

# Other/Wise

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## Transforming Ghosts Into Ancestors: Un-silencing The Psychological Case For Reparations To Descendants Of American Slavery\*

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The 2020 presidential campaign has been witness to the remarkable phenomenon of presidential candidates offering support to the idea of providing reparations to African Americans for the traumatic history of American slavery. The idea of reparations—the provision of resources such as land or money as compensation for the lasting harm of slavery—has ebbed and flowed in the United States since the Civil War, and even before (Araujo, 2017). However, the recent wave of chatter represents a dramatic upsurge in the willingness of politicians to consider, publicly, the prospect of reparations. For nearly 30 years, beginning in 1989, Michigan Congressman John Conyers seemed the lone political voice in introducing a resolution to have congress at least investigate the prospect of reparations. It failed to get out of committee.

In the June 2014 edition of *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates presented in “The Case for Reparations,” a compelling argument for the just provision of material reparations to the descendants of American slavery. Coates argued that reparations are due not just because of the history of enslavement, but also because of the discrimination that has ensued. He described the horrors of Jim Crow, but shined an even brighter light on the systematic theft of wealth owing to the policy of “red-lining” whereby banks would not loan money to African Americans seeking housing in middle class neighborhoods. However, more than economic, ultimately his argument was a moral one for a just response to slavery and discrimination that could provide a spiritual healing of the entire country.

Coates' article coincided with an awakening in America surrounding the killing of unarmed African Americans. Several highly publicized and, not coincidentally, videoed incidents forced the public to reckon with a disparity in law enforcement treatment of African Americans that had fatal consequences (e.g., Trayvon Martin, 2012, Michael Brown, 2014, Philando Castile, 2016, Alton Sterling, 2016).[1]

Further, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, a landmark book by Michelle Alexander (2011), described a more than 30-year process of systematic mass incarceration of African Americans, also penetrated public consciousness. This calamitous public and legal assault on African American freedom and—ultimately, enfranchisement—was based on trumped up drug laws and has had devastating effects on family and social life in African American communities. Thus, this overt public demonstration of continuing oppressive circumstances for African Americans in conjunction with Coates' powerful article thrust reparations back into the public's imagination.

In addition to the moral imperative of reparations, we suggest that there are powerful psychological forces that need to be un-silenced if this policy of repairing a profound tear in the multicultural fabric of the country is ever to be realized. Specifically, we seek to clarify the psychological benefits of reparations for all Americans as well as the psychological factors that serve as resistance to enacting reparations. Further, we call for a program of reparations that includes both monetary compensation as well as an official governmental apology. This comprehensive approach to reparations is what Brooks (2005, p 141) calls "the atonement model." Finally, we recommend psychologically infused strategies that, we believe, will increase the prospects of success with reparations advocacy.

## WHY A PSYCHOLOGICAL CASE FOR REPARATIONS

The transatlantic slave trade began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It grew in the mid-1600s with the establishment of plantations in the Caribbean, South and North America. Approximately 12.5 million Africans were stolen from their homeland and sold into slavery. During that period, the United States prospered economically and suffered morally by instituting a system of chattel slavery.

Chattel slavery distinguishes itself from other forms of slavery in that death is the only way out of an individual's enslavement. Chattel slavery also means that one's children and one's children's children are born into slavery. Chattel slaves are considered property and are bought and sold as such, like animals or mercantile goods. Chattel slavery is a crime against humanity and needs to be acknowledged as such.

You cannot build a unified and integrated country ensuring from a system of chattel slavery, then ignore that history, and then, outrageously, act as if it doesn't matter. It mattered and still matters today! Economically, morally, and psychologically, chattel slavery and its impact on society mattered. Ignoring the impact of chattel slavery on American culture and the subsequent denial and refusal to repair the moral, economic and psychological damage wrought by that system promotes a ruling culture of hubris, arrogance and fantasies of omnipotence and superiority as if expressing: *We can do whatever we want, to whomever we want, whenever we want. We do not have to acknowledge when we are wrong, and there are no consequences for our behavior.*

That grandiosity, heretofore left unchecked, has enormous destructive consequences beyond the relationship between the United States and its African American citizens. One example of the long-term effects of this type of disordered thinking and destructive behavior can already be observed in our growing income inequality and the degradation of the environment (Boyce, 2019). This is just the beginning of an answer to the question of why make a psychological case for reparations.

## A NOTE ON OUR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In addressing a subject as comprehensive as the psychology of reparations, we found it necessary to shift between theories of intrapsychic, interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup dynamics from various perspectives including psychoanalytic, psychoanalytic group, psychosocial, sociopolitical, sociological,

philosophical, historical and literary. We recognize that an effort to seamlessly move amongst many theoretical perspectives (each with their own heuristic foundations) may be fraught with theoretical missteps. However, we find it impossible to try to address reparations without taking the broadest and most inclusive theoretical perspective since behavior, after all, is multi-determined.

For instance, we use an implicit intrapsychic frame to discuss the guilt that may be involved in resistance to reparations. And, we describe an interpersonal paradigm to propose the value of apology, which is an essential component of reparations, in helping work through that guilt. Yet, we are ever mindful that in understanding intergroup processes, we cannot ignore group mentality, which Bion (1961) described as more powerful than individual mentality. Indeed, Wells (1990) stated that the group mentality formed its own gestalt, exceeding the sum of its parts.

