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Racialized Forgiveness

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Abstract

This article introduces a concept that I refer to as *racialized forgiveness*. Cases that exemplify certain conditions that I take as paradigmatic of the problem of racialized forgiveness include instances in which: (a) who is forgiven or not is determined by the race of the offender; (b) praise and criticisms of forgiveness are determined by the race of the victim; and (c) praise and criticisms of forgiveness are, at least implicitly, racially self-serving. I argue that this practice is morally objectionable because of its psychological origins, moral failures, and negative effects. Accordingly, in order to dodge these pitfalls, we need to practice forgiveness differently.

Because of the growth in feminist theory developed by an increasing number of women in the profession, Charles Mills argues that “new conceptual and theoretical philosophical horizons have been opened up, revealing realities that in a sense were always there but that were either not seen or deemed not worth mapping” (Mills 1998, xi–xii). He cites work on gender domination and feminist epistemology in particular to illustrate that new voices have enabled us to conceptualize and theorize things that other voices were unable or unwilling to, but we can also add work in moral psychology to his list. New concepts in feminist moral psychology have also enabled us to see what was once hidden in work on forgiveness, for example. Traditionally, philosophers of forgiveness have focused primarily on providing necessary and sufficient conditions for it; defending it as a moral ideal; or doubting its value all together. However, some feminist philosophers have helped us understand that forgiveness is gendered.

Alice MacLachlan and Kathryn Norlock, for example, argue that forgiveness has traditionally been considered a gendered virtue—one that is regularly required of women and used as a tool for silencing assertive women (MacLachlan 2009; Norlock 2009). They both note how women have been socialized to be forgiving and often experience social pressure to do so. Even our philosophical examples of forgiveness, they claim, are gendered. Forgivers X and M, or Jody and Sam, are usually men and colleagues who are independent and share in mutual advantages. However, when women appear, MacLachlan and Norlock point out that they are often abused wives or are said to practice a pseudo- or inauthentic forgiveness that is likely to fail since it is not the real thing. These examples also rely on cultural tropes of women as helpless and not self-respecting. This diminishes their agency. For these reasons, MacLachlan notes,

“feminists may have reasons to regard an ethics of forgiveness rather warily” (MacLachlan 2009, 185).

Feminist theorizing about forgiveness can inspire new ways of looking at forgiveness through a racial lens. Since MacLachlan says that “understanding forgiveness as a moral practice requires that we understand it as gendered, *among other things*,” I hope to show what “other things” forgiveness might be understood as (191, emphasis mine). My first aim in this article, then, is to show how forgiveness can be understood as racialized.

My second aim is to highlight its moral dimensions. In addition to the gendered claims Norlock and MacLachlan offer, there is a general debate in philosophy about what makes the practice of forgiveness morally objectionable. Some philosophers argue that *withholding* forgiveness can be objectionable when a moral agent refuses to let go of particular attitudes or actions (that is, when there is moral reason to let go of them) such as hatred, contempt, and revenge (Butler 1896; Hampton 1988; Bell 2013). Martha Nussbaum, in particular, argues that *extending* forgiveness is morally objectionable because it is status-focused, aims at payback, and humiliates the wrongdoer, among other things (Nussbaum 2016). Going into the political realm as well as beyond only the actions of victims, philosophers Charles Griswold, Thomas Brudholm, and MacLachlan argue that the *rhetoric* of forgiveness is morally objectionable when subtle and covert pressure is used to get agents to forgive (Griswold 2007; Brudholm 2008; MacLachlan 2012). I will add to this discussion by providing additional reasons for when extending, withholding, and talking about forgiveness is morally objectionable—reasons that are grounded in race.

Thus in what follows I introduce a concept that I refer to as *racialized forgiveness* and argue that the practice of it is morally objectionable because of its psychological origins, moral failures, and negative effects. Accordingly, in order to dodge these dimensions, we need to practice forgiveness differently.

I use *racialized forgiveness* to refer to how race *negatively* influences whom we forgive; whose forgiveness we praise and criticize; *and* for what reason. The practice of forgiveness involves taking on roles as forgiver, withholder, advocate, or critic. So, to practice forgiveness differently involves taking on these roles with care—which includes revising our racial assumptions and aims, as well as refraining from and indulging in certain considerations.

This is not to say that the practice of forgiveness lacks value. Forgiveness can aid in moral repair, reconciliation, self-healing, restoration of trust, release for the offender, and relief for the offended. Withholding forgiveness can also serve as a way to hold wrongdoers accountable and to retain self-respect. Praising forgivers can be a way to prevent wrongdoing from having the last word. Nevertheless, it is still possible to practice forgiveness in ways that are morally problematic. For example, charity is valuable—it can provide resources to those who are in need. However, a person can practice charity in biased ways that reinforce inequality rather than remove it. Likewise, the practice of forgiveness can be valuable. However, a person can practice it in ways that reinforce racial stereotypes or place disproportionate social and psychological burdens on others because of their race or ethnicity. Although some argue that forgiveness is supererogatory rather than required, this is not to say that we cannot commit moral failures when engaged in either role. When we do, we then have reason to alter our forgiveness practice.

