

What Do We Owe? Reflections on Supremacy, Debt and Desire

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Introduction

Despite an initial idealized transference, my work with Sam, a dark-skinned Latina woman, brought about enactments of racial and maternal oppression. As we transitioned from a community-based setting to private practice, uncertainties around who owes what to whom emerged and destabilized our positive, albeit nascent, therapeutic rapport.

An unanticipated and growing balance for our sessions forced us to confront an intense, disavowed rage rooted in fears of vulnerability and dependency. In the process of investigating the determinant meaning behind this debt, Sam began to confront feelings of grief and hopelessness as her idealization of me faltered. This rupture consequently shed light on the underlying dynamic of economic oppression in our relationship, illustrated in part by a powerful dream, a haunting echo of both her relationship to her mother and to white supremacy.

Through my reflections here, I detail how my unconscious desire to embody the character of a white male savior not only fed into the unrealistic fantasy of the perfect caring parent Sam and I both hoped I would be, but also contributed to a supremacist othering of her as an “emotionally weaker” woman of color in need of “guidance.” Despite my Arab identity and attempts to diminish the privilege of my whiteness and maleness, my positionality was inevitably exposed through my latent feelings of grandiose superiority and consequent interventions.

My involvement in familial and racialized enactments proved destructive but ultimately transformative. In assuming the role of “superior” debtor, like many others in Sam’s history, I reflected on her self-absorbed and perpetually burdened mother. Through elucidating transference feelings of hate, guilt and an anxious clinging to the familiar, I illustrate how

assuming this role transformed me into this more familiar and unconsciously desired object of attachment. I conclude by describing how, in allowing myself to consider and own my role in the enactments, and navigating the ruptures with Sam around her shame and grief of this familiar repetition, we began the process of discovering new ways of feeling and relating.

Sam's History

Sam is a 31 year-old, dark-skinned Latina woman who lives with her boyfriend in a Chicago apartment. She works as an administrative assistant in animal health care in a wealthy, predominately white neighborhood of Chicago. Born and raised by her mother and father in Chicagoland, Sam described being the “narcissistic object” and “mirror” of her mother, who worked as an office administrator most of her life. She described her mother as always talking about herself and complaining about how everyone else, including her dad, are “stupid and lazy.”

Sam described feeling resentment with her mother because of her constant criticism of Sam while simultaneously feeling extremely dependent on her. She remembers her mother incessantly commenting on how Sam could never do anything right when it came to completing tasks, criticisms that served to confirm that she “needed” her mother. Interestingly enough, Sam angrily illustrated to me how she was regularly fed expired and fatty food in her childhood, leading to a lifelong issue with obesity. Sam also described that her mother would itemize expenses of what it cost to pay for Sam's various necessities (braces, gas to get to work, clothes, etc.) and relayed it back to Sam as a debt Sam had to pay off.

One Christmas, Sam described receiving a “gift” from her mother: an envelope with the shredded list of debt she owed to her mom. Despite having her debt excused, her feeling of being a burden seeped into her teenage years, when her mother stated that she was not going to pay for

Sam to go to college because she claimed Sam would just “party.” Sam remembers feeling jealous of and “less than” her white classmates because of their ability to go to school with financial support from their parents. Nevertheless, Sam attempted college on her own, trying to pay her way while working full time, but she found the emotional toll of this too great, so she dropped out. Needless to say, Sam recanted this experience with tremendous bitterness.

Sam’s gripes with other family members are somewhat less potent. She described her father as aloof, working long hours as a contractor and then coming home to play video games in the basement. Her parents, she said, would often argue about who was going to take care of Sam, take her to appointments and support her in extracurriculars. Not surprisingly, Sam felt even more like a burden as well as envious of her older brother, who was adopted into the family after the death of his mother, Sam’s aunt, when Sam was 5. She believed her parents provided him with favorable treatment because of her father’s preference for a son, and also because of how males are often exalted in her family’s culture.

