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Discussion of Green's 'Melanie Klein and the Black Mammy: An  
Exploration of the Influence of the Mammy Stereotype on  
Klein's Maternal and Its Contribution to the "Whiteness" of  
Psychoanalysis'

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This article is a response, in cinematic, historical and autobiographical terms, to Emily Green's 'Melanie Klein and the Black Mammy: An Exploration of the Influence of the Mammy Stereotype on Klein's Maternal and Its Contribution to the "Whiteness" of Psychoanalysis'. The author attempts to open up Green's analysis to a wide range of aesthetic, emotional and political implications, moving between a consideration of the 'passing' motif in Douglas Sirk's film *Imitation of Life* (1959); thoughts on racialization and trauma in psychoanalytic history more generally; and reflections on the author's own experiences of racialization and collective disavowal in psychotherapeutic training.

There is a scene in Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life* when the iconic 'tragic mulatta' (cf. Raimon, 2004) Sarah Jane, played by Susan Kohner, having fled to the big city to reinvent herself as a White dancing-girl, is trying

frantically to get her Black mother Annie (Juanita Moore) out of her dressing-room before anyone catches them together. If she is to carry on 'passing' successfully as White, Sarah Jane cannot risk her blood relationship with Annie coming to light. But a fellow dancer at the glamorous revue where Sarah Jane is performing catches the disintegrating mother-daughter couple in their farewell embrace. Annie does finally get out, rhetorically distancing herself from the visibly distraught Sarah Jane (now rechristened 'Miss Linda'), at which point the intruding White dancer-colleague, in faux-Southern drawl, cracks what is, for her, a light-hearted joke: 'So, honey child - you had a *mammy!*' 'All my life,' whispers Sarah Jane in muffled response. For the viewer, the tragic disavowal at the heart of this scene can be overwhelming.<sup>1</sup> The true bond of kinship that exists between Sarah Jane and Annie must be denied, and the embarrassing Black body in these 'White' women's dressing-room must be repackaged, in order to make sense, as a 'mammy'. By the time the film ends, Annie, having been downgraded from blood mommy to Black mammy, will eventually be eliminated altogether, entirely replaced in representational terms by the powerful White icon of 1950s maternity that is Lana Turner's blonde 'Miss' Lora.

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<sup>1</sup>When I saw *Imitation of Life* last year at a retrospective at the British Film Institute, the audible sobs - which would last until the end of the film - began to be heard in the auditorium at this point.

After reading Emily Green's remarkable article about a disavowed Black mammy buried in an unmarked grave at the heart of Kleinian theory, I found myself thinking that Susan Kohner, the little-discussed actress who played Sarah Jane, was really an unusually psychoanalytic icon. For not only did Kohner play Freud's (Jewish) bride Martha in John Huston's underrated film classic *Freud* (1962), but her far more celebrated earlier role as the reluctantly African-American Sarah Jane in *Imitation* could be read, I now realized, as the perfect cinematic embodiment of the invisibly racialized Kleinian infant that Green helps us to conceive of. Green makes no reference to Sirk's remake of *Imitation* (although she does briefly allude to John Stahl's original 1934 version). Not uninterested in the cultural significance of cinema - her discussion of *The Jazz Singer* is quite fascinating - Green tends to draw on film history as a way of building up a context for Klein's life and work, rather than as a philosophical resource in its own right. Green's paper argues, broadly, that Kleinian psychoanalysis was consciously or unconsciously invested in the perpetuation of an image of unmarked 'universality'. This investment involved the presentation of a phony Whiteness within the published theoretical and clinical discussion, from which all Black origins had been carefully displaced, covered up - 'whitewashed' - or removed. At the same time, Green

points out, via her detailed analysis of the important recent documentary *Black Psychoanalysts Speak* (Winograd, 2014), contemporary institutionalized psychoanalysis, Kleinian or otherwise, remains frightened and frightening in the policing of its own White borders: it does not want to be subjected to anything resembling a racialized or racializing gaze, and it certainly does not wish to be infiltrated by conscious or visible Blackness. Like Sarah Jane, it seems as if psychoanalysis is always trying, duplicitously, to 'pass'. Green's paper posits - speculatively, but with truly subversive energy - that Melanie Klein made use of a disavowed 'Black mammy' figure in order to structure aspects of her thinking about infantile violence and the projective assaults of hatred and envy to which the maternal figure is subjected. Once she has been used to build the 'universal' theory, this 'Black mammy' is quietly removed from the psychoanalytic scene, escorted by Kleinian security guards out of a building now (invisibly) marked 'Whites Only'.

