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Passivity and Gender: Psychological inertia and maternal stillness

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ABSTRACT

Who is afraid of passivity? Historically, women and minoritized people have had good reason to be, given that passivity has been a way to keep them out of the world of “reason.” Freud’s move from the activity/passivity binary as the principle of all instinct, to its gendering as femininity/passivity and masculinity/activity, leads him to assert the “repudiation of femininity” as the bedrock of psychic life (Freud, S. 1937. “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 23, 209–254. London: Hogarth Press). This has led to a generative history of feminist, queer and Black psychoanalytic scholarship that constantly re-opens the question of female subjectivity and sexuality, and what we mean by psychic femininity and masculinity. However, what does remain as “bedrock,” even in this theorizing, is the figure of the mother in the internal world of the infant – supposedly castrated yet all-powerful, and requiring that the infant defend itself against what is stirred up as a result of dependency on her. After reviewing some of the psychoanalytic debates about femininity, I turn to “stillness” rather than passivity to suggest that we can identify a maternal element that is on the side of development, a figuration of psychological inertia that holds the capacity for waiting, stopping, ceasing and withdrawing in a world in which these mental functions are sorely missing.

KEYWORDS

Passivity; gender; maternal; femininity

Introduction

Let’s start at the end. Freud begins “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937), his reflections at the end of his life on the question of cure, with a struggle over the partial failure of analysis. A young Russian, a man “spoiled by riches, who had come to Vienna in a state of complete helplessness ...” had made considerable progress in the first years of his analysis, becoming more independent and less depressed. “But then”, Freud tells us, “we came to a full stop” (217). A kind of “psychical inertia”, that he had first described as far back as the “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895), had appeared to have set in. In Freud’s view the patient had stalled in the face of the historical causes of his neurosis, the working through of which would bring the analysis to an end; instead the patient had settled for the relative comforts of what had been achieved so far. Although we can think of this as

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a defence in a conventional sense of turning away disturbing thoughts and feelings from the conscious mind, Freud hints at a more passive resistance in the face of his own active wish for a cure, closer to the seductive pull into a form of mindlessness that the contemporary Kleinian tradition has parsed from more violent or sadistic attacks on internal objects, complicating the idea of death drive as a single mode of psychic functioning (Bell 2015). Freud's remedy was to fix an ending date for the treatment. He would meet the patient's full stop with his own – touché. At least initially this seemed to cause the patient's resistances to crumble away. In the last months of the treatment the young man produced the prerequisite memories and links to the historical causes of his neurosis that enabled him to "recover". However, Freud then rather dolefully reports that his own belief in a cure was short-lived. The patient returned to Vienna towards the end of the first world war as a penniless refugee, and had to be helped "to master a part of the transference which had remained unresolved" (218). The patient was, of course, Sergei Pankejeff, whom Freud had named "Wolf Man", who appears to have suffered from delusions entailing a conviction that a doctor had drilled a hole in his nose (Brunswick 1928). Freud's view of this as an unresolved transference suggests it had crossed his mind that the analysis may have made Pankejeff worse rather than better. He concludes this opening section with the statement that he passed the patient over to his junior female colleague, Ruth Mack Brunswick, who periodically cleared up Pankejeff's attacks for the rest of his life. In handing over the interminable clearing up to Brunswick, whilst he nursed his disappointment at the failure of a definitive cure in the face of a stubborn psychical inertia, Freud unwittingly already places us in a scene of gender and psychical passivity.¹

By the end of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable", we encounter Freud's famous statement about the bedrock of analysis that ties passivity back to psychic femininity and indeed to the sexed female body. We can find many instances in Freud's work where he puts into question the pairings femininity/passivity and masculinity/activity, and maintains the predominance of psychic bisexuality whereby masculinity and femininity are uncoupled from biological sex and are only ever precariously attained psychic identifications. However, in this late, pessimistic text, he finds himself back with the primal fantasy of castration, the question of sexual difference and passivity. There are two themes, he tells us in the closing paragraphs, "which give the analyst an extraordinary amount of trouble" (250). They are connected with the differences between the sexes and entail a common factor that is expressed differently in each – the differential fate of "masculine striving" that propels both men and women away from the psychic meaning of castration. The striving itself is not masculine as such. Although Freud does at times use activity as synonymous with masculinity, and passivity with femininity, activity and passivity are used by Freud as the defining characteristics of specific types of instinctual aims that structure mental life prior to the oppositions between phallic and castrated, or masculine and feminine (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). In "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (1915), for instance, Freud maintains every drive is a "piece of activity" (122), including

