

---

# PSYCHOANALYSIS, COLONIALISM, AND MODERNITY: REFLECTIONS ON BRICKMAN'S *ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS IN THE MIND*

---

## ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS IN THE MIND: RACE AND PRIMITIVITY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

By Celia Brickman

New York: Columbia University Press, 2003  
Pp. 296. Cloth, \$66.00, ISBN 0-231-12582-8;  
paper, \$27.50, ISBN 0-231-12583-6.

---

Reviewer: Diane Jonte-Pace

Santa Clara University  
Santa Clara, CA 95053

In *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind: Race and Primitivity in Psychoanalysis* Celia Brickman has put together in a new way the pieces of the often contradictory puzzle that we know as psychoanalysis. I have sometimes argued, struggling with this puzzle, that there are many Freuds and that some of Freud's statements are simply less central than others (2003). I have spoken of Freud's masterplots and countertheses to differentiate oppositional and contradictory threads in his work (2001a). My students have sometimes referred to some of the more problematic texts as "Freud on a bad day." But Brickman has made sense of it all. Freud's good days and bad days are all part of one coherent paradigm in which the trope of the primitive plays a central and troubling role. This book, in my view, will change the way we read Freud. I would like to outline Brickman's argument, raising two questions about the implications of her argument for how we read Freud.

Brickman observes that although anthropologists have long abandoned the notion of the primitive, psychoanalysts continue to use the term: the primitive functions as a sign of psychological regression. Methodologically, Brickman's argument is deceptively simple: she has applied a postcolonial critique to psychoanalysis—particularly to this notion of primitivity. This strategy leads to four conclusions:

1. The psychoanalytic notion of the primitive as developmentally early communicates a temporal mapping of psychological difference that is colonialist, racist, and embedded in evolutionary assumptions that imply savagery and a lack of civilization.
2. This colonialist subtext shapes psychoanalytic understandings of health/pathology, time/history, femininity/masculinity, religion/science, Judaism/Christianity, and dark skin/light skin as racial categories.
3. In the psychoanalytic understanding of the feminine and religion, both are evolutionarily "primitive" and both involve a position of submissive "enthrallment" to authority, a psychology and ideology that, in Freud's view, should be overcome.
4. Within Freud's modernist temporal framework, the civilized and secular (scientific) future overcomes the primitive religious past. Modern subjectivity requires, psychoanalytically speaking, a repudiation of the past, the primitive, the religious, and, in some sense, the feminine.

A passage from the book captures this complex thesis well. According to psychoanalysis, Brickman states,

[T]he abjected past from which the psychoanalytic subject is believed to have emerged includes the maternal (infantile) past, the evolutionary (racial) past of humankind, the social (racial/ethnic group structure) past, and the cultural (religio-symbolic) past. Domination and subordination were the political relations of primitivity; enthrallment was the psychology of primitivity; religion was the ideology of primitivity; disgust and repugnance were the emotional affects provoked by primitivity; and non-white was the skin color of primitivity. (171)

Brickman is not the first to point out the presence in Freud's work of the social Darwinist paradigm, the thesis that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" on a cultural level. Others have shown how this paradigm shapes *Totem and Taboo* and other early works. But she is the first to show how deeply implicated this evolutionary framework is—how it is a metanarrative for all of psychoanalysis, clinical as well as theoretical, cultural as well as metapsychological—and how significant it is for uncovering a troublingly racist, colonialist subtext within psychoanalysis.

The four conclusions of Brickman's argument, it is important to note, do not lead her to abandon psychoanalysis as clinical practice. Rather, she finds opportunities for disengagement from the colonialist legacy in current Anglo-American revisions of psychoanalysis. The book thus mounts not only a critical project—exposing the colonialist subtext in psychoanalysis—but also a constructive project—reclaiming a revisionist form of psychoanalytic practice.

---

### I

---

Although I agree with much of the argument, I want to raise one question about the critical project and one about the constructive project. First, could one argue, to phrase it simply, that Freud can be seen as a proto-postcolonialist thinker, rather than a racist thinker trapped in a colonialist ideology? Or, to rephrase the question, could one argue that the traces of colonialist ideology in Freud's work can be read as an analysis of racist discourse rather than as evidence of a straightforward reproduction of racist discourse? To unpack this question I would like to apply an approach I have found useful in understanding a related body of literature—the complex discourse on psychoanalysis and feminism.

