that which subtends war. The logical implication, then, is that the distinction between whiteness and war represents a difference of degree, not kind.

I have tried to take care to descriptively index preceding moments in this discussion conducive to reading whiteness as violence: most notably, as the epistemological violence of imposed ontology and as the symbolic violence of performatively transcendent subjectivity (i.e., presumptive authority everywhere and assumptive accountability nowhere). Indisputably, war, too, is violent. Each is violent through and through, the former being typically moderated by sociocultural conditions, the latter usually tearing through them. Whiteness most often consists in immaterially effected violence. To recall Fanon (1952/2008), for example, whiteness gives the pretext for the interpellation, “Look! A Negro!” (p. 89) which, in dialectical conjunction with the sociopolitical power structure that informs and is informed by it, relegates its object to sub-humanity. (Fanon recounts that the
immediately preceding derision, which accompanies and gives additional context to
the interpellation quoted above, is “Dirty nigger!” thus testifying to the transparent
intention to regard the object of the address as lower than human and dispelling any
illusion that this is less than nakedly violent.) War, however, ordinarily exists as
material violence. For instance, Freud (1915/1957a) observes that war “tramples in
blind fury on all that comes in its way” and “ignores the prerogatives of
the wounded and the medical service” (p. 279), clearly registering trauma suffered by
flesh and bone rather than subject and psyche. There is nothing novel or
debatable about classifying war as materially violent.

I took for granted, earlier, as a corollary to the Freudian assumption of the
instinct toward violence (or what is often translated as the “aggressive” instinct),
that the violence which comprises whiteness follows from the level of the instinct
and not from some higher-order process, a conclusion that I want to reaffirm here
for the benefit of what remains to be said about whiteness and/as war. As a case in
point, I contend that the history of lynching offers no other interpretation than a
direct and constitutive connection between the violent instinct and whiteness (see
Du Bois, 1935; Kovel, 1970). Of course, history is replete with countless
illustrations of whiteness deployed as a means to innumerable ends, be they social,
political, cultural, or economic. On such occasions, whiteness comes with goal-
directed, non-instinctual interrelations. Yet, we heuristically confirm to ourselves
that these ends make up the stuff of whiteness in and of itself, in effect absorbing the
object into and as the white subject (hence the conventional difficulty making sense
of whiteness apart from white people and what they do) (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996;
Leonardo, 2009). Sometimes, though, we run up against what labor historian David
Roediger (1991) distinguishes in whiteness as “the insufficiency of job competition
as an overarching explanation for the violence” (p. 106). In these moments, we see
whiteness when sociocultural moderation is absent or fails; or, whiteness for
whiteness’s sake as unadulterated violence. It is one thing to racially discriminate
against Black competitors in social or material arenas; it is even another thing, not
wholly incomparable, to resort to physicality in such competition; but it is
something entirely unto itself, unmistakably violent on such a primordial level as to
leave no doubt of instinctual origin, to Lynch and to mutilate Black bodies for no
other reason than that they are not white bodies. Whiteness, in its essence, cannot
but relate to the non-white subject-as-object by absolute violence. This is not to say
that unmediated whiteness always manifests in lynching, but that lynching is always
a manifestation of unmediated whiteness, and thereby tells the story of the violent
instinct in and as whiteness.

To say that whiteness and war are both violent is not necessarily to insist, beyond
that commonality, that one exists in the same way as the other. My reason for
returning to a discussion of whiteness and the violent instinct was to be prepared,
now, to bridge this conceptual gap, to go all the way to a theory of whiteness as war. Recall that the crux of this reconceptualization resides in the how of whiteness, or
whiteness as a process of successive moments that constitute its being; whiteness
insofar as it connects to war at the level of form rather than content, structure rather
than surface. Whiteness develops just as war does not simply by virtue of sharing in
the medium of violence, but in the instinctual movement of that violence. We have
already explicated whiteness as sociogenetically resulting from the repeating, historically mediated cycle by which the violent instinct arises, pursues satisfaction, elicits repression, and recurs (Freud, 1933/1964). War, too, is sustained—continuously made and remade as possible, even probable—by the repression of the violent instinct that civilization, by its very nature (Freud, 1930/1961), demands.

Specifically, modern war functions by the same perpetual loop of formative (re)genesis that etiologically structures whiteness. The First World War effectuated the advent of war machines capable of visually contactless killing. Warfare historically antecedent to this technological (mal)adaptation demanded that combatants come to unmediated terms with the existential gravity of taking life. But so-called progress in military engineering has by now normalized attack strikes from unmanned aerial vehicles. These drones, as they are colloquially known, permit killing that is not only visually contactless but entirely remote; and so they run roughshod, with the click of a button, over both any sense of personal responsibility for civilian casualty and the chance of trepidation that used to be the final safeguard against unnecessary death when the ultimate act of violence still required the modicum of human intimacy that prevented one from reducing their enemy totally from subject to object, from who to what, from body to datum. As Poulomi Saha (2019) frames the moral and ethical territory we now occupy, “by handing over the realm of surveillance to the machine who both sees and destroys, we have liberated ourselves from the responsibility to know, to count, to be held accountable” (p. 67). Unencumbered by the inhibition of accountability, massacre in the name of war can originate today with as little cause as the violent instinct alone and can ceaselessly repeat thanks to the repression carried out by and in the evolution of increasingly remote military technology, which ensures that the conscious trace of killing never approaches a magnitude commensurable to that which characterizes the material devastation that modern war guarantees.

