



## **Whiteness Studies and Psychoanalysis: A Critique of Aruna Khilanani and Donald Moss**

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In the summer of 2017 Andrew Samuels, a prominent Jungian analyst, invited me to contribute a volume to a series he curates for Routledge addressing the topic of antisemitism in C.G. Jung and his inner circle. The result was *Anti-Semitism and Analytical Psychology: Jung, Politics and Culture* (Routledge, 2021). As I delved into Jung's papers and correspondence from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940's, I discovered that Jung was indeed an antisemite, at least by contemporary standards. His remarks about the difference between the psychology of Jews and Germans leave no room for doubt on that score. As my research progressed, I was struck by the thought that *anyone* who indulges in sweeping generalizations about the "collective unconscious" of a particular religious or ethnic group may follow Jung's example and go over the deep end, giving voice to thoughts and feelings that appear insightful to some, but are actually quite harmful. That being so, caution and candor are both called for when attempting to evaluate the merits of efforts like these, especially when they emanate from people of stature in the profession.

Meanwhile, to place what follows in some sort of context, let us remember that America's "racial reckoning" began more than ten years ago with the murder of Trayvon Martin in February of 2012, and gathered considerable momentum after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Since then, I began to take note of psychoanalytic reflections on the subject of "race", and in particular, on the subject of "Whiteness". So, shortly after my book on Jung and antisemitism was published, I stumbled across the text of a talk given by Dr. Aruna Khilanani, a board certified forensic psychiatrist and psychoanalyst on April 6, 2021 for Grand Rounds at Yale University's *Child Study Center*. Her talk, entitled "The Psychopathic Problem of the White Mind" appeared in Bari Weiss' substack, *Common Sense*, on June 4, 2021. Then one month later, Dr. Donald Moss published an article entitled "On Having Whiteness" in the May issue of the *Journal of The American Psychoanalytic Association (JAPA)*. His article caused a considerable stir both in and outside of psychoanalytic circles (Moss, 2021). Much of the controversy surrounded the circumstances of its publication, since the paper was perceived by many readers as a hoax designed to discredit psychoanalysis, although its author is a respected training psychoanalyst, who taught for many years at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute and the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis.

But before I begin, I hasten to inform readers that I have no sympathy whatsoever for White Supremacy, or for efforts from the Right to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in American universities. On the contrary, I firmly believe that CRT should be taught there, and that any effort to remove it from the curriculum is a blatant infringement on academic freedom. Nevertheless, I am quite critical of Moss and

Khilanani's work, and the mere fact that I hold some critics of White Supremacy to account for far-fetched conjectures and blatant misstatements does not necessarily mean that I am their adversary, or on opposite side of all the issues from them. That is a simplistic, self-serving and undialectical way of framing the debate, one which serves to insulate many anti-racist activists from cogent and compelling criticism from allies, or potential allies. Unfortunately, however, to be accounted as an ally in many activist networks and communities nowadays, people of my age, gender, skin color and religious heritage must refrain from substantive criticism altogether, lest we be labelled racists or White Supremacists. And this is true even when the ideas and utterances that we critique do nothing tangible to advance the cause of racial justice.

Finally, much as I support the teaching of Critical Race Theory in university settings, I believe that the separation of students or faculty into "affinity groups" or "safe spaces" based on the color of their skin in educational settings – a common practice in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings and in many primary and secondary school curricula - is a profoundly regressive step. It perpetuates the racist assumption that skin pigmentation is the primary determinant of our (individual and collective) identities. This practice is particularly damaging in primary and secondary school settings, where we should be doing our utmost to encourage interracial friendships, and a sense of openness and fellowship amongst all students, imparting a shared sense of belonging and purpose, and of responsible citizenship; to de-segregate (rather than re-segregate) children and adolescents as much as possible to prepare them for living responsibly in a multicultural society. I raise this issue now because current efforts to re-segregate society in educational settings (under the banner of anti-racism) are mirrored (and to a large extent, justified) by efforts to re-segregate society in *theory* as well, and the ideas of Khilanani and Moss are closely aligned with this overarching trend.

