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# A Black Woman as an American Analyst: Some Observations From One Woman's Life Over Four Decades

Annie Lee Jones, Ph.D

**ABSTRACT**
A narrative of one black woman who is a trained psychoanalyst in America gives a small window to the way raced, gendered, and economic experiences influenced her perception of her world. Candid descriptions of situations she encountered, participated in, and observed are offered to illuminate some of the continued racialization of difference that is a part of the psychoanalytic community. The reader is asked to rely on the theoretical positions offered by the author to understand the importance of recognizing minoritarian voices as authentic and relevant to the work of psychoanalysis.

## "The Spectacular Character" of Suffering

This is one of the most difficult papers I have ever written. I have a considerable amount of shame and fear about some of the racialized encounters in which I have been involved over the past 10 years. I cannot find words to describe some of them. I am relying on some of the writings of Andre Green (1986) to stabilize my thoughts so that I am not overrun by my fears and anxieties associated with my use of denial over the years to cope with graduate study in clinical psychology and postdoctoral study in psychoanalysis. In my readings, I have come to the conclusion, like Green, that it is object relations that governs the language we use to think about and communicate our understanding of transference. Additionally, I believe that transference cannot be separated from Real World experiences of the Analyst and her Analysands. Therefore, it is important in treatment and supervisory relationships that the black analyst feels free enough from the traditional restraints associated with abstinence to be able to use herself and her relationship to the outside world in her clinical practice. This outside world includes the psychoanalytic community.

In the telling of instances of painful, embarrassing, and often hurtful experiences I have endured as a black woman analyst, I wish to help the reader avoid the pitfalls of psychic numbness and distancing that can occur when confronted with the types of the narratives about my psychoanalytic life. I am also fully aware that in the psychoanalytic community writ large, there is a continuing struggle between Eurocentric foundational thought and emerging voices from the margins. The remaining Eurocentrism points to the stagnating effect of the refusal to recognize racialized enactments and internal racialized object relational structures as legitimate psychoanalytic thought (e.g., Gump, 2014; Jones and Obourn, 2014; Woods, 2020; Yi, 1998).

In other spaces, I have struggled with the economics of what is considered "legitimate thought" in psychoanalysis. Fricker (2010) explores the many facets of epistemological justice and points to the problematics of the effects of racialized components in the authority to authorize a body to describe, name, and locate their experiences as legitimate. This country automatically bestows on those who occupy white spaces the authority to determine what an authentic experience is. Fricker's use of testimonial injustice is to characterize when a group or individual listener has the power to discredit someone's telling of their experience based on their identity. According to Fricker:

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> if a history of such injustices gnaws away at a person's intellectual confidence, or never lets it develop in the first place, this damages his epistemic function quite generally. The under-confident subject will tend to back down in the face of challenge, or even at the very prospect of it, and this tendency may well deprive him of knowledge he would otherwise have gained. (2010, p. 51)

Similarly, Saidiya Hartman evokes the brutality of slavery not by directly referencing Frederick Douglass's narrative of the beating of his aunt, but rather by locating all that follows within the tradition of *known knowns* of black people suffering in America. This approach frees the reader to continue with Hartman's text without distancing and dissociation. Indeed, Hartman makes a pathway for the reader to wonder within the written text about what they know about "the spectacular character of black suffering" (Hartman, 1997, p. 3).

So, following Hartman's approach, I invite the reader to do the same with my story.

## Professional and Personal Location

For many years I have been working in an urban center that is rich with experience of others with language and socioeconomic experiences far different from my own. In the part of the city where I live, poverty is real. It often seems that I share my commute with folks who are primarily workers rushing to take their children to schools near and far, laborers, security guards, and day workers of all sorts. My community abounds in languages far removed from English and Spanish. Where I live, if there is a universal language it is usually Spanish, which I do not know. Then there is the psychoanalytic community, where I am a clinical psychologist and institute-trained psychoanalyst. My two worlds do not fit me, or, more clearly, I do not fit in my two worlds, at least not comfortably. Because of rent stability and travel constraints, my neighborhood works for me, and in fact I often marvel in the newness of everyday encounters with my neighbors. My difference is one of many, and I often enjoy being discovered as I, too, recognize myself in others.

