

## Overcoming Trauma: Rank's Feminist Approach Robert Kramer, PhD

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For decades, analysts have criticized the dominance of Oedipal theory, tirelessly making the case for object-relations. For example, one analyst went so far as to publish a book in 2011 entitled, *Rescuing Psychoanalysis from Freud*. "Although taking nearly three quarters of a century," concludes Peter Rudnytsky (2011), "there is a reason to hope that the collective undertaking of 'rescuing psychoanalysis from Freud' is reaching a successful conclusion" (p. 155). Yet, Rudnytsky, like virtually all other recent critics, simply privileges the pre-Oedipal theories of Ferenczi over classical theories, going no further than promoting object-relations in the guise of "rescuing psychoanalysis from Freud."

But a more profound critique of Freud stretches far beyond that of object-relations theory, yet few are making it even today. This critique, I will argue in my talk, is so explosive that it remains virtually undiscussable in analytic institutes around the world. I am referring here to Freud's total failure to understand the Other – simply put, everyone *different* from him. I am not exaggerating. Once, in a conversation with Otto Rank, Freud compared psychotherapy, his impossible profession, to "the white-washing of a negro" (Rank, 1941, p. 272). Why did Freud employ this bizarre metaphor – "the white-washing of a negro" -- to describe his analytic patients, most of whom were young women, like Anna O and Dora, who refused to accept Oedipal interpretations about their roiling unconscious? And what did Rank learn from Freud's bizarre metaphor?

To preface my talk, I want to show you a video about the repression of *difference* in psychoanalysis, a video posted on the PEP web site in 2014. That this astonishing video has now become the most downloaded item on the PEP web site, taking over first place by a wide margin from classic articles by icons such as Winnicott and Bion, reflects just how deeply *difference* -- rather than object relations -- has been and is still being repressed in psychoanalysis. It is not surprising that the undiscussability of Freud's failure to understand *difference* – Jones tells us in his biography that Freud, as late as 1924, was still calling recalcitrant patients "negroes" (Jones, 1957, p. 105) -- is most keenly felt by black psychoanalysts, men and women alike, who are fighting for acceptance of *difference* within their own white-dominated analytic institutes, which, as of 2015, continue to cater almost exclusively to privileged whites. Let's watch and listen.

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**Show first eight minutes from this web site:**

<http://www.pep-web.org/document.php?id=pepgrantvs.001.0001a>

### TRANSCRIPT

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: I had an analyst who was exceptionally bright, exceptionally on. But when it came to the issue of race, he was thoroughly blocked. He said to me in his career, he had only treated one Negro. That was his word-- one Negro, which I smiled. He told me, he said,

the treatment didn't go well, because all the guy wanted to do was talk about race. I couldn't get him off race, OK? I smiled again.

KATHLEEN WHITE: One of my teachers was one of those old white guys who could not hear the word "race." He used to take his cane and beat the table.

ANNIE LEE JONES: There has been near violent reactions to the things I say about the way racism, culture, and economic inequality affects my life and my work with my patients. I presented in London at the Freud museums, and I talked about race. One psychiatrist grabbed me by my arm and wouldn't let me go up this steps.

KATHLEEN WHITE: His cave was closed. He didn't want all these ideas in his well-honed, well-published point of view that had made him famous.

DOROTHY E. HOLMES: When I've presented on this subject, more than once I've had a clinician, a white clinician, say I don't know if I want to talk to patients about this. I like my privilege. I don't know if I want to share my privilege.

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: The issue of race so prompts excessive anxiety that it blocks off our capacity to think.

MICHAEL MOSKOWITZ: In the diversity class that I teach at IPTAR last night, I just made some reference to the Jewishness of psychoanalytic culture, and people gasped. Not because they didn't recognize it was true, but because you're not supposed to talk about it.