I begin in section I by describing what is involved in racialized forgiveness, and I provide (preliminary) conditions for it. I also explain what I do not mean by the concept. I then go on in section II to show that some of the moral ills that arise in the

aftermath of wrongdoing is the consequence of our racializing forgiveness. I conclude in section III by arguing that this gives us reasons to transform how we engage the practice. I also provide some recommendations.

I. Race and Forgiveness

Let's begin by considering two examples. Paul has treated Jane unfairly. After he refuses to admit to any wrongdoing, Jane still decides to forgive him. She does so because she thinks it is better to have less than more tension, since the latter makes her more stressed. Consider another example. Adam has spread an awful rumor about Phillip. When Phillip is made aware of this, he proclaims that he will never forgive Adam. By doing so, he believes he maintains a sense of self-respect and he is praised for doing so. In both instances, feminist philosophers have described their forgiveness as gendered. This is because, perhaps, Jane feels more pressure to forgive because she is a woman. Or when she forgives, her forgiveness is viewed as "not the real thing" since she does not appear to forgive for any moral reasons but rather for nonoverriding, prudential ones. The second example also shows how forgiveness can be viewed as gendered. If forgiveness is viewed as something that "only women should do," Phillip may decide to withhold forgiveness in order not to appear too weak, like a girl. Adam and Phillip (two men) are depicted as both autonomous and have fairly equal standing—unlike Paul and Jane.

However, if we look at these examples through only a gendered lens, we will miss other important things. Perhaps when the reader analyzes the first example, she imagines Paul and Jane as members of the same race. She may imagine that Phillip and Adam are both white. Perhaps the reader doesn't see race at all. But how might an understanding of their racial identities influence how the reader (and Paul, Jane, Phillip, and Adam) understands and practices forgiveness? How might we understand forgiveness when Jane is white, and Paul is Black? Or when Adam is Arab, and Phillip is Filipino? Through a gendered lens, we might expect Jane's forgiveness and applaud Phillip's choice to withhold forgiveness. However, through a racial lens we may understand forgiveness differently. Jane's forgiveness may not be expected if Paul is Black, regardless of her gender. Phillip's unforgiveness may not be applauded if he is Filipino. Phillip may think he has additional reasons to forgive if he is Black and Adam is white, and he may feel social pressure to do so because of his race. The way that we account for this difference in understanding is by recognizing that forgiveness is not only gendered. It is racialized such that if we change the racial identities of the characters or make their identities much more salient, the ways we understand forgiveness and practice it may also change. My aim is to provide an explanation for how and why this is the case, as well as the negative outcomes it is likely to generate.

Cases that exemplify certain conditions that I take as paradigmatic of the problem of racialized forgiveness includes instances in which:

- A. Who is forgiven or not is (overtly or tacitly) determined by the race of the offender.
- B. Praise and criticisms of forgiveness are determined by the race of the victim.
- C. Praise and criticisms of forgiveness are, at least implicitly, racially self-serving.

There could be instances of racialized forgiveness that include other conditions; this is in no way an exhaustive list. I am focused here only on these conditions. Racialized

forgiveness describes how race (that is, racial goals, stereotypes, and implicit and explicit racial biases) informs the practice of forgiveness in significant ways such that it affects our engagement with it, as well as producing negative outcomes including but not limited to racial disrespect, paternalism, and the reification of racial hierarchies.

An interlocutor might immediately be suspicious of my use of “determined” in condition A because we can never be sure what is actually determining our actions. Our motives and intentions are often unknown to us. This gives us reason to suspect that we can never be fully confident or absolutely certain of what the truth is behind our actions. I agree. But instead of abandoning the language and thus the point, it will be helpful to clarify what I mean by “determined by race.” When using the phrase, I am referring to when race is morally irrelevant yet is given primary consideration that it does not deserve. Therefore, when a potential forgiver (overtly or tacitly) decides to withhold forgiveness, and race becomes a primary consideration—one that overrides other morally relevant ones—we can say that her forgiveness is determined by race. We can, therefore, describe her as participating in an instance of racialized forgiveness. Further, forgiveness can be determined by race even if someone is not consciously aware that race is playing such a role. This can occur particularly in cases in which implicit bias is informing their forgiveness.

Let me briefly clarify “racially self-serving” in condition C. The practice of forgiveness can be racially self-serving when we praise or criticize forgiveness: (1) as a form of “racial” grandstanding; (2) in order to reinforce or obscure racial injustice; or (3) to promote counter-resistance. That is to say, a person could criticize the forgiveness or unforgiveness of others as a way to showcase themselves as one of the “wise whites,” “revolutionary Blacks,” or “angelic Asians” in comparison to others who lack these features. They can also praise a person’s forgiveness in ways that ignore systemic injustice or promote docility.

What do I not mean by racialized forgiveness? In claiming that forgiveness is racialized, I do not mean that it is essentially so. We can imagine that before race was a concept (before modernity), there was no racialized forgiveness. Thus, to say that forgiveness is racialized is to emphasize only that the ways in which *we practice it*—that is, think about it, extend and withhold it, expect it from others, and talk about it—is racialized. Can forgiveness be racialized even where race is absent? I do not think race is ever absent. Just as forgiveness can be gendered in the case of Adam and Phillip (that is, when both agents are of the same gender), since gender does not disappear when two men interact, similarly, forgiveness can be racialized when both agents are of the same race, since race does not disappear when two white men interact. Forgiveness can therefore be analyzed as racialized in cases of white on white relations and Black on Black relations; even in intraracial contexts, race can negatively influence how we practice forgiveness.

