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Abstract

In 2017, Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson brought out a landmark edited collection entitled *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice & Queer Theory* with the open-access, nonprofit publisher Punctum Books. This issue of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* gathers a range of responses from scholars and clinicians to the book. To introduce the issue, I offer some thoughts, inspired by Bion, on “encounter.”

In 2017, Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson brought out a landmark edited collection entitled *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Practice & Queer Theory* (Giffney and Watson, 2017) with the open-access, nonprofit publisher Punctum Books. As Giffney explains in her introduction, their overt curatorial aims were to open up a range of issues about sexuality from a clinical psychoanalytic perspective. They wanted to use queer theory as a subset of sexuality studies to provoke responses to a series of questions that they felt it was high time clinical psychoanalysis rethought: What are the discourses of sexuality underpinning psychoanalysis, and how do they impact on clinical practice? In what ways does sexuality get played out for and between the psychoanalytic practitioner and the patient? How do social, cultural, and historical attitudes toward sexuality impact on transference and countertransference, consciously and unconsciously? And finally, why is sexuality so prone to reification (Giffney, 2017, p. 20)? Anticipating that these were questions that pertained not just to clinical psychoanalytic practice, but recursively, through an engagement with clinical practice, to queer theory too, they designed and orchestrated a densely layered series of encounters between the two fields. The first section of the book, comprising six essays, addresses prominent themes that have preoccupied scholars working in the field of queer theory, namely, identity, desire, pleasure, perversion, ethics, and discourse. The authors of this section—Alice Kuzniar, Lara Farina, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Lisa Downing, Michael D. Snediker, and Will Stockton—are largely academics, working in universities in the global north in the arts and humanities. Their task was to write on a particular theme in queer theory and reflect on their engagements with psychoanalysis in their work. The second section of the book includes 14 responses to these chapters, written largely by practicing psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychotherapists coming from a range of traditions, though with a weighting toward Lacanian perspectives—Robert D. Hinshelwood, Abe Geldhof, Paul Verhaeghe, Ann Murphy, Ian Parker, Claudette Kulkarni, Carol Owens, Aranye Fradenburg, Olga Cox Cameron, Katrine Zeuthen, Judy Gammelgaard, Ken Corbett, Rob Weatherill, Dany Nobus, Ami Kaplan, and Patricia Gherovici. As practitioners (though many are also theorists, and involved in many forms of practice), they were asked to respond to their encounters with the writings in section one, and to consider the

ways, if at all, queer theory might influence and permeate their understanding of sexuality in the clinic. Section three consists of a further seven commentaries on the staged encounters between the authors in section one and section two, again by well-known figures in the fields of psychoanalysis and queer theory—Stephen Frosh, Jacqueline Rose, Tim Dean, Noreen O’Connor, Mark J. Blechner, Susan Stryker, and Ona Nierenberg—although as Susan Stryker, a prominent trans* scholar, aptly points out, queer theory and trans* studies are not synonymous, and the restricting of the encounter to that between queer theory and psychoanalysis has consequences for the kinds of dialogues that can unfold (Stryker, 2017). After its release the book was celebrated at a conference held at the Freud Museum, London, in February 2018, hosted by Giffney and Watson, which occasioned another 15 contributions and addressed further questions: the abiding influence of Sigmund Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality on contemporary clinical practice and psychosocial considerations of sexuality; what clinical psychoanalysis might learn from queer theories of sexuality; and what we might mean when we speak of both “experience” and “encounter” within the context of practice and theory.

Here, in the following pages of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, the book has prompted a further round of encounters, a dossier of published responses by Philip Lance, Angie Voela and Chrysanthi Nigianni, David Richards, Daniel Anderson, Sasha Roseneil, and Sheila Cavanagh, as well as commentaries on these articles by the original editors, Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson. The current contributors are variously queer and trans* theorists and scholars, academics working in gender and sexuality studies, psychiatrists, group analysts, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, psychoanalytic theorists, psychosocial theorists, sociologists, all of the above, those in between, and more besides.

