Entre Negros, Blancos y Judios: Revisiting Claudia Tate’s “Freud and His Negro” with Puerto Rican Eyes

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Abstract In this essay the author, a Puerto Rican psychoanalytic therapist, weaves personal, clinical, and theoretical material to interpret Claudia Tate’s paper, “Freud and his ‘Negro’: Psychoanalysis as ally and enemy to African Americans,” through the eyes of the Puerto Rican experience of anti-Blackness, racial mestizaje, and colonial capitalism. Drawing on Afropessimism, the author argues that Tate’s paper points toward a fundamental rethinking of psychoanalytic theory. Using clinical examples, theory and personal narrative, the author concludes by pointing toward clinical and political possibilities for theorizing anti-Blackness, and the verticality it facilitates, as a component of psychic structure.

Keywords anti-Blackness · Freud · Puerto Rican · Jewishness · mestizaje

People arrive at a destination either because they’re looking for it or fleeing another. Maybe the negro, trying to escape that hostile hole that oppresses him, falls into a worse trap. Out of contempt for a situation that makes it difficult to breathe, the Puerto Rican negro seeks entry into a new situation in which breathing will not be difficult, but impossible. Isabelo Zenón Cruz (1974, pp. 126–127, my translation)

I sat in an empty subway car on the commute back from a party, empty save for me and my father—the silence between us inhabited by a haunting, a testament to love and the 500 year gap it could not close. He broke the silence:

“Viste como me ignoraron toa la noche?” “See how they ignored me the whole night?”
“Si papi.” “Yes father.”
“Sabes… po’que, velda?” “You know… why, right?”

When we arrived at the party I was welcomed warmly, whereas my father had almost ceased to exist, left ignored in a corner. I felt vertigo as I read the room, realizing the kindness I received stretched only as far as the color line. Embarrassed and mortified, I put my white hands on my father’s brown skin, “Nos vamos?”/ “You wanna go?,” “Sí,” he replied, done with this night.

My Brown father and I, his white son, were haunted by that which conjoins us: Puerto Rican *mestizaje* and the anti-Black logic embedded within it. We both knew the *why* but dared not say it, silenced by the fundamental fantasy of Puerto Rican identity—that my father and I are “the same,” one mestizo people with three “harmoniously integrated races,” the white Spaniard, the indigenous Taino, and the enslaved African. Although the Taino were enslaved to the point of genocide, in the Puerto Rican imaginary it is the African who is represented as a slave (Godreau, 2008). When Blackness is allowed to appear outside this association, it is in folkloric performances filled with drums and bomba y plena to remind us of our heritage—and once remembered, grant us permission to forget. Blackness disappears when the performance concludes, rendering whiteness an irreducible futurity (Godreau, 2015).

This paper is my attempt to articulate a grammar my father and I did not speak on that subway car years ago by re-engaging Claudia Tate’s (1996) classic paper “Freud and his ‘Negro’” through the lens of Afropessimism and Puerto Rican history. In essence, to articulate the distinctions and intersections between the grammars of white, “Brown,” and Black Puerto Rican suffering. Put another way, how the suffering of Black Puerto Ricanness is both the source of non-Black Puerto Rican suffering and its performative redemption—a *jouissance* seeking the perpetual reconstruction of whiteness (Rodriguez-Silva 2020). I approach this as a psychoanalytic theorist and a practicing clinician, and will present an abbreviated case to illustrate the implications of this grammar for Puerto Rican identity and psychoanalytic theory broadly.

I have wrestled with these ideas since my time as a masters student in Black theologian James Cone’s class at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 2007 (Cone, unfortunately, passed away in 2018). In this “return to Tate,” I was compelled to return to a paper by Annie Lee Jones (2015). Jones was a panel discussant of a paper of mine (Gaztambide, 2015) at a 2014 panel when I was a doctoral student. Coincidentally, my father had come up from Puerto Rico to attend the panel. I have a distinct memory of him and Jones talking—as a gregarious man with a warm, contagious laugh, it did not surprise me he engaged the panelists before I did! I share that for context, as this paper intersects with the personal, clinical, and political in ways I could not have foreseen.

In her paper, Jones (2015) articulated her negation and erasure by me when I drew on Cone’s (1970) concept of “ontological Blackness.” Cone described ontological Blackness as the process by which oppressed people recognize their common humanity in the struggle against white supremacy. In my 2015 paper, I used ontological Blackness in Cone’s sense as a lens to reread Freud’s relationship
to Blackness as a Jew in his anti-Black, anti-Semitic turn-of-century Viennese milieu. Jones (2015) read my use of Cone as a “traumatizing text” erasing the “traumas specific to the African American community” which are positioned as “silent and absent yet evocative” (p. 722). Further,

As a Black analyst, I am “used to” seeing, or I should say reading, myself being positioned to stand in for any number of negations, abjections, and injuring historicized experiences that are unique to our country but that have been transformed into types of licensing stories that can be captured by invoking Blackness. (Jones, 2015, p. 721)

Jones’s reaction to my paper is commensurate with an Afropessimist (Wilderson, 2010) critique of analogy—treating the grammar of suffering of non-Black people of color and that of Black people as the same—although she had not engaged with that literature at the time (Jones, October 5, 2020, personal communication). She read my use of Cone as symptomatic of a “multicultural ideology” foreclosing the specificity of anti-Blackness (see also Sexton, 2010). Jones challenged me to reflect more deeply on Puerto Ricanness and Blackness, though in writing this paper I realized I did not remember the specific question she asked me after our 2014 panel. Rediscovering her question after an email exchange led me to Afropessimism and decolonial thinking as a way of contextualizing my return to Tate.