One specific resentment, as she described it, was being forced to clean the house regularly while her brother went out with friends. Moreover, Sam described her own expression of resistance and resentment over the misgivings she felt toward her parents as being quickly met with explosive anger and shaming of Sam as being ungrateful and too needy. These swirls of experience were extremely chaotic for Sam. The quickly shifting emotions and expectations of her parents were incredibly unpredictable and erratic displays for her, but they also formed the shape of her object of attachment.

Upon writing this, I have realized I possess a dearth of knowledge on Sam’s experience as a dark-skinned Latina woman in a white supremacist society. Part of this, as I will elaborate further, has been my reluctance to explore the dynamics of white supremacy in our relationship.

Sam has described facing discrimination from managers when applying for promotions at past jobs, as well as facing racial micro-aggressions from coworkers and customers alike. She shared that customers would attribute perceived “incompetence” to her skin color. Sam described these experiences as reinforcing feelings of powerlessness in the face of this indignation, and feeling inferior and jealous in comparison to her white colleagues.

Our Early Work

Sam was my first patient (and I her first therapist) at a community mental health clinic, where I became employed upon graduating. As a white-passing, Arab-American man in my mid-20s, I came from an upper middle-class family in a Chicago suburb. Sam, 30-something, grew up in a lower middle-class Latino family in a Chicago suburb. I identified with our overlapping immigrant and geographic identities. This over-identification was not only misplaced due its clear oversight of important differences, but it also fueled my own paternalistic desire to save Sam by assuming I knew more about her experiences than I actually did.

Sam stated that she came to work on her depression and anxiety, but I soon discovered our initially positive therapeutic rapport masked an unspoken ambivalence about treatment, in addition to overwhelming but well-disguised episodes of explosive rage and unbearable, dissociative shame. She began to gradually open up about her chronic use of alcohol and weed to numb anxiety and feelings of self-loathing.

Consequently, uncontrollable emotional storms affected her ability to take care of herself, her bills and her apartment, to maintain stable relationships, and to hold down consistent employment. These issues only exacerbated the self-loathing and feelings of helplessness. In my unwittingly defensive response to learning more about her emotional chaos, I positioned myself as “Mr. Wonderful,” feeling a pull to be unconditionally positive but also disavowing my own

vulnerability as a therapist in order to feel above her emotional instability and disguise the fact that I did not know everything that was happening with her. Here I was trying to play into the desired, idealized, heroic object of attachment. When our work was disrupted by the pandemic, forcing us to move online, my underlying fear that she would starve without me spiked. Quite literally, many times she would go days without feeding herself as I pleaded with her to eat. In reaction to her own restricting, she would gorge on fast food. This bulimic-like pattern around depriving herself or binging with unhealthy food would continue through the pandemic, particularly as she was forced back into closer quarters with her family.

Much of our work during this time focused on containment of her feelings of rage toward her family and fostering a healthy desire to separate despite my ignorance around her problematic financial situation. In order to contain her, I suggested we increase our meetings to twice per week, and she readily agreed. This invariably deepened our relationship, and it excited me from both a psychoanalytic sense that “more is better,” and because I felt like a hero, being able to rescue her. Upon reflecting, I feel that much of what motivated me was my unconscious desire to embody the character of a white male savior. This fed the transference-countertransference dynamic of me being frequently available to answer questions and talk for 15 minutes here or there, as well as both of us feeling like I was someone who “has all the answers” as she constantly asked me “what to do.” I fed her as much as I could in an anxious effort to contain her and feel like a powerful expert. In hindsight, this also contributed to the enactments of both othering her as an “emotionally weaker” woman of color in need of “guidance,” and as an overburdened caretaker she was feeling overly dependent on.

As the pandemic waned, we transitioned back to in-person sessions and to a private group practice. I was remiss in not attending to her growing balance as my being paneled on her

insurance through the group practice was unexpectedly delayed. Until our sessions were back-billed after this long delay, I was unaware of how much money she owed me and how incapable she was of paying. She had previously struggled to pay off the debt from the community clinic, but this was something I knew less about, and probably did not want to know much about at the time because I didn't want to feel burdened by it.

