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Tracking the Lacanian unconscious in language

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ABSTRACT: This paper makes two contributions to the emerging field of Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA), one by way of theoretical exposition, a second oriented toward the challenges of empirical analysis. In the first section of the paper I illustrate and develop upon the elusive Lacanian notion of the unconscious structured as a language. This discussion yields a series of important ideas: the assertion that a matrix of latent significations shadows any utterance; the distinction between statement/enunciation; and the concept of repression-in-language. These concepts provide a platform for the second section of the paper which draws on textual material collected by the Apartheid Archive Project (AAP) in order to demonstrate a particular procedure of LDA. This procedure entails an attention to discontinuous narrative components and the role of symbolic juxtapositions. It points, furthermore, to the value of making novel combinations of given textual elements as a way of querying what may be repressed in the text. Two important conclusions are drawn from this discussion, each of which indicates a priority for Lacanian practice. Firstly, the idea that the ongoing work of symbolic juxtaposition may be more profitable than 'depth' interpretations in conducting analysis. Secondly, that facilitation of lateral significations and associated significations should take priority over the aim of extracting a single over-arching message.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Lacan, repression, unconscious, symbolic juxtaposition

Introduction

I have two basic objectives in this paper, both of which inform the procedures and conceptualization of both Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) and clinical practice. In the first half of the paper, I develop a series of arguments in respect of how we need to understand that most elusive of psychoanalytic notions, namely the Lacanian unconscious. Doing so will set the scene for a

practical example of how one might utilize LDA in respect of narrative texts. The narrative material I draw on here stems from the Apartheid Archive Project. My attempt here is not to develop a series of methodological steps for a version of LDA. Neither is it to become bogged down in the theoretical minutia of Lacanian jargon. My agenda is rather to explore a series of implications of Lacan's important conceptualization of the unconscious which will, in turn, open up practical possibilities for a psychoanalytic analysis of textual material. I should note here, following Thom (1981), that any attempt to reduce the complexity of Lacan's thought in favour of accessibility, runs the risk of simplification, of engendering misleading assimilations of his ideas. Such

is the risk I take here.

Unintended hearings

How are we to understand Lacan's famous (2006a) declaration that 'the unconscious is structured like a language?' Bearing in mind that Lacanian theory ultimately aims to inform clinical practice – a fact sometimes overlooked by Lacan's more abstruse commentators – it seems worthwhile to offer to explore some practical applications of this idea.

One way of exploring Lacan's maxim is with reference to Bill Clinton's infamous insistence "I did not have sexual relations with that woman". We might find support from an unlikely source here, namely discursive psychology's attempts at a revised understanding of 'Freudian repression' (Billig, 1999). Proponents of discursive psychology emphasize that it is quite possible for an audience to hear in given expressions something quite different to what the speaker had intended.

This possibility of unintended hearing arises for the dual reason that all expressions leave some things unsaid and what is said can be understood in more than one way...Expressions do not exhaust the possibility of their meaning (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2010, pp. 174-175).

Although many such social psychological engagements with the notion of repression are explicitly anti-Lacanian (Billig, 1999, 2006), the above understanding fits perfectly with a Lacanian approach to communication. From such a perspective, every statement brings in its wake a series of variations, every utterance exists within a horizon of differing formulations. This is part of what Lacan draws from Saussure's (1916) structural linguistics: the idea that language contains in itself no positive or inherently-meaningful values. Language works rather as a differential system in which effects of meaning are achieved by an ongoing play of difference, by a series of 'not', and 'different to' qualifications. That is to say, a given signifier – i.e. a word, an acoustic trace, a physical mark or gesture – comes to mean something only by virtue of differentiation, by means of its difference from surrounding and similar terms. (In structural linguistics, a signifier – a mark or a sound – needs to be considered alongside a 'signified', that is, the concept, the idea attaching to the signifier. The combination of these elements gives us a sign (Saussure, 1916)).

Saussure's (1916) idea that successfully meaningful instances of language are reliant on a series of 'not' and 'different to' qualifications implies that if we have understood a given message, we have also grasped a matrix of possible alternative significations, a series of different potential significations. We would not have properly understood a given assertion if this were not the

case, if it were not contextualized by a series of varying – and opposed – significations and interpretations. Without launching into a long technical digression of Saussure’s linguistics, let me simply emphasize one point that will prove crucial in what follows. What is conveyed in a communicative exchange is not merely a minimal, stripped-to-the-core message, but also a number of subsidiary – and potentially proliferating – associated significations. This alerts us to a point of Lacanian psychoanalytic technique that I will expand upon as we continue, the idea that the facilitation of a series of lateral significations may take priority over the aim to extract a single over-arching message.

