Exploring racism

Helen Morgan, London

Abstract: Whilst the concept of ‘race’ has no basis in genetics or biology, the dynamics of racism pervade all aspects of modern life – including the consulting room. In this paper the relationship between a white therapist and a black patient is explored through an unbidden thought and a verbal slip that occurred in the course of the therapy. The amplification and examination of these unwanted ‘slips’ are used to shed light on the subtleties of the effects of difference in colour on the relationship. It is argued here that the interaction reflects and illuminates the asymmetrical relationship between ‘black’ and ‘white’ in modern western society. This is then considered using the concepts of the cultural unconscious and social unconscious as ways of understanding the tenacity of racism in ourselves.

Key words: archetypal image, black, collective unconscious, cultural unconscious, racism, social unconscious, white.

Introduction

In an article on racism for the Guardian newspaper, March 4th, 2000, A. C. Grayling wrote:

It is an irony that although racism is a reality, and a harsh one, race itself is a complete fiction. It has no genetic or biological basis. All human beings are closely related to one another, and at the same time each human being is unique. Not only is the concept of race entirely artificial, it is new; yet in its short existence it has, like most lies and absurdities current among us, done a mountain of harm ... In human terms, DNA analysis dismantles the idea of race completely ... rather, race is a social, cultural and political concept based on superficial appearances and historical conditions, largely those arising from encounters with other peoples as Europe developed a global reach with the slavery and colonialism that followed.

Here Grayling is referring to the evidence that is emerging from recent developments in the analysis of DNA which confirms what has been suspected, that the term ‘race’ is a constructed idea with no objective basis in biology. It is, as Rustin states, ‘... both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization’ (Rustin 1991, p. 57)

This paper attempts an exploration of the effects of this form of ‘social categorization’ on the relationship between two individuals within the setting of the consulting room. To do so I have returned to an interaction that I first
described in a paper written a few years back entitled ‘Between fear and blindness; the white therapist and the black patient’ (Morgan 1998). The interaction arose in my work with Dee, a black woman whom I saw three or four times a week over some years. In amongst this material were two little ‘slips’, one of thought and one of speech, which have continued to interest me. It is as if two tiny holes opened up in the floor of ego consciousness, and here I want to dig down into the spaces they have created to see if they can help illuminate what might be called the racism within the unconscious psyche.

It is evident from the definition of racism such as that given by Chambers dictionary as ‘belief in the inherent superiority of some races over others, usually with the right to be dominant; discriminative treatment based on such belief’, that there exist many forms of racism, and many types of oppression. This paper, however, focuses on white racism and concerns primarily the matter of difference in colour. I have kept the focus here for a number of reasons:

1) The particular interaction I explore occurred between a white therapist and a black patient. What was brought to the fore through this interaction concerned the fact of the difference in our colours and the impact that seemed to be having on the analytic relationship. In other aspects, such as gender, class and culture, there were many similarities between us. It was colour that seemed to be permeating our engagement with each other, and an unconscious, asymmetrical dynamic that took its cue from a racist backdrop of the wider world of which we are both part. The amplification of the images that arose from this very specific engagement is used in consideration of a wider dynamic, that of perceived white supremacy. I am reluctant here to stray too far from the original interaction, and so, whilst I believe that the thinking behind white racism is applicable to other forms of racism, especially that of anti-Semitism, I do not make specific reference to such in this paper.

2) With a few notable exceptions referred to later in the paper, very little has been said within Jungian circles about the issue of white racism and, in particular, Jung’s own writings on the subject of what he calls ‘the primitive’. It is my belief that this matter needs examination because it raises a number of important questions concerning our theories. By trying to face the racism within Jung’s thinking and within our own, and by examining the theories we have by that light, we may deepen and expand the theoretical framework within which we work.

3) It seems from the paucity of material on the subject within the psychoanalytic world that the black/white issue is an extremely difficult matter to consider for white therapists. I know of no other subject that raises anxiety, the temperature and defences quite so readily. Considering myself a liberal, the word ‘racism’ itself sets up an immediate accusatory tone from which I flinch. ‘Not me’ I want to shout. ‘I’m on the side of the good guys’. For the ‘bad guys’ include the British National Party, Le Pen, the Klu Klux Klan,
the murderers of Stephen Lawrence, etc, etc; all extreme forms of racist attack which are alien and abhorrent to me. Yet it is possible that the very existence of the extreme racists means that a container is provided into which I, as a white liberal, can project the racist self.

