PAQ 89(4):741-770 (2020) • DOI: 10.1080/00332828.2020.1805271

First World Problems and Gated Communities of the Mind: An Ethics of Place in Psychoanalysis

Author: Francisco J. González

Abstract

Using the social meme of “first world problems” as an opening, this paper articulates a continuous field of psychoanalysis which extends from the individual to the social, and is demarcated by an ethics of place. Psychoanalytic processes are seen as taking place in a number of possible material settings, delimited by structures of framing which necessarily must exclude significant elements in order to make process accessible for work. This view is dependent on understanding that the unconscious operates within the heterologous and distinct registers of the collective as well as of the individual. Clinical examples help illustrate these ideas.

Keywords: Community psychoanalysis | place | demarcation | framing | ethics

Respirator masks are once again commonplace. Most of us already have one. Two years in a row, the fires raged. For a time, the San Francisco Bay Area claimed the unhappy dis

tinction of having the worst air quality in the world. If in the first year stores quickly sold out of the coveted N95 government-approved masks, by the second year people had learned to stockpile them. By the time the virus hit, it was the medical providers who couldn’t find them. San Francisco was a ghost town, streets deserted, a scene from a cheap zombie movie. A few people milled about wearing flimsy surgical masks or scarves, anything that might prevent the transpiration of harmful particles, or maybe simply as a guard against a greater onslaught: the loss of hope against the infiltration of despair about the end of the world.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

When I started writing this, news of recent fires — the Kincade, the Tick, the Getty — were stirring the kinds of symptoms that could only be called post-traumatic, an ironic word now, as if the trauma were already behind us. The beginnings of a sickening new routine in the Bay Area — anticipating the fire season, fearing the winds, anxiously watching the smoke roll in as we pulled out the masks — now seem almost quaint in the face of the new global assault. The frequency and magnitude of the fires were frightening, but at least we had a living memory — collectively, if not always individually — that even fires could be survived.

Now it's different. As of this writing, confirmed cases of Covid-19 caused by the novel coronavirus have passed 10 million worldwide, the United States claiming about a fourth of worldwide deaths; and the numbers keep rising.[†] For now, the San Francisco Bay Area is still relatively sheltered, not yet assailed by the dreadful surge that nearly inundated metropolitan New York, where the really harrowing stories were coming from. Still, to the scenes of horror the fires seared into us — pictures of burned-out car husks, dazed animals wandering in smoky fields, the faces of stunned residents, tear-streaked and dirty, watching their lives burn to ash — we are now forced to add other agonies we had yet to imagine: refrigerator cars for corpses, people dying isolated from those who love them, exhausted health care workers in space suits, some collapsed.

Pandemic literally means *all people*, and the consulting room, of course, could not be immune. The afflictions of shared social trauma touch not just every*one* but the dense network of connections that

connect those everyones: acquaintances and fellow strangers as well as intimates, the invisible reticulation of interdependencies. It is as if the very matrix of our in-between is sullied, the psychic air contaminated and dangerous, the collective environmental mother herself terribly stricken.

If last year the buildings outside my window in downtown San Francisco were barely visible, shrouded in the dull brown smog of the fires, the sun an eerie orange disk filtered through the haze, this year the eerie scene couldn't be more different: the sun blazing in the clearest sky, the streets utterly deserted, everything in sharp relief. Last year, the smoke itself was a literal residue, no abstract symbol, but real lives turned to cinder, aerosolized trauma. This year, what we breathe into our lungs is imperceptible, undetectable: not the residue of an external conflagration

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

that has already happened, but the indifferent harbinger of dreadful potential, of a life-threatening internal conflagration to come. The invisible monster — a hundredth of the diameter of a human hair — the SARS-CoV-2 virus, like others in its class, exists in a nether world between life form and inert chemical matter, a true species of the undead of horror films, utilizing human bodies as the matrix of their mindless replication.

But like with the smoke from the fires, we are once again plunged into a fog of blurred edges, where the line between internal and external becomes ominously indistinct and surfaces shimmer with hallucinatory danger. Like with the fires, those of us with the means to do so take refuge, "sheltering in place" in roomy houses, retreating to second homes away from the fray. But the enclaves of home and consulting room offer no ultimate security; neither fire nor virus ultimately acknowledge the distinctions of class and privilege. I recall one patient during the fires who felt irritated, the butt of a cruel joke: *we didn't move here to have air quality that is worse than Mumbai or Shanghai…* For months, Wuhan remained a place firmly elsewhere. But the soap-bubble fantasy then burst: whether smog or sickness, privilege could no longer protect *us* here from the miasmas that daily beset *them* there.

What would seem to be so completely unrelated to the conduct of psychoanalysis in a private practice office in 21st-century California — Mumbai and the Cold War language of political economy — finds its way, through association and displacement, into the discourse of my

patients with some regularity. It's not at all uncommon that a patient, after a long complaint about loneliness or the pains of relationship brushes it all away by sighing: *oh well, first world problems….*

A common ironic meme meant to dismiss the trivial irritations of life in the rich capitalist West (like the heartbreak of an espresso drink made with the wrong milk product), the phrase is psychic sleight of hand, cloaking concern in the guise of (false) humility. At the most obvious level, it seeks to foreclose. The patient fails to elaborate the loneliness, refuses association, doesn't speak the transferential accusation of a lack of receptivity in the analyst, say. We are familiar with these kinds of defensive dismissals.

But a meme — like a gene — is a mode of transmission, of replication and dissemination, but with a grounding in the *social* unconscious of *collectivities*. And so this "first world" meme

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

invokes problems in the collective sphere which are increasingly becoming a focus of attention for psychoanalytic practice. And in this guise, the evocation of “first world problems” has surfaced in a denser, more poignant way in my practice as of late than as the defensive minimization of personal emotional experience. A first world problem implicates other worlds and their problems, performing a dismissal at a collective level too. At its core the phrase houses, then, a double disavowal: let’s not think about *me* (and, implicitly, the collectives to which I belong) by not thinking about *them* (the collectives I explicitly disavow).

Uncannily, the term can be traced to an article published in 1979 by Geoffrey Payne, a housing and urban development consultant, entitled “Housing: Third World Solutions to First World Problems.” Addressing a frustration any even upper-middle-class home buyer in the metropolitan Bay Area would instantly recognize today (“the bottom rung of the housing ladder moving upwards consistently faster than income levels,” [p. 100]), Payne suggests anarchic innovations from the third world: perhaps unauthorized building and squatting could ease the housing strain. The irony couldn’t be more complete: a line from an article seeking solutions *from* the third world to a very real problem of housing inequity *in* the first world, flips into an erasure of problems by the disavowal of inequities.

But psychoanalysis teaches us something about the processes of disavowal: namely, the biting return of reality. And if San Francisco will not

go to Mumbai or Wuhan, then Mumbai or Wuhan will come to San Francisco. The smoke of climate change is hard to keep out, and the changing climate is far more penetrating than only atmospheric, as catastrophic as that promises to be. Late last year, the crowds rioting in Santiago, Chile echoed the crowds rioting in Beirut and Hong Kong and Paris as country after country struggled with growing inequity; early this year, the abandoned plazas of St. Peter’s mirror the vacancy of Time Square, empty avenues near the Eiffel Tower, the desolation of common streets the world over, as country after country locked down against the horrifying pandemic. In a shrinking world that gets ever faster and more “liquid” (Bauman **2000**), groups with radical differences are thrown ever more tightly against each other. There can be no denying now that Hubei is intimately conjoined to Seattle, Milan, Teheran, Sao Paolo. The air quality in Mumbai cannot be dissociated from that of the Bay Area. If the UN Refugee Agency estimates that almost 71 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide by the end of 2018, then some of them, no doubt, live close by. In short, the teeming cities and comfortable suburbs of first world

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

America can no longer be seen as impermeable to the crises shaking the other worlds co-inhabiting the planet. And with the closing of the gap — with this intimate global touch — the fear of infestation, of a threatening contamination by the other, often becomes the impetus for a pressing imperative of safety: close the door, round the wagons, please just keep all of it — and all of them — out.