Statement/enunciation

A further Lacanian notion may assist us in expanding upon the idea of unintended hearing. This is the notion of the inevitable split between statement and enunciation. This incommensurability between statement and enunciation, that is, between the *content of a given communication* and the *performative conditions of its utterance*, is irreducible in Lacanian thought. Simply put: the breadth of how I might be interpreted always exceeds the more delimited field of what I had intended to say. This mismatch might be exacerbated by a number of factors: the tonal variations of my voice, the ‘materiality’ of how I speak (patterns of pronunciation, enunciation, etc.), or the related bodily gestures present in the moment of expression. From a Lacanian perspective, the fact of this gap or irreconcilability cannot be overcome, it qualifies all communication and it ensures that a minimal entropy characterizes each instance of speaking. A seemingly sincere compliment may be accompanied by a gesture which causes one to call the remark into question; the deadpan delivery of a comment may leave one wondering whether in fact it was meant sarcastically.

This cues us into a particular way of listening: not to attend to sense, to intended meaning, but to the continual mismatch between enacted enunciation and apparently intended meaning. The *form* of how something is said may cause us to call into question the content of what is being offered. The repetitive insistence ‘I did not do it!’, may, for example, give rise to the suspicion in the listener that the opposite is the case. Similarly, the *content* may act as a check upon the form, as in the case when the (ostensibly earnest) performance of apology is ruined when the speaker lets slip a word betraying their true (very different) feelings.

The chief assertion of this introductory section is a basic one: language is always open to (other) interpretation(s); what has been said is never all. What clinical psychoanalysis seeks to facilitate, and what LDA is particularly attentive

to, are those disruptive or surprising “opening of the unconscious” where other possible significations can be read out of an expressive attempt at communication. I have stressed two possible listening strategies that follow on from this objective. An attention, firstly, to the category of variant significations and interpretations latent within what has been said. Secondly, a sensitivity to mismatches between content and enunciation, to the discrepancy between *what* has been said and *how* it has been said as a means of opening up alternative readings of the material.

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman”

“You did not have sexual relations with *that* woman. What other woman *did* you have sexual relations with?”, such would be one response to Clinton’s statement. Another, taking into account the legal ambiguity of Clinton’s appeal to “sexual relations”: “You say you didn’t have “sexual relations” with her. What kind of other sexual activity *did* you engage in with her?”. Or: “The force of your denial that YOU DID NOT have sexual relations with that woman makes me think that you most certainly did”.

Here we return to an idea introduced above: any communicative statement conveys along with it a matrix of alternative readings of what is being said. Or, differently put, there is a framework of intelligibility that accompanies any statement, that supports multiple grammatical permutations of a given assertion, and which thus affords different possible hearings. More simply yet, we might simply underscore the provisional nature of any message. How it connects up to the context within which it is being relayed; how it is related to the imagined intent of the speaker; the conditions of exactly how it is uttered, performed and why: all of these considerations mean that a message remains – even if perfectly legible and understood - ‘incomplete’, open to scrutiny.

That a given message (“I did not have sexual relations with that woman”) brings with it a grid of grammatical permutations is easy to demonstrate. As suggested above, we could subject this statement to substitutions of object and verb (i.e. “I did not have sex with ‘a’ [but with b]” (change of object); “I did not ‘c’ with that woman [but I did ‘d’ with her]” (change of verb)). Likewise, we could suspend the negation in such a statement changing “I did not have sexual relations with...” simply to “I did have sexual relations with...”. We need to bear in mind, furthermore, that a statement unfolds in time and that the first clause of a sentence cannot properly be understood until we hear what follows on from it. We could as such ask ourselves what effects of meaning are put in play by positing a conjunction (“I did not have sexual relations with that woman *but/although/and then...*”) or

simply by suspending the 'closure' of ending the sentence, and experimenting with what might emerge: "(I did not have sexual relations with that woman..."...["although I certainly tried to"]).

