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Implications of Projection for
Dark-Skinned Puertorriqueños**

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The Psychogenesis of Color Based Racism: Implications of Projection for Dark-Skinned Puerторriqueños

A cursory review of the sociological literature affirms a critical bias in the analysis of racism (Longres and Seltzer, 1994; Garcia and Swenson, 1992). Not only are Anglo-Americans consistently regarded as perpetrators but African-American minorities are consistently regarded as victims. Nonetheless, other groups suffer similar victimization (Banerjee, 1985; Bagley and Young, 1988; Lancaster, 1991). In fact, "minority" is a political term that includes an ever-expanding assortment of races and ethnic groups differentiated from Anglo-Americans by skin color. This view of "minority" does not take account of the historical miscegenation among an increasingly indistinct Puerto Rican population. This paper will attempt to move the dialogue addressing racism from discussions of "race" to discussions of skin color.

Skin color is a trait germane to the experience of racism by all minorities (Hall, 1992). However, they are simultaneously victims and perpetrators. As perpetrators, their racism is contingent upon a light skin ideal. Puerto Rican multiracialism, brought about by miscegenation, indicates that Puerto Rico never was a racially homogeneous society. The discussion of skin color preference among minorities does not negate the pervasiveness of Anglo racism, but allows an amplified analysis to include the role played by "victims." Ultimately it will benefit Puerto Ricans by contributing to the knowledge required for cooperation among such a phenotypically diverse group of people.

Racism, according to academe, is regarded as an extension of white supremacy (Hopkins, 1980). Scholars of the social sciences study in great detail its implications, which result in various forms of discrimination. They have long traced the origins of drug addiction, hypertension, stress, family disjuncture, and other societal ills to the existence of racism (Beckett, 1983; Codina and Montalvo, 1992; Boyle, 1970). Fresh perspectives have not been forthcoming. This paper will attempt to add insight by ignoring, for the moment, the supremacy model and addressing the role played by Puerto Ricans themselves in sustaining the existence of racism among the island population.

Critics of the skin color preference phenomenon among minorities, contend that Puerto Ricans do not exhibit prejudice and that color-based racism is not an issue (Holtzman, 1973). Most are either uninformed or perhaps harbor some personal agenda that limits their perception of reality (Atkins, 1992). The fact that color remains an issue among people of color is now a matter of judicial record. As demonstrated in *Walker vs. the IRS 742 F. Supp.* (N. D. Ga. 1990), Tracey Walker, the plaintiff, alleged that her employment supervisor discriminated against her on the basis of skin color (Hiskey, 1990). The plaintiff is light-skinned, whereas the defendant, belonging to the same ethnic group, is dark-skinned. This case focused attention upon an issue that seldom reaches public discussion.

W.E.B. DuBois asserted more than 60 years ago that the American dilemma is the dilemma of the color line (cf. Yellin, 1973). That assertion is no less true today. But as Stember (1976) notes, the issue of racism has never been resolved, merely construed as an inappropriate topic of polite conversation. As Hall (1992; Arce, Murgia and Frisbie, 1987) notes, the issue among Puerto Ricans is even less amenable to elimination. After all, as victims it would hardly serve the efforts of equality for Puerto Ricans to acknowledge some role in the perpetration of racism among themselves. Although the issue has been addressed to a limited extent by some Ethnic Studies scholars, for the most part it has been all but ignored by the Hispanic academe (Codina and Montalvo, 1992). Its existence is no less stressful. For example, in Nicaragua, color-based racism has an influence upon the manner in which common folk interact. *Mestizos* (the racially mixed light-skinned majority) refer to the darker-skinned *Costenos* (persons of African descent) in derogatory terms (Lancaster, 1991). In Cuba, skin color has been an issue historically despite the attempts of Castro's Revolution to eliminate it. There, status is still based upon gradations of color, and this affects all aspects of Cuban life, covertly and overtly (Canizares, 1990; Cubillos, 1988). Color-based racism continues among those who migrate to the U.S.