4) An important feature of the matter of colour racism is the fact of its visibility. In Britain for example, however comfortable the black person is in their own skin, they are always having to deal with the reactions of a predominantly white society to their blackness. Reactions that cover everything from the extremes of expressed hatred of the bigot to the subtle shades of response, including guilt, fear and envy, of the white liberal.


... Western civilization is saturated, not merely with racism – that is obvious enough – but with the elementary gesture out of which racism is constructed: splitting the world in the course of domination. It follows that:

- racism antecedes the notion of race, indeed, it generates the races;
- racism supersedes the psychology of prejudice, indeed, it creates that psychology for its own purposes;
- racism evolves historically, and may be expected to appear in different phases in different epochs and locales;
- racism cannot be legislated out of existence, since what is put into law always serves to legitimate the system which generates and is defined by it.

(Kovel 1988, pp. xiii–xiv)

Kovel’s first statement, that racism antecedes the notion of race, asserts that it is a dynamic located in the urge to power and privilege and that splitting the world into so-called ‘races’, and then allocating certain characteristics to each ‘race’, is a function of that urge. As such, it is essentially a dynamic that belongs to the rationale of the political and economic, and that to seek a purely psychological explanation misses the point. This is underlined in his second assertion that racism supersedes the psychology of prejudice.

There have been a number of attempts in the analytic literature to formulate an explanation of racism as a psychological phenomenon. Such ideas as the projection of shadow; splitting; Stranger anxiety; an enactment of Oedipal conflicts; Freud’s ideas on the narcissism of small differences ... these can be useful ways of thinking about the psychology of prejudice, but I have come to the view that they all fail to explain the central fact of racism – the asymmetry that is created between groups in terms of discrimination, domination and power.¹

The first difficulty with this analytic theorizing is that it locates the dynamic as primarily a function of the psyche. It assumes a model of this psyche that

¹ For a fuller critique of the consideration of the psychology of racism in the psychoanalytic literature see Dalal 2001.
is discrete and individualistic, where racism is thought of as a neurotic or psychotic phenomenon within the particular self. By prioritizing the individual in this way, we may be complicit in feeding a culture of narcissistic preoccupations and serve further to cut us off each from the other.

Almost all theories of racism that have been developed within the analytic world contain the tacit assumption that, contrary to Kovel’s view, it is ‘the psychology of prejudice’ which creates racism. The individual is placed in the foreground with racism seen as primarily an internal matter, from which the social, the external is formed. Without explicitly addressing the matter, one difficulty is how to explain the racist structures or mass movements such as those of slavery, colonialism, Nazi Germany or of the era of South African apartheid. Are we to assume a synchronous arising of this psychological phenomenon in the majority of individual psyches, all at the same time? By glossing over this problem, it seems to me that we lead ourselves into a cul de sac. Reversing the basic idea as Kovel does, by placing racism first, as the creator of the psychology of prejudice, rather than the other way round, does not invalidate theorizing that psychology, but gives it a more appropriate, less inflated place within a political and economic perspective.

Another difficulty with these analytic theories is that they do not take into account the differences in power and privilege of the general groupings that each individual is defined within. Taking the idea of Stranger anxiety as an example, if this is a real phenomenon that arises in humans, then it must arise in all humans whether they are black or white, gentile or Jew. To say otherwise would assume a fundamentally different psychology for different peoples, which leads us directly back into those theories used to justify colonialism and slavery in the first place. So, assuming that all humans develop this Stranger anxiety, how do we explain how this fear in one group leads to their domination of the other, whilst an equivalent fear in the other leads to their being discriminated against? And, even if we are to consider the psychology of the dominant group alone (which most of such theories do), why should certain sets of people – the Black, the Jew, etc, as opposed to other groups – be divided off and defined as ‘Stranger’ or ‘Other’ and then feared, projected into etc. The fact of racism, as it is embedded within Western culture, means that being defined as one so-called ‘race’, as opposed to other so-called ‘races’ due to them being born with certain characteristics, determines whether one inherits membership of the group that discriminates or that which is discriminated against. Theories of the psychology of prejudice, on the whole, fail to address this.

