

On White Shame and Vulnerability

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Abstract

In this paper I address a tension in Vice's claim that humility and silence offer effective moral responses to white shame. Vice describes these twin virtues using inward-turning language of moral self-repair, but she also acknowledges that this 'personal, inward directed project' has relational dimensions. Her failure to explore the relational strand, however, leaves her description of white shame sounding solitary and penitent. My response develops the missing relational dimensions of white shame and humility arguing that this strand, once visible, complicates Vice's project by (1) challenging her unitary and homogenous view of white identity, and (2) demonstrating the important role vulnerability plays in our understandings of white shame.

'Do not take responsibility unaccompanied by those who can show you your part in the harm.'

– Barbara Houston (1998, 28)

I. Can I Understand 'This Strange Place' from Here?

I have come to this conversation late. Until I read Samantha Vice's 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?' I had not thought about South Africa in a very long time. Contemporary 'on the ground' conversations about South Africa are largely inaccessible from where I sit. Yet Vice's insights resonate deeply with me. We both live in 'strange and morally tangled' racial landscapes that are the products of four centuries of Dutch and English colonization. Early seventeenth century Dutch commercial projects brutally impacted both the African Cape and the tri-state area (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut) where I grew up. I am a direct descendant of these settlers. These colonial legacies continue to shape racial identities in each of our worlds, but in very different ways.

My reply to Vice's essay is as heart-felt as it is philosophical. It is offered in the spirit of sparking further reflection on white identity and its global colonial legacies. How should people in our positions animate whiteness, if at all? Who should we be? Where should we focus our moral attention? My understanding of Vice's argument must be clear from where I sit. So, I begin by summarizing her project with an eye toward clarifying and expanding her account of South African white identity and its re-

lationship to shame, humility and silence.¹ My reply is a call to bring out the relational features of white shame, the virtuous responses to white shame, and to suggest vulnerability as a resource for future projects.

II. How Should White South Africans Be?

Samantha Vice's 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?' raises uncomfortable questions about possible moral responses to being white in the wake of apartheid. South African whiteness has many political and ethnic expressions, but Vice has a particular one in mind—well-meaning morally conscientious white liberals who grew up during the apartheid years. These are not the whites interviewed in Rehad Desai's documentary film *The Heart of Whiteness* who resent the changes apartheid's end brought to their lives. These are white South Africans who are aware of their whiteness and understand themselves as the problem. She asks how privilege-cognizant whites 'can *be* and live well in such a land, with such a legacy? What is it like to live in South Africa as a white person? What is the morally appropriate reaction to one's situation of privilege' (2010, 322)?²

To answer these questions Vice applies the conceptual tools from critical whiteness studies to white South African's unique position. She accepts as correct Shannon Sullivan's (2006) pragmatist account of white privilege as a set of unconsciously patterned psychical and somatic habits, and pairs it with Lisa Tessman's (2005) thesis that systems of oppression limit and burden expressions of character in morally damaging ways. The later claim echoes similar observations made by Frederick Douglass who 'saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon the slave holder' as he watched slavery divest his tenderhearted mistress of her 'heavenly qualities.' 'Under its influence,' he observes, her 'tender heart became stone, and [her] lamblike disposition gave way to a tiger-like fierceness' (2002, 66 and 71). The ticket, as James Baldwin put it so well, has a price (1985, xix). Apartheid and its legacy have had a damaging effect on white character that is shaped by what Tessman calls 'the ordinary vices of domination' (2005). These include habits such as 'indifference or callousness, cowardice or dishonesty, the failure of imagination and empathy, or just plain laziness' (Vice 2010, 327). Whites (even liberal whites) are morally damaged because the character traits that unconsciously bolster race privilege are precisely the ones that allow us to dominate. The only difference is that conscientious whites make an effort to recognize, eradicate, and mistrust the vices that make them complicit in injustice.

