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"IT AIN'T FITTIN'": CINEMATIC AND FANTASMATIC CONTOURS OF MAMMY IN *GONE WITH THE WIND* AND BEYOND[1]

Maria St. John

When David O. Selznick's 1939 *Gone With The Wind* (*GWTW*) was re-released in Technicolor in the summer of 1998, *Rolling Stone*'s endorsement urged, "Catch *GWTW* in a dazzling, digitally re-mastered version." It seems that although 90% of the North American population has seen the film, and sales of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel have been rivaled only by the Bible,[2] still there is something that the dominant cultural imaginary continues to attempt to master through the reproduction of this story, some fantasied fugitive who escapes no matter how many times she is captured on celluloid or in print. I would like to suggest that the longevity of dominant cultural interest in *GWTW* may be in large measure attributed to the appearances of the character Mammy in both the book and the film. The mammy stereotype may seem archaic, but the continued market success of Aunt Jemima products, as well as the proliferation of mammy-isms across literary and visual cultural forms, attest to its continued activity.

Wanting Mammy: race, gender and psychic service

Scarlett O'Hara says, "Is Mammy here, Pork? Tell her I want her."[3] Mammy would not be wanted so persistently, would not be sought in so many places (film screen, television screen, page, and

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pantry) if her functions were few or her effects incidental. Indeed, the dominant cultural consumer would not risk the alienation effect her image threatens (mammy all but hails one as "Master") if s/he did not sorely need her bulk just there, obscuring the very contradictions she embodies. So: what service does mammy perform?

It seems to me that mammy is a dominant cultural fantasy, reenacted with each new production of her image. I see this fantasy in terms of what Kaja Silverman has called "the dominant fiction."[4] Silverman argues that "ideological belief...occurs at the moment when an image which the subject consciously knows to be culturally fabricated nevertheless succeeds in being recognized or acknowledged as a 'pure, naked perception of reality'" (17). She suggests that belief, the arbiter of reality, is granted at the level of fantasy, rather than that of consciousness. She asserts further that "within every society, hegemony is keyed to certain privileged terms, around which there is a kind of doubling up of belief. Since everything that successfully passes for 'reality' within a given social formation is articulated in relation to these terms, they represent ideological stress points" (16). I would like to suggest that mammy represents such a stress point. Silverman's focus in this Althusserian analysis is on the ways in which "the subject is sexually, as well as economically, 'captated'" (15). It is my contention that mammy marks one of the sites at which the white subject is, in addition, racially captated.

In an essay on psychoanalysis and race, Hortense Spillers has suggested that "race may be not fact, but our deadliest fiction." She says:

> "[R]ace" alone bears no meaning, even though it reifies in personality; it gains its power from what it signifies by point, in what it allows to come to meaning.... "[R]ace" is not simply a metaphor. It is the outcome of a politics, and for one to mistake it is to be politically stupid and endangered. But it is also a complicated figure or metaphoricity that demonstrates the power and danger of difference, that signs and assigns difference as a way to situate social subjects.[5]

Spillers argues that a socioethical analysis involves thinking in terms

of the problematics of culture rather than of race.

Spillers' assertions suggest that race functions as an assignation in much the same way that many feminist theorists have argued that gender does. In other words, such characteristics as skin pigmentation, facial features, and hair texture are conscripted into underwriting the elaborate cultural construction of race just as male and female genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics are called upon to substantiate what Gayle Rubin termed the sex-gender system.[6] With respect to the organizing opposition of blackness and whiteness, for example, the fact of the culturally and historically specific presence or absence of the category 'mulatto' exposes the forces of construction at work. 'Black' and 'white' are terms which are defined by their opposition and encompass — or exclude — different groups of actual people at different historical and geographical points based on the political/ideological requisites in operation at the time and place in question.