If forgiveness is racialized, this does not mean it cannot be other things; it can also be gendered. However, describing forgiveness as racialized can help us, for instance, understand why a Black woman’s forgiveness may be praised or criticized differently from an Asian woman’s. It would do so in ways in which a gendered analysis alone would be incomplete. Lastly, to say that forgiveness is racialized is not to say that those who practice it are racists. Race can inform our social practices without requiring that we hold any explicit negative beliefs, feelings, or intentions toward a racial group.¹ Nevertheless, this is not to say there are no morally objectionable dimensions. I will discuss further, in section II, racialized forgiveness’s moral dimensions and effects. Also, I am not committed to any one account of forgiveness in developing my account since

there are many ways to forgive and several moral aims of forgiveness. Therefore, I will rely on several accounts to support my thesis. I am not being careless with distinctions by doing so. My approach is grounded in a multidimensional and nonideal view of forgiveness—a view that I expand on more in section III.

II. Some Cases and their Moral Problems

Let's return to the examples that began section I in order to provide further explanation of the conditions as well as the moral problems with racialized forgiveness.² Recall that condition A of racialized forgiveness is met when a person (overtly or tacitly) decides to forgive or withhold forgiveness because of the offender's race. Again, it can occur when Jane does not forgive Paul because he is Black. Instead of considering his remorse and apology, the wrongdoing's impact, or her own moral aims as decisive reasons to forgive or not, she instead (consciously or unconsciously), takes his race as a relevant factor in her decision.³ This factor overrides other moral considerations. What might be at work here? How could race have such a weighty impact on her decision to withhold forgiveness?

Perhaps she doesn't think Paul is worthy of forgiveness since given certain racial stereotypes of his group as violent, aggressive, and beastly, she believes that the wrongdoing does indeed express the totality of his person. Perhaps it is because she has not spent much time with Blacks to counter these stereotypes. This may also lead her to think that he is not really remorseful or committed to not reoffending, no matter what evidence he presents. This, she believes, reduces her reasons to forgive. In a moderate case, she might not be able to put her finger on why Paul isn't worthy of forgiveness. Perhaps it's a gut feeling; she is not aware of what is motivating the feeling that Paul is not worthy. This becomes an instance of racialized forgiveness when that feeling is grounded in latent views of Blacks as unworthy. Her feelings may never consciously affirm this.

Further, and more explicitly, she might believe that her identity as white places her on a different tier within a racial hierarchy. His wrong against her may be interpreted as more devastating and less forgivable since by committing a wrong against her, he violates not only moral norms but racial ones. She may then decide to defend her status by withholding forgiveness. Given this racial hierarchy, she might also think that forgiveness in response to what she takes to be both a moral and social violation may make her appear weak—not as a moral agent but, more important, as a white woman. She then may withhold forgiveness as a way to deny the wrongdoer status as a racial equal, and to communicate that she does not accept mistreatment from those who are less than she. She need not be a self-avowed racist to fulfill condition A. As research in implicit bias reveals, all of this can occur on the unconscious level. Avowed racists are the clearest cases. But of course, many of the most interesting cases we'll be concerned with will be more nuanced cases. Even avowed antiracists can be exposed to these implicit or unconscious mechanisms, and these unconscious associations at work mean race is determining forgiveness. This is not to say, however, that we will have no evidence of condition A being satisfied. It could be discovered, for example, through self-reflection or by the observation of critics.

What moral failures does Jane commit? What are the negative impacts of her racialized forgiveness? By fulfilling condition A, she is engaging in an epistemic failure. By relying on stereotypes of Blacks, she is submitting to what Lawrence Blum describes as "false or misleading generalization of groups" (Blum 2004, 251). She is also refusing to submit to counterevidence that Paul may be providing her (for example, reformed

attitudes and actions). But this is not just a cognitive error. Jane is also engaged in a moral one that has an interpersonal impact. By relying on racial stereotypes of Paul to inform her decision, she is holding a “morally defective regard for persons” (271). What is the negative impact of this? Blum writes:

Cultural stereotypes involve a defective regard that is widely shared, and that can therefore do a kind of damage to stereotyped groups that goes beyond individual stereotyping. But individual stereotyping also involves an individual morally defective regard, that can lead to individual mistreatment of the other. (271)

By having race as a determining factor in her decision to forgive, Jane is failing to recognize Paul as an individual. This failure to acknowledge him as such is a form of disrespect to Paul and his racial group. But note that “as groups stereotype one another, they fail to experience a sense of commonality, of mutual identification—for example, of a shared civic fate, or of common humanity” (276). Blum describes this as moral distancing. Jane’s decision to withhold forgiveness is a signifier of this moral distancing: in failing to forgive for racial reasons (even if she is unconscious of them), she is not sharing in a common humanity with Paul.

