THE CONSTRUCTION OF WHITENESS

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity

Edited by Stephen Middleton,
David R. Roediger, and
Donald M. Shaffer

9

THEORIZING WHITE RACIAL TRAUMA AND ITS REMEDIES

BECKY THOMPSON AND VERONICA T. WATSON

SOCIOLOGIST BERNARD GIESEN (2004, 114) ARGUES, IN HIS ESSAY "The Trauma of Perpetrators," that there is work to be done in recognizing the impact of racism on the perpetrators—those who commit direct acts as well as those who are collaborators, supporters, and silent witnesses. What does it mean to try to recognize, to acknowledge, the trauma of whiteness?[1] What do we surface when we consider that question? African American intellectuals have been saying for over a century that people of color are not the only ones who are traumatized by the politics of race in this country. Those writers—including W. E. B. Du Bois (1903, 1935), Charles Chesnutt (1905), James Baldwin (1998b), Kenneth B. Clark (1963), and Thandeka (1999)—have provided contemporary scholars a way to journey with the perpetrators, out of a spirit of love and concern, as they recognize their own pathology. One cannot speak of pathology, recognize the deep pain that whiteness has caused, without also seeing the loss of humanity that has attended those aggressions. This recognition does not mitigate or excuse white violence and repression; but it does require that those of us who serve as "disagreeable mirrors" (Baldwin 1998b, 320) to whiteness not lose sight of the bigger picture, their lost and denied humanity that we are journeying with them to reclaim.[2]

At the heart of racism are attempts of the perpetrators to deny knowledge of themselves as violent aggressors, morally destitute, even barbaric. In the United States, whiteness has rarely had to confront that image and knowledge of itself. Instead, it has worked hard to repress and discredit that history, which has continued the silence and deepened the trauma rather than opening avenues of accountability and healing. We might compare the need for public, interracial dialogue and historical accounting in the United

States to the reasons South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the end of apartheid, though its work was unfinished and uneven. As the former Minister of Justice Dullah Omar wrote, "A commission is a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation."[3] But such effort and spirit have never found traction in the United States. Whiteness in the United States has been predicated on reinventing itself, of never looking back, of running from its own history, often under the guises of "progress" and "freedom." Thus, the violence and the trauma have continued. It shows up in the macabre fascination with unimaginable horrors that saturate both media and entertainment, and it shows up in the intransigence of racism. Attempts to give language to and visualize the unspeakable are the "haunting dreams" (Giesen 2004, 119) that evidence the trauma of whiteness.

Many activists, artists, and critical race scholars have established that racism has existed deep within the construction of white subjectivity and culture since the founding of the United States (Mills 1997; Morrison 1992; Roediger 1991; Feagin 2013). That exclusionary spirit was then actualized in the political and social institutions of the fledgling nation, even as elaborate systems of justification, myths, and evasions were also invented to maintain whiteness's sense of itself as moral, upright, and just. White Americans have not had to honestly confront racial oppression and violence as symptomatic of and central to whiteness because they have been told that the violence was committed by a few outliers, a fringe group of racists who acted in ways incommensurate with mainstream white America. Acknowledging that, instead of being "heroes," members of one's community are "perpetrators," necessitates a reckoning, an accounting that recognizes the distance between the egalitarian ideals and oppressive practices of a people.[4] Most will try to avoid this damning self-knowledge through "collective schizophrenia, . . . denial . . . decoupling or withdrawal" (Giesen 2004, 114). White racial trauma is the white response to its own racism and moral failures, and as such can be triggered by a range of individual acts and social conditions that intersect with racism, including the refusal to acknowledge and atone for the social world that whiteness has created.

We believe that white people carry with them memories and experiences that tell them that something is desperately wrong, that racism is not natural or inevitable. White racial trauma may occur from witnessing or being responsible for extreme acts of violence such as police brutality, for example, or from the mundane, everyday violence of racism such as refusing

to interact with people of color or to acknowledge their contributions in professional or educational settings. Often, such exposure involves repeated witnessing of damage done without intervention or cessation—repeatedly watching children of color being bullied on the school bus, recognizing that your education has included no real attention to realities or histories other than that of white people, or hearing justifications meant to rationalize the mass incarceration and murder of people of color. Rather than stay present to feel the pain of brutalized bodies and psyches, and then act from that knowledge, most white people deny, justify, and then reproduce the very violence that was the source of their own dis-ease, often leading to a range of affects that counseling psychologist Lisa Spanierman and education researcher Nolan Cabrera outline as the emotions of white racism in their article "The Emotions of White Racism and Antiracism." White apathy, fear, and rage, and perhaps more that have yet to be recognized, we believe are usefully thought of as evidencing white racial trauma. The multilayered reality of this trauma—of enacting and/or supporting the violence done to people of color in a racist society, and of benefiting from the denials of what is seen and known—has significant implications.

In *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, activist Laura van Dernoot Lipsky (2009, 3) recognizes that "bearing witness to others' suffering" has an effect on those who are witnesses, and outlines sixteen "warning signs" of trauma overexposure.[5] While van Dernoot Lipsky identified these symptoms to describe people triggered or exhausted by taking care of people, these secondary trauma symptoms have an eerie resonance with what can happen to white people as part of a racist society. Though whites so affected are reluctant witnesses to the pain of others, what is striking are the parallels between the coping mechanisms of secondary trauma exposure of those trying to alleviate suffering and, in our analysis, those who are consciously or unconsciously enabling the suffering of people of color through their silence and inaction. What van Dernoot Lipsky describes as coping mechanisms that alleviate the pain of "staying in touch with the heart that was breaking" (3) look a lot like normative white culture in the United States.

