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**We are threatened with suffering from
three directions: from our own body,
which is doomed to decay and dissolution ... ;
from the external world, which may rage
against us with overwhelming and merciless
forces of destruction; and finally from
our relations to other men. The suffering
which comes from this last source is
perhaps more painful to us than any other.**

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*



Illustration by Sarah-Jane Crowson

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ON THE COVER: The cover image, *O Hidden Below* by Austin Hughes, once again depicts *TAP*'s hallmark heroine Anna O. and her pet wolf, Wolfman. It's a journey into iceberg territory, with several Annas fearlessly plunging downward to discover what lies beneath the mind's horizon, beyond awareness.

THIS PAGE: Illustration by Virgil Ratner

TAP THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYST

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Managing Editor
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Art Director
AUSTIN HUGHES

Design Director
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THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ASSOCIATION

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Psychoanalysis teaches us that what forms an indelible part of history, but is not able to be brought into consciousness, often breaks out into the open in the form of action. This makes all discussions about racism highly vulnerable to enactment.

—Final Report of the Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in American Psychoanalysis

EDITOR'S LETTER

Beyond Immolation and Infighting

WALK THROUGH Brooklyn Bridge Park on a summer Sunday and you see people with dark skin and people with light skin and every shade in between. The Statue of Liberty stands out there behind them in the Harbor, overseeing the melting pot she's helped create and fill. You hear Spanish, English, Chinese, and languages you don't recognize. You see women in hijabs, in spandex, and in saris. Everybody eats the same ice cream. Everybody's children play in roughly the same way, running ahead of their parents. I've wanted these first two issues of the new *TAP* to be like Brooklyn Bridge Park—diverse and unifying, full of life. Psychoanalysis, the science of feelings and experience, is about what is both unifying and diverse in us. Feelings are universal, but our experiences and sensitivities differ.

That was obvious in the fighting that erupted in APsA this spring, the climax of an upsetting conflict *The Guardian* described as a “war tearing psychoanalysis apart.” Reproaches and outrage led to a cascade of resignations. The task of publishing a tapestry of harmonious diversity suddenly looks a lot more complicated.

Diversity takes work. The Holmes Commission did some of that critically important work in a Final Report that looks through the periscope of psychoanalytic reason into a sea of tempestuous feelings churned up by deep currents of racism. From the decks of a vessel itself submerged in those waters, the Report explains why psychoanalysis is indispensable to the elucidation and solution of unconscious systemic racism. For

one thing, the field holds the key to unlocking the defenses that prevent us from identifying unconscious racism and talking it out. In one of many rhetorically powerful passages, the Holmes Report offers this gateway to a psychoanalytic understanding of systemic racism and the obstacles to seeing it and stopping it:

Because the deep and difficult emotional work of healing has been unequal to the wound of racism, in our country and in psychoanalysis itself, many of the thoughts, feelings, processes, procedures, and organizational structures that surround and sustain racism have been pushed out of consciousness into the personal unconscious of individuals or the social unconscious of groups and institutions. As analysts we believe, as Freud did, that what resides in unconsciousness constantly pushes up towards awareness, while contravening forces attempt to keep these unpleasant and intolerable contents hidden. Psychoanalysis teaches us that what forms an indelible part of history, but is not able to be brought into consciousness, often breaks out into the open in the form of action. This makes all discussions about racism highly vulnerable to enactment.

In this issue of *TAP*, I interview Phillipe Copeland, an African American professor of social work at Boston University, a writer on “racism denial,” and an educator at the Center for Antiracist Research. We talked a bit about “the war tearing psychoanalysis apart” in what he and I agreed was an “uplifting conversation.” He said, “Feelings and facts are not the same thing. . . . Our emotional reactions by definition aren’t necessarily rational. That doesn’t mean that they’re wrong, but . . . to deal with [emotional reactions is] not just about trying to figure out who was right in a purely factual sense.” Also in this issue, former president of APsA Bill Glover invokes the concept of “the subaltern” to help us understand the sensitivities manifest in the organization’s recent imbroglio.

The Holmes Report delineates practical remedies to stop the perpetuation of racism, beginning with psychoanalytic institutions themselves, and it models the core competency that’s needed for such work: the ability to talk about *the feelings*. All of them. Black feelings and White feelings and all the colors in between. Race workers outside of the field, take note; the Holmes Report offers fresh psychoanalytic approaches to the problem of racism.

One wonders to what extent a fear of annihilation played into the spring fighting in APsA. Psychoanalytic knowledge can be threatening and trigger defense mechanisms. Because of the vulnerability of this knowledge to repression, I have often argued, psychoanalysts are plagued by

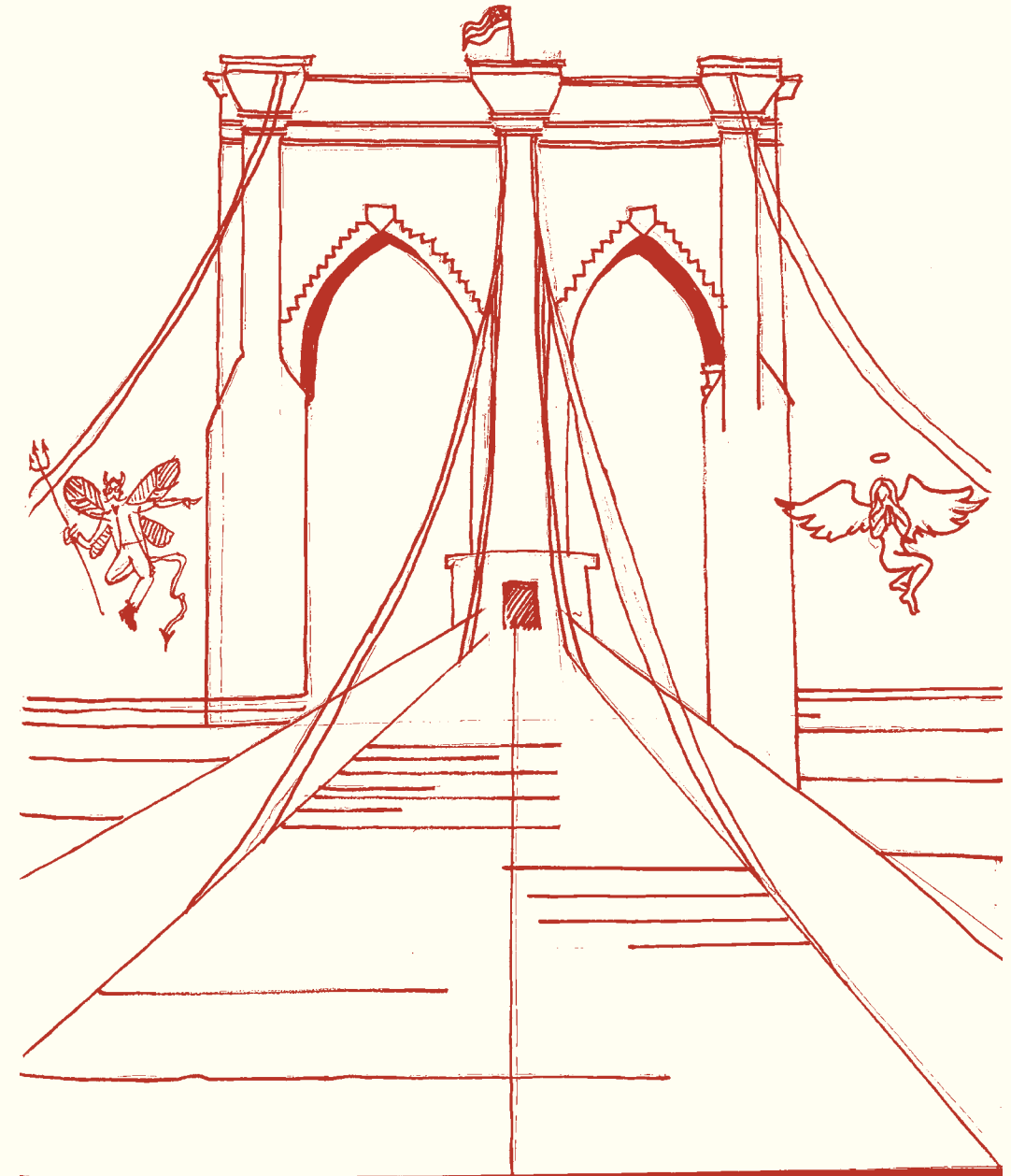
a chronic fear of erasure, and have long ostracized their own “dissidents” to protect their idea of what psychoanalysis should be. Freud was not immune to this dynamic and neither are we.

Death anxiety is a theme of this issue of *TAP*. In this edition’s Spotlight on Research, Sheldon Solomon, professor of psychology at Skidmore College, talks about the decades of research he and his colleagues have conducted on death anxiety and its attendant defense mechanisms. Their research has provided a significant source of twenty-first-century scientific validation for the Freudian theory of unconscious defenses. And it’s given rise to a kind of corollary of psychoanalytic defense theory called Terror Management Theory, which has begun to be applied to end-of-life care and in public health settings. Psychoanalyst Elisa Cheng, meanwhile, writes more intimately and personally on death anxiety in the context of parenting and psychotherapy, and *TAP*’s managing editor and in-house philosopher Lucas McGranahan reminds us of the benefits of ephemerality when it comes to suffering—“this too shall pass”—in a fascinating essay on the cross-connections between Buddhist meditation and psychoanalysis.

In Arts and Culture, *TAP* continues to expand its retinue of professional writers and artists to help spur renewed interest in psychoanalysis. Matt Gross, former author of the *New York Times* Frugal Traveler column, writes on the masochism of chili peppers, and Craig Harshaw explores the varieties of male masochism in cinema; Chukwudi Iwuji, one of the stars of the latest installment of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, helps us dig into the psychology of the supervillain; and Mitch Moxley, former executive editor of *Maxim*, explores themes uncovered in his psychoanalysis that he’s applied in the writing of a play about the late Anthony Bourdain, with whom he worked. Vera Camden, psychoanalyst and literature professor, and her colleague Valentino Zullo, literature professor and analytic candidate, share an essay that not only elucidates self-conscious moments of storytelling in Homer’s *Odyssey*, but demonstrates that psychoanalytic psychotherapy is, in part, a literary method in which patients hear their own life stories narrated back to them in a form that engenders self-sympathy.

In *Stories from Life*, poet Malcolm Farley writes movingly about the failure of his psychoanalyst to appreciate the social context of his teenage woes back in the 1980s—he was badly bullied for being gay—and psychoanalyst John Burton offers an empathic commentary.

As I’ve said, and will keep saying, I hope these offerings bring more positive public attention to psychoanalysis. People need psychoanalytic wisdom. They need psychoanalysis to think things out clearly before intense emotions electrify into destructive action. They need help to heal wounds of the past, to stop defensively hurting each other in the present, to take care of the future with “clear eyes and full hearts” as Coach Taylor used to say on *Friday Night Lights*. We need



psychoanalysis to care for our vulnerable children and our vulnerable planet.

I admit it saps my own morale for the cause when I see psychoanalysts with so much to offer the world transfixed by the ever-smoldering brushfires of committees that nobody outside of the field has heard of. It’s dispiriting to see mental health professionals overrun by their own sensitivities and feelings to the point of shunning their own friends and allies. Perhaps the stresses of containing their patients’ emotions every day take a toll on their peer interactions. My God, that listserv! The APsA listserv is a tinderbox where psychoanalysts seem to enjoy lighting themselves on fire like a Buddhist monk at a Saigon intersection. What is the point? The Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức who actually did that sixty years ago this summer did it to draw international attention to oppression, while the listserv immolations are conducted in obscurity, apparently to

spite a handful of other psychoanalysts.

If you are bored of the immolations and the infighting and want to get behind the agenda of the new *TAP* to advance the standing of psychoanalysis in the world, please consider a donation of any size. Our small team is working overtime at “low-bono” prices because it’s for a good cause, but we can’t meet our high standards of content and design without financial support.

Join us! The real fight is out there. “Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose!” ■

Austin Ratner

AUSTIN RATNER

P.S. Our website is now live at theamericanpsychoanalyst.org!

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VALIDATING ERNEST BECKER'S THEORY OF THE DENIAL OF DEATH

An interview with Sheldon Solomon

Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel said a little over twenty years ago that “psychoanalysis still represents the most coherent and intellectually satisfying view of the mind.” Since then, a vast body of research has accumulated in support of Freud’s core theories. One significant source of validation has come from the work of social psychologist Sheldon Solomon and his colleagues, who have spent decades conducting experiments on death anxiety and the defenses that keep it out of consciousness. *TAP* editor in chief Austin Ratner spoke with Solomon in the spring of 2023 about his work, psychoanalysis, and matters from the sacred to the profane. Solomon is professor of psychology at Skidmore College and author of over 150 scientific papers, as well as the popular psychology book *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (Random House, 2015). Talking with him, Ratner says, is a little like communing with the ghosts of Socrates and comedian George Carlin at the same time.

“I realized, wait a minute, these depictions of Freud in academic psychology are ludicrous. They focus on the things that he says that I agreed are generally quite absurd while ignoring what I thought was the extraordinary profundity.”

Illustrations by Virgil Ratner

AUSTIN RATNER: I wondered if there was anything personal about death and death anxiety for you that drew you to this sort of line of inquiry in your professional work.

I remember in the evening I was just going through my stamp collection and in the old days all the stamps had American presidents. And I'm like, "Oh, here's George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Madison, whatever. Oh, wow, those guys are no longer here." And then I'm like, "Oh, and my grandma's no longer here." And then I'm like, "Wait a minute. Let's fast forward a bit. That means my mom is gonna get old at some point and then where's the spaghetti and chocolate pudding gonna come from?"

Fast forward. I get through college and graduate school, and it is literally my first week as a professor at Skidmore College where I was supposed to teach personality theory that I had no background in. So I'm like, "Oh, let me start with Freud. I'm told he's got some stuff to say." And at the Skidmore Library, Ernest Becker's books are right next to Freud's. And I see Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* and *The Denial of Death* sitting right next to each other.

What I was trained to do in graduate school had little to do with any of these ideas. I read Becker, at the same time I'm reading Freud's *Introductory Lectures*, and I'm just astonished. I realized, wait a minute, these depictions of Freud in academic psychology are ludicrous. They focus on the things that he says that I agreed are generally quite absurd while ignoring what I thought was the extraordinary profundity. I see [Freud



AR: You came to these ideas and then did decades of the hands-on, really hard, dirty work of getting funding for experiments, doing the experiments, rounding up the test subjects, developing a methodology that didn't exist before for testing all these things and then marshalling evidence that could be presented in a persuasive way to other people. It's a Herculean undertaking that you put on your shoulders. And now all these years later, your work is an "immortality project." You kind of pulled it off!

So we started giving talks and we annoyed every famous psychologist of yesteryear. I would start talking, I'd mention Freud, people would start walking out. I'd mention the word *theory*, people would start walking out. The point is that no one was interested. They're like, "I never think about death, so Becker's gotta be wrong." We wrote a paper for the *American Psychologist* that was rejected with a single sentence review: "I have no doubt that these ideas are of no interest whatsoever to any psychologist alive or dead." That same paper was rejected at every psychology journal on earth. It took almost ten years to publish.

We think we've been an interesting interneuron of sorts that has connected the psychodynamic with the experimental community. And I do like the thought that there may be some downstream ripples based on that work. Having said that though, the older I get, I desperately yearn to get to the point where I am just as pleased when I wake up on a fine day and walk the dog



“BECKER SAYS THAT THE UNIQUELY HUMAN AWARENESS OF DEATH AND OUR DISINCLINATION TO ACCEPT THE REALITY OF THE HUMAN CONDITION UNDERLIE A SUBSTANTIAL PROPORTION OF HUMAN ACTIVITY—AND THAT WAS A THUNDERBOLT TO MY FOREBRAIN.”

RESEARCH

around the block. We’ve planted all kinds of fruit trees around our house in what I call the Apocalypse Fruit Grove, and I’m not scratching my name on any of the trees, but I sincerely hope that they will be bearing fruit for anyone when I’m no longer around. And so I do like the idea of immortality projects—that all of us have a yearning to express ourselves creatively and uniquely—but I’m also interested in broadening the scope of what matters, because I think we live in a difficult time right now in our culture where we unfortunately teach our kids that the only thing worth doing is what you’re great at. And if you’re not the best at what you do, you’re a failure.

We also opened a little restaurant. When you’re up in Saratoga, we’ll have a snack there. I’m just as pleased to be associated with good food as good ideas.

PRACTICAL IMPACT OF TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

AR: I wondered if you could just comment a little bit on the reception of the work and some of the places where you see it having had effects on other researchers.

SS: It took almost a decade to publish our first theoretical paper, and that was after we had already published empirical studies. And even the empirical studies took a long time. Finally, an editor of a journal said, “I don’t agree with you guys, but I cannot explain the finding of your experiments without assuming that there’s some merit to your rather bold claims.”

We were brash, we were young. My first two talks as a psychologist were “Why Does America Cause Mental Illness?” and “The Psychopathology of Social Psychology.” I said, “Why is it that social psychologists don’t study anything interesting or important?” And my point is that we put the methodological cart before the theoretical horse. In other words, we tend to limit what we study by the available laboratory paradigms. And I was like, “Fuck that. Why don’t we start with the question and, if need be, develop the paradigms that will enable us to explore them?”

So we were annoying at first, in part because the 1980s was also a time when psychologists were moving away from big, broad theories and focusing on little microscopic detail. We wrote a lot about why we disagree with that approach using a little-known guy, Einstein, the physicist who pointed out that facts mean nothing without the theoretical formulation. So we were annoying because we were advocates for a motivationally based, broad theory when psychology was talking about microscopic cognitive approaches.

And then we’re like, “Yeah, your fear of death determines or influences everything, even if you’re unaware of it.” Again, the dominant response is, “I’m not afraid of death and therefore your ideas are wrong.” Even when we started producing evidence, people were not particularly engaged. It was only when other theorists started to jump in to (a) replicate our findings and (b) more importantly, extend them. A group of Israeli psychologists—Mario Mikulincer, Gilad Hirschberger, and Victor Florian—connected, theoretically and empirically, attachment theory with terror management theory. That added a developmental twist.

To make a short story long, it took about twenty years. But over that time, we gradually became incorporated into academic psychology. You’re part of the mob, like it or not, when there’s a GRE question about your work. And then we got a little plaque from the American Psychological Association. It was very cool because on one side of us was Daniel Kahneman, and he’s won a Nobel Prize—he got a bigger plaque, and that’s right—and on the other side was Claude Steele, a famous African American psychologist who developed the concept of stereotype threat.

So, we went from basically homeless janitors to legitimate academic psychologists in two or three decades. I’d like to think that we had a little bit to do with establishing the idea that you can ponder existential questions from an experimental point of view.

I think terror management theory is in an interesting moment because it is getting much more widely known outside of academic psychology. There’s a communications program at James Madison University based on using terror management theory—what does that imply about how we communicate? There are other folks that have developed a health model of terror management theory. I’m delighted to be talking to you and other psychoanalysts. Two weeks ago I was in Japan talking to a group of palliative care oncologists, and so our work has now moved into clinical circles. Death anxiety is now being described as a trans-diagnostic construct that underlies or amplifies all psychological malaise. The people in sustainability programs are like, “Hey, we’re never going to get at taking care of the environment unless we understand the role of death anxiety in destroying it.” There’s a large literature showing how intimations of mortality influence the outcomes of judges’ and juries’ deliberation. A lot of economists are recognizing that we don’t cling to money for rational means so much as it is a thinly veiled immortality symbol. Political scientists are actively engaged with us as a result of our work, demonstrating that the appeal of populist demagogues is very much a result of existential anxieties.

PROXIMAL AND DISTAL DEFENSES

AR: The notion of proximal and distal defenses is a nomenclature that is not really used in psychoanalysis that seems very useful.

SS: It's not anything familiar to psychoanalysts—or in fact to us at the time. I want to put in a plea for why science is important. It's not only to corroborate the merits of an idea. We started terror management theory research to just see if Becker was on the right track when he said that concerns about mortality make us embrace our particular cultural worldview. It was in trying to figure out why our studies sometimes worked or didn't work that we realized that it matters whether you know you're thinking about death or not. And so if I say to somebody, "Hey, tell me your thoughts and feelings about the fact that you're gonna die," whatever you say thereafter, death is immediately on your mind. What we have found is that that automatically instigates a process to banish death thoughts. We call it, "not me, not now." If somebody says to me, "You know you're standing in the road and there's a truck coming at you," well, I could move out of the way. That would be a proximal defense. Or if somebody says, "Hey, there is a pandemic coming in." And you'll be like, "Well, I'm going to make an appointment and get vaccinated." That's a rational proximal defense. On the other hand, if we were in my office, I could push a button and the word "death" would be flashed on the computer screen for 28 milliseconds—so fast that you wouldn't know that you've been exposed to it. Well, that instigates a completely different set of responses that are more geared towards maintaining self-esteem and confidence in one's belief systems.