Focusing on a throw-away phrase from the hipster lexicon against the dark background of great fires and a historic pandemic rings of bathos. But by doing so, I hope to highlight concepts and modes of working that give shape and coherence to emergent trends in psychoanalysis today, a psychoanalysis that progressively recognizes it can ill afford to be a gated community, even in the name of protecting internal reality from the taint of the social. My goal is to work in part through illustration and clinical vignette, and in part conceptually, interweaving psychoanalytic and critical theory, to figure a horizon of thought that is increasingly being developed clinically and theoretically, but cries out for more development. It is, in fact, the horizon of a response to a cry in the world, which psychoanalysis — as an art of listening to what remains shrouded but insistent — cannot help but hear. And as it is at the heart of our ethic that true listening is mutative, psychoanalysis cannot help

but be changing. This change has broadly to do with the recognition that the social field is an essential constituent of psychoanalysis, both within its unfolding as clinical praxis, and as a foundational element of its theoretical evolution. More specifically, and critically, work in a social field concerns *positioning* — what I might call an ethics of *place* — for patients and ourselves as practitioners, but also for the collective we are as a discipline. As the importance of positioning is crucial to my project, I will continue, then, by attempting to locate *myself* psychosocially, through a psychoanalytic story.

FAT CATS AND INVISIBLE PEOPLE

David is a well-off businessman, almost 70, whom I have been seeing for just over a decade in weekly psychotherapy. An immigrant from Latin America, he pronounces his name in English rather than the Spanish (*Davíd*), which is just one way he signals ambivalence about his pre-immigrant past. He grew up in a lower middle-class household and came to the United States as a young adult, when he struggled economically before slowly working his way up to his now

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

highly successful position. He himself was homeless for a time and depended on the kindness of friends to get by, for which he is deeply grateful. In the series of sessions I have in mind from a few years ago, he is very concerned about being overweight. He is clear that he knows how to lose weight and has in fact done so before but cannot seem to find the motivation to embark on this project now, as much as he feels the pressure to do so for his health and comfort. He is associating to this problem. Even as I too have the words in mind, he says with a chuckle that he is thinking of himself as a *fat cat*, which opens a dialogue on his economic position. A session or two later he enters the consulting room quite animated; there was much in the news about the Occupy movement at the time and the slogan "We are the 99%." He had just read an article on current wealth statistics. *It turns out I am in the 1%!!* — he says, apparently dumbfounded. I myself am taken aback with disbelief that he could have thought anything otherwise, and tell him so, he is an educated and well-travelled man, it seems curious to me that this would not have occurred to him before. He has a quick response: *I don't really look down, I look up. Believe it or not, in my circles there are many people who have a lot more money than I do. I am*

really towards the bottom of the pack. In the parking garage, my Mercedes is the least expensive car. The parking garage is in a high-end hotel not far from my office in downtown San Francisco. On the way into my office, I have seen people with needles in their arm, shooting up; I routinely hear what I presume to be a psychotic homeless person, shouting incoherently for an hour at a time just under my window. *Didn't you walk here from the garage?* — I ask — *did you happen to see the people on the street?* He had not, he says, seeming a bit confused. During the conversation, I search for and decisively dismiss any possible feelings of envy I might harbor concerning his wealth, while vaguely settling into a warm and pillowy moral superiority. The following session, he picks up without missing a beat. On leaving my office the previous session, he had conducted a little test as he walked back to his car. With each person he passed on the street, he asked himself, *do I think this person has more money than I do?* And with each one, the answer was the same: *no, definitely not*. It had suddenly become possible to see invisible people.

Tellingly, it is only now, through the writing of this paper which placed me in dialogue with colleagues and an imagined readership, that is in dialogue with a collective social object, that — for the first time, astoundingly to me — I turn to see the door within myself that I have shut on my patient, Davíd.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

The first time I returned to Cuba — the country my parents and I left when I was a small child — I invited the extended family in Santiago to eat at a *paladar. Paladares* were the in-home restaurants newly sanctioned by Castro as he struggled to improve the disastrous economy of the so-called *período especial,* the "special period" following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Of the 15 of us present, only I ordered the local lobster, everyone else thrilled to taste chicken again, which they hadn't seen in years. I don't remember what the bill came to, it might have been $50 — little for me, but about one-and-a-half months of my cousin's salary, a doctor with a decade of experience. When I went to pay, the waitress told me it was taken care of, apparently by my uncle — aging, unemployed, and the patriarch of the family. I became irritated with him — I had been planning this dinner from the beginning of the trip, this was to be my treat, a gift. As we walked home, one of the frequent power outages now suddenly hit, and in the hot darkness that accompanied us as we picked our way among the potholes in the empty

streets, my anger melted into shame. I realized how cheated I felt, how fiercely I had wanted to be the benevolent one. And now, rather than luxuriating in the anticipated generosity of my first world largesse, I was left with the humiliating emptiness of narcissism laid bare, knowing the next morning I would board a plane and fly back to my comfortable life, leaving this third world of my family behind. Davíd was clearly not the only one with first world problems.

SOCIAL NAUSEA

I use this clinical story to highlight an intricate transference/countertransference mesh involving class, ethnicity, political upheaval, immigration, bi-culturality, and language. It is a story that could be read in conventional individualist terms, along the lines of Oedipal dynamics, envy, and survivor guilt, for example, but such readings would ignore important structural elements, an erasure that would constitute a kind of violence.

For now, let me look in a different direction and say that the true recognition of privilege, and the acknowledgement of the social inequities that undergird it, almost inevitably leads to disruption (Swartz **2019**). For psychoanalysis as a discipline, this disruption is often confined to the psychic; we recognize it in the oft-conceded charge against our discipline of its elitism, of its white fragility, and guilt. But increasingly the disruption is structural, as we question what constitutes the canon of psychoanalytic literature and grapple with changes to the teaching curriculum, as we

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

reconsider the session frequency that defines an acceptable training case, and as we struggle with painful issues of diversification in our institutes. Our journals and conferences are crowded with the complexity of these issues. But precisely because a true encounter with otherness is disquieting and disruptive, the conservative forces of psychic equilibrium will seek to restore homeostasis, reinstalling old paradigms, to quell the disruption and prevent change. We know this from our clinical practice, but it no less true for the institutional resistances within the discipline of psychoanalysis than it is for the resistances of the individual analysand.

