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Whiteness Catalyzes Character Disorder and Mass Violence

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ABSTRACT

Whiteness, understood in psychoanalytic terms as a complex emerging in relation to an invidious object, catalyzes character disorder and mass violence. Drawing on historical analyses of the early American colonial period and a 2014 mass shooting in Isla Vista, California, I articulate a theory of the workings of Whiteness, with an eye toward the interrelationship of psychodynamics and sociocultural, structural, and ideological forces. I conclude with a consideration of how and why psychoanalysis has failed to fully contend with Whiteness because of the discipline's own investment in Whiteness and White aggression.

“A full bleaching”

When Elliot Rodger was nine years old, he was hell-bent for leather on bleaching his hair blonde. As he wrote shortly before murdering six people and wounding fourteen others in Isla Vista, California, “I was different because I am of mixed race. I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with. I envied the cool kids, and I wanted to be one of them . . . I always envied and admired blonde-haired people, they always seemed so much more beautiful.”

The first time Rodger tried to bleach his hair, the salon only dyed the top of his head, leaving the back and sides black—per Rodger, “they said that I was too young for a full bleaching.” As I was reviewing this section of Rodger’s manifesto, I wrote myself a marginal note—“even his hair was multiracial!” Rodger persisted, and the next year, he got “a short haircut and bleached all of my hair blonde. When I looked at myself in the mirror [sic], I felt an intense level of satisfaction.”

...

I have studied and taught the case of Elliot Rodger extensively since the mass shooting he perpetrated in 2014. This case has been the subject of analysis by a number of other scholars and critics, notably Singh (2015), Larkin (2018), Srinivasan (2018, 2021), and Wynn (Contrapoints, 2018).¹ Srinivasan’s (2021) work, in particular, uses the Rodger case as a launchpad for a deeply revealing analysis of long-standing conflicts within and between feminist movements and Anglo-American popular culture. On the whole, the focus of these analyses is (quite understandably) on gender and sexuality. The Rodger case was the one that introduced most Americans to the concept of the “incel,” and analyses of the case have engaged it, fruitfully, as a site for the exploration of dynamics of masculinity, desire, power, and violence.

My own concern is related, but distinct; I hope to complement these feminist analyses with one that is feminist in spirit, but focused on Whiteness. As I see it, the Rodger case is as much a story of Whiteness as it is one of masculinity and misogyny—indeed, I do not think these are neatly separable issues. Through the Rodger case, understood in its deep historical context, we can come to understand

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¹I would especially recommend these last two texts to psychoanalysts eager for a model of how to make psychoanalytic ideas compelling to a popular audience.

the profound and deforming effect that Whiteness has on character formation and character structure, and why Whiteness is so often a catalyst for mass violence. Via such a reading of the Rodger case, I argue that Whiteness is a catalyst for character disorder and mass violence, that the *telos* of Whiteness is alienation and destructiveness, and that Whiteness reproduces itself in part through its catalysis of character disorder and violence. I further argue that, within clinical psychoanalysis, we have systematically failed to understand or address this destructiveness in a material or meaningful way, precisely because we are profoundly structurally and psychically invested in Whiteness in ways that are disturbing to acknowledge (Carter, 2023).

Why engage psychoanalysis, in the first place? In part, because it has the advantage of being both a robust theory of human motivation and activity, particularly with respect to sex and aggression, as well as an incisive method of studying those motivations and activities. At its best, these two aspects of psychoanalysis, its theory and its practice, cohere into an ethical praxis that can do much to liberate us from bad ideas, bad structures, and bad modes of relating to ourselves and others. Misogyny is at once a bad idea, a bad structure, and a bad mode of relating; so is Whiteness.

Whiteness and its discontents have already been taken up by numerous psychoanalytic scholars (see, e.g., Fanon, 1952, 1963; Suchet, 2006; Straker, 2004; Altman, 2004; Miller and Josephs, 2009; Davids, 2011; Grand, 2018; Parker, 2019; Stovall, 2019; Morgan, 2021; Merson, 2021; Woods, 2020; Caflisch, 2020; Moss, 2021; Malamed, 2022; Carter, 2023). Psychoanalysis's failure to understand Whiteness and its effects on character development and identity formation is very much *despite* the extensive efforts of numerous psychoanalytic scholars. Indeed, its collective failure is especially striking in light of this work. A psychoanalyst would typically see disavowal at play in such resistance, animated by a desire to protect a highly valued defense. Psychoanalysis teaches us that we often jealously guard our capacities for violence and destructiveness; since Whiteness, as I shall elucidate, is an "ideological framework for violence" (P. C. Christinaki, December 13, 2022), there is perhaps no theoretical model better suited to analyzing it, and no praxis better suited to thwarting and transforming it.