Let me give you an example. If you tell somebody in Florida that they're gonna die, and then you say it's a bad idea to go outside in the sun because you might get skin cancer, and then you just ask people, "When you go to the beach next, how long are you going to lay out and how much sunscreen are you going to use?" people say, "I'm gonna use more sunscreen, and I'm gonna stay out on the beach less." That's a proximal defense to ward off death anxiety. But if I blasted you subliminally with the word "death" so you didn't know that you were thinking about it, people whose self-esteem is based on their appearance—because for White people at least, ironically, being tan is beautiful—they say they're gonna be there longer and they're gonna use less sunscreen because now it's a defensive response to boost your self-esteem because brown or bronze is beautiful.

This is what we feel to be a major theoretical and empirical extrapolation that extends our understanding of these phenomena way beyond what Becker and other theorists ever proposed. Of course, we've known conscious and unconscious—everyone makes that distinction—but what this work demonstrates is that they are qualitatively distinct defensive processes that unfold in an orderly temporal progression as a function of the degree to which you're aware that death is on your mind. And we think that's been a big addition above and beyond just saying, "Oh, Becker's right here and he's right there."

AR: So, proximal defenses push death anxiety out of consciousness. Distal defenses are unconscious. They are more irrational and more emotional and are designed to keep death unconscious.

SS: You have it exactly right. To me, any psychoanalyst should be delirious to look at this work.

DENIAL AT THE CROSSROADS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

AR: I look around at what I sometimes refer to as an urban legend that Freud has been completely discredited. And then I look at your work and how much data it presents in support of the notion of defenses, one of the pillars of psychoanalytic thought. It just seems to me extremely important that people know about this branch of the evidence base for defense mechanisms.

SS: No one denies right now that we are very likely at the crossroads of human existence. And yet I see very little reference in popular discourse to this very existential psychodynamic historical approach, without which I think you can understand almost nothing. Not saying that these ideas by themselves will suffice, but to pretend that what's happening now—the fascism, the xenophobia, the psychological disassociation, this pervasive dis-ease—to not see that as a massive individual as well as collective defensive reaction to literally being marinated in existential anxieties, it's anal-cranial fusion. It is a denial of the one point that we should be starting with as the foundation for an understanding of our present concerns. ■

This interview has been edited and condensed. The audio of the interview is available with this story on our website.





HOT STUFF

Sometimes a chili pepper is not just a chili pepper

BY MATT GROSS

Illustrations by Austin Hughes

PICTURE THIS: One Saturday morning in the mid-1980s, a ten-year-old boy and his mother are roaming the weekly farmers' market in a college town in western Massachusetts. It's the end of September, and the stalls are overflowing with the bounty of the Pioneer Valley: stacks of late-season sweet corn, piles of tomatoes, watermelons almost as heavy as the fifth-grader himself. The boy's attention is caught, however, by a display of cherry peppers—deep-dark red, squat and round, somehow both shiny and dull, and, he suspects, spicy. Spicy: he knows what that means, yet he doesn't know. He's eaten Indian food with his parents—chicken tikka was a favorite—and maybe that was in some way spicy, but this little fruit right here, he knows, is something else. He picks one up and looks at the farmer manning the stand. The farmer nods. The boy chomps in without hesitation (where is his mother, anyway?), and his mouth explodes. Never has he felt pain like this. This is no skinned knee, no vaccination. This is electric, unfiltered, *living* pain that hums and vibrates and will not let go until, minutes later, it crests and relents and recedes into a muted throb, then a memory. And yet—the boy is alive! Undamaged! Oddly joyful! He has faced this danger, let it have its way with him, and emerged not just unscathed but stronger. Through this trial by fire, a chilihead has been born.

This is, you've surely guessed, my own origin story as a lover of spicy foods, and I've told it so many times that it now takes some effort to fully recall the sensations and not just produce the words that describe them. But those sensations *are* still there in my memory, and the tale is as true as any we tell of our childhoods: I ate my first chili pepper, it hurt, I survived, and I decided I liked the experience enough to

repeat it—enough that today I am, I suppose, an expert on chili peppers (genus *Capsicum*). I grow peppers in my Brooklyn backyard; I make my own hot sauce, chili oil, kimchi; I help judge hot sauce competitions; I have roamed the world, from the Caribbean to Hungary to Thailand to China and beyond, in search of spicy foods; I've written dozens of articles about all of these things; and one of these days, I'll produce a book about the post-1492 history of chili peppers. All because of that one day when I was ten.

Of course, that's an insane oversimplification. For one thing, I have no further memory of spicy food until I was sixteen. Maybe there was spicy food in our household, maybe there wasn't. If so, it meant nothing to me, the pain and elation of that first experience forgotten entirely—or maybe pushed aside by other adolescent experiences? For much of my teenage years, I was a skateboarder, and the topography of wounds across my shins and the rainbow of bruises on my hips testified to a new relationship with willingly embraced pain. Who needs habaneros when you have asphalt? Still, I remember hot sauces in the pantry: Tiger Sauce, Melinda's. I remember a fiery larb at a Thai restaurant, jalapeño slices served with phở at a Vietnamese place.

Those memories are there, but they don't feel significant. I know that when I began to cook for myself, during college, I made a lot of Southeast Asian food, so I must have been eating spice. But no sense memory leaps out at me. When I graduated, I moved to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where every meal could be supplemented with finely chopped red chilies or a spoonful of garlicky, vinegary hot sauce. Yet heat is not at the core of my memories there. Loneliness, sexual frustration, existential angst, but not the pain I now seek out.



Still, something must have been evolving through my early adulthood. In my mid-twenties, on a vacation to Mexico with the woman who is now my wife, I conjured up the Spanish to ask a resort waiter, “Tiene una salsa más picante?” A few years later, I was the copy editor who kept a green-capped bottle of Sriracha on my desk for lunches and late closes at *New York Magazine*. Perhaps whatever had awakened within me at age ten had gone latent and was starting to reemerge. Perhaps every birth requires a rebirth?

Or perhaps this is all just ... normal. In the many countries and cultures I’ve visited where chilies are a fundamental part of the cuisine, you rarely hear origin stories such as mine. Food can be more spicy or less spicy. That’s just the way it is, and if you live in Chongqing or Mumbai, it’s a fact you must deal with from

an early age. Most likely, you’ll fall into the category of “Eats some level of spice,” alongside everyone

In Indonesia, a man who worked in advertising told me he’d noticed the word “Pedas!” (“Spicy!”) increasingly emblazoned on bags of snack chips—a brand-new way to market in a country where sambal, or hot sauce, is a de facto feature of nearly every meal.

(There’s a whole gender thing to go into here as well: a 2015 study found that men tend to like spicy foods for social/status reasons, while women like chilies because of how they taste/feel. In Sichuan province, the spiciest thing I ate was málà rabbit heads—really just pure fire. Later I found out this was considered a “ladies’ snack” because it was all about plucking the delicate shreds of meat from the rabbit skull.)

On one level, this is just late-stage capitalism, but it’s also something more interesting: the realization that what is utterly normal for you—as a country, a culture, an individual—is not actually a universal experience. In fact, it’s unique in its contours, its history, its expression. It’s part of what makes you you.

And so maybe that was what was going on with me for

wandered through the convention, people kept coming up to me, congratulating me on my performance, for having the guts, the literal guts, to even attempt such masochism.

This was not something I was used to: the approval of a crowd. And I’d earned it not by doing something extraordinary but by just being myself, only more so. I had embraced the person I’d been becoming since I was ten, and—in transforming my masochism from private and personal to public and performative—started to figure out what made me different from everyone else: I’m not just willing to suffer, to embrace my suffering, and to share my suffering—I’ve got an unusual level of *comfort* with it. It’s been with me forever. It’s my soft old T-shirt. It’s my theme song.

Frankly, it’s not such a big difference: we each inflict upon ourselves a certain amount of pain, intentionally or otherwise, and we each decide, intentionally or otherwise, what level we can stand and eventually find our own level of tolerance for the pain. Just because your level is low does not mean you’re not a masochist. We are *all* masochists to some degree, and the

Masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self.

—Sigmund Freud

“I’m not just willing to suffer, to embrace my suffering, and to share my suffering—I’ve got an unusual level of comfort with it. It’s been with me forever.”

else, and never even think about it until some White, Western journalist asks you.

That’s not to say there’s no variation or self-awareness in spicy-food countries. In Thailand, people debate which regional cuisine is spicier: the northeast, where you order papaya salad by saying how many chilies to pound it with, or the south, whose sour, soupy curries are known for their long, lingering burn. In Jamaica, older men sometimes carry Scotch bonnet peppers in their pockets, to slice up and add to any meal they happen to encounter—this is seen by younger people as cute, maybe a cliché, but also a little over-the-top, spice-wise. And nearly every country has symbolized chilies to some extent, with proverbs like this Brazilian one: *Passarinho que come pimenta sabe o cu que tem*. The bird that eats peppers knows its own ass. In other words, actions have consequences.

Other countries, meanwhile, have started capitalizing on what was, until recently, their unremarked-upon love of chilies. Chili pepper festivals have taken off in China, from Beijing to Hunan Province, complete with pepper-eating competitions and viral images of people sitting in pools filled with chilies.

nearly three decades: I liked spicy food more than most people, but did not understand to what degree, and therefore it didn’t *mean* anything to me. That changed, I think I can say, in 2013, when I took the stage at a hot sauce convention to compete in a Guinness World Record attempt to speed-eat three Carolina Reaper chilies, which are about 500 to 1,000 times spicier than a jalapeño—that is, they are the world’s hottest peppers. I was one of about a dozen contestants (mostly but not entirely male), and the only one to announce to the audience of 300 that I was going to try to really enjoy the flavor.

That was incorrect. I did not enjoy the flavor. I didn’t have time. I chewed, swallowed, chewed, swallowed, chewed, swallowed—finishing in just under 22 seconds, last place. For another 60 seconds I had to wait onstage, to make sure I didn’t vomit, and during that minute, the burn set in. My throat swelled, sweat beaded across my face. My ears popped. I craved milk—its protein casein counteracts the capsaicin in chilies—but I’m lactose-intolerant, so once I left the stage I drank water and just tried to wait out the most intense chili pain I’d ever experienced. After 15 awful minutes, that pain subsided, as I knew it would, and the endorphins kicked in. I felt great, *ass-kickingly fucking great*, and not just for psychophysiological reasons: as I

chili peppers have simply helped me to pinpoint my personal degree.

Or maybe that’s just what I’m saying now, at this particular point in my life, having told this Carolina Reaper tale enough times that its visceral memory exists mostly as words. Well, mostly but not entirely. Because I can recall all too well the blazing pain that, an hour after the contest, gripped the core of my being and would not let go. It wracked my body as I stumbled through Penn Station, as I squirmed on the subway home, as I walked my leafy Brooklyn neighborhood, and as I lay moaning in bed all night—until, in an epiphany I won’t soon forget, I realized I had heartburn, drank a glass of water mixed with baking soda, and felt near-instantaneous relief. As they say in Malaysia, *Siapa makan cili dia terasa pedas*. He who eats chili gets burned. Actions have consequences. And mostly they’re worth it. ■

Matt Gross has been the New York Times’ Frugal Traveler (2006–10) and editor of BonAppetit.com, Boston.com, and Realtor.com. He is the author of The Turk Who Loved Apples: And Other Tales of Losing My Way Around the World.



TRUE GRIT

In the 1969 western *True Grit*, macho-man John Wayne plays an eyepatch-sporting “greasy vagabond” named Rooster Cogburn, hired by young Mattie Ross to avenge her father’s murder. Cogburn is unfit for polite society and eschews its comforts, which makes him an unlikely partner for Mattie, but also makes him the right man for the job. “They say he has grit,” Mattie explains. “I wanted a man with grit.” Along the way, she displays a lot of her own grit, proving that girls can be as tough as boys.

Freud was ahead of his time in imagining that an individual psyche might blend culturally “masculine” and “feminine” traits. He characterized masochism as “feminine,” whether it was present in a male or a female. Was that correlation too simple an assessment of traditional gender norms? Even in the nineteenth century, femininity could be fierce; think of Martha Freud shaming the Gestapo officers who entered her home and disturbed her linens. Likewise, what is traditionally macho includes ascetic habits and a performative love of pain, whether in John Wayne’s turn as Rooster Cogburn or a contest to see who can withstand eating the spiciest chili pepper.

Next, Craig Harshaw explores the spectrum of cinematic approaches to male masochism in his article “Cut”—ed.

Illustration by xfx

Great

MALE MASOCHISM
IN EIGHT CINEMATIC
DOUBLE-FEATURES

BY CRAIG HARSHAW

Illustrations by Austin Hughes

Why do we seek out pain, and how does the pursuit differ in men and women? Filmmakers around the globe have mined for the answers. Here are eight double features with male protagonists who just can't get enough pain, punishment, and self-destruction.



The Blue Angel (Josef von Sternberg, Germany, 1930)
Fox and His Friends (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, West Germany, 1975)

Two German films that show men being ripped apart by their own romantic delusions. In Sternberg's classic film, the erotic nightclub singer Lola (Marlene Dietrich) destabilizes a bourgeois academic's (Emil Jannings) conservative life, while in Fassbinder's a bourgeois playboy named Eugen (Peter Chatel) sweeps into the life of a working-class carnival worker (Fassbinder) who wins a major lottery and manages to drain him of his newly found economic resources as well as any level of self-respect he once had. Both films deftly explore their protagonist's perverse attraction to their own social degradation. Both protagonists know from the beginning that their infatuation will bring about their ultimate downfall—and yet this very fact makes them all the more obsessive in their romantic longing.

Devdas (Bimal Roy, India, 1955)
Shampoo (Hal Ashby, USA, 1975)

In the Bollywood classic *Devdas* the titular character (Dilip Kumar) is forced by his family to forsake the woman of his dreams because of her lower-class background and bitterly turns to alcohol as a form of passive suicide. In Hal Ashby's political satire *Shampoo* Warren Beatty plays George, a popular LA hairdresser who everyone assumes is gay, giving him the ability to bed his married clients (played by, among others, Goldie Hawn, Julie Christie, Lee Grant, and Carrie Fisher). Social class plays a key role in both films: Devdas forsakes his love because he wants to remain wealthy; and George's class status forecloses the possibility of ever having a public relationship with the women he has sex with. Both Devdas and George are also attracted to perverse levels of risk taking—an unconscious form of self-undermining. George, for example, sleeps with the wife, the mistress, and the daughter of a man he desperately needs financial support from. Devdas's mercurial shifts in strategy—from writing a letter to his forbidden love Paro telling her he never had more than platonic feelings for her to then showing up at her door saying he is burning with romantic love—suggest he may be as much in love with his own self-image as the tragic lover as he is with her.



Noir et Blanc (Claire Devers, France, 1986)
Jungle Fever (Spike Lee, USA, 1991)

In *Noir et Blanc* Antoine (Francis Frappat) is a married accountant who gets a contract at a local gym, where he is encouraged to use the facilities including the massage services. Here he meets a muscular African immigrant masseur named Dominique (Jacques Martial) who begins to inflict real physical pain, which emotionally excites Antoine, leading to a dangerous escalation of violence during their sessions. Flipper (Wesley Snipes), the protagonist of *Jungle Fever*, cheats on his African American wife with his younger White secretary (Annabella Sciorra), endangering his relationship with his children, his wife, his family, and in some ways his entire community. In both cases, taboo interracial desire attracts the protagonists to their romantic object. Antoine and Flipper seem more attracted to the political danger of their relationships than they are to the individuals who ignite this danger.

Reflections in a Golden Eye (John Huston, USA, 1967)
The Paperboy (Lee Daniels, USA, 2012)

Freely adapted from acclaimed novels, these two films explore masochism in the context of homosexual desire. Huston’s film, set on an Army base in 1940 in the American South, stars Marlon Brando as Major Weldon Penderton, married to the promiscuous Leonora (Elizabeth Taylor). Leonora is a sadist who taunts Weldon, often in the form of homophobic insinuations, for his failures at classically masculine tasks such as horseback riding, landscaping, and sports. Major Weldon becomes sexually infatuated with the young, free-spirited Private L. G. Williams (Robert Forster). His pained efforts to curb his homosexual longings lead to self-destructive and violent acts including attempts to ride the most dangerous horse in the military stable, engaging in punishing weight lifting, and inviting men into his home whom he correctly believes are having sexual affairs with his wife. We watch Leonora’s treatment of her husband become progressively more violent, climaxing in her beating him with a riding crop in front of all the other officers on the military base. In Lee Daniel’s subversive adaptation of Pete Dexter’s novel *The Paperboy*, Matthew McConaughey and Zac Effron play brothers in a small town in Florida in 1969. McConaughey’s character Ward, a civil rights attorney, fetishizes sexual encounters with

**The transformation
of sadism into
masochism appears to
be due to the influence
of the sense of guilt
which takes part in the
act of repression.**

—Sigmund Freud,
“A Child Is Being Beaten,” 1919

heterosexual Black men whom he asks to physically assault and verbally degrade him. Daniels’s adaptation radically changes the narrator from the younger brother to the family’s African American maid (Macy Gray) and thus allows for a deepening of the analysis of Ward’s masochistic desires. As a man from a wealthy White family in the Jim Crow era south his laudable work on behalf of racial and economic justice is tangled with his desire to be humiliated and violated.

Mikey and Nicky (Elaine May, USA, 1976)
Bullet in the Head (John Woo, Hong Kong, 1990)

These radically different buddy films depict the dangers of masochism in a world where friendship means exploitation and self-sacrifice. In May’s film, the friendship between two partners in crime (John Cassavetes and Peter Falk) necessitates self-destructive choices. Nicky calls Mikey in the middle of the night claiming that he needs him even though he suspects that Mikey might have been contracted to murder him. In fact, his love for Mikey might be tied to the danger of being betrayed. Several times Nicky directly asks Mikey if he plans to betray him and then shifts to saying “I’m only kidding”—at one point even sharing that if the situation were reversed he would certainly betray Mikey—calling to mind Jacques Derrida’s suggestion in *The Politics of Friendship* that male friendship



is a way of seeing oneself through another’s eyes based on the realization of mortality. Friendship contains dread because friends are constantly preparing to either outlive the other or to be outlived by him, an idea that is made explicit in Woo’s action thriller about a trio of close friends (Tony Leung, Jackie Cheung, and Waise Lee) who flee the police in their native Hong Kong for Saigon thinking they can become smugglers in a war zone. The three friends in Woo’s film all know that going into war torn Vietnam in 1967 is the worst possible option for their safety and security, but their love for each other creates a kind of siren’s call that makes them willing to forsake their female partners and families in order to remain the three musketeers. In both films, friendship often takes the form of cruelty, argumentation, needless risk taking, and physical violence. Each man knows that his friendships will only bring danger and tragedy, but is too wedded to the friendship to save himself.

Humpday (Lynn Shelton, USA, 2009)
Another Round (Thomas Vinterberg, Denmark, 2020)

Two films about the way male ego opens itself up to emotionally and physically dangerous levels of peer pressure. In Lynn Shelton’s brilliant comedy, two heterosexual male friends (Mark Duplass and Joshua Leonard) dare themselves to make a gay porn film together. The audience anticipates a theme of repressed homosexual desire undergirding male bonding, but neither friend really desires sexual contact with the other. Rather, they each masochistically follow through in order not to appear the weaker man. In *Another Round*, a quartet of friends in Denmark (Mads Mikkelsen, Thomas Bo Larsen, Magnus Millang, and Lars Ranthe) dare each other to remain constantly drunk while engaging in their professional and personal lives. As in Shelton’s film, Vinterberg’s suggests that none of the quartet of friends would have engaged in the experiment alone but throw themselves into it because of fear that if they didn’t their friends would judge them as cowardly.

All That Jazz (Bob Fosse, USA, 1979)
An Egyptian Story (Youssef Chahine, Egypt, 1982)

Two films directly inspired by Federico Fellini’s masterpiece *8 ½* depict two different self-destructive film/theater directors whose overwork and commitment to their art gives them a life-

threatening heart condition. Chahine nods throughout not only to Fellini but to Fosse, highlighting differences in sexualities, nationalities, and aesthetic strategies of the two men. What links them is a masochistic relationship to their own creativity. Their commitment to their art means that they will ruthlessly mine aspects of their personal and professional lives regardless of how painful this may be to themselves, their friends, their lovers, and their colleagues. While engaging in the harsh auto-critique that is a hallmark of artistic modernity, both films suggest that these men got a thrill out of the emotional danger and angry responses to their work.