In this brief discussion we have of course by no means exhausted the elaborative permutations of Clinton's statement. (The possibility of an active/passive reversal regards the verb of the statement gives us another humorous way of responding to Clinton: "*You* did not have sexual relations with that woman...but did *she* have sexual relations with *you*?") I hope here simply to have indicated the proliferation of unintended hearings that are latent in even in a straightforward assertion and in this way point to the immense generative potential of language – indeed, of the signifier – to overrun any one single trajectory of meaning.

Before drawing this section to a close, it is worthwhile briefly mentioning the description Fink (2004) offers, derived from Lacan, of analysts listening to their patients' speech as if it were a musical score. The type of listening we practice in everyday conversation is akin, in this comparison, to hearing a piece of music and attending only to the dominant harmony. This much is to be expected: conversational interactions are successful largely because we have learnt to screen out the multiple ambiguities, the unexpected implications and discomforting associations that are latent in any instance of speech. By contrast, psychoanalytic listening bears comparison with the listening skills of the trained musician, who remains attuned to the various, overlapping and co-present sounds of various instruments, each of which makes their (often unnoticed) contribution to the overall music. The importance of this illustration lies not only in how it emphasizes the importance of attending to multiple layers of signification. It is informative also in stressing the spiralling complexity of signification that becomes apparent when multiple layers of potential meaning play off one another in different ways over a period of time.

The repressed as the return of the repressed

Lacan (1988) offers us the notion that the return of the repressed and the repressed are one and the same. This assertion is strictly correlative to the idea that the unconscious is not an internal space or mentality. The Lacanian unconscious is not a 'depth psychology', an irreducibly intra-psychic collection of contents and impulses. It is, by contrast, an 'external' unconscious, which is fashioned out of, made possible by practices of language, by the utilization and arrangement of words, signifiers. It is important to stress the idea of the signifier here as broader than words alone, because after all, images are signifiers, as are semaphores and instances of sign language, each of which

fulfil the function of a signifier. That is to say, each of these examples can be read, they convey meaning for someone – indeed, for an other - even if what they signify is not always immediately evident. Furthermore, as is the case for all signifiers for Lacan, they are polyvalent, they are able to carry more than one possible meaning simultaneously. How then to approach Lacan's idea that the repressed and the return of the repressed are one and the same? By taking seriously for the moment that in speaking I create the possibility of a repressed (or, more accurately, of a potential 'return of the repressed').

Let us resort to an example. I once invited a famous colleague to a dinner-party, aware that her presence would make a memorable night for my other guests. Afterwards I felt guilty, because my colleague had to suffer the overbearing attentions of my friends. I resolved to apologize, until I realized that to apologize would alert her to the fact that I had something to be guilty for. "Why would he apologize?" she might have asked herself. After all, it may not have entered her mind that I had anything to apologize for. The inappropriate behaviours of my friends wasn't something that I was necessarily responsible for, *unless* of course I had contrived the situation precisely to impress those friends. To let her know that I felt guilty would be to indicate something of my complicity in the situation. This calls to mind the cliché of the guilty husband whose gift of flowers makes his otherwise trusting wife start to suspect that something is up.

The beauty of these examples is that my famous colleague, like the wife who has received flowers, may not have had *any idea at all* about the 'guilty truth' in question. There was no inner psychology, no "intra-psychic" repressed material: it was only by virtue of what was said or expressed that a 'repressed' was created. To be clear on this point: in Lacan's understanding of 'the return of the repressed' there needs be no existing 'dirty secret'. This would be the case where the husband gave flowers on a whim without having anything to hide. All that is hence required is a signifier – the act of giving flowers – that causes one to start questioning its broader significance. The act of speaking, the subtleties of communication, this is all that is required for a 'repressed' to come into play. Such signifiers are condition of possibility enough to ignite a thought, a suspicion, a question, and once this is in place (a 'return of the repressed') then there effectively *will have been* – that is to say retrospectively – a repressed.

Indefinite meaning

We can add a further layer to our developing account of mishearing and an 'external' unconscious. Even if one has perfectly understood the words of an

other's utterance, the act of them being spoken still poses a question as to their underlying pragmatic function. For Lacan (1981), conveyed meaning is never static, but is always subject to further articulation, indeed, to the question "Why are you telling me this now, in the particular way that you are?" Any communicative utterance is thus, to some degree, held in 'suspense of finalization'.

