REALITY MATTERS
The Shadow of Trauma on African American Subjectivity

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Few psychoanalytic theories accord social, political, and cultural realities a role in the development of the psyche. This silence distorts and constricts our understanding of all subjects, but is particularly pernicious for the nondominant, as it renders significant aspects of their subjectivities invisible. African American subjectivity is an instance of such omission. The trauma of slavery critically shaped our subjectivity, yet this impact is rarely acknowledged. In fact, the subjugation, cruelties, and deprivations of slavery have given a traumatic cast to African American subjectivity. Through the intergenerational transmission of trauma this wounding has endured. This article examines the effect of African American historical reality on subjectivity. In particular, transmission of slavery's essential characteristic—a relationship of domination—is explored. A clinical case manifesting instances of these issues is discussed.

Keywords: African American, subjectivity, slavery, trauma

I argue here that material conditions, and political and social realities—culture—impact the subjectivity of a culture's members. In fact, the construct subjectivity contains the idea of something brought under the control or influence of forces greater than itself, of something cast beneath (Smith, 1988). Yet, few psychoanalytic theories accord culture a role in the development of the self. This silence distorts and constricts our understanding of all subjects, but is particularly pernicious for the nondominant, as it renders significant aspects of their subjectivities invisible.

I begin with a brief discussion of subjectivity viewed from different psychoanalytic positions, and follow with a discussion of African American subjectivity as impacted by slavery.

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Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Sigmund Freud’s primary objective was to delineate the internal workings of the individual mind, and it is through those ideas that most have come to know him. In fact he acceded the environment considerable developmental importance. In his introduction to a paper on group, Freud maintained that others were invariably a part of the individual’s internal world. (Gay, 1989, and others suggested that group is an imprecise translation of Freud’s original word masse, which might better be translated as mass or culture.) Indeed, Freud maintained that social psychology and individual psychology were one. Still, these were paths neither he nor his immediate followers pursued (Gay, 1989, pp. 626–627).

Interested in culture and civilizations, Freud used psychoanalysis to better understand them. However, in such works as Totem and Taboo (Freud, 1955), he sought large answers to broad questions, such as the origin of the incest taboo, rather than the elucidation of those minute interactions through which culture is imparted. Thus, it is his clinical theorizing, rather than his writings on culture, that provide the foundation to the later knowledge and theory with which this article is concerned.

Both British and American psychoanalysis developed a tradition that argued for inclusion of the object as formative of subjectivity. These various schools—the interpersonal school, object relations theory, self psychology, intersubjective theory, and psychoanalytic feminism—may be distinguished from the drive/defense model by their emphasis upon a relational interactive system as the focus from which psychological development proceeds (Mitchell & Aron, 1999).

Self psychology (Kohut, 1977, 1984) may be regarded as one of the earliest relational theories, with its focus upon the caregiver as a vital element in the developmental process. Caregiver and infant co-create the intrasubjective experience that Kohut referred to as the self-object function. Still, it remained for intersubjectivists to articulate a theory more resolutely relational.

Intersubjectivity

The intersubjectivity of Stolorow and Atwood (1992), Orange (1995), and Orange, Atwood, and Stolorow (1997) refers to the intersection of at least two independently organized subjectivities in which psychological phenomena arise. It is these contexts that give rise to subjectivity. Intersubjectivists imply the presence of culture as it is a part of the mother’s subjectivity. However, the role of the greater social order is only marginally discussed.1

Jessica Benjamin’s (1988) work is an exception to the customary omission of social and political reality in American psychoanalytic theory. (This aspect of her theorizing is further discussed in Subjugation below.) Central to her intersubjectivity theory is the idea of reciprocal recognition: It is precisely in recognition of the other’s subjectivity that the self is found. As the infant’s productions elicit a response from the caretaker, the infant is informed that she exists. But this recognition by the other presupposes the infant’s recognition of this other, this separate entity that may confer upon the infant an affirmation of her self. Benjamin’s emphasis upon mutuality and insistence upon the tension that such mutuality creates offers theoretically the profound possibility of parity.