DOLORES O. MORRIS: I can go back as far as when I was three years old, and there was a woman in the neighborhood that looked very different to me. And I asked my mother who she was. And my mother responded, she's white. I'd never heard that term before, white. I said, oh, white? Are you white? Am I white? And then I start skipping around saying, she's white, I'm white, you're white. And I make a little game out of it. And my mother was obviously very embarrassed. And she shook me to be quiet.

I came to understand that I'm black, and she's white. And that to talk about it, in a way that I was playing with it, was a source of embarrassment.

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: Kimberly Leary points out in one of her papers that patients can come and talk about murderous, rageful feelings toward family members. But then if you ask them about a negative racial thought, they'll close up on you. In America, we don't talk about that.

C. JAMA ADAMS: We just don't have a language for talking about race in a thoughtful way. So a black psychoanalytic group, as a vanguard group, does the important task of saying, this is something important to talk about. At least it can be put on the table, and it can be examined.

MICHAEL MOSKOWITZ: I think psychoanalysis suffers from a painful contradiction. At its core is a radical revisioning of culture and all forms of human relatedness. It asks us to examine those processes of self deception that perpetuate both individual unhappiness and those social structures that benefit from inequality and oppression.

Yet our psychoanalytic institutes have largely turned away from the big picture, the ills and inequalities of our cultures, and instead have focused on training and treating the relatively privileged. People whose problems can be narrowly conceptualized as stemming from their family relationships. People who seem, at least for a time, to be relatively immune to the traumas of history and cultural conflict.

Sometime in late 2011, Richard Reichbart, then chair of IPTAR's diversity committee, and now its president, asked me for some ideas about how to get psychoanalytic institutes to confront their cultural blindness and lack of diversity. I suggested black psychoanalysts speak. The idea was to give greater voice to black psychoanalysts who had devoted themselves to the field despite the insularity of psychoanalytic institutions, as well as to call out the institutional racism of psychoanalytic education.

The first conference took place in May 2012. It was so oversubscribed that we had to find a larger venue to accommodate the crowd. Never before had a psychoanalytic conference been so diverse. More than half the people there were students, candidates, therapists, and analysts of color. A follow up conference took place a year later. The William Alanson White Institute and then The New School joined IPTAR in co-sponsorship, along with NYU post-doc support. It again attracted a full house.

SPEAKER 1: For a field that is so drawn to intimacy, it's very difficult to be reflective about culture. Is there a place for culture in psychoanalysis? Has that been found yet?

SPEAKER 2: As a psychoanalyst and a person of color, are you privileged because you are a psychoanalyst?

ANTON HART: With multicultural competence-- I wish that term would be banished from this earth. Competence. We're going to be competent in relating to the other?

SPEAKER 3: Is there any obligation to blackness?

JANICE BENNETT: I think, well, how can we make it relevant to the community when within the psychoanalytic community, I think people have not dealt with their racial issues. If you have the one course, that means there's-- you know, you care about diversity. And it's usually, you know, a course held at midnight, or something.

MICHAEL MOSKOWITZ: Based on the success of these conferences, we applied for and were awarded a grant from PEP to make this film. We hope to provide you not only with a sense of what these participants have to offer, but also to inspire you to continue the conversation.

CLEONIE WHITE: What do we mean when we speak of black and white? Those are terms that I find very limiting.

ANTON HART: My racial identity is complicated. Maybe everyone's is. But mine is complicated in a particular way. I'm interested in questioning those categories. Questioning the category of the black psychoanalyst.

DOLORES O. MORRIS: Sometimes you don't feel that you're a black. You don't even think about it. I just go on about my work, my business. And all of a sudden, something may happen in my personal, professional life that reminds me that I am a black person.

C. JAMA ADAMS: The first thing to understand is that there is no universal definition of blackness. There is as many ways to be black as there are black people. Then again, when you live in a stratified society such as ours, black can be dictated to you.

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: I'm guilty of it, when I use the word black, that it cuts out a whole lot of what other people can be about. And that even though it-- I agree with you-- it's not a biological reality, it is such a social construct that it has power and it has meaning.