Jane can also be reifying a racial hierarchy by meeting condition A. Racial hierarchies are constructed rankings of value based on race. They are also lived out through social roles. That is to say, hierarchies are reinforced by the roles certain social identities are expected to take on. Examples are the American slave system and India’s caste system. What we expect from others and designate them to do and not do (because of their racial identity) reifies a racial hierarchy. Although Paul—because of racial stereotypes—may be expected to be violent, he is not expected to be violent toward whites, at least according to Jane, given the hierarchy. This may explain her decision to withhold forgiveness. It is possible to interpret her decision as being an issue of self-respect. We expect a self-respecting person to be indignant about wrongdoing done to them, and we may understand their decision to hold onto that anger given this self-respect. Philosophers have noted that wrongdoing communicates that I, the victim, do not matter, but my anger communicates that I do not accept that message. However, this is not all that is happening in the hierarchy case. Jane could be responding not just out of self-respect but out of a feeling of racial superiority, although she may consciously recognize only the former. The wrongdoing in this case, then, not only communicates that she doesn’t matter; it communicates that a person of color (supposedly below her) holds this view about her (who is supposedly above him). This act and its communicative force are therefore unforgivable. As a result, her racialized forgiveness can communicate a commitment to this hierarchy and reinforce it at the same time.

Let’s switch identities in order to consider other ways condition A can be met. If Jane is Black (B. Jane) and Paul is White (W. Paul) the condition can still be met as long as her decision is determined by his race. What’s at work in this case is different from yet similar to the above example. Here, B. Jane may explicitly withhold forgiveness from W. Paul because his wrongdoing, on her view, represents the wrongdoings of his white ancestors.⁴ Since Jane is aware that whites once enslaved Africans and continue to mistreat them, she might think (without evidence) that his wrongdoing is a continuation of the wrongdoing that his white ancestors began. As a result, his wrongdoing may have a certain moral weight it would not have had if it were not connected to this ancestral past. Given such a wrongdoing, she withholds forgiveness. She might also see him through the lens of contemporary wrongs committed by other whites.

With these two views together (ancestral and current ties), she might think that he is actually less remorseful or likely to repeat the wrongdoing since it seems that “White people can’t be trusted.” B. Jane’s decision may seem understandable given US racial history. Her decision to view him as a representative of his race is a survival strategy that many Blacks often use in order to stay clear of the potential that all whites have to enact racial violence and mistreatment on them with impunity. Perhaps she is deciding to withhold forgiveness in order to survive. Her reasons need not be intentionally cruel here. However, in doing so she is engaged in racialized forgiveness and her practice is morally objectionable. She, as in the above case, is failing to see W. Paul as an individual. When she sees him and his action only as an extension of his ancestors or *necessarily* tied to the wrongdoings of other whites, she is not recognizing or respecting him as a person.

Whereas Jane withheld forgiveness in order to “punch down,” B. Jane could withhold forgiveness as a way to “punch up.” By punching, I mean a form of payback aimed at lowering the moral status of the wrongdoer. Whether that punch is up or down will depend on the social status of the participants. On my view, the decision to withhold forgiveness as a form of payback is quite different from the model that Nussbaum sets up. Nussbaum claims that both conditional and unconditional forgiveness can be forms of payback. For example, through conditional forgiveness, we exert power over others by creating conditions that often ask wrongdoers to suffer through penitence as the victim sits in judgment of them. She claims that this leaves little room for dignity or self-respect. Even unconditional forgiveness produces the same effects. If conditions are lacking, there are still moral problems. In unconditional forgiveness, the offended still assumes a moral high ground and inflicts humiliation on the offender. These are, on Nussbaum’s view, all signs of lowering the status of the wrongdoer (Nussbaum 2016, 73–77). But there is another way to lower the status of the offender. It is not only through anger *per se* or through the kinds of forgiveness that Nussbaum describes; we can also “punch up” or lower the status of others by the very practice of withholding forgiveness. Although a white-supremacist society would place W. Paul at the top of the racial hierarchy, B. Jane may respond by withholding forgiveness as a way to pay him back by attempting to lower his moral status. She will do this as a way to proclaim that he is not above her, but rather beneath her.⁵ She might think that forgiving him signifies his racial superiority. So she withholds forgiveness as a way to make him inferior. However, because the goal is to make him inferior as opposed to being her moral equal, she is engaging in racialized forgiveness. This punching up by withholding forgiveness is quite similar to what Macalester Bell refers to as active contempt: an attitudinal response that involves characterizing the target as threatening and responding with hostility and active nonidentification (Bell 2013, 48–51). To be clear, I am not claiming that withholding forgiveness necessarily consists of payback or status-lowering. I am only claiming that status-lowering is a possible motivation of racialized forgiveness, and as such, it gives us reason to find the practice morally objectionable.