As such, any communicative instance might form the basis of the 'return of the repressed'. It is worthwhile stressing the prospect of uncertainty that shadows the signifier. The signifier – and the act of giving flowers again serves as a good example here – is never, as one might put it, completely domesticated. It is never afforded a single, definitive 'once-and-for-all' interpretation. Various other signifieds may be attached to it; I may not at first realize what I am saying in saying something. One appreciated thus that signifiers provide the 'material', the apparent evidence that brings a repressed possibility to light. Consider the following scene: a woman watching her partner chatting to his secretary at a Christmas party, suddenly detects an inappropriate gesture, a giveaway sign that, she thinks, betrays that they are having an affair. One should note the odd temporality underpinning this logic: the 'repressed' here, the fact of the apparent affair, did not exist as 'repressed' until it came to light. The 'repressed' in effect did not exist, until the observing woman is confronted with the 'return of the repressed'. Although this may seem an unfamiliar conceptualization of the repressed, it of course accords with Freud's (1950) notion of deferred action, that is, with the idea of retrospective causality whereby a current event (typically, for Freud, of a traumatic sort) triggers the latent impact of an earlier incident. What is also notable about Lacan's approach to this question is that he attempts to understand repression not as a psychological quality or function, but as a potentiality within the signifying field. Repression of this order – which is to say secondary repression – is thus contingent upon language, or, more accurately, the reception and production of signifiers, whose meaning is never completely fixed.

This point is worth reiterating: Lacan's notion of the unconscious is not thus 'psychological' - certainly not in any narrow sense of the word - but rather 'linguistic' in its functioning. (Or, taking Miller's (2011) lead, we may speak simply of the *linguistic* structure of psychology). This then is one way of understanding Lacan's 'the unconscious is structured like a language', namely that the unconscious is brought about by – and is hence contingent upon - the productions of language (or indeed, of signifiers). Such an unconscious would be undoubtedly complex, evidently so if we consider the multitude of proliferating interpretations sustained by any ongoing instance of linguistic

production. It would also, however, be an omnipresent potentiality, by which I mean to stress that it exists as a possibility whenever there is a communicative exchange, or, indeed, the use of language.

Bridging disjuncture

One of the themes in the above discussion has been the idea that the unconscious, while an omnipresent potential, is never simply evident. I have tried to emphasize how it may be necessary to employ a matrix of latent significations to make guesses at what is 'repressed' within a given utterance. I want now to extend something of this idea by considering the possibility of juxtaposing seemingly discontinuous narrative elements.

The case of two seemingly disconnected scenes that need to be juxtaposed is any indication of the unconscious is to be gained is no doubt familiar to analysts. A personal example suffices. I started a session (as an analysand) complaining about a work colleague who had (I thought) unfairly snubbed me. I discussed some other banal daily experiences and then recalled an incident in a prison where I used to work as a lay counsellor. A prisoner had told me how he never lost his temper. Should someone do him an injustice he would patiently bide his time, wait till that person was at his ease, then stab him in the back. No great analytical ability is needed to pose an interpretative hypothesis here: I wanted to stab my work colleague in the back.

This is of course a crude example, and the tentative reading I have suggested remains open to different interpretations. One might speculate that the desire in question was far more paradoxical or masochistic in nature, that, for example, I may have wished that *I* be stabbed in the back. It is worth stressing this point so as to avoid the pattern of formulaic interpretations that the worst of psychoanalysis is infamous for (i.e. the superimposition of a series of caricatured themes, penis envy, Oedipal desire, castration anxiety, etc. as pertinent explanatory scripts for virtually any situation).

What the stabbing example brings home is that unconscious desire is never simply stated, afforded first-person propositional form. It emphasizes the importance of attending to the *form* of what is being said. A prospective truth of desire is not simply pictured, given obvious possessive expressive form ("I want to..."); it appears instead, rather as a result of the combination of elements. That is to say, unconscious desire might be accessed not simply through explication, but via the work of juxtaposition. We might treat this, precisely the work of symbolic juxtaposition, as a methodological maxim for LDA. Lapping (2011) makes a similar point in her discussion of psychoanalytic social research. She (2011) stresses the need to identify associative tugs

against dominant narratives, and emphasizes the importance of “attending to elements that connote symbolic relations outside...the linear narratives” of a dominant discourse (p. 72). Crucially, she also remarks:

[A]pparently cohesive accounts cover over a set of more complicated relations, and they pose questions that invert the obviousness of what they are seeing... [D]ominant discourse is unsettled by the construction of a symbolic juxtaposition (p. 72).

