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Psychoanalysis in the Wake

Abstract

Psychoanalysis has a long history of engagement with racism, often through theorising racism's sources. It has nevertheless been criticised for its neglect of Black experience and its narrowness in relating to the social realities of racism as lived in the wider Black community. Very recently, there have been attempts by psychoanalytic institutes and practitioners to respond positively to the emergence and strengthening of the Black Lives Matter and decolonising movements. In this article, the possibility of this response is examined through the lens of one particular Black studies text that has had a substantial impact and offers one of the clearest and most potent articulations of Black lives in the wake of slavery. This is Christina Sharpe's book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. This article draws out some of the issues from *In the Wake* that seem to have most potential for challenging psychoanalysis to rethink some of its assumptions and practices in relation to the ongoing violence of antiblack racism.

Key words: psychoanalysis, racism, slavery, Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

Psychoanalysis in the Wake

Psychoanalysis and Racism

To anticipate my argument: if the world in which psychoanalysis acts is structured by and through racism, it must become the ground of being of psychoanalysis itself.

Psychoanalysis has not had a comfortable history in relation to 'race' and racism (the scare quotes are deliberate here; what we know of 'race' is mainly its fictitious nature yet its discursive potency). Of course, psychoanalysis has its own ethnic and cultural specificities, most relevantly its origins in the Jewish lives of Freud and the other first-generation progenitors, and for that matter its continuing intersection with Jewishness even until today, if less so than previously. This gives it a certain degree of credibility as a framework for antiracist thought: the insistent pressure of antisemitism was something that Freud reacted against directly, and was deeply aware of, and his last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud, 1939) can be seen at least in part as an assertion of the resilience of Jewishness and Judaism in the face of the monstrous upsurge in annihilatory antisemitism in the 1930s (Frosh, 2005). In addition, there is something to be said with regard to the prospect of an alliance between a psychoanalytically-relevant Jewishness and antiracist practices, premised on parallel histories of oppression and intimate connections between antisemitism and antiblack racism (Frosh, 2020). These parallels are recurrent. Historically, they reflect ways in which Jewishness and Blackness are constructed as 'barbarically' other in the western, Christian imagination. For instance, Daniel José Gaztambide (2019, p.6) sets the scene for his tracing of the relations between psychoanalysis and Latinx liberation psychology by commenting that, 'The history of the Jewish people in Europe is in tragic and important ways intricately tied to the history of the Indigenous people of the Americas and Black people kidnapped from Africa - each [of] their subjectivities were distorted and rendered subhuman under the gaze of European Whiteness.' In the current moment, antisemitism and antiblack racism reappear in right-wing conspiracy theory making Jews responsible for the 'flood' of migrants – that is, people of colour – into Europe and indeed of 'terrorist' Muslims into the United States as part of a phantasmatic Jewish plot to destabilise the West. This is not to take away from the specificity of either antisemitism or antiblack racism. The positions of Jews and people of colour are nowadays quite radically distinct in most societies, including within the psychoanalytic movement where, notwithstanding the emergence of antisemitic tropes at various times (Frosh, 2012), the White Jewish presence has been marked and powerful. The point here, however, is that the history of antisemitism that has dogged psychoanalysis is one reason to claim its relative openness to awareness of the reality of antiblack racism, including the need to combat it.

There is also, arguably, something intrinsic to the notion of the dynamic unconscious that opposes any idea of a racialised dichotomy between civilised and savage, despite Freud's adoption of this distinction in *Totem and Taboo* and elsewhere (Freud, 1913; Frosh, 2017). If the unconscious acts as a subversive, multifarious, pleasure-seeking, disordered 'space'

within the psyche of *every* human subject, then it is not possible to hold onto a racist assumption that some groups are more 'civilised' than others. Instead, we are invited to consider how the *belief* that that is the case, as well as being used cynically to justify colonialism and enslavement, is also a dynamically projective process: *our* internal 'savagery' is inserted into the denigrated other, an insight that informs many psychoanalytic theories of racism (Frosh, 2013a). It is this kind of perception, along with Lacanian ideas on racism as 'theft of enjoyment' (Hook, 2018) and postcolonial appropriations of Freudian notions of melancholia (Khanna, 2004), that have made it possible to think of psychoanalysis as a potentially decolonising, antiracist practice.

