

# White Dreamers and Black Madonnas: Unconscious Bias and White Privilege in Jungian Literature and Dreamwork

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In support of conscious efforts to combat racism and embrace diversity, this essay identifies how white privilege expresses itself in contemporary Jungian dream literature, challenges our habitual identification of dark-skinned dream figures, and calls for an end to an unspoken convention that defaults to whiteness as the norm. This essay is addressed to white readers with gratitude for people of color who join the conversation.

At a recent conference hosted by the Jungian Society for Scholarly Studies (JSSS), a draft diversity statement was circulated among the membership, stating in part:

We acknowledge that Jungian psychology has roots in a white, colonial, patriarchal worldview that . . . produces areas of cultural blindness. While this history does not negate the value of Jungian psychology, it does require conscientious efforts by Jungians to understand . . . and to confront the damaging practice of other-ing. (JSSS, 2022)

Because toxic patriarchy is embedded and integrated within psyche, those conscientious efforts must begin within our own selves—a task that is not always easy.

## A Challenging Process

Despite having presented some of the following ideas at the JSSS conference, I encountered considerable inner resistance to writing this essay. It's one thing to speak in person, making eye contact, reading the room; it's another thing entirely to send controversial ideas about race and privilege into today's politically-charged atmosphere. Inner exploration revealed a feeling deep in my body that could best be described as terror—a fear of attack.

The unconscious terror that kept me from writing is an expression of my own white fragility, defined by Robin DiAngelo (2016) as:

A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves . . . such as argumentation, *silence*, and *leaving the stress-inducing situation* [emphasis added]. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial comfort and status quo. (pp. 355–356).

I moved past my fear by recognizing that a similar kind of embodied terror probably lives in many if not most Black people *every day*. My whiteness shields me from having to live with such fear. People of color have no such shield.

### Unintended Racist Stereotypes

Jungian analyst Fanny Brewster (2017) noted, “Jung initially identified African Americans within his collective unconscious theory as being and carrying *the Shadow*—his principal archetype for all that was negative within the unconscious” (p. 4). In one of his own dreams, Jung (1989) saw his Black barber as “a Negro threatening me,” a warning from his psyche that he was in danger of “going black,” meaning “to go primitive, to go instinctive, which is to go insane” (pp. 272–273).

Marie-Louise von Franz saw alchemy in a white man’s dream of a Black goddess whose dark skin peeled back to reveal golden-white skin underneath. She interpreted the color change as a transformation from negative to positive. Black male figures in the dream were seen as negative, primitive aspects of the psyche (von Franz, as cited in Adams, 1996, pp. 74–76).

Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson have offered different interpretations of dark-skinned figures in dreams. For them—and for me—a dark skin color implies embodiment and a closer connection to the feminine, to nature, and to the Earth—truly valued aspects that are desperately needed in these times (Dickson, 2019; Woodman & Dickson, 1996). Unlike Jung, who responded with terror, I feel gifted when Black figures appear in my dreams.

So I was horrified when Anne Liu Kellor, an author whose writing on race and culture I respect, called out a number of racist stereotypes she noticed in my essay, “In the Lap of the Mother,” published in *Immanence: The Journal of Applied Myth, Story and Folklore* (Laffey, 2018). Describing figures that arose during an active imagination, I compared a brown-skinned male bodybuilder to King Kong and likened the size of his biceps to watermelons. In that same essay I also referred to a Black Madonna/Earth Mother figure as a “Black Mamma,” which Kellor interpreted as a “mammy” figure. She suggested that I Google these phrases (+ racism) and wrote,

While I trust that this is how these images appeared to you, and I know these weren’t your intentions, I think this really speaks to so much unconscious bias or imagery/archetypes that we ingest through living in this culture built on slavery, without realizing their racist roots. (personal communication, July 21, 2021)

My initial reaction was self-defense: *I’m not racist*. I consider myself caring, open-minded, and open-hearted; I see myself as respectful and inclusive of everyone. Being told that my writing expressed racist bias left me feeling embarrassed and defensive. Robin DiAngelo (2016) suggests this kind of defensive response is inevitable because of a binary framework in which “racist = bad / not racist = good” (p. 24). I could not possibly have written anything racist because I am a good person.

Additionally, I felt protective of the images I had written about. I experience dream images as sacred gifts from psyche; those figures were *my* sacred gifts from psyche. James Hillman (1977) urged us to stick with the image (p. 68). But if I am white and my sacred dream images are Black, how shall I navigate the risky terrain of unconscious bias in my writing? Jungian literature does not provide us with good role models.

In typical Jungian conversations about dreamwork—from Jung’s Black barber to Woodman and Dickson’s Dark Goddess and beyond—race is called out only when it’s relevant, different, Other. One might write about a dream of a beautiful woman, a military

man, or an orphaned child but never once mention race, until specifically identifying a Latino man, a Black woman, or an Asian child. Why? Because in Jungian literature *white is the norm* and only the *difference* is relevant; the Other carries meaning, identifies shadow.