This torrent of discussion may be an indication that this is a unique and long-overdue encounter. The book, the conference, and this collection of articles stage a vital, if uncanny, dialogue between queer theory and psychoanalytic practice. If the uncanny signals something disturbing, odd, curious, weird, “queer” even, it also entails an encounter, as Freud tells us, that is strangely familiar, and describes a field, as Lacan tells us, in which we cannot distinguish pleasure from unpleasure. We are therefore “strung out” by these encounters, “suspended” even, in a rather fraught affective state, one that is both familiar and strange, both pleasurable and unpleasurable. All the contributing authors to *Clinical Encounters in Sexuality* (hereafter *Clinical Encounters*) attempt to get hold of this state that itself has the hallmarks of the “sexual.” Whether we understand the sexual as a structural missed encounter, an affective overwhelming of the ego by the unconscious life of the other, a change in affective intensity produced in the factory of machinic desire, a series of iterative relational acts, or an impersonal alien element that pervades mental life and eludes all attempts at naming and knowing, the contributors to *Clinical Encounters* approach the problem of an encounter between queer theory and psychoanalytic practice in the full awareness that they will probably fail to get something amenable going between them. Queer theory and psychoanalytic practice “needle” one another, according to Stephen Frosh (Frosh, 2017, p. 391). Strange bedfellows, they produce a grumpy attachment, which appears to be a love–hate thing. Carol Owens describes the encounter as a “rigged game” from the start (Owens, 2017, p. 263), wary of an attempt at a romance, or anything as normative as an integrationist agenda, given what she sees as fundamental problems of incommensurability between the two fields. She stages her own

dilemmas in responding to the queer theory papers in the collection, stating that one of the tasks of the encounter might be:

challenging a queer = cool/psychoanalysis = fool motif as well
as,
noticing what queer demands of psychoanalysis. (Owens, 2017, p. 271)

Lisa Downing describes the incommensurability more definitively:

Whereas for psychoanalysis, traditionally at least, sexuality has an etiological status as the nexus of f/phantasies underlying an analysand's symptoms and behaviors, for queer theorists, especially following Michel Foucault, sexuality is a constructed epistemological category that functions to normalize the behaviors and bodies of social subjects. In the former, it is a source of truth to be tapped; in the latter it is a pervasive and power-laden lie to be exposed. (Downing, 2017, p. 123)

Yet despite these very real epistemological differences, the promise of an encounter hangs over all of us who claim an interest in both psychoanalysis and gender and sexuality. Surely "queer," as the name for the permanent challenge to "the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," as David Halperin put it (Halperin, 1995, p. 62) (even as "the normal" reappears and resolidifies in otherwise marginalized or radical corners of theory and everyday life), has enormous potential to engage productively with psychoanalytic theories and practices that are premised on a deep suspicion of claims to truth or naturalness, as Giffney elaborates in her incredibly useful and lucid introduction. Surely psychoanalysis is, as some in the collection claim, "a queer theory," or if not a queer theory, then at least queer in its own right, given that the Freud of Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (Freud, 1905) stakes the future of psychoanalysis on the premise that a wayward deviant sexuality is central to psychic life, and sexuality's aim is always already perverse. As Eve Watson writes in equally lucid fashion in the afterword to the book, "This encounter is underpinned by the centrality of sexuality to both disciplines and the crucial nature of psychoanalytic theory to queer theory's theorization of gender and sexuality" (Watson, 2017, p. 445). Here psychoanalytic practice and queer theory not only are seen to share an insistence on the centrality of sexuality, but also are caught in an entanglement of shared theoretical resources to elucidate it. Yet, as Patricia Gherovici states, "Something about sex is intractable; it resists assimilation, it disrupts meaning" (Gherovici, 2017, p. 373). If what is shared by queer theory and psychoanalytic practice is something that disrupts meaning, then the encounter itself is by necessity volatile, an entanglement they cannot get clear of and yet one that is bound to end in tears.