Nevertheless, the failure to fully address racism is a running sore in the psychoanalytic movement. There are institutional reasons for this, to do with the creation of psychoanalytic societies around a kind of 'guild' framework that promotes a Eurocentric vision and tends to judge the adequacy of candidates for training through the lens of those already 'in' (Winograd, 2014). The location of psychoanalysis mainly in high-fee private practice militates against its availability within Black communities too. There are also epistemological and philosophical reasons, notably the focus that psychoanalysis has on the individual's so-called 'inner world' and its relative neglect of the 'external' social environment. The degree to which this is the case obviously varies according to school of thought and historical and social location, but it remains a strong tendency that then neglects the 'real', racialised conditions of a person's life, making them subservient to the psychological *perception* of those conditions (Davids, 2011). The result can be a turning away from the social, as if it is not the legitimate concern of the analytic encounter; as if entering into what feels like the 'politics' of a situation can be a betrayal of psychoanalytic neutrality (Frosh and Mandelbaum, 2017). Why talk about the 'real world' when the job of the psychoanalyst is to help a patient deal with phantasy? This seems a legitimate question until we notice that the supposedly external and internal worlds are bound up with one another, penetrating each other, and that psychoanalysis knows this very well, as Laplanchian, Lacanian, Winnicottian and relational psychoanalysts explicitly acknowledge. Which is to say, in neglecting the reality of racism psychoanalysis misses the subject itself.

These issues have always been important and there is a long history of discussion of antiblack racism and psychoanalysis, perhaps beginning seriously (as so many postcolonial critiques do) with Fanon (1952) but including significant contributions from many more recent authors, both from within and outside the psychoanalytic movement (e.g. Abel, 1997; Dalal, 2002; Davids, 2011; Frosh, 1989, 2013a; Hook, 2013; Kovel, 1995; Rustin, 1991; Seshadri-Crooks, 1994). The somewhat hidden history of mid-twentieth century American Black engagement with psychoanalysis has lately gained some recognition in accounts of progressive psychoanalysis (Gaztambide, 2019; Zaretsky, 2015). Furthermore, in the last twenty-five years there has been a powerful influx of psychoanalytic work from writers of colour that challenges many of the absences in the literature to date, including Hortense Spillers' (1996) wide-ranging *All the things you could be by now if Sigmund Freud's wife was your mother*, through Kimberlyn Leary's delicate and extensive writings on 'race' and clinical psychoanalysis (e.g. Leary, 2007, 2012) and Kathleen Pogue White's (2002) sensitive elaboration of personal and clinical issues in *Surviving hating and being hated*.[1] This can

[1] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this piece who noted the relative absence of Black psychoanalytic authors in my bibliography. They wrote, 'Names that should be present in your piece include, but are not limited

perhaps be seen as part of a broader engagement with 'social and political issues' that itself has a long history (Frosh, 2018); but it is also a specific response to an awareness of the importance of racism in governing the lives and mental health of analytic patients (and analysts) as well as reflecting the use made of psychoanalysis by some committedly antiracist social theorists (Butler, 2020). Recently, however, there have been some significant social and intellectual developments that make the issues even more pertinent and that have encouraged a response from some psychoanalysts that is questioning and outward-looking in relation to their own practices and theories. Amongst these developments, two related strands stand out: the decolonising movement, with its emphasis on the legacies of Empire, particularly in relation to British and European imperialism ('Rhodes Must Fall' is an instance of this in its activist version); and the antislavery movement that has had a very powerful manifestation in Black Lives Matter and that has more of an American focus but is also deeply relevant to British involvement with slavery, and indeed to that of other colonial powers (Portugal in connection especially to Brazil; but other European states as well). These two strands have slightly different emphases and spheres of action, but they make some similar points: the continuing effects and ideologies of colonialism, observable in discriminatory practices in every social sphere, including education and health; perpetuation of the legacy of slavery, observable especially in violence towards people of colour on the part of the State, as well as the radically reduced life chances of many Black communities; and a demand that the haunting of the present by these supposedly past, but in fact very current, oppressions needs to be addressed finally and firmly, through acts of genuine acknowledgement, reparation and justice. We have seen shocking instances of police violence on people of colour come to light – though this has happened before, of course, and little seems to have changed – and we have also seen active responses to this by several psychoanalytic institutions. For example, at the time of writing (August and December 2020) the British Psychoanalytical Society carries the following statement prominently on its website:

> The recent killing of George Floyd highlights the profoundly destructive cycles of racial hatred and violence against black people and members of other minority groups and the resulting trauma and continued structural injustice that still exists in society… The British Psychoanalytical Society wishes to acknowledge particularly the impact of such violence on our members and patients who identify as black people and the echo that this brings to others who have also experienced discrimination. (British Psychoanalytical Society, 2020)

It is far from obvious that such a statement would have been made in the past and clearly it is to be welcomed; but perhaps we can go further and ask what difference these events can really make to psychoanalysis.