"The normal fully white kids"

I must begin by taking pains to define what I do and do not mean by Whiteness. My uses of the terms "White" and "Whiteness" do not neatly align with their common usages. I am using Whiteness to refer to a constellation of interdependent psychological, social, structural, and ideological phenomena and functions, much as psychoanalysts use constructs like "the ego" to metaphorize a universe of real and interrelated psychic phenomena and functions (Freud, 1992, pp. 4–20). When I talk about Whiteness, I am not talking about a unitary thing, any more than the ego is a unitary thing; like all of the functions of the ego, though, it becomes impossible to talk about cogently without using a unitary metaphor.

I am not using Whiteness to refer to demography *per se*. When I am referring to demographics, I will use the lower case *w*, for example, a white person. If referring to a person as acting as an agent of White Supremacy as an ideology, on the other hand, I would describe them as a White person, serving Whiteness.

A White person is not always or necessarily a white person, and vice versa, confusing as that might sound to some. For example, John Brown, the American abolitionist, may have been a white person, but he sure as Hell was not a White person (Reynolds, 2006), according to this formulation.

Mills (2022), writing of Moss's (2021) work, has argued that such a White-versus-white distinction "is an ontic distinction without ontological difference (as an ordinal property of a property), and is itself incitive" (Mills, 2022, p. 9). I think Mills means to say that it's a false distinction, and a racist one, inasmuch as it seems to make a categorical argument about the inherent nature of a group of people based on the color of their skin or other "immutable characteristics," a point Mills amplifies by asking how it would sound if excerpts of Moss's argument about white people were made about black people.

Whatever one's aesthetic objections to the style of Moss's argument might be, this is not itself a valid critique of the general premise of distinguishing between Whiteness as a complicated construct

(à la “the ego”) and whiteness as a demographic category of which an individual might be member. I would suggest that what is incitive is an effort to cast as racist *any* effort to analyze constructs like Whiteness or Blackness, and their relationships to individuals and groups of people. The fact that many people have historically analyzed Blackness and black people *in a racist fashion* does not therefore mean that any such analysis is ipso facto racist and illegitimate; by this logic, feminist research and criticism would be sexist and impermissible.

To borrow Mills’s own rhetorical device in relation to another example, imagine saying that the difference between Christianity and being a Christian is “an ontic distinction without an ontological difference.” That would obviously be silly! While there is no simple relationship between an ideology and a culture and a person whose identity is shaped by them, there is nonetheless, and obviously, a relationship, and one that matters very much for psychoanalysis. To categorize all such analytical efforts as racist, and thus beyond the pale, would seem mainly to serve the function of forbidding any psychoanalysis of Whiteness—which seems more likely to enable racism than to prevent it, and would stand as an excellent example of the defensive resistance I have described here and elsewhere (viz. Carter, 2023).

It does not, in short, appear to be a good-faith argument.

A return to the Rodger case offers an apt example of why distinguishing between Whiteness and whiteness is conceptually crucial. Rodger’s demographic status as a white person was complicated, contingent. He was, like me, multiracial, with some European heritage that would commonly “count” as white and some Asian heritage that would “count” as non-White. So, at minimum, saying he was “white” would be a reductive misqualification of his demography and the way he was interpellated by others, in the context of a society in which the norm is to see “white” and “non-white” as mutually exclusive categories and to use logics of hypodescent to categorize anyone with any non-European heritage or phenotypical features as ultimately non-white.

We can see this clearly in the excerpts of Rodger’s manifesto that I cited earlier. He saw himself as racially different from monoracial white peers, and his desire for “a full bleaching” was an effort to erase that difference and pass as purely white. Elliot Rodger was a person of color, in the way we generally understand that demographic category. He was also an avid and virulent White Supremacist. Thus, he may or may not have been a white person, but he was definitely a White person, by my definition. One cannot understand his experience or his actions without a conceptual distinction between white and White.

Returning to Rodger’s racism—his manifesto is overflowing with racist vitriol, including numerous references to his horror (Kristeva, 1980) at seeing black and brown men seeming to be romantic or sexual with blonde white women. Learning that a black neighbor had sex with blonde white girls while in middle school, Rodger fumes, “If this is actually true, if this ugly black filth was able to have sex with a blonde white girl at the age of thirteen while I’ve had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is. They would give themselves to this filthy scum, but they reject ME? The injustice!”

