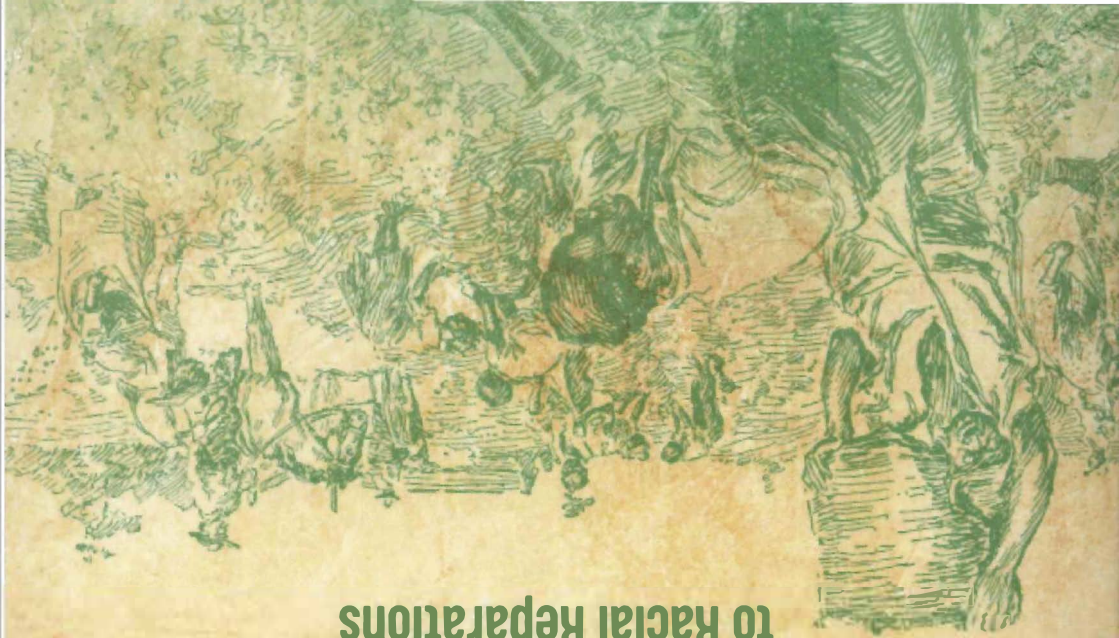


WHITE WORK AND REPARATIVE GENEALOGY

Reckoning with Ancestral Debt as a Path
to Racial Reparations



"Unsuturing" the White Self: Creating Freedom and Integrity by Reckoning with the Past

In Ta-Nehisi Coates' novel *The Water Dancer*, the main character, Hiram, is an enslaved young man. He discovers that to "conduct," to lead himself and others from slavery to freedom, he must remember the stories that were given to him by his family and his own experiences, including those of tragic loss. He gradually lifts the veil that has protected him from these painful stories. In doing so, he emerges into an awareness of the islands of stories of which his is an essential part *and* the many bridges that connect them, bridges that lead to freedom. The character of Harriet Tubman mentors Hiram on how to conduct oneself and others to freedom, how to "jump":

The jump is done by the power of the story. It pulls from our particular histories, from all our loves and all of our losses. All of that feeling is called up, and the strength of our remembrances. We are moved.

Hiram was born a slave. I was born a descendant of enslavers. The work for this book is my effort to lift the veil that hides and distorts the stories of my ancestors—and yours—and to find the bridges between their past and our present. I, too, am yearning for freedom, freedom from

the iron linkage of whiteness with racism and racial hierarchy; freedom from ignorance about the structural sins of slavery; and white supremacy; freedom from false stories about my ancestors and myself.

While researching for this book and laboring to uncover the ancestral history of which I am a part, I deepened into the process of "unsuturing" that philosopher George Yancy describes. A sutured white self grows up believing itself to be deserving of whatever merit, privileges, and wealth are bestowed upon it. It mistakes itself as self-sufficient and autonomous, perhaps as masterful. In seeing itself as self-made, it is ignorant of history's role in its constitution. It does not reckon with how centuries of unremunerated or poorly paid labor of Black people have added to its own comforts and coffers; it is unreflective about how racial hierarchy contributes to a false sense of security and worth. When confronted by people of color or by history itself, it too often reflexively denies, deflects, or attacks.