Tate (1996) argued that, for African Americans, psychoanalysis was both an ally, “a weapon … to articulate the complex effects of racism” and an enemy aligning itself “with the forces of domination and oppression” (pp. 53–54). Analyzing Freud’s infamous “joke,” “twelve o’clock and no negro,” referring to an American patient who missed their session, Tate revealed his enactment of a kind of “discursive Blackface,” eliding the equation of Jewishness and Blackness made in his turn-of-century European world while repositioning himself as a colonial master. The effacing of Freud’s racial difference as a Jew was made possible by whiteness, whose “social borders were marked by ostracized blacks. This confinement repressed the ‘primal scene’ of the larger culture and its racial castration” (Tate, 1996, p. 55). Anti-Blackness functions precisely as a “primal scene” confronting the racialized subject—whether white, Black, or non-white—with the gratuitous violence visited upon Black people. European modernity’s analogizing of Jewishness with Blackness simultaneously provided Freud with anxiety toward death, and the very pathway through which to achieve life, with Blackness serving as the “bottom” of an ontological hierarchy “uplifting” him into whiteness (cf. Wilderson, 2020).

By obsessively repeating this joke, Freud “reconstitutes the polarized economy of [white over Black] power … by transforming this relationship into a tripartite one of … whites, Jews, and Negroes before collapsing the triangular formulation into the simple polarity of white and black” (Tate, 1996, p. 57). Consider, not unlike the narrative of Puerto Rican mestizaje or mixture, that Jews were considered not only Black in Freud’s turn-of-century world, but mischling, a “mixed-race” descended from African peoples (Brickman, 2017). Freud’s language betrays these scripts, for example, in his classic paper distinguishing the preconscious between the conscious and unconscious,
We may compare [the preconscious] with mixed-race [mischling] individuals who, taken all around, resemble whites, but who betray their colored descent by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people. (Freud, 1915/1957, p. 191).

Embedded in this passage is what I would call a fundamental tension intrinsic to whiteness and anti-Blackness. A tension between ontological Blackness as understood by Cone (1970)—how non-Black people are potential allies in the struggle against whiteness—and ontological anti-Blackness as understood in Afropessimism (Sexton, 2010; Wilderson, 2010, 2020).

For Afropessimists, ontological anti-Blackness renders non-Black people the beneficiaries of anti-Blackness and thus always already antagonists to Black people, making allyship and solidarity aporetic, asterisked propositions. Exploiting the “ontological blackness of African Americans,” Tate (1996) argued, allowed Freud “to erase the figurative blackness of the Jewish body” (p. 57). If being Black or perceived as proximate to it (Cone’s ontological Blackness) is associated with violence and proximity to social death, then dissociation from Blackness (Afropessimism’s ontological anti-Blackness) marks the path away from it. To understand the resonance of Freud’s tripartite anxieties between whiteness, Jewishness, and Blackness with Puerto Rican anxieties surrounding whiteness, “Browness,” and Blackness, it is important to contextualize them in the turn-of-century contexts of both Vienna and Puerto Rico.

Briefly (see Gaztambide, 2015; cf. Brickman, 2017), Freud was born into a world of rapid change. The emancipation of the Jews in the late-eighteenth century in hand with liberal economic reforms was met with fierce racial backlash from right-wing populists and racial science of the day. The Jew occupied “the ‘lowest’ rung” of biological science’s racial hierarchy, positioned as a “dark-skinned” race commensurate with African peoples (Gaztambide, 2015, p. 702). For liberal gentiles and Jews, emancipation offered the possibility of cultural rehabilitation transforming Jews into ideal (read: white) liberal subjects grateful to the liberal project, whereas for conservatives this represented a danger to the integrity of the white/Aryan body politic. Hence, Jews were “both inside and outside Western society: newly ‘emancipated’ and able to claim influential positions, yet still victims of social exclusion” (Frosh cited in Gaztambide, 2015). Again, while being “non-white” gave Freud a critical distance with which to critique society, being non-Black allowed him a kind of social and symbolic mobility into whiteness. Although Freud as an Ashkenazi Jew was—objectively speaking—not Black, the white supremacist imaginary of his social context made a racist association between Jewishness and Blackness. As Tate (1996) shows, Freud was haunted by this association, performing his anti-Black “joke” as a way of dispensing his racial anxieties—as if to say “I am not a negro,” not as statement of fact but as anti-Black performance.

A parallel dynamic can be observed in turn-of-century Puerto Rico. Four hundred years of Spanish colonial rule had assimilated the indigenous Taino people through physical and cultural genocide, while manumission and revolts by enslaved African
people resulted in a fraught relationship between “free people of color”—free Black and multiracial people—embedded in a broader multiracial working class on the one hand, and criollo (creole) elites on the other (see Kinsbruner, 1996). Rodriguez-Silva (2012) outlines how liberal elites sought allegiances with the multiracial working class while also vying for independence and political autonomy from the Spanish crown. These elites—many of them also multiracial—harbored an anxiety that Blackness had a degenerative effect on Puerto Rico’s cultural development (and capacity for sovereignty), and economic productivity (of wealth to be extracted). This was in turn a reflection of the Spanish crown’s racial logic, meant to limit the colony’s autonomy. Puerto Ricans, whether white, Brown, Black, multiracial, or otherwise were framed as constitutionally Black and hence incapable of self-governance (Rodriguez-Silva, 2012).

The abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873 served not only to silence slave revolts and multiracial anti-colonial coalitions—such as the 1868 Grito de Lares revolt—but was predicated on the belief that granting Black people freedom and subjecting them to a project of racial hygiene and blanqueamiento (whitening) would produce generative workers who willingly accepted the new liberal order, with gratitude toward their benefactors paving the way to autonomy. Resistance to this program by the working class, in particular Black workers, was met with draconian anti-Black, anti-labor laws while promoting discourses of la gran familia Puertorriqueña, “the Great Puerto Rican family,” a multiracial body whose purpose was to produce whitened, cisheterosexual, obedient laborers (Rodriguez-Silva, 2012). Key to elite mestizaje discourse was the argument that Puerto Rican subjects are not really Black, but a multiracial people who are becoming white and hence capable of autonomy. The result was an anti-Black mestizaje ideology covering over a murderous political economy, leading to widespread poverty, hunger, and brutal mortality rates. While destitution was widespread, this did not prevent anti-Blackness from dividing the working-class, with whiteness serving as a tool of divide and rule (Quintero Rivera, 1976, pp. 185–186; Zenón Cruz, 1974).

Twenty-four years later in 1897 the Spanish Crown granted the Carta Autonómica giving Puerto Rico the right to self-governance, with Luis Muñoz Rivera’s liberal party winning the first elections in 1898. It would have almost been according to plan for the elite class save for the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. The U.S. invasion precipitated a racial, economic, and political crisis for the Puerto Rican elite, unleashing working-class uprisings where protestors assassinated their former pro-Spain bosses and set their properties on fire (Picó, 1987/2004), with some welcoming Puerto Rican annexation into the United States (Zenón Cruz, 1974).

The U.S., however, frustrated the efforts of both the populists and the criollos—it reinstated colonization as a vehicle to “develop” Puerto Rico, framed once again as a backwards Black nation floundering the efforts of the elite’s autonomy project (Rodriguez-Silva, 2012). What is important to understand is that although Puerto Ricans—objectively speaking—can be white, Brown, Black and/or multiracial, in the eyes of the U.S.’s colonial policy and ideology, Puerto Ricans were defined as a mixed, mongol race that was in its essence Black and thus incapable of self-governance. In passing, Picó (1987/2004) notes how the war against Spain “closed
the old wounds of the Civil War … [consolidating] a new spirit of unity and a sense of national mission” (p. 64). Ironically, the crisis in Puerto Rican whiteness instigated by the invasion facilitated the post-Civil War reconstruction of whiteness for the United States (see Rodriguez-Silva 2020).

Godreau (2015) outlines how a repositioning among criollo elites through the 1930s led by Luis Muñoz Marin—the son of Luis Muñoz Rivera—led to discursive claims stressing Spanish heritage and European ancestry to validate Puerto Rican’s capacity for autonomy, stressing a distinct “Hispanic,” “Latin American” culture as part of a growing community of independent Latin American states, while “Africa was … understood as a backward influence that had to be contained, mitigated, or diluted through assimilation, mixture, and education” (p. 122). This was the foundation for renewed negotiations for reform and autonomy with the U.S., where Puerto Rican elites could mount a “resistance” to U.S. colonial power as a racist incursion on their particular “Hispanic” culture, while simultaneously collaborating with U.S. interests in industrialization, racial hygiene, and sterilization programs meant to control and “en-whiten” the population (Preciado, 2008/2013). Central to this project was the reification of narratives of racial mixture, deployed as an example of how Puerto Rico “overcame racism” in contrast to U.S. racial segregation. The result was increased political autonomy in the form of the Estado Libre Asociado, or “associated free state,” in 1952—Puerto Rico evolved into an in-between “state,” neither an independent nation nor an incorporated part of the U.S.’s body politic.

Once again, through policies such as Operation Bootstrap, anti-Blackness and colonial capitalism produced rampant destitution and death, a process that continues to this day through neoliberal austerity policies, disaster capitalism, and an unelected fiscal control board turning Puerto Rico into a haven for capital empowering Puerto Rico’s elites and their U.S. allies (Morales, 2019), triggering multiple waves of migration to the U.S. where the category “Brown” and its tacit colorism functions as an escape valve, a form of epidermic capital facilitating social mobility (Busey & Silva, 2021; Charles, 2021). Again, elite maneuvers seeking autonomy and independence were oriented to benefit themselves, not Puerto Ricans as a whole. Each crisis of race and political economy in Puerto Rico was a crisis in colonial capitalist power, with whiteness as a grammar for economic development. Each crisis, even when exploited by a Black and multicultural working class for greater freedoms, resulted in a violent reconstruction of whiteness (Rodriguez-Silva, 2020). The categories “Brown,” “Latinidad,” and—to the extent it functions as a mask for whiteness—“Puertorriqueñidad” or Puerto Ricanness serve as a medium for the reconstruction of non-sovereign racecraft (cf. Godreau & Bonilla, 2021)—non-sovereign but in pursuit of sovereignty with anti-Blackness as its dispositif (Wilderson, 2010).

