

## Do Black Lives Matter? A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Racism and American Resistance to Reparations

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*Psychoanalysts assert that when wrongs have been done to others the impulse to apologize and forgive is natural, although in reality efforts toward interpersonal and social repair are often frustrated. This article assesses current debates on reparations for African Americans, applying psychoanalytic ideas to account for American resistance to engage in a process of reconciliation. Contemporary authors claim that racial repair requires a moral and ethical acknowledgment of and responsibility for harms committed to African Americans. This article demonstrates, in addition, reparations as a psychological necessity. Racism, however, emphasizing the reality of racial difference, continues, as always, to serve as a powerful defense thwarting the reparative impulse. The result has been the securing of physical separation between Whites and Blacks and the persistence of psychic enmeshment. Absent the implementation of a politics of reparations, African Americans will never achieve externality, or independence, from the White mind.*

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“The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling...Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way.”

—James Baldwin (1962)

“Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions”

—Frantz Fanon (2008)

### Reparations and Racism

Murders of young Black men at the hands of the police, the failure to indict or prosecute those responsible, and the emergence of a formidable movement, *Black Lives Matter*, all within the last

several years, have not generated new insights on the doggedness of American racism. In fact, at this point, the nation—even the progressive forces within it—appears exhausted; the intractability of racial division seems to offer the only point of agreement across dissonant perspectives. Yet racism, like the crack in the liberty bell, remains foundational to American democracy. With the current surge of violence against Blacks, the problem is more urgent than ever, requiring fresh thinking.

Psychoanalytic understandings of the human psyche have undeservedly been overlooked in attempts to wrestle with racism's tenaciousness over the course of American history. Yet, racism inhabits the mind; it continues to possess a psychic reality all its own. It operates internally according to its own rules and logic. It remains in place and enacted, in part, because specific mechanisms required to loosen it have remained unconsciously repressed.

This article bridges the insights suggested by the comments quoted above by Baldwin and Fanon with particular strands of psychoanalytic theory, especially those that highlight the unfolding infant and mother relationship. Mobilizing this body of work, I look anew at American racism. The first section identifies the key role of a *reparative impulse* initiated by the maturing infant towards the mother as it comes to perceive her as existing outside of its own insatiable demands. As the baby recognizes the mother's separateness, the need to make amends to the mother for his or her self-centeredness is expressed; the mother, in turn, *forgives*. The mutuality of a loving relationship is made possible and deepens. The next section applies this dynamic to the American *body politic* suggesting that racial division can be considered as a condition of *thwarted love*. Here, I characterize an ever-demanding *White baby* resistant to the reparative impulse while the *Black mother* is thereby denied the capacity to forgive. Reconciliation between the two is obstructed. Further, I identify *racism* as the key psychological apparatus that insures this continuing obstruction; racism, whose core organizing principle is racial *difference*, secures a White supremacist nation without apology.<sup>1</sup>

In light of this psychodynamic approach, the third section emphasizes the limits of reparations conceived as financial compensation, and the fourth section in contrast, highlights the powerful recent writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who broadens reparations as a foundational moral and ethical obligation of all Americans. Consideration of *the reparative impulse*, I argue, deepens and extends his discussion, redirecting it from political and moral imperative to psychological necessity. The fifth section casts America's current racial crisis as a *politics of antilove*, where racism serves to suppress guilt and stifle the possibility for identification by Whites for Blacks, and the sixth section concludes by exploring the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and its focus on the most elemental features of American racism. Its critique, I suggest, is consonant with the psychoanalytic insistence that love and mutuality between mother and infant depends on reparative efforts by the baby. This framework of understanding offers a sliver of hope toward the creation of a *politics of love*, with reparations at its core.

### The Reparative Impulse: A Psychoanalytic Contribution

To acknowledge that wrongs have been done and to apologize, forgive, and reconcile with others, psychoanalysts have discovered, are universal human impulses, although in reality achieving them is

<sup>1</sup> There is a long and controversial history, beginning with Freud himself and extending to Critical Theorists such as Erich Fromm, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others who have linked an interpersonal psychoanalysis with social critique. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud acknowledges the epistemological challenges posed by this gambit from the interpersonal to the collective. In this essay, he asserts the challenges faced by society when forced to powerfully repress both sexual and aggressive instincts inherent in the individuals who comprise it. Freud concludes it remains an unsettled question whether the forces of love and eros might successfully counter the increasing dominance of thanatal forces of hatred and aggression. Freud does not shy away from social analysis based upon his original discoveries of individual psychology. Only by evaluating the usefulness and truthfulness of the analysis, he argues, can one assess psychodynamics' utility for sociology. In that spirit, my analysis proceeds. Does a careful application of psychodynamic evidence to these group processes yield insights and understandings that otherwise would be missed?

often frustrated. When the impulse toward repairing significant interpersonal relationships fails, whole lifetimes can be affected; in the case of social groups, an inability to acknowledge a rupture in the social bond and collectively apologize for its occurrence often yields harmful consequences that endure.<sup>2</sup> The toll can last generations, even centuries, where the silencing of the reparative instinct yields a distorted, typically hostile and distrustful, set of interactions between the injured parties and their descendants.