The intrapsychic correlate of the historical and cultural contingency of racial categories is the notion that a subject's assumption of a singular racial identity is an ideologically laden psychic achievement. I would like to suggest that we may think in terms of psychic multi-raciality in much the same way that many feminist psychoanalytic theorists have urged us to read the psychic hermaphrodism or bisexuality that Freud postulates.[7] This would mean seeing lived racial identities as compromise formations, just as lived gender identities must be understood to be compromise formations if the notions of psychic hermaphrodism and bisexuality are accepted. The stakes, dangers, pleasures, costs, and possibilities involved in the discrepancy between fantasmatic multi-raciality and hegemonic cultural reproduction of race vary monumentally from one subject to another, depending upon the racial position each of us is asked to occupy and the intrapsychic, interpersonal, institutional, and discursive routes by which we take up or refuse our spots.

In the dominant cultural imagination, I am suggesting, mammy officiates at one of the scenes of racial interpellation. She is erected as a testament to both the cultural insistence upon and the psychic refusal of absolute interracial disidentification. Mammy both is not and is the black mother of the white child she tends. That is, she is

taken for the mother at the level of fantasy (where racial barriers do not hold sway) at the same time she assumes a role distinct from that of mother at the level of cultural representation (where race is regulated and reproduced). The contradictions inherent in the simultaneous cultural requirement of and psychic impossibility of absolute racial disidentification produce a dilemma so urgent and vexing that mammy is retained full time, and is "never beyond the reach of a summons day or night."[8]

Race Relations/Object Relations

Judith Butler has described "the white racist imaginary" in terms of the "[complete]. . .circuit of paranoia: the projection of. . .aggression, and the subsequent regarding of that projection as an external threat."[9] Although she does not here refer to her directly, Butler has traced in these lines the psychoanalytic circuit that charges the entire body of work of Melanie Klein. And Klein's is indeed an apt theoretical world for anyone in search of a psychoanalytic account of racism or even, following Spillers' intervention, race relations (as opposed to the "problematics of culture").

Klein's notion of the paranoid-schizoid was theorized initially as a developmental phase and a pathological character structure, and subsequently also as a 'position' or psychic register which is operant in everyone to a greater or lesser degree and under certain conditions. It is this last use of the concept that I find most useful to the task at hand. The paranoid-schizoid is described as a primitive order, which manages the challenges of existence by way of the crudest of psychic tools: omnipotence, the fantasies of splitting, projection, and introjection, and the attendant elaborations of persecution and idealization.

Briefly, the plot runs as follows. There is a little human organism within which operate a death instinct and a life instinct. It would be optimal if these two forces were to intertwine and mitigate each other so that something like a livable tragic sensibility and ethical cohabitation with others might be possible, but the ego, desperately afraid that the death instinct will do in the life instinct, moves in the opposite direction. It keeps the death instinct and the life instinct wide apart by splitting, and then divides them both again

via projection, so that it meets up with external versions of these forces, one threatening death and the other offering life.

In the house of mirrors that Kleinian object relations constitutes, there is no such thing as equilibrium. Every impulse ricochets wildly about so that the distinction between that which arises within the subject and that which emanates from without is a precarious one at best. 'Internal' instances of hatred and impressions of badness are instantly exiled lest they destroy the lovely feelings of goodness that they are defined over and against. But by virtue of the fact that they are disavowed, these forces take on in fantasy a life of their own — a life dedicated to the persecution of the ego which expelled them. The sense of danger proliferates endlessly.

The dominant fiction of race holds sway to the extent that we live our lives as though we 'belong' to one race or another and take it for granted that those whom we encounter are, in a complimentary fashion, proper to our own or to another race. This fiction both feeds on and fuels the regulation of mutually exclusive racial categories. It seems to me that the busy attribution of badness to the other in the form of splitting and projection described by the Kleinian paradigm provides an apt account of this regime of regulation at the intrapsychic level.