Of the sixteen symptoms van Dernoot Lipsky describes, four are particularly revealing to our discussion of whiteness: hypervigilance, a sense of persecution, diminished creativity, and dissociation. Collectively, these signs of white trauma might usefully be thought of as a white schizophrenic subjectivity, which calls attention to the myriad ways that an investment in whiteness can distort how people think, act, and perceive reality.[6] It focuses

us on the ways in which whiteness amplifies white fear and disconnection between people and the ways that it stifles the ability to discern the real from the imagined. Our interest is in naming the specificities of these traumas, how they manifest in everyday life, in culture, in psyches, and in the public imagination. Such naming then opens a way to consider antidotes to the trauma of racist domination and exclusion in ways that move us beyond the insanity of whiteness.

HYPERVIGILANCE AND A SENSE OF PERSECUTION

Van Dernoot Lipsky (2009, 64) describes *hypervigilance* as "a dynamic of being wholly focused on our job, to the extent that being present for anything else in our life can seem impossible." She continues, "It is often an attempt to restore safety and prevent any further victimization by anticipating and recognizing everything as a potential threat and acting accordingly." What an apt description of whiteness. When considered from the vantage point of racial trauma, whiteness can certainly be understood as having been "wholly focused on [the] job" of defining, policing, and protecting white privilege, space, identity, and culture. Collectively it has drawn boundaries, defined an inside and an outside to a presumed sacred space/identity, and aggressively ejected and rejected those bodies that fall outside of the ideological and social pale.

Policing those boundaries has resulted in the destruction and murder of innumerable people, from lynching victims in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to civil rights workers of the mid-twentieth century to young men of color in the United States today,[7] including seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager killed in 2012 by a neighborhood "watchman" in the predominantly white community of Sanford, Florida,[8] after being described as "suspicious" by his attacker. Philosopher Sara Ahmed (2012, 2) astutely points out, however, that the act of "registering those who are out of place" actually serves to "*create* strangers and establish a direction toward them, as those who threaten the place of the 'in place,' as those who generate anxiety" (emphasis added). People of color are made into strangers by the act of policing whiteness, and whiteness becomes ever more anxious through its hypervigilant attempts to identify those who should not be part of the body, the community, of whiteness. But this obsessive behavior does not alleviate the trauma plaguing whiteness. Rather, it is a distraction from dealing with the real knowledge and

disregarded emotions that are causing whiteness to feel out of control, threatened, and at risk, even as it continues to maintain almost exclusive control over contemporary social, political, and economic sources of power.

This racialized hypervigilance often leads white people to a false sense of persecution, another warning sign of trauma overexposure identified by van Dernoot Lipsky (2009, 93). In the context of whiteness, the *sense of persecution* is about believing that it (whiteness) is always threatened, victimized, and under attack. Whiteness sees enemies everywhere but in its midst: in its communities and in its homes. So, the myth of the black rapist still has white women clutching their purses while walking toward black men even as these women head to homes where they may, in fact, be among the epidemic of women abused by their domestic partners. White flight and segregated communities still provide white enclaves of living, but that does not prevent troubled white teens and adults from rampaging through schools in search of easy victims and a release from the pain of their lives. Those who are invested in whiteness believe that reverse racism is a truism rather than an oxymoron; they believe affirmative action programs are taking "their places" in jobs or education, adding fuel to their sense of displacement and endangerment. Much like the rhizomatous spread of white supremacist ideology described by Adela Fofiu in the Romanian context,[9] this sentiment is held, repeated, amplified, and given credence in discourse as well as legal suits that deny white entitlement and the overwhelming evidence that there are few black and brown bodies in positions of power, or often even present, in most institutions.

The myth of the black and brown job robber becomes a distraction from organizing against the perils of a post-industrial, neoliberal society where dignified living-wage and middle-class jobs are eliminated by the ever-growing search for corporate profits. Whiteness has long kept workers across race from supporting each other (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991), encouraging white laborers to be ever vigilant about being skipped over in favor of a black hire even as bosses increasingly hire neither. Instead, NAFTA-supported economies where there is nothing "free" about trade proliferate. In focusing on a perceived "black or brown threat," however, whiteness is able to ignore the larger, more imminent threat to individual and collective well-being, the threat of its own making that is not so easy to dislodge. In refusing the more difficult task of societal regeneration, whiteness abdicates the responsibility of "transform[ing] [its] circumstances" (van Dernoot Lipsky 2009, 93) in ways that benefit both self and others.

DIMINISHED CREATIVITY

Along with a sense of persecution, van Dernoot Lipsky (2009, 67) lists *diminished creativity* as a trauma response in which originality and innovation take a back seat to just getting the job (meal, holiday, funeral, garden, hiring, firing, life) done. Overwhelming signs of diminished creativity in white culture include the loss of originality in popular culture, including the endless recycling of film and television programs under prequels, sequels, and remakes. It also includes an increasingly noisy culture in malls, stadiums, and public gathering spaces as more and more of us conduct our daily lives with electronic appendages, seemingly fleeing from any moment of quiet that could lead to self-reflection. This noise keeps white culture from acts of contemplation that can be sources of transformation and drowns out the still, small voice that can be a seed of creative inspiration and originality. This shrinking of creativity can be heard when the jazz of Miles Davis and John Coltrane is stripped down to a Muzak track in a grocery store. It is evident in mainstream public school curricula that bore everyone, and a culture of standardized testing that de-emphasizes unique thought and creative problem solving. It can be seen in the dumbing down of political campaigns and a corporate culture where a Marriott hotel looks the same whether it is in New York City, Tunis, Amsterdam, Cairo, or Singapore. These corporatized cultural sites represent whiteness as a homogenized culture, reinforcing the elimination of ethnic and religious diversity among whites. It is a whitewashing that robs people of knowing who they are and where they come from.