This multicultural mestizaje ideology states that since Puerto Ricans are racially “mixed,” racism is “not a problem” so long as whiteness (whether Spaniard, “Hispanic” or American) remains the silent ideal (Chavez-Duées et al., 2014). Yet the silencing of Blackness also authorizes other forms of race talk (Godreau, 2008, 2015; Rodriguez-Silva, 2012). In Puerto Rican Spanish, the word negro exists in an explosive, ambivalent position as both noun and description, Black, and a slur
akin to the “N-word.” In Puerto Rican Spanish we have a multitude of words that perform the double function of pointing toward Blackness while also pointing away from it. *Indio*, *mulato*, *trigueño*, and *moreno* quietly name skin that is not-white, while forcefully declaring that skin is definitely *not-Black*—“yo no soy negro, pero …” [I’m not black, but …]. Adding to this complexity are the slippery semantics of these terms, as one person’s *trigueño* might mean “Brown” while another’s *trigueño* might mean “Black” (Godreau, 2008).

The exception is the phrase *gente de color*, which means “people of color.” In Puerto Rico, Black Puerto Ricans may be called *gente de color* whereas I, a white Puerto Rican, became a “person of color” upon crossing the colonial symbolic into the U.S. mainland. Much like in the U.S., “people of color” discourse blinds us to the specificity of anti-Blackness (Sexton, 2010), except in Puerto Rico it silences Blackness as such (Godreau, 2015). These words betray the language of the Puerto Rican unconscious, a tripartite structure akin to Tate’s analysis of Freud—white, “Brown,” and *negro*. A three-part hierarchy is collapsed into a simple binary of Black and non-Black, similar to Freud’s performance of his “joke.”

With Freud and Puerto Rico’s history in mind, I complement Tate’s work with Afropessimism and decolonial thought as analytic lenses on the structure of anti-Blackness. Wilderson (2020), following Frantz Fanon (1952/2008), makes a distinction between existence, the world of relational experience, and ontology, the structure of being in terms of who is human within a racial hierarchy. At the level of ontological structure, Blackness is subject to a non-contingent form of violence that does not require formal transgression and impedes attempts at repair or “escape” from the position of ever-present violence. As Fanon (1952/2008) once wrote, while racism may “place” non-Black oppressed people alongside the Black subject they are able to—physically and symbolically—“get out.” “Wherever he goes,” Fanon clarifies, “the Negro remains a Negro” (1952/2008, p. 133). In this way, Wilderson (2020) frames the function of anti-Blackness as “a healing balm for the Human mind” (p. 199). Freud’s “negro joke” allowed him access to a *jouissance* that made him feel whole, with each repetition reconstructing his whiteness (cf. Rodriguez-Silva 2020)—a portable Ellis Island. Each telling enacted the creation of a bottom, an ontological “safety net” below which he could not fall (Wilderson, 2020).

Anti-Blackness relates human status to the question of capacity. Not capacity at the level of existence, the things we are physically and mentally capable of doing as individuals, but at the level of ontology—the things we are prefigured as capable of by socio-economic structure and psychosocial fantasy. The category of the human is capable of consent, freedom, recognition, and subjectivity, whereas the Black subject, defined a priori as not-human, is always already rendered incapable as a “speaking implement” (Wilderson, 2010). For Afropessimism, no amount of recognition redresses this ontological amputation, and it is this tension between lack and plenitude that provokes anxiety for Black and non-Black subjects.

“Honey, you alone?” she said as my five-year-old hand held my father’s, “where are your parents?” Another time, at a gas station, my father is paying for the pump. This time seen but no less haunting, “Is that *trigueño* your father?” a man whispers, but I don’t know why. I feel anxious. He misinterprets my discomfort. “Is he a stranger?” he glances at policemen nearby enjoying a morning *cafecito*. A man with
trigueño skin next to a “white” child did not mix—had I been kidnapped from a playground? Whether in childhood or adulthood, my father’s body “slid” in between different categories. When “well-behaved” my father was referred to as a kind “indio,” a gentle Taino and therefore “Brown,” but if he became angry or contentious, “se te salio el negro!” “the Black came out!” The line between the seen and the unseen, what is permitted and disavowed, being Brown and being Black, shifted like quicksand. For a time, about 80% of Puerto Ricans identified as white, an assertion often made regardless of phenotype (Godreau, 2008; Loveman & Muniz, 2007). Despite this “white hope,” Puerto Ricans could always slide back down into being seen as “Brown” or Black. As a product of our history of mestizaje, my own Puerto Ricanness entailed that although I have faced discrimination and violence, my white skin allows me an escape other Puerto Ricans do not have access to. Depending on the eye of the beholder, my body can slide in between not Brown and Black, but white and “ambiguously non-white,” with a path always open back to whiteness.

“Clara” (pseudonym) was a young adult, cisheterosexual, middle-class Black woman presenting to treatment due to escalating arguments over race with her fiancée “Tom,” who was white. These arguments had become so intense, that at times it made her question their engagement. Interestingly, she described Tom as “woke,” and generally open to discussing race. I suspected Clara was stressing how open Tom could be as a defense—maybe Tom and his family engaged in subtle microaggressions that were only now rising to the surface. That did not seem to be the case, as their families were warm toward each other, and the two of them had a lovely courtship leading up to their engagement. I remarked to Clara that hearing the story of their relationship sounded like a “multicultural” dream. She laughed, “a dream deferred?”