I have referred only to interracial cases so far, which is not to say that racialized forgiveness cannot occur in intraracial cases. As I have previously noted, racialized forgiveness can occur in intraracial cases since race does not disappear in such instances. For example, racialized forgiveness occurs in cases in which W. Jane forgives W. Paul because he is white. Again, instead of considering his remorse, the wrongdoing’s impact, or her own moral aims as decisive reasons to forgive or not, she instead considers his race as a relevant factor in her decision. Just as we saw earlier, stereotypes

can be working at the unconscious level and can determine her decision to forgive, which overrides other moral considerations. Perhaps she forgives Paul because she has implicit biases connected to his whiteness, which makes her interpret him as more innocent and less culpable. Just as there are negative stereotypes of Blacks, there are also positive stereotypes of whites. Whereas Blacks are viewed as stereotypically “violent,” whites are stereotypically “good.” Maybe W. Jane unconsciously sees white people as good or perhaps she explicitly thinks this. Good people deserve second chances, according to W. Jane. She may also unconsciously accept the racial ideal that when whites engage in wrongdoing, they have simply made a mistake.⁶ Whites’ (particularly white men’s) assumed innate affective capacities make it possible for her to imagine him as remorseful and repentant. Of course, she can overtly hold these beliefs, which would be a conscious case of racialized forgiveness. Another conscious motivator may be at work, although it may not seem morally worrisome. W. Jane might also intentionally see her forgiveness as a form of racial solidarity: a way of protecting a member of her race from the psychic and communal harm that she believes unforgiveness might create. This leads her to become sympathetic and forgiving.

However, by allowing race to determine her forgiveness, W. Jane is disrespecting W. Paul and his racial group. Although she may be relying on positive racial stereotypes to inform her decision, such stereotyping still involves “the bad of masking individuality, masking internal diversity” (Blum 2004, 277). She fails to see W. Paul as an individual. When she thinks that by virtue of his race, he possesses certain moral qualities and thus warrants differential treatment, she displays what Kwame Anthony Appiah describes as “a moral incapacity (the inability to extend our moral sentiments to all our fellow creatures) and a moral failing (the making of moral distinctions without moral differences)” (Appiah 1990, 10). Her appeal to racial solidarity in this manner does not necessarily give her legitimate reasons to fail to contemplate other moral and prudential considerations. Therein lies the instrumental bad. Moral risks are always involved in withholding and extending forgiveness (for example, a wrongdoer could repeat the wrongdoing or the apology may be insincere), but by taking race as morally relevant, she is more at risk of compromising her safety and the safety of others because of her ill-founded racial confidence in him. She can also implicitly condone his immoral actions as a result.

Let’s now turn to conditions B and C. Recall that racialized forgiveness is present in cases in which praise and criticisms of forgiveness are determined by the race of the victim. The practice of forgiveness is also racialized when such praise and criticisms are, at least implicitly, racially self-serving. This occurs when praise or criticisms of forgiveness are used: (1) as a form of racial grandstanding; (2) in order to reinforce or obscure racial injustice; or (3) to promote counter-resistance. In what follows, I will provide some real-life examples in order to highlight the moral features and effects of these instances.

Consider the 2019 case of Amber Guyger and Brandt Jean. When white Dallas, Texas police officer Amber Guyger was sentenced for killing Botham Jean—an African American—as he sat in his home, his eighteen-year-old brother expressed forgiveness during his victim-impact statement. He also hugged Guyger in court.

There were mixed reactions within the Black community—some reactions that illustrate racialized forgiveness. First, some criticisms seem to be determined by the race of Jean’s brother. For example, African American writer Frederick Joseph wrote, “I respect forgiveness. But Botham Jean’s brother just further bailed Amber Guyger out after the judicial system already did that for her.” Joseph continued, “He (Brandt) continued a

terrible precedent of Black people not holding white people accountable and that expectation being placed on the community” (Da Silva 2019). While empathizing with Brandt’s response yet asserting her own, African American journalist Christen Johnson noted, “Sometimes it’s easier to forgive, to let it all roll off your back like a duck, than it is to unpack and productively deal with the emotional and psychological trauma that comes with being a black person navigating America. . . . Miss me with that. I have the energy to be upset today.” Recognizing these criticisms, Brandt’s mother wrote on social media, “I’m proud of you my son, Brandt. Your load is lighter. Regardless of the views of the spectators, walk with God always. Forgiveness is for the forgiver and it doesn’t matter what the forgiven does with it” (Johnson 2019).

On one hand, Brandt’s forgiveness was seen as inauthentic. He was thought to have no overriding reasons to forgive Guyger. (Being Christian and desiring healing were not viewed as sufficient reasons by some critics.) His forgiveness was thought not only to lack self-respect, but respect for his brother. However, no supporting evidence backs up these claims. All that was made available was his forgiving utterance and action. It seems that the fact that he was Black, and the wrongdoing was of a racial nature, were all that were needed to conclude that his forgiveness was not the real thing. Instead of forgiving, he was viewed as unproductively dealing with his trauma and failing to hold his brother’s killer accountable.

What seems to be happening in this case is quite similar to Norlock’s criticism of gendered forgiveness. Recall, paradigmatic examples of forgiveness consist of individuals who are autonomous and self-interested, and who act out of self-respect. When they forgive, they do it for moral reasons rather than prudential ones. Forgivers who do the opposite seldom count as engaging in the real thing. Norlock recognizes that women are often examples of practitioners of pseudo-forgiveness. When Jane forgives Paul because she doesn’t want the event to stress her out, even though Paul has not admitted to any wrongdoing, her forgiveness is described in the philosophy literature as inauthentic. This is an example of gendered forgiveness. Likewise, the ways in which some criticize the forgiveness of others, particularly that of racial minorities, seem to follow a similar framework. Brandt is viewed as not self-respecting or autonomous simply because of his race. By criticizing him in this way, those who practice racialized forgiveness are denying him agency and failing to show him respect. Their refusal to understand or attempt to see his actions as reasonable shows their refusal to see him as a moral agent. Their unwarranted presumption of his docility and the equating of his forgiveness with “bailing out” also places an unfair social burden on him, a burden placed on top of his grief.