With this multidimensional understanding, we move freely between units of analysis. An example of this is our application of Kleinian intrapsychic processes to the analysis of intergroup behavior. We do this knowing full well that group behavior does not exactly mirror individual behavior and that individuals behave in groups in ways that they themselves would find shocking to see in individual behavior (Alford, 1990). We also recognize that the defensive constructs found in individuals, though interrelated, do not operate in the same way as the defensive constructs shared by members of large groups. Nevertheless, certain principles, such as projective identification still apply, albeit in the service of different defensive functions and with different outcomes (Alford, 1990; Bion, 1961; Balbus, 2005; Wells, 1990; and, Miller & Josephs, 2005).

We also wish to comment on our use of the terms “white people” and “whiteness”. We tend to use these terms interchangeably, though we think this it is regrettable and symptomatic of the linguistic restrictions our racial lexicon imposes on our efforts to change. We view whiteness as synonymous with the systemic ideology of white supremacy, and not the same as white people. Yet efforts to disentangle these terms is complex given the numerous ways (health, wealth, education, etc.) in which white people benefit from their whiteness. Given our focus on reparations, we are interested in the ways in which whiteness has captured the minds of some white people (as well as others) and perpetuated white privilege through structural inequities. For the most part, however, we maintain that the psychosocial phenomenon of whiteness engenders psychological costs for both white and black people in the United States when whiteness operates as a large group dynamic that is fostered and maintained through the defensive use of projective identification.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESIDUE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS OF A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

The psychological toll of chattel slavery and subsequent discrimination has been told by many of our most iconic African American writers. W.E.B. Du Boise (1903) described African Americans as living in a perpetual state of ambivalence, a “double consciousness” in which

“One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 5).

Ralph Ellison (1952) described African American social invisibility as one of the results of the dehumanizing objectification that was embedded in slavery and discrimination.

"... you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful" (p. 4).

Cornell West (1993) called for African Americans to come to terms with a nihilism that can result from living at the tip of white supremacy's spear:

"...we must delve into the depths, namely the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America...to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America..." (p.19).

In a prior article (Nichols, 2017), we added our own observations of African American mistrust and suspicion to this catalogue of psychological distress, observations that reveal a terror of repeated exploitation. Joy DeGruy (2005) has stated that African Americans suffer from "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," which she defines as encompassing three broad behavioral characteristics: "vacant esteem, ever present anger, and racist socialization." She states that this syndrome is the result of, "multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression and absence of opportunity to access the benefits available in the setting..." (p. 125).

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESIDUE FOR WHITE AMERICANS OF A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY: MORAL INJURY

In our experience, the word "reparations" becomes emotionally charged when it is used in conjunction with African Americans. This is curious given the fact that the word does not incite the same reaction when applied to Jewish Holocaust survivors or to Japanese Americans who were granted a formal apology and given monetary compensation by the U.S. government for forcing them into internment camps during WWII. Granted, these examples refer to reactions after the fact. But, that does not explain why, after 150 years, African Americans have not been granted a formal apology and given monetary compensation for 300 years of enslavement. One does not need to be a psychologist to recognize that such a blatant omission proves that something powerful is lurking just below the surface of the American psyche when it comes to African Americans and reparations. It is our contention, capital concerns notwithstanding, that the intense reactions to the idea of reparations to African Americans involves "moral injury."

The institution of slavery and its aftermath has inflicted a profound moral injury upon, and stands in sharp contrast to, the foundational beliefs of our country. The term "moral injury" was popularized by psychiatrist Johnathan Shay (2009) in his book entitled *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Shay (2009) makes explicit the ways in which veterans are traumatized, differentiates between Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and moral injury, and makes recommendations for healing. According to the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM V), PTSD can be triggered by the following:

- directly experiencing a traumatic event

- o witnessing a traumatic event
- o learning that a traumatic event occurred to someone close to you
- o experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to the details of a traumatic event

Symptoms of PTSD include: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions.

While there is overlap between the symptoms of PTSD and moral injury, Shay (2009) differentiates the two by defining moral injury as something that occurs when one is ordered to engage in acts of killing that violates one's moral code of right and wrong. Over time that definition expanded to include the moral wounds soldiers sustained by "perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgressed deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p.696).

Shay (2009) maintains that when you behave in a way that violates your moral code there must be acknowledgement of the loss of both an ideal, and of the space to mourn that loss. Otherwise, grief turns to rage, against oneself and/or others. In addition, he argues that dishonoring the enemy is a major component of moral injury. Honor is integral to war. It allows soldiers to justify killing in the service of a higher cause. If the enemy is respected, the soldier can embrace their behavior as an act of patriotism. But, if the enemy is dehumanized, the soldier is transformed from being a patriot to merely a killer. In debasing the other, the soldier debases him/herself. "Dishonoring the enemy [yields] toxic psychological results for the soldier" (p. 118). One can see the religious admonition "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" at the root of this psychological struggle.

In an act of theoretical appropriation, we have taken the concept of moral injury and used it as a way of understanding the visceral tension associated with the 150 years of resistance that has been met when exploring the moral imperative to provide reparations to the descendants of those enslaved by American law. However, whereas the moral injury to veterans studied by Shay (2009) is largely conscious, we suggest that the moral injury residing in the United States white collective is largely unconscious and protected by various forms of denial.

Just like the soldier who degraded his enemy, the moral character of our nation was undone by the institution of chattel slavery and the moral injury that ensued. This moral threat did not go unnoticed by some of our early and most celebrated presidents. Thomas Jefferson, a prodigious slave holder who was famous for his ambivalent attitudes toward slavery, expressed moral trepidation regarding slavery when he commented that, "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever..." (Jefferson, 1785). Our fourth president, James Madison (1820), years following his presidency, referred to slavery as our country's "original sin." Additionally, Abraham Lincoln (1865) punctuated the presidential recognition of slavery as a moral offense in his second inaugural speech in which he said:

"Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, John J. Chapman (1913), an attorney and essayist stated:

“There was never a moment when the slavery issue was not a sleeping serpent. It lay coiled up under the table of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Owing to the cotton gin it was more than half awake. Thereafter it was on everyone’s mind though not always on his tongue” (p.9).