Clara’s parents grew up working class in the South during Jim Crow, later moving to the northeast where they achieved a middle-class lifestyle. At the time she described her parents as being from mixed African-American and Afro-Caribbean families, but that there was not much discussion of her Afro-Caribbean side’s immigration history—some came from Trinidad, some from “other islands.” As far as she was concerned, “We were all just Black Americans.” Her parents raised her in an Afrocentric household which recognized the realities of racism, but with an underlying faith that “we will overcome.” Yet as Clara grew older, the world she experienced outside her home was not the world her parents hoped for. It was the world of Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Tanisha Anderson, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, a world of gratuitous violence where it was not clear Black people “will overcome.” Whenever she brought her experience of this world home, her parents quickly reminded her that “things were getting better,” and that this was “racism’s last gasp.” A language of ontology was foreclosed.

Although Clara described Tom as open to talking about race and receptive to feedback in their relationship, they struggled whenever Clara expressed her anger at recurrent murders of Black people by the police. Although Tom was initially open to Clara’s anger at injustice, he would eventually express feeling judged by her focus on him. “He would say ‘Yes Clara,’” she related, “‘racism is real and these
killings are terrible, but I’m Tom, I’m Tom not whiteness.’’ Clara felt at times he
could not handle discussing what anti-Blackness meant for their relationship. “Of
course he’s not whiteness incarnate,” she assented, “but he’s white!” Such fights
often ended with Tom “capitulating” (her word), “owning” his white privilege and
inability to understand her experience, overtures Clara did not find satisfactory or
“reparative.”

Aside from these arguments with Tom, Clara was otherwise successful at work
and had healthy relationships with friends, family, and her fiancée. There was no
evident splitting in terms of her psychic structure and yet something felt split. Over
the course of many sessions—including ruptures that emerged between us around
colorism and racism between Black and Puerto Rican communities—we wrestled
with this possibility. In one session in particular, Clara expressed her anger at me—
or more accurately, through me (see below)—remarking that even though I was
Puerto Rican, I was “light-skinned,” and therefore “probably dated white women,
light-skin women at best.” I was struck by the structure of this thought. If I dated
predominantly non-Black women, this would reflect anti-Black feelings resulting
from having white skin, justifying her anger toward me.

Not knowing where I was going, I replied, “What would it mean if I dated
exclusively Black women?” She laughed out loud, remarking that I was probably
“exotifying” them. I had this feeling that regardless of the actuality of my intimate
life I was “damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” and wondered if this is how
Tom felt. I started to realize that at a deeper level this mirrored how Clara felt. If
you are damned if you do and damned if you don’t, then you are damned—per
Frantz Fanon, le damnes de la terre. The non-contingent nature of this dilemma was
curious. “What would it mean,” I said as another thought came to mind, “if I was
doing neither of those things,” Clara seemed struck, “and your anger toward me
was still valid and justified?” My words hit on something for her. What if, in the
absence of specific racist feelings or behavior on my part her anger was still, a
priori, valid? She was puzzled yet enticed by my question, which she meditated on
in subsequent sessions. In returning to a recent argument between Clara and Tom, I
said, “It’s almost as if you love your fiancée because he loves you, but hate him not
for what he does but for what he is.” This “inexact” interpretation impacted
something that allowed Clara room to fill in the gaps in my knowledge with the
knowledge of her unconscious—the following came through her speech, which
neither of us quite understood at first. Clara reflected as if swishing a new and
vibrant whiskey in her mouth:

*deep sigh* It’s like I love him as my partner and best friend, but I get so
angry at him, but not really him? I don’t know … I don’t hate him because of
anything he’s actually done … It’s also like, I don’t hate him because of
something he’s going to do. I wouldn’t be marrying the man if I didn’t trust
him. I hate him because of what he’s… capable of doing, I guess?

Clara went back and forth, reiterating how this thought “didn’t make any sense” yet
resonated with her. I remained silent, less for any technical reason than the fact that
I did not understand what was happening. A shiver ran down my spine as I saw even
more clearly, in my mind’s eye, a subway car. A young man. His father. The color line between them.

There was a shift over the following weeks as Clara expressed to Tom how even though she loves him, times will come when the violence she witnesses against Black people—and experiences as a Black woman—will fill her with rage and despair, and she will express her feelings “not at you, but through you.” This changed how they talked about race, allowing Clara to articulate, and for Tom to hold, a fundamental tension in their relationship between their love and the racial gap between them. Tom came to understand that although the source of her anger implicated him it was not fundamentally about him, while Clara was able to validate an experience of the world for which she previously lacked a language.