The racially marked other is nominated, I would argue, via a thousand discursive conventions as a receptacle for white badness. Judith Butler discusses what she calls the "racially saturated field of visibility" and suggests that "racism pervades white perception, structuring what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception."[10] When we see race as a fact, this is an act of "perception" which obeys the crude laws of the paranoid-schizoid — laws according to which two may never survive together and the only relevant question, chronically, is how quick one can be to the draw. As Klein herself says, "it is in phantasy" that this law operates, "but the effect of this phantasy is a very real one."[11]

Good Breast, Bad Breast, Mammy and Mother

It is something of a feat to have gotten even this far inside Kleinian theory without encountering "the breast." In Klein's view, splitting is deployed initially and perennially in an attempt to pre-

serve a positive relation to the maternal breast and its derivative representations. Klein says it this way:

> The observation that in the infant's mind the mother primarily appears as good and bad breast split off from each other... helped me to understand the importance of the processes of splitting and keeping apart good and bad figures.[12]

The Kleinian epistime accommodates mammy especially well in my view not only because, as I argued in the previous section, race relations with their definitional basis in aggressivity and mutual exclusion are best accounted for in terms of primitive object relations, but also because of the resonance between the all-important doubleness of the maternal breast constellation for Klein and the maternal doubleness in relation to breasts that mammy signifies. As many commentators on the mammy phenomenon have observed, mammy's significance is derived in large part from her relation to the white mistress. Whether she serves literally as a wet nurse or not, mammy is etymologically tied to the breast in a way that her white counterpart is not. This linguistic concreteness, as well as her bigness and her blackness, tie mammy to the materiality of maternity in contrast to her white counterpart, who is frequently and significantly referred to as "the absent mistress."[13]

In Margaret Mitchell's *GWTW*, as soon as Scarlett misses her mother, she misses Mammy. She thinks it is Mammy's arms to which she wishes so much to return. She "longed for Ellen's sweet face, for Mammy's strong arms around her" (358). But when she finally sees Mammy, Scarlett "[runs] to her" and "lays her head on the broad, sagging breasts which had held so many heads; black and white" (409). Ellen's face appears to be a displacement away from Mammy's arms, which represent in turn a displacement away from Mammy's breasts. Nested within this and countless other series of displacements is, I believe, the kernel of the dearly held dominant fantasy that is mammy: the scene of the white child suckling at the black woman's breast. In Mitchell's book, this fantasy is elaborated most fully through the figure of Dilcey:

> Her faded calico dress was open to the waist and her large bronze breast exposed. Held close against her, Melanie's baby pressed his pale, rosebud mouth greedily to the dark nipple, sucking, gripping tiny fists against the soft flesh like a kitten in the warm fur of its mother's belly. (407-8)

The key elements of the fantasy are these: the greedy child is pale, the dark breast is perennially available and inexhaustible, the embrace is mutual (she holds tightly, he presses and grips), and the mammy is symbolically mother. The scene of the black woman nursing the white baby eulogizes a moment of imaginary plentitude prior to racial captation.

Klein stresses repeatedly that the symbolic importance of the maternal breast is powerfully operative regardless of whether or not a child has literally been breast fed. The bottle-fed child proceeds psychically as if he had been suckled, substitutes the breast for the bottle fantasmatically, and relates to his objects through the same mammo-templates as his La Leche League counterparts. While Klein unfortunately explains this phenomenon by way of phylogenesis (i.e., a hard-wired expectation of the nipple taking the form of a primary fantasy), it seems to me straightforward to imagine that these symbolic elaborations of psychic modes of relating may be installed discursively, just as, for example, the oedipal structure takes hold in the psyche of a child who is raised in a setting other than a traditional nuclear family.

I believe that mammy is still big for similar reasons. The fact that only a small percentage of white children may ever have been nursed literally by black women, or that wet nursing per se has fallen out of fashion, diminishes in no way the psychic power of the image of black/white suckling. As long as race is continually reiterated by way of paranoid-schizoid mechanisms, the dominant order does indeed feed off of the racially marked body of the other. And if racial captation is, as I believe it to be, traumatic in ways similar to sexual captation, then it is not surprising that, just as we tend to rehearse perceveratively scenes of sexual captation, so must we retrace our steps perpetually to those junctures at which we were hailed as singularly racialized subjects, and turned.