In a 1937 article, “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” the British child psychoanalyst and theorist Melanie Klein (1937/1988) describes how each individual at a very early age experiences a reparative impulse.<sup>3</sup> It is the baby’s own antidote, she explains, to aggressive, demanding, greedy feelings directed toward the object or person upon whom he or she depends. The body can seize up with frustration or excitation when what is wanted is not present soon enough. In time and in most instances, the mother presents herself and the baby calms. As awareness unfolds of total dependence on her care, the infant seeks to please the generous and forbearing mother; mother, in turn, *forgives* the baby’s demandingness. She remains reassuring to her child that she continues as a constant and reliable presence.

Should reparation not occur, child and mother fail to achieve the kind of attunement characteristic of a loving relationship. This quintessentially human conundrum of holding the capacity to both love and to hate is solved, Klein (1937/1988) argues, through the development of the feelings of *guilt* and the consequent drive to make reparation with others whom you need. The strength of human desires *and* the realization of one’s dependence on others yield, for Klein and psychoanalysis more broadly, *the emotion of love*: a complex set of feelings always, at the same time, self-centered and other-directed.

A contemporary of Klein and another British psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, characterizes this same phenomenon as a child’s struggle between “pre-ruth” and “ruth” (see Winnicott, 1954/1975). Over time, the child thinks of pre-ruth as *ruthless*, but at the time, pre-ruth is simply the fully enveloping self-absorption of being satisfied and gratified. Ruth implies the baby’s sense of absolute or total omnipotence: Others can be conjured up simultaneously with one’s need for them. Yet when the infant is able to see the mother as something “not-me” and nonetheless essential to his or her well-being, feelings of care and concern toward the mother develop, only retrospectively felt as ruthlessness. The infant’s concern for the mother, as a result of her consistent presence despite the rage she is sometimes subjected to, develops as she demonstrates again and again her capacity to survive his or her ruthlessness.

For Winnicott, this process—pre-ruth, guilt, ruth—is essential in the infant’s developing capacity to distinguish between an inner world—feelings, desires, needs, and fantasies, subjectivity—and an outside world of others not entirely subject to control, the objective environment. For Winnicott, as for Klein (1937/1988), love is the result of a reparative impulse, the psychic urge to repair the damage felt to have been done to the loved person—“to give and to construct and to mend” (1950–55/1975, p. 206). Winnicott insists that the capacity to distinguish between what is produced subjectively with what is an objective impingement, while initiated in infancy, is a life-long challenge and defines the human condition.

As both analysts insist, reparation is an essential feature of individual development. With its appearance, the human being, in its concern for another, enters an interpersonal social world. The

<sup>2</sup> For examples of psychoanalytic analyses focusing on basic ruptures within a political community, see Gobodo-Madikizela (2015), Volkan (2014), and Prager (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Klein (1937/1988); see also Balbus (2004, pp. 159–185). Balbus, like the analysis that follows, discusses the relevance of Klein’s essay to American racial reparations. Some of the conclusions drawn about racial reparations are similar. In this essay, however, my emphasis uniquely underscores the repression of unconscious guilt in the White mind as key to understanding the nation’s failure to address the issue of reparations. For another discussion of Klein’s essay, see Gobodo-Madikizela (2016).

child now appreciates the necessity to preserve elements of certain intimate others for survival. The mother, in turn, empathically attuned to her child, must possess the capacity *to forgive*. Reparation operates unconsciously and is essential *both* to the aggressor, as apology, *and* to the recipient of this aggression, as forgiveness. When it doesn't occur, whatever the reason, the natural bond between individuals becomes severely strained if not broken. *Unconscious guilt* for one's own demanding self-centeredness and the danger it imaginatively presents to the other, in contrast, establishes an intimate, loving attachment between the two.

This unconscious guilt is a complex emotion that develops only slowly in the newborn infant and creates in him or her growing capacity for clear distinction between an inner world and the limits of a providing outer world. Guilt is a set of affectively charged feelings to be respected, to be processed unconsciously and not to be dismissed.<sup>4</sup> In this form, this binding guilt is *necessary* to achieve a social world based on caring and reciprocity, replete with loving energy generating connectedness. Not something to overcome, guilt unconsciously serves as an essential component to insure affectively charged human relatedness.<sup>5</sup>

### The Reparative Impulse Denied, Racism Empowered

Following the Civil War, Southern Whites were in a position to initiate repair with those formerly enslaved. However, they failed to do so; the opportunity was squandered. The possibility for deepening the bond between fellow Americans went deeply awry. Initial efforts were repelled, and, instead, dominion over African Americans continued through various forms of legal enactments: "slavery by another name" (Blackmon, 2008). The failure by Whites to respond to reparative impulses, despite a period of unmitigated exploitation of those enslaved, indeed illuminates this critical feature of American racism: Throughout post-Civil War history, except for a brief period of Reconstruction, a reciprocal unconscious cooperation between an African American and a White population has been vigorously *thwarted* (DuBois, 1935/2014; Foner, 2002; Kendi, 2016). To this day, Blacks continue to occupy a subordinate place in a White supremacist racial hierarchy. Despite the end of slavery, Whites retain almost complete freedom to expect of African Americans their complicity in the hierarchical racial order. Though they are in every other respect dominant, Whites continue to possess an emotionally immature relationship to African Americans. In failing to acknowledge or act upon any reparative impulse, Whites refuse to concede their omnipotent and self-centered conception of themselves or to accept an external reality where they do not occupy its voracious center. Notably, they have collectively refused to apologize for the harms committed to their fellow Americans.