The diminished creativity that results from homogenization makes people tired, lethargic, bored by everyday life, and susceptible to reaching for the next quick fix. It also leads to an inability to have a nuanced, holistic, and realistic understanding of one's history, a rush away from truths that fuel creative output. Alice Walker's *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* provides a model for the excavation of African American history leading to rich, creative work that reflects the past, present and an imagined future. The same willingness to search needs to take place among white people in order to find full and honest expression as citizens, activists, intellectuals, and leaders. That searching takes people to a place of recovery and innovation. Creativity—personal, cultural, and social—is forward-looking; it is creating something in the present that we believe will endure. Creativity nurtures moments in which we are able to envision the future and to communicate with people we hope we will meet.

Instead, white people have practiced a long history of historical amnesia, an aggressive "disremembering"[10] of historical realities that are replaced by fictitious versions of history that promote whiteness. Janet Koenig calls these historical fictions—nostalgic celebrations like the Fourth of July, Columbus Day, and oft-repeated contemporary notions of a "post-racial" world—"an advertisement for the state."[11] Enacted in and through legislation, taught in the school system, and incorporated into the lives of those who know them to be untrue,[12] historical amnesia coupled with advertisements for the state lead to an unclaimed sense of one's history and an unwillingness or inability to tap into one's creative potential. This is why feminist poet Adrienne Rich (1986, 141) refers to historical amnesia as "the imagination's sugar rush, leaving depression and emptiness in its wake."

One problem, of course, with such advertisements is that without an accurate sense of history, white people are unable to imagine a future that is fundamentally different from the present. A scant or misinformed understanding of history makes it easier to pretend that the past did not happen or that it has little meaning for today, which makes it possible to deny responsibility for what has happened and for enacting new ways of being. White people may be able to identify their geographical origins (in general terms, somewhere in Europe), but they typically lack a comprehensive understanding of whiteness's relation to slavery, genocide, land stealing, and other daily, less grand forms of racial oppression and exclusion. In this void, white folks flee to platitudes like "My family did not own slaves," "We are X, we were oppressed too" (where X equals an immigrant group who was discriminated against when first arriving in the United States), and "I have friends who are Y" (where Y equals a racial/ethnic group that is asserted to be unassimilative by mainstream standards).

White ideology provides flattering, nostalgic renderings of white history in place of nuanced, multicultural retellings of American history that would demand critical thinking and questioning from teachers, students, and citizens. Both issues—a nostalgic view of the past and a vague or nonexistent sense of one's future—erode one's creative potential, and in particular, the potential for seeing a world that is not based on hierarchy and division. This may be one reason that Henry Louis Gates refers to racism as "a profound failure of the imagination."[13]

DISSOCIATION

Another characteristic common to trauma exposure, according to van Dernoot Lipsky (2009, 92), is *dissociation*, a protective response in which "we cut ourselves off from our internal experience in order to guard against sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming to our system." It occurs when trauma is so severe that awareness cannot stay fully present. With dissociation a part of the psyche splits off from the rest of consciousness, separating from the trauma itself. This separation may manifest as vacating one's body during exposure to trauma (when witnessing racial shaming, exclusionary practices, police brutality, etc.), which renders the individual white person unable to remember the specifics of the event while carrying the emotional trailings associated with the event: untethered guilt, shame, panic, anxiety, a sense of betrayal, and/or a feeling of abandonment. As a traumatic response of whiteness at the individual level, dissociation runs on a continuum, from momentary unhinging to long-term and sustained fleeing of one's consciousness and conscience. It can be seen among those who appear not to reside in their bodies—no smiling, no dancing, no laughing, no gesticulating, no distinctive walk—and among white people in positions of power who have so separated themselves from reality that they cannot see their own entitlement even as they are benefiting from it. It often appears as seemingly free-floating, overwhelming anger and cynicism. Addictions are a common response to dissociation, an adaptation that, while immediately comforting, adds to depression, anxiety, and sense of persecution.

Dissociation can occur when trying to undo racism as well as when working to uphold it. Momentary splits can be experienced, for instance, by a white person who calls attention to a racial injustice in a personal or professional setting. Typically this truth telling in predominantly white settings is met by silence as the audience becomes flat-eyed, disengaging from the naming that is occurring in its midst. Such a response positions the truth-teller as the problem, as the one who is causing the argument.[14] In that moment, the witness is not only silenced, but also is made a nonperson by the nonengagement, an actual threat to the white family, organization, or institution. With such rendering, the chance for creative engagement with the issue gets reduced to moments of non-action and apathy. For the person who has spoken, the message is clear. Being shut down can produce a visceral sense of not being safe or not being seen, and of being erased, which can result in lifting a part of oneself out of the room, out of the trauma, as a means of protection. White traumatic disassociation is one reason why white people are

often afraid to confront racism; as Thandeka (1999) persuasively illustrates in *Learning to Be White*, the possibility of being isolated and expelled from the body of whiteness is scary enough to keep them silent.