Once our private practice sessions were finally back-billed by insurance, I finally learned how much debt she had amassed during our time together at the clinic, how oblivious she kept herself to her financial responsibilities (including how much she owed for therapy), and how unwilling a large part of her was to pay off this new debt. In a parallel process, all of these issues overwhelmed me, too. To cope, I minimized and avoided, colluding with her defenses toward the reality of her debt. I wanted to trust that she was “good for it” and initially asked her to pay what she could, when she could, again trying to be “Mr. Wonderful.”

I rationalized that I was keeping in line with practice at the past agency. However, upon deeper reflection with supervisors and in my own therapy, I realized this would not be sustainable as her debt with me was reaching thousands of dollars. To make matters worse, her income from full-time employment was relatively low and she also was avoiding other financial debts. In an effort to continue seeing her while paying toward her balance at a rate we both felt comfortable with, she received a discount through a hardship policy at my group practice, and we agreed to a bimonthly sum so she could pay off the balance in one year.

This agreement also came with some sacrifice. In order to afford the payment plan while still working together, we needed to drop down to one session per week. She would owe me less, and I would see her less and significantly cauterize my growing resentment for feeling burdened. Despite my attempts to cauterize the debt — calling her insurance company multiple times to

clarify any possible reductions in her sadly high co-pay amounts, collaborating on a hardship policy with administrators, and drafting several different payment plans — issues around white supremacy and the uncanny specter of her desired attachment budded between us nonetheless. Amazingly, these issues were presented in a powerful dream of Sam's around the time of our debt discussions.

The Dream

Sam came in late to our session a week or two after my winter vacation, saying she had trouble waking because she was “dreaming hard.” A week before the dream and immediately following my vacation, she asked me for an additional session while she was living at an extended-stay motel after a nasty fight with her boyfriend. I was unable to accommodate her and in our next session she briefly mentioned feeling bitterly abandoned. When I inquired more about these feelings, she stated she did not “trust me” to share more about her anger toward me, fearing some kind of retaliation.

In the dream, she stated she was in a room that was painted very similarly to the walls of my office, but the tables and chairs looked like that of her nephew's recent birthday party. He was 2 years old and she often worried about what life would be like for him growing up in her childhood home with Sam's parents. She was sitting with her parents and her uncle. In waking life, she felt abandoned by her uncle when she sought a place to stay after the heated argument with her boyfriend. The conversation with her family in the dream quickly escalated as Sam yelled at them and “put them in their place” for emotionally abandoning her. Her mother responded by crying and telling Sam that she was “being so mean and hurtful,” and that it was “killing” her. Sam associated this comment to all the times during her childhood when her

expression of anger toward her mother was countered by guilt-inducing comments detailing how “wrong” and burdensome Sam was for this expression. Through this first segment of the dream, Sam described feeling relief in unleashing frustration toward them.

In the second segment of the dream, Sam walked into a pet store, a place she was previously employed and was passed over for manager because, she believes, of her race. In the dream, she walked further into the store and noticed a small, black-haired monkey that was in a snake tank. She compared the monkey’s size to my water bottle that I keep next to me in sessions. The monkey was wet and struggling in a tank full of encircling snakes. Sam stated that she tried warning the employees in the store of the monkey’s impending fate, but she was met with indifference. She noticed at this point in the dream that she was scared and frustrated.

Upon describing the dream to me, Sam felt a familiar discomfort at recognizing her own rage toward her family and me (represented by the white walls) for feeling abandoned, as well as an intense fear about the fate of the dark-haired monkey. To me, her dream underscored important themes of feeling persecuted and devalued for her racial identity (represented by the dark-haired monkey), and her conflicting desires for feeling dependent on her mother and me versus embodying her rage toward us. This dream captured how these core conflicts have contributed to her ambivalence about our relationship. She worried about how an expression of her rage toward me would make her vulnerable to my white retaliation and a loss of dependency, but she also wished to be heard and understood. I will next elaborate more on these issues and how they apply to our work.