I learned to be highly observant in my urban environment in order to stabilize my everyday work experiences so that they would approach some type of normative standard that I could rely on in my own interpersonal encounters. This becomes noteworthy when you consider that I work and live in an environment where I often have to self-identify by explaining that my accent is regional, not national, and that I am not an immigrant to the United States, just a migrant from within. It is very possible for me to go from home to the hospital where I am on staff, travel to my private practice office, and then back to my home and have very little, if any, contact with anyone who I share any aspects of my developmental history, beyond that related to the color of my skin.

Not only am I a Southerner in the Northeast, but I am also in an environment where I can be asked where my accent originates, and be tasked with tolerating all the discourses that can follow from these casual exchanges. I often imagine myself as part of the Diaspora that resulted from the 1960s' integrationist political decisions. As an analyst, I am heard with a textured voice in skin color, regionalism, and gendered notes. I became sensitized to the nuances of initial encounters with people who sought treatment in my practice. I became aware of the often-startling contrasts between the way I perceived myself and the way I was perceived by them. This discrepancy between my self-perception and descriptors applied to me by my patients resulted in my developing strategies to illuminate what their perception of me meant to us, while fostering an environment that could promote the work in the psychoanalytic situation. By studying the nuances of self-descriptive language in the analytic process, I noticed an important space where the voice of the black woman as analyst was silenced, not articulated, and not heard. Now, I want to point out that initially this silencing was unconscious, and as analyst, I would attempt to suspend the experience of myself as a black woman in order to occupy the space of analyst.

Illuminating this space where the black woman as analyst could speak resulted in further exploration of the problems in communication encountered by me as the hyphenated other in the psychoanalytic setting. I am attempting to incorporate into the psychoanalytic frame a different kind of relational strategy that can make room for newer definitions of the position of analyst and patient,

thus affecting the analytic surface and know-ability of the analyst. To examine some of the ways my cultural and social experiences of me as a black woman quilted my role as analyst is one of the goals of this paper. At the end of the paper, I list some of the examples of problematic experiences I have had in the psychoanalytic community—some violently intrusive and traumatic, others injurious to my internal sense of who I am as a person, a black woman, and finally as an analyst.

The culture of skin-color-defined values and associated worth plays out in the session on both sides of the analytic dyad and in the psychoanalytic community. For me, Henry F. Smith (1993), in his article "The Analytic Surface and the Discovery of Enactment," correctly notes that the patient uses external cues. And yes, that the analytic surface is a co-created phenomenon that provides a venue for interpretive interventions, patient disclosures, and analyst awareness of social and other factors at play when patient and analyst meet. Many of my patients' concerns paralleled my own, and I became determined to read out loud those circumstances whispered about in the darkness. After all, psychoanalysis has its own reified metaphors for race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism.

I have come to learn that these experiences in the session occur at moments where the narrative moves from conscious to unconscious explorations; intersecting with the patient's experience of the analyst; resulting in the patient's intrapsychic encounter with the minoritarian gendered analyst; and leading to narrations of previously undisclosed traumatic events that they can best capture with race-tinged, color-loaded, socioculturally laden discourses of the events. I have also found that the black female analyst becomes, in certain analytic moments, a powerful stimulus, resulting in shared, often painful moments that can lead to a dramatic change in the scope of the analytic relationship, providing more freedom for the patient to do her work, while, on the other hand, requiring the black woman as analyst to utilize her experiences both inside and outside the psychoanalytic community to shore up the structural bridge over language, color, and ethnic/nationality barriers.

It is a curious fact that in my urban area, non-blacks,who are not white (here again I am using the historically situated binary, acknowledging my own background in the United States) will seek consultation and often treatment with me because of my skin color. My initial impression is usually that they are white. As the work progresses, and I become aware that I am returning to initial interview material, I begin to make a conscious effort to use this repetition to afford the patient more room for self-definition, clarifying their experiences of themselves as the bicultural or hyphenated other. Repetition of attempts to illuminate and explore these aspects frees up communication so that the patient can locate and identify their own referents across the color divide. This suspends over time, defers interpretation, and promotes opportunities for shared experiences that can ground the treatment. Indeed, I have come to realize, that when the black analyst finds herself "wondering" whether her patient is white, the patient is then usually ready to explore their own color-based assumptions about the analyst's viability in the work. When the patient prefaces disclosures with "you know" or when the racialized epitaphs used to refer to persons of implied lesser class or darker skin color are freely used by the patient in the presence of the black analyst, the work has moved to a platform that can further the treatment. Very often the discourse is interrupted when the patient becomes aware of the analyst's presence as a black woman, resulting in moments both traumatic and illuminating. Repetition of disclosures that mirror shared bicultural and external experiences in the reality that defines both participants' external worlds marks the discourse with permission needed for progress in the treatment, no matter how traumatic for the analyst as a black woman.