More recently, in an article entitled *The Sleeping Serpent of Slavery*, Fred Zilian (Zilian Commentary, 2012) wrote “...from our Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the start of the Civil War in 1861, slavery posed a fundamental contradiction to our American identity.” Continuing with the snake metaphor, Cornel West has described slavery as the “reptile wrapped around the legs of the table upon which the Declaration of Independence was signed” (as cited in Goodman & Olivares, 2004, p. 131).

Rather than confront the immorality of slavery and work towards repair, for the most part, Americans have defended against that realization using denial and avoidance as defense mechanisms; hence the ubiquitous discomfort that arises when the idea of reparations is introduced. At the most superficial level, white Americans who have this reaction worry that they will have to pay for something in the here and now, because of a wrong that their ancestors perpetrated in the there and then. The ways in which white Americans have benefitted from the institutionalization of white privilege and white control (McIntosh, 1990, 2018) and that are derivative of hundreds of years of forced labor by African Americans, is discounted and obfuscated by our rugged individualist and meritocratic mythologies (Tankersley, 2018).

This phenomenon we have described as “the discomfort” of white Americans when the idea of reparations challenges the unconsciously held moral injury of slavery is more particularly labelled by Robin DeAngelo (2011) as “white fragility” (p. 54). DeAngelo views white fragility as the result of white Americans living lives that preclude encounters with “racial stress.” thereby making them vulnerable and unprepared when racially stressful circumstances do, in fact, appear.

“White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (DeAngelo, 2011, p. 54).

Protected by the insulated environments described by DeAngelo (2011), moral injury operates at a deep emotional level in the American psyche. The challenge of acknowledging moral injury is that when that acknowledgement is done properly, it is accompanied by a fragility that may cover the emotions of shame, guilt, unworthiness and /or despair. To cope with that experience, white Americans can be seen as defensively *doubling down* with a righteous anger that helps fuel the angry backlash we see whenever there is any movement towards equality (Anderson, 2017). To view African Americans as equals threatens to activate moral injury, for in the realization of black people as equally worthy, is the horror of one’s active or complicit participation in dehumanizing them.

Moral injury is also embedded in the ways we think about U.S. history. Our country has competing narratives; soaring accomplishments on the one hand, and collective trauma on the other. While our achievements are proudly embraced, our collective trauma is disavowed and held in what Jungian theorists refer to as the collective cultural unconscious:

"The cultural unconscious... is that location between the personal and archetypal unconscious as theorized in Analytic psychology introduced in analytic psychology by Jungian analyst Joseph Henderson. He defined this as an area of "historical memory" (Kimbles, 2018, p.5).

Trauma shatters consciousness. It signals that the horrors of an event are too overwhelming to emotionally integrate into the conscious mind. As such, the psychological implications of the traumatic event are relegated to the "sunken place" (McKittrick, et al., 2017) where they can exist without being encumbered by the responsibility of action. Still, the traumatic "not known" is tricky. Freud (1922) observed that catastrophic events which are not fully known have a "peculiar and uncanny" way of repeating themselves (repetition compulsion) in ways that appear outside the intention or control of the actor. However, Caruth (1996) points out in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that "repetition is never simply representation nor its absence but rather the reenactment—potential erasure—of a history that refuses recognition" (p. 132).

Slavery qualifies as a catastrophic event. Like many traumatic events, slavery is generally "known" in a matter-of-fact way, while the emotional impact of slavery is split off. This suggests that opening one's awareness fully to the horrors of this crime against humanity is too much for many white Americans to bear. This lack of integration between the fact of slavery and its emotional resonance creates a dual consciousness that prevents the moral wound of slavery from healing.

It seems that many white Americans are more than willing, whether consciously or unconsciously, to allow the African American community to carry the trauma of slavery alone. In accordance with Shay (2009), who points out that the communalization of trauma is critical to the healing of PTSD and moral injury, it's too much for any single community to manage. While some might argue that using war symbolism is not analogous to black/white relations in America, one would be hard pressed to find an African American who has not had the experience of being treated like an enemy combatant. This is especially true for black men. Evidence of this reality is the militarization of police forces that patrol black communities with military grade rifles, equipment and even tanks (as occurred in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, to quell community outrage following the police shooting of Michael Brown).[2]

The past/present alignment of the traumatic legacy of slavery must be consciously communalized across many segments of the population if we are to move towards a place of genuine caring about one another. Our history demands a conscious, collective, emotional "knowing" about the legacy of slavery. ***Otherwise, the moral wound of slavery will continue to persist, split off and segregated into unconsciousness, buttressed by our bifurcated histories.*** Without a conscious avenue for expression, moral wounds show up as metaphorical ghosts, hence the opening phrase of this article's title.

## TRANSFORMING GHOSTS INTO ANCESTORS

The notion of "transforming ghosts into ancestors" was conceptualized by Hans Loewald (1960), a psychoanalyst. He stated that:

"Those who know ghosts tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and led to rest as ancestors. As ancestors, they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow life" (p. 29).

When we say, "transforming ghosts into ancestors," we think of the phrase in terms of the ghosts of American slavery being transformed into, and integrated into the fabric of culture, as ancestors.