Civilization, in its steady march forward in the names of purported progress and enlightenment, produces new technologies that facilitate the repression of blood-guilt, and therefore the repetition of war. Just so does civilization, in the same ostensibly process of advancement, by collective historical inattention and symbolic denial, enable the repression of whatever guilt may result from the violence of hierarchical racialization, and thus the persistence of whiteness as the cornerstone of racial stratification. Freud (1930/1961) wrote, “it is not easy to understand how it can become possible to deprive an instinct of satisfaction. Nor is doing so without danger” (p. 97). Yet, he knowingly cast the instinct in inevitable and eternal tension with repression, and this opposition as the very bedrock of civilized society. To the extent that our society continues to resemble that which Freud himself knew, whiteness and war remain the preeminent dangers that threaten—by, in, and always against repression—to undo the civilization they have created and themselves perpetuate.
Mourning and Melanin

Psychoanalysis may offer a useful hermeneutic for deciphering the what, the why, and the how of whiteness, but it is all the more useful, still, if it can map out some actionable orientation by which one might respond to these specifications after having come to realize them, as we hopefully have. A reinterpretation of the Freudian juxtaposition of mourning and melancholia delivers just such a promising scaffold from a psychoanalytic theory of whiteness to viable practice concordant with that theory. Freud (1917/1957b) theorizes mourning as the gradual, emotionally painful process of divesting attachment (i.e., libidinal cathexis) from an object once loved but, as reality would confirm, no longer present; it is, for most intents and purposes, the process of grief in the wake of loss. Melancholia, on the other hand, Freud construes as the neurotic (narcissistic at its core) inability to detach from the absent love-object; it is, essentially, a continual and repeated failure to bring to completion the same shift toward libidinal withdrawal that underlies mourning. The fact that Freud pathologizes melancholia as he does seems to be based primarily on what he views as a normative temporal relationship of subject to history in which the former is and must remain resolutely subsequent to the latter. There is no place, other than under the discreditable heading of neurosis, for attachment to the lost object, the object that has supposedly passed into history. Put another way, Freud sees the misfire in melancholia as a chronic refusal of historical closure.

David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (2003) engage this problematic differently, seizing on the guiding ethos of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” to chart a more psychoanalytically informed but functionally parallel course by which to “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin, 1955/2019, p. 200). Starting from the diagnostic judgment—which Freud, himself, could not have disputed—that the ego is born from the remains of abandoned object-cathexes, Eng and Kazanjian upend the orthodox conception of mourning and melancholia to posit that, actually, “melancholia is the precondition for both the ego and the work of mourning” (2003, p. 4). They attribute a productive capability, rather than neurotic disability, to attachment that inverts Freud’s prescribed normativity: “The ability of the melancholic object to express multiple losses at once speaks to its flexibility as a signifier, endowing it with not only a multifaceted but also a certain palimpsest-like quality” (2003, p. 5). Elaborating further on the implications of this relationship to the past upon a politics in the present and for the future, Eng and Kazanjian promise that “[a]vows of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings” (2003, p. 5). History—always as much a repository of subject(s) projected from a now as object(s) imprinted on and as a then—becomes the recursive wellspring of the present and every potential future, imbricated in an expansive, dialectical chronology that is inassimilable to linear temporality. Generativity is restored to—in fact, emanates from—what is dead, abandoned, gone, lost in some way to sensorial (which is not always to say perceptual) immediacy.
Herein lies the opportunity to devise a strategy for honestly and meaningfully responding to the definition of whiteness that we have arrived at here: The what of whiteness being the sociogenetic product of the violent instinct as pure negativity; the why of whiteness being the denial of the constitutive lack that founds subjectivity; and the how of whiteness being the very structural cycle that perpetuates modern war by repressing the conscious trace of catastrophic violence and the needless, endless death that it breeds. All this being true, the most fitting response to whiteness might be to give none at all, to leave whiteness to wither and perish in neglect. But this is certainly implausible and likely impossible. So, if one must respond to whiteness, then one must respond to whiteness as an object of loss—as an object that does not exist as we once believed that it did (which is to say nothing of whether it ever actually existed as many claimed that it did), but an object, nonetheless, that still informs. And if one must respond to whiteness as an object of loss, it is not in mourning, but in relation to whiteness as a melancholic object. Our definitional criteria—shot through, as they are, with negativity, denial, and repression—confirm that whiteness has never really been, never will be, and can never possibly be all that it has operated as if it already were. Whiteness has always been a lost object.