In Jenny Erpenbeck's (**2017**) acclaimed novel *Go, Went, Gone*, a retired philology professor from former East Germany finds his life

deeply subverted when an initial curiosity about a group of African asylum seekers becomes deep engagement. In a review of that novel, literary critic James Wood (**2017**), gets to the troubling heart of our resistance to change when he reflects on his disturbing experience of reading it, and his retreat from this disturbance. Wood writes:

> "I am like some "flat" character in a comic novel, who sits every night at the dinner table and repetitively, despicably, intones, without issue or effect, "This is the central moral question of our time." And, of course, such cleansing self-reproach is merely part of liberalism's dance of survival. It's not just that we are morally impotent; the continuation of our comfortable lives rests on the continuation—on the success—of that impotence. We see suffering only intermittently, and our days make safe spaces for these interruptions."

It is precisely the safety of these spaces which is the matter at hand; for this safety can be the way that these interruptions are domesticated, minimized, and brushed aside. Through the influence of philosophically-inflected cultural criticism, a growing body of analytic literature has begun to take up this problematic, and indeed some quarters of institutional psychoanalysis have been adept at naming the social disturbances that daily besiege us, but we too often settle back, re-inscribing the old paradigm: individualistic and introspective, wary of the structural changes that deeper social engagement compels. It took nearly 100 years of theorizing for the Establishment (the term here is Bion's) to begin to problematize the workings of power as a properly psychoanalytic category, and this mostly through the lens of feminism and gender; we have much further to go in unpacking the operations of racism, economic disparities, migration,

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

climate change, political upheaval, globalization, technological acceleration, and a host of other forces, which might rightly be called shared social traumas. These domains have typically been relegated as *external* to psychoanalysis proper, but this sense of propriety is itself already shot through with the workings of the unconscious, an unconscious which operates at a different level than that of the individual, namely, the social unconscious. These new changes in psychoanalysis are due, in no small measure, to the recovery and

accentuation of a lineage of thinking that has always been with us but has often been relegated to the margins.[†]

As an example, I will focus now on some ideas from the work of Janine Puget, the Argentinian analyst who has long been writing on the necessity of psychoanalytic work in the domain of the social. Puget (**1982**, **1988**, **1991**, **1992**) has insisted that there are two distinct psychoanalytic domains with heterologous logics: the domain of the personal, Oedipal, conventional psychoanalytic project and the domain of external reality, uncertainty, and groups, of the social psychoanalytic project. As part of this work, Puget (**2018a**) has written on those who are made invisible — specifically, the homeless, the unemployed, and the "desaparecidos" of the Argentinian dirty wars. We could easily add Judith Butler's (**2004**) register of precarious life, those who pass unmourned because considered socially unmournable; or the status of non-being relegated to black subjects, in the line of Frantz Fanon (**1987**[1952]), Saidya Hartman (**1997**), and Achille Mbembe (**2017**). Puget (**2018a**) places such subjects under the rubric of disposability, operating in a state she calls a naturalized "dis-existence." Cloaked in invisibility, they become recognizable only when they amass into a group, in a moment of protest, like the refugees in Erpenbeck's novel. More often than not, we relegate them to a third world or pass them in the street as ghostly entities, if not quite seen, yet still with the power to haunt.

For if there are holes in the social fabric through which people effectively disappear, they do not exactly vanish without a trace. These "invisibles" trouble my consulting room with great regularity, as we saw in the example of Davíd. In one now seemingly distant week, when people still left their houses and all talk did not involve references to the

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

coronavirus, several patients from tony parts of the city told a similar story: leaving home in the morning, they step over the sleeping body of a homeless person at their door step, and are left with a kind of social nausea, trailing malaise, awkwardness, guilt, fear, disgust. *I don't want to bring up my child in these conditions* — says a single mother. *I want to help but I don't want to enable them* — says a venture capitalist. And the common refrain: *they should do something*. Often, the greater the frustrated disgust of the patient in question, the more precarious the economic position the patient occupies. Despite our attempts to insulate ourselves, to edit the scenario out of the psychic picture, an encounter with these "invisibles" leaves a mark, an affective vestige. The homeless person does more than confront us with someone who can, all too often, be reduced to a depository for projected abjections which return to threaten us from the realm of the uncanny. The homeless subject also challenges us with the radical and disquieting alterity of a form of human living which seems alien, confronting us with the stranger within. Such an encounter puts us face to face with the precarity we all inhabit — though unquestionably in radically unequal ways — within the incomprehensible complexity of the social order. Few of us working in the urban centers of this privatized first world do not feel it: I need to command the fee that pays the mortgage, and the nameless person sleeping on the stoop can obviously not pay that fee.

One patient, a successful artist from a war-torn country, works a reception job, barely eking it out — despite critical acclaim. At the community clinic where I work, asylum holders and seekers live in shared rooms and SROs, where tensions run high and an argument can end in eviction, and thus the streets. But such precariousness does not affect only my poorer patients. A South American immigrant from a well-off family, Ivy League schooled, came to the land of start-up opportunities, but can't quite get it to gel, and everything threatens to unravel: house, family, marriage. An American-born woman, Ivy League schooled, is holding on with a tech job consultancy, but looks into immigrating to Mexico, where she knows from past experience she can afford Montessori schools, health care, and a nanny. More than one patient cannot stop working, despite significant wealth: one literally works himself ill, overwrought but unable to slow down, he develops strange somatic disturbances despite extensive negative medical workups; another,

mortgage-free and many millions in the bank, frets he does not yet have enough money.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

Each of these patients comes porting the complicated childhoods that conventional psychoanalysis is well-equipped to address: psychic intrusions large and small, insufficient holding, inadequate containment. But it is difficult to sit for a day of analytic sessions and not hear the relentless press of a world gone mad, the steady shrill pitch of unreconcilable political discord, the nauseous unease of a collective holding environment turned toxic, the fear of contagion, illness, and death. The accelerated speed of social and technological change, globalized political ferment, the bombardment of information, of misinformation, of case numbers, the constant pinging of the next message, the next tweet — a relentless and exhaustive uncertainty that goes well beyond the nameless dread and existential uncertainty of one's own individual death or even the death of those one loves, to something more diffuse, more all-encompassing, like the collapse of whole systems of material sustenance, the death of an intelligible social order, the annihilation of the planet.

Our ability to create livable forms and adequate structures of containment are overwhelmed by what analyst Rachael Peltz (**2005**) calls our "manic society" and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (**2000**) calls "liquid modernity." We are born into a social order we did not create, but to which we are inextricably bound, stepping over its bodies. Overwhelmed by its complexity, we remain relatively powerless to change it, even as organized collectives, much less as individuals. The anxieties exposed here concern our unstable belonging. And the interruptions of daily comfort opened this deluge of anxieties can only create "subliminal ailments and defensive formations" ["malestares subliminales y formaciones defensivas"] (Puget **2018a**, p. 27)† as we attempt to ward off the chaos.