Green does an admirable job of excavating the spectral traces of a site of racialized trauma from under the presentable surface of Klein's writings. Her project can be compared, I think, to a number of recent explorations of classic psychoanalytic 'whitewashings' of racism and racialized difference. In each of these scholarly

investigations, a researcher makes a convincing case for understanding a major aspect of innovative psychoanalytic theory as a disguised repackaging of violently racializing phenomena. Geller (2008), for example, re-examines Freud's major theories via the careful contextualization of his life as a Jewish man in turn-of-the-century Vienna, arguing that much of what animates Freud's discussions of gender roles, sexuality, castration, fetishism and aggression is an underlying - but unthematized - experience of everyday antisemitism, in which (circumcised) male Jewish identity in particular finds itself the object of a relentlessly racist and racializing scrutiny. Meanwhile Kuriloff (2014) attempts to name the monumental racist and racializing trauma perpetrated by the Third Reich as the major unspoken structuring dimension of developments in British psychoanalysis from the 1920s to the 1940s. Considering the bizarre and sustained conflict between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein during the so-called Controversial Discussions (1941-1945) in London as being fully comprehensible only in the light of the seemingly unspeakable horror of the genocide that was being simultaneously perpetrated (against Anna Freud's three murdered aunts, amongst millions of others) in continental Europe, Kuriloff argues throughout her book that we do the development of psychoanalytic thought a great

disservice when we collude in the blanking out of its racialized history, even if so many (racialized) psychoanalysts themselves have consciously and unconsciously encouraged this process.

I want to suggest, then, that Green's 'Black mammy' project forms part of a larger scholarly movement to re-inscribe violent racialization within a psychoanalytic narrative that has often, Sarah Jane-like, seemed hellbent on removing it from view, so desperate have the psychoanalysts themselves been to be seen to fit in. If the non-Nazified Britain to which Sigmund and Anna Freud and so many other Jewish analysts were fleeing in 1939 was also one in which everyday xenophobia, antisemitism and racism were rife, this offers us an indispensable further context for our understanding of Klein's deployment of racialized and racializing tropes such as the 'Black mammy'.<sup>2</sup> Klein had arrived in London more than ten years before the Freuds, not as a refugee, but as a

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<sup>2</sup>It is hard to forget James Strachey's contemptuous description of the incoming Europeans who were fleeing for their lives as 'bloody foreigners invad[ing] our peaceful compromising island' (King and Steiner, 1991, p. 33). See also the published 1924-1925 correspondence of James and Alix Strachey (Meisel and Kendrick, 1986), for repeated exposure to what can, at times, seem like an obsessively racist and anti-Semitic rant on the part of the husband-and-wife psychoanalytic Bloomsbury duo.

respectable *émigrée*, invited by a British Psychoanalytical Society keen to build up an exciting new clinician who might offer their slightly dull community a little distinction. It is moreover important, if we are to grasp fully Green's hypothesis regarding Klein's silent procedures of racializing and de-racializing appropriation and erasure, that we understand that they took place against a background of the generalized silencing of trauma, racialized or otherwise. The truth which had been emerging ever since Ferenczi (1988[1933]) - determined, with his landmark 'Confusion of Tongues' paper, to bring trauma, violation and hierarchized abuse back into the psychoanalytic discussion - fell from grace in the early 1930s, was that the forgers of canonical psychoanalytic theory had, from Freud onwards, tended to construct their theories around a blanked-out centre of traumatic lived experience. This blanked-out experience was often racialized, but it was *always* traumatic.