I want to approach this question in a limited way, by looking at one especially powerful and influential account of antiblack racism understood as the lived currency of slavery. This is the book by Christina Sharpe (2016), *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (cited from here as *Wake*). This is not a psychoanalytic text; indeed, psychoanalysis does not appear in the book's index and it looks mostly to be far from the author's mind. It is also only one of

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to, Kopano Ratele, Shosei Kessi, Foluke Taylor, Guilaine Kinouani, Dorothy Holmes, Kimberlyn Leary, Annie Lee Jones, Kirkland Vaughans, Janice Bennett, Natasha Holmes, and Anton Hart. That none of these names showed up in the text is a glaring omission that underscores how, despite our best intentions, we continue to enact a forgetting of Black folks and their labor.' I include this note as a self-addressed symptomatic statement.

several texts that could be chosen, many of them from the Afropessimist strand of intellectual work with which Sharpe's volume is connected, and others, such as Mbembe (2019) from postcolonial and necropolitical sources. However, what distinguishes Sharpe's text and a number of others with which it is often paired that have found their way into mainstream awareness – books such as Claudia Rankine's (2015) *Citizen* and Saidiya Hartman's (2019) magnificent *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* – is its extraordinary literary power and accessibility, yet its uncompromising *necessity* as a visceral expression of the 'ongoing disaster' (*Wake*, p.5) of slavery. The book has made its way speaking to and of the Black experience, creating consciousness of the manner in which everyone lives 'in the wake' of slavery, something that still ripples outwards further and further, leaving no shoreline untouched. This is, according to Sharpe, a distinctive characteristic of trauma: that the wake spreads rather than narrows.

> A ship moving through water generates a particular pattern of waves; the bow wave is in front of the ship, and that wave then spreads out in the recognizable V pattern on either side of and then behind the ship. The size of the bow wave dictates how far out the wake starts. Waves that occur in the wake of the ship move at the same speed as the ship. From at least the sixteenth century onward, a major part of the ocean engineering of ships has been to minimize the bow wave and therefore to minimize the wake. But the effect of trauma is the opposite. It is to make maximal the wake. (*Wake*, p.40)

Slavery is the arch-trauma here; it maximises, tarnishing everything, unsettling any complacencies, turning claims of comfort into manifestations of denial.

My suggestion here is that *In the Wake* – to reiterate, taken as one of several expressions of the way in which slavery and antiblackness structures the world – is not just enormously powerful and challenging for everyone, but it also asks some questions that *psychoanalysis* ought to be able to address about the living legacies of supposedly past trauma, about intergenerationality and, very specifically, about how we understand the workings of 'race'. Again to try to be clear, I am not looking for a psychoanalytic interpretation of these things; this is not difficult to construct and there are some useful psychoanalytic theories of racism already available, as previously noted. Instead, I see psychoanalysis as challenged by the wake, and want to try to articulate some of what that challenge might be.

Who can Speak?

Before going further, there is an issue about whiteness to be addressed. To what extent can I, embodied White, ventriloquise the Black experience conjured in *In the Wake*, and in whose name do I speak of it? This is a familiar question that I have grappled with before, in the context of Holocaust and trauma literature (Frosh, 2019): by what right can I, or anyone else for that matter, invoke an experience that I have not had? Is it enough to claim a specific form of solidarity through my Jewishness, as outlined earlier, not as an essential category (this would reinstate 'race' as real), but as a historical feature, a material reality that through antisemitism as well as a certain cultural ethics places Jews on the side of those who have to fight racism? This 'barbaric' antiracism needs to be reclaimed; Jews belong in this fight (Slabodsky, 2014; Frosh, 2020) and psychoanalysis, whether or not one can countenance thinking of it as a 'Jewish science', belongs there too. But this is too brisk

and insufficient, especially given the centrality and power of certain forms of Jewishness in the historical formation of psychoanalysis itself. If psychoanalysis has not fully addressed antiblack racism, then Jewish members of the psychoanalytic community are as responsible as anyone else. I think I have to let this question hover without full resolution, but noting some important imperatives. One is that there is an ethics at issue here, the ethics of taking responsibility for something when it is forced upon us. It is not always easy to do this, but what *In the Wake* and Black Lives Matter and the decolonising movement all do, alongside evoking and expressing Black lives, is to demand acknowledgement of historical and contemporary injustices, of the damage done and being done by people in my position (White, academic, liberal), and of the reparation and action required to put it right. A second ethic is that of imagining the position of the other. I cannot accept that all attempts at alliance are forms of cultural appropriation. Speaking from one's own rendering of the experience presented by others is a necessary step for identification and action, even though it carries the risk of speaking in their name rather than letting them speak for themselves. (But people can read Sharpe's book, they do not need me to explain it to them, my aim is different.) Most of all, however, there is the question of whiteness itself, of the benefit that comes to all White people through the subjugation of people of colour (the 'white premium'), but also of the losses, the violence that does violence to everyone, albeit not the same kind or degree of violence, but still the impoverishment and the generation of guilt and the need to do something about this. It seems to me that White people have to respond to what is being presented to us so powerfully and so utterly convincingly. The simplest point is, then, to my mind the most compelling: Whiteness, including Jewish Whiteness, has a privileged place in psychoanalysis as elsewhere, and this means that there is an ethical imperative placed on White scholars and practitioners of psychoanalysis to speak of and oppose the pervasiveness of racism and the damage that it does.