Momentary dissociation can also be triggered, as seen in the previous example, in the audience who is present at the moment in which personal, structural, or institutional racism is named. In educational settings, for instance, when students are encouraged to confront racial constructions, racism, and their own whiteness, they often experience fear, guilt, and sometimes shame.[15] Predictably, given our earlier discussion of the sense of persecution as a traumatic symptom, white students assume the position of victim. Their body language reveals their defensiveness; they lead their comments with familiar disclaimers such as, "I hope no one misunderstands what I am about to say. . . " and "I am not a racist, but . . . ," even as their contributions seek to dismiss, deny, or delegitimize the knowledge that is being shared. Just as often, however, they become broodingly silent, as if their refusal to speak, to engage, can stave off whatever they might hear, see, feel, and come to know in these moments. Silence prohibits their careful listening rather than creating a space where sympathetic, empathetic involvement with the perspectives of another human being can occur.

While dissociation is largely thought of as an individual response to trauma, with regard to whiteness it is also a collective cultural response with social implications. Sustained dissociation among white people is evident when racist ideology is repeatedly performed to the point where racism becomes seemingly "automatic," inescapable, and/or justified. This is the shift where whiteness, and the trauma associated with it, becomes hegemonic. Here, signs of trauma are evident in whiteness's unwillingness to acknowledge its "appallingly oppressive and bloody history" (Baldwin 1998b, 320), both in the United States and globally. It can be seen, for instance, in whiteness's refusal to be accountable for the removal and slaughter of native people on this continent, which makes it easier to continue national policies that ignore their sovereignty, colonize their lands, and keep them economically dependent on the "beneficence" of their colonizing government. In the place of accurate historical awareness and honest moral reflection, whiteness feeds itself stultifying myths of Native Americans being "dead," an inaccurate reframing that removes responsibility for the legacy and contemporary practices that continue to oppress Native American communities. This dissociation refuses to recognize the "open season" on black men, in particular, that has characterized US history (past and contemporary) and turns its back on the desperation of millions of people in their home

countries and immigrants to western nations who have been set adrift by US economic policies (Martinez 1998; Alexander 2012; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Ultimately, this dissociation is most clearly present in an unwillingness or inability to see people of color as fully human. Delegitimizing the experiences and perspectives of people of color—which is fundamentally dehumanizing—serves as both a mechanism for maintaining white supremacy as well as a disassociation that removes whiteness from the violence it is enacting.

With long-term dissociation comes an unwillingness to see oneself as responsible for one's actions, since the acts of the perpetrators are removed from the story itself. A devastating example of this form of dissociation is evident in the German government's dominant reference to the Holocaust as "the immense suffering of the Jewish people" (Giesen 2004, 119) with no mention of the perpetrators. The subjectivity and agency of the oppressors is lifted out of the story, a removal that parallels the dissociation (psychically removing oneself from the scene of the crime) on the part of many German citizens during World War II. Dissociation, then, is closely associated with historical amnesia; it is often the result of, but can also be triggered by, this white cultural practice.

Another chilling example of this lifting of a part of one's psyche away from the scene of the racialized terror is documented in Martha Collins's *Blue Front* (2006), a book of poetry where the author seeks to find the consciousness of a young white boy (her father) when he and 10,000 others viewed or otherwise participated in the lynching of a black man, and then a white man, in Cairo, Illinois, in 1909. Collins gives us clues of the five-year-old's daily life—a seller of fruit, a counter of money, a child who went to school—and then provides bone-crushing details of the fact of lynchings as a public spectacle. What Collins's poems show the reader is what is missing—the emotions, sensations, and memories of the five-year-old witness. There is a void where feeling and language should be. This is racial dissociation: the missing psyche, the missing emotion, a protective response to trauma that produces fragmentation, disorientation, and denial. Racial dissociation leaves a hole in its wake, a hole that might be filled with shame, guilt, loss of self or a "ruined moral identity" if the perpetrator engaged the emotional response that was suppressed (Giesen 2004, 116). This is the hole of unabiding hunger, of unspoken fear and repression, which leads to an insatiable desire for stimulus, noise, and distraction. Collins's poetry is a recent contribution that challenges us to better understand the triggers for and consequences of racial dissociation.

While underexamined in contemporary critical whiteness scholarship, dissociation is a white racial trauma and way of being that has been signaled. African American intellectual James Baldwin (1998a) wrote of it in his powerful short story "Going to Meet the Man." In the contemporary moment of the narrative, Jesse is a southern police officer actively working to suppress black activism in his community. After a day in which he had participated in the torture of a "ring-leader" spearheading a voter registration drive (258), he returns to his wife agitated and sexually impotent. As he lays next to her recounting his day of brutality, remembering that he felt "very close to a very peculiar, particular joy" (259) when he beat his victim, he slowly recovers a repressed memory of a lynching that he and his family attended when he was a child. He had buried the memory so deeply that only when he was participating once again in the brutalization of a black man, repeating an act that he had witnessed as a child, did the sources of his pain, confusion, silence, and fear return to him. Left unnamed and untreated, as Baldwin highlights in his story, dissociation leaves people at risk for repetition and at risk for the mentality of a mob. Alternatively, dissociation precipitates a radical withdrawal from others, an unacknowledged fear that association within whiteness might introduce additional trauma and pain. This refusal to connect with others leaves whites unable to strategize collectively and inhibits the mortar and brickwork needed for long-term social change.

