



## **Empty Space: Creativity, Femininity, Reparation, Justice**

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In an article titled “The Empty Space,” Danish journalist Karin Michaelis recounts how her friend, “Ruth Kjær,” suddenly discovered a great artistic talent. Despite being “beautiful, rich, and talented,” Michaelis reports that Kjær felt haunted, hunted, by what she described as “a dark spot in her life”:

In the midst of the happiness which was natural to her, and seemed so untroubled, she would suddenly be plunged into the deepest melancholy. A melancholy that was suicidal. If she tried to account for this, she would say something to this effect: “There is an empty space inside me, which I can never fill!” (quoted. in Klein, 1929, p. 215)

Michaelis goes on to detail how Kjær’s melancholic anxiety about empty spaces was abruptly externalized one day, when a painting from her carefully curated home was removed, leaving yet another empty space. For Kjær, this absence seemed “in some inexplicable way[, ...] to coincide with the empty space within her” (*ibid*, p. 216). But Kjær’s response to this blank space on the wall was surprising. To the great astonishment of everyone in her life, the lamination of internal and external emptiness prompted within Kjær not an intensification of her own misery but an inexplicable urge to create, to fill the empty space. In lieu of the lost picture, Kjær painted a portrait with such skill that both husband and brother-in-law—the apparent arbiters of aesthetic merit in this story—refused to believe she was the artist. From this, Kjær developed a decades long career in portraiture, as from an empty space.<sup>1</sup>

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Many psychoanalytic readers surely recognize this narrative arc since Kjær’s story is the subject of an important paper on art and aesthetics by Melanie Klein. In “Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in A Work of Art and In the Creative Impulse” (1929), Klein speculates on the psychic life of art, creativity, and the aesthetic sentiment, taking both a Ravel opera and Michaelis’s narrative report as her objects. While creativity will become a key term in Klein’s later work when she formalizes her theory of the depressive position, reparation, and love, this early essay witnesses one of Klein’s first attempts to think psychoanalytically about creativity’s origins and operations. According to Klein, Kjær’s sudden burst of creative production constituted a psycho-aesthetic act of reparation in which her urge to

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<sup>1</sup> For a consideration of the painter’s identity, see Olsen’s “Depression and Reparation as Themes in Melanie Klein’s Analysis of the Painter Ruth Weber” in *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review* 27.1 (2004).

paint—that is, her compulsion to “restore people”—worked as a ballast against a history of phantasied destructive assault on her mother’s body (1929, p. 218). It was, observes Klein, a manifestation of the desire “to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself” (*ibid*). Through the production and reproduction of matrilineal images, Kjär tried to repair her own filial rifts.

In this article, I take up Klein’s theorization of creativity through reparation to consider how this principally psychological formulation articulates a relationship between aesthetics and politics.<sup>2</sup> Much scholarship on Klein, like that by Leo Bersani (1990), Lyndsey Stonebridge (1998), Esther Sánchez-Pardo (2003), and Mary Jacobus (2005) has rightly called attention to the central function of creativity in her work, showing how her narrative of the psychic impulse to create opens onto a broader theory of aesthetics. Yet, for all this attention to aesthetics, few psychoanalysts or scholars have considered how, through the language of “reparation,” Klein’s psychoanalytic theory sutures aesthetics to a thoroughly *political* grappling with the limits of justice. In this article, I therefore re-orient previous critical engagements with Kleinian psychoanalysis and aesthetics by locating reparation as a critical axis within Klein’s work that bridges aesthetic and political concerns, thereby bringing aesthetic scholarship on Klein into conversation with incisive political readings of her work by critics like Jacqueline Rose (1994), Eli Zaretsky (1998), and Michal Shapira (2013). As a distinctly twentieth-century framework for negotiating global, political claims to and for justice, “reparation” is far from simply—or indeed originally—a psychological operation. Thus, that Klein would adopt the language of “reparation” to name the psychic process she understood as paramount to creativity is not only aesthetically but, I argue, politically salient.

To consider the implications of this link between aesthetics and politics in Klein’s work, I begin by fleshing out how Klein theorizes creativity as a psychological process by implicitly soldering it to the gendered configurations of femininity and maternity. Although Klein never declares outright that her theory of psychic creativity emerges from the feminine, I chart how her work nevertheless proposes a theory of

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<sup>2</sup> Although psychoanalysis does not always make careful distinctions between related terms like “aesthetics” and “creativity,” it is worth pointing out that throughout this article I do not use them interchangeably. In my use of “creativity,” I mean to name a principally psychological (rather than, for instance, ontological) process. This usage is consistent with most psychoanalytic approaches to creativity since they attend first and foremost to the realm of subjective experience, emotionality, and intentionality. Creativity, then, names the interior, psychic disposition from which one creates, not the ontological novelty of the object or ideation in itself. In contrast, my use of “aesthetics” is admittedly less precise. “Aesthetics,” as I use it, mantles both an internal subjective disposition or sensation in relation to the creation and apperception of (art) objects *and* a potential quality inhering in the art object itself, even as I strongly agree with Jacques Rancière’s (2013) account of how historical, political conditions structure the legibility and recognizability of any object or event as “art” in the first place. Creativity, as I use it, is therefore just one potential aspect of aesthetics, albeit one that has been of major interest to psychoanalytic aesthetics. I leave aesthetics as a broader concept in an attempt to expand, rather than limit, what we imagine as the proper field of “the aesthetic” in the first place.

aesthetic creativity that is tied to femininity; as I show, there is a tacit link between Klein's theory of femininity and her account of the impulse for creative, aesthetic production. As readers see even in the short excerpts from the Kjær case (which I return to later in this article), it is *feminine* production and the creation of *maternal* images that takes precedence in Klein's writing about creativity. She suggests that given their identificatory relationships with their mothers, women are uniquely compelled to acts of creative reparation.

