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When Empathy is Not Enough: a Reflection on the Self-Experience of Black Boys in Public Spaces

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Published online: 22 August 2018

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Abstract

This project explores the self-experiences of Black boys in public spaces, primarily in Chicago. Given the plethora of negative media attention placed on violence in the city and on violent encounters with law enforcement, this project asks how Black boys can experience themselves in a life-giving way when so many negative images and stereotypes denigrate their humanity. The author introduces the concepts of *group-level racial delusion* and *demonic transference*. The former term suggests a psychological split occurring at the societal level that historically has allowed emotional and physical violence to be disproportionately and callously inflicted on Black boys in public spaces, which society has internalized as normative while simultaneously extolling democratic and Christian values central to Western identity formation. The latter term suggests the interpersonal or group transference that occurs just prior to the infliction of emotional or physical harm on Black boys—a transference that is propped up by abject images and stereotypes of Black males. The article concludes first with reflections on a qualitative interview conducted with two groups of Black boys in Chicago pertaining to their self-experiences in public spaces and then with thoughts on future work.

Keywords Black boys · Violence · Black males · Demonic transference · Racial delusion · Empathy

They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, *How does it feel to be a problem?* they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. *To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.* (Du Bois 1903, emphasis added)

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Background and context

In the above passage, W. E. B. Du Bois outlines for us a familiar interaction. It is the kind of red-herring, small-talk conversation that witnesses to contexts where the very presence of Black bodies (especially Black male bodies) precipitates anxiety, uncertainty, or gazing. When Du Bois postulates what he believes to be the real question (i.e., how it feels to be a problem), he is capturing in literary form the deadly psychosocial practice that has infested the Western psyche for centuries: the unconscious and implicit practice of demonizing, criminalizing, and objectifying the Black male body.

This paper offers a psychodynamic framework for explicating the unconscious propensity to objectify and criminalize the Black male body—particularly Black boys—in public spaces along with the deleterious emotional effects this objectification has on the lives of these boys. Instead of examining the lives of Black boys through caricatured images and stereotypes that inundate television and social media (and only exacerbate the problem of objectification), I highlight their *self-experiences* through the power of their own voices. Using salient themes derived from qualitative interviews of Black boys on the south side of Chicago, I draw attention to the *self-experience* of the boys as they strive to exist in public spaces that are generally antagonistic to their presence, bodies, and personhood. The field of practical and pastoral theology has long viewed empathy as a critical component of redemptive praxis. *But what happens when empathy—the capacity to imaginatively place oneself in the context of another—is simply not enough to bring about healing to the wounded and flourishing to the marginalized?*

The idea for this project, in large part, is in response to the negative portrayal of Black males—particularly boys—in the national spotlight. Especially in Chicago, images of life on the south side of the city commonly associate negative story lines and imagery with Black male youth. Across the country, narratives of Black people being vilified in public spaces are becoming common. The latent elements of an intergenerational, deep-seated racial animus (and hatred) is rising to the surface of the collective American psychic space. It is becoming commonplace for Black people to have the police called on them—by White people—for the most mundane acts in public spaces (sitting in Starbucks without buying coffee, barbequing in a public park, sleeping in a student lounge in an Ivy League school, etc.). Deadly encounters with law enforcement (and other self-appointed enforcers of the law) have reached epidemic proportions: Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Trayvon Martin are but a few of the victims. As it relates to lost life, the ultimate tragedy is not only these deaths but also the potential for life that has been foreclosed. Even as I initially penned this short manuscript, my community of Grand Rapids, Michigan, internalized images of police officers holding five Black boys at gunpoint because an anonymous caller to 911 indicated one of the boys *might* be armed. None of the boys were armed. Hearing some of the boys cry out “I don’t want to die” is the stuff of nightmares.

It is important that I specify my social location in proximity to this project. I am a Black male scholar, born and raised on the south side of Chicago. It pains my entire being to see the media portrayal of Black boys in Chicago—as if the only existence these youths know is one of violence, guns, and death. My observations and lament are in no way meant to minimize the epidemic of violence in the city. Indeed, the proliferation of gun violence in Chicago is not beyond my scholarly purview. In the very contentious sociopolitical environment where we find ourselves in 2018, some might find it conceivable that I would focus more on the intracultural violence that transpires between Black males rather than reflecting on the violence

between law enforcement and Black people (particularly Black males) or the tenuous self-experiences of Black boys in public spaces. In part, my point is to argue that the Black male imagery commonly highlighted in the media is a far cry from the *actual lives* of Black boys and teenagers in Chicago.

On a more personal note, after I was pulled over in the Hyde Park area of Chicago for talking on the cell phone, a White female police officer approached my vehicle and asked for my license, registration, and insurance. While keeping both of my hands on the steering wheel, I explained to the officer everything I was about to do *before I did it* (e.g., reach for my wallet in my back pocket or reach for my glove compartment for registration and insurance). The officer smiled in response to my actions, but for me it was no laughing matter. It was only when I reached to open the glove compartment that I noticed in the passenger-side mirror another police officer flanked to my right with his hand clearly in the vicinity of his holster. Ostensibly, the responding officer had requested backup for a stop related to my talking on the cell phone. Since that incident, I have often pondered how quickly something could have gone wrong if the officer flanked to the rear of the car had *thought* I was reaching for something else in my glove compartment. As I have occasionally shared this story with others, the responses I get ranged from empathic reactions of disdain and frustration to more paternalistic diatribes explaining that the officers were within their rights and acted according to their training or that they hadn't broken the law. But whether we are considering this personal encounter or any of the preceding incidents mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the point of this project is not to determine the legality of any action per se.