Perhaps detecting precisely this absent presence of whiteness as a melancholic object, Cheryl E. Matias (2016) asserts that “whites seemingly love their whiteness so much that they are willing to undergo a kind of spiritual death to sustain it and reap what they believe are its material and psychic rewards” (p. 58). Thandeka (2000) observes a similar phenomenon in her case studies of persons young and old who self-identify as white. She tragically echoes the undeniable if unnerving (to some more than others) motif of the sort of existential decay and dissolution which does not befall so-called whites exogenously but makes them such by and in their voluntary consignment to and as moribund whiteness:

Children and adults who learned how to think of themselves as white … achieved their wish but at a price: the quiet breakup of their core sense of themselves … so quiet that no one noticed that the wholehearted presence of the child or adult was gone. (Thandeka, 2000, p. 20)

Articulated through the lexicon of mourning and melancholia, whiteness is nothing other than an object of veritable loss; an object that has only ever been dying or dead, whether or not we knew it or cared to admit it. The productive response to whiteness, then, is to recognize, endorse, and cultivate this reality as a point of reparative and constructive departure. Whiteness as a melancholic object does not perform as a master signifier, but—to reemphasize Eng and Kazanjian—as an immanently flexible signifier. The multitudinous, melancholy signification of whiteness cedes the obsolescence of its hegemony without erasing its history, and in so doing foresees liberation by the historical-material dialectic that tends toward humanistic plurality. Melancholy whiteness at once finds itself and disavows historical closure because closed history is an illusion maintained in service of all that whiteness once claimed to be and now, as a melancholic object, instead rejects. Call it white melancholia: an irresoluble sense of loss, not over the disappointed prospect of all that whiteness made itself out to be, but all that whiteness precluded
from being by averring always to be other than it really was; a sense of loss which, further, engenders inexhaustible hope by constant reference to its indeterminate other, the unbounded possibility beyond whiteness.

This aim approximates an epistemological trajectory parallel to that to which Paul Gilroy’s (2005) notion of conviviality aspires insofar as each gestures toward an aporetic resolution of the tension between reification and non-identity; not by further dichotomizing history and freedom but by subsuming, and in that way superseding, the illusion of historical progress as anything other than the sedimented objectification of that which is free; a productive letting-go that is neither color-blind nor color-bound, perhaps. Gilroy nicely sums up conviviality as a dialectical homeostasis amid (post-)racial pluralism that neither elides as cosmopolitanism nor ossifies as identitarian projection:

This negative work can discover and explore some of the emancipatory possibilities that are implicitly at stake … but do not announce themselves, preferring to remain hidden and unpredictable. This choice is aligned with the ordinary, spontaneous antiracism that has also emerged intermittently. (2005, p. 145)

And Gilroy goes on to surmise, in conclusion:

This hope suggests that there are other stories about “race” and racism to be told … in which “race” is stripped of meaning and racism, as it fades, becomes only an aftereffect of long-gone imperial history rather than a sign of Europe’s North American destiny. (2005, p. 150)

It is within a mode of being just such as this that white melancholia does not impart reason to mourn, but inspires opportunity to celebrate.

Armistice

Foucault (1997/2003) famously reversed Clausewitz’s principle to suggest that “politics is a continuation of war by other means” (p. 48). Taken as a whole, our analysis, here, might imply, at best, that whiteness is a continuation of war by other means; at worst, one could argue that war—modern war, at least—is a continuation of whiteness by other means. Bleak as this may be, any chance of a transition from white hegemony-as-usual to melancholic whiteness bears some assurance of armistice amid the tireless onslaught. Beseeching so-called whites to relent from this violence, James Baldwin opined, “As long as you think you are white, there’s no hope for you” (Thorsen, 1989). Not one to misread the racial dilemma, Baldwin’s indictment nevertheless wants for a feasible mechanism of change. So-called whites cannot simply cast off their whiteness. Perhaps, though, they might explore alternative relations to whiteness from a relational psychoanalytic perspective; they may undertake a Lacanian excavation of the elements of fantasy that uphold the illusory, delusory master signifier of whiteness; or, instead, endeavor in Kleinian fashion to relocate the repressed violence of whiteness from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position (see Muñoz, 2006); each of these
strategies representing hopeful possibility, but also an underdeveloped area of intervention whose potential psychoanalysis has yet to substantively appreciate and which could aid significantly in meaningful work upon melancholic whiteness. White melancholia provides a psychoanalytic off-ramp from hegemonic whiteness, leading to a realistically inhabitable mode of identifying that is capable of reclaiming white historicity as a vehicle for progress through the war of whiteness and toward a peacetime that is free from the systemic violence of racialization and colonization.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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