



Invisible: A Mixt Asian Woman's Efforts to See and Be Seen in Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT

The multiracial experience is only minimally addressed in psychoanalytic literature. This paper makes use of both Dr. Crane's lived experience as a multiracial Asian American female and her encounters with psychoanalysis. Directed to the only psychoanalytic literature focused on non-white individuals, Dr. Crane found a strong and growing body addressing the experiences of both Black people in the United States and Black analysts at work. Thanks to ground prepared by pioneering Black analysts and intellectuals, multiracial clinicians and academics have opened up the psychoanalytic discourse to mixed-race voices.

Where am I?

Psychoanalysis is personal for me.

“Read Kim Leary's piece in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (2000).” “I think Dorothy Holmes would be a good one to read.” “Bev Greene is great in this regard.” Always about Black and white, which, of course, I understood to be of paramount importance and deeply appreciated—but where was Asian? How could I locate myself in the analytic literature? Eng and Han's “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” (2000) was earth-shattering for me and opened up my only racial pathway into psychoanalysis. Eng and Han's article became my *urtext*, the text I used to anchor every paper I wrote and presentation I gave for a psychoanalytic audience. Citations imbue legitimacy, but I had so very little. How could I cite a psychoanalytic literature in which I could not even find myself?

My brothers and I were born before 1967, before *Loving v. Virginia* struck down all remaining antimiscegenation laws in the United States, and in Delaware, a state that still had those laws on the books. We were children of an Asian immigrant mother and a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant father from New England. I identify as *hapa*, a Hawaiian term meaning “half” and originally referring to those who were mixed Hawaiian and *haole*, “foreigner” or “white person.” I also identify as “mixt,” a term I use to denote an intersectional approach to multiracial identity, identity that goes beyond “mixed race” or race alone (Donnella, 2016). Mixt can be inclusive of multicultural, multigenerational, multilingual, multiclass, and other both—and components of multiracial experience. Mixt, for me, is an identity term of pride, a name I have chosen for myself rather than one imposed on me by dominant majority folk. I am tired of being told “what” I am, and find that my mixt patients also bristle at being named by those who feel entitled to pronounce on their identities. Growing up, I would tell people, “in our house we have three generations and two cultures.”

Legitimacy is a recurring theme in my life. Specifically, *illegitimacy*. I am not “fully” Asian. I no longer want to be any part white. I am not a psychoanalyst, yet I am active in the Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology (SPPP) of the American Psychological Association (APA). Psychoanalytic psychology provides the words, complexity, and depth I find lacking in oftentimes stiff, statistically focused psychology research. Psychoanalysis provides the space to “say everything.”

Or does it?

Psychoanalysis is a white-centric, specifically western European discipline. If we use traditional psychoanalysis, up to and including its contemporary forms, how do we make space for folx and cultures that are not? How do we decenter psychoanalysis to make way for reality? Despite the United States being founded as a white supremacist nation that displaced the indigenous population and was built by slave labor, the reality is that now many “free” non-white people continue to struggle against systemic oppression. The subjective experience of non-white people is frequently that of being treated as less than human, perhaps as not suitable for white-centric treatments and privileges (Sheehi and Salvo Crane, 2020, in press). Where is the psychoanalytic literature that addresses the lived experiences of these individuals and their communities? How do we admit the harms and complicity with the systems of oppression that have been wrought by psychoanalysis without centering whiteness? How do we create an inclusive psychoanalysis that does not marginalize, harm, or destroy non-white, non-heteronormative, gender-nonconforming populations?

Am I here?

Psychoanalysis is nothing if not insular and self-referential. Only recently, despite analysts addressing the problem of racial invisibility and racism in psychoanalysis in the 1990s (e.g., Akhtar, 1995; Altman, 1995; Chodorow, 1995; Comas-Diaz and Greene, 1994; Frankenberg, 1993; Holmes, 1992; Leary, 1995, 1997; Young-Bruehl, 1998), has the conversation turned to positive conceptualizations of racial “others,” and moved beyond the Black and white binary. As Leary (1995) and Suchet (2004a), among others, point out, psychoanalysis, when addressing race at all, focused primarily on the racism of white analysts.