On a first reading, Klein's proposition might seem a feminist windfall since it locates femininity (rather than masculinity) as the central axis of creativity and cultural (re)production. Such a reading is not untrue. However, in this article, I am interested in tracking how Klein triangulates creativity, reparativity, and femininity precisely because it is my contention that, *thought politically*, this theory actually goes some way toward pronouncing the difficulty inherent in any unequivocal claims to justice, in sexual *and* global politics. Shifting focus in the final section of this article to a historical genealogy of the term reparation, I argue that Klein's theory of feminine reparative creativity constitutes an unexpected site through which she enters into larger (inter)national debates about the unstable and highly contested political life of reparations. Read historically, Klein's theory of reparative creativity extends emergent political debates about the relationship between reparation and justice. I claim that, through the politicized language of reparation, Klein's psychoanalytic work is implicitly tackling the fraught problem of reparative justice in the twentieth century and, in this way, her work proposes a gendered, psychological explication of global, geopolitical concerns.

What seems especially significant to me about this political reframing of reparation, though, is not that it offers feminine aesthetic creation as the *solution* to geopolitical histories of damage and injury; rather, I find Klein's theory of reparativity compelling because it actually emphasizes the difficulty of even conclusively adjudicating justice. By routing aesthetic reparation through femininity, Klein actually complicates *any* idealization of reparation, aesthetic or otherwise, as the final, conclusive realization of justice since she insists that feminine creativity is never properly separable from aggression and destruction. My final reading of Klein's theory of reparative creativity is thus that it might allow us to think femininity not so much as a stable sexual identity position, but as the mark of the struggle for—and ultimate impossibility of—the secure achievement of reparative, relational justice writ large. Femininity and reparativity are the locus of the impossible within Klein's work. In this way, feminine creativity might be understood as politically desirable *not* because it can ever secure the promise of reparative justice, but rather because it embodies the political value of the struggle for it in the first place.

### **“The Greatest Gift”: Creativity and the Work of Art in the Age of Psychoanalysis**

In his 1919 essay, “The Uncanny,” Freud begins his study of E.T.A. Hoffman's gothic short story, “The Sandman,” with a reflection on aesthetics:

Only rarely does the psychoanalyst feel impelled to engage in aesthetic investigations, even when aesthetics is not restricted to the theory of beauty, but described as relating to the qualities of our feeling. He works in other strata of the psyche and has little to do with the emotional impulses that provide the usual subject matter of aesthetics, impulses that are restrained, inhibited in their aims, and dependent on numerous attendant circumstances. Yet now and then it happens that he has to take an interest in a particular area of aesthetics, and then it is usually a marginal one that has been neglected in the specialist literature. (2003 [1919], p. 123)

In this demure prelude, Freud frames his analysis of uncanny phenomena through a qualification, describing the aesthetic inquiry he is about to pursue as the exception rather than the rule in psychoanalytic inquiry. According to Freud, *psychoanalysts*—because Freud interestingly speaks here of the human practitioners, not the theoretical field—have “little to do with... the usual subject matter of aesthetics” and only occasionally does the analyst pursue the “marginal” aspects of the field that have been otherwise “neglected” by aestheticians. The work of psychoanalysis, Freud implies, is somehow *other* to the work of art.

Yet, for all Freud’s posturing about the exceptionalism of his engagement with aesthetics, this essay on the uncanny is far from the only piece where Freud brings psychoanalysis and aesthetics into less than “remote” proximity. From his well-known study on Leonardo da Vinci, to his shorter works on fairy tales and creative writers, to his lesser-known writings on Dostoyevsky, Goethe, Thomas Mann, Wilhelm Jensen, and Michelangelo, aesthetics was anything but an ancillary concern for either the field of psychoanalysis or for Freud himself. Indeed, that Freud would build some of the most central concepts in psychoanalytic theory—the Oedipus complex, primary and secondary narcissism, sadism, masochism—through terms derived from literature and myth already suggests that questions of art, aesthetics, and creativity are central to the psychoanalytic enterprise, even from the earliest days of its inception. We might even go so far as to say that Freud needed to position aesthetics as psychoanalysis’s “other” precisely because he built so much of psychoanalytic theory on and through it. As Andrea Gyenge’s reading of aesthetics and theater in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in this special issue brilliantly argues, theories of aesthetics in Freud’s work exist even in texts that we think are “beyond” their scope.

Given the sprawl of Freud’s own writings about art, aesthetics, and creativity, then, there are (at least) two important ways that Freud theorized the relationship between art and the psyche. In the first instance—and perhaps most well-recognized of all—is the kind of methodological application of psychoanalytic theories of human subjectivity to aesthetic objects. As in the case of da Vinci, Freud often looked to art objects (be they literary or visual) for confirmation of his theories about subjectivity, sexuality, and sociality. While these intersections certainly generated new insights for Freud, transforming psychoanalytic theory in concert with the novelty of each art object, it is not unjust to say that they chiefly explored art at the level of its *content*, assessing representational figures or narratives according to the perimeters of modern theories of human psychology. As the introduction to this special issue details, this is

the style of reading that has been heavily trafficked in by post-Freudian psychoanalytic clinicians. It is also the mode of reading that has been most lambasted by academic scholars in literature, visual culture, and art history for its inattention to concerns of form, style, and history.

Familiar though this debate about psychoanalysis's "applicability" to art may be, Freud had at least one other way of engaging with art. In the second instance, Freud speculated not at the level of the finished art *object*, but rather concerned himself with the psychology of the artist and the subjective experience of aesthetic sensibility. Although in "The Uncanny" Freud maps the geometry of the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety onto Nathaniel's encounters with the grotesque, eye-gouging Coppelius in Hoffman's "The Sandman," ultimately the yield of this inquiry is Freud's fledgling sketch of uncanny *experiences*. More than just gesturing to the substitutability of an eye for an "I" in Hoffman's tale, Freud instead uses the story as a springboard to consider what happens in the reader or viewer of uncanny experiences to give them such unnerving potency.

As when Freud finds himself wandering, again and again, back to the same red-light district in Italy, his ultimate suggestion is that there is an important element of audience-response at work in experiences with *unheimlich* familiarity that are the true stuff of the uncanny. Pushed further, we might even say that the germ of Freud's writing about uncanny experiences—indeed, aesthetic experiences—is that there is something unsettling (or unsettled) within his own work about female sexuality and women's productive and reproductive labor, which like that famous "dark continent" Freud found himself both lost in and yet compulsively returned to.