1 In a personal communication, R. D. Stolorow made clear his awareness of this omission, which he hoped would be corrected.
A Postmodern Perspective

The subject of the Enlightenment is a subject above the particularities of time, locale, or custom, who through reason, comes to possess a universal truth, meaning, and knowledge. In contrast, the postmodern subject is historically bound, determined by the very culture that the Enlightenment eschews. Postmodern theories may vary as to which constituents of culture are determining. Power relations, as well as gender and racism, are among those aspects thought to determine subjectivity (Davis & Schieffer, 1998; Layton, 2002).

With the exception of relational psychoanalytic feminism, the subject of postmodern discourse may be seen as differing radically from the American psychoanalytic subject. In fact, the two participate in different levels of discourse. As Layton (2002) pointed out, the clinician has much to learn about the ways in which culture constructs the patient/subject, just as postmodernists would profit from Anglo-American psychoanalytic theory’s ability to articulate the specificity, developmental construction, and internal life of the individual.

Toward Synthesis

Layton (2008) recognized the formative power of a particular familial relational environment while simultaneously acknowledging the constructive capacity of the historically bound, socially located subject. Her synthesis allows not only for differing subjectivities and their mutual influence upon one another, but also for their mutual determination by, and participation in, the norms of their culture.

Layton (2008) proposed the construct unconscious normative processes to refer to processes that uphold and sustain the power structure extant. The norms making up these processes split human attributes and capacities hierarchically, with the dominant group attributing to itself those qualities they deem of greater value, projecting onto the non-dominant—women, those of other races and classes—less desirable attributes. Thus, the dominant group (White men) is assumed to possess such traits as rationality and autonomy, while emotionality and dependency are assigned to the female; intelligence and comeliness are assigned to Whites, and stupidity and ugliness to Blacks.

Some have questioned the persistence of such norms given Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States. Though extraordinary, it is unlikely that this event signals such revision, given the plethora of studies demonstrating implicit social cognition. This construct refers to unconscious, automatic, or implicit influences upon social behavior, influences that subjects cannot identify or identify incorrectly, but which can be shown to affect both judgments and behaviors (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). An extensive literature demonstrates that stereotypes are instances of such influence.

In an amazing demonstration of the power of automaticity of race-based stereotyping, Blair, Judd, and Fallman (2004) asked respondents to determine the probability that stereotyped descriptions of African Americans and Whites could be attributed to each of 20 White and 20 Black faces. Predictably, respondents were more likely to attribute stereotypically African American descriptions, and more negatively valenced descriptions (grew up in inner-city Detroit, was on a basketball scholarship, had failing grades), to African American faces.

However, when data were analyzed to assess the effect of Afrocentric features on assignment of descriptions, irrespective of the race of the pictured face, the more Afrocentric the features, the higher was the probability rating that the stereotype described that face. It was also the case that faces with more Afrocentric features, irrespective of
race, were assigned the more negative attributes. Thus, the broader the nose and the fuller
the lips, the more likely the probability that the face would be assigned a stereotype, and
one that was more negatively valenced, whether the face was White or Black. Further-
more, though participants could, when sensitized to race-based stereotypes, control their
responses to a significant degree—that is, respond less stereotypically—when using facial
features, the automaticity of response increased.

No single event can alter a construct as elemental as race, not even one as momentous
as the election of an African American President. Race permeates the culture too much
and too unconsciously to so readily yield.

It is important to recognize that while subgroups have their own norms, they inevitably
internalize the normative processes of the dominant group. African Americans are found
to react similarly to Whites in many studies of stereotypy (Gladwell, 2005).

Subjectivity

Most valuable about the intersubjective perspective discussed by Stolorow and Atwood
(1992) and Orange et al. (1997) is its specific explication of the nature of subjectivity
itself. For them, subjectivity refers to those invariant organizing principles whose function
it is to structure experience, to give experience its thematic organization. Formed during
the earliest stages of development, these organizing principles emerge from the intersub-
jective matrix of caregiver and child. Later intersubjective systems, such as the therapeu-
tic relationship, make possible the formation of new organizing principles, adding to the
repertoire of those extant.