Taking Kovel’s last point concerning legislation, there is a warning here for us as we engage in theorizing on the psychology of racism. He is speaking of the law, but if we take seriously the idea that racism creates the ‘psychology of prejudice’, then we who are the practitioners of that psychology may be in danger of developing theories that ‘legitimate the system which generates racism and is defined by it’. By failing to acknowledge the fundamental asymmetry
in the power of the phenomenon, or by concerning ourselves only with the
psychology of the dominant group, or by assuming a psychology of the
internal can truly explain the external, we may be contributing to the legitim-
izing of the system of racism itself.

With all these caveats in mind, I now return to the clinical material and
the interaction that occurred between myself and my patient, Dee.

Clinical background

Dee was the eldest of four, having come from a religious family where a strict
discipline was imposed on all the children. This discipline was sometimes
harsh and often experienced as arbitrary, to which Dee responded by retreat-
ing into a fantasy world inside herself and away from the family. It was only
in her late teens that she discovered that she had been adopted when she
was 6 months old. Her real mother had become pregnant when still young,
and her sister who had just married had taken the baby. The people, there-
fore, whom Dee had grown up believing to be her parents, were, in fact, her
aunt and uncle. The birth mother left the area after which time all contact
with her was lost, and the couple who adopted Dee proceeded to have three
children of their own. The adoptive parents did not know the identity of the
natural father.

For some months into the therapy Dee was polite and eager to please, yet
we didn’t seem to really be engaged with each other. It was only after the first
long break that any negativity surfaced when she began to miss occasional
sessions. This was interpreted as an expression of anger and a re-enactment of
her ‘disappearance’ from the family as a child, but it remained a theoretical
understanding and wasn’t felt in the room by either of us. Gradually I became
aware of a feeling in me in her sessions of wanting her to leave. One day, as I
looked at her on the couch, the phrase ‘cuckoo in the nest’ came into my mind.
I realized the more particular thought was that she was a ‘cuckoo in my
nest’ and I didn’t want her there.

Negative thoughts about patients are usually accepted, welcomed even,
as counter-transference responses, and helpful, therefore, in illuminating what
might be going on. This time the thought was experienced as intrusive, alien
and unwanted, and it was hard for me to own. After a while I said that there
seemed to be a wish in the room for us not to be together. Dee was clearly
relieved and began to talk of her growing sense that she didn’t belong with me,
that being in therapy was a betrayal of herself and maybe not right for her.
Over the next few weeks she verbally attacked therapy in a contemptuous
way, describing it as tyrannical and against people’s thinking. At one point she
was saying how she feared that I would – and she meant to say ‘brainwash’
er – what she actually said was that I would ‘whitewash’ her.

For Dee the early loss of the mother, and the later felt tenuousness of the
bond with the adoptive mother was the pain that lay at the centre of her self.
She was, in many ways, the cuckoo in the nest, not a real part of the family and not conscious of why. She had to be good to hold on to her mother’s love, but she still kept being beaten for crimes she often didn’t understand. Her rage had no expression and she had to defend herself against angry, destructive thoughts in case she was rejected altogether. She could only cope with the situation by retreating into a fantasy world and into ideas of suicide, as her only way of making sense was to imagine that there was something fundamentally wrong with her.

The strict religious culture of this particular family meant that Dee’s illegitimacy was regarded as a sin, which was covered up by the aunt’s adoption of the baby. One can only speculate how the adoptive parents felt towards this child, the product of shameful intercourse, especially after the birth of their own children. But I believe that my thought and Dee’s verbal slip tell us something of their unconscious rejection of this infant, and of the child’s sense of her own wrongfulness, but also of a fear that her ‘rehabilitation’ requires a whitening that will wipe out her distinctive self.

Here, then, were two individuals together in a room in NW London at the very end of the twentieth century. Both were well educated and used to the multiculturalism of a world shrunk by telecommunications and migration, and both would describe themselves as liberal in their thinking. Into this engagement two small, barely formed thoughts pushed their way; each unwanted, yet each managing to slip past the defences and through the cracks of the ego consciousness of the thinker. As has been touched on above, each idea, one spoken and one merely thought, informed a deeper understanding of the particular vicissitudes of Dee’s personal psyche, and also of the unconscious transference/countertransference relationship between us.