My decision to take up this topic does not mean that I am oblivious to intracultural violence among Black males any more than a White scholar taking up an issue that affects the lives of White people suggests that she is somehow oblivious to intracultural violence among White people. The *myth of black-on-black violence* as a unique ontological category has for far too long represented an uncontested stereotype. This is not to deny the reality of intracultural violence but only to recognize that White people commit violence against other White people, Latino and Latina people commit violence against other Latinos and Latinas, human beings kill other human beings—you get my point. The point of this project is to *examine the psychodynamics behind why some people or groups in the psychosocial space of our society disproportionately and implicitly experience anxiety or fear in the presence of Black male bodies and experience a sense of civic or moral justification when exacting any form of violence (emotional or physical) against Black male bodies—especially Black boys.*

Brief historical analysis

The objectification of Black male bodies in the Western imaginary is not a recent phenomenon. It has a long-standing tradition in modernity. Fanon (1952) understands it as a fundamental *Weltanschauung* of the colonial project. It operates with ruthless efficiency in the unconsciousness of the colonial subject (both victims and benefactors). For Fanon, the violence inherent in Western expansionism effectively forecloses psychic countermeasures within the subaltern against the imposing imagination of Eurocentric fantasy. That is to say, “Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (pp. 82–83). This objectification of Black male bodies can come across in the most seemingly innocent manner—even from children: “Look, a Negro.. .. Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened” (p. 84). Fanon recognized that his very existence was manifested not only in the time and space he

occupied at any moment but by the weight of his ancestry and history and the legacy of colonial fantasy: “I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else. . . ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (pp. 84–85).

Even in America, the deadly effects of this racialized imaginary are self-evident in the terror of lynching inflicted on Black lives—namely, Black males—in the early twentieth century. The ubiquitous and unconscious nature of this racialized imagery comes to light especially well in an exchange between Jane Addams (an acclaimed pioneer in the field of social work) and Ida B. Wells-Barnett (a well-respected female Black journalist and activist best known for her work related to the anti-lynching campaign). What makes this case most intriguing is that Jane Addams is (deservingly) recognized and celebrated for her work in women’s suffrage, feminism, and the establishment of Chicago’s Hull House—a settlement house for European immigrants. Nevertheless, Addams’s (1901) notable regard for human experience falls short in her examination of lynching in the Jim Crow South and her explanation of why so many Black men were being victimized. According to Addams, the epidemic of lynching was in reaction to an *assumed rise in crime* committed by Black males. She further argued that Southerners had a right to self-govern, to determine how to deal with this *alleged rise* in crime, that *criminals* should not be hanged without a trial by jury, and that the *primary mistake* of Southerners was the false assumption that “criminality can be suppressed and terrorized by exhibitions of brutal punishment; that crime can be prevented by cruelty” (p. 18). Her entire analysis stems from the implicit and unconscious criminalization of Black males. To support her position, Addams grants robust hermeneutical privilege to the supporters of lynching (participants, observers, and bystanders) when she posits:

Let us then assume that the Southern citizens who take part in and abet the lynching of negroes honestly believe that that is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crimes; that they have become convinced that the Southern negro in his present undeveloped state must be frightened and subdued by terror; that, acting upon this theory, they give each lynching full publicity and often gather together numerous spectators . . . let us give the Southern citizens the full benefit of this position, and assume that they have set aside trial by jury and all processes of law because they have become convinced that this brutal method of theirs is the most efficient method of dealing with a particular class of crime committed by one race against another. (Addams 1901, p. 18, emphasis added)

In her analysis, why must we assume that Southern citizens honestly believe lynching is the only successful method? Who cares if they believe this? Why must we give them the full benefit of this position? The position that somehow the lynch mob should be excused for their actions if they honestly believe they are in danger is precarious at best and sociopathic at worst when it comes at the expense of Black lives. Even today, we hear a similar train of thought used to justify violence committed against Black boys in public spaces (i.e., did the actor honestly believe there was imminent danger) whereas *other lighter-skinned bodies* move about relatively invisible in the public sphere and tend to get the sociopolitical benefit of the doubt. Addams’s entire analysis was based on an unconscious racialized imagination that *seemed and felt right* to her. For Addams and many others in the Western psychic space, the presumed danger and guilt of Black male bodies are akin to psychic muscle memory; Black culpability is an unconscious, foregone conclusion. Unfortunately, the application of the colonial logic has real and deadly implications. That is to say, implicit and unconscious racial bias and animus often yield explicit and material reactionary violence.