For nearly 10 years, the only culturally relevant article I could reference in my work with Asian and Asian American patients was that by Eng and Han. For me their article, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” was the first item in psychoanalytic literature where I could imagine placing myself, where I felt somewhat seen by psychoanalysis. Eng and Han provided a way into psychoanalysis that included me and other Asian Americans, allowing us to be agentic subjects rather than objects; fully fledged humans rather than fetishized others.

Pamela Hays’s ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2009) provided a useful framework for identifying cultural similarities, differences, and touch points, but it was not specifically psychoanalytic. Turning to Usha Tummala-Narra in conversation, mentoring, and literature,¹ I began to be able to imagine myself within psychoanalytic discourse. Through Usha, I was able to meet other non-white and Asian thinkers in psychoanalysis to expand my playground, so to speak, and to begin to develop more robust ways of thinking analytically about those who are neither white nor Black.

Being mentored and invited to join the discussion made such a huge difference to my feelings of inclusion. Listening to, reading, and talking with Usha helped me learn relationally, and not just cognitively, that I did not have to be constrained by traditionally white voices in psychoanalysis—no matter how loud they were. I learned that my voice, too, is valuable and that I had the right to enter into psychoanalytic spaces. After giving many presentations on mental health and Asian/Asian American/mixt folx, I also learned that nothing truly exists unless it can be cited. Here I learned that I had an obligation to write, despite the unbridled fear and agony it brings up in me. Since I am “only” a clinician and not an academic “proper,” as in abundantly populated with the words of others, writing is a particular struggle for me. My best and most powerful writing, according to my readers and editors, is evident when I am writing about my lived experiences, about myself. But how am I to overcome the internalized prohibitions against writing in first person in academic publications? Or the fears of being pathologized, and thereby dismissed, by a psychoanalytic audience? How many times must I expose

¹For more information, see Usha Tummala-Narra’s extensive body of work, including Tummala-Narra (2001), Tummala-Narra (2004), Tummala-Narra (2007), Tummala-Narra (2009), Tummala-Narra (2011), Tummala-Narra (2014), Tummala-Narra (2015), and Tummala-Narra (2016).

myself, make myself vulnerable to judgment, in order to protect my mixt patients by using myself as a case example? No wonder writing about mixt experience feels torturous.

Where was I?

My father was born in 1905, growing up in what became my childhood home in Connecticut, before indoor plumbing and heating were commonplace. My mother was a World War II war bride who, from the age of 16, supported her family in Manila by doing secretarial work for the U.S. Army. She survived the Japanese occupation of Manila and, in the process, witnessed horrific things about which she refused to talk. I was a child during the Vietnam War, aware only of older boys' terror of the draft, tension around my cousin's multiple deployments, and living in a pro-war household where antiwar agitation was attributed to "dirty hippies." I was taught that "the bomb," that is, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States in order to "end" World War II, was not only justified but "the only thing that would have stopped [the Japanese]." My mother repeatedly said to us: "Just be glad you'll never know what it's like to have war in your own backyard." After all, she did; she was traumatized.

Sometimes I am not here

When my brothers and I were children, we would witness our mother's dissociative episodes but did not know what to call them. "Mom, Mom—look at me! Mom, pay attention! Mom!" Her eyes would unfocus and we intuitively knew she was far away, though we did not have the words for what this meant. My brothers would hold her face in their hands. "Mom, look at me!" was another way of saying, "Mom, where are you? I need you to hear me. Come back." Dissociation can be a learned behavior and, unconsciously, we all learned it. Unconsciously and involuntarily, we all make use of it. Is it a curse or a blessing?

My mother "learned" to dissociate to survive the many traumas she experienced: invasion, enslavement, deaths of family members and neighbors, constant terror of Japanese soldiers—and "war things" she will not talk about; almost dying on a war brides ship; escaping servitude and sexual advances from "helpful" service acquaintances when she landed—alone—in the United States; making her way from California to the East Coast—alone—to settle and make a home for herself; racism and violence from the society around her and from her husband in our own home.

What have I dissociated?