Racism, in fact, thrives on this psychological space between Whites and Blacks, first established in the minds of the slave society and, since then, never effectively challenged. The failure to acknowledge past national wrongs has produced instead a collective psychology frozen in time when domination by race was a formal feature of America and when bifurcation of Blacks and Whites, as slave and free, was codified as law of the land. The racial *binary*, refashioned because of a new postslavery social order in which Blacks were formally free, nonetheless continues to be cast as a natural, inevitable, and permanent feature of American life. The slave society legislated against White care and concern for those enslaved, and, therefore, the social arrangements likely posed less of a moral or psychological challenge to those in control. In postslavery America, the suppression of a reparative

<sup>4</sup> Freud (1924), in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," describes unconscious guilt as "moral masochism." He discusses the challenge to demonstrate to a patient the presence of "an unconscious sense of guilt." "We may," Freud writes, "give up the term 'unconscious sense of guilt', which is in any case psychologically incorrect, and speak instead of a 'need for punishment', which covers the observed state of affairs just as aptly" (S.E. XIX, p. 166).

<sup>5</sup> In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," Freud (1924) makes clear that unconscious guilt or moral masochism, unlike conscious conscience, activates libidinal or Oedipal ties to parental figures. Unconscious guilt, when mobilized, represents a regression to sexualized ties and the evocation of loving feelings to those upon whom one needs (S.E. Vol. XIX, pp. 169–170).

impulse toward African Americans, in contrast, necessitated not only new laws of racial domination but also a greatly invigorated racism, with an amplified and elaborated set of justifications preserving racial domination. A more persuasive racism became articulated incorporating the new “race” science spreading throughout the Western world. This racism emphasized as its essential feature the *reality* of racial difference. In the name of White supremacy and the preservation of a bifurcated nation, racism, implemented within various institutional settings, was energetically deployed; efforts toward racial reconciliation concomitantly were repelled.

American racism has obscured from view the reality that psychologically Whites continue to preserve the fiction of themselves as self-sufficient and independent, reliant on no one but themselves. Blacks continue to be seen as “a social problem” (DuBois, 1903, p. 1), not as equal claimants to the American nation. White refusal to *access* its own reparative sentiments preserves that fiction. To do otherwise is tantamount to psychologically abandoning their position as dominant, to perceive themselves as cohabiting the American nation, along with Blacks (and Indians). Whites, in short, psychologically remain *developmentally arrested*. They hold stubbornly to their position, omnipotent and demanding like children. Concurrently, they undercut any Black capacity, however patient they remain, to forgive.

D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (originally titled *The Clansmen*), produced in 1915, helped consolidate for a very receptive White audience White refusal to access healthy reparative instincts. It powerfully resonated with America’s decision, forged over the 50 years prior, to choose a brutally racist alternative to the expression of humane concern for those formerly enslaved. It communicated their sense of themselves as occupying America’s moral center, relegating all others to the periphery. Credited with being instrumental in creating the “second era” of the Ku Klux Klan following the Civil War, the film invokes in its imagery the post-Civil War forms of racism, establishing the biological differences between Whites and Blacks. Depicting African Americans as unruly and licentious *by nature*, *The Birth of a Nation* projected on to Blacks elements of Whites’ own repressed primitive mind. It shifted blame and responsibility to those whom Whites had harmed, allowing Whites to defensively ward off their own responsibility. The film celebrated an *unnatural* birth, portraying the American nation as burdened by its childlike and immoral African American population. Stern parental intervention was required to secure a moral, democratic nation. *The Birth of a Nation* offered a powerful visual representation that racial division itself—one White world and one Black one—remained as foundational to America as democracy itself.

American racism flourishes *concurrently with*, as a function of, White failure to acknowledge injuries inflicted on African Americans. Indeed, it is handmaiden to any denial of collective responsibility. Though true during the slave period, racism has been no less virulent—only different—following the end of slavery. As a result, there has been scant attention paid to assess the long-standing psychological consequences and material effects of the national failure to *apologize* to African Americans. Guilt for harms committed, rather than being acknowledged and felt, instead have been denied and repressed. African Americans, in turn, have never been allowed to collectively forgive those who subordinated them. *Psychological reconciliation* between American Whites and American Blacks has never occurred.

Yet the *thwarting* of the drive to achieve redress or reconciliation has produced devastating effects on the collective psyche. White refusal to accept responsibility for its dominion over African American bodies and labor power has yielded a disfigured body politic infected by racist belief and practices. The American social fabric expressed through law, politics, legislation, economy family, religion, education, culture, customs, traditions, procedures, mores, and fantasies all have been contaminated and implicated. In place of reparation, White supremacy, in the end and despite some impressive efforts to dismantle it, has successfully disallowed the politics of social redress and reconciliation from finding voice.