### ***Critical Race Theory and Psychoanalysis: Beginnings***

Critical Race Theory emerged from a body of scholarship in the legal profession launched by the late Derrick Bell, the first African American to get tenure teaching law at Harvard in 1971. In the 1980's, Bell and his associates called attention to the prevalence and persistence of racism in America, and to the steady erosion of the gains made by the Civil Rights movement because of adverse decisions by the Supreme Court. As a cumulative result of these decisions, and the market machinations of powerful business elites, said Bell, the dream of racial equality remains elusive, because structural racism and profound economic disparities still blight the lives of African Americans, indigenous people and other minorities of color. And this remains true today.

In the 1990's, Critical Race Theory began to influence and penetrate other fields, including education, political science, sociology, philosophy and more recently, health care, public health and theology as well. It also spawned a new academic field, Whiteness studies (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, pp. 85-92).

As Delgado and Stefancic point out:

For several centuries, at least, social scientists have been studying communities of color, discoursing learnedly about their histories, cultures, problems and future prospects. Now a new generation of scholars has put whiteness under the lens and examined the construction of the white race. If, as most contemporary thinkers believe, race is not objective or biologically significant but constructed by social sentiment and power struggle, how did the white race in America come to exist, that is, how did it come to define itself? (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 85 )

Given its expanding spheres of influence, it was only a matter of time before Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies began to influence the mental health professions – psychoanalysis, psychology, psychiatry and social work. Indeed, it is instructive to note that one of the founders of Critical Race Theory, Charles Lawrence III, employed psychoanalytic concepts quite skillfully in a landmark paper entitled “The Id, the Ego and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism” in the *Stanford Law Review* in 1987 (Lawrence, 1987). Lawrence made the point that racism is normal in our society, not an aberration or the exception, nor even a product of overt psychopathology. To buttress his argument, Lawrence addressed the defense mechanisms – like displacement, reversal, repression, denial, projection – by means of which the majority of citizens who are “well adjusted” to a racist society remain smugly oblivious to their own racist attitudes and behavior, and perpetuate it without a trace of self-awareness or remorse. He also demonstrated how Supreme Court decisions may reflect an unconscious racial bias shared by the dominant (white) majority in diverse ways, becoming, in effect, an instrument of White Supremacy; a critique that seems especially relevant now, given the composition and direction of the Supreme Court today.

To drive his point home, Lawrence also described American racism as a crime and a disease, which was both a brave indictment and a somewhat unfortunate choice of words. Why? Because calling racism a crime or a disease is a potent figure of speech, but it is not a statement of fact. On the contrary, racism is obviously *not* a crime – at least in purely legal terms – when the law actively permits or encourages its presence and persistence in the body politic. Neither is it an infectious illness or degenerative disorder that threatens the well-being of the racist person. These are analogies or metaphors at best. Instead, I would have advised Lawrence to follow Erich Fromm’s usage, and to call racism a “socially patterned defect” (Fromm, 1941), or even a “pathology of normalcy” (Fromm, 1955); something akin to a deficiency disease that is prevalent in a given population, except what is lacking in people so afflicted are not vital nutrients or sunlight, but an intact critical faculty and a well-developed conscience; faculties which were stunted or atrophied under the pressure of social forces (Burston, 1991).

In 2008, Professor Lawrence published another article that dwelt on what he termed the “collective unconscious” of white society, and acknowledged that his earlier claim that everyone is racist was primarily a tactic designed to diminish the defensiveness of his white colleagues in the legal profession; an effort to side-step their resistance to the deeper thrust of his argument. His honesty on this score is commendable, but sadly, these remarks may also have set the stage for some more recent and worrisome developments,

in which some psychoanalysts now purport to elucidate “the White unconscious” by borrowing tropes from Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies, and applying them in a more hasty, heavy handed and polemical fashion.