Rodger expressed a similar, positively Kleinian sentiment in a video he posted before he undertook the mass shooting: “If I can’t have you, girls, I will destroy you.”

Bracketing, reluctantly, Rodger’s misogyny here, let us consider the paranoid racial politics (Hofstadter, 2008) he is evincing. His horror and envy at interracial sex between black boys and white girls fit clearly in old American traditions of paranoia about miscegenation. One can also read this as an anxiety about the interracial primal scene of his own conception.² His feeling that it is better to destroy a desired object if one cannot take sole possession of it is also characteristic of White American racial politics (see McGhee, 2021, on “swimming pool politics”)—this envious, destructive mindset is obviously one psychoanalysts understand very well.

²This reading is further substantiated by confessions in his manifesto that he secretly listened in on his younger sister having sex and was filled with a mixture of envy and disgust that any Freudian would recognize.

Rodger was a product of a society that has been deeply paranoid about race mixing; that relies on concepts of blood quantum and complexion to define social standing; that does not have common working models or representations of multiracial subjectivities or interracial family life. He was a product of a society in which any man of color having sex with a white woman is a transgression, potentially one punishable by death, and in which the sexual and romantic possession of a white woman as property (a variation on Harris, 1993) is a chief symbol of social success, as with the “trophy wife.”

Rodgers was constantly trying to erase his own racial alterity, to fully bleach himself. In his manifesto he describes himself as “Eurasian,” a term he misuses in order to amplify his proximity to Whiteness. He also wrote extensively about his father’s British upper-class bona fides as a point of special pride, while systematically eliding his Chinese heritage. Because his white identity was contingent, because he felt he could not fully “belong” with white people due to its contingency, he came to embrace Whiteness to (over)compensate—White Supremacist ideology, exaggerated White cultural modes of self-fashioning (e.g., calling himself “the supreme gentleman”), and a distinctly paranoid and narcissistic character structure built upon disavowal and projective identification as means of managing anxiety and conflict. His obsessive efforts to sexually conquer white girls and women were animated by a fantasy that belonging in society meant belonging inside the bodies of blonde white women, such that their rejections led him to feel excommunicated and banished. His manifesto is also full of accounts of him throwing hot lattes on couples of whom he was jealous and then running away, a symptom formation that I suspect speaks loudly for itself to any psychoanalyst.

Indeed, I think most any psychoanalyst, including the more classical among us and those of us who putatively do not “see color,” would look at the Rodger case and regard him as suffering from a tenacious, Gordian complex, one that would mainly have been very legible to a Freud or a Klein. What I would argue is that Rodger’s psychodynamics can only be understood by understanding Whiteness, which is the aspect of the case that would be illegible from a classical perspective and which I would argue is the most crucial aspect of all. In turn, I would argue for an understanding of Whiteness itself as a complex.

Whiteness as complex

I am not the first to use the notion of the complex to think about race and Whiteness—Brewster (2019) and Morgan (2021) both do so compellingly. Traditionally, a complex is understood as a knotty conflagration of memories, desires, affects, fantasies, and defenses related to an underlying anxiety. Where a classical psychoanalytic understanding of the complex falls short, in my view, is in its *individualization* of neurosis—or, in the present case, psychosis, since the ideology of Whiteness is predicated upon fixed false beliefs about racial metaphysics, superiority, and inferiority that are not responsive to evidence, that is delusions.

Psychoanalysis has traditionally recognized that an individual can have a complex, or perhaps a pair of people (Deutsch, 1938), or a family unit (Lacan, 2001). Why stop there? Fanon did not—his body of work effectively conceived of colonialism as precipitating and sustaining a mass racist complex (Fanon, 1952, 1963). Along that line, I would argue that Whiteness is a kind of fractal complex, one that is constantly being enacted at different interrelated levels of scale. It implicates not just the psychic, but the social, structural, and ideological.

Further elucidating how Whiteness operates as a complex requires both historical analysis and psychoanalysis. These are obviously two very different levels of scale, and I must beg the reader’s indulgence as I attempt to tack between them as clearly as possible—one of the challenges of studying a fractal phenomenon is that it requires one to work on multiple levels at once! Understanding the nature of the complex requires an understanding of the history that produces it, so we begin there and return to psychodynamics afterward.

“I envied the cool kids, and wanted to be one of them”

The story of Whiteness is a story of shame.