Ganga Bruta (Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1933)
Holy Smoke (Jane Campion, Australia/USA, 1999)

These are two of the strangest and most troubling romantic films ever made. *Ganga Bruta* is about a man who murders his wife on their honeymoon night when he discovers she is not a virgin, gets acquitted, and then moves to another city and becomes part of a love triangle. Jane Campion’s film tells the story of a cult “deprogrammer” (Harvey Keitel) who begins to be overpowered by the young woman (Kate Winslet) he is attempting to recondition. What disturbs in both cases is that the protagonists often confuse violence with intimacy and that both directors record this confusion without sentimentalism or moralism. The men in both films seem to have a compulsive attraction to situations where they will be critiqued, resisted, ridiculed, and humiliated—an attraction resulting from the guilt they feel for having gotten away with something that they believe they should have been punished for. In *Ganga Bruta* the murder of his first wife brings shame to the protagonist, who becomes the adulterous seducer of a married woman. In Campion’s film the deprogammer wonders if he has been getting away with brainwashing people himself, as his entire career is called into question by the resistance of the young woman he is supposedly “freeing.” ■

Craig Harshaw is a performance artist, cultural critic, and theater director. He has taught or worked for Columbia College Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and MCA Chicago. He hosts DIVISIVE, a live radio broadcast exploring cultural work and politics.

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HOW I FOUND A KINDRED SPIRIT
AND CREATIVE INSPIRATION IN
ANTHONY BOURDAIN

BY MITCH MOXLEY

Illustrations by Austin Hughes



IN SEASON 8 of his CNN travel show *Parts Unknown*, Anthony Bourdain visits a psychoanalyst during a trip to Buenos Aires, a city some have called the psychoanalytic capital of the world. Lying on a couch in a dimly lit room looking up into a fisheye camera lens, the host describes a recurring dream.

“So, I had this dream again that I’ve had for as long as I can remember,” Bourdain tells his analyst-for-the-day. “I’m stuck in a vast old Victorian hotel with endless rooms and hallways trying to check out, but I can’t. I spend a lot of time in hotels, but this one is menacing because I just can’t leave it. And then there’s another part to this dream, always, where I’m trying to go home, but I can’t quite remember where that is.”

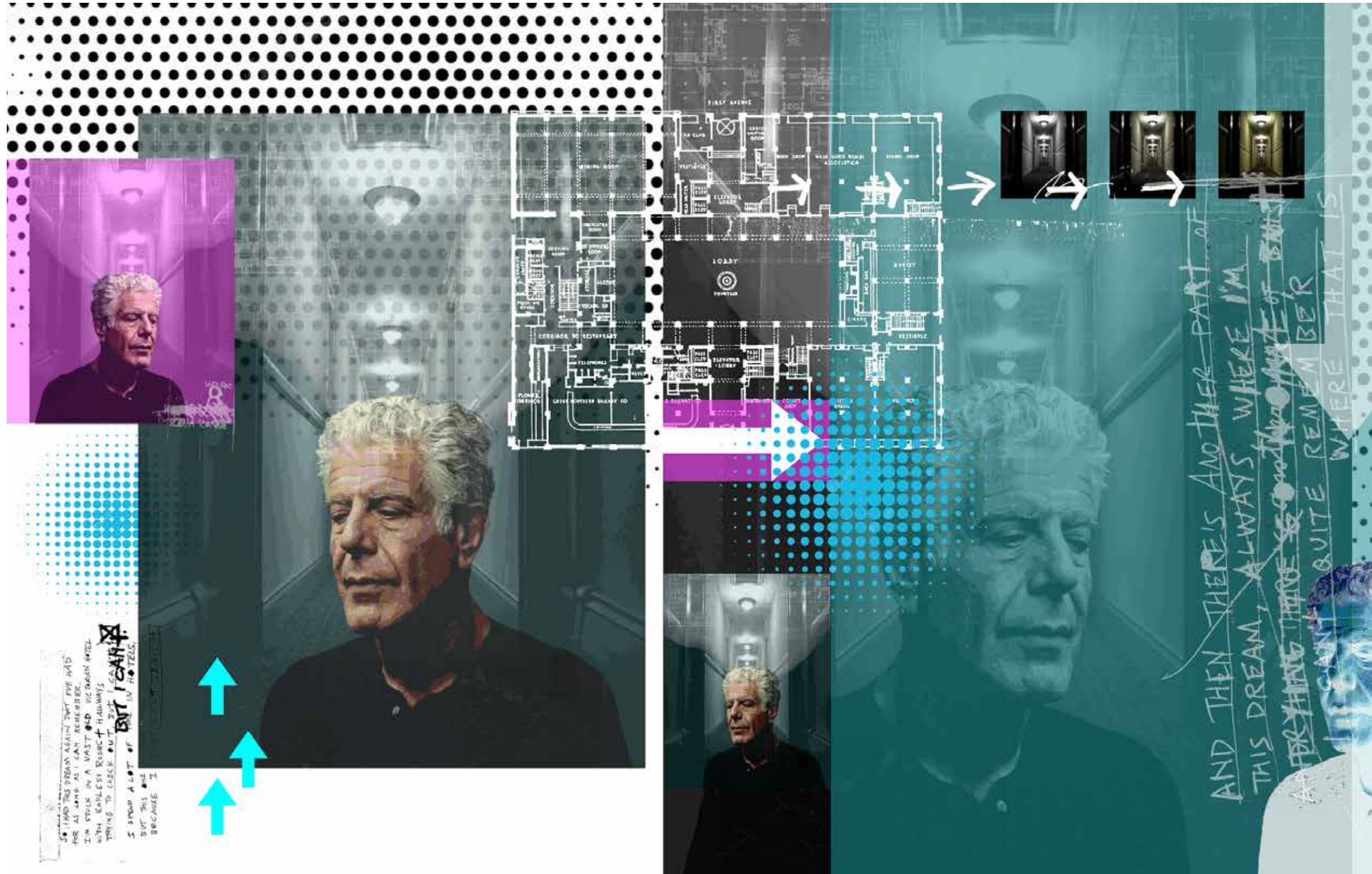
During his two decades of fame, Bourdain—an itinerant, drugged out chef; truth-telling literary oracle; rugged vagabond with a camera crew in tow—pitched himself as something of an open book and haunted figure. He described in his writing and on his shows the temptations of addiction, his failed marriages, the burdens of his life on the road—somewhere between 200 and 250 days a year living in hotel rooms—and his flirtations with suicide.

Bourdain’s approach to these struggles was to raise a glass to them, shrug them off with his dark sense of humor, and keep barreling forward despite them. On to the next flight, the next destination, the next hotel room. Privately, he was known to be skeptical of therapy, and he only began seeing a therapist in the months before the end of his life.

The dream he describes in the Buenos Aires episode carries a chilling significance now, considering the circumstances of his death. But in the show, he plays the scene as a bit of a gag. After describing the dream, he goes on, “I feel like Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame—if he stayed in a nice hotel suite with high thread count sheets, that would be me.” He also claims that eating an airport burger can throw him into a “spiral of depression,” as a whimsical soundtrack plays.

I’ve thought a lot about that episode since Bourdain’s death. Tony, as his friends called him, ended his life where he lived much of it: in a hotel room. This uncomfortable coincidence went virtually unmentioned as the tributes to his life flowed in after his suicide in Alsace, France, on June 8, 2018, less than two years after the Buenos Aires episode aired.

By then, the man who lived what for millions of fans was a fantasy life, a winning lottery ticket, was lonely and miserable.



“BOURDAIN’S

APPROACH TO THESE STRUGGLES WAS TO RAISE A GLASS TO THEM, SHRUG THEM OFF WITH HIS DARK SENSE OF HUMOR, AND TO KEEP BARRELING FORWARD DESPITE THEM.”

He was separated from his second wife and barely saw his teenage daughter. He described himself as increasingly agoraphobic, was drinking to the point of blackout, and had become impossibly ensnared in an obsessive, toxic relationship.

Bourdain, a person who seemed to know himself so well—who *we* seemed to know so well—in the end didn’t appear to know himself at all.

ALITTLE OVER a year before Bourdain died, I was invited to spend the day with him in Brooklyn for a magazine profile as he got what was likely the last tattoo of his life.

He was early that morning. He was known for that. As my Uber idled at a red light at 8:30 a.m., I could see him outside the Bushwick tattoo studio wearing an olive bomber jacket and slim jeans, alone, smoking a cigarette in the winter cold. His face was tan from his travels and clean shaven. His head looked like an Easter Island statue. His damp hair matched the gray of the cloud of smoke he exhaled. By the time the car pulled up to the curb, he was inside, ready to shoot.

Bourdain came to tattoos, like fame, in middle age, but they had become one of his defining physical characteristics, as signature as his baritone voice and his mallet of a chin. There was a skull on his shoulder, a snake on his inner arm, and the tribal arm band he got around the time *Kitchen Confidential* transformed him into an international literary star.

On this day, he was shooting an episode for a YouTube series about craftspeople sponsored by a whiskey brand. The series featured a traditional Japanese *tebori* tattoo artist who lived in Brooklyn named Takashi Matsuba. During the filming, Matsuba would use a long stick and homemade ink to poke, by hand, a pale blue chrysanthemum onto Bourdain’s shoulder, while Bourdain sipped whiskey and asked him about his work. This was Bourdain’s life: meeting interesting people, coaxing out their stories, being the curious host. Later, between sessions, I would get to interview him for my piece.

This was a special experience for me. When I moved to New York in 2013, I became the features editor at *Roads & Kingdoms*, an online publication covering food, culture, and travel founded by a pair of journalists with a global outlook on storytelling. It was a part-time, low-paying gig, but it gave me some sense of stability. Two years later, Bourdain became an investor, and I was the original editor of his curated feature series, *Dispatched* by Bourdain, which published longform nonfiction pieces from all corners of the globe. I admired his commitment to helping our little outfit, which was very much made in his image.



I had never paid close attention to his career, but when I started reading Bourdain’s writing, I began seeing myself more and more in him. This was probably his real gift: the way his voice, his self-doubt and angst, his curiosity, could convince his fans that he was in communion with them. He was a cooler, rougher, luckier version of *you*, a guy moving through the world, taking things as they came, seeing through the bullshit of it all.

I had always wanted to be someone like Bourdain, even before I knew who Bourdain was—a swashbuckling, hard living (and drinking), world-traveling lone wolf. In 2007 I moved from Canada to China, looking for that kind of life, as I documented in my book *Apologies to My Censor*, a memoir of the six years I lived in Asia. Along the way, however, I learned that a life without roots, without real growth or a real home, presented its own challenges. It was lonelier, more shapeless than the alternative. I suspect it was the same for Bourdain. “Travel isn’t always pretty,” he once said. “It isn’t always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart.”

The tattoo profile was my first real chance to sit down and talk with a man who was in many ways my inspiration. The studio that morning was buzzing and warm. A crew of a dozen or so scurried about while Bourdain and Matsuba prepared on a tatami mat. I poured myself a cup of coffee and made myself invisible.

The tattoo looked painful—I could hear the fleshy sound of the stick penetrating the skin, *thook, thook, thook*—but the host put on a brave face. He sipped the whiskey. It was still early, and I didn’t get the sense that he wanted to drink it—he didn’t drink it at all when the cameras were off. But the story called for it, and he obliged.

Bourdain was sixty years old at the time. This was a rare day off, and yet he was still working, with a crew who appeared half his age. He was collegial with them but removed. As I watched him smoke outside through the window, I couldn’t help but notice how solitary he appeared. I thought about how isolating it must be being *the* Anthony Bourdain, permanent vagabond.

AFEW YEARS before the tattoo shoot, the life I had built myself, precarious as it was, began to fall apart. I was addicted to the high highs and low lows of life, and this manifested in my career and relationships. I was lonely, single, drinking too much, and feeling a general despair about what to do or how to grow up. My situation was not dissimilar to the one Bourdain described before *Kitchen Confidential* changed his life.

I began seeing a therapist, a trained psychoanalyst. I had no idea what psychoanalysis was or what it entailed. When she described it to me, it sounded both impossible and somewhat ridiculous. *Who*, I thought, *could possibly afford the time and money for that?*

We began with a more conventional approach: meeting once a week, sitting across from each other, looking at my problems in broad strokes. One day she said, “You would make a good candidate for analysis.” I almost laughed.

We trudged along, barely chipping away at the surface of the things that ailed me. From time to time, she brought up the subject of analysis, and, over time, I grew more curious. I read about it, and we spoke more about options. Eventually I moved to the couch, then from one to two days a week. It was like dipping my toes into hot bath water: I was getting used to it but still not ready to go all the way in.

Then, in the summer of 2016, I went through a particularly devastating breakup that tore me up so deeply I could barely function. I thought of suicide. I was tens of thousands of dollars in debt. I had no real plan, and very little hope that things would improve.

“This is rock bottom,” I told my therapist the day I decided to start an analysis in full. “I have nothing to lose.”

As I launched into my analysis, I did what I had long resisted: I took a full-time, well-paying job with health insurance so I could pay for the treatment, and I committed to staying in New York after long agonizing about moving elsewhere.

It wasn’t easy. My analyst often compared the early stages

“I TOOK THE MANY LESSONS I LEARNED ABOUT MYSELF OVER THE YEARS OF MY ANALYSIS AND GRAFTED THEM ONTO BOURDAIN’S STORY.”

of analysis to flipping over boulders in a quarry: you learn about a lot of the biggest, hardest things in your life right away, but you can’t move them at first. I learned, for example, how hard it was for me to commit to anything, like a job, a girlfriend, or an analysis. Staying the course became our earliest obstacle to work through.

I learned just how much damage my parents’ difficult marriage had on my ability to foster nurturing, long-term relationships with women. I learned about my addictive personality, the types of relationships I was drawn to: dramatic, fast-burning, doomed. I realized how much rage I carried with me, and what a burden it was, even if I would continue to have a hard time quelling it. I learned, over time, that I was a lot like Anthony Bourdain.

WHEN I FINALLY got the chance to interview Bourdain at the tattoo parlor, he sat across from me on a couch in the shop’s waiting area, his jacket still draped over his shoulders. For someone who did this kind of thing all the time, there seemed to be a certain rigidity to him, a kind of hesitance or skepticism. His posture was stiff and upright, and he looked at me from an angle, maintaining eye contact throughout.

I asked him about his love of tattoos. “It’s a selfish, personal thing,” he told me. “I jokingly say, ‘I’m driving an old car. It’s filled with dents. One more dent ain’t gonna make it any worse than this.’” I asked about his writing, and he said he was working on a ghost story. “About these spirit houses in Asia Pacific, Thailand, Vietnam. They need to lure the hungry ghosts away from the main house, and I’m obsessed. I’m interested in these figures from folklore and history. In some way I feel a kinship with them—a wandering spirit, never satisfied.”

When the interview was over and the voice recorder turned off, a crew member appeared to reattach his microphone. Out of curiosity, I asked Bourdain about Siberia Bar. It was his favorite Hell’s Kitchen drinking haunt, now closed, that once occupied a space in the 50th Street Subway station. I had recently met the bar’s former owner, as well as one of Bourdain’s old drinking buddies from the time.

Immediately, he lit up. His shoulders bounced up and down and he swayed from side to side telling me about breaking up fights and drinking with Jimmy Fallon and the other “fucking degenerates” that frequented Siberia. (Fallon was a big drinker, apparently.)

Bourdain was like a kid excitedly telling a story he just couldn’t wait to get out. And I thought—*this* was it. That

magical spirit, that lover of life who captivated the world. What a gift it was to see it, I later realized, that spirit, if only for a moment.

Soon, he was called back to shoot. I thanked him for his time, shook his hand, and wished him luck with the rest of the tattoo. “It looks painful,” I said. “It’s not as bad as it looks,” he replied with a tired smile.

He took his place on the tatami, under the lights. The cameras rolled, Matsuba poked, and the host continued his work. He took a sip of whiskey and endured.

I WAS TWO YEARS into my analysis when Bourdain died. I was shocked, of course, but also not terribly surprised. People who knew him far better than I did described the sadness that radiated off him like cold off ice. They worried about his behavior toward the end of his life, and how his relationship with the actress and filmmaker Asia Argento was tearing him apart.

I tried to imagine what he was experiencing at the end through the experiences that pulled me toward analysis. I imagined him tortured by the decisions he had made, consumed by loneliness, fear, and anger, briefly redeemed by a person who could never really give him what he was looking for—true companionship, a home—and then having that fantasy ripped away. *Wandering spirit, never satisfied*. I knew about that, I thought.

I kept thinking about the dream he described in *Parts Unknown*. I was haunted by it. Life, to me, often felt like what he described in the dream: an endless loop, waking up day after day stuck in the same situation, unable to escape no matter what you do. Given the context of Bourdain’s death, and the life he led—a twice-divorced, sixty-one-year-old father, who spent three-quarters of the year on the road—the hotel room, in both his dream and in real life, was a kind of purgatory for him.

I had similar dreams. They took place in different places, but always had the same theme: abandonment. In the dreams, I had fallen in love, found a home and a partner, finally, and then was suddenly and without explanation left alone. In the dreams, I frantically searched for my companion, wondering why she left, where she went, what I had done wrong. I could never find her.

I felt like I had something to say about Bourdain’s life and death, and what it all meant. I just didn’t know how, exactly, to express it. I was taking acting classes at the time as a way of filling the creative void that was left when I migrated from freelancing into a full-time job. I had theater on my mind and was trying to write plays.

An idea began to take shape: the story of a solitary man, the Traveler, who wakes up in a hotel room, somewhere, unsure of how he got there, where he’s going, or where home even is. The character was based on Bourdain, obviously, but it was more than that. Through a fictionalized, undefined version of him, I could dive into the themes that he embodied in life and death. I took pieces of the story of Bourdain’s life—a career in the kitchen, from dishwasher to chef; overnight literary stardom; a globe traveling TV host—and strung them up like guiding lights, and then fictionalized the stories within.

As it came together, the play became a sort of psychoanalysis of Bourdain. The source material was his writings and shows, to be sure, but more than that it was my own analysis. I took the many lessons I learned about myself over the years of my analysis and grafted them onto Bourdain’s story.

The Traveler’s only other companion on this journey is the Concierge, a shapeshifter who adopts numerous guises in the Traveler’s stories while concealing a few secrets of her own. It wasn’t until I saw the play on stage several years later that I realized I had unconsciously written my analyst into the story. The play opens with the Traveler lying in bed, with the Concierge seated over his right shoulder. The Concierge is his companion, confidant, torturer, jailer, wife, fellow-traveler, mother. Talk about transference.

That play, called *Last Room*, premiered in New York in Spring 2023, the result of five years of work and more than six years of analysis, which is still ongoing. Our producer on the show worked on *Parts Unknown*, the actress who played the Concierge once worked at Siberia Bar, and the musician who scored the show performed there, too. We became like a creative family during the production. And Anthony Bourdain was our spirit guide. Our wandering spirit. ■

Mitch Moxley is a writer in New York who has contributed to Esquire, the New York Times Magazine, GQ, and elsewhere. He’s the author of the memoir Apologies to My Censor and the play Last Room, inspired by Anthony Bourdain.



CHUKWUDI IWUJI
ON CREATIVE PROCESS,
CHILDHOOD DREAMS,
AND HIS ROLE IN
*GUARDIANS OF THE
GALAXY VOL. 3*

Chukwudi Iwuji is a distinguished actor of the Royal Shakespeare Company, an Obie-Award winner, and a star of the recent Marvel movie *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, in which he plays the supervillain known as the “High Evolutionary.” The film’s director, James Gunn, has called Iwuji one of the best actors he’s ever worked with. Over the summer *TAP* editor in chief Austin Ratner met with Iwuji via Zoom to discuss the psychology of villainy in Marvel movies and beyond.

Photograph by Vikram Pathak
Illustrations by Austin Hughes

PLAYING THE VILLAIN

AUSTIN RATNER: [You’ve come] to Hollywood in the footsteps of Sir Patrick Stewart and Sir Ian McKellen. I wanted to ask you when your knighthood is coming.

CHUKWUDI IWUJI: You know, I think I need to rebuild my relationship with Prince [King] Charles. I actually have met him on a couple of occasions at the Royal Shakespeare Company. So I need to go through the back channel. Say “Hey, Charlie, hook me up, you know.”