The folkloric concept of ghosts is a useful psychological construct as we consider the violent legacy of slavery because ghosts represent experiences from the past that affect the present despite the fact that they frequently go unseen. Their ethereal presence is oftentimes characterized as unwanted and menacing. They are often associated with something horrible which is why they are the staple of horror movies. Ghosts terrify us. They often provoke flashbacks of atrocities that the living often attempt to disappear. Ghosts demand reckoning for past injustices that have not been truthfully acknowledged. Ghosts defy death and time.

The mission of ghosts and their haunting behavior is beautifully rendered in Avery Gordon's (2008) book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological imagination*. Gordon maintains that "...the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (p.x). She believes that "the past *always* haunts the present," because the "forced 'disappearance' of aspects of the social continues to shadow all that remains" (p. viii).

Kimbles (2014), in his book *Phantom Narratives: The Unseen Contribution of Culture to Psyche*, characterizes haunting similarly. In the language of Jungian analytic theory, he believes that "intergenerational processes are manifested as phantom narratives that provide structure, representation, and continuity for unresolved or unworked through grief and violence that occurred in a prior historical cultural context that continues into the present (p. 21). To be even more succinct we can turn to Faulker's (1951) famous quote from *Requiem for a Nun*; "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (p. 73).

America's history of slavery, its resistance to acknowledging the harm done, and its unwillingness to compensate African Americans for the country's moral failings make us ripe for haunting. Our ghosts are spirits of both former slaves and former slave owners because as we pointed out in previous sections of this paper, no soul can rest in peace in the aftermath of a crime against humanity that has not been emotionally resolved by that community.

We believe that until America can properly honor through acts of atonement, the millions of African Americans who toiled and died to build America's economic foundation, the ghostly presence of both slave and master will continue to haunt every aspect of American culture. This haunting will yield negative forces that subvert the basic, and oft-repeated tenets of our country: "land of the free, home of the brave."

Haunting is not the same as being exploited or traumatized. It is distinctive in that it is a manifestation of an unresolved loss sustained by social violence done in the past that is making itself known in the present. Haunting is also differentiated from trauma because it produces a "something-to-be-done" (Gordon, 1997, p. xvi).

Trauma as a unit of analysis invites a depoliticized interpretation of symptoms as they relate to the subjective experience of the individual. With this emphasis on the individual, the political and institutional structures that provide the scaffolding for racial inequities remain unseen and consequently unchallenged. Trauma as the focus of analysis emphasizes the individual transformation of the victim, and in doing so shifts our attention away from the action of the perpetrator. Implicit in this perceptual shift is the notion that it is only the victim who needs an intervention. In this paradigm, the menace of the perpetrator goes unacknowledged and, as such, is tacitly allowed, and, in some instances even rewarded for engaging in these harmful acts. [3]



When the perpetrator is a socio-political structure, focusing on the victims of that structure reinforces a type of institutional blindness, suggesting that only victims are harmed by these unjust practices. And, while there are numerous theoretical and evidence based studies that document all the obvious and implicit ways in which structural inequities are destructive to the recipients of that deadly socio-economic force (Crenshaw, 1989; Degruy, 2005; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; & Sue et al., 2007), rarely is the toll of that aggressive ignorance on the perpetrators of social inequities considered a legitimate object of study. It is as if only positive outcomes accrue to the perpetrators of shadow violence, blind assassins who kill without seeing. Haunting suggests otherwise.

In our lexicon of haunting, American culture is haunted by both former slaves and former slave owners. Our ghosts are equal opportunity "haints." [4] ([https://ifpe.wordpress.com/2020/05/14/transforming-ghosts-into-ancestors-un-silencing-the-psychological-case-for-reparations-to-descendants-of-american-slavery/#\\_ftn4](https://ifpe.wordpress.com/2020/05/14/transforming-ghosts-into-ancestors-un-silencing-the-psychological-case-for-reparations-to-descendants-of-american-slavery/#_ftn4)) No one escapes the taint of a crime, but the effects of being a victim are different than the effects of being a perpetrator of the shadow violence. We are all bound by the complexity and particularity of the American social contract. As such, haunting calls for a "something-to-be-done" (Gordon, 1997, p. xvi). For us, as we stress in this article, that "something-to-be-done" is reparations.

It is our contention that reparations to the descendants of American slavery, through an expression of collective remorse, are the only way that this country can move from its racialized inequities to restorative justice and racial reconciliation (Brooks, 2004). In this way, our ghosts can finally rest and be transformed into ancestors.

## ORIGINS OF THE GHOSTS

Tracing the origins of American "ghosts" requires inquiry into the origins of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Historian Ibram Kendi (2016) has examined the history surrounding the first ship that brought captive Africans to be enslaved in Portugal in 1444. The idea was spearheaded by Prince Henry the Navigator who, many years earlier, had observed the profits earned by Muslims controlling the land routes used to transport captive sub-Saharan Africans through the Sahara-Desert to an island in the Mediterranean.

"...in 1414, Prince Henry and his brothers had convinced their father, King John of Portugal, to capture the principal Muslim trading depot in the western Mediterranean: Ceuta, on the northeastern tip of Morocco. These brothers were envious of Muslim riches, and they sought to eliminate the Islamic middleman so that they could find the southern source of gold and Black captives" (Kendi, 2016, p. 22).

Though Africans were enslaved at that time, they did not comprise the majority of slaves. The majority of enslaved people at the time were Eastern Europeans of Slavic origin, thus the source of the derivative name "slave." However, by the early 1400's, Slavic people became better at defending their territories creating pressure to explore Africa for more humans to enslave. Prince Henry's innovation was to commission ships to be built to navigate previously unexplored routes south around the western cape of the Sahara-Desert, Cape Bojador. Eventually, six ships were dispatched to central Africa and returned to Lisbon with 240 African captives.