Yancy describes the white work before us as "unsuturing," of opening ourselves to vulnerability and the probability of being wounded as we search for the truth. When one is unsutured, one risks losing one's way by allowing confrontations that unravel one's previously felt sense of intactness. Unsuturing, like reparations, is not an event, but a process, a decision to commit to defect from fictions about oneself that have harmed people of color, even if it leaves one disoriented and lost. One commits, says Yancy, to "undo, to trouble, over and over again, the complex psychic and socio-ontological ways in which one is embedded in whiteness. The decision is one that is made over and over again for the rest of one's life."¹

Despite my years of formal education, I began in deep ignorance. Beyond two generations back, I did not even know where my ancestors lived, much less the histories of their inhabited places and the harms committed to Black people in them. As I focused on each one in turn, a set of stories came forward that seemed essential to and paradigmatic of the American story. The ancestral threads I followed were woven tightly into the racist patterns of our national cloth.

I hope that you have been inspired to find *your* ancestral threads and come to know their historical context. Follow them to dispel ignorance and misconceptions. Allow them to help you know the streams of history

that carried you into who you are now. Follow them to assess and reckon with your debts to others and the natural world—personal, ancestral, and collective debts.

This is the white work laid out in front of us. We owe nothing less to people and communities of color who are our neighbors, our "brothers" and "sisters." It is also work we owe to ourselves and our white communities to gain release from the destructive individual and cultural pathologies that we suffer and inflict on others. Yancy describes whiteness as "a site of dispossession." It deprives white people of their cultural identities before their ancestors claimed whiteness. When whiteness is not critically questioned, when it is taken as normal, it occludes our self-understanding. We do not see its destructive shadow and the harms perpetrated on people of color; nor do we understand the distance from people of color that continues to haunt us, depriving us, says Yancy, of a sense of shared humanity. Once we recognize our ancestral and personal threads and their patterns, we can use them to weave a different design, helping to co-construct a more compassionate and equitable future together.

As white folks, we should not attempt to shed our whiteness to evade the legacy of white supremacy that demands our grappling. We can, however, demonstrate through our actions that when a group assumes an identity that creates harm for others, it can work to redeem itself. Indeed, Germans did not try to be non-Germans after the Holocaust. Many slowly revealed that they could acknowledge and take responsibility for German crimes against humanity and chart a different and more humane future. Would it not be amazing if one day those who are white can claim not only the horrors that the creation of whiteness enabled but the ability for a group to do what is possible to redress these horrors, as it hopes to gain a place alongside the descendants of those harmed?

Psychoanalyst Stephen Frosch tutors us that "what is left unresolved in history works its way into the present as a traumatic haunting that is profoundly social yet is lived out in the deepest recesses of individuals." This has certainly been proven within my own life, from my earliest childhood to the present moment. The white work I have described allowed me to claim this unresolved history and to begin the process of knowing and adopting it from its orphaned status.

As I began to finish this book, I returned to Somerville, La Grange, and Memphis, Tennessee, where so many of my ancestors are buried, from my third great-grandparents down to my father and aunts. I have no fixed ideas about the afterlife, of whether ancestors can hear our prayers to them, or whether I will meet up with them in the future. But I do know I can speak to them and through my words acknowledge the bridges between their lives and my own.

I went first to visit with my father, who met an early death falling off his roof while trying to fix his barometer. I was 31 when he was buried in Memphis. After his death, I started a family through international adoption. I was determined not to bring my daughters-of-color into the South. It was 35 years before I returned to visit my father's grave.

I am not a person given to tears and so was surprised to find my love for and missing of my father begin to flow in steady tears as I got within a few miles of the cemetery. I sat at his grave and shared the intervening decades, about the granddaughters and great-grandsons he had never met, my divorce and remarriage; my missing of him, my gratitude for his love, gentleness, and generosity toward me. I visited his grave again as I began this book. This time, I wandered more widely in the area of the cemetery where he is buried; I had known my maternal great-grandparents were there, as well as my maternal grandmother and her siblings, but this time I found my grandfather and his second wife and then, slowly, graves bearing the names of families I had heard about in my first ten years of travelling back and forth as a child from New York to Memphis.