The most zealous proponents of racism in the Americas profess that light-skinned Anglo-Saxon/Teutonic people are superior to the dark-skinned as a matter of biological fact (Welsing, 1970). They postulate that light-skinned Europeans have been uniquely endowed with the capacities necessary to bring about civilization. Their so-called “advancing civilization” theory was a cultural form of projection, devoted to rationalizing the right of Anglos to embark upon a mission aimed at dominating dark-skinned peoples (Pinderhughes 1982; Daly, Jennings, and Leashore, 1995). By way of conquest, slavery and/or colonization, Europeans eventually influenced every sovereignty of the known world. In the wake of this mission to “civilize” non-Europeans (including Puerto Ricans), psychological justification necessitated a universal belief in the potency of skin color to elevate or taint (Hyde, 1995).

In a sociological context, racism, according to Banton (cf. Kitano, 1985), refers to the efforts of a dominant group to exclude a dominated group from sharing in the material and symbolic rewards of society. It differs from other forms of exclusion in that qualification is based upon skin color and other observable physiological traits. Such traits are taken to suggest the inherent superiority of dominant groups, which is then rationalized as the natural order of the biological universe (Minor and McGauley, 1988).

Racism in some form is a phenomenon as old as civilization itself. However, in a historical context, its analysis on the basis of skin color is relatively recent (Montalvo, 1987). Among Puerto Ricans skin color prejudice is the direct result of Anglo domination. Following their colonization of Puerto Rico, Anglos evolved a skin color hierarchy. The uppermost in status became those Puerto Ricans whose color approximates that of the dominant light-skinned colonizers (Welsing, 1970). Dark-skinned Puerto Ricans — as well as light-skinned — have been subjected to a value system that is in many ways not only alien but pathological. For a population as diverse and heterogeneous as that of the island, the effort to assimilate all without recognition of the existence of skin color based racism could prove counter to cultural health. It will impair the ability of a segment of the Puerto Rican population to value themselves, creating a false dichotomy.

Racism on the basis of skin color is a tenacious social problem in Puerto Rico (Hernton, 1965; Kovel, 1984; Rodriguez, 1990; Rodriguez, 1991). At the root

of its psychoanalytical crux are dark-skinned Puerto Ricans (Stember, 1976). In an age of political activism and the rhetoric of island unity, Hispanic scholars have paid little attention to skin color prejudice, perhaps due to its divisive potential. To rank skin color based racism as anything less than a priority could result in dire consequences for the entire Hispanic population. This racism provides a conduit for continued social, economic, and political oppression, perpetuated on the basis of skin color at home and abroad. While investigating the psychogenesis may have controversial implications, for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans it is critical. The careful analysis by scholars of this issue is what distinguishes science from quackery (Steiner, 1987; Aro, 1995; Morris, 1992).

In the works of Freud, there are few references to the social and psychological potency of skin color (Gould, 1984). During his era, Puerto Ricans were discriminated against with minimal consequence. Freud’s lack of attention to this psychoanalytically rich phenomenon may have been a reflection of his own dirt fantasies, resulting in the view that the personal tragedies of dark-skinned people were simply irrelevant to mainstream scholarship (Rojek, 1986). Heretofore, color-based racism has been covertly lodged firmly in the island subconscious. But the subconscious fantasies from which projections are fashioned may, in effect, be more potent than reality itself. Such fantasies are a form of purification reflected in Western culture’s obsession with cleanliness. This obsession was likely unknown among primitives (Bullough, 1988). Dirt in the form of excrement is externalized to the outside world and projected onto dark-skinned peoples, who must attempt to thrive in spite of its implications. The direction of psychological projection must be from the body to the outside world. All things viewed as dirty or disgusting represent those internal aspects of the body and its waste products. This provides the basis for the psychologically justifiable subjection of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans to various forms of color-based racism by their own people (Gaines and Reed, 1995; Relethford, Stern, Gaskill and Hazuda, 1983).