THE EXCESS OF THE SOCIAL

Social subjectivity, in Puget's terms, regards that arena of living in which a social reality that exceeds us, one that is well beyond our control, produces its effects on the mind and on relationships, producing "new

marks for which we have no previous inscription" ["nuevas marcas para las cuales no tenemos inscripción previa"]. I quote from her paper ""Coartada social" ["Social alibi"]:

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

> “These marks are incorporated as intrusive, representing the alienness of the world as much as the alterity of others, and making a place for them produces a kind of displacement from known positions. It breaks with inherited models and forces a difficult coexistence between what is known and what is alien/ foreign. A typical defense [against this difficult coexistence] attempts to articulate the present and the past as if they corresponded to similar logics when they tend to be heterogeneous logics.
>
> …
>
> It also includes the necessity of processing belonging to a world in which events take place that populate the life of the subject, without depending on his having generated them. It includes the culture to which he belongs, which must needs clash with his inherited culture.
>
> Estas marcas se incorporan como intrusas, representan tanto lo ajeno del mundo como la alteridad de los otros, y hacerles un lugar produce una suerte de descoloque de posiciones certeras. Rompe con modelos heredados y obliga a una difícil convivencia entro lo conocido y lo que es ajeno. Una defensa habitual lleva a intentar articular el presente y el pasado como si correspondieran a lógicas similares cuando suelen ser lógicas heterólogas.
>
> …
>
> Incluye también la necesidad de procesar el pertenecer a un mundo en el que suceden eventos que pueblan la vida de un sujeto, sin que dependa de él haberlos generado. Incluye la cultural a la cual pertenece, que habrá de chocar con la cultura heredada. [2008, p. 324]”

The brave new world in which we live cannot be domesticated through the logic of yesterday. That is, current social events and traumas (the California fires, the churning political turmoil, the symptoms of white supremacy, the coronavirus pandemic), cannot be simplistically reduced to intra-psychic (or even inter-subjective) terms using the psychoanalytic logics and hermeneutics of the previous century. But neither can the disjunct in our theorizing be reduced to a lag resulting from the acceleration and liquidity of contemporary life. The shrinking and quickening of globalization generates heat and energy, to be sure; but what this compression more clearly reveals are the fissures that were always there in our thinking. In truth, psychoanalysis has always struggled with the brave newness of the world, and from the beginning. The

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

psychoanalysis of the individual was always in an unstable tension with the heterogenous logic of the group and the social (Kaës **1995**[1993]).

Like Lynne Layton's (**2006**) critique of conventional psychoanalysis for its attacks on the social link, Puget (**2008**), reading Steiner's famous **1985** paper against the grain, asserts that it is we who have "turned a blind eye" on the social realities of our time. As in the Oedipal myth, such repudiation comes at a great cost. It is not an exaggeration to say that the vibrancy and relevance of psychoanalysis as a useful discipline for the next century hangs in the balance. We have undoubtedly come some way since Winnicott famously noticed that bombs were dropping outside, during the controversial discussions, only to have Klein chide him for forgetting that psychoanalysis concerns itself with the internal world. Most contemporary analysts at least acknowledge the daily bombardments of 21st century living. Nor is it to say that narratives concerning social events might not fruitfully be reinterpreted as characters to "dream the session" of the patient's intra-psychic world as one might do following post-Bionian field theory. It is more to assert that, following Freud on the function of dreaming, strictly hewing to the oneiric function could also serve as a kind of wish fulfillment to help keep patient and analyst asleep to a social reality which threatens the psychic stability, creativity, and vibrancy of both parties and their web of relations, and that this "external" force has as much impact on the psyche and requires as much metabolization as do the forces of an endogenous drive. And if, rather than dream-making, a useable accommodation to reality is to be our guide for healthy psychic functioning, there are urgent matters

before us, literally matters of life and death, to which as individuals and collectives we continually turn a blind eye. The contemporary catch phrase used to signify new-found understanding of the pervasiveness and reach of structural racism — being "woke" — has been an easy target for the caricature of politically correct culture, but it is hardly a metaphor easily dismissed. No one (on either political left or right) is likely to deny the anger, divisiveness, dismay, and anxiety — indeed, the jarring rudeness — of waking from the fantasied promises of the mid-twentieth-century American dream, the apogee of institutional psychoanalysis.[†]

What, then, is an analyst to do?

Puget (**2008**) recounts a clinical vignette that opens a door. A patient recounts his disdain at seeing homeless people gathering up trash and cardboard for money: it's a shame, he says, they

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

should get a job. Puget finds herself uncomfortable, her ethical stance at odds with her patient. In another case a patient recounts smuggling something across the border, gloating about getting away with it. Puget is initially silent while feeling complicit with a socially accepted culture of corruption. Recurrence to interpretations about childhood seems an easy way out, but this feels disingenuous. In both these instances, Puget recognizes that the patient's positions, derive from a political and ideological stance, as do her own; in both cases she opts for speaking out, in effect disclosing something of her own ethical position. The patient becomes angry, but a rich analytic process ensues. In a similar vein Eyal Rozmarin (**2009**) has written about countering a fellow Israeli patient's insistence on serving in the army, with his own ideologically dissimilar position, again with complications for the analytic process. Rather than interpretation, what is sometimes needed is *opinion*, Puget (**2008**) says, since this demonstrates the alterity of two subjects.

Now, bringing opinion to the toolbox of technique (and suggesting that it is on par with interpretation), implies a rather different relationship of the analyst to what psychoanalysis is about and how it works. This difference, however, should not be constituted or understood as a call for politics in analysis. Considered psychoanalytically, opinion as technique is neither an act of political suasion nor bullying, but a form of intervention whose goal is making apparent ideological differences

undergirding the analytic encounter. Opinion emanates from social positioning; it begins to make visible facets of the larger structure in which the two subjects are embedded. That is, it touches on the kind of technique that will become more necessary as we develop tools for making the *social* unconscious more conscious.

An opinion, as opposed to other more conventional forms of intervention (interpretation, elaboration, etc), reveals the positioning of the analyst, the analyst's ideological investments. Not only the alterity of the other, but how that alterity is located in a socio-political field. Analytic use can be made of this if it helps to illuminate the psychic reality of the social unconscious, which exists in a plane well beyond individuals. There are, of course, limits to how much alterity any given analytic dyad can bear and still remain clinically useful to the patient, a matter which implicates our thinking on the social. Franz Fanon famously worked with both resistance fighters and their torturers at the Blida hospital in Algeria (Macey **2012**), and to do so, did not reveal his political affiliations. An interesting thought experiment[†] is to consider not only whether one could

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

work as an analyst with someone of wildly divergent political views (a progressive analyst with a Trump supporter patient, say), but whether one can imagine being the analysand of an analyst holding such views (the Trump supporter now as the analyst). It is not uncommon that a queer person wants a queer analyst or a person of color, an analyst of color. These preferences cannot be reduced to matters of individual subjectivity or something like "ego fragility"; they reflect an intuition by the patient about the social dimensions of the unconscious, and its impact on the formation of the analyst. A gay patient with a kind, understanding analyst who is also hell-bent on dissolving the "pathology" of homosexuality — certainly not an uncommon scene even 50 years ago — represents an annihilating alterity for the patient.

DOORS, MEMBRANES, WALLS, THRESHOLD, SKIN

Classically considered, the frame is an essential mechanism which turns attention toward the so-called "inner" world, and in Jose Bleger's (**1967**) terms constitutes the "non-process" of the analytic setting. For Marion

Milner (**1987**), who is credited with the introduction of the psychoanalytic concept, frames simply and profoundly "show that what is inside has to be perceived, interpreted in a different way from what is outside" (p. 81). Institutionalization has tended to reify the term, prosaically reducing it to such things as the length of the session and the fee. But recent interest has turned not only to the quality of attention in the analyst's mind that makes the frame portable, but more trenchantly to how the conventional frame comes packing a great deal that is socially unconscious (Tylim and Harris **2018**). Indeed, in the face of the social — especially at the level of social trauma, but not only at this level — the question of framing becomes particularly complex, as both members of the analytic pair are *embedded* in complex realities beyond their making or control (Boulanger **2013**; Puget 1982). This can appear to overwhelm or explode the frame, though more accurately what it does is decenter it, revealing its latent history and ideological underpinning (see especially Hartman, Gampel, and Puget — all in Tylim and Harris **2018**).