In the United States in its early colonial period, the political economy was characterized by a vast multiethnic laboring class. This included many low-status Europeans, who arrived under various conditions of indenture and duress, as well as enslaved Africans and indigenous people in the midst of colonization (Lepore, 2018; Roediger, 2007; Ignatiev, 1995). As Graeber has argued, they were almost all in debt bondage as a practical matter, whether by virtue of their own debt or because they were stolen and sold as a means of clearing the debts of others (Graeber, 2011). This new settler-colonial society was ruled by an élite that was small in numbers and often vicious. The industries of this new settler-colonial society required extensive person-power, and it was in the main intensely physical and dangerous work. Remuneration for this work was negligible, and living conditions were rough—at least for the laboring class, who had to witness a small élite living in relative comfort while they lived in relative poverty (Gilligan, 2001).

The laboring classes felt ashamed, humiliated (Roediger, 2007; Ignatiev, 1995). To be impoverished and to see others who are not, to be judged inferior and defective by your supposed betters (Schweder, 2003), to live under authoritarian conditions of coercive control, is a state that is regarded as humiliating across historical periods and cultures (Stearns, 2018; Gilligan, 2001). It is narcissistically injurious in the extreme. As psychoanalysts well know, narcissistic injuries beget narcissistic rage, and conditions were such that the élites were the obvious targets of this rage, outnumbered and inculcated as they were. Rebellions and revolts were a known risk to élites in this early colonial period, and the élites feared them (Lepore, 2018). The élites derived their powers from their connections to England, but England was an ocean away, six weeks by boat. All of the cultural forces that stabilized these humiliating labor arrangements back in England—military power, fortified castles, long-standing cultural norms about knowing one’s place—were largely unavailable to the élites in the colonies.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and in face of this existential threat, the élites invented Whiteness (Roediger, 2007; Painter, 2011; Ignatiev, 1995). They propagated this idea of Whiteness as a means of forging an alliance with their fellow Europeans, in order to cultivate a majority that would protect them from the kind of retributive violence, fueled by narcissistic rage, that they were already experiencing in isolated instances (Lepore, 2018; Reynolds, 2006). They built upon a common cultural and religious heritage in order to construct a racialized (Dalal, 2002) Us that could be counterposed with a Them, a racialized Other.

Whiteness was an effort to get poor Europeans to identify with the aggressor. It worked like a charm.

The invention of Whiteness was ingenious. It capitalized on preexisting psychological strategies for managing shame that, as psychoanalysts, we know well—disavowal, splitting, grandiose fantasies, and projective identification. That is, it capitalized upon the basic strategies people with pathological narcissism arrive at for managing their towering shame and fears of annihilation and loss (Kohut, 1972; Masterson, 1993; Kernberg, 2018). Miller and Josephs (2009) recognized this fact when they conceptualized Whiteness as a form of “pathological narcissism.”

Narcissism is the rootstock of Whiteness. Whiteness is an ideology and a set of culturally prescribed fantasies about self and others that are object relationally grafted onto the sturdy trunk and subterranean root system of narcissism, particularly in the areas of ego defense and object relations, and most particularly at the point where these defenses and relations engage shame. By grafting the ideology and fantasies onto such a fundamental set of psychological structures, Whiteness grows deep into the minds of people socialized into it, making it very difficult to uproot.

In essence, the premise of Whiteness as a psychopolitical project is a redrawing of the society’s fundamental hierarchy so that people who get to be white never have to feel that they are at the bottom of it—even and especially when, in their immediate material context, they really are. It accomplishes this in part by predicating a sense of belonging on a White identity. To be white is to belong in this new society, to be inalienably a part of it, even if only a small one. *Pari passu*, Whiteness imagines BIPOC as

always already outsiders to the body politic. Black and indigenous people especially are imagined as not really people at all, as inherently abject and shameful sinners who must be either civilized or annihilated (Brickman, 2017). The civilizing part was, of course, a bait-and-switch; as Eng and Han (2019) note, to be a racial Other means to never be regarded as truly belonging in America, no matter what one does.

As Brown (2010) has noted, shame and the sense of belonging are intimately linked. Schweder defines shame as a “deeply felt and highly motivating fear of being judged defective” (Schweder, 2003). As a social species (Mitchell, 1998), being “judged defective” by one’s group means a threat of being shunned or banished from the group, which is tantamount to death, and engenders a commensurate “deeply felt and highly motivating fear” (Schweder, 2003; see also Sapolsky, 2004). Whiteness provides people who get to be White with an unimpeachable defense against this anxiety, this fear, by inculcating in them a sense of ontologically essential belonging in America. To be American is to be White, and White pride is the ultimate antidote to shame. It is in light of this that I have previously described Whiteness as a “shame management system” (Carter, 2020, 2021).

