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Persistence

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Abstract

This essay surveys the continued persistence of psychoanalytic theory and practice over the past decades. It argues that the psychoanalytic understanding of “ambivalence” has been crucial (and underappreciated) in key developments in both affect theory and in the use of psychoanalysis in critical race studies. Such ambivalence, moreover, still has the capacity to prod critical conversations in more nuanced, less antithetical, directions.

To reckon by the sheer number of journalistic claims over the past couple of years, psychoanalysis seems to be back. From film (*Freud's Last Session* [Brown 2023]) to journals / magazines (*Parapraxis*, founding editor Hannah Zeavin); from podcasts (Know Your Enemy and, more recently, *Ordinary Happiness*) to Instagram accounts (“freud.intensifies”), examples of a renewed flurry of psychoanalytic media proliferate. This kind of proliferation inspired Joseph Bernstein (2023), writing for the *New York Times*, to claim that “after several decades at the margins of American healthcare—and 100 years after he published his last major theoretical work—Sigmund Freud is enjoying something of a comeback.”¹

Many of us might reply that psychoanalysis never really went anywhere in the first place. To be sure, psychoanalysis remains one of a number of long-term therapies populating the margins of the deeply troubled American healthcare landscape. But it has nonetheless been here all along; it is surely here now and will be for some time. Psychoanalysis persists. It is still here. Critiques by Frederick Crews (1975, 2017) and (in our own field) Lee Patterson (2001) notwithstanding, psychoanalysis has usefully persisted both as a clinical practice and as a critical method over the decades. And this very persistence helps explain the persistent resistance to psychoanalytic method. That, too, is still here, and predictably so—as a glance at the comments on Bernstein’s NYT story will confirm.

Some critiques are so familiar as to have become conventional. These raise the notion that psychoanalysis doubles-down on the exclusions inherent in any notion of the universal subject, and, thus, is suspect on the grounds of its inability to consider the particularities of race, class, or ethnicity. Others see the psychoanalytic reliance on the category of the subject as outmoded for our post-humanist age. Still others claim psychoanalysis is persistently anti-scientific (no amount of longitudinal data, or empirical studies of the success of analysis as a clinical therapy will convince them otherwise), or scientifically *belated*, outstripped by cognitive science and Functional MRI research in this, the Age of the Brain (Doidge 1997, 2007; de Maat et al. 2009; Skillman, 2016). This was the critical context in which the organizers of this colloquium posed their original question: “What does psychoanalysis *still* have to offer to our [field of] study?” (emphasis mine).

My response to this question begins with what I see as the useful ambivalences implied in the word “still.” On the one hand, the provoking question itself implies the very *persistence* that I also wish to urge upon us, i.e., that psychoanalysis still offers things to us and to our field. But that “still” also hints at a familiar critical impatience with psychoanalytic persistence, again, as a species of belatedness, a worry about the endurance that it also seeks to recommend. In that context and history, the colloquium’s question acknowledges, as if in the background, its opposite: “can anyone *still* be using psychoanalytic theory?” (This impatience is hardly new—it has been around in the academy for as long as I have been here to witness it.)² Taken together, the temporality of “still” encodes both a wish and a worry: if only psychoanalysis—with its bad readings, its non-medieval “modernity,” its arrogant “cures”—would go away; and yet, what would be obscured by such a disappearance? How might we

¹ Bernstein is not alone. See also Zeavin (2023). As Zeavin puts it, “Psychoanalysis’s contributions—from the war evacuations architected by Freud’s followers to our best method for treating trauma—are both historical and, thankfully, alive.”

² For a full account of these resistances, dating from the beginning of the current century, see Scala (2002).

otherwise cope with evidence of extrarational, unconscious motivations nearly ubiquitous in our current global political scene? Psychoanalysis flourished as a method for analyzing the rise of fascism in the twentieth century. And it now seems ever more useful in analyzing, among other things, the current repetition of those regrettably old attachments, fantasies, and aggressions.

Rather than pursue one pole or the other, rather than offer only one more defense of this method, I want to think with the insightful *doubled* locutions of psychoanalysis, specifically, its capacity (unequaled, I think) to interrogate the critical power and affective force of ambivalence. This is one reason why psychoanalysis continues to haunt its supposed successors, continuing its direct relevance to affect theory and to cognitive approaches. In what follows, I want to direct us to the power of psychoanalytic theory to elucidate a crucial kind of critical ambivalence, one that is not resolved or overcome, but that itself persists.

So, about ambivalence: it is more complex and textured than we casually understand. Perhaps best known from the work of Melanie Klein and object relations theorists, ambivalence can be defined as the *simultaneous* presence of love and hate towards the same object. There is some debate and considerable nuance among theorists and clinicians as to whether this conflicted feeling state is something that the subject needs to overcome: does ambivalence need to transition into some kind of resolved state, or can it usefully persist? Despite some differences on this question, theorists generally agree that ambivalence can lead to significant epistemological and affective insight. Accepting the simultaneity of love and hate registered in ambivalence, for one thing, counters the defense mechanism known as splitting, in which polarized or dichotomous oppositions starkly separate the good (or gratifying) part-objects from bad (or frustrating) ones.