As Leader (2003) notes, Freud’s description of dream-pairs proves a helpful means of expanding upon this idea of symbolic juxtaposition. If a dream-wish has as its content some forbidden behaviour towards an individual, says Freud, “then that person may appear in the first dream undisguised, while the behaviour is only faintly disguised” (1932, p. 27). In the second dream however we would expect that “[t]he behaviour will be openly shown...but the person made unrecognizable...[or] some indifferent person substituted for him” (p. 27). Leader (2003) points out that Lacan’s thesis, following the influence of Lévi-Strauss, advances upon Freud’s. It is not simply the case that a forbidden thought would be disguised, hidden via means of substitutions of subject, object or indeed act itself – although presumably one would want to keep such a possibility open – it is rather that the forbidden thought “only exists...as a slippage between the one and the other” (p. 44). The example Leader provides is instructive:

A man has two dreams... In one, he loses a blood-soaked tooth and stares at it in absolute horror. In the other, his penis is being examined in a medical test and no problems are found. Neither of the dreams represents castration as such, but it is in the relation between the two that the reference to castration is situated (2003, p. 44).

Leader’s conclusion? “When something cannot be expressed as a meaningful proposition, it will take the form of a relation between two sets of elements” (p. 47).

Apartheid narratives

I want now to turn to an extract drawn from the Apartheid Archive Project. Before doing so, it is necessary to add a few contextualizing words on this project and thus provide a framework for the analytical undertaking in question. The Apartheid Archive Project is an ongoing research project that aims to collect narrative accounts from ordinary South Africans about their experiences of racism during apartheid and to understand the ongoing effects

of these experiences in present-day South Africa (for more on the project see <http://www.apartheidarchive.org/site/>). The project aspires not just to record these narrative accounts but also to engage analytically and theoretically with this material. In these ways the Apartheid Archive Project encourages both a commitment to personal remembering and a joint intellectual commitment to interrogating narratives rather than taking them at face-value. The range of narratives collected by the Project is broad: participants were asked to write down and describe their earliest significant experience of racism. The task, then, was relatively open-ended and different narrators approached the task in different ways.

My own engagement with the narrative materials of the Apartheid Archive took several forms (Hook, 2011a, 2011b). What I want to focus on here is what I took to be a particularly puzzling aspect shared by a number of the narratives contributed by white South Africans: the role of an animal in their discussion of racism. The animal in question seemed often to play an important mediating role, the function of which was not immediately obvious. My question then was: what type of mediator is the animal in these narratives, or, more directly, how did it link the white and black characters in the respective narratives, what relation does it support? I quote at length from the narrative I wish to focus on:

It is...Sunday afternoon... I need to ask Phyllis something. I burst into her room. The door was half shut...but I have no respect for her privacy, there are no boundaries between her space and mine. The scene on the bed is a surprise to me, I live in the sexually repressive days of apartheid... The beautiful tall man enmeshed with Phyllis becomes the hero of my novel written...in the long hours of the weekend and evenings....

Of course I am the heroine, but I am myself, not Phyllis, a bit older though as I want to be enveloped in his arms too. We are having a relationship across the 'colour bar'; he is a young activist...It is 1976, he is becoming increasingly politically active. He is a leader. I am in love with him, and of course I am against apartheid. He is murdered...at the brutal hands of those masquerading as public protectors. I survive, to join the struggle, to tell the tale. Phyllis also plays a role in the book, a small part...

Notions of 'us' and 'them', difference and 'otherness' are central to my early constructions of the world... The community I grow up in is so tightly woven, based on notions of a shared history, religion, culture, we only know each other... I hardly ever meet or even speak with a member of an 'other' community....[A]partheid and other discriminatory practices are woven into the fabric of our day to day lives, but my primary sense of difference is about who is part of my community and who is not.

There are always Black women living with us. Not a part of the family, but living on the premises of our home. They perform the submissive role of servant, yet I know they have power too. Since my mother is absent, all of us know where we can get our comfort, enfolded in the large warmth of our 'nanny's' arms...

Besides my sister [Phyllis]...is my favourite person in the world in those years – she is young, beautiful, full of fun...She brought the chicken to our house, which became our pet as it raced around our garden clucking. When it disappeared one day, only to reappear on our dinner table, my long commitment to vegetarianism began!

Sometimes, as we rough and tumble, which I catch a hint of the sweet-sour scent of Phyllis' addiction to alcohol. She also died young, just like my hero, ultimately a consequence of the same violence. I found this out much later. I never knew her story. I never asked her. Just wrote my own. (Compendium of Apartheid Archive narratives, N11, 2010).