### ***Aruna Khilanani’s Talk***

For one example of this trend, let’s look at the work of Dr. Aruna Khilanani. Before getting to the substance of her remarks, a bit of context is in order here. In an interview with Katie Herzog, Dr. Khilanani disclosed that before she earned an MA at the University of Chicago, where she majored in English literature and Critical Theory. Her studies at the University of Chicago appealed to her, she says, because she was already interested in “the unconscious” and in other (unspecified) “different ways of thinking”. However, when Herzog asked what she means by “the unconscious”, she replied:

Critical theory is about how you are positioned in the world. Ever since I was a little kid, since I’ve interacted with people who are white, and especially white women, I would notice that things were really off. So what I’ve done by going through psychoanalytic training, which is all about getting in touch with the unconscious, is literally work backwards. I’m like, “OK, I’ve noticed that white people tend to put me in certain roles. White women will experience me this way, white men will experience me this way.” I’m going to use psychoanalysis to work backwards and treat all of this as a projection to see what I can learn about their mind.

Dr. Khilanani’s response to Herzog’s question is instructive. First, note the conflation of critical theory with psychoanalysis. (Yes, the histories of psychoanalysis and critical theory are intimately intertwined, but at the end of the day, they are *not* the same thing.) Moreover, when asked about the unconscious, she gives a perfunctory response, then promptly lapses into autobiographical reflection. Indeed, as it turns out, in the course of this interview, Dr. Khilanani never really defines or even attempts to describe more fully what she means by “the unconscious”, beyond offering the vague suggestion that it has to do with how people “organize” their anxiety. Worse yet, in this same interview, Dr. Khilanani asserted that the unconscious “is different for everybody,” though this assertion flatly contradicts her own essentialist perspective on “the White mind” and white guilt, which we address further below.

With these thoughts in mind, let’s turn to the actual substance of her remarks. Here are some things that Dr. Khilanani said on April 6, 2021:

This is the cost of talking to white people at all. The cost of your own life, as they suck you dry. There are no good apples out there. White people make my blood boil. (Time stamp: 6:45)

I had fantasies of unloading a revolver into the head of any white person that got in my way, burying their body, and wiping my bloody hands as I walked away relatively guiltless with a bounce in my step. Like I did the world a fucking favor. (Time stamp: 7:17)

White people are out of their minds and they have been for a long time. (Time stamp: 17:06)

We are now in a psychological predicament, because white people feel that we are bullying them when we bring up race. They feel that we should be thanking them for all that they have done for us. They are confused, and so are we. We keep forgetting that directly talking about race is a waste of our breath. We are asking a demented, violent predator who thinks that they are a saint or a superhero, to accept responsibility. It ain't gonna happen. They have five holes in their brain. It's like banging your head against a brick wall. It's just like sort of not a good idea. (Time stamp 17:13)

The cumulative impression one gets from these remarks is that Dr. Khilanani never intended to deliver a well-researched, well thought out presentation, but decided in advance to simply unleash her anger and contempt for white people on her audience, declaring that here is no point in talking to White people (although, by her own admission, that is precisely what she was doing.) This becomes apparent in her disclaimer to Katie Herzog:

So when I was saying that talking to white people is useless, I'm not actually really saying it's useless because if I really thought it was useless I wouldn't devote time to doing this. I'm talking about an experience that I have, that people of color have, of futility when coming up against a psychological defense. So it's an experience of futility.