This de-centering allows us to consider the frame less statically: less a noun and more a gerund, as *framing*. Framing still offers the non-process elements or ground *against which* something can be analyzed, but considers this frame contingently, itself necessarily constructed, historically and institutionally bound, and so subject to the social unconscious. In this sense it is a less of a door,

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

and more like a construction manual for doorways — a threshold phenomena, like a border or skin.

Indeed, borders have always been an extremely generative site of development for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is about coming and going: the patient transits through the world and returns, transits through the session and leaves. This weaving in and out makes psychoanalysis permeable. The cell wall, the skin, the doorway — all are sites of enormous activity. Interaction and exchange with the world is a necessary condition of vitality; metabolism, like breathing, requires transport across these thresholds. Too porous, and liquid processes leak out diminishing the organism; not permeable enough, and the organism suffocates.

Wisława Szymborska (**2000**), in her poem *Psalm*, marvels at "the leaky boundaries of man-made states," those frontier borders criss-crossed "with impunity" by insects, birds, and clouds, despite the vigilance of the border patrol. She concludes that "Only what is human can truly be foreign." Psychoanalysis has always been deeply engaged with

this foreignness and the border crossings that constitute it. Indeed, elsewhere (González **2016**) I have argued that immigration is one of our discipline's animating tropes: from Freud's erogenous zones, through the great psychoanalytic diaspora following World War II, to contemporary theory, psychoanalysis is a study of boundaries, errancy, and otherness.

It is precisely against this fluidity that the frame is compelled. Both egos and groups establish and maintain — and at times police — a boundary demarcating inside from out. Psychoanalytic orthodoxy has tended to frame the social out of the purview of strict clinical work, but a psychoanalysis that attends more carefully to questions of social subjectivity — to the problems of collectivity, the effects of social reality, and the violence and strangeness of the world in which we must live — cannot be a psychoanalysis of closed doors.

DELIMITATION OF THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS: DEMARCATION AND PLACE

So, the psychoanalytic encounter with the world and its social order, a matrix of unfathomable complexity, is an encounter with alterity, with the otherness of the other and the otherness this

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

opens within ourselves. Think of the encounter with homelessness already mentioned, of the refugee crisis in Europe, red and blue political divisions in this country, the coronavirus pandemic, and racialized difference anywhere. These encounters with otherness force us to a border, the frontier between a domain of familiarity and putative sovereignty and a foreign territory whose workings are beyond our ken or control.

I want to move our thinking now towards a *topological* consideration of this border. What do I mean by this? Topology derives from *topos* (Greek for a *site* or *place*, akin to the Latin, *locus*). We are familiar with it in the rhetorical notion of a *topic*, a place where an argument or theme is developed, or in the idea of the *topography* of natural borders — a river or mountain range, say — that provides geographic distinction between countries. Consider then the *topology* of the border, as a place or site of the construction of borders in multiple registers of existence: whether as a topic in theoretical discourse or a patient's speech; the border of repression or dissociation, fencing off the internal otherness of our own unconscious; the construction of the me/not-me distinction; the sense

of belonging to or exclusion from groups constituted through identity markers such as gender or race; or the geopolitical and discursive frontiers of nation-states. This is the *topos* of the border, in multiple registers. Thinking *topologically* about borders is a way of considering the continuities and transformations of these interrelated but different locations: the way that shutting the office door is like crossing the border into a land of dreams — or like entrapment in a reeducation camp.

Like any psychoanalytic work, work in and with the social requires some sort of delimitation of a vastly complex field. To distinguish this delimitation from the framing of conventional analysis and its work on the personal, I will use different terms. This is an artificial convention and used here only for heuristic purposes. Space constraints prevent me from an extensive elaboration, but I do not mean to say that the question of the social concerns psychoanalysis only in certain unusual or traumatic circumstances, though these make a great deal visible that otherwise goes unnoticed. I argue instead that subjectivity itself only arises at the intersections of the two domains of *personal* and *social* unconscious, each with their respective psychoanalytic logics.[†]

Rather than "frame" or "framing," then, I will use the term *demarcation*, by which I mean the temporary or contingent location of a portion of the social field, with all that corresponds to it

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

unconsciously. Closing a door (real or metaphoric) creates a domain, it demarcates a terrain or territory. Framing — as we conventionally understand it — happens in a demarcated place. Demarcation of a social territory, field, or zone allows analytic work on social subjectivity to take place, a term I distinguish from the more typical emphasis on psychoanalytic space (González **2016**, **2018**, **2019**). A correlate of this thinking stresses that psychoanalytic processes — those relations that are open to analytic transformation, interpretation, interference, interruption, punctuation, elaboration, and so forth — are always materially anchored, an anchorage that itself is an important site of analytic interrogation.

I emphasize that demarcation is material, and in more than one way. Conventionally this material demarcation defines the place of the

office, with its closed door, armchairs and couch, and two bodies. The realm of potential *space*, of dreaming, of free association that leads to an elaboration of the unconscious in the personal psyche is not possible without this material demarcation of *place*. Place is the sub-floor of framing. While we have extensive allusions to it, we have yet to sufficiently elaborate how consequential the material dimension of our work is: the location of the office (neighborhood, building), the arrangement of waiting rooms and modes of crossing of the threshold to the consulting room, its furnishings as “thinking surface” (Leavitt **2013**), the lying down or sitting up, the movements of analyst and patient. The ritualization of the psychoanalytic encounter, to the point of cliché, has rendered this materialization relatively invisible; it has made it seem as if the psychoanalytic encounter did not take place in the physical world. As with so many aspects of conventional psychoanalysis, the material sub-flooring of framing is made more consciously visible by the encounter with a specifically social psychoanalysis. Consider the contingency of my office being located in downtown San Francisco, for example, where there are many homeless people, as part of materiality that generated the fat cat sequence. Such material contingencies are part of the heterologous logic of the social register of the unconscious and should not simply by collapsed to psychic determinism and its representations.

The current Covid-19 crisis underscores the significance of materiality to psychoanalysis. In the nearly universal move to so-called “remote” therapies via phone and video platforms, analysts the world over have been forced to alter their relationship to the material setting. It is not that analysis at a distance is de-materialized or lacks a frame or setting (tele-communications do not, of course, make us all suddenly spirit). Instead, these platforms reconfigure the relation of bodies

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

to each other, the points of contact in voice and sight, the loss of a place *shared*. We are familiar enough with the profound psychic effects of a simple material repositioning, namely from chair to couch: we know that reorienting the relation of the perceptual apparatus of analyst and patient to one another can become a portal to the workings of psyche. Freud theorized about the effects of this (not the least of which was the safeguard it afforded of his own social privacy). Psychoanalysis might thus be seen as a discipline that investigates the relation of psyche to materiality: not just between mind and body, but in the living linkages between bodies

and the variabilities of place, architectures of all sorts, the population of diverse topologies.[†]

There are, of course, many other material configurations where analytic process can and does take place. The most familiar of these are the same kind of office, now inhabited by three bodies, in the form of a couple and an analyst. Or, perhaps in a larger room now with more chairs and an assembly of bodies, whether a multigenerational family or a group of relative strangers, as family or group analysis. And this can be extended further, to large groups or to organizations and institutions, such as in organizational consulting or in community psychoanalysis. With the Mexican individual and group analyst Juan Tubert-Oklander (**2014**), I suggest there is a continuity from individual to group to social analysis, and further, that these modalities are in fact interdependent and co-constituent. Once we recognize other material platforms for fostering analytic process (from couples' therapies to community psychoanalysis), it becomes clear that framing is a contingent, artificial, and temporary demarcation of the social field which establishes useable terrain where psychoanalytic process can *take place*.