## Racial Reparations as Financial Transaction, Racism Empowered

In the context of American sociopolitical debate and discussion, the concept of racial reparations holds a very different meaning from the psychoanalytic formulation of reparation discussed above. The dissimilarity reflects the powerful ways in which racism, among its many effects, has also served to frame political discussion. The objective reality of racial difference is a taken-for-granted presumption, never subject to interrogation on its own terms.<sup>6</sup> This is no surprise because racism has served precisely to distort the reparative impulse so as to be unrecognizable. Until recently, reparations were primarily cast as a form of *financial* compensation for social and personal harms committed in the past.<sup>7</sup> Especially in the case of African Americans, reparations as payment for losses suffered as a result of enslavement have never gained widespread public support, though it has been a claim consistently made *sub rosa* by engaged scholars and by members of the African American community (see, for example, Bittker, 1973; Brooks, 1999; Browne, 1993; Feagin, 2004; Kull, 1995; Swinton, 2002). The debate over restitution for African Americans, Japanese-Americans, American Indians, and other peoples of color has been so narrowly defined as to deplete it of psychological significance for either the recipients or the initiators.<sup>8</sup> In certain instances, efforts have been made to calculate in monetary terms the financial losses suffered by African Americans due to slavery and Jim Crow (see, for example, Feagin, 2004). When moral claims are elaborated for apology and restitution to African Americans, most often it is to provide justification for monetary compensation to the sufferers' descendants (for a welcome exception, see Brooks 2004a, 2004b). In the discussion becomes organized over the technical problems reparations poses. It is largely summarily dismissed by raising certain practical questions. Who, 250 years after slavery, are the rightful recipients of financial payment? Why should this generation today be assessed for wrongs for which they were not responsible. Reparations, it is argued, require the same kind of hardheaded realism as any other business transaction.

Psychologically, Americans have demonstrated especially a fulsome capacity to invert the discourse, viewing it through a powerful racist prism in which Blacks are viewed as making unreasonable demands on this generation of Whites. The seriousness of the issue becomes trivialized, and the necessary initiators of reparations, as I argue, are inverted along with the rightful recipients of moral and psychological atonement. Those recipients who lay claim are experienced as the *initiators* of reparative claims—as hostile claimants—as grasping and as overly insistent. Whites have typically responded to reparation calls as if they expressed only revenge on behalf of the descendants of those who suffered.<sup>9</sup> The effected population, *objects* of White aggression and dependence, are felt instead

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu (1991) makes a similar point in reference to his challenge of analyzing gender relations. He writes, "being included, as man or woman, in the object that we are trying to comprehend, we have embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perception and appreciation. When we try to understand masculine domination we are therefore likely to resort to modes of thought that are the product of domination" (p. 5). This difficulty is no less the case when assessing American racial domination. Black and White, in America, do not exist as categories of analysis independently of the racist conviction in the separateness and difference between Blacks and Whites. In this regard, they are thoroughly relational terms describing a hierarchical social relationship of domination, nothing essential to the people themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks (2004a; Chap. 5) characterizes this as "the tort model" of Black redress.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. federal law, The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, granted reparations to Japanese Americans who had been interned by the U.S. government during World War II. Monetary payments were paid to each surviving internee, and 82,000 individuals received redress checks. With respect to Indians, the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946 was established to adjudicate claims made by Indians to the U.S. Government. Certain tribes succeeded in receiving large money judgments, but the ICCA was a disappointment to most claimants. It defined its own mandate very narrowly, relied heavily on technical procedural rulings, and claimed monetary compensation as the only form of reparations. Only financial claims were considered while broadly defined moral claims for redress were nullified (see Newton, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Assemblyman John Conyers, in 1989 and every year since, has introduced a bill concerning reparations for African Americans. The bill does not call for reparations but for a commission "to examine the impact of the nation's 250 years of slavery, and the discrimination that followed, on living Americans. The commission would suggest remedies" (Bogira, 2014). The Bill has never gotten out of committee and brought to the full House.



to be reparations' aggressors, a perfect example, as Freud describes it, of *projection*. This constriction and distortion of the impulse has succeeded, thus far, not only in narrowing its rendering to a simple consideration of financial compensation but, over generations, succeeded through inaction to insure racism's efficacy in preserving the *status quo* (see Brooks, 2004a; Chap. 4).

This collective failure to address seriously the possibility for reparations has had profound ramifications for African Americans. White inability to acknowledge their own hostility means they act toward Blacks *as if* they know Black hostile intentions. Recent police shootings of unarmed Black men because of unwarranted fear for their own safety reveal the power of this displaced capacity to instinctively anticipate the antipathy directed toward them. This captures *projections'* deadly power. Similarly, for those who propose reparations as a vehicle of social redress, the White reaction is to claim instead this to be an unjustifiable attempt by the descendants of those enslaved to wrest back what is rightfully theirs. These calls have been rejected as a form of *ex post facto* theft, a ransom demand from individuals today for what had been done to their ancestors. Demand for reparations is typically scorned as yet another instance of Black refusal to move beyond the memory of slavery.