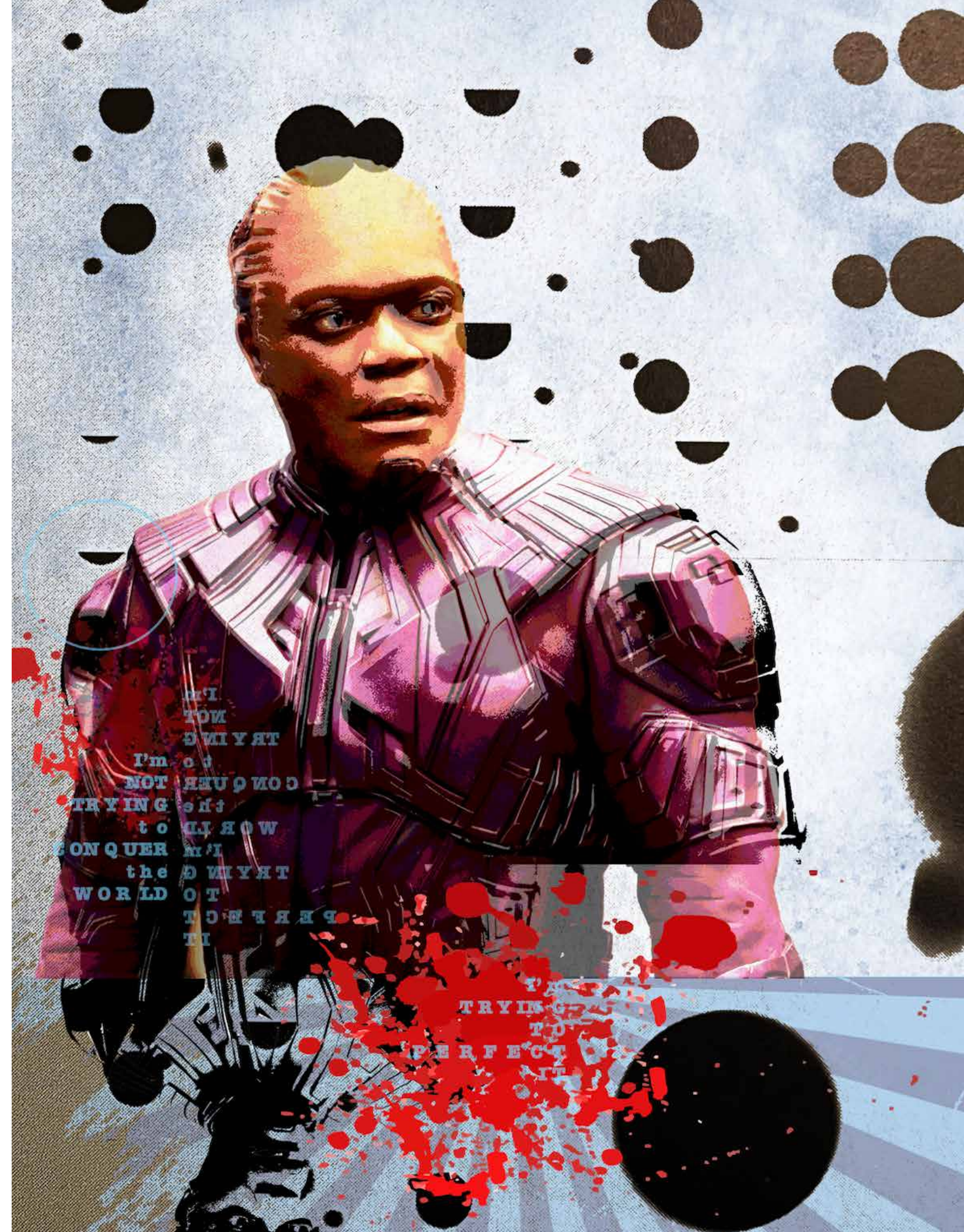
AR: Just drop my name, I’m interested in a knighthood as well. One of the things that I wanted to ask you was whether your background in Shakespearean theater helped you conceive of the High Evolutionary, because he is actually kind of a tragic hero.

CI: From the first moment in the movie the sort of determined single-mindedness of the character was part of the psychology. The fact that he loves space opera was part of the psychology. The fact that he’s referred to as “Sire,” it gives [an idea of his] God complex. His overall thing—to create a perfect world, which is a completely subjective idea and deeply flawed—is very Shakespearian in the sense of tragic heroes usually are these great people who have a flaw. His is the egotistical narcissism of believing he knew what perfect was.

AR: Freud wrote a paper on character types met with in psychoanalysis. One of the character types that he lays out in this paper is what he calls “criminal from a sense of guilt,” and his idea is that criminality is in some cases a manifestation of an internal conflict where people are essentially rebelling against their overly harsh conscience. I felt this was relevant to the figure of the High Evolutionary. There’s a great line in the movie where he says, “I’m not trying to conquer the world, I’m perfecting it.” That was a moment where I felt like, “Oh, I understand this guy, he has this conscience-driven need to make things better to satisfy some internal ideal—an ideal of himself and of the world and of people.” It leads him to do actually horrible, horrific things.

CI: You might have just tapped on how to play villains, actually. There’s the thing they say in acting: “When you’re playing a villain, you never think of yourself as a villain.” I think that’s just “conscience-driven criminality,” it’s just brilliant. He doesn’t see himself as doing anything wrong, but his drive to perfect the world is criminal in how he does it—and that’s an interesting villain. “Conscience-driven criminality.” I’m gonna drop that in a lot of conversations going forward because he is ultimately a criminal because of that need.

“There’s the thing they say in acting: ‘When you’re playing a villain, you never think of yourself as a villain.’ I think that’s just **‘conscience-driven criminality,’ ... [The High Evolutionary] doesn’t see himself as doing anything wrong, but his drive to perfect the world is criminal in how he does it—and that’s an interesting villain.”**



Ultimately this guy is damaged on the inside, right? Anyone that (a) has that as a goal, (b) seeks it without seeing that they're doing anything wrong, is damaged inside. There's a hell of a lot of pain inside this guy, and I think it's depicted physically with what Rocket does to his face. But even before that, there's a suggestion that what his face then becomes already existed inside him. What if it started with him, doing it to himself, trying to perfect himself. That would be the conscience-driven criminality. They perform the criminal act because of something ruptured inside them. I mean, you hit the nail on the head. I never codified it in terms of that, but that is essentially what it is: "I'm just trying to make things better," which comes from a damage inside him.

AR: *Guardians 3* director James Gunn has called you one of the best actors he's ever worked with. Is it empowering to work for a director who has that kind of belief in you?

CI: First of all, it's empowering to be hired, period. James Gunn is one of the most powerful directors on the planet. So the fact that he literally said he could have had anyone and chose me was, I'd have to say career-wise, given the scale of it, the single most empowering hiring that I've experienced. The fact that I was working with him for the second time really meant that when I turned up on this set with all these hundreds

of people, with the world literally watching us do this, I didn't feel that pressure of "Oh, will I disappoint him?"—no, I did. I still felt I might maybe screw it up or let him down, which is an actor's impostor syndrome that I don't think will ever go [away], and maybe it's a useful thing to have. I'm sure Freud had something to say about that.

[Working with James] was that wonderful combination of knowing you're in safe hands, that the minimum you're gonna do is what was in his head, which is gonna be great. Or the minimum I was gonna bring was what he hoped I would bring to the character. And then after you've done that, you both know you've got it in the bag and you say, "What can we do if we just let go of our expectations?" and then some magic would come out of it. You know, there was a scene where I asked Rocket, "How the hell did you know this all happened?" It's probably my favorite scene [that I was in]. Between [James] writing it and us shooting it, I had sent him all this classical music that I really love. Because I was just imagining, "this guy listens to space opera." One of the things I sent was Purcell's "Dido's Lament," which then plays in that [scene]. John Murphy recorded it live with a choir, I think in Abbey Road. And James plays his music live on set. He actually played it and that music came on. And then we started doing the scene, and this was one of those scenes we didn't quite know how it was [going to go] and the music informed it.

Paradoxical as it may sound, I must maintain that the sense of guilt was present before the misdeed, that it did not arise from it, but conversely—the misdeed arose from the sense of guilt. These people might justly be described as criminals from a sense of guilt.

—Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work," 1916

There was this pathos, there was this Shakespearean operatic drama to it that can only come with me feeling the music, the sense of grandness of it. And then we got the scene. When you have that type of music playing, you fit the action to the word, the word to the action, right? As Hamlet said. And then we got something different. And I love that about James. As prepared as he is, as much as you know you're in safe hands, there's always room to say, "What else can we create here?"

AR: When you talk about space opera and the music, I immediately think of *Star Wars*, because it's the original Hollywood space opera, at least for people our age, and the music plays a huge role in it. For someone like you or me, who grew up on *Star Wars*—and it was literally an early inspiration for you as a kid, according to [an] interview that I read in *Variety*—what does it feel like to inhabit a dream like that?

CI: I have a therapist, we talk about childhood a lot. It's still hard for me to put together that kid that watched those movies with me now. I can almost put together that kid with me in my everyday life, but the kid that has become the actor, in *Guardians*, I can't. It's too big a leap. When you ask me that

question, I get emotional because it's almost like I'm re-realizing that I've done that. When you put it like that I go, "Oh shit, I've now done that and someone is watching *Guardians 3* like I watched *Return of the Jedi* or *Empire Strikes Back*." [It's] impossible for me to put that kid together with the High Evolutionary. I process it for a while and then let it go because it's almost too big to accept. It's almost like it's happening to someone else, you know? It's weird. Sometimes in life, we tick so many of the boxes we dreamt about without knowing we've done it, or we've ticked them and we're already thinking of the next one we need to tick off. I need to think of it in those terms, that I really did do that, instead of being caught up in all the stuff that's attached to it, like box office and Marvel in general. *I did that, I played that character:* my Darth Vader. ■

This interview has been edited and condensed. The audio of the interview is available with this story on our website.

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STORIES FROM LIFE

Psychoanalysis and Its Discontents:

A gay patient's reflections

BY MALCOLM FARLEY

Illustration by Tati Nguyễn

STARTING IN THE FALL of 1980, I sequestered myself four mornings a week in a windowless cubicle beneath a Saks Fifth Avenue in suburban Philadelphia. I'd just begun my freshman year at Temple University. The purpose of my voluntary, underground ordeal, which demanded the unusual sacrifice of so much free time? Freudian psychoanalysis. Specifically, I hoped therapy would help straighten my "crooked" sexuality.

Yet, after four years of rigidly orthodox head-shrinking (more "orthodox" than any protocol ordained by the Master, I suspect), I remember shockingly little. When my therapy petered out in 1984, I didn't morph into a heterosexual, either.

My psychoanalyst, whom I'll call Dr. R., was warm and sympathetic, at first. She smiled frequently and seemed motherly. Her office was a paradigm of studied, chromatic banality: beiges, toffees, and creams. The walls were covered with what would now be called fiber art: tapestries and carpets, each exhibiting a variety of yarny fringes and furry impastos. I faced away from her during our sessions, lying on a couch.

Shortly after we began therapy, I suggested that her décor evoked a giant vagina. I also asked if her vertical carpeting was an attempt to mimic Freud's collection of primitive art. I don't recall her reacting to these provocations, but perhaps she chuckled. I do remember that if I could get her to laugh during a session, I felt I had somehow notched a victory. That's because silence was my single most vivid recollection of Dr. R.

As a blabbermouth, I had no trouble talking, particularly for the first three years, filling the void of Dr. R.'s impassiveness

with inane chatter about Freud's ideas—I'd read *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* in my parent's library the year before—and amateur explanations of my own dreams and nightmares.

At the beginning, I had inchoate expectations of a psychological *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, à la Jules Verne, with fantastical discoveries at the end. But soon enough, I became apprehensive. Dr. R.'s monastic wordlessness distressed me more and more as my therapy progressed. Partly, this was because I came from a highly verbal family where *not* talking was a sign of extreme anger or deep, sustained resentment.

But my naive fantasies of self-transformation were also based on the tattered mass-market paperback I'd discovered at seventeen in an attic bookcase: Dr. Robert Lindner's 1956 bestseller, *The Fifty Minute Hour: A Collection of True Psychoanalytic Tales*. The edition my parents owned, from the early 60s, featured a lurid scarlet cover and a painting of a naked woman with her back to the viewer and lush brown hair that fell to her waist. In deep distress, she held her head in her left hand. The image was strangely compelling. Lindner's quote on the cover was equally melodramatic:

I am a psychoanalyst. I meet and work with murderers, sadists, sex perverts—people at the edge of violence—and some who have passed that edge. These are their stories as they told them to me: searching, revealing, perhaps shocking. But they are the raw stuff of life itself, and therefore these people are not beyond help.

“The case of the homosexual in society may, in fact, offer a particularly compelling argument for revising Freud’s ideas about when and how a sufferer needs to adapt to social norms and when she may need to seek ways to force society to meet her needs.”

I remember one case history about a female patient (perhaps the woman depicted on the cover?) whom we might now call a sex addict, and another, entitled “Come Over, Red Rover,” about a radical whom Lindner “cured” of an “anti-social” Communist Party affiliation.

Lindner portrayed himself as a heretical Freudian superhero capable of engineering dramatic change in his analysands. Perhaps Lindner’s book appeared crude and self-glorifying to his psychoanalytic peers or a more sophisticated general audience. As a teenager, however, I found his stories enthralling and his iconoclasm pleasantly disturbing. I glossed over the fact that his wonder cures conveniently reinforced 1950s phobias about the “Red Menace” and female promiscuity. Quite consciously, I hoped Dr. R. would “fix” me just as Lindner claimed to have done with *his* patients. Absent a miracle, I was desperate to uncover sexual feelings for women buried deep in my unconscious. Perhaps that would be enough to make me seminormal, I told myself.

At the same time, a darker, more rebellious part of me wished an adult would tell me my attraction to men was OK, that it didn’t make me a freak, a “sex pervert ... on the edge of violence or beyond,” or an anti-American extremist.

At the very least, I desperately wanted Dr. R. to be like my image of Dr. Lindner—a talkative, combative, challenging *presence* in my analysis. Alas, Dr. R.’s taciturnity made her an *absence*, instead. (Did this mean I unconsciously desired a male analyst, rather than a female one? I’ll leave that to the experts to decide.) Maybe her silence was meant to elicit my transference, but her apparent neutrality (did she condone or condemn homosexuality?) could not, by its very nature, meet either my developmental needs as an adolescent queer or my political necessities as the closeted member of an oppressed minority.

THE TROUBLE OVER my sexuality—and my failure to live up to ideal boy-ness—had started early, inside the family. My mother often expressed dismay that I acted out fantasies with stuffed animals (a lion and a koala bear were favorites) or that I played hopscotch with the neighborhood girls. Normal boys didn’t act this way, she intimated with increasing frequency and intensity. Finally, at her wit’s end, she promised to get me a cat (she hated pets) if I promised to stop my “girly” behavior.

School was no better. When I entered first grade, other boys started to torment me relentlessly for reasons I couldn’t fathom. True, I read books constantly (even in class, when I wasn’t supposed to), I was bad at sports, and I liked girls at an age when other boys didn’t. These behaviors triggered an atavistic tribal disgust in many of my male classmates.

My bullies would taunt me with some of the nastiest slurs any boy could hurl at another: “sissy,” “faggot,” and “pussy.”

When I told them to shut up or demanded they leave me alone, they would “call me out”—which meant I was supposed to meet them after school for hand-to-hand combat. I had no desire to fight any of them, of course. I just wanted to escape. So, I quickly found several “secret” exits from our large, World War I-era school building and evaded my tormentors every time—a small victory of brains over brawn.

In the late 60s and early 70s, I don’t think any of us understood these antigay and misogynistic insults. What did being a “faggot” really mean? I doubt my first-grade Furies had any clue what homosexuality involved. Nor did I. It was a more “innocent,” if violently homophobic, era, long before the media and the internet—including web-based pornography and hookup apps—made homosexuality more public and accessible, both to gay men and their enemies.

Antibullying programming and resources, such as those now maintained by the American Psychological Association and the National Institutes of Health, were not even “motes in the eye of God” back then, either. Indeed, most of the teachers and administrators in the Lower Merion public school system ignored the atrocious bullying occurring daily, right in front of them. Unfortunately, this publicly enacted cruelty extended far beyond my own sad situation. Other boys and girls—deemed “different” or “peculiar”—suffered too. One girl, named L., was viciously teased because a serious heart condition had turned her skin purple and made walking difficult. Other targets, such as C., W., and F., were simply geeks like me. They wore thick glasses. They read books. Already bullied, they’d grown fearful of other kids, which only encouraged further bullying. (I suspect I experienced Dr. R.’s silence about my same-sex attraction as a repetition of this larger social injustice.)

Some of my worst tormentors would chase me home after school and try to beat me up. (In the 60s and 70s, we walked to and from elementary school in the suburbs, which may seem surprising to many adults and children today.) It took me about 15–20 minutes each way. When my parents asked about bruises or cuts or mud on my clothes, I’d spin a story about a fall in the gym or a misstep over a curb. Since I was a klutz, they apparently thought my excuses were plausible or at least convenient, requiring no further investigation. In any case, concealing the source of my misery was paramount. How could I reveal the shameful things other boys were saying about me? Would my parents believe me or blame me?

Even as a sixth grader, though, I felt my pariah status was unfair. Was it my fault I’d been born “wrong?” After a school psychologist visited my classroom, I sought her out and asked for help. Apparently, she called my parents and recommended treatment for me. But nothing came of my valiant attempt to protect myself after my family, community, and school had failed to keep me safe—the most basic promise to a child any

society should honor. Many years later, my mother confessed that she and my father had nixed the psychologist’s suggestion but wouldn’t tell me why. Perhaps they were embarrassed or worried about the cost.

By the time I reached thirteen or fourteen, however, I realized my bullies had been all-too-prescient. I *was* a “faggot.” My overtly erotic crushes on various boys—in school, in the neighborhood, in the summer classical music programs I attended, or in the antinuclear group I joined, full of sexy guys in their twenties with beards, ponytails, earrings, and lots of pot—had made that all too clear. These experiences aroused, terrified, and enraged me. How could little first-grade thugs—transforming year-by-year into a smaller but nastier cadre of twelfth-grade goons—have seen into my darkness more clearly than I had?

Many years later, when I read Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, I remember nearly jumping out of my chair at this passage:

Nothing that went into [the homosexual’s] total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it

was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away.

Foucault’s description of the homosexual’s ineradicable, involuntary identity seemed to explain my ostracism as a child so precisely that it spooked me. Provocatively, Foucault claims that the budding field of nineteenth-century psychiatry helped invent “the homosexual,” as a medicalized identity for individuals, in contrast to an earlier religious animus against sodomitical *acts*.

But it’s hard to articulate the anguish I felt in the moment, as I first became conscious that my attraction to men was explicitly sexual and romantic. It was as if I’d belatedly grasped a Delphic pronouncement about my inner nature—and my fate—that everyone else had understood ages before. I was both doomed *and* stupid.

INARRATED MY SAD history to Dr. R., of course. I also talked quite explicitly about my current sexual fantasies, my painful romantic infatuation with a sexually ambiguous boy one grade ahead of me, and my desperation

to become “normal.” She always seemed sympathetic in a cloudy, subverbal way. She never told me my feelings were “wrong” or “bad,” at least. But I don’t recall her saying anything supportive, either.

My disenchantment with her detachment grew acute during my fourth year in psychoanalysis. I stopped speaking much in treatment. Most of the time, I was bored out of my skull. I began to arrive late to our appointments. My resentment made our sessions almost unbearable. Yet Dr. R. didn’t change her approach in any way, even as the symptoms of my frustration mounted. Towards the end, we often just sat together in total silence for fifty minutes, my parody of her silence becoming an ultimate defiance. When Dr. R. and my parents started to argue about her fees, I used their quarrel as a pretext to end my analysis.

Was my fear—that Dr. R. might, deep-down, view same-sex attraction as a “mental disturbance”—completely unwarranted? After all, the American Psychiatric Association didn’t completely remove homosexuality from the *DSM* until 1987, long after its declassification as a mental illness in 1973. Did her failure to provide what is now termed “gay affirmative psychotherapy” mean she shared, to some degree, the homophobia in the culture around her? It’s not an unreasonable question.

Alas, it’s hard to answer. Reading Freud, experiencing psychoanalysis first-hand, and sixty years of living have taught me hard lessons about the radical unreliability of memory and interpretation. So, I attempted to contact Dr. R. for this article and check my recollections and impressions against hers. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a response, a silence which feels—ironically, if unfairly—all too predictable.

However, I am certain that Dr. R. graduated from medical school in 1969, far from the epicenters of gay life in New York City and San Francisco. When she trained as a psychiatrist, the *DSM* still classified homosexuality as a full-blown mental illness. Moreover, hostility towards gay men was deeply entrenched in twentieth-century American culture. The 1969 Stonewall riots, and the subsequent gay liberation movement, had had little impact on the Main Line—the starchy, affluent, and nominally liberal Philadelphia suburb where I grew up and where Dr. R. practiced.