Klein's theories of infancy and mothering may demand to be reconsidered, in line with Green's hypothesis, against a background of unspeakably 'blackened' and 'whitened' figures, but they should also be read within the context of her disintegrating relationship with her estranged daughter, the psychoanalyst Melitta Schmideberg. At the disavowed heart of Klein's writing in the 1930s and 1940s, then, are traumatic



conflicts which are, sometimes in obscure ways, racialized, but which are also embarrassingly exposing. Racialized conflict and not-necessarily-racialized vulnerability feed into each other beneath the surface of private and public battles, and simultaneously emerging theories. When Schmideberg publicly accuses her mother and her mother's followers, near the start of the Controversial Discussions, of resembling Goebbels and his Nazi propaganda machine (King and Steiner, p. 98), she rhetorically enacts - not unlike Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* - a performance of imperceptibly racialized hostility, evoking mother-as-Third-Reich without spelling out explicitly the psychosocial dimensions of this conflation to her horrified audience in the British Psychoanalytical Society. The discursive violence on the part of the raging adult daughter in turn feeds into the development (by the attacked mother Klein) of increasingly dogmatic and defensive theories about infancy and mothering, theories which refuse to acknowledge the presence of Klein's own traumatic experience of mothering in their genesis, but instead masquerade as neutral, objective, universal science. An ugly bifurcation ensues in the psychoanalytic culture, in which analysts find themselves on either side of a massive ideological wall. On one side of the wall lie increasingly alienated - one might even say hysterical - 'child'-identified

theorists, patients and clinicians, who clamour to have various personal and social traumas - including those of racism and violent racialization - named, acknowledged and discussed at an institutional level. On the other side of the wall stand the authoritarian, 'parent'-identified guardians of allegedly scientific objectivity, who insist on the preservation of bright, white silence, even as they continue to make secret theoretical use of hyper-racialized figures, figures more excluded and marginalized than themselves, in ongoing, respectably mainstream attempts to forge ever more definitive stories about human behaviour.

It is no accident that these hyper-racialized figures were historically, as Green has suggested, Black people who found themselves caught up, for one reason or another, in the phantasies, both racialized and not-necessarily-racialized, of an increasingly dissociated - and itself traumatically racialized - institutional psychoanalysis. Green's second agenda in her essay is to draw attention to the *contemporary* phenomenon of disavowed White violence done by psychoanalysts to subjects racialized as Black. She does this by referring, firstly, to the film *Black Psychoanalysts Speak*, noting the hostility, marginalization and (sometimes physical) abuse faced by analysts of colour at the hands of the White self-proclaimed guardians of the psychoanalytic faith. When reading

Green's piece, I was reminded of my own first two years of clinical training, in a respectable British institution, which I eventually left in order to transfer to London's Tavistock Clinic, where I later qualified, unproblematically, as a psychodynamic psychotherapist. I underwent a number of experiences of quite remarkable - but consistently and often angrily disavowed - racialization during my two years as a trainee in that first organization, but one instructive situation stands out for particular mention. The first-year cohort of trainees had been asked to invent a fictional patient with whom we would work, in roleplay scenarios and the like, from week to week, for the duration of our first year. Asked to describe this fantasy patient - gender, age, 'presenting problem', etc - so that we could begin to build up a clinical profile, the class was, for a moment, silent. But after a few seconds, the silence was broken. My almost exclusively White trainee colleagues - I was the only Black (in fact biracial) male in the cohort - had decided, by seemingly miraculous consensus, that our group's imaginary patient would be called 'Richard', that he would be an adult male of mixed race, with a Nigerian father, white English mother, and two older sisters, and that he would live in London. Richard's presenting problem would be 'anxiety'.