### Racial Reparations Reconsidered

Promising developments have recently pointed to new ways to think about White complicity in racial injustice. In a 2014 path-breaking and award-winning article in *The Atlantic*, "The Case for Reparations," Ta-Nehisi Coates challenges the rendering of reparations as financial compensation for the wrongs committed during the slave period. Carefully documenting the continuing history of racial discrimination since the end of the Civil War, Coates demonstrates how African Americans remain the objects of unfair social and economic practices insuring their subjugation (see Blackmon, 2008). Slavery first established a social abyss by race: free subjects, on the one side, and enslaved objects, on the other, absent any cohesiveness linking them together as equal members of American society. Little since then has changed, he argues, specifically to restore a sense of mutuality and interdependence between the African and European populations in America.

By focusing largely on housing discrimination, Coates' (2014) article demonstrates that Emancipation did not serve as a watershed moment in ongoing practices of White supremacy. The methods to segregate and subordinate African Americans only changed; "a difference of kind, not degree," Coates' writes. Rather than undoing the separation of an enslaved population from those who were freed, post-Civil War America secured segregation between Blacks and Whites through newly conceived legal and extralegal means. Both formal and informal mechanisms worked in remarkable synchrony to perpetuate Black subordination. With respect to housing, the implementation of Jim Crow legislation following Reconstruction, the Constitutionally defended imposition of restrictive covenants, redlining predominantly Black neighborhoods, and differential applications of the GI bill for Blacks and Whites all served to maintain the American racial order (Coates, 2014).

Evidence for this current racial disparity is ubiquitous. Average White household wealth in this country is \$656,000, Black households \$85,000 (Latinos \$98,000). For the average Black household to reach parity with White households' wealth *today*, it would take 228 years (Asante-Muhammed & Collins 2016; see also Surowiecki, 2016). Black unemployment rates have remained for decades on average *double* the White unemployment rates, even *after* adjusting for demographic factors such as gender, age, and levels of education (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011; see also Buffie, 2015). Further, African Americans are paid less than Whites at every education level (Wilson, 2016). Aggressive efforts to preserve the racial order and to secure White supremacy have rarely faltered. Coates (2014) writes, "black nationalists have always perceived something unmentionable about America that integrationists dare not acknowledge—that White supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it" (p. 68).

The racial bifurcation in America, “one nation, two societies, one black, one white” (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968) has been a result of both continuing practices *preserving* differences in Black and White outcomes *and* a permanent acquiescence by all to a conviction in America’s racial *brokenness* (see Prager, 2014, especially pp. 295–299). The nation has demonstrated a remarkable equanimity or resignation in accepting the disparate quality of life and life chances for Blacks and Whites. There is, too, an extraordinary unanimity in accepting the reality of difference. Rather than being viewed as an artifact of racism and systemic White supremacy, all are viewed instead as a result of some combination of the specific features of Black Americans’ 250 years of an enslaved past and the consequences that followed. Black subordination is approached as a *natural* feature of American history and society originating with the institution of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

American racial history might have been different. The psychological reality of an essential racialized difference and permanent incompatibility, both the linchpin of White supremacy and the hallmark of racism, has generated an external world that has molded itself in ways to conform to this psychic imaginary. Moreover, separate and unequal lives lived by Blacks and Whites, from slavery until now, recapitulate the collective whole’s ongoing unwillingness to fully acknowledge and address long-standing disparities. Its premise is based upon a refusal to apologize. Coates makes clear that the terms of debate for racial healing in the United States requires, in the first instance, an acknowledgment through reparative efforts of the continuing wrongs committed to a whole Black population. Cast in psychological language, reparations imply the necessity to accept collectively the nation’s unconscious guilt, or care and concern for the other. Coates not only challenges the claim that the demand for reparations need simply be a response to a temporally finite period of time, that is, the slave era, and linked to the issue of financial compensation. A discussion of reparations, instead, is necessarily a moral engagement with the history and ongoing practices of White supremacy.

By documenting the unabated persistence of anti-Black sentiments and discriminatory practices, Coates (2014) characterizes the tenacity of the Black/White divide as an ongoing tear in the social fabric of the country. The American community remains deeply split. A politics of repair, Coates suggests, might include financial or material compensation to African Americans to upend White supremacy. But also required are further ways to exhibit persistent *moral* or *ethical* failings of the nation by accepting American culpability, to apologize. “And so we must imagine a new country,” Coates writes. “Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. . . . Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history” (p. 41).

### The Politics of Anti-Love and Love

With Coates’ respecification of reparation’s broader meaning, the psychoanalytic and sociopolitical discussions converge. They now help inform one another. For Coates, opposition to reparations today is a *moral* failure of the American body politic. Not a consequence of financial penury or insoluble technical questions about the rightful beneficiaries, it is a refusal to accept responsibility for a shameful past.