Because it *is* often traumatic to know what each other knows about the hyphenated other.

When a black gendered object occupies the dyadic role of the Analyst, people from nations, regions, and cultural milieus that have clear and distinct class, role, and authoritarian relationships to one another based on strict, locked, if unarticulated, pigmentocracy, where black gendered objects never or rarely occupy roles of authority or expertise, experience disquieting, dislocating, and often fearful moments. I assume that the meaning of skin color and the manner in which unconscious associations to the skin color of the analyst and the analysand intersect in a matrix of metaphors have impact upon the intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences they share in the analytic situation. In this matrix, experiencing the analyst's contribution is painful and can prove traumatic, as

attempts are made to wonder out loud about what the dyad is experiencing. Some responses may be stimulated by my southern accent, which may trigger nationalist-type associations similar to this one: "I do feel that I am better off here, and that I am better off here than at home, but I am not an American, I remember when I told you I had just gotten my permanent resident card, you acted as if I should be happy, I don't think you understand what it is like to know that people know you are not American, and treat you different."

Other associative material may refer to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, resulting in "you know" type revelations regarding assumed shared experiences of persecution and degradation. Analytic shifts between visibility and invisibility are the continuing question. When the patient assumes shared moments or spaces where unconscious communications become part of acute awareness, inarticulate shifts can result in loss of time and space between the patient and the analyst. Exploring and illuminating the moments when the skin colors of the analyst and patient intersect with factors like those just described can lead to traumatic moments as they come into conscious awareness. But knowing what they both know about each other's racialized projections can facilitate the work with a heightened awareness of their individualized experiences around gendered racialized encounters.

## Seeing and hearing myself in Fanon

Fanon said:

> The colonized subject is constantly on his guard: Confused by the myriad signs of the colonial world he never knows whether he is out of line. Confronted with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed guilty. The colonized does not accept his guilt, but rather considers it a kind of curse, a sword of Damocles. But deep down the colonized subject acknowledges no authority. He is dominated but not domesticated. (2004, p. 16)

I have read and experienced myself reading Fanon many times, having read him extensively recently, as I am going to be teaching him this fall in New York. But when I heard Lara Sheehi quote the preceding material from Fanon at "Psychology and the Other" in October 2019, I could not think, and I found that I could not remember the text. After getting the quote from Lara, I in fact did "find" it in one of my editions of the volume. This experience of knowing but not knowing, remembering but forgetting, is so familiar that I am comfortable with it: The anxiety signals danger and risk that I have feared before, especially when I speak in psychoanalysis. I really mean "in psychoanalysis," a location and a space that I can only be present in as a colonized other—hyper visible-seen-not seeing-able to risk speaking at my own peril, especially if heard.

I always take responsibility for the traumas, as Fanon writes. The colonized always takes responsibility. I want to share with the reader that I have lived with a profound terror inside that if I speak the wrong way I will be killed. But, of course, I always speak the wrong way. I cannot help but speak the wrong way in psychoanalytic spaces because I am a black woman in the United States. I am nearly 71 years old, but fear and terror have continued to be my constant companions when I move around outside my local community or in psychoanalytic spaces. This is true for me in my own head and when I look out and see and hear myself speaking psychoanalytically.

Any economic risks I imagined in the past (e.g., not getting a referral from my institute) to justify my silence no longer seem viable. This feels like the time to speak and to be seen and heard, as I feel myself seen and heard in Fanon.

Colonialist stereotypes pass unexamined in many of the raced groups that I am a member of as a psychoanalyst. Perhaps unsurprisingly, if we take Fanon at his word, skin color and raced biases of the larger group also circulate within black psychoanalytic organizations. For example, I am fully aware that in some quarters my relying on "real events" as reported by me and to me as a vehicle for us to explore our shared racial unconscious would be frowned upon and considered completely irrelevant to the work we do with our patients.

