I recently returned from serving as a Fulbright Specialist in pedagogy and curricular development in Singapore. My task was to assist a private university in their efforts to enhance critical thinking, creativity, reflectiveness, and autonomous questioning among students.

Part of my work including facilitating several lengthy workshops with faculty and student-tutors in which we discussed these outcomes, their meaning, and the many forces that can get in their way.

In several of these workshops, I devoted a considerable amount of time to the topic of group dynamics, since classes, study groups, peer-mentoring sessions, and even universities themselves all involve groups, and since group forces may exert tremendous power over group members, often to the detriment of critical thinking, creativity, reflectiveness, and autonomy.

For portions of these workshops, I introduced a modified, highly abbreviated, and relatively benign version of the Tavistock method of group study and experience known best via the work conducted by the A.K. Rice Institute and the writings of W.R. Bion (2001).
The most basic yet most essential insight of this area of group psychology is that “groups” are more than bunches of individuals, and more than the collectivity they form. Once a group is formed, it takes on a psychic life of its own — fueled primarily by members’ externalized unconscious needs, desires, and fears.

The banality “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” does not do this insight justice, for the group is both greater than and distinct from the “whole” that is greater than the sum of its constituent members. The group is or becomes a semi-autonomous (i.e., influenced but not determined by any single individual, or even by all of the group members’ conscious wishes) force, which, in turn, acts upon group members individually and collectively.

Large groups may possess a massive aspect — as in: an aspect of the “mass” — but even they are both more and less than a mass. The “face” of this group is not that of an individual, nor is it “ourselves, sounding ourselves,” at least not precisely. Instead, “There are not leaves enough to cover the face / it wears.” It governs us and then is “nowhere again, away and away.” It is “never the face / That hermit on reef sable would have seen, / Never the naked politician taught / By the wise,” only the face of the invisible, colossal group (Stevens 1990, 206).

I sometimes find myself imagining the group as a kind of cloud, in both a basic and more contemporary sense. The trick, when in groups, is to be aware that we sit amidst a cloud that contains powerful psychic charges, and to attempt to make that cloud — and its changing colors and tone and charges and movements and which is presently thundering, et cetera, et cetera. — more visible and comprehensible to group members.

This aim, of facilitating awareness of the group — which is to say the “group-level” of experience — is the primary aim of the activities concerned with group-dynamics mentioned above.

2.

In the modified version of the group activity I introduce, I inform group members of the nature and objectives of the activity
up front, I counsel them a bit about the theory of groups with which I am operating, and I warn them that I, as a group facilitator, will be attuned to the group level of experience — and not to individual group members or sub-groups — with the ultimate goal of drawing their attention to the group level of experience.

This also means, I inform them, that I may behave somewhat differently than a traditional moderator of a discussion or leader of a workshop. I ask them to consider their primary “work task” to be to reflect upon and discuss what is happening at the group-level experience in real time. I even write this “work task” on the board, for reasons that will become clear shortly.

Then, I usually ask if everyone feels comfortable with the activity or if any questions remain before starting. When all are ready, I say simply, “Okay, let’s begin.”

Typically, as I fall silent, the group falls silent for several minutes as they try to figure out what to do in this unique situation. They may be trying to figure out how to organize themselves, how to speak to other group members, whether or not they really want to be a part of the group and its work, or whether they can tolerate the anxiety of being in an ambiguous and, to some degree, leaderless group.

Frequently, the tension of silence is broken by an individual who asks, perhaps on behalf of or in service of the fledgling group, if I can re-explain everything about the activity: its work, its goal, and what members are “supposed to do.”

This presents an immediate challenge the group facilitator, who must decide what the question really expresses and how it relates to the life of the group. Some facilitators simply remain silent. I usually do not.

Every group is different, but fairly commonly I find myself saying something like, “I wonder if this request for clarification on behalf of the group is actually something else entirely.”