¹I have noted elsewhere that in psychoanalysis the terms *sex* and *gender* are not used very frequently. Instead psychoanalysis gives primacy to *sexuality* as the drive that inhabits and determines psychic reality, and *sexual difference* as the unstable achievement of the drive's maturation. In Freud's view, sexuality is the product of the pressure put on the mind by the instinct, and its structuring occurs through the primal fantasy of castration that leads to the psychic positions masculinity and femininity. Here I will use the term gender interchangeably with sexual difference, however, in keeping with the direction of travel currently in both sociological and psychoanalytic terminology. See Baraitser (2019) for further discussion about terminology.

a drive with a passive aim. Indeed, given the aim of every drive is satisfaction and that this can be achieved through a change “from activity to passivity” (127) such as in sadomasochism, passivity is always paradoxically infused with a certain force even as its aim is to dissipate excitement. Passivity is not an absence of striving as such but a certain kind of striving, whether a psychical investment in masochism, in inertia that comes from the binding of libido to certain objects, or after “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, in repetition and ultimately a striving or deviation towards death that is the arc of a life (Freud 1920). “Masculine striving” should be understood, then, as a particular striving towards the masculine as a flight from castration. It is “ego-syntonic”, Freud tells us, in “males”. What is repressed in the process is the “passive attitude, since it necessitates the assumption of castration” (252). In a footnote Freud clarifies,

We must not be misled by the term “masculine protest” into supposing that what the man is repudiating is his passive attitude [as such] – what might be called the social aspect of femininity. Such a view is contradicted by an observation that is easily verifiable – namely that such men often display a masochistic attitude – a state that amounts to bondage – towards women. What they reject is not passivity in general, but passivity towards a male. In other words, the “masculine protest” is in fact nothing else than castration anxiety. (252)

Passivity in men can be tolerated in the presence of women, but must be repudiated in relation to other men as an echo of the Oedipal drama. Indeed, as a recapitulation of a very old story, femininity/passivity only functions as the “other” to masculinity/activity, as a relation, that is, to men, and not as a psychic position in and of itself.² It is the association with “lack” that is attributed to women – the missing phallus – that men want to get rid of in relation to other men.

In “females” there is also a “masculine striving”, Freud tells us, that is ego-syntonic up until the phallic phase where development in the direction of femininity sets in, after which it is subject to a “momentous process of repression”(251). The form this masculine striving takes in the phallic phase is the “unsatisfied wish for a penis” that is destined to be converted into a wish for a child, and for a man who possesses a penis. This leads Freud to conclude that the two corresponding themes that cause analysts so much trouble, and that in the end cannot be worked through, are “in women, envy of the penis – the striving after the possession of a male genital – and, in men, the struggle against their passive or feminine attitude towards other men” (250). Nothing, he suggests, can really persuade us to give up these wishes. Freud notes that Adler had originally called this shared attitude to the castration-complex a “masculine protest”, which, Freud states, in the case of men, is “exactly right”. But from the beginning, he tells us, he would have preferred the phrase “repudiation of femininity” (250). It is femininity that is repudiated in both men and women, figured as passivity in men and penis envy in women, but both a result of a flight from anticipated or corroborated castration. Here “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” itself comes to a full stop. Freud’s struggles with the question of cure, with a psychical inertia that puts a stop to the process of understanding what disturbs us, ends with his return to familiar territory. In the place of the disturbance of stasis itself, he puts castration, and ultimately femininity, a lack that at least he knows the contours of, and that mitigates the anxieties of passivity as a state of deathly inaction that has no shape.

²This is an argument that Luce Irigaray has made about the “sexual indifference” of Freudian theory (1985).

Psychical inertia gives way to the safety of a form of “knowing” that at the root of psychic life is the fear of the feminine.