The inversion of the reparations question, as I described, has effectively prevented contemporary America from recognizing its own current need to promote social repair. It has refused to place itself in that position, much like a greedy baby who has had its way since birth. What has not occurred in America is psychic access to move ahead: to acknowledge past wrongs or to implement affirmative

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Blumer’s (1958) classic article, “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position,” emphasizes this same point. He writes “race prejudice exists basically in a sense of group position rather than in a set of feelings which members of one racial group have towards members of another racial group” (pp. 3–7). Racism in the first instance, Blumer argues, is relational as opposed to attitudinal.



policies explicitly to close or heal the divide of a racially divided *body politic*. As a result, there has been little inclination to challenge White racial privilege itself and/or to democratize social privilege across racial boundaries. Just as there has been an unwillingness by White Americans to accept the reality of their continuous history of hostility and aggression toward Black Americans, so too has there been a refusal to embrace specific compensatory efforts designed to undo racial privilege. The psychological consequences of this failure are profound. Most significantly, they inhibit the possibility of breaching the racial divide, a bifurcated *body politic*—White and Black—never to be contested. White denial has meant that the Black capacity to forgive their mistreatments, despite a remarkable history demonstrating their willingness to do so, has never really been possible. African Americans, too, accept this racial divide as essentially real.

Recent shootings of unarmed Black men as well as boys and women suggest that the collective racial consciousness in the United States has not moved beyond this psychologically primitive position. If love is understood as a thoroughly intersubjective achievement dependent upon each party accepting the needs and limitations of the other, it is clear that here love has been developmentally obstructed (see Benjamin, 1988; Chap. 2). The effect has been that the singleness of all Americans continues to be denied, and African Americans continue to be psychically categorized, in relation to Whites, as subordinated beings. The capacity for Whites, under the umbrella of White racism, to develop with Blacks a sense of their common humanity, not demarcated by racial category, has remained nearly unimagined. When Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed Black man was murdered in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014, the police allowed his dead body to lie out in the midafternoon sun, uncovered for more than three hours. His dead, uncared for body was in view of the entire community, including its children.<sup>11</sup>

In another instance, in North Miami, Florida a middle-aged Black behavioral therapist in July 2016 was attending to an adolescent autistic boy. When the boy ran out of the school onto the sidewalk, the therapist followed to insure his safety, only to find police having drawn guns upon him. Lying on his back with his hands raised high, he yelled to the officers not to shoot him. To account for his behavior, he explained for all to hear his occupation and his professional responsibility to the boy. Nonetheless, he was shot in the leg. In disbelief, he asked the policeman why he fired at him. The policeman responded, seemingly as bewildered, “I dunno” (Alvarado, Miller, & Berman, 2016). Indeed, the officer’s instinctive reaction to shoot, as he himself acknowledges, overpowered any reflection or rational thinking of which he might have been capable. It is right to presume that the officer’s response, “I dunno,” was an honest one: His unconscious and impulsive response to this Black individual as dangerous, unsafe, and nonhuman prevailed over any protocols of caution or restraint with which he may have been instructed.

These instances illustrate a much broader and deeper truth, implicating not only the police officers who precipitously fire arms but rather all Whites unconsciously susceptible to similar experiences. Black bodies, males especially, are experienced unconsciously as the site of potential danger, unpredictability, and aggression. For the officers, they are experienced as *unknown* and foreign, dimensions of their own psyche from which they are estranged. Unconsciously, African Americans are not *recognized* as human beings. In the minds of the police, they represent instead potential threats to their own personal safety and security.

Any inclination toward national restitution, what might be described as a *politics of love*, is not at hand. The contours of such reconciliation are not in view. White Americans still assume a defensive and denying stance toward Blacks. The “devouring population”—White Americans—has failed to forge an ethical response or the psychological insight to reconcile with those who have suffered its aggression. They do not acknowledge their own capacity for unbridled antagonisms. They make inaccessible to themselves recognition of their own guilt toward the Black population they regularly

<sup>11</sup> For another example on the policy of “stop and frisk,” see Prager (2014).

encounter. They deny their complicity in the many social practices and procedures that help to reproduce racial subordination. There is, in short, still no concession that Black otherness, now so real and *natural* as to be irrefutable, is a product of the White imagination.<sup>12</sup>

There is, however, certain ground for hope because of the attention these deaths in the Black community have received. Scientific evidence supports the existence of fantasies, fears, and preconceived ideas beneath the surface of conscious awareness. Recently, interest has focused more pointedly on research documenting “implicit bias” in human interaction. The subliminal correspondence has been demonstrated, for example, between images of Black men and impending danger.<sup>13</sup> Social science research on racial conflict also now finds itself more sympathetic to the view that systematic attention to “unobservable measures” beyond *intention* to discriminate contribute to different social and economic outcomes for African Americans when compared to Whites.<sup>14</sup> Further, in 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court, as a result of a surprise ruling by Justice Kennedy, acknowledged that the law stipulates that racism in housing policy legally might be assessed when “disparate impact” on various racial communities is established. In this ruling, conscious intent to discriminate racially was determined as too narrow a standard by which to consider the effects of social policy. In another instance, President Obama, responding to the shootings of unarmed Blacks in various American cities, invoked the language of “unconscious bias” to better account for frequency with which police officers seemed “trigger happy” when encountering Black men.<sup>15</sup>

The uncovering of “unconscious racism, however, produces too sobering recognition of the problem the nation confronts. American racism remains firmly lodged in the White mind. Its elimination cannot occur through any quick fix. We are left with an ever more profound and daunting appreciation of the nation’s challenges as it seeks to undo a multigenerational, multicentury effort to secure the subordinated position of African Americans. Powerful defenses, not the least of which is racism itself, continue to be mobilized to protect against guilt and responsibility. They constitute an in-place and an ongoing *politics of antilove*. This politics describes Whites’ *refusal* and incapacity to empathize with Black experiences. Whites are unconsciously incapable of feeling Black suffering *as if* it is happening to fellow Americans.