In a 1928 essay written by one of the most highly regarded Harlem Renaissance
writers, Zora Neale Hurston (1979) illustrated both the importance of the social order in
creating organizing structures, and the possibility of change at later developmental
periods. Writing about her childhood in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida, she
spoke of a transformation in subjectivity:

I remember the very day that I became colored [italics added] . . . . During this period, White
people differed from colored only . . . in that they rode through town and never lived there.
But changes came in the family when I was 13, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left
Eatonville . . . as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat in Jacksonville, she was no
more . . . I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. (Hurston, 1979, p. 133)

With few notable exceptions, such as psychoanalytic feminist writing and the work of
Frantz Fanon (1961/1966, 1952/1967), mainstream psychoanalytic discourse has failed to
address the subjectivity of the non-dominant other (K. Leary, 2002). Diana Fuss (1995)
wrote eloquently of this invisibility:

For the white man, the considerable cultural capital amassed by the colonization of subjectivity
amounts to nothing less than the abrogation of universality. While the “black man must be
black in relation to the white man”, the converse does not hold true; the white man can be
white without any relation to the black man because the sign “white” exempts itself from a
dialectical logic of negativity. (p. 143)

As does Layton (2002), I conceptualize the self as relationally constructed in the
Western family unit (however composed), and multiple in nature while experienced as a
singular, conscious, coherent entity. Subjectivity incorporates the lasting significance of
the earliest organizing principles while also acknowledging the direct determinacy of social, economic, and political realities.

While subjectivity is partially conscious, it is largely unconscious, both in the manner in which organizing principles are unconscious, and in the sense that we may be unaware of the meaning of various subject positions. Subjects who occupy the subject position White, for example, may be unaware of the entitlement and privilege the position bestows.

Trauma

Stolorow and Atwood (1992) defined trauma as the experience of unbearable affect occurring in a context of profound relational maladaptation. Affects produced by slavery were quintessentially of this nature, whether grief from the loss of everything and everyone familiar, the despair of captivity, the helplessness and rage of physical abuse, or the rage and shame of rape. Slavery evoked the core intrapsychic experiences of helplessness, shame, and rage.

The neurological processing of trauma appears to differ from the processing of less emotionally charged experience. Whereas the olfactory, visual, auditory, and proprioceptive sensations produced by ordinary experience become, along with affects, integrated into a logical whole, affects and sensations attendant to trauma appear to remain discrete and fragmented (van der Kolk, 1996).

Furthermore, it seems fairly clear that the neurological activation underlying the processing of declarative memory differs from that of traumatic memory, with decreased activation of the hippocampus in traumatic as opposed to declarative memory. And in positron emission tomography studies, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) subjects displayed heightened activity in areas supporting emotional arousal, that is, the amygdala, and diminished activity in Broca’s area, an important language center. There is then, “a functional expressive aphasia” in those who have been traumatized (Chafetz, 2000, p. 292).

Trauma leaves a void that can be filled only by the revisiting of it, whether through creative productions or through the presence of another. The film, poetry, art, and the therapist make possible the registration of horror. To be mastered, the unspeakable feelings evoked by trauma must find communicable form, and a structure that gives them coherence and meaning.

To a large extent, conditions enabling the integration of slavery’s traumas have been absent. Though other slaves offered the only immediate and empathic refuge available, they could not witness, in the sense that Laub and Auerbach (1995) use the term, as their own existence mirrored the trauma of any given victim’s. In fact, those slaves who witnessed traumatic acts were themselves traumatized. The church and music provided solace and release, but even these containing and creative vehicles permitted only partial witnessing.

Slavery

Institutional slavery in the United States lasted over two hundred years. Its impact reached far beyond the plantation, affecting the entire culture, and not just for some circumscribed period, but until the present moment. Though exhaustively studied, there is a way in which slavery has been denied; to know it requires knowing its affective, traumatic aspect. Of
course, it is this aspect of slavery that has made its integration difficult for African Americans. As an African American, and given my interests, I knew something about slavery, but knowledge gained from additional study—and deepened affective resonance—has saddened me in a new way.