You see, to do this work, although you are sincerely trying to help, you have to be willing to be a bit evasive, even, perhaps, a bit of an asshole, like a cross between a Yoda and that guidance counselor who thinks he is too smart to be a guidance counselor.
and so tries to do psychotherapy with children when they only need some form to be signed.

The response is not meant to be frustrating, but it is often taken to be so. After all, the objectives and nature of the activity were explained clearly and at length; the “work task” of the group is even written clearly on the board.

The group, then, is not really asking for clarification but for something else. The group is using the voice of a willing member to test the facilitator, to see to what degree it can become a dependent group: dependent upon the facilitator to do all the work for the group.

Refusing to answer this question directly, then, is a way of telling the group that, as a facilitator, I am not going to collude with their effort to make the group dependent upon me, although it may very well become a dependent group anyway.

3.

The most extreme example of a dependent group I had ever encountered was the first group in Singapore with whom I introduced this exercise. They did something I had never experienced before: They immediately disintegrated. It was as if an alarm bell had gone off.

Within seconds of beginning, all group members pulled their chairs back from the circle, took out their mobile phones, and paired off into small groups of two or three, chatting about everyday things: gossip, news, breakfast, and the like.

This continued for twenty minutes with only one interruption: One group member shouted over the din, “This is great; can we do this all day?” at which group chuckled.

The immediate collapse of the group, as a group, was shocking. My own experience was one of amazement, but also frustration, and, eventually, anger.

The group had refused to be born, had refused, right from the start, to become a group. The only thing that group members did together was to disband or abort the group, rejecting its
potentiality, never giving it a chance to be, never giving themselves or me a chance to experience it.

Eventually, when I became convinced that we would, indeed, “do this all day” absent any intervention from me, I somewhat reluctantly said: “I wonder why the group killed itself.”

The response to this somewhat mysterious comment by group members was to all assert and concur that, absent clear directions from me, they could not do anything other than what they did. That is, their actions held no meaning and were the only, the natural, and the inevitable outcome of the activity.

What is more, they did not understand the meaning of my statement, and they rejected the premise that there was or could have been a group to kill. They made it clear that they would continue to reject tasks that were ambiguous and unstructured, in large part because they saw in them no point or purpose. I had designed these tasks, in the view of the majority, to be deliberately frustrating, depriving, and withholding.

While this group represents something near to one extremity of a disorganized and helplessly dependent group, a group that rejects even the work of becoming a group, the experience holds an insight into the accusation of withholding.

4.

Quite often, group members will accuse group facilitators of withholding the assistance, the “answers,” or the support necessary for the group to function.

Such accusations contain considerable emotional valences: rage, sadness, terror, feelings of abandonment, and more.

In a dyadic (one person to one person) psychotherapeutic encounter, an accusation that the analyst is withholding something from the patient may be interpreted as a manifestation of the transference, which means simply that the patient is transferring or projecting into the analyst’s silence the meanings, emotions, and understandings associated with another silence that resides at least partly in the patient’s unconscious. The patient has formed a schema or paradigm about silence, absence,
neglect, withholding, or deprivation that is activated by the analyst’s behavior and that arises in the psyche of the patient when the analyst’s behavior permits.

What struck me about the group referred to above, and then about subsequent groups with which I interacted on this trip, was that the accusation of withholding may be more helpfully understood along different lines when dealing with groups.

In these cases, the accusation of withholding seemed to be less a matter of projecting group members’ prior experiences or fantasies onto me or onto the group, and, more fundamentally, a matter of the projection the group’s own withholding behavior.

That is, it was the group that was withholding itself from itself. It was group members who were refusing to share, to be a part of, or to contribute themselves to the group in ways that might have given the group something with which to work.

In a different language, we might say that it was not I who was withholding the nourishment needed for the group to thrive but the group, itself.

This insight, of course, even when I suggested it to the group in a way that the group could ingest, could not be recognized by the group.

This method of understanding the meaning of the accusation of withholding resonates to some degree with Harry Guntrip’s notion of the “schizoid compromise” (1992), for group members split off and withhold valuable aspects of themselves from the group, while, at the same time, projecting onto the group disavowed impulses and emotions.