How might we account for the contradiction and irony of Addams's assessment of lynching? How does a tireless advocate of human rights concede the barbarity of lynching and at the same time—through the uninterrogated, presumptive, and unconscious criminalization of Black males—craft an empathic argument that favors the architects and supporters of such demonic brutality? Wells-Barnett (1901) cogently debunks these implicit biases and assumptions of Black criminality in her response to Addams:

It is unspeakably infamous to put thousands of people to death without a trial by jury; *it adds to that infamy to charge that these victims were moral monsters*, when, in fact, four-fifths of them were not so accused even by the fiends who murdered them. . . . [I]t is this assumption, this absolutely unwarrantable assumption, that vitiates every suggestion which it inspires Miss Addams to make. It is the same baseless assumption which influences ninety-nine out of every one hundred persons who discuss this question. Among many thousand editorial clippings I have received in the past five years, ninety-nine per cent discuss the question upon the *presumption* that lynchings are the desperate effort of the Southern people to protect their women from *black monsters*, and while the large majority condemn lynching, the condemnation is *tempered with a plea for the lyncher*—that human nature gives way under such awful provocation and that the mob, insane for the moment, must be pitied as well as condemned. (pp. 1133–1134, emphasis added)

The same observations that Wells-Barnett made over a century ago still hold true today in terms of the unconscious demonization and criminalization of Black males in public spaces. Yet the question remains: How can a person or society extol democratic values while simultaneously condoning, justifying, or ignoring violence commonly exacted on Black male bodies?

Group-level racial delusion

One possible response to this question relates to individual or group splitting.¹ One side of the split (for an individual or group) reflects a reactionary violence toward Black male bodies in the public sphere or a self-experience of anxiety, fear, or even rage at the sight of Black boys or teenagers in public spaces. The other side of the split reflects the unconscious self-experience

¹ Kohut's (1979) conception of a vertical split is persuasive for the purposes of this paper. In the vertical split, an individual (or group) experiences itself self in two distinctly separate ways—ways that are antagonistic toward each other or that could represent such wide contrasts that the vertical split becomes a source of cognitive or emotional dissonance within a person or group. In the case of racial oppression, one side of the split of the oppressor reflects grandiose-exhibitionistic self-experiences related to Western superiority or potential death-dealing "acting out" by the individual (or group). These grandiose self-experiences and acting out are primarily driven by archaic nuclear ambitions and ideas related to Western exceptionalism. The question of whether or not these nuclear ambitions and ideas are life-giving, especially in Western society, is open for debate and was beyond the work of Kohut. The other side of the split represents American and religious idealism that is necessary to prop up Whiteness or the *images and facades of Western innocence and exceptionalism*. The split itself reflects disavowal—a maladaptive but formidable ego strength that enables the person or group to possess the capacity to know and not know at the same time. Undemeath this entire psychic structure is a horizontal repression barrier that represses the realities (for both the individual or group) of a violent Western history, a history that turns the very ideas of American innocence and virtue on its head. It also represses experiences of guilt, shame, anxiety, or condemnation stemming from the violence or injustice that is necessary to underwrite Whiteness and the political ideology of Americanism.

of innocence, virtue, exceptionalism, or any other experience of the self that is *necessary to prop up the ideology of Whiteness and Western superiority*. That is to say, one side of the split adheres to the values and principles of democracy and American idealism while the other side of the split justifies and normalizes brutality and violence on the bodies of the subaltern—in this case, Black male bodies. The psychic structure of the split allows for widely competing ideas. The concept of splitting accounts for the requisite mental, emotional, and spiritual resources that enable an individual, group, or empire to simultaneously inflict heinous violence against subaltern bodies—to be oblivious to the interior hatred, biases, and bigotry that underwrite such violence—and at the same time to be fully convinced (religiously, socially, and politically) that its actions are morally justifiable. When this psychic structure—and the resulting affective state of the individual or group—undermines all other psychological or spiritual faculties at the expense of objectifying, violating, or indiscriminately killing Black people in public spaces (especially Black males), I refer to it as *group-level racial delusion*. To this end, I suggest that what Wells-Barnett witnessed in the early part of the twentieth century in the terror of lynching, and what Addams (and many of her White contemporaries) fell victim to, was *group-level racial delusion*.

Given the long history of the objectification and criminalization of Black male bodies, this project reflects on how young Black males on the south side of Chicago experience themselves in public spaces. How can Black boys experience themselves in a life-giving way that is accretive to human flourishing when colonial fantasy, *group-level racial delusion*, and death-dealing stereotypes have all but stamped out any substantive or life-giving symbols in the occidental public sphere? The insatiable media appetite for negative Black male imagery reflects a long history of colonial images that play out in the psyche and emotional field of Western civilization, effectively reducing the bodies of Black men and boys to objects of fear, suspicion, and abjection. Morris (1999) sums the problem up succinctly, noting that “the popular imagination, the media, and social science literature have focused on the Black male as criminal, violent, family deserter, lazy and shiftless predator, and extremely self-centered. .. thought to be a creature of emotion and impulse rather than intellect. .. dangerous, menacing, and a drain on the resources of the larger society” (p. xii).

A brief history of the objectification of Black bodies

Although it is problematic to assume a linear trajectory between contemporary racial oppression and precolonial or Victorian-era images of sub-Saharan Africans or Black and Brown peoples of the earth, the psychosocial and anthropological antecedents of contemporary racial pathology are deeply entrenched in the Western collective psyche. Scholars such as Braude (1997), Blackburn (1997), Morgan (1997), and others have cogently demonstrated that the complexities of racial formation and identity originated east of the Atlantic during the medieval and enlightenment eras and cannot be reduced to how race is conceived in the modern-day West. Still, the primary hegemonic tool that seems to remain characteristic of the oppression and enslavement of human beings throughout the history of Western expansionism is the *animalization of the subaltern*: associating individuals and groups—through idealization or objectification—with beast-like features (Davis 1997).