So, there we have it. Rather than engage her audience in searching reflection on the sense of futility people of color often feel when attempting to discuss race matters with white folks, Dr. Khilanani *performed* it in front of a live audience, believing this approach would have more impact. Did it? Who knows? Either way, this still begs the question whether expressing such violent antipathy towards white people really advances the cause of social justice for people of color, or whether the kind of racial essentialism that Dr. Khilanani promotes threatens to derail or disfigure that project in the long run. In conversation with Katie Herzog, Dr. Khilanani said:

People of color, myself included, suffer from being positioned in the world, psychologically, and the stuff that goes with it: violence, this, that. Now, white people suffer from problems of their own mind. They suffer with trust, they suffer with intimacy, they suffer with closeness, shame, guilt, anxiety. They suffer with their minds. Don't get me wrong, people of color are also neurotic and have their own stuff and ups and downs. But there is a fundamental issue I think that is very unique to white suffering and I think that's their own mind.

Sadly, this way of framing the issue completely ignores the fact that experiences of trauma and loss, abuse and neglect, have a similar impact on our psyches regardless of the color of our skin, and that poor white people are also "positioned" in ways that expose them to a far greater risk of suffering from ill health, violence, incarceration, suicide, substance abuse (and so on) than their more affluent white counterparts, and that with the rise of neo-liberalism, impoverished and marginalized white folk comprise an increasingly large percentage of the overall population year by year. Yet Dr. Khilanani

insists that the suffering of white people is merely “of their own mind” and “unique”, and when asked why, she replied

White people have an intense level of guilt. I have never seen a level of guilt that I see among white people. I mean, white people don't eat bread. Think about that. There have been wars all over the world over grains and bread and only here, white people are depriving themselves. Think about that shit.

Furthermore, she adds:

Everyone has this gluten allergy and you're like, what the fuck is a gluten allergy? That's a psychosomatic symptom. If you actually talk to a GI doctor, they're going to say, “Well, there's Celiac and there's everything else” with a wink, and you know what the “everything else” is. It's all the guilty gluten people.

And, by way of further explanation, she says:

I don't deny that people may get symptoms, but how is it that all these people suddenly now, after all the violence has occurred, are not eating bread. It's like the weirdest fucking thing.

So according to Dr. Khilanani, any sensitivity or aversion to gluten that falls short of Celiac disease in severity, i.e. is not actually life threatening, *must* be psychosomatic in origin, despite the fact that many accomplished doctors and medical researchers disagree emphatically with her appraisal. She ignores the fact that many non-white people also suffer from gluten sensitivity, and deems avoidance of gluten – and more specifically, of bread – to be rooted in lingering guilt feelings associated with colonialism, and the lies that were promulgated and designed to support it, but provides not a single shred of evidence – beyond her clinical “intuition” - that this is in fact the case. And when asked by Katie Herzog whether she thinks that white people actually *should* feel guilty, Dr. Khilanani replied: “No, I think guilt is the most useless emotion on the planet. What function does it serve? It's not helpful.”

This last remark is illuminating, if only because it stands in stark contrast with Freud's ideas about human development and with mainstream psychiatric opinion. Besides, by the end of their sophomore year, every psychology major learns that a major feature of psychopathy is precisely the *absence* of real guilt or remorse over a person's past misdeeds. So on the one hand, Dr. Khilanani claims that white people are psychopaths. On the other, she claims that they are riddled with guilt and psychosomatic disorders. Clearly, something is amiss here. Because if you take her statement that guilt is useless at face value, you imply that it's absence in psychopaths could (and perhaps should) be construed as a sign of health. Where is this line of thought going? These reflections also serve as a reminder that in Freud's estimation, guilt is emphatically *not* a useless emotion; that in optimal circumstances, i.e. when one's guilt feelings are not excessive or irrational, but proportionate to our actual deeds or phantasies, its presence

serves to curb anti-social behavior and preserve a measure of decency and civility in human affairs.

Based on Dr. Khilanani's remarks, one would assume that the vast majority of white clinicians are at once so guilt-ridden and so oblivious to their own collective "psychopathy" that they are unsuitable as therapists for non-whites. But according to Dr. Khilanani, repressed guilt is only part of the problem. Repressed rage is a factor too. Indeed, she scorns liberals, and claims that conservatives are psychologically healthier because

They are more in touch with their anger and negative feelings. They can articulate it. They can say it, they're not covering it up or like "Oh my god, I'm amazing, I love all people." There's not all this liberal fluff of goodness. Conservatives can go there. They can say things that are uncomfortable that I think liberals would shirk at or move away from or deny.