Undecidable attachments

The narrator in the above extract bursts in on a sexual scene which spurs on an fantasy scenario. The author sees herself, a little older, as the beautiful tall man's lover. There is something cinematic to this imagining ("I am the heroine"), which is clearly indexed as fictitious (he becomes "the hero of my novel"). Importantly also, there is an element of appropriation here; the beautiful man is now *her* lover and Phyllis is reduced to a minor character. Phyllis, in short, becomes the imaginative vehicle that enables the narrator to live out the romantic vision of a heroic woman against apartheid.

The mid-section of the narrative provides some of the socio-historical context (a "tightly woven" white community in which "we only know each other") explaining why difference becomes such a fantasmatic (and indeed *sexual*) preoccupation. What also becomes apparent here is the necessity of a mediator – an object of sorts – to manage a relationship between the narrator and the black domestic worker, a relationship which is both in certain senses intimate and yet nonetheless contractual. As has often be noted, the conditions of apartheid led to such contradictions, the prospect of loving attachments ("comfort, enfolded in the...warmth of our 'nanny's arms") even of erotic attraction, occurring within oppressive, racially-structured social relations.

The problem that is constituted by the relationship with Phyllis is underscored by the narrator's comment that her "primary sense of difference is about who is part of my community and who is not". Phyllis, who is both a part and not a part of the narrator's family, thus seems difficult to place. I should add here the obvious qualification that the nature of this relationship

and Phyllis's potentially ambiguous status within it were of course very well defined within the symbolic framework of apartheid itself which provided the discourse and associated social norms of "nannies", "domestic workers". As many of the Apartheid Archive narratives make abundantly clear, apartheid values were thoroughly ingrained within white South African children who understood their prerogatives all too well. Crucial to grasp however is that apartheid ideology nonetheless exhibited clear social contradictions that could not always be explained away, and that – as in the following narrative – inevitably sparked a type of fantasy, which we can understand in a Lacanian way as an attempt to mediate, make sense of, social roles and identities.

These considerations go some way to explaining what at first seems an anomalous component in the unfolding narrative: the chicken that becomes the family pet and that abruptly turns up on the dinner-table, igniting thus the narrator's commitment to vegetarianism. Although this may appear a relatively arbitrary component of the narrative, there is much of significance in this seemingly trivial element. The chicken is a *pet*, a designation that places child and animal in appropriate domestic roles and that affords a familiar and thus stable familial 'object-relation'. The chicken is owned and yet – so it would seem – loved. There is a proprietorial relationship in place which has not precluded the development of ties of affection. The text implies that the narrator was saddened by the loss of the pet, although this loss nonetheless benefits her. The animal serves an important purpose even in its demise: it becomes the basis of the narrator's ideological commitment to vegetarianism.

The link between Phyllis and the chicken is not only metonymic (the chicken is an extension of Phyllis who "brought [it]...to the house"). "Phyllis also died young" the text tells us, introducing an ambiguity: who might the 'also' refer to (the young hero no doubt, but also, given its proximity in the text, the chicken?). There is a parallel between Phyllis and the pet here in view not only of their sudden deaths, but in terms of how each benefits the identity of the narrator; each is the basis of a type of appropriation. As noted above, Phyllis provides the materials of a story that the narrator crafts about herself, a story which would appear to be crucial to her formative political identity. This is a non-reciprocal and an unequal borrowing. Phyllis provides the imaginative basis for the narrator's story about herself; she becomes essentially a device in the narrator's own self-fashioning, her own perspective, her own 'real' story never being involved ("I never asked her. Just wrote my own").

What does such an associative link tell us? Is this a case of the disguise-by-way-of-substitution that Freud discusses in dream pairs? Or are the narrative elements in a Lacanian manner as suggestive of an unconscious idea that exists only as a possible intercalation between components? The task then

is to consider what the result would be of superimposing these narrative pieces. Such a conjunction, I think, provides one way of telling us something about the relationship to Phyllis that cannot otherwise be admitted. As is by now evident, Phyllis is 'owned' by the family, the narrator has certain 'rights of privilege' over her as a condition of such an unequal relationship. Phyllis cares for, gives happiness and love to these children, yet seems ultimately to be discarded by the white family ("she...died young...I found this out much later") who appear to have known little about her life ("I never knew her story").