The origin of civilization evolved logically from the distinction between purity and impurity (Wacker, 1995). It was followed by the psychological projection of dirt onto dark skin. As a result of this “civilizing” experience, the psyche was predisposed to categorize humanity into the valued and devalued (Thomas and Wolfensberger, 1982). It is a

primal dichotomy manifested in the psychodynamics of color-based racism. By projecting dirt fantasies onto dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, racism by light-skinned Puerto Ricans could be sustained with a minimum of psychological consequence, because dark-skinned Puerto Ricans had become a devalued component of the island population. The aftermath has brought about a national tolerance for poverty, job discrimination, crime, and other preventable social problems in communities inhabited by dark-skinned islanders (Gilbert, 1991).

The earliest distinctions between dirt and purity have been enabled by civilization (Weiner, 1995). Civilization is reinforced by culture and the influence of significant others. In Puerto Rico such distinctions were carried to the extreme as a result of Anglo domination, and projected onto the dark-skinned in a way that defied logic (Disch and Schwartz, 1970). The association by Puerto Ricans of dark skin with dirt also brought about sexual overtones, given the proximity of genitalia to excrement. This intensified a libido-driven conflict reflected in the various forms of neurosis characteristic of the island as a whole (Capponi, 1993).

In a psychoanalytical context, the racist associates dark skin with excretion (Bullough, 1988). Originally experienced as pleasurable, feces excretion begins earlier in life than does maturation of the libido. As a result, it may be subject to a more complicated conflict process over extended periods of repression. Eventually children come to abhor the experience. The association of feces with dirt and unpleasant odors is the result of that abhorrence, learned from significant others and reinforced by culture (Lueptow, 1980).

The senses of touch, smell, taste, and, most importantly, sight allow for the generalization of feces abhorrence onto human groups. It culminates in the concept of dirt (Bullough, 1988). Its dark color, conveyed by the sense of sight, allows for projections onto Puerto Ricans and other dark-skinned peoples. The same Puerto Ricans are then cast as the physiological embodiment of psychic filth and inevitably devalued (Clark and Clark, 1940).

The concept of dirt is a major factor in the psychogenesis of color-based racism. A desire to touch, taste and smell is normal for both child and adult. In an effort to become "civilized" the individual contributes to racism by learning to be the normal expect-

tations of society (Roberts, Boldt, and Guest, 1990). This produces inner-conflict and compares in intensity to the Oedipus and Electra complex experienced by youth on the verge of sexuality.

Dirt projections among the island's population reinforce the most potent forms of color-based racism. In Puerto Rico it is potent, because it enables discrimination to occur with minimal psychological consequence (Crowley and Derezotes, 1994). Akin to the distinction between dirt and purity, it also reinforces the stratifications of class in Puerto Rican society. The dominant group makes of the dominated something devalued. In Indian society the devalued are referred to as "untouchables." Among the "untouchables" are more than a few who are dark-skinned (Hall, 1994). Such classification of people based on psychological projections of impurity is civilization's method of rationalizing domination of some groups by others.

As Anglo domination requires, the dark skin of Puerto Ricans in North America necessitates their status as "minorities" (Kitano, 1985). As their most salient feature is skin color, this may have an effect upon every phase of their lives including self concept (Vontress, 1970; Sciara, 1983). It is a "master status" which distinguishes the island's upper class from the lower class. So potent is this "master status" that it is frequently grounds for social discord between persons of light and dark skin color belonging to the same ethnic group (Hiskey, 1990). The degree of social conflict is an indication that, for dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, life has been particularly stressful given the psychologically conflicting implications of their skin (Vargus-Willis and Cervantes, 1987). That is, they have internalized much of Anglo culture as well as Puerto Rican culture, which is not Eurocentric (Wagenheim and de Wagenheim, 1973). Their willingness to idealize light skin reflects an effort, not to become Anglo, but to improve their quality of life and live the upper class dream. In so doing, Puerto Ricans develop a disdain for dark skin because the disdain is a by-product of domination. It is regarded by the various island institutions as an obstacle that might otherwise afford citizens the opportunities necessary to succeed. In order to reduce such stress some Puerto Ricans have opted in various ways to compensate for their color (Seda-Bonilla, 1972). Furthermore, since high status closely correlates with having a skin color approximate to the Anglo population, light skin has emerged as a critical ideal (Reuter, 1969).