She continues

I would feel more comfortable hanging out with Anne Coulter than a lot of liberals because she's unlikely to do anything. She's in contact with her anger and her hatred, and I think that needs to be worked through, don't get me wrong, for the country to heal, but she's actually in contact with those feelings that a lot of people can't say out loud and that's a safer space. Now do I agree with her? No. But liberals have no access to that at all. The thought is forbidden.

Clearly then, Dr. Khilanani regards liberal sentiments as inauthentic or superficial, and deeply divorced from the repressed rage that all white folks presumably feel because their privilege is being threatened by oppressed minorities. Liberals, by this account, espouse good intentions at the conscious level, but lack the inner honesty – and by implication, the courage and self-awareness - to admit to themselves that they are riddled with fear and resentment. (Would people like these make good psychoanalysts? Not bloody likely.) Furthermore, the fact that she would feel more comfortable in Anne Coulter's company than in the presence of "a lot of liberals" is somewhat disconcerting. Perhaps her preference is not merely because Coulter is (allegedly) more honest, authentic or "healthy" than her liberal counterparts – a strange assertion, to say the least - but because Coulter's politics are profoundly illiberal (or anti-liberal), as are many contemporary proponents of Critical Race Theory (Pyle, 1999; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

### ***Donald Moss: Parasitic Whiteness and the Emotional Plague***

For a second example of emerging trends, let's turn to the ideas of Donald Moss. But before addressing Dr. Moss' substantive claims, I wish to acknowledge his good intentions. While I disagree with his position, I don't doubt that he meant well when his paper was first conceived, and that he (and many close to him) have suffered dreadfully from the Rightwing backlash that ensued when his paper was published, which his daughter Hannah Zeaven described in chilling detail (Zeaven 2022. Why all the fuss?

In his abstract, Dr. Moss says that Whiteness is

. . . a condition one first acquires and then has—a malignant, parasitic-like condition to which “white” people have a particular susceptibility. The condition is foundational, generating characteristic ways of being in one’s body, in one’s mind, and in one’s world. Parasitic Whiteness renders its hosts’ appetites voracious, insatiable, and perverse. These deformed appetites particularly target nonwhite peoples. Once established, these appetites are nearly impossible to eliminate. Effective treatment consists of a combination of psychic and social historical interventions. Such interventions can reasonably aim only to reshape Whiteness’s infiltrated appetites—to reduce their intensities, redistribute their aims, and occasionally turn those aims toward the work of reparation (p. 356).

Dr. Moss goes on to explain that the term “Whiteness” is capitalized to denote “Parasitic Whiteness”, which he defines as 1) a way of being, 2) a mode of identity, and 3) a way of knowing and sorting the objects constituting one’s human surround; a condition which, he claims, should not be confused with being phenotypically white-skinned. Nevertheless, he insists that people who *are* white-skinned are uniquely susceptible to acquiring it, and that once acquired, it is nearly impossible to treat. From that point onwards, he says, mitigation and harm reduction are the most effective treatment options. Moss then goes on to say that

Parasitic Whiteness infiltrates our drives early on. The infiltrated drive binds ego-superego into a singular entity, empowered to dismiss and override all forms of resistance. The drive apparatus of Whiteness divides the object world into two distinct zones. In one, the Whiteness infiltrated drive works in familiar ways—inhibited, checked, distorted, transformed—susceptible, that is, to standard neurotic deformations. In the other, however, none of this holds true. There the liberated drive goes rogue, unchecked and unlimited, inhibited by neither the protests of its objects nor the counterforces of its internal structures (pp. 356-357).