This is not to cast aspersions on the genuine love and affection felt by the narrator for Phyllis. Then again, the nature of this affection should be qualified. We might say then, following the implication of overlaying these narrative components, that Phyllis's relation to the family is akin, in many ways, to that of a pet. As disturbing as such an association as this is – one which remains necessarily speculative, based on a provisional reading of the 'unconscious' of the text - it is not particularly surprising given the racist social conditions of apartheid itself. Mbembe (2001) for example lists a series of such unspoken assumptions made of the black subject of (neo)colonial servitude, who, in varying circumstances, is considered as equivalent to an object, a form of property, an animal, a type of natural resource, and so on. Gordon (1995) moreover warns that the presence of love on behalf of whites for blacks by no means eradicates all traces of racism; one can love another in the same way, he notes, as one loves an animal.

Wild (discourse) analysis

My aim in analysing this material is not to pin a charge of racism on the author. A discourse analysis is by definition focussed on the broader discursive currents animated within the language productions of the speaker, not on the singular speaker themselves. My objective is to show how the text might be said to speak beyond itself, to extract something that is *implied* but *not explicitly said* by the text. These methodological provisos in place, it is nonetheless necessary to stress again the problematic epistemological status of what I am asserting of the text (i.e. the idea that Phyllis's relation to the family is akin to that of a pet). This idea is nowhere stated in the text; it cannot as such be ascribed to the author. The argument could just as well be made that this idea exists more *in the mind of the interpreter* than in the author of the text; as Pavón Cuéllar (2010) warns, this is a often the lure of imaginary understanding in attempts at discourse analysis, that one's 'findings' are essentially a projection *of the analyst's own* reading.

To read for the ‘unconscious’ of a text is then perpetually to risk ‘wild analysis’. Textual interpretations of this (psychoanalytic) order are thus ethically problematic, and not only for the reason that they are very often more a function *of the reader* than of the discourse of the text itself. Such interpretative attempts utilize a set of clinical strategies for material over which the reader has no clinical warrant. If such interpretations were to be utilized in the clinical context they should not take the form of definitive declarations on the part of the analyst. If such an interpretative association were to be eluded to, it should be done so discretely, gently, enigmatically perhaps, in such a way that the analysand may opt to take it up and develop it (or not). This then poses a series of ethical challenges for the prospective use of LDA, challenges that need be considered and responded to within the life of any given research project.

The ‘trans-individual’ unconscious

It pays here, before closing, to return to our opening discussion of Lacan’s (2006a) idea of the unconscious structured like a language. Clearly, there are many possible interpretations and uses of this proclamation, whose ambiguity and polyvalence I cannot claim to have explored in any systematic way. Let me though offer a few thoughts on the implication of this notion for analytic practice and theoretically, starting with the idea of a ‘trans-individual’ unconscious.

It is by now apparent that Lacan’s notion of the unconscious cannot be understood along the lines of a depth psychology. Seshadri-Crooks (2000) makes this argument to great effect: the unconscious must not be grasped as a subterranean space opposed to consciousness, as an inchoate, swirling mass of repressed contents. It is neither a primal, archaic function, nor a set of unorganized drives and repressed contents. This unconsciousness is activated in the operations and performances of language, by virtue of the subject’s attempt to make sense of their place in the symbolic order. Lacanians hence insist on the idea of an *external* as opposed to internal unconscious (Pavón Cuéllar, 2010), an unconscious that appears within and relies upon the production of symbolic exchanges and utterances.

It is for these reasons that Lacanian theorists prefer the notion of a ‘trans-individual’ unconscious (Chiesa, 2007; Žižek, 1989) to characterizations of either an ‘individual’ or ‘social’ unconscious. Such an unconscious is never reducible to the psychical interior of the single subject, for it is reliant upon instances of communication, speech, symbolization. Likewise however, it cannot be wholly reduced to the social, because it always necessarily involves

the subject battling to convey something of the singularity of their desire in words which are never perfectly suited to the task of attempted expression.