In fact, antigay bigotry still permeated my community. While I was in junior high, the older siblings of friends whispered about how school authorities had shut down the high school theater department’s production of *Cabaret*—directed by a senior who later became an openly gay Off-Broadway playwright—because it included simulated lesbian groping among the chorines. Later, as a high-school junior, I monitored my school’s reaction to two courageous, defiant, and flamboyantly out seniors who endured constant derision from

their classmates. At the end of the school year, they tried to attend the senior prom together. School administrators forbid them entry. The discrimination they endured exacerbated my own secret shame.

On the positive side of the ledger, my aborted psychoanalysis did formalize an innate tendency to introspection. The habit of self-talk has proved invaluable in a lifelong struggle with depression and anxiety. It has also enabled me to understand the unconscious motivations of others, a particularly useful skill in relationships—and for a writer, I might add.

To my surprise, the most important therapeutic insight I took away from Dr. R. had little to do with “fixing” my homosexuality. Instead, I discovered that the institutionalization of my severely disabled eldest brother, Jeffy, when I was five or six, had had a major effect on my development. Despite her apparent detachment, Dr. R. did help me uncover my buried reactions to this seminal episode. I learned that I’d interpreted Jeffy’s removal from the family as a punishment. My combative relationship with my parents, afterwards, derived in no small measure from the anger I felt at Jeffy’s heart-rending exile in a state home “for the incurable,” and the fear my parents might banish me, too.

NOW, AFTER MANY decades as an openly gay man, and several stints in other forms of psychotherapy—the most successful of which combined Freudian theory with cognitive therapy—I believe the inadequacy of my psychoanalysis was much bigger than Dr. R.’s inflexible treatment protocol or her lack of empathy for a budding suburban queer boy.

It would be like picking a low-hanging apple off the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to point the finger at Freud himself. Surely, an accuser might insist, Freud must be guilty of the replication of socially sanctioned homophobia in the treatment he recommended for neurotic individuals, some of whom “suffered” from homosexuality. Yet Freud seems to have been considerably more sympathetic to homosexuals than the European culture around him, with its antigay penal codes, cruel social ostracism of visible offenders like Oscar Wilde, and the early-twentieth-century scandals involving gay military officers like Eulenburg in Berlin and Redl in Vienna. For example, in 1934 Freud wrote to the mother of a gay man, with admirable delicacy, seeking to dissuade her from trying to “cure” him:

Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function, produced by certain obstacles to sexual development. ... By asking me if I can help, you

mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make normal heterosexuality take its place. The answer is, in a general way, that we cannot promise to achieve it.

While Freud’s letter echoes the calumny that homosexuality is abnormal, and rightly wouldn’t satisfy the LGBTQI community today, his attitudes towards homosexuals seem pretty “advanced,” at least towards the end of his life. It’s also hard not to feel, from his letter and his many case histories, that Freud’s attitude towards those suffering from mental distress—whatever its causes—is warm and empathic, rather than blandly observant as Dr. R. seemed to be.

No, if I had to put my finger on a damaging assumption in classical Freudian theory, it would come to rest on a more fundamental issue—one that many others have pointed out before. Namely, Freud’s therapeutic method seeks to help patients adapt their inner needs to a fixed reality principle, regardless of their social situation. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, his late masterwork from 1930, Freud does make passing allusions to ethnic or religious bigotry as sources of psychic damage. (The psychological effects of discrimination by class, gender, race, and sexual orientation go unacknowledged, however.) But, by and large, he seems to believe that individuals in society are like deep-sea creatures who all feel the same extreme pressure from the superego’s patriarchal aggression, extreme libidinal inhibition, and a profound cultural “Unbehagen”—or malaise—at the bottom of the ocean.

Surely one thing we all know about primate social organization, however, is that some individuals live closer to the surface and the sun. They have more access to the means of production *and* reproduction than others, and therefore experience less libidinal inhibition. For bottom feeders, on the other hand, the libido may be the least of their worries. Survival itself may be at stake.

The case of the homosexual in society may, in fact, offer a particularly compelling argument for revising Freud’s ideas about when and how a sufferer needs to adapt to social norms and when she may need to seek ways to force society to meet her needs.

For example, John Boswell, in his introduction to *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, suggests a uniquely toxic interaction between homophobia and individual mental health:

Gay people are for the most part not born into gay families. They suffer oppression individually and alone, without benefit of advice or frequently even emotional support from relatives or friends. This makes their case comparable in some ways to that of the blind or the left-handed, who are also dispersed in the general population

rather than segregated by heritage. ...

... The history of public reactions to homosexuality is thus in some measure a history of social tolerance generally.

Boswell published his book in 1980, the year I started my psychoanalysis. It would have provided Dr. R.—and scores of other psychoanalysts—with a very clear picture of the psychological challenges specific to gay adolescents in that particular moment in cultural history. It might have also suggested something other than silence as the most efficacious response to my confession of homosexuality in the basement of a Saks Fifth Avenue department store. Alas, I’m almost certain Dr. R. never heard of Boswell’s book. She wouldn’t have been trained to seek it out, either.

While the tolerance American society has accorded to the LGBTQI community expanded dramatically after 1980—profoundly affecting the etiology of mental distress among us, young and old—the recent repoliticization of LGBTQI identity and the revival of homophobia suggests just how fragile such tolerance may be. The pendulum of social acceptance for us has swung back and forth many times across history and different cultures. Such wild cultural mood shifts suggest a problem with civilization itself, not with LGBTQI individuals.

Even Freud, contemplating the intractable unhappiness of civilized “man,” tentatively asks at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*,

May we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become neurotic? ... For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder ... we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities.

Might “one day” be today? Might “someone” be contemporary psychoanalysts? I’d suggest we must all reenvision the old therapeutic Ananke as a new, double-headed Necessity: *both* to look deeply into the individual psyche *and* to gaze outward at adverse conditions that may require social diagnosis and social treatment, as Freud suggested nearly a century ago. ■

Malcolm Farley is a poet and essayist. His work has appeared in The New York Times Book Review, The Paris Review, and The New Republic. He has won residencies at MacDowell, VCCA, and the Vermont Studio Center.

Civilization and Its Playlist

Reflections on Malcolm Farley's
'Psychoanalysis and Its Discontents'

BY JOHN BURTON

Illustration by Tati Nguyễn



MR. FARLEY'S CULTURAL references, and the historical moment of his psychoanalysis, are mine. We were both college freshmen in the early 1980s. As teens, we both discovered sex-themed, pop psychology paperbacks on our parents' bookshelves. (*Nice Girls Do and Now You Can Too!* was one title that, oddly, shows up in the inventory of my adolescence.) Farley was influenced by John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, which I also read, owned, and eventually gave to a curious, churchgoing, family member. And, contrary to stereotype, it was our mothers who charged themselves with the responsibility of solving our atypical masculinity. More painfully, we also share memories of bullying, and worse, teachers and staff turning a blind eye—what researchers call the “innocent bystander” phenomenon.

Everybody has a teenage playlist, the soundtrack to their adolescence. Farley's account of high-school bullying has Bronski Beat's “Smalltown Boy” wailing plaintively in my ear once more, his rightful anger at psychoanalysis calls to my mind Billy Idol's hypersexual, sneering “Rebel Yell,” and his whole treatment seems to ask Missing Persons' snappy, new wave question, “What Are Words For?” For psychoanalysts, Farley touches on many points worth exploring, the complicated history of antihomosexual bias in psychoanalysis, the unique role that sexual desire plays in the developing identity of queer people, and our field's evolving awareness of the significance of social circumstances in the functioning of the psyche. But for me, a gay psychoanalyst who was also, more than once, a gay patient, the Gen X anthem that best recaps the central question of the essay is “Enjoy the Silence” by those inveterate gay social critics, Depeche Mode.

As Farley's world is familiar to me, so too is Dr. R. and her silence, a feature of the technique that psychoanalysis terms, puritanically, “abstinence.” We must not speak too much or reveal anything about ourselves so as not to deprive the patient of the “blank slate” upon which they draw their unconscious fantasies. I recall the spirit of Dr. R. in my first supervisor, who thought I was talking too much and suggested that I practice psychoanalytic abstinence by forcing myself to be silent for the first 20 minutes of the session, no matter what. (The treatment was ended by the patient shortly thereafter.) Dr. R. was also my colleague who feared revealing too much about himself—it would “be too stimulating, and would pollute the transference”—to the point where he kept no personal items or art in his office. But Farley notes that such violent removals of oneself from the therapeutic setting are not consistent with Freud's work. Freud was “warm and empathic,” not “blandly observant,” and Freud did understand that social factors are implicated in our patients' suffering.

Dr. R. has also been me, not speaking, not showing myself, hidden behind neutrality and abstinence. In 2010 I wrote, along with Karen Gilmore, about this dilemma in an article entitled, “This Strange Disease: Adolescent Transference and the Analyst's Sexual Orientation.” Here, though, the roles were reversed; I was the gay analyst who was using silence defensively against the desperate attempts of an adolescent to destroy her treatment by “outing” me. At least, that was the formulation we held in the paper. I was relentlessly abstinent and refused to disclose my sexual orientation, a technical choice that we ultimately decided was of most benefit to the transference/countertransference. I still believe the conclusion we came to was correct. But

sometimes I wonder: Had I retreated into my own adolescent trauma and deprived “Diana” (the pseudonym I gave the eighteen-year-old woman in my case presentation) of the possibility of feeling seen by a flesh-and-blood human being, not “the man behind the lamp,” as she called me? Perhaps Diana, like Farley, even needed to know she was admired, especially the parts of herself that she most hated?

There is a coda to my treatment with Diana that is not in the paper. She came back from time to time after the analysis ended, with progress in many areas of life. But the theme of feeling devalued and hopeless as a woman persisted. Though she was an accomplished singer, she felt categorically disempowered because she could not name a female vocalist she admired. At a certain point, I became exasperated with her constant complaints and I said, “What about Madonna?” She had heard of Madonna but had never seen a Madonna video. (I was suddenly confronted with a skull-crushing epiphany—Buddhism is right—nothing is permanent, not even Madonna videos.) To challenge her inconsolability, I told her to watch “Express Yourself.” The next session, Diana came back elated. “Madonna is right! I'm *not* going to settle for second best anymore,” and then, “You're gay, aren't you, Dr. B.?” It was several years after the part of our work where I had withheld disclosure of my sexual orientation. We both laughed as I shrugged, “yes.” This exchange began an exploration of images of powerful women and the determinants, both social and dynamic, that led to her inability to identify with these available models around her. I believe that my moment of transparency, of reacting to Diana, not just observing, was an important one in the evolution of her adult identity as a woman. She now has her own daughter and still emails me

“Freud was ‘warm and empathic,’ not ‘blandly observant,’ and Freud did understand that social factors are implicated in our patients' suffering.”

every time she goes to a Heart concert.

Despite his frustration with Dr. R., Farley does not present her as a bigoted monster. In fact, it sounds like she was helpful at times, clarifying the significance of an earlier developmental event and strengthening a lifelong capacity for self-reflection. But the central theme of the treatment is of an adolescent who, like all adolescents—and all patients in one way or another—comes to treatment and first desperately needs to be seen, to be recognized, and, in that relational process, to be felt as loveable. In her silence, and her neutrality about Farley's sexual orientation, Dr. R. unfortunately created a space where socially conditioned self-hatred expanded, blocking out,

not improving, the ability to reflect on this feeling.

Depeche Mode asserts, “Words are very unnecessary.” Like all analysts, I often sit and hold back the need to speak. This allows for the marvelous experience of something new and authentic emerging that neither I nor my patient would have found without “enjoying the silence.” For me, the challenging question is, how do we know when to go beyond observing without judgment—being merely cognizant of the injuries of the patient's particular social situation—to acknowledge that we analysts are not outside observers but also participants in the social and cultural moment we inhabit together? If only Dr. R. had acknowledged the danger of an identity that must be hidden for fear of violence, and the pain of an adolescent desire that will, mostly, not be returned.

It's hard to know how to strike this balance. As an end to the soundtrack, I hear the Psychedelic Furs' poignant musing, “Love my way, it's a new road. I follow where my mind goes.”

Our job is, of course, to follow where the mind goes, but we do need what Hans Loewald was brave enough to call “love.” This is warmth and empathy, but it is also a willingness to not merely observe, but also to demonstrate that we are walking alongside our patients, their way, on each new road we have the privilege to travel. ■

John Burton, MD, teaches psychoanalytic concepts to trainees in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research at Columbia University. He has a private practice in New York City with a special interest in psychoanalysis and psychedelics.



WORK

LOOKING, OR NOT LOOKING, TOGETHER

An analyst and mother on facing the unbearable

BY ELISA CHENG

Illustrations by Sarah-Jane Crowson

**If you cannot bear the silence
and the darkness, do not go there;
if you dislike black night and
yawning chasms, never make
them your profession.**

—Loren Eiseley, “The Night Country”

I WAS HONORED to be invited to speak at the APsA annual winter meeting in February 2023, along with Alan Pollack, Stephanie Brody, Salman Akhtar, and Dionne Powell, as part of a panel on death and mortality. Our panel’s starting point was the myth of Orpheus, which Alan had written about in a past *TAP* essay, and Stephanie’s book weaving clinical vignettes, literary references, and personal reflections on the impermanence of life titled *Entering Night Country: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Loss and Resilience* (Routledge, 2015). A reprise of the panel was given at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute in May 2023 for their Solange Skinner Program. The following essay is adapted from these presentations.

IT IS LATE at night, and I am sitting at my younger daughter's bedside, tucking her in—the fuzzy pink and cream blankets layered just so, the pillow fluffed, her monkey lovey from infancy tightly clutched in one hand. The lights are out, the last lullaby sung, and the ritual goodnight hugs and kisses exchanged. It has been a long day, and my own eyelids are fluttering to a close when I am startled by a sudden, urgent, unexpected query: “Mama, am I going to die tonight?”

My heart stutters. “What? Oh Lilly, why are you wondering that?” My mind is awl—has there been a recent death or illness at school I haven't heard about? My thoughts then flash to the panel I'll be presenting at during the APsA winter meeting just a few weeks later, about death and mortality. Has this panel topic, not something that I've explicitly mentioned at home, somehow found its way into the unconscious space between us?

“Am I?” she persists. In the faint light from the streetlamp outside her window, I can make out her eyes, luminous, questioning, the slightest crescent lining of anxiety.

“Oh no, munchkin,” the protective words tumble off my tongue. “We all die eventually, and it's not something to be afraid of ... but you're young, and healthy, and there's absolutely no reason for me to think that you'll die *any* time soon, including tonight.”

“How *sure* are you?” she presses, my girl who travels between the worlds of facts and fantasy, who during the day will demand courtroom-level evidence to back up any statement about the value of green vegetables or piano practice, but at night still believes in Tib the tooth fairy and that her trio of stuffies, the Dream Team, can order up a dream for her at will.

I love to play in the world of fantasy as much as my daughter. I am her nightly dream consultant; I am the morning zookeeper who feeds blueberries and chocolate chips to Ella, the invisible alligator who guards her bedroom threshold. I am the one responsible for naming our household toilets “Toily” and “Tilly,” for spinning elaborate backstories about their early childhoods and the advanced schooling they received in order to immediately squash any of the evil spirits my daughter fears might enter our house from the sewer pipes. But I am also a doctor by training, and somehow “100 percent certain” is a lie I just cannot tell.

“99.99999 percent sure,” I say with as much conviction as I can justify. She considers my answer, then seems to accept it. I breathe a small sigh of relief, noting to myself that further conversation may be warranted the next day, but not right now—not when the Dream Team is waiting to whisk her away to a library sleepover full of delicious books made of shortbread and chocolate.

“Are *you* going to die tonight?” This, I'm a little less certain of. I've noticed with chagrin in

the last couple years that my former magic metabolism, the “second dessert stomach” that let me eat unlimited ice cream, has abandoned me, and I'm now prone to the occasional aches and pains of middle age. Still, three of my grandparents lived into their nineties, so I feel justified telling myself that I haven't yet hit the halfway mark. I'm relatively healthy (other than the sedentary nature of our profession). But then I recall my friend Devah, mom to one of my daughter's best friends from her time in daycare, who died of pancreatic cancer four years ago, and I pause for a beat.

“I really don't think so,” I answer, and to head off her next question, I add emphatically, “and I'm 99.999 percent sure”—compromising by subtracting a degree or two of certainty and hoping she doesn't notice.

IN THE MYTH of Orpheus, the famed musician is heartbroken over the death of his wife Eurydice and finds his way into the Underworld of Hades, realm of the dead. By moving Queen Persephone to tears with his singing, Orpheus is granted the chance to bring his beloved back to the land of the living, if he can just prevent himself from looking back at her, trusting that she is following closely behind him. Tragically, he fails, losing her forever.

Is this how we think about death? By *not* thinking about it, not looking at it, keeping it at bay, at the very outer edges of awareness? Like the sun, Medusa, or Orpheus's Eurydice, is death too blinding, too terrifying, or too wraith-like and aching with loss, for us to look at directly? Do we keep ourselves in shimmering bubbles of denial, warding off death by pretending it is something that happens “out there,” to others? Even as he formulated a universal death instinct, Freud once wrote that “no one believes in his own death ... in the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.” Freud's continued habit of smoking twenty cigars a day till the day he died, despite doctors' warnings, chest pain, heart palpitations, and sixteen years engaged in a painful, disfiguring, and debilitating battle with oral cancer surely suggest some difficulties in facing the reality of his own vulnerability and mortality.

Is death anxiety, or *Todesangst*, as Freud called it, possibly a cultural construct? Could one not feel calm, perhaps even relieved, at the prospect of eternal rest? In Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, the three pillars of ancient Chinese philosophy and religion, death is seen as a natural and inevitable part of life, something to be greeted with peaceful acceptance. If a Chinese person dies after the age of eighty, they are buried in celebratory red, the color of weddings, good luck, and fortune.

And yet, I was taught early on that to talk about death in Chinese culture is taboo, as if one will hasten death's arrival by speaking its name. The number four is considered unlucky—many buildings in China skip the fourth floor—because the

Mandarin word for four sounds too close to the word for death. The 2019 movie *The Farewell*, based on writer/director Lulu Wang's own experience, depicts the extreme lengths a Chinese family takes in order to hide their beloved matriarch's terminal lung cancer diagnosis from her, believing that knowing would accelerate her deterioration. As the mother in the movie states, “It's not the cancer that kills them—it's the fear.” I've encountered similar stories: families begging their loved one's physician not to disclose a terminal diagnosis, fearing the impact of such knowledge and wanting to carry the burden themselves. I can recall such a scenario coming up in my ethics seminar during medical school, or was it in our “cultural competence” class? Our classroom debate pitted Western principles of “medical truth telling” and individual patient autonomy against Eastern values of collectivism, the family unit, and what seemed to be depicted as collusion in a kind of culture-bound, backwards superstition.

However, as noted in Jing-Bao Nie's paper “The Fallacy and Dangers of Dichotomizing Cultural Differences,” a much older and longer-standing Chinese tradition of direct medical truth-telling to one's patients has been documented back to twenty-six centuries ago, in line with Confucian principles of truthfulness; meanwhile, concealing the truth about terminal illness was historically the cultural norm in *Western* practice, even stipulated in the writings of Hippocrates and the American Medical Association's 1857 Code of Medical Ethics.

Freud's personal physician Felix Deutsch, upon first laying eyes on what was clearly an advanced case of oral cancer, chose to keep the diagnosis from Freud, fearing it would be

too much to bear. Deutsch lied that it was a more benign case of leukoplakia. His paternalism, both in concealing Freud's diagnosis of malignant cancer and then breaking confidentiality to ask six of Freud's friends to collude in holding this “most deadly secret” (per Ernest Jones), led to an irreparable loss of trust. When Freud interviewed Max Schur to be Deutsch's replacement, he asked for two things: that they always tell each other the truth, and that when the time came, that Schur not let him suffer unnecessarily. And indeed, in 1939—as Schur recounted later, “without a trace of emotionality or self-pity, and with full consciousness of reality”—Freud faced death with a clear-eyed gaze, seeking death as relief from his suffering.

I HAVE WONDERED whether one of the draws of mythology, folklore, or even religion is the wish for some kind of playbook or preview for what comes after death. None of us living mortals have been granted, like Orpheus, a roundtrip ticket to the underworld, or however we might conceive of the afterlife. We want details.

“What does it *feel* like, when you die?” my daughter asked another night. “Does it hurt? Do you still get to see all your friends? Are your favorite stuffies there with you?”

As parents, we have the daunting task of figuring out how to answer these questions, when and how to shield our children from danger, when to alert them to it, and when to help them face it. While COVID's sharp edge of fear is now dulled in much of America's conscious awareness, it left an indelible mark on so many of our children. Steeped in our own fear and uncertainty, especially in pre-vaccine 2020, we were forced to share those fears and uncertainties with them; with barely any warning, we huddled together in lockdown, and their worlds (and ours) were upended. Suddenly, sources of care and comfort were now tinged with possible danger—going to school to see beloved teachers and friends was unsafe, as were playgrounds, postcards and care packages, groceries, playdates. Even their own homes and bodies were unsafe, a source of vulnerability as well as a danger to their loved ones.

“I'm sorry, sweetie, but we can't see PoPo and GungGung for Christmas—we don't want to get them sick.”

My daughter: “I touched the couch—do I have to wash my hands? I touched my face—do I have to wash my hands? I touched *you*—do I have to wash my hands?”

We had to balance safety with isolation and fear. We created “pods,” little bubbles of protective denial.

WE ALSO FLED our offices and the presence of our patients, each of us potential victim or killer of the other. Our bodies left “the room where it happens,” and we became halting two-dimensional images on computer screens, or disembodied voices, miles apart.





“Like the sun, Medusa, or Orpheus’s Eurydice, is death too blinding, too terrifying, or too wraith-like and aching with loss, for us to look at directly?”

As analysts and psychodynamic therapists, we are both our patients’ old parental objects and their new ones. Correspondingly, we may hold similar unconscious dilemmas with them, as parents do with their children. While we like to think that we are helping our patients to face their fears, to bear seeing and sitting with painful truths—in other words, to *look* and *to be seen*—I think we are often scared to be seen ourselves, and perhaps most of all, to be seen in our own vulnerability and mortality. Like children, our patients may not want to see this either. My first control case, a man who struggles with self-loathing over his self-perceived incompetence and brokenness, reacts with explosive anger if I ever try to model self-compassion or the universality of imperfection by pointing out my own mistakes or shortcomings to him.

“How can the blind lead the blind?” he sputters in outrage (and fear), and threatens to quit analysis. He desperately needs me to be omniscient and omnipotent, a replacement for the fumbling father who failed to teach him “how to be a man.”

So when my daughter asked me, “Are *you* going to die tonight?” and I rushed to reassure her that I would see her the next morning, I thought about the fantasy that many of us collude in with our patients, that we will always be there for them. Like Orpheus, they cling to this notion while also wondering if they have been tricked, if we are *not* in fact there for them, following closely behind—if it’s mere illusion, our presence behind them, just out of sight. And like Eurydice, we *are* at perpetual risk of disappearing, abandoning, slipping away in ways both imagined and real.

A mutually determined termination, I’ve been told, is the opportunity to experience, perhaps for the first time, a “good” goodbye. This is how I envision a “good” Asian death, like those of my grandparents—one that is anticipated but not dreaded, accepted, ideally at home in the presence of loved ones.

Perhaps because of this experience, I don’t fear death that much myself, but I do worry about those I’ll leave behind. In the past year, I began working with two new patients who still feel utterly decimated by their respective therapists’ sudden retirements due to aging or health problems—many days, the feelings of abandonment, of having driven their therapists away by being “too much” or “not enough,” can negate five, ten years of solid, caring work, throwing them right back into their early traumas of dead(ened) or rejecting parents. I wonder sometimes if it’s the fear of abandoning or retraumatizing their patients that causes some analysts to continue working far longer than perhaps they should, trying to put off the inevitable—but in doing so, in *not* looking at or acknowledging their own vulnerability or mortality, they end up traumatizing their patients even more. Because what is invisible is still there. Our children, our patients—they *know* us, and they sense our anxiety, our vulnerabilities, the hairline fissures below the surface, the perturbations in the field. For many of our patients, one of their compounding traumas was how things went unacknowledged, unspoken, not looked at; so how can we knowingly repeat that?

Traumatic losses—the ones that blindsides us, the ones that defy understanding—shatter frames and whatever illusory bubbles of safety we try to create for ourselves and for our children. In the last decade, we have had to face not just COVID, but the stark, horrifying deaths of so many victims due to racial violence and mass shootings—Black churchgoers and Jewish synagogue members at their places of worship, members of the LGBTQ community while dancing at a nightclub, Black sons and daughters in the supposed safety of their own cars and beds, children at their schools, or Asians at our most festive time of year, Lunar New Year. To Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, this pandemic brought not just a fear of COVID, but a fear of violent, anti-Asian hate crimes. My older teen daughter, the fearless one, who wrote a scathing, prize-winning editorial on how Trump’s racist rhetoric around “kung flu” had stoked xenophobia, began to have difficulty sleeping, worrying about the safety of her Chinese grandparents, my parents—whether they too might get shoved, punched, or stabbed upon leaving their Manhattan Chinatown apartment building. There are days when I come home numb and shell-shocked, wondering, “What do I tell my children, when I can’t even begin to metabolize my own horror and helplessness?” As a parent, I want to protect them from harm, from ugliness, from fear, from traumatic loss, and perhaps from death itself. I think it is the incomprehensible loss of innocence that tears most at me—the school children of Sandy Hook or Uvalde, George Floyd or Tyre Nichols calling out, begging for their mothers as they were dying. It feels like a violent rip in the fabric of the universe, and sometimes it is too much to bear or look at.

Still, to be constantly preoccupied and fearful of death is to be, in many ways, dead already. So we live in compromise—sometimes looking, sometimes averting our gaze. We do this with our children, our patients, and each other. Sometimes this means covering my daughter’s eyes during the scary parts of a movie, but also letting her peek through if she wishes, from within the safety and containment of my embrace. Wanting to teach her not to be afraid of life *or* death, to be brave enough to look at what is painful and scary—but also letting her retreat to the Land of Stuffedies and Dreams when it is too much. And sometimes she is the one who gets *me* to look, with her unflinching, persistent questions. I hope that this is how it is with our patients, our loved ones, and this field of psychoanalysis—always titrating, always holding, and ultimately, looking *together*. ■

Elisa Cheng, MD, is a fifth-year candidate at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, where she is chair of the Candidate and Affiliate Scholar Council and serves on the Ethics Education and Joint Curriculum Committees. She practices in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



WORK

THE SPRING DEBACLE

Can the subaltern speak at APsA?

BY BILL GLOVER

Artwork by Tate Overton

**“I disapprove
of what
you say, but
I will defend
to the death
your right
to say it.”**

THIS QUOTE, attributed to Voltaire, sounds naive today when we are so ready to kill off those whose speech we disapprove of. The controversy over Dr. Lara Sheehi presenting at the June APsA meeting has mirrored a broader polarization of American society with regard to speech. Speaking at APsA has become contested ground. Many protested Lara’s noninvitation as silencing her, while others claimed a silent majority approves.

I will not repeat the details of the controversy but instead will focus on the general breakdown of collegiality in speaking and listening to each other at APsA. Most of the attention, pro and con, has focused on two individuals, Dr. Sheehi and Dr. Kerry Sulkowicz, then our president, who carried the explosive large group dynamics for us. While they volunteered for their respective roles, we projected our conflicts onto Lara and Kerry and are collectively responsible for the controversy. The path to truth and hope for repair requires us to own those projections.

	Can the Subaltern Speak?	A Silent Majority?		The Terrorist and the Tyrant	Representation	
	<p>Initially, out of solidarity with Kerry and Dan Prezant, the colleagues and friends who followed me as president, I blamed the turmoil on the underlying governance conflict between the Executive Committee and Program Committee. I was aghast as the animosity and splitting deepened. Looking for insight, I turned to Gayatri Spivak’s landmark 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”</p> <p>“Subaltern” was a British army term for a lower-ranking officer. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary socialist thinker, adapted the term to describe marginalized people and groups whose agency and voices are excluded from society to preserve the “cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie.” The concept resonated in post-Raj India with anti-colonialists who founded the journal <i>Subaltern Studies</i> and an academic specialization striving to learn from below, from the oppressed and voiceless members of society. Use of the term has expanded to include anyone with inferior rank or station in a social, political, or other hierarchy. You can be subaltern in one hierarchy but not in others. When someone is identified by what they are not they are subaltern, with their power and voice diminished by their lesser status.</p> <p>In this view, Lara Sheehi, racial/ethnic and sexual/gender minorities, and the new categories of members welcomed into APsA by recent bylaw amendments are all subalterns. The controversy over Sheehi speaking suggests that the answer to Spivak’s question is no, the subaltern may not speak at APsA after all. Despite our professed welcoming of diversity, her voice is apparently contingent and can be canceled at any moment. We are ambivalent about a subaltern, in this case an anti-colonial Arab woman, speaking her truth. All who might identify as subaltern at APsA have reason to fear that they too could be silenced. This includes the psychotherapists, scholars, and researchers we invite to join us who have been subaltern in the psychoanalytic world for so long. Lara and others resigned, absenting themselves from our discourse in protest, while prospective members turned away. The message threw a cold blanket on our invitation to join by alienating the diversity we aim to welcome. In our speaking controversy Kerry came to represent another hierarchy not heeding the subaltern, but he too was silenced, alienating those who sympathized with his position.</p>	<p>There is another silence at APsA. Many of us are reluctant to enter public debate, particularly in the thrust and parry of the APsA listserv, now even more so for fear of being called out for enacting racism. As subaltern voices challenge the hegemony of traditional powers at APsA, many of us are silent about the changes underway. The Holmes Commission report finds that</p> <p>A climate of fear (typically of retaliation) impedes needed change ... White faculty and candidates were fearful of showing racism or ignorance. These strong subjective states among BIPOC and white faculty and candidates can lead to superficial and ineffectual engagement of race and racism, and even stasis.</p> <p>In our controversy Lara Sheehi was not the only one canceled. Feeling he could no longer lead when his critics dominated the listserv and the Board did not support him, Kerry Sulkowicz resigned as president and fell silent. My formulation is that a backlog of ambivalence about the many changes at APsA inflamed the controversy. In a condensation, Kerry represented a part of the Association we usually consider “superaltern,” a part which experienced a turning of the tables and a moment of subalternity. I hesitate to suggest any equivalence between the momentary subalternity of a majority and the enduring subalternity of a minority, but the unconscious is neither fair nor politically correct. Everyone harbors unconscious transgressive wishes to murder, assault, and dominate others, and we all can experience victimization.</p> <p>Is there a silent majority opposing change at APsA? Some members comment privately that the changes are “not psychoanalytic enough” and that our turn to the social dilutes psychoanalysis. They too feel it is not safe to speak at APsA. Silence can be a passive-aggressive delay, a flight tactic, while aggressive opposition becomes a fight tactic, together producing Bion’s basic assumption group of fight/flight instead of a cooperative working group.</p> <p>The phrase “silent majority” has deep ties to conservative politics and arguably played a role in polarizing the listserv debates. It was first used by Nixon and recently exhumed by Trump who deployed it as a campaign slogan with clearly racist undertones—i.e., the silent majority is implicitly the White majority. The silent majority is evoked not only to preserve psychoanalytic identity and values but also privilege. I do not think there is a silent majority at APsA opposed to change. I believe that we want change but are conflicted about how to achieve it. Most of us are bystanders. I suggest that “abdicating bystanders,” Stuart Twemlow’s term for those who sit on the sidelines, is more accurate than “silent majority.”</p>		<p>At our worst, we labeled Lara an anti-Semitic terrorist and Kerry a racist tyrant. The accusations of anti-Semitism against Lara included allegations that her husband supported the terrorist organization Hezbollah, locating them outside of civilized mores, deserving of silencing, and adding to the constant threats and opprobrium they endure. When he would not agree that his stance toward the Program Committee was an authoritarian, racial enactment, Kerry was portrayed as a racist tyrant who must resign, eclipsing his many contributions to human rights work and to APsA.</p> <p>Such accusations are standard political tactics to discredit an opponent. “Racism” and “terrorism” are two of the strongest moral condemnations of our time. As the rhetoric heated up there was a rush to judgment. Both sides reproached each other in a flurry of superego-charged projections.</p> <p>We have a standoff where the subaltern shouts to be heard and some clap back while the majority don’t speak. We all need to engage and not retreat into enclaves. Both the implementation of change and preservation of values are weakened by our polarization. Cui bono? If we are divided who benefits? The enemies of psychoanalysis and of our humanist values—those to whom <i>psychoanalysis</i> is marginalized and discredited. What is a psychoanalytic approach? In our turn to the social we want not only to recognize the social in theory and clinical practice but also to bring a psychoanalytic perspective to the group and political dynamics of society.</p>	<p>Spivak can help us here. The first and obvious reading of her essay is as a straightforward call to listen to the subaltern. In another reading she raises the problem of representation: who speaks for the subaltern? The example Spivak gives is the Indian custom of Sati-sacrifice, where a widow joins her husband on his funeral pyre. Spivak points out that the Indian patriarchy spoke for the widow and claimed she took her life out of free will while the British who colonized India claimed to be saving her from this barbaric custom, thereby giving her free will. Spivak noted this act where “white men are saving brown women from brown men” is but one example of the supposed beneficence of the Raj legitimizing colonization. Spivak emphasizes that neither patriarchy listened to the wife, a subaltern, for the meaning of the act to her. Along with political <i>representation</i>, she calls for a <i>re-presentation</i> of the subaltern, as in literature, her original field. Art and reportage are best able to represent the subaltern.</p> <p>Witnessing George Floyd’s death was a piercing re-presentation of the subaltern speaking, his murder captured on video by Darnella Frazier, a courageous young Black witness. But George Floyd moments are rare. It is well-nigh impossible for the subaltern to speak so directly. They need the tools to speak, the language, delivery, and access to an audience, but the subaltern inhabits a different world. George Floyd’s death speech required re-presentation. But when someone speaks for the subaltern, they bring their own values. The patriarchs of Bengal claimed the widows wished to die with their husbands while the British patriarchy claimed to be saving them. In my reading, Spivak’s thinking implies similar biases for other hierarchies, even the activist ones that see her as a spokeswoman. Our own values and ambitions come into play when we aim to represent the people. Politicians seek power, scholars academic capital, and professionals a monopoly.</p> <p>It is no coincidence that pandemonium broke out immediately after the expansion of APsA membership. We evoked a desire to belong to a reimagined APsA by those previously excluded, but when our fears of change crystallized around Lara speaking, her exclusion signified the ambivalence of our invitation and disappointed that desire.</p> <p>This is a soul-defining moment for APsA. Our actions need to match our aspirations for recognizing the social in psychoanalysis. Our commitment to racial equality is challenged. We need to deliver the home we promised. For APsA to be a truly inclusive psychoanalytic community we must work through our projections without silencing anyone to achieve as democratic a consensus as possible.</p>	

**“We have a
standoff where
the subaltern
shouts to be heard
and some clap back
while the majority
don’t speak.”**



Reciprocity

We need reciprocity in speaking and listening to each other. Too often we speak to prove our belief, to convert others to our cause, or to mobilize our base, rather than to converse with one another in an exchange of views and opinions. Listening means listening to someone, considering what they say, not looking for a riposte to “own” them. We need to tolerate both dissent and pushback.

Can those in the supernaltern position listen but also speak and not retreat into enclaves of illusory safety? Can the subaltern speak and be listened to? Can the subalterns listen as well as call out those who say something objectionable, giving their other the space to speak and be listened to? Can we listen without disqualifying each other as terrorists or tyrants, nonanalysts or rigid stereotypes, woke or racist? We know the limits of confrontation in the consulting room, and the same applies in groups and in society. Democratic change requires confrontation leavened with compassion and the courage to listen to the other as we reshape our habitus. Fleeing into enclaves deprives us of the opportunity for the collective working through, which is necessary for real, lasting change.

The national movement for diversity, equity, and inclusion recognizes that it must lead to belonging. If inclusion means opening the door, belonging means being accepted and listened to even when you rock the boat. If expanded membership does not lead to true belonging, it will fail. We have to do more than invite people to join; we have to be willing for our home to be reshaped by and for them as we make APsA their home too.

If there is a silver lining in this controversy it is the passionate engagement of so many members. Enactments are mutually constructed and each of us must reflect on our part. All of us, both active participants and bystanders, are implicated in this traumatic institutional enactment. As much as the final report and recommendations of the Holmes Commission will help us, the work of repair is up to all of us.

I believe that both Lara Sheehi and Kerry Sulkowicz deserve our apologies. I don’t mean to equate them or the merit of the positions we’ve projected onto them. The equivalence is that both are used as receptacles for our projections in the fight or flight basic assumption group functioning that APsA so often devolves into. All of us bear responsibility for the breakdown in collegiality and rupture of our community. Repair depends on our ability to own our projections, to speak truthfully, and listen carefully to each other. ■

“Democratic change requires confrontation leavened with compassion and the courage to listen to the other as we reshape our habitus.”

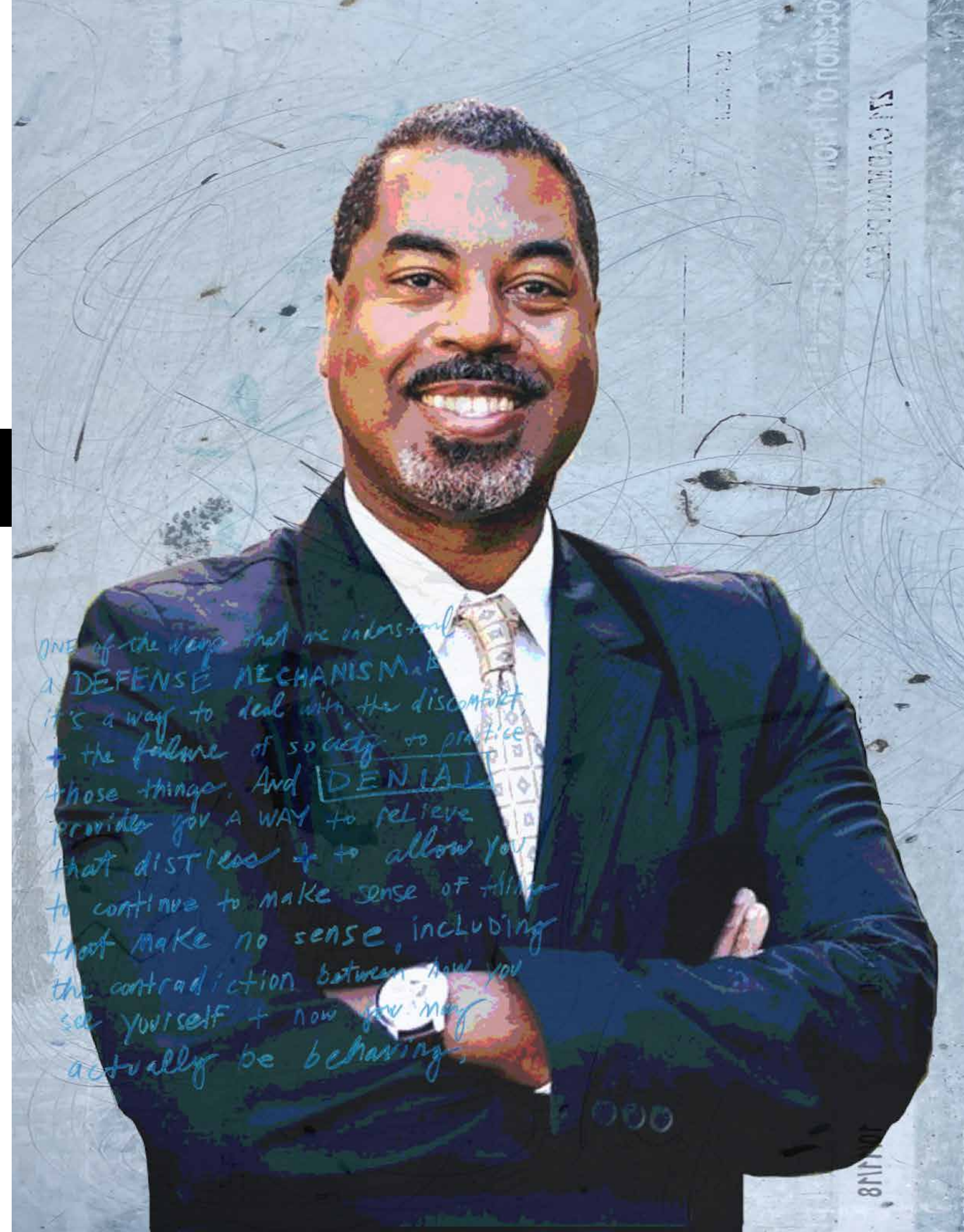
Bill Glover is a past president of APsA. He has served psychoanalytic institutions locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally, and now is on the APsA and IPA boards. He is vice chair of the Psychoanalytic Education Division at the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis.

Beyond Guilt and **RACISM DENIAL**

An interview with Phillipe Copeland

Illustration by Austin Hughes

TAP editor in chief Austin Ratner took an opportunity to chat with Phillipe Copeland, a professor of social work at Boston University, author of an article on racism denial, and educator who teaches practical competencies at dealing with racism and talking openly about it. When it comes to denial of racism, Dr. Copeland makes a distinction between strategic denial and psychological denial. With the former term, he describes conscious, calculated political efforts to dismiss the seriousness or even the existence of racism, and he suggests that that sort of denial must be called out for what it is and exposed. The latter term, psychological denial of racism, Dr. Copeland describes as an unconscious coping strategy employed by both White people and people of color to protect themselves from painful feelings in connection with racism—whether guilt or anger or other negative emotions. Most of the interview relates to the latter and includes a discussion of the recent outbreak of accusations of racism in the American Psychoanalytic Association. After talking to him, Ratner says, the insoluble seems soluble.