Klein (1937/1988) describes this unhealthy response with regard to mother and baby as “an incapacity for identification” (p. 311). “We are only able to disregard or to some extent sacrifice our own feelings and desires, and thus for a time put the other person’s interests and emotions first,” Klein writes; “if we have the capacity to identify ourselves with the loved person.” Identification implies the capacity to reverse roles. “This *making reparation*,” Klein writes, “is in my view a fundamental element in love and in all human relationships” (pp. 312–313; see also Gobodo-Madikizela, 2015). Despite the interdependent demands on the situation that enable identification and love to develop, he or she seeks to modulate aggressive fantasies with *recognition* of the externality and necessity of the parent for survival.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hetey and Eberhardt (2014), for example, find that Whites when told of the disparity of rates of incarceration by race are more inclined to favor more punitive policies for those accused and convicted.

<sup>13</sup> “Implicit bias is the bias in judgment and/or behavior that results from subtle cognitive processes (e.g., implicit attitudes and implicit stereotypes) that often operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control. The underlying implicit attitudes and stereotypes responsible for implicit bias are those beliefs or simple associations that a person makes between an object and its evaluation that ‘are automatically activated by the mere presence (actual or symbolic) of the attitude object’” (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002, p. 62; Banks, Eberhardt, & Ross, 2006; Casey, Warren, Cheesman, & Elek, 2012; Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004; Kahneman, 2011; Kang et al., 2012).

<sup>14</sup> See the recommendations by the Economic Policy Institute (Wilson & Rogers, 2016) calling for the Bureau of Labor Statistics to work with organizations directly engaged in the education, workforce development, and employment of African Americans to identify the “unobservable measures” that impact the Black-White wage gap.

<sup>15</sup> In a speech to the nation on July 8, 2016, Obama declared “there are biases, some conscious and unconscious, that have to be rooted out” (Jones, 2016). For a classic statement concerning unconscious racism in the law, see Lawrence (1987).

When these conditions do not occur, love is thwarted. “The incapacity for identification” by Whites toward Blacks provides a more in-depth explanation for America’s reluctance and unwillingness to move beyond its racism. In defending against the reality of African Americans’ full humanity, Whites have preserved the psychic experience of Blacks as *undifferentiated* from them. In this imaginary, Blacks, by definition, do not exist separately. Identification is impossible because African Americans have never been provided their autonomy. Jim Crow laws, separate but equal statutes, and both formal and informal mechanisms that promote to this day ongoing segregation help privilege White fantasy over reality. This is the paradox and conundrum of American racism: Whites, since the end of Reconstruction, have insisted on wholesale *physical* estrangement from African Americans despite their proximity. Yet at the same time, Whites insured that Blacks and Whites would remain *psychically* enmeshed. As *appendages* of the White imaginary, Blacks remain indistinguishable and largely undifferentiated from White fantasy.<sup>17</sup>

The American hostility to a politics of reparations *by definition* denies collective interdependence or human relatedness between Whites and African Americans. Instead, only the White experience is defined as central and defining to *the* American nation. Blacks, in contrast, especially those who fit a certain physical profile, are presumed unsafe and dangerous, until, on a case-by-case basis, they can demonstrate through various measures their harmlessness. Because of psychic enmeshment, the Black body is invested with precisely those properties disallowed in the White body. The American body politic thus equates *Americanness* with Whiteness.

The nation collectively is unwilling to move beyond its paranoid anxiety and fear of the Black Other, requiring Black individuals on their own, when so motivated, to attempt to traverse the racial divide. Antilove, in rejecting even the consideration of reparations, describes the failure by the nation to achieve *ruth*. It is a refusal to assume responsibility for the fate of both those who are the objects of aggression as well as admitting to oneself to being trapped in an ethos of denial. Whites refuse to recognize how they are implicated in the condition and fate of African Americans. Antilove, consciously foreswearing either guilt or ruthlessness, operates to continually reproduce America’s brokenness.