What I am interested in exploring here, however, is whether these two fears – of the cuckoo and of the whitewash – tell us anything about a larger dynamic within the social and historic framework of which we are part. A significant clue to this lies in the fact that we both sought initially to reject these ideas that emerged unbidden in our respective minds. It was as if they each erupted into the relationship, spoiling as they did so, the benign, enlightened view we held about ourselves and about the other. Apparently, at a deeper, more raw pre-rational level, there was a fear in each of the other. The fact that the other was perceived as a threat was the same, but the form the threat took differed, and an amplification of these specific images may shed further light on this unconscious, asymmetrical relationship between ‘black’ and ‘white’.

The cuckoo in the nest

The familiar phrase, ‘cuckoo in the nest’, refers to the attribute for which the cuckoo is well known, its brood parasitism. The cuckoo does not build its own nest but lays its eggs singly in the nests of other bird species. The eggs are then incubated and reared unwittingly by the foster parents. According to the
Encyclopaedia Britannica various adaptations enhance the survival of the egg. These are:

... egg mimicry, in which the cuckoo egg resembles that of the host, thus minimizing rejection by the host; removal of one or more host eggs by the adult cuckoo, reducing both the competition from host nestlings and the danger of recognition by the host that an egg has been added to the nest; and nest-mate ejection, in which the young cuckoo heaves from the nest the host’s eggs and nestlings.

You can’t help but feel sorry for the poor host-bird. She works away building this nest for her offspring and then diligently incubates the eggs until they are ready to hatch. She is not aware that she has a foreigner, an intruder amongst her treasures. Maybe one of her own has already been tipped out to make way for this interloper. Maybe it is yet to be destroyed by this pseudo-sibling. The cuckoo is the lazy parasitic good-for-nothing penetrating the nest when the host-mother isn’t looking and exploiting her efforts and her innocence.

The nest is a place of retreat, our comfortable home, the place where we belong. We ‘feather our own nest’ and we lay down that which we have worked for and saved, our nice little nest egg. Listen to the rhetoric in Britain today concerning asylum seekers and one hears the fear of the bird in her nest. In this country we live with the privilege of a prosperity we hug to ourselves, fearful of the intruder who will ‘steal’ it from us and of the ‘envious’ attack of the other. The introduction of the notion of the ‘bogus’ as opposed to the ‘genuine’ asylum seeker legitimizes this fear whilst at the same time allowing us to maintain a perception of ourselves as generous and hospitable to those who are deemed worthy of our acceptance. The image of the ‘bogus’ summons up the sham, the impostor who could exploit our ‘innocence’ and trick us into sharing our hard-won wealth, should we relax our vigilance. When we are not looking this intruder can contaminate the nest, usurp the rightful child and replace it with the alien. The infant’s greed is an abuse of the beneficence of the mother and, as such, is sacrilege. It will gobble up our hard-earned resources whilst we flap about working to feed this impostor and looking foolish.

Put this way the projective elements in this fear begin to emerge. If anyone has intruded into the other’s nest, plundered its resources, fed off its land and displaced its children, it is the Europeans. A substantial part of the feathering of this nest has been through the exploitation of the so-called ‘Third World’. The prosperity we enjoy in the West was largely pillaged from the colonies, from slavery and exploitation, and continues via the inequality of trade today. But even deeper than this is the privilege of the white skin per se. It seems to be a great privilege indeed, and must, therefore, be guarded deep in the safe realms of the unconscious.

Why is this apparently trivial fact of being born with skin of a lighter hue, such a privilege? How was it made so? The history of racism is the history of the construction of an idea, of a way of making divisions, of categorizing, which then become so imbued in our ways of perceiving the world it seems that no
other view is possible. The concept of ‘race’ itself, the division of humanity into groups who can be defined by appearance, is only an idea, but has come to be perhaps the most powerful in its implications that the human mind has ever conceived. The history of this idea shows that it is a conception of the European mind which, in its dominion, has secured the right to say how the world is to be divided and, in so doing, to award supremacy to itself. As Kovel points out:

... the world is neither black nor white, but hued. A lightly-hued people – aided perhaps by fantasies derived from their skin color – came to dominate the entire world, and in the process defined themselves as white. The process that generated this white power also generated the fear and dread of the black.