The subjugated caricatures of black life and black bodies in classical media, literature, and entertainment only served to further ingrain abject imagery in the psychic space of the West. Victorian depictions of the Black and Brown peoples from the African continent tended to

highlight difference and thereby underwrote the requisite ideologies of inferiority and subcategories of humanness (Vaughan and Vaughan 1997). The effect on the English imagination was (and remains) clear and self-evident: “A black African provoked curiosity at the very least and often marvel; rarely, if ever, did the sight inspire admiration. Judging from the writings of George Best and all of his contemporaries whose ruminations survive, *contempt was the prevailing response*” (p. 27, emphasis added). Given the ubiquitous distribution of contemptuous literature and caricatures of abject Black bodies juxtaposed against the Elizabethan imagination, it is preposterous to think that the effect of such imagery was delimited to Shakespearian theater or other forms of classical entertainment. For Vaughan and Vaughan, the implications for a nation are clear:

These negative representations of alien black Moors were perhaps symptomatic of what Richard Helgerson calls “nation formation,” in which *accounts of exotic peoples helped England define itself*. As a nation being formed, insecurely groping toward common ground in religion and politics and searching for national symbols in literature and art, England was *as concerned with what it was not as with what it was*. And the English public acquired its images of alien Others to an appreciable extent in the theater. (p. 38, emphasis added)

If there is to ever be a redemptive path forward beyond racial oppression, the utilitarian purposes of Black objectification—especially that of males—must be understood as far more than morally objectionable; the criminalized Black body in public spaces *helps America define itself*. ... as *Western exceptionalism is continuously concerned with what it is not and with what it is*. Interrogating American identity politics, then, especially in the post-Obama sociopolitical environment, is inseparable from truly comprehending the self-experience of Black boys in public spaces.

Racial delusion and religion

Negative imagery related to Black bodies has long infected the religious realm as well. In addition to discrediting alternative epistemologies (i.e., ways and means of knowing) from marginalized groups that had been *otherized* in the colonial project, the colonization of Christianity not only anthropologically redefined what it meant to be human but also engaged religious categories such as demonic, heretical, or unorthodox to describe the practices and experiences of the Amerindian and African *other* (Wynter 2003). For example, as I periodically reflect on my own experiences in various religious denominations or in the halls of theological education, I am amused at how poverty-stricken communities, individuals at the margin, or groups of Black boys that leisurely congregate in public spaces all become targets of *alleged evangelism or missionary work*. The subaltern, the marginalized, and the poor are commonly experienced by the church as needing spiritual aid and assistance. Of course, the implicit assumption made by these religious organizations is that marginalization reflects a person’s meager spiritual condition or divine punishment or wrath (or that the privilege of those who exist at the center is reflective of a healthier spiritual condition or divine affirmation). It never occurs (it seems) to such actors that people can *be forced to exist at the margin and simultaneously possess a life-giving faith*, often a faith that looks radically different from religion of the powerful and privileged. That is to say, *marginal social location and raced bodies* (especially the bodies of Black boys in public spaces) tend to become implicit, unconscious markers of irreligiosity in the colonial project.

This presumptuous tendency in religion, especially in Western Christianity, is rightfully located in colonial history. Building on the work of anthropologist Jacob Pandian, Wynter (2003) highlights a critical feature of Western expansionism—“the West’s transformation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas/the Caribbean. .. together with the population group of the enslaved peoples of Africa, transported across the Atlantic into the physical referents of its reinvented True Christian Self, as that of the Human other to its new ‘descriptive statement’ of the ostensibly only normal human, Man” (p. 265). That is to say, instead of Christian God-talk being used to live more faithfully and to foster a radical love of neighbor, in the colonial project theology effectively becomes a tool that legitimates who is human and who is less than human, which bodies are important, and which human experiences will be recognized or discarded. Given this historical propensity to associate the subaltern with non-Christian themes, Ray (2003) cogently observes that those with the least amount of power (socially, economically, and politically) tend to be the object of Christian sin-talk. The material danger of such demonizing sin-talk cannot be overemphasized. Ray observes two presuppositions typically held in most Christian circles: “sin destroys, and God punishes sin. .. [S]in-talk is therefore serious business because once the source of social sin is named, the impulse to stigmatize it is strong and the desire to destroy it even stronger” (p. 1). This, in part, might go toward the inexplicable silence the Church tends to maintain when it comes to the topic of violence perpetrated toward Black men—especially Black boys—by law enforcement: *Black boys have long been negatively stereotyped and associated with sin and the need for salvation.*

Racial delusion in public spaces

This public portrayal of negative Black male imagery works in tandem with social, cultural, and historical fantasies in the American collective psyche, a psyche underwritten by a racialized imagination. The insatiable appetite of the media (including social media) for negative Black male imagery reflects a perverse group-level functioning that entails elements of splitting, projective identification, valence and container functions, and psychotic anxiety (Cytrynbaum 1993). Psychotic anxiety relates to anxiety that is irrational in its *prima facie* functioning and experienced as persecutory. Such anxiety stems from fears of personal, cultural, or social annihilation. In-group/out-group dynamics, or intergroup bigotry, derives its energy from psychotic anxiety. Group-level functioning suggests that groups take on a mind and life of their own that are far more complex than individual psychic functioning. For our purposes here, projective identification reflects undesired elements that individuals or groups have projected (or scapegoated) onto the Black male body. Ultimately, this contributes to the constant negative media imagery and resulting fear and anxiety related to Black male bodies in public spaces. The identification counterpart (of projective identification) reflects the possible internalization (by Black boys) of racialized projections materializing in a variety of ways, including cultural trauma, depleted self-worth, or even the commercialization of negative imagery (in the music entertainment industry or Hollywood) that plays off of racialized stereotypes.