Discussion Part 1 - Maternal Enactment

This dream illustrated the emergence of a maternal enactment as we began to navigate her debt. Shortly after the dream, I noticed that I began to empathize more with her mother. I felt burdened and resentful for having to take care of someone with so much financial “need.” As we discussed the meaning of this debt, Sam also began to discuss guilty feelings around “not being good enough,” which she associated to the guilt she experienced with her mother and her childhood debt. As I was compared to her mother, I felt that I was not only destroyed as a good object, but my role was transformed into a more familiar and, I believe, deeply desired object of attachment.

For Sam, the emotional storms of this uncanny situation resembled, as Bollas puts it, “the deeply disturbed emotional wake” of her early attachment life (1996). The way Sam lived her life in relation to debt, I believe, helped her to unconsciously reenact this early dynamic through her indebtedness to me. She approached this issue with such emotional turbulence, including hatred of both herself and me, and fear of losing her dependence with me in a way that mirrored her relationship with her mother. Swallowing her rage for me as I forced her to repay the debt while cutting our time in half, she denied and displaced these feelings, fearing they would cause abandonment or retaliation.

For example, Sam explained to me that she felt dependent on our now one hour per week as the “only place” she felt “truly heard.” She expressed loathing her own apprehension to let go of her agreeableness and allow herself to feel her anger toward me. In our sessions, she directed it away from our relationship and toward her family, her partner and many others who she felt had abandoned her or asked “too much” of her. Sam’s suppression of her anger manifested as GI distress, bloody diarrhea and physical inertia, such as coming late to our sessions because of “oversleeping.” Her recurring payments elicited the familiar feeling of shame that “I am not

enough,” and shaped her perception of me as the “heightened” and “superior” therapist, leaving her feeling “less than.”

She consequently found her object of desire (this familiar, maternal connection) in these feelings of chaotic emotional attachment to me. Much like the dynamic with her mother, she hated me for doing things that conjured this feeling of “not enough,” yet she believed she needed me to feel understood and cared for. This is represented in the dream, where she felt that unleashing her indignation on others might cause her to feel helpless and terrified in the face of retaliation and abandonment, represented by the dark monkey in the snake pit and her useless attempts to find someone available and understanding.

Particularly, Sam felt an inability to escape her debt with me, and she constantly expressed hopelessness in attempting to find a solution. Although she spoke with a financial counseling agency that I linked her to, which helped strategize with her on how to alleviate some of this burden, she felt she was trading an alleviation of debt for a feeling of inescapable, indentured servitude as they suggested she work more hours. In this reluctance to take responsibility for her role in the indebtedness, I felt again like the resentful mother.

When I interpreted this dynamic, it forced us to finally confront her deep self-hate, shame and guilt at feeling burdensome. She spoke of her own desire to rid herself of hate and shame by depositing that hate into me through “communications by impact” (Casement, 2001). More specifically, amassing debt and subsequent avoidance filled me with loathing, and it also kept her close to this unconsciously desired early dynamic with her mother. She stated that she anticipated an explosive retaliation and/or rejection by me in regard to this debt, so she could locate the shaming rage outside of herself, thus using this amassing of debt to also communicate

to me her level of self-loathing in a way that might bring about this chaotic object of desire. [20 minutes]

Not long after this confrontation did this unconscious desire slowly emerge into Sam's consciousness. In one session, she expressed her frustration toward me about charging her the agreed-upon amount on the scheduled date because she did not have enough money in her bank account. She claimed that I was "taking food" out of her mouth by enforcing the collection. I felt defensive and indignant, while Sam felt I was "demanding too much" from her, feeling unable to say no and to express *her* indignation. I initially reacted empathically and reexplained our agreement. Later on, while reflecting on this moment between us, Sam admitted that she set herself up for failure by intentionally avoiding asking enough questions to clearly understand the details of our payment contract.