It would seem that Whites have had even more difficulty acknowledging and integrating their forebears' transgressions, a grievous and complex failing impeding this country’s moral and spiritual growth. Some within the analytic community have begun to address the dynamic of “Whiteness” in courageous and exciting ways (e.g., Suchot, 2007).

It is the 18th century upon which I focus, relying on Berlin’s (2003) *Generations of Captivity.* I confine my remarks to one of three generations described, and to the Chesapeake region. Practices varied in different areas of the country, but in major respects, the regions were similar. They all required increasingly larger numbers of importations to meet new demands for labor; they imported a preponderance of men, making families almost impossible; slaveholders accumulated significant wealth and power, and in all regions slavery was racialized.

Berlin (2003) argued that America transformed itself from a “society with slaves” to a “slave society” during the 18th century. A society with slaves is one in which “Slaves [are] marginal to the central productive processes... and [s]lavery [is] just one form of labor among many.” Though slaveholders might be callous and brutal, “this was the way they treated all subordinates, be they indentured servants, debtors... or perhaps simply poor folks” (Berlin, 2003, p. 9).

In contrast, slavery is the economic engine in slave societies, and the master–slave relationship becomes the template for all social relations, whether within a marriage, between parent and child, or between employer and employee (Berlin, 2003). Slaveholders constitute the ruling class.

America’s transformation to a slave society turned largely on the discovery of a commodity that could command an international market. Tobacco was that product in the Chesapeake area. Labor demands intensified, and thousands more Africans were imported. Farms became plantations, drastically different social and producing organizations controlled by men whose appetite for power and money seemed almost unquenchable (Berlin, 2003).

Survivors of the Middle Passage arrived physically weakened, vulnerable to disease. They were housed in desolate barracks, separated by sex. Little effort was made to clothe, house, or feed them adequately. The booming slave trade made “New Negroes” expendable, as others could readily replace them. And given their susceptibility to disease in the new environment, efforts to assure their health seemed futile. Within a year of their arrival 25% of the slaves were to perish (Berlin, 2003).

Though servitude and slavery had frequently been brutal during the previous century, there was now an upsurge of violence. To the escalating beatings, mainings, and brandings, acts of humiliation were added (Berlin, 2003).

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2 I rely on I. Berlin because his work is narrative, providing not only data but interpretations and a context from which some sense of those times may be gleaned. However, *From Slavery to Freedom* (Franklin & Moss, 1994); *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (J. Jones, 1985); Jordan’s (1968) *White Over Black; and K. Stamp’s (1989) The Feculor Institution have also contributed to my thinking.

Conditions and terms of servitude became bleaker as well, and differences between Whites and people of color grew. Africans worked longer and harder than did English servants, but their allotments of food, provisions of shelter, and attention to medical needs rarely equaled those of Whites. As the status of Blacks diminished, Berlin (2003) writes, the aspirations, if not the positions of Whites, grew. Powerful slaveholders had scant interest in sharing power, and White servants and the poor were pushed to the margins.

Whereas there had been free Blacks, capable of owning land and slaves, their legal standing diminished, and many were themselves enslaved. Roads to freedom shrank—manumission was now forbidden—and the streets of slavery became more heavily policed (Berlin, 2003).

It was power that made this possible, a power carefully constructed through instrumental marriages, business relationships, and the erection of rituals intended to secure a ruling class. It was realized in a personal manner as well, as slaveholders became sovereign of all that transpired on their lands—marriage, punishment, hours of labor, even life, for they were no longer held liable for the murder of a slave.

Blacks were readily identified, and alienated from the social fabric. The advantages of a distinguishable, seemingly inexhaustible supply of cheap labor proved irresistible.

The Trauma of Slavery

African American subjectivity is marked by trauma. I use the term broadly, to include the life-disruptive quality denoted by post-traumatic stress as well as the developmental trauma found within the family. The trauma may be explicit and conscious, or unavailable to awareness. It may come from the society at large, as in racist acts of oppression or discrimination, or from the nuclear family. And it may be the result of trauma generationally transmitted. But infusing and determining both intrafamilial and societal traumatic acts is the historical fact of slavery.