The Weather

In the Wake deals with contemporary antiblack oppression as a continuation of past oppression. Amongst its deliberations on, and evidencing of, these continuities are its repeated evocation and meditation on a number of present evils, all of which are understood as 'in the wake' of slavery. 'In the wake,' Sharpe writes,

> the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school. (*Wake*, p. 21)

Those elements to which Sharpe gives especial prominence, returning to them again and again just as they keep returning to (but also slipping from) awareness (wakefulness) are the refugees crossing and drowning in small boats in the Mediterranean, the Haiti earthquake of 2010 and the deaths of Black people at the hands of police in the USA. The last of these was a powerful catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement and has been a major trigger for its resurgence in 2020, four years after *In the Wake* was published (Butler, 2020, similarly provided a roll-call of Black deaths in the USA and the UK prior to the killing of George Floyd). We could add to this the differential effects of the Covid pandemic, in which people

of colour around the world have suffered significantly more than White people; this has made prominent the ongoingly vicious disparities in health care, poverty, education and policing that have been hidden in plain sight for ever. Moreover, the present-tense of antiblack violence and the constant expectation of death (a necropolitics of daily life, we might say) run right through the book from start to end. The book opens with deaths in Sharpe's family and a dedication page to family members that includes, 'For those who have died recently' and 'For those who died in the past that is not yet past.' In between, Sharpe offers a stunning presentation of the story of the *Zong*, the slave ship that became the centre of a celebrated legal case in the late eighteenth century when the owners sued for insurance payouts on cargo – that is, human beings – who had been thrown overboard supposedly to save the ship. In one of the most powerful weaves of the book, all these events are linked through the wake: they are understood not just to have their source in the history of slavery, but actually to *be* that history; which means, the situation continues. Laying out her intentions early on, Sharpe announces (*Wake*, p.13), 'I've been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past.' This is a political and historical statement, but it has psychoanalytic resonances and significance too in the idea that a past that is not resolved, that is not treated with justice, remains present, an idea to which I shall return.

This is the first, but pervasive, instance of what are, to my mind, some striking echoes of psychoanalytic ideas in *In the Wake*. These do not, however, necessarily open the text out for psychoanalytic exploration so much as challenge psychoanalysis to think about the rooting and relevance of some of its ideas in the context of 'race' and racism. Perhaps Sharpe's idea of 'the Weather', the title of the final chapter of her book, makes this clear. The weather is the climate of racism and slavery; it penetrates everything and is also the backdrop to everything; it determines how the ship will sail, but it is also what is not exactly noticed, what stands present as an often-unremarked context for lived lives. 'It is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated,' writes Sharpe (*Wake*, p.111), 'but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather.' For Sharpe, this is an expansion of Fanon's (1970) statement, 'We revolt simply because, for a variety of reasons, we can no longer breathe' (*Wake*, p.111). Fanon's evocation of breathing, in its disturbing prescience in relation to the cries of 'I can't breathe' that have been brought to the fore by the recent Black Lives Matter movement, shows how ubiquitous and permanent and recurrent – how repetitious – the wake is. The weather determines how well one can breathe: 'In my text, the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack' (*Wake*, p.104). For Sharpe, the route to take here is through the notion of 'aspiration', both drawing breath and hoping for something, aspiring to breathe the air of freedom. Who, however, can breathe free, asks Sharpe (*Wake*, p.112), in a context in which breathing is denied ('I can't breathe') and in which the weather is continuously hostile? 'I've been thinking,' she writes (*Wake*, p. 109), 'aspiration in the complementary senses of the word: the withdrawal of fluid from the body and the taking in of foreign matter (usually fluid) into the lungs with the respiratory current, and as audible breath that accompanies or comprises a speech sound.' The damage done and the possible way out of this are indicated here. Can psychoanalysis attune itself to this weather and to this aspiration, finding ways to recognise and acknowledge the actual conditions of Black lives as well as seeking routes to fulfilling their aspirations – that is, allowing and promoting articulation of the sounds of a

body that is in need of free air, the air of freedom? The point here is that if it ignores the weather, psychoanalysis cannot reach out to the suffering subject who is buffeted by storms; or less obviously allegorically, without acknowledgement (that is recognition plus responsibility, to use Jessica Benjamin's (2017) framework) contemporary lives stay mired in the continuity of slavery, its oneness with what happens today. It also makes clear, as the whole book does, just how indivisible social and personal must be. Listing her losses at the beginning of the book (*Wake*, p.3), Sharpe makes the point of how they are not arbitrary, but rather socially contingent: 'The overriding engine of US racism cut through my family's ambitions and desires. It coursed through our social and public encounters and our living room.' The structures of racism may not *determine* every element of all our lives, but there they are, cutting through them, a rupturing 'flow' that cannot be dammed or indeed, to change the metaphor, bracketed out. Psychoanalysis needs to notice this: how can we not speak of racism when, like the weather, it is always there, rupturing the best laid plans?