In this way, Freud's essay on the uncanny is not dissimilar from his writing about daydreams, creative writing, poetry, and even humor, where his concern is less the aesthetic object than it is the subjective experience of creativity itself. Although Freud famously makes "culture" and "civilization" the special provenance of paternal, patriarchal relations by defining it through the firm instantiation of the super-ego which solidifies the social contract between men, in his work on creativity, beating fantasies, and the uncanny he nevertheless unconsciously locates the specter of 'Woman' at the heart of the creative impulse.

As Anna Freud's own analysis of beating fantasies, daydreams, and creative writing attests (1922), women's erotic life is subject to far more repression than men's; it should thus come as no surprise that the urge to sublimation and creation are common psychic precipitates of feminine subjectivity. Symptoms are, after all, a form of somatic creativity, a performance art acted on and through the body. As the first subject of psychoanalysis, the hysterical woman enacts the origins of the psychoanalyst's work through her body's somatic art. What psychoanalysis offers us, then, is the ability to think aesthetic production outside of traditional mediums. As Chienyn Chi suggests in her analysis of Aimé Césaire's decolonial poetry, the symptomatic body, neurotic speech, and madness—as much as proper paint and canvass—embody the art of the subject.

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While the hysteric might have manifested the first properly psychoanalytic engagement with art, she was hardly the last. Since Freud, many psychoanalytic clinicians have subjectivized aesthetics—or alternately aestheticized the subject—crafting theories of subjectivity and psychic life that pivot on the primacy of art and creativity. Even in the first and second generations of analysts following Freud, Melanie Klein was hardly alone in giving pride of place to creativity and art. Ella Sharpe (1950), Ernst Kris (1952), Marion Milner (1950; 1969), Adrian Stokes (1965), Wilfred Bion (1965), Hanna Segal (1952; 1991), D.W. Winnicott (1971), Christopher Bollas (1987), and Donald Meltzer (1988; 2004)—to name but a few—were some of the most prominent analysts to develop theories of aesthetics and subjectivity, but not the only.<sup>3</sup> Each analyst had their own unique clinical and theoretical interpretation of Freud’s work. But what they shared was a recognition that some element of aesthetic sensibility and/or the creative impulse was indispensable for thinking the subject.

Klein was no exception here. In spite of the fact that she would claim fealty to Freud throughout her life—indeed, the rhetoric of her contentions with Anna Freud in the (in)famous Controversial Discussions often hinged on positioning her method as the truest embodiment of “classic” Freudian technique—Klein’s psychoanalytic theories from the 1930s were unequivocally her own. Notably, while Freud held that the superego was a precipitate of the Oedipus complex and crystalized in the child somewhere around the fifth year of life, Klein radically predated this Oedipal scenario, imagining children as young as two in the thick of an Oedipal drama. According to Klein (especially in her early work), young children introject a superego much earlier than Freud suspected, when their unbridled sadistic instincts are at their height. Because of this, the superego functions as a sadistic and persecutory internal object bent on tyrannizing the child’s relatively weak and defenseless ego. As Klein explains,

There could be no doubt that a super-ego had been in full operation for some time in my small patients of between two and three-quarters and four years of age, whereas according to the accepted view the super-ego would not begin to be activated until the Oedipus complex had died down—*i.e.* until about the fifth year of life. Furthermore, my data showed that this early super-ego was immeasurably harsher and more cruel than that of the older child or adult, and that it literally crushed down the feeble ego of the small child. (1933, p. 248)

Powered by the destructive force of the death instinct, Klein’s superego is less a guardian of cultural reproduction than it is a mechanism of subjective disintegration. It “literally crushed down the feeble ego of the small child,” who is consequently dominated by the fear of suffering unimaginably cruel attacks, both from its real objects and from its superego (*ibid*). Yet, for Klein, this overly cruel superego is one of the first and most important aspects of the child’s psychic life; its early arrival,

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<sup>3</sup> For more contemporary post-Kleinian (and post-Freudian) clinical writing about aesthetics, see Glover, 2009; Harris Williams, 2010; Walsh, 2013; and Civitarese, 2018.

instinctual force, and destructive capacity make it responsible for much of children's acute anxiety and early inhibitions.<sup>4</sup>

The hostility of this internal world—where terms like “attack,” “destroy,” “tear,” “bomb,” and “annihilate” reign—characterizes how Klein conceptualized early paranoid and persecutory states.<sup>5</sup> According to Klein, the child's earliest experiences were defined by persecutory, “bad” part-objects. Unable to make sense of the complexity of internal and external experience, and unable to withstand its own unmitigated aggression and sadism, the child splits objects into unadulterated “good” and “bad” parts, projecting “bad” part-objects outside itself and (in the best-case scenario) securely introjecting “good” part-objects within its own ego. Through these processes of splitting and projection, the child is able to safeguard its own ego. It expels that which seems intolerable or unassimilable and constructs its ego on and through that which seems good. But like all survival strategies, which bluntly reduce complexity in order to secure a baseline continuity of existence, this process of splitting and projection ends up impoverishing the ego, leaving it alienated from that which it projects outward. Even though the child's ego may have survived disintegration, Klein will point out—and did so increasingly toward the end of her career—that this hardly meant that it had secured integrity.

If anxieties about ego disintegration, aggression, and paranoid anxiety predominated in Klein's early work, then a perhaps complimentary concern with integration, reparation, and depressive anxiety took shape in her later thinking. With this turn, Klein emphasized not persecutory bad objects, but sustaining good ones. As the first object of splitting mechanisms, the alternately good and bad breast was the prototype of all later object relations. This was a meaningful shift in Klein's thinking because it furnished a version of the self—and consequently of the world—that was not crushed inescapably between overwhelming anxiety and annihilating aggression. By attending to the introjection of the good breast and the child's depressive attempts to make reparation to objects newly apprehended as whole, Klein began to focus on the child's capacities for creativity (rather than just destructivity). As she explains in her later work, “[t]he breast in its good aspect is the prototype of maternal goodness,

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<sup>4</sup> Tracking a genealogy of the development of Klein's thinking around key terms like “the superego” is important, but it is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the 1930s Klein newly began to describe the superego as a precipitate of the ego's originary attempts to deflect the death instinct. The superego is, as she writes, “an offshoot of very intense destructive instincts” (1933, p. 250). Its persecutory force derives from the death instinct, which strives for (self) disintegration. For further reading on the place Klein accords to the superego, see R.D. Hinshelwood's *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*.