Freud’s move to position femininity as a placeholder for the anxieties of an amorphous and threatening passivity was protested in his lifetime and has prompted many new approaches to femininity,³ female sexuality and motherhood over the last hundred years, both within psychoanalysis and beyond. Extensive discussions have taken place in the field of psychoanalytic feminism, particularly in the French and Anglophone worlds, in critical theory, gender and sexuality studies, trans studies, and more recently at the intersections between critical race studies and psychoanalysis. Many have identified not just the misogyny but also the racism that is tied into Freud’s theorization of passivity, given Freud’s linking of the “dark continent” of female sexuality with the colonial notion of the “primitive” that racializes those deemed other to the white European subject (Abel, Christian, and Moglen 1997; Holmes 2021; Khanna 2003; Preciado 2021). Yet at the same time these fields have sought to re-engage with the ongoing emancipatory promise of a psychoanalytic theory of psychosexuality that offers complex ways to think about difference *per se*. As Juliet Mitchell argued many decades ago (1974), if we cannot theorize how difference structures psychic life, we have no way to understand the persistence of social and political structures of difference, whether patriarchy, as she argued, or white supremacy as the psychoanalyst Dorothy Holmes draws our attention to (2021), or homophobia and transphobia, as Paul Preciado describes (2021), let alone begin to change them. And as Judith Butler has shown, difference in psychic life is not just a product of unconscious internal phantasy prompted by the awareness of the difference between the sexes, but via the mechanism of melancholia in which the ego is formed as a result of incomplete mourning of lost objects, the social world and its already structured differences “gets in” to the psychic world and shapes the very psychical agencies that come to organize it (1997). We might then ask, what is at stake now when we reconsider the conjunction femininity/passivity or masculinity/passivity? Is passivity really gendered? Do we need a concept of passivity to understand sexual difference? Can we do without it? Or is there something productive, even, in thinking “with” passivity rather than passing it like the hot potato of psychoanalytic theory, between men and women, between the auto-affective male European subject and its many “others”? Who, after all, is afraid of passivity?

There are good historical reasons why women and minoritized people have been afraid if it. Freud inherits a history in western metaphysical thought, and its importation to other parts of the globe via colonization, that links passive matter, the body, nature and emotion – the opposite of reason – to both the feminine and the “primitive”, that continues to have very real social effects for women and minoritized people. These are discourses that have long underpinned the exclusion of women and minoritized people from what are seen as “rational” activities. The hierarchized dualisms of nature/culture, private/public, emotion/reason, body/mind and passive/active, run from Aristotle’s (1995) notion of woman-matter as passive by nature, and man-form-spirit as active and creative, through to nineteenth-century biological determinist and eugenicist views. Geddes and Thompson, for example, wrote in 1889, that social, psychological and behavioural traits are caused by metabolic states. In the language of mechanics that Freud also drew on, women are “anabolic”, making them passive, conservative, sluggish, stable and

³See Grigg, Heqc, and Smith (1999) for a discussion of this.

therefore uninterested in politics, whilst men, being “katabolic”, are eager, energetic, passionate, variable and interested in political and social matters (Gedde and Thompson 1889). These biological “facts” were used to shape the social and political rights of women, and by extension those racialized through the expansion of empire, under the guise that “what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament” (quoted from Moi 1999, 18). These kinds of associations have long tendrils right into the present where we still see the persistence of deterministic discourses linking femininity to passivity, for instance, in contemporary accounts of the biology of sex and gender that continue to describe ova as “passive” and spermatazoa as “active” despite these descriptions being scientifically debunked (Martin 1991). The literature on the racialization of passivity is equally stark, linking passivity with docility and laziness and pathologizing “Black rage” (Stoute 2021) in ways not dissimilar to the pathologization of feminist protest as a form of hysteria. Whilst being characterized as docile, Black women under conditions of slavery were forced to be permanently “active” through enforced labour, reproduction and sexuality, without access to “passivity” that remained the discourse of white femininity. Critical race theorist Joy James argues that in contemporary life what she calls the “maternal captive” goes on being a site of both extraction and exclusion. The maternal captive is held in place by what she calls “womb theory” – theory that imagines reproducing itself without the simultaneous labour and locking out of Black voices, of which psychoanalytic theory has historically been an example (James 2016). In a similar vein, Christina Sharpe writes in *Ordinary Notes* about the possibilities of “stillness” rather than passivity or fear in the face of the fact that “there is no set of years in which to be born Black and woman would not be met with violence” (Sharpe 2023, 131). Reflecting on moments of stillness in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, stillness can be the stillness of exhaustion brought on by interminable labour, but also the stillness that holds the possibility for rearranging Black life. Sharpe calls stillness “anagrammatical”, in that words shift their meanings when they come up against Blackness. She writes: “*Beloved* started me thinking about stillness and its anagrammatical life for Black people. Started me thinking about Black. Still. Life” (241). Here stillness rearranges Black life as what endures beyond “mere” endurance, or survival, by creating the possibilities of existence, a life. The move to stillness also speaks to a question of care that is connected to discourses of Black life, femininity and passivity. She writes:

Care is complicated, gendered, misused. It is often mobilized to enact violence, not assuage it, yet I cannot surrender it.