If the morally damaging habits of white privilege are learned unconsciously and performed automatically, and if their origins are not under our control, then we might ask: What is the most morally appropriate response to living as a white person in a world

1 I have chosen to follow political rather than stylistic conventions around the capitalization of racial categories. I follow U.S. people of color's convention to capitalize non-dominant racial terms (like 'Black') and to leave 'white' in the lower case as a way of visual signaling Black visibility. Other U.S. writers have argued that white does not need to be capitalized because U.S. whites normally think about identity along ethnic rather than racial lines. The exception is in white supremacist literature where 'White' is capitalized because adherents to this view have very specific understandings about white identity. I recognize that capitalizing 'White' in South African contexts makes sense on the grounds that white South Africans, unlike North Americans, do think of themselves as White. Since part of my argument calls for making Black voices more visible in Vice's account, I continue to follow political conventions. Samantha Vice does not capitalize any racial categories.

2 The term 'privilege-cognizant whites' comes from Ruth Frankenberg (1994).

where these injustices and their attendant privileges persist? Guilt, shame, and regret historically have been the default moral emotions in the philosophical literature on complicity and collective responsibility for injustice.³ Following Gabriele Taylor (1985) and Bernard Williams (1993) Vice accepts the basic distinction between shame and guilt. She explains:

In standard accounts of the moral emotions, shame differs from guilt in being essentially directed toward the self, rather than outwards toward harm one brought about. Shame is a response to having fallen below the standards one sets for oneself, whether moral or not. One's very self is implicated in a way that need not be the case with guilt, which is a reaction to what one has *done*, not primarily to who one *is*.... Shame is the recognition that one ought not to be as one is, and it does not, I think, depend on the claim that one could be different to how one is (2010, 328-9).

The differences between shame and guilt reflect the distinction between behavior (doing) and character and identity (being).⁴ People feel guilty for *what they have done*, but feel shame for *who they are* either as individuals or as group members. The kind of shame Vice has in mind here is a collective white shame: the shame some whites feel for just *being* white in South Africa.

Guilt, shame and regret are all appropriate moral emotions in this context, but Vice thinks shame best characterizes the 'identity and phenomenology of the white South African self' who 'cannot unproblematically see herself as fitting into or contributing much to the post-Apartheid narrative' (2010, 329). She focuses on whitely *beings*, whose *selves* are 'implicated and stained by privilege,' rather than whitely *doings*, so it is 'helpful to put guilt aside and to concentrate on shame' (2010, 328).⁵ If whitely habits are a central feature of white South African identity (who one *is*), and these habits sustain and support white supremacy, then shame is the most morally appropriate emotional response. White South Africans are left with what appears to be an inescapable dilemma. They can either live with shame [and regret] and not live very well, or embrace a comfortable ignorance of their 'wicked natures' and indifference to the suffering of others, and live rather well (Tessman 2001, 63). Ignorance and indifference are vices of domination, and as such, are incompatible with the emancipatory projects most liberals support. So, for conscientious whites the only choice is to embrace shame. Here is Vice:

3 The philosophical literature on collective responsibility after World War II is extensive. For a brief historical summary see Mellema (1997). For two contemporary responses see May (1991) and Card (1996). Classic Western philosophical readings on this topic have been anthologized in May and Hoffman (1992).

4 Shame and guilt cannot be separated with any empirical precision. The distinction between character and behavior is artificial: we are what we do, and our doings say a great deal about who we are. The relationship between guilt and shame is much more complicated and nuanced than Vice's brief account makes it out to be, but I'm perfectly comfortable with this rough distinction as a starting point for our conversation.

5 Vice's argument is more complex. The line between guilt and shame is not hard and fast, and she recognizes that guilt is also an appropriate response to privilege cognizance. She also considers the possibility that what morally conscious whites may in fact be feeling is better expressed as agent regret, but concludes that agent regret collapses into self regret, for 'once we admit the possibility and appropriateness of *self*-regret, we are back into the realm of shame: once we regret *who we are*, regret seems to collapse into shame. See Vice (2010, 328-332).

[F]or white South Africans, the morally best situation is still a bad one. Living as a self one is ashamed of or regrets is morally more decent in this setting than living with a self one is comfortable with, but how is this self to live well? And how can one ever be a good person in South Africa if one's best moral response is to recognize and feel one's ongoing complicity with wrong (2010, 333)?

