Book Section:
Truscott, R. (2020) Psychoanalysis and Whiteness Studies. In: Casey, Z.A., (ed.) Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education. Brill ISBN 978-90-04-37630-4

https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004444836_068

CHAPTER 68

Psychoanalysis and Whiteness Studies

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Related Entries: Baldwin, James; Du Bois, W.E.B.; Emotionality and Whiteness; Postcolonialism and Whiteness; Racial Melancholia; Roediger, David

1 Introduction

While there are psychoanalytic currents in the work of scholars who, with some ambivalence, place their interventions under the heading of whiteness studies, psychoanalysis is not a dominant frame within whiteness studies. Where psychoanalysis has been invoked in whiteness studies to disclose the unconscious aspects of whiteness, there has infrequently been a sustained critical engagement with psychoanalytic theory and its quandaries.

However, texts drawing on psychoanalysis, or, rather, texts seemingly psychoanalytic in their preoccupations, have been repeatedly invoked as a spur for the emergence of whiteness studies – that these texts are written by black authors is of no small importance. Any consideration of how whiteness studies and psychoanalysis *can* be brought together, then, requires attention to the ways in which psychoanalysis had already been taken up within a tradition of scholarship in the wake of which whiteness studies places itself in narrating its origins.

Such an undertaking would be incomplete without attention to critiques of whiteness emerging from within postcolonial studies, within which psychoanalysis is considerably less marginal than it is in whiteness studies. Sometimes dwelling on the psychopathologies of white subjectivity, the focus of this scholarship has largely been whiteness as a problem that concerns all marked by colonialism, which equated being human with being white.

The critical study of whiteness and psychoanalysis has thus been, and can still be, brought into a complementary relation, along numerous lines, some of

 | DOI: 10.1163/9789004444836_068

which are noted below. But, once brought together, they also begin to productively trouble each other.

2 Pleasure in Whiteness Studies

David Roediger's (1991) *The Wages of Whiteness* is often taken as the founding text of whiteness studies. It is a claim worth refusing, as Roediger (2010) himself does by offering an account of the beginnings of whiteness studies according to which, long before the 1990s, whiteness had been treated as a problem by black writers, most notably, though not only, W.E.B Du Bois, who drew on Freud later in his career, C.L.R James, who was resistant to psychoanalysis, James Baldwin, who made occasional use of it, and Frantz Fanon, who reworked it tirelessly, calling it into question but never fully relinquishing it.

It is well known that *Wages* takes its title from Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America.* Of the failure of southern white workers to unite with fellow black workers, Du Bois (1935) writes: "It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage" (p. 700). It is from this formulation that Roediger (1991) takes the idea that "the *pleasures* [emphasis added] of whiteness could function as a 'wage' for white workers" (p. 13).

With the notion of pleasure as a wage, Roediger makes a very particular historical argument, but it bears a kinship with psychoanalytic critiques of racism more generally, including those in postcolonial studies. In the uneven field of the psychoanalysis of race there are as many forms of racism as there are psychoanalytic diagnoses, and one could, in an encyclopedic spirit, catalog the use made of each of the major psychoanalytic concepts to critique racism. At its most elemental, however, Freud's (1900) "royal road to the unconscious activities of the mind" (p. 604) offers a method by which to follow the circuitous routes along which forbidden wishes are relayed, finding disguised gratification, bypassing censorship. What most psychoanalytic formulations of racism share, despite their heterogeneity, is a foregrounding of the pleasure of racism.

Stuart Hall (1992), for example, has written of how new forms of racism, no longer brazen, require attention to the censorship of racist pleasure, which functions, as Hall puts it, "rather more like Freud's dreamwork than like anything else" (p. 2). Employing a related mode of reading, J. M. Coetzee (1991) diagnosed apartheid whiteness as a form of obsessional neurosis, the pleasure of which made use of a number of associative paths, predominantly its very negation. Indeed, for Coetzee, apartheid was a "counter-attack upon desire" (p. 17) that was "continually bursting at the seams and leaking" (p. 20) with precisely what it aimed to contain.

3 The Ambivalence of Whiteness

One of the key insights to be drawn from a tradition of black writing making use of psychoanalysis to critique whiteness is the way that white subjects invest in blackness all that they cannot consciously acknowledge about themselves, all that they have supposedly been required to relinquish as the cost of constituting themselves as white, producing blackness as, for instance, sexually virile, aggressive, but also sensuous, intuitive, rhythmically in tune with nature, and so on. As Baldwin (1961) writes, "to be an American Negro Male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others" (p. 217). Thus, for Baldwin and others, between whiteness and blackness there is no relation, for in blackness the white subject sees only itself, frightened by and, simultaneously, drawn back to, blackness as an image of whiteness in an unalienated state.