In the Wake of the Ship

The wake has some distinct meanings in *In the Wake*. The dominant one is the wake of the slave ship, and hence the wake of formal slavery; we still live in this wake. American racism has long outlived the abolition of slavery – indeed, slavery basically survived its own abolition during reconstruction – but it is not just in the United States that this applies. The revelations in recent years about the compensation paid by the British government to slave owners, but not to slaves, when slavery was abolished, and the extent to which the wealth of Britain was predicated on slavery, have firmly challenged the myth of British imperial largesse (Hall et al, 2016). In any case, the continuing institutional racism and antiblack agitation at governmental and civic level (for instance, the British Home Office's 'hostile environment' towards migrants and refugees) is only one of the more recent transparent manifestations of the continuities of colonial racism in the UK. Similarly, the outrageous death rate of young Black men at the hands of the police in Brazil, which was the last major country to abolish slavery, testifies to its continuity even amongst a nation that supposedly prides itself on its 'racial mix'. We are all in the wake, clearly in different positions, some drowning, some in boats: 'to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding' (*Wake*, pp.13-14). We might call this the grammatical tense of the past continuous or the past progressive, except that the continuing act referred to has not as yet ever passed and it is not progressive, unless one takes that to mean 'progressively worse'.

Psychoanalysis might have a lot to say about this. It is a form of hauntology, in which what is left unresolved from the past continues to operate in the present, often as an unknown or unrecognised force that impacts upon, speaks to or through, disturbs and disrupts any attempts to settle comfortably in the present. Toni Morrison's (1987) great novel, *Beloved*, is the quintessential statement of this, widely referenced in the literature on cultural haunting (e.g. Gordon, 1997), and central to the narrative and imagery of *In the Wake*. I will not re-describe this novel here, except to note its foundation in the historically attested event (attended to closely by Sharpe) of Margaret Garner, who killed her child to protect her from re-enslavement; *Beloved* may be a ghost story, but it is not fiction. The broader and more psychoanalytic point is how the wake is translatable into the familiar awareness of

a past that will not go away, specifically the past of trauma with its intergenerational consequences (Abraham and Torok (1976) are the source for much of the most developed thinking on this; see also Frosh (2013b)). The principal issues here are not restricted to *Nachträglichkeit*, which in many ways is taken to be definitional of psychoanalytic temporality (the present remaking the past; the past working its way into the present), though there is an element of this in how the supposed 'pastness' of slavery is now revealed to be a fantasy: that is, slavery never died. We may not be as aware as we should be of how this corpse still moves around amongst us, as lively as ever; but in making it more visible we might begin to see how these past events (Jim Crow; the compensation to slave owners) are ever more traumatic in their social and psychic effects. Additionally, however, what *In the Wake* foregrounds is the way injustice perpetuates ghostliness, and how haunted our societies consequently become. This is precisely invoked by *Beloved*, but what Sharpe's analytic discerns is how it is specifically antiblack *violence* that erupts as a destructive ghost through the gaps in awareness in which we so often live. We have seen this in the response to Black Lives Matter, which can be understood as a way of registering the unthought and denied murderousness of racism: the violence has come out in the open for a while, been seen for what it is. Will this last? Slavery was embedded, systematic, structural violence; it framed the modern world and formed the basis of its technological, political and economic power; and there it remains, denied and repressed both as knowledge and as impulse, yet breaking through. Can psychoanalysis acknowledge this in its own practices of constraint and control, its own normalising activities and its neglect of these structures of violence as it goes along its day-by-day way? What price a psychoanalysis that might instead reveal the way these hauntings are not solely individual or family secrets, but social ones too? Violence everywhere: 'Wake; in the line of recoil of (a gun)' (*Wake*, p. 97).

There is another point here about the unconscious. In a famous aside by Otto Fenichel (1940, p.31) on the dynamics of antisemitism, an association between the unconscious and the Jew was formulated: 'It can be expressed in one sentence: one's own unconscious is also foreign. Foreignness is the quality which the Jews and one's own instincts have in common.' Antiblack racism has a parallel dynamic, which Joel Kovel (1995) has argued is constituted through the splitting off of the corporeality of the White into the fantasied 'non-human' of slavery. For Spillers (1996, p. 732), noting the centrality of the Oedipus complex as a marker of human subjecthood for both Freud and Lacan, 'The riddle of origin that the Oedipus is supposed to constitute, first, as a crisis, then as a resolution of order and degree, was essentially cancelled by the Atlantic trade, as the "crisis," for all intents and purposes, has continued on the other side.' The exclusion of people of colour from the 'human' continues, which is why they can be so easily subjected to violence and why they also become the fantasised *embodiment* of violence. The rawness of what has been projected into them and institutionalised in slavery – the 'hold', in Sharpe's terms – makes them available as the psychic repository for violence itself. This operates in various ways, as Judith Butler (2020) demonstrates in her analysis of how it can be that unarmed black men shot whilst running away from police are cast as threats.