So, Donald Moss declares that Parasitic Whiteness “infiltrates” our “drive apparatus”, collapsing the various psychic agencies (id, ego, superego) into a single entity. According to Moss, this process begins when the infant first experiences stranger anxiety, and starts to become cognizant of her care-givers’ group boundaries, or definitions of “us” and “them” – i.e. those who belong to the caregivers’ trusted reference group, and those who do not. In theory, at least, this way of framing things allows for the possibility that if a white-skinned infant’s caregivers embrace people of color among their kin and friendship groups, that the infant will be spared the “infiltration of the drives” that drives them to become “unchecked, unlimited, inhibited by neither the protests of its objects nor the counterforces of its external structures.” But more often than not, says Dr. Moss, the result is a sadistic mode of relatedness toward people who are not white.

Holding these objects in place, inflicting pain on them—this sadism becomes the exquisite and economical solution to any apparent conflict between wanting and hating. Parasitic Whiteness further demeans its nonwhite bodies and beings by way of a naturalizing system of naming and classification. Once it has mapped and transformed its



nonwhite objects into such a fixed taxonomical category, the rogue sexuality of Parasitic Whiteness can expand its aim. It permanently maps them as external/away, and from there, wherever that is, these objects are available for limitless use—limitless labor, of limitless kind (p.357).

Stripped of excess verbiage, Dr. Moss is saying, in effect, that white-skinned people are extremely susceptible to acquiring a sadistic and exploitative mode of relatedness towards non-whites that leads them to control and enslave them. Once acquired, this rigid and internalized “taxonomy” is basically locked in and is seldom susceptible to external influences that might take the white person’s development in a more pro-social direction.

One problem with this argument is that it directly contradicts Sigmund Freud’s views on human nature. In chapter five of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Freud wrote that

. . . people are not gentle beings in need of love, who at most can defend themselves if attacked. Rather they must also recognize among their drive impulses a powerful tendency to aggression. Their neighbor, consequently, is not merely a potential helper or sexual object for them. Rather, they are also tempted to gratify their aggression on him, to exploit without compensation his capacity for work, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, after all the experiences of life and history, will have the courage to dispute this observation? (p. 85)

Now, let us grant that Freud was fallible and an extremely flawed thinker in many respects, and that contemporary psychoanalysts are no longer obliged to consult him at every turn. But neither was he a theorist of negligible importance, and whether you agree with Freud or not, the fact remains that he deemed the desire to dominate and exploit our fellow human beings to be a generic human attribute. In other words, said Freud, the willingness or propensity to injure, exploit and humiliate other human beings, which Dr. Moss deems to be chiefly front-loaded into the psyche of white infants is, in truth, innate and universal, and resides within all of us. If so, it is not merely the product of the new born infant’s “positioning” in the social and cultural nexus, or of a rigid, internalized (and socially constructed) “taxonomy” that gives license to white skinned people to dominate, exploit and humiliate non-white people.

While you may not share Freud’s grim assessment of human nature, there is plenty of evidence to back it up. Slavery was practiced all over the world long before European and Anglo-American imperialism started to shape the contours of global politics. Please consider – were the Sumerian Kings or the Egyptian Pharaohs, who enslaved many dark skinned people, white? Were the Akkadians, Hittites, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, or Persians white? Were the Tartars, Turks, Huns and Mongols white? Were the agrarian empires of India, China, Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia, where untold millions were enslaved for centuries before European imperialism set foot in Asia, governed by white-skinned people? Were the Incas, Aztecs,

Mayans, Toltecs, Olmecs, etc., white? Were the Muslim conquerors who controlled North Africa, the Middle East and large swathes of Central Asia, white? But why rely solely on Freud's testimony? In *Transformations in Slavery*, the noted historian Paul E. Lovejoy noted that

Slavery has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It has been found in many places, from classical antiquity to modern times. Africa has been intimately connected with this history, both as a major source of slaves and as one of the principle areas where slavery was common. Indeed, in Africa, slavery lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century—notably longer than in the Americas. Such antiquity and persistence require explanation, both to understand the historical development of slavery in Africa in its own right and to evaluate the relative importance of the slave trade to this development (Lovejoy, 2012, p.1).