C. JAMA ADAMS: Many blacks have that experience of being told, this is how you're black. You know, you're poor, you're not educated, you're not psychologically minded.

CLEONIE WHITE: People sometimes would say to me, no, but I don't think of you as black. You're Cleonie. What then do you think? And why is it necessary for you to not see my difference?

I was born in Jamaica, West Indies. I began to think about the way theories are written. Freudian theory, it's all about the internal world. And it's a structural theory, and everybody's the same. And so culture, and race, and class, and difference have no place in our thinking about a personality, about development, about modes of attachment, about identity.

CHERYL THOMPSON: I think psychoanalysis struggles from many misperceptions, one of which is the fantasy that people are all the same.

MICHAEL MOSKOWITZ: But there is this aspect of psychoanalysis-- which I think can somewhat be attributed to Freud and Freud's attempt to flee his Jewishness-- it is to assume that people are sort of generically the same.

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: He wanted psychoanalysis to be universal and not just a Jewish idea.

MICHAEL MOSKOWITZ: However, the generic human being happens to be a white male.

KIRKLAND VAUGHANS: And yes, we're all the same in the sense that we're all different.

**END VIDEO**  
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Let me repeat the remarkable words of the last speaker, which sum up the entire video: “We’re all the *same* in the sense that we’re all *different*.” Can we please marinate for a few moments in these powerful words?

This statement is a virtual paraphrase of Otto Rank’s poignant question, raised in 1939: “Will people ever learn that there is no other equality possible than the equal right of every individual to become and be himself, which actually means to accept his own difference and have it accepted by others?” (Rank, 1941, p. 267).

It was Otto Rank, over three quarters of a century ago, who first formulated a “psychology of difference.” But, because Rank was expelled from official psychoanalysis in 1926, no one was listening -- just as no has been listening for decades to these black analysts. In 1930, the American Psychoanalytic Association went so far as to require that any member analyzed by Rank wishing to remain in good standing be re-analyzed by a Freudian. Otto Rank, who had worked side-by-side with Freud tirelessly for two decades to create the psychoanalytic movement, was now a pariah, undiscussable, repressed, like difference itself, never to be seen or heard from again.

Now that object-relations is well established in analytic institutes, Ferenczi, once excommunicated (like Rank) by Freudians, is back in good standing, 82 years after his death. His writings are widely admired, with conferences on his work held almost every year in the US, South America and Europe. Yet Rank, the only other original thinker in Freud’s inner circle, still remains buried and forgotten. No one reads him, even though he collaborated closely with Ferenczi for half a decade on creating object-relations theory and therapy, even coining the term “pre-Oedipal” in 1925, one year after publishing *The Trauma of Birth*. Could it be that the repression of Otto Rank in psychoanalytic institutes until this very day is somehow connected to the repression of *difference* in these same psychoanalytic institutes?

After being expelled by Freud, Rank devoted the rest of his life to arguing that *difference* not *likeness* should be at the center of psychotherapy. In 1939, the year he died, Rank wrote: “Whereas Freud conceives of all people as fundamentally alike, for Jung they are different (though racially alike); while Adler maintains that though their behavior is different it *ought* to be alike” (Rank, 1941, p. 35)

“That Freud’s psychology,” adds Rank, “being an interpretation rather than an explanation of human nature, was not valid for all races, Jung pointed out; that it did not apply to different social environments, Adler emphasized; but that it did not even permit individuals of the *same* race and social background to deviate from the accepted type led me beyond these differences in psychologies to a psychology of difference” (p. 29). Rank now formulated his most important learning, after years of thinking about the meaning of difference and its relation to Freud’s secret understanding, shared with only a few, including Ferenczi, that classical psychoanalysis

was the “white-washing of the negro” -- in other words, a failure as a therapy. Shortly before his death, Rank wrote, “In our attempt to carry the discussion beyond the controversy of different psychologies to a ‘psychology of difference,’ we have to allow for the individual as well as for social and racial differences, and furthermore to consider woman – the child for that matter, too—as another group in need of a psychology of its own” (p. 37). How current these words sound.