We know the other side of this dialectic. It is racial alterity, Blackness and indigeneity, objects into which the White psyche can project whatever it cannot bear. Notions of racialized alterity, Blackness and indigeneity especially, are constructed in such a way as to give credence to White fantasies of superiority and projections of unbearable psychological material (Knoblauch, 2020; Hartman, 2020; Sheehi, 2020), especially shame-saturated material. Black and indigenous people are subjected to totalitarian governance and coercive control that make resistance to these projections virtually impossible (Carter, 2020). Resistance becomes almost³ impossible because one is emotionally, materially, spiritually vitiated by domination. Resistance becomes almost impossible because one’s efforts at resistance are pathologized and become grounds for yet more intense domination (Metzl, 2011; Sheehi and Sheehi, 2021). And, perhaps most crucially, being made to live in conditions of degradation makes it so much more plausible for White people, and indeed BIPOC, to actually believe that These People really are disgusting, lazy, filthy, oversexed, violent—shameful (Carter, 2020).

Such structural ultraviolence makes the fantasies of Whiteness more convincing to White people. It also shows relatively disempowered whites what Hell awaits them if they stop identifying with the aggressor and start fighting in cross-racial solidarity.

This is all to say that Whiteness is an ideology that capitalizes upon basic psychodynamic tendencies and structures to cultivate internal working models of race, what Layton has called “the normative unconscious” (Layton and Leavy-Sperounis, 2020) and Davids (2011) has called “internal racist organizations,” that are advantageous to the powerful. There is an iterative relationship between the ideology and the mechanisms of power it creates (Sheehi, 2020), and the internal working models of race in the individual psyche. As Merson (2021) notes, individuals are racially interpellated, and come to imagine themselves and others in terms of this interpellation. This crystallizes into an internal working model of how they see the world, one that governs expectations and actions in the world; one imagines a reality and then winds up contributing to its realization. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Over time, this iterative relationship between ideology, interpellation, and psychodynamics reshapes the world. Roediger notes that in the early 1600s there was often a fair degree of fellow-feeling between European laboring-class people and their African and Native American counterparts; by 1800, this was largely gone. The consolidation of the American nation-state went hand-in-hand with the consolidation of a system of racial apartheid that became encoded in law (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006) and custom (Roediger, 2007; Painter, 2011; Metzl, 2019; Woods, 2020). Ultimately, as full belonging in the American state became contingent upon Whiteness, most potentially white

³The “almost” does a lot of work here, because as Sheehi (Sheehi, 2020; Sheehi and Sheehi, 2021) has noted, the subaltern does speak (Spivak, 1988), does resist, does sustain *sumud* in face of overwhelming opposition. The “almost” here conveys how extraordinary it is that so many can sustain such resistance in face of such monumental efforts at their subordination and annihilation.

people fell in line in order to be able to belong (Carter, 2021, 2023).⁴ As Baldwin had it, “it took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country” (Baldwin, 1998).

In this system, Whiteness is positioned as the entitlement to possession, self-possession, belonging(s), and pride (Carter, 2021). It is a promise that as a citizen of the nation, one will never be dispossessed, at least not of one’s symbolic capital; dispossession is the lot of those who are not White. Whiteness was not a guarantee of changed material conditions (Roediger, 2007); it was a guarantee of more favorable *psychological* conditions by dint of the mitigation of shame through the right to feel self-possessed, in part via identification with the empowered aggressor (Carter, 2020, 2021). In critical instances, rights to property were modified in order to facilitate White feelings of self-possession, as in 1705, when “a new Virginia law granted title and protection to the little property that any white servant may have accumulated—and simultaneously confiscated the personal property of all the enslaved people in the colony” (McGhee, 2021, p. 10). The personal effects were not the point—they were props. It is a mistake to imagine that the point of Whiteness was to redistribute wealth to poor whites. Rather, wealth was redistributed to poor whites to some limited degree to lend plausibility to the narcissistic fantasies of Whiteness that were designed to redirect narcissistic rage away from the élites and toward BIPOC.