In a discussion of the clinical implications of Lacan's declaration that the unconscious is structured like a language, Miller (2011) draws a number of conclusions which apply perfectly to our discussion here. He repeatedly stresses Lacan's insistence that clinicians attend to "the letter of the speech" (p. 42) of their patients. The focus in psychoanalytic work should thus remain on the verbal productions of patients, on their *actual* words as opposed to the clinician's own semantic or thematic extrapolations. As straightforward an injunction as this is, it can be surprisingly difficult to adhere to. This is especially so in a therapeutic culture where interpretations derived from counter-transference observations are the norm, and where the patient's affective state is prioritized above and beyond their words. Close attention to performances of speech is partly motivated by accuracy. It involves

less of a leap of theoretical faith than does the more common approach which takes as its source the inferred content of a patient's speech and behaviour....the letter of the patient's speech is readily observable (Miller, 2011, p. 52).

The implicit warning here is that the process of inferring ideas and intentions behind speech typically imports the clinician's own assumptions. What ends up speaking the loudest in the session in such a situation is not the patient's unconscious, but the analyst's own ego.

Surface rather than depth

Miller (2011) justifies this attention to the letter of the speech also on the basis that a patient's history might be more completely articulated in this way. Highlighting unintended significations, slips and "errors" in speech can prompt memories that may not have otherwise been accessed. More fundamentally yet, attending to the details of linguistic production is crucial inasmuch as *this* is where the unconscious manifests itself, precisely in operations of the signifier (displacements, unexpected associations, double meanings, switch-words, etc). The Lacanian imperative is clear: it is not the transference or the affective state of the patient that takes precedence as a means of accessing the unconscious, but rather the patient's *use of signifiers*.

What follows on from these arguments is a de-prioritization of the *contents* of speech, in favour of attention to the 'lateral movement' of signifiers. So, rather than elevating in importance the semantic substance of what is said, the analyst should remain alert to the profusion of unintended

implications and possible significations (slips, puns, connotations). Hence the avoidance of interpretations of 'deep' meaning in Lacanian practice in favour of the exploration of the verbal bridges and grammatical permutations of a given utterance. Parker (in press) puts it this way: Lacanian Discourse Analysis "does not burrow underneath language, or inject interpretations into the text". One attends thus to surface rather than depth. The unconscious is not to be found 'behind' language, or deep 'inside' a psyche, but at the level of signifying practice. Hence Žižek's (1989) comment that unconscious desire is not concealed *within* manifest contents, but is decidedly 'more on the surface', consisting entirely of the signifier's mechanisms.

What is implied here is a desubstantialized notion of the unconscious. If language is a differential system with no positive terms, and the unconscious is structured like a language – i.e. effectively *works* like language – then it, the unconscious, likewise has no positive terms, no depth, no essential inner truths. The unconscious, following this reading, is a differential system which functions only, as I have noted above of language, on the basis of an ongoing series of 'not' and 'different to' qualifications. Clinical work then is less a striving after definitive conclusions than a case of stoking the productions of the unconscious, that is, of opening up, extending, following the patient's signifiers.

Endless desire

By way of conclusion I would like to offer a comment on the above extract which responds to the earlier distinction between Freud's theory of dream-pair substitutions and the Lévi-Strauss idea (1963) that one needs to look for *a relation between elements*. What emerges in the above text is not simply a case of substitution. Yes, there are a series of telling parallels between Phyllis and the pet, and questioning what such a substitution might mean or imply would perhaps be a useful analytical exercise. As in the 'stabbing in the back' episode cited earlier, such an initial substitution (the prisoner's actions as my own desired actions) opened things up, it enabled further questioning of what might be repressed. Other possible extrapolations of desire were made possible. To fix upon a single substitution as the key would, very possibly, have closed down additional interpretative possibilities; my own possible desire to be 'stabbed in the back' would not have come to light in this way. A further interpretative leap was required here; the initial substitution was just the springboard for a hypothesis that required elements of both apparently disconnected narrative components, but that ultimately proved greater than the sum of their parts.

Levi-Strauss's (1963) emphasis on the *relation between elements* within the study of myths proves so important to psychoanalysis because it suits an engagement with the over-determined nature of psychical material. Levi-Strauss famously asserted that there is no one totalizing version of the Oedipus myth; there are only variants, and the only regularity we can trace within the matrix of versions we might plot is that of certain types of relations between components. The link to the work of psychoanalysis seems clear: the prospects of re-interpretation of any over-determined psychical material means that there is never one singular, triumphant interpretation. This provides an important ethical guideline for LDA: we do an injustice to the complexity of the material in attempting to extract a single over-arching message. And this of course allows us to affirm an injunction of Lacanian clinical practice already noted, namely that facilitation of lateral significations and associations should take priority over the aim of distilling any definitive meaning.

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