<sup>5</sup> Although Klein's earliest work (throughout the 1920s and early 1930s) was squarely focused on children's experiences of aggression, persecution, and paranoia, at this point she had not yet codified these psychic mechanisms into a coherent “position.” Her elaboration of the “paranoid-schizoid position” (as an antecedent of the “depressive position”) would not come until years later, in 1946 with the publication of “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms.” Thus, while much of Klein's early writing about persecutory part-objects and projective processes forms the groundwork for her later distinctly *positional* thinking, it is not synonymous with it.

inexhaustible patience and generosity, as well as creativeness” (1957, p. 180). Klein continues in this same essay:

The ‘good’ breast that feeds and initiates the love relation to the mother is the representative of the life instinct and it is also felt as the first manifestation of creativeness. ... If identification with the good and life-giving internalized object can be maintained, this becomes an impetus towards creativeness. ... The capacity to give and to preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest cause for envy. (1957, p. 201-202)

Allied with food, love, survival, and indeed life itself, the good breast is that “first manifestation of creativeness” and the identificatory object from which all later creativity springs. The good breast and the subsequent experience of creativity are interestingly figured as a “gift,” a description that, as sociologist Marcel Mauss (1925 [2016]) has theorized, places them within economies of reciprocal exchange that produce and maintain social ties. What Klein argues here is that, if the child experiences the good breast as offering a gift, then by accepting it—by introjecting it—the child has little choice but to reciprocate through the vitalization of its own creativity. Put another way, the creative impulse, both given and received, is the fabric of the social tie.<sup>6</sup>

My reading of Klein’s theory of creativity, insofar as I see it as constituting a kind of social bond, is of a very different order than how most scholars (myself

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<sup>6</sup> This formulation of sociality through a literal “creation story” develops in an interesting direction in the next lines of the passage from which I just quoted. After Klein juxtaposes envy with creativity, aligning envy with the child’s phantasies of putting “badness...into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her” and her creativity, she fascinatingly turns to a discussion of Christian literature and theology to illustrate her thinking. Klein describes Satan’s “war on God” in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as an example of the way envy seeks to “spoil” Heavenly creation. She then she follows this with theological citations from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and the First Letter to the Corinthians. Although Klein was Jewish by both ancestry and upbringing, Christianity and Catholicism were significant internal objects for her throughout her life. Indeed, as a child of eight or nine, she felt “tortured” that she would suddenly turn Catholic (Grosskurth, 1986, p. 14). As Grosskurth comments, Klein’s “later theories on constitutional envy, the primary importance of the mother, and reparation bear close parallels to the doctrines of original sin, the Immaculate Conception, and Christian atonement” (1986, p. 84). Klein’s psychological work, with its moral emphasis on good and bad, creation and destruction, envy and redemption, has more than a little of the flavor of Christian theology—never mind her direct references to Satan’s expulsion from heaven! This similarity even led Edward Glover to comment that the internal fantasy world of Klein’s infant is a “matriarchal variant of the doctrine of Original Sin” (quoted in Phillips, 1998, p. 42). Read through this theological framework, the child’s experiences of creativity and its attendant reparative tendencies are not only psychological and (as I argue) political, but deeply moral and ethical, organized in a fairly recognizable way according to Christian theological narratives of good and evil.

included) would read Sigmund Freud's thinking about sublimation. Although Klein never entirely abandoned the language of sublimation, her most original contributions to a theory of creativity do not hinge on Freud's original libidinal-repression model. For Freud, sublimation describes the process by which creativity is derived from the instinctual life of the human organism; because of the prohibitory moral mandates of that paternal "civilizing" order, the child must renounce libidinal need and direct these energies to new objects or modes of expression. Creativity, as defined by Freud, does therefore trace something of the monadic subject's relation to the world; but it is, fundamentally, a mark of the *foreclosure* of the social tie rather than its reciprocal reception. Klein would ultimately agree with Freud that there is something secondary rather than primary about creativity since it is only through aggression that the creative impulse emerges. But, in her work, creativity is nevertheless a mark of sociality's affirmation rather than its negation. Vitaly, she posits that creativity is allied with reparativity as one of the psychic operations born of the child's depressive concern for its objects; reparation is the motor force that enables creation. According to Klein, the "drive to make reparation adds impetus and direction to the creative impulse and to all constructive activities" (Klein, 1942, p. 321). While in the early years of Klein's work she described reparative creativity as merely "reactive," throughout the 1940s and 1950s she increasingly framed it as the core process of psychic life, connecting it to love, object-relatedness, and ego-integrity (Gosso, 2004, p. 3). Far from a permutation of libidinal energy, creativity for Klein thus named a reparative relation to the object-world as such.

Read through this contrast, what seems noteworthy about Klein's spin on the theory of the creative impulse is that she traces it by way of the social bonds made specifically through the maternal, through the feminine. By narrating creativity through the breast, Klein locates the mother (and the child's phantasies about her) as the origin of the creative impulse. In Klein's theoretical writing as in her case material, the mother—her body, her breast—is situated both as the object of the child's first aggression and as the first site of its nascent creativity, which constitutes a form of social relatedness that emerges from the depressive position and the child's attempts at reparation for its aggression. Rather than a paternal injunction acting as the catalyst for the genesis of the creative impulse and acts of cultural (re)production (*a la* Freud), in Klein's theory it is a sustained relation to the mother's good breast through reparation that fosters creativity. The mother, reparation, and creativity are the triangulated terms through which the social order is maintained and reproduced.