I want acts and accounts of care as shared and distributed risk, as mass refusals of the unbearable life, as total rejections of the dead future. (333)

Given the social distribution of care and the historical and current misuses of the binary femininity/passivity for purposes that neither support nor enhance the lives of all women, the question about its use in psychoanalytic theory and practice might then be whether we repetitively reinscribe a relation between femininity and passivity because without it we no longer quite know what “femininity” refers to as a psychoanalytic term. If we reject passivity and couple both maternity and femininity with psychic forms and structures of care, love and receptivity instead, do we not reinscribe in psychic life the collective failure of redistributing and sharing care? Further, if we de-gender passivity and activity, what

does this do to our understandings of the drives, the body, sexuality and sexual difference? And if, as I will argue below, passivity may be a psychic and social capacity that needs to be fostered, does it, along with its gendering, need to be so forcefully repudiated? Does Freud highlight something important, in other words, with his notion of “psychical inertia”, that may enable us to conceive it as a refusal to move on, a wish to stop, that may be akin to Sharpe’s “stillness”, and may be understood as an important state of mind, even a psychic achievement? Passivity understood as the mental capacity for withdrawing, for instance, from rampant consumption and unsustainable growth, is vital if we are to interrupt the “business as usual” of what some term “heteropatriarchal racial capital” as it burns up the Earth.⁴ Stopping would also mean interrupting the historical reality that “there is no set of years in which to be born Black and woman would not be met with violence”. Can we multiply our understandings of unconscious forms of psychical inertia that may have a bearing on some of the predicaments that the world finds itself in, a world intent on the destruction of the biosphere, the criminalization of many forms of resistance, enforced migration, war and mass displacement, economic instability and escalating violence directed against women and sexual minorities globally?

In what follows I briefly rehearse some of the psychoanalytic feminist responses to the Freudian binary femininity/passivity, focusing on a key point of tension between Juliet Mitchell’s “law of the mother” (2022) and Judith Butler’s notion of the law that governs sexual difference in unconscious life as mutable and open to social change (2012). This is by no means a comprehensive review of the significant debates in psychoanalytic understandings of femininity and female sexuality, which would include important contributions from Jessica Benjamin, Dana Birksted-Breen (1993), Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, Patricia Gherovici, Leticia Glocer Fiorini, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Alexandra Lemma, Rosine Perelberg Jacqueline Rose, and many others. It is an attempt, however, to historicize the questions I have raised above, and to maintain an intergenerational discussion amongst psychoanalysts and scholars invested in understanding the unconscious meanings of sexual difference. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first outside of psychoanalytic theory to offer a cogent critique of Freud’s linking of femininity with passivity, questioning the value he placed on virility, his lack of an account of a feminine libido and his suggestion that for women to claim their femininity they must sacrifice their independence and agency – they must accept the price of castration which is passivity and receptivity ([1949] 1972). Yet to have no theory of the unconscious life of sexual difference leaves us with a flat and superficial reading of gender as simply a social construct. A psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference that maintains a disruptive and polymorphous perverse sexuality at the heart of the human subject, that is incompletely “bound” through the sexually differentiating process of Oedipus, goes a long way towards understanding how difference *produces* psychic life. But if difference is only ever structured around a binary, whether masculine/feminine, passive/active, father/mother, or law/body, rather than a more multiple set of differences between multiple terms, we remain, at least in Luce Irigaray’s view, with only one term (the masculine), and not with two, as binaries tend towards hierarchies in which difference is actually suppressed; activity subsumes and dominates passivity (1985). The persistence of these binaries has therefore been a central concern in feminist,

⁴See the history of Women of Colour theorizing, including the work of bell hooks (1981), Chandra Mohanty and Alexander (1996), and Maria Lugones (2008).

queer and trans debates about the limits of psychoanalytic accounts of both the sexual and difference.⁵ Equally, however, accounts that emerge from the object relations tradition and draw on notions of primary femininity, or the formative relation with an already gendered maternal body and its contents, both appeal to and also fail to provide adequate answers to the question of sexual difference. After rehearsing some of these debates, I briefly return to this question of the value of passivity in reference to a certain kind of necessary stasis (Baraitser 2020). I argue for a form of life within death that is distinct from the life drive as Freud conceives it, and may offer a model for the psychic capacity to stop, withdraw and wait, whilst remaining on the side of life.