What demarcation does is isolate a field and its players, and in addition to the analysis that it enables within its walls, it also allows the appearance of what Daniel Butler (**2019**) has called the "phantomatic aspects of the setting." Butler's work is specific to black subjectivity, but it is, I think, applicable in a wider way. He extends the work of Bleger, bringing theorists of blackness (such as Fanon and Marriott) to bear on Bleger's more individualist theorizing. As we have seen, Bleger speaks of the setting as the "non-process": this is the dimension, Bleger (**2012** [1967]) says, which sediments the "phantom world" of the patient, that is the psychotic part of the personality, that "most primitive and undifferentiated organization" (p. 230 — as quoted in Butler). Like a number of other contemporary analytic writers (Bass **2018**; Gampel **2018**; Hartman **2018**; Puget **2018b**), Butler challenges the view that the frame is able to insulate the clinical pair from history and its structural racism. It is the

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

very supposition that the clinic can be a pristine space isolated from ideology that in fact enacts the recapitulation of structural inequity, for the institution of the clinical frame itself is also historically placed and must needs carry its own “primitive and undifferentiated” world, which as Brickman (**2003**) so clearly shows specifically for psychoanalytic theory, is here a historically racist one. What kind of setting is created by a psychoanalysis haunted by this invisible whiteness? Only one that inadvertently annihilates the fullness of black subjectivity. What then can be done to help to put things “in their proper place”? (Fanon **1987**[1952]; González **2019**).

What the psychoanalytic clinic can do — and here I am thinking again of its multiple manifestations, not only as a dyadic enterprise but in other more expansive configurations — is to be a place where this veiled history can come into apparent view, and become amenable to imaginative transformations in those who are subject to it. As such it acts as a topological site, where transferences and traces from the domains of both the social and the personal unconscious iterate.

Let me share a brief vignette about this kind of work, from outside of the dyadic setting.

For about 6 years, I have been part of a group of community mental health practitioners, activists, and psychoanalysts called Reflective Spaces Material Places. The group meets about five times a year. The open meetings — typically a mix of 25-40 regulars and newcomers — are organized by a core group which meets regularly. The past two years have been strongly inflected by racialized dynamics, with an explicit focus on the workings of whiteness, racism, and colonialism. While this is not psychoanalysis in a conventional mode, I identify and am interpellated as an analyst in and by this group, among other identities and positions I hold. To some extent, then, and along with others, I represent psychoanalysis in this group. Loosely speaking, I work analytically in the group, and the group in turn is working analytically upon me. I do not mean by this a formal position as the “group analyst,” but rather a vertex of listening beyond the apparent, a consideration of the operations of history (part of the social unconscious) and how they become enacted in the group, and a collective attempt to work through that historical repetition to new kinds of relationships in the group. Doing so requires occupying a very different position than the one I occupy in the

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

conventional psychoanalytic setup. To the extent that I help contribute to a containing function in the group, it is not by operating in the typical way that I do in the consulting room. Without doubt, enormous transferential forces from a variety of domains map onto the field demarcated by this group and its setting, including its material home in an established and strongly culturally-identified Latino mental health organization. A great deal of work along the lines of metabolization, containment, structuring, and to some extent interpretation happens within and through the organizing group which facilitates the meetings, more than through any one individual. We have experienced serious ruptures as well as important gains in this process.

I will mention one particular experience here. During a series of heated discussions in which a number of people of color were speaking more forcefully and directly than they had in the past, challenging a current of hegemonic whiteness in the organization, I found myself in the hotseat. I believe I represented a number of vertices for the group: as a founding leader, as a white man, and as an established psychoanalyst. Other aspects of my identity — as an immigrant, bicultural/bilingual Latino, and vocal queer man — were less prominent in this sequence. At one point, I made comments about *feeling afraid for the sustainability of the group given the intensity of affects and suggested that what we were doing might be precisely what real change actually looks like, but that I thought this kind of change takes a good deal of time*. These comments were met with anger by some people of color who I believe saw me as using my position of privilege to place my fears above others, of being condescending in lecturing patience from a position of relative comfort and power, and of generally trying to shut down dissent. I was quite rattled by the experience; it took me several days after the event to finally settle down. Initially I felt quite misunderstood and hurt regarding marginal aspects of my identity I wished to have recognized and held in solidarity (especially my ethnic provenance and status as immigrant). I felt like an object of transference and wanted to justify a psychoanalytic move on my part, centered on an interpretation of “their” projection with a concomitant reaffirmation of my goodness. It took a little longer to get to the self-analysis: I was tremendously displaced from my typically more sheltered position behind the couch; this sense of exposure felt humiliating and made it difficult to hear the truth in what was being said to me. I came to realize that I

was, in fact, relatively unconscious about the position I was occupying in this social field. This was not an intellectual insight (I could have easily described this positioning before), but a lived experience of “seeing” for the first time the freedom I had to speak in a certain way granted by

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

virtue of the place from which I was speaking. The visceral emotional shake-up I experienced was public and painful; it implicated deeply held unconscious identifications with privileged groups. I do not believe I took a masochistic position of self-denigration nor was I wracked with a paralyzing white guilt, rather I feel I learned something about the unconscious way I inhabited my social position, a position that became more completely visible to me precisely because I was shaken out of it. Being de-centered from whiteness and from cherished identifications provoked the anxious malaise that arises from troubling the supposed sovereignty of the ego at its foundational joint with the collective matrix that grounds it. It meant a reconfiguration of my relation to myself and to others that was disturbing, growth-promoting, and impactful, allowing me to work and respond in the group in new ways. It was an encounter with the social unconscious, which would not have been possible without the demarcation of the social field the group made useable for me.

As with dyadic analysis, transferences and enactments from the register of the social unconscious — that is, historical transmission of inequities, un-avowed group pacts, ideologically freighted categories of thought (Brickman **2003**, unpacks "primitivity," for example) — will inevitably take place. And as with dyadic analysis, these will have to be acknowledged, suffered, mourned, worked through, though now both at the level of the group as well as the individual.

ETHICAL ITERATIONS

Demarcation, then, is the kind of framing that looks toward the social unconscious, one that seeks to explore the effects of social reality, to catalyze the appearance of the phantomatic setting, and to analyze the hidden ideologies in which we are embedded. It does not dispense with the work we have conventionally been trained to do regarding the personal unconscious and its manifestations in intersubjective life. Rather, it seeks to expand the possibilities for rich engagement in and with a troubled and troubling world. It has become, in my estimation, a

necessary part of contemporary analytic practice, which for me includes many non-dyadic forms of being an analyst.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

I am fond of a metaphor regarding knowledge, which I believe I read once in Jorge Luis Borges: as the sphere of knowledge grows, so too does its contact with the unknown, only now exponentially. We might extend this to say that as the group under analytic consideration grows (from dyad to community), so too does its contact with the social, which must include its supra-human complexity, its vast realms of unpredictable and unstable possibility. Such contact not only subjects the individual egos in the field to significant centrifugal forces, but exposes them to the enormous violence, pain, and suffering of the social sphere. To be fully open to the world would mean to be unbearably open to its suffering, a suffering we are only rarely able to usefully manage.