### **Portraits of the Mind: On Creativity and Femininity**

Such a formulation arrived cleanly only in Klein's late work. However, readers of her earlier work (such as Kjär's case) can see how there is a sketch of this narrative already in development. Klein makes note of the fact that, after filling the "empty space" on the wall, Kjär painted a series of portraits of women, focusing especially on her mother and on the matriarchs of her family line. "It is obvious," writes Klein

that the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself was at the bottom of the

compelling urge to paint these portraits of her relatives. That of the old woman, on the threshold death, seems to be the expression of the primary, sadistic desire to destroy. The daughter's wish to destroy her mother, to see her old, worn out, marred, is the cause of the need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty. By so doing the daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavor to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait. In the analyses of children, when the representation of destructive wishes is succeeded by an expression of reactive tendencies, we constantly find that drawing and painting are used as a means to make people anew. The case of Ruth Kjär shows plainly that this anxiety of the little girl is of the greatest importance in the ego development of women, and is one of the incentives to achievement. (1929, p. 218)

According to Klein, Kjär's spontaneous creative production shows how reparative efforts succeed destructive attacks, seeking to "make people anew" through visual representations like drawing and painting. Aesthetic creation follows on the heels of phantasied destruction. But by framing Kjär as a "little girl," Klein importantly emphasizes the gendering of her theory of creativity and reparation, which establishes a relationship between femininity and creativity. If what Klein suggested above was that reparation and creativity bear the mark of the maternal (and thus, by extension, the feminine) because the good breast is the object for these impulses, then she here adds to this equation the proposal that it is particularly those children sexed as female that are compelled most keenly to these acts of reparation and creativity.<sup>7</sup>

For Klein, Kjär's case demonstrates something of how it is a particularly feminine anxiety—that menacing "empty space"—that galvanizes both women's psychological ego development and their later creative achievements. Klein's proposition is that Kjär experiences an aggressive and destructive anxiety specific to femininity and that it is this experience that sets in motion her creative and reparative gestures. Her implicit suggestion, in other words, is that there is something about a specifically feminine fear that is indispensable to the genesis of creativity.

Such a proposition importantly elaborates the "other side" of Klein's theory of creativity. If the mother marks the birth of creativity and the social tie, then she could only ever do so because she first introduced the early anxiety situations (for the little girl, especially) that formed the point of departure for reparation and creativity. In Klein's theory of psycho-sexual development and sexual difference, girls more than boys—women more than men—experience early anxiety situations that have to do

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<sup>7</sup> I use the language of sex and sexual difference here because although Klein's theory of phantasies provides the conceptual grammar for a radical deconstruction of binary sexual difference, Klein herself invested in the importance of the anatomical, sexed body as an indispensable determinant of gendered behavior and phantasy life. For a compelling reading of how Klein's theory of phantasy can be read against essentialized, heteronormative psychological narratives that align gender with genitalia and mental health with heterosexuality, see Soto-Crespo, "Heterosexuality Terminable or Interminable? Kleinian Fantasies of Reparation and Mourning" in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*.

with spatialized interiorities. For Klein, the maternal body (originally represented by the breast) is that first container of alternately harmful and helpful objects.

For all children, the mother's body thus inaugurates a tension between exterior and interior, between the visible and the invisible; on and through it, the child elaborates its first conception of space and the (always permeable) boundaries between internal and external. Just as Klein's theory of psychic positions eventually spatialized Freud's more temporal thinking about sexual stages, so too did her re-configuration of sexuality emphasize conflicts to do with spatial depth rather than a flat, triangulated geometry of Oedipal exchange. But, because of Klein's conviction about the sexual symmetry between female children and their mothers, the mother's unknowable, uncontrollable, and invisible interiority provokes especially great anxiety in the girl who, in phantasy, attacks the mother and robs her of all her imagined internal objects. According to Klein's analysis of Kjär,

The little girl has a sadistic desire, originating in the early stages of the Oedipus conflict, to rob her mother's body of its contents, namely, the father's penis, feces, children, and to destroy the mother herself. This desire gives rise to anxiety lest the mother should in turn rob the little girl herself of the contents of her body (especially children) and lest her body should be destroyed or mutilated. In my view, this anxiety, which I have found in the analyses of girls and women to be the deepest anxiety of all, represents the little girl's earliest danger situation. (1929, p. 217)

In this narrative of internecine feminine conflict, the maternal body is the first geography of the child's plunder. The desire to rob, and the subsequent fear of being robbed, represent the girl's "deepest anxiety," her "earliest danger situation." Klein's suggestion here is, at least in part, that interiorities figure largely in the psychological dramas of girls and women. Such a claim registers the longstanding psychoanalytic tendency to narrate women's genital and reproductive organs as internal, invisible, and thus fundamentally unknowable. Although Klein pushed back on Freud's equation of femininity with castration—that is, she resisted Freud's routine reduction of femininity to lack or absence—she did so not by recognizing the visibility of the labia or clitoris, but instead by emphasizing the presence of *internal reproductive organs*, which are simultaneously present but invisible, introducing the child to its first epistemological quandary.

Admittedly, such a suggestion is anything but novel in much psychoanalytic theory which unsatisfyingly aligns creativity with *procreativity*, representing the latter as the special provenance of women. True to her psychoanalytic idiom, Klein did trope on this psychological calculus, all too often boiling down the particularity of femininity to the heteronormative, reproductive collapse of "woman" into "mother." For Klein, the principle determinants in the psycho-sexual development of those sexed female are the genital and reproductive organs, along with the phantasies that constellate around them. Yet Klein's thinking about creativity and femininity also exceeds the too-easy formulation of aesthetic creation as a tidy substitute for biological procreation. If Sigmund Freud always imagined the masculine as the universal subject of his psychoanalytic theories—if, that is, he always took the "little

boy” as the lead actor in his Oedipal drama—then Klein famously restaged the Oedipal tableau, giving much more air time than Freud ever had to what she called the “early anxiety situations” of little girls. Even though Klein did think of the “empty space” that plagued Kjär as having to do with a maternal anxiety, her understanding of it was far from a trite formulation of anxieties about an “empty womb.”

Recognizing the constellation of this unique feminine anxiety, Klein quite radically proposed that there is a maternal super-ego that forms in the pre-genital period and that the putative chastisements of this archaic, persecutory superego are most poignantly felt by women rather than men. For her, “the super-ego is more strongly operative in women than in men” (Klein, 1932, p. 233), a fact that brings women—much more so than men—under the dominion of sadism, aggression, and the “culture death of the death drive,” as Ester Sánchez-Pardo (2003) has articulately phrased it.<sup>8</sup> While for Sigmund Freud the political prerogatives of patriarchal privilege are reproduced through the instantiation of that intra-psychic representative of the social contract between men—the superego—for Klein, the superego is at least in part maternal and it is women, more than men, who are most subject to its censures.