ORIGINAL TRAUMAS

Where does whiteness learn to separate heart from head, body from spirit, and humanity from living? What are the original traumas that have only begun to be excavated, examined, and recovered from? While there is room for much theorizing about these early traumas and a promising roadmap has been provided by theologian Thandeka (1999) in her groundbreaking *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America*, our sustained work over the years with white people struggling to understand white identity and racism has confirmed a common theme: a sometimes unconscious, often dogged return as adults to first encounters when whiteness was indelibly taught in across-race interactions. Our belief is that for many white people, especially in our contemporary moment,[16] the trauma of whiteness originates from the time when a child initially "sees" racism enacted. This "seeing" may come in the form of witnessing a parent or other relative lying, being condescending, insulting, or cruel to a person of color, which is often coupled with pretensions of kindness. In that moment the white child, who has not fathomed that distinction, may be so aghast that she/he cannot find her/his tongue; the level of betrayal is often overwhelming as well as unbelievable. Nothing seems safe anymore. In overwhelmingly white environments, this betrayal may be especially devastating because the individual person of color (the Chicano gardener, the African American domestic worker) is alone. They do not come with their kin. Their solitude makes them appear defenseless, unable to fight back. The child has no knowledge that the person of color has a family or community of protection. To see your kin in the role of the perpetrator is to be forever homeless.

As Baldwin (1998a) also highlights in "Going to Meet the Man," that vulnerability is recognized by white children because it is mirrored in their own life experiences. Like Jesse who finally remembers the castration of the black victim before he is burned alive, white children are just as likely to see themselves in the person of color who is being threatened and violated as they are to see themselves in the white adult who wields complete power over their lives, too. In the moment before the man is castrated, Jesse screams as if he is the one being dismembered, but he recognizes that he cannot ask his father why this violence is happening. He wonders helplessly, and silently, "*What did he do?*" (270). Thandeka (1999, 24) argues that this childhood trauma is the moment when the white person comes to know how fragile and tenuous their acceptance is within whiteness. Fear of being expelled from home and community, of being even more adrift and unprotected, leads to an embracing of the very thing—whiteness—that has alienated the white child from her/his sense of self. For in that moment, the hierarchy of race eliminates room for human bonding both within and outside of whiteness, resulting in devastating separations and loneliness—and guilt—for the white child. The slight, insult, pointed condescension, or reprimand done in the name of whiteness now implicates the white child.[17] While people of color may go back to a space of possible belonging and safety, the white child has no place in which to retreat, except to her white skin. The trauma becomes a source of alienation from what Marx (1964, 112) refers to as "species being," the ability to see oneself as connected in physical, spiritual, and artistic ways to other human beings.[18]

Perhaps this is why we often see the trope of the one black witness in so many white movies, such as Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy* and Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*. That one black presence brings white people back to the original scene, compelled to go back to the trauma of which

they have no conscious awareness. Without words, they are drawn back to that moment, even as they are unable to resolve the source of their uneasiness. However, the machinery of modern entertainment, while providing an archetype, does not help whites recover the trauma. In place of language that might connect the memory with an understanding of white violence, the industry instead provides comforting images of racial reconciliation and forgiveness, as if the forgiveness is all that is needed to heal the trauma. But forgiveness by the victim is a source of healing for the victim. The perpetrator has a separate journey to travel. That journey has to do with recognizing and becoming accountable for the violence they have done, and continue to do, out of their fear, greed, and apathy.

There is something about betrayal done at the level of skin—the largest, most unprotected, and most visible organ of the body—that makes a child feel especially defenseless, caught off guard, and then forever seen as the perpetrator even though she/he was not initially guilty. We hear this sense of being exposed in the fevered denials of white college students who are terrified of being perceived as racists, as if the very fact of their skin implicates them in something, accuses them of something, before they have a chance to speak. This is why many white children and adults throw themselves so unreflectingly, obliviously, into whiteness. They have a sense of there being no escape from this recognition, and the only protection they can imagine in their historically amnesiac, traumatized states, is a greater embrace of the white ideologies and ways of being that have prevented them from feeling anything too deeply.

This distorted dynamic typically gets stored in the unconscious where there are no words, a location that Freud has helped us understand leads us to repetition compulsion, a doubling back to the scene of the crime, each time trying to make sense out of it through reenactment. We know from trauma scholarship that trauma victims are in the same day every day, stuck in place, without the questions or resources to recover the memory not yet explored. But without the possibility of the reenactment being consciously tethered back to the original trauma, white people get stuck—the white child who witnesses his first racial affront, the white teen or adult who represses the initial trauma but internalizes the lesson of whiteness, the white society that denies its continued investment in whiteness even as it purposefully or inadvertently teaches another generation of white children what it means to be white. In the process, the meaning of whiteness and the emotional connection to that meaning are severed. While white folks may be aware of a vague sense of guilt, foreboding, or shame, they cannot

necessarily connect these feeling to a source. They are free floating, haunting and painfully persistent.

Of course, not all white children are subjected to an "original trauma" as they see a loved one insult or violate someone of color. In fact, some white children have the fortunate chance to witness egalitarian, respect-driven relationships across race that affirm a sense of themselves as part of a larger world community. Unfortunately, however, this modeling does not protect them from exposure to racist ideology practiced in the larger world—in the media, at school, in their neighborhoods, in the military, through religion, to name but a few places where white ideologies are communicated. The dissonance between egalitarian modeling they may see in their families and what they witness in other social institutions can be equally devastating for white children, often without the language or skills to make sense of the contradictions they experience. The reality is that even children who are spared the personal betrayal of racist violence still witness racism around them and carry the knowledge of racism done in their names. Escaping an original trauma done at the hands of a loved one does not protect against the white racial trauma that white people experience, often in fits and starts, often without direct teachings. Those lessons seep into the bloodstream, reminding us, often without name, of the damage whiteness has caused.