Contemporary psychoanalysis struggles within itself to recognize the raced and ethnically informed relational exchanges that shape the dynamics of interpersonal encounters, often by distancing the despised other, relegating their experiences to the outside, as if far removed from what is relevant to psychoanalytic considerations. Blackness, Fanon's phobogenic object, and the recognition of the shared object relational processes it represents are not easily metabolizable within the psychoanalytic mind.

It is as though the very act of being immersed in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking and training includes the psychologizing away of social inequality—ignoring the facts of racism and violence and/or worse, subsuming the enterprise of skin-color-coded acts of dominance under areas of cultural diversity or competency training, or transference. Instead, I am suggesting that the burden of racial trauma is conceptualizable as an intrapsychic phenomenon that we share inter-psychically and interpersonally, culturally and by tradition.

Judging by my own experience, racialized encounters are often dissociated. We become anxious, but I want to point out that even in these moments of anxiety, racialized *perceptions* are not unconscious. Together we can bear the unpleasantness that can sometimes occur while attempting to think out loud about what we associate to blackness and associated experiences in the presence of those who are not white

## Racialized encounters of a black analyst

### *Example 1*

The first example I can no longer deny or dissociate occurred in London at an international meeting sponsored by the Freud Museum. After co-presenting a paper on the economics of internalized racism, I was accosted by a member of the audience that I later learned was a prominent psychiatrist in Britain. He approached me immediately after my panel ended to tell me that he had several points to discuss with me. He was interrupted by other attendees who also wanted to speak to me, but he persisted, eventually following me out of the conference space, which was down a flight of steps.

Though I went into the ladies' room, he waited.

As I (we) went up the stairs, he pulled me by the arm and invited me to join him for lunch, and even though I respectfully declined, I was then pulled over to a seating area near the exit. I got free of him and pivoted to my friends who were waiting for me near the exit. He held on, however, and pulled me closer to him and kissed me. I got free of him with the assistance of two of my female my colleagues and my friend, who along with others rushed up to me and got me away from him. In the following days, I got e-mails from observers defending him with declarations that he only wished to discuss his experiences in Africa with me and that I reminded him of someone with whom he was deeply involved during his stay on the continent. I am clear that the weight of his efforts to engulf me was taken seriously because of the heftiness of the credentials of those who wrote me. I included him on the list of those who had requested a copy of our paper. He did not acknowledge receipt.

I am very sorry that it is only years later that I can "see" that I was separated from my co-presenter prior to leaving the stage during this incident in London. It seemed as if all the questions were directed at me. I am black; my co-presenter was white.

I have a lot of guilt and shame associated with this incident, directly related to it, but also because of its aftermath. For example, I know that a dear friend and colleague did not publish a paper about fetish from an international Ferenczi conference because she omitted her observations of the just-described incident in London due to the sexualized nature of the way I was treated by this member of the British psychoanalytic community. I had been a fetish. I was surrounded by white faces; I was filmed/taped after the conference as I navigated the crowd. My use as a fetish at the conference was overwhelming and traumatic.

### Example 2

At a psychoanalytic conference registration desk, I was immediately waved over to a nearby registration table for Al Sharpton's National Action Network, which was convening at the same time and in the same hotel as the psychoanalytic conference for which I had preregistered. The white woman at my conference desk took one look at me and gestured to the other registration desk where a considerable number of black people were in line. I went over as directed, not realizing at first what had happened.

After realizing what had happened, I returned to the psychoanalytic conference registration desk and asked for my registration material. I must admit that I did not see another black person of any type registering at the psychoanalytic desk, and must say that it seemed almost "normal" for the clerk at the desk to wave me over to where the black people were waiting in line. I have since learned that white members of the psychoanalytic group recognized me, observed what had happened, and registered their concerns with the conference planners. However, that registration woman remained in charge for several more years.

### Example 3

I attended a major event at my institute where I proudly thought I would witness a black candidate present a case to a prominent analyst. My heart sank when, at the end of the candidate's presentation, the lead analyst announced to the candidate and the audience that the case she presented was not a psychoanalytic case. Without elaborating on his decision, he proceeded to engage the other two supervising analysts who shared the stage with him around his theoretical construction of the case—without so much as consulting the candidate or their work.