I sat at my father's grave and told him about this book and the roles he and his family played in helping me learn about whiteness and racism. His gravestone had darkened, slowly being covered by the dark hues of lichen, moss, and mildew. That evening, I researched how to clean grave-stones, and after procuring a bucket, water, a bottle of Dawn dish soap, a toothbrush, and a nail brush, I set out the next morning to clean his stone. I found that the slow process allowed me a quiet time to speak with him. After finishing, I walked a short way to a towering monument for RJ, my great-grandfather. I was determined to explain to him why he had won the largest personal role in this book. The grandiosity of his monument had not prevented the letters on his stone from also becoming darkened and hard to read. Unlike my father, I never knew or loved RJ. I was

highly critical of his amassing so much excess wealth, building an ostentatious mansion, and decimating so much of the Mississippi Delta forests. I imagined that if he read Chap. 6 of this book, he would be outraged at me. I leaned into my cleaning task and slowly explained my perspective as I washed the letters on his stone with care.

I had the distinct feeling that such slow cleaning work was akin to washing his feet in the Christian tradition. Gradually, I found a way to marry the difficulty of my message with the tenderness of acknowledging our shared humanity. I knew he had met heartbreak in his life, with his wife and daughter being killed when their car was struck by a train. As much as I had yearned to understand his motives, all I really learned in my research were some of his actions. In studying his context, the intersection of the Gilded Age with post-Reconstruction white supremacy, the linkage of my life with his had become clearer. Indeed, I was now feeling that a single life—such as my own—is a most inappropriate measure of human life. These ancestors before me, each contributed to my ways of moving in my own life and to learning the tasks set before me. There was unfinished business in their lives, just as there will be in my own—work to be picked up by subsequent generations, tasks unfinished, perspectives in need of critique, visions needing flesh and bones. As I worked the toothbrush around the letters of his name, I found a way of speaking that was honest but not adversarial, that respected his inherent birthright of dignity. This was new.

Over the next week, I returned to clean the stones of my grandmother's. Then I went to find my ancestors east of Memphis in La Grange and Somerville. Slowly I washed their stones, told them what I had learned of their lives, their intimate entanglement with and support of slavery, acknowledging all I did not know about their struggles, understandings, and motives. From the look of their darkened stones, I think I must have been a very rare visitor, indeed.

White work. Ending in utter disdain of our ancestors will not do, though we must reject their complicity with white supremacy. To disavow them would assist us in pretending that somehow we are made from altogether different stuff than they, that they were the racists and we are the redeemed. Whether we have excess assets or not, our lives are entangled with privileges born of white supremacy. I have been blessed to

be tutored by people who are in advance of me in understanding how to patiently disentangle myself from financial and social systems that harm African Americans. I have been inspired by their historical understanding, their clarity of purpose, and the joy they have found in letting go of stolen and excess wealth and stepping more lightly and honestly on the earth and with people of color.

Some have argued that acts of individual and family reparations are merely piecemeal approaches to the main task before us as white people: moving the federal government to enact racial reparations. While this is true, I experience these acts as portals of initiation for white people into building a world where we can all thrive, a world where we can truthfully acknowledge the harms that we, our families, and communities have wrought and are capable of. The portal opens to the cross-racial work of solidarity around seeking reparations from the people and institutions that have profited from the harm.

Racial reparations are about refusing to accept the injustices that have accrued to African Americans as normal and inevitable. While it is about supporting spaces of healing for African Americans and their communities, the process of reparations is *also* white people's path to healing. To embrace racial reparations would put our communities and nation on a different footing, one where accountability triumphs and honest truth-telling prevails for the sake of justice. These capacities—to honestly admit wrong-doing and to take up the responsibility of redress—are needed in so many areas of the life of our nations. May the Black-led demands for reparations, nurtured courageously across generations, be a teacher not only to us individually but to our communities and nations going forward. May we each lean into responding to this long-denied demand for justice.

Study Queries

1. Reflecting on philosopher George Yancy's description of "unsuturing," where are you in this process?
2. As you have journeyed in your own process of unsuturing, what have been the personal fruits of this work?

Notes

- 9 "Unsuturing" the White Self: Creating Freedom and Integrity... 343
3. What are you contributing (or hoping to contribute) to building a culture of truth-telling and accountability?
4. How do you envision your racial reparations work in the future?
5. What supportive structures do you need on your path to accountability?
1. George Yancy, *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), xiv.
2. Stephen Frosch, *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmission* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).