Reconfiguring passivity

The Freudian story of femininity has always been rather bleak: after a period of activity in which the little girl is understood as a “little man” she goes on to be consumed with penis envy, prone to masochism, with a weak superego and capacity for sublimation, and a normative heterosexual and reproductive destiny laid out for her if she is to avoid neurosis. She must give up the clitoris as the active genital organ and accept the vagina as the source of sexual pleasure, along with the receptive psychic position in order to acquire the penis-substitute, the baby. Analysts as early as the 1920s produced alternative accounts of femininity as a primary biologically based organization of sexuality that has its own genealogy in the historical development of the female subject. Karen Horney, for instance, argued that the inferiority that women struggled with was a result of their social position and that psychoanalysis was itself infected by the “dogma of the inferiority of women” (Horney 1924, 1926, 331). Along with Abraham (1922) and Jones (1927, 1933), she saw heterosexual attraction as biological (332), and the girl’s masculine active phase as a defence against primary feminine anxiety that her father would penetrate and damage her. Here, the unconscious awareness of the vagina crystallizes a form of passive vulnerability in relation to male aggression into the female psyche right from the start. Klein also elaborated the girl’s unconscious knowledge of the vagina, adding that both boys and girls have a primary feminine phase, loving and identifying with the mother as an originary source of goodness (Klein 1928). Bringing the Oedipus complex forward, she argued that in the first months of life oral, urethral, anal and genital libidos overlap with one another, and both sexes have unconscious phantasies of desiring the paternal penis, and of an opening in the maternal body, as well as wishes to receive the penis (Klein 1945). Yet any account that relies on biological differences between the sexes to explain femininity, even if the emphasis is on what the infant does with these differences in unconscious phantasy, simply “finds” the difference it is seeking to explain, and none of these accounts that suggest a separate already constituted femininity get around the problem for women of an “essential” castration. As Juliet Mitchell puts it, “the absence of the penis in women is significant only in that it makes meaningful the father’s prohibition on incestuous desires. In and of itself, the female body neither indicates nor initiates anything” (Mitchell 1982, 17). This is a problem, Mitchell argues, because it reflects patricentric culture rather than explains it.

⁵See for instance Brennan (1992); Benjamin (2017); Glocer Fiorini and Abelin-Sas Rose (2010); Lewis (2009); Rose (2018); Stryker (2017).

Mitchell's response has been to develop a conceptual apparatus that she calls the "law of the mother" that prohibits murder and incest between siblings. This is her way of instigating a symbolic function for the maternal figure in the psychic life of the infant, bringing the mother out of the passivity/femininity nexus and making her function available to the infant as an instigator of identification and not just repudiation (Mitchell 2003, 2022). The law of the mother precedes the Freudian/Lacanian law of the father, and responds to the violent desires elicited in the infant as it experiences the "trauma" of the arrival of a sibling (whether actual or phantasized). Where the hysteric facing the Oedipal dilemma asks "who am I", the infant facing the new baby asks "who am I if the baby has replaced me" (Mitchell 2022, 123). Sibling trauma, she argues, is a primary trauma that gives rise to an hysterical infant that in turn precipitates the structures of the unconscious, in keeping with Freud's original proposition that the unconscious is grounded in female hysteria. Where the vertical axis of Oedipus-castration enables intergenerational relations to be installed in the unconscious, the horizontal axis of sibling relations structures later social relations. Although it instigates sociality, Mitchell is clear that the maternal law is a law, and not a social practice. The infant must stop its murderous and incestuous desires towards the sibling, or it will not survive the mother's withdrawal of care and protection. The payoff for the infant comes in the form of two pieces of knowledge: the knowledge of annihilation or death, and the knowledge of seriality, that every irreplaceable person is also replaceable. These are vital for sociality and constitute a different kind of "reality" principle that enables the infant to move from private fantasies, through reality, and then into social meaning, as well as to manage the problem of sameness. Because the infant identifies with the new baby and loves the baby through recognizing it as herself, the murderous impulse towards the baby would leave her attacking herself, and this pushes her to find a difference between self and other. Difference emerges out of sameness as a psychic function through the law of the mother.