Engaging shame morally requires whites to consider responses that disrupt whitely ways of being while supporting Black South Africans' efforts to rebuild their country. Vice suggests that humility and political silence are effective responses for these purposes, but before settling on them she considers whether whites can be rehabilitated through good works (good *doings*). Conscientious whites might work toward reparations, redistribute resources (including their own) along more equitable lines, or become politically active in organizations supporting Black South African's political efforts. Vice sets aside the good works solution because she thinks that the transformation of the *self* through political activism, is a response to white guilt and not to 'the broad logic of shame, which has change of heart (*metanoia*) as a proper end' (2010, 334). Now, she is not suggesting that white selves can never be transformed through good works: only that public activism is risky for whites because they still have deeply engrained whitely habits. White folks' thoughts are 'heavy with whitely assumptions' and this makes coalition-building tricky (2010, 334). The vices of domination make us prone to mistakes. We are misunderstood. We misspeak. The help we offer may be inappropriate or insulting. In short, our good works alone are unreliable. They are not enough. For these reasons white people's energies are best spent on the direct work of caring for the self.

Vice's remarks are mindful of a general theme in many people of color's work on race: the demand that white folks 'clean up their own houses' as part of broader transitional justice projects. James Baldwin requested that whites do their 'first works over again' by examining everything: 'Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing, shout, testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came*' (1985, xix). Steven Biko says something similar when he argues that white racism 'rests squarely on the laps of white society,' and that 'white liberals must leave blacks to take care of their own business while they concern themselves with the real evil in our society—white racism (1978, 4). Vice's suggestion that whites turn their attention to the self takes these remarks to heart: white South Africans' are the problem, so they should focus on 'recovering and rehabilitating themselves.' Whites must 'express our attachment to justice through a commitment to a private project of self-improvement, recognizing the moral damage done to the self by being in the position of oppressor' (2010, 334-5).

It is important to understand why she highlights whitely being/shame over whitely doing/guilt. White complicity, as Sandra Bartky once remarked, is often a matter of being and not just doing (2004). We need to 'work on our own stuff' first, so to speak. If we do not, then we risk getting caught up in the whitely habits and scripts Marilyn Frye identified when she coined the terms 'whitely' and 'whiteliness.' According to Frye, whitely people have an unshakeable faith in our own rightness and goodness, and that of other whitely people. We behave ethically. We are not crooks. We are generous. We are principled: we believe in rules and follow them. We embrace authority and believe we can run things best. We do not like to be challenged. We want to fix

things. We want to be helpful. We want to be seen as good, and will do just about anything to restore, center, and highlight our goodness. These habits are central to white identity, the sense of who we are, and the ways we imagine others see us (1992, 152-7). This sense of self influences white peoples' understanding of responsibility which María Lugones describes as being very controlled and self-focused. In her work on pluralist identity she speaks directly to members of dominant groups and tells us:

your sense of responsibility and decision making capacity are tied to being able to say exactly who it is that did what, and that person must be one and have a will in good working order. And you are very keen on seeing yourself as a decision maker, a responsible being: It give you substance (2003, 73).

Whitely do-gooding responses give us substance. When whites bypass 'working on our stuff' in favor of direct political action we risk falling back into unreflective do-gooding, rescuing, controlling, fixing, and missionary responses that allow us to restore our goodness (at least in our own minds) rather than understanding our complicity in systematic wrong doing.

Humility and silence offer more effective, and perhaps less whitely, moral responses to collective white shame. They are a step toward putting one's house in order. They also act as restraints that prevent the conversation from becoming too self-focused. As Vice puts it:

To be morally successful, a certain restraint on our parts is required, which I now suggest we think about in terms of *humility* and *silence*. This restraint is, I think, appropriate to the South African context in a way it might not be elsewhere. *Whitely* invisibility sustains white privilege, but in South Africa, where at least some aspects of whiteness are highly visible and explicitly acknowledged, reducing one's presence through silence and humility seems right. It would indicate the recognition of one's morally troubling situation and a determination to prevent it from causing further harm.