For contemporary feminist theorists working to excavate a version of psychoanalysis *not* inescapably entrenched in the reproduction of hetero-patriarchy, Klein’s focus on the maternal, on the feminine, and on the intergenerational relations between women has been fruitful resource. Klein herself never fully fleshed out the consequences of this reconfiguration of femininity and the maternal superego, but at various points she gestures to the fact that the theoretical reconsolidation of feminine anxiety has corollary ties to an emergent feminine creativity. Implicitly, Klein suggests that although the little girl is more subject to the superego and the death drive, she is also more capable of creative and reparative response.

As she explains, the little girl’s “reaction-formations against her own sadistic omnipotence and the transformation of the latter into constructive omnipotence enable her to develop sublimations and qualities of mind which are the direct opposite of those traits which we have just described...” (1932, p. 235). In other words, if women, more than men, are subject to the censures of a sadistic superego—the internal embodiment of persecutory parental part objects—then they are also more able to “develop sublimations and qualities of mind which are the direct opposite of those traits”; they are more capable of constructive compensations that Klein will name the “reparative” tendencies. Here, creativity forms as a gendered response to the superego’s sadistic imperatives. In Klein’s thinking, creativity is the compensatory response to the child’s gendered, superegoic anxieties and assaults. Distinctly feminine anxieties, born of the death drive and the superego, are the condition of possibility for creativity.

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<sup>8</sup> In *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (2003), Ester Sánchez-Pardo reads Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theories beside modernist texts in order to trace the way the primacy of melancholia animates both. For Sánchez-Pardo, Klein pronounces the hold that melancholia had on visual and literary modernists alike, arguing that Klein’s thinking about gender and sexuality in unconscious phantasy offers useful insights for theorizing aesthetics of literary modernism.

In other words, what a close reading of Klein's theory yields here is the proposal that no act of creative reparation is ever fully detachable from previous experiences of aggression, anxiety, and destruction. Put in context, this is hardly a novel point about her work since even her immediate contemporaries like D.W. Winnicott famously took issue with the way her theories positioned aggression, destructivity, and other "negative emotions" as the core of psychic life, giving creativity the status of (at best) a secondary appurtenance. Nevertheless, the reason I think it worth returning to the potential inseparability of destructivity from creativity is because it complicates a stable alignment between femininity, creativity, and reparativity by putting them always in relation to the fact of destructive assault. The nature of Klein's positional thinking means that creativity and reparativity, no matter how idealized, only ever make sense as relational terms that sit in proximity to—and always turn back upon—aggression and destruction. Such thought challenges a sentimentalized idealization of creativity, which imagines creativity as a viable "solution" to human aggressivity and destruction. Klein herself acknowledges as much, writing:

There is actually no productive activity into which some aggression does not enter in one way or another. Take, for instance, the housewife's occupation: cleaning and so on certainly bear witness to her desire to make things pleasant for other and for herself, and as such is a manifestation of love for other people and for the things she cares for. But at the same time she also gives expression to her aggression by destroying the enemy, dirt, which in her unconscious mind has come to stand for 'bad' things. (1937, p. 312)

Working yet again through an instance of women's reproductive labor—here not biological maternity but household domestic chores—Klein further fuses femininity with both aggression and constructive creativity. Importantly, the relationship between creativity and destruction she imagines here is closer than either the positional swing between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive or a progressively-minded dialectical synthesis. Klein's claim here—and a quite direct one at that—is that to some extent *all* creative efforts include aggressive destruction if examined from a different angle, that any act of creation necessarily entails the transformation (that is, the *destruction*) of what previously existed. To this end, Klein points out that it can actually be "quite constructive" to direct aggression and hate at those things deemed (un)worthy, among which Klein names not just the housewife's offending "dirt" but also people and political, artistic, and moral principles. Indeed, as I am sure we are all relieved to hear, she avows that "the work of lawyers, politicians, and critics" testifies to the constructive utility of aggression in professional life.

But by again routing creative and constructive energies through an anxiety and aggression specific to femininity—by again using femininity as the triangulating keystone that binds aggression and creativity—Klein interestingly suggests not so much that 'Woman' as a sexed identity is specially gifted with reparative abilities but rather that femininity names the inseparability of destructive aggression from reparative creation. Taking this suggestion as more than just a casual coincidence, I think there is a reading of Klein available that understands her theory of femininity

*not* as the mark of a stable, sexed identity but as the site through which reparative creativity is both defined and undone, both figured and de-figured. Insofar as femininity in Klein unites destructive assault with reparative creation—insofar as it is the narrative medium through which Klein sustains the link between destruction and reparation—it seems to me that femininity might be most productively understood as indexing the limits of reparative justice. Put another way, femininity can be read as an implicitly *political* term in Klein’s work because it announces both the promise and the impossibility of reparative justice, as it was being lived out in broader postwar politics.

### **Create and Destroy: Reparative Justice in the Twentieth Century**

*“It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair - it is then that we must recreate our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, recreate life.”*  
—Hanna Segal, 1952, p. 47

After the attacks on the US World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001, and amid the flurry of xenophobic, anti-Muslim, racist panic that spread like wildfire throughout the U.S. under the banner of “patriotism,” a conversation about reparation and memorialization began. Galvanized by an act of aggression that, for most Americans, seemed unwarranted, unprovoked, and unjustified—as though decades of the US’s perpetual war, capitalist expansion, and imperialist interventionism worldwide had not been provocation enough—there was a wide-ranging public push for a commemorative memorial around the crash site. This memorial would eventually find its final, official shape in The National September 11 Memorial and Museum, which was designed by Israeli architect Michael Arad after his plan for sunken twin reflecting pools won the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition in 2004. However, before this large-scale memorial was ever built (let alone designed) another less formal memorial was created. Originally a 70-foot mural on the wall of the Equitable Building in New York City in 2002, this first mural project has since spurred numerous other acts of aesthetic reparation in the neighborhood surrounding the former World Trade Centers to commemorate the fantasy of national trauma.