The color-based racism of light-skinned Puerto Ricans did not occur without personal consequence; their psyches were not totally unaffected. The effects weren't, however, dealt with in a manner that would minimize repression. Thus, "upper class civilized island society" repressed their guilt by stereotyping those having dark skin as being of less value. By denigrating dark skin; the inhumane treatment of dark-skinned Puerto Ricans became irrelevant, accommodating a view of them as dirt (Disch and Schwartz, 1970). This served "civilized society" in the effort to cleanse its psyche of the injustices directed at their dark-skinned counterparts. The church, no doubt the only institution that could have combated this view — enabled it instead, by ignoring the fact of its existence.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of color-based racism is referred to as "brown racism." According to Washington (1990), brown racism is perpetrated by lighter-skinned Hispanics against darker-skinned Hispanics of African descent. It is considered a variation of Anglo racism that probably came about as a result of domination. While Puerto Ricans are not racist in the definitive, as members of a dominated population their values and styles of interaction reflect and reinforce its existence.

The psychoanalytical data on dark-skinned Puerto Ricans and their reaction to discrimination by a light-skinned upper class is limited. Nevertheless it would appear that dark skin is significant to the perpetration of color-based racism (Hall, 1995). Just how much can be attributed to dirt fantasies is debatable, but that some role is played is without question. Because it is learned, it is also avoidable. The light-skinned Puerto Rican child probably has no feeling against dark-skinned Puerto Ricans initially. He must be encouraged by adults (Staub, 1988). His reaction is reflected in the common explanations for dark skin being the result of drinking black coffee. This is a primal and innocent rationale recapitulated in its naïveté among those who have a less hostile response.

As one story goes, the Creator was "baking" the first man. He fell asleep over the first batch causing them to burn — African. Out of anxiety he removed the second batch too early — European. On the last try the Creator made the perfect red-brown batch who became Native-Americans (Yellow Bird, 1995). While containing a substantial degree of ethnocentrism, this Native-American folk tale is devoid of derogatory projections of dirt onto dark skin.

In order for Hispanic scholars to make a contribution to the effort to value dark skin all must be better informed (Franklin, 1986). The projection of dirt fantasies is a Eurocentric phenomenon deeply rooted in the island psyche. It must be viewed not as a Euro-American problem, but as a Puerto Rican problem, requiring the efforts of light and dark-skinned Puerto Ricans in the course of its resolution. This is critical for a multiracial nation. The predominant sociological analysis of racism should be accompanied by understanding the psychological underpinnings. Only by being informed of racism's psychoanalytical basis can projections onto dark skin be better understood in the proper context.

The education of Hispanic students will play a critical role in how dark-skinned Puerto Ricans are viewed (Garcia and Swensen, 1992). As a content requirement, the psychogenesis of color-based racism, if included in college course work, can begin their process of becoming better informed (Ifill, 1989). Classroom discussions will provide students with clues of how to combat it in their family and in society (Sciara, 1983). Their ability to identify the cultural nuances of such a delicate topic will enable their efforts in relating to a diversity of skin color populations (Herrera, 1986).

In conclusion, if the genesis of color-based racism is a psychological projection onto dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, the task is clear. As a group Puerto Ricans must define for themselves, irrespective of Anglo ideals, the implications of skin color. In the interests of psychoanalytic health, perceptions of island society must then reflect that self definition. Open discussions involving race issues will allow for honest exchanges between the light and dark-skinned factions of the population. The outcome will afford concerned parties an opportunity to become more enlightened about racism via its psychodynamic genesis.

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