Second, the satisfaction of condition C is also illustrated in this example. Johnson’s criticisms can also be interpreted as an act of what I am calling *racial grandstanding*. This is because the criticisms seem to serve the purpose of getting others to recognize Johnson’s morality and to see her as having certain moral insights, racial priorities, and beliefs. Note the implicit contrasts between Brandt and herself: ease of forgiving vs. productively dealing with trauma; someone forgiving vs. her refusal to do so; and the energy Brandt lacks to be angry vs. the energy she has. Unlike Brandt, she, as a Black person, is more productive, resistant, and affectively correct. And she wants others to recognize the “ideal blackness” that she possesses. In their 2016 paper, “Moral Grandstanding,” Brandon Warmke and Justin Tosi claim that grandstanding, although a feature of public moral discourse, is also problematic for the problems it brings (Tosi and Warmke 2016). Some of the problems include failing to see others as peers, contributing to group polarization, and undermining the improvement of public behavior. Although racial grandstanding may have this impact in public discourse, the moral

problems it creates in the forgiveness context I am interested in is much more interpersonal. Critics, by racial grandstanding, show a lack of sympathy and sensitivity toward the victim. They also display a lack of moral awareness—what a victim experiences and his reactions to it are not analogous to outsiders’—regardless of what racial group they both belong to. The emotions, attitudes, and actions of the two are not on par. To make a character comparison to someone who is experiencing such a loss shows a lack of attunement to moral and factual features of the situation. One might then conclude, “Of course she has more energy: her relative, while eating ice cream in his home, was not killed by a cop.”

This is not to say that our actions and attitudes do not have social meaning. Our actions can reinforce racial stereotypes and convey meanings whether someone intends them or not. They have what Elizabeth Anderson and Richard Pildes refer to as expressive meanings—meanings that “are socially constructed. . . a result of the ways in which actions fit with (or fail to fit with) other meaningful norms and practices in the community” (Anderson and Piles 2000, 1525).⁷ But it is not clear that these meanings will override other reasons to engage in a practice. Brandt may have been aware of the social meanings his forgiveness would have. Yet he believed self-healing was an overriding reason, so he forgave. What he should or should not have done, in light of these meanings, is not my focus here. What is important to note for our purposes is when others criticize him in ways that illustrate racial grandstanding, they are engaged in the practice of racialized forgiveness.

Condition C is also met when a person’s forgiveness is misused to reinforce racial injustice. We can see this in other reactions to the Guyger and Jean case—reactions that drew attention to this misuse. For example, civil rights lawyer Cornell Brooks noted that “the danger, however, here, is that the forgiveness of Black folks is used as a permission slip for police brutality, a permission slip for racial profiling and a permission slip for racial disparities.” He adds, “I NEVER imagined the capacity of Black folks to forgive would be misused as a benediction for police brutality. I have preached #forgiveness for 25 years, BUT using the willingness of Black people to forgive as an excuse to further victimize Black people is SINFUL” (Da Silva 2019). Recognizing the racial meaning Brandt’s forgiving actions might have for many Americans, Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., responded: “But don’t confuse his forgiveness with absolving this nation for its gross, bitter discrimination against Black people in a myriad of its systems and policies. Racism and white supremacist ideology can’t be ‘hugged out’” (Chappell and Gonzales 2019). When a person’s forgiveness is interpreted as an excuse for racial oppression or absolution for the nation’s wrongdoing, we have an instance of racialized forgiveness.

Philosophical discourse can also satisfy condition C. This occurs through philosophers’ *standard use* of racial minorities (such as Brandt and others) as forgiveness exemplars. By valorizing forgiveness (or attitudes that are involved in the practice), they can implicitly deter minorities from engaging in affective forms of resistance.

This doesn’t mean that we should never use moral exemplars. They are important since through them we are morally educated and inspired to be better. In the domain of forgiveness, exemplars can remind us of how we can better respond to wrongdoing. They demonstrate to us the possibility of forgiving the unforgivable since they are proof that forgiveness is possible. Forgiveness exemplars can also give us hope and even motivate us to be less vengeful or angry (Cherry 2017). However, if I were to ask you to name an exemplar of forgiveness, I wonder who would come to mind? Norlock notes that the paradigmatic *examples* of forgiveness used by philosophers involve

white men who are autonomous, self-interested, and in fairly equal positions of power (Norlock 2009, 15). However, it is interesting to note that the real-life *exemplars* of forgiveness often used by philosophers are overwhelmingly Black and Brown men and women who have experienced racial and colonial oppression. They include Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and more recently, the families of the Charleston Nine.