In a preface to the third edition of his book, Lovejoy acknowledged that one of his aims in undertaking his research was “to confront the reality that there was slavery in the history of Africa, at a time when some romantic visionaries and hopeful nationalists wanted to deny the clear facts (p. xxiii).” Moss doesn't deny these facts outright, however. He just ignores and sidesteps them completely.

So, let's be candid, shall we? For all its shortcomings, Freud's grim appraisal of human nature has a lot of evidence to support it. By contrast, Donald Moss' theory of Parasitic Whiteness has none – or none to speak of, apart from his own autobiographical reflections and two meager case histories, a very slender thread on which to hang such a weighty hypothesis. Instead, Moss offers up baroque conjectures couched in metaphors of “parasitism”, “mapping” and “verticality” which are entirely divorced from the actual history and practice of slavery before and outside of the European and Anglo-American orbit, where domination, exploitation and humiliation were widely practiced by non-whites against other non-white populations.

Besides, on reflection, to insist that white-skinned people are uniquely susceptible to these “perversions” and drive “deformations”, as Moss calls them, appears to imply that human nature is basically good, but that white-skinned people are more heavily endowed with sadistic and anti-social traits than non-whites because of their acquired “taxonomy”; a kind of second nature that can seldom be remedied or reversed. In some ways, Moss' claims about Parasitic Whiteness are strangely reminiscent of what Wilhelm Reich called “the emotional plague” (Reich, 1976); a deep and pervasive deformation of the psyche which its victims and carriers are utterly unconscious of. Both these ideas lean heavily on the metaphor of disease. The difference here is that Parasitic Whiteness is deemed to be primarily an affliction of white-skinned people, while the emotional plague, as Reich conceived it, is present in every form of racism, and does not discriminate on the basis of skin color.

So far, we've noted that Moss' remarks on the ways that white-skinned people are uniquely susceptible to acquiring the sadistic, exploitative and de-humanizing mode of relatedness he calls “Parasitic Whiteness” is dramatically at odds with the facts of human

history, and lacks any real evidence to back it up. Nevertheless, generous souls may insist that we honor the lived experience of racism's victims, many of whom may honestly believe that white-skinned people are innately more prone to sadism and exploitation than non-Whites. After all, they have suffered much, and quite apart from the harms inflicted on their ancestors, the mechanisms which reinforce structural inequality today continue in the form of exclusionary or predatory lending and housing practices, voter suppression, water and food insecurity, drug abuse and the "war on drugs", overcrowded schools and prisons, gang life, police brutality and mass incarceration, the "school-to-prison pipeline," and so on.

Mindful of these egregious wrongs, activists and their allies often *privilege* the testimony and beliefs of the victims of contemporary racism, prompted by a deeply felt sense of solidarity with the oppressed. But this course of action is a decision, a choice – *our* choice - and not a guarantee of validity or veracity by any means. As a result, if we "center the voices" of oppressed minorities and, in deference to their feelings, ignore or dismiss the historical record on sadism and slavery, we run the risk of fostering a subtle kind of anti-white racism; one which deems sadism and exploitation to be far more prevalent among white-skinned people than among non-White populations.

Finally, Dr. Moss' contention that Parasitic Whiteness is almost impossible to "treat" evinces a very pessimistic attitude toward the future of race relations, encouraging a kind of moral masochism that prompts people to wallow in endless self-recriminations, while harboring the delusion that this attitude constitutes evidence that they are morally superior to other white-skinned people who don't share their perspective. Though it may not be apparent at first, moral masochism of this complexion is really a gift to the radical Right, and to Right-wing pundits, politicians and "influencers" all around the world, who gleefully quote Moss' words to Right wing audiences as proof that the Left is unhinged.