So, recognizing their damaging presence, whites would try, in a significantly different way to the normal workings of whiteness, to make themselves invisible and unheard, concentrating instead on those damaged selves (2010, 335).

White South Africans should live quietly and decently and refrain from offering their views, analyses, and solutions publically. They should step back humbly and give Blacks the public space to remake their country on their terms.

Vice has a *virtuous* humility and silence in mind. The painfulness of these traits in this context is what makes them virtuous. White moral agents are pained by their shortcomings. If whitely character by definition lacks humility, then whites should cultivate humility. Silence is more complicated because it has many expressions and not all are virtuous. Audre Lorde's famous dictum 'Your silence will not protect you' illustrates the dangers of passive silence for women of color (1984, 41). Here, silence counts as a moral failing of self-preservation. There are also whitely versions of silence that lack virtue. When white silence is characterized by a lack of self-reflection, shutting down, refusal to consider the costs of white supremacy, or defensive retreats to internal silence, then it is a moral failing of self-knowledge—a vice of domination. A virtuous white silence requires an active and engaged silence—a silence that patiently waits, a silence that opens space for long-silenced voices to emerge and to be

heard. It is a silence that decenters white agency by moving it into an uncustomary marginal role.

Virtuous white silence does not rule out conversations with people inside and outside of white social comfort zones. It is not the silence of withdrawing from the world, pulling in, and becoming invisible in worlds where one is uncomfortable. It is a virtuous silence in the *political* sphere, not an end to conversation on topics of race and power. Political silence is offered as a strategy for preventing whitely perspectives from distorting (indeed polluting) the projects of transformational justice. It ensures that Black South Africans control the dialogues on reconciliation and rebuilding. Vice's solution is not a pure one. Living well under these conditions is difficult. Conscientious whites must work towards a non-whitely practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in order have a sense of when silence is appropriate, and when a few choice public words of support would be meaningful.

III. With Whom Do We Sit?: Plural White Selves and the Power of Vulnerability

The central strength of Vice's account is that it embraces whiteness in all of its messiness. She resists restoring white moral goodness. White selves are tainted, impure, and burdened. It is impossible for whites to be morally clean in this non-ideal world. My reply focuses on Vice's suggestion that white South Africans concentrate on these damaged selves, and her recommendation that responses to collective white shame be tempered by humility and political silence. We agree that whites must clean up our own houses, but there is a curious inconsistency in her proposed solution that needs to be addressed. Humility and silence are introduced both as non-whitely responses to collective white shame and as restraints on white solipsism, but her account of how white selves should animate these virtues strikes me as solitary, non-relational, and perhaps whitely. I want to suggest that non-whitely animations of humility and silence require interdependent or *relational* understandings of white identity which acknowledge and engage people of color's contributions to general understandings of white complicity. Following Barbara Houston, I am suggesting that we not take responsibility for our white selves unaccompanied by those who can point to our harmful and damaging presence (1998). Let me explain .

Focusing on damaged selves presupposes that whites learn how to recognize how our complicity in complex systems of domination is damaging, but this is difficult to see from where most of us sit. Social relations affect what we are likely to know. White privilege has a purposely attendant epistemology of ignorance, that is 'a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made' (Mills 1997, 18). White misunderstandings, misrepresentations, evasions, and self-deceptions are among the most pervasive cognitively functional legacy of colonization. White supremacy presents cognitive dysfunctions as normal cognitive functions and this has an impact on how white people understand our complicity in injustice. Vice recognizes this phenomenon when she observes that white South Africans' thoughts are 'heavy with whitely assumptions' (2010, 334). If whites habitually see the world wrongly, then it follows that we should not take on rehabilitation projects independently of those who help us to gain a greater understanding of that world and our complicity in maintaining white supremacy. People of color are epistemically situated in ways that facilitate see-

ing white complicity in its complexity. Recall James Baldwin's remark that 'color seems to operate as a most disagreeable mirror' (1985, 409). These mirrors not only reflect white selves back as they are, but also they prompt our self-conscious interactions with others.⁶