Months before their wedding, Clara announced she was pregnant with their child. Since we had agreed to end our work the prior to her wedding, this led to a crisis. How does she talk to her child about race as the product of an interracial relationship? We explored her fantasies of how talking or not talking about Blackness would impact their child. “Well,” she replied, “it depends ... *laughs* ... I guess on whether the baby is white or Black? Or looks mixed?” We explored the possibilities. “If my child is Black, maybe I’d be introducing them to the world too early. If they’re white or mixed, I feel like I’d confuse them. No matter what they look like I should just play Paul Mooney for them on YouTube!” She referenced the Black comedian Paul Mooney, who joked about how non-Black people of color “diss Africa, nobody wants to talk about [their] Black grandmother.” A Puerto Rican saying came to mind, El que no tiene dinga tiene mandinga [who doesn’t have an indigenous parent, has a Black grandparent]. “All my Puerto Rican friends [say] ‘I’m Spanish,’” Paul Mooney explained, “don’t get it twisted, you speak Spanish, you have Spanish blood, but you’re a [N-word] because of slavery” (AfroPrideTV, 2014).

“Do you know the Schomburg?” Clara brought me back from my reverie, referencing the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York City. “Did you know he was Puerto Rican?” Arturo Alfonso Schomburg—Americanized as “Arthur Schomburg”—was a figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Clara had read about how Schomburg, born in Santurce, Puerto Rico one year after the abolition of slavery in 1874 (Sinnette, 1989), was told by a school teacher that Black people had no history or culture. This made Schomburg determined to document the achievements of African peoples across the world. He left Puerto Rico and settled in Harlem in 1891, where he founded one of the world’s first collections of Black literature. Clara associated to Schomburg’s experience of not having a home, fleeing Puerto Rican anti-Blackness only to encounter American anti-Blackness. What caught her attention was how Schomburg coined a new term for himself, Afroborinquen, fusing Boricua, an appellation based on Boriken, the original Taino name of the island, with an Afrocentric identity.

Clara: Turns out the whole world is fucked up. But even after coming here, he made a space where he could exist.

DG: He built a home for Blackness.
Clara: That’s what I want for our kids, a home where [we’re] loved no matter what... [I’m] afraid I’d lose that after we end therapy. I felt my parents’ [love], so whenever I struggle I worried something must be wrong with me.

DG: Fix me!

Clara: Fix me, but fuck you too! Now I know it’s not me, or Tom, or you. There’s a real broken world out there.

DG: Or me?

Clara: I wanted to fix you so bad! My white Boricua therapist with his internalized issues.

DG: I’m a tough case.

[both laugh]

DG: I wonder if your anxiety is a way of both asking me to help you with it, and a question—Is it ok that I don’t know the answer?

Clara: I think my parents had the same fear I’m having now. Of something so big you don’t know how to fix it, you just hope the problem goes away. I don’t know if we’re gonna beat racism … but we’re still building, even when they break us down.

Years after our work I was not sure what felt mutative, and the theories I had did not quite capture its essence. It was not until reading Wilderson’s (2020) anecdote about meeting with a biracial Black-identified student that what happened in our treatment “clicked.” The student’s mother was white, and her boyfriend was Asian American. She described “the way I love my mom but hate her so, so much. The way I love my boyfriend and hate him as well. I hate them not for what they do, because they’re both loving and sweet. I hate them because of what they can do. And they don’t want to talk about it [emphasis added] ... It seems like I’ve loved them and hated them forever.” Wilderson replied that his first book “was about this very problem, a duel in the heart, for which no denouement is possible [emphasis added]” (Wilderson, 2020, pp. 332–333).

I needed to lie down (unironically, on my own couch) after reading that. This anecdote, which read like an analytic session, made me reflect on how Clara’s treatment was mutative not primarily because it helped “repair” a once whole object or provide a corrective experience, but because it helped Clara make sense of her feelings not through a horizontal language of relationship and recognition, but a vertical language of hierarchy and racial ontology. Clara loved a whole object at the level of her relational existence, the fiancéé (later husband) who loved her, and also hated a whole object at the level of ontology—the structural position Tom inhabited and allowed him, and by extension me, human status. The essential split was not within Clara or between her and Tom, but between her and the world. The treatment, somewhat by accident, helped Clara articulate a grammar of Black suffering and redefine her relationship to it. Without it, she lacked a scaffolding to understand her feelings toward her fiancéé—her anger must be toward him specifically, or else it was her who was “crazy.” The intervention Clara made by correcting my interpretation freed them to love each other within an anti-Black world because they valued their love, holding the gap between them. But it also put
something else into words, the meaning of which would emerge years after the end of our treatment.

As mentioned earlier, I wrote an email to Jones as I was preparing for this paper (shared with her permission), asking to clarify her question from years prior to reflect on my relationship to Blackness as a Puerto Rican. Jones replied:

I wish I had seen your father before I wrote the critique of your paper. Your father is the same colour as my mother! That makes a difference because I think I saw you as a white person from the caribbean before I saw him. Seeing him made a difference, not sure what difference but I remember this awareness when he greeted me so warmly. If he had been white … [Your question] Is very important! I don’t think I know how to conceptualize “a Puerto Rican.” (Jones, October 5, 2020, personal communication)

As a good psychoanalytic mentor, Jones did not answer my question directly, but her reply was moving and thought provoking. Her experience of my father made her reevaluate me as something other than a caribbean “white person.” At the same time, her initial read of me was not wrong— I am a Puerto Rican white man, just one who also reads as “non-white.” This question of how to conceptualize “a Puerto Rican” circled back to Clara in an unexpected way.