In many groups, a bargain is struck such that group activity will be, of necessity, empty, draining, and meaningless, even to the degree that the group experiences a good deal of anxiety about its own annihilation. This anxiety, then, seems to be more tolerable than the anxiety provoked by not withholding selves from the group in the ways called for by the group’s work.

5.

Of course, we are all schizoid.
There is a healthy splitting and preservation of a part of the self, a part not available to others.

Retaining a secret part or parts of the self, what Winnicott calls our “incommunicado” elements (1965, 187), is necessary if we wish to remain subjects, to assure contact with ourselves in difficult circumstances, and to exercise reflective autonomy and agency in groups.

— Group 2 —

I.

At a recent panel discussion at the meeting of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, one participant made a comparison between the stigma associated with the slang term for mental illness, “crazy,” and the more powerful stigma of “the n-word.”

In making her point, however, she did not say “the n-word,” but, rather, used the n-word.

The group organized itself around this utterance.

It took its new purpose to be that of sharing experiences of race-, gender-, sex-, and sexuality-oriented victimization. These were overwhelmingly the kinds of events that we now class, for better or for worse, as “micro-aggressions”: subtle verbal slights, ignorant and callous remarks. For example, a black person is questioned about the texture and style of her hair, or a person’s gender-identity is presumed based on physical appearance alone.

Group members responded to these narratives with sympathetic sighs and nodding, but also with wringing hands and winces, visible reactions of pain and even guilt, an important matter which I discuss below. In any case, the reactions of group members affirmed to the group that these experiences were important and painful. The utterance, in this sense, was the catalyst that gave the group a chance to form an identity and a belief-system or ideology.
It did not appear that the participant who used the *n*-word meant it as an attack, although she later admitted that she knew it might be “provocative.” In such cases, one can often rightly assume that the individual is hoping (perhaps unconsciously) to draw the ire of the group or, at the very least, to ensure that her individual contribution becomes central to the group’s life and activity.

Somewhat surprisingly, this participant was never attacked in a personal way by the group. If she succeeded in making her utterance central to the group’s short life, the group responded by making her continuing presence — including her later comments and attempts at clarification — seem utterly irrelevant.

The utterance allowed many group members to forge identifications with those who suffer the racism, hatred, and degradation associated with and represented by the *n*-word. Through this identification with what might be called the (victim) “ego-ideal” (see Freud 1959), group members bonded with each other.

At the most patent level, the group found a way to change its function, which was initially to discuss an academic question having little or nothing to do with victimization.

At a deeper level, the group found that it could achieve what all groups seek to achieve, an experience wherein members are submerged into a group that feels larger than life and is fantasied to be harmonious, perfect, and even, in some sense, immortal.

This is the coming-together dynamic of groups, the group’s embrace of the group, which is not the same thing as the group’s embrace of its members, as a collectivity or as individuals. Let us call it the *primary erotic activity of groups*.

Erotic activity in groups defends against the fear of fragmentation or disintegration, a fear that has more than a whiff of early (infantile, childhood) loss.

It may be understood as an attempt to recreate in the group what Winnicott refers to as a “holding environment” (1965), the earliest form of connection between infant and caregiver, where,
instead of bounded persons, relationships, and difference, there is unity, communion, and an experience of merger in which a corporate strength or power may be found.

“There is no such thing as a baby,” Winnicott famously quipped (1992, 99); there is only a baby-caregiver dyad, fused together by Eros, among other things.

A group’s erotic activity, then, is inseparable from its need to survive: Once “born,” the group does not want to “die.”

At the same time, of course, individual group members do not want to “die” by being subsumed by or swallowed up by the group. The ambivalence—and, sometimes, outright contradiction—between these dual ends and dual anxieties, constitutes a good deal of the psychic activity of groups.

This means, of course, that the terms “erotic” and “Eros” must be read broadly and not strictly in line with the “Eros” of Plato, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, or any other individual thinker.