Sometimes I forget that I am not white. After all, I did not exist in any books or lessons from first grade through graduate schools. I did not exist in psychoanalytic literature. I am both invisible and seemingly hideous to behold—at least judging by reactions from dominant majority folk. "Oh, we didn't think you were anything," responded a white colleague when I asked how I was read racially and ethnically by our cohort. However, seeing the sneer on the face of my sixth-grade English teacher as he pointedly and repeatedly mispronounced my name for an entire school year, I knew he was seeing something—me—that disgusted him.

Performing whiteness is required to approximate "success" in U.S. society (Ahmed, 2007). As I child, I learned to capitulate to white power, and now, looking back, I understand that I learned, intuitively, that school and church are designed to recapitulate the systems of oppression on which the United States was built (Tallbear, 2014). I learned to study and copy dominant majority customs, language, attitudes, and beliefs. I learned, for safety's sake, to become as white as possible. Sadly, I sometimes even *thought* I was white. Whiteness is the template, the goal, the ideal. Yet it is also required that non-white folk know their places *below* whiteness and dare not assume equality. I have experienced this lesson repeatedly, especially when entering spaces with and without my partner, my "white bodyguard." Ignored and overlooked as I seek service in a shop, I stand in shock as a shopkeeper or salesperson graciously welcomes my partner and only then addresses me. I feel stupid for forgetting that this can happen. But still I forget, perhaps by design.

Just a few weeks ago I, startled, said to a friend, “I am in an interracial relationship!” I have been married to a white man for more than 30 years and talk about cross-racial difficulties openly. But somehow the words “interracial relationship” hold a different and powerful valence. How and why had I dissociated this clearly evident fact?

I dissociate to protect myself from trauma, from unbearable terror. Dissociation and compartmentalization have become so automatic that I am only recently learning how un-integrated my experiences and memories have been. Dissociation makes writing extremely difficult as I struggle to knit together the disparate parts of myself. Like my mother, at times I disappear from myself, automatically and involuntarily.

I was here

Recently a person of color asked, “Do you remember when you learned you weren’t white?” He was asking us, a group of people of color, and it blew my mind. A vivid image flew into my mind and I recalled exactly where I was and what was going on. I was standing in line to go to the cafeteria for lunch. Carrying my Fireball XL-5 lunchbox, I was practically shivering with excitement at being in school, finally, in the first grade. Our school district had no public kindergarten at the time. All I ever wanted to do, before I was able to, was read and write. Reading was and remains my first true love and my great escape. I remember my Mom coming up to me in the hallway of Mitchell Elementary School, something she never did again, and slipping a quarter into my dress pocket “for snack.” Neither one of us knew that first graders were not allowed to purchase snacks, but I will remember that act of love for the rest of my life.

Later that day, or possibly that week, when all of the elementary school students were outdoors for recess, someone called me Chinese. That was when I knew I was not white. That was when I knew that I did not fit in.

Recently I shared that story about “When did you learn that you weren’t white?” with a white friend. “Oh,” they responded, “because they saw your mother.” I was dumbfounded. I always believed that it was solely because of the way I looked that I was called Chinese. It never occurred to me, despite the vivid memory of my mother coming to me in the lunch line, rather than when, where, and by whom, exactly, it was that I was called Chinese. Hearing how a white person interpreted that scene, my lunch-line memory, shifted my understanding entirely. Of course, my mother, who is fully Filipina/Chinese/Spanish, appeared “Chinese” to sheltered white people in Connecticut. Of course, by association, I appeared “Chinese” to white people. Putting all the pieces together, I now realize that it is a both/and situation: I look not-white, possibly Asian, away from my mother. I look Asian—to white people—when I am with my mother. My mother is my Asian-ness. My mother holds the Filipino cultural knowledge I do not have but deeply crave.

Was I even there?

Experiencing racism—racist attacks, racial microaggressions, racist aggression—is a strange experience. As a child, I did not even have a name for it. Now I think of it as “involuntary othering,” being put in my place by dominant majority people, in the United States, specifically *white* people. “You are not *us*,” is the message. “You are *less than*.” “You do not belong.” “Go away.” “You are different and I/we will harm you because of that.” I feel like I am an infection to be eradicated. Racism, racial aggression, and racial attacks are the antibiotic-equivalents designed to eradicate the infection of un-white people like me.