She associated that "not asking enough questions" in efforts to avoid responsibility extended to other aspects of her life, including insurance and other financial issues. Moreover, Sam detailed that her role in conjuring the misunderstanding around this debt was a way to feel closer to me in a familiar way. She reflected and disclosed that the emotional turmoil caused by the enactment was subtly gratifying in its familiarity. She explained to me that "it's what I'm used to, and it fits my view that people don't listen and just want to take advantage of me, like with my mom."

She used her avoidance and its consequences as an attempt to conjure a retaliatory "guilt trip" that was common with her mother. Because I did not collude with Sam's attempts to provoke an angry, guilt-inducing response from me, this allowed us to more deeply examine her rigid transferences toward others, as well as how they relate to her own feelings toward herself. Here, she did not feed into her desire to deposit the rage into me or someone else, but instead

attempted to understand the pain behind it: her traumatic grief in living for decades with a perpetually overwhelmed mother who was limited in her financial and emotional resources. Through conversations like this that allowed us to better examine her desire, we began to kindle Sam's sense of agency.

Discussion Part 2 - Racialized Enactment

The occurrence of this debt and the cluster of feelings surrounding it also forced us to confront the enactment of a white supremacy dynamic. I began to notice that throughout our work, I unconsciously felt like the white "expert" and "contained" male therapist. This grandiosity fueled my own latent desire to feel superior, in part because of my positionality, as well as my belief that I owed it to others whom I deemed "emotionally weaker" (like Sam) to "show them the way." I realized I had been avoiding the feeling of shame for this grandiose view, as well as avoidance of guilt about how our differences in race and gender might influence our relationship.

When we talked about her rage at feeling stifled in fully expressing her hatred of my privilege, I regularly responded by defensively making transference interpretations. Although I mentioned some of these productive conversations about her anger above, other conversations were more difficult to make sense of at first. In these conversations, she retreated from what I thought were invitations. She responded, "I was thinking you were going to make it about you and that frustrates me that you did. It's not about you."

By constantly interpreting her feelings about white domination outside of our relationship as "really feelings about me," I was, in her eyes, prematurely and narcissistically asserting my viewpoint. My comments left Sam feeling angry and incompetent in knowing her own experience. These feelings of incompetence and uncertainty are quite common in her interactions

with white people. This dynamic also is an aspect that Stephen Anen detailed about narcissistic states of white privilege. Mine was an egocentric attempt to use my perspective as a “white expert” to define experiences of “others” (2020). Constantly attempting to dominate the narrative for me to intellectualize my guilty feelings through interpretations, and to assert my expertise to feel “superior,” contributed to placing myself in the “superior” white male role and Sam in the “inferior” woman of color role.

The white supremacist enactment also showed up in Sam’s fear of my retaliation to her expression of anger, as well as my misattribution of what was behind this fear. Throughout a lot of our work together, I conceptualized Sam’s issues as narrowly relating to internal “borderline” features. I did not deeply consider the systemic dynamics at play. Through ignoring the effects of white supremacy, I foreclosed my ability to understand the depths of her suffering in feeling paralyzed to express anger. During the times I would correctly interpret that she had angry feelings toward me, particularly in regard to payment conversations, she would tell me that she was angry but she also was afraid. “It’s really hard to believe that you’re not going to yell at me or kick me out of therapy for expressing my anger at you.”

In these moments, I wondered about what was a more familial transference issue and what was more systemic or political. Was this fear related to her parents’ retaliations and guilt trips? Or was it fear that I, a white man, could use my position of supremacy to take away her therapy or verbally abuse her without consequence? For Sam, the danger in expression extends beyond maternal transference and echoes a phenomena many women of color face when it feels too dangerous to express anger for fear of violent retaliation (Tummala-Narra, 2021). We wondered aloud together if my supremacy and capacity for retaliation was represented by the snakes in the dream, and if Sam identified with the trapped, dark-colored monkey.