What is truly “erotic,” in the sense intended to describe the activity of this group and others, is not the sublimated sexual activity or fantasy life of the group—although this remains important—but the continuation of the life of the group, the consolidation of the group around basic assumptions, beliefs, and fantasies, and the formation of a group identity that offers a form of psychic support (if members align themselves with it adequately).

In this particular group, members’ preoccupation with telling tales of victimization was both erotic and regressed: regressed toward a paranoid stance in which the conflict between identifications with victim and victimizer was intensified.

The aggression occasioned by this paranoid stance was only partly directed “outside.” That is, the participant who uttered the n-word was not “cast out,” nor did group members wish only to split up the world into those outside the group setting and those inside it.

Rather, the tales of victimization told by group members elicited affective reactions—the hand-wringing and wincing described above—that expressed not only the fact that these
experiences cause victims to feel diminished to the extent that they accept and internalize the attribution implied by the words or actions of the victimizer. Rather, members simultaneously took on the guilt of the victimizer.

To the extent that this interpretation is accurate — and it may not be — it would imply that the group’s activity was not split so simply as one might think, e.g., ‘The inside (the group) is good and the outside (the world) is bad.’

In a more complex way, members evinced hostility and aggression toward members’ own inner victimizers, the parts of themselves identified with victimizers.

The group was able to recognize that the “outside” was also inside, in the sense that members could not or did not wish to fully distance themselves from guilt for victimization.

Perhaps the group felt that its activity would help excise these inner victimizers. But, of course, this kind of activity is, itself, victimizing.

That is, the parts of ourselves that identify with victimizers — which is to say: that see ourselves in them, and see them in ourselves — cannot be gotten rid of so easily, mainly because of the obvious paradox: Attempts to destroy our victimizer-selves are acts of victimization themselves, as parts of ourselves come under attack. Thus, when we attack our victimizer-selves we are, at the same time, identified with and acting on behalf of our victimizer-selves. Therefore, we are expressing erotic impulses toward the parts of ourselves identified with victimizers, and these, too, become part of the psychic life of the individual or the group.

3.

After being patient for a long time, a senior member of the Association was given the chance to speak and managed to get out only eight words (“I teach at a large state university and —”) before being interrupted by several others who informed him that he was derailing the group’s activity.
These persons, including the group’s leaders, reminded him of the need to “stay with what was happening” in the group. This individual spoke in a calm voice with little emotion. If it was inferred from his affect that he would not “stay with” the group’s primary activity, it was because it was clear that he was not likely to testify to an experience of victimization. Worse, he was going to offer a thought. The majority of group members, at that moment, did not want to depart from the activity of testifying about victimization and certainly did not wish to think, for several reasons, the most important of which is the possibility that his thought would have called the group’s attention to the fact that they were speaking about discrimination and victimization, but were really interested in exploring ways to identify with their victimizer-selves. Testimonials of being victimized were covers for a different sort of activity: the group’s coming together as a group of victims who victimized each other’s inner victimizers.

4.

It seems worth pointing out that, at the beginning of this group’s time together, a short speech was given about fluidity in sex- and gender-identity and, in what has become a familiar practice, all members of the group were told to state our names, followed by our preferred pronouns:

*Hi, I’m Matt:* He, Him, His.
*Hi, I’m Zelda:* They, Them, Their.
*Hi, I’m Ty:* Ze, Zir, Zirs.

While understandable, this exercise strikes me as a very unfortunate way to begin group conversations. The breathless conjunction of names with strings of pronouns makes it difficult to recall anyone’s proper name, much less each person’s preferred pronouns. So, after this exercise has been completed, group members may have succeeded in reveal-
ing aspects of their individual identities to the group, but, ultimately, have partaken in a group ritual that may hold deleterious consequences for productive group work.

As might be expected, group members quickly forgot how to address each other, and, thus, the conversation became more abstract, passive, and fearful than necessary, as in:

*Something said a few minutes ago by, erm — sorry I forget your name — in response to the earlier, um, comment made by — made a few minutes ago on the topic of structural violence, was — interesting, in my opinion.*

Perhaps this blockage of communication was, or is, an unconscious goal.