In a final move, Mitchell uses the maternal law to explain not just difference but sexual difference. The hysteric's question is "who am I", but also "am I a man or a woman", a question that is supposed to be resolved at Oedipus as each child lines up, in some way or other, with both boys and girls paying the cost of castration in different ways. However, if the unconscious is founded on a *universal* pre-oedipal trauma, the trauma of murderousness towards the loved baby, then how does sexual difference come about? Mitchell's answer lies in the fact that bisexuality is the domain of the law of the mother. In the vertical axis, difference is constructed through the difference between the generations, whereas in the horizontal axis the bisexual child does not operate through binary difference (I am this and not that), but through seriality (I am this, and this, and this). The subjective meaning of gender only intrudes on the bisexual child when the new baby turns out not to be a generic baby but a sister or a brother, and not both. It is through the sibling trauma overseen by maternal law that the bisexual child can eventually separate from the family and enter a social world, having found through the new sibling that it too is a sister or a brother, a specifically gendered "I" that emerges from a more generic "we" (this and this and this). We move, in other words, from the psychological to the biological, and not the other way round. Although gender is usually presented as a pre-existing pair that underlies bisexuality, Mitchell maintains that originary bisexual subjecthood is a distinct third position that contains fused and contradictory gender identifications out of which the binary resolves, just as the

life and death drives emerge from the free and unbound aggression that is the remainder of the two, Freud's "activity" in the drive with a passive aim (133). In her very different progress through the Oedipus complex, the bisexual lateral girl wants to continue as an active and agentic subject but she increasingly realizes that men seem to monopolize that position under conditions of patriarchy; maintaining a "greater bisexuality" with her peers is her rightful demand for subjecthood. Mitchell writes:

The last thing a boy wants is to be "nothing"; if psychology were to be biology (which it is made to be, but is not), the girl would have no choice. "Nothing there" in the Oedipal girl may be no-penis. But laterally "nothing there" has already suggested death, when one really will be *nothing*. The girl is resisting being bound on the wheel of fire which is death. (Original, 133)

Sexual difference, in other words, is secondary to a more primary struggle with life and death. The bisexual girl resists "nothing" with a "drive to thrive".

Entering the discussion with a different set of concerns, which have to do with how neither psychic nor social life is ever "beyond" the operations of power and discourse, Judith Butler suspends, rather than grounds, ontological claims about gender so that a conceptual space can be opened up to track the construction and circulation of any such claims, and understand how they produce meanings of sex, gender and sexuality rather than describe them. Why, for instance, does sexual difference need to refer only to masculinity and femininity? Can there be sexual difference within homosexuality that is not fully describable with these terms? Is masculine passivity the same as femininity or something else entirely? This leads Butler to a larger question as to whether sexual difference can ever be fully separable from its social determinants – when we refer to masculinity and femininity as the only elements of sexual difference, we are already referring to the social organization of those terms that has occluded other possibilities of social organization, and other terms. Butler writes:

Just to be clear: those theories of socialization that maintain that gender relations and the prospects for gender equity are determined only by social conditions and effects preclude the operation of the unconscious on the assumption that the unconscious forms no part of the social. And yet, if the rejoinder to that theory takes as its presupposition that the unconscious is definitely separable from the social, that it undercuts the progress made in the name of the social, then that position tends to share the same dichotomy that the first position supposes. My suggestion is that just as the theory of the social invariably relies on unconscious dimensions, so the theory of the unconscious cannot be elaborated without reference to modes of transmission that form an important, if undervalued, dimension of social relationality. (2012, 5)

For Butler, both gender and sex cannot be assumed, and both should be thought of as discursively produced in psychic and social life (Butler 1990, 1993). Refusing the distinction between sex as material reality and sexual difference as a precariously attained psychic position, she follows Foucault in establishing that power both presses down on, but also produces, socially legible bodies that then come to be thought of as "natural", or prior to signification, somehow untouched by discursive or symbolic operations. In response to Kristeva's notion of a maternal semiotic (1975) – a prelinguistic pre-oedipal area of experience in which the inchoate pulsations of the drives associated with the maternal body have primacy – she argues that the semiotic is a retroactive effect of the symbolic rather than a psychosexual realm operating prior to it, making sex as

unstable and mutable as gender. Although the maternal (sexually differentiated) body of course exists, the infantile ego that is phantasmatically engaged with the breast is itself formed through identifications with lost loved and hated objects that are themselves socially constituted, and already lined up in heterosexual arrangements that are not “natural”. Butler therefore unhooks the maternal body from its traditional association with passive “dumb” matter that is simply lying there prior to signification. Instead, she reveals the cultural work that is done to “materialize” that body as a sexually differentiated body in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative (Butler 1993, 2). Rather than developing a new “law of the mother”, however, Butler is concerned with the existing but unacknowledged “law” against the desire of sameness that underpins the very formation of masculine and feminine subjects. For the Oedipal child heterosexuality is already assumed, leaving the child no choice but to line up psychically in a heterosexual arrangement and give up the attachment to the same-sex parent, despite sameness and difference having not yet been firmly consolidated. Femininity/passivity, in other words, is produced to consolidate a social structure organized around heterosexuality that psychoanalysis itself remains wedded to, and that forecloses, in a melancholic fashion, an unmourned same-sex desire at the level of both psychic and social life.