This is a formulation found widely in psychoanalytic scholarship on race. Homi Bhabha's (1994) use of Freud's notion of fetishism to understand racial stereotypes is perhaps the most influential version of it. While Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks* is frequently invoked as a first iteration, a version of this formulation was sounded out in the mid-1930s by South African social psychologist, I.D. MacCrone. MacCrone (1937) writes: "Upon the man with the black skin there is projected the evil which the white man refuses to acknowledge as part of his own nature, and the black man becomes the scapegoat of the white" (pp. 298–299). While MacCrone's is an inside out model of applied psychoanalysis according to which the social world is shaped by internal, subjective conditions, more recent psychoanalytic critiques of racism emerging from within psychosocial studies and postcolonial theory attempt to think through the social and the psychic as being in a reciprocal, mutually constitutive relation.

In this way, the ambivalence of whiteness has been brought into critical focus, the way blackness is produced by whiteness as both threatening and, at the same time, alluring. Psychoanalysis has provided a conceptual vocabulary according to which whiteness – in its symptomatic ambivalence, an ambivalence acted out rather than articulated reasonably, in its fragile narcissism – can be understood as having a pathological psychic organization.

4 Psychoanalysis and Colonialism

Notions of the "primitive" and the "civilized," while jarring to readers of Freud today, are built into psychoanalytic theory; grounded on a division between the sensible and the intelligible – a division older than the eighteenth century,

but which has come to the present shaped by Kantian philosophy and its legacy, of which Freud is an inheritor – the "primitive" and the "civilized" is an opposition assumed in psychoanalysis. The critique of whiteness that psychoanalysis enables runs into trouble in this opposition. As Stephen Frosh (2013) renders this trouble:

> A primitive impulse is never a rational one; it always arises unmediated from the unconscious and hence has not been worked over by the secondary processes of thought. The sleight of hand then is to link this kind of primitivity with the irrationality of the colonized other and then to make rationality itself the marker of civilized human society. (p. 144)

Freud performs this "sleight of hand" repeatedly, from *The Interpretation of Dreams* onwards; he inherits a Kantian dualism that has never been undone within the psychoanalytic tradition – the apartness between thought and the body is tirelessly bridged but, for all that, presumed. However useful psychoanalysis might be for whiteness studies, the historical association of blackness with the body and thought with whiteness haunts every psychoanalysis of racism.

Frosh (2013) concedes "the rootedness of much psychoanalytic thought in colonial assumptions," but argues that psychoanalysis "both draws on colonialism and disrupts its categories at the same time" (pp. 144–145). As a bodily state, "primitivity" is always insufficiently mastered by reason; it is not that, in the struggle, reason is overcome by affect, but, in and through reason as the form of that mastery, "primitivity" returns. Reason is thus placed into a kinship with so many forms of unreason, "rationality is underpinned," as Frosh (2013) writes, "by violence and irrationality" (p. 145). Here, one might speak of rationality's wish fulfilments, its forms of enjoyment, often sadistic, "primitive" pleasures.

It is no secret that psychoanalysis has been critiqued for its Eurocentrism, and not without good reason given how psychoanalysis was used not only against, but also in the interests of, colonialism. While many may wish to frame these as so many misapplications of psychoanalysis, the latent colonial assumptions within psychoanalysis make such misuse possible, even likely. Celia Brickman (2003: 72), for instance, writes:

> The psychoanalytically conceived norm of mature subjectivity was, by virtue of the correlation of libidinal development with the cultural evolutionary scale, a rationalism whose unstated color was white, just as its unstated gender was male. (p. 72)

The more even handed interventions that draw attention to the colonial conditions of possibility of psychoanalytic theory, the ways in which colonial geopolitics came to structure the psychoanalytic conception of the subject, have aimed to abide by that which within psychoanalysis may still allow the contradictions of modernity, specifically nationalism in its relation to race, to be critically apprehended.