Glen Pettigrove, for example, lists Gandhi, King, and Mandela as exemplars of gracious forgiveness (Pettigrove 2012).⁸ Their forgiveness was gracious insofar as they forgave before the wrongdoer acknowledged the wrongdoing. Nussbaum notes that the families of the Charleston Nine displayed attitudes very close to the love and generosity that she believes plays an important role in intimate relationships and revolutionary justice. The Charleston Nine were nine African American members of Emanuel African Methodist Church who were gunned down by white supremacist Dylan Roof after they welcomed him to Bible Study one evening in 2015. Their family members were acknowledged for their willingness to forgive Roof during his indictment. Nussbaum offers the following analysis:

There is, however, a version of unconditional forgiveness that lies very close to unconditional love and generosity, lacking any nuance of superiority or vindictiveness. This sort of unconditional forgiveness was remarkably displayed by the survivors of the racially motivated shooting in a Charleston, South Carolina, church on June 17, 2015. Invited by the judge in charge of the bond hearing to make statements on behalf of each victim, family members addressed the defendant, Dylann Roof (who has confessed). Most uncommonly in so-called “victim impact statements,” they did not express any vindictiveness or payback wish. Nor did they express anger—except, in one case, to admit it as a defect: “I’m a work in progress, and I acknowledge that I am very angry.” But universally, while expressing profound grief, they offered Roof forgiveness, wished for God’s mercy, and insisted that love is stronger than hate. “She taught me that we are the family that love built.” No concrete Transition is envisaged, and the only future mentioned is one of God’s mercy at the final judgment. Perhaps the situation offers little room for the Transition. And yet there is something Transitional in its spirit, in the idea that love will prevail over hate and that a world can be reconstructed by love. (Nussbaum 2016, 77–78)

Later, she lists Gandhi and Mandela as exemplars of love and generosity.

Using exemplars is not morally worrisome, but what is said and not said in their utilization is indicative of racialized forgiveness. Particularly, what gets ignored as we use these exemplars is revealing. Pettigrove admits that our admiration for these exemplars stems from the “difficulty of forgiving in such dramatic situations.” Citing Aristotle, he notes that these are “situations that strain human nature to the breaking point” (Pettigrove 2012, 138). Although Aristotle’s words provide a more detailed description of what the forgivers experienced than Pettigrove’s “dramatic situations” and is what we perhaps admire, he still ignores in explicit terms what their forgiveness was a response to: white domination and supremacy. And he ignores the afterlife of that racial wrongdoing that forgivers may carry after they forgive. Nussbaum lays out the details of the families’ forgiveness that was offered up in the courtroom. But this description is also too simplistic. It constructs a “love triumphs over hate” narrative—as if transitions of this kind are actually this neat. My worry is simple: although racial

minorities are popular exemplars of forgiveness, what they actually forgave is often underdescribed, which risks obscuring the racial violence to which their forgiveness was a response.

Exemplar talk can also be an instance of racialized forgiveness when justified suspicions around racial-exemplar usage are not addressed, thus hinting, albeit implicitly, at its racially self-serving nature. For example, using racial minorities as exemplars of forgiveness can communicate to minorities that forgiveness is the only acceptable way to respond to oppression—since its constant usage implies that it is what the white normative gaze admires. It is not surprising that racial minorities may then have reason to be suspicious of such usage. To not acknowledge this or to revise how we use these exemplars may at best make the usage ineffective to some audiences, and at worst, communicate counterresistance. In other work, I describe this suspicion:

I am concerned about what can be inferred through their use. I'm afraid that most people who are the target of Nussbaum's argument (political resisters) are also racialized minorities who have been told by society to respond to racial oppression with positive dispositions like love and generosity. The lack of diverse examples (and not simply the argument) may make them resistant to conclusions like Nussbaum's. . . . Continual oppression and societal norms as they relate to emotions have created a context of distrust on the part of oppressed groups. Adding arguments on top of this context without addressing the history, the suspicion, and what's at stake when we argue for love [*we can add forgiveness*] (with black and brown people as our favorite examples) can create more problems than it solves. (Cherry 2019, 663–64; emphasis mine)

I am in no way claiming that I know the motivations of philosophers. What I am claiming is that when we use racial minorities as forgiveness exemplars in ways that obscure state-authored or racial violence, and are not attuned to the docile message it can promote to racial minorities, we risk engaging in a practice that is, at least implicitly, racially self-serving.

III. Theorizing and Practicing Forgiveness Differently

I have argued that the practice of forgiveness is racialized when who is or is not forgiven, and whose forgiveness we praise and criticize, are determined by race. It is also racialized when we criticize or praise forgivers in ways that are, at least implicitly, racially self-serving. Given its features and impacts, I've claimed that racialized forgiveness is morally objectionable. If all of this is tenable, then what should we do in response? In this concluding section, I provide some brief suggestions.

One of the proposals both Norlock and MacLachlan offer in response to gendered forgiveness is to conceive of forgiveness as multidimensional or as “forgivenesses,” respectively. For MacLachlan, this entails conceiving of forgiveness as “a set of non-hostile practices for negotiating wrongdoing that may express a number of reparative aims: relief, release or reconciliation” (MacLachlan 2009, 191). In other words, forgiveness is not a singular ideal. People can forgive and express forgiveness in a variety of ways. Norlock and MacLachlan aim to show that forgiveness does not look like one thing. One of the upshots of their proposals is that they enable women's forgiveness to be seen as forgiveness rather than as pseudo-forgiveness that lacks self-respect. The idea that forgiveness is racialized provides additional reasons for us to theorize multidimensional forms.