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STRATEGIC DENIAL AND COPING DENIAL

AUSTIN RATNER: People talk about denial as if it's only a form of cognitive bias. Which doesn't, to me, capture one of the key aspects of it—that people are actually protecting themselves from discomfort, and that that actually has implications for how you talk to them about it.

PHILLIPE COPELAND: One of the ways that we understand a defense mechanism is it's a way to deal with the discomfort, the psychic discomfort, the psychic suffering that comes from the values which you have internalized and the failure of society to practice those things. And denial provides you a way to relieve that distress and to allow you to continue to make sense of things that make no sense, including the contradiction between how you see yourself and how you may actually be behaving. It has a lot of emotional value, and I want to make the point that this isn't just true of the United States, this is true of most liberal democracies, sometimes in ways which are so horrific that they can't be ignored. You can't ignore it, so you gotta do something.

What some people do is they try to deny the significance of what they're seeing. The contradiction is too painful to live with. And so you try to create a way to live without it or beyond it. And I refer to that as racism denial as a coping strategy. Strategic denial and psychological denial often go hand in hand. They reinforce each other, so people who are engaging in racism denial as a coping strategy are much more susceptible to manipulation by people who are doing it strategically. In some ways, those groups really need each other. So if I could say "Look, so and so, who I believe has authority, is also saying that my beliefs about racism are accurate and that what other people are saying is inaccurate," it's much easier for me to say, "Well, see, it's not me, it's you. There's something wrong with you because from my perspective there's available evidence to suggest that my views are correct, that my perceptions are correct. I'm not in denial, you're in denial!" The strategic folks really need the coping mechanism people—and vice versa.

AR: And they're enabling them.

PC: Absolutely. They're enabling them. They're manipulating them. They're reinforcing their denial. Sometimes it's strategic and sometimes it's unconscious, and sometimes

it's a bit of both. And then you get the outcome, which is that the problem doesn't get solved because it can't really be seen. You make the problem harder to solve.

OPTIMISM OR PRAGMATISM?

AR: As a White person my skin doesn't provoke the same set of cultural and psychological reactions that a person of color's skin does in many situations, and so I'm not under the same kind of pressure in relation to racism. It's easy for me to be optimistic about this. It's harder for a person of color. How are you able to be positive and effective in this way, and how do you deal with your own emotions?

PC: I don't experience it as optimism. I experience it as pragmatism. That's really my first principle: I do believe that this is a problem that can be solved, and that the means of solving the problem have practical identifiable elements. We can learn to live differently. We can learn, for example, to not rely on denial to deal with the pain of the contradictions of the societies that we live in, and in fact engage in active means of making things better. So rather than trying to feel better about racism, we actually make the world better, which is in fact a better way of dealing with the problem. I think at this point in our history, there are more people who want to live in a world without racism than people who want to live in a world with racism. I think it is possible to equip them with tools that will help them to create that kind of a world. And so part of it is to understand the nature of the problem clearly and to be able to recognize the obstacles that come up in the world and in ourselves to doing that work, and racism denial is one example. We can do this.

ON THE INFIGHTING AT APSA

AR: Let me throw at you a case example drawn from recent events. The former president of the American Psychoanalytic Association recently resigned. [AR explains the polarizing fight that erupted after the president's withdrawal of a speaking invitation for an APSA member who had been accused of anti-Semitism.] He ended up really getting into a fight with what he ended up describing as the "illiberal left" in the organization, and they called for his resignation and he resigned. It got more and more inflamed, and then

certain people of color started to feel that their viewpoint was not represented in the power structure and several of them resigned from the organization.

PC: I think this is just happening in a lot of places. How do you hold space for the emotional content of this work, understanding that feelings and facts are not the same thing and that our emotional reactions by definition aren't necessarily rational? It doesn't mean that they're wrong, but you gotta figure out a way to deal with that that's not just about trying to figure out who was right in a purely factual sense, right? You're dealing with people who are from communities that have experienced significant harm, that have valid concerns. Having a valid concern doesn't mean that it's going to be expressed in a valid fashion—but that doesn't matter because the concern itself needs to be addressed. I think it's very difficult to do that, but I do think that naming that—naming the emotional element of it, acknowledging the emotional reality and experience of people—that doesn't require you to agree with their perspective, but you have to sufficiently express empathy. You see them, you hear them, value them inherently, and none of that requires that anybody agrees with each other. But you gotta start there.

This is really hard because for some people, what they want you to do in those moments is to clearly take a side, to validate their own feelings of righteousness. If they experience you as failing to do that, then you're wrong and then you become the problem. There are problems on multiple levels, part of which is the society in which we're all living, which is incredibly oppressive and toxic. And then it shows up in organizations and interpersonal relationships in ways that we're not responsible for. We didn't create this context, but we got to figure out how to live effectively with it. It sounds like in this situation a variety of different people were trying to do what they believe to be the right thing and what they thought was best either for the organization or for the community of people that they are part of, and it doesn't sound like anybody walked away happy with the outcome. And so that's tough, you know, because ideally you get to a place where—again, not requiring a complete agreement—everybody involved in the interaction walks away feeling valued, respected, seen, heard, even if they don't completely agree with the particular way that the problem was dealt with. And that's really hard to do, but in my experience when you're able to navigate and get to that place, it allows for the possibility for relationship to continue into the future. I think a lot of people have not yet developed the skill sets to deal with conflict related to these issues very well, and that's not a

character flaw—I really do think that it's about learning. It's about skills and it's about competence, but it gets framed as a kind of personal deficit. It gets framed as you're a bad person who's doing hurtful things to other people.

Look, this isn't just about whether this or that individual is a good person. There's a much bigger political, cultural context here at play, and so what can we do with that dynamic that gets as many of us as possible to an outcome that as many of us as possible can feel good about moving forward? You know, in my work I say it's a matter of both will and skill, and so it's not just that people don't care or they're not trying to do the right thing or they're deliberately trying to hurt people. I think a lot of people genuinely do not know how to handle these situations because they haven't been given the opportunity to learn. Or to practice. Practice makes progress. And you can hear that as optimism, but I really do think a lot of that's just very practical. We have lots of people who are reaching adulthood and assuming all kinds of positions of great responsibility, with high stakes, who have never learned how to deal with these problems effectively. And that's a choice. That is a choice that our society has made, again, because some people don't want people to learn—and in some cases, it's really by omission.

We need to think about it the way that some people think about STEM education: it really is a problem to reach adulthood and not have developed these particular skill sets. You cannot be a functional participant in liberal democracy if you don't know how to deal with these things. You can't. It's that fundamental. We have people who are functionally illiterate when it comes to issues of racism, and it's literally killing people. Literally, lives are being lost because of that, and we don't have to keep doing that. And so there has to be that sense of urgency.

RAGE, GUILT, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

AR: I have noticed a dynamic between White people and Black people sometimes where a Black person feels angry, understandably, and a White person feels the anger is coming at them. And that makes them feel defensive and perhaps guilty. Guilt is a huge motivator of denial because nobody wants to feel guilty. I wish there was a path forward through this locking of horns of rage and guilt.

PC: One way of thinking about that is I need to take action which is consistent with the person I want to be. That's a really useful reaction. That's really adaptive, really healthy, and something that's worth cultivating. I say to students

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AND YOU'RE
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COMMUNITY, IN
RELATIONSHIP."

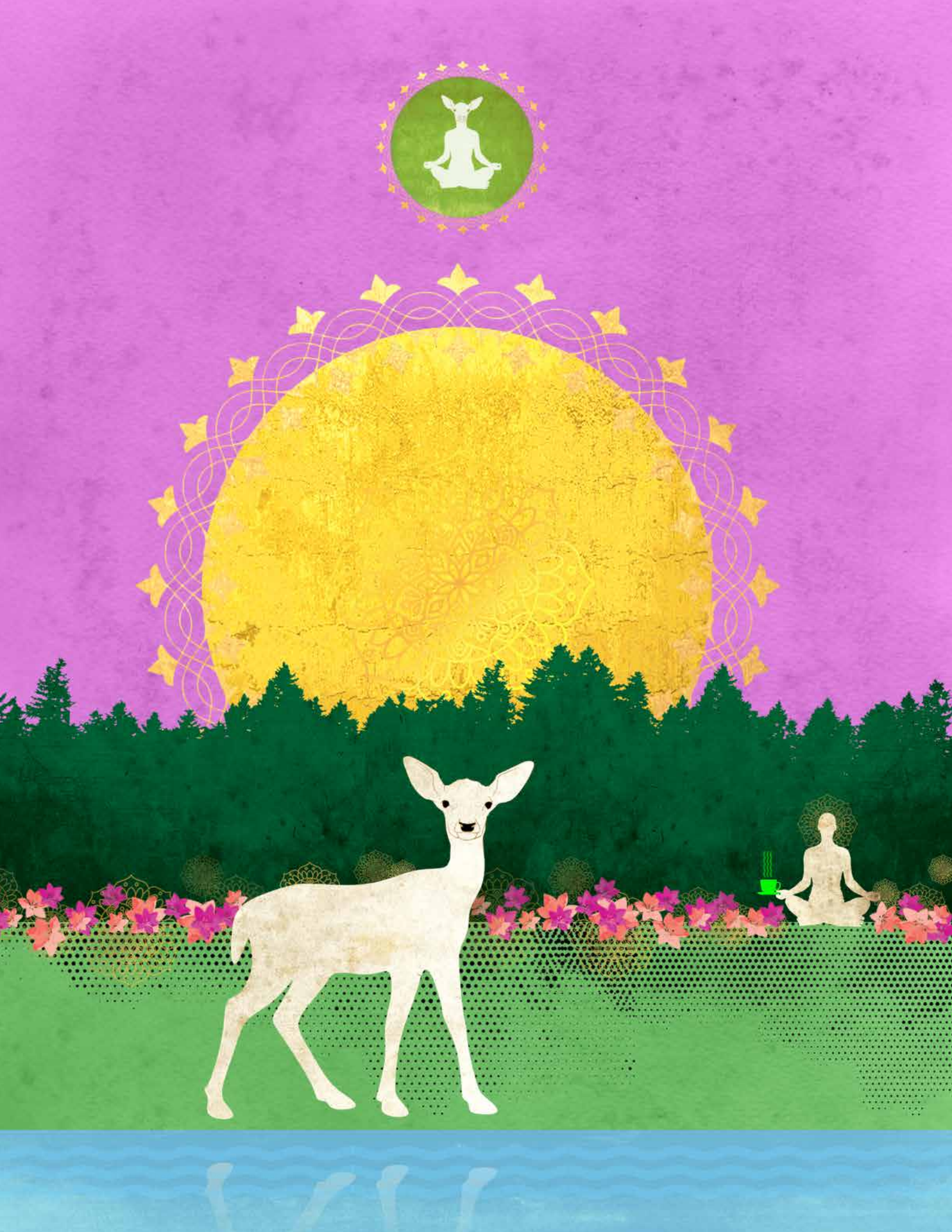
when they have that moment of feeling guilt, if you have to choose between guilt and sociopathy, guilt is better, right? Because if you're feeling bad, it suggests that you care, right? That's good. The problem is if you get stuck there. That's when it becomes toxic and not particularly helpful because you feeling bad about yourself doesn't help me get free. So again, pragmatically, it's not a very useful place to stay, right? That's when it becomes pathology. I think it tilts into a kind of a narcissism, and that's where it's unhealthy because it doesn't actually motivate you to become a better person. It just gives you another reason to feel bad about yourself and move into self-hatred and all these other kinds of things that are really destructive.

I say to students, emotions are energy, right? And energy can be transformed. It can be transferred. And so wherever you start, it's what you do with it. So if you start with guilt and get stuck there, that's a problem. But just the fact that you had that emotional reaction in and of itself is not bad. You gotta do something with it that's transformative, that feeds you, that supports you, and that produces better outcomes for the people around you. It sounds really simple, but the fastest way to feel better is to do better. Absolutely. You know what I'm saying? If you're learning about racism and you're feeling bad about it, do something about it, and do something about it in community, in relationship.

You read the accounts of civil rights workers and things like that. Some of them are still with us, right. What they will say is that the experience of that struggle was transformative. They became new human beings. They are not who they were before they started, and some of these people in their eighties, like, their whole life trajectory changed completely. Because they said I'm going to go down to Mississippi, spending this summer helping people to register to vote, which is different than me sitting in Boston being like, "God, racism is awful and I'm awful, right? Because I'm racist, right?"

There's this idea of social prescribing. There's actual psychological benefit to trying to make the world a better place to live. Even from the perspective of the subconscious, doing the work is a great way of learning about yourself and becoming observant. It's a great way of thinking about encouraging people into civic engagement, you know, and to make even just their own world—their own immediate neighborhood, their own immediate apartment building—better. ■

This interview has been edited and condensed. The audio of the interview is available with this story on our website.



The Sitting Cure:

Suffering and awareness in meditation and psychoanalysis

BY LUCAS McGRANAHAN

Illustrations by Austin Hughes

IT'S NOT HARD to shut your mouth. It's not hard to deposit your phone behind the front desk with Jen. The hard part is meditating.

It's late summer and I am attending a silent retreat at a meditation center in the Midwest. I am one of twenty or so students who have sworn off our ordinary preoccupations—work, family, friends, sex, screens, booze, drugs—all the things that agitate and soothe us cyclically.

Whether seated on a firm cushion with legs folded or, as I prefer, on a wooden bench with knees bent in front, we meditate copiously: several sessions a day, an hour at a time, sometimes longer, together in the dhamma hall, which is divided down the middle by gender to keep passions at bay.

The instructions are clear. For the first three days we are observing the “touch of the breath” on the upper lip. Respiration is the sharpening stone for attention. Starting on the evening of Day 3, we

will scan the body methodically using an ancient mental technique called *vipassana* in Pali, the language of the Buddha and his followers.

There are many forms of meditation. I know little about them. What we're taught to do is this: no self-talk, no mantras, no conjuring up images to contemplate. The only legitimate objects of awareness are extant bodily sensations: fleeting perceptions of heat, pressure, moisture, tingling, and the like. In the background, swells of emotion, neither indulged nor inhibited, arise and pass away according to their own intrinsic half-life.

Itch on the scalp? Noted. Excruciating lower back pain? Noted. Your worst regrets and most cherished hopes? Set aside, except for their corporeal residues—the hidden pockets of affect, the knots of agony held in the body's trunk that exist on the same phenomenological plane as the itchy head and cranky back.

It's all just sensation, whatever its provenance, and the good news is you can metabolize it.

“Embracing the emptiness of the ego may seem to contradict the psychoanalytic project of strengthening the ego, but that is a semantic confusion.”

Our most important renunciation is speech. We practice *noble silence*, not communicating with one another, not even in gesture, not even if we need something.

Noble silence suits me fine—better than being buffeted by idle talk or the threat of it. Without silence, there is no settling of the mental sediment. Without silence, we would be trapped in the versions of ourselves we give voice to, trading rehearsed life stories around the red picnic table.



Meditation is simple, unnatural, and difficult. Over and over, my attention flags. My thoughts wander. I become drowsy. I slump forward, backward, to one side. I adjust my leg. I dredge up memories or stoke desires or chart out some quixotic life plan to pass the time. Will draping one more blanket over my shoulders get me into the zone?

The recorded Pali chanting has begun, so this session will end soon, thank God.

Failure is inevitable. Judge yourself for failing and your failure multiplies. Best to smile and start again, righting yourself as you would a wayward child.



I am undergoing this series of self-corrections for the sake of a deeper sort of self-correction.

I have just spent eleven years in sunny California which culminated in the gloomy abandonment of two things, a career path in academia and a marriage. After these twin engines of my adulthood suffered mechanical failure—too many years in, no longer under warranty—returning to the Midwest feels right. Appropriately, this retreat, held in rural Illinois, is downstream on the same river that passes through the small town in Wisconsin where I grew up.

I have done some sitting practice, in fits and starts, at home and at community meditation centers, but nothing like this. Bookish and verbose, I am better at dwelling on subjective experience than dwelling in it. Going deeper into the practice will turn out to have unanticipated effects.



The curriculum is simple. Morning bell at 4 a.m. Two meals a day: breakfast and lunch. Lemon water with honey at 5 p.m. The rest is meditation and breaks from meditation in which we

are free to shower or walk slowly or sit on a log.

Each evening we hear from our teacher, S. N. Goenka, the Indian-Burmese businessman-turned-guru who founded this international network of centers. Goenka speaks to us, not in the flesh—he died in 2013—but in dhamma talks that were videotaped in the 1990s. Thus, the only time anyone speaks to us at length during the retreat is from beyond the grave and behind the screen.

Still, any form of human connection feels valuable when you are starved of it.

These Buddhist sermons are my favorite part of the day. Each video consists of a single static shot of the round-faced, short-haired Goenka against a pale blue backdrop, apparently filmed at one of his retreats, his live audience laughing occasionally from somewhere off-camera at his shopworn parables and jokes.

Our teacher speaks of kindness, compassion, ethical resolve. His smile is radiant, his questions perennial. He is affable and wise and a passable father figure. He upholds a philosophy of love and I love him. Even when I don't buy what he says—something about introspecting elementary particles?—I indulge him so that he, a dead man, approves of me.

I could even start calling myself a Buddhist if he would like that.



The idea from these talks that sticks with me most is *sankharas of suffering*, layers of misery sedimented in the body that can be uncovered and released incrementally through vipassana. Goenka says every mental reaction of craving or aversion creates a little (or big) sankhara, which adds weight to and resonates with the existing stock. This is how the body, in Buddhist terms, keeps the score.

Listening to Goenka, I am reminded of the early Freud, for whom the unconscious is a stock of intolerable, emotionally charged ideas. Idea and feeling are two sides of a coin, currency that can be frozen by internal censors when a memory or fantasy is too much to bear. Unfreeze it—make the unconscious conscious—and you can bind it, abreact it, cash it in for a more easeful mental life.

Maybe we are all in the position of Breuer and Freud's hysterics, whose bodily complaints were symptoms of mental suffering. Maybe hysteria was just a strange example, exploding for some reason in fin de siècle Vienna, of a more general phenomenon: the somaticization of psychic pain that remains

stuck in the body until you find a way to look at it squarely.

For the patient to look squarely, according to the mature Freud, requires cultivating a habit of free association, the ability to follow the train of one's thoughts without criticism or fear, complemented by an open attitude of even-hovering attention in the analyst. The two halves of the analytic dyad interlock in a poise of attentive, nonjudgmental curiosity.

Goenka's description seems to collapse this dyad into one: liberation for him lies in a disinterested connoisseurship of one's own raw inner states. The difference is there is no attempt at verbal expression. Merely accepting the sankhara as it is, without speaking of it or endowing it with a back story, can dissolve it spontaneously.

What Goenka calls the "ultimate goal"—more ambitious than Freud's stated goal of replacing neurotic misery with ordinary unhappiness—is to dissolve all sankharas, to stop generating new ones, to reach nibbana. If you believe in rebirth, as Goenka does, you'll want to enter the next life with as few sankharas as possible, and it might take a few lifetimes to get rid of them all. If you believe in just one life, do your best with the time you have.



Sunrise. Sipping hot mint tea. The proto-hallucinogenic effects of intensive meditation are setting in. A doe, browsing vines along a tree, spots me from the ravine. *What kind of being are you?* she seems to ask.

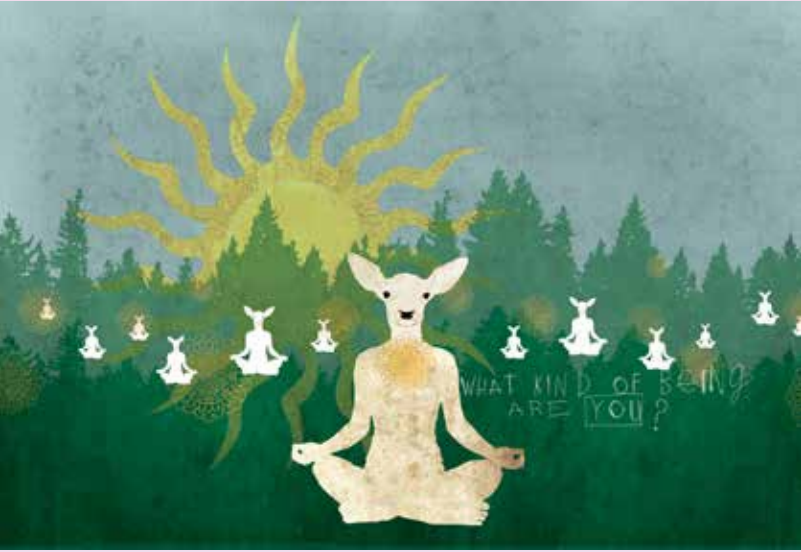


Evening. We are being initiated into vipassana—surveying the body piece by piece. We are to observe extant sensations while noting their quality of *annica*, or impermanence.