I have argued (2001b) that the feminist literature on psychoanalysis and feminism can be categorized into three approaches: critical, inclusive, and analytic. The first group of theorists, the feminist critics, have challenged psychoanalysis for its androcentrism, dismissing Freud for constructing a virtually "womanless" theory, for assuming masculine normativity, and for portraying

women as physically, morally, and intellectually deficient. According to this view, Freud creates or perpetuates misogynist ideologies.

The second group, the feminist inclusivists, seek psychological theories that incorporate and attend to women's knowledge and experience. These theorists have often turned away from Freud and toward the alternative approaches developed by object relations theorists and self-psychologists. This vein of psychoanalytic feminism frequently explores the maternal infant bond in the earliest "pre-oedipal" months of life as part of the project of developing a more inclusive approach to the psychology of gender and culture.

The third group, the feminist analysts, have initiated a different enterprise. Developing a partnership between psychoanalysis and feminism, these theorists have inquired into the intersections of gender, culture, and psyche. The founding mother of this "analytic" approach is Juliet Mitchell. In her groundbreaking work of three decades ago, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Mitchell cautioned feminists against dismissing Freud's work, arguing that "psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one" (1974, xiii). In her view, Freud's goal was to show how a patriarchal culture creates hierarchically gendered beings, how infants are turned into gendered women and men. She argued, famously, that Freud's notion of penis envy, often rejected by feminist critics and dismissed by inclusivists, could be reconceptualized in social and cultural terms: If the phallus is a symbol of the systems of social power and authority from which women are excluded, then penis envy is a way of describing a concern for social equality.

What if we apply this paradigm to the literature on postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, differentiating postcolonialist critics, postcolonialist inclusivists, and postcolonialist analysts? Within this framework the postcolonialist critics are those who dismiss Freud as racist and colonialist. Here is a description of this perspective by Stephen Frosh: "psychoanalysis has tended to overlook the impact of ethnicity and culture in the clinical setting . . . to be overconfident about the generalizability of its theoretical claims to all cultures . . . [and] to be deficient in examining racist attitudes within its ranks . . . and in its theories" (2004, 457). The postcolonialist inclusivists take a different position: they document the voices of the excluded or marginalized and draw upon alternative psychological paradigms in which racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are visible and valued. Kimberly Leary's essay in *Gender in the Psychoanalytic Space* (2002) on the dynamics of race in the clinical situation provides a good example of this approach.<sup>1</sup>

The postcolonialist analysts, on the other hand, inquiring into the ways that race and colonialism shape the psyche, would argue, to paraphrase Mitchell, that "psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a colonialist society, but an analysis of one." Examples are not hard to find. Among them are Franz Fanon's exploration of the effects of racism on the consciousness and the unconscious of black and white people in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), or Anne Anlin Cheng's analysis of race, culture, and psychology in *The Melancholy of Race* (2001).

Where does Brickman's work fall in this framework? A first reading of *Aboriginal Populations* would locate her firmly in the camp of the critics: she develops a critique of psychoanalysis, showing how deeply racism is embedded in its core formulations. But I find an analytic trajectory quite evident as well. I see within

her work a hint that Freud was reaching toward an interpretation of the effects of colonialism. This is why I asked if Freud might be considered proto-postcolonialist. I think he is constructing—or *almost* constructing—a postcolonialist critique of racism and colonialism in psyche and culture. The evidence for this more generous view of Freud's project is embedded in Brickman's notion of the mixed discourse, double movement, or bivalent perspective in Freud's work. A quote will provide the flavor of this mix. Brickman argues,

Freud deploys a mixed discourse in his figuration of the relationship between psychological primitivity and "primitive peoples". . . . His argument for universality of the primitive psyche . . . provided a radical antidote to the biologically conceived racial distinction between the civilized and primitive minds of evolutionary anthropological thought. But . . . Freud could not help but press into service the available colonialist constructions concerning primitive peoples of his day and as a result the psychoanalytic universality of the primitive psyche . . . masks a hierarchy of particularities. . . . Thus . . . Freud reproduces the very stereotypes he cautions against. (106)<sup>2</sup>