The volume of negative imagery related to Black males in the media suggests a valence and container function (on the part of the media industry) wherein the media acts as a container that holds the racialized fantasies, resentments, and anxieties of society. These media moguls exhibit a valence (or archaic disposition) to focus on (or exacerbate) false or negative story lines of marginalized individuals or groups. This form of cultural trauma flattens the histories and life stories of Black boys, effectively preventing their voice and agency from articulating

their own life stories and human experiences. In their psychosocial analysis of group dynamics through the lenses of race and culture, McRae and Short (2010) offer up a cogent analysis of projective identification at the social level, suggesting that when it occurs it “is often a microcosm of what occurs in society. . . subgroups that may have greater access to power and privilege may seek to maintain status by disowning undesirable and ambivalently held aspects of themselves by projecting negative attributes onto other subgroups. . . recipients of stereotyped, racist, discriminatory projections” (pp. 62–63).

Of all the group-dynamic themes mentioned, splitting provides the requisite emotional repertoire for an individual or group to unconsciously enact racial ideology, embody injurious behaviors and attitudes, and exact violence while at the same time extolling values of human decency and liberty, democracy, and good will. Although not comprehensive in its explanatory power, the concept of splitting—applied to group-level functioning—provides compelling historical insight into how some of the most heinous atrocities committed against humanity (the trans-Atlantic slave trade, American slavery, the Holocaust, Native American genocide, etc.) were carried out by groups and nations that espoused moral virtue and democracy. More specific to this project, splitting provides significant insight into how the bodies of young Black males can be objectified and brutalized in public spaces with little to no public outrage. In this paradigm, I suggest that the Black male body becomes a theological and religious scapegoat—the societal fetish necessary to underwrite the group-level split. Without a scapegoat, the group disavowal that sustains the split would collapse. Borrowing from Freud’s work on fetishism and disavowal, Hook (2005) sums up the emotional impasse that is the result of this inner working²:

Racism functioning at this level is very difficult to eradicate. Why so? Well, *because the racist has more often than not already assimilated the lesson of anti-racism*. Disavowal works . . . by being a less than fully adaptive attempt at adapting to a threatening state of affairs, by saying . . . I believe x, I just choose, every once in a while, to believe not x anyway. . . . As pessimistic as such an implication is, it is important to confront, otherwise we are left with less than effective ways of countering racism. What is particularly important about this understanding of fetishistic disavowal is that it reminds us again of the limitations of the myth of racism as mere ignorance: *one can repeatedly challenge racists with the proof of racial equality in all the ways that matter, without making the slightest dent in their racist perceptions, because after all, they have already acknowledged that race makes no difference—they just opt to act as if it did, anyway.* (pp. 715–716, emphasis added)

A notable historical example of racial delusion in public spaces is evidenced in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1986) letter from a Birmingham, Alabama, jail cell in April of 1963. Far more than simply composing poetic prose, he succinctly captures the phenomenon of group-level racial delusion (along with its splitting and disavowal functions) when he writes with utter frustration:

² Challenging disavowal is important, but some groups lack sufficient ego strength to even critically engage in redemptive conversation that could expose and challenge splitting or group-level racial delusion. Such groups tend to psychically decompensate to such an extreme (via passive aggressiveness or claims of unfair treatment) that any form of empathic interpretation (about racial delusion) is nearly impossible—especially if the individual or group is part of the power structure.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: “*What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?*” (p. 299, emphasis added)

When he questions the kind of people who worship there and the nature of their God, King wrestles with how people can simultaneously hold Christian principles and racial ideology without any *apparent* anxiety or discomfort—a perfect example of *group-level racial delusion* and splitting. On the night before he was assassinated, in his final sermon, King responds to this long-standing practice of *American splitting and disavowal* by preaching “*All we say to America is, ‘Be true to what you said on paper. . . . If I lived in . . . any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand some of these illegal injunctions. Maybe I could understand the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges. . . . But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly . . . the freedom of speech . . . [and] the freedom of press.’*”³

Demonic transference

In addition to splitting, the concept of transference offers compelling explanatory power for both the propensity to objectify Black boys in public spaces and also the mechanism by which it becomes easier to inflict psychological violence. Expanding how we understand the concept of transference and how we examine the content of this transference is beneficial to this work. The classic definition of transference delimits our understanding of the possibilities of human connectedness to the therapeutic encounter. As traditionally understood in a Freudian paradigm, transference describes the unconscious displacement of past affect related to significant others onto the person of the therapist, commonly due to emotional deficits related to unresolved conflict (s).