The first diagnostic criterion for posttraumatic stress disorder is the “experience[ing], witness[ing], or confront[ation] with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 427). There is little in slavery that was not traumatic: the loss of culture, home, kin, and attendant sense of self, the destruction of families through sale of fathers, mothers, and offspring, physical abuse, or even witnessing the castration of a fellow slave. Yet subjugation was its most heinous aspect, as it sought nothing less than annullilation of that which is uniquely human—the self.

In an earlier paper I wrote of slavery’s absence from the general trauma literature:

[While] attention is given the Holocaust, Three Mile Island, the Buffalo Creek Disaster, floods, earthquakes, sexual abuse, rape, even the Depression, except for a brief mention here and there, slavery is missing from the canon. For instance, of two highly regarded...texts on trauma—Herman’s Trauma and Recovery (1992) and Janoff-Bulman’s Shattered Assumptions (1992)—only Herman lists slavery in the index. (She discusses slavery generically, and does not refer explicitly to American slavery) ... Janoff-Bulman (appears) not to mention American slavery at all. (Gump, 2000, p. 625)

J. D. Leary’s (2005) Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is an exception. Intended for a popular audience, Leary seeks to inform African Americans of their traumatic history, and to encourage them to understand many behaviors, feelings, and thoughts as that history’s
legacy. In that she includes post-slavery traumas (e.g., Reconstruction, Black Codes, and segregation) as well as slavery, her scope is broader than mine. Post-slavery traumas have had effect, but many have received greater attention than those stemming from slavery, which I see as the first cause.

Though indicating that there are others, Leary (2005) described three outcomes of our traumatic past: vacant esteem, by which she appears to mean low self-esteem, ever-present anger, and racist socialization. She attributes no small part of African American anger to what she terms sensitivity to disrespect, a state we might call shame-proneness. Her discussion of this sensitivity is a powerful and persuasive treatment of African American rage understood as a response to centuries of unbearable shaming.

Leary (2005) explained the parental transmission of these attitudes and behaviors as instances of modeling. Maccoby (1992), in a review of the socialization literature, indicates that Bandura’s initial formulation of imitative learning (modeling) has undergone considerable revision. Analyses of moment-to-moment parent–child interactions have largely replaced the “top-down” perspective of psychoanalytic theory and behaviorism with a bidirectional model in which the responses of parent and child are found to be codetermining. An aggressive response from a child, for example, will affect the parent’s response. Furthermore, affect, cognition, and other factors now render modeling, currently referred to as psychological matching, a considerably more complicated construct than Leary suggested.

Given the audience to whom Leary is writing, a more comprehensive causal explanation, one that includes psychodynamic and developmental constructs, trauma transmission, and a more nuanced discussion of modeling, is not necessary. This is a readable book conveying important information.

Subjugation

Patterson’s (1982) Slavery and Social Death is an exhaustive, many-layered analysis of slavery that I can only touch upon here. Though his elaboration of power and degradation are indisputably relevant, I have chosen to focus on his discussion of the relational nature of slavery, as it is particularly applicable to theoretical and clinical issues raised in this article.

Following Karl Marx, Patterson (1982) defined slavery as “first and foremost a relation of domination” (p. 2). It is perhaps no wonder, then, that this relationship appears to be one of the critical paradigms generationally transmitted, a paradigm I find in many African American families, and one that figures prominently in the case presented.

It is not surprising that of all the psychoanalysts here discussed, Benjamin’s (1988) theorizing is most applicable to the reality of slavery. Her theoretical orientation derives not only from psychoanalysis, but from Georg Hegel, Marx, critical theory, and postmodern feminism, especially as it focuses on the “historical and discursive construction” of the subject (Young-Bruehl, 1998, p. 634).

As is noted above, Benjamin (1988) argued that the self receives affirmation by dint of the other’s recognition: It is the other that grants the self subjectivity. But this

affirmation of the self necessitates that the self recognize the other. There is, then, a mutual recognition that must be sustained, if both subjectivities are to exist.

Domination is the refusal to accept this mutuality, to accept that I am as dependent upon you as you are upon me.