It Ain't Fittin'

The first Oscar ever to be bestowed upon a black actor went to Hattie McDaniel for her performance as Mammy in *GWTW*. Of the scenes devoted to her in the film, the most emblematic is the one in which Mammy laces Scarlett's corset (while Scarlett clings to her bedpost) and helps her dress for the barbecue. I would like to suggest that the enduring success of this emblematic Mammy scene derives from the fact that it represents while concealing the suckling fantasy I have described.

The corset scene is ostensibly about Scarlett's waist. In fact, it is as much about her breasts; she and Mammy have a veritable tug-of-war over her bust line, and Mammy scoffs at the prospect of Scarlett's getting freckled after all the buttermilk she administered to Scarlett's lily-white skin all winter. But the scene is equally about Mammy's breasts, displaced onto the food she attempts to force-feed Scarlett. The details, suggesting an infantile feeding scene, include the fact that Scarlett's first line is "ooo," to which Mammy replies, "just hold on and suck in." Later, Mammy puts a bib on Scarlett, and there is a good deal of concern about spitting up (Mammy: "Now don't eat too fast. It ain't no need having it come right back up again." Not to mention the projectile parasol). And, just like a good feed, the scene ends with a burp. (Scarlett says, "Oh, dear. Fastened it so tight I know I'll never be able to get through the day without belching.") More generally, but equally Kleinian-ly, this is a battle scene, and the battle is over the locus of control of Scarlett's insides. Mammy's moment of victory consists in her sneakily revealing that she knows what Scarlett has congratulated herself for concealing — her secret, sexual wish. Scarlett maintains the upper hand throughout most of the scene by means of her refusal of food.

Scarlett does not want to need what Mammy has to offer, but Mammy reminds her not only that she is subject to hunger, but that race — the currency of Scarlett's contempt for Mammy, the permission for her disregard — is meaningless in the face of hunger. Scarlett will, Mammy predicts, be "eatin' like a field hand" by the afternoon. Mammy reminds Scarlett that they are united around Scarlett's hunger, that Scarlett can neither escape her nor conceal things from

her because Scarlett's insides are Mammy's business. Ultimately, though, Mammy is Scarlett's insides, and her comment, "It ain't fittin', it just ain't fittin,'" echoed throughout the film, betrays the fact that the projections with which Scarlett wants Mammy to be coincident will always fit her ill. "It," the projected image, doesn't fit because "it," the mammy stereotype, embodies the contradictions "it," the dominant cultural imaginary, disavows through secretly nursing the fantasy.

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1 Thanks to Robin Silverman, Linda Williams, and the Townsend Center working group on object relations psychoanalysis.

2 Kenneth Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Moose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 51.

3 Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: Warner Books, 1934), 399. Hereafter cited as *GWTW*.

4 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

5 Hortense Spillers, "'All the things you could be by now if Sigmund Freud's wife was your mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," in *Female Subjects in Black and White* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1997), 137.

6 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Raitter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

7 See in particular Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905d), *S.E.* 7, 125-245; "Hysterical Phantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality" (1908), *S.E.* 9, 157-166; "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Female Homosexuality" (1920a), *S.E.* 18, 147-172; "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes" (1925j), *S.E.* 19, 243-258; "Female Sexuality" (1931), *S.E.* 21, 223-243; "Femininity" (1933a) [1932]), Lecture 33 of "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," *S.E.* 22, 112-135.

8 Eliza Ripley cited in D.G. White, "Ar'n't I a Woman?": *Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 47.

9 Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King; Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19.

10 Butler, 15-16.

11 Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. J. Mitchell (New York: The Free Press,1946), 181.

12 Melanie Klein, "The Psychoanalytic Play Technique: Its History and Significance" (1955) in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, 52.

13 M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: