"Analysis of Eartha Kitt and her book, 'Confessions of a Sex Kitten'"

formerly called "Along with Me"

By: Patricia D. McClendon, MSSW candidate

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Note 1: I sent a copy of this article to Ms. Kitt, in 1994, through a late night talk show in which she had just appeared, but received no response before I posted this article. I could not find her address, nor her publisher's address. In 1995, I sent her a copy of this article via DRG Records, Inc. and I received no reply, either.

Note 2: This was a class assignment in which I was expected to give a diagnosis.

Note 3: See scans of the front and back covers of this book and Eartha Mae Kitt links.

TELEVISION INTERVIEW

I had a vague sense that Eartha Kitt was an international entertainer, but a 1991 or 1992 "60 Minutes" (or similar program) interview made me realize that she was a remarkable woman that I wanted to know better. She had an album that she said was due to be released in April of that year, which I have tried to get to no avail. I finally got a copy of her autobiography by having a bookstore do an out-of-print search. Her autobiography confirmed my initial impression of her: She was a brave, courageous, and high-functioning survivor of child abuse.

In the television interview, she spoke of being abused as a child and if I recall correctly her voice changed to that of a small child at one point in the conversation. As the interviewer asked her questions, it was evident to me that she was listening to an internal dialogue before answering some of his questions. I told a friend who was watching the program with me that Eartha Kitt is a multiple (that she has MPD, multiple personality disorder or some variant of MPD). "Watch her dissociate, look at her having a conversation with herself, and listen to the changes in her voice", I told my friend. After the interview was over my friend said, "You could be right. I saw what you were talking about." Now, I really wanted to know her better.

I think that there is a general misconception that people with Multiple Personality Disorder and other dissociative disorders are not capable of being high-functioning individuals. There are varying degrees in which these individuals can function: Some "multiples" consistently function well most of the time, while others struggle to function at all, and the rest function somewhere in between the two extremes. The degree in which these individuals function is related to the amount of cooperation among their "alters" or "personalities" which is related to the amount and quality of communication among their "alters" or "personalities" (Kluft, 1988). The number of personalities, the type of personalities, and of the complexity of "subsystems of personalities" are not as important in determining individual's functional level as is the overall quality of cooperation among the "alters" (Kluft, 1988). Eartha Kitt is a high-functioning individual who has uses her dissociative skills creatively, as do many individuals with dissociative disorders.

EARTHA MAE'S CHILDHOOD

Earthmae does not know how old she is (her birth was not recorded) and only has a vague sense of any relationship with her mother. Eartha Mae has a few memories of her early childhood back to the time when as she said, "I don't remember being able to talk" (p.2). Eartha Mae, Pearl (her half-sister) and their mother were homeless and lived under the pines trees in South Carolina. At night, Eartha
Eartha Mae's mother covered them with pine straw to keep them warm. They ate food that they found in the forest, or that they had begged from one person or another, or, in desperation, that they stole. Eartha Mae's mother wandered about begging for food and shelter for her children and for herself. They were often rebuffed by African-Americans because Eartha Mae was a "yella gal" (mixed blood). Eartha Mae's mother was African-American and she believes her father was white (p.1-4) and that she also is part Cherokee Indian (p.170). With each rejection, the message to not exist as "the yella gal" became louder and clearer. Eventually, Eartha Mae's mother gave her children up to relatives in order to be with the man she loved. Eartha Mae remembering seeing her mother leave, arm and arm with a black man and instinctively knew that she would never see her again. Eartha Mae recalls watching her mother leave them (Eartha Mae had been instructed to sweep the yard): "I stood in silence with some kind of long stick in my hands- it must have been a broom- and the movement of my body slowly swept the leaves closer to the plants as though I had been hypnotized. My movement continued to sweep my hurt under the bushes. Now I knew Moma was gone forever. I did not cry. I could not cry. I would not cry. My soul was hurt and lost" (p.7). This broom became her only comfort for a while: it gave her "something to hold on to"(p.8). Eartha Mae's mother left her and Pearl with their Aunt Rosa, her husband, and Aunt Rosa's teenage grandchildren, Gracie and Willie. Eartha Mae was to work for her "keep". Gracie and Willie beat Eartha Mae with a peach switch until she was bloody many times just for the fun of it, while laughing and commenting, "Damn, you're yella all over, ain't cha?" (p.10). They threatened her not to tell anyone that they beat her or they would beat her again. She refused to cry during these beatings sensing it would have given them more pleasure. Later, Gracie sexually abused Eartha Mae but was interrupted upon hearing her family returning from an outing. Eartha Mae frequently visualized her mother's image in her mind's eye for comfort but remained tormented by mother's abandonment of her for the rest of her life (p.11).

Eartha Mae did see her mother one more time: Her mother was on her "death bed". "Mama! I cried in my soul, but no tears reached my eyes. Still in silence, I was taken from her bedside by some women. A voice clicked in my brain: 'Eartha Mae, you're so still- don't you wanna cry?' this voice haunted me. I did not like it. 'Eartha Mae, you're so still'. They sat me in a chair by the fireplace and they all looked at me. 'She's so still, she's not crying. She's too still,' the voice said, digging deeper and deeper into my brain... So Moma had gone. Suddenly, as I gazed at the ceiling, I felt her presence over me" (p.23).

Eartha Mae believes her mother's husband had her mother poisoned to get rid of her (p.25).

Eartha Mae later went to live with her Aunt Mamie, her mother's sister, in New York City when she was about 10-12 years old. To Eartha Mae's relief her Aunt Mamie was the same color as she. Eartha Mae was experiencing "culture shock" in the big city (p.29). She was beat by her Aunt Mamie and suffered a black eye for eating her aunt's chocolates. She had not eaten them and her aunt found them later where she had hid them but her aunt never apologized for beating her wrongly (p.33). Her aunt moved a lot and they finally ended up staying with her aunt's lover. Eartha Mae did well in school, the church choir, and with piano lessons. A teacher, Mrs. Bishop sent Eartha Mae to audition for the New York School of Performing Arts and she was accepted to the school (p.32-36).

Eartha Mae had run away from her aunt's house several times and was brought back. During those times, she "picked the garbage cans, slept on rooftops, and rode the subways..." (p.124).

**EARTHA KITT**

Eartha eventually won a full scholarship to the Katherine Durham Company, a dance school and a traveling dance company. Since she was afraid her aunt would not allow her to go to this school, she decided to hide out from her aunt while attending Miss Durham's school. "And that is where Eartha Kitt came in" (p.43). Miss Durham frequently picked on her dancers, probably out of jealousy. One day she said to Eartha. "You'll never become anything Kitt, you have too much excess baggage." Eartha responded, "If you thought that before, Miss Durham, why did you put me in the company?" I heard myself asking" (p.46). Eartha Kitt was surprised a lot of times by what came out of her mouth.

Throughout her narrative of her story, Eartha Kitt is vague about details of events and the time frame of the events. She describes herself in a trance a lot of the times and talks frequently to herself. She often displays a child-like wonder and naïveté about new situations and the ways of people. She described her first experience with Beverly Hills, California: "I was just amazed in a child-like way at how beautiful Beverly Hills was and how rich you have to be to live there" (p.50). She was taken advantage of many times because of her naïveté about people. She was frequently hurt by people's prejudices and their "take what you can get and run" attitudes.

Eartha Kitt needed parent consent to go to Europe and after much internal dialogue decided that she must contact her Aunt Mamie and asked her to help her. Her aunt gave her permission and Eartha Kitt started her international career (p.54). Eartha Kitt went on to be a famous actress, singer (of ten languages) and sometimes comedienne, as well as a dancer. She was more successful internationally because she was not discriminated against as much in many countries as she was in the United States. Many of the countries, where she performed, were cultural diverse. She found living conditions in many parts of the world that brought back the haunting memories of her childhood in South Carolina.

She described her dissociation in different ways: "...as my mind surfaced..." (p.63), "In my zombie, hypnotized state...still in a trance" (p.65), "I was numb from sorrow, and walked out of the cinema in a hypnotic state, dazed and missing Jamie..." (p.169) (James Dean had recently died in a car wreck), "As I reminisced about my days past in London, the men's voices were weaving in and out, with me coming back into the picture when I had to give a response" (p.175). The following narratives confirmed her multiplicity to me:

...I was hailed as one of the greatest artists of our time. I could not recognize this person as me...But this glory was for Eartha Kitt, not for Eartha Mae. As Eartha Mae, that unwanted urchin child of the cotton fields who survived in the dirt and the forest with the animals, I was proud to have a friend who was now becoming an important actress as well as a singer...Eartha Mae was happy for Eartha Kitt but sad for herself...Eartha Mae was hiding behind- no make-up, hair tied up, old clothes; anything
Earth Mae was never supposed to have anything, and was now beginning to feel whatever Eartha Kitt achieved did not belong to her, it belonged solely to Eartha Kitt, the achiever, the survivor. I could feel the separation of the two of me as I stood in front of the theatre, analyzing both of us...(p.144-145).

I stood for a moment and looked at myself in the mirror. I took the brush to put my hair in place and saw Eartha Mae peeking through the Eartha Kitt façade with that primitive savvy: "Don't expect too much...If Moma didn't want you, nobody will..." (p.193).

The dress and make-up made Eartha Mae feel out of place. The ladies' room attendant tried to help me re-do myself, but with Eartha Kitt and Eartha Mae struggling for their part in it (She had just found out that their lover married another woman.), I had a hard time figuring out which one was going back to the table. Neither one of us wanted to be seen at this moment, and both were in sorrow for the other one. Eartha Kitt could stand against the world, but Eartha Mae was too abused and could easily be broken. Eartha Kitt had to protect her, hide her, soothe her, until the pain subsided...(p.203).

...The fun of being Eartha Kitt was one thing, but what did Eartha Mae want? A someone to call her own, a someone to share with, to love with, to like with, to be with, to be a part of. Eartha Mae wanted a child, a child she could be proud of...(p.215).

I was completely disconnected from everyone - my soul had left my body to stand and watch, observing all that went on. I wanted to love the evening, I wanted to enjoy my daughter's happiness, but I was not there. I was in a world all by myself, in search of a place to land my soul...I was in another place looking down on it all (p.270-271).

Eartha Mae/Eartha Kitt experienced depersonalization frequently: "...my legs carried me along of their own volition" (p.169), "...I was confused by what my feelings should be, so I became numb and almost felt nothing at all..." (p.265), "...I was walking in a zombie-like state, numb from wounds of hurt" (p.269), and "As we drove on and on, I found myself getting smaller and smaller on my side of the car..." (p.190). This last example is really more a phenomenon of her "switching" from an adult "alter" (probably Eartha Kitt) to a child "alter" (probably Eartha Mae) because as she said, "I was ashamed that my show had not been successful, but more embarrassed that the relationship between" me and Arthur Loew Jr. "had failed" (p.190).

As a child Eartha Mae had whooping cough and pneumonia. Several times in her life Eartha Mae/Eartha Kitt became ill but the doctors never could find the source of her illnesses and finally, thought that her illnesses were due to a nervous condition (p.89). Perhaps it was "nerves", but I wonder if an "alter" was poisoning her or refusing to allow her to eat until she got sick or some other self-destructive behavior was going on. In many of the photographs included in her autobiography, Eartha Mae/Eartha Kitt looks emaciated and gaunt: She looks like she is anorexic and/or bulimic. She started her career off as a dancer, where oftentimes eating disorder-related behavior is condoned, if not encouraged, in this subculture. She made several comments that sounded like they could possibly be eating disorder-related, for example: "I sat and thought and cried over my lack of knowledge and felt so stupid I wanted to vomit" (p.103) and "I got the same sickness I had in Paris: I started to haemorrhage. No one could explain why...I would force-feed myself to build up strength...my hair was falling out, and I was scared" (p.142-143). This particular illness was after her lover's rejection of her. She made several references to her problems of not being able to eat or sleep (p.265 and others). She was often also ritualistic about exercising, especially bicycling and jogging.

Eartha Kitt describes her hypervigilance and her belief that she had special intuitive powers throughout her book, for example: "For no reason I can find to explain, I said softly, "Jamie, I don't like this car, it's going to kill you'...I didn't want him to go in this car race..." (p.152) and "The tone of his voice made me suspicious...I pressed the phone more closely to my ear to analyze his voice" (p.174). Being hypervigilance and having good intuitive powers are skills that increase a person's chance of surviving abusive environments, however, a clinician may view these behaviors as schizotypal behavior.

Eartha Kitt frequently stood up against what she perceived as wrong, and took the consequences when they followed. She made Lady Bird Johnson cry at luncheon at the White House by speaking out against the Vietnam war. She was "blacklisted" and was not able to find work for approximately eleven years in the United States (p.249). She was investigated by the FBI and the CIA. Her CIA files contained this excerpt describing her as: "a sadistic, sex nymphomaniac...rude, crude, shrewd, difficult...one of six children...mother and father farmers in South Carolina...ranaway from home at the age of sixteen...would do anything to get attention..." (p.240).

Eartha Kitt lacks of any sense of time. One of the men who admired her brought her a watch because he noticed that she didn't wear one (p.208). For some people with dissociative disorder, a watch makes them more aware that they are "losing time" and this increases their anxiety about what happened in the meantime. A logical way to reduce this anxiety is to not wear a watch. For other people with dissociative disorders, time has no significant meaning to them because of time distortions. Of course, the other extreme is possible too. Some people with dissociative disorders wear watches that tell them the date, the day of the week, and whether it is a.m. or p.m. because not knowing this information might expose their multiplicity. I can only speculate that for Eartha Mae/Eartha Kitt time had little meaning. There is only one example given of her "losing time" in the book: "...My mind was so fuzzy when I realized it was too dark for me not to have arrived at the club, that I looked up and saw I was three-quarters of the way home. I could not believe the car had automatically steered me home..." (p.273). This incident occurred shortly after Eartha Mae's daughter, Kitt, was married. Eartha Mae experienced this as abandonment by her daughter and was very distraught. To avoid missing anymore shows at the club, she had a limousine drive her to and from work and as she said, "...I went on with my life with no one the wiser" (p.274). There are ways to cover up and compensate for multiplicity, and people with dissociative disorders are very creative in the methods they employ.
Besides Eartha Mae and Eartha Kitt, I believe Eartha Mae Kitt has other "alters". I believe she has one that could be called "the zombie" and this is the "alter" that experiences most of the depersonalization. Another possible "alter" is "the subconscious devil" (p.275) that perhaps intimidates her when she get panicky about her upcoming performance. She probably has an "alter" that represents her mother because immediately after her mother dies she felt her presence over her (p.23). A diagnosis of dissociative disorder not otherwise specified (with accompanying depersonalization) is appropriate for Eartha Mae Kitt with the real possibility that she has multiple personality disorder. At times, she may have also had a somatization disorder because she was very ill and the symptoms could not be explained medically, but perhaps this was the result of an eating disorder. Lastly, Eartha Mae Kitt probably also qualifies for the diagnosis of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) which should probably be listed under dissociative disorders, rather than the anxiety disorders. An example of one of her flashbacks was at her daughter's wedding: "...When I had to step aside on the arm of the father-in-law-to-be I almost screamed. The vision of my mother came to me as I saw her on the arms of the man she walked off with, leaving me in the yard of the family she gave me to" (p.269).

DIAGNOSIS

Axis I. Dissociative disorder not otherwise specified (DDNOS) with accompanying depersonalization, and Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Multiple personality disorder (MPD), Somatoform disorder, and Eating disorders deserves serious consideration.

Axis II. Mixed personality disorders (this is a "given" with the above diagnosis.)

REFERENCES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Update on Ms. Eartha Kitt: On Monday, August 14, 1995, Ms. Kitt appeared as a guest on a talk show, "Mike & Maty", to perform a song from her recently released CD, "Back in Business". She sounded great and lived up to her reputation as a diva! She did several of her famed Catwoman "purrs". I hope someone does a movie about her life before she's no longer with us: she'd appreciate the positive strokes.

A couple days later, I went out and bought her CD and it's great! It's available through DRG Records Inc., 130 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019; (212) 265-4050 / Fax (212) 459-9437

"Back in Business" by Eartha Kitt, (1994) DRG Records Inc.

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For this post, Eartha Kitt, the eternal getter and doer of. She has three autobiographies. They are Alone with Me, Confessions of a Sex Kitten, and Rejuvenate. Ladies, this was the lesson we should've all gotten when we was little. When we was told that the little booger who ate his boogers made fun of you and people told you IT meant he liked you! Kitt had a very hard childhood, it was known that her father left before she knew him and her step-father, realizing she was mixed race didn't want to take care of her. She later lived an aunt who kicked her out of her home. With this, Kitt had to start supporting herself doing lots of service jobs until she bumped into the legendary choreographer Katherine Dunham at just 16. Eartha Mae Kitt, American Actress, singer. Named Woman of Year National Association Negro Musicians, 1968; nominated 2 Grammys, 2 Tony awards, 1 Emmy. Kit's autobiography Confessions of a Sex Kitten describes becoming increasingly frustrated as the luncheon continued.