How, then, is the master to get what he simultaneously nullifies, that is, recognition from him who is no-thing? In erotic sadomasochism, Benjamin (1988) wrote, the masochist willingly submits to the sadist because alliance with the sadist grants her, paradoxically, the power she cannot obtain through assertion of self. This must have been true of some slaves ("Uncle Toms"), but on the whole the New World slave did not willingly surrender his autonomy. In fact, we know that in large and small manner he resisted over and over again. Nor did the master believe his dominance secure, for he sought and obtained ever-increasing means of manifesting his power.

Furthermore, the master’s insistence that he was psychologically independent of the slave is immediately contradicted by slavery’s raison d’etre, labor without compensation. The slave was very much needed, even though any given slave could be replaced.

And so, the paradox of denying recognition, but demanding it from him who will not be recognized, is resolved through coercion: Might and violence are to bring about what mutual dependence would have conferred.

Of course, such a relationship is inherently unstable, as the master subjugates and the slave resists. The cycle is unending, as resistance evokes redoubled efforts at subjugation, which in turn elicits renewed resistance.

A Clinical Case

My patient’s history reveals the dynamic of subjugation within the African American family. While hardly universal within our families, it is not unique. In the present case it is the father who is subjugating, but the trait is not gender specific: I have treated many patients whose mothers exhibit it as well.

Clara’s initial presentation was striking: a slim, attractive woman of 27 years, her acute pain and anxiety were riveting. The tension of her body and the shrillness of her voice bespoke colossal efforts to suppress these affects. She had been taught she had “nothing to cry about” and feared a “cloud of depression” were she to examine her sadness. Could I calm her enough to work, I wondered, and with her resistance to dysphoric affect, could I get her to stay?

She seemed aware of me only as an object to whom she must reluctantly transmit feelings, not as someone with whom she might be in relationship. Not until termination, when we met briefly and did some long-distance phone work, did I have a sense of mutual engagement, of some vibrant space between us.

An only child, Clara described a childhood in which she felt imprisoned by a father who was domineering, mean, and needy. Mother worked full time, including weekends, and my patient was left to attend father’s needs. He demanded constant attention. She must sit for hours as he fixed his car, and accompanied him so often to the tailor she still knows exactly where a pants leg should break.

It wasn’t just that father devoured all psychic space—the only one who could talk at mealtimes, make decisions, whose job mattered: through his expressions of annihilative contempt for his wife, and his eventual pairing of Clara with her mother, he also destroyed the possibility of safety. During their hours alone together, father demeaned the mother, calling her stupid, denigrating the rewards she received at work.
The patient’s graduation from professional school ushered in the most painful period of our work. Without including her in the planning, her father arranged a large celebration. His extended family was coming from the South, his friends coming from work. At the party she would be expected to further display her excellence: “Yes, I graduated from Radcliffe. Yes, I went to graduate school on a full scholarship. Yes, I have been asked to join a (prestigious) organization.”

The patient was given no invitations, but that was fine, for she did not want her friends to come. Her father was not to meet them, for only by keeping them separate could she keep something for (and of) herself.

Patient: He had a way of making me think my judgments were wrong; my perceptions were off. That brings to mind a dream. [She is in a room calling her friends, and tries to reach the boyfriend who first exposed her to empathy, in front of whom she could make mistakes. She can’t get through to him, and turns from the phone to find her father in the room.] “You fool,” he says, “can’t you see that he doesn’t love you, doesn’t care about you? Why are you calling him?” I felt stupid and duped and hurt. He ... made me feel I couldn’t trust my own perceptions.

This revelation angers and upsets her, and she has a difficult few days until the next appointment. She then tells me,

It was as if there was a conspiracy against me and my mom ... but we couldn’t see it. He made us feel as if there was no place to go, we had to stay with him. I used to think my fearfulness was due to my frailty, but last week I realized my Dad purposefully kept me fearful so that he could retain complete control.

This patient describes efforts to subjugate any notion of self. She was not to play with other children, but to be with him as he attended his needs; she was never to contradict, but acknowledge his superior knowledge; she was to wear the clothes he bought her, he approved of, “or [she] was going to stay in this house and go nowhere.” Even her graduation from a professional program was to honor his excellence, not hers.