This notion of mixed discourse appears frequently in Brickman's pages (93, 104, 106, 107, 167, etc.). We find it in her analysis of the feminine, the Jew, the primitive, and the racial/colonial other.<sup>3</sup> Note the rhetorical structure of the argument: in descriptions of the mixed discourse Brickman lets the colonialist side of the mix dominate her evaluation, as if to say "Yes, Freud was developing a critique of his own culture's colonialism, but the existence of colonialist elements in his theory negates his own critique."

One could argue, however, that Freud held these two views in tension. Or, one could argue that although Freud was in some sense limited by the ideas and ideologies available in his era, he was nevertheless able to look beyond this perspective toward a more contemporary, complex, and sophisticated formulation. But even these remain caught in a binary opposition that may not capture the richness of Freud's thought. Is there a more productive way to describe Freud's project?

Examining more closely Brickman's description of this mixed discourse, one can see that there are three positions in the mix, not just two, and that the presence of the third allows us to escape the polarity of the binary approach. One of the positions is the "dangerous other," (or the dangerous feminine, or dangerous primitive, or dangerous Jew). The second is the inferior other. The third is an other that is simply different. In my view, Freud is constructing a psychological interpretation of each.

In Brickman's text we read of Freud's analysis of the "anxiety of difference" (123) and of the slippage from an alterity of the simply different to an alterity of the structurally inferior and developmentally prior. Freud "begins," she tells us, "by providing a nonexclusionary discourse (we are all bisexual; the primitive mind is part of us all) which is then superseded by a particularist normative position that repudiates previously included categories by casting them as developmentally and evolutionarily inferior" (106-7). Elsewhere (drawing on Benjamin) Brickman describes a different slippage, from alterity as fear in relation to abhorrence to alterity as disdain in relation to inferiority: "[the] oedipal solution to the unmediated extremes of domination and submission of primitivity has itself been attained through a repudiation of the maternal surround, transforming a

feared maternal domination into a disdained feminine submission" (123). She goes on to critique (quite convincingly) Benjamin's assumptions about origins and development, but the argument is important—embedded in Brickman's reading of Freud are three positions on alterity: abhorrence, inferiority, and recognition of difference.

This analysis suggests that the binary of the mixed discourse might more productively be framed as an analytic triad. Rather than concluding that Freud failed to articulate a nonexclusionary theory of the primitive, or that Freud tried to "subvert the imperialist arrogance of late nineteenth century European thought" (12), but failed, could we not argue that he pointed toward a critique of western civilization; that he tried to develop a tripartite psychodynamic understanding of response to difference; that although he may have been limited by the ideas and ideologies of his day, he nevertheless aimed to develop a postcolonialist analysis and critique of culture and psyche? Could we argue, in other words, that he is a proto-postcolonialist thinker?

---

## II

---

Now the second question. Turning from Brickman's project of critique to her project of reclamation, her defense of contemporary Anglo-American psychoanalysis as a tradition that is not caught in colonialist ideologies, we come to a question that, more broadly, concerns modernity, colonialism, and psychology itself. To phrase it simply, if psychology emerged from modernity, and if modernity is constructed on a colonialist edifice, then is not all psychology inevitably suspect?

Let me flesh this out a bit by giving these ideas a provenance. Peter Homans (1989; 1995) has shown, in work that has been important both to Brickman and to me, that introspective psychologies like psychoanalysis emerged out of particular social conditions, specifically, the loss and mourning of "common cultures" in the wake of industrialization and modernization. Brickman, in a sense, has contextualized Homans's thesis: drawing from Spivak and Said, she has exposed the role of colonialism in the construction of modernity, noting that the colonized peoples of the third world provided the "possibility of cultural self representation" through their role as the raw material out of which "theories of culture, society and the mind [were] constructed" (141).