Schaeffer (2007) suggests a basic possibility behind transference in the human situation, suggesting that “though the conscious mind knows that past conflicts need to be resolved, the unconscious mind uses transference as a means of avoiding conflict resolution” (p. 4). According to Schaeffer, our understanding of transference (since Freud’s conception of the phenomenon) has expanded to include fantasizing (i.e., the transferor does not subject the transference to reality testing), positive and negative components or emotions, the conflictual nature of transference (i.e., interior anxiety related to frustrated desire), transference understood as a re-enactment of past negative intersubjective experiences, and the dynamic nature of transference (i.e., even though it reflects a past encounter, the emotional outcome upon the transferor is subject to the response of the present therapist). Summed up then by Schaeffer in

³ This is an excerpt from the last sermon of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., preached on April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple—the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ—in Memphis, Tennessee. See source at <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>

what she refers to as a totalistic definition, “Transference is the client’s unconscious displacement of attitudes, feelings, sensations, and thoughts from another person in the client’s life, past or present, to the therapist in an attempt to re-enact and resolve conflict; it presumes the therapist’s unconscious participation in these efforts” (p. 9).

The totalistic definition incorporates a more comprehensive understanding of transference, but more recent definitions of transference have sought to include the impacts of culture, ethnicity, and race in the therapeutic encounter. The term ‘ethnic unconscious’ has been employed to account for the unconscious workings of sociocultural themes and symbols within transference and the therapeutic space (Hersch 1980; Javier and Rendon 1995). Altman (2010) employs what he has termed a three-person model (juxtaposed against the traditional one- and two-person models) “so a larger social perspective can enrich our understanding at the level of both individual and dyad” (p. 61) and to focus “our attention not only to the analytic dyad, but also to the patient’s and the analyst’s relationship to the social context within which the analytic dyad functions” (p. 86). Further highlighting the potency of thirdness, Aggarwal (2011) goes as far to suggest that the sociocultural subjectivity generated by the patient and the therapist has the capacity to “take on a life of its own in the culturally inflected, interpersonal field” (p. 212). Lastly, a growing number of theorists and practitioners are recognizing that the larger sociohistorical context does indeed manifest itself in the therapeutic encounter via transference and countertransference (Altman 2004; Bonovitz 2005; Gump 2010).

What seems then to be absent from reflections on transference in the literature is its usage beyond the therapy room in a way that sheds light on interpersonal and psychosocial interactions. Specific to this project, I am concerned with transference and how it affects tenuous interactions with Black boys in public spaces, whether it be with law enforcement, the media, or any other societal stakeholder that has an interaction with Black boys. An expanded conception of transference (in terms of both its content and its usage beyond the therapeutic paradigm) seems to hold tremendous interpretive power. For example, it could go a long way toward explaining the growing amount of quantitative data that substantiates the material reality of adverse interactions between law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and Black males (Goff et al. 2016; Ross 2015; Spencer and Charbonneau 2016).

Similar to when it occurs in the therapy room, *it is not beyond the pale to suggest that transference can be precipitated when there is any interpersonal or group interaction that triggers strong emotional or affective states, especially an encounter that entails a power dynamic whereby one person or group is subordinate to another person or group.* For example, it is very conceivable that transference is involved when ethnic minorities are mistreated at the hands of law enforcement or when unarmed Black men and boys are callously gunned down because they are *experienced or perceived as dangerous.* Quantitative data in implicit bias research continues to suggest a greater statistical likelihood of negative encounters between police and people of color than between police and Whites that cannot be explained by crime rates. Transference holds significant explanatory power. Further on in her expository on transference, Schaeffer (2007) highlights several triggers (or what she refers to as archetypes) that precipitate and influence transference in the therapeutic encounter. This includes experiencing the therapist (or, for my purposes, the one perceived as having more power or authority) as a mother, as a father, as a god or goddess, as a sibling, or as the source of completion a person seeks from the opposite gender. She does not give much attention to it, but Schaeffer does suggest that other cultural phenomena could precipitate transference as well.

One such cultural phenomenon that I suggest precipitates and shapes transference is the fantastic hegemonic imagination as elucidated by Townes (2006). Building on Michel Foucault's conception of fantasia and Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, Townes argues that the fantastic hegemonic imagination perverts and distorts history and memory in a way that hijacks personal and social imagination in order to erect and sustain structures of evil. In the Townesian paradigm, the "fantastic" renders evil banal and latent, such that anyone is susceptible to its influence. Likewise, the essence of the hegemonic in this paradigm rests in its ability to seduce the subjugated into acquiescing (across numerous disciplines and institutions) to the rules and ideologies of domination (both consciously and unconsciously), thereby creating what Townes refers to as a "false conscious." I believe it is this "false conscious" that, psychodynamically speaking, makes hegemony *feel right to those it oppresses*. In her project, Townes locates the etiology of the death-dealing stereotypes imposed on Black women within the fantastic hegemonic imagination. I would further add that it is the fantastic hegemonic imagination that has produced and maintained colonial fantasy, racial delusion, rabid stereotypes, and the criminalization of Black boys in public spaces. At this point, considering Schaeffer's observation that other cultural phenomena can prompt transferences and my suggestion that Townes's conception of the fantastic hegemonic imagination represents one of those cultural phenomena, I introduce *demonic transference*. *In this proposed conception of demonic transference, I am arguing that the fantastic hegemonic imagination, when left unchecked over the long run (individually, socially, or culturally), creates an antagonistic or hostile interpersonal or group transference that potentially leads to brutal or death-dealing encounters with Black male bodies in public spaces.*