It is essential that I highlight the interactive component of this mirroring. My point is not to reduce people of color to the function of reliable mirrors for the purposes of white consciousness raising; that would be a non-relational account. The shift is not from 'what do I think about me' to 'what do *you* think about me.' It is about our interactions and what they reveal about race. Knowers are fundamentally interdependent with other knowers and the shared epistemic resources (e.g., language, concepts and criteria) that we use to navigate the world operate collectively. We reflect these selves to one another. María Lugones takes the mirror-interactive imagery a step further by highlighting the plurality revealed by these reflections. People of color are noticed when white folks realize that people of color are mirrors in which whites can see themselves as no other mirror can show us. It is not that these 'disagreeable mirrors' show white folks as they *really* are; they just show us one of the many selves we are. What they reveal is the plurality of white selves, a hybridity that we block because some of the selves revealed are frightening and inconsistent with the view of our selves as good. Whites block identification with those selves because 'remembering that self fractures [us] into more than one person. [We] know a self that is decent and good, and knowing [our]self in [that] mirror frightens [us] with losing [our] center, [our] integrity, [our] oneness.' And, '[we] block identification with that self because [we] are afraid of plurality' (2003, 73). Whites turn away from these mirrors precisely because they reveal the many aspects of our selves, and not all of them are flattering. People of color also see themselves reflected in white mirrors. The difference here, at least in North American contexts, is that survival under white supremacy requires a complex understanding and constant awareness of their many selves, and how whites see them. White survival does not require a working understanding of plurality in this sense.

So, I want to ask Vice directly: Can conscientious white South Africans articulate their moral responses independently of these disagreeable mirrors? If not, then how have the voices of Black, Indian, and other colored South Africans contributed to your understanding of South African whiteness? How might these voices respond to the white humility and political silence you advocate? Into which of these disagreeable mirrors do you gaze? Which of your many selves stare back at you when you do? Which of these selves can you meet with loving eyes and engage? And, which of those selves frighten you and cause you to turn away in shame? Which selves do you have in mind when you speak about South African whiteness generally?

For humility and silence to do the work of preventing whites from becoming too self-focused white folks must learn to see interrelationally. We must see our selves in our plurality. Now, Vice recognizes both the self-reflective and interrelational aspects of these virtues, but the self-reflective strand regularly overwrites the relational strand. On the one hand, moral attention is redirected toward a 'private project of care of the self,' a 'commitment to a private project of self-improvement,' a 'personal, inward directed project,' in which 'the task of white people is to engage with their selves' (2010, 324 and 334). She understands that the emphasis on privacy and self-improve-

⁶ See Narayan (1995) for a lengthy discussion of the dangers of reducing others to emissaries, mirrors and authentic insiders.

ment makes many readers cringe. However, she takes the moral dimensions of individual selves seriously and is fully aware that these conversations sometimes unavoidably ‘degenerate into morbid egocentricity and perverse fascination with our faults’ (2010, 335). On the other hand, Vice recognizes the importance of relations for self-knowledge. Citing Plato, she affirms that ‘self-knowledge is often reached in dialogue with others; you find your own voice and allow others to find theirs in sincere, truth-directed conversations’ (2010, 336). So, virtuous white silence does not rule out conversations with people inside and outside of white social comfort zones. There is no theoretical tension between these strands: Self-examination, self-perfection, and care of the self are central to ancient Greek moral philosophy. The failure to explore the relational strand fully, however, makes her account of moral reflection sound unitary and withdrawn and her discussion of white shame sound solitary and penitent. White shame, humility and silence all have relational components and engaging these keeps people of color’s voices visible in the discussion.