5 The Wager of Whiteness Studies

In its relationship to the work of black scholars who have made use of psychoanalysis, whiteness studies declares an intellectual debt. This is not the same as blackness being narcissistically apprehended as the phantasmatic origin of whiteness. But there is a repetition in which whiteness studies participates insofar as it is against the "primitivity," not of blackness but of pathological whitenesses, that its own, ostensibly already analyzed, non-pathological relation to blackness emerges. Here it may be worth taking seriously Fanon's (1952, p. xii) claim that "an individual who loves Blacks is as 'sick' as someone who abhors them" (p. xii), precisely because such a libidinal investment maintains the very mechanism that produces these racialized positions in the first place.

The modes of warding off narcissistic wounds to whiteness, to which whiteness studies scholars draw attention using psychoanalysis, occur on a developmental spectrum that positions some defensive structures as more "primitive" than others. Indeed, it is not blackness that, for whiteness studies, is "primitive," but whiteness itself; in its irrationalities, in its defenses – whether neurotic, perverse, or psychotic – in the circuitous routes of its pleasure – that is, in the way defenses fail, or are circumvented – whiteness is rendered, more or less, "primitive." Beyond the libidinal investments of whiteness studies in blackness, beyond what whiteness studies has been prepared, and not without some violence, to annex as a part of its own historical development, at stake here is the way whiteness studies draws its frontiers between itself and "primitive" whitenesses.

In making use of a psychoanalytic conceptual apparatus, whiteness studies finds itself – in rehearsing, pedagogically, and as if for the benefit of afflicted whitenesses, a different relation to blackness – within and a part of the very field it works to unsettle. This does not mean that psychoanalysis is useless for the critical study of whiteness; indeed, acknowledging this implication in the scene under analysis would be but a first step of the process. This is one of the great strengths of psychoanalysis, the way it always reflexively counts itself into what it seeks to think through. But there is a limit to what psychoanalysis

can contribute to the critique of racism. Perhaps the most one can hope for with this framing of the problem of racism is a reversal of positions.

To circle back on the point with which I began, the very move of placing psychoanalysis, through the work of black scholars, at the beginnings of whiteness studies can be questioned. It is true that Du Bois (1940) notes in *The Dusk of Dawn* that he began reading Freud seriously in the 1930s: "I now began to realize that in the fight against race prejudice, we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing… unconscious habit and irrational urge…" (p. 140). The language of psychoanalysis does recur through this and subsequent texts. But the mistake should not be made of reading Du Bois as simply applying Freudian ideas, reducing Du Bois's thought to a form of psychoanalysis. One might say that both he and Freud set to work upon related problems, that he and Freud are intellectual contemporaries (Zwarg, 2002), a point that requires returning to the concept of "double consciousness" set out in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1903), prior to Du Bois's reading of Freud. There is, here, a concept that cannot, without a certain Eurocentrism, be called psychoanalytic.

Similarly, Baldwin does utilize formulations that seem, at face value, psychoanalytic, but as Baldwin scholars underline he is at his most complex, and attends to racial ambivalences most keenly, in his fiction. One should exercise caution in folding Baldwin into psychoanalysis, for a reading of his oeuvre as a whole will not be pressed neatly into psychoanalysis. Fetishism, in other words, has many forms.

6 Conclusion

Psychoanalysis has been used to critique whiteness, and there can be little doubt about how productive such a pairing has been in addressing questions of the libidinal recalcitrance of racism. But the pairing might also reveal certain blind spots of both fields of inquiry. On the one hand, the psychoanalytic concepts marshalled to critique the problem of whiteness can be extended to whiteness studies itself, to the ways in which it is more implicated in the problems it addresses than it is often prepared to admit.

On the other hand, psychoanalysis can be treated as part of the problem whiteness studies addresses – as has been suggested, psychoanalysis has been, and remains, ensnared in histories of whiteness, which came to mark Freud's work, written in an anti-Semitic Vienna, from the outset, as both Sander Gilman (1993) and, more recently, Alfred López (2005) have argued. That the particular values of whiteness have operated as universals has been a central point made

in the critical study of whiteness, and what whiteness studies would be able to contribute to the critique of the universalism of psychoanalysis remains a question yet to be pursued in any sustained way.

If politically committed psychoanalytic critiques of whiteness are not to repeat an epistemological kinship with the very problem under study, this relation has to be foregrounded and worked through. The relation between reason and the body that psychoanalytic formulations always entail – between the sensory data it is reason's purpose to synthesize, arrange, order, even stand over – has to be thought in its correspondence with a racialized social order wherein some are designated as the bearers of bodily being, others the life of reason. Such a possessive relation to bodiliness – one always has a body, while reason is exercised – cannot simply be reduced to a racialized division of labor in which certain bodies can be possessed, but it has to be thought in relation to it.

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