> So, when unarmed black men or women, or queer and transgendered people, have their backs turned to police and are walking or running away, and they are still gunned down by police – an action often defended later as self-defense, even as a defense of society – how are we to understand this? Is that turning of the head or walking or running away actually an aggressive advance anticipated by the police?... The violence

> that the policeman is about to do, the violence he then commits, has already moved toward him in a figure, a racialized ghost, condensing and inverting his own aggression, wielding his own aggression against himself, acting in advance of his own plans to act, and legitimating and elaborating, as if in a dream, his later argument of self-defense. (Butler, 2020, p.118)

'Phantasmatic' is the term Butler uses, emphasising the phantasm, the ghost; she too is alert to the recurrence of slavery, even though she is also more explicitly referencing psychoanalysis, especially Melanie Klein, in her rendering of how violence is projected onto the black body and then returns. For Sharpe, this is a routine phenomenon in racism, that the one to whom violence is done comes to embody violence and then be experienced as a threat, but she asks too about the impact of this on the person of colour, and especially on women who are mothers. She writes (*Wake*, p.78), 'What kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one's child? Is it mothering if one knows that one's child might be killed at any time in the hold, in the wake by the state no matter who wields the gun?' Condemned to a life of violence, is how she puts the experience of the Black child; but for the mother it is also a precocious, ever-present awareness of loss. This is the precise reverberation of the notion of precarity that Butler has previously developed (Butler, 2004) and recurs in her more recent vocabulary of grievability. Indeed, Butler's first mention of grievability in *The Force of Nonvolence* (2020, p.11) is in the context of racism: 'One cannot explain this form of inequality, which accords measures of grievability to groups across the global spectrum, without taking account of the racial schemes that make such grotesque distinctions between which lives are valuable (and potentially grievable, if lost) and those which are not.' 'Racial schemes', racism, slavery: these structure the marking of lives in violence, between those that count as human and those (the slaves and those who come after them) that do not. The phantasmatic component of this is clear: being confronted by a terrorising ghost, white violence erupts, without recognising that the source lies in itself.

Wake as Mourning

The Black mother is just one figure of mourning in *In the Wake*; more generally, the second meaning of 'wake' is mourning and grief. A wake is something that mourners hold for a person who has died, both sad and celebratory, asserting the value of a life and sorrowing for its loss. A wake is not in essence a *melancholic* situation in the psychoanalytic sense promoted by Freud (1917), because it is part of the process of accepting and working through the loss, an attribute shared with rituals of mourning in other groups, such as the shiva in my own Jewish culture. However, there are specificities to Black mourning in the wake of slavery which makes it appear melancholic because of its unworked-through nature; but what Sharpe establishes is that this is not melancholic in the sense of intimating a denial of loss, but rather the lack of working through happens because the loss is *ongoing*. One cannot finish grieving if grief descends on us unabated.

> I want to distinguish what I am calling Black being in the wake and wake work from the work of melancholia and mourning. And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? (*Wake*, p.19)

I will come back briefly to Sharpe's use of trans*; here, the issue is about mourning and melancholia. Mourning the event might be interminable and this could be called melancholia under some situations (though of course not always – for instance, the death of a child might be interminably mourned, and is so in many families); but mourning the interminable event is impossible because there is never an end to new losses. Sharpe takes this up in relation to how museums and memorials try to respond to trauma, a set of issues that trouble all monumentalising and pedagogic memorialisations. Her point is that there is an intrinsic contradiction at work in such efforts: 'if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?' (*Wake*, p.20).

The challenge here is over how to mourn the ongoing and everyday; there is no final 'coming to terms with' continuing atrocity. This has been a concern within many disciplines. For instance, perhaps the most notable investigator of what it means to live with the 'quotidian' post/continuing situation is the anthropologist Veena Das (2007), whose explorations of ordinary life in India in the wake of violence show both the desperation and the resilience of people in that situation. It is an issue too in supposedly post-conflict societies where the perpetrators and victims of violence, and their descendants on both sides, have to find ways to live with one another, a situation that amongst other things has given rise to truth and reconciliation commissions in various places and a large literature on recognition and forgiveness (e.g. Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). It is also a challenge for psychoanalysis, because psychoanalysis commonly operates with a model of putting the past in its place, of finding ways to articulate trauma so that it becomes comprehensible and can be worked through. This is often based on the idea that trauma remains active because it has not been made symbolisable. I have argued elsewhere (Frosh, 2019), however, that the assumption that trauma is constituted as an inability to speak of something is too limited (though trauma can certainly be *hard* to speak of) and that, as with Thomas Trezise's judgement on Holocaust testimony, the claim that trauma 'is unrepresentable or unspeakable appears to stand in for a refusal to listen' (Trezise, 2013, p.211). Trezise is alert to the ethical necessity of finding a way of responding to suffering through a process of listening; the issue is not that trauma is unspoken, but it is commonly unheard. This, he suggests, is what needs to be reversed.