Working on this paper through the Covid-19 pandemic, I received a request for a session from Clara, who left me a voicemail stating she “needed to talk” following her grandmother’s recent death from Covid. On our virtual session, I felt a warm smile as she came on screen with her young daughter. “Hola!” she greeted me in an accented Spanish. “Hola!” I replied with surprise, before saying hello in English. Clara introduced me to her daughter, then updated me on how she was coping during the pandemic. A thought crossed my mind in passing, as it had before when meeting biracial/multiracial people—this kid could be Puerto Rican. We talked about the pain of losing her grandmother and having to attend the funeral over Zoom. I reflected on my own alienated mourning, of funeral after funeral of friends and family mediated by a computer screen. “I never told you,” she said, “I spoke to her about you.” She reached for a jewelry box with her free hand, opened it, and withdrew an item. A small Puerto Rican flag came on screen, fitting gently in her hand. Mooney and Schomburg rushed through my mind like a subway car off the rails. Clara inherited this box after her grandmother passed away, a secret left behind as a gift. Had she known this about her grandmother during our work together?

Clara shared that her grandmother, a former social worker, had once followed up whether she started psychotherapy after she first disclosed the difficulties in her relationship. Clara said she had—with a Puerto Rican therapist. Her grandmother’s eyes widened, asking numerous questions about my background including what part of Puerto Rico I was from. At the time, she interpreted this as her grandmother wanting to make sure she was with a “good” therapist. “When I told her you were light-skin,” she said, “grandma got quiet.” She had never seen her grandmother silent like that. After a beat, her grandmother answered, “There are those,” before changing the subject. The silence stayed with Clara, an intergenerational silence reproduced within her family, broken when she received the jewelry box as an
heirloom. After talking with her grandfather about the flag, Clara learned her grandmother was Puerto Rican, a migrant who left the island in her teens and avoided discussing her experience growing up. Not unlike Schomburg, she had left because she could not see a future there, erasing her past just as it erased her. It was then I realized Clara was saying “hola” for her abuela [grandmother] and herself—“olas” making waves against the anti-Blackness passing through my Puerto Rican mind. Why would her biracial daughter look like she could be Puerto Rican, but not Clara?

Upon arriving in the States, Clara’s grandmother hoped for a better world outside of the anti-Blackness of her youth in Puerto Rico—a dream quickly collapsing into the reality of the American nightmare. Clara’s parents were able to leave the Jim Crow South and achieve a middle-class status, adopting anew a dream of racial progress. Although her grandmother also achieved professional status as a social worker later in life, she did not adopt her son and daughter-in-law’s belief in progress, nor had she ever shared her background with Clara. Her parents’ experience of racism led them to cope with a fantasy of future redemption—a symbolic and material escape into middle-class status. This silenced Clara’s experience of racism, authorizing the kind of race talk in which racism is primarily the result of individual actors to be overcome with greater enlightenment and redress of injustice. This silence was not just her family’s attempt to cope, but also their attempt to protect Clara from an overwhelming reality. A grammar of ontology, then, was not so much repressed as left unformulated.

Our treatment revealed itself to be an intergenerational dialogue between two Puerto Ricans across the silenced discourse of race. The granddaughter of a Black Puerto Rican woman who escaped Puerto Rico but could not escape anti-Blackness. The son of a Puerto Rican man who could not escape the association between brown skin and Blackness, with the category “Brown” serving as an ambivalent middle ground. Clara’s grandmother not so much silenced her Puerto Ricanness, so much as it was silenced for her. My father’s brown skin, by contrast, alluded to whiteness as a failed performance in constant need of reconstruction. In a way, Clara’s Blackness functioned as the fulfillment of her grandmother’s wish to be free to be Black, including, to be free to articulate a grammar of Black suffering—a grammar that was a source of anxiety for her parents. My whiteness functioned as the fulfillment of the mestizaje wish to be free from Blackness, something my father periodically pointed to yet needed to remain silent—my whiteness allowed me access to a privilege he could not enjoy.

Tate’s (1996) foundational paper inspires a new field of vision within contemporary psychoanalysis. Whether looking at turn-of-century Vienna or Puerto Rico, we find a curious ideological structure accompanying colonial capitalism, where development is associated with whiteness, stagnation and degeneracy with Blackness, with different subjectivities “in between” competing for uplift in “the middle”—whether Jewish or “Brown” Hispanic/Puerto Rican. This vertical racial structure, with anti-Blackness providing an economy of redemption, finds curious expression in the very structure of Freud’s model of the psyche—“mixed” preconscious, Black “aboriginal” unconscious, and tacitly white conscious (Brickman, 2017). If we follow Ferenczi’s (1910/1994) comment to Freud, that in
psychoanalysis “we investigate the real conditions in the various levels of society … just as they are mirrored in the individual” (p. 153, emphasis original), then we must take this not merely as a sign of Freud’s individual racism, but of how racial capitalism “passed through” him, registering itself in his very language—a series of “slips” revealing how racial capitalism structures the psyche as such.

As illustrated in my work with Clara, attention to object relations at a horizontal level of lived existence threatened to obfuscate a racialized language of verticality, reducing racism to an essentially interpersonal conflict. The treatment made room not just for race talk, but talk about how the language of racial ontology structures lived existence as such. Remember Wilderson’s (2020) anecdote with his student—her pain was not primarily about racist performances in her otherwise loving relationships, but about structural positions and how her loved ones’ resisted talking about them. In psychoanalytic theory and technique this requires not just a theory of psychic reality, but of how the psyche registers a language of verticality—gender, sexual, racial, and economic—grounded in anti-Blackness within capitalism. This means understanding not just the client’s relational or cultural world, but also what structural position they fantasize themselves to be in, and who do they see as “above” or “below” them in the symbolic order.