Genocidal settler-colonial violence and chattel slavery should not be understood just as strategies for securing favorable material conditions for white people, by “clearing” the land and forcing others to do the lion’s share of the work on it (Roediger, 2007). These institutions must be understood as advancing the psychological interests of whites, by forcing people interpellated into racialized (Dalal, 2002) identities of “Black” and “Brown” and “Red” and “Yellow” into conditions of degradation *that are humiliating for the psychological benefit of whites*. Grand (2018) seems to arrive at a similar conclusion in her consideration of how and why whites “vanish” the object of “The Indian,” and Knoblauch’s (2020) reading of Fanon also sheds light on this dynamic.

“When I looked at myself in the mirror [sic], I felt an intense level of satisfaction”

Extrapolating from this historical analysis, and considering it in light of a number of other compelling empirical contributions to the literature on Whiteness (Metzl, 2019; Parker, 2019; Roediger, 2007; Painter, 2011; among others) and of the work of Fanon that has undergirded this analysis (1952, 1963), I take the view that Whiteness is an object⁵ of such destructiveness that it can only warp the character of anyone who introjects it—which is to say, everyone socialized in a colonial context (see also Eng, 2016). Catalysis of character disorder is precisely what allows Whiteness to reproduce itself—psychologically, culturally, and structurally—so effectively.

This is, obviously, a provocative claim, and one that would be misleading if understood overly generally. Allow me to map the psychodynamics of the matter in greater detail.

The nature of this warping of character is far from uniform. BIPOC are, of course, damaged by the introjection of Whiteness, as a number of compelling recent contributions have explored (Griffin, 2021; Reynoso, 2021). Typically, though, the psychosocial lives of BIPOC include a wealth of counter-narratives and established cultural strategies for resistance to the “wrecking effects” (Holmes, 2006) of this introject of “the racist within” (Reynoso, 2021; see also Davids, 2011). Psychoanalysis has, of late, been curious about how to engage and repair these painful aspects of BIPOC subjectivity, and has shown more respect for our cultural strategies for surviving and flourishing (see Sheehi and Sheehi, 2022, on both counts). These are both salutary developments.

Troublingly, and unsurprisingly, White dominant culture has little in the way of such counter-narratives or strategies for resistance. There is not much in the dominant culture that helps white people to hold the tension between Whiteness and the better angels of their nature. The result is

⁴American history is nonetheless full of heartening exceptions, for example, the Quakers, whose resolute pacifism was inimical to slavery and white supremacy and who were consequently regarded as bizarre outsiders in the early American state (Lepore, 2018).

⁵It might in fact be most apt to conceptualize it as what Morton (2013) had called a “hyperobject.”

predictable: dissociation, specifically, what Eng and Han have in another application called “racial dissociation” (2019). White people generally only learn that they are white (and should be White) implicitly, through a veritable drip irrigation system of dominant cultural messages. They typically take their Whiteness to be an axiomatic fact of the universe, so normalized that it would be bizarre to acknowledge it in almost any situation. They often lack any conscious attachment to it, because the attachment is disavowed. The complex works much better that way, of course. It serves Whiteness to be what Suchet has called “the silent norm” (Suchet, 2006).

The fact that Whiteness begins as an object relational introject, and specifically as the introject of an abusive object, is important to emphasize as we seek to understand how Whiteness catalyzes character disorder. It is this introject around which the complex is organized. The ways in which a particular introject will shape the mental life of any given individual are difficult to predict, but we would generally acknowledge that a single introject of a hostile, paranoid, destructive object that repudiates vulnerability and dependency is overall less deforming to character than a mind full of such introjects (Fairbairn, 1943). Following Bromberg (2001), I think we can understand Whiteness as an object to which different self-states must all relate, and to which they are liable to relate somewhat differently depending upon their particular composition. This is why I would regard characterizing Whiteness as an “immutable” (Mills, 2022) characteristic as a quite mistaken understanding of the issue at hand and of much of the literature on the topic, a mistaken understanding that may in fact be willful (Carter, 2023).

As a practical and empirical matter, we know that white people have drastically different relationships to Whiteness, and indeed that each individual white person may experience and deal with Whiteness very differently depending upon the context. I believe we can begin to explain this by understanding the issue in terms of self-states. It is not a controversial statement in psychoanalysis to recognize that we are all liable to lapse into more narcissistic or paranoid self-states under challenging conditions; it is also uncontroversial to recognize that, for a great many people, pathological narcissism and paranoia are their steady state, the baseline self-state in which they live most of their lives. Elliot Rodger was just such a person; he was almost a caricature of paranoid pathological narcissism.