However, merely acquiring Prince Henry's human cargo was not enough to successfully launch and sustain this new enslaving business. Since, Portuguese society was largely governed and influenced by the Catholic Church, and on the face of it, enslaving humans violated basic Christian values. However, according to Kendi's research, Prince Henry the Navigator's nephew, King Afonso V, commissioned

Gomes Eanes de Zurara to write the story of Prince Henry's life and slave trading exploits (*The Chronicle of the discovery and conquest of Guinea*, 1453, as cited in Kendi, 2016). Zurara's account provided the justification the church needed by describing Prince Henry's slave trading as missionary in nature: "In building up Prince Henry's evangelical justification for enslaving Africans, Zurara reduced these captives to barbarians who desperately needed not only religious but also civil salvation" (p. 24). Zurara's manuscript was eventually spread throughout Europe and provided a blueprint for how to engage in the slave trade without incurring religious intervention.

The importance of Kendi's history is that he clarifies that slavery was not initiated out of some innate racist intention, but that it was pure economics that required a strategic racist portrayal of Africans as animalistic heathens. The fatefulness of this history is that it is the racist justification, passed down now for over 6 centuries, locks us into the racial difficulties we face today. This justification, transmitted inter-generationally as it was, eventually acquired the feel of fact to many Europeans, European Americans, and unfortunately, some African Americans. It continues today, haunting our current racial discourse. For example, consider how often it is that African Americans are disparaged with language associating them with monkeys. This is sometimes done quite consciously (see Narayan, 2016), but more insidiously, research has found that this association rests unconsciously in the minds of most US citizens (Goff, et al., 2008). It's this type of stereotypical and degrading association, lingering in society, to which we refer as "ghosts," with roots in Zurara's depiction.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN ADVANCEMENT...AND BACKLASH

With regard to the possibilities of actually seeing reparations to African Americans become a reality, this particular moment in history seems to be full of hope. As described in our introduction, several presidential candidates have already made positive statements about reparations. Additionally, a conservative New York Times columnist has beautifully chronicled his gradual transformation from reparations opponent to advocate (Brooks, 2019). The activist group *Black Lives Matter* has made reparations one of its policy planks and much of this seems spurred by the transcendent 2014 article by Coates mentioned earlier in our article.

However, we heed the warning of Carol Anderson (2016) in her book, *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*:

"The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship" (p. 3).

In that book, Anderson cautions that moments of advancement in U.S. racial equality are each typically followed by a powerful, neutralizing backlash. In a previous paper (Nichols, 2017), we already referenced the un-doing of General William Tecumseh Sherman's 1865 field order that each of the formerly enslaved shall be given "40 acres of tillable land." Only a few months later President Andrew Johnson, who rescinded that order, took the land back from former enslaved people and returned it to their former slave masters. In that article, we similarly noted the 30-year movement to provide a pension to the formerly enslaved, only to have the action scuttled by charges of mail fraud against the leaders of that movement (Farmer-Paellmann, 2003). In other examples of "doing and un-doing," we note the remarkable comment by President Lyndon Johnson, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, in a speech at a Howard University commencement:

“You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair” (1965, cited in Kendi, 2016, p. 390).

Kendi (2016) called this Johnson speech, “...the most antiracist avowal ever uttered from the lips of a US president” (p. 390).

Yet, less than 10 years later, the next American president, Richard Nixon, in strategizing how to ensure future electoral wins for his political party, stated (as reported by H.R. Haldeman, White House Chief of Staff):

“...you have to face that fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to...” (Cited in Anderson, 2016, p. 104).

Ultimately, Nixon sought to create drug laws that would specifically target “the blacks” (and “the hippies”), leading to incarceration and eventually, disenfranchisement. However, Nixon was sidetracked by the Watergate matter before completing his agenda. According to Michelle Alexander (2011), it was the Reagan administration that eventually fulfilled Nixon’s plan by launching drug policies that would yield rates of African American incarceration never before seen in the US, or any other Western democracy.

In 2008, America did what was unimaginable only a few years earlier and elected Barack Obama, an African American man, to be president. It was heralded by some as the symbol of a post-racial America. Yet, in further exemplifying the dramatic pendulum swings, eight short years later, America elected Donald Trump to be president, a man who had harassed the previous African American president in a bogus claim that he was a non-citizen. This claim was socially painful and preposterous on its face, but it was more sinister in that it was a manifestation of the “ghosts” that we cite, echoing Civil War era claims that formerly enslaved Africans were unworthy of American citizenship.

And thus, in another cycle of “doing and un-doing,” we now lurch forward potentially toward “doing” with the advocacy of reparations by presidential candidates. Nevertheless, the seeds of “un-doing” are evident in the 2020 candidates’ early statements on reparations. They are reluctant to propose reparations specifically for African Americans, something we view as essential to real reparations. To correct the harm done to African Americans, the reparative policy must be explicitly race-based. Yet, this somehow seems absent from campaign positions of all of the candidates.

In addition to Senator Elizabeth Warren’s call for more conversation, Senator Kamala Harris proposed tax breaks to low and middle-income people regardless of racial background. Reparations advocate William Darity has suggested that Senator Corey Booker’s idea of providing Baby Bonds to any child born into a family that makes less than \$126,000 would be an effective way to close the gap of racial inequality, though he doesn’t consider it to be real reparations (Wolf, 2019). Further, Darity conceded that a policy addressing African Americans indirectly by focusing on economic status is the only politically palatable way of addressing reparations.