Tillich's (1936) conception of the demonic is useful here as well. According to Tillich, the demonic is not about a spirit (as object) per se but is nonetheless still spiritual (i.e., part of the human situation that is concerned with the divine or the ultimate concern). The demonic finds its realization in the spirit. For Tillich, the demonic is primarily manifested in the personality of the individual or group. The essence of demonry reflects the cleavage of that personality. That is to say, for Tillich possession reflects the division of consciousness. Similar to how Kohut conceives of the vertical split, Tillich suggests that in the individual or group personality, "Its power over itself is founded in its unity, in the synthetic character of consciousness. .. [but] the possessed state is the attack on the unity and freedom, on the center of the personality. .. cleavage of consciousness has always been held a sign of the possessed state" (p. 87). Because demonry, for Tillich, represents a cleavage of the personality (as opposed to an overtaking of consciousness), mind and being remain in place such that the possessed "recognize Christ as Christ" (p. 87).

Consequently, a Tillichean lens reveals the demonic (both individual and socially) as a *cleavage* in group or individual personality such that *individuals and groups can be both spiritual and spirit-deforming at the same time*, capable of revealing the divine but only "as a reality which it fears, which it cannot love, with which it cannot unite" (p. 88). Religious groups and institutions thus can create good, but they can also exact a perversion of creativity that generates destruction. The ultimate paradox of the Tillichean lens of demonry is that an individual or institution—even an established religious institution—can simultaneously do great good and great evil (in its pursuit of what it thinks is good). *That is to say, religious people and institutions can exact some of the greatest crimes against humanity while in the pursuit of goodness or the holy.*

Consequently, in both Townes's explication of the fantastic hegemonic imagination and Tillich's understanding of the demonic, anyone is subject to its influences. The fantastic

hegemonic imagination has the potential to captivate anyone—Black or White—in a way that objectifies and vilifies Black boys in public spaces. The Tillichean lens on the demonic turns the rhetorical question of Christian racial culpability on its head—that is to say, Western Christianity and racial oppression are not mutually exclusive. Both narratives are independent. Western Christianity is implicated in North American racial oppression. The concept of *demonic transference* is helpful in explaining violent events such as those that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017. Individuals and groups can profess religious values and—at the same time—march and demonstrate for neo-Nazi and White-supremacist values.

A brief conversation with Black boys

The ongoing negative portrayal of Black boys in Chicago has the potential (if it has not already happened) to create a permanent psychic caste system because these boys are constantly experienced as threatening (at best) or abject (at worst) by the larger society. This death-dealing psychosocial cast system provides little to no spiritual, emotional, or psychological resources that are accretive to the emotional and spiritual well-being of Black boys. Life-giving identity formation is foreclosed. Therefore, this project asks questions of these boys about their *self-experience* in an intersubjective global world that (implicitly and explicitly) relegates the bodies of Black men and boys to the lowest rungs of an interpsychic caste system.

In this project, I interviewed two groups of Black boys: one group of high school juniors and seniors and another group (at a different location) that ranged in age from 13 to 21 years old. I asked questions informed by a Kohutian framework. This was not because of any predisposed affinity for Kohut's work but because of the context (Nazi Germany atrocities against Jews) in which, as a Holocaust survivor, he likely conceived and fashioned his theory of the human project. According to Aron (2007), for Kohut the ultimate horror one could experience in life was to exist in an environment where one was not deemed to be human. This seems to be the context of Black boys in America.

Below, I briefly reflect on five salient themes/questions I posed to both groups: (1) What is your experience of self in various public spaces throughout Chicago or when you see Black males depicted in the media? (2) If you had a worldwide audience, what would you want them to know about you as a Black male? (3) Describe an instance or situation in your life that was a high point, a time when you thought you could conquer the world? (4) Who do you admire most, such that being around them (or in that place) gives you a sense of being *uplifted* or encouraged, and, (5) If you could have anything or any type of life after graduation, what would it be?

Regarding the first question on self-experience in public spaces (and the media), the responses included experiences of being stressed, being depressed, being enraged (because of negative stereotypes), and being hurt (because of implicit biases relative to Black boys). Both groups seemed to share the belief that the negative media depictions or negative social responses served to motivate them to personally succeed and defy low expectations or beat the odds. Salient comments included (1) "It's hard to be a black male in Chicago"; (2) "It's motivating, you see this bad stuff and want to do better, but it is scary, it is a life-and-death situation"; (3) "The media does not try to tell the whole story. They will always show killings. They will not show graduations or other good things about Chicago. Focusing on the killings makes their jobs easier"; (4) "No one is talking about the kids in my high school that won first

place in drama. No one is talking about the girl that got pregnant and still got accepted to college and plans to attend”; and (5) “The negative portrayals are especially hurtful when they come from other Black people.” There was a general sense of existential fatigue associated with the negative media depictions or the negative stereotypes they faced in the public spaces of Chicago. One student summed it up by saying, “It is stressful and depressing but beneficial because when you have been through so much, you don’t feel it anymore. I learned to bottle it up and not to show emotion. But now I am finding myself around people that help me express myself and not be a shell. Teachers and friends in school help take stress away.”