I had to protect myself from the racial aggression. I repeatedly experienced white people doing or saying things to remind me that I am decidedly and unequivocally not white. I learned to adopt a compliant and obedient position, to capitulate humbly—sometimes obsequiously—to white people, and to powerful white men especially.

In my experience, white people responded positively to my servility, to my words and actions that indicated their position of superiority over me. When I acknowledged their superiority, they tended

not to hurt me, or to hurt me less. Crenshaw (1989) quite accurately points out that race is also gendered, that women of color experience a particular kind of misogyny informed by their non-whiteness. To keep my body safe, then, I performed servility so frequently that it became automatic, an unconscious response to white power. Nowadays, given the language and community I have to express my otherness, I occasionally am able to perform servility rather than to embody it. I have a better awareness of when I am doing it, but sometimes only in the midst of or after the fact. My habit is so deeply ingrained and practiced that it is a part of me. I am trying to expel it, but it takes vigilance and effort.

It has taken more than 60 years to undo the many years of habit and conditioning. But now I am becoming racism-resistant, oppression-resistant, colonization-resistant. Although psychoanalysis characterizes resistance as pathological, something to overcome in order to achieve therapeutic growth, liberatory psychology views resistance as life-affirming and necessary to survival (Sheehi, personal communication, 2020). Sheehi describes how resistance, for psychologists, includes resisting pathologizing the ways in which marginalized people cope with systemic oppressions in specific times and places. In other words, considering trauma and marginalized populations requires locating them socioculturally, historically, and politically. Resisting Eurocentric conceptualizations of mental illness, including the ways in which marginalized people resist colonial oppression, “clinicians should be explicit in their challenging of oppressive systems and structures, to include the field in which we practice and the theories and techniques we use” (Sheehi and Salvo Crane, 2020, in press).

I was not supposed to be here

As a psychology graduate student, I felt powerfully drawn to psychoanalysis. The concepts of unconscious defenses, such as repression, denial, projection, and sublimation, felt logical and commonsense to me. The use of countertransference felt particularly true to me as I realized that I had been using a version of it for years to decode the behaviors and expectations of the white people around me. Attending to all of my senses, including sensations that felt alien to me, had become habitual in order to find safety, so using countertransference in my clinical work felt completely natural. I was introduced to the annual meetings of the SPPP of APA and found my intellectual feeding in the papers, presentations, and discussions led by psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychologists. I began to feel included in the discussions and as if I could find a nourishing home in the psychoanalytic community. I believed that there was space for my mixt body, mind, and words.

And yet, even in these spaces, odd “things” happen that speak to the unconscious embedded structures. Some remain indelible in memory. For example, I was asked to sub in for a representative who was unable to attend the APA Council of Representatives meeting in Washington, DC, February 18–21, 2016. I readily agreed, having felt part of a multiyear struggle to address the abuses of power that led to psychologists participating in torture at illegal black sites. I also felt like my voice mattered in the company of indigenous and “ethnic minority” female psychologists, the first to welcome me into APA Council. When an indigenous psychologist asked for support in pushing back against a blatantly racist report scheduled to be presented in the Council, of course I agreed. I will never forget the experience of standing with other psychologists of color, mostly my sisters but also some of my brothers, to address the largely white Council and leadership in resistance to white supremacy within our organization. We spoke passionately and with tears streaming down some of our faces. I will never forget standing up to a white man, a psychoanalyst of some standing, who sought to speak for us. I felt, powerfully in my body, what I now know the slogan “No White Saviors” really means. We who spoke risked—and later many of us received—targeted attacks by white representatives who were offended by and defensive about our statements.

I, along with several of my sisters of color, were indeed targeted and attacked verbally, primarily by white men. I remember escaping one such attack to find myself alone, all other psychologists having gone to lunch. I remember sobbing in a corner of the hall, terrified and devastated to be

attacked, yet again, for stating my right to humanity. I will never forget that it was a young Black woman, an APA staff representative, who comforted me and gave me a quiet place to rest until I was ready to reenter the fray.