Furthermore, if for Mitchell what binds the *socius* is the fact that the human psyche is conditioned by a set of universal laws that do not change over time, and are therefore unconsciously transmitted across generations, then feminism is in effect on a hiding to nowhere, as it can change only the social position of women, but not the unconscious transmission of the “horror” of castration, and the repudiation of femininity/passivity. Butler’s response to this is via Laplanche, whereby intergenerational communication that instigates the sexual unconscious in the infant occurs through the transmission of enigmatic signifiers that the infant can only partially decode. If intergenerational transmission of laws, whether of the mother or father, is via enigmatic signification, then such signifiers can never quite transmit what they intend: “what is sent turns out to be not the same as what arrives, and this means that displacement and deviation account for what we might call the invariably queer ways in which sexuality emerges” (2012, 17). The “no” of either the mother or the father that instigates sexual difference, the knowledge of death, and our unique lack of uniqueness, is taken in via a process of unconscious translation and transposition, so that the law, although universal in the sense that no-one lives outside the law (there is no social subject who has not had to contend with loss and has not had to give something up), is no longer invariant or immune to culture, but changes over time, producing what is never fully predictable or expected.

I have offered just two different responses to the Freudian legacy from the history of psychoanalytic theorizing, but there is now a growing body of psychoanalytic literature that argues sexual difference cannot be separated from other modes of power. For instance, normative heterosexuality is constituted as much through the regulation of the intersections between social class and whiteness as it is by the prohibition against same-sex desire. Analysts such as Gail Lewis (2009), Katheline Pogue White (2002), Lynne Layton (2015), Noreen Giffney (2021), Joanne Ryan (2019) and many others have demonstrated that the “breast” carries powerful cultural projections that have to do with class, race and gender that the infant is not immune to, but identifies with in subtle and complex ways, alongside the major demands to manage the relationship between loving and hating impulses towards internal objects. Internal objects, in other

words, are already nuanced, and the infant is inducted into specific and not universal symbolic orders and psychosexual fields of tension (Flax 2004; Laplanche 1999). To theorize entrance into the symbolic without specifying its raced and heterosexed demands, Jane Flax argues, simply “repeats the repressions that permit the confounding of inevitability and power and generate the appearance of universality” (Flax 2004, 911). Similar arguments can be made about the cultural prohibition against transgender that sutures the hetero of sexuality through the naturalized and ontologized binary categories of man and woman, rather than a more expansive notion of difference, as Susan Stryker and Paul Preciado have argued in different ways (Preciado 2021; Stryker 2017). Acknowledging these multiple forms of prohibition means understanding how sexual difference, differences of sexuality, and those produced through class hierarchies and racialization, are formed and constituted through one another at psychic and social levels, a point revealed when the clinical work of psychoanalysis opens itself to insights generated from further afield.

Maternal stillness

I started by noticing that in the structure of “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”, Freud raises the spectre of an amorphous psychological inertia that seeks to evade cure, that attempts to put a stop to further treatment, and that is given form as the repudiation of the feminine. The gendering of passivity does some work to allay Freud’s anxiety about a tendency in mental life towards a passive form of resistance, in which partial gains are the acceptable price for further mental disturbance. The “no thing” of femininity, in the sense of castration, protects against the more profound “nothing” of not just loss, but a destructive refusal linked to death and annihilation. In the detour we have taken through some critical responses to femininity, passivity is either biologized as an innate psychological awareness of the body’s permeability and receptivity, or worked around through reformulations and rearticulations of various laws that uncover femininity’s capacity for prohibition, for new forms of relationality, for difference that is not understood as difference from masculinity, but a proliferation of differences within, between, and amongst other relations, including between women. Passivity itself is repudiated in favour of an account of femininity that can respond psychoanalytically to de Beauvoir’s observation about Freud’s failure to theorize female agency, sexuality and power. But what of the potentialities of passivity itself? What of a form of passivity that may signal a mental willingness to dwell in a suspended time beyond the bounds of action or inaction, a kind of stillness that may be a condition for care, and may be central to the analytic encounter? I suggested above that there may be some valency in mental capacities that entail desisting, deferring, stopping, withdrawing, or psychically “playing dead” in conditions in which lives are permeated by violence. More generally, we may need new ways of going on in what Eric Cazdyn calls “the new chronic” (2012), a form of stuck present time in which the future no longer appears open or unfolding, and no longer brings with it the promise of better times, but is foreclosed by the intersecting catastrophes of capitalism, neocolonialism and climate crisis. Are these new ways of going on, carrying on, or we could say “caring on”, dependent on mental capacities that we may, after all, want to name in the feminine, and if so, what might legitimate such a move? Dominique Scarfone (2019) has recently picked up on an early set of associations