Start with a calm and quiet mind, Goenka says. *See that you pass your attention through each and every part of the body. Every sensation has the characteristic of arising and passing away. One may be experiencing solidified, gross, unpleasant sensations. And one may be experiencing very subtle and pleasant vibrations. It makes no difference. Both are welcome.*

The more I scan my body, the less I find "gross sensations"—say, a straining shoulder—and the more I find transitory and nameless ones. The tractable body of the anatomy book is supplanted by a procession of flickering ephemera.

Although Goenka tends to mention the surface of the skin—the tingling here or the pressure there—such boundaries



lose meaning. Surface gives way to depth, to *interoception*, to listening to the viscera glistening darkly.

An entrenched primordial knot prods into awareness on the left side of my chest. It seems to be trapping intense affect under pressure but leaking it slowly. I allow the liberated sensation to arise and pass through me as it seems to want to. The knot slackens dramatically, unleashing a tremor of reassociation that feels so holy and transfiguring that words fail, except to say: the face behind my face fits better now.

I leave the session, not enlightened, but ontologically lighter, righter in myself and the world, realigned. I stand up from my bench, slip on my shoes, and step from the dhamma hall into the moonlight.

SEVERAL YEARS ON, the retreat seems to have served its purpose, an existential reboot, including a different career and relationship, built in the psychic space opened up, at least in part, through vipassana. I've mostly kept up my meditation practice. I've also had a chance to read and think more about the relation between meditation and psychotherapy that first struck me then.

I've learned that psychoanalysis has been ambivalent about meditation. Freud said mystical experience engendered by meditation is a regression to an oceanic feeling of primary narcissism, and he thought the Eastern attempt to quiet the drives was antithetical to the psychoanalytic goal of expressing or releasing them. The tide turned somewhat in the mid-twentieth century, as Alan Watts, Erich Fromm, and Karen Horney—all

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mentored by Zen master D. T. Suzuki—attempted to synthesize insights from Eastern and Western psychology to encourage people to lead more authentic or self-realized lives. Some recent commentators have continued working in this more synthetic vein, and I’d like to conclude by taking up a few of their ideas that are validated by my experience.

First, meditation improves affect tolerance. The main benefit of meditation for me is not that I live in an ongoing state of mystical rapture or that I constantly uncover massive sankharas. No such luck. It is that I am more able to sit with what I’m feeling. I am more apt to see a spike in emotional response as a metal detector going off at the beach, a sign of something buried that could be profitably unearthed. I am somewhat more self-curious, somewhat less averse to my own aversion, somewhat less given to extraneous meta-suffering that takes first-order suffering as its object of concern. (One study showed that if you apply painful levels of heat to the hands of expert meditators, they feel it as much as anyone—but they anticipate the pain less and thus suffer less overall than control subjects. I’m not there yet, but the idea tracks.)

This ability is helpful, among other reasons, for therapy. Few things are more useful on the couch—for both analyst and analysand—than the ability to notice and tolerate what is normally held at arm’s length.

Meditation can do this because it offers a special form of self-relation, one that both resembles and differs from that sought after in psychotherapy. Psychiatrist Mark Epstein, a student of both the Buddha and Donald Winnicott, puts it like this: being mothered is like receiving therapy is like meditating. In each case, one’s inner states are recognized, but not reified, through a process of attunement. The good-enough mother does this for the child. The analyst does this for the patient. In meditation, you do this for yourself.

This logic of meditative self-regulation makes use of a deflationary metaphysical attitude. After all, the traditional aim of Buddhist meditation is to attain insight into the emptiness—conditioned and impermanent nature—of all things, especially the ego. As clinical psychologist Jack Engler has argued, this insight is part of what makes meditation therapeutic.

Embracing the emptiness of the ego may seem to contradict the psychoanalytic project of strengthening the ego, but that is a semantic confusion. The ego denied by Buddhism is not a set of adaptive psychic functions that have developed over time—phylogenetically, ontogenetically, perhaps culturally—to help us get by in the world. The ego denied by Buddhism is a pure, unconditioned ontological core beyond the world of time and chance. These are apples and oranges, and the oranges are a hallucination.

Buddhism sees value in exposing the hallucination. Acknowledging that you are a contingent psychosomatic construction emerging within a circus of equally contingent constructions can make you more willing to face the reality of suffering because it takes reality down a peg. This is an interpretation of reality, not a denial of reality: my problems are real but not Real, not eternal; see how they erode in the temporalizing stream of awareness.

These points in favor of meditation—that it replicates the logic of maternal and analytic care by deflating the ontological status of stressors and otherwise increasing affect tolerance—are considerable. They suggest that the talking cure isn’t the only game in town. There is also the sitting cure.

After all, untying the knot in my chest didn’t seem to require dialogue, interpretation, the electric dyadic rapport of the transference; I simply honed my concentration, opened myself to what was habitually ignored, and let

go of a reflexive act of tightening. I did this in silence, without a copay, through a nondiscursive phenomenological investigation of the submerged structures of my lived body.

I am not claiming that meditation can replace talk psychotherapy. Perhaps dialogical free association can lead to sankharas that body scanning can’t find. And perhaps vipassana’s flight into mute sensory experience may itself serve as a defense mechanism, a way of avoiding ideas, wishes, and fantasies one is afraid to confront.

Plus, meditation is not for everyone. A patient experiencing pathological dissociation or derealization is the least ready, not the most, for a lesson in Buddhist metaphysics. As Engler put it, “You have to be somebody before you can be nobody.”

In the end, I am a pluralist. Psychoanalyst Jeffrey Rubin’s “bifocal” metaphor seems apt: the self is both a product determined by its history (psychoanalysis) and an undefined process in the moment (meditation). Both lenses serve a purpose, and when to toggle between them is a judgment call based on who you are and what you want to achieve.

For my part, the lens of meditation has been a useful one. I believe this is because it provides an oblique approach to psychical problems when—at least for individuals of a certain neurotic disposition—a frontal assault isn’t advisable.

I find meditation therapeutic, paradoxically, because it is not meant to be therapy. This could be an idiosyncratic thing about me, but maybe others will relate. If I directly seek to address my psychic tensions, my defenses circle the wagons to protect the status quo; I am being too transparent. Meditation disarms the defenses by not aiming to accomplish anything. Indeed, once I start trying to accomplish something other than observation, I am, by definition, no longer meditating, and it’s time to start over. The result, when it works, is not only greater equanimity but renewed sensitivity, aliveness, and levity. Such good-humored self-attunement, not emotional flatness or ascetic self-denial, strikes me as the hallmark of successful meditation.

I am not saying this is easy to achieve. I am often distracted, and my practice gets infected with craving for the psychospiritual fireworks of my first retreat. When this happens I take a breath and begin again, reinstating an attitude of pointless curiosity that we all seem programmed, with age, to forget—an attitude, not aimed at healing, which is intrinsically healing. ■



Lucas McGranahan, PhD, is a writer, editor, and quasi-academic philosopher. He is the owner of Isthmus Editing, managing editor of *The American Psychoanalyst*, and author of *Pragmatism and Darwinism: William James on Evolution and Self-Transformation* (Routledge, 2017).

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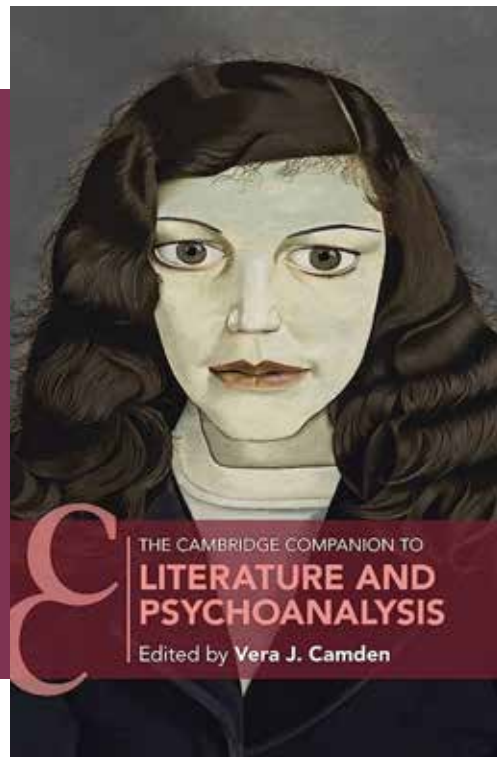
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A Return to Literature and Psychoanalysis? It's time.

BY VERA J. CAMDEN AND VALENTINO L. ZULLO

EARLIER THIS YEAR, colleges and universities began to report a surprising trend about their 2023 applicants: declared humanities majors for the first time in years are on the rise. Most notably, UC Berkley reported more than a 100 percent increase in first-year students declaring majors in the arts and humanities. Informal surveys of our own local colleges speak to a similar trend. While these numbers may not make up for the years of decline in the humanities, they do tell us something these students recognize: we need the humanities—and the critical context in which they flourish—to help us understand our increasingly complex and divided world. As young people return to the humanities to help them navigate their world, it is time psychoanalysis likewise reclaims its relationship with art and literature as it navigates its own future. Thus, when Austin Ratner asked us to contribute a piece on psychoanalysis and the humanities to highlight the publication

of the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis* for readers of *TAP*, we felt hopeful that this volume forecasted not only a growing trend toward the humanities in society but in psychoanalysis as well. That encountering literature is a sustaining, healing, revelatory experience is already known to us as readers and as psychoanalysts. As philosopher Martha Nussbaum proclaimed in her 2010 book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, literature and the arts offer “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experience of many different kinds and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in.” We can only agree, for with the rise of AI and other technologies that will redefine the human, we return to those works that reveal to us our humanity. Literature has long informed psychoanalysis, and it must continue to do so to sustain the latter’s transformative power as both clinical and cultural method.

“By hearing his own story
out loud,
Odysseus inhabits it in
a new way.”

Works of literature can do more than offer us examples of characters who resemble the patients who come into our office or help patients to process their feelings. They can inform our psychoanalytic theories and our clinical practice as they did for Freud. Contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis* return, thus, to Shakespeare and Austen, to Toni Morrison and Gabriel García Márquez, to listen to the ways they not only document life but also offer, each in their own way, fresh insight for psychoanalysts. Freud’s debt to culture is most famously recognizable in his formulation of the Oedipus complex: today’s psychoanalysts, following the spirit (if not always the letter) of his discoveries will find within the creative arts and human sciences the inspiration and, indeed, instruction they need to keep their practices vibrant.

HOW MIGHT THIS be exemplified? In what follows, we offer one example inspired by the *Companion* volume, bridging the applied and clinical divide, in what we here are calling a *return* to what Freud dubs—in a distinctly modernist and surprisingly industrialist metaphor—the rich “oil wells” of human culture, wells which “have only just been sampled.” As he tells poet Hilda Doolittle, “There is oil enough, material enough for research and exploitation to last fifty years, to last one hundred years, or longer.” We thus draw from these wells to recount one story that resonates for our troubled times—from Homer’s *Odyssey*.

When we meet our hero, Odysseus, he is already “experienced in loss.” A wandering veteran, he is a stranger in a strange land: strange even to himself, lost on his journey home. Among the many ways his story may speak to us—and the patients who are coming to see us now—is in his loneliness. While it is true that patients who feel lost and are experiencing

loss have always walked into analysts’ offices, we now recognize, along with myriad sociologists, that loneliness is on the rise today. Can such a thing as an ancient tale of searching and woe and recognition offer even us a way back to such things as home, family, friendship and ... collegiality?

On his circuitous route back to Ithaca, Odysseus meets the Phaeacians who live on the island of Scheria. Odysseus and the other Phaeacians spend time listening to stories from the blind poet Demodocus, who has been endowed with his gifts by the muse. Demodocus tells the story of Achilles and Odysseus. Upon hearing his own story, the hero begins to weep, as Homer describes:

Each time the singer paused, Odysseus
wiped tears, drew down the cloak and poured a splash
of wine out of his goblet, for the gods.
But each time, the Phaeacian nobles urged
the bard to sing again—they loved his songs.
So he would start again; Odysseus
would moan and hide his head beneath his cloak.
Only Alcinous could see his tears,
since he was sitting next to him, and heard
his sobbing.

After ten long years, Odysseus “wiped tears” and “poured a splash of wine” for the gods, who looked upon him fondly during the war. But Odysseus is not moved by just any story. When the poet tells the story of the affair of Aphrodite and Ares, he does not cry. Rather, like the Phaeacians he enjoys the story but is not touched by it. What Aristotle calls *recognition* occurs when the poet speaks Odysseus’s story back to him and he can see himself. Odysseus recognizes the power of the



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Top: *Ulysses at the Court of Alcinous*, Francesco Hayez, 1814–15

Left: Wall painting of Aphrodite and Ares, Pompeii, first century CE



EDUCATION

poet's language when he asks for one more story. He asks a "house boy,"

Go take
This meat and give it to Demodocus.
Despite my grief, I would be glad to meet him.
Poets are honored by all those who live
on earth. The muse has taught them how to sing:
she loves the race of poets.

Thus the "complicated man" returns to his story only when he hears the story of Troy. What is particularly revealing, though, is not just the return to that moment but how the poet's words lead Odysseus to inhabit his story anew:

Odysseus was melting into tears;
his cheeks were wet with weeping, as a woman
weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms around
her husband, fallen fighting for his home
and children. She is watching as he gasps
and dies. She shrieks, a clear high wail, collapsing
upon his corpse. The men are right behind.
They hit her shoulders with their spears and lead her
to slavery, hard labor, and a life
of pain. Her face is marked with her despair.
In that same desperate way, Odysseus
was crying. No one noticed that his eyes
were wet with tears, except Alcinous,
who sat right next to him and heard his sobs.

Odysseus finds himself living the story of Troy once again—both as himself and as another. He feels current despair, as well as empathy for the self that suffered for so many years. Alcinous who sits next to him bears witness to this pain.

We remember that the Homeric poem was sung to the listeners who would learn these lessons as we might again learn them today. Thus, when Odysseus hears his own story told back to him in the song of the poet, it mirrors the listener's own experience of hearing the poet sing this story to the Phaeacians and Odysseus. This mirrored experience teaches the listener to remember what happened, in the presence of another. By hearing his own story out loud, Odysseus inhabits it in a new way. The *Odyssey* depicts a reintegration of the traumatic history without "cathecting the wound." The story itself allows Odysseus to inhabit the space in a new way so that it is both familiar and separate.

Demodocus as poet and Alcinous as witness embody elements of the psychoanalytic process. Psychoanalysis is first a method of witness as analyst and analysand construct a story together. However, what the *Odyssey* tells us is that it is not

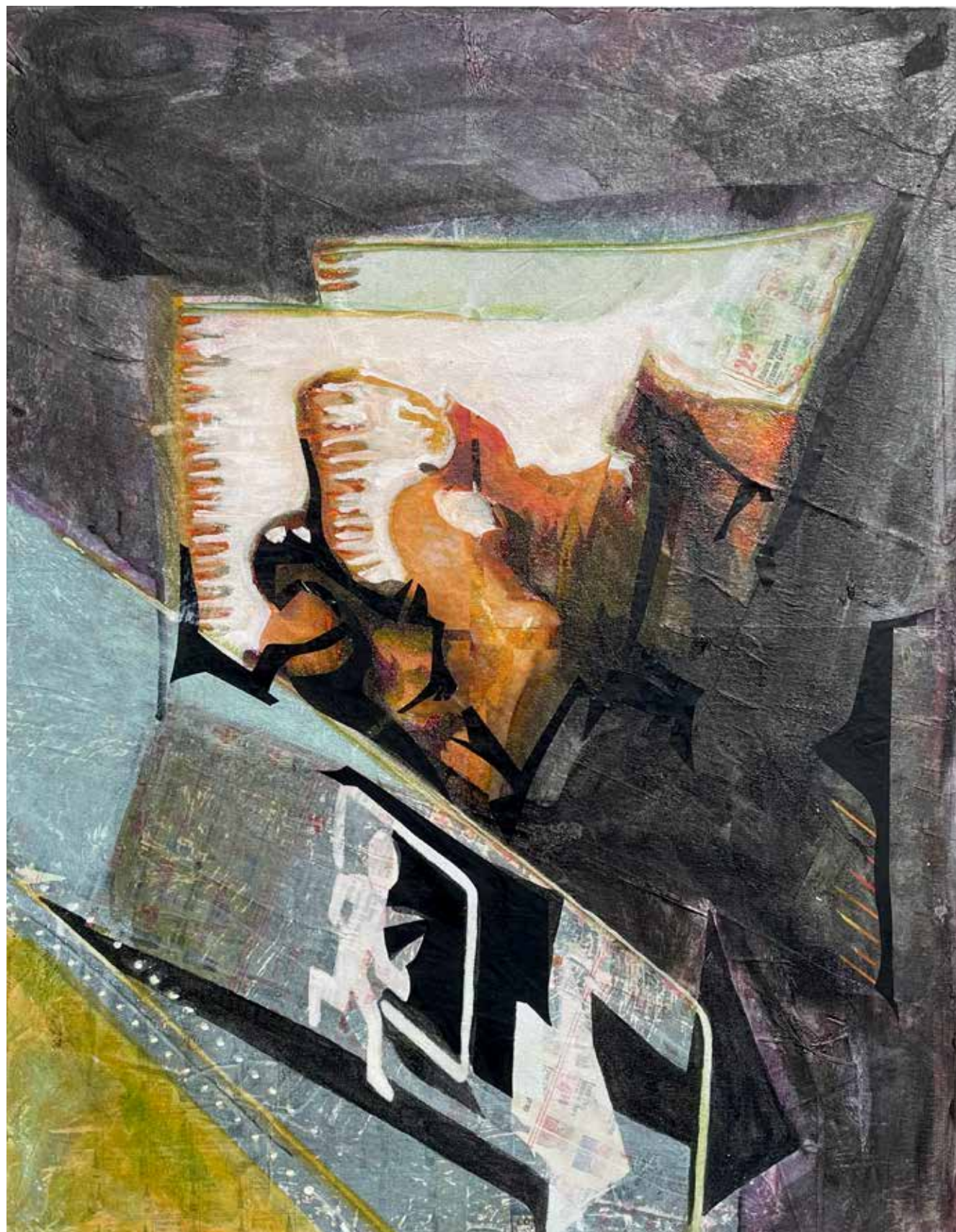
enough to bear witness and to contain. Analysis puts into a new language a shared experience. Odysseus does not tell his own story: he needs one who can speak it back to him, which allows him to relive it. The story of Homer's hero invites us to think about our own clinical method to reflect on what our process entails. What's more, such a moving story might allow us to consider what other places poets have trodden, offering us as clinicians (as Freud was the first to admit) an endless repository of energy—in a tired time.

IT IS TIME WE psychoanalysts—like undergraduates—turn back to the humanities. To this end, the contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis* recognize that literary language is not the same as everyday language. This volume does not pretend to be comprehensive but rather aspires to be suggestive. Listening to literary voices as venerated as Shakespeare and Austen on unhappy families; as searingly urgent as Morrison and James Baldwin on maternity and sexuality; as revelatory as Sa'adat Hasan Manto and Emmanuel Levinas on political partition and what it means to be human—to name just a few of the topics within its covers—the volume returns us to that happy companionate marriage of psychoanalysis and literature that initiated Freud's discoveries and sustained him throughout his life. Even in his last work, he turned to that stranger in a strange land, the biblical Moses. Our calling, like Freud's, is not only to listen to stories but to tell stories of our patients back to them. Even the unique literature of the case study which defines our field is narrative. While our profession may increasingly seem "impossible," as Freud put it in a phrase for the ages, its challenges are lightened by the wisdom of the poets and painters. Thus, this volume out of Cambridge is meant not so much to provide answers as examples of ways forward. It aspires to remind us of what we already know, namely that the clinical method to which we have dedicated ourselves is fueled by the endless wellspring of human culture.

If we return to the creative and humanistic arts, we might once again find our way home, recognize our losses, and remember both who we are and who we hope to become as analysts and as human beings. ■

Vera J. Camden is Professor Emerita of English at Kent State University and supervising and training analyst at the Cleveland Psychoanalytic Center.

Valentino L. Zullo is the Anisfield-Wolf Fellow in English and the Public Humanities at Ursuline College and a candidate at the Cleveland Psychoanalytic Center.



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