Given the drama of the events, I was shocked to learn that not one of my white, psychoanalytic fellow representatives had reported the incidents to our leadership. A couple of them had offered condolences, but no one spoke up. Later I heard an analyst complain that the indigenous psychologist who led the protest “hijacked the [Council] meeting—she should not have done that.”

“Hijacked?” As though Dr. Melinda Garcia did not have the right to speak, the right to disrupt, even as certain male representatives interrupted, disrupted, talked over, and bullied the Council body in meeting after meeting. As though a study report containing racist comments and attitudes, solicited by APA leadership, should not have been addressed. As though members of color should remain silent and invisible while the communities they represent are harmed by the policies of psychology’s governing body? As a Black woman representative stated, “All of us in this room possess doctorates in psychology. We should know better. We should do better.” For shame. As though we who understand the unconscious do not also understand the code for “hijacked” when it comes to brown and black bodies.

Lynne Layton writes about “normative unconscious processes” that both drive and serve as the basis for dominant majority norms. According to Layton (2002), these processes enforce and reinforce “dominant identity categories, by the racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia in which these categories are forged” (p. 203). In other words, we are for the most part unwilling—though some are willing—prisoners of these unconscious processes and must force ourselves to be vigilant and conscious in order to battle the splits of the -isms that create, among other things, significant power imbalances. In the Council uprising and in the silence that met my pain and fear were evident both an awareness of the unconscious splits and pushback against them, and a not-knowing that led to silence among my psychoanalytic colleagues. In joining with my fellow psychologists of color, I felt “recognized and acknowledged as a subject who has his/her own separate thoughts, feelings, wishes, etc.” (Layton, 2002). In experiencing the silence and silencing from psychoanalytic colleagues, I once again experienced myself as an object lacking in agency.

I am here

I stayed with psychoanalysis because I could not imagine another way to think, to conceptualize cases, to talk about my clinical work. I felt trapped by a discipline that naturally and in many ways mirrored the way I think, but did not seem to have room for me in the literature. Yet by presenting papers on mixt identity and on working clinically with mixt folx, I began seeing and meeting more mixt folx at annual meetings. “I see you” is always part of my message when addressing an audience that includes multiracial folx. Mutual recognition provides a sense of support and the hope of being deeply understood. Knowing that we all yearn for community, I seek out mixt attendees at these conferences. I introduce them to other mixt members so that they know their voices—all of our mixt voices—are important and have something to say to and for psychoanalysis.

In this vein, I remember sitting in 2017 with two mixt colleagues to hear Alexandra Jamali’s paper on queering race (Jamali and Mendez, 2019). Brilliantly conceptualizing the complexities of mixed-race existence, Jamali uses queer theory to describe the fluidity of mixt identity. Jaws on the floor, my mixt friends and I vowed to work together to produce the presentations and literature that would introduce the psychoanalytic world to mixt lives. We make use of both personal experience and case material to illustrate how mixt identity and experience are not the same as white or Black identity and experience. We join in dialogue and writing to create a psychoanalysis for us. Who better to provide the citations for the psychoanalytic study of and clinical work with mixt folx?

Yet presenting and writing about mixt, multiracial, chicana/o, hapa, mestiza/o, and other mixed-race identities is not without its own dangers. We reveal ourselves as angry people of color, angry mixed people of color, pushing the boundaries of psychoanalytic thought to consider and include us,

not accepting conceptualizations and judgments from white—or other monoracial—psychoanalysts. We address intrafamilial racism, white passing, invisibility, being categorized by non-mixt folx, being denied our ability to name our identities for ourselves, absence of community, identifications and disidentifications with parents and extended family—and these topics are only tips of icebergs. In our multiplicities, we find common ground in mutual recognition and in our efforts to translate our lived experiences into psychoanalytic awareness and theory.

I can be here

As a hapa friend recently told me, “No one writes alone.” I now know that not only must I not write alone, I need not think alone. Reading Fanon (1963, 1967), Freire (1972), and my contemporary friend and sister Sheehi (2019), I am learning the language of colonization within psychoanalysis and the world. I can recognize that my very body, part white, is colonized. My body is evidence that a white man used his power to reach into the global south and lay claim to a brown woman. I am a result that is often seen by dominant majority folx as confusing, ambiguous, or racially wrong. I can recognize that my education, that which I value so deeply, has been primarily used as a tool for colonial socialization. I learned at age 50 that antimiscegenation laws and attitudes were the reasons that my brothers and I got dirty looks in church, and I wondered how it was that I never knew about this in childhood, when it would have explained so much. I wondered what else had been whitewashed from my education to allow me to believe that I somehow benefited from and thus should support U.S. laws and policies.