Perhaps this unrecognized trauma at the heart of whiteness accounts for why people of color often say they are not able to "get anywhere" with white people in terms of having reasonable discussions about race. Instead of honestly confronting legacies of whiteness, many white people get frightened, driven, mean. The frustration, from the person of color's point of view, is that there is no way to call white people out from their spell, to be able to ask: "Why are you so frightened? Why are you lying again? Why are you denying the benefits of whiteness?" For people of color, it is unfathomable that white people do not know themselves and the world they have created well enough to engage these questions. But when one is chronically traumatized, much of life is lived in the land of hypersensitivity, if not outright delusion.[19] From the white perspective, nothing is so risky, so frightening, as acknowledging that whiteness is not neutral, not free of racism, not innocent. It would mean not only taking stock of one's own self, but reconnecting with the alienation that white folks might feel from their kith and kin.

This conversation about whiteness as racial trauma necessitates an awareness that, in the twenty-first century as in the past, whiteness is a tie that binds and blinds. Whiteness often makes people more susceptible to

external reinforcements and guides, to not being able to listen to their own voices. Groupthink easily becomes the lay of the land. Seeking external reinforcements leads to a rabid grasping for things as indicators of personal and social success. Few pause to ask, "For what are you grasping?"[20] and the unchecked desire for endless growth and prosperity become the hallmarks of the nation. Investment in whiteness inhibits whites from recognizing the common ground that most of them share with most people of color in the United States: that job and housing markets are stacked against us, that the educational system is preventing more of us from aspiring to greatness, and that the political system serves the interests of a narrow and powerful few. Still in denial, white people will use many excuses to avoid responsibility. People get crazier and crazier; the violent binges get worse, seemingly willing to destroy the world before coming to their senses.

CRITICAL WHITE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

In Sara Ahmed's (2012, 14) "Whiteness and the General Will" she argues, "To stand against the world can require willfulness. . . . You have to become insistent to go against the flow and you are judged to be going against the flow because you are insistent." We take this as a political call to action. It requires us to recognize that the healing that is needed within whiteness will not come without concerted effort, without the will to reimagine what is possible. It will require people to acknowledge, then teach one another of the traumas of whiteness. The cessation of this white schizophrenic subjectivity will necessitate that allies and friends challenge the echo chamber of voices that tell the same twisted story of white innocence on the one hand, and victimization on the other. We need the histories that have been flattened, marginalized, and dismissed, and the complicated stories of antiracism activists who have dedicated themselves to living wholly and reconnecting all parts of themselves (see Thompson 2001). Whiteness must take responsibility for the injuries it has and continues to cause, and white folks must find ways to reimagine and reinvent themselves, authentically and in good faith, in the multiracial, multiethnic world that is, and always has been, our reality.

One of the many contributions of Marx's (1964) dialectical materialism is the recognition that dynamics of oppression (in this case, racial oppression) carry within them the seeds for their own transformation. Neuroses can be turned into resistance. Hypervigilance carries within it the seeds of

its reduction; dissociation carries within it the seeds of its own reintegration; and the antidote for diminished creativity can be found in the creative energy that can come from working with people who are themselves doing antiracist work.[21] Building on Du Bois's concept of black double consciousness, we believe that the remedy to white schizophrenic subjectivity is the cultivation of a critical white double consciousness.[22] This consciousness, unlike its debilitating counterpart, seeks to rejoin the heart and head, body and spirit, and the humanity of whiteness to the social world that it both inhabits and creates. An antidote for the trauma of whiteness is a critical white double consciousness; it is a spirit of atonement that seeks to acknowledge and recover that which has been lost to whiteness through violence and oppression. Thus, critical white double consciousness is a resistant subjectivity. It is one that demands a fuller, multi-voiced narrative of the past and present, which it then utilizes for honest self-reflection and accountability. It seeks out multiracial, multiethnic interactions as an antidote to the monologues of whiteness, and learns the twin disciplines of silence and close listening as antiracist praxis. It commits itself to remaining a fully present and vocal *witness* in the face of white lies, denial, and aggression. It retools liability and trauma into assets for coalition building and organizing across race and other socially constructed differences. Critical white double consciousness nurtures the spaces that make the personal and social transformation of whiteness possible.

Thankfully, there are examples of this healing currently taking place. We are struck, for example, by a recent campaign to help organize a union among food service workers, most of whom are women of color, at a private women's college. Hypervigilance on the part of the food service workers and their allies was needed to learn the workplace conditions and to maintain the confidentiality and secrecy needed to lay the groundwork for organizing. To be the keeper of secrets for those who have been exploited and victimized can feel very risky—it can remind you of secrets kept when damage was first done (if you tell I will fire, kill, not love, disown you). Once that original betrayal has been committed, it can feel like everyone is lying, that there is no truth. But the workers' safety depended upon hypervigilance. For several months the momentum grew, culminating in a significant number of students, alumni, and faculty standing up in support of the workers' rights to organize. The energy garnered standing with people who were speaking truth to power, to telling their own stories of exploitation and resistance, fueled new energy among white allies to stay vigilant in their secrecy until it was safe to make the union demands public.