The wife’s subjectivity was demeaned—her work denigrated, her ideas belittled, her desires disallowed. But she was able to create a space with her daughter in which she could find support and solace. It was not, however, a space of mutual sustenance to any marked degree.

Clara was to pursue a graduate degree in an area deemed fitting. There was no thought of what might have interested her, even by the patient. Only in graduate school had she garnered sufficient strength to choose her own clothes.

Two years into our work, on vacation with her parents, the patient became embroiled in an argument with her father. At a given point she told him, “This conversation is over.” “Look smartass,” father responded, “you don’t tell me when the conversation ends!” “Then my Dad, who has pulled off at the side of the road, starts yelling at me at the top of his voice, and I say, ‘Oh, yes, the conversation is going to stop, because I’m not going to be yelled at like this. I’m an adult.’” Her voice was confident, resolute, and her father heard it. The argument ended. Each time it’s revealed in the therapy setting, I am struck by the power of the discovered self.

It is interesting to note that the father’s mother, whom he behaviorally resembled, was widely disliked in their community for her meanness and lying. Furthermore, her father— the father’s grandfather—had also been cruel. He managed the former slave dwellings on the plantation where they still lived. I think it not too speculative to imagine that someone
in his family had held the kind (and quality) of authority given not only to overseers, but also to some slaves.

The task of linking slavery and racism to African American intrafamilial behavioral patterns is daunting, even if it has a certain prima facie logic. Scientific rigor would require that behaviors argued to result from slavery be demonstrable in slaves' descendants, but absent in those whose ancestors had not been enslaved. Such a demand is unnecessarily restrictive, however. Drawing upon the construct of trauma, and arguing that slavery and racism are instances of this larger phenomenon permit me to make links between slavery and familial patterns of behavior.

Organizing principles, the stuff of which subjectivity is made, are in large measure about relations, of what happens to a when b acts in this manner, of how I will be responded to when I act in that manner. The traumatized derive two sets of organizing principles from their experiences: One contains the representations and images of the wounded, traumatized self. The other comprises images and representations of the terrifying, traumatizing other. Either set may be enacted, though Shengold (1989) maintained that most often the parent traumatized as a child now traumatizes or soul-murders his own progeny.

This is what obtains in the case presented, in which the cruel, and almost assuredly subjectivity-effacing aspect of the grandmother's father is transmitted through three generations. Organizing principles derived initially from slavery were unconsciously transmitted to this great-grandfather, were then transmitted to his daughter, who as the mother of my patient's father, transmitted them once again. Clara's father demonstrates the manner of transmission of domination. I cannot know that therapy has broken the chain; as yet there are no children who might tell. I am confident, however, of its substantial weakening.

I have not spoken of the father's vulnerability, but under his rageful posturing there existed a fragile self. We know what narcissism defends against, and if this father's narcissism was overwhelming—which it was—then so must have been his sense of vulnerability. Were he not everything he would be nothing. His daughter was aware of his fragility as she felt no one else was. She thought he would die if she left him. Though I can only speculate about his mother's cruelty toward him, I do know that she was incapable of the affirming sustenance required for a child's sense of self.

Conclusion

Though slavery was abolished, its effects endure through the intergenerational transmission of traumas it perpetrated, and the organizing principles it bequeathed. Subjectivity is shaped, ultimately, by the subjectivity of those to whom we first relate, which in turn was determined by those to whom they related, giving subjectivity an historical and cultural determinacy. But if we must go back to understand the present, so too must we recognize that, without intervention, the past will assuredly be manifest in the future.

African American patients are different, but of course are also the same. It was a wise White therapist who, when I wondered about the wisdom of our working together, said, "You'll have to teach me." Because she knew enough to know there was something to know, and because she was open and comfortable about not knowing, I felt it safe to tell. If as therapists we are blind to difference we will leave untouched critical aspects of our patients' selves; if we cannot perceive the sameness that difference leaves untouched, we limit not only our patients but ourselves.