It is also possible, if not likely, that *not all* members of all groups wish to announce the pronouns associated with their sex- or gender-identities, whether they are consciously aware of their aversion or not.

The idea driving the practice of announcing pronouns is, of course, that having one’s sex- or gender-identity mistaken can be painful. The practice is intended to prevent this.

But beneath the fear of being mistaken lies a conviction that announcing one’s preferred pronouns cannot or *should not* be painful, or, at least, that it is less painful than being mistaken.

Put another way, the activity suggests that, even if someone may wish to abstain — for whatever reason — from announcing his/her/their/zirs pronouns, no one *should* wish to abstain from the ritual because the ritual, itself, is fantasized to possess magical properties by which shame is transformed into pride. By enforcing this ritual (quite undemocratically), the group insists that members *should* be proud of their sex- and gender-identities.

A desire not to announce one’s pronouns to a group would be understood by the group as a *betrayal*, in both senses of the word:
1. betrayal as contravention of a group norm, in this case, the norm of showing pride, even if the person does not actually feel pride, and
2. betrayal as revelation of the individual’s emotional and intellectual reality and presence as an individual, perhaps with complex and ambivalent feelings about his/her/their/zirs own sex and gender identity, and not merely as a member of a group that insists on performances of pride.

Not to pronounce one’s pronouns betrays the group because abstention introduces doubt, not only about the strength of the ties that bind group members together — including their beliefs, their dedication to their rituals, their fantasies of abandonment of individuality for the group, et cetera — but about the core conviction that the group is capable of mobilizing aggression to protect members from shame.

5.

Many people struggle mightily with their sexes, genders, and sexualities. Many queer persons face enormous challenges in societies and cultures where cis-gender identity and heterosexuality are still the norms, where “deviations” from these norms are stigmatized, and where such stigmatizations are internalized in the form of shame.

Yet, there are different methods that we can employ in the struggle against shame. Insisting that, instead of shame, we feel pride, is one. There is no need to feel pride about one’s sex, gender, race, or sexuality, for instance, unless there is, first, shame, or the possibility of shame.

In pronouncing pronouns, people announce their pride and insist that others do so as well, regardless of whether that pride is genuine or, beneath the active performance of pride, there is a reservoir of shame that must not be acknowledged.

This reservoir of shame is projected into the group, and is related to ambivalently: It is both depended upon and attacked.
Shame is inextricably linked to the part of the self that identifies with the victimizing other. To attempt to eliminate shame from members of a group is to supplant internal defenses against victimization (identification with the aggressor) with group-based defenses (identification with the group, which may be aggressive, itself).

Thus, the bargain is this: The group will provide members with identity-support and will protect members to some degree from experiences of shame, so long as the member attacks those aspects of his/her/their/zirs individual identities that do not accord with the group's basic beliefs, fantasies, and assumptions.

The connection, then, between the preliminary activity of pronouncing pronouns and the later erotic/aggressive activity of the group is this: The group was “born” in a ritual whose emotional meaning was: “All group members must be on guard against their own feelings of shame, which is to say: against their own internal victimizers. But, at the same time, we must bring to the group our shame, in the form of pronouncing pronouns of pride, and as a part of the narratives of victimization and their impacts, so that shame can be attacked.”

Put another way, the group decided that it could and should victimize the victimizers, both within and without.

In sum, the group did not regress because of an outside threat, represented by one member’s use of the n-word or the possibility of a group member misgendering another. Rather, the group seized opportunities to victimize itself, in a manner of speaking, in a forum where group members would not have to become aware of this activity.

— Group 3 —

1.

Each year, I teach an advanced seminar in psychoanalytic political theory. The course examines hatred, among other things, as a central dynamic in the life of families, organizations, and groups.
The participants in the seminar reflect upon our own group experience — our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they arise in the group — as part of our work.

This “group encounter” aspect of the course demands that my role as professor include some of the work of a psychodynamically-sensitive “group facilitator,” and that students, too, become conscious of their dual roles as students and as group members.