I can recognize that I do not have to capitulate to the types of learning and knowledge that eviscerate people and communities of color. I have access to literature and communities that support mixt folx and can share these resources with my patients. My patients study the bookshelf in my office and feel free to ask about multiracial studies, queer theory, and antiracism. I am able to support my patients in pursuing indigenous and ancestral forms of healing, knowing that talk therapy is not the only modality for relieving suffering. I can recognize that by using myself in the treatment room, rather than refusing to “gratify the wish” of my patients who ask direct questions about my experiences as a mixt person, I can help them know themselves and their circumstances in this country on the way to empowering them.

Because my very appearance gives lie to the blank screen concept, I am free to reject the all-powerful stance of the analyst and address intersections of identity and experience with my patients. My mixt patients and I literally see each other as mixt, and that recognition alone can bring great relief and a sense of no longer being alone. I recognize that I can use myself as a tool of resistance by addressing and processing the ways in which we/they have been harmed by U.S. systems of oppression. I can validate their experiences of racism and societal fear. I recognize that my patients of color, my Asian and Asian American patients of color, my hapa patients, and I share experiences of racism and invisibility that chip away at our senses of self, legitimacy, and abilities to not only exist, but to thrive in U.S. society. My mixt patients receive acknowledgment that we—they and I—are in a shared experience of not being located within the racial construct of the United States (Mary Kim Brewster, personal communication, 2020). We share particular experiences, such as lack of community, lack of multiracial role models, lack of understanding from monoracial parents, lack of reference group, and intrafamilial racism, that white folx and white practitioners may never be aware of, much less understand. I recognize that dedicating myself to resisting racism and oppression is not countertherapeutic or out of place in my treatment room. I recognize that empowering my patients of color and joining with them in the struggle does not inevitably destroy the treatment, nor is it “not psychoanalysis.”

I will be here

My mother is 91 years old and has dementia. As my youngest child has said, “When Lola (Filipino for “grandmother”) dies, our Asian connection will be gone.” I feel it, too. My mother legitimizes my Filipina-ness, despite my lack of language, culinary knowledge, and most cultural

knowledge. Adrift in a white world, I need to hold onto the not-white in me. Rejected by white society, I strive to be as Asian as possible, knowing that my very ability to do so was blocked by white people.

I want a psychoanalysis that helps me make sense of this dilemma and to forge a way to wholeness, despite the splits inside of me. As relational psychoanalysis states, we exist only in relation to one another. For so long the normative subject against which all U. S. residents-objects have been compared is the white individual. Decentering whiteness in psychoanalysis requires that white individuals and their psychologies are not the norm, not the control case in identity development studies. We mixt folk must be our own normative, given the infinite possibilities for multiracial existence. Separated from each other, sometimes separated from awareness of each other, we mixt have no coherent community. As a consequence, in the absence of community, I feel the need for community within, by which I mean the ability to validate and legitimize myself, to stop feeling less-than in a world that confronts me daily and violently with the message that I am. I want this for myself, my patients, and all of my othered comrades.

We are not less-than and we do deserve to exist and to take up space in this country, while also being mindful of those—namely, indigenous folks—whom we inadvertently might displace if we “take up space” in allegiance with the majority. We deserve to flourish. My sense of wholeness helps others. I have a duty to myself and others to continue to strive to make my voice heard. We deserve a psychoanalysis that recognizes, supports, and serves us.

Notes on contributor

Dr. *Leilani Salvo Crane* is a psychologist in private practice in Manhattan and honors the Lenape land on which she stands. Dr. Crane focuses her practice on serving primarily Asian, Asian American, and mixed-race individuals from a liberatory psychology stance that is psychoanalytically informed. She also has expertise in treating individuals struggling with eating disorders and varieties of traumas, including sociocultural trauma.

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