The importance of relationality is best demonstrated in the case of shame.⁷ Redirecting our moral attention inward papers over a key relational epistemic feature of white shame: shame is almost always before someone—a response to being seen. Disagreeable but faithful mirrors play an important part in understanding shame because they reveal the ways we are seen. As Gabriel Taylor explains: ‘The person feeling shame feels exposed: he thinks of himself as being seen through the eyes of another. The case of shame introduces an observer or audience.’ The key point here is that ‘only by seeing what he is doing through the other’s eyes does he recognize the nature of his action, and so it is crucial, it seems, that there be some other through whose eyes he can look at this action’ (1985, 57-8).⁸ Shame is a response to having fallen below the standards one sets for oneself. Recognizing this requires being epistemologically equipped to see the *contrast* between the self you thought you were and the self you turned out to be. Mirrored interactions offer a sharp contrast between our selves as we imagine them and our selves as others imagine us. This is what mirrors do! The reflected self provides the contrast necessary for shame to be felt.

When the inward-turning responses to white shame overwrite relational responses we are forced to embrace a narrow account of shame, one that may inhibit future coalition building. Shame has a dual nature: it can sever connections between people, but it can also motivate us to repair our relationships. As Caitlin Charos observes: Shame makes a highly interesting double movement toward painful individuation on the one hand, and toward uncontrollable relationality on the other. ‘Shame separates us from others, causing us to experience the state of painful disidentification and self-consciousness that at times would threaten to implode the self, yet it also indicates our desire to connect to the people with whom we share a space’ (2009, 276). The trick is to know when one is headed down the path toward separation, and when one is headed down the path toward reconciliation. Vice, no doubt, would argue that humility and

7 Space restrictions prevent me from fully developing relational accounts of humility and silence. A relational account of silence might begin with the observation that for silence to be active, as Vice suggests it must be, that it must be interactive. Relational accounts of humility shadow the comments I have made about white shame: Humility requires an audience. We feel humble before others.

8 Now, it might be objected that Gabrielle Taylor’s remarks are directed primarily at actions, so they don’t really apply to Vice’s basic concern with selves. Again, I think the distinction between guilt/doing and shame/being is extremely artificial: a person who feels shame becomes conscious not only of what she is doing, but also becomes conscious also of her self, of how she is seen, of the kind of person she thought she was, but now realizes she is not.

political silence are morally appropriate first steps on this path towards reconciliation, as Charos puts it ‘they put shame to work in the national narrative of “feeling better”’ (2004, 278). Understanding shame relationally, in terms of audience, makes people of color’s knowledge of whiteness, and indeed their very presence visible in our discussions. If a central concern is to diminish white visibility, then a good strategy would be to make Black South African voices more present in these conversations.

Shame is fickle: It exposes as much as it conceals. When whites collectively feel shame we are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, humility and political silence are concealing responses to white shame. They are back-stepping gestures that operate to protect public discourses from whitely intrusions. In doing so they reduce the visibility of whiteness, which for Vice, is central to reconciliation. Concealing responses strike me as safe: they allow white selves to become less visible, but they also place us at risk of closing off our identities in ways that keep whiteness comfortably whole and stable.⁹ But, when we step back we risk turning away from others. We may deceive ourselves into thinking that others do not see us for who we are. On the other hand, responses to white shame that chance unmasking whiteness in its multiplicity are more risky. Shame is also an uncomfortable and occasionally violent exposure of one’s vulnerability. Encouraging white South Africans to make themselves epistemologically and ontologically vulnerable is about white people’s willingness to be open to seeing and being seen in ways that challenge whitely self-conceptions. It offers white South Africans the opportunity to see themselves from many angles — to see themselves in their multiplicity. The vulnerability I have in mind here is not simply the condition of being weak, defenseless, dependent, or susceptible to harm or injury. It is closer to Erinn Gilson’s understanding of vulnerability as potential; that is, as the basic characteristic of all humans, not just those in particular circumstances. As she explains:

Vulnerability is understood to be a more general term encompassing conceptions of passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispossession, and exposure, which are the basis for certain fundamental structures of subjectivity, language and sociality. Taken in this way, as a fundamental state, vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. *Vulnerability* is not just a condition that limits us but also one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn (2011, 310).