When I pointed out to the excited group - and to our silent seminar leaders - that, for me, this was a decidedly strange turn of events, given that I was an adult male of 'mixed race', with a Nigerian father, white English mother, two older sisters, living in London, I was told by one of the seminar leaders that this coincidence was indeed interesting, but ultimately of little consequence, as I would *have no greater connection to the lived experience of Richard than anyone else in the class*. The months that followed were both fascinating and acutely disturbing. Having optimistically hoped for a short time after Richard's group conception that perhaps he might be an opportunity for us trainees to think together about racialized (and other) differences from a clinical perspective, I watched as my colleagues, supported by our White seminar leaders, played out an increasingly bewildering set of scenarios involving Richard and his therapist. I too was involved in these roleplays, of course. But when, placed either in the role of Richard or in that of his therapist, I attempted to make reference to what some of this character's experiences of racism and racialization in contemporary London might look like, I found myself ignored, silenced, and told repeatedly that I *knew no more about Richard's internal world than anyone else in the group did*. I apparently needed to let go of the delusion that I had any special insight into this

young man's putative psyche. Meanwhile, many of my colleagues not only continued to erase all references to racism from Richard's imaginary sessions, but also forgot the original 'group' decision according to which Richard was supposed to be English and biracial, and instead described him as an 'African'. Richard's phantasmatic figure lurched in the White group consciousness between incarnating extremes of otherness (though with no reference to racialized suffering of any kind) and unmarked universality. My interventions continued to be silenced, before I eventually made the decision, following another year of silently, violently racialized interactions within the organization, to leave this particular psychoanalytic community - and its collective drive to disavow - behind me. I share this distressing vignette from my own training experience in London, as I think that it sheds considerable light on the complex phenomena that Emily Green so expertly uncovers in the course of her paper. Green shows us how, on the one hand, Klein and her followers (Riviere (1929) being an obvious case in point) were busy making covert or surreptitious use of racialized phantasy characters (which were rooted in the realities of actually suffering people) in their construction of whitewashed stories about supposedly universal human behaviour. On the other hand, the almost exclusively White 'gangs' of contemporary psychoanalysts,

descendants of both Klein and Anna Freud (but also Jung, Winnicott and Lacan), have not only, on the whole, refused to acknowledge these racialized/de-racialized borrowings and displacements in the work of their ancestors, but continue actively to repel all and any attempts on the part of the tiny minority of Black practitioners within their community to name or speak about the ongoing phenomena of pathological re-racialization and disingenuous de-racialization which structure clinical, theoretical and institutional life.

Green's fascinating 'Black mammy' paper deserves to take its place within an inspiring network of 'race'-conscious psychoanalytic re-inscriptions which run parallel to Geller's (2008) 'circumcisions' project and Kuriloff's (2014) Third Reich-focused excavation of post-war developments. This network - landmark members of which include Altman (2009), Kovel (1970), Lowe (2014) and White (2002) - analyses the tricky double-movement of psychoanalysis's various racializing stigmatizations, together with its concomitant erasure of the very act of stigmatization. These critical interventions are of crucial importance if our theories and histories of psychoanalysis are truly to grow and develop. If we are to find our way to a place of *real* reparation, the variously vulnerable, traumatized, and racialized dimensions at the core of psychoanalytic thinking and practice must be acknowledged

and helped to reconnect to the whitewashed and dissociated face of psychoanalytic 'passing'.

At the climax of *Imitation of Life*, the disavowed mommy-mammy Annie, finally gets her big funeral. As Mahalia Jackson sings 'Trouble of the World' before the assembled mourners (Black and White, male and female, old and young), the film's spectator is afforded the cathartic sense that a woman - Annie - who was once considered shameful and in need of concealment, has at last been publicly recognized, not only as a full human being, but as the hitherto unacknowledged psychological underpinning of the film's entire cast of surviving characters. Is it too late for Sarah Jane, who arrives, screaming and tearful, to bang her fists in regret on the coffin of the mother she once colluded in whitewashing as no more than her 'mammy'? Perhaps not. Perhaps it is not an unforgivable crime to have made a mammy of mommy, or a mommy of mammy - not for Klein (who would die in 1960, soon after the film's release), nor for Sarah Jane, nor for anyone else.<sup>3</sup> It may be that the psychoanalytic and more broadly social challenge ahead lies in a fearless - and genuinely self-reflexive - exploration and acknowledgement of our myriad

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<sup>3</sup>Klein's daughter Melitta famously did not attend her mother's funeral, but instead gave a lecture that day in another part of London, wearing a pair of 'flamboyant red boots' (see Grosskurth (1986), p.461).

projections, inventions and substitutions, racialized or otherwise.

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