(Kovel 1988, p. 95)

It is common to many cultures, I believe, that the notion of ‘white’ carries with it thoughts of light, purity, innocence, and of the divine. ‘Black’, on the other hand, is often associated with darkness, dirt and the devil. Once the light-hued defined themselves as ‘white’ and the dark-hued as ‘black’, then the respective associations could be appropriated and linked to peoples. As Hillman explores at length in his paper, ‘Notes on white supremacy’, white and black are not opposites in themselves but have been made to be so by the white:

‘White casts its own white shadow’. This conclusion may be bettered to say, ‘white sees its own shadows in black’, not because they are inherently opposed but because it is archetypally given with whiteness to imagine in oppositions. To say it again: the supremacy of white depends on oppositional imagining.

(Hillman 1986, p. 41, itals. in original)

By defining ‘white’ and ‘black’ an opposition was set up. By associating goodness with one and badness with the other, by embodying the difference and fixing it in the unalterable nature of our wrappings, white supremacy became assured and unassailable. Thus the domination of the other, the establishment of white privilege, were justified. Philosophy, religion and science have been employed to bolster that privilege, science assuring us that physiognomy and phrenology tell us ‘how we look is how we are’, and that physical appearance, the superficial, defines not only who we are and who we are not, but also a hierarchy of quality and, therefore of justifiable privilege.

Religion too had an important part to play in affirming white supremacy. A little story in the Old Testament of the Bible (Genesis, 9) took on a great significance in this matter. This story tells us how Ham failed to cover his eyes and saw his father, Noah, naked and drunk and how, as a consequence, God cursed the descendants of Ham and his son Canaan. The curse condemned all future generations of Ham’s line to servitude to the children of the other obedient sons. Throughout the history of European trade in slaves from the African continent, this story was a central plank in the argument of those wishing to justify such activities. In the Caribbean, slaves were taught in the
churches that they were black because God had made them so. They were
descendants of Ham and hence inferior, and their task on earth was to serve
their white masters. For these white masters, the keeping of slaves is validated.
Indeed, through being endorsed by God Himself, it becomes almost a duty.

The whitewash

The story of white supremacy then has not been told only by the whites to the
whites for it has been essential that the blacks learn the stories too, and learn
them well. The privilege of the white skin and the inferred inferiority of the black
are a message that comes through the media, through our Western institutions,
through our professions. The pervasiveness of such a message gets into all of us
and is one from which neither white nor black is immune. Such a message is sure
to take its toll, a toll on the black individual about which Frantz Fanon writes:

As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating
the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this
conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin; or else I want them to be
aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad – since I unthinkingly conceded
that the black man is the color of evil.

(Fanon 1986, p. 197)

Fanon’s book from which this quote is taken is entitled ‘Black Skin, White
Masks’. The concept of the white mask brings us close to that of the whitewash.
According to Chambers dictionary this is defined as; ‘to cover with whitewash;
to give a fair appearance to; to take steps to clear the stain from (a reputation),
cover up (an official misdemeanour) or rehabilitate (a person) in the public eye;
to beat (an opponent) so decisively in a game that he or she fails to score at all’.

In the therapy with Dee her unconscious slip from ‘brainwash’ to ‘white-
wash’ opened up the question of her relationship to colour – both hers and
mine. She was initially shocked by the idea that she was relating to me as a
colonial, imperial power that could take her over with my mind. Soon after
this she began to express a disparagement of blackness. She said she had been
secretly relieved that I was white when she first met me because of a sense that
a black therapist would be second rate and she wanted the best. She was
deeply ashamed of these feelings as a woman who was politically aware and
dissemine of the mimicry that she saw in some black people.