As we continued our reflection, we both came to realize that my whiteness and maleness greatly inhibited Sam's ability to safely and authentically express herself with me. I believe that failing to look at the significance around this dimension also played into seeking supervision on this case with older, white therapists. The white identity I shared with these supervisors contributed to a mutual avoidance around considering the dynamics of race in this case. Anen (2020) discussed this phenomena as a way that narcissistic states of white supremacy work to systematically conceal the conscious awareness of its existence, like in our field. With Sam's case, the idea that she would be scared to express her anger because of race was never considered, unfortunately contributing to this issue of supremacy.

I looked at Sam's issues as almost entirely internal and maternal in other aspects of our work as well, which contributed to the enactment. I felt a hyperfocus in sessions on her work schedule and wondered if she was working hard enough to pay off the debt. I wonder now if I was putting too much emphasis on her debt as more self-inflicted, instead of considering the nuance of how white supremacy can contribute to underemployment and debt repayment roadblocks, such as being passed over for a promotion due to race, systemic barriers to education and predatory financial practices (Fors, 2018).

Despite now appreciating the complexity, at the time I did not fully consider the implications of the systemic or political factors due to my guilt-ridden complicity in white supremacy, which reinforced the enactment. Moreover, this disavowal of feelings of how race was affecting the issue of debt left Sam feeling that her experiences with race outside our relationship were unheard by me. She explained to me how she felt burdened and indentured to work harder despite stagnant wage policies at her white-owned corporation, as well as in dealing with white gentrification and general cost-of-living increases in Chicago.

Sam expounded on this indentured feeling of work and debt as inescapable and hopeless, and often felt that these injustices were left unheard, reminding me again of the caged monkey of her dream and her attempts to alert the store employees of its peril. Fortunately, through further reflection on my mistuned, defensive and aloof positionality, we have been better able to wonder together how white supremacy, including mine, has affected Sam's problems with living. Through this process of ownership and reflection, we have come to understand these experiences as understandably engendering intense resentment and loneliness that echoed of her past but also extended to capture the broader white, patriarchal domination and economic inequity. (27 minutes)

Conclusion

Through becoming more aware of how supremacy has influenced my interventions with Sam, I have managed to reflect on how it has affected her while more skillfully avoiding the same problematic experiences since. By asking questions about this racialized enactment, when we both have felt it, we have deepened the intimacy of our relationship. Without this emotional vulnerability, I would have been unable to begin working through my defensiveness and the supremacist feelings that perpetuated the racial enactment.

Moreover, seriously examining my defenses freed up Sam to disclose more about her feelings around race in our relationship, as well as the issue of debt between us, including the grief and hopelessness around the painful consequences she endures because of white supremacy. Reflecting more deeply on my white supremacy and how it has influenced our relationship thus far has helped us begin to talk more freely about the effects of race both inside and outside of our relationship. In our discussions, Sam has shared more with me about the hopelessness she feels with regard to her positionality, as well as the grief of the supremacist

reality that influences her life and our relationship. More work is still needed on my part, however, to continue to dismantle my supremacist defenses and bolster Sam's sense of safety in our relationship, as well as to inquire more intentionally about Sam's history with white supremacy and how it has influenced her sense of self and problems with living.

Furthermore, our ability to confront the debt in our relationship and its legacy in her life caused Sam to reflect and disclose awareness around her own involvement in dynamics that perpetuate her affective storms. For Sam, the debt kept her in a hostile dependency, feeding the emotional hurricanes while keeping her largely inert in an unconsciously desirable familiarity, thereby obliterating important affective experiences. In our exploration of this desire, Sam has been able to slowly grieve the unfulfilled wish of a more emotionally attuned and available mother while taking responsibility for paying down the debt.

Through mapping together her fear of straying from familiar patterns of living, Sam increasingly discovers the dignity found in sticking up for herself. Although she still fears my abandonment, she is now able to talk more about it as opposed to enacting it. Our willingness to be vulnerable in our work together will continue to propel us forward, and it will allow us to relate to one another and the outside world with more curiosity and authenticity.

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