These policies, which strike us as “reparations light,” or “reparations on the sly,” do not fulfill a few of the basic requirements of reparations. First, they do not clarify that reparations are in connection to an apology to African Americans for the harm done. We are in accord with Brooks (2004), who suggests that reparations ought to be offered within what he calls the “atonement model.” Brooks clarifies that:

“Atonement, however, entails much more than the tender of an apology. It also requires making restitution—that is, providing a reparation or reparations commensurate with the atrocity. Reparations are essential to atonement, because they make apologies believable. They turn the rhetoric of apology into a meaningful, material reality and, thus, help to repair the damage caused by the atrocity and ensure that the atrocity will not be repeated” (p. 142-143).

With all due respect to the laudable intentions of candidates who discussed reparations, we recommend, “go big or go home!” A “reparations light” policy that does not specifically address African Americans will not achieve the national healing and racial reconciliation that true reparations could yield. Conversely, we fear that it would generate the historically customary backlash without the policy even being authentically “reparative,” thereby sully the name reparations. If candidates wish to suggest policies that redress income inequality, we suggest that they name and discuss those policies accordingly.

Moving forward, the burning question for those of us who wholly advocate reparations is whether we can unlock the clues that will prevent us from hurtling toward another round of “doing and un-doing.” We believe that it is in the uncovering, working through, and honoring of the psychological factors connected to the crime against humanity that was enslavement, and in applying its potential antidote, reparations, that hold the key to whether we “get over the hump” this time, or not.

## PSYCHODYNAMICS OF THE RESISTANCE TO REPARATIONS

Long-time reparations activist and writer, Raymond Winbush (2005), stated that, “Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of reparations on the part of many Africans and non-Africans is that somehow reparations is a government ‘shakedown’ or an ‘undeserved handout’” (p. vi). In our view, exclusive focus on economics represents one of the most fundamental resistances to the idea of reparations. Psychoanalyst/sociologist Jeff Prager (2017) has offered a clue about why reparations discussions get bogged down with economics; “the impoverished nature of reparations discourse represents a refusal to know or to become aware of the presence of unconscious guilt toward the subject populations” (p. 8).

Further, Prager suggests that public reparations discussions get completely distorted by projection:

“The subject of reparations and the object of them have been stood on their head. Those recipients who have been harmed are felt not as the rightful recipients of restitution for wrongdoing but instead as the initiators of reparative claim, effectively as hostile claimants wrongfully (and greedily) seeking monetary compensation. Whites have typically responded to reparation calls as if they were the angry demandingness of the descendants of those who suffered. The affected population, objects of white aggression and dependence, are felt instead to be the aggressors, a perfect example, as Freud describes it, of projection” (p. 8).

Prager ultimately sees the resistance to reparations as a failure of white Americans to muster the identification with African Americans and with the harm done to them, as the key impediment to materializing remorse and reparative action. Political Science Professor Isaac Balbus (2005), who integrates psychoanalytic and political theory, had a similar view on the key emotional factor in resistance to reparations: “...any discussion of financial restitution should take place within an emotional context that encourages whites to confront their guilt for the... harm done to blacks and to respond reparatively to that guilt” (p. 113).

While guilt, defined as feeling bad about what one does, or feels, is clearly a powerful emotional impediment, we actually think that **shame**, defined as feeling bad about what one is (Tangney, 1990) is an even more crippling experience. Recognition that the “ghosts” of slavery are still present, in that: white privilege extends from a murderous history; and, notions of meritocracy may be self-serving distortions of reality that squarely locate white Americans in the position of perpetrator. We suggest that all these factors represent a narcissistic wound, often resulting in all manner of defensive dissembling and, in some cases, a rageful backlash. Shame is often a disabling and overwhelming emotion that tends to generate behaviors designed to “kill the messenger.” Since shame feels like an indictment of the soul, the soul paralyzing experience is one of helplessness to correct the situation. This, then, represents a massive problem for those of us advocating for reparations as the salve to heal the profound historical wounds of this country.

## PSYCHOLOGICALLY INFORMED STRATEGIES IN ADVOCATING FOR REPARATIONS

If our understanding of the resistance to reparations is correct, then the explicit accounting for shame in white Americans must be a central tenet of any reparations movement. Psychologist Lynne Jacobs (2014) is one writer who has addressed the shame that derives from recognition of being in the dominant/oppressor position. In her provocatively entitled article, *Learning to Love White Shame and Guilt: Skills for Working as a White Therapist in a Racially Divided Country*, she encourages white therapists struggling with shame over their privilege by offering the following context.

“We are ‘guiltily situated’...this helps depersonalize our racism...I am not entirely a personally bad racist, but I do live guiltily situated in a racist culture, and it is inevitable not only that I will live privilege, but that my experiential world will be infused with racism and prejudice... Such an understanding... helps bring my shame into manageable proportion” (p. 306).

We believe that “bringing shame into manageable proportion” is key when reparations advocacy confronts denial in the white individual’s mind. Managing shame is critical in circumnavigating DeAngelo’s (2011) “white fragility.” To Jacob’s message we would add, “It is not your fault that you were born into an inherited privilege that continues to contribute to harmful disparate outcomes and discrimination against African-American citizens, but as a faithful American, it is your responsibility to contribute to the undoing of this egregious historical inequity.”