To begin the process of seeing difference, and discussing the undiscussable, let’s go back in time and un-repress the repression of Rank. Otto Rank began noticing the absence of difference as early as 1924, in *The Trauma of Birth*, when he was the second most powerful figure in the world of psychoanalysis: “It has been noticed, especially in recent times,” he writes, “that our whole mental outlook has given predominance to the man’s point of view and totally neglected the woman’s ... We tacitly represent sexual relations only from the man’s point of view ... from an insufficient understanding of woman’s sexual life” (Rank, 1924, p. 36). Early analysts ignored both sides of the mother-child relationship, mother being passive and primarily the object of male sexual desire and competition. In 1924, in strikingly feminist terms, Rank was bringing a new lens on mother as emotionally nurturing for the child and enormously potent, sexually and in every other way, in her own right. “To reinstate the high estimation of woman,” writes Rank, was one of his reasons “in attempting to make conscious again the repressed meaning of the birth trauma (p. 37).

“Where is woman in psychoanalytic theory?,” wondered Rank after the birth of his child, a girl, in 1921. Overshadowed by powerful fathers, the mothers of Little Hans, Dora, the Rat Man and the Wolf Man are passive and disembodied, entirely colorless, showing no signs of sexuality, commanding no authority. But this was not Rank’s experience with his own powerful wife, Tola, later an eminent analyst in her own right. Otto Rank was the first to notice that woman is never a willing agent in Freud’s Oedipal map of the human mind. She’s always impotent to effect her desires, sexual or otherwise. For the same reason, Rank was the first to notice that Freud divined no trace of will in the psyche of women, whose difference – emotional and sexual -- from men mystified him. “*Was will das Weib,*” he asked in 1925, in the midst of his struggle with Rank. “What does a woman want?” (Jones, 1955, p. 42), or, more precisely, “What does a woman *will?*”

One year later, in 1926, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, his blistering critique of *The Trauma of Birth*, Freud returned, once again, to his favorite African metaphor. “The sexual life of women is a *dark continent*” (Freud, 1926, p. 212), he wrote, still bewildered by woman’s difference, while simultaneously rejecting the light from Rank’s new lamp. “I am boiling with rage” Freud erupted to Ferenczi about Rank’s anti-Oedipal heresies while drafting his attack on *The Trauma of Birth* in mid-1925 (Freud & Ferenczi, 1920-1933, p. 222). *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* was the first book published by Freud not read or edited by Rank, managing director of Freud’s publishing house since 1919. The traumatic break between Freud and Rank was now final and Rank sank into the unconscious of psychoanalysis, a black hole of repression, from which he has never emerged.

Although repressed and unread, Rank was not yet dead. To Freud's question about woman's will, Rank responded, simply, "What does *anyone* want?" For both women and men, he wrote in 1929, "the emotional tone is an index of the 'what' of the will." (Rank, 1929, p. 24). Because Freud refused to accept the powerful sexuality, emotions and will of women, Rank argued that "the real I, or self with its own power, the will, is left out" (Rank, 1929-31, pp.113) of psychoanalytic theory and practice, even in object-relations therapy. Without the recognition of *willing*, he argued in *Will Therapy*, published between 1929 and 1931, there can be no recognition of *difference* in psychoanalysis. The will in "*Was will das Weib*" remains invisible and repressed.

It's no coincidence that Rank's "will therapy" was embraced in the 1930s by American social workers, the vast majority of whom were (and are) women. Rank helped Jessie Taft, one of his closest friends and co-workers, found the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work in the late 1920s, which went on to influence all of modern American social work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Taft developed a large corpus of feminist therapy," according to a biographer of this remarkably courageous social worker (Deegan, 1991, p. 387). Living openly with another woman, Taft was a lesbian "surrounded by women: their ideas, issues, friendships, life-styles, and institutions... her feminist epistemology, and her female clients and colleagues are all indicators of her woman-centered life" (*ibid.*, p. 384). Taft's 1916 University of Chicago doctoral dissertation, *The Woman's Movement from the Point of view of Social Consciousness*, according to a recent writer, "reads as a deeply felt examination of the predicament of American women at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Mertens, 2012, p. 60). It has been called by modern feminist scholars "the best testament of feminist pragmatism that's ever been written" (*ibid.*). How many analysts, even feminists, have ever heard of Jessie Taft?