made by Lyotard (1988), who suggested the term “passibility” (*passibilité* in French) to describe a quality of passivity linked to suffering or sensation. This draws on the etymological root of passivity that comes from the Latin *passivus*, meaning “submissive” but also being capable of suffering or feeling, in the sense of “serving to express the suffering of an action” (OED). This would mean there is action, but also the suffering of that action, its passivity. When that condition of suffering is relational we get “compassivity”, and via the same root (*pati*) we have compassion. Scarfone suggests passibility as a description of the transference that captures the analyst’s openness to being affected, their “readiness” for bearing sensations that may be difficult to tolerate, echoing Bion’s notion of containment. Scarfone helpfully resists the pull to gender passibility (given that psychoanalysis has no way of defining femininity without at the same time prescribing what it is), and claims passibility as a non-gendered, inherently analytic disposition rather than a receptive feminine/passive one. However, in doing so he sidesteps many of the questions raised by feminist psychoanalysis that we have discussed above. Whilst passivity breaks free from femininity, what remains untheorized is the maternal imago that shadows any capacity for the analysts’ “readiness” – already figured in the feminine “she” is the maternal presence that can digest beta-elements (Bion), the source of the drive itself (Laplanche), or the all-powerful maternal imago on whom the infant depends, and against whom it must defend itself and what is stirred up in her presence (Klein). To uncouple femininity from passivity we still need to re-theorize the maternal. Analytic openness to being affected cannot be constantly maintained, but is returned to again and again after periods of breakdown and impasse for both analyst and patient (Baraitser 2020). Analytic time is closer to “grey time” (Salisbury 2023) in which time’s intensity rather than its movement or flow can be felt and endured. What is sustained is the repetition of returning; the willingness for both to go on, to bear the suspension of the time of development, and to stay in a stuck present even when nothing seems to be happening. From this reading, “readiness”, or we could say stillness is the foreclosing of the future of the treatment in the name of what can be known about the stuck present. It is related to a series of other non-developmental or obdurate forms of time that are linked to mundane practices of care; those that involve not moving on but staying alongside others, remaining, delaying, persisting, waiting, returning, repeating, stopping and ending (Baraitser 2017). Repetition, and its temporal sibs, are feminized, as both Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1972) and Hannah Arendt (1958) remind us, reproducing social life and life itself, but without “producing” anything durable, saleable, lasting. In this sense repetition is linked classically with “women’s time”, the time of cyclicity rather than development, and the “monumental” time of the reproduction of the species (Kristeva 1981/1986). I have argued elsewhere, however, that the notion of “women’s time” fails to capture something paradoxical about repetition – that the willingness to return again and again to the scene in which care is needed does turn out to be developmental in that its very stuckness is what allows time to come to matter to both patient and analyst. Repeatedly remaining open to being affected by the other – Scarfone’s description of the transference – entails sustaining some form of contact precisely when development or the possibility for therapeutic action has been foreclosed. Developmental time, from this perspective, is precisely a suspension of the flow of time, a capacity to wait for the other to unfold, a temporal stillness. Maternity from this perspective is not synonymous with femininity/passivity but describes the asymmetrical and asynchronous

return, again and again, to a scene that matters, a kind of repetition that is a principle of generativity. The return to a scene that matters entails enduring a suspended or crystal-line time, which we could think of as the time it takes for love and hate to come to have a relation to one another based on guilt, and therefore for “mattering” to take place. Stillness relies on the maintenance of an asymmetrical and asynchronous relation in an elongated and stuck present, to bear any deadening inertia. We might think of this “stillness” in terms of Hannah Arendt’s notion of beginning – repetition, or going over and over the same ground, that produces the time to begin again. This stillness can be felt as obdurate, distinctively uncertain in its outcome, both intensive and “empty”, and is bound to the pace of the unfurling other. It takes the form of repetition, but this repetition holds open the possibility of forms of attachment that endure in time, rather than simply a return to non-being.

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