Vulnerability has a strong relational component that opens up the self for a more authentic interaction. Vulnerability is always openness before someone. There is a brief moment in Vice’s essay when, recalling a conversation with Sally Matthews, she notes that ‘introspective activity alone runs the risk of sacrificing the possibility of vulnerability and the new knowledge it could bring to the need for whitely control’ (2010, 336). She recognizes the importance of vulnerability, but deeply regrets not having the space to explore it. So, in closing I would like to briefly sketch a few reasons why both epistemic and ontological vulnerability are important to consider in the context of Vice’s project.

⁹ I unpack this claim below in my marks on white vulnerability.

I certainly think vulnerability can be incorporated in Vice's work either as a facet of humility or as an alternative response to collective white shame. If her central goal is to engage white identity in ways that support liberatory projects, then we might begin by understanding the role that invulnerability plays in maintaining white supremacy. The habits of whiteness are the habits of invulnerability. Colonial master narratives have universally constructed white selves as civilized, competent, strong, autonomous, self-sufficient, independent, pure, and stable. These narratives mythically equate white bodies, whitely habits, and power with invulnerability. As Gilson puts it, invulnerability 'is a central feature of masterful subjectivity because it solidifies a sense of control, indeed, an illusion of control' (2011, 313). Invulnerability is a convenient myth for the master subject. It allows us to ignore those common traits of our humanity that either fail to match the fanciful images we have of ourselves, or that make us feel uncomfortable and exposed. We forget that we are fragile beings: our bodies bleed, our hearts break, our minds fade, and our lives can be move from joy to unimaginable sadness in less than a moment. Vulnerability is universal. When we are willfully ignorant of our human vulnerability we mistakenly believe that people who are the most vulnerable and oppressed are somehow responsible for their misfortunes and that we are somehow immune to similar circumstances.

The myth of invulnerability has both epistemic and ontological consequences. I have already touched briefly on the relationship between epistemic ignorance and white cognitive dysfunction. Here I would like to gesture briefly at some of the ontological consequences. Again Gilson's work is helpful. If vulnerability is an openness being affected and affecting, then invulnerability is a resistance to being affected and affecting (2011, 213). There is no multiplicity without vulnerability. Glimpses of our multiplicity are frightening because they reveal to us the many ways we are seen. Learning to see one's self as others see that self introduces an element of vulnerability that can often be shameful. White selves masquerading as invulnerable present themselves as closed, whole, and impenetrable. They reduce our multiplicity to a fictitious unity. My fear is that Vice's plea for shame and humility wraps a new white moral psychology around an old colonial racial ontology that continues to present white selves as stable, whole, and homogenous. The stability of white identity (and the power that comes with it) is challenged when whites let go of our *selves* in the sense that we make our selves vulnerable. Opening white selves up to risk is one way of releasing us from the grip of an colonial racial ontologies that keep white identities in control, stable, and centered.

Vulnerability opens up possibilities for new hybrid white South African identities. It requires that whites welcome the many possible directions post-apartheid identities might take. How we choose to ontologically frame white identity will shape our moral responses to injustice, including the focus on recovery and rehabilitation projects. When we hold onto unitary but malleable white selves we risk mapping new habits onto an old racial order. For new white selves to emerge we need to let go of the old self completely and experiment with new hybrid expressions of whiteness. Recent scholarship has begun to conceptually reconfigure racial geographies in ways that recognize racial selves as malleable and *hybrid*.¹⁰ I'm curious as to how humility and si-

¹⁰ Some argue that whiteness can only be challenged when 'white' individuals adopt a discourse of hybridization. The literature on hybrid, a plural, creole or mestiza identity is too long to cite here. My own thinking on pluralist white identities is strongly influenced by the work of Gloria M. Anzaldúa (1987),

lence might be animated from these new hybrid identities, and hope that other commentators will have something to offer on this point.

Vice's exploration of white South African identities has given me a great deal to consider from where I sit. I hope that as the conversation continues that we can explore the strategies for living in this strange place that incorporate the relational dimensions of collective white shame, humility and silence in ways that recognize the potential of vulnerability.

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