Beyond social workers and gays, artists in all fields of creativity, women and men alike, were attracted to Rank's powerful thinking on the creative will and difference. His influence on Anais Nin and Henry Miller is well known. But Rank's ideas on willing also had a strong influence on Martha Graham, called by many the "mother" of modern dance (Franko, 2012, p. 11). Graham, according to Agnes de Mille, a close friend, "made a greater change in her art—in the idiom, in the technique, in the content, and in the point of view—than almost any other single artist who comes readily to mind ... It is reasonable to assume that henceforth every theater dancer who is exposed to this new style will move differently because of it" (de Mille, 191, p. vii).

Like Jessie Taft, Martha Graham was the embodiment of difference. Her dances pulsate with rage, loneliness, love, angst and the whole range of emotions that Freud strove to repress in his women patients. In 1925, at the height of the Rank affair, and while she was being analyzed by her father, Anna Freud told Max Eitingon: "Papa makes it clear that he would like to know me as much more rational and lucid than the girls and women he gets to know during his analytic hours, with all their moods, dissatisfactions and passionate idiosyncrasies" (Young-Bruehl, 1988, p. 156).

Martha Graham was 20<sup>th</sup> century warrior of dance who shattered the conventions of prettified ballet. No Anna Freudian, Graham expressed her pulsating life force—the inexhaustible energy of her “will”—in electrifying terms. Listen to Graham speak, and ask yourself whether her words would resonate with the black psychoanalysts we just heard complaining about the lack of appreciation for difference in psychoanalysis:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. ... No artist is pleased... [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time... There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others (Graham quoted in de Mille, 1991, p. 264).

According to Rank, the emotional energy of willing and difference expresses itself uniquely for each individual, male or female, gay or straight, black or white. Willing, he wrote in 1929, is “the temporal representative of the cosmic primal force” (Rank, 1929, p. 4), the energetic nature of the living, unfolding universe. We are *in* the cosmos and the cosmos is *in* us. Human “being,” Rank believed, is a verb not a noun. Expressed through intense emotions, including the power of sexuality, “the strength of this [cosmic primal] force represented in the individual,” he writes, “we call the will” (*ibid.*). The terms “will therapy” and “relational therapy” were always synonymous for Rank. Willing, he insisted, is always relational. Tenderness, compassion and love are the quintessential feelings energizing us to unite with others; while aggression, anger and hate energize us to separate from others. Feelings *are* relationships.

For the patient, according to Rank, each therapeutic hour is art-in-motion — a creative, moving, dancing back-and-forth feeling of uniting and separating, surrendering and asserting, connecting and differentiating, holding on and letting go. If a patient can learn to accept the feeling of her own dancing, pulsating will in this fragment of time, without too much anxiety or guilt-feeling, then living, creating and loving more fully outside the allotted hour may also be possible. Adult development, he was the first to say, is a lifelong construction, requiring continual negotiation and renegotiation of the dual yearnings for individuating and connecting, difference and likeness, the emotional will to separate and the emotional will to unite. But without willing there is no difference, and without difference there is no life and no human being.

“What does a woman want?,” asked Freud famously and infamously in 1925. In 1939 Rank answered, once again, as he first did in *The Trauma of Birth*: “She has always wanted, and still



wants first and foremost to be a woman, because this alone is her fundamental self and expresses her personality, no matter what else she may do or achieve" (Rank, 1941, p. 254).

"Will people ever learn," wondered Rank softly, "that there is no other equality possible than the equal right of every individual to become and be himself, which actually means to accept his own difference and have it accepted by others?" (*ibid.* p. 267).

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