This question, therefore, is really about the paradox of psychology in postcolonialist modernity: Is Brickman's project of reclamation realistic? Is it possible to discover or construct a psychology that is not colonialist if psychology is modernist and modernity is colonialist?

There is much more that could be discussed. Particularly important are Brickman's discussions of subjectivity in terms of recognition and relationality rather than separation and exclusion; her discussion of the significance of Judaism and anti-Semitism in Freud's life and thought; and her analysis of time, history, and the past. She shows, provocatively, that "there is no site of primitive/maternal origins temporally prior to our current, lived historical time."<sup>4</sup> And she argues that "conceptions of the enthralled and entralling maternal/feminine/primitive are simply retrospectively constructed fantasies of archaism" (127).<sup>5</sup> I am particularly

enthralled by the concept of "retrospectively constructed fantasies of archaism" and the notion of a subjectivity that is not inevitably grounded in the abhorrence of the maternal body. Brickman's thesis leads us to reconsider the notions of past, present, and history; to think psychoanalytically about the self and religion in new ways; and, indeed, to think in new ways about psychoanalysis itself.

---

## Notes

---

1. See also Neil Altman (1996); Lila Labidi (2002); and Jane Flax (2004). These authors mix critical and inclusive approaches.

2. There is a "mixed discourse on femininity in Freud's writings on gender, sexuality, and women" whereby "femininity is culturally constituted rather than given by nature. . . . on the other hand, Freud's writings include a biologicistic-essentialist dimension" (104). Similarly, Brickman describes a mixed discourse in the relation between psychological primitivity and primitive peoples. For example, she notes that Freud's "work is torn between, on the one hand, unmasking the hypocrisy of a culture that deems itself superior to subaltern populations, and, on the other, adopting the . . . position that abjected those populations" (169).

3. Another example: Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is "a critique of so-called civilized institutions, revealing their 'primitive' underpinnings and a veiled critique of the forces at work in the popular mass anti-Semitism of the era. It is a prescient analysis of the psychology of totalitarianism." But it is based on the "colonialist construct of primitivity and sustains its racial overtones" (92). And again: although Freud's intent "was to demonstrate that contemporary institutions may be . . . barbaric . . . the evolutionary language in which he argued his case ascribed the desire for domination to the intrinsic psychological structure of primitive man" (115).

4. She is drawing here on the theories of Benjamin, Stern, and Shepherdson.

5. Although this formulation is useful, it raises other questions. Since Freud did not create these notions but rather developed psychological interpretations to explain these cultural and psychological constructions, might we use Freud's formulations to help us see how our culture creates and maintains these ideas, symbols, and practices?

---

## References

---

- ALTMAN, NEIL  
1996 *The Analyst in the Inner City: Race, Class, and Culture through a Psychoanalytic Lens*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- CHENG, ANNE ANLIN  
2001 *The Melancholy of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- FANON, FRANZ  
1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.
- FLAX, JANE  
2004 "What Is the Subject? Review Essay on Psychoanalysis and Feminism in Postcolonial Time." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, 905-23.
- FROSH, STEPHEN  
2004 "Review of *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind*, by C. Brickman." *Psychoanalytic Review* 91, 457-60.
- HOMANS, PETER  
1989 *The Ability to Mourn*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
1995 *Jung in Context*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## JONTE-PACE, DIANE

- 2001a *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2001b "Analysis, Critics, and Inclusivists: Feminist Voices in the Psychology of Religion." In D. Jonte-Pace and W. Parsons (eds.), *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain*, 129-46. London: Routledge.
- 2003 "Teaching Freud in the Language of Our Students." In D. Jonte-Pace (ed.), *Teaching Freud*, 17-33. New York: Oxford University Press.

## LABIDI, LILA

- 2002 "Being Elsewhere . . ." Women and Psychoanalysis in the Contemporary World." In M. Dimen and V. Goldner (eds.), *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space*, 263-83. New York: Other Press.

## LEARY, KIMBERLY

- 2002 "Race in Psychoanalytic Space." In M. Dimen and V. Goldner (eds.), *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space*, 285-311. New York: Other Press.

## MITCHELL, JULIET

- 1974 *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: Pantheon.