Dr. Moss concludes his essay with the following reflections. He writes:

To turn Whiteness into an object for thought one must first look for a point of stillness. This point actually does not exist. After all, Whiteness, in its mature form, generates a volatile totality from which there is no clear exit, no clear escape. To pursue that exit, to hope for even temporary escape . . . depends, I think, on a kind of conceptual mobility, a willingness to use metaphors and similes for only as long as they serve, and then to move on. For me, here, the most important of those metaphors have been "parasite," "mapping," and "verticality." Each seemed to me both stable and elastic, capable of simultaneously supporting thought and providing a jumping-off point whenever that support felt exhausted. And, of course, psychoanalysis provides something other than similes and metaphors. It provides a reliable theoretical/technical structure, one we can count on, one that, in spite of its limitations, will hold up—has held up—as we all try to achieve the requisite conceptual, emotional, and personal nimbleness to grapple with the Whiteness that, whoever we are, infiltrates our interior and exterior surround (p. 370).

It is not evident from context what Moss actually means by "a point of stillness" from which to turn Whiteness into "an object for thought". Besides, in the very next sentence,

he himself asserts that this point of stillness “. . . does not actually exist”. What are we to make of this gnomic utterance? As if these statements were not puzzling enough, Moss then encourages readers “to use metaphors and similes for only as long as they serve, and move on”. That tacit implication of this methodological maxim is that when your preferred metaphors are no longer serviceable, you may adopt another one, or perhaps jump back and forth among your chosen metaphors to make your case. He never acknowledges the fact that metaphors and similes do not always illuminate. They can also seduce, mislead and obfuscate – though that was never his intention, I believe. Still, though he does not say so in so many words, one can’t escape the impression that this nimble rhetorical strategy of juggling metaphors spares him the requirement of providing solid, tangible evidence for his claims.

### ***Conclusion***

Needless to say, psychoanalysts must never turn a blind eye to the mind-boggling injustices that still afflict communities of color in the USA. Nor can they support the dominant narratives that perpetuate these injustices. But if they are going to remain intellectually honest, neither can they abdicate their responsibility to critique statements or positions that are a-historical, lack substance or are riddled with contradictions and glaring omissions. If they do so, they are liable to indulge in sweeping and untenable generalizations which may mask a deeper despair about achieving genuine equality and understanding among whites and communities of color.

Sadly, given our diminishing attention spans, our growing appetite for sound bites and slogans, and our collective anguish over the long-standing injustices faced by non-white citizens in the USA, the pernicious nonsense Dr. Khilanani spouted will probably have a strong appeal to many activists on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, to many of them, it probably seems far more “authentic” or “real” than genuine scholarship, given their anti-intellectual biases. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that psychoanalysts (like Donald Moss), who express their views in a more temperate fashion, still espouse a kind of racial essentialism to explain extremely complex social realities. The stark, Manichean simplicity of binaries like these afford people a false sense of moral clarity, multiple opportunities for virtue signaling and a sense of pride for being on what they imagine is “the right side of history”. But clinical experience demonstrates that simple binaries often belie much that lies beneath the surface, and psychoanalysis was designed to wrestle with ambiguity, contradictions and complexity in the individual psyche and society at large.

Personally, I would *like* to believe that Khilanani and Moss’ racializing attitudes toward white-skinned people are not shared by the mainstream in most activist communities. But even if they are merely minority views, talks and texts like theirs are too polemical, incoherent and poorly thought through to be really useful in the long run, and do nothing to advance the cause of racial justice. At the end of the day, the “White Mind” that Dr. Khilanani claimed to elucidate in her talk is a reified abstraction; a confused and confusing mish-mash of ideas, rather than a cogent theoretical position. Dr. Moss’ article, though more artfully wrought, lacks substance. At the end of the day,

“Parasitic Whiteness” resembles nothing so much as the Emperor’s new clothes. There is no “there” there.

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