> Both recovery, understood as the integration of traumatic experience into the framework of a personal history already altered by that experience, and the reintegration of victims within a broader community, can be seen to depend on the listening of nonvictims, on a reception that is not confined to the mere registration of traumatic narrative but encompasses a response to it. (p.59).

This implies that there are two things wrong with an approach to racial trauma that positions it as an unsymbolised impingement in need of articulation. First, it is not in fact unsymbolised; there are innumerable articulations of the reality and effects of slavery and of racism. The problem is that these articulations are not listened to, recognised or acknowledged. There has been no solid reception 'that is not confined to the mere registration of traumatic narrative but encompasses a response to it.' Secondly, the trauma is not over, so its symbolisation and reception cannot be seen as a one-time event, a testimony that is delivered and reacted to, even if this is a necessary stage on the way to a

full response. What is being testified to is an ongoing trauma, an endless repetition – something that psychoanalysis should be attuned to (what is psychoanalysis if not the most developed discipline of repetition we have?) if it is to remain alert to the present-tense of racism and not just to an idea of an already-completed past. To try to be clear again: I am not suggesting that no psychoanalyst recognises the continuing realty of racism, only that the challenge to psychoanalysis is to develop a way of integrating this fully into its theoretical and clinical practice. How can mourning occur, or trauma be resolved, in this locus of endless suffering? Can psychoanalysis speak to this with a more elaborated vocabulary than that of 'holding' or containing' the pain (holding – the hold – is powerfully critiqued by Sharpe as an index of constraint over, and regulation of, Black lives, as it is bound to be in a society characterised by a racist carceral regime)? The wake for a person who has died is a communal event; mourning is most complete when it is shared; and solidarity is key both for the acknowledgement of trauma and the action needed to prevent its recurrence. This suggests the need for an active rather than an interpretive stance in relation to racism on the part of psychoanalysis, perhaps even a campaigning approach – something for which the recent statements of support by psychoanalytic societies for Black Lives Matter might act as a precursor.

Awakening

This leads into the third sense of 'wake' in *In the Wake*: wake as awakening, as waking up to the reality of racism but also as awakening to possibility, despite everything, despite the ongoing disaster. '*Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness.* It was with this sense of wakefulness as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation' (*Wake*, pp.4-5). Wake work of this kind allows the presence of the past to appear, so that the reality of continuing racism, the everlasting wake of slavery, is not belittled or denied; but it also tries to take hold of this to push forward the possibility of the awakening being *to something else*. There are echoes here of Cathy Caruth's reading of Freud's (1900, pp.509-510) report of the 'Father, I'm burning' dream, in which she emphasises the difficulty of waking up to something as the central problem of trauma. What does it mean to awaken? Caruth (1996, p.99), reading Lacan, suggests that the dream is a call that can only be heard in sleep – 'the awakening represents a paradox about the necessity and impossibility of confronting death.' Awakening itself then becomes a trauma: the father in the dream could not absorb his child's death and had to wake up to it retrospectively, always too late. '*Awakening*, in Lacan's reading of the dream, *is itself the site of a trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and the impossibility of responding to another's death' (p.100). This seems potentially to be a call to all of us, including psychoanalysts: can we face the trauma of awakening both to the realisation of the damage done, the deaths, and to the challenge of what needs to be done, the change and recuperation?

For Sharpe, the kind of wake work at issue is a rupturing of racism through the constant reiteration of Black lives, perhaps along the model that Saidiya Hartman (2019) offers in her rendering of those lives in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Sharpe has an extended account of what wake work involves, which includes the disruption of academic disciplines that position blackness as unknown otherness and instead to question 'how to live in the

wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives' (*Wake*, p.50). Das' (2006, 2020) insistence on the 'ordinary' again comes to mind, the way particular (singular) lives express opportunities for what we can call resistance as well as for suffering, for contiguities of care alongside those of violence. Treating racism predominantly as a response to otherness, which has been one tendency in psychoanalysis when it has struggled with the question of the derogated 'other', participates in the exclusion of blackness from the social norm, and therefore in the marginalising of Black lives. Opening out to Black experience means relating to the quotidian and the possibilities this generates amongst those that have always been denied; that is, it de-mystifies otherness by allowing it to take up its place in the 'human'. For Sharpe, some of this potential openness of Black experience is symbolised in the asterisk of trans*:

> The asterisk speaks to a range of configurations of Black being that take the form of translation, transatlantic, transgression, transgender, transformation, transmogrification, transcontinental, transfixed, trans-Mediterranean, transubstantiation (by which process we might understand the making of bodies into flesh and then into fungible commodities while retaining the appearance of flesh and blood), transmigration, and more. (*Wake*, p.30)