Jacobs further suggests that rather than flee or otherwise disavow feelings of shame, we ought to, “lean into the guilt and shame in order to learn and grow” (p. 304). She is suggesting that by leaning into shame, through humility, we grow and affirm our humanness. It should not be forgotten that Jacobs is speaking to therapists when making these remarks, and therapists are people trained and motivated to be self-reflective. Therapists, therefore, may not be representative of the general population, who need to be engaged if reparations advocacy is to be successful. But, Jacobs does offer us a nugget here, which is the suggestion that shame need not be the end of the road, need not be a fatal block to any efforts to redress past crimes against humanity. Human beings are capable of great evil, even our direct ancestors, but humans are also capable of reflection, remorse, and redemption, if only we can find the humility to do so.

In searching for other models that may guide our path toward reparations, several analytic writers exploring reparations have turned to the seminal theory of Melanie Klein (Alford, 1990; Balbus, 2005; & Prager, 2017). Klein (1937) in her classic paper, *Love, Guilt and Reparation* offers a theory of how infants resolve a developmentally based propensity to split good and bad objects by activating a “reparative impulse” in rejoining the previously “bad” mother who may have been late in meeting a need. In this moment of repair, unconscious guilt moves the infant to integrate the powerful feelings of appreciation

for the mother with previous feelings of rage, thereby developing the capacity for both remorse and love. If successfully navigated, this lays a foundation for an individual to settle into the “depressive position,” as Klein calls it, and thereby live an emotional life governed by “reparative morality” where empathy, caring, remorse, and love are active features of interpersonal life. On the other hand, if this developmental moment is not successfully navigated, the infant settles into what Klein calls the “paranoid-schizoid” position where emotional life is governed by “talion morality,” the morality of eye-for-an-eye revenge.

In searching Klein’s theory for metaphorical clues about reparations in a socio-political context, writers have been mostly pessimistic. Elsewhere (Nichols, 2017), we have suggested that a common Western ethic is to teach our children to apologize when they’ve done something wrong, and to further suggest that they’ll feel better when they do so. However, many writers caution that a group’s capacity to exhibit this type of reparative morality is limited by the propensity for “othering”—the tendency for groups to view non-group members in adversarial terms (see Powell, 2015 for a discussion of othering). More specifically, in applying a Bion (1961) inspired analysis, Alford (1990) articulates the group process barriers that mitigate against the actualization of the reparative impulse. Essentially, Alford suggests that, in the service of group unity, individuals within the group are compelled to project hostility to out-group members; “We purchase the love and concern found in our private relations by investing our anxiety and aggression in the group” (p. 9). If we accept Alford’s analysis, this poses a daunting challenge to those of us advocating a policy requiring contrition, remorse, and atonement from one group to another.

Though not a psychologist, political philosopher Mihaela Mihai (2013) has suggested an approach to reparations that is psychologically sensitive. Much like Jacobs in the individual context, she sees shame and guilt as major barriers to a successful program of reparations. However, in contrast with Jacobs’ recommendation that individual therapists “lean into their shame,” Mihai’s recommendation to the presumptive political *reparationist* is that:

“She should make it clear that, far from denigrating “us,” an apology puts “us” in the best possible light: it shows us to be liberal democrats who possess the courage to own up to a past of atrocity and who reaffirm a commitment to a principle of equal concern and respect for all. An apology can invite resistant groups to conceive of honesty about the past as an act of courage, not an injustice. A powerful appeal to positive feelings of courage, rather than shame—to pride, rather than repentance—could persuade citizens to see the apology as a sign of strength, and not one of weakness. Framed this way, the apology is more likely to resonate with recalcitrant segments of the public” (p. 217).

We imagine Mihai’s “appeal to positive feelings of courage” in concert with Jacob’s emphasis on being “guiltily situated” as the cornerstones of a psychologically informed strategy in helping white Americans actualize support for reparations.

Mihai’s (2013) recommendations, which focused more on the United Kingdom than on the US, are actually consistent with Alford’s view of what it would take to overcome a group’s proclivity to adhere to the paranoid-schizoid position, “(a) truly reparative leader might be able to interpret citizen’s anxieties with sufficient sympathetic accuracy to lessen them” (p. 28). Nevertheless, though Alford does conjure this possible reparative scenario, he is expressly pessimistic about its prospects.

In our view, pessimistic outlooks and discouraging theories are not reason to give up on advocating a policy of social healing that, we believe, would alter the course of our national trajectory. We envision a large multi-racial group of activists advocating reparations as a necessary pre-condition for any true

reparative policy. We don't imagine politicians leading this cause but rather following when the winds of the public have blown more clearly in support. A diverse composition of the advocacy group leading this movement is required to circumvent the appearance of, and the embodiment of, a "talionic" retributive act that would lead to more pendulum swings. This group would serve as something of an exemplar of the multi-racial relationships that could ensue in the aftermath of a comprehensive reparations policy. Further, it must be clear that this is not a policy of white Americans giving reparations to African Americans because to do so further reinforces black/white division. Instead, we believe that it should be clear that the reparations come from American Institutions, such as the federal government, making amends to African Americans on behalf of all Americans.

## THE HOPE

It is not lost on us that pessimism about the prospects of reparations is, unto itself, a form of resistance to reparations, especially as we note the group process land mines that can form when well-intentioned people join to engage a worthy cause. Nevertheless, it is our contention that moral and psychological benefits would accrue to the country as a whole from the provision of reparations to African Americans. We think this is hopeful from restorative justice and racial reconciliation perspectives despite the fact that the recognition of those benefits would take time to evolve and would vary given the complexities of large group dynamics.

For African Americans the healing begins with the demand. For a group that has suffered degrading challenges to its basic sense of humanity, the demand for reparations is an affirmation of humanity, a dignified statement that "we deserve better." It represents an extrusion of the negative projections heaped on Africans and African Americans for about 6 centuries. Even though the country could never find the moral imperative to fully actualize a program of reparations to a group of "original Americans," the African American demand for them would provide a significant measure of healing.