In Melanie Klein's understanding, splitting is a particularly stark kind of ambivalence, and a feature of what she calls the "paranoid-schizoid" position wherein the love object is experienced in polarized terms (Klein, 1984 [1946]). One moment the object is beloved, the next moment it is hateful, and the subject remains caught amid stark oppositions, oscillating between paired and rapidly sequenced affective charges. Klein's work on the paranoid-schizoid position, specifically, serves as an important, though often under-emphasized, backstory in the development of Affect Theory. Eve Sedgwick, one of the first and most important queer thinkers to recommend the turn to the "affects," joined others in developing interpretive alternatives to the "hermeneutic of suspicion" associated with psychoanalytic and Marxist modes of critique. In *Touching/Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Sedgwick (2003) emphasized the "tools and techniques for non-dualistic thought" (1), and in so doing she drew directly on the theories of Klein.

The paranoid-schizoid position was a direct ancestor to Sedgwick's analysis of paranoid reading. But there's more. The paranoid-schizoid position isn't the only kind of ambivalence that Klein describes. In her topology, the splitting that accompanies the paranoid-schizoid position can shift. And it does so primarily via "a steady, though painful, approximation towards the reality of oneself and others" (Appignanesi 2006, 131). This way of putting it suggests the uses both of self-analysis and of research—whereby knowledge of the reality principle might assist in transforming judgement into understanding. Such shifts raise the possibility of the *depressive position*, a more properly ambivalent, and mixed, affective state. Of course, for Klein, this task must necessarily be regularly repeated: such shifts (like the Lacanian mirror stage) are never entirely finished.

As for Sedgwick (2003), both she and José Esteban Muñoz (2006) took up Klein’s depressive position in their insightful reparative readings. Both, as Maggie Nelson (2021) recently reminds us, drew on the psychoanalytic sense of reparative. For Klein (1984 [1946]), as for object relations theorists generally, reparation is key to the movement from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position. It involves the psychological processes of repairing the damages to one’s internal world. Object relations theory generally understands such repair to become available only as one moves out of the paranoid position. Reparative acts—like Sedgwick’s and Muñoz’s reparative readings—respond to the pain that attends the depressive position, a pain that follows upon the relinquishment of the reassuring aspects of the oscillation of love and hate that mark paranoid splitting.

Questions remain as to whether or not today’s scholars of affect theory, even those influenced by Sedgwick, remember the psychoanalytic meaning at stake in those methods. To what extent can and do methods of affect redeploy their own version of paranoid readings insofar as those methods insist on an opposition to psychoanalytic thinking? To what extent does the tendency to ignore or forget this backstory make it harder to see the way that psychoanalysis—precisely as a method of research and analysis—can and does remain open to new emphases, and to new theoretical and clinical developments? From one point of view, affect theory is, both historically and theoretically, a fresh take on our object-relations, one with extraordinary interpretive power.

Perhaps at this point we are in a better position to assess the temporality of the “still”-ness of psychoanalysis. It is useful to recall that, for Sedgwick, the problem with paranoid readings is a problem that circulates around temporality. It is a problem about certain (bad) kinds of persistence. Nelson (2021) puts it this way: “a paranoid mindset presumes to know—in advance, retroactively, quickly, and totally—what something means now, what it will mean in the future, and what should be done with it” (29). On the one hand, when critics of psychoanalytic thinking roll their eyes at the persistence of this method, they reveal the “paranoid mindset” that purports to know—whether in past, present, or future uses—precisely what psychoanalysis means, and what it will always and ever mean. And they, furthermore, redirect that opinion back onto psychoanalysis—claiming that it is psychoanalysis, not its paranoid resisters, that is flawed by a commitment to stasis, and the status quo. (This kind of splitting can lead to projection—but I digress.) According to this view, what Freud once meant is incontrovertibly clear (it’s not) and is and always and forever will be what it once was. In this case, paranoid readers ignore or reject the claims of a host of psychoanalytic theorists and practitioners—from Klein to Lacan to Zeavin—who have changed the psychoanalytic tradition through clinical work, re-readings of Freud, or assessments of unlikely historical convergences.³

On the other hand, precisely what Sedgwick’s and Muñoz’s methodological work offers is a good kind of psychoanalytic persistence—its “still”-ness—as marked by revision, by reworking, by productive interpretive shifts that can’t necessarily be grasped in advance. I’m persuaded that Sedgwick’s and Muñoz’s work indeed offers what Klein would also see as a set of reparative insights.

³ Lacan (1955) famously spoke of his work as a “return to Freud” (334/401). Lacan named the group he established in 1979 to carry forward his work *Le Fondation du Champ Freudien*. Zeavin (2021) analyzes developments in teletherapy on her way toward tracing the history of psychoanalysis as relying on distance methods.