The fact of being black in a white society fitted her personal sense of not
belonging. Her experiences of racism had provided an unconscious confirmation
that she was ‘bad’ and deserving punishment. Despite political alignment with
the black movement, her internal sense remained that of being an outsider, of
being wrong and somehow dirty. White meant belonging and white meant
what she was not, ‘good’, successful and of value. My whiteness, I understood,
meant she could get close to the source of what was good, but she had to be
careful that she didn’t antagonize me through any exposure of her ‘bad’ rage.
As we explored the self-loathing inherent in her ‘secret’ disparagement of ‘black’, her comments switched from a denigration of the blackness of herself to a denigration of my whiteness. This was done largely through her accounts of the racism she had experienced. She seemed to be challenging me to take up a position. Was I allied with these white others or would I join with her in her attack, and feel black like her? What was not to be allowed, it seemed, was our difference. I was to be for her or against her.

This complex attitude to her self and to me clearly related to her personal story, but perhaps this also illustrates something of the dilemma of the black person in the white society. If what is perceived to be good is white, then the fairer one can become, the more one may gain acceptance. The stain, the misdemeanour is in the blackness and so must be whitewashed, but by becoming whitened the individual is lost, as is the value of blackness. There is a wiping out, an annihilation of the diverse when a blanket of white is layered over all. In this game, the black is beaten so decisively by the whitener that ‘he or she fails to score at all’.

To save oneself, a protest, a resistance is required. To stand out, to become noticed. It is the black fist in the air refusing the white-out.

When we put these two fears next to each other we begin to see the projective nature of both fantasies as well as how intricately tied up with each other they are. In his book, *Taking the Group Seriously*, Farhad Dalal states:

What the marginalized groups are then forced to do, as a strategic necessity, is to use the same weapon, and assert a new essentialism at the margins ... The point about being at the margins is that the centre finds it hard to hear, partly because of psychological distance, and partly because what is being said is inconvenient. And so the marginalized are forced to shout until hoarse, and can end up sounding shrill ... Once ‘whiteness’ exists and is used to organize the social order, then blackness is forced into existence. The shape and meaning that this notion of blackness can take are constrained by what has been allocated to whiteness. The power of ideology is such that the ‘whiteness’ as organizing principle is unconscious. In other words the white ensign at the centre is invisible, and it is only the black ensign at the margins that is able to be seen. Thus those at the centre feel themselves to be innocent, unfairly assaulted from without.

(Dalal 1998, pp. 206–207, itals. in original)

The white ensign is painted against a white background and is made invisible. Those who are deemed to be not white, to be ‘other’ are pushed to the margins and blackened. It is those at the centre who have become whitewashed as payment for the privilege, whilst the black edges are feared as potential intruders and robbers of the nest. It is, I believe, this relationship that is referred to by the two unwanted thoughts of myself and of Dee. And, whilst they are thoughts that shed light on the system of projection and projective identification that was alive at the level of the personal unconscious, my argument is that the personal system seeks and is formed by the wider web of symbols, myth and language within which it exists.
Jungian thinking and racism

The question now arises as to how this web can be said to function within the psyche. For Jungians, the obvious place to turn to is the concept of the collective unconscious and of the archetypes, but I think we must take care. For it is easy to forget that the archetypes are unknowable directly and un-representable. We never see an archetype, we can only see the image, and they are not one and the same. As Jung himself says:

Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content, in other words that it is an unconscious idea (if such an expression be permissible). It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form, and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience.

(Jung 1938/54, para. 155)

In the words of Anthony Storr:

This formulation disposes of the accusation sometimes brought against Jung that he was a Lamarckian, believing in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. What is acquired is a predisposition, not an idea; a predisposition to create significant myths out of the common stuff of day-to-day experience … It is true that in other contexts Jung writes as if he did believe that culture affected these predispositions; more especially when he postulates racial differences in the collective unconscious: but these seem to be later accretions.

(Storr 1986, p. 40)

These ‘later accretions’ should not be passed off lightly as they show how even the originator of an idea can misuse it to re-enforce a prejudice. Dalal himself has written a strong piece entitled ‘Jung: a racist’ (Dalal 1988) where he examines much of what Jung has written on the so-called ‘primitives’. Michael Vannoy Adams has also considered this important subject in his book, The Multi-Cultural Imagination. ‘Race’, Color and the Unconscious (Adams 1996). Both these works examine Jung’s attitudes to the ‘non-European’ in some depth and are important texts.

The point here is not to attack Jung but to wonder about our own silence in regard to the racist nature of much of what he says about those other than Europeans in particular and the question of colour in general. And to raise the question of whether there are implications for the theory to which we subscribe. Jung was quite emphatic about the psyche of ‘the primitive’ as he was about the danger of the white man ‘going black’ through contamination, and he linked much of his pronouncements to the collective unconscious (Jung 1977, para. 554; 1930, paras. 507 & 527). We can put aside the embarrassment of our founder’s words and call him a man of his times, and we are indeed looking back at a man who is speaking from the first half of the last
century from a linguistic dialogue that has changed. But by doing so we are accepting that thought and image are constructed, contingent and changeable, and how do we square that with the timeless, universality of the archetype?

The cultural, social and collective unconscious

It seems to me that the Jungian model of the psyche leaves too great a gap between the personal and the collective unconscious – a space that can be filled with questionable and even dangerous material. Henderson (1990) introduced the idea of the cultural unconscious as an additional layer of the psyche. Adams (1996) takes on this idea except that he believes it to be a part of the collective unconscious. However, this still assumes cultures as discrete entities as if our membership of such was unproblematic, whereas in fact the groups, our cultures, with which we identify and which determine our identity are many, they often overlap and they may be conflictual.

I can locate my culture geographically in Britain, but for this to have any meaning, questions of class, gender, colour, ethnicity, and many others are instantly raised. The context will determine which particular form of identification is in the foreground. Each form of categorization brings a blanket of homogeneity down on the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ so that, for that moment, differences between those in ‘our’ group are lost, as are differences between those in ‘theirs’. Each grouping has its own cultural norms and its own cultural unconscious. In post-structuralist terms, they are discourses and all of us belong to a multitude of discourses, not just belong to, but are in them and they are in us. We define and are defined by this interplay of a multi-verse of cultural discourses.

It is important to keep in mind that these cultural discourses exist, define and are defined by the social world – a world that is not democratic in its valuation of the worth of each culture. As there is a hierarchy of power relations between cultural discourses at the conscious level, it can be said that there exists such a relationship at the unconscious level. Dalal describes this as the social unconscious. This he considers:

... includes, but is bigger than, what might be called the cultural unconscious. The cultural unconscious can be described as consisting of the norms, habits and ways of seeing of a particular culture, that are so deeply embedded in each of us that they are indeed unconscious. This notion is the same as that of discourse. But we have already said that we are subject to more than one discourse at a time – none of us is monocultural. The social unconscious, as I think of it, includes the power relationships between discourses. This ordering is also unconscious. This gives the social unconscious the appearance of an absolute, which it is not, it is still a discourse.

(Dalal 1998, p. 212, itals. in original)

This suggests a way of thinking about the structure of the unconscious psyche as including the cultural unconscious of particular discourses, itself contained within a social unconscious which orders the power relationships between
discourses. As a white woman, where the issue of ‘race’ is of most significance, then one set of power relations is relevant. When the issue is that of gender, then another set moves to the front of the stage. Neither are fixed, and a different discourse may operate in the foreground at any moment. Dalal would disagree, but I believe we can consider a stratum which underpins the archetypal forms or predispositions, and it is as the archetypal moves through the social, cultural and personal filters of the unconscious that it is filled out into an image or an idea that emerges into consciousness.

Holding to an insistence on the archetypal as ‘predisposition’ can help us own the internal experience and lessen the likelihood of its projection onto the external object. Thus, to return to my fear of the cuckoo in the nest, the compulsion is to blame the other as a real object that brings my fear into existence. It is my fear that is the experience, and my unconscious sense of privilege which I am compelled to protect, that calls up and gives shape to the imagined threat and calls it ‘cuckoo’. It may be that this fear is archetypal, as, perhaps, is the fear of the whitewash. Or rather, perhaps they can be seen as a pair of fears that image the archetypal linkage in that relationship between the centre and the margins.

It is certainly possible that the fear of a return to a primitive state of mind can be termed archetypal, but for Jung, this became fixed to the external object, to the modern black African and to the risk he referred to as ‘going black’. He filled out the ‘primordial image’ with ‘the material of the conscious experience’, with cultural and personal projections and used it as a justification for his own fears and fantasies. Unfortunately he also loaded his conclusions about Africans, Asians, African Americans and others with all the weight of his influence and of the universality of the archetype.

The image is not the archetype. If we confuse the two then we fall into the very shadow of our theory and, like Jung, we appropriate the weightiness of the archetypes to justify our particular prejudices. By doing so we lend them an immutability and a certainty that echo the use that once was made of the story of Ham, and we amplify our own voices by appropriating those of the gods. Thus the fluidity of the archetype is fixed into the image, into the cold metallic template of the stereotype.

End point

Of course, one particular culture or discourse is that of analytical psychology itself. I cannot speak for other organizations, but within my own the numbers training who are from black and ethnic minorities are low, and I suggest it is worth asking why. Worth it, not just because we might be caught in a form of institutionalized racism, but because it may mean we have developed and are colluding with a way of thinking about the human psyche that unconsciously maintains a Eurocentric, white supremacy. The opening up of this through that which is excluded has difficult but interesting possibilities.
A paper by Bob Young (1994) on how little the issue of racism is addressed within training organizations is entitled ‘A loud silence’. Not only is the centre a place where the white ensign is invisible, it is also a very silent place where all that can be heard is the confirmation of those who are deemed to be like ‘us’ that ‘we’ are right. The uncomfortable questions have been pushed to the margins where they may shout with shrill voices, or give up, shut up and turn elsewhere. It is as if, in order to enter the centre, a whitewash is required – and then the question disappears against the white background. Thus, the interesting noise is from the margins and can only be asked from there. We at the centre may need to stay the rush to defend ourselves and keep quiet and listen, we may need to strain to hear and we may risk the privilege of the centre in the process, but I suggest a more interesting world arises when all voices are allowed. Perhaps it is time to apply the ‘talking cure’ to the culture that is our own profession.

Translations of Abstract

Alors que le concept de ‘race’ ne repose sur aucune base génétique ou biologique les dynamiques du racisme infiltrent tous les aspects de la vie moderne – y compris le cabinet de l’analyste. Est explorée dans cet article la relation entre un thérapeute blanc et un patient noir à partir d’une pensée spontanée et d’un lapsus qui sont apparus dans le cours de la thérapie. Ces ‘glissements’ indésirés sont amplifiés et examinés pour mettre à jour les subtilités des effets de la différence de couleur sur la relation. Cette interaction est montrée comme reflétant et mettant en lumière le fait que la relation entre ‘blanc’ et ‘noir’ dans la société moderne occidentale est assymétrique. Ceci est ensuite mis en relation avec les idées d’inconscient culturel et social, idées pouvant donner des voies pour comprendre la tenacité du racisme en nous.


Mentre il concetto di ‘razza’ non ha alcuna base in genetica o in biologia, le dinamiche razziste pervadono tutti gli aspetti della vita moderna – inclusa la stanza dell’analisi. In
questo lavoro viene esaminata la relazione tra un terapeuta bianco e un paziente nero attraverso un pensiero non espresso e un lapsus verbale che avvennero nel corso della terapia. L’amplificazione e l’analisi di questi indesiderati ‘lapsus’ viene usata per far luce sui non-detti degli effetti della differenza di colore nella relazione. Si sostiene quindi che l’interazione riflette e illumina la relazione asimmetrica tra ‘nero’ e ‘bianco’ nella moderna società occidentale. Si considera poi l’uso dei concetti di inconscio culturale e inconscio sociale come un modo per comprendere la tenacia del razzismo in noi stessi.

Mientras que concepto de ‘raza’ no tiene su basamento en la genética o biología, la dinámica del racismo permea todos los aspectos de la vida moderna – incluyendo el consultorio. En esta disertación, se explora la relación entre un terapeuta blanco y una paciente de raza negra, mediante un pensamiento no deseado y un lapsus verbal que ocurrió en el transcurso de la terapia. La amplificación y examen de estos ‘lapsus’ no deseados, se utilizan para ilustrar las sutilezas de los efectos que la diferencia de color ejercieron sobre la relación. Se discute aquí como la interacción refleja y destaca la relación asimétrica entre ‘negro’ y ‘blanco’ en la sociedad occidental moderna. Luego esto se considera, tomando los conceptos del inconsciente cultural y el inconsciente social como maneras de comprender la tenacidad del racismo en nosotros.

References
—— (1938/54). ‘Psychological aspects of the Mother Archetype’. CW 9i.