As this unfolded, I stood up and asked him why he would announce that the candidate's case was not psychoanalytic. I said other things I now cannot remember, questioning the propriety of such a broad statement, tears flowing from my eyes, my voice audibly cracking. And yet, the panelists never addressed my question and never returned to the candidate in any supportive fashion. Rather, they proceeded onward with their psychoanalytic jargon.

### Example 4

This incident occurred at a major trauma conference sponsored by my institute. I have steadfastly avoided trauma conferences over the past decade—ever since I was used at a race conference my institute held when I was still a candidate.

But let me start from the beginning

I did not register for the conference. A week before the conference, my dear friend Kirkland Vaughans contacted me and asked me to attend the meetings to provide support for three or four of his black female graduate students that he had encouraged to attend. He wanted me there as he could not attend. Since I am a hospital-based externship supervisor for the graduate program they all attended, I felt that I had to be supportive, and the reality is, whatever Kirkland asks of me in the field, I do.

Also, the conference organizers allowed Kirkland to transfer his paid registration to me.

On the first morning of the conference, I was greeted at the door and was told that Kirkland had handled everything and that his registration was transferred over to me and all I had to do was enter. I had no problem finding the graduate students because they were at a table together. The morning was uneventful, I think, until I heard an interesting left-unexamined exchange between two prominent analysts—one black and one white. The graduate students at my table were whispering about this, and I felt some kind of reaction, but no place to locate or process it in the setting of this conference.

In the afternoon, Dr. Janice Gump presented and I was struck by how alone she appeared on the stage; no one else was up there. My gut was churning, and it later turned out that my instinct to be afraid was correct.

Why was she up on the stage at the table alone?

I found the example she gave of being in the elevator alone and a young black man with a hoodie getting on with her was an apt and appropriate metaphor for where she was in real time at this conference. The line was long during her Q&A period, but I got on the line at the end and made an attempt to ask Dr. Gump to wonder about the inner world of young black men like the one she described, wondering whether psychoanalysis has the tools to ask questions about the inner worlds of young African American men. As I tried to articulate my question, a colleague came up behind me and hugged me at the microphone, whispering to me that she was relieved that I spoke up. As I turned to walk back to my table, a white man demanded that Dr. Gump explain to him the meaning of Michelle Alexander's book (2010).

Since Dr. Gump had exited, the white man turned to me and grabbed me by the arm, refusing to let go. He demanded that I explain Alexander's book, since Dr. Gump did not, and that I answer "what white men have to do with the whole thing." This turned into a pulling match as I tried to get loose. He had my right arm so tightly that I could not break free. He kept repeating his questions. The students got involved, yelling at him to turn me loose. He held on as I pulled further and further toward the exit.

I can still hear the students yelling, No means No! Over and over again.

I finally got his attention and told him to release me and to apologize. As I talked to him, I could see he was listening, but he refused to let go of my arm.

The students were holding me and pulling me away while he held on.

He then got on his knee and said that he would apologize if I would talk to him about the questions he had and also answer them. A white colleague intervened on my behalf when he again tried to accost me—he listened to her and disappeared back into the crowd. The graduate students and I were left to our hypervigilance for the rest of the day.

The next morning, I arrived at the conference space and was met by the institute's secretary, who told me about a special meeting/round table that was happening because of "the letter that was sent to the institute overnight." She thought I knew about the letter, but soon realized I did not. "The letter" was sent to the institute director and the conference planners, who acted on it immediately, though no one contacted me or identified my assailant as far as I know.

I entered a part of the room that had been set up with the morning attendees in a circle. I do not know who planned the circle, or who moderated it. I just walked over and sat in a chair in the circle while realizing that I still had no idea of what was in progress, what was in the letter, or that I was involved. I do know that I felt betrayed and stigmatized as members in the circle offered me their concerns for my well-being. I wondered whether this is what it feels like to be stripped of agency.

## Conclusion

A friend and colleague, Jane Caflisch, who brought the writings of Saidiya Hartman (1997) to my attention, wrote to me after hearing me present my thoughts on learning to think in the presence of endangerment based solely on the color of my skin. Jane reminded me that, in complex ways, my experience of objectification very much reflected "the ways in which empathy and identification can end up using another person as a metaphor, rather than relating to them as a full and separate subject in their own right." For me, resisting this objectification has been life-affirming and, more specifically, I feel as though learning to think psychoanalytically is a type of internality that improves my ability to survive.

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## Notes on contributor

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