In my essay I associated the bodybuilder's dark skin with a positive, creative energy. His tender-heartedness reminded me of King Kong cradling Fay Wray. But when I Googled, I discovered that the King Kong story contains an ugly racist subtext about white men protecting a white woman from a dangerous black jungle creature (Demby, 2017). I Googled *watermelon + racism* and learned that after Emancipation watermelon farming became a symbol of freedom for former slaves, but then Southern whites turned watermelons into a symbol of Black people's "perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence" (Black, 2014). Similarly, my description of an enormous Black Madonna/Earth Mother as a "Black Mamma" had evoked a *Black mammy*, another stereotype. "During slavery, the mammy caricature was posited as proof that blacks—in this case, black women—were contented, even happy, as slaves" (Pilgrim, 2000).

Neither King Kong nor watermelons nor mummies were part of my actual fantasy imagery. Rather they were the easy and familiar stereotypes I defaulted to when writing about a large, brown-skinned bodybuilder and a huge, loving Black woman. In fact, King Kong, watermelons, and Black mummies are oppressive cultural images rooted in Jim Crow, white supremacy, and the enslavement of Black people.

How could I not know this? How did *Immanence*, a respected journal with a stellar editorial board and rigorous editorial review, not notice a problem? No one had suggested my essay contained racist stereotypes until I sought Kellor's opinion more than three years after publication. I believe it went unrecognized because awareness of white privilege and racial bias has been lacking in our Jungian communities. Although the stereotypes in my essay related to slavery in the United States, I find the same situation throughout the international Jungian community. In a compelling dialogue between Jungian analysts Fanny Brewster, who is Black and American, and Helen Morgan, who is white and British, (2022), Morgan wrote:

A key aspect of white privilege is that we have a choice whether to address—or even register—our whiteness and its impact on others. Racism is a matter I can ignore, deny, or disavow should I wish to. Fanny cannot."  
(p. 113)

Our everyday language and imagery can often be fraught with unintended stereotypes that perpetuate racism. With eloquent restraint, Brewster (2017) wrote: "I believe there needs to be an increase in self-reflection on the part of the Jungian collective and a demonstrated effort at deconstructing the Euro-centric psychological language that alienates African Americans. *Language speaks*" (p. 113). In addition to appealing for an increase in self-reflection, and with a view toward helping others avoid the kind of blunders I made, I propose it is time to bring a new level of awareness and sensitivity to the inadvertent use of racist tropes and stereotypes in our dreamwork and writing. To do so, we must first move past DiAngelo's good/bad binary and acknowledge our own part in sustaining a racist culture. Next, we must stop presuming that the experience of being white is universal.

### The Generic Human Is a White Male

Defaulting to whiteness is a subtle, inherently racist practice that can be found throughout Jungian literature. For example, in the remarkable documentary film, *Black Psychoanalysts Speak* (Winograd, 2014), clinical psychologist Cleonie White called out Freudian theory: “It’s all about the internal world . . . and everybody’s the same . . . culture and race and class . . . had no place” (08:58). Michael Moskowitz noted how psychoanalytic theory assumes “that people are generically the same . . . [and that] the generic human being happens to be a white male” (09:31). Psychoanalyst Annie Lee Jones added, “Whiteness floats through everything . . . it’s hidden, but it’s implied, and it’s understood” (52:22).

Not long ago Jungian literature moved beyond *man* as a shorthand term for all humans and *he* as a universal pronoun. The first time I read an essay that deliberately used the pronoun *she* as a universal, I felt something melt in my body, releasing a tension I had not known was there. Just as authors are now encouraged to use he/she or similar more inclusive language, it is now essential to move beyond the unspoken norm of whiteness as default. I call on each of us to pay attention: When race or skin color is relevant in working with a dream, it is necessary to name the dreamer’s race; if a figure is identified as Black, the white figures must be identified as white. When we stick with the image, *everything* in the dream, including every figure’s skin color, is relevant. To assume a dreamer is white when a Black figure arises is simply no longer appropriate or functional.

For example, Woodman (1990) recounted a dream from Tom, “a prosperous businessman” (pp. 122–124). The dream included Vikings, a Christ figure, a God figure, a boy, a cow, and a beautiful Black woman. Tom’s race is never specified; only the Black woman’s race is identified. We simply assume all the other figures are white. The Black woman’s race is specified *because she is Other*.

In another example, Dickson (2019) recounted this dream:

[A] woman dreams she is attending an outdoor lecture. A man is writing on a blackboard and it is very boring. Suddenly a larger-than-life Black man walks up and takes the chalk. He begins writing, but the words fly off the blackboard and fill the air with music. (p. 99)

In this dream, I know for certain that the first man is white because the dream was actually my own, from 20 years ago when Dickson was my therapist. Neither of us identified that first man as white, because we automatically defaulted to white as the norm.

In both of these examples, the dreamers were identified by gender, but not by race. This convention is typical of writing found throughout Jungian literature in which *only* non-white figures are racially identified. The underlying assumption is that the dreamer is white; therefore, a dark-skinned figure is Other. This default-to-whiteness reflects a basic cultural practice that underpins and perpetuates systemic racism. When only characters of color are specified they will always be Other, thus perpetuating a deeply entrenched bias and privilege. The harm this practice may cause to people of color cannot be measured.

### Concluding Thoughts

Racism has shaped Western consciousness and identity, granting white people “unearned yet powerful advantages that result in disadvantages for people of color” (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 158). It can be challenging to acknowledge one’s own unconscious bias; nevertheless, I appeal to all of us in the Jungian community to awaken to this racist shadow. Choosing to

bring a newly conscious awareness to our writing and our dreamwork can only result in greater equity and impact for our work in the world.

### **Contributor**

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