

WHAT CARL JUNG SAID ABOUT RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICA

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This is an unpublished article based on “The Metaphor of America’s Darkness,” a chapter in America’s Identity Crisis. It was written in 2017 in response to police brutality and shootings across the nation and the white supremacy march in Charlottesville, Virginia the same year.

The Negro is America’s metaphor.

– Richard Wright

About a hundred years ago, the famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung visited the United States. He came three times, lecturing and traveling widely in order to acquaint himself with the peoples of this country, including Caucasian, African, and Native Americans. “America,” he concluded, “has probably the most complicated psychology of all nations.” This is as true today, if not more, as it was then. The race problem still plagues us, and although great progress has been made since then—who would have imagined that an African American president would be elected early in the twenty-first century?—the nation still has a long way to go, as recent events show. What can we learn from Jung that could help us today?

To begin, Jung would say that our first task would be to acknowledge race as a problem at the center of American life. Then *we* would *have* the problem, rather than *it* having *us*. The race problem poses a heroic challenge to *all* Americans in the profoundest sense. African American jazz musician Wynton Marsalis has aptly described this challenge: “Race for this country is like the thing in the story, in mythology, that you have to do for the kingdom to be well, and it’s always something you don’t want to do. It’s always that thing that is about you confronting yourself and that is tailor-made for you to fail. And the question of your heroism, courage, and success at dealing with this trial is, can you confront it with honesty and with energy to sustain an attack on it? The more we run from [race] the more we run into it. It’s an age-old story. If it’s not race, it’s something else. But in this particular instance, in this nation, it is race.”

In most of the myths, legends, and folk tales of the hero, there is a confrontation between the hero and a “wholly other,” some monster, evil figure, or antagonist who threatens him or tests his worth and abilities. From a psychological point of view, the “wholly other” is really within the hero himself; it is the unrealized or unconscious part of his own personality. Perhaps it is his fear, or his untapped strengths, or, not unlikely, it is the monstrous, evil part of himself. The outer battle or conquest is a symbol for the inner one. The truth of such tales is universal, and Marsalis is correct in appraising the heroic challenge of race relations in America as a confrontation with oneself.

On an experiential level, fundamental changes must take place within both races before the gulf between them can be really bridged. Each race must confront the “wholly other” within itself before it can reach across the racial divide to the other. Each race must confront its dissociated part and integrate it into *itself* before it can integrate with the other race into a single society under a common roof. Integration of blacks and whites

into a single society is a moral imperative that, in the long run, will make or break American civilization. Integration here implies a psychological and spiritual partnership and not just economic parity. This is the most viable kind of integration we can strive for and is the wellspring of any economic advancements. It implies a genuine sense of shared community and not just paranoid togetherness. Can America truly be a model of a refined, democratic civilization in the absence of such integration?

It was to our dissociated parts that Jung was referring when he said, “every [American] Negro has a white complex and every [white] American a Negro complex.” Herein lies one of the mechanisms that make racism the destructive force that it is: when a psychological complex such as one of these takes hold of us, we act it out unknowingly, unconsciously, seeing both others and ourselves in a distorted way through its lens. Jung said that there is nothing fatal about having a complex unless we think we don’t have it.

The white complex is, figuratively speaking, the white man inside the black person’s psyche, as the black complex is the black man inside the white person’s psyche. The white complex operates in the African-American psyche as a judgmental and alienating authority principle that compels African Americans to displace onto whites their inner authority and the measuring rod of their own goodness. The black complex operates in the white American psyche as a threatening instinctual force—what Joseph Conrad called the “Africa within”—compelling white Americans to displace onto blacks their animal nature, dark fears (such as fear of death), and evil impulses. The infantilization that white America has imposed upon black America through slavery, segregation, and stereotypes that are still active today has been a way to keep this part of the human psyche at bay. Historian Daniel Boorstin as well as Jung described this living part of us as the primitive childhood of our species. Repressing and projecting it onto them, whites reduced the status of blacks to that of children needing to be reared and managed—the proverbial “white man’s burden.” White fear of the strong sexual drive rooted in this part of the psyche prompted social economist and Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal to note the sexual element of segregation and the castrations that often preceded lynchings: white women supposedly needed to be protected from the advances of supposedly lascivious black men.

The white complex of the black American is grounded in a very real history of oppression, suffering, and injustice, leading on the one hand to the black’s deep resentment and mistrust of white Americans, and on the other to a profound longing to be accepted by them. The black complex of the white American is not grounded in a historical experience; rather, it is loaded with dark material—fear of instinctuality, death, and evil—of a fundamentally irrational and mythic, religious (or if you will, demonic) nature. This casts the black into the position of somebody or something “wholly other” than the white.

On the one side then, integration would require whites to become conscious of their black complex and assimilate it into their being. For this, they must come to terms with what makes the African American an enemy at the same time as a cultural hero: his deeply tabooed but deeply desirable connection to the instinctual side of the psyche. This includes the “wholly other” darkness they dread to face. *By having unconsciously projected all this upon blacks, whites have in fact become what they most fear in blacks: barbaric and diabolically dark.* And yet, the more whites condemn and push this side of their psyche away, the more it is forced to live itself out through the African American.

The latter thus becomes the white American's unconscious connection to this side. The more it is scorned, the more it is forced to manifest in a shadowy, menacing form. The problems from which African Americans suffer and which invariably affect the rest of society—poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, violence and crime—are basically symptoms or ways through which the dissociated part of the white American psyche returns to obtain recognition and redemption (what Freud called the “return of the repressed”). What is not let in through the front door sneaks around and breaks in through the back door. Unfortunately, in this way the white American's worst fantasies of the black American become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and American society remains polarized and divided by racial animosity.

One could add to this black complex a guilt complex that whites have for what they have done to blacks. Because one can hardly claim that this complex haunts them, it exists more as an unconscious guilty condition than as a guilt complex in the usual sense of the meaning. Unlike the black complex, this condition *is* grounded in history as the counterpart to the black's complex. Though one may deny its existence, it has a palpability and pervasiveness that affect even immigrants and others who have no connection to the enslavement or segregation of blacks in their personal or family history. Commenting on a similar condition that has affected Germany since the end of the Second World War, Jung wrote: “Psychological collective guilt is a *tragic fate*. It hits everybody, just and unjust alike, everybody who was anywhere near the place where the terrible thing happened. . . . Therefore, although collective guilt, viewed on the archaic and primitive level, is a state of *magical uncleanness*, yet precisely because of the general unreasonableness it is a very real fact, which no European outside Europe and no German outside Germany can leave out of account. If the German intends to live on good terms with Europe, he must be conscious that in the eyes of Europeans he is a guilty man.” The same goes for the American case: if the white American intends to live on good terms with the black American, he must be conscious that in the eyes of the black American he is a guilty man. Of course, the argument that Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel made in regard to Germans can be made in regard to white Americans too: it is unfair to hold current and future generations responsible for the deeds of past generations. Rather than to blame and punish, the existence of collective guilt as a “very real fact” seems to have the purpose of making sure that the abominable transgressions of the past are not forgotten; it seems to be history's way of living on in the present, seeking redemption through our acknowledgment of it.

But is this enough? To be conscious of guilt in a way that produces meaningful results must involve more than merely acknowledging the past deeds that merit the guilt. We must wrestle with the current forms of racism, most immediately, the toxic relations between the police and the communities they serve. Institutional racism is *still* rampant. Police departments must introduce in-depth training on the stereotypes some officers carry and project onto African Americans. Without awareness and examination of their black complex, white officers remain vulnerable to being seized by it in moments of danger and panic. How can we expect to change behavior without acknowledging the workings of the psyche from which it stems? A similar educative process of raising the awareness of young people and instilling tolerance should be implemented nationwide and, while they are still impressionable, in elementary and middle school. How else can

we influence their character development so that they don't grow up to be like the hateful, angry, fear-driven bigots that acted out in Charlottesville?

On the other side of the equation of what integration would require, there is the work African Americans must undertake to integrate their white complex into their being. Any exploration of race relations in America must take into account the role of both parties in collective infantilization. This, again, is the dynamic that occurs when one group projects the childhood aspects of the psyche onto another. To the extent that this latter group then "buys into" or internalizes this dynamic, it indeed becomes infantilized. Too many African Americans are still in the grip of infantilization, defeated in their outlook and ragefully exploiting and hurting their own people. *By not assimilating their own white complex, blacks unconsciously act out the role of the white exploiter, but upon themselves.* They believe they have no power to help themselves, that all the power rests with the white man. No doubt, inasmuch as money or ownership of resources is power, the facts show that much of the power in America does reside in white hands. But people with a sense of peoplehood are powerful too, and as civil rights leaders have pointed out, integrity of self is the most important power one can have. Hopefully the rest of society will recognize that the inner city needs more in the way of education and opportunities than just promises and good will, but waiting for this to happen cannot be an excuse for the people who live there to waste their energies and lives away. Psychological integration of their infantilizing white complex is the first and most critical step toward their empowerment.

The only real solution to America's race problems, as Jung repeatedly emphasized in regard to social issues, is consciousness of the shadow, of the disowned, projected parts of the personality and of one's own propensity toward evil. But this can only be practiced by individuals, as it is a matter of learning to live with awareness. Such learning can surely be fostered by good education—education that has depth—but by and large, it is not something that can be enforced collectively or top-down from the government through social programs. The solution to America's race problems is a matter of the individual's efforts to achieve integration within him- or herself, and of many such efforts by many individuals. In the end, a nation can only be as conscious, integrated, and moral as its individual citizens.