In this formulation, the Whiteness complex comes alive at the conjunctures of introjects, self-states, and environmental conditions. This can help us understand how some white people can be avowedly antiracist, and then act out in racist ways under certain conditions (Kinouani, 2020; DiAngelo, 2018; Carter, 2023). It can help us understand the common phenomenon of white people who become markedly more or less affirmatively invested in Whiteness throughout their life course. It can help us to understand the psyche of a person like Elliot Rodger, who both was and was not white and, relatedly, came to be profoundly possessively invested in Whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006) as his life course became more challenging. In the Rodger case, this reading is also consistent with findings in the mass shootings literature that such shooters are often experiencing “triple entitlement and homicidal anger” (Madfis, 2014), a confluence of relatively privileged racial, gender, sexuality, and class identities that are colliding with ego-dystonic and unexpected experiences of downward mobility and social failure that leads to narcissistic injury and narcissistic rage.

“I will destroy you”

Mass violence and Whiteness have always gone hand in hand. Mass violence is the essential instrument of Whiteness as a source of power; indeed, it defines White power in the United States: from genocidal campaigns against Native Americans, within and beyond the borders of the contemporary United States (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015), to mass kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder of people of African descent (Gates and Appiah, 2005; Graeber, 2011), through the colonial domination of many island nations and their citizens and émigrés, still sanctioned by *stare decisis* towards the Supreme Court’s Insular Cases, forced removal and incarceration of Japanese-Americans (Park, 2019), and recent hate crimes against women of Asian descent, to the systematic surveillance, violation, and massive wars against people who are, or are imagined to be, Arab and/or Muslim (Sheehi, 2011).

A full taxonomy of White mass violence against racialized communities could, and does, fill libraries.

Mass violence fulfills a number of essential functions for Whiteness. It is, perhaps foremost, a strikingly effective force multiplier for projective identification; it makes projective identification more forceful while also massively expanding its reach, especially by implicating potentially vast numbers of worldwide witnesses in receiving the projection. Gilligan (1997, 2001) has written persuasively about violence as the most reliable means of evacuating shame via the expression of narcissistic rage. It does so by situating the violent actor(s) as dominant and powerful, but perhaps more importantly, it does so by positioning them as virtuous. This aspect of the issue is not always intuitive to people in more liberal and privileged quarters, for whom express cultural prohibitions against violence and limited experience of violence in daily life make it harder to imagine violence as conferring virtue.

Yet it does.

Fiske and Rai (2015) have assembled an exceptionally persuasive empirical case for what they call virtuous violence theory, the foundational thesis of which is that “people are morally motivated to do violence to create, conduct, protect, redress, terminate, or mourn social relationships with the victim or with others” (Fiske and Rai, 2015, pp. 1–2). They make the case that many people feel uncomplicatedly compelled to violence by dint of their social roles, partly to embody said roles and partly to fashion themselves and others as part of a distinct group that can create said roles in the first place.

Virtuous violence theory would lead us to see mass violence motivated by Whiteness as being, in part, an effort to evince White virtue. It is often a response to a perceived threat to the virtue or pride of a White person—that is, to their humiliation, to shame. The mobilization of mass violence as a projective identificatory defense against shame fulfills several functions for the violent actor, and for Whiteness writ large. It is a virtually guaranteed strategy for the expression of narcissistic rage. Relatedly, mass violence is a ritual built around projective identification; both ritual and projective identification are social processes designed to delimit and assert in-group/out-group and self/other boundaries (viz., Douglas, 2002; Geertz, 1957; Bell, 1992).

In the case of Whiteness, the ritual of mass violence does much to reify *who* Whites are, and who Whites are *not*. This is partly how it is able to include some people who are not white, such as Elliot Rodger and other people of color who espouse White Supremacist ideals (viz. Sharlet, 2022). The ritual reifies *what* Whites are—powerful, virtuous, unashamed—and what they are *not*—disempowered, helpless, and, thus, ashamed. It creates a material threat to the safety of non-White people, making clear that we challenge Whiteness at our peril. This, in turn, can work to keep us sequestered or segregated in the spaces (literal and figurative) where White people want us to be.

In this light, we would actually understand Rodger’s mass shooting as a ritual means of asserting his Whiteness, by virtue of his appropriation of the ritual of the mass shooting, which for decades and even centuries was a signature ritual of White terrorism (Carter, 2021).