What is an encounter? The editors are very clear that they want to stage an encounter, and not just a meeting, discussion, argument, conversation, dialogue, or any other form of linguistic coming together. Perhaps something is captured in the notion of an encounter that is embedded in its etymological derivation, which is a meeting of adversaries, or in Middle English to meet as an adversary, to come to the meeting in the expectation that there will be something adverse within it, so that you seek something but are also against it, or up against it (Oxford English Dictionary). Adverse itself, in its Latin root, means to turn, to turn against, so in

an encounter you come toward another, an object, an experience, but in doing so you are coming toward a turning against, perhaps even in the hope of a turning around. Wilfred Bion talks about experience as emerging from a state of expectation and the simultaneous realization of something missing, which is felt as adverse, in his terms as frustration. Encounter and experience are bound up with one another. In *Learning from Experience* he writes about the infant “whose expectation of a breast is mated with a realization of no breast available for satisfaction” (Bion, 1962, pp. 111–112). The encounter with no breast, which he calls simply “experience”—this going toward and finding what is adverse in the breast, the no breast—gives rise to an object relation (frustration with an internal no-breast), which if tolerable is transformed into a “thought” (harking back to Freud’s notion of the hallucination of the breast to deal with no breast), which in its turn produces the apparatus for thinking. We also know from Bion that we are not so good at tolerating frustration at the beginning of life and that we need some help with that, usually in the form of a willing other with a mind that can “digest” the beta elements projected into it, which are the thoughts produced out of the encounter with the no breast that Bion calls experience, and can be given back in a moderated form. This function is lent, in essence, to the infant until it can manage its own thoughts.

When this model is used to think about a clinical encounter of the analytic kind, Bion is most concerned with how in analysis we can come to know something about this mode of experiencing through the analyst’s own experiencing of the session, without precluding that experience of one another with preconceived knowledge. He constantly tries to clear a space for experience understood as this kind of encounter that needs to turn with and not against adversity. This is what makes experience emotional. It’s something we come up against, not something we passively are exposed to. So too the psychoanalytic encounter, a peculiar encounter, this going toward adversity, which can last for years, a discourse that founders at the point at which it becomes intercourse or conversation (both forms of mutuality that the psychoanalytic frame seeks to actively prevent), or becomes itself an institution that forgets it is paradoxically devoted to dissolution. The paradox is sustained only because this nonconversation is premised on the asymmetry that is the condition of the transference: one that is enacted not just in psychic space, but by the physical and social estrangement between two people talking in a room.

But asymmetry is not the same as inequality, and perhaps this distinction is something that comes to the fore in the encounter between queer theory and psychoanalytic practice. As Sheila Cavanagh writes in this issue: “The game is born of a structural impasse between queer theory and psychoanalysis ... But, equally, there is systemic homophobia, racism and transphobia in the psychoanalytic clinic, in the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) and its affiliate organizations” (this issue). The psychoanalytic clinic and queer theory both do things in the world and to one another. As Jacqueline Rose names, as her own interest in theory, what matters is what theory “does,” (Rose, 2017, p. 392) and, we might add, how practice “thinks,” with political and psychic consequences on both sides. Queer is not just a theory, Angie Voela and Chrysanthi Nigianni remind us in this current collection. “Queer is also mainly a practice—doing and undoing of norms around gender, sexuality and bodies” (this issue). They rightly call for a queer clinic, one that could operate as a mode of inquiry that “acknowledges the violences of norms, power systems, and social exclusions,” those that psychoanalysis also continues to propagate. The work of a queer clinic, they argue, is how to

use this knowledge to promote change. We might also glean from Sasha Roseneil's moving account in this issue of her journey toward her own practice as a sociologically informed group analyst and an analytically informed sociologist that institutional psychoanalysis can "turn against" in ways that are not about asymmetry at all, but simply inequality.

This collection of commentaries on the book therefore constitutes yet another layer of deep reflexive work. Many of the themes in the original book are iteratively rehearsed for a second time, producing new meanings and questions— notions of missed or failed encounters, this time with Deleuze making an appearance as a potential missing interlocutor who offers a different account of desire, and therefore a different account of both queerness and the analytic encounter; the politics of institutional psychoanalysis and institutional queer theory and the remarginalizations that they both produce, especially those of trans* but also those of race through the lack of representation from queer of colour scholars; the ever-present potentials for deradicalization of both the queer and psychoanalytic projects and sometimes by one another; questions of lack and fullness and the very real differences within that baggy term "psychoanalysis" of how to understand sexuality, the function and purpose of the clinic, and questions of technique. These commentaries, taken together, broaden and deepen the original aims of Noreen Giffney and Eve Watson's extraordinary project, the frustrations of no breast pushing us further into thinking, which, as we know, is a thoroughly emotional affair.

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