Several of these trans* affiliations resonate with negations of life (for instance, 'transatlantic', as in the slave ship; 'trans-Mediterranean' as in contemporary flows of refugees); but as a whole they also leave something open: 'The asterisk after the prefix "trans" holds the place open for thinking' (Ibid.) signalling new possibilities in relation to the old versions of trans- that marked the slave trade. This is not to be too resolutely optimistic as a way of closing down the viscerality of Sharpe's portrait of Black suffering; that too would be an easy route for denial and also a psychoanalytic truism. Being open to possibility is a therapeutic goal (the opposite of the closure of the mind that is part of Jacqueline Rose's (2007, p. 21) striking definition of resistance: 'repetition, blockage, blind obeisance to crushing internal constraint'), but the conditions for the redemption of that possibility have to be available, and, given what has been written here, this is not the case with racism. Psychoanalysis needs to recognise this in its practices, in what it holds out as a route for psychic and social change.

But Sharpe's wake work is more precise than this, and circulates around a notion of care. Again, we need to be cautious: the 'culture of care' is an important topic in contemporary social thought, and rightly so; but this has to be more than binding up each other's wounds if it is to effect the kinds of changes needed to offset the continuing disaster of racism. Laying out the ground at the start of her book, Sharpe (*Wake*, p.5) states, '*In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a work that insists and performs that thinking needs care ("all thought is Black thought") and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake.' Near the end, she fills this out as follows:

> Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance that started with the door of no return, continued in the hold of the ship and on the shore. (*Wake*, pp.130-1)

Thinking and care run together, as does survival and imagination. 'Repair, maintenance, attention' echo the 'enduring time' elaborated by Lisa Baraitser (2017), a time of slowness and focused thought, indeed of endurance, so that wakefulness becomes not a sudden release from trauma, but a slow process of uncovering the way the past directs the present, and staying with this as it is observed and renewed. In Baraitser's text, care always signifies something intersubjective; even self-care, as we know from Winnicott (1958), requires an other to care about one first. It happens as a background, a new turn in the weather, in the interstices of ordinary time; yet it is always a showing of solidarity, an acceptance of the basic principles of each person's life. Psychoanalysis again has, in principle, a lot to offer here. Its slowness and willingness to stay with someone over an extended period, to wait for something to happen and not to press when it fails to come; its capacity to confront and value repetitions – these attributes go against the run-of-the-mill therapies of neoliberalism (quick, short, 'efficient') to preserve a vision of care sustained over time. Sharpe's challenge to it is to bind this psychoanalytic ethic with *all* the elements of the wake: the enduring violence of slavery and antiblack racism; the endless mourning for this enduring state; the endurance required to *think otherwise*.

Conclusion

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* is an especially potent expression of Black awareness of the kind signified politically by Black Lives Matter. It presents a challenge to everyone, but here my interest has been in what it speaks back to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has largely ignored the 'weather' of ongoing racism in which slavery is at worst denied and forgotten, at best thought of as past. In this regard, psychoanalysis remains a colonial discipline, and one that fails its truth-seeking ethics by neglecting the actuality of Black experience. This is not to belittle the creative work of psychoanalytic thinkers on racism and the attempts by some institutes of psychoanalysis to respond honestly to racism in general and the Black Lives Matter movement in particular. Yet what *In the Wake* might alert us to is how psychoanalysis needs to address some of its own theoretical and practical assumptions if it is to rise to the challenge of wake awareness and wake work. This goes further than critiquing some of the more egregious elements of the theory, for example Freud's use of the civilised-savage divide or some of the interpretations of 'other' cultures promulgated in the mid-twentieth century, or even the perpetuation of the racialised vocabulary and imagery of 'cannibalism' in some psychoanalytic thought (Vyrgioti, 2018). It is additionally to require of psychoanalysis that it notices and makes explicit the real conditions of Black lives and how they – as well as society as a whole – are haunted by the legacy of slavery in the way ghosts haunt an unsettled body. This means acknowledging that slavery is still with us and that Black experience needs to be understood in the light of that fact. This is the ground and backdrop for psychoanalytic activity, the *weather* in which it takes place. Psychoanalysis cannot isolate itself from this, either in terms of who constitutes its practitioners and patients or how it speaks on a public stage about the persistence and effects of antiblack racism. It may mean a re-examination of its focus on interpretive practice, not because the unconscious ceases to be its concern (that concern is of course the essence of psychoanalysis), but because the unconscious is, to use the Lacanian trope (Lacan, 1966), 'transindividual'. It has an exterior structure, derived from the sociality in which it is embedded and actualised by the introjection of 'messages' from this sociality through

processes of the kind that Laplanche (1999) has so beautifully delineated. In the divided world in which we live, the form that this exterior structure takes is that of racism. Acknowledging this at every moment, not reducing it to psychological disturbance or bracketing it out as a sociological appendix or irrelevance, but making it the centre of analytic interest, will not be a proposal that is universally acceptable to psychoanalysts. But it has to come or, like so many others, we will all drown in the wake.

Conflict of Interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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