Consequently, this will expand the kinds of exemplars of forgiveness we make use of since forswearing anger will not be the only nonhostile practice that qualifies as forgiveness; thus we will not be limited to only nonangry exemplars. This will allow for alternative models of forgiveness (for example, those who retain yet moderate their outlaw emotions) and may then lessen the suspicion that exists in current racial-exemplar usage. Multidimensional forms of forgiveness will also help curb the tendency to quickly criticize racial minorities' forgiveness, since the decision to forgive will not necessarily hinge on matters of Kantian self-respect. Rather, it will include non-individualistic as well as prudential conceptions, considerations, and values. Nonideal forms will also help us resist creating neat "forgiveness triumphs over hate" narratives—which is likely to risk obscuring wrongdoing and its afterlife. That is to say, forgiveness may not get us to ideal goals such as reconciliation. Hate may still exist and reign despite our forgiving stance. Even though forgiveness may result in moral repair, as with any kind of repair, things may never be what they once were before the wrongdoing. They may even be worse.

We can also begin to resist certain practices and create new ones. When using forgiveness exemplars, we can make sure to emphasize the racial violence and mistreatment that sparked the forgiveness of racial minorities. We can highlight that given this mistreatment (and evidence of its continuation), some have not forgiven, yet there are reasons for why that is OK too. We can also resist allowing race to inform us in negative ways. This can also occur by reflecting on if and how our racial biases affect whom we decide to forgive, and then remedy them. We can also resist allowing a person's forgiveness to represent their racial group by understanding its microaggressive nature and by being proactive in lessening the social pressure we put on others to forgive. Even when we disagree with people's decisions to forgive or withhold forgiveness—particularly in response to race-based violence and in interracial cases—we should be careful not to ascribe to them attitudes (for example, lacking self-respect) or actions (for example, letting someone off the hook) that are not grounded in evidence. We should, as a default, grant them agency and respect.

Creating new practices may also require us to acknowledge social meanings of forgiveness and redefine them. For example, if the racial meaning of Blacks' forgiveness communicates continual permission to enact violence, a person can contradict this meaning and express a new one, just as Bernice King and Cornell Brooks illustrate in section II. As members of the moral community, we should also extend sympathy toward victims. Even when we think there is a lot at stake, particularly in instances of high-profile, race-based violence, there is no excuse for failing in our moral obligations to those who are the direct victims of wrongdoing. It may be easier to engage in racial grandstanding, but cultivating and extending sympathy, compassion, and support is more fitting and productive.

In a nonideal world, wrongdoing is inevitable. We may be limited in controlling when wrongdoing occurs, but we can control how we respond, and this is not the sole responsibility of victims. We all engage in the practice of forgiveness when we forgive, withhold forgiveness, and praise and criticize forgivers and withholders. I have attempted to show how race can negatively influence these practices with the hope that we can begin to see what so many before were unable or unwilling to see. Now that we have seen the many facets of racialized forgiveness, it is up to us to begin to theorize and practice forgiveness differently.

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Notes

1 Neil Levy makes a similar argument, but he goes a step further by claiming that this is not to say that they are not racist nor are they off the moral hook (Levy 2017).

2 My hope is to use these examples in ways that do not commit the failures Norlock and MacLachlan find in examples of gendered forgiveness. I admit there is a risk whether I use Jane and Paul or Adam and Phillip.

3 Of course, race can play a role in one's decision to forgive (or not), yet not be decisive. Someone may more readily forgive members of a certain race for an action that, ultimately, they would have forgiven anyone for. In such cases their process of deciding to forgive was inflected by race, even if ultimately race didn't *determine* the decision to forgive. I am not counting this as a case of racialized forgiveness. It is important to note though that people who have their decisions about forgiveness inflected by race are liable to engage in racialized forgiveness, since if you're more disposed to forgive people of a certain race, there will be times when race will determine your decision to forgive.

4 This is not to say that there are no acts of wrongdoing that would represent the actions of his ancestors. Racial violence, paternalism, discrimination, or racially motivated mistreatment most definitely would count. My point here is that not all acts of wrongdoing would. The example of B. Jane is pointing to these other kinds of acts.

5 So there are three options here: You can use forgiveness to lower others' status to a position beneath you; you can withhold forgiveness to lower others' status to a position beneath you; and you can withhold forgiveness to lower others' status from a position of superiority to your moral position, one of equality.

6 For more on how US society tends to view white offenders, see Metzl 2017. For more information on how whites tend to imagine themselves as morally superior and as "good people," see Feagin 2001.

7 See Robin Zheng's and Charles Mills's arguments for how social meanings of exclusionary dating practices can communicate disrespect to one's own racial group and thus provide reasons for why they are morally wrong (Mills 1994; Zheng 2016).

8 To be fair, he also lists two biblical figures, Jesus and Stephen, and US President Abraham Lincoln.

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