For the question related to what they would want the world to know about them as Black males, the prevalent theme seemed to focus on their being no different than any other human being. A sample of responses includes the following: (1) “Never judge a book by its cover. You never know what a person goes through. Nobody’s opportunities should be taken from them because of the way they look. Know what people stand for!” (2) “Other races do the same [presumably negative] things as Black people, but Black people are the face of all things bad. ... *they make us the face of the world’s problems*”; and (3) “We are something greater than what you see on television. We are in school trying to do great things.”

Responding to the question about a high point in life when they felt as if they could conquer the world (i.e., affirming self-object needs), the responses coalesced around school, sports, and the arts. In several cases, the most important element for the boys seemed to be what they accomplished with their fellow classmates. A sampling of responses included the following: (1) “I feel most alive when I am doing what I do best: playing a sport like football—doing what I do best and showcasing it”; (2) “When we put that helmet on, *winning together is what counts because we are from the south side* [of Chicago], *and people automatically think we don’t amount to anything*”; (3) “Graduating from elementary school was the highlight of my life”; (4) “A high point for me was when I transcribed a piece of music that my instructor didn’t believe I could transcribe. ... he was surprised”; and (5) “Band camp was a high point for me.”

Regarding the question of who they admired or liked being around because they *uplifted* them (i.e., idealizing self-object needs), in both groups the boys’ identified one of their fellow classmates or friends, a teacher, an administrator, someone at their church, or one of the boys in the room where we were having the group interviews. Interestingly enough, when I prodded them about admiring a famous athlete or entertainer, the overwhelming response was that because they didn’t have access to such individuals, they felt no strong admiration for them.

Finally, in response the question about what they wanted if they could have anything (or live in any way) after graduation, every response—in both groups—centered on giving back to their community or somehow making *their world* a better place. One might think that because there were other adults present observing the group interview or because the boys were aware of the topic being discussed (i.e., Black males in public spaces), they were possibly embellishing their responses to look better. But as the empathic investigator in the room, I did not sense that this was the case. My impression was that the responses were genuine. A sample of responses included the following: (1) “I would like to have peaceful communities, no crime, and be successful so I can take care of everyone in my family”; (2) “I want to be an entrepreneur to make things better for the community and provide jobs for youth, not just Black youth but all youth”; (3) “I want to be able to give back to the community, have different resources to give to poor communities, not just Black communities but everybody in the city of Chicago”; (4) “I want to work for a world where we can be all together. I desire for Black people to be free from White people or anybody who stigmatizes

different races. Black people are stigmatized the most, like dirt. Everybody else is respected for who they are. If everyone works together, we will be surprised at what we can accomplish”; (5) “I just want peace of mind”; and (6) “I want peace of mind that stems from people coming together, loving each other, and understanding what’s going on in [the] press. Instead of just showing violence, show the people who are trying to do something about it. With understanding comes resolution of issues.”

Final thoughts and future work

The reactions of the adults who observed the boys being interviewed was visceral, emotional, and tearful but also included frustration. Instead of idealizing the responses of the boys, the general communication from several administrators was that the boys should not have to be in a situation or context to respond in such a serious manner. In their general assessment, Black boys do not have the opportunity to be children. Based on their years of experience as educators, clergy, and law officers, several of the adult observers even suggested that White children can be just that—children—and would have responded differently to the questions.

In reflecting on the interviews and the overall project, I cannot overstate how important it was that the teachers and other adult observers did not idealize the boys’ responses and refer to them as *young men*. Instead, they lamented the inability for Black males to live lives in which they are first Black *boys*. Vaughans and Harris (2016) pick up on the deleterious psychological effect that Black boys suffer when they are not allowed the developmental period whereby they can be boys and experience insecurity, vulnerability, and ambiguity. The authors assert “in the national media, Black boys are in legal trouble because they are not described as such. ... we hear phrases such as ‘young man’ or a statement of their age. ... unlike their White counterparts there is no questioning in the media about their psychological state of mind” (p. 174). Furthermore, Black boys can be objectified in public spaces and also within their own care communities. The temptation to idealize their responses to interview questions (and experience them as young men) possibly reflects internalized stereotypes that strip the boys of their agency and voices and flattens their life stories.

When asked about what it took to do their jobs, one of the teachers lamented, “We can equip younger teachers and staff with certain skills that will allow them to be relatively successful, but we cannot teach younger teachers *how to give a shit. You have to give a shit.*” Another senior faculty member added, “*You have to love them and be willing to do things outside of your official job description.*”

The comments from these caregivers caused me to ponder this question for future research: As pastoral psychotherapists—or practical, pastoral, or public theologians—what if our *ideological golden calf called empathy* is not enough? This is not to suggest that empathy is not fundamentally important. But does empathy solve all? In the colonial logic and the Western racial imagination that is fundamentally designed and structured to subordinate the Black male body, how far will empathy go in relation to dismantling structures of evil and providing life-giving spaces for Black boys? I wonder, then, what is the theoretical and theological correlate to giving a shit? That is to say, what does a pastoral theological and psychological praxis of giving a shit entail? I suspect that more than having empathy for Black boys, there is a larger (more substantive) question to investigate. What does it look like (and mean) to believe in Black boys, and what is the redemptive effect on the lives of Black boys when their caregivers and community believe in them?

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