There is a particular kind of “Eros” running through any college class, even more so for a course on a subject of emotional intensity. The desire — shared by professors and students — to “love” the course and to “love” one another is always there.

In this case, the class was already close-knit, comprising eighteen students who had enrolled in an undergraduate “learning community,” and who had taken a number of courses together for the past three and a half years.

The course group had already reached certain conclusions about hatred, conclusions which I believed to be reasonably well-founded. For instance, we had spent some time reflecting upon the way hatred can be used to distance the self from internal bad (hated) objects.

We had arrived at a shared understanding of the need for hated objects, too, since, if we, following Otto Kernberg, associate hatred with rage, then by taking on the badness of our rage, hated objects permit us to experience our rage without experiencing our hatred and, therefore, without experiencing shame or guilt.

Likewise, we had come to a tenuous agreement regarding the transformative nature of hatred and the way that it often behooves the hating person or group to transform an object into something more, not less, hateful, so that the hatred already felt is better justified.

2.

Rather late in the semester — which, until then, had proceeded more or less uneventfully — a student announced abruptly:
I really hate the kids in my classes.

It was an odd statement, and not germane to our discussion.

It was also quite clear, from her body language, her gaze, and the direction in which she spoke, that she was not talking about “her classes” in an abstract or general sense but was, in fact, referring to a particular and identifiable sub-group of students in our class.

The students to whom she referred were present at the time, although they were not paying attention to her: an important dynamic that likely contributed to her feelings of hatred.

The student continued:

Sometimes people are just so stupid. I hate stupid people. So, I guess I am like a Nazi or something?

This student’s announcement of her hatred, combined with the complex question of whether her hatred made her bad and hateful — which was at least part of the emotional meaning of “like a Nazi” — proved challenging for me and for the group.

Nearly all group members were aware that the comment was directed at a small number of readily identifiable members of the group. Some squirmed in discomfort.

The student was saying that she hated those students right there, and not just a little. She “really” hated them, perhaps in the way Nazis “really” hated Jews, homosexuals, Roma, and others.

She was also saying that she really hated the group, as a whole, and that she really hated me, as the group’s facilitator, for causing her or permitting her to feel hatred and, what is worse, for putatively suggesting to her that she should feel “like a Nazi” for harboring hatred.

My sense was that the student’s comment was intended to accomplish several things at once.
First, and most obviously, she wished to vent hateful feelings toward a certain sub-group of students in the class, students who often derailed our progress with off-hand comments, noise, laughter, and other disruptions. These students also seemed to make other group members feel frustrated at not being attended to or heard.

This student also wished to push the limits of the group and to test my limits as a facilitator. She wished to see if we could tolerate an explicit announcement of hatred in a course in part about hatred, or if we would shut down the dialogue, mobilize aggression (and potentially hatred) against her, and collapse the openness that had thus far characterized our discussions.

I believe she knew we would not retaliate in this way, that it was “safe,” at least in one sense, for her to announce her hatred. That is, it would have been extremely unlikely for anyone to have answered the student’s rhetorical question about being like a Nazi in the affirmative — which I confess to having had the urge to do — by saying, for instance: “Yes, your hatred makes you like a Nazi.” In some way, it did.

At the time of her comment, the sub-group of unruly students were again talking among themselves, not paying enough attention to her to notice that they were being named as hated objects, which, of course, only confirmed their hateful aspect in the eyes of some group members.

The behavior of the sub-group therefore was a predictable and convenient evidentiary hearing, by which the student was able to offer proof that her hatred was justified. This dynamic is by no means unknown to those who study victimization: The victimized persons, caught or recalled in the very act of being victimized, are seen in moments of degradation or diminish- ment, and are then regarded as degraded or diminished persons, unworthy of care and deserving only of further victimization.

What I found most fascinating was that the student’s announcement of hatred had an impact on all members of the group except for the sub-group at which it was aimed, which might be said in another way: She instilled in others something of her experience, recruiting the majority of group members
against the sub-group and asking them to share with her the burden of her hatred while in the presence of the hated sub-group.