In this work we can also see the counter to white dissociation. Participants had to remain present for the sharing of difficult truths from people who are marginalized by race, class, and gender in their workplace. These were voices and perspectives not typically heard, not often welcomed, and difficult to reconcile with the privilege of college faculty and students. The desire to "check out" on the part of white people who were trying to support the food service workers was enormous. The responsibility of those participating in the process was to resist the urge to retreat to denial or to feel attacked or persecuted by the life stories being shared during the process. To choose to remain present physically, emotionally, and psychologically, to become an investigative journalist about the dynamics and complexities of race in a particular context, can be a powerful antidote to dissociation. It is a choice to stay in one's body and then speak out with clarity when racism and other injustices are being (re)enacted.

As for overcoming the original white traumas, there may be no substitute for getting to the bottom of the emotional legacies such scenes left us to carry. Just as people of color run the risk of carrying scarring memories from early racial traumas with them into adulthood, white people carry memories of when whiteness was first performed in their names, often at the expense of those they wanted to know, trust, and love. Making space in social movement organizing to do this deep psychological work together becomes a crucial piece of creating new scripts that are not based on hierarchy and exclusion.

Certainly, our sustained conversations over the past two years while writing this chapter, as a black and a white woman both seeking to understand white racial trauma, has required a willingness to do this work, with many intellectual and emotional bridges to build and cross over in the process. For people of color, a willingness to name and confront whiteness speaks both to a deep desire for social change as well as to a generosity of spirit. White people wanting to do antiracist work must come to understand that this commitment is essentially about saving their own souls. Confronting and healing the traumas of whiteness—hypervigilance, diminished creativity, a sense of persecution, and dissociation—is essential to developing a white racial identity that is not based on subjugation and alienation. Our charge, then, is to nurture the multiple ways that this can be embodied and passed on.

NOTES

1. Our shared experience based on decades of teaching in overwhelmingly white universities, of wanting to understand what keeps white students stuck, the role of fear and shame in the white psyche—and our need to know when breakthroughs do happen, what made that possible—laid the groundwork for the theorizing we offer in this paper. The authors want to thank Diane Harriford and Susan Boser for their generous conversations on various drafts of this chapter.

2. Throughout the chapter we use the term "they" and "them" in reference to white people, while recognizing that the "them" is actually "we" for one of the two authors (Thompson). Our pronoun gives example to how race necessarily bifurcates the English language—making divisions inevitable even at the level of words.

3. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2009. www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

4. James Baldwin implicitly makes this argument when he outlines the stammering responses of white Americans to their "black conscience, the black man in America"; see "Going to Meet the Man," in David Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken, 1998), 322.

5. While attending to all sixteen signs of trauma is beyond the scope of this paper, Lipsky does map out a comprehensive list: feeling helpless and hopeless; a sense that one can never do enough; hypervigilance; diminished creativity; inability to embrace complexity; minimizing; chronic exhaustion/physical ailments; inability to listen/deliberate avoidance; dissociative moments; sense of persecution; guilt, fear, anger and cynicism; inability to empathize/numbing; addictions; and grandiosity.

6. We use the term "schizophrenic" here to invoke the recognized symptoms of the genetic illness of schizophrenia. However, we diverge from the medical discourse of the disease most notably in our assertion that white schizophrenic subjectivity is a social construct that can be healed through specific knowledge and actions (i.e., it is not genetic or incurable). For additional discussion of white schizophrenic subjectivity, see also Veronica T. Watson, *The Souls of White Folks: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

7. Another tragic instance of the assault on black men in the United States occurred on July 17, 2014, when Eric Garner, a New York City resident and father of six, was killed by a New York City police officer. Garner, who was heard saying "I can't breathe" on video footage of the nuisance arrest, was subdued using a chokehold, a maneuver prohibited by New York Police Department regulations. The medical examiner who autopsied Garner's remains ruled his death a homicide.

8. According to the 2010 US census, there were 53,570 residents in Sanford, Florida. This population consisted of approximately 57.3 percent white and 30.5 percent African Americans. United States Census Bureau (2010), http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/1263650.html retrieved December 17, 2014.

9. In "Stories of a White Apocalypse on the Romanian Internet," Adela Fofiu borrows the term "rhizome" from the field of botany to describe the potential of apocalyptic narratives from the Romanian New Right blog to reinforce the panicked narratives of other

white supremacist websites as well as to spread to mainstream media outlets both in Romania and beyond. Her deployment of this term is useful for thinking about the ways that neoconservative and neoliberal sentiment gain popular traction and ascendency in purported nonracial states.

10. Toni Morrison coined the term "disremembered" in one of her novels. It is used in the last pages of the novel to describe the complex relationship the community has to the character Beloved after she has been exorcised. Beloved is both known and unknown, remembered and disremembered. The lack of memory the community has is active and deliberate, not a forgetting so much as a willful rejection of memory because of the fear that it animates in those who remember. As Morrison writes, "Remembering seemed unwise . . . They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do." See *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 275.

11. Janet Koenig, "Commemorative Stamp Series," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* 4, no. 3 (1982): 8; cited in Rich 1986, 140.

12. Definition created by Celeste Lockhart, an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (Fall 1988), based on her reading of Adrienne Rich's (1986) essay "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life."

13. Cited in Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Communique to White Ally Heaven," *Sinister Wisdom* 87 (Fall 2012): 48.