### Is a Politics of Love Possible?

*Black Lives Matter*, a political organization established first in 2012 after the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown has emerged as a national umbrella organization for all those wanting to protest these random killings. Its formation marked the first organized national political challenge, mostly by African Americans themselves, in the last several decades. Its focus is a new one. By name alone, it expresses the kinds of concerns about the treatment of African Americans not articulated since the postslavery period of American society and around which it is organized. As it says of itself, “when we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity.”<sup>18</sup>

The reality of African Americans’ greater physical vulnerability to arrest, to removal and incarceration, to their seemingly easier expendability due to unnecessary police shootings, and to their susceptibility to random acts of aggression and insult remain features of the contemporary American landscape. All serve to express a deep sense that they don’t *matter*, that basic human rights and dignity

<sup>16</sup> See Winnicott (1971) on the pathologies that follow when an infant experiences an environment as “too persecutory” (p. 12).

<sup>17</sup> The imposition of Jim Crow laws expressed the intent to separate the White body, perfect and free of imperfections, from the Black body, imperfect and soiled. Its aim was to insure that White and Black bodies do not touch, nor that bodily fluids should intermingle. Toilets, drinking fountains, swimming pools, public seating, barber and beauty shops, and cemeteries all became legally segregated. The laws were enactments, expressing at its core the struggle by Whites to experience themselves as “civilized,” shorn of human untamed qualities. All other features become channeled into the contaminated, dangerous and different—soiled—Black skin and body.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com)

can be easily disregarded. The precariousness and unpredictability of life itself for African Americans by virtue of their “special status” captures an important feature of slave society. Similarly, the commonplace of lynchings and vigilante justice describes the dangers faced especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Black Lives Matter*, for the first time, identifies an unbroken link from contemporary America to slavery: the omnipresent reality that, in an instant, by virtue of Blackness alone, life can be dramatically impinged upon, even stolen away.<sup>19</sup> The movement demands acknowledgment of the insecurity faced by African Americans for their physical safety and corporeal integrity. Previous political struggles on behalf of African Americans since the Civil War have sought the guarantee of fundamental political and civil rights. But as is painfully evident in contemporary America, racism has not been eliminated. Nor have these political campaigns adequately identified the psychological mechanisms that keep White supremacy in place.

*Black Lives Matter* speaks to basic and fundamental psychological experience of nonsafety, insecurity, and vulnerability. These concerns, ontologically prior to any politics of integration or civil rights, describe a deeper political and interpersonal reality for African Americans where their bodily integrity is never felt to be entirely secure. The movement addresses an appreciation of these most elemental and primitive features of American racism, entirely consonant with a psychoanalytic understanding of its unconscious roots. By *Black Lives Matter*'s name alone, it identifies in racism a failure to individuate African Americans as physically distinct human beings, not as emanations of White needs and desires, deserving the same basic respect and dignity bestowed to all citizens.

Reparations serve as a vehicle to help facilitate a politics of love. The proponents of *Black Lives Matter* insist that African Americans as founding members of the American community are to be recognized, accorded equal respect and dignity, and their current-day devaluation and mistreatment eliminated. Emancipation from the White imagination is the ultimate goal of reparations when African Americans each are guaranteed the same freedoms as Whites bestow upon themselves. The German social philosopher, Axel Honneth (1996), describes a situation where one or the other member of a dyad is not accorded basic respect as a “relational disorder” (p. 106). America suffers from such a disorder. The price paid is what Honneth (1996) and the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1988) both describe as a failure to achieve “mutual recognition.”

Reparations for the African American community are an appeal that America undertakes, for the first time in its history, a *politics of love*. Reparations require acknowledging America's shameful past and its continuing failure to recognize Black individuality. The politics of repair, of love, constitutes a rethinking of the American community shorn of its antihuman principle of White supremacy. Such a politics includes making available provisions for those who have, thus far, been denied capacity to live fully and freely in the nation. It is to extend the resources available in the United States according to principles that defy White supremacist thinking.

Yet a politics of love also requires repair work done to the aggressive child who has fought tooth and nail to avoid guilty feelings about assaults directed at the parent. Policies and practices insuring African American subordination serves as the vehicle through which the petulant White child refuses to grow up. This child has resisted love by refusing to know of its own interdependence with others. So love through reparations, though self-interested, also serves broad social interests and cements together a world characterized by human connectedness. A politics of reparation, seen in this way,

<sup>19</sup> Complaints about microaggressions demonstrate the denial of respect and dignity as felt experiences by members of the Black community. There are many examples offered to expose the fact that for Whites, the Black body is fair game for intrusion. African Americans are perceived as subjective extensions of the White mind. On college campuses, Black students report typical encounters of White students casually invading personal space, for example, by touching their hair without permission. Elsewhere, “Driving while Black” and “stop and frisk” police actions are instances too of the ease with which Whites feel entitled, perhaps even laced with sadistic pleasure, to invade personal privacy and autonomy. These examples serve as instances of the refusal of American Whites to have established Blacks as external and separate from the White imagination.

shifts the focus of pathology away from, say, various features of the Black community, the family, or individual. Instead, should the language of pathology be invoked, it is to the White mind, a product of an American history steeped in determination to dominate African Americans.

James Baldwin (1962), the great American essayist, throughout his career embraced this politics of love. In *The Fire Next Time*, he writes:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then, the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The White man’s unadmitted—and apparently to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro. . . . The price of the liberation of the White people is the liberation of the Blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law and in the mind. . . . In short, we, the Black and the White, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women. (pp. 95–97)

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