It would not be at all surprising to me if this result was intended by the student: that her comment, appropriately timed, would coalesce the majority of the group around her hate.

Rejecting many of the complexities and conclusions reached in the course-group, the student offered a proposal, a kind of bargain, to the group:

*If what we have learned is right, then my feelings of hatred mean I hate myself. But I am not like a Nazi, so I should not hate myself. Since I should not hate myself, I refuse to accept responsibility for my hatred. And yet I still hate. You can join me in my hatred and, since you are no more Nazis than I, you, too, will not have to experience yourselves as hateful, which means you, too, will not be forced to confront the hatred within yourselves. The idea that we could be involved with anything here, in this group, that resembles Nazis is absurd.*

She was asking, then, for support in identifying with her victimizer-self and to be able to survive this identification emotionally, both as an individual and as a group member. These are not unhealthy or unreasonable things to ask. And yet, she was asking, in an aggressive way, something that the group could not provide, even if they had tried: that the group make her feelings of hatred tolerable to herself.

4.

After she spoke, I felt it was necessary to let the group contemplate what had happened. I, too, needed time to think about it, so I remained silent for several moments.

The extremity of her simile — “like a Nazi” — suggested that, for her, the emotional tension produced in the group was considerable. The group had put her on the “wrong” side, the Nazi side, and she needed to get herself back to the “right” side.
She used the group, and the sub-group of students, then, to reject much of the substance of the course and to place an emotional burden—virtually an ultimatum—on the group as a whole, which was the burden of reconciling her own emotional dilemma. The group had made her feel shame for feeling hate, even though we had explicitly discussed the reality of hate and had tried to establish an environment in which hate could be recognized and dealt with maturely, as it is always a potential for persons and groups.

To the extent that she was seeking absolution for her hatred, I could not provide it, mainly because that would lie beyond the boundaries of my roles as facilitator and professor. Likewise, the group did not defend or console her. Perhaps this was because such a request for absolution, if indeed there was one, was framed in such a way that in order to grant it, we would have had to become complicit in her hatred and in her implicitly hateful denouncement of the group and of our work together.

It may be that the student who announced her hatred did so because the alternative was for her to feel fractured, disintegrated, or annihilated, or for her to fracture, disintegrate, or annihilate the group in some other, less reparable, and more terrifying way—terrifying, at least, in her imagination and fantasy.

In any case, the student’s announcement returns us to the idea of using aggression to defend against shame.

Consider the similarities between group members who withhold themselves from groups only to aggressively accuse the group or its facilitator of withholding and depriving them, persons who utter the n-word at academic conferences or otherwise aim to “provoke” the group, and split off and hated sub-group of students in a college course.

While these persons and groups disrupt the group’s real work, they behave as if it is their function to sustain group life, without which there would be no group at all. They take their task to be a survival task, one of barely being. They provide reliable backstops against utter aimlessness, chaos, or group dissolution in the sense that the group can always turn to them to organize its activity around aggression or hate. In this sense,
hate contributes, in a primitive but perhaps underappreciated way, to the erotic life of the group.

5.

Of course, as both a group member and the group’s facilitator, I had to consider the student’s comment in the context of my own feelings about her and about the group, which is a matter akin to analyzing the countertransference in psychoanalysis and is, unfortunately, too complex to examine at length here.

Nevertheless, it remains true that, in spite of a very difficult moment of hatred announced, and in spite of the fact that we could have very well devolved into extreme conflict, the group remained together and even remained, in some important sense, unchanged.

If I am honest, I believe this lack of change was a source of relief for me, since, at the time, it seemed to me that the group’s emotional survival was being held in the balance.

My feelings of relief may very well make me complicit with conservative and regressive forces in the group, such as the desire not to change, not to learn, and not to grow from new experience.

Perhaps predictably, while I was contemplating this, laughter and irrelevant chatter from the disruptive sub-group of students distracted me and the rest of the students until our time was up.