This synthesis also sheds light on some dynamisms observed across both Freud’s Vienna and my homeland of Puerto Rico. It is sometimes assumed that being a member of an oppressed group within a racial hierarchy would spur a natural desire to dismantle that hierarchy. The opposite would seem to be the norm. Put bluntly, while anti-Blackness serves as a central vehicle of oppression for non-Black colonial subjects—whether in Puerto Rico or Vienna—it does not necessarily lead to solidarity. Rather, the association with Blackness presents an injury, a symbolic castration that, in an attempt at self-repair, reconstructs a desire for whiteness with anti-Blackness serving precisely as the vehicle for psychic and material uplift. James Cone’s ontological Blackness—or Blackness-by-association—holds out the promise of solidarity against whiteness but can often collapse into Wilderson’s ontological anti-Blackness as a “healing balm” seducing non-Black and Black subjects to seek the heights offered within racial capitalism—heights textured by whiteness, unreachable like the sun yet no less deadly if we fly too close. Like Icarus, our wings burn away as we fall back down to the bottom of the ocean.

Recently, Godreau and Bonilla (2021) pointed to how the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and disaster capitalism may trigger a crisis in Puerto Rico’s non-sovereign racecraft, bringing into question the wages of whiteness (Du Bois, 1935) within our social imaginary. However, while this crisis may lead Puerto Ricans to increasingly perceive themselves as non-white within the U.S., “whiteness will continue to be valued and protected locally in myriad ways” (Godreau & Bonilla, 2021, p. 521). While space has cracked open within mestizaje for articulations of Black and indigenous identity on the island through art and activism (see CFC, 2017; Colectivo Ilé, 2020), it has also triggered renewed efforts for white reconstruction (Rodríguez-Silva 2020), Puerto Rican style. One form it may take is the discourse of “Brown” hybridity allowing Puerto Ricans a sort of racial “plausible deniability”—not-Black but could be, not-white but should be.
This is not to analogize the structure of Black and non-Black suffering as “the same,” but point out that the structure of this suffering is different though indelibly related. Warren (2018) identifies something I have struggled to name in my own Puerto Rican context—how “Blackness becomes a ubiquitous threat, always already existing and floating throughout civil society as a phantom-like danger” (location 2851–2857). As stated above neither Freud, my father, or myself are Black and yet the phantasmatic association with Blackness—a product of the white supremacist imagination—was deployed by white supremacy as a tool of colonial oppression. This association requires anti-Black performances to “restore” one’s humanity—humanity on the path toward whiteness itself. This is enacted through cultural and physical violence toward actual Black people and symbolic performances carried out to ward off (even in fantasy) the feared association, whether Freud’s obsessional repetition of his “negro joke” or the Puerto Rican obsession around showing one is “not a negro.” What is at stake is the freedom of Black people—such as Clara’s family and grandmother—to be, and for non-Black subjects to free ourselves from the material and phantasmatic dependence on anti-Blackness.

I called my father recently and asked him about that night in the subway a decade ago (I translated our conversation into English). “I don’t understand why people see me as Black,” he replied, “If you think about it, my arms are trigueño, my face is more brown [he said “brown” in English], my chest—which doesn’t get a lot of sun—is kinda white. I have some Black features, pero yo no soy negro.” It is not his statement as a fact that stands out to me, but its performance. As I heard him break down his body parts like a mestizaje Frankenstein, I told him about Jones’s experience of him a few years ago. He became irate at the association of his body with Blackness, “I don’t get these racist people who have an issue with my trigueño skin … seeing me as Black.” I interjected, “But papi, your skin reminded Annie Lee of her mother, someone she loves.” I have sat with many silences as a clinician, but the silence on other side of the phone had a different quality, the gears in my father’s mind turning as a possibility took shape—that his skin could be associated with love.

“Hijo! Sabes que te amo?” he asked, “Son! Do you know that I love you?”
“Si papi,” I answered, “Yes father.”
“Sabes… po’que, verda?” “You know… why, right?”
“Si papi.” “Yes father.”
“Porque tu eres mi hijo!” “Because you are my son!”
“Papi! Bendicion!” “Father! Grant me your blessing!”
“Bendecion mi’jo! Bendecido.” “Be blessed my son! Be blessed.”

Puerto Ricans are a multiracial people descended from Europeans, Tainos, and Africans, yet as a whole we are not Europeans, fully indigenous or African. We share this heritage collectively in our culture, but our families might be predominantly Afro-descendant, indigenous, white, or multiracial. Our phenotype as individuals might be white, Brown, Black, or “in between.” We may or may not share our phenotype or skin color with our parents or broader family. We are a complex people born from a wound that haunts us across generations. When I think
about this I too am left without words, unable to conceptualize a Puerto Rican. The short-hand schema of what a Puerto Rican “should look like” fails, and the colony rushes in to restore coherence based on *mestizaje* logics. Let it fail. Let it die so others who have been silenced may speak. I do not know what lies on the other side of this death. Maybe it will be something else we as a community decide is Puerto Ricanness. Maybe it will be something else we do not yet have words for. Maybe it will simply be *familia*.

**Declarations**

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