Clearly, my earlier bracketing of misogyny begins to really strain here. The relationship between Whiteness and misogyny in producing violence of this nature is well documented in the literature (Madfis, 2014; Farr, 2018, 2019; Kalish and Kimmel, 2010), and is particularly salient in the Rodger case. He was not only proving his Whiteness, he was using it to prove his (heterosexual) manhood. Logics of Whiteness often run in parallel to logics of misogyny (Manne, 2017) and heterosexism (Corbett, 2009), and while it is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly explore the question, one might well wonder whether the notion of Whiteness grafting onto a narcissistic rootstock might also apply to misogyny, heterosexism, and other supremacist ideologies. It may well be the case that this grafting process is at work in all psychosocial dynamics of normativity and alterity, dominance and subjugation—Layton’s work on normative unconscious processes (Layton and Leavy-Sperounis, 2020) gives us reason to think so. In any case, the effects of intersecting identities and ideologies can do much to amplify the felt need to commit mass violence, as the Rodger case exemplifies.

Conclusion: on dying of whiteness

Elliot Rodger died of Whiteness, as did his victims (Metzl, 2019). As Metzl has ably demonstrated, Whiteness does much to create the psychological and material conditions that allow gun violence to flourish in the United States. Following mass shootings like the one perpetrated by Rodger, polarized political rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1992) emerge; one could argue that these rhetorical situations, which amount to doing-and-undoing in most cases, constitute a part of the ritual of mass shootings in their own right. Rodger's characterological deformity is the individual version of the large-scale deformity of our American national character—Whiteness.

Rodger's character formation shares many similarities with the national character formation of the United States. He was, like the nation, multiracial, a product of one British parent and one racialized parent. His multiraciality, like the nation's, felt like a problem, though it did not need to be one. In a strikingly Oedipal configuration, both Rodger and the nation felt the need to disavow deep (and feminine-coded) desires for interdependence and mutual aid in favor of paternal, masculine, British dominance and violence. He, and we, felt the only path to virtue was through identification with the White aggressor, and that at-will control of the bodies and minds of white women and BIPOC is essential to being a White man. Rodger's act of mass violence is the *telos* of American Whiteness in miniature.

Psychoanalysis is itself dying of Whiteness (Merson, 2021; Wood, 2020; Malamed, 2022; Schechter, 2014; Carter, 2023), even after it was saved from dying of misogyny and heterosexism by the ministrations of numerous brilliant feminist critics (see Dimen, 1997, for a thorough intellectual history of this resuscitation). Whatever the theoretical improvements wrought by the social turn, in practice psychoanalysis is a profession that is de facto segregated. It confines itself to enclaves segregated along racial and socioeconomic lines. It works assiduously to select for trainees and patients—often one and the same, since almost all patients in analysis are clinicians (Schechter, 2014)—in a manner that is virtually guaranteed to treat white patients as wheat and non-white patients as chaff. It governs its institutions in an authoritarian manner that is systematically hostile to the inclusion of BIPOC (Merson, 2021; Woods, 2020; Malamed, 2022; Griffin, Echegoyén, and Hyman, 2020; Holmes Commission, 2023), and that, *pari passu*, invites misogynistic abuses of power with which the profession has hardly begun to wrestle. In my experience as a consultant and advocate within psychoanalytic institutions, and as a researcher studying discrimination in these institutions, it has become clear to me that they are fundamentally committed to the reproduction of Whiteness, and that they will launch ruthless covert and frontal attacks on anyone who challenges Whiteness too forcefully within their hallowed halls (Carter, 2023).

A full analysis of the origins of psychoanalysis's own possessive investment in Whiteness is beyond the scope of this article; I hope to take up a thoroughgoing analysis of this issue in subsequent papers, and to map other ways in which Whiteness as instantiated in mass violence is more closely connected to psychoanalysis's own Whiteness than might be thought. For now, let it suffice to say that part of why psychoanalysis has struggled to make Whiteness analyzable is because it must scotomize its own Whiteness in order to sustain fantasies of its own goodness (Carter, 2023)—Lara Sheehi has spoken of this as “psychoanalytic innocence” (Sheehi and Sheehi, 2021). This is troubling for a host of reasons, not least because psychoanalysis, of all intellectual traditions, has some of the sharpest tools for challenging Whiteness. As we have witnessed a surge in mass shootings motivated by Whiteness, in the context of an authoritarian politics motivated by Whiteness, it is hard to miss, or to overstate, how crucial such a challenge is. As psychoanalysts well know, when we want to understand a problem and help others address it, we first need to recognize and address it within ourselves. We must become, as Ignatiev had it, traitors to Whiteness (Ignatiev, 2022).

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