Affect theory, in the wake of this critical history, offers insights on psychoanalysis from the vantage of what Klein (1984 [1946]) calls the “depressive” position, as indeed Muñoz’s subtitle from 2006 makes clear: “the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” (675). In this case affect theory displays the psychoanalytic benefits that it also describes: it shows us how the depressive position enables repair precisely by seeking to replace judgement with fresh understanding. My dialectical understanding of the “still”-ness of psychoanalysis does seek to defend psychoanalytic thinking, but not by being defensive about it. Instead, I wish to attend carefully to the fresh developments that have emerged—or better, proliferated—under the psychoanalytic sign of ambivalence and its vicissitudes. I am recommending a kind of persistence that is not without its epistemological surprises.

One more point before venturing toward those further developments: the oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, as one of my graduate students insightfully remarked a few semesters ago, seems on display today in social media contexts. The oppositional polarization of the paranoid-schizoid position is amped up by social media algorithms that select for reaction intensity; the depressive position—as approximating the “reality of oneself and others” (Appignanesi 2006, 13)—might register in the regular after-reactions of regret, qualification, modification, or even the abandonment of social media entirely. We can observe both dynamics in any of our social media platforms that reward engagement in rapid-fire fashion, with likes and emojis, with shares and snarky replies. Given the arguable importance of social media to academic culture, this phenomenon seems notable. A return to the doubleness of ambivalence—its various forms—might help us to think about what’s next.

Most importantly, ambivalence has been at the heart of some consequential changes in psychoanalytic theory, and it has crucially emerged as a feature of the writings of psychoanalytic thinkers working on race. Frantz Fanon—whom Hortense Spillers (2018) memorably called the “ever-skeptical psychoanalytic practitioner”—demonstrates not paranoia so much as the marked ambivalence characteristic of the depressive position in relation to psychoanalytic method (29). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon’s ambivalence has crucial hermeneutical power. In the case of what he calls the “Negro of the Antilles,” Fanon (2008) famously rejects the Oedipal narrative; yet a few pages later, he will reference Lacan’s notion of mirroring in an account of white paranoid reactivity to the black body as a “phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety” (151). In her brilliant essay “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” Spillers (1996) retraces Fanon’s ambivalences—his way of “appearing to withdraw with the left hand what he has proffered with the right” (76). Fanon’s “contradiction” is situated, for her, not as a logical failing or a refusal to choose; it is, instead, a marker of contradiction as an ambivalent epistemology with affective power—as a kind of insightful double-mindedness. She puts it this way: “The Frantz Fanon we believe we know brings on a kind of astigmatism, a kind of superimposition of contradictory messages of the kind that might have been provocation to a forthright self-analysis” (91). The turn to self-analysis here suggests that Spillers reads Fanon’s work as a non-defensive prompt for ethical self-knowing, something at the heart of her own psychoanalytic method and mode.

And this is, in fact, exactly how Spillers engages with Fanon’s work in the psychoanalytic context. Spillers (1996) is interested in whether there might be “an apposite psychoanalytic protocol” for the “subjects of race,” whose “autobiographical itinerary” remains nonetheless deeply implicated in history (139). Her answer, in contradistinction to and dialogue with Fanon’s, finds useful “the stripes

of an oedipal crisis (for male and female children)” but with a difference: this is Oedipus not as “origin,” not in an account of the past (which, for the African American subject, can only involve the rupturing of silence), but *as if a “myth”* that “speech can only point to and circle around” (139). This ambivalent Oedipus might offer, she wagers, “an entirely new repertoire of inquiry in human relations” (139). Thirty years later, Spillers (2018) will clarify this point further, this time via Ta-Nehesi Coates’ moving epistle, *Between the World and Me*. Reading that work as one legacy of African American intellectuals and poets, she writes that “words ... travel between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters on the vertical axis of the transfer of power and authority” (30).

Spillers’ account of the usefulness of self-analysis is part of her own commitment to non-defensive ethical self-knowing. And it occupies the heart of a psychoanalytic method with power to effect change in ourselves as well as in the quality of our relationships to one another, what Spillers (1996) calls “human relations.” (139) This is the insightful double-mindedness she finds in Fanon; but also the kind of double-mindedness she regularly uses in her own analyses. Double-minded thinking—the dialectic of blindness and insight—will no doubt come up against the brand of ambivalence that psychoanalysis helps us to recognize. And in just that way, it may offer one of our best opportunities for reparative work.

Our field, like the academy generally, has long traded in polarized oppositions: theory vs. history; surface vs. symptom; medieval vs. medievalism; love vs. hate; Chaucer the repudiated vs. Chaucer the admired. Amid that history, we might consider what it will take to move into less polarized—less paranoid?—accounts of who we are and what we do. What kind of self-analysis might today’s scholars of Chaucer and his age conjure? What might an account of our ambivalences free up? How might the double-minded persistence of psychoanalytic thinking on ambivalence shift the harms that persist in our work? And how might it help renew our positions as readers and writers, as teachers and scholars most especially in these challenging times? We can, I would wager, find ways to experiment with reparative work, first by shifting ourselves (however temporarily) out of our paranoid-schizoid positions and attachments, and by investing in a non-defensive self-analysis of them. This is real labor—intellectual and affective. But it could constitute a kind of scholarly ethical self-knowing that will usefully persist, so as to (Spillers [1996] again) “unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework” and, instead, “decentralize and disperse” what we think we might be able to know (141).

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