Receiving reparations would initiate a process of healing the hurt, anger, and begin to alleviate the mistrust in the African American psyche. Just as these feelings did not evolve overnight, we don't imagine resolution of such profound emotional states to occur instantaneously. We envision a gradual process, reinforced by African Americans being able to release some of Du Bois' double consciousness as they begin joining the American body as a "full partner."

For white Americans who have been conscious of, and pained by, the enactments of racism, we imagine they would obtain some relief of the anger, guilt and shame associated with being identified as oppressive. We also imagine that reparations might foster some relief of the persecutory fears and anxiety that occur when splitting and projective identification functions as a defense mechanism for individuals and group members. As we noted earlier, using projective identification as a defense mechanism creates psychosocial instability because it is based upon the projection of one's own angry/hateful parts. It is not reality-based. Reparations can be an antidote to the destructive force of this defense mechanism in that it challenges the fantasy of "I'm good, you're not," and has the potential to expose the unconscious splitting off of the emotional needs that sustain the defense. Moreover, any intervention that weakens the psychological structure that supports racial inequities not only lifts the burden of racism from African Americans, it also has the potential to dismantle a psychological construct that undermines the development of an integrated white identity with inclusion of both its good and bad parts. In this way, reparations have the potential to allow white Americans to not just see black Americans, but also themselves as real people rather than figments of their imagination (Balbus, 2005). Additionally, we imagine a sense of pride at being part of the generation of white Americans to finally address this centuries-long unfinished business of atoning for the sin of slavery.



The fact that the provision of political reparations for crimes against humanity is not unprecedented is also a hopeful sign. Winbush (2005) makes this point by providing examples of reparations such as: the United State providing reparations to Japanese Americans interred during World War II; the United States providing land and money to several native American nations; and, Germany paying reparations to individual Holocaust survivors as well as to Israel.

Ana Lucia Araujo (2017) highlights the power of the multi-century advocacy for reparations in her book, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A transnational and comparative history*. While she noted that many scholars and activists pronounced that the movement for reparations was dead near the end of the twentieth century, she commented that:

“...not only are these demands not dead, but they have a long and persevering history... since the eighteenth century, enslaved and freed individuals started conceptualizing the idea of reparations in correspondence, pamphlets, public speeches, slave narratives, and judicial claims...” (p. 2).

Punctuating Araujo’s point is a plaque that hangs in the National Museum of African American History & Culture that tells the story of *Belinda*:

“...an enslaved woman born in Africa, petitioned the Massachusetts legislature in 1783 for her freedom. Belinda’s detailed petition shed light on the horrors of slavery. She shared her story from the terror of her kidnapping in Africa through her experience of enslavement. Belinda’s successful petition granted her a pension, providing one of the earliest recorded examples of reparations for enslavement” (Belinda, Plaque at National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d.)

Further, we would also like to offer this final point. We suggest that the most current moment in the reparations movement may have a new element that gives it more power. We have already highlighted the power of Coates’ (2014) persuasive case and the associated outrage over highly publicized police shootings. We add to this the fact of the recent presidency of Barack Obama. Note that Prager (2017) felt that white inability to identify with the harm caused to African Americans was a key component of white resistance to reparations. We suggest that it was the presence of an African American president at the very moment these shootings were publicized that allowed a greater segment of the white population to, in fact, identify with the plight of African Americans. Indeed, Obama accentuated the point following the shooting of Trayvon Martin by suggesting that Trayvon Martin could have been him, Obama, 35 years earlier (Obama, 2013).

We make this suggestion, despite the fact that Obama, himself, rejected a policy of reparations. He thought it would never gain political support, a point he made in a highly publicized interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017). The presidency of this African American man was heralded as the sign of the beginnings of a post-racial America (e.g., Schorr, 2008). Clearly, today, we know that it was not. However, it just may be that the presence of an African American man in the white house stirred the awareness of unconscious emotions in a segment of the white population. This may just create the necessary impetus to courageously navigate the shame obstructing politics of love required for a real reparative U.S. policy toward its African American Citizenry.

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[1] We suspect that when the COVID19 crisis is looked at in retrospect, a similar awakening may occur surrounding the disproportionate number of African Americans who fell victim to the virus related to reduced lifelong access to healthcare.

[2] "Why Ferguson Mo looked like a war zone this week." According to this CBS News article August 15, 2014, "for several nights this week, tanks, combat gear, and assault rifles were seen in Ferguson, Missouri. It looked like a military operation. That's because police departments in the St Louis area—like those across the country—are arming their officers with equipment once on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of it free of charge or bought with federal grant money authorized by congress," CBS news' Jan Crawford reports.

[3] The 2008 financial crisis, also referred to as the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930's, was ushered in by bankers and financiers who used predatory lending, market manipulation, and other anti-social practices to enrich themselves. Excessive risk-taking by banks magnified the impact globally. Millions of Americans lost their jobs, their homes and whatever wealth they had managed to acquire. Meanwhile, the bankers got richer and were not held accountable for their transgressions.

[4] <sup>2</sup>A "Haint" is a southern colloquialism. Haints are considered malicious ghosts, often seeking to steal or harm naughty children.

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All this brings me to Medria's article, "Transforming Ghosts into Ancestors: Unsilencing the Psychological Case for Reparations to Descendents of American Slavery" (Nichols & Connolly, <https://ifpe.wordpress.com/2020/05/14/transforming-ghosts-into-ancestors-un-silencing-the-psychological-case-for-reparations-to-descendants-of-american-slavery/> ).