Certainly, the practice of memorializing national injury through symbolic, aesthetic creation was hardly inaugurated by the U.S. in 2001. To see this, we need only think of the Berlin Memorial to Murdered Jews, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation, among others. But what is particularly interesting about the Equitable Building memorial is that it was lobbied for not through the language of the state, but through that of the psyche. The advocates of the mural used a quote from Hanna Segal’s early paper, “A Psychoanalytic Approach to Aesthetics” (reproduced in the epigraph for this section) to curry support for the art installation. This quote, which implicitly draws on the Kleinian swing between paranoid attack and depressive reparation, was used as a “rallying cry” for the mural production (Able-Hirsch, p. 6; <http://www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/segal>). The commemorative art project was thus explicitly commissioned as an act of both

political *and* psychic reparation. Put another way, an act of aesthetic creation meant to redress national injury interestingly legitimated itself through a specifically *psychological* idiom, more particularly through a *psychoanalytic* idiom, that directly linked political reparation with aesthetic creation.

While this is not an article about either state-funded or privately-funded efforts at memorialization, what this contemporary mobilization of the language of psychological reparation for principally *political* ends indicates is the dual life of reparation. Importantly, reparation is not just—or even originally—a psychological concept. Despite the fact that it is a habituated concept within psychoanalytic literature, importantly reparation is a principally political language for negotiating claims for individual and/or collective justice in the face of unresolved histories of state violence. Reparation could only ever become the grammar of Object Relations because it had first been the unique language of the state’s (inter)national relationships.

The political historicity of this concept is vital to appreciating the implications of Klein’s deployment of it as a psychological, ethical, and indeed aesthetic ideal. As I have been describing, Klein sketched something of her theory of reparative creativity in the interwar years, but developed it most thoroughly in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>9</sup> Prior to this, while Klein did occasionally refer to something like reparative processes, she was just as apt to call them “restorative” or “restitutive.” As I have shown elsewhere (2019), there is a historical significance to this idiomatic deployment since reparation was a significant concept for framing international justice, but it was highly mutable, undergoing significant transformations in both scope and reception throughout the twentieth century. For instance, after World War I, monetary reparations against Germany were first publicly lauded and then publicly decried as critics made the link between national impoverishment and the rise of National Socialism. The growing sense, throughout the 1930s, that that the Allies had mistreated Germany by levying such punishing fiscal reparations was due largely to the publication of John Maynard Keynes’s *The Economic Consequences of Peace* in 1919, which became an immediate, trans-Atlantic bestseller. Keynes’s text, perhaps more than any other single document, brought about the widespread public opinion that reparations were anything *but* an expression of political justice.

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<sup>9</sup> As Klein’s work developed throughout the postwar 1940s and 1950s, she came to give more and more attention to reparative processes and the development of creativity. In lieu of the anxious, paranoid, and aggressive attacks she had focused on in the first half of her career, in the second half of her career she was more interested in the generative and generous capacities of the human being, which she understood to be curtailed by the destructive force of envy. As Klein developed this work, she began increasingly to ascribe a moral weight to creativity and reparativity, framing an internal psychic tension that often took quite biblical proportions as a struggle between “good” and “evil.” Following this, many have used Klein’s work to think about the salvational capacities of creativity, aesthetic and otherwise—a point that Bersani (1990) tackles in his own critique of the fantasy of art as redemption. But while these scholars emphasize the aesthetic capacities of reparation, my point here is to think about its political capacities.

Yet, curiously, after World War II, reparations re-surfaced as one of the foremost terms through which victims of national or international violence sought justice. To see examples of this, we might think here of the postwar reparations agreement between the newly created state of Israel and West Germany for the resettlement of Jews displaced by the Holocaust; or of the still incomplete claims for reparation in Argentina for human rights violations throughout the Dirty War; or of the ongoing reparations debate in the U.S. about the horrors of chattel slavery, which has been re-popularized by public intellectuals like Ta-Nehisi Coates.<sup>10</sup> In the postwar decades, reparations expanded from being interstate monetary negotiations to being a transnational victim- and citizen-focused framework that sought justice by and through the emergent language of *human rights*. This is a framework most often employed to parse injuries that either cross national boundaries thereby invalidating the state's internal justice system or that past formations of the state have enacted against its own citizenry. In contrast to initiatives that adjudicate justice through the legal system, through perpetrator-focused procedures of discipline and punishment, reparation attempts to identify injury and redress harm specifically by recognizing victims as victims through their status as rights-bearing national (or world) citizens. In other words, what defines reparation as a unique program for international justice is the victim-focused nature of its pursuit.<sup>11</sup> As Ruth Rubio-Marín explains in her introduction to *The Gender of Reparations*,

the main aim of reparations [is] to be [able] to give victims due recognition *as citizens*, something which, I argue, requires all of the following: the recognition of the wrongful violation of victims' rights; the acknowledgement of state responsibility for such violations; the recognition of harms ensuing from the violations; and the attempt to help victims cope with the effect of the harms in their lives, and to subvert, however minimally, the structures of subordination that might have led to the violations of their rights in the first place. (2009, p. 7)

Insofar as reparation operates conceptually (either at national or international levels) by recognizing the subject of injury through the grammar of national citizenship and/or human rights, it is a particularly twentieth-century framework for conceptualizing the relationship between injury and repair. Although the narrow, legal sense of the term as juridical compensation can be seen as emerging from the Talmudic Law of Talion, only throughout the twentieth-century global consolidation of nation-states and the postwar transnational affirmation of human rights (through global bodies like the UN) did it take on an extra-judicial relevance to justice.

What all of this means is that when Klein adopted the term 'reparation' to describe the ethical efforts of the infant in its depressive attempts to ameliorate harm, she was entering into an explicitly political conversation about shifting and highly

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<sup>10</sup> For further case-study analyses of different national reparations programs throughout the twentieth century, see Pablo de Grieff's edited collection, *The Handbook of Reparations*.