14. For fuller discussion, see Sara Ahmed (2012).

15. In *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism*, Karen McKinney (2005, 2) argues that "whiteness is a *prompted identity*," a racial identity that is not thought of "in any depth" until people are asked to do so. This finding aligns with Thandeka's (1999) work, wherein she concludes that when white people *do* connect with the meaning of whiteness in their lives, they often tap into the emotions named above.

16. We stress the traumatic response that might be triggered among white youth in the twenty-first century because, unlike in previous historical moments, flagrant racism in language and action is not generally condoned by mainstream white America. That is, the social norms have shifted enough in this "post-race" era such that there is little support for outright acts of racism. We argue here therefore, that witnessing racist acts in the formative years creates irreconcilable dissonance in white children who grow up being fed a narrative about a post-race America. Though the conflict was always present (Clark signaled a similar psychological response in white children in 1963), it is heightened in this age that so vocally claims human equality, which is perhaps why we see these traumatic symptoms so pervasively now when we arguably did not before.

17. In more mixed-race environments, this initial scene may be slightly different. If the person of color is not alone, has community support, and/or the white child has access to more people of color (i.e., one person of color is not the initial stand-in for a whole people), there may be some buffers to the white loneliness, or at least less chance for the white child to equate white pain with black pain, to merge the two lonelinesses and alienations into one.

18. See also Diane Harriford and Becky Thompson, *When the Center Is on Fire: Passionate Social Theory for Our Times* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008): 122–25.

19. Interestingly, in yogic philosophy there are three states that cause suffering: delusion, aversion, and craving. All three are psychic states of whiteness—the delusion that racism does not exist, the aversion to people of color (as the original witness), and craving (for a belonging severed in the original scene).

20. This question is a recurring one in African America. It echoes Ethiop's (1999, 64) 1860 query, "Whither are this people tending?," voiced in his satirical essay "What Shall We Do with the White People?," and Baldwin's (1998b, 325): "To what, precisely, are you headed? To what human product precisely are you devoting so much ingenuity, so much energy?" There are many other examples, indicating a sustained African American critique of capitalist values and the dehumanization it fosters when it is embraced as a core national identity.

21. This is an example of what Douglas Kellner refers to as "'immanent reversal'—a flip flop or reversed direction of meaning and effects, in which things turn into their opposite." Douglas Kellner, "Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 2005).

22. See Veronica Watson (2013), *The Souls of White Folks: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness*, for a conceptualization of white schizophrenic subjectivity and critical white double consciousness. Our work here is a fuller exploration of the psychological, social, and ethical/moral implications and possibilities of those terms. For additional discussions of white double consciousness, see also George Yancy, Introduction to *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (2012); Steve Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness* (2010); Linda Martin Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?" (2009); Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (2006).

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Sara. 2012. "Whiteness and the General Will: Diversity Work as Willful Work." *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 2 (1): 1–20.

Alcoff, Linda Martin. 2009. "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia* 13 (3): 6–26.

Alexander, Jacqui, M., and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. 1997. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge.

Alexander, Michelle, 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.

Baldwin, James. [1965] 1998a. "Going to Meet the Man." In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David Roediger, 255–73. New York: Schocken.

———. [1965] 1998b. "White Man's Guilt." In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David Roediger, 320–25. New York: Schocken.

Chesnutt, Charles. 1905. *The Colonel's Dream*. New York: Harlem Moon.

Clark, Kenneth, B. [1963] 1988. *Prejudice and Your Child*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Collins, Martha. *Blue Front*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1935. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

———. [1903] 1986. *The Souls of Black Folks*. In *W. E. B. Du Bois Writings*, compiled by Nathan Huggins, 357–548. Des Moines, IA: Library of America.

Ethiop. [1860] 1999. "What Shall We Do with the White People?" In *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David Roediger, 58–66. New York: Schocken.

Feagin, Joe. 2013. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. New York: Routledge.

Fofiu, Adela. 2014. "Stories of a White Apocalypse on the Romanian Internet." In *Unveiling Whiteness in the 21st Century: Global Manifestations, Transdisciplinary Interventions*, ed. Veronica Watson, Deirdre Howard-Wagner, and Lisa B. Spanierman, 29–47. Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Giesen, Bernhard. 2004. "The Trauma of the Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, 112–54. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan, eds. 1994. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kellner, Douglas. 2005. "Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday." *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2 (1).

Martinez, Elizabeth. 1998. *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina View for a Multicultural Century*. Cambridge: South End Press.

Marx, Karl. 1964. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Dirk J. Struik. New York: International Publishers.

McKinney, Karen. 2005. *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism*. New York: Routledge.

Mills, Charles. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Morrison, Toni. 1987. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

———. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage.

Rich, Adrienne. 1986. "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985*, 136–55. New York: Norton.

Roediger, David. 1991. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London and New York: Verso.

Spanierman, Lisa, and Nolan Cabera. 2014. "The Emotions of White Racism and Antiracism." In *Unveiling Whiteness in the 21st Century: Global Manifestations, Transdisciplinary Interventions*, ed. Veronica Watson, Deirdre Howard-Wagner, and Lisa B. Spanierman, 9–28. Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Sullivan, Shannon. 2006. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Thandeka. 1999. *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*. New York: Continuum.

Thompson, Becky. 2001. *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

van Dernoot Lipsky, Laura, with Connie Burk. 2009. *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Watson, Veronica, T. 2013. *The Souls of White Folks: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.