Fundamentally, this is an ethical question, one of our relation to the suffering of both individual and collective others.

Levinas (**1969**[1961], **1998**[1974]) has appeared a great deal in psychoanalytic writing lately. Levinasian ethics puts a transcendent primacy on the other, obliging us to a radical responsibility for this other, thus inaugurating critical inquiry into ourselves. The serious engagement with questions of the social, of collective aspects of individual subjectivity, of the group cannot but open a vein of critical self-inquiry for the discipline. Is this not one of the roots of the discontents our discipline currently faces? To investigate what it means for practice when we attempt to be open to collectives not usually served by psychoanalysis? To question the institutionalization of a frame that can shut the door on particular groups of people, while making invisible that very closure? The infamous elitism of psychoanalysis is not a demographic chance happening: it is predicated on this unconscious and structural closing off, which has become reified in the normative clinical practice that defines what psychoanalysis is supposed to be. This results in a widely accepted view that psychoanalysis is a privatized, office-based, closed-door encounter between two people. This material sub-flooring of conventional clinical practice naturalizes the idea of keeping the social “without” in order to make room for the personal psyche “within,” as if the social were extraneous to psyche.

Complicating Levinasian ethics for psychoanalysis, Rozmarin (**2007**) claims we cannot be fully for the other in psychoanalysis: our hearing of

the other is not simply a transcendent exercise. As he writes, the essence of psychoanalytic ethics is to hear the other “in his materiality and presence in this world” (p. 359) — that is, in his

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

particularity. To be open to the social and its deleterious effects — what Fanon (**1987**[1952]) called sociogeny — is truly to court the "plague" (as Freud, on his journey to the United States, famously characterized psychoanalysis, a phrase which now, in the shadow of the coronavirus, takes on, *nachträglich*, an eerie resignification). For there is no easy way out of the ethical problem which reiterates in every material field: in demarcating a portion of the field by closing doors, we shut out important elements of fruitful possibility, and often violently; but also necessarily, for such closures are constitutive, making available to analysis and possible understanding the very processes we aim to pursue.

Examples from the Community Psychoanalysis Track at my institute readily come to mind.[†] In projects at an agency working with highly traumatized refugees, the complexities of establishing workable limits were a pervasive dynamic. How much availability should a therapist allow a client in catastrophic need, when what hangs in the balance is deportation? What are the boundaries between the process group and agency as a whole, between the group and the analytic institute? The institutionalized fee-for-service frame was hardly relevant here, and the establishment of workable limits had to be grounded in other ways. When need is virtually infinite, the preservation of providers as human resources for ailing communities becomes its own priority. Transferences from an often inept, discriminatory, volatile, confusing, and underfunded system infiltrated the organization, affecting its providers, appearing as projective identifications in the candidates working with them. Demarcation of useable analytic fields was necessary, but closing doors was also deeply fraught ethically, and only possible by some measure of dissociation.

This has become accentuated under the current conditions of practice during the global pandemic. In a recent episode of the IPA podcast *On and Off the Couch*, Marilia Aisenstein (**2020**) spoke of a "community

of soft denial." We all keep a certain kind of sanity, like the "fat cat" patient, by not looking down.

But psychoanalysis has something to offer precisely here. Our practice is to question, to question continually, to note the significances and the problematics of doors, to promote the difficult task of articulating values, to try to become responsible for the choices we make.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

What we can attempt to do is to make more conscious our ethical struggle — to question and problematize the framings that keep the other out, recognizing the necessity of demarcation, and using these delimitations of the social field as a way to make the social unconscious visible. This allows us to take up a relation to the social and towards history that might be analogous to Klein's depressive position, though now in collective terms. At the level of the singular subject, recognizing our individual limitation in the face of the collectives which supersede us, while not renouncing our agency and responsibility to act on what troubles us as neighbors and as citizens in the world. At the level of the group and institution that is psychoanalysis, recognizing that our forms of practice and our theories must carry the marks of a social unconscious which seeks to obscure the workings of power.

A psychoanalytic theory and method for the 21st century must be one that rigorously takes up the double provenance of the unconscious — as *both* social and personal. Problematizing the social ills of our patients, we problematize our own as psychoanalysts. That means working within our institutes and with other groups and collectives, to broaden the cultivation and reach of psychoanalytic process. It means questioning our institutional foreclosures. Working as a psychoanalyst does not have to mean working with one patient, on a couch, for 50 minutes 4-5x per week. I do not mean to water down our thinking: quite the opposite. We will have a great deal of theoretical and clinical work to do, if we are to follow the rigorous tradition that is our inheritance.

But honestly, I don't see how we can keep from doing the psychoanalytic work of the social and still remain a viable practice. It is an inevitable catastrophic change.

You might recall the dream Freud recounts, and which Lacan made much of. A father keeping watch over the body of his dead son, falls asleep, during which time a candle falls over, setting the son's bed on fire. From the vantage point of the social analysis I am describing here, let us

figure this son as the future of psychoanalysis, ailing unto death at times, and beset now by what Baldwin would call "the fire next time." In Freud's (**1900**) recounting of the dream, the father sleeps on, and in his dream the son appears, imploring, "*Father, can't you see I'm burning?*" (p. 509).

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

We can ill afford to ignore the smoke that even now infiltrates through the closed doors of our consulting rooms, and the imagined refuge of our offices.

Notes

- It is a marker of the speed of the pandemic: in the first iteration of this paper the worldwide caseload was approaching 1 million.
- A description of this lineage is well beyond the scope of this paper, but a quick sketch of it might include not only the late works of Freud on culture and the group, but such figures as Burrow, Ferenzci, Reich, Horney, Sullivan, Pichon-Revière and South American psychoanalysis more widely, along with post-Lacanian thinking on the social, and the American Relational School. An indispensable part of theorizing the social link in psychoanalysis is the rich tradition of group analysis on the social (Bion, Dalal [**1998**], Foulkes, Hopper [**2003**], Kaës [**2007**], Tubert-Oklander [**2014**], among others). For introductions to this social lineage see for example Aron and Starr (**2013**), Danto (**2005**), Herzog (**2017**), Jacoby (**1983**), Salberg and Grand (**2017**), and Zeretsky (**2015**).
- Translations from Puget's Spanish are my own.
- This was written before the uprisings sparked by the murder of George Floyd. It is even less deniable now.
- I thank Jay Greenberg for this.
- See González, F. J. (**in press**), for a more detailed elaboration of the idea of subjectivity at the intersection of these two domains (personal and social) of the unconscious. For a grounding introduction to the domain of the social unconscious, see Hopper (**2003**), who is often credited with coining the term.
- Analysis at a distance should make visible to us the virtuality underlying all analytic encounters. Well beyond the scope of this paper, Deleuze's (**1991**) concept of virtuality is linked to the emergent, to what can "become." Events are pregnant with possibility. Rather than the common expression, "it is what it is," psychoanalysis is predicated on the premise that "it is more than it seems to be."

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

- The Community Psychoanalysis Track at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California (PINC), founded in May 2019, allows candidates to count a project — conducted at a partnering community mental health agency and under psychoanalytic group supervision — as a formal psychoanalytic case towards progression.