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller conceptual elaboration of reparation, see especially Pablo de Grieff's contribution, "Justice and Reparations," in *The Handbook of Reparations*, 451-477.

contested approaches to global justice. This is an important recognition because the dual political-psychological deployment of reparation helps pronounce some of the latent (and underacknowledged) complexities of thinking reparative justice. Importantly, in Klein's psychological work and in the work of international politics, reparations claims are claims *about history*, are claims that involve the recognition of a history of injury juxtaposed against a present moment geared toward creation and repair, terms that (as in Klein's work) are invariably thought together.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on Klein's theory as itself historical is an admittedly unconventional interpretation; however, creativity and reparativity can only ever emerge as psychological virtues in a historical framework that has, *in its past*, privileged destructive assault. The fact of a past that is understood as being destructive and inadequate—as *necessarily insufficient* and, more than this, the locus of harm—is what makes creative reparation seem necessary, moral, and sufficient. There is a necessary temporality at work in the oscillation between destruction and reparation and it is through this positional tension that the historical and political stakes of creativity and reparation enter the scene. History, in Klein, is thus imagined not as linear progress narrative but as the space necessarily held open between an irreparable harm and the imperative to justice. The complexity of Klein's theory of reparation—as feminine, as relational, and as the motor force of the creative impulse—lies in how her work reveals that political claims to reparation paradoxically announce the impossibility of their own project: they depend on a unique historical gap that binds destruction to reparation, making full restitution impossible because of the very fact of injury's temporal past-ness. The promise of reparation—its appeal, but also its limitation—is that it could somehow be sufficient to the injury in and of the past.

Therefore, to the extent that reparation articulates *historical* trauma, it subtly suggests the impossibility of ever fully closing the gap between past injury and present redress; the need for reparation itself signals an *irreparable* harm, one that can only ever be recognized, never resolved. This is the space from which history emerges. Undoubtedly, attempts at recognition are important and, I would venture, indispensable to the pursuit of justice. But the historical narrative that reparation is

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<sup>12</sup> While psychoanalysis has undoubtedly provided much leverage for re-thinking history to the extent that the operation of repression and the constellation of the unconscious inaugurate the fact of historicity itself within the individual subject, this emphasis on history in Klein's work is slightly unusual since the innovation of her work is typically ascribed to the positional (and thus spatial) oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive. In other words, her theory of the subject is generally understood spatially and not temporally. As Juliet Mitchell usefully quipped her introduction to *The Selected Works of Melanie Klein*, "The Kleinian unconscious is a container full of contents," not a historical process (1986, 24). And to some extent this is absolutely true. Yet, on my reading, there are still important aspects of historicity in Klein's work to take account of, such as the underacknowledged fact that her conception of instinctual phantasies pulls from phylogenetic theory and thereby defines the modern subject according to biological theories of species pre-history. Similarly, by resisting a specifically linear, progress-narrative conception of (historical) development in favor of her specialized positions, Klein ultimately proposes a model of history that emerges only by and through the tension between an irreparable harm and the (necessarily impossible) imperative to justice.

defined by and through introduces a necessary limitation to the full or sufficient closure of injury. From this, I suggest that the justice reparation strives for is an impossible one, but that the fact of striving for an impossible justice—a justice that the historical world narrative necessarily cannot give—is justice’s most politically desirable form. Reparation constitutes the psychological, political, and historical relation, and yet indexes that relation’s entrenchment in past narratives of destruction and aggression to which any present-tense creativity or reparativity can never be fully sufficient.

To this point, it is worth noting how remarkably few critics writing about Kjär’s case address the fact that Kjär’s first painting was not, in fact, a family portrait. Rather, Kjär filled that “empty space” on the wall with “the life-sized figure of a naked negress” (Klein, 1929, p. 217). Thought politically, such a frivolous appropriation of racialized femininity binds histories of political injustice to present-tense reparative aesthetic production. White femininity produces its “reparative” art on and through the blithe reproduction of a racialized Other. As Jean Walton rightly argues in her analysis of the racial elision in this case study, “Klein’s theory is predicated upon an example containing this unexamined representation [which] suggests that it is, in itself, a theory of a specifically white female subjectivity” (1995, p. 799).<sup>13</sup> Here, what Kjär’s aesthetic reparation suggests is the impossibility of ever fully closing the gap between past injury and present redress; indeed, her art emphasizes how the reparative impulses of the present can, in fact, reproduce harm.

Such political attention to reparation in Klein’s psychoanalytic theory is therefore important because it reveals how fused the operations of politics are to the work of aesthetics and aesthetic creation. If reparation is an explicitly aesthetic term within Klein’s theory, then it is my contention that this language of reparative art and creativity needs to be understood as equally political. Such a reading complicates aesthetic claims that see reparative art, aesthetics, and creativity as what Leo Bersani has called a “redemptive” answer to histories of political injury and destruction. On my reading, the impulse toward creative reparation instead signals an *irreparable* harm, one that can only ever be recognized, never resolved.

This recognition highlights how Klein’s local, psychoanalytic work constituted a fraught grappling with the problematic of political justice. For Klein, reparative creativity was the grammar through which she contended with the unstable function of global claims to justice in a modern world. By connecting the creative impulse to the feminine subject’s reparative capacities (which are always already bound up with aggression and destruction), Klein did not just diagnose something of the political problematic structuring reparative justice. More than this, she suggested that femininity was definitional to the struggle for reparative justice, conceived individually *and* politically.

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<sup>13</sup> That I am aware of, Walton’s work is the only other examination of the racial elements of this case study—a noteworthy fact in its own right. For her reading of the elision of the racial politics at work in Kjär’s painting (and in feminist psychoanalytic theory focused on sexual difference and femininity more generally), see Walton (1995). For a reading of how this appropriation of black femininity as (aesthetic) reparation complicates the ethical idealization of reparativity (especially vis-à-vis reparative reading), see Laubender (2019).

If Freud famously giped that “[women] show less sense of justice than men,” then Klein answered by elaborating a theory of femininity that was inextricable from a complex understanding of the geopolitics of reparative justice (1925, p. 257). By reading femininity in Klein’s work not as a stable anatomical sexual identity or psychological gender identification but rather as a mark of the struggle for justice, Klein’s work suggests that reparation might be best understood as politically desirable *not* because it can ever secure the promise of justice’s closure, but rather because it embodies the value of the struggle for it in the first place.

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