REFERENCES

Aisenstein, M. (2020). *On and Off the Couch*. Podcast series: Episode 43. A Report from Paris with Marilia Aisenstein, March 31, 2020. **ipaoffthecouch.org**

Aron, L. & Starr, KE. (2013). *A Psychotherapy for the People: Towards a Progressive Psychoanlaysis*. New York: Routledge.

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bass, A. (2018). *When the frame doesn't fit the picture. In Reconsidering the Moveable Frame*. Eds. I. Tylim & A. Harris. New York: Routledge, pp. 111 - 138.

Bleger, J. (1967). Psycho-Analysis of the psycho-analytic frame. *Int. J. Psychoanal*., 48: 511 - 519.

Bleger, J. (2012[1967]). *Symbiosis and Ambiguity: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Tr. J. Churcher. London: Routledge. Originally published as Symbiosis y mbigüedad: estudio psicoanalítico. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

Boulanger, G. (2013). Fearful symmetry: shared trauma in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. *Psychoanal. Dial .,* 23(1): 31 - 44.

Brickman, C. (2003). *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind: Race and Primitivity in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.

Butler, DG. (2019). Racialized bodies and the violence of the setting. *Stud. Gen. Sex .,* 20(3): 146 - 158. doi:**10.1080/15240657.2019.1641935**

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.

Dalal, F. (1998). *Taking the Group Seriously: Towards a Post-Foulkesian Group Analytic Theory*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Danto, E. A. (2005). *Freud's Free Clinics: Psychoanalysis and Social Justice*, 1918 - 1938. *New York*: Columbia Univ. Press.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

Deleuze, G. (1991). *Bergsonism*. New York: Zone Books.

Erpenbeck, J. (2017). *Go, Went, Gone. Tr. Susan Bernofsky*. New York: New Directions.

Fanon, F. (1987[1952]). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Tr. CL. Markmann. London: Pluto Press.

Freud, S. (1900). *The Interpretation of Dreams. S.E. 9.*

Gampel, Y. (2018). *The frame as a border in a variety of settings. In Reconsidering the Moveable Frame*. Eds. I. Tylim & A. Harris. New York: Routledge, pp. 164 - 183.

González, FJ. (2016). Only what is human can truly be foreign. *In Immigration in Psychoanalysis. New York: Routledge*, pp. 15 - 38.

González, FJ. (2018). Re-Placing objects. *Stud. Gen. Sex*., 19(1): 41 - 47.

González, FJ. (2019). Necessary disruptions: a discussion of Daniel Butler's "Racialized Bodies and the Violence of the Setting," *Stud. Gen. Sex .,,* 20:3, 159 - 164.

González, FJ. (in press). "Trump cards and Klein bottles: on the collective of the individual," *Psychoanal. Dial*.

Hartman, Saidya. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Hartman, Stephen. (2018). *When we frame. In Reconsidering the Moveable Frame*. Eds. I. Tylim & A. Harris. New York: Routledge, pp. 141 - 163.

Herzog, D. (2017). *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in the Age of Catastrophes*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Hopper, E. (2003). *The Social Unconscious: Speaking the Unspeakable*. New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Jacoby, R. (1983). *The Repression of Psychoanalysis: Otto Fenichel and the Political Freudians*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Kaës, R. (1995[1993]). *El grupo y el sujeto del grupo: Elementos para una teoría psicoanalítica del grupo*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu Editores.

Kaës, R. (2007). *Linking, Alliances, and Shared Space: Groups and the Psychoanalyst*. London: The International Psychoanalytical Assoc.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

Layton, L. (2006). Attacks on linking: the unconscious pull to dissociate individuals from their social context. In L. Layton, N. C. Hollander, & S. Gutwill (Eds.), *Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting*. New York: Routledge, pp. 107 - 117.

Leavitt, J. (2013). Superficie, spazio e artefatto: la presenza materiale della memoria. *Rivista Psicoanalitica*, 59: 549 - 571.

Levinas, E. (1969[1961]). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Tr. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Univ. Press. *Originally published as Totalité et Infini : Essai sur l'extériorité. Le Livre de Poche*.

Levinas, E. (1998[1974]). *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Tr. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Univ. Press. Originally published as Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence. Martinus Nijhoff.

Macey, D. (2012). *Frantz Fanon: A Biography (*Second Edition). Brooklyn: Verso.

Mbembe, A. (2013/2017). *Critique of Black Reason. Tr L. Dubois*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press.

Milner, M. (1952/1987). The framed gap (1952). *In The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*. New York: Tavistock Publications, pp. 79 - 82.

Payne, GK. (1979). Lessons from the Third World. *Built Environment*, 5:2, 99 - 110.

Peltz, R. (2005). The manic society. *Psychoanal. Dial .,* 15(3): 347 - 366. doi:**10.1080/10481881509348834**

Puget, J. (1988). Social violence and psychoanalysis in Argentina: the unthinkable and the unthought. *Free Assns .,* 1(13): 84 - 140.

Puget, J. (1991). The social context: searching for a hypothesis. *Free Assns.,* 2(1): 21 - 33.

Puget, J. (1992). Belonging and ethics. *Psychoanal. In ,,* 12(4): 551 - 569.

Puget, J.(2008). Coartada social y psicoanálisis [Social alibi and psychoanalysis]. *Psicoanálisis*; 30(2/3): 321 - 332.

Puget, J.(2018a). Habitar espacios en el hoy o en un para siempre [*Inhabiting spaces in the now or in a forever]. Psicoanálisis, 39 (1/2*): 19 - 39.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms

Puget, J. (2018b). *Revisiting the concept of frame. In Reconsidering the Moveable Frame*. Eds. I. Tylim & A. Harris. New York: Routledge, pp. 184 - 204.

Puget, J. & Wender, L. (1982). Analista y paciente en mundos superpuestos [Analyst and patient in overlapping worlds]. *Psicoanálisis*, 4(3): 503 - 536.

Rozmarin, E. (2007). An other in psychoanalysis: Emmanuel Levinas's critique of knowledge and analytic sense. *Contemp. Psychoanal*., 43(3): 327 - 360. doi:**10.1080/00107530.2007.10745913**

Rozmarin, E. (2009). I Am Yourself: Subjectivity and the Collective. *Psychoanal. Dial*., 19(5): 604 - 616.

Salberg, J & Grand, S., Eds. (2017). *The Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma*. New York: Routledge.

Steiner, J. (1985). Turning a blind eye: the cover up for Oedipus. *Int. Rev. Psychoanal*., 12: 161 - 172.

Swartz, S. (2019*). Ruthless Winnicott: The Role of Ruthlessness in Psychoanalysis and Political Protest*. New York: Routledge.

Szymborska, Wislawa. "Psalm." *The Iowa Review*, 30.2 (2000): 24 - 24. Web. Available at: **10.17077/0021-065X.5231**

Tylim, I. & Harris, A., Eds. (2018). *Reconsidering the Moveable Frame*. New York: Routledge.

Tubert-Oklander, J. (2014). *The One and the Many: Relational Analysis and Group Analysis*. London: Karnac.

Wood, J. (2017). “A Novelist’s Powerful Response to the Refugee Crisis.” The New Yorker, September 18.

Zeretsky, E. (2015). *Political Freud: A History*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.

Content downloaded on 2026-11-17 20:42:20 UTC from IP 72.89.68.2. Use subject to https://pep-web.org/terms